

A WALK THROUGH THE QUIET STREETS AT MIDNIGHT:  
GENDER, RACE AND THE NEW WOMAN  
IN THE SHORT STORIES OF KATE CHOPIN

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## ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Letters Dissertation by

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This dissertation explores the intersections of race, ethnicity and gender in the construction of Kate Chopin's 'New Woman' across her short stories. Spurred by Toni Morrison's call to examine that which exists in the shadows of America's literary canon, the project applies a feminist lens to understand the ways in which Chopin's protagonists navigate a transforming post-Civil War world in search for freedom and identity. Through the analysis of twenty-nine short stories, the dissertation identifies four core methods Chopin employs to establish her New Woman. First, Chopin reinforces racial essentialism in order to establish an 'other' against which white women measure and define their own subjectivity. Secondly, Chopin depicts the Civil War's crisis in masculinity via men ill-equipped to face a new and changing world, which establishes their institutions, including marriage, as inadequate. Additionally, Chopin defines white female empowerment using diction reflective of the slavery system, conveying women's rejection of paternalism and, consequently, white women's dissociation with Blackness. Lastly, Chopin creates female characters whose private lives remain inaccessible to men, outwardly performing gender as a means of survival but inwardly curating unknowable intimate lives associated with whiteness. Through these methods, Chopin portrays female characters who exert power and autonomy precisely because they demonstrate separation

from enslavers' ethos and language, while simultaneously leveraging their own racial privilege to pursue that very freedom.

## DEDICATION

To Timothy Paul and Beatrix Lola,

you may have been too young to understand all of the hours I spent reading and writing,  
but I hope one day you will reach for your own stars, run toward them with all of your  
being and nurture them as long as your passion carries.

I love you so very much.

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I want to thank my students, who inquired periodically about this project, and in doing so, kept me honest! Thank you for inspiring and pushing me and allowing me the space to be a creative educator on my own terms. I'm so proud of you all.

Without the support of my family, this project would still be a dream. My parents, Andrew and Mary Ellen Salthouse, have encouraged my curiosity and questioning from day one, and beyond supporting my formal education, have also been absolutely essential in providing the childcare support required to pursue this project in the first place. Thank you so much for your care of Timmy and Trixie during the six years of my doctoral program. To my sister Marie Salthouse, who has always encouraged my intellectual exploration and graciously provided careful feedback on my draft, thank you so much for your support. To my husband and partner Matthew Dalmedo, you believe in this project because you believe in me, and that makes all the difference in the world to do what I do. Thank you so much for your love, support, knowledge, understanding and humor! I love you so much. And lastly, thank you to Timmy and Trixie. Your love sustains me.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### PROJECT ORIGINS, QUESTIONS AND CLAIMS

This dissertation, an exploration of Kate Chopin’s portfolio of short stories, nearly thirty of which receive attention here, was born from over twenty-five years of admiration for the writer who awakened me to alternative narratives concerning gender, marriage, motherhood, identity and the art of living. *The Awakening*—the novel that continues to singularly define Chopin for most readers—sparked a slow but steady breeze of possibility across my adolescent mind, at times billowing and sometimes nearly hushed. The confident stride of Edna Pontellier across the beach, down the street, into the ocean: all were alien states of being to my suburban New Jersey upbringing yet somehow felt strangely clear. Over the years, they percolated, intermingling as I developed the tools and language to understand the circumstances at play within Edna’s world. As I grew through undergraduate and graduate degrees in English, women’s and gender studies, and psychology, my questions regarding the connections between the personal and the political, the social and the psychological, only grew. Literature and analyses by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Maya Angelou, Margaret Atwood, Jane Austen, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Sandra Cisneros, Lucille Clifton, Paulo Coelho, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Joan Didion, Michel Foucault, Roxane Gay, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Zora Neale Hurston, Jhumpa Lahiri, Toni Morrison, Mary Oliver, George Orwell, Ezra Pound, William Shakespeare, Elie Wiesel, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf and Iris Marion Young fundamentally challenged and reshaped my worldview. Reading Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* in particular transformed my critical eye; her

argument against the homogeneity of sisterhood assumed by white women (Lorde 116) challenged me to revisit those white-centric feminist texts that so shaped my earlier years.

Thus, when given the opportunity to explore literature in a long-term, in-depth project, I returned to Chopin, this time to the entirety of her canon, examining what I read under the fine-tooth comb of the feminist theory, especially intersectionality, developed years earlier. As I worked on this project from 2022-2024, Chopin's *The Awakening* continued to receive widespread scholarly attention for its role in giving voice to first-wave feminist concerns and as the work that most definitively positions Chopin as a touchstone of American literature over a century after its publication and after decades of Chopin scholarship. Today, *The Awakening* and a small selection of short stories, namely "Désirée's Baby" and "The Story of an Hour," dominate scholarly articles. Yet to narrow Chopin to this singular novel and short list of stories erases the complexity and totality of her work, which saw her publish two novels and write approximately one hundred short stories, all as a single, widowed mother of six children whose husband had left her in significant debt in the late-nineteenth-century South. Her creative output given these circumstances alone speaks to Chopin's remarkable tenacity and storytelling capacity.

Indeed, when one reads the entirety of her work, which I did in the spring of 2022, knowing she deserved a deeper examination past that famous novel, I was struck by what I found: beyond Edna Pontellier, there exists whole communities of characters that suggest nuanced, intricate relationships and ways of being marked by equally intricate social, political and racial codes. Presented with the opportunity to pursue in-depth scholarship on the woman who helped spark my love of feminist literature, I pursue this dissertation with the goal of bringing attention to the oft-overlooked short stories that

constitute the majority of Chopin's canon. Heavily influenced by Toni Morrison's assertion in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* of "the interdependent working of power, race, and sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence" (Morrison, *Playing*, 20), I have refined my scholarly questions as follows: across the totality of Chopin's work, who is her New Woman? What do Chopin's short stories do with race, and how does racial othering construct her New Woman? What rewards are associated with white women's distancing from Civil War-era white masculinity? And what does it mean to be a 'feminist' author when such progressivism hinges on the subjugation of others?

Building upon the work of Chopin scholars and applying feminist and critical race theory, I argue that her New Woman's empowerment depends upon identifying herself in opposition to the paternalism that structured Southern culture as well as a subjugated Black woman. I contend that her existence as a presumed white woman hinges upon, and is rewarded by, her distancing from Blackness and the legacy of the Southern slave experience. Her power exists precisely because of her ability to establish ownership over her body and demonstrate separation from post-Civil War disenfranchised African Americans and disillusioned white men. Her action and language establish clear separation from conceptions of enslavement.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In the spring of 2022, as I embarked on this project, I read the entirety of Chopin's work as published in the 2002 Library of America collection edited by Sandra Gilbert. Alongside this reading, I dove into the seminal work of foundational Chopin

scholars Per Seyersted and Emily Toth, widely accepted to have published the key Chopin biographies. Their work helped me contextualize the artist behind the words, which deepened as I continued down the rabbit hole of contemporary Chopin research, including that by Joyce Dyer, Anna Elfenbein, Barbara Ewell, Bernard Koloski, Kate O'Donoghue, Heather Ostman, Bonnie James Shaker and Helen Taylor, among many others. The last several decades have seen sustained critical attention on Chopin's work, perhaps mirroring the establishment of the Kate Chopin International Society, the website of which many of the aforementioned scholars meticulously maintain. The society's twentieth anniversary remarks reflect the richness of its community, depth of critical attention and level of personal investment by scholars. As Heather Ostman states as she opens her reflection, "Kate Chopin's work has changed my life" (Ostman, Commentary).

Despite the amount of scholarship on Chopin, however, I found that both classroom and scholarly attention had to expand. Gilbert's edited collection includes ninety-nine short stories, but, having worked in education for nearly two decades, I could still count on one hand the number of works by Chopin seriously studied in American classrooms. Anthologies that include ranges of short stories by Ray Bradbury, Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Allen Poe, for example, regularly circulated in the high-achieving middle and high schools around my New Jersey home. Yet covering *The Awakening* or perhaps "The Story of an Hour" ticks the box of 'reading' Chopin for most secondary English students. Such an act not only limits the opportunity to engage with the majority of Chopin's writing, but reinforces Sandra Gunning's argument that "the traditional implication of white feminist critics and others of the term *woman writer* renders economic, racial, ethnic, and regional distinctions subordinate to gender, masking the

unavoidable convergence of all five categories and severely limiting fuller critical discussion of Chopin and other white female writers within American literature” (Gunning, *Race*, 112). In my research, I was still struck by the lack of conversations on stories I found complex, invigorating, and representative of Chopin’s range. Several times during the course of this project I found myself with little or no material—perhaps one or two articles, decades old—mentioning a given story.

Thus, I began methodical reading, carefully annotating and grouping each of those ninety-nine stories. I analyzed each work for depictions and thematic explorations of gender and race, stylistic sophistication, and the degree to which the work seemed to represent or stray from Chopin’s body of work as a whole. From there, I identified and categorized works based on how they contributed to Chopin’s ‘New Woman’ vision, and the relationship between this woman and a given story’s narrative. I noted patterns and discrepancies in regards to such topics as overall plot, theme, point of view, voice, tone, definitions of gender, portrayals of ethnicity, bodily autonomy, relationships, class, Southern identity, freedom, sexuality, spirituality, trauma, vengeance, loyalty, community, family, and power—at times with difficulty, as Chopin’s layered, nuanced stories often defy stark categorization. In identifying patterns among her stories as it relates to building the New Woman, I began grouping stories that I felt clearly conversed with one another, yet as my research continued and my writing began, these groups remained fluid as my own analysis took shape. Ultimately, I chose approximately two dozen short stories, grouped into clusters of 3-5 to use as case studies in evaluating those elements key to constructing and interpreting Chopin’s New Woman. Such patterns illuminate the New Woman’s status not as an isolated entity developing independently,

but as one fully situated in a dynamic, evolving intersection. Additionally, my analysis considers several areas of secondary source material: nineteenth-century reviews of Chopin's publications by her contemporaries; literary scholarship on Chopin, particularly from the last few decades; and historical materials regarding the sociopolitical context under which Chopin wrote, especially regarding regional racial hierarchies and evolving gender norms. The project also applies the theoretical lenses of late-twentieth and twenty-first century scholars, notably Toni Morrison and Joyce Dyer as well as feminist theorists such as Maria Tatar, Nina Auerbach, Sandra Gilbert and Clarissa Pinkola Estés. Synthesizing theory, history and textual analysis illuminates clear narrative patterns that build nuanced depictions of the Southern woman that simultaneously challenge and reinforce particular narratives of gender and race.

## **CHAPTER ORGANIZATION**

The resulting chapters in this dissertation develop one of many possible conversations around Chopin's short stories, race, gender and freedom, built on earlier, more focused conversations typically encompassing a few stories at a time. I situate my project within this existing scholarship with my first chapter, a literature review of key work on Kate Chopin, including the notable biographies by Per Seyersted (1969) and Emily Toth (1999). The Toth and Seyersted biographies remain pertinent in part due to their attention to a wider range of Chopin's writings alongside contextual biographical information. Furthermore, I review core relevant texts in feminist theory investigating gender performance and the body as culturally situated; Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), for instance, builds on Michel Foucault's work on gender as dependent upon and

a result of judicial systems of power, therefore questioning the ‘naturalness’ of women’s place in the domestic sphere, providing rich opportunity for revisiting the Victorian-era models of family and social life. I likewise consider scholarship in Black feminism, intersectionality and race in American literature—particularly that by Toni Morrison, who suggests that the portrayal of the Africanist other in much of American literature “is an astonishing revelation of long, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity” (Morrison, *Playing*, 17), reflecting fundamental projections of white anxiety. Morrison’s call for scholars to reevaluate white writers’ treatment of race indeed shapes more recent scholarship concerning *The Awakening* and the most popular short stories. My work is both inspired by and continues the work of, among others, Joyce Dyer, who argues that Black “repression plays a forceful role in the formation of Edna’s character and in Chopin’s final years of artistry” (J. Dyer, “Reading,” 139).

Chapter 3, “Race, Ethnicity, Hierarchy,” opens with pertinent biographical information on Chopin alongside a survey of the sociopolitical landscape in which she grew and wrote. Challenging the “local colorist” label many applied to Chopin as a writer, the chapter examines how racial categorization fundamentally builds her fictional worlds. Chopin reinforces racial essentialism while also depicting complicated, boundary-pushing relationships between members of varying ethnic backgrounds, suggesting a tense post-war Southern world in a state of transformation yet ambiguity. The chapter examines how Chopin builds her enslaved characters and/or characters of color through conceptions of madness, ignorance, romanticized segregation, distrust and the shame white characters feel when they support characters of color. Against these backdrops, Chopin suggests an ‘other’ defined against the relative agency of white

women seeking and practicing a degree of autonomy allowed by such otherness. This chapter opens the larger discussions of the dissertation in order to establish certain racial and ethnic codes at play, through which later chapters focused specifically on gender operate.

In the next section, “Masculine Bewilderment and White Man’s Loss of Control,” I argue that the Civil War led to a crisis in masculine identity that essentially changed how individuals saw themselves and one another and ushered in an evolution concerning gender, freedom and control. Within this context of transformation, Chopin depicts male characters at odds with themselves and others as they make sense of a new world order in which previous codes of conduct no longer function. Her male characters believe they can face this alien world through, to use the words of Iris Marion Young, a form of “masculinist protection” (Young), but their realizations that such tools are inadequate or even irrelevant lead to even deeper levels of terror and turmoil. These conflicts become all the more real against the activities of Chopin’s women, who defy these older power systems. Through explorations of men’s loss of access to resources and women, the exposure of marriage as inadequate for female fulfillment, and the self-condemning effects of white male supremacy, her works suggest a world positioned for change.

Chapter 5, “Marriage, Maternity and Freedom,” examines Chopin’s treatment of women’s roles in the domestic sphere in the context of the evolving late-nineteenth-century narratives of the New Woman, which had not only gender but racial components. I argue that Chopin frames her depictions of empowered white females in terms of a freedom defined by the context of slavery. Her women reject paternalism and in so doing must disassociate themselves from any identity or cultural experience similarly associated



with the slavery system. The chapter outlines the narratives of paternalism and authority as well as the rules of respectability that women navigate in performing virtue and enacting agency. I analyze in particular Chopin's use of "mastery" and "slavery" language to both define white women's experience of marital despair and suggest their experiences are akin to slavery while still benefiting from the structures that allow them to leave. I argue that Chopin conveys her characters with complex nuance yet suggests they must reject the Blackness they associate with slavery and traditional marriage.

Finally, I turn attention to "White Sexuality and Bodily Autonomy." I explore how Chopin's female protagonists navigate the tensions between their sexual agency and the burdens of institutions, buoyed, in part, by racial privilege. The chapter highlights how characters outwardly maintain a thin line of respectability that does not necessarily reflect their actual personal desires and pursue opportunities for intimacy in sometimes unexpected spaces. In essence, building from Butler's work, these women perform gender as a social survival tool but curate vibrant, private interior lives inaccessible to their male counterparts. By associating many of her protagonist's pursuits with whiteness, Chopin also, however, reinforces cultural codes regarding race and sexuality, marking the sexual agency of some women as more favorable than that of others, thereby identifying her New Woman as both self-deterministic and white.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS**

My love of and respect for Kate Chopin as a writer began in high school and so at minimum, I hope to inspire current and future Chopin readers to turn their attention to lesser-read works, for they are as rich in imagination and meaning as the tale of Edna

Pontellier. They deserve such attention for the nuance they offer regarding subjectivity, silence and the quest for power—universal issues still at the fore of academic, cultural and political debates today. Chopin herself envisioned a life practicing such agency and filled with self-determination and joy. In a diary entry dated June 2, 1894, Chopin reflected, in her trademark ambiguous way, that such living is possible: “There are a few good things in life—not many, but a few. A soft, firm, magnetic sympathetic hand clasp is one. A walk through the quiet streets at midnight is another. And then, there are so many ways of saying good night!” (Chopin qtd. in Toth and Seyersted 186). I titled my dissertation after this particular entry to never forget Chopin’s vision, no matter how isolating it can be or feel, as well as to emphasize the quiet, the silences at play that make such an experience happen. Chopin’s works consistently depict women striving for joy among the ordinary and extraordinary circumstances of life, an experience Chopin could undoubtedly understand as a young, widowed mother faced with significant debt. In the quiet stillness, a young mother can think, can do, can breathe in a way she may not be able to elsewhere, yet in that quiet stillness there exists a lack. What can we listen for? Who can we ask? What do they say?

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison explores an American literary tradition in which “regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white” (Morrison, *Playing*, xii). Kate Chopin, whose *Awakening* remains a classic American feminist text, holds a precarious position among scholars in regards to her own depictions of race. In her Pulitzer Prize-nominated biography *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, Emily Toth provides a sympathetic perspective, arguing that as a member of the last generation raised by enslaved women, Chopin held a unique position

in seeing Black women's points of view, including in moments of silence: "white people could not know what a black woman might be thinking" (Toth, *Unveiling*, 12). This may be true, but it also does not mean that a white woman could possibly understand the totality of Black women's experiences. Building on Dyer's arguments on *The Awakening*, my dissertation responds to her concluding note that "this is only the beginning," that other Chopin works await exploration of the "vital" Blackness that "lives powerfully at the center of the white imagination" (J. Dyer, "Reading," 153), and seeks to contribute to this ongoing debate concerning the nature of Chopin's treatment of race, and gender, as reflected through the white protagonist. By examining such codes and systems, this project contributes to ongoing revisions of the 'masters' of American literature and brings further clarity over the definition of the American woman.

## CHAPTER TWO: CHOPIN SCHOLARSHIP AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

Multiple and wide-ranging bodies of knowledge inform this project, not the least of which is the rich, ever-beating scholarship of generations of Chopin readers. Indeed, conversations on Chopin's work show no signs of slowing down, offering opportunities for varied, complex inquiries yet posing challenges due to their sheer volume. The literature review below thus conveys one considered pathway into such existing and evolving conversations.

### FOUNDATIONAL CHOPIN SCHOLARSHIP

In the years following Kate Chopin's publication of *The Awakening* in 1899 and her death in August 1904, Chopin fell out of the public eye, due in part to the mixed—and at times harsh—criticism she received for that novel. The *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* referred to *The Awakening* as “not a healthy book” with its characters unable to earn “admiration or sympathy”: “It is a morbid book, and the thought suggests itself that the author herself would probably like nothing better than to ‘tear it to pieces’ by criticism if only some other person had written it” (“Notes from Bookland,” 5). This “decidedly unpleasant study...not really worth telling” (“Novels and Tales,” 314) appeared to doom Chopin to obscurity.

That is until Daniel S. Rankin published the first book-length biography of Chopin in 1932. Rankin, a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania, recognized Chopin's work as “the art of genius” and situated her as a regionalist (Rankin 5), a label later scholars would widely dispute as limiting. Rankin's work itself would later fall into

obscurity, rarely referenced by today's scholars. The current body of scholarship regarding Chopin emerged after the late 1960s, when her work was 'rediscovered' by Per Seyersted, a Norwegian graduate student at Harvard University, who was encouraged to read *The Awakening* at just the moment when the American feminist movement gained traction. Seyersted's 1969 biography remains the starting point of contemporary Chopin work. At the time of the biography's publication, Chopin remained mostly in the shadows of the American literary canon, acknowledged only occasionally within anthologies. Seyersted builds his accounts from a wealth of sources, including Chopin's own letters and diaries, reviews, interviews with immediate family members, manuscripts, historical documents, and, to a lesser degree, Rankin's first biography, for which Rankin had saved her manuscripts and interviewed her immediate contacts. Significant early biographical information gleaned from Rankin should be read, however, with a healthy level of skepticism and with the knowledge that his "complete set of notes for his sparingly annotated book was accidentally lost, and that a considerable part of his material is beyond checking" (Seyersted 10-11). This includes information regarding Kate and her husband Oscar's upbringings, both of which took place within households supportive of the Confederacy.

Preeminent Chopin scholar Emily Toth, whose two Chopin biographies provided arguably the largest steps forward in Chopin research since Seyersted's biography, offers a much more cutting critique of Rankin's work as based on "questionable conduct" gleaned from someone who made "arbitrary and unilateral" decisions against the Chopin children in regards to their mother's private papers, some of which were remarkably discovered in an abandoned Massachusetts warehouse in 1992. Linda and Robert

Marhefka had purchased a building in Worcester, Massachusetts, as an investment and upon cleaning out abandoned contents, came upon manuscripts, letters and other fragments that Rankin had apparently borrowed from the Chopin children and never returned (Toth and Seyersted 133-34). Those since-named Rankin-Marhefka Fragments, later returned to the Missouri Historical Society and published by Seyersted and Toth in their *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* (1998), include valuable insights into Chopin and her writing process, such as two previously unknown stories, which Seyersted and Toth named "Melancholy" and "Doralise." "Melancholy," for example, anticipates the maladapted and dissatisfied men of several Chopin stories in which male characters, left alone, seem utterly helpless (274). Additionally, while Chopin and her friends also claimed that she produced her writing in bursts of inspiration, in one sitting and largely unchanged from initial draft to the final version sent to editors, the Rankin-Marhefka Fragments also suggest otherwise (245).

Seyersted's biography offers the first thorough documentation of Chopin's lifespan. Born Katherine O'Flaherty, Kate grew up in a French Creole household: her father Thomas, an Irish immigrant, ran several successful businesses in St. Louis, while her mother Eliza's French bloodline had arrived to the U.S. many generations ago. Eliza would, unfortunately, continue her own mother's experience as a young widow (which would be shared by both Kate and her own daughter), as Thomas was killed in a train accident when Kate was only four. Seyersted paints a childhood framed by several core experiences that would later inform Kate's literary themes: the sorrow of family loss buoyed by Catholicism and storytelling; the abolitionist tensions seen in St. Louis and elsewhere during the mid-nineteenth century; and the emerging awareness within Chopin

of women's independence and self-reliance. She read widely, including Darwin and especially Maupassant, preferring to read German and French authors without translation.

Despite the detail with which Seyersted presents Chopin's writing life, he spends brief time on the role of race in her stories, nevertheless presenting support for her portrayals and explorations of race. He suggests Chopin as having a sympathetic view of Black Americans, if not a "remarkable" presentation of race on her part, explaining that "she accepted the colored people as persons worthy of serious study, and...in her writings treats them as people and with little condescension" (Seyersted 79). While it was clearly impossible for her to fully understand the Black experience, Seyersted evaluates that her "limited" portrayal of Black characters and Black life is nevertheless "truthful as far as it goes" (79), yet simultaneously admits that when it came to the trope of the "faithful" Black slave, Chopin "occasionally falls into the sentimental or melodramatic when idealizing him" (79). He claims that within her standard focus on individual experience, she refrained from moral judgment or taking sides on issues such as segregation (93).

Seyersted spends ample time, however, presenting Chopin's development writing on the female experience, characterizing her major theme as "woman's spiritual emancipation...in connection with her men and her career" (Seyersted 108), which parallels her work building toward women's sexual assertiveness. By the time she began work on *The Awakening* in the summer of 1897, Chopin had established her writing voice as amoral, rarely entering the minds of the characters but rather hinging stories on the power of suggestion and detail. Seyersted sees *The Awakening's* Edna Pontellier as existing between the demands of motherhood and the calling of one's spirit, with Edna's suicide as the path toward freedom that does not threaten domestic duties (146). For

Seyersted, Chopin's lasting achievement exists in her ability to "write on the two sexes with a large degree of detachment and objectivity" (169), a feat that went largely unacknowledged for decades.

He writes that at the time of her death in 1904, Chopin was "practically forgotten" (Seyersted 186), *The Awakening* having received largely critical reviews over its adultery and perceived vulgarity. Examinations of American literature anthologies through the late 1950s yield little scholarship on Chopin, often categorized solely as a local colorist—a label Seyersted finds too limiting. Seyersted claims, however, that Chopin should be viewed for her groundbreaking work presenting women's sexuality as a subject worthy of serious writing: "She was something of a pioneer in the amoral treatment of sexuality, of divorce, and of woman's urge for an existential authenticity" (198), with a desire solely to present women's sexuality in its truth, rather than to apply any ethical judgment. Seyersted believes that, if the world were ready for it, *The Awakening* would have only been the beginning of this exploration.

Seyersted's biography, paired with his *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, reintroduced the world to Chopin and her stories, and ushered in the beginning of serious Chopin scholarship. Emily Toth, preeminent Chopin scholar, writes in her 1990 biography *Kate Chopin* that as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University in 1970, she had never heard of Chopin. When she later began her own dissertation on Chopin, only one other dissertation on the author had ever been written; by the time she finished, there were nearly a dozen on the topic (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 9). Indeed, Robert D. Arner, Joyce Dyer, Bernard Koloski and Peggy Skaggs, among others, established the early



conversations in the 1970s on Chopin's exploration of identity politics and woman's quest for freedom with which this project engages.

Toth would spend the next decades contributing significant scholarship, including editing *The Kate Chopin Newsletter*, co-editing with Seyersted *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* and writing the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (1999), all of which aimed to answer the question of Chopin's incredible insight concerning gender and self-fulfillment: "How *had* Kate Chopin known all that in 1899?" (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 9). Building on Seyersted's work, Toth explores several key biographical experiences that all seemingly contribute to the literary imagination of a writer acutely aware of white women's experiences and the desire to do and live *more*. Madame Victoire Verdon Charleville, Kate's great-grandmother, introduced her to the power of storytelling, often sharing tales of her contemporaries, including those involving adultery, that "suggest a realistic, if not amoral, attitudes" that conveyed women as "torn between morality and freedom, convention and desire" (38-39). Toth argues that Charleville's stories showed the young Kate the power of suggestion, implication and small detail. To this day, Toth and Seyersted's early work remain key in conversations regarding what Chopin explored and, in particular, who she was.

## **THE NEXT GENERATION OF CHOPIN SCHOLARSHIP**

The second wave of feminism in the 1960s propelled reinvestigations of female artists, and in the case of Kate Chopin, this scholarship has remained vigorous since that time. The majority of this work centers around gender, female agency, motherhood and independence, especially in regards to *The Awakening*, but "The Storm," "A Pair of Silk

Stockings,” and, in particular, “The Story of an Hour” and “Désirée’s Baby” continue to receive scholarly attention due to their depth of character, thematic alignments with *The Awakening*, opportunity for varying interpretation and quality of writing. As Johanna Valdez outlines in her 2022 thesis on race and gender in nineteenth-century women’s literature, the scholarship of the last fifty to sixty years expanded critical attention to voices previously underrepresented, which speaks to the continued attention Chopin’s work enjoys. Overwhelmingly, this new attention “remained centered on white experience continuing a racialized structure defining great American literature and understanding women within first wave feminism” (Valdez 3). While race has occasionally figured as a lens of analysis, often scholars apply this to *The Awakening* or “Désirée’s Baby”; still, conversations mostly focused on the politics of gender and teaching Chopin, often as a starting point on feminist theory.

