Immigration, Ethnicity, and Race in Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “Tony’s Wife”

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In reference to Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s published fiction, one of her critics, Violet Harrington Bryan observes, “To make her stories marketable […], Dunbar-Nelson camouflaged the issue of race, even though matters of race and gender are easily apparent to the late-twentieth-century reader” (125). In this observation Bryan aligns herself with the majority of scholars who have commented on Dunbar-Nelson’s work. As a brief sampling, Caroline Gebhard, Pamela Glenn Menke, Elizabeth Ammons, and even Akasha Gloria Hull—the woman who has single-handedly done the most to perpetuate critical interest in Dunbar-Nelson—all concur that race, albeit race handled sometimes covertly, permeates the fiction as a dominant theme. Interestingly, however, much of the attention that many scholars have paid to race in Dunbar-Nelson’s oeuvre has focused on the figure of the Creole and on the characters who are of an ambiguous but mixed-race heritage. These readers adopt, I believe, a somewhat limited, literalistic, and anachronistic view of racial dynamics operating in Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s short stories. Even in an ostensibly “white” short story, like “Tony’s Wife,” which was published in the collection *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories* in 1899, race is an inescapable undercurrent. “Tony’s Wife” is the tale of an Italian shopkeeper and the German woman with whom he lives. Yet Pamela Menke speaks for the majority of critics when she categorizes “Tony’s Wife” as a story concerned with “gender obedience” (85), and Menke skips over it in her analysis of race in the stories.

Using critical race theory and situating the text within its appropriate historical context, this paper argues that while “Tony’s Wife” tackles gender issues, race is just as much its thematic focus. Reading this white short story written by an African-American woman, I am mindful of the insightfulness of another “Tony”—Toni Morrison—and her study, *Playing in the Dark*. It’s almost as if Morrison has Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction in mind when she declares, “Even, and especially, when American texts are not ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation” (46-47). Racialist dynamics and politics, particularly in the guise of the
blackening of the Other, are indeed a factor in the short story “Tony’s Wife,” even though most readers in the twenty-first century would conceive of it as, at most, a tale of ethnicities and national origins. I concur with Jürgen Grandt’s assessment that the tendency to read select pieces of Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction as raceless overlooks the clear presence of race in her work (46), and when we view “Tony’s Wife” in its appropriate historical context, Grandt claims, “multiple and often ironic layers of meaning [...] emerge” (54) that demonstrate the story is a highly racialized narrative. Similarly and more broadly, Caroline Gebhard concedes “that America vainly tries to reduce everything to black and white, whereas the reality is often not so simple” (173). Such an acknowledgement is especially appropriate for this one short work.

3 Historian Howard Zinn offers some of the background that helps read “Tony’s Wife,” with all of its multi-hued complexity, in context. From his work *A People’s History of the United States*, we learn that as early as the 1830s and 40s those in power fomented anti-immigrant sentiment as a political strategy (216). Furthermore, Zinn notes, it became common under “Jacksonian Democracy” for African Americans, Native Americans, females, and the foreign-born to be elided and placed outside the target audience for governmental appeals (221). From a nineteenth-century perspective what arises is a linkage of blacks and foreigners; foreigners and blacks; foreigners as blacks. Now while it would be incorrect and disingenuous to suggest a uniform oppression was applied to all subaltern groups, it is, nonetheless, interesting that they were aggregated into one disenfranchised body. The situation worsened throughout the 1800s. The race hatred under which black Americans suffered was accompanied by a class hatred that plagued immigrants. In the midst of a severe depression in the 1870s, immigrants were used as strike-breaking scab labor (Zinn 244). And by the last two decades of the century, the pace and the face of immigration changed. Greeks and Italians and Jews, those, as Zinn observes, who were “even more alien to native-born Anglo-Saxons than the earlier newcomers” (265), comprised the nine and a half million immigrants whose desperate need for work resulted in “a labor surplus that kept wages down” (266). The swarthy faces of the immigrants and the black faces of the resident African Americans became equally contemptible to the white working class, because these groups, on account of their own economic hardships, were willing to work for less. And for its own unacknowledged reasons, the privileged class amassed these blacks and foreigners into the same category as well.

