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“You done cheat Mose out o' de job, anyways; we all knows dat”: Faith healing in the fiction of Kate Chopin

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“YOU DONE CHEAT MOSE OUT O’ DE JOB, ANYWAYS;
WE ALL KNOWS DAT””: FAITH HEALING
IN THE FICTION OF KATE CHOPIN

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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Karen Kel Roop

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Faith Healing in the Fiction of Kate Chopin**

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ABSTRACT

**“You Done Cheat Mose Out O’ De Job, Anyways; We All Knows Dat”:
Faith Healing in the Fiction of Kate Chopin**

by

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Born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1850, the half-way mark of the century in which the country itself would be broken in two, Kate Chopin was destined to bear witness to the many divisions that have distinguished the United States. Especially noticeable in the post-Reconstruction period in which she wrote was the expanding chasm between the races. This dissertation argues that even Chopin’s most seemingly orthodox Southern stories betray a quest for a theology capable of healing the physical, emotional, and spiritual ills omnipresent in the country and especially apparent in the post-Civil War South. The alternative to mainstream Protestantism and Catholicism, which Chopin indicts for furthering racial division, was the Voodoo of Louisiana and Haiti. This study shows that both her short fiction and two published novels incorporate elements of the African-based religion as tools for forging and metaphors of the interdependence of soul and body, individual and community, time and space. For Chopin’s African American characters, the belief system serves as a source of power. Most of all, Chopin draws upon Voodoo values to question the role of art itself and to posit a more expansive notion of aesthetics than that which dominated Western thought of the late nineteenth century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of writing this dissertation has been much like a Voodoo rite in which a cool, watery Rada god descends only to be followed by a hot, fiery Petro god. To maintain order amid such tumult has required the intervention of many wise priestesses and priests, otherwise known as mambos and houngans.

Indeed, I owe thanks to a mambo I never met, “Aunt Cynthy” who introduced my Texan mother to some conjure practices later passed on to me. Without my mother’s stories about Cynthy, I might never have begun this literary and academic ritual. So I would like to thank Hilda Roop for giving me a glimpse into a past not that removed from the world Kate Chopin knew and recreated in her fiction. But I am also indebted to many women friends and colleagues who have encouraged me more recently as I have wrestled with the lwa. Special thanks go to the Three Graces in the Writing Center who helped me face down my own self-doubts and maneuver my way through the dissertation process: Drs. Natalie Hudson, Jacquie Elkouz, and Patrice Hollrah. Of course, this dissertation would never have come to fruition without the patient support of Professor Darlene Unrue, my committee chair.

I must also acknowledge the houngans who made this dissertation possible. Although my studies ultimately took a different path, I cannot ignore the support I received at the University of Texas, Austin, where I began my doctoral work with my committee chair Professor James Duban and committee members Professors William Scheick and Donald Graham. At UNLV I owe thanks to Professor John Irsfeld, who brought me back into the fold at the university, and Professor Richard Harp, who has supported me at several academic junctures. Most of all, I would like to thank my committee members Professors

Joseph A. Fry, John Unrue, and especially Joseph McCullough, who initiated my entrance into the doctoral program at UNLV and whose class inspired the paper that became the foundation for my dissertation.

Apart from the lwa, mambos, and houngans are two individuals for whom no category seems to suffice. So I will simply say thank you to Bill, who in our lives together gave me the time and space to work, and to Walter Nowak, my Père Antoine whose spirit continues to sustain me and to whose memory I dedicate this dissertation.

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INTRODUCTION

TWO EIGHTS, CHANGE OF STATES

In early American history, one of the most infamous theological developments originated with a bit of divination practiced by a group of teenage girls eager to know whom they would marry. The harmless event soon turned ugly as the Salem witchcraft trials unfolded in 1692, with the Barbados slave Tituba in the eye of the storm. Accused of initiating the girls' fits, Tituba turned state's evidence as a means of self-preservation and implicated other women as worshipers of Satan. While her slave and ethnic status undoubtedly contributed to her precarious position in the Salem proceedings, popular and academic assessments have often misrepresented Tituba as both an African and a Voodoo priestess. According to Elizabeth Reis, historians have finally recognized that Tituba was an indigenous woman of Barbados, but the myth that the slave practiced the African-based faith and regaled the Salem girls with stories of Voodoo has long endured.¹

That Tituba was a scapegoat of Puritanism gone horribly awry is undeniable. That she has little to do with a study of the *fin de siècle* writer Kate Chopin might seem equally certain. Yet the seventeenth-century slave's experience exposed a tension between race and religion in the United States that did not relax with the hanging of the last Salem "witch." In the late nineteenth century, the relationship between people of color and mainstream religion became especially strained as Jim Crow legislation and attitudes increasingly infiltrated God's houses, be they Protestant churches or Catholic cathedrals. Nonetheless, the scholarship addressing the topics of race and religion in Chopin's fiction has adhered to parallel rather than intersecting lines and confined itself to separate if

¹ Elizabeth Reis, "Gender and the Meaning of Confession in Early New England," in *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America*, ed. Elizabeth Reis (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1998), 53-74.

equal cars in the train of critical analysis. In the meantime, the lesson of Tituba has been ignored.

Kate Chopin's position on race has inevitably been a controversial subject resulting in conflicting assessments by biographers and critics alike. In 1989, Helen Taylor headed up the faction that would find Kate Chopin guilty of subscribing to conservative, Southern notions of white supremacy. Disregarding the more nuanced perspective promulgated in Per Seyersted's biography, Taylor proclaims, "Chopin's racism is a central element in her writing." The critic inverts Seyersted's argument that "Kate Chopin's [racial] range . . . is quite wide compared to these authors [e.g., Ruth McEnery]" to fashion a Southern Erinyes consisting of Chopin, McEnery, and Grace King. With the publication of Emily Toth's seminal biography in 1990, scholars garnered more evidence with which to indict the adult Chopin for honoring the Confederate flag just as she had as a youth when she tore the Union standard down from her house. Raised by Confederate slaveholders, Katherine O'Flaherty married Oscar Chopin, who gained notoriety by participating in the White League's failed attempt to take control of New Orleans in 1874. While acknowledging that "whether Kate Chopin shared Oscar's prejudices—whether she cheered on the White League—cannot be known," Toth also claims that "in her fiction, [Kate Chopin] never depicts social equality between blacks and whites." Most damning is Chopin's continued friendship with her brother-in-law Phanor Breazeale, who, during Reconstruction, participated in collective efforts to intimidate blacks. Against such a backdrop, Sandra Gunning concludes in her 1996 examination of race and lynching in American literature that "Chopin does not . . . advocate the abolition of Jim Crow." Thus, in evaluating Chopin's portrayal of Grégoire Santien, whose murder of the biracial Joçint

in *At Fault* mirrors the white-on-black violence perpetrated by Creoles like Breazeale, Gunning contends that “though [Chopin] may not approve of white violence, she respects its usefulness.” Such guilt-by-association analyses did not end with the millennium. In *Coloring Locals: Racial Formation in Kate Chopin’s “Youth’s Companion” Stories* (2003), Bonnie Shaker assumes that the local colorist subscribed to the same white, middle-class values of the editors of *Youth’s Companion*, in which several of Chopin’s stories appeared, and embraced the racist reunion ideology driving post-Reconstruction America.²

But in the same year that Taylor published her tome, Anna Shannon Elfenbein’s comparative study of George Washington Cable, Grace King, and Chopin appeared to set the stage for a less absolute position regarding race in the Chopin canon. With a focus on “evolving stereotypes,” Elfenbein recognizes in such stories as “In Sabine,” in which a black man helps to facilitate a white woman’s escape from her abusive husband, Chopin’s defiance rather than support of prevailing Southern biases. Since then, many scholars have capitalized on Elfenbein’s observations to posit a racial complexity in the Chopin *oeuvre*. Especially intriguing are those analyses informed by a passing detail in Toth’s biography: Kate Chopin’s distant relatives included people of mixed races. Critics

² Helen Taylor, *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 156; Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 80; Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1990), 136; Sandra Gunning, “Rethinking White Female Silences: Kate Chopin’s Local Color Fiction and the Politics of White Supremacy,” in *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 117, 121; Bonnie James Shaker, *Coloring Locals: Racial Formation in Kate Chopin’s “Youth’s Companion” Stories* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003). To arrive at her position, Shaker downplays the influence the following publishing reality no doubt had on Chopin: *Youth’s Companion* was one of America’s most prominent publications. With a circulation of approximately 480,000 at the time Chopin was writing, one would wonder had she *not* considered the magazine as a venue for her child-centered stories. She had good company; in the 1890s the magazine featured the works of a who’s who list of writers ranging from Mark Twain to William James. See Paulette D. Kilmer, “*Youth’s Companion*,” in *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*, ed. Stephen L. Vaughn (New York: Routledge, 2008), 610.

such as Susan Castillo have recently emphasized the porous nature of ethnicity in both Missouri and Louisiana to argue that racial constructs in Chopin's work are dynamic and multifaceted, as befit a "Creole" world in which the label itself has been historically confusing and misleading. Janet Beer shrewdly proposes that, just as the adult writer rejected the religious teachings of the Academy of the Sacred Heart, so, too, did the former "littlest rebel" outgrow racial biases; one suspects Chopin came to appreciate the intricate web of colors and meanings in the word "Creole." The most compelling discussion, however, may be that of Geraldine Hord Seay, an African American who uses the "call and response" structure of black music to demonstrate that in at least three works—"At the 'Cadian Ball," "The Storm," and *The Awakening*—Chopin challenges racial stereotypes by introducing them only to deconstruct them. In obvious contrast to Sandra Gunning, Seay believes "Chopin did indeed embed in [her fiction] issues of race as the black race faced Jim Crow."³

The topic of religion has posed less of a problem for critics, who, citing Kate Chopin's break with Roman Catholicism, typically view the writer as having divorced herself from institutionalized religion. Those few who contend that Catholicism continued to influence the writer primarily do so from the perspective of modern theological feminism. More often scholars, such as Priscilla Leder and Elaine Showalter,

³ Anna Shannon Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line: Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989); Susan Castillo, "'Race' and Ethnicity in Kate Chopin's Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 59-72; Janet Beer, "Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction—An Introduction," in *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 131; Geraldine Hord Seay, "From Anomaly to Lily: The Call and Response of Jim Crow in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, 'At the 'Cadian Ball,' and 'The Storm'" in "The Literature of Jim Crow: Call and Response" (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1996), ProQuest (AAT 9800186), 160-1. For a discussion of Chopin's biracial relatives, who included a member of "The colored Aristocracy of St. Louis," see Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 39.

have turned to the Platonic idealism of Emerson and Whitman to argue that Chopin adopted the values of Transcendentalism and incorporated them in her fiction, especially *The Awakening*, in which Edna Pontellier supposedly epitomizes Emersonian self-reliance. Jane F. Thraillkill has even drawn on William James to transform Chopin into an über-Brahmin: “Chopin radicalizes Emerson’s notion that books are for nothing but to inspire, by resituating the cerebral process of reading—and of philosophizing—within the diurnal vicissitudes of the physical body.” Thus, the hallmark of spirituality for Chopin is the hypersensitivity to such rhythms that Pontellier demonstrates. Those opposing such homage to Romanticism point to Chopin’s Darwinian leanings to situate her among American Naturalists. But the most extensive treatment of philosophy/spirituality in Chopin’s fiction has focused on classical mythology. Following the lead of Sandra Gilbert, who in 1983 equated Edna Pontellier with Aphrodite, scholars have repeatedly invoked a pantheon of Greek gods and heroes to explicate Chopin’s work, or, at least, her most famous novel. At various junctures, Edna is not only Aphrodite, but also Ariadne, Artemis, Persephone, Phaedra, Athena, and Icarus. Nor is Edna the only character who assumes mythic proportions. Adele Ratignolle is a siren while Victor Lebrun is Dionysus. All, however, are subject to the conflicting forces of Eros and Thantos.⁴

⁴ The following represent the primary scholarly perspectives on Chopin’s philosophy/spirituality: Garnet Ayers Batinovich, “Storming the Cathedral: The Antireligious Subtext in Kate Chopin’s Works,” in *Kate Chopin in the Twenty-First Century: New Critical Essays*, ed. Heather Ostman (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 73-90; Jarlath Killeen, “Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” *Religion & the Arts* 7, no. 4 (Dec. 2003): 413-38; Barbara C. Ewell, “Regions of the Spirit: Nature vs. Dogma in Chopin’s Religious Vision,” in *Performance for a Lifetime: A Festschrift Honoring Dorothy Harrell Brown*, eds. Barbara C. Ewell and Mary A. McCay (New Orleans: Loyola University Press, 1997); Priscilla Leder, “Land’s End: *The Awakening* and 19th-century Literary Tradition,” in *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Petry (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), 237-250; Elaine Showalter, “Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book,” in *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 33-57; Jane F. Thraillkill, “‘Mindless’ Pleasure: Embodied Music in *The Awakening* and *Theron Ware*,” in *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007), 155-200; Bert Bender, “Kate Chopin’s Quarrel with Darwin before *The*

Missing in such exegeses is any consideration of the souls of black folk. This is perhaps understandable since Kate Chopin rarely places people of color within a readily recognizable spiritual or mythological context. However “Uncle Tom-esque” her African American characters might seem, they do not exhibit the fundamentalist Christian devotion that distinguishes Harriet Beecher Stowe’s hero. In her first published novel *At Fault*, Chopin undermines the Christianity of Uncle Tom and Little Eva by briefly inverting their relationship through a black servant, Aunt Belindy, and a young Catholic zealot, Lucilla. Rather than bonding with the child through a shared devotion to a white God, Aunt Belindy scoffs at the Catholic minutiae to which Lucilla is so attached. But Belinda is not “ignorant,” as the girl imagines. The African American ““knows all ’bout convent””; this might even lie at the heart of Aunt Belindy’s disdain. For in the Jim Crow world she inhabits, the “indulgences” shored up for Lucilla had become increasingly out of reach for people of color (CW 840-2).⁵

Awakening,” *Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1992): 185-204, and “The Teeth of Desire: *The Awakening* and *The Descent of Man*,” in *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Petry (G.K. Hall & Co.: New York, 1996), 117-128; Donald Pizer, “A Note on Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* as Naturalistic Fiction,” *Southern Literary Journal* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2001), <http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=4569393&db=afh>; Sandra M. Gilbert, “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire,” *The Kenyon Review* 5, no. 3 (1983): 42-66; Christina Giorcelli, “Edna’s Wisdom: A Transitional and Numinous Merging,” in *New Essays on “The Awakening*,” ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 109-48; Kathleen Margaret Lant, “The Siren of Grand Isle: Adele’s Role in *The Awakening*,” *Southern Studies* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 167-75; Joyce Dyer, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings* (New York: Twayne, 1993); Angela Hailey-Gregory, ““Into Realms of the Semi-Celestials’: From Mortal to Mythic in *The Awakening*,” *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 59, nos. 1/2 (Winter 2005): 295-312; Cynthia Griffin Woolf, “Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” *American Quarterly* 25 (1973): 449-71.

⁵ Interpretations of the Belindy-Lucilla exchange emphasize how elusive a definitive understanding of Chopin’s attitude towards race can be. Although Donna Campbell maintains that “Aunt Belindy[’s] failing to grasp the idea of Purgatory” casts the black woman in the role of an uneducated stereotype, Nancy Walker, I would argue, more accurately considers Belindy’s comments as indicative of “Chopin’s own reservations about Catholicism.” See Donna Campbell, “*At Fault*: A Reappraisal of Kate Chopin’s Other Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 40; and Nancy A. Walker, *Kate Chopin: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 65, respectively.

The disjointed encounter between Belindy and Lucilla, which contrasts with *At Fault*'s surface theme of reunion, highlights the racial fallout engineered and endorsed, in part, by America's religious institutions. In *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898*, historian Edward Blum explains the degree to which Christian leaders helped organize a reunion of the Northern and Southern states that increasingly alienated people of color and paved the way for the imperialism of United States' social and political policies in the next century. Blum, however, lays the blame solely at the feet of mainstream Protestantism, to the point that he describes Roman Catholics as victims rather than co-oppressors.⁶ In her fiction, Chopin casts a wider net to indict the supposedly more liberal strains of Protestantism and the Mother Church, Roman Catholicism.

