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Re-Inscribing Racial Hierarchy: White Racial Anxiety, Interracial Sexuality, and Ambiguously Raced Bodies in Kate Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby”

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Abstract: This paper explores how Kate Chopin’s short story, “Désirée’s Baby” reflects the racial anxieties of white people in the 1890s as they attempted to suppress racial equality and entrench white racial supremacy through the legalization of segregation, literary arguments against interracial sexuality, lynchings, and symbolic violence. White racial anxiety often manifested at the level of sexuality and resulted in the policing of bodies and spaces in order to prevent miscegenation. By contextualizing “Désirée’s Baby” in the physical, legal, and symbolic racial violence of the 1890s, “Re-Inscribing Racial Hierarchy” investigates how white racial anxiety manifested across a variety of spheres and led to multilateral efforts to maintain and re-inscribe White racial power and hegemony. This essay examines how racial lineage and anxiety operate in the text, reflecting the period’s fear around interracial sexuality, multiracial individuals, and the “purity” of bodies and bloodlines.

Keywords: Kate Chopin; Désirée’s Baby; race; racial ambiguity; interracial sexuality; miscegenation; 1800s

In the 1890s, attempts to entrench white racial dominance were enacted across multiple public arenas. Through legalized segregation, literary arguments against interracial sexuality, lynchings, and symbolic violence, the white ruling class sought to stabilize the racial hierarchy that gave them social power. White racial anxiety often manifested at the level of sexuality, and resulted in the policing of bodies and spaces in order to prevent miscegenation. Illustrating these dynamics, Kate Chopin’s 1893 short story “Désirée’s Baby” examines white anxiety around multiraciality and interracial sexuality, reflecting how national projects to codify racial difference on biological, social, and legal grounds played out as obsession with sexuality, bodies, and bloodlines.

“Désirée’s Baby” details the story of Armand Aubigny, a man from “one of the oldest and proudest [families] in Louisiana,” who marries Désirée, a young woman of unknown origin adopted by the Valmondé family (Chopin). Although Désirée and Armand are both white-appearing, their child appears black, and when Armand realizes this, he assumes Désirée is black, and he expels Désirée from their plantation L’Abri, leading her to take their child and disappear into the bayou. However, at the end of the text, Armand finds a letter from his mother to his father, revealing that she is black. “Désirée’s Baby” shows how white fixation on racial purity, hierarchy, and separation on biological-social grounds manifests as the policing of sexuality and women’s bodies, while also reflecting how symbolic, physical, and legal violence against black Americans on the systemic level led to violence on the interpersonal level.

Life as a black American at the end of the nineteenth century, when “Désirée’s
Baby” was published, was fraught with a variety of violences—physical, symbolic, psycho-emotional, and judicial. Enacted upon communities of color by dominant white power structures, racially-motivated violence abounded across the United States with “the 1890s witness[ing] the worst period of lynching in U. S. history” (Burned). From Henry Smith in Paris, Texas (Alexander), to Samuel J. Bush in Decatur, Illinois (Cha-jua), and others both recorded and lost to history, ritualized public executions of black Americans were frequently enacted by white mobs intending to entrench white supremacist structures and terrorize black communities. For sociologist Oliver C. Cox, “lynching serves the indispensable social function of providing the ruling class with the means of periodically reaffirming its collective sentiment of white dominance” (Cox, qtd. in Cha-jua 197). In this way, lynchings advertised white supremacy across social and legal arenas, normalizing white power and white judicial immunity—the same kind of assumed immunity Armand employs when he expels his wife and child from his estate, confident in the protection his status as a white man gives him. Lynchings not only served as acts of terrorism and reification of white dominance, but also as entertainment for white audiences, as illustrated by the lynching of Henry Smith. After his white accusers publicly tortured him, Smith “was burned alive to the jubilant shouts of the mob, who immediately purchased his bones and organs, sold as souvenirs of the event” (Alexander). The commodification of Smith’s very body reflects the intertwining of physical and symbolic violence upon black American bodies; Smith is tortured, murdered, and then sold, his body parts owned by white people in an echo of slavery. After exiling Désirée, Armand similarly makes a “spectacle” of a “great bonfire” in which he has his slaves burn the belongings of Désirée and their child, turning the aftereffects of violence into an exhibition (Chopin). The normalization of violence against black bodies in the public sphere allows for similar violence in the private sphere as well, as “Désirée’s Baby” depicts.