Alice Hall Petry’s 1996 edited collection, *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, provides a collection of nineteenth-century book reviews of Chopin’s work alongside contemporary and modern essays that underscore the relevance of Chopin to “timeless questions about identity and morality” (Petry 2) and acknowledges her work as one slice in an “enormous and growing” body of criticism following Seyersted’s 1969 biography (6), including evolving conversations on masculinity. Writing nearly thirty years after Seyersted’s publication, Petry noted that “very little work has focused on the artistry of Chopin’s stories” (18) or to *At Fault* (19). She devotes two paragraphs to the exploration of race among Chopin scholarship, noting two core works from 1989 that seemed to push the conversation of Chopin’s treatment of race forward. Anna Elfenbein’s *Women on the Color Line*, which dedicates a chapter to Kate Chopin’s exploration of power, gender and

race in *The Awakening* and four short stories, argues that Chopin “was unusually nonchalant about observing racial distinctions” (Elfenbein 120). Elfenbein suggests that while Chopin “was able to identify the tension between opposing cultural values” (123) she could also be “careless” (121) in her treatment of race in her writing. In her *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin*, Helen Taylor is more cutting: Chopin’s *The Awakening* and “The Storm” “demonstrate the power of erotic bliss in the creation of a new kind of woman” but her work was “deeply embedded in southern racist ideology” (H. Taylor, *Gender*, 202).

Around the turn of the century, seemingly drawing from third wave feminist attention on intersectionality and sexuality, Chopin scholarship similarly produced new conversations on Chopin as a product of her time, holding “a strong preoccupation with white adjustment in the wake of Black emancipation, with the problem of internal ethnic and class divisions, and with the shift from rural to urban, from Southern to Northern bases of power” (Gunning, *Race*, 112). Speaking in reference to *At Fault*, Sandra Gunning argues that “Chopin is willing to challenge the politics of white supremacy only enough to liberate her white heroines, while embracing at the same its structure of race relations” (112). Sandra Gunning’s work on white supremacy within Chopin’s writing and Joyce Dyer’s 2002 article, “Reading *The Awakening* with Toni Morrison” critically consider the silences and racial politics at work that allowed Chopin’s white women such complexity and comparative power. Dyer notes Elizabeth Ammons’ 1992 *Conflicting Stories*, in which Ammons, herself referencing Morrison, suggests that white maternity in *The Awakening* is “shaped and controlled by” the “presence of black women” (Ammons 76).

Joyce Dyer's article calls for greater attribution to Morrison's work as well as even deeper analysis of Chopin's treatment of race, arguing that far from being "insignificant," race "is on her mind always" as "an inevitable source of anxiety" (J. Dyer, "Reading," 140). Dyer contends that as a Southern writer, Chopin could not possibly avoid the "Africanist presence" (141), which permeates every page of her *Awakening*, regardless of whether Chopin wrote about it consciously (142). Dyer uses the coded language Morrison implores her readers to look out for to draw conclusions regarding the lived realities and attitudes of, and the relationships between, those unnamed servants surrounding Edna Pontellier's life, imbuing that reality with violence (144-45). Dyer also applies such code analysis to three of Chopin's short stories, examining the destructive force of whiteness.

In the over twenty years since, Chopin scholarship has not slowed down, with *The Awakening* remaining central. Prominent Chopin scholar Bernard Koloski in 2009 published a collection of essays by fellow career Chopin researchers on Chopin's resurgence, arguing that their initial work as graduate students formed the "literary foundation narrative" (Koloski, *Awakenings* 2). Robert Arner, who had written one of the first American dissertations on Chopin in 1972, argues that, as of 2009, much of the previous four decades of scholarship "still fails to establish her reputation on the basis of closely contextualized readings" and that he could "detect a sense...of unease" about her among critics (Arner, "On First Looking," 119). The "unease" Arner detects among Chopin scholars may indeed be the more critical view of Chopin as a product of her time, of the paradigms that come to light when applying, for example, Morrison's call to look at the shadows. Most recently, additional attention has turned to *At Fault*, Chopin's first

novel, with scholar Heather Ostman editing a 2022 collection that explores wide-ranging topics like religion, family structure, sexuality and Antebellum nostalgia (see Ostman, *New View*). In regards to the latter, Nadine Knight argues in her article that when it comes to *At Fault*, Chopin's "persistence of antebellum values pertaining to the plantation way of life, including its racial hierarchies...emphasizes a regional jingoism that cannot be overlooked" (Knight).

Chopin scholarship shows no signs of slowing down. The year 2024 saw celebrations take place in honor of *The Awakening's* 125th publication anniversary, from conferences to articles and even a podcast, and at least two hundred doctoral dissertations have been written on Chopin since the 1970s. Today, Chopin seems as alive as ever: the existence of the Kate Chopin International Society, and its maintenance of a vast directory of hundreds of theses, articles, books, translations and presentations published each year on Chopin and her work, speaks to her continued pull and relevance.

## **EXPANDING THE LENS**

Early feminists based their arguments and activism on gender essentialism and explicit gender difference (Waugh 19), but later, as the influence of postmodernism grew, the idea of gender difference became increasingly subjective, understood to be shaped by social and cultural context; these views, along with the growing acceptance of cultural relativism, "diminished the individual by reducing him or her to an ostensible group status" (Tolan 150) and rejected the Enlightenment idea of Truth. As Simone de Beauvoir famously argued in *The Second Sex*, "along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a

thing,” particularly as “she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her” (de Beauvoir 10). In de Beauvoir’s view, gender is constantly mediated—physically, linguistically, mentally—as individuals negotiate power systems that code male as standard. In 1976, Hélène Cixous defined “woman” as existing in a perpetual and “inevitable struggle against conventional man,” as a woman who must bring other women “to their senses” (Cixous 875) while simultaneously recognizing there is no uniform category “woman,” only “individual constitutions” (876). Theorists to come responded to this challenge to gender as a fixed identity, among them Kate Borstein, Judith Butler, Candace West and Don Zimmerman. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, argues for an understanding of gender as essentially performative, politically embedded and culturally situated. Building on Michel Foucault’s work on gender as dependent upon and a result of judicial systems of power, Butler questions the fixed identity “woman” as socially produced and constantly maintained, existing temporarily in particular contexts: “if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler 179). Butler’s work therefore questions the ‘naturalness’ of women’s place in the domestic sphere, providing rich opportunity for revisiting the Victorian-era models of family and social life.

Debates around gender and feminism continue to evolve, with some questioning gender as performative on the basis of undermining a core ‘essential’ component of the self. Rather, gender has “scores of meanings built into it” as an “amalgamation of bodies, identities, and life experiences,” including those shaped subconsciously and by language

(Serano 179). Viewing gender as solely performative, the argument goes, limits and denies experiences of those for whom gender remains both tied to an inherent personal essence and fixated to the physical body, defining gender from the perspective of a singular group. Margaret Atwood likewise argues that “politics, or any other monolithic system, any single approach, is inadequate to deal with the complexities of human life” (Atwood qtd. in K. Stein 6). Similarly, as Roxane Gay notes, essential feminism “doesn’t allow for the complexities of human experience or individuality,” challenging readers to look beyond the one-size-fits-all belief systems driven primarily by white women’s experiences (Gay 305).

Moreover, feminist scholars have acknowledged and critiqued the continued oppression and exploitation that Western, colonialist thinking causes. Chandra Talpade Mohanty states, “I believe one of the greatest challenges we (feminists) face is this task of recognizing and undoing the ways in which we colonize and objectify our different histories and cultures, thus colluding with hegemonic processes of domination and rule” (Mohanty 125). Scholar bell hooks continues that a lack of unification among feminists has “made it easy for bourgeois women...to maintain their dominance over the leadership of the movement and its direction” (hooks 52), a challenge Mohanty suggests may be addressed through a “feminist discourse [that] must be self-conscious in its production of notions of experience and difference” (Mohanty 119).

Likewise, the work of Black feminist theorists, especially Audre Lorde and Kimberlé Crenshaw, on feminism, intersectionality, and race provide insights critical to a (re)reading of Chopin’s *New Woman* and her assumed whiteness. In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde states that writing is a “vital necessity” for women (Lorde 37), the language

whispering “I feel, therefore I can be free” (38). To express oneself is a revolutionary act in a world set on diminishment. As Lorde notes, “Your silence will not protect you....you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent” (Lorde 41-42). Lorde argues that survival in America hinges on the knowledge that Black women were “never meant to survive” and language is indeed a transformation from silence to action. In her now-classic article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Crenshaw argues that “feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women” as feminist theory cannot “ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents” (Crenshaw 166). Such contemporary theories on gender and race push scholars to reconsider those ‘masters’ of American literature and to pay attention to the silences and absences that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Developments within gender theory offer opportunities for renewed analyses of literature and established assumptions and interpretations. Taking into account multiple, intersecting modes of identity, late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century scholars question constructions of gender that, while not necessarily directly applied to Chopin, offer guidance on exploring the same essential life questions Chopin’s stories convey. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace the stories of nineteenth-century female creatives as challenges against male writers’ ubiquitous depictions of women as either angels or monsters, and the encouragement of white women and girls to be dainty, physically weak or even ill (53-54). Such women’s ‘awakenings’ are thus “dangerous precisely because they might very well sense, as [Adrienne] Rich does, that ‘never have we been closer to the truth / of the lies we were living’” (Rich qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar



408). Feminist theorists point to male-centered language as a fundamental factor of female diminishment, both in terms of portrayals of and writing by women and aim to reframe traditional understandings of female characters and storytellers. Reexamining the hero archetype developed by Joseph Campbell, Maria Tatar argues that women in myths and literature “wear curiosity as a badge of honor rather than a mark of shame...women’s connection to knowledge, linked to sin and transgression and often censured as prying, is in fact often symptomatic of empathy, care, and concern” (Tatar xiv). Her work echoes that of Estés, who argued that by uncovering that which has historically and culturally been buried within women’s lives, women’s full humanity, “the shape of the entire story,” may be acknowledged and understood (Estés 16).

Through such reframing, scholars may revisit those value systems undergirding previous readings, illuminating and reinterpreting the silences and how writers construct subjectivity, examining, for example, what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, considering Edward Said’s work, calls “the politics of exclusion” (Spivak 276). Language has long served as a deterministic tool to shape and define understanding, serving as “promotional literature” to “fix a concept of the Self in relation to” other peoples, as well as “justificatory” for ensuing systems (Nelson 6). Thus, race is not an “essentialist, immutable classification but rather...a discursive formation responding to an urgent need at a particular historical moment” (Castillo 59), and constructed not via biology “but in the relations between racialized bodies” (Fielder 3). Literature by its very nature serves as a key site of this production.

Given this understanding of race, Morrison offers a roadmap for readers: where are the points of control? Who has it, and how does it function in constructing freedom and personhood? In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison argues,

[I]t may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary ‘blackness,’ the nature—even the cause—of literary ‘whiteness.’ What is it *for*? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction that is loosely described as ‘American’? (Morrison, *Playing*, 9)

Morrison suggests that the portrayal of the Africanist other in much of American literature “is an astonishing revelation of long, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity” (17), reflecting fundamental projections of white anxiety. In her analysis of turn-of-the-century writing, Morrison finds that the illusory white world constructed within narratives reflect a “struggle to address an almost completely buried subject: the interdependent working of power, race, and sexuality in a white woman’s battle for coherence” (20).

Morrison’s call for scholars to reevaluate white writers’ treatment of race indeed shapes more recent scholarship concerning *The Awakening* and the aforementioned most popular short stories. In particular, Joyce Dyer offers one starting point into applying Morrison’s perspective to Chopin. Dyer, responding directly to *Playing in the Dark*, argues that Black “repression plays a forceful role in the formation of Edna’s character and in Chopin’s final years of artistry” (J. Dyer, “Reading,” 139). Indeed, Dyer finds Chopin’s treatment of race so compelling that for Dyer it is “an inevitable source of anxiety” (140), pointing to the “restless and subversive...discontent, detached” servants

(143) in *The Awakening*, alongside the pervasive, “terrible whiteness” (145), as prime examples.

Notably, scholars express wavering assessments concerning Chopin’s own level of racism: Helen Taylor believes “Chopin’s racism is a central element to her writing” (H. Taylor, *Gender*, 156) while Barbara Ewell believes Chopin’s feelings exist closer to “ambivalence” (Ewell, *Kate Chopin*, 72). Dyer herself suggests that rather than being far from her mind, Chopin clearly expresses deep anxiety about race as seen in the use of color description, characters’ physicality and the nature of servants’ persistent presence around and distancing from Edna. In a 2008 article, Susan Castillo similarly applies a more sympathetic view in suggesting that Chopin’s writing prowess “enabled her to appeal to the sensibilities of editors who were probably unaware of what is happening underneath the wealth of sentiment and picturesque local detail” (Castillo 68), yet later acknowledges an “ambivalence and uneasiness” in her portrayal of free people of color (69). And in her 2019 dissertation, April Urban documents Chopin’s interest in Darwinian evolutionary theory as a way to “understand how her narratives position racialized and gendered bodies” (Urban 187), suggesting a racial determinism underlying Chopin’s body of work.

Thus, while the Chopin community lacks consensus regarding Chopin’s position on race, “all of this,” concludes Dyer, “is only a beginning. Other Chopin stories are waiting for critics to explore” (J. Dyer, “Reading,” 152).

### CHAPTER THREE: RACE, ETHNICITY, HIERARCHY

What is the American South? Or, perhaps more accurately, who is the South? At the heart of Kate Chopin's fiction lies the nexus of storytelling, identity, norms and politics: as a St. Louis transplant who married into an established New Orleans family, Chopin occupied an insider/outsider status to the myriad cultures at play in Louisiana that shaped her vision of Southern individuals as both individuals and members of groups, among them Creoles, Acadians, Indigenous peoples, French and African Americans, further subdivided by degrees of Blackness. The post-war Southern world was one of social anxiety, established power dynamics, carefully orchestrated gender norms, trauma, and notions of legacy and Americanness—in many ways a microcosm of the new and changing United States. To help understand the ways in which Chopin writes race into her stories of resilient women, an account of her own experiences as a white female from a pro-Confederacy household in a shifting United States proves fruitful.

Prior to the Civil War, St Louis had grown to become the eighth largest city in the United States. Though African Americans made up only two percent of the total population in 1860, slavery “was fully integrated” into the city’s life, serving as “a key element of the urban economic development” where African Americans, both free and enslaved, labored (Romeo 19). Around the time of Kate’s birth in 1850, her parents enslaved four individuals, about whom almost nothing is known; by 1855, a young enslaved woman with two biracial children appears within their household record in the St. Louis census. Emily Toth theorizes these children may have been Kate’s half-siblings, given enslavers’ frequent insistence on controlling reproduction, “a daily

reminder...about male power and female vulnerability” (Toth, *Unveiling*, 7), and about deep-seated assumptions concerning white supremacy and power.

Raised predominantly by her widowed grandmother and mother, Kate Chopin grew up in a home led by women and maintained by enslaved Black women and child and Black servants. Friend William Schuyler noted in an 1894 biographical sketch that both groups clearly shaped the person Kate was to become: “Her father’s house was full of negro servants, and the soft creole French and patois and the quaint darkey dialect were more familiar to the growing child than any other form of speech. She also knew the faithful love of her negro ‘mammy,’ and saw the devotion of which the well-treated enslaved persons were capable during the hard times of the war” (Schuyler 115-16). As a teen in Civil War-era St. Louis, Kate displayed “strong Southern sympathies,” one day tearing down a Union flag that had been tied to her front porch, likely by one of the many German-Americans abolitionists living in the city at this time; the episode famously earned her the nickname “Little Rebel” of St. Louis (Seyersted 20). While Kate’s specific politics remain unknown, her beloved half-brother George’s enrollment in the Confederacy, alongside a childhood household operating with enslaved peoples, undoubtedly shaped her views.

In the early 1860s, many St. Louis homes no longer enslaved individuals; Eliza O’Flaherty was apparently one of the outliers, still enslaving six people in the 1860 census (Toth, *Unveiling*, 22). With its increasing population of pro-Union German immigrants moving in alongside its enslaving residents, St Louis saw skirmishes, mobs, arbitrary arrest and even martial law throughout the Civil War years as Confederate sympathizers and Union supporters remained at odds (Romeo 24-25). Following news of

the Confederate loss at Vicksburg in July 1863, Union supporters went to the streets of St Louis in celebration, but also vandalized the O’Flaherty home, breaking in and threatening Kate’s mother. Neighbor Anne Ewing Lane later wrote to her sister that men entering the home committed an “outrage” (Toth, *Unveiling*, 30). While few specific details about the incident exist, Susan Brownmiller notes coded language for sexual assault, such as “insult,” “outrage” and “submission,” began appearing in the mid-nineteenth century in accounts regarding white women (Brownmiller 143). Threatened at bayonet point to hoist the Union flag or have her house burned down, Eliza O’Flaherty, Toth writes, “showed her daughter how to survive” (Toth, *Unveiling*, 31).

Ideology founded on white supremacy continued to infiltrate Kate’s adult household. Oscar Chopin, who Kate would marry when she was twenty-five, was the son of Dr. Victor Chopin, by Rankin’s accounts a harsh enslaver in Natchitoches Parish, where half the population lived under slavery and where Kate moved after marriage. Seyersted notes that Dr. Chopin had a penchant for cruelty and tried unsuccessfully to make Oscar an overseer (Seyersted 37). While Oscar resisted, even fleeing his home for a time, at the time of his marriage to Kate, he was a member of the White League, “a fearful association...[in which] one of its chief objects is to prevent the education and elevation of the colored race. It whips, intimidates or murders...and its terrible outages have already surpassed the horrors of the most vindictive civil war” (Jackson). The White League was so accepted in Natchitoches Parish that when it successfully staged an insurrection in New Orleans in 1874 and installed its own leadership, Democrats across the parish celebrated, leading President Ulysses S. Grant to intervene (Fairclough 196). Seyersted suggests that Oscar’s membership may have facilitated Oscar and Kate’s

acceptance into the community when she moved to the parish (45). Seyersted presents Chopin as a keen observer of Southern life, particularly in regards to racial politics, given her husband's associations and her father-in-law's reputation as a brutal enslaver.

Chopin sets the majority of her work within Louisiana, particularly Natchitoches Parish, where she paints clear pictures of rural life in its abundant natural beauty. Louisiana itself had seen significant change in the two centuries preceding Chopin's writing: home to thousands of Indigenous peoples, including speakers of the Caddo language, the Spanish explored the area in the sixteenth century before the French claimed the territory in 1682, naming it after King Louis XIV. The French established settlements and trade ports, which would see an influx of enslaved people from West Africa. By the late eighteenth century, Acadians from present-day eastern Canada as well as Spaniards from the Canary Islands settled in the area, following the territory's transfer to Spanish rule in 1765. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Louisiana became the 18th U.S. state in 1812. Yet within Chopin's stories, any outside (Northern) influence rarely affects the parish's Black, Acadian, Indigenous and Creole residents, who exist in a clearly defined social ecosystem. Seyersted argues that Chopin "was not interested in a dying civilization, and she had no wish to rescue the past" (Seyersted 80), likely due to the fact that she was raised in Missouri and was, therefore, an outsider. However, the late-nineteenth-century South existed in a state of slowly evolving change, with some communities grasping firmly onto the past and change arriving quicker for some than for others.

Unsurprisingly, then, Chopin's attempts to convey the complexity of Southern life similarly served as the points of intrigue for the many editors and critics quick to label

her a writer of “local color” (see Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 191), as her depictions of the aforementioned communities quenched Northern readers’ tastes for the exotic. Kari Meyers Skredsvig notes that some critics believe local color fiction developed out of “the need to reaffirm the value and the heterogeneity of regional identities within a national whole” following the Civil War, while other scholars view such stories “as nostalgic, if doomed, attempts on the part of the authors to deny the changing realities of the newly fragmented, industrialized society by continuing to live in an idealized past” (Skredsvig 90). In Chopin’s case, it seems to be both: her deceptions speak to the layers of Louisiana’s communities and the grasp those communities hold on the past, at times reinforcing the very depictions she calls readers to examine. As Andrew Dix notes in his work regarding Black history and representation, in “African American temporality, violence is not only foundational but dismally unfinished” (Dix 1).

Chopin’s thirty-page 1896 story “A Vocation and a Voice” is one such example. The tale centers on a young man who joins two travelers using false ‘exotic’ identities in order to run a business as fortune tellers. The woman initially explains to the boy that “Because my skin’s dark and my eyes,” she markets herself as “the Egyptian Maid, the Wonder of the Orient...I guess if my hair was yellow [my companion would] call me ‘The Swiss Fortune Teller,’...Only there’s too many Dutch in his here country; they’d ketch on” (Chopin 843). The woman insinuates that non-European foreigners are all unknowable and similarly indistinguishable, assuming a white viewership and an essential, monolithic ‘other’ identity as its opposition and object of its gaze. Even the boy himself cannot recognize the fake dialect the woman’s companion uses: “He might have been Egyptian, for aught the boy could guess, or Zulu—something foreign and bestial for



all he knew” (845). Apparently, neither can their customers similarly tell the difference, as they “believed and bought and felt secure” in the “secret and mysterious” products they purchased to heal their ailments (848).

While Chopin vividly paints nineteenth-century life throughout “Vocation” and her other stories, racial categorization fundamentally undergirds the foundation of social relationships. Nonwhite individuals appear bound by the same essential definitions of race developed centuries earlier, such as in the trope of the “[i]rrational and dim-witted” Africans, who “functioned as living counterexamples to things civilized or European” (Curran 105). The very categories of race developed by French doctor François Bernier in 1684—European, African, Asian, and Lapp, referring to the indigenous Sami peoples of present-day Scandinavia (Bernier)—would even still exist as the same used in the United States Census. At the time of the 1880 Census, when Kate Chopin lived with her husband Oscar and their six children in Natchitoches Parish, there were nearly one million people recorded as living in Louisiana: 48.4% “white,” 52.4% “colored,” 0.05% “Chinese” and 0.09% “Indian.” Of the 19,707 people recorded living in Natchitoches Parish specifically, 38.8% were “white,” 61% “colored,” 0.2% “Chinese” and 0.08% “Indian” (“Population”). Such essentialism erases layers of history and identity, functioning “as a metaphor that serves to inscribe, naturalize and, occasionally, subvert power relationships” (Castillo 60), upholding the very systems of paternalism and gender roles Chopin’s white women attempt to resist. Rain Prud’homme-Cranford writes in her examination of Louisiana Creole identity that despite the rich indigenous legacy within the South, “Blackness has been the dividing line not only between whiteness in the US

South but also ‘Indianness’” (Prud’homme-Cranford 22-23), a boundary against which economic, social, sexual, and political life is measured, created and maintained.

Chopin’s responses to questions of Southern identity suggest a world in a state of in-betweenness, yanked into a future the Confederacy feared while the nails holding together the social fabric remained embedded deeply in the past. Throughout her work, the color line remains centered, sometimes loudly, as in moments of white reprimand or confessions by Black characters of ignorance, and sometimes through painful silence. Characters challenge that line just as often as they dole out punishments for those who cross it. Chopin indeed depicts moments of nuance, joy, pain and development within her vast array of characters, yet her perspective remains undoubtedly white. In order to understand just how Chopin can create the sort of emancipated white women, like Edna Pontellier, for whom she is best known, attention must be paid to the ways in which Chopin builds and defines her ‘other’ characters through ideas of shame, distrust and ignorance. It is against these depictions that white women seek independence, at times with an ease that would not be possible without the existence of the same systems they flee.

### **PERCEIVED IGNORANCE, MADNESS AND THE OTHER**

Arguably no Chopin character embodies projections of white anxiety and assumed madness as intensely as Jacqueline in Chopin’s 1891 story “Beyond the Bayou.” Framed as a story of a woman overcoming childhood fear, the tale instead reads as a reflection on trauma and the apparent power of white neediness as the motivating force to overcoming terror. Jacqueline, referred to by both the narrator and everyone on the

story's plantation as "La Folle," French for *lunatic* or *madwoman*, due to an unnamed childhood event that "frightened [her] literally 'out of her senses'" so badly that she "never wholly regained" them (Chopin 216), refuses to step past an imaginary line circling her small cabin on the plantation's premises until a violent emergency compels her over it. Her enslaver's son, whom she nicknamed Chéri ("my dear"), shoots himself, and despite the "extreme terror...upon her," her "instinct"—read as maternal—"seemed to guide her" to cross the imaginary line she drew for the purpose of saving the child (219). "Don't cry, *mon bébé, mon bébé, mon Chéri*" (218) she cries, emphasizing her motherly feelings toward the boy. Despite "the fear of the world beyond the bayou, the morbid and insane dread she had been under since childhood" (218), Jacqueline indeed persists in racing to the child, and running, while carrying him, to the plantation house, navigating the unknown waters of the bayou along the way.

Certainly, Chopin's choice to weave her story around a Black female protagonist, one who overcomes deep personal trauma to heroically save a child, consciously centers Black female power and agency—no small thing in late-nineteenth-century Southern writing. Jacqueline was the one to draw the boundary around her home, and likewise chooses when and where to cross it. The story ends with a hopeful tone, as a "look of wonder and deep content" grows on Jacqueline's face as she sits on the plantation's front porch (not the back, where enslaved people would typically enter; see Green 7), watching "for the first time the sun rise upon the new, the beautiful world beyond the bayou" (Chopin 222). A new day, Chopin seems to say, has indeed arrived.

Yet only through cries of a white child does Jacqueline's power awaken to overcome her fear. Taking into account Toni Morrison's argument that "the subject of the

dream is the dreamer” (Morrison, *Playing*, 17), Chopin experiments with female agency and mobility through the “*safe* participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice” (28).

Yes, Jacqueline has traversed the borders of her trauma, but she has not upended social systems. Even during the child’s rescue, she remains a “spectacle” with a “distorted face” (Chopin 219); her name also remains La Folle, never Jacqueline, throughout the text.

Moreover, when she finally arrives at the plantation house with the bleeding child, she breathes “as a tired ox” (220), like a work horse or other domesticated animal.