4 Howard Zinn is not alone; other historians corroborate this view of a complex interrelatedness between race and ethnicity in America’s past. In one especially provocative essay from the collection *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, David R. Roediger argues that our knowledge and understanding of how race and ethnicity were interpreted and deployed in American history are woefully inadequate. While trying to rectify that deficiency, Roediger agrees with others in his field that a too easy conflation of race and ethnicity is both naïve and inaccurate, and he insists we acknowledge the distinct and different experiences of immigrant populations and African Americans. Nevertheless, Roediger points out “that immigrants could be Irish, Italian, Hungarian and Jewish [...] without being white. Many groups now commonly termed part of the ‘white’ or ‘white ethnic’ population were in fact historically regarded as nonwhite, or of debatable racial heritage, by the host American citizenry” (184). Talking specifically about the middle decades of the 1800s, he goes on to posit that any distinction among nonwhite
populations in the US, at least in the minds of the white citizenry, was nebulous and slippery:

The ‘simian’ and ‘savage’ Irish only gradually fought, worked and voted their ways into the white race in the US. Well into the twentieth century, Blacks were counted as ‘smoked Irishmen’ in racist and anti-Irish US slang. Later, sometimes darker, migrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were similarly cast as nonwhite. The nativist folk wisdom that held that an Irishman was a Black, inside out, became transposed to the reckoning that the turning inside out of Jews produced ‘niggers’. Factory managers spoke of employees distinctly as Jews and as ‘white men’, though the ‘good Jew’ was sometimes counted as white. Poorer Jews were slurred as Black with special frequency. (184)

What arises from Roediger’s observation is how easily “nonwhite,” a term applied to immigrants, became synonymous with “Black” in the racist views of the times. The status as Other, and specifically as subaltern, trumped all other factors, real or perceived.

In this social and historical context, Alice Dunbar-Nelson composed her short fiction for the collection *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*. These tales of local color, the first such collection published by an African-American woman (Menke 78), coalesced in this milieu. And this heavily racialized worldview preoccupied the stories’ intended readers. Dunbar-Nelson must have been quite aware of this dynamic, so she finessed her treatment of race, but that is not to suggest she shrank from exploring it.

Artfully, and also somewhat patronizingly, Dunbar-Nelson differentiates the characters throughout the story “Tony’s Wife” from the type of people who are its intended audience. Right from the opening, in the commercial exchange of two marginal figures, two immigrants, we encounter telling details that mark these fictional characters as different from—and, notably, lower than—the white, Eastern readers anticipated for this collection. In the opening paragraph a young, Jewish girl buys candy from the character known simply as Tony’s Wife. The little customer places her order in non-standard, heavily accented English, and she makes the purchase with a “dingy nickel grasped in warm, damp fingers” (19). The imagery here is loaded. Those who could afford to purchase and spend time reading a short story collection from the New York publishing concern Dodd, Mead and Company would most likely not trade in “dingy” coins, much less nickels gripped tightly and expectantly in sweaty hands. Moreover, accented and non-standard English was one of the defining attributes of local color fiction. Through it, white Eastern readers engaged in vicarious forays into the exotic. Exoticism, however, operates on at least two levels here: there’s the foreign or the Other, to be sure, but there’s also the aspect of the subaltern. Comparable to how later generations would go slumming—that is, frequenting jook joints and dives merely for the enjoyment and excitement of seeing how the underprivileged lived—these readers encounter the lower classes from the comfort and security of their privileged lives.