Kate Chopin, James Bennett shows, knew of what she wrote. In his study of the effect Jim Crow attitudes and legislation had on religion in New Orleans, Bennett explains that neither the city's Methodist Episcopal Church (M.E. Church) nor its Catholic cathedral were immune to the dictates of white supremacists. The three-caste system in New Orleans, which had previously prevented the strict segregation characteristic of churches elsewhere in the United States, ceased to exert such influence after 1877, when America at large became divided along black and white lines. According to Bennett, during Reconstruction, the New Orleans M.E. Church, consisting primarily of black members, had gained increasing support from white Methodists for civil rights efforts and integrated conferences and social programs. But as feelings of white supremacy grew, agents of Christian righteousness such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union

⁶ Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

(WCTU) began to serve Jim Crow. Promoting an image of black men as drunks and rapists, the WCTU made whites less willing to encourage their black brethren. Such developments were so effective that “by the 1890s, black church members found themselves alone in their calls for equality.” Even more disturbing to Chopin would have been the changes occurring in Catholicism. Unlike those of Protestant churches, Louisiana’s Catholic congregations had always been integrated. In fact, free people of color had been some of the Church’s most prominent members; this was inevitable when, as was once the case of St. Louis Cathedral, they also constituted the majority of the congregation. However, the presence of blacks did not necessarily indicate acceptance by white members or clergy. Even during Reconstruction, some priests held separate first communion services for black and white children and white religious orders would not admit people of color. The Church reached a literal breaking point when, to defuse the growing animosity whites felt towards blacks, Archbishop Janssens determined that separate churches were in order. To meet this end, he oversaw the building of what was to be the first black church, St. Katherine’s, which opened in 1895. (The name doubtless attracted Chopin’s attention.) However well intentioned Janssens’s decision might have been, it “ensured a religious separateness that paralleled [blacks’] exclusion in nearly every other aspect of their lives.” The black Creole writer Alice Dunbar-Nelson declared that, with the erection of St. Katherine’s, “the Catholic Church undermined its claims to universality and destroyed ‘the most beautiful portion of the Catholic creed.’”⁷

But just as Louisiana society consisted of three racial castes, so, too, was the state home to a third religion that had long provided people of color with the spiritual support

⁷ James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

they needed: the African-based faith of Voodoo imported by the slaves. What Kate Chopin, a resident of the conjure heartland of America, could do that Salem's Reverend Samuel Parris and his fellow clerics could not was bring a Southern female perspective to a belief system traditionally denounced as Satanic. Indeed, in her fiction Chopin neither advocates that the Louisiana equivalents of Tituba be scrubbed clean of Voodoo nor reduces them to superstitious stereotypes declaimed by many scholars. Instead, she achieves what at least one black conjurer might have called "change of states," that is, a shift in perspectives by which practitioners of the African-based faith can be viewed.⁸ Such an endeavor befits an author who moved from Missouri to Louisiana and back again. So too, I will argue, did she gravitate spiritually from being a true believer in Roman Catholicism to affirming Voodoo as a viable alternative to American Christianity, a positive source of power for a people betrayed by the country's mainstream religions, and a metaphor for the function of art. Although intimations of the faith are woven throughout her fiction, in 1897 Chopin overtly proposed that it, or "Hoodoo" as it is known in Louisiana, be regarded as a belief system worthy of serious consideration. Discouraging on the human desire "to seek to unravel mysteries and things hidden and denied," she observes that "there are the scientists, probing the heavens for its secrets, delving in the depths of the earth for what they may discover. And what about explorers,

⁸ The phrase "change of states" comes from a form of divination to which Chopin could easily have been privy: card readings ("two eights, change of states"). "Hoodoo doctors" in Louisiana and elsewhere, Jeffrey E. Anderson explains, commonly used playing cards as one tool for telling fortunes. See Jeffrey Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 101. As a child, my Texan mother learned the technique—and the incantation—from "Aunt Cynthia," who, according to family legend, was a former slave. However "superstitious" the readings might have been, they were a source of consolation and hope for me when I was a lovelorn teen on a Saturday night. I can only imagine the solace they would have provided to a slave.

Theosophists, Hoodoos?”⁹ As a faith-healer, Chopin lays words instead of hands upon her readers to honor the Hoodoos whose gods descend to earth as symbols of the plurality rejected by America and forces by which flesh and spirit, black and white, male and female might merge. Voodoo, Chopin implies, is a much-needed religion of miscegenation.¹⁰

That Chopin should posit Voodoo as a saving grace for people of color in Jim Crow America is not surprising. But the degree to which scholars have avoided the elephant in the midst is perplexing. David LoShiavo, whose article focuses on the influence of Judaism on *The Awakening*, makes the only direct suggestion that African beliefs inform Chopin’s fiction. Otherwise, Voodoo leads are merely dropped like crumbs that Hansel and Gretel ignore. For instance, “Literary Sources,” an addendum to Suzanne Disheroon Green and David J. Caudle’s edition of *At Fault*, includes Alice Dunbar Nelson’s short story “The Goodness of St. Roque,” which, as the editors note, “demonstrates the ways in which Catholicism and voodoo have become intertwined in much of Louisiana’s culture.” But they fail to elaborate on how this merger plays into the novel or any other work by Chopin. Christina Giorcelli aptly describes Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening* as a “conjurer” only to confine the role to a Greek mythological context. In her dissertation “Other Worlds: Christianity, Conjure, and Dialogue in American Literary Realism,” Rosslyn Elliott includes an epilogue featuring Chopin as a “modernist foil” to the real subjects of the study, Charles Chesnutt and William Dean Howells. And in his 2010

⁹ Kate Chopin, “As You Like It,” in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2006), 715 (hereafter cited in text as *CW*).

¹⁰ Voodoo goes by many names and spellings. Chopin herself is inconsistent, using “Voodoo” and “Hoodoo” interchangeably. Throughout this study, I will use the term “Voodoo,” which is most familiar to an American audience. Voodoo priestesses and priests will be identified as *mambos* and *houngans* respectively.

article “‘A Lot Up for Grabs’: The Idiosyncratic, Syncretic Religious Temperament of Kate Chopin,” David Zahm Wehner overlooks the “syncretic” faith most readily available to the Louisiana writer to argue instead that she arrives at her own notion of spirituality by way of Christianity, Darwinism, and Transcendentalism.¹¹ Part of the problem might be the “damnation” Edna Pontellier arranged theologically for herself and critically for the Chopin canon.¹² Much of the scholarship has focused on *The Awakening* and glorified to varying degrees Edna, whom, I contend, critics misread as pursuing a genuine union of body and soul. Unable to escape her spell, they have overlooked the lesson Chopin’s people of color have to teach us. The critics may also have simply privileged the white, Western ideology with which they and their audiences are most familiar. Aphrodite is certainly much better known than Ezili. One of Chopin’s black characters, Aunt Agnes, seems to sum up the situation best. In an altercation with a ferryman, Nathan, she alleges, “‘You done cheat Mose out o’ de job, anyways; we all knows dat’” (CW 866). Although Mose/Moses has long been recognized as an important symbol of African American emancipation, the Old Testament leader also has a Voodoo significance that introduces a distinct layer of meaning to Chopin’s work. What Nathan, another Old Testament figure, has “cheated” Mose of might be much more than the opportunity to tote folks across a river in Louisiana.

¹¹ David LoShiavo, “A Matter of Salvation versus Freedom: Understanding Edna’s Conflict through Hebrew Metaphor in *The Awakening*,” *Southern Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the South* 8, nos. 1/2 (Winter-Spring 1997): 83-90; Suzanne Disheroon Green and David J. Caudle, “Literary Sources” in *At Fault: A Scholarly Edition with Background Readings*, by Kate Chopin, ed by Suzanne Disheroon Green and David J. Caudle (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 2001), 170-1; Giorcelli, “Edna’s Wisdom,” 137; Rosslyn Elliott, “Other Worlds: Christianity, Conjure, and Dialogue in American Literary Realism” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2006), 249-50, ProQuest (AAT 3212349); David Zahm Wehner, “‘A Lot Up for Grabs’: The Idiosyncratic, Syncretic Religious Temperament of Kate Chopin,” *American Literary Realism* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 154-68.

¹² In response to the negative reviews of the novel, Kate Chopin famously explained, “I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did,” *Book News* (St. Louis), May 28, 1899. Cited in Kate Chopin, *Kate Chopin’s Private Papers*, eds. Emily Toth and Per Seyersted (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 296.

In the following pages I will demonstrate how Chopin exposes the fault line in American Christianity and then invokes the demigods, the *lwa*, of Voodoo to bridge the chasm. The point of departure is the single date, August 28, specified in *The Awakening*. Although scholars have assigned various historical, literary, and philosophical significances to the date, for the purposes of this study, it is most important as the feast day of St. Augustine.¹³ Best known as a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, he began his life as the son of a pagan in North Africa and long after his death became a major influence on one of Catholicism's major antagonists, the Puritanism of John Calvin. Augustine, then, typifies the three spiritual paths Chopin addresses in her fiction, the first two—Roman Catholicism and Protestantism—as agents of oppression and exclusion of people of color in post-Reconstruction America, the third—African-based Voodoo—as an affirming and inclusive force that enabled African Americans to endure.¹⁴ In Chapter 1, I demonstrate how American Catholicism and Protestantism supported a system of reunion and redemption that encouraged the rejection of people of color. Chapter 2 shifts attention to the Voodoo *lwa*, whom Chopin, no less than African Americans, recognized as agents of both rebellion and healing. The three religious strains intersect in Chapter 3 via *The Awakening*, in which Edna Pontellier's allegiance to American Christianity and inability to embrace the ways of the *lwa* prove her undoing.

¹³ Besides the feast day of Augustine, the date has also been linked to Edna's age, lunar cycles, and the birthday of both Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his creation, young Werther. See Dyer, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*, 56; Robert Treu, "Surviving Edna: A Reading of the Ending of *The Awakening*," *College Literature* 27, no. 2 (March 1, 2000), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112513>; Giorcelli, "Edna's Wisdom," 138-9. Giorcelli offers the most comprehensive discussion of the date and notes the influence of Augustine on Edna's individualism, but ignores the saint's African roots.

¹⁴ I have admittedly taken poetic license with St. Augustine's pagan associations. Unlike the slaves brought to the Americas, Augustine grew up in what is now Algeria where his father's faith was that of the Berbers. After converting to Christianity, Augustine challenged the polytheism of ancient Rome, which he addresses in *City of God*. See Eugène Portalié, "Life of St. Augustine of Hippo," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02084a.htm>.

The conclusion focuses on Chopin's first published story, "Wiser than a God," to consider briefly the influence of Voodoo imagery and ideology on the writer's aesthetic sensibilities. Ultimately, in this study I explore the many ways Kate Chopin championed an important theological mission: to give Mose his job back.

CHAPTER 1

CHRISTIANITY AND THE “NEGRO PROBLEM”

Born into Missouri, a state made famous as the linchpin for a federal compromise that simultaneously expanded and curtailed slavery, Kate Chopin seemed destined to bear witness to hypocrisy, especially that concerning race in America. Although the adolescent Katie O’Flaherty championed the cause of the Confederacy even as she adored her mammy, the adult Kate Chopin apparently realized one cannot simultaneously love and enslave another. She also would have learned how tenuous words like Unionist/Republican and Confederate/Democrat could be as in post-Reconstruction America the whites of the North and the South became allies along a Jim Crow line. As historian David W. Blight has explained, Northerners and Southerners engaged in a process of reunion and reconciliation dependent upon romanticizing the Civil War and shifting attention away from the slavery at the heart of the conflict. Whites of both regions benefited materially from this exercise in forgetting, which enabled the railroad and industry to move into the South. Lost in the equation were the hard won rights of people of color.¹⁵

Even more disturbing to Kate Chopin may have been a parallel course in American Christianity, in which, despite their antagonism towards each other, white Roman Catholics and Protestants proved remarkably similar in their attitudes toward and treatment of African Americans. This could only have vexed the writer who, as a sixteen-year-old student at the Sacred Heart Academy, embarked on her own crusade for Catholicism when she penned an annotation to a passage from T. B. Macaulay’s

¹⁵ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

“Ranke’s History of the Popes” in words that would have made the contemporary pontiff, Pius IX, proud: “It is to me a subject of wonder that a mind such as Macaulay’s, so enlightened and free from bigotry, should have considered the Catholic Church a mere work of ‘human policy.’ He yields however to this politic work a superiority and primacy, in which we (Catholics) see every evidence of a divine Institution.”¹⁶

Had Katie O’Flaherty looked more carefully at the central icon of her religion, she might have been less inclined to champion the cause of Catholicism in the holy war, for although Protestants had removed the body from the crucifix, the soldiers for Christ in both camps rallied around the same emblem, the cross, to practice various forms of “bigotry.” By the time Chopin launched her writing career, she apparently had determined that the “divine Institution” of her childhood was no more laudable than Protestantism. At least in post-Reconstruction America, the two branches of Christianity subscribed to complementary yet equally intolerant paths to perfection that excluded many of the country’s people of color. In her fiction Chopin often paints Christianity as a subtractive force encouraging segregation rather than inclusion, a belief system that, far from acting as a refuge for African Americans and other outcasts, helps to ensure their continued oppression.

At Fault: The Unhallowed Ground of Reunion and Redemption

In her first published novel, *At Fault*, Chopin establishes this Protestant-Catholic alliance as a backdrop against which she will repeatedly examine the position of people

¹⁶ Chopin, *Private Papers*, 15

of color in white America.¹⁷ Like her more famous book, *The Awakening*, *At Fault* revolves upon cultural conflicts, in this case ostensibly based in a North/South, Protestant/Catholic dichotomy represented by the St. Louis manager of a lumber company, David Hosmer, and the French Creole protagonist, Thérèse Lafirme respectively. But beneath such superficial distinctions, the two characters have much in common. Both have lost their spouses, one to death, the other to divorce. Both are childless but act as surrogate parents to their adult sister and nephew respectively. Unlike David Hosmer, Thérèse knows French and communicates in it freely when necessary, but she typically speaks English with little to distinguish her voice from that of either David or his sister Melicent Hosmer. Most of all, Hosmer and Thérèse, as the novel's title hints, adhere to notions of human perfection that only beget intolerance and illusions of superiority. While nineteenth-century reformers envisioned a utopian America, Chopin seemed acutely aware of the inherent crack in the country as well as its citizens. In a rare instance of authorial intrusion, she felt compelled to set the record straight, at least concerning Thérèse Lafirme. Responding to one critic who believed David Hosmer's alcoholic ex-wife Fanny is the errant character, Chopin writes: "Thérèse Lafirme, the heroine of the book is the one who was at fault—remotely, and immediately. Remotely—in her blind acceptance of an undistinguishing, therefore unintelligent code of righteousness by which to deal out judgments. Immediately—in this, that unknowing of

¹⁷ Self-published by Chopin in 1890, *At Fault* might be considered the writer's manifesto in which she identifies many of the themes she would address throughout her brief career. As Suzanne Disheroon Green and David J. Caudle attest, "In her first novel, [Chopin] deals with the ideological questions arising from the redefinition of gender, race, and class roles that foreshadow the more explicit treatment of these themes in much of her short fiction and in *The Awakening*." Suzanne Disheroon Green and David J. Caudle, introduction to *At Fault: A Scholarly Edition with Background Readings*, xix. But until recently, scholarship has focused on the surface plot concerning the budding relationship between the two protagonists, David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme, and the way religion intrudes upon it. Little attention has been given to the greater sins in the novel committed against those who do not subscribe to white Christian mores.

the individual needs of *this* man and *this* woman, she should yet constitute herself not only a mentor, but an instrument in reuniting them.”¹⁸

About Thérèse’s Protestant complement David Hosmer, the author notes only that he “reads [Thérèse] a brief lecture upon the ‘living spirit,’ the ‘dead letter,’ etc.”¹⁹ Such phrasing has an edge suggesting that Chopin may be even more critical of the male Unitarian member of the couple. As we will see, the metaphorical use of the verb “reads” reiterates an intellectual bias characteristic of Hosmer and his religion. Coupled with what Chopin implies are theological buzzwords, the lecture, far from serving as a positive alternative to Thérèse’s misguided reform movement, seems mere pontificating, albeit of an anti-Papist variety. It does not undo the reality that, as the actual agent of his reunion with his ex-wife Fanny, Hosmer, no less than Thérèse, orchestrates Fanny’s doom. In fact, Chopin’s response to the critic includes a passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson that applies to Hosmer as much as it does to Thérèse: “‘It were an unspeakable calamity if anyone should think he has the right to impose a private will on others. That is a part of a striker, an assassin.’”²⁰ Hosmer at least indirectly kills, for although his hands are not

¹⁸ Kate Chopin, “*At Fault: A Correction*,” *Natchitoches Enterprise* December 18, 1890, cited in Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 194.

¹⁹ The “lecture” follows Thérèse Lafirme’s question: “‘Do you think, David, that it’s right we should find our happiness out of that past of pain and sin and trouble?’” Hosmer replies, “‘The truth in its entirety isn’t given to man to know—such knowledge, no doubt, would be beyond human endurance. But we make a step towards it, when we learn that there is rottenness and evil in the world, masquerading as right and morality—when we learn to know the living spirit from the dead letter.’” One cannot ignore the traces of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” in the allusion to the “dead letter.” This combined with the fact that Hosmer bears a “scar on his forehead, coming out like a red letter” might undercut Hosmer’s role as truthsayer, for neither Bartleby nor Arthur Dimmesdale is an ideal spiritual guide. Indeed, Hosmer’s “lecture” has more than a hint of Puritanism about it that projects “rottenness and evil” onto some unnamed other.

²⁰ “Character,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 10 (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1883), 89-122, http://books.google.com/books?id=W406AAAAMAAJ&pg=PA91&lpg=PA91&dq=%22it+is+the+what+and+not+the+how%22&source=bl&ots=R_vULTudNM&sig=sS6bYn-0QDnHVGlioLFSQocyLNY&hl=en&ei=LRvzTI3ZBZC8sQPLm7jTCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22it%20is%20the%20what%20and%20not%20the%20how%22&f=false. The essay was first published in 1866 in *The North American Review*.

bloody, he contributes to the deaths of not only his wife, but also of his employees Joçint and Grégoire Santien, Thérèse's nephew. In his fight with Fanny that precedes and precipitates her drowning, Hosmer even utters the threat ““By heaven—I'll—kill you!”” (CW 860). No mere expression of frustration, the oath betrays his and his country's belief in a god that sanctions the oppression of those whose existence interferes with the plans of the anointed ones. Together David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme represent a white American Christian fault line defined by two points—reunion and redemption—often at odds with the needs of entire peoples.