But most significantly, Jacqueline crosses that border following the cries of a little white child, signaling her willingness to take physical and psychological risk in the name of preserving white life. Emily Toth argues that Chopin’s “attitudes toward race and racism...cannot be determined from the stories she wrote” and that her stories “do not push particular ideas” but rather appear “sympathetic” (Toth, *Unveiling*, 77-78). Of “Beyond the Bayou” Toth writes:

[T]he old family servant...conquers a thirty-year fear of the outside world to save a white child....Motherhood, not race or politics, dominated Kate Chopin’s years in New Orleans, and it linked women across the color line. Mammies still nursed white children, and babies were more important than battles. (78)

Toth’s analysis oversimplifies the nexus of sex, gender and power within the slavery system, under which Black women nurse white children and Jacqueline cares for Chéri. The white family enslaving Jacqueline would likely expect nothing less than her full commitment in raising the next generation of enslavers, and in that regard, she “played the proper part for a black woman in post-bellum Louisiana” (Nixon 946). In this context,

Jacqueline's heroism further supports both the view of Black women as selfless caretakers and the full submission of colored bodies to white ones.

Furthermore, because Jacqueline's fears run so deeply, one may conceive of the child's plight as an ideal opportunity for her and one for which she should be grateful. Hysteria, long depicted in the nineteenth century as a trajectory of cultural anxiety, existed as a problem that, through its successful solution, would indicate that "a society has reigned in and tamed its broader social fears" (Rampelli 1). The Civil War, in all its destruction, served as the greatest source of anxiety for the nineteenth-century South. Suzanne Green suggests that Jacqueline operates as "a symbol of the new age of civil rights...in which African-Americans would begin to emerge from their state of Otherness," albeit incredibly slowly (Green 6). Chéri's incident reminds Jacqueline, traumatized by violence, that if she simply focuses on his wellbeing, she would similarly find her purpose restored. She makes it to the steps of the plantation house, but she is not allowed inside.

In regards to white characters mediating spaces and dismissing lived experience as madness, "Beyond the Bayou" does not stand alone. "Loka," which appeared alongside "Bayou" in Chopin's 1894 collection *Bayou Folk*, and "Mamouche" and "Nég Créol," both published in 1897's *A Night in Acadie*, all position resourceful people of color as spectacularly irresponsible and/or ignorant—all *because of* their ethnic identities. All embody Morrison's "ghost in the machine," those characters who shape so much of American literature with so little recognition (Morrison, "Unspeakable," 11). While Morrison speaks specifically of African-American contributions, such 'ghosts'

undoubtedly include all peoples of color building the worlds of American literature but given so little subjectivity by its authors.

Like Jacqueline, César François Xavier in “Nég Créol” becomes known by names assigned by others, including “Chicot, or Nég, or Maringouin...one felt privileged to call him almost anything, he was so black, lean, lame, and shriveled” (Chopin 425). His world is one in which a young priest “thrashed” him for “expressing his religious views” (425), a policeman “jerked” him and “brandished a club,” and César himself “accepted anything, and seldom made terms” (426). He “never looked for recognition from...superior beings” and spent time convincing others of the power and wealth associated with his enslaver’s family, the Boisdurés (425). The story centers on César’s visits to Aglaé, an impoverished yet faithful, self-respecting woman known as “La Chouette” [“the owl”] for scolding others in “shrill sudden outbursts” from her window (426). César and Aglaé share a degree of poverty, but remain respectful companions, with César thinking of ways to bring her sugar and noticing her difficulties brought upon by rheumatism, keeping up a “running fire of sympathetic comment and suggestive remedies” (428).

Scholarly interpretations of César, while few, vary widely. Writing in 1971, Richard Potter sees César as “another of Mrs. Chopin’s pathetic reminders of what slavery has wrought in the South,” lacking both pride and identity (Potter 54). In her brief article on “Nég Créol” and “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” Barbara Ewell characterizes Chopin’s César (notably, both Potter and Ewell do not refer to him as César but as Chicot) as “one of Chopin’s final and most sensitive portrayals of an Afro-American” whose “devotion” to Aglaé “gives his life purpose and value” (Ewell, “Barbara,” 143).

Ewell praises Chicot and Aglaé's subjectivity and the "larger network of charity that dignifies the lives of the poor" as well as the "kindness" of Aglaé's "eccentric neighbors" (143). But Ewell's assessment should not presume that Chopin's portrayal of César remains wholly sensitive—at times, the narrator reinforces shortcomings and racial stereotypes. While César enjoys tea time with Aglaé and "lived but to serve her," he "knew so little, and that little in such a distorted way" that he remains unable to commit to her and improve her circumstances (Chopin 429). Ignorance apparently plagues César to such a degree that he "could scarcely have been expected, even in his most lucid moments, to give himself over to self-analysis" (429). César maintains the awareness to strategize his regular visits with Aglaé and consider how to provide small gifts despite his own poverty, yet the narrator diminishes the limits of his own agency.

Possibly, César bases his approach to Aglaé on the context within which they first met: they are the only two remaining formerly enslaved peoples from the Boisduré plantation. César's "devotion" to Aglaé mirrors a "condition and a time that have ceased to exist" (Potter 54) but which, nevertheless, still define him. Moreover, when César learns of Aglaé's death, he "whined low like a dog in pain"; later, when he pays his respects, he "laid a little black paw" on her body. Realizing he has "nothing" to contribute for the funeral, he leaves, only for a praying neighbor, Purgatory Mary, to mutter "black h'athen!" (430), associating César with wickedness. Indeed, after experiencing the pain of Aglaé's sudden death, César ignores her funeral procession under the guise of her funeral not reflecting the former glory of the Boisduré family, with César unwilling to see the enslavers in any diminished position. César's New Orleans is not one of full emancipation, but a complicated one, full of conflicts and judgment, and,

for formerly enslaved individuals, a struggle for personhood. Post-Civil War life, in which César lives “among the reeds and willows of Bayou St. John, in a deserted chicken-coop constructed chiefly of tarred paper” (426), is one where he must toil out a rough existence, brushed away by nearly everyone, except the one person who knew his previous existence as an enslaved man. “Nég Créol” positions César as a server, continuously willing to bolster the reputation of those who enslaved him within a community that, while culturally diverse, remains intent on seeing him as the “Maringouin” [“mosquito”] (Chopin 425). His given identity remains unshaken.

Thus, the ‘New World’ remains definitively Eurocentric, with non-European characters being simply ‘too ignorant’ to possibly know their designated space, role or path. The community judges their errors as representative of individual ignorance rather than systemic discrimination. In her 2016 work on Chopin’s short fiction, Janet Beer suggests that the comparatively diverse cultural makeup of Louisiana in relation to the rest of the United States creates a particular mindset against homogeneity when it comes to political matters, such as integrating Northern politics. Beers notes that the same “cultural confidence...[the] conviction in the superiority of its own distinct social organisation” create individuals who are so certain about their “apparently harmonious” existence that they live “unperturbed by the questions which agitate the wider post-war world” (Beer 25). Thus, they fall into the “same easy classifications and stereotypes” that create a system “indistinguishable from that of slavery” (25). Appropriately, then, César remains comfortably at ease praising the Boisdurés, just as Loka and Marshall, in “Loka” and “Mamouche,” respectively, retain places as caretakers to white families who verbally



demean them. While César displays resilience and resourcefulness, through Aglaé's death, Chopin denies him joy.

When white adults confront the racial 'Other' in "Loka" and "Mamouche," they set clear boundaries to uphold separation and prevent integration. Written across two days in 1893, "Mamouche" concerns the relationship between an old white doctor and a young white boy who appears one day at his home. Doctor John-Luis comes to learn that the young boy, Mamouche, is the grandson of "the pretty Acadian girl" Stéphanie Galopin and the "handsome" and well-admired Théodule Peloté (Chopin 450), the former of whom reminds him of his lack of companionship, as the doctor has never married. Having provided confirmations of his lineage, Mamouche receives the treatment one would expect from a family member despite the doctor just having met him: "'Marsh,' called Doctor John-Luis, turning in his chair, 'bring him a mug of milk and another piece of pie!'" (449). Over the course of a few days, even after Mamouche leaves, the doctor realizes that the child may be the perfect person to take on his farm and manage his wealth. At the same time, the doctor has been concerned with vandalism on his farm, someone recently having lifted the gates to allow animals to trample over the gardens. One day, a man drives up insisting he has found the person responsible for the vandalism, only to bring forward Mamouche. At first, Doctor John-Luis insists that "the grandson of Stéphanie Galopin could not be a thief" (454), but the boy tearfully confesses, admitting his sense of shame considering how the doctor had taken such good care of him. Rather than respond with rage—an appropriate response, given the circumstances—the doctor sees the boy as "the incarnation of unspoken hopes; the realization of vague and fitful memories of the past" (454). The doctor not only forgives him but admits "I want you for

my own child,” concluding that the child is workable given his grandmother’s intelligence. Indeed, lineage matters.

One may expect from the summary above that the doctor lives alone, but such is not the case. Marshall, “the old negro” (Chopin 448) and the doctor’s servant, attends to both John-Luis and Mamouche, acting as the post against which family and legacy is defined. While physically together, the doctor and Marshall could not exist further apart: the doctor continually notes Marshall’s ignorance and pettiness, despite Marshall’s logical concerns. When Mamouche initially enters the doctor’s home, “clothes in wet rags” as he arrived in the rain without an umbrella, his appearance is apparently so ambiguous that Marshall asks “Is you w’ite o’ is you black?”; while the boy claims “I’m w’ite, me,” the doctor does not remark on this interaction (448), indicating that Marshall and the doctor agree that such a question may be appropriate. Yet the moment the doctor realizes Mamouche’s lineage, Mamouche, in the doctor’s eyes, becomes someone who must be served, and the doctor belittles Marshall for any questions or perceived wrongdoing. When the “ever attentive” Marshall explains that Mamouche suddenly left the morning after he arrived, yet did not steal, the doctor—already favoring Mamouche—appears exasperated: “‘Marshall,’ snapped Doctor John-Luis, ill-humoredly, ‘there are times when you don’t seem to have sense and penetration enough to talk about!’” (450-51).

Moreover, the doctor emphasizes Marshall’s inadequacy in proving a fulfilling companion—indeed, ‘companion’ would not even exist as a consideration within Southern whites’ social order. Lamenting over his lack of a suitable comrade, the doctor explains to Marshall:

“Marsh,” he said, “you know, after all, it’s rather dreary to be living alone as I do, without any companion—of my own color, you understand.”

“I knows dat, suh. It sho’ am lonesome,” replied the sympathetic Marshall.

“You see, Marsh, I’ve been thinking lately,” and Doctor John-Luis coughed, for he disliked the inaccuracy of that “lately.” “I’ve been thinking about this property and wealth that I’ve worked so hard to accumulate, are after all doing no permanent, practical good to any one. Now, if I could find some well-disposed boy whom I might train to work, to study, to lead a decent, honest life—a boy of good heart who would care for me in my old age; for I am still comparatively—hem—not old? hey, Marsh?”

“Dey ain’t one in de pa’ish hole yo’ own like you does, sah.”

“That’s it. Now, can you think of such a boy? Try to think.”

Marshall slowly scratched his head and looked reflective. (Chopin 452)

“Mamouche” has garnered limited scholarship since Seyersted’s initial work. Writing in 2000, Wen-ching Ho characterizes the doctor here as attempting to repeat the past—both the immediate prior evening in kinship with Mamouche, and in regards to the apparent love he felt for Stéphanie Galopin, the one who got away (Ho 159). One may equally argue that the doctor attempts to ensure his future, addressing Southern anxiety

surrounding miscegenation and his personal legacy by designating Mamouche, progeny of the doctor's object d' affection, as his own.

The narrator also establishes clear color lines between John-Luis and Marshall, underscoring Marshall's perceived ineptitude and thus failure to provide ample companionship. This line is most clearly apparent in the dialogue. Marshall's diction, with consonants and syllables dropped, errors in pronoun-verb consistency, and his use of "suh" to address John-Luis, clearly marks Marshall as 'other' against John-Luis's comparative linguistic sophistication. "Marsh" appears "sympathetic" to the doctor's emotional strain, yet simultaneously dim-witted as he "slowly scratched his head" to think, unsuccessfully, for a solution. Chopin relies on "one-dimensional" stereotypes in portraying the attentive Marshall, but provides John-Luis with "an acute sensitivity" and perpetual awareness of "class, ethnicity, and generation" (Gunning, *Race*, 117).

In both "Mamouche" and "Loka," importantly, the image of the white mother also exists as a referent for ideal family-making and measure against which others in caretaking roles are measured—and thus deemed inadequate. Doctor John-Luis infuses his home with the product of Stéphanie Galopin's caretaking in his decision to take in Mamouche and trusts this association is enough to render Mamouche an appropriate beneficiary. Likewise, in 1892's "Loka," Chopin depicts a young Choctaw woman taken in by a local Acadian family after she suddenly appears in a local community; Loka loses the matriarch's trust after she unexpectedly takes the woman's baby into the woods.

Chopin chooses to title and focus her story on this young indigenous woman, who regularly encounters judgement from the surrounding town and appears out of place with a community that remains, while geographically close, worlds away from Loka's

upbringing and worldview. No community members make an effort to understand Loka's background, let alone examine the ways they contribute to the distance between Loka and the white world. The Choctaw Nation materializes simply in Loka and her desire for "the woods," memories of the "squaw" who drank and beat her, and the smell of leaves and flowers (Chopin 269).

The limited scholarship on "Loka" varies in its assumptions concerning Chopin's level of compassion and subjectivity for Loka. Bonnie James Shaker argues that Loka's half-white/half-Choctaw status renders Loka "less as a sympathetic subject than as an object through which to teach white southerners a kinder, gentler management style for governing people of color" (Shaker 64), a view shared by Thomas Bonner (Bonner 92). Kelly Clasen, however, finds Shaker too limiting, instead seeing in "Loka" a critique of white charity, and stereotyping; in Clasen's view, the story "suggests that white America is responsible for the degradation of Loka's culture" and holds responsibility for helping her (Clasen 37). Yet from the first sentence to the last, Chopin makes it clear that Loka's native identity defines her from a white perspective. In the first line, Chopin establishes Loka's identity in terms of her ethnic and social place, through the gaze of whiteness: "She was a half-breed Indian girl, with hardly a rag to her back. To the ladies of the Band of United Endeavor who questioned her, she said her name was Loka, and she did not know where she belonged, unless it was on Bayou Choctaw" (Chopin 266). She lacks the delicate, feminine features associated with beauty in her "coarse, black, unkempt hair," "broad, swarthy face" and "big-boned and clumsy" body (266). Apparently, she also lacks manners: her breaking glasses over customers' heads at a local saloon predicates a

local women's organization to send her to the Padue household, where she "would not only be taught to work...but receive a good moral training" (266).

There, under the careful watch of Mrs. Tontine Padue, Loka is given responsibility over laundry, household washing, yardwork and other duties, including the care of baby Bibine. Left alone with the child one day, Loka "gave herself up to the dreams of idleness" (Chopin 268), when her thoughts turn to the woods and her indigenous community members. Despite the fact that "Old Marot wanted her to steal and cheat, to beg and lie, when they went out with the baskets to sell" (269), presumably to white customers, Loka had refused and hence fled. In this moment, she feels "savage homesickness" (270) and finds herself compelled to overlook the violence and corruption of her indigenous life and to desert the 'morally upstanding' Padue household, which she does—along with Bibine, whom she recognizes she cannot possibly leave alone. When the Padues return to an empty household, panic ensues, then gives way to immediate accusations that there could be no possible explanation for Loka and Bibine's absence except Loka indeed fleeing with the baby.

That evening, Loka returns—"It was difficult to distinguish in the gathering dusk if the figure were that of man or beast" (Chopin 271)—with Bibine in hand and a simple explanation that she was "lonesome" (271), unwilling or unable to adequately express to Tontine how "the joy" of her previous life's "freedom" (270) remained immeasurable against any pain she had experienced. Her desire for freedom, sense of homesickness, innocent walk in the woods—none of it exists in Tontine's consciousness. She admonishes Loka and Mrs. Laballière alike for sending the Padues "such a objec' like you" (271). When Mr. Baptiste Padue asserts himself as "masta in this house" (272) that

his wife has been too demanding of Loka, he insists that Tontine ease up, not out of compassion nor understanding, but because of Loka's innate difference: "You can't drive a ox with the same gearin' you drive a mule....We got to rememba she ent like you an' me, po' thing; she's one Injun, her" (272). Little may be expected of Loka. When given the opportunity to assimilate and prove her whiteness, she fails, and does so under threats of removal. Only maternal feelings for Bibine, the moment that Loka does effectively embody white femininity, preclude her from total banishment. Baptiste finds her redeemable only through the salvation brought by his own son, "her guarjun angel" (272), language that haunts of miscegenation under slavery.

#### **FATE DISGUISED AS FREEDOM: SEGREGATION ROMANTICIZED**

Like Loka, the Jean-Ba' family in "A Little Free-Mulatto" undergoes a "search for identity and security" (Koloski 71-72), but unlike her, they succeed in finding happiness, doing so by moving to a mixed-race community, defined not through but against Blackness and whiteness. This story, together with "La Belle Zoraide," underscores Chopin's portrayals of atmosphere of distrust. Such worlds exist on mutual suspicion; despite the long history of acculturation, social evolution, and racial mixing in Louisiana (see Hall), the French paternalistic slavery system resulted in a number of white fathers granting freedom to their mixed-race children, sometimes even naming them in wills (Davis Smith 10). While Louisiana's history positioned its communities in Chopin's era as ethnically heterogenous, vibrant and layered, her stories reflect the arbitrary nature of social categorization, ensuing rules, isolation and distrust.

Treatment of mixed-race peoples varied across the nineteenth-century South, with those identified as “mulatto” generally receiving more favorable treatment as those perceived as having predominantly African ancestry, reflecting the “variations in white attitudes...especially in connection with conflicting opinions about miscegenation, sexual oppression, and racial identification” (Toplin 185). Louisiana’s free Black population—the most concentrated in the United States—lived and worked amongst enslaving white families as professionals like tradesmen and businessmen, but faced significant discrimination. In the years leading up to the Civil War, anxiety concerning free Blacks increased among pro-slavery whites, who believed this population would most likely sympathize with abolitionists. As a result, “on the eve of the Civil War, free people of color represented just 2.6 percent of the population of Louisiana, a decline from 7.7 percent in 1830” (M. Taylor), and they faced significant economic challenges and resentment following the war. Chopin’s stories both critique and reinforce the “internally incoherent, inconsistent...and unstable” racial categorizations (Hochschild and Powell 60) existing in worlds of turmoil.

Emily Toth suggests that the loneliness Chopin herself saw within her own family’s enslaved children—those same children suspected of being Chopin’s half-siblings—may have inspired “A Little Free-Mulatto” years later (Toth, *Unveiling*, 8). At just four hundred words, the story follows unhappy, shiny-haired Aurélia, daughter of the “fine and imposing” M’sié Jean-Ba’, who “was not permitted to play with the white children up at the big-house” nor “allowed to associate in any way with the little darkies who frolicked all day long as gleefully as kittens before their cabin doors” (Chopin 744). The narrator identifies the source of that unhappiness not necessarily as Aurélia’s



inability to integrate but due to her father: “because of that unyielding pride, little Aurélia’s existence was not altogether a happy one” (744). Due to M’sié Jean-Ba’s physical appearance and material wealth—with “his glossy beard, his elegant clothes, and his gold watch-chain” (744)—he could easily pass for white, but refuses to enter white-only spaces. His refusal to take advantage of murky color lines only has the effect of punishing his daughter, ostracizing her from her peers. Realizing, however, the toll taken on Aurélia, the family decides to move once M’sié Jean-Ba’s work contract expires, and they do, to “paradise”: “L’Isle des Mulâtres” [the Isle of Mulattoes] (744-45). There, Aurélia enjoys an education with “little children just like herself” where they “breathe an atmosphere which is native to them,” even riding “creole ponies” (745); it is a world of total freedom, beyond the boundaries of where white society operates.

L’Isle des Mulâtres, today known as Isle Brevelle, has “existed on the margin between black and white” since its formation in the early eighteenth century (Chaffin 99), the community developing from French and Spanish settlers, enslaved peoples, and indigenous Americans (97). For Aurélia, this isle appears utopian, the dream of what could be and whom she can become. This life and this dream remain inaccessible otherwise, as prideful resistance to racial others prevents any group from integrating. While Per Seyersted argues that the story “represented an achievement that [Chopin] saw colored people as individuals,” he cannot deny “a white segregationist undertone in the story” (Seyersted 96), particularly in Jean-Ba’s family enjoying land “native to them.” Their position remains as outsiders, reducing the possibility of further miscegenation and protecting white racial purity. Not until they remove themselves from this atmosphere to one of their own defining can Aurélia find happiness.

Chopin's strength often lies in her quiet irony and ambiguity, on display in the seemingly happy ending of "Free-Mulatto." By choosing as her protagonist a young girl, Chopin garners sympathy for the innocent child who simply wishes for companionship. The segregated, white supremacist world will never allow the young child to flourish. She must step outside, away from both the "white children" and "little darkies" to a wholly new world, suggesting that a balanced world exists through separation. Chopin insinuates that finally, separated from the white world, Aurélia will be able to bloom. She ironically can ultimately pursue education and experience joy and freedom—the antithesis of what the slavery system intends for any young woman of color—precisely because she does not integrate. While her father "could easily have ridden" in the white-only car (Chopin 744), it's his own pride that does not permit Aurélia from playing with other children. The family does not accept the status quo nor do they make any radical moves to change it.

"La Belle Zoraïde" similarly paints a picture of white control disguised as Black autonomy, structured as a story within a story. It also significantly relies on a range of racial stereotypes and myths, especially concerning enslaved peoples loving their enslavers and overt Black sexuality, though its heartbreaking ending positions some criticism toward paternalism without admonishing the entire slavery system. The story begins with Manna Loulou, a Black woman telling a story to the white Madame Delisle at night before sleep. Because Madame always desires true stories, Manna Loulou tells the story of Zoraïde, a lighter-skinned woman in love with a fellow enslaved individual named Mézor, but whose enslaver intends for her to marry someone else. While her enslaver, Madame Delarivière, desires Zoraïde to marry "in a way to do honor to your

bringing up”—Zoraïde herself “even had her own little black servant to wait upon her”—Zoraïde hates the light-skinned man that Madame has chosen for her (Chopin 313). Her rejection of Monsieur Ambroise, a “little mulatto, with his shining whiskers like a white man’s” (313) and of Madame’s control over her own marriage ultimately leads to Zoraïde's mental breakdown.

Chopin’s descriptions of both Mézor and Zoraïde, and the relationship that unfolds, imbue the characters with a passionate sexuality that neither seemingly can contain. Chopin introduces Zoraïde herself through physical appeal: “La belle Zoraïde had eyes that were so dusky, so beautiful, that any man who gazed too long in to their depths was sure to lose his head” (Chopin 312-13), suggesting that Zoraïde’s sexual strength causes male breaks in respectability. When Zoraïde is taken by the image of Mézor dancing in a square, Chopin depicts Zoraïde’s gaze upon Mézor’s “splendid body swaying and quivering”: “His body, bare to the waist, was like a column of ebony and it glistened like oil” (313). Zoraïde later becomes “distracted” by the vision of Mézor working “barefooted and half naked” in the fields (314). When Zoraïde eventually asks Madame if she could marry Mézor, Madame becomes infuriated and prevents it, but, Manna Loulou explains to Madame Delisle, “you know how the negroes are... There is no mistress, no master, no king nor priest who can hinder them from loving when they will” (314). Zoraïde becomes pregnant, Mézor is sold away, and when Zoraïde eventually gives birth, Madame Delarivière tells her the baby died, leading Zoraïde to become “a sad-eyed woman who mourned night and day for her baby” (316), parenting a little rag doll to such a degree that when her actual child is later brought to her in the hopes of curing her madness, Zoraïde rejects the child.

Chopin's story relies heavily on what Barbara Omolade argues is the white male perception of African sexuality, absent of any cultural context and 'repackaged' for his own material gain. She explains:

[I]n the hip-shaking, bare-breasted women with sweating bodies who danced to drums played by intense black men, in the market women and nursing mothers wrapped in African cloth, in the scantily clad farming women, the European man saw a being who embodied all that was evil and profane to his sensibilities. He perceived the African's sensual ways according to his own cultural definitions of sex, nudity, and blackness as base, foul, and bestial....The racial patriarchy of the white man enabled him to enact his culture's separation between the goodness, purity, innocence, and frailty of woman with the sinful, evil strength, and carnal knowledge of woman by having sex with white women, who came to embody the former, and black women, who came to embody the latter.

(Omolade 362-63)

Chopin infuses "La Belle Zoraïde" with these perceptions. Mézor's enslaver agrees to sell him, for instance, because he himself hopes to win over Madame Delarivière, using Mézor as currency for Madame Delarivière's love within the bounds of coded social rules of respect and gentility. Likewise, Madame Delarivière, who previously deemed Zoraïde honorable (i.e. white) enough for a proper wedding, punishes Zoraïde for her sexual agency, screaming "That negro! that negro!....You white! *Malheureuse!* [Miserable woman!] You deserve to have the lash laid upon you like any other slave" (Chopin 314). Zoraïde's daring act, to ask to marry a person she loves, challenges white sexual and

economic gatekeeping and suggests that Zoraïde herself may control and hold ownership over her body. Once Zoraïde acts on that ownership in consummating her relationship with Mézor, Madame Delarivière must reassert her own control, weaponizing Zoraïde's access to all forms of love, including maternal.

One must not forget that “old Manne Loulou, herself as black as the night” tells Zoraïde's story to Madame Delisle (Chopin 312). While Madame Delisle is married, it is Manne Loulou who sits with her before bed. Before starting the story, Manne Loulou had “already bathed her mistress's pretty white feet and kissed them lovingly, one, then the other” (312), suggesting, as Omolade notes, an “innocence, and frailty” on the part of Madame Delisle, who Manne Loulou approaches as a mother would a child. Madame's insistence that her bedtime stories be true, however, also suggests a desire for knowledge of the world as it is, rather than one of fantasy, and that Manne Loulou acts as the access point for that knowledge. Jolene Hubbs argues that “Manna Loulou tells her enslaver the story of Zoraïde” precisely to “expose some of the horrors of slavery” and disrupt “the myth of the plantation family” (Hubbs 628).