Throughout “Tony’s Wife,” we encounter these exotics. There are Germans and Jews, Irish and Italians; there are even a few quick appearances by a couple of Orleanians—a hodgepodge people if there ever was one. All of these characters, however, are marked by their difference from the East Coast reader, and it is a racializing mark that they bear. We see this most distinctly in the figure of the shopkeeper in this story. It is rather apparent that Tony was meant to be read, during Dunbar-Nelson’s time, as not white. In this character, Dunbar-Nelson built upon the distance that her white Eastern readership would have felt between themselves and immigrants from Southern Europe. As is the case with so many of the characters in her short fiction, the single most important indicator of
Tony’s race, his status as “not white,” is his eyes. We are told at one point in the story that he has “black eyes” (28). Like her ambiguous yet still racially marked characters Manuella, from “The Goodness of Saint Rocque” (3), and Sister Josepha in the eponymous story (157), protagonists in other stories in this collection, Tony’s black eyes position him as “other than white.” They are a synecdoche: their blackness darkens Tony’s entire person.

Additional details in the story point to Tony’s status as a non-white Other as well. In painting an image of her character, the narrator describes Tony as a “great, black-bearded [...] specimen of Italian humanity” (22). The significance of this modifier, “Italian humanity,” is its specificity. Tony is not the typical Everyman found in much fiction; he is Italian. A passage from the preface to Playing in the Dark, where Morrison observes that white readers tend to view themselves as “‘universal’ or race-free” (xii), comes to mind here. Such a view would certainly have prevailed among Eastern, white readers at the turn of the century who could not—or would not—see themselves as raced. So through the specificity of his country of origin, Dunbar-Nelson’s Tony is neither on par with nor representative of her intended readers, those who thought of themselves as universal, for he is, above all else, Italian. Thus, he is not white; he is racialized.

Beyond his Italianness, other indicators suggest that Tony is marked by race. First, Tony is a “specimen of Italian humanity.” In terms analogous to the racist and pseudo-scientific views European and American slavers had of Africans, Tony exists in a liminal space somewhere between the bestial and the human. He is a specimen, which connotes objectification beneath the rational, Western—that is, white—gaze. Furthermore, the narrator notes, “You instinctively thought of wild mountain-passes, and the gleaming dirks of bandit contadini in looking at him” (22). Wildness, lawlessness, and danger, aspects at odds with civilization, are, then, appended to Tony’s characterization. And in the West at least, civilization has historically been defined from one frame of reference, the white point of view. So again, on account of his wild, unruly nature; his bestial and objectified status as a specimen; his specificity, rather than universality; and his black eyes—not an eye color found often among Anglo-Saxons and Northern Europeans—Tony is racialized.

A return to Roediger for some additional historicizing is appropriate here, for the uniqueness of the story’s setting appears to be significant as well. Dunbar-Nelson was a native of New Orleans, so she logically relied on it for the setting of so much of her early fiction. However, that city and its populace were not like other cities in America of the time. Immigrants in this particular locale in this particular era may have behaved and been conceived of differently than anywhere else in the United States. Roediger observes, That the native population questioned their whiteness may also have led immigrants to a sense of apartness from white America and occasionally a willingness to sympathize and fraternize with African Americans. The best-studied example of the dynamics of such solidarity and mixing is that of the Italian (and especially Sicilian) immigrant population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in Louisiana—a ‘not-yet-white’ population both in the view of white Louisianans, and in its self-perception. (186)

Because Italians in Louisiana at the time may have had easier exchanges and less fraught interactions with African Americans than did the white residents of the day, the two communities could have been associated in the minds of the white polity and readership. The character, Tony, therefore, may have been easily interpreted as a nonwhite, racially
inferior Other through nothing more than guilt by association. Thus, his ethnicity informs how others assign a racial category to him.