Reunion

Set in the post-Reconstruction 1880s, *At Fault* depicts the difficult period of reunion of the states during which companies, such as David Hosmer's, established businesses in the deep South. To date, David Russell has offered the most comprehensive assessment of the role of social and political reunion in the novel, yet he does not address the religious underpinnings of Hosmer's arrangement with Thérèse and, by extension, of the renewed alliance between the North and the South.²¹ In fact, Russell's argument, in which he claims the South corrupts David and Melicent Hosmer, depends on a North/South division that Blight and others have described as much less absolute than has been believed. This was especially true of Chopin's and the Hosmers' hometown, St. Louis, Missouri, which soon after the end of Reconstruction notoriously succumbed to the same racism that infected the deep South and much of the rest of the country. In 1879, the city experienced a massive incursion of “Exodusters,” African Americans traveling through St. Louis to Kansas to escape the racial violence in the South, including that in

²¹ Those scholars who have considered religion at all in the novel have primarily discussed the Catholic Church's position on divorce and the influence this has on Thérèse Lafirme's instructing Hosmer to remarry Fanny.

Louisiana. Although most of the local black community worked diligently to assist the people, whites were far less supportive. Mayor Henry Overstolz, who had fought to deny the Exodusters money set aside for immigrants to the city, demanded a “public statement from the St. Louis African American community leaders discouraging the Exodus.”²² Chopin could not have ignored the hypocrisy of Overstolz, who was himself a German immigrant to St. Louis; one wonders if she had the mayor in mind when she assigned the surname of “Stolz” (pride) to the protagonist of her first published story, “Wiser than a God.” In any case, the history of St. Louis undercuts Russell’s assumption that David and Melicent Hosmer “as Northerners might be considered possible agents of social change” but then “prove susceptible to [the] harmonious [Southern] vision” of Thérèse Lafirme—that is, a feudal, hierarchal perspective.²³ If, in fact, the French Creole culture contaminates the Hosmers, we would expect Roman Catholicism to emerge as the dominant theology in the novel. Instead, the tenets and history of Unitarianism, the Hosmers’ religion, drive much of the novel’s action and establish David, rather than Thérèse Lafirme, as the primary controlling force on the Place-du-Bois plantation.

Unitarianism may have appealed to Chopin’s sense of irony, for, despite the religion’s efforts to honor a single Godhead within a unified Church, its history shows it to have been susceptible to the same sort of strife that fractured the country. Chopin’s novel demonstrates that such disintegration resulted, in part, from the religion’s emphasis on the intellect and detachment from the supernatural. Increasingly secularized, Unitarianism, at least as portrayed by Chopin, became complicit in the materialism of the

²² Bryan M. Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 38.

²³ David Russell, “A Vision of Reunion: Kate Chopin’s *At Fault*,” *Southern Quarterly* 46, no.1 (Fall 2008): 14.

Gilded Age. Moreover, the religion provided the author with a symbol for the hypocrisy of unions achieved by discounting individual needs and differences, especially those of people of color. The charge Chopin levels against Thérèse Lafirme—that the Creole subscribes to a “blind acceptance of an undistinguishing, therefore unintelligent code of righteousness by which to deal out judgments”—seems even more descriptive of a religion and country in active pursuit of homogeneity. The “one nation” that American school children would soon begin to intone as they recited “The Pledge of Allegiance” had little room for pluralism.²⁴ While the marriage of David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme does signal a “national reunion built on the politics of white supremacy,” a key source of this racism is not “Old South” ideology, as Russell contends,²⁵ but the country’s Judeo-Christian foundations and theological devolution through which the hearts and souls of African Americans were systematically removed from the American body. For Chopin, Unitarianism represents a return to the Old Testament foundations of Christianity and the perpetuation of the manifest-destiny mindset introduced by the Puritan colonizers of America.

The author’s perspective admittedly diverges from that generally held regarding American Unitarianism. In describing the Church as “wide and inclusive,” George Willis Cooke, a Church representative and contemporary of Chopin, articulated a common

²⁴ Written by the former Baptist minister Francis Bellamy, “The Pledge of Allegiance” originally appeared in *Youth’s Companion* in 1892, only two years after Kate Chopin published *At Fault* and one year after she saw the first of her own submissions included in the magazine. See both Margaret Butterfield, “Francis Bellamy” and Francis Bellamy, “The Story of the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag,” at *University of Rochester Library Bulletin* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1953), <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=3418>. Chopin’s story “For Marse Chouchoute” was published in *Youth’s Companion* on August 20, 1891. See *CW*, 1005.

²⁵ Russell, “A Vision of Reunion,” 8.

opinion of believers and nonbelievers alike.²⁶ By relying on reason to refute the concept of the Trinity—the tripartite God consisting of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—Unitarian leaders imagined they could return Christianity to its theological roots. As envisioned by William Ellery Channing, the father of American Unitarianism, the mind that informed this first step towards religious purification “comprehended universal truths and strove to unite them.”²⁷ Such seems the gist of David Hosmer’s quest to ascertain the “truth in its entirety.” But the degree to which the Church should recognize other beliefs became a point of contention that would divide rather than unify Church leaders. By the same token, for some Unitarians, the focus on unity had political significance and dovetailed with efforts to undermine secessionist efforts leading up to the Civil War; Southern Unitarians inevitably broke with their Northern Unitarian brethren on this point. Most indicative of the inherent disunion in Unitarianism was the position of the Church, Northern or Southern, on race. Although many Northern Unitarians in antebellum America supported an end to slavery, the majority distanced themselves from more radical abolitionists. The Unitarians’ allegiance to reason led them to shirk any hasty actions and to advocate the slow elimination of slavery.²⁸ In the South, the Unitarian

²⁶ George Willis Cooke, “Preface” to *Unitarianism in America: A History of Its Origin and Development* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902), <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8unit10h.htm>.

²⁷ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 204.

²⁸ As we might expect, Cooke provides a more positive gloss on this aspect of Unitarians than do others. He begins his section “Anti-Slavery” with the claim that “in proportion to its numbers no religious body in the country did so much to promote the anti-slavery reform as the Unitarian.” While he recognizes that many of his religious persuasion remained detached from the abolitionists, he contends that the Unitarians’ position was rooted in their “desire . . . to be just, rational, and open-minded.” Gary J. Dorrien’s more modern reading of the Unitarian position regarding slavery is less complimentary: “Unitarianism upheld the dignity of human beings in theory, but gave few of its sons and daughters to the struggle against chattel slavery.” One notable exception was Theodore Parker, who not only contributed to John Brown’s mission but defended it and other slave uprisings. See Cooke, *Unitarianism in America*, and Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 101-103.

sense of unity was an even clearer shade of white. As they explored ways to rise in the social hierarchies, ministers and their followers often worked with rather than against the established social hierarchy to attain a position of note on the social ladder. Some Unitarians became planters and acquired their own slaves to work the plantations.²⁹

Chopin's decision to feature Unitarianism as the complement to Catholicism in *At Fault* could have been influenced in part by the history of the New Orleans' pastor Theodore Clapp. Although he died in 1866, four years before Chopin moved to the city, he had been such an integral part of the city's society that the *Daily Picayune* eulogized him with the following words: "And who that lived here with him were not his friends? Who could fail to be such to one who was the friend of the otherwise friendless, of the stranger and solitary?"³⁰ Originally from Massachusetts, Clapp moved to New Orleans in 1822 to serve as a Presbyterian minister. By 1830 he had embraced the more liberal faith of Unitarianism and established "what came to be known as the 'Strangers' Church," which, according to John Macaulay, included "a sizable congregation made up of former Presbyterians, Universalists, German Unitarians, and New Englanders, with a gallery overhead that could seat up to four hundred 'strangers' and visitors to the Crescent City." With his focus on Clapp's somewhat idiosyncratic application of Unitarianism, Macaulay ignores a troubling component of the minister's theology and politics, that is, the ultimate exclusion of people of color from the house of "strangers," indeed, from America itself. Although Clapp vacillated between endorsing and rejecting

²⁹ John Allen Macaulay, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South: The Other Invisible Institution* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama, 2001), 18, 59.

³⁰ A. M. Holbrook quoted in Macaulay, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 75. Although, as Green and Caudle observe, "Unitarianism [was] a belief system that was foreign to both the Catholic Creoles and the fundamentalist African Americans of the Cane River region," Clapp's fame as well as Unitarianism's prominence in St. Louis could have inspired Chopin to pit the Hosmers' Unitarianism against the Creoles' Catholicism. See Green and Caudle, *At Fault: A Scholarly Edition with Background Readings*, 218.

slavery, he remained constant in his belief that colonization was the solution to the “race problem.” In Louisiana, a state with extensive racial mixing, such a proposal was not widely entertained as a valid course of action.³¹

Theodore Clapp’s relaxation of his supposed early abolitionist sympathies might seem to give credence to Russell’s assertion that the South corrupts Kate Chopin’s Northern Unitarians, but much suggests that the New Orleans pastor brought a Unitarian-inspired intolerance into the South. With their eighteenth-century emphasis on reason, Unitarians substituted a belief in potential human perfection for the concept of original sin. As a result, the religion was in the vanguard of nineteenth-century social reforms. However, the rubric by which progress was graded was of a decidedly white hue. Clapp did eventually support the abolition of slavery, but like many Americans, he did not welcome the idea of African Americans remaining in the land of the free because he considered the ways of blacks to constitute a path to an earthly hell. Instead, he pushed for the relocation of people of color to other countries, the most famous of which was Liberia. As Timothy Reilly explains, “With regard to the future of black Americans, it is difficult to perceive Parson Clapp and most other colonizationists who were actively or theoretically engaged as representing a combined influence for good. Their advocacy of the black man's removal to Africa was apparently based on a vision of the future which saw America as some kind of white man's Elysium, at long last free of the clouds of racial discord, chronic guilt, democratic contradiction, and the threat of amalgamation.”³²

³¹ Timothy F. Reilly, “Parson Clapp of New Orleans: Antebellum Social Critic, Religious Radical, and Member of the Establishment,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 16, no. 2 (Spring 1975): 167-191, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231459>; Macaulay, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 7, 47-51; Timothy F. Reilly, “The Conscience of a Colonizationist: Parson Clapp and the Slavery Dilemma,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 39, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 411-44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233535>.

³² Reilly, “The Conscience of a Colonizationist,” 440.

Although colonization was not a uniquely Unitarian idea—Abraham Lincoln was but one of many prominent Americans who endorsed it³³—it and the Unitarians’ emphasis on gradual emancipation demonstrate the religion’s conflicted position regarding people of color and others who did not subscribe to the religion’s ideology or conform to its value system. In post-Reconstruction America, the elitist and racist underbelly of Unitarian conservatives became more pronounced. The Church’s desire for an educated congregation, while it inspired movements to increase access to public education, had an evangelical edge that rejected anything of a “savage” nature; unlearning native ways often played as important a role in education as learning the supposedly more civilized manners of whites. The social reforms, such as the temperance movement, which Unitarians widely supported, were conspicuously based in the Judeo-Christian foundations of America. As the title of William Ellery Channing’s 1819 sermon “Unitarian Christianity” demonstrates, the Church, although it denied the divinity of Christ, was Christ-centered. Human perfection was attainable provided humans followed the example of Jesus. Eventually this would become a source of conflict as radical Unitarians rallied for a merger with Universalism, which did not require belief in Christ as a prerequisite for belonging; for much of the nineteenth century Unitarians were fiercely divided on this issue.³⁴

³³ James D. Lockett, “Abraham Lincoln and Colonization: An Episode That Ends in Tragedy at L’Ile a Vache, Haiti, 1863-1864,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 4 (June 1991): 428-44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784687>. African Americans themselves were hardly of one mind regarding colonization. Although some participated in the movement, especially to Liberia, many opposed the efforts of the American Colonization Society, organized in 1816 by Robert Finley, a St. Louis Presbyterian minister. See Ella Forbes, “African-American Resistance to Colonization,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 2 (December 1990): 210-23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784474>.

³⁴ Channing died in 1842, eight years before Kate Chopin was born, but in 1888, just as Chopin was about to make her own literary debut, Routledge and Sons published a new edition of the Unitarian’s collected works. According to the author of the preface, “nearly a hundred thousand copies” of other editions had been produced between 1873 and 1888. In all likelihood, Chopin had access to Channing’s

Kate Chopin would have had ample opportunity to witness the harangue, for in 1885, a year after she returned to St. Louis, the debate was carried to the Western Unitarian Conference held in Chopin's hometown. The next year, Jabez T. Sunderland, the conference's leading conservative, published the pamphlet "Is Western Unitarianism Ready to Give Up Its Christian Character?" In his defense of the Christian heart of Unitarianism, Sunderland unconsciously betrays how deftly nineteenth-century American scientific, commercial, and social agendas were intertwined with the religion. Darwinism is on the Judeo-Christian God's side because Christianity, as "the highest faith of religion," represents "progress and evolution." Christian Unitarianism also practices good "business intelligence" because it follows the path of the businessman, who "knows that any enterprise which attempts to embrace everything succeeds in nothing." Thus, the Church does not attempt to appeal to such deviants as Papists or polytheists. Beneath such pragmatism, however, lurks the real crux of the matter: Unitarianism must remain Christian because Christianity is the "truth" and "the most powerful force operating in our day against sin, and in favor of the higher life of men." While "the great Christian army" might have donned new uniforms, they still seem ready to fight the pagans undermining the foundations of the City on a Hill.³⁵

Among those Sunderland cites who had "warn[ed]" of the conflict within the Church is "Dr. Eliot, of St. Louis," i.e., William Greenleaf Eliot, founder of both the Unitarian

writings, many of which have direct bearing on themes addressed in *At Fault*. See *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D.* London: Routledge, 1888, http://books.google.com/books?id=kPJsHeNLuXoC&pg=PP8&lpg=PP8&dq=%22on+the+elevation+of+the+labouring+classes%22+channing&source=bl&ots=htFr7FBFen&sig=539SgZC1sCJgM3D8xc0rmSZlrCs&hl=en&ei=1uHpTOe5DI_CsAOa1pGxCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CC0Q6AEwBw#v=onepage&q&f=false.

³⁵ Jabez T. Sunderland, "Is Western Unitarianism Ready to Give Up Its Christian Character?" Pamphlet first published in 1886. Rprt. by American Unitarian Conference, 2006, <http://www.americanunitarian.org/sunderlandissue.htm>.

Church of the Messiah (1835) and Washington University (1853) in St. Louis. Kate Chopin would have had first-hand knowledge of these and other Unitarian developments from her acquaintance with Charlotte Stearns Eliot, wife of William Greenleaf Eliot's son Henry Ware and mother to the famous American poet Thomas Stearns Eliot. Since William Greenleaf Eliot lived in St. Louis until his death in 1887, Chopin could have met with the minister himself. In any event, both Charlotte Stearns Eliot and William Greenleaf Eliot had direct ties to the most obvious Unitarian source for Chopin's character David Hosmer, James Kendall Hosmer, who entered the ministry but later became a professor at Washington University. That Unitarianism knotted the Eliots and Hosmer together in Gordian proportions is apparent in a biography of William Greenleaf Eliot: written by Charlotte, the book includes a preface by Hosmer. In 1882 Hosmer and his siblings had similarly honored their deceased father, the Unitarian minister George Washington Hosmer, by producing an equally grandiose memorial consisting of their own musings and writings by the minister.³⁶

At the heart or, rather, mind of Unitarianism is an emphasis on the "force of intellect," an idea repeatedly articulated by Channing and perpetuated by the Eliot-Stearns Eliot-Hosmer trinity. Like America's eighteenth-century founding fathers, nineteenth-century Unitarians promoted reason as the basis for spiritual enlightenment and social progress; such "social gospel" proposed various reforms to enable people to rise from a fallen spiritual state. (In "On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes,"

³⁶ See Charlotte Chauncy Stearns Eliot, *William Greenleaf Eliot: Minister, Educator, Philanthropist* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904) and *Memorial of George Washington Hosmer, D.D.* Edited by his children. (Privately printed: 1882), <http://www.archive.org/stream/memorialofgeorge00hosmrich#page/n3/mode/1up>. Emily Toth has linked David Hosmer to James Kendall Hosmer. Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 186-7. However, to date no one seems to have considered the literary significance of the excellent leads provided by Toth.

Channing insists that the “elevation” he envisions is primarily mental and spiritual, not physical. Thus, he could not be accused of challenging the social hierarchy in America.³⁷⁾ Education was therefore of paramount importance, especially to William Greenleaf Eliot; among the achievements lionized by his daughter-in-law is his expansion of the public-school system in St. Louis. George Washington Hosmer and his son James were similarly attached to academia: the elder Hosmer served briefly as president of Antioch College in Ohio while James was a professor first at Antioch and then at Washington University in St. Louis. While the three deserve recognition for their work, Chopin may have regarded Unitarianism’s glorification of the mind as evidence of a cerebral approach to theology that has the ironic effect of taking the spirit out of spirituality. This, in fact, has long been a major criticism of the religion. Eliot’s writings suggest that the charge is not unfounded. In his attempt to refute the accusation that Unitarians “deny the existence of Mystery in religion,” he quite logically distinguishes “Mystery” from “contradiction” and then demonstrates the inherent contradiction in a belief in the Trinity by compiling a lengthy list of Biblical verses to support his claim—a move that makes Eliot’s writings as exciting as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s are to *The Awakening*’s Edna Pontellier.³⁸ Certainly Unitarianism has no room for what Voodooists call *les Mysteres*, the spirits with whom

³⁷ See William Ellery Channing, “On the Elevation of the Labouring Classes,” in *The Collected Works*, 84.