Manna Loulou is effective: when it comes to any knowledge gleaned from Zoraïde's tale, as Manne Loulou finishes her story, Madame Delisle cannot fall asleep; something about the story apparently keeps her up. “Ah, the poor little one, Man Loulou, the poor little one! better had she died!” Madame insists (Chopin 317). But Madame's sympathy ultimately lies with Zoraïde's child, not Zoraïde herself, reinforcing Zoraïde's outcome not as tragic but as just. For Madame, the tragedy lies in a little child never knowing “the love of mother or father” (317), as if that is enough, as if there is nothing more.

## WHITE SHAME

If white enslavers remained resolute in policing the boundaries of colored bodies, logic follows that those who ally themselves with disenfranchised individuals would face similar punishment. “In and Out of Old Natchitoches” (written 1893) and “Ozème’s Holiday” (written 1894) suggest this to be the case. In both instances, light-skinned men support Black or mixed-race individuals, and either face harsh judgment by their fellow European Americans or refuse to acknowledge such support in the first place. Their actions underscore the deep anxiety held by white men regarding their position of dominance and the degree to which associations with the ‘other’ threatens to dismantle one’s status.

In a generally favorable 1897 piece on *A Night in Acadie*, the collection in which “Ozème’s Holiday” appeared, a reviewer in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* felt delighted by the simplicity and relatability of protagonist Ozème, who helps a Black woman with a lost crop only to regret and lie about his actions upon returning home. Calling the story “humorously pathetic,” the reviewer characterized Ozème as “constrained by the pure goodness of his heart” to spend his holiday helping “a poor negro woman” and depicted his lie as “quaint”: “It is all very touching and entirely charming and human” (“Among the New Books,” 4). In his 1969 biography, Per Seyersted names the story as “among Kate Chopin’s best dozen tales” because of “excellence in character delineation” (Seyersted 123), yet, in truth, Ozème is a man grappling with—but unwilling to resolve—deep internal conflict regarding his sense of moral obligation to a formerly enslaved

person, as indicated by his feeling “quite shame-faced” by the end of the story (Chopin 517).

Chopin provides rife indications that the light-haired, blue-eyed Ozème takes pride in curating a well-regarded image of himself: he enjoys “the company of a few choice companions” and takes regular leisure trips, dressing for this year’s holiday “well, regardless of cost” (Chopin 511). The narrator indicates that Ozème prepares for his trip by borrowing items from “Mr. Laballière” and “the negro Sévérin,” labels which have led to debate among critics regarding Ozème’s own ethnic background as a Cajun (Seyersted 124) or free mulatto (see Elfenbein 120). However, his desire to be seen through a veil of gentility does not preclude him from assisting Aunt Tildy, who had been “attentive to him during a spell of illness” in the past (Chopin 513). Ozème clearly holds Aunt Tildy in some degree of affection, as he keeps “an eye open for [her] cabin” when he departs for his vacation. When he discovers her with an injured hand, “hobbling” (513) in her yard next to an overgrown cotton field, with her son Sandy sick in bed and unable to hire help, Ozème feels compelled to step in: “The whole outlook appeared to Ozème very depressing and even menacing, to his personal comfort and peace of mind” (514). As the story continues, Ozème toes the line of feeling pity and acting on a sense of urgency to help her, as well as frustration and exasperation over the inconvenience. He insists that “nex’ time I go abroad, ‘tain’t me that’ll take any cut-off” but “he would have considered it criminal indifference and negligence to go away and leave the boy to Aunt Tildy’s awkward ministrations just at the critical moment when there was a turn for the better,” despite him calling her “as helpless as a’ ol’ cow” (515). Racial boundary crossing creates an ethical impasse for Ozème that disturbs him to his core.

While “Ozème’s Holiday” varies the “black-white devotion theme” (Toth, *Unveiling*, 169), ultimately Ozème returns home from his holiday keeping his actions secret, lying to his fellow men that he went “campin’ an’ roughin’” (Chopin 517) in the woods. And he must—to do otherwise, to admit his unsolicited service to the aid of an older, poor Black woman in his leisure time threatens the entire social order that measures respect and identity through racial and gender power. His submission to his own sense of duty would call into question the very ethics of the race-based system, much too dangerous for this (ironically, overwhelmingly Christian) South. His shame demands that he silence his racial trespassing as well as his goodness.

Chopin similarly conveys integration as personally insulting to the more racially dominant in her “In and Out of Old Natchitoches,” though this time, a young white woman appears the most infuriated by such attempts. The story generally conveys the love interests of the “charming” Mademoiselle Suzanne St. Denys Godolph, a young schoolteacher whose physical appearance as a blue-eyed woman with a “smooth, white forehead” (Chopin 193) distinguishes her from a new community member, Alphonse Labellière, who associates with the “swarming” mulatto Giestin family (192) and finds Suzanne “chilling” (191). Labellière, discovering the family’s home “unfit to serve as a civilized human habitation” (192), oversees the building of new structures, but then is later accused of being “mighty fon’ o’ mulatta,” a rumor he strongly admonishes: “By thunder! if I want to hobnob with mulattoes, or negroes or Choctaw Indians or South Sea savages, whose business is it but my own?” (193). Minutes later, he shows up at Suzanne’s school with the intention of enrolling one of the mulatto family’s children, a moment, according to the narrator, in which he was “blinded by stupidity” (193).



Suzanne takes personal offense to his request and, rather than just refuse him (which she does), resigns from this “insult” (194) and closes the entire school. Labellière, for his part, is “filled with shame” and “stung...with remorse to realize that he had been the stupid instrument in taking” Suzanne’s livelihood (195). He recalls her “sweetness and charm” and wishes “to exterminate the Giestin family, from the great-grandmother down to the babe unborn” (195). The Giestins, sensing Labellière’s change of heart, up and move to l’Isle des Mulâtres, the same mulatto community featured in “A Little Free-Mulatto.”

The second half of the story focuses on Suzanne’s decision to move to New Orleans, where she encounters Hector Santien, who sympathizes with her portrayal of Labellière’s “affront” (Chopin 199) and openly flirts with her. One day, Suzanne is shocked to find Labellière, who informs her that her own mother has sold him some land and who clearly still holds Suzanne in high esteem. Suzanne eventually returns home with Labellière, who informs her that Hector’s real name is Deroustan, a gambler and con artist (204).

With this ending, Chopin presents a complicated portrayal of white women’s path for independence and respect. In their collection of Chopin’s private papers, Per Seyersted and Emily Toth convey this story as one of a “hot-headed” young man who bring “terrible troubles” upon himself (Toth and Seyersted 125), seemingly furthering Chopin’s own suggestion that desegregation remains an individual challenge of honor rather than a systematic, political one. However, Toth admits in her biographies that the story does “not push particular ideas” (Toth, *Unveiling*, 78) and that like “most white southern sympathizers,” Chopin “apparently thought blacks and mulattoes preferred to be

with their own” (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 136). In fact, Chopin provides conflicting views of the powers of perception, love and self-preservation: Labellière’s willingness to pursue and protect Suzanne despite her rejection of the Giestin boy, paired with the family’s move to l’Isle des Mulâtres, offers support for continued segregation and suggests that maintaining such systems ultimately leads to the best outcome for all involved. Suzanne’s own independence hinges on her ability to maintain the color line; she further pursues escapism in New Orleans for the very reason that she finds integration so personally insulting. In the end, Labellière rewards Suzanne with admiration, with Suzanne earning further respect from him by enacting independence and agency through the very racial policing he so vehemently opposed. What matters, then, is rectifying Suzanne’s own discomfort, a step toward one liberation built through the indifference of another.

## CHAPTER FOUR: MASCULINE BEWILDERMENT AND WHITE MAN'S LOSS OF CONTROL

The wanting male characters in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* follow a long line of men who exist at the intersections of the changing, post-war Southern world. While Edna Pontellier may have caused a stir in her direct rejection of both her husband and lovers, in truth, Chopin's work consistently reflects men at odds with their inability to access women: access to their inner emotional lives, genuine beliefs, vulnerabilities, and physical selves remains, for men, elusive. Several of Chopin's short stories convey American masculinity battling against forces undermining its traditional modes of power. Her male characters believe they can face this alien world with their toolkit of authority and protection, and their realizations that such tools are inadequate or even irrelevant lead to even deeper levels of terror. These realizations, and the stories Chopin weaves about America and its ordering systems, are made all the more real through the stories' women. These women are often proactive and determined, and stand as nuanced representations of life's complexity. They defy established hierarchies in favor of their own, challenging the narratives offered by Chopin's men. Such discourses offer alternate narratives concerning the truth of America and its people.

The Civil War brought to the fore a cyclone of social, political and economic tensions that manifested in a crisis of masculinity. In her analysis of the gender dynamics of the war, Drew Gilpin Faust argues that the "Civil War necessarily challenged the very foundations of personal identity" (3), fundamentally shifting how men and women saw themselves and one another. Hierarchies of gender and especially race, which structured

the entire Southern social system, suddenly and “necessarily threatened and transformed each of these interrelated hierarchies...that had so firmly placed white men at the apex of the social pyramid” (4). Roles and rules previously deemed natural eroded. Devoid of the markers that defined white maleness, a crisis in masculinity unfolded, with Southerners seemingly at odds to designate the lines that established old boundaries and spheres.

Southern supporters similarly viewed the women’s rights movement in the North with suspicion and were keen to dismiss it as threatening to the superior ways of life in the South. Pro-slavery and pro-South advocate George Fitzhugh theorized that a moral society depended on the enslavement and disenfranchisement of those members of society deemed incapable of participation in independent, public life; thus, the logic continued, maintaining the pre-Civil War ‘status quo’ protected all segments of society. In 1854’s *Sociology of the South*, Fitzhugh writes that something was deeply “wrong” with women’s “condition in free society, and the condition is daily becoming worse” (Fitzhugh). Feminism, abolitionism and the Northern economy all threatened the hierarchies upon which the South depended. Fitzhugh further argues that a Southern woman “has but one right and that is the right to protection” which “involves the obligation to obey” her “husband, lord and master” (Fitzhugh). Writing from the context of a contemporary American political conflict, the events of September 11th, Iris Marion Young nevertheless provides a theoretical context relevant to understanding this post-Civil War crisis. Masculinity, according to Young, depends upon man’s ability to protect woman, whether through violence and domination, or via the chivalric heroism of ‘good’ men. Both models, however, depend upon man’s ability to control woman; within such logic, “the role of the masculine protector puts those protected, paradigmatically women

and children, in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience” (Young 2). For some, the definition of manhood was inherently tied to “men’s willingness to sacrifice their lives in battle” (Pinar 240). Womanhood was indeed defined by perceived natural distinctions between men and women, and their corresponding spheres. The Civil War, and its traumatic effects on nearly every aspect of Southern life, obliterated these lines.

The ensuing decades would see increasing anxiety concerning the state of masculinity as core questions regarding identity gave way to evolving gender norms. Some abolitionist men aligned themselves with suffragettes, championing “a manhood based on inclusion and self-expression” or “women as spiritual or even sexual equals” (Kimmel 70). They argued that it was a degradation to men for women, along with Black men, to not be free. Yet these views were far from universal. One editorial critiqued abolitionist men as the “poor creatures who take part in the silly rant of ‘brawling women’ and Aunt Nancy men” who “would make demons of the pit shudder to hear” (Schlesinger 139). Truly, the Civil War encompassed a battle over the very definition of manhood and “represented a claim for manhood on the part of black men” (Kimmel 73). In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass argues that freedom meant he “was now my own master” and that this freedom “revived within me a sense of my own manhood” (Douglass). Increasingly, the battle between Southern and Northern men was a challenge to one another’s masculinity. But it did not end there.

“Disappointment is the lot of women,” Lucy Stone wrote in 1855 (Stone 165). Whether enslaved within plantations or exhausted in factories, women’s lives were defined by their association with the home and their lack of legal rights. John Stuart Mill argued that the wife “is the actual bond-servant of her husband” (Mill 53) because

women “were denied the legal and social sanctions necessary to fight unjust and intolerable” conditions (White 15). The Civil War shifted these positions. Suffrage gained ground and states slowly granted married women increasing control over their earnings and possessions. Historians have noted the prominent roles played by Black women in political change during this era, as well as the ways in which women generally shaped the undoing of domestic patriarchal authority (C. A. Jones 113). Such change led to a greater level of autonomy for women and Black men than previously seen and similarly blurred the separation between the domestic and the public.

The opening of gender norms during the war found backlash in the years of Reconstruction. Drew Gilpin Faust notes that following the war, white Southern women “accepted gender subordination in exchange for continuing class and racial superiority” (247). By the time Kate Chopin began drafting *The Awakening* in 1897, such debates on gender produced similar anxieties among whites concerning racial dominance, manifesting in narratives on lynching, childrearing and global affairs. Faced with direct challenges regarding traditional understandings of “male bodies, male identities, and male authority,” white, middle-class Americans developed new strategies to assert and maintain power. Thus, as definitions of gender advanced, and female autonomy developed, so did the proclivity “to explain male supremacy in terms of white racial dominance and, conversely to explain white supremacy in terms of male power” (Bederman 4). Nevertheless, the circumstances had fundamentally changed; the old world order had failed and no longer appeared fixed and natural: “For southern men, defeat meant a kind of gendered humiliation” and the Southern middle-class “gentleman was discredited as a ‘real man’” (Kimmel 77). For Chopin, these shifts in masculine identity

parallel, reflect and further support women's steps toward greater freedom as women assert themselves within a new world order.

### **MEN'S LOSS OF ACCESS**

While the hero archetype plays a prominent role not only in classic literature but within Western gender norms at large, the male protagonists inhabiting Kate Chopin's mid- and late-nineteenth century short stories appear helpless in their ability to access, control and protect women. Introducing Joseph Campbell's work on the hero archetype, Maria Tatar argues that scholars of class literature have often interpreted gender through a specific assumption: "anatomy is destiny" (Tatar xvi). Chopin's work, however, suggests men at a loss to grasp neither women's needs nor their attention and affection. Middle-class masculine behavioral standards stand ineffective in the post-war South, and men must come to terms with both this loss and how to respond.

"An Idle Fellow," a concise story written in 1893, opens with a simple declaration: "I am tired" (Chopin 755). Over the course of a single page, the narrator establishes a distinction between the world of formal education and that of nature. Man's institutions, and the knowledge gleaned from them, are no match for understanding the world outside. Paul, the narrator's "strange" friend rejects such books and turns away from "the world with which I would instruct him" in favor of attunement with the raw and untouched (755). Reading passersby's eyes and the "story of their souls," the narrator deems Paul "wise" for his knowledge of "the language of God" and the secrets they reveal (755).

Though devoid of any real plot nor character development, “An Idle Fellow” nevertheless creates a clear division between the institutional and the spiritual, between arbitrary social ‘laws’ developed by man and the intangible, mysterious wisdom lying deep beneath the facades of everyday existence. Paul’s wisdom amplifies the narrator’s own ignorance of that “which I have not learned” and, the text seems to suggest, may never know. The sphere of white, middle-class men, and the systems they built, are no match for the new, “strange” world before them. Their books leave them ignorant, devoid of any useful tools that may not just sustain them, but allow them to thrive as they did in traditional systems. A bird, originating from an indistinguishable “blur of yonder apple-tree,” sings for a mate who will never arrive. Such a song yearns for an unreachable past yet also serves as a baptism into a world in its infancy. The white man’s charge is to make sense of this new and strange world, and to come to terms with the fact that he intuitively has no obvious place within it.

While succinct, “An Idle Fellow” offers a representative snapshot of Chopin’s vision concerning men and masculinity and the themes developed further in many lengthier works. This snapshot proves all the more significant when considering Seyersted’s argument that Chopin’s Paul may be a nod to the Biblical Paul, who blamed Eve for the Fall in the Garden of Eden and who encouraged wifely submission. Seyersted admits, however, that Chopin’s is “an unconventional Paul” against whom she posits actual, lived reality (Seyersted 115). In particular, Chopin’s work consistently conveys middle-class men whose objects of affection remain unknowable and out of reach.

Written in 1888, “A No-Account Creole” introduces readers to several men all vying for the love of the beautiful, “white-faced” Euphrasie (Chopin 170). Placide



Santien, the rough son of a plantation owner, pines for Euphrasie, certain his family's status will secure her affection. Even in her infancy, Placide viewed Euphrasie "as a birthday gift to be his little playmate and friend" (170) and assumes she will become his possession, just like his family's plantation, since "it was the easiest thing in the world for a girl to fall in love with him" (170). Euphrasie seems to return his affections, noting she will marry him the following spring. Yet when she eventually visits New Orleans, where a gentile Mr. Wallace Offdean lives, to socialize, Placide views her independence as a personal threat: "It made him very fierce to think of the possibility of her not being entirely his own" (179). Realizing that Offdean "wanted her for his very own" (184), Placide eventually confronts Offdean, pistol in hand, in order to protect his perceived 'property.' That the encounter ends in Placide's realization that he will never satisfy Euphrasie speaks to Chopin's vision for gender norms within and beyond the bounds of marriage.

Placide's rise and fall reveal much concerning the politics of class, masculinity and race in the Reconstruction-era South. Placide, "not very well acquainted with the city" (179), has known Euphrasie since birth yet is primarily concerned with his mastery over her. He views her only in terms of possession, rather than of her individual humanity; when he finally 'sees' her he questions, "How had he not seen it before?...I did n' know myse'f" (171), questioning his own world vision. Contrasting Placide's authoritarianism stands Mr. Wallace Offdean, a young, "sure-footed" land inspector who had done all "the usual things" that men of good society do in order to maintain their status quo, restlessly yearns for something greater (165-66). In his "Chopin's Enlightened Men," Bernard Koloski argues that Chopin's portfolio offers male characters who convey

the evolving gender dynamics playing out in Europe and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century; Koloski includes Offdean as one such men who represent “the openness about sex, the questioning of gender roles, the intellectual audacity” (Koloski, “Enlightened,” 15-16). While Offdean’s views remain interested in possession over Euphrasie, in comparison to the hot-headed Placide, Offdean’s “youthful charm” (Wagner-Martin 205) appears measured, considerate and respectful. Offdean’s associations with Northern, Anglo-American respectability suggests a cosmopolitan, progressive masculinity at odds with Placide’s domineering nature; despite Offdean originating from New Orleans, Placide insults him as a “d— Yankee” (Chopin 174). Offdean, and the city lifestyle he embodies, functions as “a bringer of life, change, vitality and sexuality,” an idealized version of a New Orleans that in truth was full of “capitalist exploitation, corruption and disease” (H. Taylor, “Walking,” 76). Offdean represents a break from traditional Southern codes of masculinity, and a disruption to Southern social order, so dependent on violence, mastery and possession. The polarized pair represent a common narrative strategy throughout Chopin’s portfolio of presenting opposite-minded men in order to convey the possibilities of choice and life experience, often in terms of convention versus progression (Brown 71).

Nowhere is this disruption clearer than in Placide’s decision, after realizing Offdean’s love for Euphrasie, to kill Offdean. In her research on the role of white supremacy within Chopin’s fiction, Sandra Gunning argues that Placide’s impulse is a clear extension of “antebellum traditions of Southern honor” and the ways in which that honors manifests through “white violence produced and nurtured through the region’s defining history of slavery” (Gunning, “Kate,” 61). Faced with the stripping of his power

over Euphrasie, Placide does not attempt to understand nor sympathize with Offdean's basic premise concerning romantic love: "The way to love a woman is to think first of her happiness" (Chopin 188). Placide already recognizes Euphrasie's reciprocal love for Offdean, which emphasizes his own inadequacy and essential 'lack.' Placide only speaks a language of domination and power; as such, he reasserts his authority over Euphrasie through a violent threat to Offdean.

Underscoring this threat lies the recollection of La Chatte, a Black woman formerly enslaved by Placide's family. La Chatte explains to another woman, Rose, how a hungry Placide once showed up to La Chatte's cabin demanding she immediately make him the French pastry *croquignoles*, pointing the barrel of gun toward her head the entire time. La Chatte's narrative serves several purposes: she reaffirms Placide's brutality and the position he is used to assuming as a white, male, Southern plantation owner. The Civil War has not tempered this brutality; if anything, it's been enhanced. Her comments also call attention to the power of Black men and women's collective memory, which speaks to "both the historical brutality of black-white relations" as well as "the dual hope and disappointment fostered by Reconstruction" (Gunning, "Kate," 62). La Chatte tells Rose that she does not just assume, but "knows" with certainty what Placide will do to Offdean. Placide's failure to secure Euphrasie represents his greater disempowerment and inability to retain control over what is 'rightfully' his.

Yet aside from a passing remark by La Chatte to Placide concerning Offdean's whereabouts—a remark in which Placide is certain she's lying—Chopin's narrative pays no additional focus to the larger racial politics at play in the South. The story is of a shifting *white* masculinity: the move from one order to another, based on white Northern

gentility and chivalry. Imagery of Placide's plantation further emphasizes Offdean's whiteness and the comparative respect he holds over Placide, all in terms of color. The "shadowy, ill-defined" plantation with a "black, moss-covered roof" that Offdean sets out to visit appears in wild landscape where weeds "grew rampant" next to a forest of "mystery," "witchery" and "shadow" (Chopin 166-67). Chopin describes even the white inhabitants in terms of color: Placide's father Pierre's face appears "brown and roughened" while Euphrasie's hair falls in "thick chestnut waves" (170-71). The initial meeting between Placide and Offdean further establishes a clear visual contrast: "[Placide's] face [was] such a marvel of beauty, with its dark, rich coloring and soft lines, that the well-clipped and groomed Offdean felt his astonishment" (173). Similarly, when Placide asks Euphrasie whether she loves him, it is in the "thick darkness" of night (174), while Offdean's expressions are all shared in the light of day.

Such associations between Placide and darkness reinforce the white male savior complex, rather than suggest a total overhaul of male hierarchical systems. Offdean respects Euphrasie, emphasizing her happiness even if it demands setting aside his own contentment: "He would not marry her,—certainly not; but he would let himself love her to his heart's bent, until that love should die a natural death, and not a violent one" (Chopin 183). Yet when Placide eventually loses Euphrasie, who, the story suggests, will indeed marry Offdean, she transports from the wild darkness of the plantation to the restrained and refined purity of the so-called "Yankee." Placide's conflict is that of the Southern white male faced with a changing world incompatible with his traditional modes of power. For him, the central questions concern both how he grapples with his lover's ability to choose as well as how and where he can reassert his own authority.

## THE HARMS OF TRADITIONAL MASCULINITY AND MARRIAGE

*The Awakening* may provide readers with the most famous of Chopin's meditations on the constraining effects of marriage, but critiques of the institution appear throughout her canon. Elsewhere, cruel or incompetent men buoy marriage's destructive impacts through their degradation or, less perversely, the emptiness of marriage's narrative. Chopin conveys women who in their youth were celebrated as objects d'amour, yet now find themselves in stark circumstances: hard physical labor, poverty and constant demands define their existence. As Catherine Morgan-Proux argues in her work concerning motherhood, such stories illustrate Chopin's deflation of the glorified myths defining nineteenth-century women's existence and the ways in which such institutions leave women deeply unhappy (see Morgan-Proux).

Written in 1892 and published months later in *Vogue*, "A Visit to Avoyelles" opens with the story of Mentine, a tale which may function as a warning:

Every one who came up from Avoyelles had the same story to tell of Mentine. *Cher Maître!* [Dear Master!] but she was changed. And there were babies, more than she could well manage; as good as four already. Jules was not kind except to himself. They seldom went to church, and never anywhere upon a visit. They lived as poorly as the pine-woods people. (Chopin 282)

The paragraph's proclamation "*Cher Maître!*" immediately conveys tragedy over Mentine's change—*What happened to her? How far has she fallen? Why?*—and clearly identifies Jules as an incompetent partner. Beyond their economic desperation, Mentine's

everyday responsibilities have similarly weakened her spiritual life, emphasizing both the sense of doom surrounding her future and its inevitability.

Doudouce, a man who had known Mentine in her youth, having heard of Mentine's straits several times, ventures to her home to visit the woman he once adored and to "strive to help her and her children if it were possible" (Chopin 282). The night before he travels, he dreams of Mentine in a wedding gown, open arms stretched toward him "for protection,—for rescue," which leaves him determined to 'save' her (282). But upon seeing Mentine for the first time, he immediately feels "uncomfortable" and regrets that "he lacked talent to make the lie bolder" when he claims she looks well (283). She appears "sadly misshapen," "piteously thin," as if "old age" had cut lines through her face, a shrill voice screaming at her children (283-84). In essence, she does not appear herself and has physically diminished from the person she once was.

Chopin's story seems to offer wisdom concerning both the status of Mentine as well as Doudouce's response to it. Morgan-Proux offers that Chopin's common use of irony across her work here "suggests that the version of motherhood presented is not a universal, exclusive one and that the writer and reader are aware of discrepancies" (Morgan-Proux 335). The reader becomes aware of "the inauthenticity of idealized motherhood" (334) as Mentine loses her voice from screaming and tries to close her dress where a button should be (Chopin 283-84). As Morgan-Proux continues, by presenting Mentine's life as radically changed for the worse, Chopin subverts this idealized version of motherhood as a narrative existing for the purpose of maintaining itself, but that in itself stands as an unnatural and highly curated expression (Morgan-Proux 335).

But Doudouce also remains of equal interest here: while he dreams of rescuing her, in truth, Doudouce can only handle staying at Mentine's home for a few hours. After lunch, "there was nothing for Doudouce" except offering to send Mentine one of his ponies (Chopin 284). Rather than resolute, he stands "bewildered," stumbling onto the road "because of tears that were blinding him" (285). He cries, it seems, over the realization of his own helplessness, his inability to truly make any substantive difference at all. Any action he could take would be in vain; Mentine's path, laid out before her as she gazes at her husband, appears set and resolute. The world has changed, despite Doudouce's love for her, yet he grieves for what could have been and what may not ever be. Chopin writes that Doudouce loves Mentine "fiercely, as a mother loves an afflicted child" specifically because "she was no longer beautiful" but simply "was Mentine" (285). This association between his realization and the nature of his love as maternal suggests a new vision of gender norms and how men may come to relate to women effectively, but also suggests the new world demands such changes.

Similarly, Chopin's story "In Sabine" offers additional perspectives on the hazy promises of marriage as well as the roles men play within and outside that institution. As Grégoire Santien stares at 'Tite Reine, he stands in disbelief of the woman "whose will had been the law in her father's household" (Chopin 209). Now, married to the rough, drunk Bud Aiken, Reine appears sorrowful and ragged: "Never had he seen in a woman's eyes a look of such heartbroken entreaty" (208).