While Armand does not enact physical violence upon Désirée, his exiling of her after the birth of their non-white passing baby serves a similar social function to more overt kinds of racialized violence. As Armand states to Desiree, “the child is not white; it means that you are not white” (Chopin). This declaration is a precursor to Armand’s abandonment of both Desiree and their child, an action which reaffirms sentiments of white dominance. By publicly expelling Désirée from his estate and family, Armand sends the message that if one is black, they can have no place in his society, except as property. In his discussion of Samuel Bush’s lynching, Sundiata Keita Cha-jua argues that for public executions to occur, “the general conditions’ must exist that seem to justify vigilante action. Racism established such general conditions by placing African Americans outside civil society” (Cha-jua 197). Because the racist structures operating in Chopin’s story do just that, Armand easily strips Désirée of her rights, certain of his own whiteness, and the sociopolitical immunity it ensures. Furthermore, Désirée’s unknown past creates the “general conditions,” in Cha-jua’s parlance, for her expulsion. In Orlando Patterson’s Slavery and Social Death, he cites “natal alienation” as one defining element of slavery, as the enslaved person becomes a “genealogical isolate” with a past, but “not a heritage” (5). For Patterson, natal alienation is crucial to frameworks of slavery, functioning as a symbolic instrument deployed so the master may exert sociocultural control over enslaved persons. Playing out dynamics similar to those in Slavery and Social Death, Désirée’s “incapacity to make any claims of birth.”
empowers Armand to treat her as a master would treat an enslaved person once he “discovers” her blackness (Patterson 8). By constructing Désirée as nataly alienated, Chopin sets up her readers to believe Armand when he accuses Désirée of being black. Armand himself, with a name that is “of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana,” has a respected and recorded heritage, insulating him from accusation (Chopin). Both in “Désirée’s Baby” and in racial constructions in the 1890s, genealogy protects social status, and, as Patterson argues, lack of genealogy permits violence. Expelling her from shelter and her family because of her blackness, Armand leaves Désirée with very few social options and no choice but to leave L’Abri.

By refusing to allow Désirée to remain within his social circle, Armand cements the supremacy of whiteness in his consciousness and in wider society. His rejection of Désirée, motivated by racist conceptualizations of “racial purity” reflects white racial anxiety regarding interracial relationships, governed by a “unidirectional logic of racial contamination . . . [that] fueled white racist propaganda for maintaining distinct racial categories and white hegemonies: black blood, once introduced into a family line, could be diluted, but never removed” (Duvall 52). As outlined by J. Michael Duvall and Julie Cary Nerad in “Suddenly and Shockingly Black,” white racial logic declared that any black heritage would eventually reveal itself physically, no matter how “diluted” it had become. Therefore, for Armand, the multiracial appearance of his child signifies that his own bloodline has been irreparably contaminated. In Armand’s eyes, it does not matter that Désirée appears white; her black-appearing child “reveals” her “true” nature, lineage, and bloodline. Armand’s actions reveal a fundamental conundrum in the white supremacist racial logic of the late nineteenth century: race was conceptualized as biological, but phenotypic appearance was not always a reliable indicator of race, so racist structures became dependent upon racial understandings based in blood and genealogy. Because “the physical markers of race are recognized as unstable… discourses of blood emerge to vouchsafe identity; these discourses then allow, through atavism, for embodied race to return to the scene,” a move that entrenches the white supremacist narrative of unidirectional racial contamination (Duvall 53). In fiction of this period written by white people about interracial sexuality, “submerged racial features were believed to skip generations only to recur farther down the family line, rupturing a smooth hereditary narrative of blending and exposing the parent’s ‘true’ race, always black and never white” (Duvall 51). These publications served as implicit warnings against interracial relationships by presenting a reality where racial heritage will always eventually reveal itself in an embodied way—if not through the parents, then through progeny.