³⁸ William Greenleaf Eliot, “Introductory Address” in *Discourses on the Doctrine of Christianity* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1855), 5-8, <http://www.archive.org/stream/discoursesondoc01eliogooq#page/n3/mode/2up>. Although scholars of *The Awakening* disagree on the significance of the reference to Emerson, many have interpreted it as well as Chopin’s allusions to Walt Whitman as indicating that she, too, subscribed to the tenets of Transcendentalism. To assume this position is to ignore Transcendentalism’s debt to Unitarianism and its implications regarding race and abolition. Emerson, as Green and Caudle note, “was one of the most prominent and influential thinkers of the Unitarian church,” *At Fault: A Scholarly Edition with Background readings*, 170. But the Unitarian-turned-Transcendentalist was also a late-comer to the abolition cause. For a discussion of Emerson’s hesitation regarding abolition, see Len Gougeon, “Emerson and Abolition: The Silent Years,” *American Literature* 54, no. 4 (December 1982): 560-75, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2926006>.

believers regularly negotiate.³⁹

Even more problematic are William Greenleaf Eliot's and James Kendall Hosmer's ideas on race and nationality. While Eliot's belief in gradual emancipation mirrored the position of many Unitarians and Americans at large, his writings on slaves, specifically the fugitive Archer Alexander, suggest that the Unitarian might have more in common with the likes of a Theodore Clapp than first appears. In *The Story of Archer Alexander* (published in 1885, just a few years before Chopin began her own writing career), Eliot describes the assistance he provided Alexander, who found refuge in Eliot's home. While the minister's actions are commendable, his narrative, as Joseph Thomas rightly notes, uses Alexander primarily as a means to tout the Unitarian's achievements, especially his founding of the Western Sanitation Commission, which provided medical care during the Civil War. Unlike typical slave narratives, such as Frederick Douglass's, Alexander's story is not told by the slave himself, but by Eliot who, Thomas argues, "to a great extent . . . simply removes Alexander from the book."⁴⁰ Certainly, the narrative betrays the fact that Eliot did not regard blacks as being equals to whites.⁴⁰ This is not surprising since he, like Theodore Clapp, had supported the organized effort to remove African Americans from America. As Charlotte Stearns Eliot tells us, in 1848, her father-in-law "delivered an address before the Colonization Society, wherein he declared that he had been a friend of the Society for fifteen years, and was more and more so. . . . Soon afterwards Dr. Light of the Colonization Society occupied Dr. Eliot's pulpit for his cause, and \$150 was

³⁹ Maya Deren. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Platz, New York: McPherson & Company, 1985), 29.

⁴⁰ See William Greenleaf Eliot, *The Story of Archer Alexander: From Slavery to Freedom, March 30, 1863* (Boston: Cupples Upham and Company, 1885), property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/eliot/eliot.html>; Joseph M. Thomas, "The Post-Abolitionist's Narrative: William Greenleaf Eliot's *The Story of Archer Alexander*," *The New England Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2000): 463-81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/366668>.

subscribed.”⁴¹ One suspects that Chopin would not have regarded Dr. Eliot’s cause in quite the same light as his daughter-in-law apparently did. After all, successful colonization would have deprived the local colorist of models for the many African American characters in her fiction. Neither would the writer famous for her use of dialect and the Creole *patois* have found much merit in James Kendall Hosmer’s *A Short History of Anglo-Saxon Freedom: The Polity of the English-speaking Race*, which glorifies both Anglo-Saxons and their tongue. Her Irish/French blood would probably have boiled a bit at Hosmer’s paranoid lament about “the undesirable foreign flood, which, pouring in yearly in volume . . . seems likely so far to dilute our blood as to make it unequal to the task of sustaining Anglo-Saxon freedom.” Most of all, unlike the “*inert* millions just released from slavery” in America described by Hosmer,⁴² Chopin’s less gaseous African American characters perform a variety of tasks.

While William Greenleaf Eliot and James Kendall Hosmer seem the primary Unitarian influences on *At Fault*, a more literary member of the brethren also graces the pages of Chopin’s novel: Nathaniel Hawthorne who, despite his struggling with the sins of his Puritan fathers and dabbling in Transcendentalism at Brook Farm, was a product of Unitarianism. In the *Memorial*, James Kendall Hosmer even waxes poetic about the close ties Hawthorne, along with Thoreau and Emerson, had with the Concord Hosmers:

⁴¹ Charlotte Chauncy Stearns Eliot, *William Greenleaf Eliot*, 138-39.

⁴² James Kendall Hosmer, *A Short History of Anglo-Saxon Freedom: The Polity of the English-speaking Race* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890), 323, 352 (emphasis added), <http://www.archive.org/details/historyofanglosa00hosmia>. Hosmer’s focus on Anglo-Saxons in the 1890 work is rooted in his pride at his own heritage, described at length in his contributions to the *Memorial for George Washington Hosmer*. In it, he sings the praises of a father who “showed, not only in his name but in every bodily characteristic, —perhaps, too, in his spiritual trait—that he was thoroughly Saxon,” 4. Among Hosmer’s illustrious ancestors is Mary Rowlandson, famous for her narrative about being held captive during King Philip’s War. Hosmer’s summary of Rowlandson’s experience reflects his own ambivalence about the “Indians,” for while he “regrets . . . that she did not sketch more distinctly . . . the bearing and traits of one [King Philip] we are inclined to regard as an heroic forest monarch,” he simultaneously describes the settlers as being “at the mercy of the savages,” 7-8.

“Nobel guests these Hosmer uplands have entertained. . . . Here Hawthorne has lain by the hour, stretched at length, some ‘moss of the old manse’ becoming soaked with strange fantastic beauty, as from the brain, so secret and set apart, welled slowly the weird imaginings.”⁴³ Chopin, however, seems to have taken a different view of America’s literary icon, for in *At Fault*, he assumes the more prosaic shape of Lorenzo Worthington, a pedant married to Fanny Hosmer’s friend Belle. Like Hawthorne, Lorenzo has been “employed for many years past in the custom house” (CW 781) and exhibits a kindred devotion to ideas and the printed word.⁴⁴ On the surface, Lorenzo deviates theologically from Hawthorne, for the unspecified religious affiliation of Chopin’s character seems Roman Catholicism, the faith of Belle and his daughter Lucilla; Lorenzo’s aunt is even a nun in the Sacred Heart Convent, where Kate Chopin attended school.⁴⁵ But in reality, the man, who according to Belle, rarely “‘darkens the doors of a church’” (CW 848, emphasis added), merely has a white academic interest in comparative religion. When, on the eve of their departure for Louisiana, David and Fanny visit the Worthingtons, David finds Lorenzo pouring over books in an effort to “‘trace the history of various religions which are known to us; those which have died out, as well as existing

⁴³ James Kendall Hosmer, *Memorial*, 23.

⁴⁴ Green and Caudle have commented on Chopin’s unflattering allusions to both Hawthorne and Emerson but do not link her contempt to the New England writers’ perspectives on race and religion. Regarding Hawthorne, the editors cite his “well-documented hostility toward women writers,” “Introduction” in *At Fault: A Scholarly Edition with Background Readings*,” xxi. As we will see, Chopin references Hawthorne in both *At Fault* and *The Awakening* to take issue with much more than his cynical assessment of women writers.

⁴⁵ Lorenzo’s Catholic connections actually reiterate the Hawthorne parallel, for Hawthorne’s daughter Rose converted to Catholicism and became a Dominican nun. In fact, her life touches on several issues in *At Fault*. When she converted, she was married to George Lathrop, with whom she had a son who, like David and Fanny Hosmer’s boy, died young. George Lathrop suffered from alcoholism that eventually resulted in the divorce of Rose and George; so, too, does Fanny Hosmer’s alcoholism contribute to David’s leaving her. And although Fanny apparently remains a Unitarian, she attends the Catholic Redemptorist’s Rock Church in St. Louis. See The Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, “Biographical Note,” *The Rose Hawthorne Lathrop Papers 1825-2003*, <http://www.hawthorne-dominicans.org>.

religions” (CW 792-3).⁴⁶ Despite Lorenzo’s apparent appreciation for diverse beliefs, his insistence on a “common origin” smacks of a Unitarian’s refusal to honor differences as does his focus on Western monotheism—“the Islam . . . the Hebrew . . . [and] the Christian religion” —in which only “slight differences, indeed technical differences” are present. The works of Protestant idealists Emerson, John Ruskin, and Arthur Schopenhauer form the core of Lorenzo’s library. Later at Thérèse Lafirme’s plantation, he has an opportunity to broaden his literary horizons when he examines her books, which include works by Balzac and Shakespeare, but the visitor from St. Louis does not know French and cannot read the “very small type” of the Shakespeare volume. In reality, the secular nature of the books seems unable to compete with the religious import of the tome Lorenzo does choose: a volume of Alban Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*.

Through the Lorenzo Worthington/Nathaniel Hawthorne merger, Chopin shows how Unitarians’ emphasis on the Word and words, far from expanding vision, actually encouraged a form of spiritual myopia. A “small, narrow-chested person,” Lorenzo has a physique that mirrors his limited theological perspective while his eclecticism seems to inform a social indifference or impotence that apparently serves him well in his profession. He, at any rate, fairs better than Hawthorne did, for Chopin’s character “ha[s] remained at his post during the various changes of administration that ha[ve] gone by since his first appointment” (CW 781). But like Hawthorne, at least as perceived by Chopin, Lorenzo is attached to divine ideals that do nothing to further human connections. When the Hosmers leave for Louisiana, Lorenzo quite literally cannot see them off, for, although he is at the train station, he can only “[look] blankly along the line

⁴⁶ With her allusion to “various religions,” Chopin might also be taking William James to task for his own academic review of theology in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

of windows, unable to see them without his spectacles, which he had left between the pages of his Schopenhauer on the kitchen table at home.” We should not be surprised that when his wife uses his precious books to weigh down fabric, he, much as Hawthorne inveighed against “women scribblers,” attributes Belle’s behavior to the “weak and inadequate mentality” of women (*CW* 793, 782).

Lorenzo, however, is more than a patriarch of an American literary enclave that excludes women, for Chopin’s primary objective is not to champion the New Woman cause in this novel nor, I would argue, in much of her fiction. Belle Worthington, certainly does not need rescuing; at 170 pounds, she can hold her own with her husband and most other people, male or female.⁴⁷ Instead, the allusion to his condescending attitude anticipates his even more callous insensitivity towards people of color later in the novel. While a guest in Thérèse Lafirme’s home, he proves himself again “short-sighted” as he attempts “to glean information . . . of psychological interest concerning the negro race” from another guest, Mrs. Duplan, whose Louisiana sensibilities cause her to regard Lorenzo’s questions as inappropriate for “polite society” (*CW* 844). By ignoring the

⁴⁷ Scholars typically conflate Belle and her friend Lou Dawson into a unit described in various but ubiquitously derogatory terms: “mindless matinee-goers [who] care little for anyone but themselves”; “women [who] do no meaningful work, but instead engage in a social life that includes drinking and card-playing”; and “comic exaggerations of the figures of Marie Louise and Melicent.” See Donald A. Ringe, “Cane River World: Kate Chopin’s *At Fault* and Related Stories,” *Studies in American Fiction* 3, no. 2 (Autumn 1975): 163; Walker, *Kate Chopin*, 66; Donna Campbell, “*At Fault*: A Reappraisal of Kate Chopin’s Other Novel,” 36. Superficially, Kate Chopin’s attitude towards Belle seems in concert with that of the critics, for the author writes that Belle and Lou are “professional time-killers” (*CW* 781). But Belle and Lou are distinct characters, as demonstrated by the scandal the latter creates when she leaves her husband for another man. While the Worthington marriage is hardly ideal, Belle, however flirtatious, does not betray Lorenzo, for she operates from an ethical center Lou lacks. Belle’s very name and heft suggest a person of substance. In fact, rather than an “exaggeration” of the black Marie Louise and Hosmer’s sister Melicent, she is a foil to Thérèse Lafirme, who orchestrates a marital reunion that results in Fanny Hosmer’s death. On the other hand, Belle, like the Voodoo mambos to be discussed later, is a healer who nurses Fanny through pneumonia in the winter. Fanny herself claims, “I would ‘a died if Belle Worthington hadn’t ‘a took such good care of me”” (*CW* 778). There is much more to Belle than her version of white-face—false “soft blond curls” and a dye job that fails to conceal “suspicious darkness about the roots” (*CW* 779)—indicates. That David Hosmer has always considered Lou Dawson “an amiable woman, with rather delicate perceptions” and “a less objectionable friend for Fanny” (*CW* 789) than Belle Worthington calls into question his own value system.

topic, Mrs. Duplan betrays her own Southern bias, but Lorenzo seems even more culpable for reducing African Americans to the level of specimens such as those of California flora Melicent Hosmer plans to collect at the end of the novel. Especially disturbing is the fact that he initiates his examination of race while the black servant Betsy works in his midst but remains invisible to the man most comfortable with theories. As jaded to realities concerning race was Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose removal from the Custom House resulted in part from his support of Franklin Pierce, the fourteenth President of the United States, a Democrat from New Hampshire who gained infamy by endorsing such measures as the Kansas-Nebraska Act that buttressed the continuation of slavery.⁴⁸ Chopin's reference to the "the various changes of administration" recalls the shifting political climate that determined Hawthorne's employment at and termination from the custom house.

As much as Nathaniel Hawthorne seems a model for Lorenzo Worthington, the New England writer more profoundly influenced Chopin's creation of David Hosmer, who extends Lorenzo's spiritual detachment into the practical world of commerce, i.e., the post-Reconstruction, Louisiana version of the Custom House. In fact, if, as I believe, Chopin had read Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, she would have experienced a fortunate moment of synchronicity, for in his introduction, Hawthorne refers explicitly to Harriet Hosmer, a nineteenth-century sculptor whom scholars have equated with Hilda, one of the novel's two female protagonists. Much suggests that Chopin had *The Marble Faun* in

⁴⁸ Not merely a friend and supporter of Pierce, Hawthorne published an 1852 biography of the fourteenth President of the United States to help Pierce gain office. This is not the only indication of Hawthorne's conservative position regarding slavery and people of color. Like Theodore Cooke and William Greenleaf Eliot, he endorsed colonization as a means of dealing with the race issue. See Larry J. Reynolds, *Devils and Rebels: The Making of Hawthorne's Damned Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

mind when she wrote *At Fault* and later *The Awakening*. As in Chopin's novel, *The Marble Faun* pivots on a collision of American Protestantism and European Catholicism, although the setting for Hawthorne's incursion into Papist territory is Italy rather than Louisiana. By the end of Hawthorne's novel, Hilda, the spiritual touchstone, and her fellow American Kenyon plan to marry. Although Hilda makes some mysterious forays into Catholicism, Hawthorne's conclusion indicates that American Protestantism triumphs. As an amalgam of Harriet and James Kendall Hosmer, David Hosmer reiterates Hawthorne's affirmation of American Protestantism, but the prospect, as envisioned by Chopin, is not nearly as promising as Hawthorne imagines.⁴⁹

Initially, David Hosmer might seem the antithesis of Lorenzo Worthington, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and James Kendall Hosmer. Although remarried to Fanny by a Unitarian minister (the same parson who first wed the two), Chopin's character shows little overt interest in religion. In his visit to Lorenzo, he takes refuge in his friend Homeyer's argument "that all religions are but mythological creations invented to satisfy a species of sentimentality—a morbid craving in man for the unknown and undemonstrable." Hosmer maintains that Homeyer is not "an Iconoclast" who cares little for humanity's need for the psychological/spiritual support religion offers, but instead "believes in a natural adjustment . . . an innate reserve force of accommodation. What we commonly

⁴⁹ Although Emily Toth does not link either Harriet or James Kendall Hosmer to Hawthorne, Chopin's biographer does note that Chopin's "inside joke" about the name Hosmer was inspired in part by Harriet, whose sculpture was exhibited in St. Louis. See Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 186. In his analysis of *The Marble Faun*, John Carlos Rowe extends the America/Europe, Protestant/Catholic dichotomy to include race when he defines Hilda's exotic foil, Miriam, as representative of a darker race. Rowe's concluding comment on Hawthorne's novel emphasizes the New Englander's allegiance to the course set when the writer supported Pierce's Presidency: "*The Marble Faun* is in certain respects Hawthorne's most *American* romance, because it offers clear, albeit troubling answers to the questions regarding U.S. cultural colonialism raised by 'The Custom-House' preface and conclusion to *The Scarlet Letter*." See John Carlow Rowe, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and Transnationality," in *Hawthorne and the Real: Bicentennial Essays*, ed. Mellicent Bell (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2005), 100. In *At Fault*, Chopin's ultimate "joke" seems to be transforming the "scarlet A" into an "H."

call laws in nature, he styles accidents—in society, only arbitrary methods of expediency, which, when they outlive their usefulness to an advancing and exacting civilization, should be set aside. He is a little impatient to always wait for the inevitable natural adjustment” (CW 793).