Chopin's "In Sabine," published in 1894's short story collection *Bayou Folks*, illustrates the author's critique of marriage and the possibilities this institution holds for men's domination over women. Grégoire recalls how 'Tite Reine, who had earned her

name of ‘Little Queen’ in her hometown due to her beauty and compelling nature, ran away with Bud, “the disreputable so-called ‘Texan’” one year prior (Chopin 206). Their marriage has left Reine’s life in shambles. As she first lays her “alert, uneasy” eyes on Grégoire, her face flushes with embarrassment. Grégoire notes “her shoes were in shreds” (207), and the couple own little food and just two spoons. Their home has a simple tin basin functioning as a bathroom, and its walls appear falling apart, holes in the walls stuffed with rags. Their “extremely bare” furnishings appear at odds with Bud’s vision “to sell out an’ try Vernon” (208), as it seems impossible that their lot may be improved in any substantive way. As Reine physically labors outside to prepare food, her husband sleeps well into the morning, resting off his whiskey.

Indeed, while the men of “A No-Account Creole” may be critiqued for their possessiveness or positioning as savior, Bud Aikens seems in a category all his own. His slovenly behavior, illustrated in his card playing and constant drinking, convey a disappointment, in the eyes of Reine, of grand proportions. Reine claims she is afraid of nothing except Bud and implores to Grégoire, “Bud’s killin’ me” (Chopin 210). Chopin clearly portrays her male characters as believing in their own roles as protectors of women: Placide believes he must protect Euphrasie from Offdean’s “Yankee”-ness, while Offdean intends to sweep Euphrasie away from the dangers of Placide’s temperament. Here, too, when it comes to ‘Tite Reine, Grégoire wonders “if it would really be a criminal act to go then and there and shoot the top of Bud Aiken’s head off” (210). Reine’s fear and overall life status presents a challenge to Grégoire’s natural inclinations towards the chivalrous male, protecting women from danger. But here, as elsewhere in Chopin’s work, the danger *is* the male, and woman must determine the



nature of avenues out in a society that presents marriage as the primary defining aspect of white feminine identity.

While many clues point to Bud's failure, Bud further diminishes Reine through his coding of her as Cajun and dismissing her as white. As Reine stands in quiet shock over Grégoire's arrival, Bud ridicules her silence as race-based incompetence: "That's the way with them Cajuns...ain't got sense enough to know a white man when they see one" (207). In her work on Cajun identity in Chopin's fiction, Maria Hebert-Leiter notes that Bud's remark points to the South's racial hierarchies, which included associations of Creole with middle- and upper-class whiteness. By seeing her as racially ambiguous, Hebert-Leiter argues, Chopin points to the ignorance of Louisiana outsiders, like Texan Bud Aikens, to the nuanced racial and social hierarchy within the region (Hebert-Leiter 66). Carl Brasseaux further explains that "*Cajun* was used by Anglos to refer to all persons of French descent and low economic standing" as a derogatory insult, "regardless of their ethnic affiliation" (Brasseaux 104). Bud's remark should be understood as intending to demean Reine by positioning her in closer association with the Black man Mortimer, who works for Bud and similarly receives verbal abuse, than with Bud himself.

Ultimately, 'Tite Reine chooses to leave Bud by riding away during the night to Natchitoches Parish on Grégoire's horse; Grégoire similarly rides away across Sabine on Bud's horse. Importantly, Chopin does not suggest that the two leave together, with the intention of an affair. Rather, Grégoire serves to inspire or facilitate Reine's leaving, without being her next destination. Reine chooses freedom from her oppressive husband and a return to family and culture at home. For his own part, Mortimer relishes the

opportunity to deliver the news to Bud that Reine left. And despite Bud's threats to saddle up his horse Buckeye to go after her "or I'll rip the black hide off yer," Mortimer "scratched his head dubiously," his thoughts clearly filled with skepticism over the lazy Bud's changes for success (Chopin 213). Instead, Mortimer has the last word, delivering the final nail in Bud's emasculation: "Yas, Mas' Bud, but you see, Mr. Sanchun, he done cross de Sabine befo' sun-up on Buckeye" (213).

### **'PURITY' AND POWER**

Across her portfolio, Chopin's stories suggest deep anxiety and even contradictions on the part of whites concerning the ways in which the public perceives men. At the center of these concerns stands race, and a complex web of local and national identity politics over racial purity, personal autonomy and self-definition. "The Bênitous' Slave," "Désirée's Baby," and "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche"—all of which appeared in Chopin's 1894 short story collection *Bayou Folk*—collectively indicate the boundaries of white respectability and men's struggle to come to terms with a changed new world. In its March 17, 1894 edition, *Publishers' Weekly* announced the forthcoming publication of *Bayou Folk* as "a volume of remarkably interesting tales of Creole and Acadian life" by an author "perfectly familiar with all their unusual customs and characters" ("Notes in Season" 429). The collection's publisher, Houghton, Mifflin & Company, noted in its ad that Chopin's stories remained "genuine" and "faithful, spirited representations of unfamiliar characters and customs" (450). Reviewers generally praised the collection for its local color and realism, though Emily Toth notes that the reviews, including "odd" ones that seemed to totally misunderstand key geographic and historical details of the

South (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 225), spoke to reviewers' own preference for "books they could praise for being charming, wholesome, and agreeable" (229). Thus, Chopin's published realism was at least in part bound by late-nineteenth century notions of what would be considered pleasant.

"The Bênitous' Slave" tells the story of the Black Uncle Oswald, who believes his former enslavers, the Benitous, still own him, despite having been freed for some time. He constantly attempts to return to them, often injuring himself along the way, until Monsieur and Doctor Bonfils decide "it was time to 'do something'" for "the poor creature" (Chopin 240) and bring him to Natchitoches for the evening train. Alone in a buggy, Uncle Oswald encounters Susanne Bênitou, and "[w]ithout a moment's hesitancy" follows the girl to her family's home as a "venerable servitor, who stood, hat in hand, persistently awaiting their orders" (241). Monsieur convinces Susanne's mother to "accept the gratuitous services" of "the old darky," who, reunited with the Benitous, no longer runs away and "cheerfully and faithfully" serves Susanne, declaring, "Oswal'—dat's my name. I b'longs to de Bênitous" (241).

Little scholarship examines "The Bênitous' Slave." Joan Dyer argues, "Prejudice often became not only Chopin's topic, but also, curiously, her technique" (J. C. Dyer 69), suggesting that Chopin often uses readers' bigotry to explore issues, like female sexuality, that would otherwise be considered too vulgar for publication. Dyer casts "The Bênitous' Slave" as one of Chopin's stories about characters who live in the past, while Anne Goodwyn Jones poses the story as both an "apology for slavery" and a moment of empowerment for Uncle Oswald as he fulfills his goal (A. G. Jones, "Kate Chopin," 151). Yet the 'satisfying' conclusion hinges on a return to pre-Civil War order, on the

presumption of belonging not due to one's subjectivity but due to ownership. Uncle Oswald's loss of identity mirrors the disappearance of the Bênitous family from the area and the plantation's own loss of identity through war. Seemingly having no purpose outside the plantation, this loss drives Uncle Oswald mad; community members find him "unconscious and half-dead" in the woods, physically ill and disoriented without plantation life to undergird his identity. In the end, Uncle Oswald indeed gets what he wants, or, more precisely, gets Chopin's vision of what "the poor creature" truly desires.

Likewise, the characters in "A Gentleman of Bayou Teche" yearn for self-definition and the opportunity to be heard, particularly by outsiders, conveying Chopin's critiques of the (predominantly Northern) appetite for Southern local fiction. The story centers on a Cajun man, Evariste Bonamour, approached by a visiting artist, Mr. Sublet, to paint his portrait. Mr. Sublet views Evariste as "a picturesque subject" and ideal for "an artist looking for bits of 'local color'"; after Mr. Sublet prepays Evariste, his daughter tells their neighbor Aunt Dicey, who raises concerns over the artist's desire to exploit Evariste as a caricature: "Dis heah is one dem low-down 'Cajuns o' Bayeh Têche!" (Chopin 319). Intending to return the money, Evariste saves the son of a local plantation owner from drowning, which inspires the artist to want to again draw his picture with the title "hero." Evariste refuses, but eventually agrees so long as he can title the painting "Mista Evariste Anatole Bonamour, a gent'man of de Bayou Têche" (324).

Evariste Bonamour may succeed in titling his own portrait, but he remains unknowable, an enigma, to the outsider trying so hard to depict him. Such obscurity hinges on a series of assumptions: the belief that an outsider can truly know a community, the idea that a single work of art could depict the complexity of an

individual, the assumption of the nature of difference between artist and subject and the extent to which it may be bridged. As a St. Louis-born outsider married to Oscar Chopin in rural Louisiana, Kate Chopin likely knew enough about such dynamics. The inability of Mr. Sublet to truly see Evariste's humanity, and the ignorance of both artist and plantation owner in their regard for Evariste "as an exotic specimen" (Walker 92), underscores the inability of the outsider to ever fully know the local color she wishes to portray. The photographer hopes to pay Evariste a small sum for a chance to access and stage him for public consumption. Aunt Dicey proclaims the rudeness of Mr. Sublet's boy asking her, a Black woman, to pose over her ironing for her portrait, rather than asking her to wear a new dress and bonnet and stand aside from her work (Chopin 320). Aunt Dicey's own refusal to submit—she corrects him and yells at the boy to leave, which he does—stands as the model for Evariste, who otherwise would willingly submit.

Ultimately, Evariste's final say on the painting's title reflects ownership and control: "the subject must be permitted to explain itself" (Steiling 200). Kate McCullough reads the story as a "pointedly political tale that reveals a romantic objectification of the Cajun...strips him of his dignity, his power," a metaphor for Northern consumption of a generalized 'Southern' man (McCullough 198-99). That Chopin chooses to include "A Gentleman" in her *Bayou Folk* may suggest her own ambiguity over ever truly knowing these men.

Amongst all of Chopin's short fiction, perhaps the most widely read story remains "Desirée's Baby," the tale of a young mother rejected by her racist husband once it seems their son has African-American blood. Blackness surrounds nearly every aspect of Desirée's life: found "in the shadow of the big stone pillar," the Valmondés adopted

Desiree as a baby with an unknown background; she lives at L'Abri with its "steep and black" roof and towering oaks; and her husband Armand Aubigny, rules over a plantation of enslaved peoples so harshly that they "had forgotten how to be gay" (Chopin 243). As whispers appear over their son's appearance, "the very spirit of Satan" takes hold of Armand "in his dealings with the slaves," leaving Désirée "miserable enough to die" (244). When she questions Armand over what their son's appearance implies, Armand immediately answers, "you are not white," despite her insistence that her hand looks "whiter than yours" (245). Believing God condemned him with an unjust fate, Armand dismisses Désirée over "the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name," only later burning old letters that indicate, to the reader's surprise, that "his mother...belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (247). Désirée takes their child and walks out of their house, never to return.

"Désirée's Baby" explores several critical themes relevant to this study, among them the stifling emptiness of traditional marriage and the degree of women's agency both inside and outside that institution. Of particular interest here lies Armand Aubigny's self-awareness and the extent to which that awareness disrupts nineteenth-century systems of power. Armand's status as a white 'master' hinges on a lie: he descends from a long, 'untainted' blood line of whiteness, starkly contrasted with his wife's unknown origins. Chopin does not reveal when or for how long Armand knows his mother's background; Margaret Bauer argues Armand is aware of his racial heritage the entire time and is in fact passing. Therefore, his marriage to Désirée serves as an attempt to "masquerade as a Southern (white) gentleman" (Bauer 162), with Désirée, due to her unknown parentage, the scapegoat if their child's racial purity ever came under scrutiny.

If Armand is indeed passing, Armand would be aware of what's at stake if found out. In Louisiana, free men of color existed just above the level of enslaved persons and were in no way equal to white landowners. While Chopin indicates Madame Aubigny did not join her husband in America because she "loved her own land too well ever to leave it," Louisiana Civil Codes would have deemed her marriage illegal and Armand, having mixed-race blood, would be unable to inherit his father's estate (see Gibert 46). Laura Foner's study on Louisiana's three-caste system provides context for understanding Chopin's design of Armand as bound by the rules of this racial hierarchy, in which free Blacks threatened the South:

[A]lthough the government and the ruling whites protected the distinction between a free man of color and a slave, they took equal if not greater care to preserve the distinction between themselves and a free man of color...racial distinctions served a particular function, part of which was an ideological justification for slavery. But the color line also served to preserve a strict social hierarchy with whites on top and the free coloreds securely "in their place," midway between the ruling whites and the slaves. (Foner 417)

Armand realizes, however, that this racial distinction, the invisible line between white and Black, may be easily crossed; the 'line' is psychological, not biological, and Chopin's story can therefore be read as one of racial anxiety, of white male destabilization. His knowledge informs his constant work of creating and justifying that line. Moments of love, such as his early romance with Désirée and the initial birth of their son, parallel the acceptance of racial ambiguity, which seem to temper his aggression. Yet once his son exhibits nonwhite physical traits, Armand's fury returns and with it his

realization that he has no control over the world conforming to “reductive racial categories” (Elfenbein 126).

Elizabeth Ammons claims that Chopin had “liberal, enlightened views on the subject of race” (Ammons 74), with Armand Aubigny’s detestability mirroring Victor Lebrun’s in their “contempt of black people in general” and abuse of specific Black individuals within their homes (74). However, for Armand Aubigny, Chopin relies on the trope of the “Tragic Mulatto,” rife throughout American literature, and written as deserving of pity as a “unique promise and problem as a doubly-excluded figure” who challenges racial lines yet stands as an outsider (Bernardi 13; Peel 230). Armand, aware of his mixed-race identity, relies on his cruel behavior toward Black and racially ambiguous (*Désirée*) people to distance himself from being ‘caught.’ His ability to pass as white feeds his assumption to authority and power, seemingly manifesting resentment toward his mother onto the enslaved peoples around him. His rage stems, in part, from the recognition that the invisible color lines upon which the socio-racial hierarchy stands is a lie. The story, as Ellen Peel notes, exposes the “paradoxes that result from miscegenation and the one-drop rule” (Peel 227): *Désirée*’s hand indeed looks “whiter than yours, Armand” (Chopin 245), who responds “cruelly,” “As white as La Blanche’s,” referencing the name of a (presumably) Black woman on the plantation (245).

Both Armand’s successful passing and *Désirée*’s revelation exist on the shoulders—and silence—of the Black characters surrounding them. La Blanche, the mother of “little quadroon boys” (Chopin 245) and to whom Armand compares *Désirée*, lives in a cabin from which Armand can hear the cries of *Désirée*’s baby (243), raising questions concerning the nature of the relationship between La Blanche and Armand.



Anna Shannon Elfenbein argues that La Blanche’s “shadowy and enigmatic presence...reveals Armand’s power over women” yet La Blanche—French for “the white one”—similarly highlights Armand’s inability to “make the world conform to reductive racial categories” (Elfenbein 126). Armand’s power depends on such categories remaining intact, and the forced silence and submission of the Black men, women and children allow, in part, that system to remain. La Blanche’s indirect presence also catalyzes Désirée’s revelation concerning her son’s heritage. In the moment that one of La Blanche’s sons quietly fans Désirée’s son, Désirée realizes the resemblance between the children: “She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. ‘Ah!’ It was a cry she could not help” (Chopin 245). The moment solidifies a parallel between the women and suggests that Désirée may be the next La Blanche, whose name, Chopin insinuates, represents deep irony concerning the fleeting and subjective nature of appearance and desire.

Désirée’s discovery stands in stark contrast to that of her own mother, Madame Valmondé, who upon first seeing her grandson, exclaims “This is not the baby!” (Chopin 243), echoing the “disquieting suggestion” and “air of mystery among the blacks” concerning the child. When Désirée laughs that her mother must be shocked at the baby’s quick growth, she asks Zandrine, “a yellow nurse woman” attending to the baby, to confirm that it’s true Zandrine had to already cut the child’s fingernails. Bowing, Zandrine responds “Mais si, Madame” [“But yes, Madame”] (243), suggesting her deference to Désirée. Madame Valmondé, searching for answers, “scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields” (243). Madame Valmonde gazes herself at Zandrine searching for answers.

What may Zandrine know? For how long? What may Zandrine's appearance reveal about Madame's grandson? Zandrine's own gaze suggests an unspoken knowledge—the Truth—that she knows, given the strict and cruel treatment afforded to slaves at L'Abri, she cannot share.

Unable or unwilling to face this Truth, Armand Aubigny ultimately affirms to Désirée that “I want you to go,” believing that God had served him “cruelly and unjustly” (Chopin 246). While some scholars assume that Désirée's final walk into the woods suggests Désirée's death (see Erickson), Chopin writes that Désirée “did not come back again” (247), presumably to L'Abri. Chopin leaves readers with an unknown future; Désirée literally walks into uncharted territory, while Armand sets a large bonfire, burning any memory of Désirée and the baby, as well as his mother's letter. Armand, whose actions toward the enslaved individuals are so cruel it appears as if “the spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him” (244), aligns once again with hellish imagery in a scene of complete destruction. His hatred—of his child's complexion, of the woman who bore it, of the Black and mixed-race people around him, and of himself—destroys everything and offers no hope for Truth, nor for love.

## CHAPTER FIVE: MARRIAGE, MATERNITY AND FREEDOM

If man's role encompassed dominance over the public sphere, nineteenth-century social norms dictated women's responsibility over the private one along with the larger national values that domestic sphere symbolized. The America in which Kate Chopin wrote demanded of women the creation of 'home,' that place of familial memory, kinship and honor. Women's status as wives and mothers thus remained central to the maintenance of 'home,' the foundation of a nation's senses of self and security. While actual housework may have been designated to domestic servants, the work of homemaking stood as "an emanation of Woman's nature" (Boydston 149) framed as natural, selfless acts that women should "represent as a labor of love" (Gillis 76). In his work on the practice and production of family values, John Gillis notes that by the second half of the nineteenth century, "an increasing amount of women's work was devoted to the creation of the rituals, myths, and images on which the newly enchanted world of family" depended, with women designated as the keepers and facilitators of the "family" narrative (77). Cultural narratives taught middle-class girls that the pinnacle of their lives centered on courtship and marriage, after which they would "live out their remaining years in quiet dignity" (G. Collins 282) within the private sphere of the home. National discourses therefore produced separate spheres as natural and ideal structures appropriate for two equally distinct genders.

Such gender expectations existed, however, within shifts in marriage and women's rights as well as the growth of the New Woman in the late eighteenth century. Women's growing legal autonomy over their children and property challenged notions of

male authority, though women still remained far from being legal equals with men within marriage. Unsurprisingly, “the moral and legal double standard, violence to women, male sexual practice and prostitution” alongside “husbands’ right of access to their wives” remained priorities of the “New Woman’s agenda” (Heilmann, “General,” xvi-xvii). Some celebrated the New Woman’s breadth of capabilities and contributions. In 1896, physician and writer Dr. Arabella Kenealy depicted the New Woman in overwhelmingly favorable terms, arguing the New Woman as a model of possibility:

The veritable New Woman is at present training in our colleges, teaching in our schools, serving in our hospitals, guardianing the poor and pitiful, cycling along our roads—in all of which capacities she is broadening her horizon, facing human facts, treading conventions and social fetishism under foot, learning to be a human unit rather than a social cipher. (Kenealy 439)

Yet the New Woman’s relationship with motherhood varied as definitions of the New Woman at times contained contradictions and tensions. Motherhood could be creative, a personal project of production, but also highly problematic in women’s lack of choice and the resulting demands burdened on women’s shoulders. As Ann Heilmann, editor of an anthology on New Woman texts from the 1880s through the 1930s, asserts, “few feminists...challeng[ed] the notion of the maternal instinct” (Heilmann, “General,” xxiv), with critics characterizing any turn away from marriage and motherhood as “selfish” and stemming “from motives of pure vanity” by women who “have so far unsexed themselves as to have lost the primordial instinct for conjugal life altogether” (Dixon 391).

Alongside these shifts into the public domain, white women were still expected to embody the ideals of racial purity and respectability, self-discipline and discretion. When a turn-of-the-century cosmetics advertisement asked viewers, “Is your complexion *clear*?—Does it express the clearness of your life? Are there discolorations or blemishes in the skin,—which symbolize imperfections within?” (Peiss 86), industry held women’s appearance as indicative of character and projected the necessity of prioritizing goodness. That this industry also tied goodness to whiteness, and assumed whiteness as standard, was a given. Kenealy herself shifted her vision of the New Woman in her fiction in the late 1890s, when her characters’ physical fitness and controlled behavior reflected that “women needed to maintain traditional roles to sustain the [white] race” (Mendes 259). Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution had already shifted understandings of progress and design, and eugenics, “the science of improving stock” (Galton 25), morphed into a “biologicistic discourse on *class*...Aiming at ‘racial improvement’” (Richardson 3). The New Woman’s relationship to marriage and sexuality was therefore not apolitical; rather, this vision developed within and responded to a culture rife with such narratives.

Chopin’s stories reflect these tensions as well as the desire for women to find and establish their own spaces, and center on a rejection of paternalistic discourse concerning marriage, motherhood and the limits of the private sphere. The women Chopin designs hope to or actually operate on their own terms, challenging established female submission, even if doing so results in frustration or loneliness. While at times the works conclude much more innocuously than, for instance, *The Awakening*, as they were published within the confines of “the conservative tastes of publishers and public alike” (Gunning, *Race*, 112), depictions of marriage and motherhood often push traditional

bounds and reflect nuanced emotion and sense of self. Chopin employs multiple strategies to establish her characters' autonomy, including through the use of the term "freedom." Per Seyersted suggests that when it came to matters of slavery and other social issues in the South, Chopin "hid behind a serene objectivity" (Seyersted 93) and as a result, her writing benefited from lack of "guilt or ambiguity" concerning African Americans (96). But in the stories examined here, her encounters with a specific time and place remain embedded in her craft (see A. G. Jones, *Tomorrow*, 149). By reframing narratives of personal autonomy as a matter of freedom in the context of the late-nineteenth-century South, Chopin's protagonists reject not only male paternalism, but also suggest that such paternalism is a form of slavery from which they must escape. Chopin famously reinforces such a suggestion elsewhere, in *The Awakening*, when Edna Pontellier handles her brushes "with a certain ease and freedom" (Chopin 533) as she paints outside in the company of Robert Lebrun, away from her husband and children. Thus, Chopin employs the language of slavery as a framework for traditional notions of motherhood and marriage from which white women must escape and disassociate.

### **PATERNALISTIC DISCOURSE AND AUTHORITY**

Paternalism stood as a fundamental tenet of the nineteenth-century South as an ideology that justified and structured nearly all aspects of social organization. Women remained crucial to its success. The system depended on the image, as Anne Firor Scott explains, of a "beautifully articulated, patriarchal society in which every Southerner, Black or white, male or female, rich or poor, had an appropriate place and was happy in it" (175). Scott quotes George Fitzhugh's depiction of such an idyllic environment: "The

negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and, in some sense, the freest people in the world” (Fitzhugh qtd. in Scott 175-76). In his *Sociology for the South; or, The Failure of Free Society*, Fitzhugh suggests that the enslavement system upholds essential qualities within African Americans and white women that bring fulfillment; for women, their fathers and husbands provide a protectionism that eases women’s burden. This system is a law unto itself, functioning outside of—and, he seems to suggest, above—the actual legal code.

So long as she is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness. Woman naturally shrinks from public gaze, and from the struggle and competition of life. Free society has thrown her into the arena of industrial war, robbed her of the softness of her own sex, without conferring on her the strength of ours. In truth, woman, like children, has but one right, and that is the right to protection. The right to protection involves the obligation to obey. A husband, a lord and master, whom she should love, honor and obey, nature designed for every woman...If she be obedient, she is in little danger of mal-treatment; if she stands upon her rights, is coarse and masculine, man loathes and despises her, and ends by abusing her. Law, however well intended, can do little in her behalf. True womanly art will give her an empire and a sway far greater than she deserves....The men of the South take care of the women of the South, the men of slaveholding Asia guard and protect their women too. The generous sentiments of slaveholders are sufficient guarantee of the rights of woman, all the world over. (Fitzhugh 214-16)

Kevin Ritchlin further explains that paternalism “placed southern white males at the head of the southern family, serving as its protectors, providers, and punishers” and thus both upheld the infantilized position of women as “pious, subordinate, meek, and fragile” and justified the entire system of slavery (Ritchlin 1). According to this system, white men therefore viewed both women and Blacks as children, incapable and utterly dependent. White men had to interfere with their lives, care and future as logic and biology seemed to dictate. Thus, women’s ability to choose their spouse and marry for love challenges the southern enslaver’s decision to arrange marriages for the purposes of productivity and legacy, money and control.

Across her portfolio, Chopin depicts men indeed dictating the narratives on and for women’s lives: “Désirèè’s Baby,” “Doctor Chevalier’s Lie,” “The Story of an Hour,” “Athénaïse” and *The Awakening*, to name a few, convey the restrictions placed on women by male authority figures who approach their relationships with women as parental. At times, Chopin similarly depicts more traditionally minded women who police their peers and who thus stand complicit in male control of other women. Such depictions remind readers of the relative comfort and ease of staying in one’s lane and the advantages some white women enjoy in remaining ‘kept’ and docile, as well as of the expectations held by editors and readers in late-nineteenth-century America.

Chopin’s “A Night in Acadie,” published in 1897 in the collection of the same name, further explores the gendered power dynamics within and around marriage through Zaida Trodon, whose disappointment with a man leads to her revelation on social illusion and truth. What remains an even greater shock is where this revelation leaves her: without a husband, and still deciphering what men, marriage and an entire social system



based on women's roles as wives even mean in the first place. Importantly, however, she never regrets her choices, despite the "cost of self assertion" and "the unresolved tensions" between Zaïda's "developing self and a rigid social code" (Ewell, *Kate Chopin*, 88).

As Zaïda watches gentlemanly Telèspore Baquette and her beloved André Pascal physically fight at one o'clock in the morning on the night Zaïda and André planned to marry, "the loose boards swayed and creaked beneath the weight of the struggling men," and she feels the house shake (Chopin 350). Zaïda witnesses a fierce assault over essentially paternalistic codes— Telèspore, having admired her all evening, quickly defends her over André's rudeness toward her—and feels the very foundation breaking beneath her feet. Earlier, she had traveled to a ball her cousin was attending, and attracted Telèspore's attention on the arriving train. Taken with her throughout the ball, Telèspore insists on accompanying her when she prepares to leave around midnight, eventually revealing along the way that she secretly plans to marry André Pascal, unknown to Telèspore, at one. When André eventually shows up, late and "partially sober" (349), he challenges Zaïda over Telèspore's presence and her refusal to marry, causing Telèspore to land the first punch that sends the men fighting through the house and onto the porch, where André eventually flees. The entire event leaves Zaïda reeling, yet awakening.

