Translating Chopin's Parrot: Local Color Louisiana and the Limits of Literary Interpretation, 1865-1914

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Abstract
In the aftermath of the American Civil War, national periodicals such as Harper's, The Century, and The Atlantic Monthly eagerly solicited and published literature depicting small, often isolated regional communities within the United States – literature collectively referred to as local color. This project examines a tension that exists between two conflicting impulses that drove local color writing – one that sought to participate in an ethnographic project rooted in literary realism, the other that reveled in representing local spaces as sites of ambiguity, uncertainty, illegibility, and impenetrability.

"Translating Chopin's Parrot" argues that literary historicists, drawn to the ethnographic elements of local color, often elide or fail to account for the tension that exists between these elements and those that, in accentuating indeterminacy and mystery, contest and complicate ethnography's empirical presuppositions. Unsurprisingly, this tension has led to interpretive conflicts over the most fruitful approach to reading local color literature. This project divides these conflicts into four categories – conflicts over definitions, translations, mappings, and misreadings of genre. It takes as a case study literature written about Creole and Cajun Louisiana during the heyday of local color (1865-1914) and articulates what a historicist framework can and cannot illuminate about texts by George Washington Cable, Charles Gayarré, Lafcadio Hearn, Kate Chopin, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. In doing so, it makes the larger argument that, rather than occupying a quaint and idiosyncratic niche within nineteenth-century American literature, local color grapples with significant epistemological, aesthetic, and hermeneutic questions.

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How did local color writing about the legendary West by writers such as Owen Wister, Mary Austin, and Jack London compare with native American writings by Zitkala-sa, Ohiyesa, and Sarah Winnemucca in their characters’ relationship to the land? Westerns romanticized cowboys and gold miners as they exploited the landscape; native writing sadly recorded the loss of the land to the influx of American settlers. Which African-American author and statesman did W. E. B. Du Bois criticize in The Souls of Black Folk (1907)? Booker T. Washington. Which work of nineteenth-century intellectual prose h