Whatever category might have been assigned to Tony at the time Dunbar-Nelson was writing the story, we can be certain that it would not have been white; immigrants like him were first and foremost Other. In a quick statement by the story’s narrator, we learn that Tony and his brother John both demonstrated “the same lack of race pride” (29). This accusation is made because Tony partnered with a German woman and John married an Irishwoman. The acknowledgement that persons of German and Irish descent are of distinct races from persons of Italian descent represents more than casual, careless terminology. The implication here is that the categories of Other are multitudinous. Most importantly, however, this sort of regional fiction offered members of the privileged class a vicarious experience among parties unlike them and their associates. Thus, all of the characters were set apart from and below the white, Eastern readership. Just as Tony’s description connoted danger and a lack of civilization, John’s wife, “Betty, a daughter of Erin” (29), has attributes associated with her that set her at odds with the intended readers. She is described as being “aggressive, powerful, and cross-eyed” (29). Certain suffragettes and temperance advocates of the day may have secretly prided themselves on being powerful, and perhaps a few even acknowledged their aggressiveness. But “cross-eyed”? Not only would Betty’s personality seem flawed to polite, Eastern society, she is physically unattractive as well. In what might seem like a pandering move, Dunbar-Nelson relegates this incidental character to an unsympathetic position in the minds of her readers. And it seems fairly apparent that Betty serves as a representative of her “race.” The three descriptors taken together are the discriminating factors between such Irish immigrant women and the fiction’s ladylike readers.

In her depictions of Tony and his sister-in-law as racial Others, Dunbar-Nelson panders to her white readership’s sense of centrality, its noblesse. The characters are raced, and they, the readers, are not. They are flattered by the unflattering depiction of the Italian, the Irish, the German, and the Jew. Tony’s racial self and his despicable behaviors are conflated in the East Coast readers’ minds, as are Betty’s aggressiveness and homeliness; the one is a metaphor for the other, just as the readers’ whiteness equates to rightness, propriety, and decorum. The readers see themselves reflected in the neighbors surrounding the shops “kept by Tony and Mrs. Murphy, the grocer” (21). The residents in this area of Prytania Street “are fine enough to look down upon these two […] shops” (21, emphasis added); after all, theirs is “the sort of neighbourhood where millionaires live before their fortunes are made” (21-22). Although never directly involved in the narrative’s plot, these individuals, like the persons reading about them, sit back and observe the behaviors of this ragtag band of colorful characters. And finally, in a direct address to the reader that appears almost sycophantic, the narrator asserts, “you must admit that it was indeed a condescension to tolerate Tony and Mrs. Murphy” (22). The narrator strokes the ego of the readers by applauding the tolerance and patience and generosity of spirit they demonstrate in condescending, in looking down upon these people not like them. The story, however, does not reduce to just this one interpretation.

While we find numerous indications in the narrative and from the story’s historical context that an Italian immigrant was set apart from the Anglo-Saxon readers, a simultaneous linkage or affiliation of the Italian shopkeeper and the intended reader obtains as well. In some ways, Tony is the most American of all the characters in the tale—and “American,” here, signifies white. Consider, for instance, Tony’s speech. We learn
early on in the story that despite being an immigrant, Tony’s “English was unaccented” (20). Many immigrants could recount tales of stigma and handicap arising from their accented, faltering speech—this is suggested by the inferences that are possible from the little Jewish girl’s diction at the beginning of the story. Unlike her, however, Tony is, linguistically speaking, on the inside. In referring to the work of Gavin Jones, Gebhard observes that at the end of the nineteenth century, “dialects from Maine to Louisiana could be parodied or invoked to assert the cultural superiority of the white middle class” (165). By communicating in “unaccented” English, then, Tony escapes the marginalization; he is affiliated with the white readership. Furthermore, Tony’s brother John is described as being “fair and blond, with the beauty of Northern Italy” (29), so he—and his brother, by extension—approximates whiteness. Tony is also a small business owner, exemplifying that myth of entrepreneurial possibility that America has always perpetuated about itself. Furthermore, in the most incidental of details, we learn that Tony now eats red beans with his spaghetti (24). Granted, he is still eating pasta, but it is not a dish that his Italian kin would recognize. And finally, he rejects the Catholic Church as an institution belonging to the Irish Mrs. Murphy and his German companion, figures equally marked by their foreignness. In his religious and economic life, as well as in his language and cuisine, Tony has internalized the trappings of American life.