Chopin establishes early that much lies beneath the veneer of respectability and obedience to social codes; Zaïda, for one, desires to forge her own path, despite the fact that this desire undermines men's desires to keep her in check. Telèspore, while respectful and a relative 'hero' in fighting off the drunken André, decides to attend the

ball in the first place as he “felt the need of a wife” (Chopin 335). While his community offers several options of young women, none have the look he seeks in a wife; one, Elvina, has eyes so beautiful that they “had often tempted him to the verge of a declaration,” but her skin was too “swarthy for a wife,” meaning her darkness proves her unsuitable (335). He nearly professed his love for another, Amaranthe, given her “charms and accomplishments” and the unlikelihood that she had “Indian blood” (335) but ultimately changed his mind.

However, when Telèspore spots Zaïda on the train, her association with independence and Blackness attracts him: “She carried herself boldly and stepped out freely and easily, like a negress. There was an absence of reserve in her manner; yet there was no lack of womanliness. She had the air of a young person accustomed to decide for herself and for those about her” (Chopin 338). His attraction to her “absence of reserve” and the ways in which she can “decide for herself” marks him as understanding, comparatively egalitarian and modern. Zaïda “impressed him” in a “new, unusual” way that others could not (340), as she seemingly carries herself outside the bounds of typical, submissive, ‘kept’ white women. He perceives she can handle herself, witnessing her doing so alone on the train, traveling independently to a ball; when he and Zaïda arrive at her cousin’s house before the ball, Telèspore declines an invitation into the home, later considering how the “whole situation was so novel” and something “to become acquainted with” (340), insinuating that Zaïda exists within a new set of rules unknown to him. Her association with Black free movement seems to position her as a woman emancipated, able to move independently outside of white male authority, causing Telèspore to pause and wonder at her strength.

Yet as quickly as Telèspore's attraction grows, so does his paternalism, rendering Zaïda's freedom only temporary. His assertion also grows after her transformation into whiteness. Later at the ball, when he begins to "take account of her appearance" (Chopin 343), Zaïda stands alone in her degree of whiteness. The attending women, "masked with starch powder, but never a touch of rouge" already starkly contrast with the party's night-time setting, where the Black chef Douté prepares food and "negro musicians" prepare to play by drinking whisky from "a black quart bottle" (341-42). By the time Zaïda sets foot in the gallery, she has transformed herself, "white from head to foot—literally," for even her black slippers were covered with white "first community sash" (342), as she holds a "white fan" and her hair reminds decorated with "small sprays of orange blossom," a white flower (342). Fellow attendees stand in "wonder and admiration" as one notes in French Zaïda's similarity to a bride.

Later that night, as Zaïda prepares to sneak away to her wedding, Telèspore becomes increasingly assertive to monitor and protect her movements, with the evolving dialogue reflecting the changing power dynamics between them. Chopin writes that he "demanded" to know where she is going; when she refuses to say, he repeats the same two statements, first as a question, then as an imperative: "You ain't goin' anywhere this time o' night by yo'se'f?... You ain't goin' anywhere this time o' night by yo'se'f" (Chopin 345). As Zaïda begins to leave, Telèspore jumps into the seat next to her, defying her insistence of her capability, and in rejection of his earlier assessment of her free and independent movement. Later, when the pair encounter an intoxicated André and Zaïda refuses his insistence on marrying, Telèspore again jumps into action, taking it upon himself to dictate the outcome of a couple, both of whom he met that day. After

André flees, Zaïda states that they too should leave, but Telèspore insists on staying longer for coffee, causing Zaïda to sit “submissively” and grow “numb”:

Her will, which had been overmastering and aggressive, seemed to have grown numb under the disturbing spell of the past few hours. An illusion had gone from her, and had carried her love with it. The absence of regret revealed this to her. She realized, but could not comprehend it, not knowing that the love had been part of the illusion. She was tired in body and spirit. (351)

Chopin’s diction here is telling: she assesses Zaïda’s will as “overmastering,” suggesting she may exert too much control, yet she had no regrets. The promise of marriage, it seems, had come up short, and this baptism by fire leaves her dazed and tired.

After finishing their coffee, Telèspore commands to Zaïda, “Come, I’m going to take you home now,” and she simply follows “like a little child” (Chopin 352), returning to an adolescent state. This ending, reflective of Mary Papke’s assessment of Chopin’s style as “fiction of defeat” (Papke 6), offers a startling view of marriage and women’s position with men. With either man, Zaïda loses a part of herself: André’s retort “The hell you ain’t!” following Zaïda’s refusal renders him an overbearing man worthy of disdain, while Telèspore’s increasing assertion over Zaïda’s choices leaves her “quiet and silent,” reduced to a “girl” (352). One man lies to her and cannot be trusted; one man polices respectability that effectively robs Zaïda of her voice.

Together, the unmarried writer Frances Witherwell and her visiting niece, Mildred, exhibit the tensions and contradictions of both paternalism and women’s navigation of it in Chopin’s “Miss Witherwell’s Mistake,” published in 1891. The “exact and punctilious” Frances Witherwell keeps a “neat and pretty home” while she produces

“tale[s] of passion” or articles as varied (and soft) as “The Wintering of Canaries” and “Security Against the Moth” for the town’s *Battery* newspaper (Chopin 683). One autumn morning she receives word that her brother Hiram is sending his daughter Mildred to stay with Frances for the purpose of clearing Mildred’s head following a love affair with a man “so ineligible, from the well understood, worldly standpoint,” with Mildred “submitting to her parents’ wishes” (684). Agitated, Frances recalls the twelve-year-old Mildred who used to crave sweets and tease Frances’ cat, but is later surprised, when Mildred arrives, to encounter a “well mannered young lady of nineteen” who expresses hopefulness and a desire to be useful (684-85). The success of Mildred’s visit hinges on her ability to defer to more knowledgeable adults rather than pursue her own love interests: “Mr. Witherwell felt hopeful, that time and change of scene would bring Mildred back to them completely reconciled, poor child, to the worldly wisdom of those who know the world so much better than she” (684).

Later, during a cold day when Frances must deliver a draft to her editor, she asks Mildred to do it for her, only for Mildred to discover that the new *Battery* editor is the very man her father rejected. Hoping to provide Mildred with “something to keep her out of mischief,” Frances continues having Mildred deliver weekly proofs through the winter, and Mildred happily obliges, never revealing the editor’s identity. Unsure of how to ultimately proceed, Mildred eventually seeks her aunt’s advice under the guise of asking for the ending of a love story Mildred is developing. Frances recommends, “Your hero must now perform some act to ingratiate himself with the obdurate parent,” but warns that the “poison” of realism has tainted Mildred: “Marry” the couple, she advises, “or let

them die” (Chopin 689-90). Ultimately, Mildred chooses marriage, both for her story and for herself, with Hiram and Frances eventually warming.

Both Mildred and Frances stand as models of how women may navigate a life of their own making and how systems police them, with Chopin satirizing Frances’ traditional values and independent life as a writer. While Frances may live alone and pursue her writing, she pens articles on subjects about which she apparently knows little: “the matrons of Boredomville were themselves much beholden to the spinster, Miss Witherwell, [for a paper] entitled, ‘A Word to Mothers’” (Chopin 683). While ignorant of Mildred’s resurrected romance with the editor, Frances seems to live vicariously through her niece, since “two such divergent cupids, as love in real life, and love in fiction, held themselves at widely distant points of view” (684). Chopin mocks readers who readily rely on a woman with little experience in family matters, and equally criticizes publications for producing such narrow and inconsequential content; Heather Thomas sees the story as Chopin’s attempt to challenge the “dilemma faced by women working in traditionally male fields” and to satirize “the notion that a woman writer’s scrupulous housekeeping enhances her literary credentials” (Thomas, “Kate Chopin’s Scribbling,” 21). Moreover, Chopin paints the “spinster” Frances as behind the times, associating the “asexual female journalist who champions conservative sexual values” with “a decline in the quality of art” (Zibrak 368), suggesting that only a richness of life experience can produce equal richness in writing.

Mildred must thus reject the same paternalism seen in her aunt: insubstantial, conservative values. Mildred’s desire for realism in her story suggests the ways that stories for and about women remain archaic and tied to the whims of other voices. While

a romantic perspective on life may provide momentary pleasure, it ultimately fails in leading to true fulfillment and long-term satisfaction. Mildred therefore knows that she may achieve happiness only through claiming autonomy over her private life and subverts the paternalistic discourse dictating her path by navigating from the inside out. While on the surface level “Miss Witherwell’s Mistake” appears a lighthearted tale of lovers reuniting, the story warns on sensational romanticism and domesticity (Weatherford 63) as well as the ability of outsiders to dictate matters of the heart. Mildred’s undermining of her father’s protectionism establishes Mildred as an autonomous adult, capable and independent, who understands and lives in the world as it is. That she succeeds in her ultimate goal of marrying a hardworking, respectable editor also makes the tale palatable as Mildred remains loyal to expected gender norms.

“Athénaïse” presents a similar trajectory in its title character’s separation from, but ultimate return to, matrimonial bonds, suggesting that motherhood disempowers women from any public life. Anne Goodwyn Jones argues that while on the surface the tale intends to depict woman’s stages of “sexual awakening” toward “sensuality,” implying positive development, Chopin “weaves into her fabric the themes of mastery and possession,” ending on an ironic note of continued slavery (A. G. Jones, *Tomorrow*, 149). As the story opens, readers learn that a Creole woman named Athénaïse left her home earlier that morning and by evening had not yet returned. Darkness fills her house: her “severe” husband Cazeau’s “thick black hair” shines like “a crow” while his “dark blue” eyes contribute to a sense of “fear” that he sometimes instills. Cazeau’s servant Félicité bustles about “like a little, bent, restless shadow” as the night begins to “deepen, and to gather black about the clusters and shrubs,” while “a black boy stood feeding a

brace of snarling, hungry dogs” and “a little negro baby” cries (Chopin 353-54). In contrast, visions of Athénaïse’s “fair” face disrupt Cazeau’s sleep as he recalls his “paramount” role of “bringing his wife back to a sense of her duty” (354-55). When he does eventually travel to Athénaïse’s family home to seek her out, her family meets him with a refusal that made him so angry “he looked wicked” (357).

Chopin divides “Athénaïse” into eleven parts, and the two opening sections introduce several relationships that establish Athénaïse’s character in her absence. Most obviously, Cazeau’s mystification and anger over why she would leave in the first place paints Cazeau as severe and ignorant, which justifies Athénaïse’s flight. For her own part, Athénaïse appears “thoroughly unhappy” with her recent marriage, wondering why she married in the first place and crying out over the lost opportunity to instead join a life in the convent “at peace” (Chopin 358), implying a satisfactory life as one of independence outside of her husband’s gaze and shadow. Athénaïse sees her plight as not just an individual one against Cazeau but understands it as microcosmic of larger systems: “Her husband’s looks, his tones, his mere presence, brought to her a sudden sense of hopelessness, an instinctive realization of the futility of rebellion against a social and sacred institution” (359). While Athénaïse’s brother and mother display compassion and defense, willing to protect her when she flees home, her father Miché mirrors Athénaïse’s reflects the very concerns she voices when he exclaims out of exasperation that it will take “a master hand, a strong will that compels obedience” (361) in order to control Athénaïse, thus establishing an analogy between “marriage and slavery” (H. Taylor, *Gender*, 180). The fact that Athénaïse remains “too childlike” (Chopin 359) and ignorant in matters like reproduction reinforces the paternalism under which she exists. She does



not know the workings of her own body because she has not ‘needed’ to know and there has never existed a reason to apply such knowledge.

Athénaïse’s development may be best understood not just in the context of her marriage “trap” (Chopin 362), but in relation to two key African-American women: the aforementioned Félicité, and Sylvie, a middle-aged boarding house owner in New Orleans, where Athénaïse stays before eventually returning home. Each stands as a foil to Athénaïse’s naiveté as well as her domestic frustration. Félicité, Athénaïse and Cazeau’s older servant, works in the shadows of their home as Cazeau eats the evening Athénaïse has disappeared and embodies the very ethics that most disturb Athénaïse herself. Weary of Athénaïse’s absence, Félicité expresses concern and judgment that Athénaïse has restlessly left the marital home only after two months. Her remark over Athénaïse’s defiance, “C’est pas Chrétien, tenez!” [“It’s not Christian, hold on!”] (354), suggests an allegiance to the tenets of respectability framing Athénaïse’s wifely duties. Félicité otherwise silently and obediently serves Cazeau his meals and cleans the kitchen despite her preoccupation with Athénaïse’s whereabouts. When Cazeau returns home with Athénaïse several days later, the image of Félicité standing on the lawn “waiting for them” (361) similarly suggests that of a vigilant domestic, uneasy until the family members have been reunited. Athénaïse further reverses the wife/servant relationship when she later flings her set of storeroom keys at Félicité, claiming she no longer wants them and “refuse[s] to take further account” of the storeroom (364). At this moment, Athénaïse symbolically and physically transfers household management to Félicité, an act over which Athénaïse can exhibit control in an environment in which she otherwise feels powerless. That Cazeau later brings the keys back to Athénaïse—“it was not the

custom on Cane river for the negro servant to carry the keys, when there was a mistress at the head of the household” (365-66)—undermines Athénaïse’s efforts; even within her domestic role, she will never quite have the upper hand as Cazeau will always monitor her and ensure Athénaïse plays by his rules.

Athénaïse’s transfer of her keys to Félicité embodies the disdain both she holds for Félicité’s role as well as Cazeau’s apparent dismissal of Félicité’s concerns. When Félicité voices her view over Athénaïse’s departure as “not Christian,” Cazeau seemingly does not listen, calling her “a fool”: “Félicité’s opinion of the unchristian-like behavior of his wife in leaving him thus alone after two months of marriage weighed little with him” (Chopin 354). Félicité can manage the household well and perform many wifely duties expected of Athénaïse, but she does not have Cazeau’s respect. Athénaïse associates Félicité’s domestic duties with Félicité’s actual position as a servant and the deference such a position requires to Cazeau, a man Athénaïse finds repulsive. Thus, shortly after Athénaïse returns home, she flees once more, this time to New Orleans, where she stays at the boarding house of Ms. Sylvie, an independent businesswoman who Chopin infuses with self-respect, knowledge and dimension.

Madame Sylvie stands as a model of the kind of self-sufficiency and independence Athénaïse desires. While Chopin initially describes Sylvie in humble terms, as “a portly quadroon of fifty or thereabouts,” she later depicts her with depth and “dignity”: moving “majestically,” Sylvie embodies a “loftiness and command of her bearing” and, while respectful, never acts with an air of servitude around white people (Chopin 369). She runs a well-respected and meticulous boarding house, resulting in an atmosphere that Athénaïse finds “sufficiently entertaining” and “comforting” (373), and

insists “religiously” for members of her own race to call her “Madame Sylvie” (369). On this latter point, Heather Kirk Thomas argues that Sylvie “confronts Southern codes of etiquette” (Thomas, “House of Sylvie,” 209): while she “believed firmly in the color-line” (Chopin 369), Sylvie nevertheless “demands deference where and when she can” (Thomas, “House of Sylvie,” 209), establishing a possible navigation route for Athénaïse within her own marriage. Sylvie prides herself “upon the quality and highly respectable character” (Chopin 370) of the patrons visiting “the house of Sylvie” (368), establishing Sylvie as an exacting expert in both domestic management and entrepreneurship.

It may come as no surprise, then, that Sylvie serves as the catalyst for Athénaïse’s own ‘awakening’ when Sylvie teaches Athénaïse about reproduction and Athénaïse realizes she is pregnant:

Sylvie was very wise, and Athénaïse was very ignorant. The extent of her ignorance and the depth of her subsequent enlightenment were bewildering. She stayed a long, long time quite still, quite stunned, after her interview with Sylvie...Her whole being was steeped in a wave of ecstasy. When she finally arose from the chair in which she had been seated, and looked at herself in the mirror, a face met hers which she seemed to see for the first time, so transfigured was it with wonder and rapture. (Chopin 381)

Scholars disagree regarding the nature and impact this transformation has on Athénaïse and her marriage, with some arguing that Athénaïse’s pregnancy implies Chopin’s support for motherhood as the primary source of personal fulfillment. Patricia Hopkins Lattin sees Athénaïse’s eventual return to Cazeau, which occurs within a day of her discovery, as reflecting “a traditional attitude...that motherhood changes a girl to a

woman and therefore makes her complete” (Lattin 41), while Daniel Bormann claims that Athénaïse’s “happy end is a fake,” arguing that Chopin introduces but then forgets about core social issues between the sexes (Bormann 80). In her recent dissertation on *The Awakening* and “Athénaïse,” Darby Dyer argues that Athénaïse, in her inability to find fulfillment, remains dependent, a warning to other women: “Although [Athénaïse] would like to obtain selfhood, without a designated purpose beyond wifedom and motherhood, she cannot achieve an individualized identity. Instead, she finds identity in others” (D. Dyer 162). However, these readings suggest that motherhood and marriage themselves may exist only to suppress Athénaïse and that she may not be able to navigate and produce different narratives.

When Athénaïse learns of her pregnancy, she takes on characteristics reflected in the independent and capable Sylvie. In her early days of staying at Sylvie’s boarding house, Athénaïse struggles with loneliness, depending upon Sylvie and another boarder, Gouvernail, for support. Rather than become overwhelmed, she recognizes “the need of action” and immediately puts together a plan to return home (Chopin 381). She takes a walk out in the street, “observingly” scanning another woman’s baby, then goes to a bank and “demand[s] a money on her husband’s account” in such a way that the tellers provide it “as unhesitatingly as they would have handed it over to Cazeau himself” (382). At this point, Athénaïse enters the public sphere with confidence and focus: “No one could have said now that she did not know her own mind” (382). Athénaïse shifts from rejecting the position of ‘mother/object’ to a thinking and acting subject with a “whole passionate nature” (381). Furthermore, Athénaïse’s embrace of her sexuality challenges the Victorian “angel in the house” (Patmore) ideal in favor of “a sexually active mother who

does not offer redemption for mankind” (Morgan-Proux 331) but instead takes her marriage into her own hands.

Chopin also suggests that men must consider their role within paternalism if their wives will feel satisfied and their marriages are to succeed. While Chopin initially conveys Cazeau with a sense of brutishness, thinking about his pony after Athénaïse leaves the house, Cazeau undergoes a transformative realization concerning Athénaïse’s autonomy when he escorts her back home following her initial departure. While passing a particular oak tree, Cazeau suddenly recalls a memory from his childhood, when he and his father were walking back with an enslaved person who had fled: “They had halted beneath this big oak to enable the negro to take breath; for Cazeau’s father was a kind and considerate master, and every one had agreed at the time that Black Gabe was a fool, a great idiot indeed, for wanting to run away from him” (Chopin 360). Cazeau becomes disgusted—“[t]he whole impression was for some reason hideous” (360) to him—and he quickly catches up to his wife in order to ride by her side the rest of the way home. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that Cazeau’s disgust about Gabe occurs just as Cazeau chases after his wife; like Gabe, Athénaïse’s outsider status, as a woman and as a Creole, leaves her vulnerable.

Free people of color within Louisiana, particularly New Orleans, lived in a ‘between state’ of whiteness and Blackness in the early 1800s as “respected members of New Orleans society who attended the French opera and theater, debated the latest politics in their own newspapers, and worshipped in the St. Louis Cathedral” (Gehman 3). Following the Civil War, when technically everyone was free, the term “free people of color” no longer held the same weight, and “Creoles of color,” eventually shortened to

“Creoles” came to be used to refer to individuals from this background, native born to Louisiana (Martin 59). While intermarrying, they maintained their Creole language and traditions, and, Mary Gehman explains, often “refused to send their children to school with other blacks” (Gehman 96), thus maintaining racial and ethnic hierarchy. Given the fact that “Creole” was also a term used by native Louisianans of European descent, the term could encompass a range of specific ethnic backgrounds. What all Creoles held in common, however, was a desire to define themselves “as other than what is African” (Goodspeed 46).

Thus, when Cazeau knows that his father was known as a great man, he realizes that he was still an enslaver and Gabe still ran. The fact that Gabe forcibly returns back to his enslaver against his will strikes Cazeau as “hideous” as he then sees his marriage in terms of enslavement: while he is “good” to his wife in terms of loyalty and providing, her position as his wife remains one of an object possessed. True happiness hinges on his recognizing her subjectivity and diminishing any color he sees within her Creole identity, which he seems to do immediately. The next morning, he “did not dream” of scolding her or even stopping her when she leaves again; indeed, “Cazeau’s chief offense seemed to be that he loved her” (Chopin 362). Rather than compel her to return home, he writes to her as a woman fully able to choose participation in their marriage: “He did not desire her presence ever again in his home unless she came of her free will” (367).

Avril Horner posits that one could envision “how conservative magazine readers of the 1890s might have seen this tale as that of a young woman brought to her senses by a combination of physiology and duty” (Horner 139), while Julie Goodspeed argues that Athénaïse’s position as a woman leaves marriage as a form of slavery, noting that the

“enslavement through [Athénaïse’s] marriage causes her a loss of her personal identity even though it stabilizes the Creole one” (Goodspeed 57). But it is the changes undergone by both Cazeau and Athénaïse that formulate a shift in their marriage and that allow for their reunion. Together with Chopin’s portrayal of Sylvie, and even Athénaïse’s later rejection of her brother, who encouraged her distance from Cazeau and arranged her arrival in New Orleans, “Athénaïse” suggests the necessity to step away from earlier codes of behavior and to apply new narratives and models. These old patterns, Chopin seems to offer, no longer serve anyone well; rather, individuals thrive under conditions of autonomy and dignity, knowledge and truth.

### **THE DEPLOYMENT OF “FREEDOM”**

As Louise Mallard stares out of her bedroom window into the blue sky, freshly informed of her husband’s death, a rising feeling fills her body and soul:

She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath:

“free, free, free!” (Chopin 757)

In just over one thousand words, Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” presents a harsh view of wives’ realities: news of her husband’s death brings Louise not grief but relief, surging comfort and happiness. The story of a woman who learns of her husband’s death in a rail accident—only to drop dead when he later arrives home unharmed—provides rife material for a number of debates concerning the nature of Louise’s marriage, the role of

her ego, Louise's assertiveness and the "thing" that she recognizes within her. One line of questioning regards, in essence, the validity and origin of Louise's reaction: "there is no hard evidence whatsoever of patriarchal blindness or suppression, constant or selfless sacrifice by Louise, or an ongoing struggle for selfhood. These positions are all read into the story from non-textual assumptions. The simple truth is that this story is not about society or marriage, but about Louise" (Berkove, "Fatal Self-Assertion," 153). Lawrence Berkove goes on to argue that the "monstrous joy" (Chopin 757) Louise feels, rather than the shock of later seeing her husband very much alive, is the growing stress that leads to her presumed heart attack at the story's conclusion.

An examination of women's rights within marriage—married women's literal freedoms, or lack thereof—provides some context regarding the conditions under which wives lived in late nineteenth-century Louisiana. The first article of the *Digest of Civil Laws Now in Force in the Territory of Orleans* of 1808 states that "sex alone which distinguishes men from women, establishes some essential differences between them, with respect to their civil, social and political rights" (*Digest*, Book 1, Title 1, ch 1). Louisiana's legal framework was therefore based upon such "essential differences" and the assumed 'natural' roles and abilities resulting from such differences. In Armantine Smith's sweeping history of women's suffrage within the state, she asserts that any legal equality between the sexes would challenge natural social distinctions based on the *Digest's* definition (Smith 530); as such, married women would not see any major advancement toward equality until 1916 with the passing of the first Married Women's Emancipation Act, which provided women with limited property and court rights (Louisiana, 212-13).



Until the 1916 Act passed, Louisiana women held little legal control within their marriages: a wife was “bound to live with her husband and to follow him wherever he chooses to reside” (*Digest*, Book 1, Title 4, Art. 20), could not appear in court without his permission (Art. 21) and could not remarry until at least ten months after the death of her husband (Art. 31). Upon marriage, “whatever was stated in a marriage to belong to the wife or given to her” on occasion of the marriage “by someone other than her husband, was part of her dowry,” which then belonged to the husband (Smith 525); the dowry could include “all the present and future effects of the wife” (*Digest*, Book 3, Title 5, Art. 18) and lasted the length of the marriage (Art. 26). Furthermore, a wife “could not spend her own earnings,” since they would be considered community property and thus under her husband’s control, nor could she obtain credit, as she had no control over a security deposit (Smith 529-30). Legally, at the very least, marriage was male domain.

Given this context, it may seem understandable for Louise Mallard to continue repeating “Free! Body and soul free” to herself as she sits alone looking out the window and into the world (Chopin 757). After all, white women have often been held as the model and bearer of culture, as a “symbol of civilization” (Ware 11), through whom values concerning morality, freedom and justice are enacted and policed. Indeed, in their analysis of Louise’s challenge to the burden she carries as a wife, Adisa Ahmetspahić and Damir Kahrić characterize Louise as leaving behind “her marriage, and the shackles which held her back during her matrimony” (Ahmetspahić and Kahrić 32). Given that Chopin writes in the late-nineteenth-century South, Louise’s language suggests marriage as a mechanism for enslavement and inevitably associates the role of a wife with that of an enslaved individual. In marriage, Chopin conveys, white women stand as victims of

their white husbands, as vulnerable and made to forcibly submit to their spouse's whims. Louise's forward-looking visage, face looking toward the sky and the activity below it, suggests progress and opportunity. The captivity and subjugation associated with marriage sharply contrasts with Louise's vision outside the window, outside of her domestic sphere—outside, perhaps, of the Southern sphere in which systems of gender and race operate. Louise's gaze outside the window welcomes any number of worlds beyond as possible pathways toward 'freedom.'