Additionally, literature featuring what Duvall and Nerad call atavistic children—where a black-appearing multiracial baby “reveals” the true racial identity of one of its parents—placates white fear about racial “contamination,” assuring that an interracial union will not remain hidden, but will eventually manifest itself in bodies in addition to bloodlines, as it does in “Désirée’s Baby.” Toni Morrison’s definition of fetishization illuminates nineteenth-century obsession with bodies, blood, and bloodlines, which she elucidates as “evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal. Blood for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, the purity of blood; the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex” (Morrison, qtd. in Pegues 6).
Attempting to “fix” race and make racial difference a salient form of social organization, white Americans fixated upon bloodlines manifested through bodies to structure systems of racial hierarchy (Taylor). However, interracial relationships and multiracial individuals, particularly those who were white-appearing, complicated both the systems of racial categorization and the epistemological and biological assumptions that undergirded them. Individuals like Désirée and Armand, who are white-appearing but whose child is black-appearing, challenge racial systems that rely on visual categorizations, leading racial categorization to become increasingly defined by bloodlines. In response to these complications, the white dominant culture in the 1890s strived to allay its racial anxiety by more clearly defining the categories of “white” and “black,” and the meaning of falling into either of these diametrically constructed categories. As Bridget Cooks states in her discussion of Peter Newell’s 1893 “Johnson Family” cartoons published in Harper’s Weekly, “because of anxieties about the increasing racial confusion, the visible markers of race became all the more important in the 1890s” (Cooks 440). To formalize segregation after the Reconstruction Amendments, the white dominant class constructed arguments about the supposed fundamental differences of the races both biologically and socially to justify the logic of “separate but equal” eventually made explicit in Plessy v. Ferguson.

Newell’s “Johnson Family” cartoons functioned as an implicit symbolic argument for racial separation based on behavioral-social worth, and their setting at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition is not incidental. The Exposition was a public exhibition of American national identity, progress, and power (Domosh), and “by the 1890s white Americans often defined their sense of national will, no longer seen as a legalistic entity, as the working out of the Anglo-Saxon destiny” (Silber, qtd. in Cooks 444). Newell’s cartoons depict a black family attending the Exposition, alternatively violating social norms or not appreciating the progress presented; these stereotypical popular depictions of blackness-as-unassimilated helped shape people like Armand’s perceptions of blackness, providing white people with “rationalization” for the kinds of inhuman actions that Armand takes at the end of Chopin’s story. Furthermore, Newell’s cartoons illustrate the significance of the Exposition as a symbolic arena, upon which to prop up the supremacy of whiteness:

The cartoons were part of a larger national effort to ‘fix’ unstable categories of race. . . . As illustrations of the inappropriate presence and ridiculous behaviour of African Americans, the series instructed white readers on how to be white Americans and how easily to identify behaviour that was different and essentially ‘black.’ (Cooks 436-437)

Newell’s cartoons illustrate how white society in the 1890s calcified the definition of whiteness as “not-blackness”—e.g. whiteness as civilized/blackness as uncivilized, whiteness as progress/blackness as primitive, whiteness as proper/blackness as socially unfit. Newell perpetuated racist understandings of blackness to comfort his white audience, affirming that, by virtue of their whiteness (i.e. “not-blackness”), they were adequate, functional, and good. The kind of symbolic codification project that the “Johnson Family” cartoons represent plays out on the interpersonal level in “Désirée’s Baby;” as soon as Armand associates Désirée with blackness, he speaks to her “cruelly,” looking at her with “cold eyes,” and “he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name” (Chopin). Crucially,
Armand locates the “injury” as not only coming upon his lineage, but also upon his name, reflecting how racial difference played out not only in conceptions of biology, but also in understandings of social value. Armand’s shame at Désirée’s blackness causes his love for her to evaporate, and because he now sees her as black, he does not believe she can have any place in his home, despite the fact that he had once loved her with “passion . . . like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles” (Chopin).

Armand’s previous love for Désirée and their previously happy marriage become irrelevant for him once he believes she is black. Similarly, the real actions of actual black Americans at the Exhibition, such as Frederick Douglass’s speeches on revolution and Pan-Africanism at the Haitian building, and Ida B. Wells’s activism (Mcclish), are not only conspicuously absent from, but also irrelevant to, Newell’s cartoons and other white renderings of the event. Douglass’s masterful oratory prowess, alongside his anti-racist activism at the Exposition, stand in stark contrast to Newell’s depiction of the Johnson family as unintelligent and socially unfit, revealing the contrast between white America’s perception of black Americans and reality. Armand could find no fault with Désirée prior to the birth of their non-passing child; in fact, his “dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her” (Chopin). Armand’s assumptions about what it means to be black on the biological and social levels, likely constructed and reified through the literal, legal, and symbolic violence of the period, lead him to reject her even though he knows her to be a loving wife.

