

Orbits of Agency: Recognizability of the 'I' in Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby"

Jasmine Shirey

We are all manacled by the social norms constituting race and gender. Even when we acknowledge that these identity signifiers are social constructs, the norms and assumptions around them have deterministic influence on our lives and identities. This is nothing new. In Kate Chopin's 1893 short story "Désirée's Baby," racial norms and assumptions determine the viability of the two main characters: Armand and Désirée.

Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" follows the story of a young woman of unknown origins. Désirée was left by the gate of the Valmondés' estate as a baby and raised by the Valmondés. Armond Aubigny, a wealthy young man in the area, falls in love with Désirée and they proceed to get married and have a baby. The birth of their child is followed by bliss, until the characters realize that the baby is 'not white.' After a period of uncertainty, during which Armand tells Désirée that their child is not white because she is not white, Désirée leaves the estate with the baby, disappearing into the nearby creek. At the end of the story, the reader is shown Armand handling a letter his mother wrote to his father. In it, Armand's mother thanks God for Armand not finding out that she "belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (Chopin, 178). Using Judith Butler's conceptions of human

‘recognizability’ and agency’s ‘conditions of possibility,’ in conversation with Abby Ferber’s understanding of ‘abject identities,’ we can analyze Armand and Désirée’s relationship as a literary case study in the construction of viable racial identity.

In her 2004 book, *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler questions what it means to have agency in a “social world I never chose” (Butler, 3). Butler explains that identity is indistinguishable from action (or ‘doing’) and therefore, “the conditions of my doing are, in part, the conditions of my existence” (Butler, 3). These ‘conditions’ are key. The paradox of agency, in Butler’s view, rests on the idea that we must push back against the very conditions, or social norms, that constitute us. Social norms can confer or withhold the recognition necessary to be ‘legible’ as human, so the relationship between agency and social norms is paramount to having what Butler calls a “viable life” (Butler, 2). Agency, or the ability to have a persistent ‘I,’ depends on our ability to “do something” with the social norms that simultaneously constitute us and construct the larger social order (Butler, 3). This doesn’t mean that having agency allows us to completely ‘remake’ social norms. Rather, it means that to have agency, we must be “at once constituted by the norms and dependent on them but also [endeavoring] to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them” (Butler, 3).

In “Désirée’s Baby,” Armand Aubigny’s proposal to Désirée demonstrates both the constituting power of social norms and the capacity to uphold a ‘transformative relation to them’ as described by Butler. When Armand “was reminded that she was nameless,” the reader is told, “what did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana” (Chopin, 173). With this ‘gift,’ Armand contrasts the confining and constituting nature of societal standards regarding family names with his ability to ‘do something’ with this norm. As an established name, ‘Aubigny’ conferred recognition to its owners. As one of the ‘oldest’ and ‘proudest’ in ‘Louisiana,’ the recognition that comes with the name is immediately associated with slavery, and by extension, whiteness. African chattel slavery was a bedrock of Louisiana since the seventeenth century when the territory was still under French rule, and it had only become more ingrained by the nineteenth century. The Aubigny family’s relationship with slavery is solidified on the next page when we are told that Armand’s “rule” over “his negroes” is considered “strict” compared to his father’s — “the old master’s” — before him

(Chopin, 174). By 'giving' the Aubigny name to Désirée, Armand is working within the social norms of the time to solidify Désirée's position into the white 'master' class.

Butler's ideas about recognition and human legibility informed Abby Ferber's work on the intersecting and mutually constructing natures of gender, race, and sexuality. In "Keeping Sex in Bounds: Sexuality and the (De) Construction of Race and Gender," Ferber describes how certain individuals are comprehensible, or "culturally intelligible," to others and some are not (Ferber, 138). Examples that Ferber gives of 'unintelligible' or "abject" identities include "homosexuals, intersexuals, transgendered people, and mixed-race people" (Ferber, 138). Ferber claims that individuals who are not intelligible or recognizable are nevertheless vital to the construction of "normal subjectivity," in part since 'normal subjectivity' can use them to claim what it is not (Ferber, 138). These 'abject identities' are, in Ferber's view, simultaneously attacked and central to the definition of the fictional 'normal' that is used to exclude them (Ferber, 138).¹

However, a tension arises in Ferber's text when she turns to the historical processes of delineating "who was white and who was black" (Ferber, 138). She writes that the birth of mixed-race people "represented boundary crossings that were widely perceived as threatening to otherwise stable racial boundaries" (Ferber, 139). So, in Ferber's view, 'mixed-race' people are simultaneously central to the definition of normal racial subjectivity and a threat to otherwise stable racial boundaries. More than a mistake or inconsistency on Ferber's part, this tension speaks to the instability of race as an identity category. While in theory the 'abject identity' of multiracial individuals helps define the 'normal' subjectivity of 'white' and 'Black,' in practice it 'threatens' racial boundaries that were assumed to be stable.

Ferber's analysis of 'abject' and 'recognizable' identities demonstrates the significance of Armand and Désirée's union. With the introduction of Armand and

¹ It is worth pointing out that this process works a little differently for the construction of 'normal subjectivity' of sexuality than it does for the 'normal subjectivity' of race. While heterosexuality can define itself as the single norm in opposition to homosexuality (what it is 'not'), normal racial subjectivity can be either white or Black in this sense, and both can define themselves by what they are not ('mixed-race'). Being under the umbrella of 'normal subjectivity' or being 'recognizable' in this sense does not mean equal: in this case both whiteness and Blackness are recognized, but Ferber would not claim they are treated equally by society. A similar argument could be used for sexuality if the 'abject identity' were bisexuality rather than homosexuality, however, this is not the route that Ferber goes.