Yet Louise never sees this freedom come to fruition; she dies of "joy that kills" (Chopin 758) the moment she sees her husband walk through the door. The tragedy of Louise Mallard, following Aristotle's argument that tragedy induces pity and fear (see Yazgi), lies in the realization that no such place for Louise's rising ambition, personal vision or even actual joy exists inside her home nor marriage. Her death rejects the paternalistic system as a viable means for fulfillment; her "new consciousness" as Louise, rather than as Mrs. Mallard (Papke 63), induces shudders over wifely duties and the protection marriage offers (Chopin 758). As Louise, she retains her identity as an autonomous woman, "drinking in a very elixir of life" in which "all sorts of days... would be her own," ultimately leaving her room "like a goddess of Victory" (758). Chopin's language here insinuates a continuous battle on Mrs. Mallard's part between duty and desire—one that happened to go Louise's way due to a random tragedy rather than through any actionable pathway on her part. It also suggests that Louise lives in circumstances that allow for her to pursue this freedom: when she hears of her husband's death, she does not, for instance, worry about the material needs of her own survival—seemingly, those are secure. Thus, only under the perfect conditions may such a victory

be won and such a dream come to fruition. Otherwise, Louise's death suggests, a wife's house may become her coffin, suffocated by marital demands alongside the knowledge of what she loses.

Chopin extends exploration into women's necessity for freedom in "A Pair of Silk Stockings," written in 1896 and published the next year in *Vogue*. She begins the story with "Little" Mrs. Sommers (Chopin 816), an adjective that conveys the small, constraining world in which Mrs. Sommers lives under economic stress, and the diminutive, narrow way in which others view her. The story centers on Mrs. Sommers somehow coming into fifteen dollars and how she eventually chooses to spend it: on herself. Her "worn out" purse and the way the "question of investment...occupied her greatly" indicates strained financial position and how Mrs. Sommers navigates the care of her family; she carefully considers, for example, how many shoes and fabric she can purchase for her children, of which she has at least four: "The needs of the present absorbed her every faculty" (Chopin 816). She catalogues each child's needs and knows "the value of bargains," measuring each item against its cost (816), and on the present day even forgets to eat lunch in between caring for her children and home, and preparing for the shopping trip (817). Unlike Louise Mallard, whose life without a husband she can gleefully envision as "her own," Mrs. Sommers' "vision of the future" appears "like some dim, gaunt monster" who "appalled her" (816). Mrs. Sommers, in short, is an exhausted caretaker who, while excited by her children, lives a life that revolves around them.

So when a tired Mrs. Sommers finally arrives at the store like a soldier, hungry and attempting to "gather strength and courage to charge," she welcomes the moment

when her gloveless hand falls upon a “soothing” pile of silk stockings (Chopin 817). She gives in to the ‘temptation’ of the “serpent-like” gloves and within a few moments, chooses a black pair to purchase. Turning away from the bargain counter, Mrs. Sommers takes an elevator to the ladies’ changing rooms, where she replaces her cotton stockings with her new purchase, taking on an entirely new sense of self. She returns to purchase two magazines for herself, treats herself to a table-service lunch, and finally attends a play at the theater.

The money Mrs. Sommers comes into acts as a ticket to a life of autonomy and passion: through it, she lives a day of pleasure, including the pleasure of “not thinking at all” (Chopin 818). Cristina Giorcelli explains that in 1890s America, “for most women, wool and cotton were the fabrics of which their stockings were made, while silk, with its brilliance and smoothness, bespoke of luxury—an extravagance in which only women of means could indulge” (Giorcelli 81). With this newfound money, she may play out a version of “certain ‘better days’ that little Mrs. Sommers had known before she had ever thought of being Mrs. Sommers” (Chopin 816), indicating marriage has brought about more difficulties and limitations to Mrs. Sommers than what she envisioned earlier. Given the opportunity, Mrs. Sommers enjoys the “touch of the raw silk,” something normally only her husband would see, “to her flesh,” meaning she holds the power to provide her own pleasure. She purchases the same magazines that she used to enjoy in earlier days when she had time for herself, and during lunch, she enjoys the “soft, pleasing” sounds of background music with the confidence that no one else in the restaurant judges her (819). While the stockings’ “serpent-like” description and their color—black—hold obvious associations with temptation and the fall of Eve, never does

Mrs. Sommers hold any regret nor experience any punishment for her day of pleasure. Perhaps at most her children will need to wait a bit longer to have the new shoes and clothing she intended to originally buy.

Robert Arner's 2009 analysis indicates that "Silk Stockings" has no hero as Mrs. Sommers moves from her position of marital control to one of capitalist manipulation. She becomes a product, Arner argues, of consumerism in the way that businessman like Macy has pre-designed and in that way she simply "plays at being someone who she is not" (Arner, "On First Looking," 125); the "mechanical impulse" (Chopin 818) she feels is simply the "mechanical power" of marketing urging to "keep spending money" (Arner, "On First Looking," 124). While Chopin indeed writes that Mrs. Sommers "seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function" of thinking (Chopin 818), Mrs. Sommers does not mindlessly spend simply to spend, but to indulge in self-gratification in a way that mothers, especially those without disposable income, rarely can without judgment. Mrs. Sommers is conscious of this; in the restaurant she notes the other ladies and gentlemen "who did not notice her" (819). Wearing the silk stockings, Mrs. Sommers is no longer the asexual martyr mother; she finds self-respect, deference by others, and entertainment, and "her mind and heart were gratified" (Giorcelli 90). When she feels the breeze in the restaurant, hears the soft music, tastes a bit of her lunch, glances at her magazine, sips her wine and wiggles her toes in her stockings (Chopin 819-20), Mrs. Sommers engages in a most defiant of acts: enjoying pleasure without being productive, all while being a woman. The stockings thus serve as a mechanism to enact a fantasy that women desire but that "puzzled" men cannot see

(820), alluding to when and where any individual may be play acting and when and where the truth actually exists.

Writing once to the Western Association of Writers, Chopin chided them for “clinging to past and conventional standards” in their regionalism, arguing that “true art” must convey “human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it” (Chopin qtd. in Staunton 203). Chopin herself envisions her predominantly white women in their smallest and largest moments: purchasing undergarments, learning of pregnancy, envisioning their endings. These visions suggest that the realities of women’s lives exist in the multitude of stories hidden within the mundane and the profound, well outside the insular, curated standard narratives. She writes in subtleties and ambiguities; even those women who return to home and marriage do so with renewal and self-awareness. But she also writes within a framework coded by race, gender and enslavement, at times, treating her white protagonists as “de facto Blacks” (Petry 25) in their loss of freedom or submission to white men. Navigating these systems thus requires her women to either rely on or reject other women, and in doing so, to distance themselves from the Blackness with which they associate traditional marriage arrangements, and to assert that their lives and stories are, by definition, different.

## CHAPTER SIX: WHITE SEXUALITY AND BODILY AUTONOMY

Some one has said it is better to study one man than ten books. I want neither books nor men; they make me suffer. Can one of them talk to me like the night—the Summer night? Like the stars or the caressing wind?  
—“The Night Came Slowly” (Chopin 772)

*The Awakening* may have ‘undone’ Chopin’s career with its female protagonist at peace with her extramarital affairs, but Chopin planted the seeds of her characters’ sexual autonomy well before. Writing “at a time when wives held limited rights to their children, property, income and bodies” (Heilmann, “The Awakening,” 93), Chopin recognized that larger systems of power were maintained via institutions that controlled women’s bodies and sexual agency. As of 1894, when Chopin drafted several of the stories discussed here, progress in American women’s legal rights was slow, if not stagnant. Joan Hoff-Wilson explains that even states which began to pass Married Women’s Property Acts in the 1830s did so with narrow interpretations. Furthermore, between 1872 and 1900, the Supreme Court ruled on a number of cases that fundamentally “questioned whether women were even ‘persons’ under the law” (Hoff-Wilson 8), allowing in the case of *In re Lockwood*, 154 U.S. 116 (1894) to essentially let states define persons as male only. “From 1894 until 1971,” Hoff-Wilson continues, “states could maintain that women were not legally ‘persons’ by virtue of this single Supreme Court decision” (8). Unsurprisingly, the degree with which women could exercise control over their bodies and thus futures stirred in Chopin’s mind.

To this end, Chopin knew that her evolving stories did not fit the expectations associated with the author of *Bayou Folk*'s idyllic, 'regional' atmosphere. She thus turned to *Vogue*, who accepted many (but not all) of the "unconventional tales" about women's love rejected by other national publishers (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 279). Established in 1892, *Vogue* marketed toward a cosmopolitan female audience and aimed to distinguish itself from mass-market journals (Waller-Zuckerman 729). Emily Toth asserts that in compiling these stories, intended for a new collection entitled *Vocation and a Voice*, Chopin seemed "bent on ignoring commercial, entertainment considerations entirely" (Toth, *Unveiling*, 208) in favor of more nuanced presentations of femininity and strength, instead choosing many that Toth characterizes as "somber" (208). While some indeed conclude with endings for female protagonists that modern readers may interpret as less than ideal, the characters themselves range in their actual dissatisfaction, some expressing peace with their ability to choose life paths, others at odds with the obstacles blocking their paths to true fulfillment. Chopin's stories offer visions of women navigating their own sexual desire against the grains of feminine respectability. They may indeed vary in the distance they achieve within these journeys, but of greatest interest is their ability and willingness to navigate in the first place. They reject conventional containment and express no remorse for doing so.

At the same time, their ability to explore and voyage exists because of the silent work provided by the labor of others around them. Mrs. Baruda of "A Respectable Woman," for instance, presumably may take evening strolls around the grounds of her plantation precisely because someone else tends them. Writing in the context of *The Awakening*, Elizabeth Ammons argues that Edna Pontellier may fantasize about and



pursue her independent life “for one very clear and highly political reason: Black women will raise her children” (Ammons 74). The failure of decades of white feminist literary criticism, Ammons continues, is that Edna’s story “is not universal”: only due to the “voicelessness” of women—and men—of other racial and economic backgrounds can Edna, or nearly any other Chopin woman, pursue freedom (75). Chopin’s choice to associate these protagonists with whiteness only furthers this silence.

### **THE THIN VEIL OF RESPECTABILITY**

An ideal starting point for examining Chopin’s challenge against traditional boundaries is “The Kiss,” a quick read from 1894 in which a young woman named Nathalie strategizes for a stable future by securing the love of a wealthy suitor, Mr. Brantain, despite her insinuated involvement with another, more outwardly passionate man, Mr. Harvy. The story opens with Brantain sitting “overtaken” in one of “deep shadows” of a room, watching Nathalie aside a fireplace; suddenly, Mr. Harvy, a man Brantain knows “quite well,” strolls in and “presse[s] an ardent, lingering kiss” on Nathalie’s lips (Chopin 775). Stunned, Nathalie chides Harvy, who refuses to forgive him. At their next meeting, Nathalie approaches an “unhappy” Brantain, maintaining that Harvy is a longtime family friend—“we have always been like cousins—like brother and sister” (776)—which seemingly comforts Brantain enough to later marry her.

Cunning and deliberate, Nathalie undermines the white Southern male values of dominance and honor. While postbellum white men were coming to terms with their “gendered images” and evolving masculinity, their manhood hinged on public performance of “honor and virility” that defined acceptable manliness (Friend x).

Nathalie's actions and private thoughts concerning not only Brantain but marriage itself suggest the private instability of this performance and the ability of women to navigate across the borders of emotional and sexual monogamy. From the first private detail Chopin reveals of Nathalie—that Nathalie “knew that [Brantain] loved her” (Chopin 775)—Chopin depicts her as confident and strategic, cleverer than Brantain in her ability to maneuver social indiscretions and choose her own path. Nathalie adeptly handles Brantain’s misery over Harvy’s kiss by downplaying the “little” encounter as a misinterpretation on Brantain’s part, suggesting an alternate explanation of Harry as an “intimate associate” of the family, emphasizing her own grief —“she was almost weeping”—over the idea that Brantain may have been harmed (776). Chopin reveals early that Nathalie seeks Brantain for his money: “she liked and required the entourage which wealth could give” (775); to that end only she remains faithful. As she finishes her explanation to Brantain, she seems to have ensured security for each, providing him with hope and guaranteeing her own financial future. Her face, Chopin writes, “was triumphant” (777).

Although Nathalie may yearn for a continued romantic relationship with Harvy at the end, she remains satisfied with her pragmatic choice to marry Brantain for his money (see Iancu). She has successfully blamed Harvy for the kiss and Brantain has accepted it, despite the fact that he knows Harvy “quite well.” At her own wedding, Harvy approaches Nathalie stating her husband has sent him to kiss her, who “looked hungry for” and “invited” such a kiss (777). At the last moment, Harvy claims he has stopped kissing women as it is too dangerous, likely for his reputation. If Nathalie feels any disappointment, Chopin tempers it: “Well, she had Brantain and his millions left” (777).

In her own view, Nathalie has still ‘won.’ Her compromise of choosing Brantain over Harvy seems to her a wise choice given the wealth, opportunity and status her new position likely offers. Nathalie has proven herself a capable director who no doubt will manage Brantain and his millions well.

At the heart of “The Kiss,” and of “A Respectable Woman,” written in early 1894, lies a woman’s unknowable inner self. Both Nathalie and Mrs. Baroda, respectively, do not show their full hand. They take their personal desires seriously and carefully weigh the risks and benefits associated with various paths forward. Despite the social systems that limit what they may do publicly, Chopin designs neither woman as limited. And, as in many other words, Chopin concludes “A Respectable Woman” with ambiguity, this time concerning Mrs. Baroda’s sexual commitment to her husband.

Chopin published the story in her 1897 collection *A Night in Acadie*, which highlights her interest in women’s inner lives and the inability of others to ever truly tell what lives beneath women’s exteriors. Toth sees one reading of *A Night in Acadie* as Chopin’s warning, including to her daughter Lélia, “not to shape her life around the promises of men” (Toth, *Unveiling*, 194). The story centers around the evolving passions of Mrs. Baroda, who, together with her husband, hosts his friend Gouvernail for a few weeks at their plantation in northern Louisiana. The story seems at first to offer a classic battle between the heart and the mind: without having yet met Gouvernail, Mrs. Baroda bases her image of him on his reputation as not being a “society man” and as a result, “she did not like him” (Chopin 506). Yet upon seeing him for the first time, her feelings immediately shift, seemingly prompted by attraction beyond her control: “she rather liked him when he first presented himself. But why she liked him she could not explain

satisfactorily to herself when she partly attempted to do so. She could discover in him none of those brilliant and promising traits” that her husband Gaston promised Gouvernail possessed (506). As Joyce Dyer explains, Gouvernail appears “gracious and courteous” (J. Dyer, “Gouvernail,” 47-48) and gleans pleasure from natural experiences, like the smell of the night air. He stands in contrast to the “out of touch” type that Mrs. Baroda anticipates; his preference for appreciating the natural world and dislike of hunting and fishing may be read as a rejection of traditional masculinity and male codes of honor. Over time, while Mrs. Baroda leaves Gaston and Gouvernail alone together, she “persistently sought to penetrate the reserve in which he had unconsciously enveloped himself” while simultaneously giving her husband the impression that Gouvernail bothers and thus displeases her (Chopin 507).

Over the course of the story, her passion builds to such a degree that she feels it necessary to leave her home temporarily. That night, sitting alone on a bench, Gouvernail strolls up and sits beside her, poetically observing the night sky and reminiscing about his youthful ambitions, breathing in “a little whiff of genuine life” that leaves Mrs. Baroda existing predominantly with her “physical being,” the narration cataloging her urges (508-09). Here, Gouvernail recites lines from section 21 of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “Night of south winds—night of the large few stars! / Still nodding night—” (Whitman, “Song” section 21, 15-16). Chopin’s choice here is poignant; the speaker in this section of Whitman’s poem savors in the natural world and its creation, expressing “unspeakable passionate love” (26) to the speaker’s beloved and homage to women: “I saw it is as great to be a woman as to be a man, / And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men” (5-6). While Mrs. Baroda believes it “was not addressed to her,”

Gouvernail situates his “apostrophe to the night” (Chopin 508) within a state of quiet intimacy there on an evening bench alone with Mrs. Baroda. Likely due to publishing boundaries, Chopin refrains from Gouvernail reciting the phrases that directly follow his lines: “mad naked summer night / Smile O voluptuous cool-breadth’d earth!” (Whitman, “Song” section 21, 16-17). This omission, along with the section's closing lines of “I to you give love! O unspeakable passionate love” (25-26) on Chopin’s part nevertheless suggest a parallel passion with Gouvernail that he intentionally controls out of deference to the ‘respectable’ Mrs. Baroda that she interprets as the “genuine life” that is the stuff of existence (Chopin 508).

Recognizing her impulses, she leaves him, then leaves her home in the morning. The following summer, Mrs. Baroda opposes the idea of Gouvernail returning, only to change course by winter. Her husband, “surprised and delighted with the suggestion from her,” compliments her for overcoming her apparent dislike of Gouvernail: “‘Oh,’ she told him, laughingly, after pressing a long, tender kiss upon his lips, ‘I have overcome everything! you will see. This time I shall be very nice to him’” (509).

Importantly, Mrs. Baroda never tells Gaston about her feelings on the bench. Chopin writes that Mrs. Baroda “did not yield” to this particular “temptation” (Chopin 509), noting the desire to tell her husband, not her desire to “draw close to” Gouvernail and “whisper against his cheek” (509). Mrs. Baroda maintains the facade of her disgust and uses Gaston’s naiveté to preserve her ruse, buy her time and control her narrative. Earlier in the visit, when Mrs. Baroda tells her husband that Gouvernail “tires” her “frightfully,” he brushes her off and fails to catch her remark that she wished he was like

other—i.e, average—men. Despite their close proximity in the intimacy of her bedroom, Gaston misreads her remarks’ source:

Gaston took his wife’s pretty face between his hands and looked tenderly and laughingly into her troubled eyes. They were making a bit of toilet sociably together in Mrs. Baroda’s dressing-room.

“You are full of surprises, ma belle,” he said to her. “Even I can never count upon how you are going to act under given conditions.” He kissed her and turned to fasten his cravat before the mirror.

“Here you are,” he went on, “taking poor Gouvernail seriously and making a commotion over him, the last thing he would desire or expect.”

“Commotion!” she hotly resented. “Nonsense! How can you say such a thing? Commotion, indeed! But, you know, you said he was clever.” (Chopin 507)

The conversation speaks to the failure of Gaston on several counts to catch what may be in front of him. Gaston fully admits that he “can never count upon” his wife’s actions, while Mrs. Baroda’s note that “you said he was clever” may allude to her attraction toward Gouvernail. Her comment may also suggest the ease with which Gouvernail may catch on to her feelings, as well as their ability to navigate a relationship unknown to anyone else. Gaston’s paternal movement to take Mrs. Baroda’s face into his hands underscores her assumed innocence in his eyes, as well as the lack of poor behavior on Gaston’s part as a possible motivation for his wife’s feelings. Chopin does not condemn the male sex here.

Rather, Mrs. Baroda's feelings toward another man evolve out of her developing self—a self with which she's constantly grappling even after Gouvernail leaves. Recently, scholars have read Mrs. Baroda's refusal to give in to Gouvernail on the bench as a firmness of self, and her "return to her husband" as "her approach to define her identity," due to her self-acceptance of the female condition (Pujimahanani, Pasopati & Anasis 93). This logic assumes that Mrs. Baroda accepts the broader social scripts and boundaries of respectability placed upon her. In truth, the text speaks to her refusal of such boundaries and labels. The irony of "A Respectable Woman" lies in Mrs. Baroda's manipulation of the outward appearance of respectability in favor of her own desires. She will not simply sit as the static, gracious mantlepiece of her husband or home; she welcomes Gouvernail's return on her own terms. As Patricia Schulster similarly notes, Mrs. Baroda's "mere contemplation" of an alternate future outside of her assigned role "marks her refusal to accept a standard she has had no part in creating" (Schulster). This reading remains consistent with Chopin's desire for her writing to be read as "true life and true art" and the degree to which her stories show "human existence in its subtle complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it" (Chopin qtd. in Koloski, *Kate Chopin*, xiii).

## **FEMALE INTIMACY**

Chopin's "Lilacs" brims with color and a vision of a world at peace in its utopian depiction of female affection and self-determination. Brown garb, lilac blossoms, pink cheeks, a caged green parrot and, especially, the ubiquity of white all work to produce a vibrant work showcasing the tension between that which sustains and that which

diminishes. In “Lilacs,” Chopin envisions the power of female community and sacred bonding as an antidote to the demands of industrialized life and offers a conception of female fulfillment as dependent on female intimacy. The story recounts Madame Adrienne Farival’s annual visit to a convent from Paris, where she works as an entertainer, as well as her attempted visit the next year, when she is prevented from entering the convent following rumors of indiscretion. Adrienne opens the story walking toward the convent she visits annually, dressed completely in brown, “like one of the birds that come with the spring” (Chopin 759), a signal of seasonal change. Holding a bouquet of lilac blossoms, Adrienne immediately symbolizes new life, a transformation from the old to the modern, and walks with a “happy, buoyant step,” toward Sister Agathe, who waits for her with an expression like those who “watch for the coming of those they love” (759). Upon Adrienne’s arrival, Sister Agathe embraces her with passion—“What ardent kisses! What pink flushes of happiness mounting the cheeks of the two women!” (759)—before the two return to the convent, where Adrienne takes note of even the smallest changes in decor and greets the Mother Superior.

The story continues to convey Adrienne’s joyful time at the convent, where she shares a room with Sister Agathe and enjoys quiet time on the property before leaving again for Paris. Chopin reveals Adrienne and Sister Agathe’s relationship to be a powerful one, not short of physicality and emotional depth. Waiting for Adrienne as she speaks with Mother Superior, Sister Agathe’s “face flushed and paled with every passing emotion that visited her soul” before the “two women linked arms and went together out into the open air,” where Sister Agathe later holds Adrienne’s hand and “stroked it fondly” (Chopin 761). Together, the women reminisce on previous visits, with Adrienne



recalling the convent's "old white stone wall"—the barrier between the outside world and the monastic life within—and the "white forehead" of another nun she must greet. Later that evening, as the women prepare for bed, Adrienne does so "with subtle and naïve pleasure" (764). Chopin uses "white" four times in as many sentences to set the scene:

The room which she shared with Sister Agathe was immaculately white.

The walls were a dead white, relieved only by one florid print depicting Jacob's dream at the foot of the ladder, upon which angels mounted and descended. The bare floors, a soft yellow-white, with two little patches of gray carpet beside each spotless bed. At the head of the white-draped beds were two *bénitiers* containing holy water absorbed in sponges. (764)

After Sister Agathe disrobes "without having revealed...as much as a shadow of herself," Adrienne cannot, and does not desire to, sleep (764), instead listening to Sister Agathe's breathing. When Adrienne's visit eventually comes to an end, their separation seems difficult, with Sister Agathe later looking at the clock while teaching to consider when Adrienne would return home. Chopin confirms that at that moment, Adrienne is indeed back home, where the city of Paris has already "engulfed" her (765).

Kate Chopin wrote in her private papers that while she could not recall the specific inspiration for "Lilacs," she did so after visit a convent, where the nuns "seem to retain or gain a certain beauty with their advancing years which we women in the world are strange to...The conditions under which these women live are such as keep them young and fresh in heart and in visage" (Chopin qtd. in Toth and Seyersted 181-82). This particular visit reunited Chopin after twenty years with her friend Liza, and Chopin was struck by the distinction between the two in life experiences that could be read on each of

their faces. Comparing their livelihoods, Chopin further reflects that Liza and her fellow nuns—“these modern Psyches”—are lavished upon by a divine lover, as compared to Chopin, who had lovers “who were not divine—and hated and suffered and been glad” (182). Chopin makes it clear that the women have developed in two utterly different worlds, several times returning to her friend’s apparent youthfulness.

Regardless of the specific inspiration, Chopin wrote “Lilacs” within months of “A Respectable Woman” and “A Story of an Hour,” and furthers those stories’ investigations of women’s constraints and desires for freedom. However, while *Vogue* published these latter stories within months of Chopin originally drafting them, *Vogue* editors rejected “Lilacs,” as did at least seven other publications over the course of more than two years before it was finally published in late 1896 (Walker 139). Per Seyersted suggests that it was turned down by so many editors precisely because of its thematic content (Seyersted 73) and Chopin’s “amoral, detached attitude toward infidelity” (111).

Several—oftentimes, competing—theories hint at the story’s inspiration, origin and meaning, and often depend on whether critics have interpreted the story through a heterosexual or homosexual lens, as outlined in Mariko Utsu’s own analysis (Utsu 299-300). Emily Toth sees “Lilacs” as a reimagining of Chopin’s time as student at Sacred Heart Academy, as a yearning for the youthful freedom expressed there and as reminiscent of common rules and practices experienced at the school. In this all-female environment of structure, expectation and opportunity, Chopin knew, Toth writes, that the “Sacred Heart nuns...did mingle the romantic with the religious, the sensual with the sacred” (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 238). The convent thus operated as a sacred site: one where women could cross boundaries of intimacy and discovery, outside of the heteronormative

systems through which women typically operated. Nancy Walker offers that the attraction between protagonist Adrienne and longtime friend Sister Agathe may be a reason for Adrienne being barred from the convent she frequents annually when desiring a break from her work as an actress (Walker 145-46).

Helen Taylor, however, reads the convent in “Lilacs” as representing a “kind of a death,” charting the repression Chopin felt under Catholicism across her early adult life: while the physical convent functions as a site of “emotional intensity,” the religion “provided a good deal of material and motifs for Chopin’s critique of women’s lives, especially since the fiction repeatedly demonstrates the repressive and/or dangerous nature of that faith for women’s sexuality and thus full human potential” (H. Taylor, *Gender*, 153). A monastic life is a step back from female sexuality, not a pathway toward exploring it; Taylor therefore reads “Lilacs” as an exploration of the impossibility of fulfillment (154). Reading “Lilacs” as a retelling of the Persephone myth, Andrew Crosland similarly reads the convent’s Mother Superior as representing the ineffectiveness of religion (Crosland 33) and the unwillingness of religious figures to intervene in the real world despite a call to do so. Dissatisfied with the noise and demands of the real world, Adrienne nevertheless cannot find respite, nor salvation, within the walls of a convent she once called home.

Crosland and Taylor’s readings may offer interpretations that posit the world as fatalistic, yet Adrienne still enjoys a life of her own making. Utsu interprets “Lilacs” as one in which heterosexual and homosexual readings may both be possible through veiled references to Adrienne’s relationship with a woman named Florine, who seems to hold a position of significance and familiarity within Adrienne’s life, as flowers brought to

Adrienne's home are meant for a woman named Florine (Chopin 768-69). Despite her servant Sophie's frustrations to her enslaver that men call for her with regularity, Adrienne brushes off the thought of them with sarcasm: "If Monsieur Henri is still waiting, tell him to come up" (767). At no point do males physically enter Chopin's narrative; "Lilacs" presents a world in which Adrienne engages only with women and runs her household as she wishes, much to the chagrin of her servants, who label her behavior as "lunacy" (768) and in need of a detective (769).