Perhaps because he never assumes bodily form in the novel, Homeyer has been a source of controversy among scholars, but to varying degrees many consider him David’s alter ego and Chopin’s spokesman. Referring to the social Darwinism implicit in Homeyer’s position, Pamela Menke goes so far as to claim that “David, a.k.a. Homeyer, is the mistress’ [Chopin’s] narrative’s philosophical mouthpiece” and that his “tedious ideological arguments” are Chopin’s own. More recently Donna Campbell, sensitive to the racial, class, and gender tension in the novel, has argued that Lorenzo Worthington, Homeyer, and David and Melicent Hosmer represent “a masculine level of idealism at odds with the realism of many of the novel’s women.”⁵⁰ Although Campbell does not link this ideology to religion, her point is well taken, for the underlying idealism of at least certain Unitarians led them to entertain Homeyer’s vision, that is, to support interim measures that would satisfy their own impatience for what Eliot and others regarded as a “natural adjustment” by which the “Negro Problem” might be resolved. Homeyer, one suspects, would have been a staunch supporter of the American Colonization Society. Chopin, on the other hand, is hardly a member of Homeyer’s club. While his claim that religion is “a morbid craving in man for the unknown and undemonstrable” is not that removed from Unitarians’ distrust of miracles and anything else at odds with natural

⁵⁰ Pamela Glenn Menke, “Fissure as Art in Kate Chopin’s *At Fault*.” *Louisiana Literature* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 50; and “The Catalyst of Color and Women’s Regional Writing: *At Fault*, *Pembroke*, and *The Awakening*,” *The Southern Quarterly* 37, nos. 3/4 (Spring-Summer 1999): 11; Campbell, “*At Fault*: A Reappraisal,” 36.

laws, Chopin had a healthy curiosity about events not readily explained by natural causes. As we have seen, by 1897, she would compare those “seek[ing] to unravel [spiritual] mysteries and things hidden and denied” with “scientists” and “explorers.”

In what Campbell has rightly described as a “social-problem novel,”⁵¹ Chopin, far from advocating the rejection of spirituality, laments the secular track of American white Christianity by which Unitarianism morphed into a utilitarianism perpetuating the dehumanization on which slavery had depended. Some of the most egregious sins against African Americans in the novel are committed by the Unitarian Hosmers. At several turns, David Hosmer’s sister, Melicent, betrays a racial insensitivity to rival that of many Southern white supremacists. People of color sense early on that Melicent is someone to avoid, and the Unitarian only exacerbates ill feelings when she jokingly threatens to sever the braid of the child Mandy. Campbell is perhaps too kind when she ascribes the situation to Melicent’s failure to understand “that her gesture proclaims that the white body may do with the black body whatever it wishes, a colonizing gesture that carries with it a remembered legacy of violence.”⁵² In fact, although Thérèse Lafirme implies that the blacks’ refusal to work for Melicent stems from their own deficiency—they are “averse to working for Northern people whose speech, manners, and attitude towards themselves were unfamiliar”—David’s sister more accurately feels that “some deeper motive underl[ies] [their] systematic reluctance . . . to give their work in exchange for the very good pay which she offer[s]” (CW 753). Certainly, they do not share the crass materialism of Melicent’s *modus operandi*. What they seem to recognize is that Melicent, like William Eliot Greenleaf, would prefer that they were not present and therefore not a

⁵¹ Campbell, “*At Fault: A Reappraisal*,” 28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 39.

force to be dealt with at all. Such is suggested by one of her most glaring transgressions, i.e., her honoring Robert McFarlane, Chopin's recreation of Simon Legree. While Thérèse Lafirme's nephew Grégoire Santien, who hardly exists in harmony with the novel's African Americans, believes McFarlane's ghost must haunt the swamp because of his abuse of slaves, Melicent makes a joke of the idea by dressing herself in black mourning weeds, visiting McFarlane's grave, and laying red roses by the "toppling cross" that marked it. She even goes so far as to sympathize with the "spirit [that] has listened to nothing but abuse of himself there in the other world" (CW 772). In short, she makes a mockery of both the slavery that oppressed blacks and the belief in a supernatural world that helped them survive. When she describes Thérèse as an "angel," "perfect creature," and "queen" because the Creole "giv[es] orders to those darkies" so regally, Melicent abandons any pretense of believing in democracy or racial equality (CW 760). While we might believe that the soul of McFarlane continues to exist in some, however dire, state, through her actions Melicent unwittingly but convincingly demonstrates the absence of any soul in herself.

Were Melicent's brother David to die, one suspects his spirit would be even less likely to walk the earth. Despite his supposed adoption of "Love" as "his god" and Thérèse Lafirme as "Love's prophet," he is an unlikely candidate for such romantic proclivities, for in his two-week courtship and initial marriage to Fanny Larimore, he seems hardly to have been an ardent lover. "Thoroughly the businessman," he describes himself to Thérèse as a victim "inveigled into going on a river excursion" with Fanny. He speculates that he might have capitulated to Fanny's invitation because he "was feeling unwell." He then attributes his marrying someone he considers beneath him

to the fact that he is ““little versed in defining shades of distinction between classes”” (CW 766-67). Thérèse Lafirme responds to David’s speech by chastising him, not for what careful auditors might rightly consider manipulation of her and another woman, but for ““marr[ying] a woman of weak character,”” exacerbating her ““weakness,”” and then abandoning her. Routinely censored by critics for imposing her will on Fanny and David, Thérèse seems even more grossly at fault for ignoring or accepting the tell-tale signs of a duplicitous user. David’s claim to a sort of all-American egalitarianism seems frankly fraudulent. The consummate businessman has not arrived in his position by being unable to distinguish classes and, in fact, his skill in this respect may have made him receptive to Fanny’s advances. Although we know little about Fanny before she marries David, her maiden name, “Larimore,” links her to one of St. Louis’s most prosperous families that from 1850 to 1900 owned a plantation of 2,000 acres.⁵³ By giving a weak, alcoholic character the Larimore name, Chopin might be simply ridiculing the St. Louis family, but the reference makes David Hosmer’s rendering of his burgeoning relationship with Fanny suspect. Other details further qualify his portrayal of himself as a matrimonial “martyr.” Ten years older than Fanny, he operates from a position of power from the outset, a factor that makes one wonder who was responsible for the rushed marriage. If Chopin intends for her readers to associate Fanny with the Larimore family, we might consider the possibility that David recognized a good business merger when he saw one and took full advantage of it. After all, David tells Thérèse that his ““business connections were extending””(CW 767). His remarriage to Fanny does not signify that David has reformed, but rather that he is willing to continue

⁵³ The plantation is now owned by Dena and Allen Bovey, who rent out the property for events. Dena and Allen Bovey, “The Larimore House,” 2010, http://www.larimoreweddings.com/about_larimore.htm.

to use her to achieve his desired ends, a relationship with Thérèse Lafirme, whose own plantation plays a significant role in the Unitarian's commercial plans.⁵⁴

The death of his son best illustrates David Hosmer's capacity for depersonalizing and compartmentalizing people. Although David maintains that "love for the boy was the one feeling . . . [he and Fanny] had in common" (CW 767), this "love" seems as dubious as that he claims to possess for Thérèse Lafirme. While we learn about the child early on—David literally has "pigeon-holed" a photograph of him in his desk—the boy remains anonymous for the duration of the novel. Even in the passage cited above, David refers to his son only as a "baby," "child," and finally "the boy." When David tells Thérèse that the boy is "dead . . . and buried" (CW 747), one senses that for the Unitarian businessman, the child had never really lived.

This detachment from humanity similarly characterizes Hosmer's relations with people of color. Unlike Melicent, he is able to find African Americans to work for him, but he rarely interacts with them in any way other than in the position of boss. Even his seemingly friendly encounters highlight the tensions between the races. Such is the case when, in the scene leading to Fanny's climactic drowning, Minervy's son Major fills in for David and Fanny Hosmer's usual servant, Sampson. With references to "the boy's little black paws" and "the dapper little darkey," the passage is one of the most racially incriminating in the novel and the entire Chopin canon. But the context suggests that the sense of white supremacy embedded in the language may be the protagonist's rather than the author's, for in both cases the phrasing describes Hosmer's actions and follows his

⁵⁴ Among scholars analyzing the novel, Jane Hotchkiss most succinctly attributes the "fault line" to David Hosmer, especially regarding his influence on Fanny's drowning, which to some degree results from "the fundamental dishonesty underlying David and Thérèse's scheme for 'doing what is right.'" Hotchkiss, however, does not explore the full extent and implications of Hosmer's duplicity. See Hotchkiss, "Confusing the Issue: Who's 'At Fault'?" *Louisiana Literature* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 31-43.

condescending teasing of the child. Addressing Major as “Colonel,” Hosmer “receiv[es] the mail from the boy’s little black paws,” gives Major an apple (the biblical fruit of temptation), and “smil[es] quizzingly at the dapper little darkey.” As a replacement for Sampson, Major represents a diminished state for people of color, a fact Major himself highlights when he explains that Sampson could not come because he missed the ferry and ““he know dey warn’t gwine cross dat flat ’gin jis’ fu’ Sampson”” (CW 859). In a novel titled *At Fault*, Hosmer’s claim that Major ““seems to do the right thing”” must not be taken at face value, especially when it suggests, as it does here, that Hosmer considers “the right thing” to consist of knowing one’s place. Sampson, who has enjoyed a certain power by supplying Fanny with alcohol and who ““stay mad”” once he gets angry, obviously has not.

Even more telling are David Hosmer’s interactions with less easily controlled adult African Americans, such as his employee Joçint and Joçint’s father, Morico. With Morico, David’s slight is admittedly minor. Leaving Fanny, who has grown uncomfortable on a horseback ride, with the elderly man until a carriage can be sent for her, David proves himself lacking in cultural sensitivity or, at least, language skills. Like James Kendall Hosmer, David may simply have a strong attachment to the Anglo-Saxon tongue, for although he has lived in Louisiana for some time, he knows little French and must use “pantomimic signs” with Morico (CW 812). With Joçint, David has experienced an even greater failure to communicate. A young man of African and Native American blood, Joçint does not willingly participate in Hosmer’s lumber business and expresses his discontent by causing logs to fall from the wagon he must ride endlessly back and forth. He finally revolts more forcefully by setting fire to the mill, an act cut short when

Grégoire Santien discovers him and kills him. As Campbell demonstrates, this sequence of events marks the novel as a commentary on the distorted labor relations in the nineteenth century, especially among people of color: “The surface humour, which itself rests on racist stereotypes about the work ethic of African Americans, is undercut by the recent history of violence during slavery and Reconstruction. Chopin pointedly evokes this history. . . . The choice of when and how to work, like the activity of unionized strikes that pervades the industrial novel, may be called ingratitude or disloyalty by masters such as John Thornton or David Hosmer, but it is in fact a legitimate expression of resistance to assumptions about the ownership one’s labour.”⁵⁵

But David’s response to Joçint’s early expressions of rebellion seems based on more than an employer’s frustration with a recalcitrant employee. In fact, David reacts with the same level of anger he unleashes at Fanny later in the novel. When he admits to Thérèse that he “[lost] his temper and forg[o]t his dignity,” he omits the fact that he wanted to attack his employee and still “[feels] exhilarated” from his “encounter” with Joçint. The undercurrent of violence Campbell ascribes to people of color does not belong merely to them or rash Southern Catholic Creoles like Grégoire. The most threatening character, Chopin suggests, might be the Northern Unitarian.

Only when Joçint has died and Morico rushes to the fire to pull his son’s body from the flames, does Hosmer seem moved by a person of color, but he remains an observer of the “grandeur and majesty of [a] scene” he cannot ever genuinely enter. As a father who “buried” even the photograph of his dead boy, he bears little resemblance to Morico, who refuses to allow anyone to help him as he drags his own son’s body from the flames. As a result, the old man also dies. After both bodies are removed from the scene, David

⁵⁵ Campbell, “*At Fault: A Reappraisal*,” 38.

recovers what he regards as his “dignity,” but such respectability has no relation to justice.⁵⁶ Despite the position of power he enjoys as a white man, he takes no action against Joçint’s murderer, Grégoire. Instead Hosmer assumes “one of those philosophic stand-points of his friend Homeyer” and considers the murder “one of those interesting problems of a human existence that are ever turning up for man’s contemplation, but hardly for the exercise of man’s individual judgment” (*CW* 824). Rather than take a stand and protest the abuse, David callously watches injustice unfold.

Such detachment might not simply signify the extreme intellectualism of a nineteenth-century Unitarian or social Darwinist. Instead, David Hosmer takes his lead from the biblical King David. With a religious foundation in Scripture, Hosmer would naturally turn to the Old Testament rather than the New, for it is there that God the Father, unmitigated by the Holy Spirit and the Son, most fully reigns. Just as the Unitarians took the thirty-three-year-old Son, descended from the House of David, out of the divine equation, so, too, does David Hosmer emotionally eliminate his three-year-old son from his life, leaving Fanny exactly what Melicent at one point calls her, the “Mater

⁵⁶ Both David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme are strongly attached to the concept of dignity. Struggling to endure his remarriage to Fanny, David contends that suicide would have more “dignity” than does his skewed relationship with his wife. Taken aback by Melicent’s disclosure of David’s marriage and divorce, Thérèse is saved from causing a “disturbance” by “her dignity” and later identifies “the dignity of self-respect” as a means by which one can tolerate “insurmountable obstacles.” See *CW* 757, 817, 763, and 764. In describing her two protagonists in this way, Chopin may once again have borrowed from Unitarianism, especially that of William Ellery Channing who helped establish “dignity” as a buzzword for the religion. In the Baltimore sermon in which he enumerated the key tenets of Unitarianism, Channing lamented that “many have fallen into the error, that there can be no excess in feelings which have God for their object; and, distrusting as coldness that self-possession, without which virtue and devotion lose all their dignity, they have abandoned themselves to extravagances, which have brought contempt on piety.” “Unitarian Christianity” (sermon delivered at the ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks, First Independent Church of Baltimore, May 5, 1819), <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/religion/unitarian.html>. Elsewhere in her fiction, however, Chopin links dignity to Catholicism. See, for instance, Chopin’s most famous indictment of Catholicism, the short story “Lilacs,” in which the Mother Superior’s “dignity would not permit her to so much as step outside the door of her private apartments to welcome this old pupil [Adrienne]. Indeed, she was dignity in person; large, uncompromising, unbending” (*CW* 356). That such decorum often depended on others, like Joçint, being deprived of their right to this noble state apparently escaped the attention of both Chopin’s protagonists and Christianity’s religious leaders.

Dolorosa” (CW 803). In this position, he can then do what King David does best: conquer.

The complexity of the biblical harpist seems to have struck a chord in Kate Chopin similar to that William Faulkner felt when he appropriated elements of the story for *Absalom, Absalom*. Although Chopin might have been influenced by one of the “plethora of David plays” the editors of *The David Myth in Western Literature* describe as being commonplace in the late nineteenth century,⁵⁷ a more probable inspiration was *Far From the Maddening Crowd* (1874), in which Thomas Hardy recalls the Old Testament David/Bathsheba union via his characters Gabriel Oak, a shepherd, and Bathsheba Everdene, the object of Gabriel’s affections. Chopin, who considered *Jude, the Obscure* “detestably bad . . . unpardonably dull . . . and immoral, chiefly because it is not true,”⁵⁸ seems equally dismissive of the British writer’s focus on the pastoral David. As a survivor of the American Civil War and witness to the Jim Crow war on people of color, Chopin would have had a more immediate interest in the less romantic shadow side of the Judeo-Christian icon. Thus, the warrior-king David is the model for David Hosmer.

Prior to the post-Reconstruction world of *At Fault*, the most widely known event in the Old Testament story—David’s killing Goliath with a slingshot—served as a ready metaphor for the conflict between the North and the South; the defeat of the “Confederate Goliath,” Fort Fisher in North Carolina, contributed significantly to the Union triumph in the war.⁵⁹ Hardly a boy with a slingshot, David Hosmer, representing a St. Louis company in Louisiana, uses a much more sophisticated tool—a lumber mill—when he

⁵⁷ Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik, introduction to *The David Myth in Western Literature*, eds. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1980), 2.

⁵⁸ Chopin, “As You Like It,” CW, 714.

⁵⁹ Rod Gragg has chronicled the campaign in *Confederate Goliath: The Battle of Fort Fisher* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).

extends the Northern campaign into the Philistine Cane River region. Just as the biblical David went on raids in the name of Yahweh, so, too, does Hosmer's mission for American capitalism take on the nuances of religion: "Industry . . . ha[s] come to fire the souls of indolent fathers with a greedy ambition" (CW 747). America's God must approve, for Hosmer initially succeeds with a finesse and speed (one year/one chapter) to rival that of Yahweh's warrior anywhere in the books of Kings.

But David must have his Bathsheba, and Hosmer finds his in Thérèse Lafirme. Although not an exact replica of the Old Testament woman (one wishes the Creole had some of Bathsheba's earthiness), Thérèse shares some of the biblical character's attributes, chief of which might be the warrior role of her husband: like Bathsheba's Uriah, the Confederate Jerome Lafirme died in battle. While David Hosmer does not literally orchestrate Jerome's demise as King David does Uriah's, as a representative of the North, against which Lafirme had fought, David might be regarded as his murderer. Even more incriminating is his appropriation of the timber on Plade-du-Bois. One wonders if Jerome would have given it up to David as readily as Thérèse does.