Likewise, white America’s representations of blackness, intended to uphold white supremacy, ultimately had nothing to do with the reality of blackness and black people in America. In reality, Désirée has done nothing to merit her exile; only Armand’s perceptions of what it means for Désirée and their child to be black allow him to self-justify his actions based on formulations of a sociobiological racial hierarchy.

These racist social understandings based on a diametrical opposition of blackness and whiteness reflect the symbolic violence inflicted upon black Americans in order to reify racist systems, and Désirée’s exile (and presumed death) in Chopin’s short story illustrates the embodied consequences of such symbolic violence. Blackness was presented as a contaminant to be feared, propping up supremacist views of whiteness toward the end of preserving white racial, social, economic, and governmental power “in order to stabilize racial divisions and curb the potential for black social and economic mobility in a capitalist system” (Cooks 447). In particular, interracial sexuality became a site of cultural stress for white people desperate to reclaim and maintain structural supremacy. “Désirée’s Baby” reflects that cultural stress, both in the “twist” for Armand that Désirée is black, and the “twist” for the readers when Chopin reveals that it is actually Armand who is black and “belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (Chopin). Centralized around Désirée and Armand’s black-appearing child, as the title suggests, “Désirée’s Baby” illustrates the literary trend of manifesting white fear about interracial sexuality and bloodline “contamination” through children’s bodies:

The body of the atavistic child appearing at this moment specifically evinces white racism’s increasing virulence in the first decade of the twentieth century. It coincides with the reification of the color line, the peak of lynching, and the entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation, all symptoms of the peak of white anxiety
The atavistic child and the tragedy that follows its birth in “Désirée’s Baby” and similar literature in the late nineteenth century reflect fears around interracial sexuality, particularly between black men and white women. While sexual interactions between white men and black women were somewhat normalized, particularly as abusive master-slave relations (present in “Désirée’s Baby” through the implied relationship between Armand and La Blanche), relationships between black men and white women faced greater consequences in the period’s fiction. Because of racist-patriarchal constructs, “white male/black female sex . . . ultimately failed to destabilize cultural hegemonies. Not so with black male/white female sex, which whites considered much more dangerous because it disrupted the reproduction of whiteness” (Duvall 62). As Toni Morrison states, the fetishization of blood involved fetishizing the white female womb as a site where bloodlines are either “kept pure” or “contaminated.” The fear of destabilization of racial binaries located itself on the bodies of women and “it is often the woman’s body—a vessel containing potentially destructive proof of a contaminated bloodline—that has to be feared, blamed, destroyed or put out of sight in the case of its failure to maintain unambiguous lineage” (Fedosik 3). When Désirée’s lineage is “exposed” by her black child’s birth, Armand expels her and their son, putting her out of sight to hide the supposed “failure” of the racial “purity” of their bloodline. Not only Désirée’s natal alienation, but also her social positioning as a woman play into the swiftness with which Armand pinpoints her, rather than himself, as the source of racial contamination. Armand’s genealogy and heritage allow him a degree of certainty in his own racial “purity,” and his male positioning cements his power. However, the story’s ending “reverses the common narrative construct of the white male/black female coupling. Instead, the story offers us a black male/white female pairing that actually produces in very mild form an atavistic (male) child,” who represents the “threat” of the “pollution” of white bloodlines, resulting in visually non-white bodies (Duvall 56).

When contextualizing issues of race in 1893, “it is difficult to overstate the significance of white anxiety about interracial sexuality to post-Emancipation southern culture. White demands for segregated travel were largely driven by sexualized fears that “white women and black men might otherwise find themselves seated next to one another” (Litwack, qtd. in Golub 579). Undergirding these sexualized fears was the assumption that sexuality and bodies serve as primary sites by which to reproduce racial “purity;” it is not only the fact that Armand has a black wife, but also the fact that his bloodline has been “contaminated” that causes him to expel his wife and child from his estate. As the racial anxiety of the time manifested at the level of sexuality and bodies, sexuality and bodies were then racially policed in order to preserve and protect racial hierarchy, racial separation, and white supremacy. Agitation around segregated travel culminated in the 1896 landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which presented a clear judicial/legal response to white stress around interracial populations and sexuality, and when “seen as a judicial response to racial ambiguity, *Plessy* demonstrates the law’s role not only in the treatment of racial groups, but also in the construction and maintenance of racial categories” (Golub 563). As a white-appearing multiracial individual, Homer Plessy weaponized his potential to pass as white to challenge both the assumptions of racial structures and the constitutional legality of Jim Crow. His racial ambiguity challenged the binaries upholding white structures of power and was
used as a mechanism of resistance to oppressive racial conventions. Ambiguously raced bodies call into question the clear racial demarcations that the white ruling class deployed to justify *de jure* and *de facto* segregation and oppression. Similarly, Armand and Désirée’s racially ambiguous child, who Désirée only realizes is black when she sees him next to “one of La Blanche’s little quadroon boys,” calls into question the racial identity of its mother (Chopin). Even though Désirée tells Armand to “look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand,” her apparent whiteness does not matter to Armand once their child “reveals” her blackness, illustrating both the unreliability of visual embodied indicators of race (bodies) and the ways in which whiteness is about more than just physical appearance (bloodlines) (Chopin). One can interpret *Plessy* as a working out of white racial anxiety about the unreliability and instability of racial categories on the judicial/legal stage:

Reading *Plessy* as a case fundamentally about racial passing reveals the Court's deep anxiety regarding mixed-race individuals and the specter of interracial sexuality that ambiguously raced bodies necessarily signify. Within the Court's racial narrative, passing simultaneously constitutes a violation of white supremacist norms of sexual behavior and assumption of natural racial differences upon which the institutions of segregation depended. (Golub 564-565)

Although it occurred three years after the publication of “Désirée’s Baby,” *Plessy* illustrates how dominant white culture at the time viewed ambiguously raced bodies: they “threaten to disrupt ordinary assumptions of naturally distinct races and thus are met by the law as a kind of problem to be contained” (Golub 567). Furthermore, the majority decision of *Plessy*, which led to the establishment of the “separate but equal” ethos that justified Jim Crow laws far into the twentieth century, showcases how white communities utilized the legal system to resolve and legislate the strict boundaries of their racial imaginations and constructions of race in sociocultural structures.

As a purposeful attempt by Plessy to disrupt segregation and racial categories, *Plessy* reveals how some communities of color in 1896 viewed the white ruling class’s imposition of racial categorization as arbitrary, inconsistent, and oppressive. Plessy “deploy[ed] the figure of passing to call out the inherent instability of those racial categories upon which segregation depended…[and] hoped to render the racial categories demanded by segregation both practically and conceptually incoherent” (Golub 573). At the time, racial ambiguity and interracial sexuality did not threaten black communities or multiracial ones, such as New Orleans’s population of free Creole people (Anthony). Racial ambiguity and interracial sexuality threaten white dominance, and thus only present “danger” to white people who stood to lose racially privileged positioning. Just as the arbiter of who is considered white in “Désirée’s Baby” is Armand, a man who himself is assumed to be white, strict racial categorizations were primarily determined and located within white populations. Additionally, the primary sites of racial anxiety in “Désirée’s Baby” are Armand, who turns violent at the thought of having married a black woman and fathered a black baby, and Désirée, who is accused of not being white despite appearing white. Racial anxiety only appears in characters once thought of as white, and “the story urges us to consider it a pity that Desiree and Armand, brought up as white, must undergo the trauma of receiving the news that they are black. . . . The implication is that being black might deserve no particular sympathy
unless a person was once considered white” (Peel 230). La Blanche and the other people enslaved by Armand do not figure prominently in the story, except to reveal the blackness of Désirée and Armand’s child, and do not operate as sites of empathy for the reader (as Désirée does, as something of a tragic mulatta stereotype) or sites of intra-personal racial anxiety (as Désirée and Armand do).

Contextualized within the physical, symbolic, literary, and legal racial violence of the 1890s, “Désirée’s Baby” speaks to the deep racial anxieties of white people, particularly centered on interracial sexuality, multiracial individuals, and the “purity” of “bodies and bloodlines” (Taylor 16). This racial stress both stems from and makes possible the physical and legal violence that characterized the period, and Désirée and Armand’s racial fear “is clearly traceable to the convention of nineteenth-century American regionalist literature and its presentation of the white racial anxiety, which constitutes the basis of the portrayals of white supremacist violence that implicates blackness as undesirable” (Pegues 11-12). Placed in its 1893 context, “Désirée’s Baby” clearly reflects the racial climate in which it was written—one marked by white racial fear and multilateral efforts to maintain and re-inscribe white racial power and hegemony, particularly at the level of bodies and sexuality.


“Burned at the Stake: A Black Man Pays for a Town's Outrage.” *History Matters - The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, George Mason University, historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5487/.


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