At the end of the story, Mother Superior banishes Adrienne from entering the convent, "this haven of peace, where her soul was wont to come and refresh itself" (Chopin 770). Scholars debate as to the reason for Mother Superior's decision—has Adrienne too many male lovers or does she suspect a change in Sister Agathe? Indeed, while the convent may serve as the "haven" that Adrienne seeks, that kind of peace is not possible through this traditional institution. She must return to her own home, leaving behind the white room with her empty bed, on which Sister Agathe "pressed deep in the pillow in her efforts to smother the sobs that convulsed her frame" (771), an act that suggests a strong emotional, if not physical, relationship between these women.

The story ends with another nun sweeping away the lilac blossoms left behind by Adrienne. Chopin's choice of purple lilac blossoms creates tension due to its duality: from Ovid to Shakespeare, purple flowers long held associations with grief, inspired by the spilling of Adonis' purple blood (see Ferber 164) as well as with spring and renewal. Chopin widely read Walt Whitman (Moore 114-115), whose own elegy to Abraham Lincoln opens with "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd, / And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night, / I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-

returning spring” (Whitman, “When Lilacs,” 1-3). Whitman scholars have highlighted lilacs’ symbolic duality in his poem, noting that Whitman’s choice of the lilac came from his Brooklyn home, where the flower was blooming around Easter on the day of Lincoln’s assassination. The association with spring thus conjures representations of youth and resurrection (Hinz 37) as well as “the rupture of history and nature” in man’s choice to break blossoms from their branch and deliver them to a coffin (Blasing 34). In Chopin’s piece, Adrienne appears caught between the serenity within the convent walls and the judgments of those around her, acknowledging her dream yet suggesting its prematurity in a world of such rigid demands. Here, Chopin envisions the ideal space for a contemporary woman: one of intimacy, whiteness, peace, art, and personal fulfillment, yet one, it seems for a woman like Adrienne, for which the world is not ready.

Chopin needs only a few key words in her “Fedora,” written a year after “Lilacs” to declare her protagonist’s state of mind: Fedora stands “determined” in “driving...herself” and does not flinch to take action as desired. Yet despite this early declaration, Chopin once again employs ambiguity to depict a nuanced view of women’s sexuality and desire, an ambiguity that has led to pointed critique concerning the title character’s sexual orientation and identity, particularly among mid- to late-twentieth-century scholarship. Fedora, a thirty-year-old unmarried woman, lives by an ideal for men from which she has not wavered. When she begins to notice Malthers, a man seven years younger, he seems to awaken impulses within her, which climax in her insistence on picking up his sister, Miss Malthers, from a train station; there, she presses a “long, penetrating kiss” on Miss Malthers’ mouth and the two continue home (Chopin 800).

The kiss stands at the eye of scholars' theories regarding gender identity, sexual repression, perversity and intention (see Bucher). In her 1981 article included in a 1996 Chopin anthology, Joyce Dyer characterizes Fedora as "desperate," "pathetic," and "damaged" (J. Dyer, "Restive Brute," 135-36). She theorizes that in addition to this kiss, Fedora's "clothes fetish" (in one scene, she privately holds Mr. Malther's coat to her face) may insinuate "if what she truly desires is to become male and assume a man's sexual role" and that any attraction to Miss Malther is actually a transference from brother to sister due to their physical likeness (138). This narrow view assumes binary gender identities and conflates gender and sexual orientation. In fact, the ambiguity Chopin employs throughout the story may support an interpretation of Fedora as carefully navigating social systems that offer no models nor obvious outlets for the spectrum of sexual and gender experience. Other passages within the story deserve a second view: Dyer argues that Fedora is "violently awakened" by Mr. Malther's looks (134), yet Chopin characterizes the moment as a "sudden realization" (Chopin 798); Dyer goes on to claim that Fedora "does not seem to need social contact" beyond the role that caretaking of siblings provides (J. Dyer, "Restive Brute" 134), yet it may just as easily be the case that she must quietly adhere to gender roles or may not yet have found, nor be comfortable with, social codes.

From the first sentence, Fedora remains "determined" and content with who she is and what she wants, even in moments of challenge. While historically she has found men "wanting" against "an ideal [she] treasured," Mr. Malther's appearance serves as the instrument for that "sudden realization" of his manhood (Chopin 798). She studies his countenance and seeks him out; however, while "[s]he wanted him by her...his nearness

troubled her.” At the same time, she feels a call to pick up his sister, a woman she “had never seen” before yet whom she “felt a desire to see...to be near” (799). Her feelings toward Mr. Malthers and Miss Malthers may not be grouped as a murky transference between the two. Rather, Fedora’s desire for each can coexist; similarly, the feelings toward one may propel or clarify the feelings toward the other. Chopin writes that Fedora acts in a way that she cannot analyze as it was simply “impulse which drove her” (799). At the moment when Fedora kisses Miss Malthers on the lips, Fedora holds their horse’s reins in her hands, noting how she wishes the woman to feel at home. Fedora maintains her “unruffled composure” and continues, staring “steadily ahead” as they venture home (Chopin 800). Nothing within this scene suggests that Fedora is anything but at peace and in control. She admits to Miss Malthers that she feels “that I shall be quite fond of you” (800), which may replace or extend from the feelings toward her brother. Such ambiguity on Chopin’s part suggests the failure of categorization, the inadequacy of neatly formed boxes through which to order sexuality and humanity itself.

Taking into account Judith Butler’s theory on the fluidity of gender identification, Fedora challenges gender as deterministic. Her impulse toward Mr. Malthers and the kiss placed on the lips of Miss Malthers forward an understanding of gender and of sexuality that may be read as a form of Butler’s “innovative dissonances that within gender configurations which contest the fixity of masculine and feminine placements” in patriarchy (Butler 91). Fedora challenges the stability of gender identity and acts on her provocative desire, in so doing claiming agency and autonomy.

## SEXUAL AGENCY AND WHITENESS

In her touchstone work *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins traces the silencing of Black women and provides a framework for the work of Black women intellectuals, arguing that the existence and maintenance of white patriarchy has hinged on white men's censorship of Black women. She explains:

Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas not only in the United States, but in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and other places where Black women now live, has been critical in maintaining social inequalities. Black women engaged in reclaiming and constructing Black women's knowledges often point to the politics of suppression that affect their projects. (P. H. Collins 3)

In the final two stories explored in this chapter, "At the 'Cadian Ball'" and "The Storm," Kate Chopin includes no Black women nor explores their activism explicitly. Such authorial choices, in these stories and elsewhere, of course encompass their own form of silencing. Yet in regards to the characters on the page, Collins's remarks are fundamental to understanding the experiences of Calixta, the poor, brown, Spanish woman at the heart of both stories, and that of Clarisse, the lily white, wealthier woman against whom Calixta is compared. Each woman asserts herself to get what she wants. Each practices her own version of bodily autonomy. Both are likewise scrutinized under gendered rules of propriety. But the individual experience and outcome for each woman hinges on a racialized view that places Clarisse in a greater position of respect and speaks to the "politics of suppression" that shapes Calixta.



While only written six years after “At the ‘Cadian Ball” and intended as its sequel, “The Storm” went unpublished until 1969, a key moment of social revolution for American readers ready for the story’s frank depiction of an affair. “At the ‘Cadian Ball” depicts the pulls and limits of four Louisiana young people yearning for love—or a good time. Toth frames Chopin’s approach as being “reluctant to write the kind of story that could never be published” (Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 318); by the end of “Ball,” the two men and two women find themselves in the relationships deemed appropriate for their economic and cultural backgrounds. “But by the summer of 1898,” Toth continues, when Chopin sat down to write “The Storm,” “she had no such inhibitions” (318). In “Ball,” Chopin presents “big, brown, good-natured” Bobinôt, whose greatest hope is the attention of “that little Spanish vixen” Calixta who is held to lower expectations by the community due to her “Spanish blood” (Chopin 302). Men find Calixta’s appearance “tantalizing” and register only her physical attributes: Bobinôt “thought of her flaxen hair that kinked worse than a mulatto’s close to her head; that broad, smiling mouth and tip-tilted nose, that full figure; that voice like a rich contralto song, with cadences in it that must have been taught by Satan” (302). Calixta is known to swear, quarrel and slap “with true Spanish spirit,” even on the steps of a church, and even “a flash of her ankle, a twirl of her skirts” could “put the devil” in Bobinôt (302-03); in short, “the women did not always approve of Calixta” (307). From the beginning, then, the world views Calixta as a sexualized being *because* of her heritage. On the one hand, Calixta can act on at least some of her sexual impulse because gender norms enact greater surveillance over white women’s respectability, and the community views Calixta, “because of her presumed racial difference” as not “truly one of them” (Elfenbein 135). Anna Elfenbein argues that

for this very reason any claim concerning the depth of Calixta's sexual autonomy may not seem revolutionary, "since the sensuality of women like Calixta is one of the chief features of the stereotype used to malign them" (Elfenbein 141). Indeed, Calixta's social and moral deviance indicate her 'otherness' as racially different.

In the post-Civil War South, as once-firm divisions between Black and white began to dissolve, individual needed new identifiers to delineate social position and maintain power: "people of virtually all shades on the color line engaged in a frantic claim to 'whiteness' to guarantee their social preferment and political entitlement as a new, culturally instituted dual-caste system of black/white began to emerge" (Shaker 29). In northern Louisiana, white immigrants from Canada and Europe populated the area alongside people of color and Chopin uses these stories to explore her characters' "contingent whiteness" (George 34); characters' ability to express sexuality freely is similarly contingent upon their perceived race. At the ball, where anyone "who is white may go," Calixta remains an outsider, not only because of her ethnicity but her class: her dress, though white, "was not nearly so handsome" as that of other girls and she carries a "broken" and "red" fan that reads as a warning (Chopin 307).

Still, her beauty engages a local plantation owner, Alcée Laballière, from a well-off family, who himself "was in a mood for ugly things to-night" following a devastating cyclone (Chopin 306). Alcée, who is Creole, may enter the space of the ball with relative ease due to his social and economic privilege; in the hierarchy of "whiteness," he ranks high, and may "expertly [shape] his own whiteness" at whim (George 36). Thus, struck by Calixta, Alcée happily flirts with her, playing with the earring in her "small brown ear" and catching a wisp "of the kinky hair that had escaped its fastening" (Chopin 308).

For her part, Calixta similarly seems taken by Alcée, as her “senses were reeling...when she felt Alcée’s lips brush her ear like the touch of a rose” (308). They too are smitten, “acting like fools” (307) and talking and laughing together quietly, “as lovers do” (309). Until, that is, Clarisse arrives.

Chopin conveys Clarisse as nearly everything Calixta is not: “Dainty as a lily; hardy as a sunflower; slim, tall, graceful, like one of the reeds that grew in the marsh. Cold and kind and cruel by turn, and everything that was aggravating to Alcée” (Chopin 303). The goddaughter of Alcée’s mother, Clarisse holds high status within his family, especially as she perfectly entertains visitors at the Laballière estate and stands as a model of respectability. When Alcée suddenly comes in one day from farming and holds Clarisse, muttering “love-words” in her face, as no man had done before, she looks him right in the eyes and exclaims, “Monseieur!” (303-04). A “pure maiden” (Arner, “Kate Chopin’s Realism,” 2), she accepts no unwanted advances, and maintains her comparatively higher class position, equal to that of Alcée. Yet this is not to say that Clarisse is passive—quite the opposite, as when Alcée suspiciously leaves home late one night to attend the ball and pursue such “ugly things,” Clarisse follows, unwilling to lose him. When she eventually catches up with Alcée and Calixta, lost in their own flirtatious conversation, her appearance stirs him “as with one who awakes suddenly from a dream” (Chopin 309). Clarisse, claiming an emergency at home, succeeds in separating Alcée from Calixta, who he leaves so suddenly that he does not even glance back nor say goodbye without Clarisse prompting. In a flash, Alcée reduces Calixta to “the girl...forgotten” (309). The ball ends with class boundaries reaffirmed, as Clarisse

declares her love to Alcée, and Calixta accepts, in a rather “business-like manner” the hand of Bobinôt (310).

But that is not the end of the story. Five years later in “The Storm,” as Calixta cleans her home while her husband Bobinôt and their son are out, Alcée suddenly arrives at her door as a storm begins to fall. Jolted by the impending rain, the two cling into each other’s arms, as “her warm, palpitating body...aroused all the old-time infatuation and desire for her flesh” (Chopin 928). At the moment when the two begin to make love, Calixta’s body becomes tinged with a whiteness not depicted at the ball years earlier:

Her white neck and a glimpse of her full, firm bosom disturbed him powerfully...Now—well, now—her lips seems in a manner free to be taste, as well as her round, white throat and her whiter breasts....She was a revelation in that dim, mysterious chamber; as white as the couch she lay upon. Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily...The generous abundance of her passion, without guile or trickery, was like a white flame. (928-29)

As a “brown” woman, Calixta may not marry Alcee; she tarries at housework and awaits her son and husband. But as the “white” woman, she enjoys the freedom to fully express her sexuality to whom she desires, seemingly without consequence. Calixta may embody and consummate her desire for Alcée precisely because she transgresses racial lines. Both Michele Birnbaum and Lisa Kirby see Calixta’s transformation as the conduit for the affair’s possibility. For Michele Birnbaum, albescence itself marks a kind of resolution between white and Black women’s experiences of sexuality and respectability (Birnbaum 317), while Kirby views it as Alcée’s “justification” for pursuing her once again (Kirby

97). Alcée's access to Calixta, however, must remain in the shadows. After all, they could not marry, and even after they finish, they know that they "dared not" allow themselves to fall asleep, lest Bobinôt arrive home. Calixta and Alcée's affair challenges gentility and boundaries of respectability, particularly those of women. Calixta freely experiences her pleasure; there seems no shame here. Nor can the human creations of institutions like marriage and race and class lines fully hinder the pull of human nature. Yet each ultimately returns back to the proper social position to which they belong, restoring and maintaining that order.

Scholars have taken particular interest with the final line of "The Storm"—"So the storm passed and every one was happy"—as, with much of Chopin's writing, its ambiguity seems stripped of Chopin's moral judgment. Despite this ambiguity, Lawrence Berkove views Chopin as definitively damning in her assessment of Calixta and Alcée's affair as obscene. He suggests that Chopin's mastery lies in her ability to render sympathy for characters engaged in "morally untenable positions" (Berkove, "Acting Like Fools," 188). He further argues the impossibility of Calixta and Alcée's affair having anything to do with love (190): their relationship should be understood as nothing more than "foolish behavior" (191). Berkove similarly subscribes to the perspective of Calixta supporting the "Victorian stereotype of women as morally elastic" (192), arguing that her passion ends with Alcée's departure and her lies to her son and husband. "Surely Chopin," Berkove claims, "cannot be seriously characterizing such deceptions as happiness" (192).

Others, however, point to Chopin's "lack of explicit disapproval" (A. Stein 52) and her "hopeful vision" (A. G. Jones, *Tomorrow*, 141) that the affair's "repercussions all

seem to be *good*” (Weishaar 30). At the very least, Chopin produces a vision of happiness much wider than what Victorian marriage and gender norms offer. Calixta, though constricted by her background, finds sexual fulfillment and consummates a passion initiated years earlier, outside of her own marriage. Clarisse, for her part, enjoys a break from marriage during Alcée’s absence, when “the first free break since her marriage seemed to restore the pleasant liberty of her maiden days” (Chopin 931), indicating her desire for her own space and time alongside a willingness to pause the sexual relationship with her own husband. For the women in “The Storm,” social norms around race, class and gender dictate the degree to which they may fully embody their sexual selves, but it is clear that social institutions themselves are poor barriers for the innate whims of sex and passion.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Kate Chopin rose to become a tenet of the American literary canon precisely because her work—as typically seen through *The Awakening*—challenges the nineteenth-century view of and assumptions behind the “trash” produced by “a damned mob of scribbling women” threatening “no chance of success” for comparative masterwork by male writers (Hawthorne qtd. in Frederick 231). Twenty-first century American teachers choose Chopin as an entry point for discussions of gender precisely because of her simultaneous control and ambiguity concerning the fates of, most often, Edna, Louise and Désirée. According to the Open Syllabus Project at Columbia University, as of October 2024, Chopin's *Awakening* and “The Story of an Hour” are, respectively, the 30th and 35th most commonly assigned materials across English literature courses, above even *The Odyssey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Scarlet Letter* (“English Literature”). Given *The Awakening*'s ubiquity in American high school curricula and its continued inspiration for contemporary scholars, most readers come to know Kate Chopin through the novel's depiction of Edna Pontellier's quest for space and time, defined on her terms.

As this project attests, Chopin's short stories offer much more beyond, and before, Edna's arrival, providing depth and complexity to the late-nineteenth-century ‘woman question.’ One 1889 story remains exemplary concerning the debate: when George Brainard calls upon Paula Von Stoltz one night months after an eventful evening that found Paula performing piano at a Brainard family party the same night her mother unexpectedly passed away, he assumes she will delight at his proposal of marriage. After all, Paula played with an outward, unapologetic passion that he typically did not see

among the groups of young, genteel women circling his social sphere. She made an impression, and as a wealthy young man approaching a single young woman now living alone, he presumes it would be safe for him to anticipate Paula's agreement, if not gratitude.

Yet, when Paula instead asserts "I can't marry you," ...disengaging his hand from her waist" (Chopin 668), George responds with abrupt shock, questioning why. "Because it doesn't enter into the purpose of my life," she states. "What do you know of my life...What can you guess of it? Is music anything more to you than the pleasing distraction of an idle moment?...it's something dearer than life, than riches, even than love" (668). In this moment, Paula establishes her subjectivity as consisting of much more than the performative role she plays for George's entertainment, more than the sensory pleasure others receive from her art. She asserts her voice as existing independently, rather than in servitude or for the larger purpose of garnering male esteem. In short, she owes him nothing, a concept so alien he suggests she speaks out of madness.

Kate Chopin's title for the story of Paula Van Stoltz suggests, however, that far from acting irrationally, she is, in fact, "Wiser Than a God." The story is quintessential Chopin, a testament to the claim in mother-daughter scholars Rosary O'Neill and Rory O'Neill Schmitt's 2024 biography *Kate Chopin in New Orleans* that Chopin remains a worthwhile fixture of U.S. literary history because "of the magnitude of her victory over shame and silencing": "She spoke her truth, and in so doing, she spoke ours and became one of the first great American authors" (Schmitt and O'Neill 12).

But her story should not end there.



What does Chopin conjure, for instance, when her blonde, blue-eyed German-American protagonist's mother conveys her daughter's local piano playing as "banal servitude" (Chopin 660)? Earlier in the evening of Chopin's story, George Brainard plays a banjo so well it inspires a "black-eyed" woman to "contribute a few passes of a Virginia break-down, as she had studied it from life on a Southern plantation" (664). Later on, well after George's commands—"speak of parting. Never! You will be my wife" (668)—fall to Paula's assertions of independence, the narrator reveals that "his little black-eyed wife" laments her husband's disinterest in music (669). George settles, as does, apparently, his new wife. Given, too, that Paula ultimately leaves America for Germany, what may Chopin be suggesting about the freedom of European life?

Similarly, in her 1894 story, "Juanita," Chopin presents, on the surface, a woman who gets what she wants: a husband of her choice and a life she defines. Chopin infuses the 815-word story with indications of Juanita's happiness, noting that after some time of suitors courting her, Juanita and her new husband had finally left "to the woods together where they may love each other away from all prying eyes save those of the birds and the squirrels" (Chopin 774). Rather than choose any of the respectable men who pursue her—the "wealthy South Missouri farmer" to which she may have been engaged or the "Texas millionaire who possessed a hundred white horses" (774)—Juanita turns her back on apparent social convention to determine and define her private life.

Chopin's storytelling of this remarkable protagonist relies, however, on harsh judgments on the part of her narrator, who repeatedly others Juanita as a masculine, sexualized figure far from the ideal of feminine respectability. With her height of "five-feet-ten and more than two-hundred pounds of substantial flesh," the narrator

condescendingly laments that “it was so difficult for the poor thing not to be seen” (Chopin 773). At the same time, Juanita attracts admirers “young and old” who “hung on her fence at all hours; they met her in the lanes; they penetrated to the store and back to the living-room” (773)—all indication of her sexual prowess. Even her relationship with the man she declares as her husband falls under scrutiny as the narrator lets slip rumors of “a wandering preacher...a secrete marriage...and a lost certificate” (774). In making Juanita “look bizarre” and “sexually involved,” Chopin assumes a white readership and makes her story “acceptable to her publisher, critics” and the aforementioned readers (Kunf 15-16).

Furthermore, by having her narrator admit that for “my part I never expected Juanita to be more respectable than a squirrel; and I don’t see how any one else could have expected it” (Chopin 774), Chopin sheds any opportunity for admiration. Her comparison to a squirrel, paired with details concerning Juanita’s physical labor, encounters with men, and questionable marriage evoke the same hypersexualization of colored bodies elsewhere in her oeuvre. She undermines Juanita’s independence by shaming her, distancing her (presumed white) readers from such shame. Juanita becomes a spectacle, not unlike the “proliferation of ethnological exhibitions during the same period” (Walker 89; see also Donaldson). As Joyce Dyer posits concerning Chopin’s intentional distancing, “What could a proper white Southern woman possibly have in common with a Naomi Mobry, a Zoraïde, or a Juanita?” (J. C. Dyer 69). And while Dyer argues that Chopin uses readers’ prejudice as a vehicle to discuss female sexuality in the first place, the focus on the latter comes at the price of reinforcing the former.

Toni Morrison reminds readers that such a price matters well beyond the arts. In a 1988 lecture at the University of Michigan, Morrison asserted that through literature, communities and nations establish values, social boundaries, justifications and narratives:

Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense.

Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested.

(Morrison, "Unspeakable," 8)

"We are choices," she later continued (9), reflecting the conscious decision by readers and scholars alike to centralize voices and experiences against those for which race has not even been a consideration. Literature is never apolitical, and the chosen focal points of any literary landscape inherently reflect and define its community. In her study on women's literature, Johanna Valdez surveys the evolution across the past fifty or so years regarding the reclaiming of white women's space within literature and the divisions within the women's movement—as well as the work of many scholars and activists to bridge such gaps—in defining and understanding women's experiences. Questioning and investigating such divisions, approaching women's lives in their complexity rather than in siloes, remains necessary work. Joyce Dyer had posed her question regarding distance and commonalities in 1985; nearly forty years later, Valdez reflects the continued challenges that remain: "Today, we still see this impossible obstacle: how to understand without essentializing...while holding the complexities of different races and classes as unique, not contradictory" (Valdez 150).

Chopin's canon, by its very nature, continues to provide a rich platform for examining authority, agency and identity, to start, but for twenty-first-century readers and scholars, points of contention remain. One, for instance, regards Chopin's use of dialogue and dialect as markers of race and class. In their 2024 biography, O'Neill and Schmitt interview several Chopin scholars, including Thomas Bonner and C. W. Cannon. In his discussion of Chopin's use of dialect, Bonner notes that while some writers "exploit" dialogue, "I don't think Chopin was one of those...She was simply using her ear to the best of her ability" (Bonner qtd. in Schmitt and O'Neill 143). It's a sentiment reminiscent of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who argues that Chopin's use of dialect across race and class reflects her "humility" and master as an author: "in portraying characters you start from the outside, from what you can know" (Fox-Genovese). Fox-Genovese continues her argument that Chopin's pro-slavery "support for the Confederacy, is not ever necessarily exactly the same thing as racism. It is entirely possible to favor slavery as a form of social organization and yet to believe that all human creatures, persons, are equally valuable" (Fox-Genovese). Cannon, however, sees in Chopin a fundamentally different framework operating in her writing. In comments regarding Chopin's depiction of race, Cannon notes the "odd" fact of *The Awakening's* lack of "any kind of racial analysis," pointing to a "White racial unconscious" that possibly results from "a lack of personal experience" with "Blackness": when it comes to understanding the experience of those outside of her race, Cannon argues, "[Chopin] has no idea" (Cannon qtd. in Schmitt and O'Neill 150).

Establishing Chopin's personal politics regarding the slavery system and racial hierarchy is essentially impossible and likely unproductive. But as a woman who was raised in an enslaving household during the Civil War and married a member of a white

supremacist organization, the son of a harsh enslaver, she was surrounded by paternalism, the same system that stripped all women of legal, financial and bodily autonomy. As “the most effective system of national control devised in modern times” (Zinn 59), American paternalism, manifest in the very founding of the United States, structured the everyday reality of all. If Chopin’s vision of the New Woman hinges on the “right to self-ownership,” as Ann Heilmann argues in regards to Edna Pontellier (Heilmann 94), Chopin’s short stories add complexity to the layers of social, cultural, psychological, familial, economic and political factors that shape access to that right. Aglaé compels César to seek her companionship out regularly in their later years, but after her death he judges her against the glory of the white family who formerly enslaved them both. Zaida’s freedom, conveyed through diction of emancipation, initially attracts Telèspore, who quickly aims to protect her after she appears at a party in white. Suzanne leaves for New Orleans to avoid the desegregation occurring in her hometown, tying her own independence to the maintenance of color lines, while Nathalie’s ability to navigate the attractions of various men undercuts the assumption that women are in any way knowable and thus controlled.

When examined in its entirety, Chopin’s canon offers a fuller picture of what it meant for women—some women—to pursue the kind of autonomy that institutions and social codes deemed shameful. In their quests, women navigate through such systems of paternalism, at times rejecting it outright, at times using it to their personal advantage. Some succeed. But if there is one lesson to be learned from the Chopin opus, it is this: paternalism itself will never be eliminated from within. Nearly a century after Chopin’s writing life, Audre Lorde reminded her own readers that “the master’s tools will never

dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 112). If 'new' women are truly to live in the fullness of their humanity, able to take complete advantage of what this marvelous and confounding world has to offer, they must strip themselves of the privileges stacked on pillars of subjection. Chopin's work contributes compelling feminist narratives that simultaneously push cultural norms into new directions and also cloud the racism behind them. Today, she reminds readers that, in the United States in the fall of 2024, as paternalism remains monstrously and powerfully alive, freedom requires bravery and assertion, humility and attention. It behooves us to look around and truly listen: none are free until all are.

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