Through Thérèse Lafirme, David also inherits the two men—Grégoire and Joçint—who form the racial crucible of Chopin's novel just as Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon do in Faulkner's. As we saw earlier, David's antagonism for Joçint seems rooted in something more than annoyance at a worker's resistance. The product of two races, the young man represents miscegenation, something Chopin undoubtedly knew was a fear of Northern as well as Southern whites. To David, who has been the father figure in Melicent's life since she was ten, the rebellious Joçint could have represented a threat to more than the lumber mill. Grégoire, who loves Melicent but is totally within her control,

might also worry about Joçint's presence on the plantation. In fact, the circumstances surrounding the Creole's discovering Joçint at the mill on "Tous-saint eve" are mysterious. As David's overseer, Grégoire ignores Joçint's reputation for mischief and asks the rebel to engage another worker to watch over the mill. Since the message is either never conveyed or negatively received, the mill should be an easy target for Joçint's arson. Instead, Grégoire discovers and murders Joçint, perhaps because the former planned Joçint's death much as Absalom does that of his half-brother Amnon. Like Absalom, too, Grégoire is killed, albeit by a Texan with whom the Creole fought for calling him "Frenchy." Although another Texan who delivers the news to Thérèse "clearly [has] the sense of human equality native to him," the "colonel" who took Grégoire's life apparently did not.

After the deaths of the two men, the novel moves quickly backwards in biblical time to the flood, which claims Fanny's life. David, however, is not Noah; instead, he remains the king who imagines he might control human and natural forces as he does his lumber mill. Following the chilling argument with Fanny in which he threatens to kill her, David attempts to absolve himself by following her to the cabin of Marie Louise, Thérèse's former nurse whose abode has always been in danger of being washed away. With "substantial inducements" David convinces the black ferryman Nathan to take him across the river. Unlike the biblical prophet who informs David of God's displeasure and predicts the death of the king's first son with Bathsheba, Chopin's Nathan is hardly noble. Putting money before community, he plays the toady to David but betrays people of his own race. At least according to Aunt Agnes, an elderly black woman who also

boards the boat, Nathan ““done cheat Mose out o’ de job”” (CW 866).⁶⁰ After David arrives at Marie Louise’s cabin, he becomes as enraged at Fanny as he was earlier and leaves without her. When the cabin inevitably slides into the river, David forces Nathan to steer the boat towards Fanny and dives in after her. But Aunt Agnes was right: they really needed someone at the helm who could part the Red Sea. By the end of the chapter, David is unconscious and Fanny is dead.

On one level, Fanny’s death is merely the *deus ex machina* that enables David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme to complete the reunion process and restore an Edenic harmony to the land, as is suggested by language reminiscent of that in the Song of Solomon: “Through love they had sought each other, and now the fulfillment of that love had brought more than tenfold its promise to both. It was a royal love; a generous love and a rich one in its revelation.”⁶¹ As Thérèse waits for her new husband to return from the lumber mill, she is filled with rapture and “clasp[s] [her hands] as in prayer” (CW 873). And there’s the rub. The Unitarian David has effaced not merely his former wife from the novel, but God as well. At least in Thérèse’s eyes, he has attained

⁶⁰ This is not the first time Nathan demonstrates accommodationist tendencies. Although she errs in citing his attitudes as proof that Chopin supported New South values, Gunning rightly criticizes the ferryman for his earlier willingness to excuse the dominance of another white man, Grégoire, when, following Grégoire’s death, Nathan determines that the Creole’s violence was “not altogether blamable in light of the provocation that had called it forth” (CW 853). See Gunning, “Rethinking White Female Silences,” 124.

⁶¹ Janet Beer has shown that Chopin similarly incorporates imagery from the Song of Solomon in “The Storm” to portray a blending of “spirituality and sexuality.” Beer, “Sexuality, Spirituality and Ecstatic Communion in the Short Fiction of Kate Chopin,” in *Religion and Sexuality*, eds. Michael A. Hayes, Wendy Porter and David Tombs (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 148. But in *At Fault*, Chopin’s biblical intimations are complicated by the poem’s link to King David, whose son Solomon may have written it. Beer also ignores the racial element in the Song of Solomon, which Toni Morrison capitalizes on in her novel of the same name. Read literally, the verse “I am black but beautiful, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Cedar, as the curtains of Solomon” (Song of Sol. 4) challenges racist notions of white superiority and endorses miscegenation. The editors of the Catholic Douay-Rheims version, the Bible Chopin most likely read, explicate the passage in terms that only highlight the hypocrisy of the Church’s capitulation to Jim Crow demands and sentiments: “The church of Christ founded in humility appear[s] outwardly afflicted, and as it were black and contemptible; but inwardly, that is, in its doctrine and morality, fair and beautiful.” Douay-Rheims Version, 691n.

the perfection of the Redeemer. By assuming such godlike status, he has in effect fulfilled the expectation that Christ would descend from the House of David. To be sure, he has simplified the equation into an efficient tenet the worshipers of gold could appreciate in the Gilded Age: rather than establish a line leading to Jesus, King David has *become* Christ. But the “thralldom” over which David Hosmer and Thérèse preside is one for which the white folk have sold their souls. Thus, when David does return from the mill, the writing clunks its way out of the Song of Solomon and into a ledger book. With Thérèse he discusses a “division of labor” that will occur as other investors take on some of the business—and that implies the couple’s Paradise is more hollow than hallowed. Labor, we have seen, is the stuff of the people of color at Place-du-Bois, not its rulers.

Redemption

For Kate Chopin, the counterpart to the increasingly secularized focus of American Protestantism was the supernatural, redemptive core of Catholicism.⁶² As the wife of a member of the White League, Chopin had first-hand knowledge of the political “redemption” underway in the South—i.e., the efforts of conservative Southern Democrats to regain power.⁶³ But they were not the only group to imagine themselves in Christ-like terms. According to Blight, Yankee veterans regarded themselves as the country’s “saviors” while a group as lacking in redeeming social value as the Ku Klux

⁶² The Protestantism/reunion and Catholicism/redemption designations are admittedly reductive. As we have seen, redemption as reform was a central concern of nineteenth-century American Protestants, and reunion in its most expansive sense became the focus of at least one American Catholic religious order, the Paulists.

⁶³ That the Southern Democrats regarded themselves as “Redeemers” has been well established. See, for instance, Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8-9.

Klan also claimed the title.⁶⁴ Such self-aggrandizing may have contributed to Chopin's aversion to reforms, articulated most directly in a May 28, 1894, diary entry about a "Mrs. Stone": "The spirit of the reformer burns within her, and gives to her eyes the smouldering, steady glow of a Savonarola. The condition of the working classes pierces her soul; the condition of women wrings her heart. 'Work' is her watch word. . . . Intentions pile up before her like a mountain, and the sum of her energies is Zero!"⁶⁵

Beneath what seems a *laissez faire* sensibility lurks a legitimate complaint that the work of the Mrs. Stones of America achieved little. Such individuals with their unfulfilled intentions, Chopin implies, were on the proverbial path to hell. Even more damning was the inferno these redeemers helped to create. As segregation and lynchings spread throughout the states in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the redeemers' efforts may have seemed to work in tandem with the crucifixion of people ostensibly targeted for salvation. As we will see, at least one prominent woman's reform group and its leader contributed to the continued oppression of African Americans. What Emily Toth sums up as gender-based—Chopin gravitated towards men and therefore "was critical of women reformers and women of society pretensions"⁶⁶—may actually have been race-based.

In *At Fault*, redemption assumes a specifically Roman Catholic slant via Chopin's reference to the St. Louis Redemptorists' Rock Church, which Belle Worthington, occasionally accompanied by Fanny Hosmer, attends as a way of "keeping on the safe side" (CW 784). This insurance, Chopin suggests, does little to enhance the lives of

⁶⁴ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 130, 189, and 111.

⁶⁵ Chopin, *Private Papers*, 185-6.

⁶⁶ Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 270.

people in *this* world. Nor is this the Redemptorists' primary concern, for, as a "missionary society," they have as their major objective "the preaching of the word of God"; the St. Louis church evolved out of a series of successful missions to the city.⁶⁷ Fanny Hosmer's visits to the St. Louis church do not seem to have helped her much, unless we imagine she has accumulated indulgences guaranteeing her a less tortured existence in the afterlife. (This is not likely, since nothing in the text indicates Fanny converted to Catholicism.) Even more problematic for Chopin seem the unrealistic expectations the Catholic Church had of its members. While Unitarianism posited a human Jesus as a model for living in the temporal world, Catholicism looked to the divine Christ to lead its members into heaven. Such a paradigm glorifies earthly suffering, which gives believers an opportunity to imitate the crucified Messiah, transcend the flesh, and merge with the Godhead. Such was the vision of the mystic Savonarola. What Chopin may have realized is that people of color in the United States had suffered enough and that the Church's demands could only magnify their alleged inferiority. In an ironic inversion of the dynamics of slavery, the supposed fallen state of people of color served to make them a much desired religious commodity, for in the years immediately following Reconstruction some Roman Catholic leaders considered African Americans a black market with souls in desperate need of spiritual uplift that only the Mother Church could provide.

In the vanguard of this Catholic mission was Isaac Hecker, who was born to German immigrants in 1819 and died in 1888, just one year after the Unitarian William Greenleaf Eliot. Although Hecker's mother was a Methodist, the man who would eventually found

⁶⁷ Joseph Wuest, "Redemptorists," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12683a.htm>.

the Paulist religious order in America had no formal introduction to any religion. Instead, his own inner yearnings propelled him on a spiritual quest that, through the better known convert Orestes Brownson, initially consisted of an immersion in Transcendentalism at Brook Farm. Again following Brownson's lead, Hecker became a Roman Catholic in 1844 but would go one step beyond Brownson to become a priest—indeed, a Redemptorist—in 1849 and then in 1858, under the direction of Pope Pius IX, founder of the "The Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle in the State of New York." As its name suggests, the Paulists' *raison d'être* was and continues to be spreading the Roman Catholic word to others. But just as division distinguished the Unitarians, so, too, did dissent characterize the nascent Paulist order, which came into being due to its members' opposition to the organization and focus of the Redemptorists. Unlike the priests born in Germany with whom they worked, the American clergy believed that their purpose in the states was not simply to ensure Catholic immigrants remained true to their faith but also to proselytize to non-Catholics. To fulfill its commitment to evangelicalism, the Paulists have become a leading producer of various media, chief of which may be the still extant *Catholic World*, which made its debut in 1865.⁶⁸ Hecker's vision was hardly narrow: ultimately he imagined not merely America but also the entire world united in Catholicism.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Boniface Hanley, O.F.M., *The Story of Isaac Hecker: A Missionary to North America* (Missionary Society of St. Paul, 2010), <http://www.paulist.org/hecker/biography.php>.

⁶⁹ David J. O'Brien, *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992). O'Brien sums up Hecker's mission well: "He was deeply convinced that the church was not intended to be a minority but to embrace all men and women. Someday, in the providence of God, America really should and would become Catholic and, after America, the world. This expectation of the future triumph of the church was the deepest conviction of Hecker's public career," 289. The seeming egalitarianism of Hecker's ambition does not reflect an appreciation of human differences. In fact, the infidels Hecker hoped to save first were the "class of minds who by nature are inclined to asceticism and mystical life"—i.e., people like himself, such as his friend Henry David Thoreau and other Transcendentalists. Cited in O'Brien, 104.

The role African Americans would play in Hecker's and the Paulists' mission is evident in the nineteenth-century *Catholic World*. Among the issues addressed repeatedly in the magazine was the "Negro Problem"; between 1883 and 1890, no fewer than sixteen articles appeared on the subject. While the tenor of the essays varies (one piece offers a surprisingly positive assessment of the African American, Protestant poet Phillis Wheatley), the problem is not that imagined by William Greenleaf Eliot—how to contain, if not relocate, blacks—but how to bring the black masses into the Catholic fold and rescue them from the Protestant clutches. As the numbers clearly showed, the Catholic Church in America lagged far behind the Protestants in saving the souls of black folk, who largely congregated in the Protestant South. With the end of slavery and, perhaps even more important, Reconstruction, the Church could tap into what had been a large, neglected market. Within its own ideological construct, its motives were noble. For instance, most African American children were receiving no education, at least according to the Paulists' ledger. With support from the Catholic congregations throughout the country, the Church could ameliorate the situation and at the same time bring the children to the spiritual truth only Catholicism could give them. Without the two—education and Catholic Christianity—the children were doomed.⁷⁰

Despite her break with the Church, Kate Chopin obviously continued to read its literature, for in 1895 she published "A Dresden Lady in Dixie" in the *Catholic Home*

⁷⁰ Rev. J. R. Slattery, the lead writer of *The Catholic World*'s articles on the "Negro Problem," explains, "We have joined education and religion in our view of the negro problem, because one without the other can hardly flourish nowadays. Education which leaves eternity out of account is but a poor boon to beings destined to live forever; and religion in the nineteenth century without the rudiments of secular instruction is apt to be poorly equipped with the necessary means of self-preservation." Rev. J. R. Slattery, "Facts and Suggestions About the Colored People," *Catholic World* 41, no. 241 (April 1885): 40, at Making of America Journal Articles <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=moajrnl;cc=moajrnl;rgn=full%20text;idno=bac8387.0041.241;didno=bac8387.0041.241;view=image;seq=0036;node=bac8387.0041.241%3A6>.

Journal. Father Hecker's magazine, which had an 1869 circulation of ten thousand copies each month, could also have crossed her path.⁷¹ In fact, the "fault" of which Thérèse Lafirme is guilty is nothing less than the missionary zeal embraced by Hecker and his order. Only the directions have changed: select priests go south to convert the African Americans while Thérèse Lafirme sends her embassy David Hosmer north to St. Louis to save his ex-wife. That the blacks and Fanny Hosmer might not want or need the evangelists' particular form of salvation is of little consequence.

In fashioning Thérèse into a missionary, Chopin might also have drawn on Hecker's *Questions of the Soul* (1855), in which the priest identifies ascetics as the best "apostles of nations." A mystic currently recommended for canonization himself, Hecker looked on nineteenth-century America as fertile ground for the growing of souls eager to detach from the flesh—and Protestantism. According to David J. O'Brien, the book that "established [the priest] as a national figure in and out of the church" was written "to demonstrate that asceticism was 'an essential feature of the Gospel,' [and] that 'voluntary poverty, obedience, chastity and mortification' were taught in the church by word and example."⁷² In *Questions of the Soul*, Hecker takes on the issue by first attacking the earthly focus of Unitarianism's William Ellery Channing and then defending Catholic

⁷¹ James A. Rooney, LL.D, "Reminiscences of Early Days," *The Catholic World* 101, no. 601 (April 1915): 98, http://books.google.com/books?id=jXMQAAAAYAAJ&pg=PR2&lpg=PR2&dq=%22reminiscences+of+early+days%22+%22catholic+world%22&source=bl&ots=BljUKjc9yx&sig=2Zr0kU3orU7rtzVihZdXZ3J13b0&hl=en&ei=uHzNTMWIG4T6swPL3IHnDg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22reminiscences%20of%20early%20days%22%20%22catholic%20world%22&f=false. Chopin could also have become acquainted with Hecker through her association with the Archbishop of St. Louis, Peter Richard Kenrick, who in 1855 delivered the eulogy at the funeral of his close friend Thomas O'Flaherty, Chopin's father. Hecker had likewise forged a connection to Kenrick, whom the Paulist accompanied to Rome in 1869 for the first Vatican council. The council was especially controversial in the United States because it ushered in the doctrine of the pope's infallibility and increased Roman authority over the Church, which many American clerics, including Kenrick, opposed. See O'Brien, *Isaac Hecker*, Chapter 13, "Vatican I," 225-41.

⁷² O'Brien, *Isaac Hecker*, 104.

practices that distance humanity from the things of the world. In this way, Catholics move closer to achieving what Hecker argues should be the primary aim of Christians, “union with God” rather than with mere human beings. The model for this “purification” process is Christ. Although Hecker enumerates the elementary ways ordinary Catholics take towards achieving this heavenly goal, such as fasting during Lent, the title of his chapter “Mortification” cues us to the fact that he placed a high value on the more extreme forms of asceticism practiced by the saints and certain religious orders. The products of such austere monasteries and convents, he contends, have earthly importance, for “out of these schools of Christian virtue” come “the apostles of nations, the regenerators of society, and the heroes and martyrs of faith and love.”⁷³

Kate Chopin had little tolerance for the ways of desert fathers and mothers and through *At Fault*'s Thérèse Lafirme offers her first extended portrayal of how blind and destructive the ascetic can be in his or her quest to lead others to spiritual salvation.⁷⁴ Generally cast in the mold advocated by Hecker, Thérèse Lafirme seems even more

⁷³ Isaac Thomas Hecker, *Questions of the Soul* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1855), http://books.google.com/books?id=weqRCpAHslQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=%22questions+of+the+soul%22+hecker&source=bl&ots=Pho9-cUUB-&sig=0DXKnjGBTCHi220TyUwDZL7bEo&hl=en&ei=IMDOTNGSAYfGsAODi9mUDg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false.