To the extent that we allow for this paradoxical reading—Tony as simultaneously immigrant and American, racially Other and white—we are left wondering about its implications. What was Dunbar-Nelson getting at with this racialized character? The most reasonable interpretation is that the not white/white Tony represents a jab at her intended readers. This maneuver is Dunbar-Nelson’s artfulness; hers is a slap the readership does not see coming. Of course, not many of Dunbar-Nelson’s readers would have understood her shifting, multi-leveled placement of Tony in turn-of-the-century America’s racial hierarchy. But for any who did, this most American of all immigrants in the story is far from sympathetic. Tony is bullying, drunken, spiteful, abusive, and niggardly. Dunbar-Nelson describes him as “communicating” with Mrs. Tony through growls and mutters. More often than not, he is pressuring her to tend to the business—his business. He beats his partner to the point where the neighborhood children see the “blue marks on her face and neck” and pity her (25). Tony even beats his partner’s mother for having too great an appetite when she comes for a brief visit (25). And in his final act of cruelty he refuses to marry the woman who all along had been presumed to be his wife. She implores him, before the priest, to let her become “a real-for-true married woman” (31), but Tony will not hear of it. His refusal, moreover, has greater significance than just Mrs. Tony’s position within the Church community; it also deprives her of any livelihood. Without being actually married to Tony, the woman has no claim to the store or Tony’s small estate. Instead, Tony’s brother John inherits them, and Mrs. Tony is left destitute and is heartlessly evicted from the shop, thereby casting an unflattering light on that “fair and blond” figure as well. While on one hand positioned as racial outsider, Tony is, on the other hand, something of a metonym for America, for white America. And in that representation, the token American is shown to be cruel, paternalistic, and exploitative, in no position to condescend to individuals who look or sound different.

In my reading of “Tony’s Wife,” I do not mean to suggest that Dunbar-Nelson had to be concerned with the issue of race merely because she was a woman of color, as if race is the only topic a black author can discuss. Her novella A Modern Undine, for instance, seems to sidestep matters of race altogether, and the work’s characters are almost raceless
cyphers, upon which the reader can project any phenotype he or she chooses. Nevertheless, that quotation by Toni Morrison near the opening of this essay does arise once again, and we are left to wonder how race operates even in something occupied with other themes. Race is an obvious concern in this particular Dunbar-Nelson short story, because “Tony’s Wife” is an artifact of American socio-historical and cultural life, where the nexus of immigration, ethnicity, and race was a site of great anxiety for white, Eastern readers. “Explicit or implicit,” Morrison observes, “the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature” (46). This Africanist presence, moreover, can be either the author herself or a shifting signifier—say, for instance, an Italian shopkeeper—the author has created. Regarding the author, we do know that matters of race and racism were subjects Dunbar-Nelson focused on throughout her career. For example, in her fiction, a story like “The Stones of the Village,” grapples with a light-skinned African-American man deciding to pass in white society. In her non-fiction, she devoted an essay, “Brass Ankles Speaks,” to hierarchies based upon skin tone within the African-American community. And her educational work, Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence, anthologizes notable rhetoric by black figures to instill in African-American youth a sense of pride in their history and community. Clearly, then, issues of race were of real interest to Alice Dunbar-Nelson. So despite the majority of critics overlooking the fact, “Tony’s Wife” is just as much about race as any other topic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NOTES

Cet article met en question la tendance critique dominante qui persiste à lire la nouvelle “Tony’s Wife” d’Alice Dunbar-Nelson comme si elle n’avait rien à voir avec la race et le racisme. En s’appuyant sur la théorie critique de race proposée par Toni Morrison dans Playing in the Dark, cet article affirme que la nouvelle de Dunbar-Nelson sur des immigrés à la Nouvelle Orléans au tournant du siècle représente la vie dans une communauté racialisée, bien que les personnages soient blancs en apparence. Pour soutenir cette affirmation, cet article place la nouvelle dans son contexte historique approprié, montrant comment des facteurs tels qu’un statut d’immigré récent ou une ethnicité non-anglo-saxonne facilement repérable auraient trouvé un écho chez les lecteurs blancs de la classe moyenne américaine à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle. L’article conclut en soulignant combien les questions de race étaient importantes pour Alice Dunbar-Nelson, en tant que femme noire américaine qui devait faire face au racisme et aux préjugés raciaux.

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