Désirée's 'nonwhite' child, we have a crisis of 'abject identity' — precariously situated within their child, their relationship, and themselves. While the reader can see that it is their relationship that is 'unintelligible' — demonstrated by two presumably white parents giving birth to a nonwhite child — in practice, this is an even less stable concept than the idea of having one of them be racially 'unintelligible.'

This precarity is demonstrated through Armand and Désirée's pivotal exchange about their child's race. When Désirée motions to their child and asks, "What does it mean?" Armand says, "It means [...] that the child is not white; it means that you are not white," to which Désirée responds "I am white! [...] look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand" (Chopin, 176). As Armand and Désirée dispute the colors of their skin, the unintelligibility of their relationship oscillates. As Désirée is of unknown origins, unintelligibly is ultimately shifted onto her.

It is not a coincidence that as the reader realizes that the child is 'not white' — and as this oscillation of unintelligibility happens between Armand and Désirée — the text makes a shift from referring to the child only as "the baby" (Chopin, 173, 174) or "his son" (Chopin, 175), to, most frequently, "her child" (Chopin, 175, 176, 177). This emphasis on the child's parentage is arguably most obvious in the title of the story: "*Désirée's Baby*" (emphasis added). Through this possessive language, the text stresses the need to have the child's race be the result of one 'racially unintelligible' parent rather than a 'racially unintelligible' relationship.

Armand's opening act in giving Désirée the Aubigny name returns when Chopin tells us "he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name" (Chopin, 177). We can see that Armand's attempt to 'do something' with the social norm of family names can only go so far. Armand could push on this social norm to a certain extent — extending the family name to a presumably white person with unknown origins — but he could not 'remake the world' such that her newly presumed nonwhite race, and the visibly nonwhite race of their child, did not matter. Armand's act of revocation helps him maintain his social standing and recognizability while Désirée is shouldered with an 'abject identity.'

After Butler describes how paradox is “the condition of [agency’s] possibility,” they² go on to explain how this setup can make the ‘I’ “unknowable” (Butler, 3). When this happens, according to Butler, the ‘I’ is “threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this ‘I’ fully recognizable” (Butler, 3). One way we can understand the dialectic that the ‘I’ arises out of is through the image of orbits. The individual can maintain their recognizability, or their orbit, assuming the relationship between their agency, or forward motion, and the ‘gravitational pull’ of social norms is in equilibrium. As soon as the gravitational pull is too strong or weak, or the forward motion is impeded, the orbit becomes unviable.

This analogy isn’t perfect; doing something with the social norms we are given or ‘maintaining a critical and transformative relation’ to the norms is active, while the forward motion of planets in orbit is passive. Regardless, the image of unique orbits depending on the equilibrium of gravity and forward motion for viability is helpful to understand both how agency is constituted by seemingly oppositional forces in Butler’s view, and how the ‘I’ can become ‘undone altogether.’

With Armand and Désirée, we see two extreme ways that this threat of unviability can play out: doubling down on constitution by social norms and ceasing to exist. While Armand uses his social position as the son of an established and influential family to capitalize on his assumed whiteness, Désirée is forced out of orbit. After her conversation with Armand, Désirée is no longer able to incorporate the social norms around race in a way that would make her recognizable to herself. She writes to her adoptive mother, saying “Armand has told me I am not white. For God’s sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true” (Chopin, 176). When Madame Valmondé fails to tell Désirée that she is white, Madame Valmondé does not provide the social gravity Désirée seeks and Désirée begins to lose orbit.

Désirée seeks Armand’s help in pulling her back, but he tells her to leave L’Abri, solidifying for her that she is not recognizable in her attempts to incorporate the social norm of race into her identity (Chopin, 177). As her identity becomes undone, Désirée’s character is no longer viable, resulting in her disappearance into the “banks of the deep, sluggish bayou” never to come back again (Chopin, 177).

² Pronoun aligns with preferences expressed by Butler in a 2021 interview with Jules Gleeson.

Whether Désirée commits suicide and infanticide is not explicitly stated by Chopin, but it isn't necessary for this reading of unviability. Désirée ceases to exist, for L'Abri and for the reader: there is no longer the possibility for her persistence as a recognizable 'I.'

On the final page of "Désirée's Baby" the reader discovers that Armand's mother "belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (Chopin, 178). However, this doesn't create a crisis of orbit in the story. There are numerous possibilities for why this is, but by using Butler's analysis of social norms and agency, we can see that they all have one thing in common: Armand was able to be constituted by the social norms that portrayed him as white and maintain a transformative relation to them. Armand's name and the community's silence on the mere possibility that he might not be white are norms that constitute his identity and secure his recognizability. His silence on his ancestry and his insistence that Désirée is not white are steps he takes with what is 'done to' him by social norms, both of which help ensure he maintains his legibility. This isn't to give Armand more credit as a character than Désirée. If "Désirée's Baby" shows us anything about race and identity, it is that one's ability to remain 'in orbit' often relies much less on personal strength than it does on what specific social or racial norms constitute your identity and what avenues you have to 'do something' with those norms.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. "Introduction: Acting in Concert." *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, New York, NY, 2004, pp. 1–16.
- Chopin, Kate. "Désirée's Baby." *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin*, edited by Barbara H. Solomon, New American Library, New York, NY, 1976, pp. 173–178.
- Ferber, Abby L., et al. "Keeping Sex in Bounds: Sexuality and the (De) Construction of Race and Gender." *Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: The New Basics*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009, pp. 136–142.
- Gleeson, Jules. "Judith Butler: 'We Need to Rethink the Category of Woman'" *The Guardian*, 7 Sept. 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/sep/07/judith-butler-interview-gender>.