⁷⁴ Barbara Ewell argues that “Chopin’s skepticism about the dogmas and rituals of Catholicism and her eventual rejection of its practice did not, however, include its spiritual vision: the paradoxical affirmation of the value of matter, of nature, of the human body itself. Contrasting sharply with Protestant Christianity, Catholicism retains a distinctive appreciation for the material world, relying unabashedly on the sensuality of candles, incense, flowers, elaborate vestments, music and ritual to awaken the spirit to the divine.” Ewell, “Regions of the Spirit: Nature vs. Dogma in Chopin’s Religious Vision,” 103. The Catholic Church, however, has historically proven itself to be conflicted about the material world. While Ewell quite accurately notes the sensuous dimension of the Church’s rituals, she ignores its simultaneous encouragement of asceticism, which David Wehner bases in the teachings of St. Augustine. Although Wehner errs in assuming that Chopin advocates the complete antithesis of asceticism, the purely “sensuous, epicurean indulgence” as practiced by Edna Pontellier, his point regarding religious austerity is well taken. As we can see in her 1894 reference to “Savanarola,” Chopin was clearly critical of the church’s rejection of the physical world. See Wehner, “Mapping the Modern Pastoral: The Idiosyncratic, Syncretic Religious Temperament of Kate Chopin,” in “A Lot Up for Grabs”: The Conversion Narrative in Modernity in Kate Chopin, Flannery O’Connor, and Toni Morrison” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2005), ProQuest (AAT 3192051), 41-42. What neither Ewell nor Wehner considers is the implication the Catholic Church’s position regarding the body had for people of color in nineteenth-century America.

specifically created in the image of St. Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century Spanish nun and mystic. Chopin alerts us to this possible influence in the scene in which Lorenzo Worthington browses through Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. Although he is engrossed in the story of St. Monica, canonized for achieving the conversion of her son, St. Augustine, St. Teresa is no less a presence in *Lives*.⁷⁵ Butler's lengthy entry consists primarily of a summary of the saint's autobiography *The Book of Her Life* and his own editorial gloss on the merit of her points. Chopin must have looked on the reverend's commentary with some degree of chagrin, since the priest's reflections perpetuate male control of the female saint, whose autobiography was written at the request of and reviewed by her male confessors. Having borne six children, Chopin might also have flinched at the entry's title—"St. Teresa, Virgin"—that emphasizes a state commonly glorified by the Catholic patriarchy. Even more disturbing might have been the following assessment: "The humble relation which St. Teresa has left us of her own life, in obedience to her confessors, is the delight of devout persons . . . because in it are laid down the most perfect maxims by which a soul is conducted in the paths of obedience, humility, and self-denial, and especially of prayer and an interior life."⁷⁶ Within a nineteenth-century American context, the "obedience, humility, and self-denial" Butler values so highly in Teresa and women in general correspond to qualities many whites expected and even demanded in people of color.

⁷⁵ Rev. Alban Butler, "St. Teresa, Virgin," in *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints*, Vol. 10 (Dublin: James Duffy, 1866; Bartleby.com, 2010), www.bartleby.com/210/. Nancy Walker rather prosaically explains Chopin's reference to St. Monica, who had a fondness for wine prior to her reformation, as intended to "underscore the fact that women are not above the lure of strong drink." Walker, *Kate Chopin*, 69. Barbara Ewell moves closer to the point when she explains that St. Monica's ultimate rejection of alcohol constituted an important step in her "then [becoming] an extraordinary ascetic, doing penance for someone else's benefit." Ewell, "Regions of the Spirit," 105.

⁷⁶ Butler, *Lives*, "St. Teresa, Virgin."

To appreciate fully the influence of the saint on Chopin's novel, we must look at *The Book of Her Life*. In a work built on a sense of sinfulness that even Butler recognizes as "exaggerated," Chopin seems to have found the key phrase around which she could structure her first novel: "at fault." Early in the autobiography, when St. Teresa describes her youthful intention to die for God, she reflects on how she "lost [such devotion] through [her] own fault." Her later succumbing to the temptations of a female relative is Teresa's "fault," not the relative's. For the purposes of this study, the most telling reference does not concern Teresa's spiritual state but that of Pedro Hernández, her confessor when she was seventeen. Impressed by Teresa's holiness, the priest switches roles with the saint and reveals to her that he has fallen under the spell of a "woman who had put some charms in a little copper idol she asked him to wear around his neck out of love for her." Teresa undoes the charm's *mojo* when she takes the amulet from the priest and throws it in the river. The moral of the story is not "that the poor man was . . . so much at fault" but that "men [should] be on their guard with women who desire to carry on in this way."⁷⁷ This last transgression points to Fanny Hosmer, whom, we recall, David claims "inveigled" him into accompanying her on "river excursion." In reality Fanny, who lacks the powers of Pedro Hernández's consort, is the idol itself and, like it, sinks into a river. If anyone has practiced black magic, it may be Chopin's recreations of St. Teresa and her confessor, Thérèse Lafirme and David Hosmer.

But St. Teresa's discussion of the charm also conjures up the image of women of color in Chopin's day who served pagan gods: the mambos of Voodoo. While Voodoo was not a force to be reckoned with in sixteenth-century Spain, the fear of witchcraft and

⁷⁷ Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, trans. with notes by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 3, 7, 19-20.

the devil pervaded the culture of her time. Teresa carefully amends her description of Pedro Hernández's situation with the following caveat: "I do not believe with certainty that it is true that charms have this power." Omitting this simple statement could have increased the pressure the saint already felt from the inquisitors, who speculated that devils rather than God inspired the visions that established the saint's reputation as a mystic. Unlike heretics in sixteenth-century Spain, Voodooists were not likely to be burned at the stake in post-Reconstruction America, but incarceration was possible. Teresa's family history further anticipates the ways people of color in nineteenth-century America were forced to take up the so-called truths of Christianity and abandon African beliefs. Although the saint and her father genuinely believed in the teachings of the Catholic Church, her paternal grandfather did not. One of Spain's many *conversos*, Jews forced to convert to Catholicism, he was punished for continuing to practice Judaism.⁷⁸ Other details of Teresa's story further resonate with the "Negro Problem" that commanded the attention of Hecker and his priests. The martyrdom the young Teresa had hoped for was to be obtained at the hands of the Moors, whom she and her brother intended to "beg . . . to cut off [their] heads." (A rational uncle found the children and returned them to their home before decapitation could occur.) Teresa touches on the issue of slavery itself when she describes her father as refusing to own slaves, although his brother did. We should not be surprised when Teresa later describes a devil who appears beside her as "a *black* very abominable little creature, snarling like one in despair that where he had tried to gain he had lost."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ "Teresa of Avila" in *Carmelitana Collection: A Specialized Library in Carmelite Studies* (2008), <http://www.carmelitanacollection.com/avila.php>.

⁷⁹ Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, 20, 3, 2, 212-3 (emphasis added).

Like the sixteenth-century saint, Chopin's Thérèse Lafirme struggles to keep whatever she imagines as "black devils" in check lest they undermine the perfection she, no less than Teresa of Avila, covets.⁸⁰ *At Fault* opens with the Creole roused from inertia by Uncle Hiram's announcement that other blacks have been stealing cottonseed. For Thérèse, this common and quite worldly incident assumes spiritual significance, perhaps encouraged in part by Hiram's "tender of sympathy, offered in the guise of a reckless misquoting of Scripture." What most offends the plantation's mistress is the "defiance of authority" the theft represents. This awakens the reformer spirit in her, for "she felt at once the weight and sacredness of a trust" (CW 741). In such a role, she shares David Hosmer's antipathy towards workers like the biracial worker Joçint, "inclined to surreptitious defiance of authority"; she "would have long since removed him had it not been for his old father Morico, whose long life spent on the place had established a claim upon her tolerance" (CW 754). To her credit, Thérèse exhibits a greater propensity for mercy than did her patron saint, who showed little consideration for the long-time residents of Iberia, the Moors (from which the name "Morico" is derived⁸¹). Still, we should not be overly moved by the Creole's sensitivity, for it depends upon the elderly man's subservience. Like the pope himself, Thérèse demands that her underlings respect her power and, as scholars like Russell contend, consequently perpetuates the slaveholders' mentality. What the critics overlook is the Catholic influence on such attitudes. As O'Brien notes, the Church "had never condemned slavery." In the North,

⁸⁰ As the title of her treatise *The Way of Perfection* indicates, St. Teresa, despite her meager assessment of herself, imagined people could and should aim for perfection. Her desire to show others the way to a union with the Lord motivated her to write. We are abject sinners, she informs us, but with God's intervention, we can ascend spiritually.

⁸¹ For the translation of "Morico," see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy 1718-1820* Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/index.html>.

priests like Isaac Hecker and his fellow Paulists simply “ignored” the institution that divided the very nation. In the South, some clerics higher up in the Vatican’s chain of command proved to be even more dubious shepherds for their flocks, at least concerning the rights of people of color.

At post-Reconstruction Place-du-Bois, the ever-present threat of rebellion symbolized by Joçint’s attempt to burn the mill indicates that neither Thérèse nor the Church she represents has full control over America’s people of color. Thus, Thérèse focuses her reform on a white woman, David Hosmer’s alcoholic wife Fanny, who proves a more defenseless mark than the blacks in the novel. Fanny’s struggle with demon rum specifically links her and her Creole savior to one of the most famous reform organizations in the United States, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) through which white Christian women gained significant power in the nineteenth century. More commonly considered a Protestant development, the WCTU movement did not escape the attention of American Catholics.⁸² Again, the Paulists took up the cause, producing several articles on temperance for *The Catholic World*. In 1890, for example, Rev. Walter Elliott lamented that “the Catholic Church in America is grievously injured by drunkenness.”⁸³ Father Elliott’s willingness to air the Church’s dirty laundry betrays a less than altruistic facet to the Paulist’s concern. While he might care about the well

⁸² In discussing *The Awakening*’s Edna Pontellier, Garnet Ayers Batinovich overstates the Catholic detachment from mainstream reform movements and the positive achievements of Protestant reformers: “In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Protestant women in America had formed numerous organizations to advance causes such as missionary work in foreign countries, movements to ban alcohol, and campaigns for women’s suffrage. The women had learned organizational skills through their church work, and they were the force behind the women’s movement; Catholic women, on the other hand, stuck to their traditional values and took no part in the movement.” Batinovich’s claim that Edna, due to her Protestant roots, is a “natural rebel” may be equally misguided. Batinovich, “Storming the Cathedral: The Antireligious Subtext in Kate Chopin’s Works,” 84.

⁸³ Rev. Walter Elliott, “The Church and Temperance,” *Catholic World* 51, no. 306 (September 1890): 816, at Making of America Journal Articles <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=moajrnl;cc=moajrnl;rgn=full%20text;idno=bac8387.0051.306;didno=bac8387.0051.306;node=bac8387.0051.306%3A14;view=image;seq=0819>.

being of sots in the Church's congregations, his real issue is the damage drunk Catholics do to the Church's reputation. As the Church struggled to become a significant presence in a predominantly Protestant country, it could ill afford to be tied to what Protestants regarded as the representative Catholic: a rowdy and intoxicated immigrant, whose presence in the states was perhaps only slightly less problematic than that of people of color.

Chopin could not have ignored—or approved of—the missionary zeal evident in the WCTU's widely publicized assaults on saloons and might well have frowned upon Father Elliott's capitulation to Protestant American pressure and values. Still extant, the WCTU initiated its movement with an 1873 "crusade" in New York; by the time Chopin published her first novel, the organization had become a leading force for prohibition and women's rights. Historian Edward J. Blum explains that by 1879 the organization had adopted an increasingly grandiose spiritual mission for itself and the country, to the point that the WCTU president "Frances Willard and other northern WCTU leaders viewed their organization as a new and holy army in a war for human liberation."⁸⁴ Thérèse Lafirme's debt to Willard is suggested by the Creole's response to Fanny's problem. Although the Catholic Creole primarily rejects David Hosmer's advances because he is divorced, Fanny's "weak character" and substance abuse give Thérèse Lafirme the ammunition she needs to live up to the "firmness" implied by her name. As David tells Thérèse his story about the breakup of his marriage, her very posture resembles that of one of Willard's crusaders: she sits "rigid at times, listening to Hosmer often with closed eyes." So abhorrent is Fanny's alcoholism that Thérèse cannot call it what it is but describes it in a word oddly reminiscent of the attire worn by nuns: "habit"

⁸⁴ Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*, 179-81.

(CW 768). Noticeable, too, is that Thérèse holds David largely responsible for Fanny's affliction. In this respect, she echoes the position of Willard, who seemed to consider male alcoholics, "habitual drunkards," a worse lot than "inebriate women." When David later reunites with Fanny and brings her to Louisiana, Place-du-Bois becomes a type of the new "homes for enebriate women" created during the 1880s and 1890s over which Willard's fictional counterpart presides.⁸⁵

Inherent in the Creole's crusade for temperance is irony and hypocrisy; like the nineteenth-century Paulists, perhaps, Thérèse Lafirme has strayed too far into Protestant territory. The complete abstinence demanded by the most virulent WCTU members is impossible for a Church whose primary ritual, the mass, requires the consecration and consumption of wine. This, however, was not the main reason the WCTU, especially under Willard's direction, often failed to welcome Papists into its midst. Picking up the banner of "nativism," key members in the organization denounced both Catholics and immigrants. For example, in Boston, where many Irish Catholics settled, the WCTU reportedly bemoaned "the inroads the Romanists are making in our ranks."⁸⁶ By compelling David to remarry Fanny and bring her to Louisiana, Thérèse reverses the WCTU dynamics but maintains the same sense of superiority demonstrated by Willard. Now the Protestant from the North is the outsider doomed to fall. By directing events so Fanny is isolated from her friends, coaxed into a loveless marriage, and exposed to her husband's obvious affection for another woman, Thérèse guarantees Fanny's relapse.

⁸⁵ Sarah W. Tracy, *Alcoholism in America: From Reconstruction to Prohibition* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 81.

⁸⁶ Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*, 199; Kenneth D. Rose, *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), 27

But Fanny may be Chopin's surrogate for a people more blatantly abused by American reformers, especially Frances Willard and the WCTU: people of color. A key point of contention for the WCTU was its racially segregated chapters, a travesty that prompted some prominent African Americans, such as Frederick Douglass, to urge the organization to take up the cause of "racial justice." Even more damning was Willard's perpetuating the white supremacist myth that the rape of white women by black men—"the devourers of women and children"—precipitated the rash of lynchings occurring throughout the South. No less a luminary than Ida B. Wells, leader of the anti-lynching movement, took WCTU president Frances Willard to task for this. Although Willard would later indict white men as well for endangering women, she still failed to understand a key issue for Wells, that "interracial sexuality was not necessarily immoral or the result of drunkenness; it was a choice made between whites and blacks that could be grounded in genuine love and affection."⁸⁷ Like white Americans at large, Frances Willard and the WCTU feared the boogiemans of miscegenation.

Through Thérèse Lafirme's nemesis, Joçint, Chopin embeds the specter of both lynching and miscegenation in *At Fault*. No amount of reform can change the biracial composition of Joçint's body that attests to a mingling of races, albeit black and Native American, originating in mutual desire. And lest white America attempt to ignore or rationalize away the concurrent reality of lynchings, Joçint reminds Chopin's readers of its presence in the South when he hangs his own yellow dog from a tree. As we will see,

⁸⁷ Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*, 202-6. While Sandra Gunning similarly cites Frances Willard's poor record regarding race, she overlooks Thérèse Lafirme's unflattering resemblance to the president of the WCTU. Had she considered Chopin's protagonist in this light, Gunning may have been less inclined to equate Chopin with Frances Willard and to indict the writer for "challeng[ing] the politics of white supremacy only enough to liberate her white heroines, while embracing at the same time its structuring of race relations to consolidate Thérèse's power." Gunning, "Rethinking White Female Silences," 109, 122, 124.

Joçint has a legitimate reason to eliminate the animal, but the image refutes the notion that black men's inability to control their lust prompted the lynchings. The dog has not maliciously betrayed its owner; if anything, it has been too loyal. So, too, Chopin suggests, have people of color.

Unfortunately, redeemers, despite their avowed commitment to the truth, often have a limited capacity to see such realities. As she castigates David Hosmer for his neglect of Fanny, Thérèse Lafirme accuses him of suffering from a "blindness" that has led him into being an "egotist" and a "coward" (*CW* 768,769). Were Thérèse to take the mote from her own eye, she might realize the epithets apply equally well to herself. Fanny Hosmer is not too far from the mark when she describes the Creole as "a woman passing herself off for a saint" (*CW* 860). Where Fanny errs is in assuming that the saints are any wiser than Thérèse Lafirme, for in identifying Thérèse as the individual at fault in her novel, Chopin takes issue with St. Teresa and the Church's very notion of sainthood. The sins Thérèse Lafirme cites as Hosmer's are merely the shadow side of the humility and courage St. Teresa advocated and supposedly practiced. Perhaps the pursuit of perfection is not holy, but egotistical; perhaps detachment from the world is not courageous, but cowardly.

One of St. Teresa's crowning achievements—the reform of the Carmelites that included creating a more cloistered environment in which the nuns could devote themselves to God and thereby move closer to perfection—epitomizes what Chopin abhorred in the religious life. Describing a visit to her friend, a nun named Liza, Chopin emphasizes one sign of the convent's inhabitants' detachment from reality: they stay "young and fresh in heart and in visage" (*PP* 22). The body of St. Teresa, like that of

several other saints, has purportedly defied the natural process to the point of not even decomposing after death; by such miracles, saints are made.⁸⁸ Rather than yearn for access to the Catholic fountain of youth, Chopin regarded this arrested physical development as a perversion symbolic of spiritual stagnation. Moreover, in the Church's convents and glorification of "uncorrupted" flesh, she found not perfection but a ready metaphor for the Jim Crow landscape emerging in nineteenth-century America.

If St. Peter is the rock upon which Christ built his Church, St. Teresa of Avila/Thérèse Lafirme is the cornerstone upon which Chopin erected her ongoing argument against the religious life and the elitism and disconnection from reality it encourages. "Lilacs," Chopin's most direct challenge to the Church and convent life, is set in France and therefore might seem peripheral to a discussion of race in America. But the social layers the story addresses—convent nuns, privileged socialites, and workers—correspond to the American divisions Chopin returns to repeatedly in her fiction. Typically discussed as representative of the conflict between the spirit and the flesh, the community and the individual, "Lilacs" actually shows the supposed opposing forces represented by Sacred Heart nuns and an actress, Adrienne Farival, as converging in their antipathy towards both laborers and the aged.⁸⁹ In her journal, Chopin makes clear that as early as 1870 her sympathies were with the common people, to whose "thrift and intelligence . . . France owes her greatness" (*PP* 118). Neither the nuns nor Adrienne have evolved to this level of understanding. When Adrienne, who annually visits the

⁸⁸ Butler, *Lives*, "St. Teresa, Virgin."

⁸⁹ Jacqueline Olson Padgett observes that "both worlds . . . seem profane, vacuous, mindless in mutual illumination" and rightly notes that Adrienne's maid Sophie "is a vehicle Chopin uses to highlight the vanity of both worlds." However, Padgett mistakenly equates Sophie with the nuns. See "Kate Chopin's 'Lilacs' and the Story of the Annunciation," *WILLA* 3 (Fall 1994): 19-22, <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/old-WILLA/fall94/n-padgett.html>.

convent where she was once a student, makes her pilgrimage one year, she and her confidant Sister Agathe meet up with the convent gardener and maintenance man, “old Phillipe,” with whom they discuss a youthful escapade of Adrienne. Although Phillipe still finds the memory of the girl climbing a tree to see Paris amusing, Sister Agathe feels compelled to correct him in words that, we learn later, are simply untrue: “We may laugh over it, my good Philippe, but we must remember that Madame is older and wiser now.” Later, Adrienne complains about the problems she encounters in the secular world, specifically the “detestable ways” of her own servant, Sophie. Sister Agathe does not suggest that Adrienne be kinder to other people, but instead reinforces the younger woman’s distorted perception: “Indeed, I do understand that the trials of one living in the world must be very great.” The victim truly subject to “detestable ways” is “old Sophie,” who, during her six-year tenure with Adrienne, has had to explain her employer’s sudden absences to Adrienne’s manager and appease the actress’s beaux. When, upon Adrienne’s return to Paris, Sophie complains that the manager insulted her by accusing her of lying, Adrienne compounds the insult by “pelting [Sophie] with hot-house roses,” threatening to assault her with a book by Zola, and even “[shaking] her till the white cap wobbled on her head.” Adrienne’s behavior with Sophie, however, resembles that which the Mother Superior exhibits towards the actress when the singer returns to the convent the next year. Not as direct or physical, the rejection of Adrienne is perhaps more reprehensible, for the Mother Superior relays it from a distance by way of a letter handed to Adrienne by a lay sister. The sting Adrienne feels when the other nuns must decline the lilacs she has brought no doubt matches, if not surpasses, that Sophie experienced as Adrienne lobbed rose blossoms at her face.

The astute reader should easily see the parallels between the elderly Sophie's experience and that of people of color in the United States. Like Sophie (whose name, meaning "wisdom," suggests she, not Adrienne, is the truly "older and wiser" character⁹⁰), people of color have historically been accused of sins and crimes they did not commit. Like Sophie, they have been assaulted, albeit in much more horrific ways. The revolutions in France and America had not eliminated inequality; instead, even the countries' Christian religious institutions perpetuated hierarchies, most evident in that of Catholicism, that were not that distinct from minute racial divisions concocted by white supremacists. While Chopin does not omit the patriarchy from her critique of the Church—the people to be notified of Grégoire Santien's death in *At Fault* constitute a chain of command extending to the bishop—the author takes more direct aim at nuns, like the Mother Superior, or laywomen, like Thérèse Lafirme, assuming an abbess's power. Perhaps as a mother, Chopin felt theirs to be the greater betrayal of humanity.

Such betrayal assumes more specifically racial connotations through the laywoman Madame Delisle featured in two of Chopin's stories, "A Lady of Bayou St. John" and "La Belle Zoraïde." Like Thérèse Lafirme, Madame Delisle is the widow of a Confederate killed in the Civil War, in this case, while serving under General Beuregard.⁹¹ Superficially, Madame Delisle and Thérèse Lafirme are opposites. Madame Delisle is a childish narcissist who must be read a bedtime story each night by her slave Manna-Loulou. Only a flirtation with a Frenchman, Sépincourt, disrupts this routine.

⁹⁰ In her Catholic feminist reading of *The Awakening*, Jariah Killeen argues that Christ is "androgynous . . . not only as the incarnation of Sophia (wisdom), but also as represented as a mother himself throughout Christian history." Killeen, "Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," 428. Much suggests Chopin would not have agreed with Killeen's interpretation of Christ or, we will see later, Edna Pontellier, whom Killeen contends puts on the mantle of the Sophia/Christ.

⁹¹ The allusion to Beuregard also ties Thérèse Lafirme to Madame Delisle, for Thérèse's prized horse is named for the general.

Before Monsieur Delisle's untimely demise, Sépincourt begs Madame Delisle to go to Paris with him, and Madame agrees to the proposal. But, the narrator claims, "chance"—the death of Gustave Delisle—"will[s] it otherwise" (CW 309).

Chance, however, has little to do with Madame Delisle's choice to adopt a nun-like existence. Instead, she willingly becomes one of the many Americans who transformed the Civil War into a religion and its dead into saints. By naming Monsieur Delisle "Gustave," Chopin even conflates Madame Delisle's husband with his famous general and expands Madame's grief to the entire Confederacy.⁹² Thus, when Madame erects a shrine fashioned from Gustave Delisle's portrait and sword, a scarf, and "an embankment of flowers," she idealizes not only her husband, but the Lost Cause as well. But in paying homage to the military patriarchy with an "altar" mirroring that of Catholicism, Madame also proves her loyalty to the faith in which she was raised. In fact, all of the men in Madame's life coalesce into one by the end of the story, for, when Sépincourt comes after a year to ask Madame to marry him, she "greet[s] him precisely as she . . . welcomed the curé, when the kind old priest . . . brought to her the consolations of religion" (CW 309).

That her "husband has never been so living to [her] as he is now" (CW 309) does not merely reflect Madame Delisle's escape into fantasy, as critics contend. Instead, her attachment to the "memory" of Gustave parallels the mystic's, like St. Teresa's, marriage to her spiritual "Spouse," Christ. The correspondence is hardly a coincidence, for Madame Delisle's last name resonates with that of one of New Orleans' most famous nuns, Henriette Delille, the biracial founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family. Born in

⁹² Beuregard's full name was Pierre Gustave Toutant Beuregard. See Drury Wellford, "G. T. Beuregard (1818–1893)," in *Encyclopedia Virginia*, ed. Brendan Wolfe (Virginia Foundation for the Humanities), http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Beuregard_G_T_1818-1893.

1812, Delille was the daughter of a free woman of color, Marie Josephe Dias, and a white man with whom Dias had entered into a *plaçage* arrangement. In recent years, the Catholic Church has praised Henriette Delille for founding an order that focused on serving both enslaved and free people of color; the order was especially important for establishing schools for African American girls and, later, boys. But the Church's esteem for Delille is equally rooted in her taking vows that enabled her to avoid the sort of sexual liaison into which the women in her family, including her sister, entered. So revered is Delille that she, like Isaac Hecker, has been recommended for canonization.⁹³

If the fictional Madame Delisle is any indication, Kate Chopin had reservations about Henriette Delille's movement into a convent, which, we have seen, Chopin generally regarded as an escape from life. Delille's founding of the Sisters of the Holy Family had even more disturbing implications, for it represented her adaptation to the white supremacist doctrine of the day. Since the existing white religious orders refused to accept her and other women of color, Delille had no choice but to create her own order. Rather than a symbol of liberation, the convent represented a compounding of segregation, first of women and then of people of color. The significance of this is suggested by Chopin's story "A Little Free-Mulatto," in which another "isle"—"L'Isle des Mulâtres"—plays an important role. Like the Sisters of the Holy Family, it is ostensibly a refuge for the "mulatto" of the story, the child Aurélia. Forbidden by her parents to play with either the white or black children in her midst, Aurélia pines for friendship; at the "L'Isle des Mulâtres," a Cane River community of people of mixed blood, she can go "to the convent where numbers of little children just like herself are

⁹³ Mary Bernard Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*, eds. Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); M. Shawn Copeland, *The Subversive Power of Love* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009).

taught by the sisters” (CW 203). Ignoring Chopin’s slight of hand, scholars have unanimously regarded the story as indicative of Chopin’s support of segregation.⁹⁴ But the narrator who describes the isle as a “paradise” introduces an important caveat: “That is, little Aurélia thinks it is paradise, the change is so wonderful” (CW 203). The perspective of the child might not be that of the author.

The Delisle/Delille parallel has even more ominous racial implications in the companion piece to “A Lady of Bayou St. John,” “La Belle Zoraïde,” in which Madame Delisle listens to a story told by Manna-Loulou that features a slave girl rejected by her mother, Zoraïde. Apparently driven insane when her mistress tells her the child died at birth, Zoraïde will have nothing to do with the girl the mistress returns to her. In a display of perversity masquerading as sympathy, Madame Delisle responds, ““The poor little one! better had she died!”” (CW 308). This, of course, is not the reaction Manna-Loulou hoped to incite. One senses that Chopin believed the segregated convent and school established by Henriette Delille was more cemetery than paradise.⁹⁵

Henriette Delille’s convent was the result of a Catholicism that not only did not defy the exclusion of blacks but helped to enforce it. In *At Fault*, Chopin hints at these uncatholic dynamics in the American Church in her description of Thérèse Lafirme’s spatial arrangements with her black workers. When the Creole suffers the occasional dark night

⁹⁴ See Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, 95-6; Barbara C. Ewell, *Kate Chopin* (New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1986, 68; Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 136; Gunning, “Rethinking White Female Silences: Kate Chopin’s Local Color Fiction and the Politics of White Supremacy”, 117; and Castillo, “‘Race’ and Ethnicity in Kate Chopin’s Fiction,” 70. Although she recognizes that Chopin “clearly realizes the absurdity of certain racial classifications and feels compassion for the child who is caught in the middle of them,” Castillo nonetheless takes the story at face value and also assumes Chopin advocates segregation as a solution.

⁹⁵ As we will see, Manna-Loulou, whose name resembles that of the Voodoo Queen Marie Laveaux, represents the Voodoo alternative to Madame Delisle’s/Henriette Delille’s Catholicism. Although it is impossible to know how much Chopin knew about Henriette Delille, the founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family may have been less removed from the African-based faith than first appears, for her grandmother’s last name was “Laveau” (a variant of “Laveaux” by which the Voodoo priestess is also known). See Copeland, *The Subversive Power of Love*, 26.

of the soul, she seeks refuge in cloistered spaces off-limits to her black staff. For instance, upon learning David had been married, she goes to her bedroom where she not only closes the door, but also “take[s] the needless precaution of bringing lock and bolt to the double security of her moment of solitude.”⁹⁶ Still dressed in her “riding *habit*” (emphasis added), she falls into a “semi-stupor”—not that different from St. Teresa’s periods of catatonia during her rapture. On the other side of the door, Aunt Belindy, waiting to serve Thérèse’s dinner, vents a legitimate complaint and threat: “Half de time w’ite folks ain’t got no feelin’s, no how. If dey speck I’s gwine stan’ up heah on my two feet all night, dey’s foolin’ dey sef” (CW 761). Likewise, when Thérèse meets with David to discuss his marital past, the parlor is a “stronghold” that the people of color consider “a sort of holy sanctuary, where one should scarce be permitted to breath, except under a compulsion of a driving necessity” (CW 765).

Thérèse Lafirme’s sanctuary proves far less than holy. As the Creole waits for David to return home at the end of *At Fault*, she does not seem to have moved closer to perfection. Indeed, she does not seem to have changed at all. However tenuous her literal participation in the Catholic Church might be, throughout the novel she shows herself to be worthy of her patron saint’s name, for she never ventures far from the Church’s moorings. Her response to the news of Grégoire’s death most clearly demonstrates her commitment to Catholicism and her assumed role of the great white hope. Lest readers miss this point, Chopin includes numerous religious references in the chapter in which

⁹⁶ Thérèse’s efforts to secure her bedroom have both sexual and racial connotations. On the one hand, the “double security” might simply symbolize the Creole’s resistance to the feelings she has for David Hosmer. But, since she is literally cutting herself off from people of color, the image also reminds the reader of the stereotype promulgated by Francis Willard, i.e., that white women were vulnerable to rapes committed by black men. Chopin obviously did not share Willard’s perspective, for the writer describes Thérèse’s maneuvers as “needless.”

the death announcement occurs. Aptly titled “Tidings That Sting,” the chapter opens with an image of Thérèse tending an injured and “half lifeless” lamb before a fire. As one of the most widely recognized emblems of Christ, the lamb suggests the flawed state of Christianity; that Thérèse imagines she can redeem the Redeemer himself emphasizes her own hubris. Her pride becomes more pronounced in her initial response to Rufe Jimson, the Texan messenger bearing the bad news. Jimson does not subscribe to the notions of hierarchy upon which both the South and the Church had been built; he even addresses the Creole as “he might have spoken to one of her black servants.” When he informs her that the tidings he brings are “unpleasant,” Thérèse reacts as though Jimson has confused her with someone else, for surely unpleasant news cannot be for her. But it is, and neither her own sense of superiority nor her Church can deflect its pain. We learn, too, that Grégoire even more dramatically experienced the Church’s impotence, for among the “tricks” Jimson pulls from a bag is “a pair of scapulars, one of which was pierced by a tell-tale bullet hole” (CW 849-52).⁹⁷

Despite the shock she experiences in her meeting with Jimson, Thérèse remains a true Papist and continues to prop up the set of empty rituals historically criticized by Protestants. When the Texan mistakenly refers to the Catholic services as “‘prayer meetin’s,” the Creole automatically informs him of the proper term, “‘masses.’” Likewise, her thoughts later turn to making proper religious arrangements for Grégoire,

⁹⁷ Scapulars, small swatches of wool with religious images imprinted upon them, are draped over the chest and back. By wearing a scapular, often devoted to the Virgin Mary, Catholics supposedly accrue indulgences that will shorten their time in purgatory. Although Chopin does not identify the specific scapular Grégoire wears, one possibility is that of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, which consists of one piece of material imprinted with the Sacred Heart and another with the Virgin Mary. It was officially recognized in 1876 and its devotees “granted many indulgences” by Pope Lew XIII. Chopin may be giving the scapular a particularly ironic gloss since Grégoire was apparently shot through the heart. At the same time, the Virgin Mary and her representative Thérèse Lafirme obviously lacked any real power to protect Grégoire. See Joseph Hilgers, “Scapular,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 13 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13508b.htm>.

who, on the Church's own terms, is not entitled to them. (One doubts that Grégoire ever confesses the mortal sin he has committed, i.e., his murder of Joçint.) The state of Grégoire's soul, however, seems of little concern to Thérèse as she makes a mental note to inform a variety of Catholic patriarchs of her nephew's sad demise: "Father O'Dowd," "Père Antoine in Centerville," "the good old priest and friend at the New Orleans Cathedral," and even the "Bishop of Natchitoches" (CW 853-4).

Perhaps more than anything else in the novel, this allegiance to the Church's male hierarchy reflects Thérèse Lafirme's connection to St. Teresa of Avila and lack of genuine spiritual growth. One year after Fanny's drowning, as Thérèse rides the train back to Place-du-Bois following a trip to New Orleans, the plantation mistress remains apart from the lot of common people, such as the family sharing the car with her, even as her own limitations manifest themselves. Unable to open a train's window, she looks with disdain on the "smirched finger tips of her Parisian gloves," as though such black spots have no more business on her hands than they do on the saint's soul—or among white people. Still, the narrator tells us, she is an attractive woman whom "a *man*" would have considered "worthy of admiration that he might easily fancy rising to *devotion*" (CW 870, emphasis added). When David Hosmer enters the car, we realize who will continue to light a candle at the Thérèse Lafirme shrine. As St. Teresa's *Book of Her Life* shows, however, there is a catch: to occupy such a position means not only denying others their true liberty, but becoming a slave oneself. As one moves into rapture, the saint tells us, "the will is occupied in such a way that, without knowing how, it becomes captive; it merely consents to God allowing Him to imprison it as one who well knows

how to be the captive of its lover.”⁹⁸ Thérèse Lafirme has not broken with the faith of the fathers; she has merely added another priest to the list, one, who as he pontificates to her about “living spirits” and “dead letters,” pulls “down the loose wristlet of her glove and clasp[s] his fingers around her warm wrist” (CW 872)—a gesture whose implied sexuality merely masks the more ominous suggestion of mind-forged manacles imposed by David Hosmer upon his beloved.

“Black Devils”

That Chopin does not endorse this white Christian worldview is suggested by the meager role she assigns Christianity to the lives of the African Americans in *At Fault* and elsewhere in her fiction. Those instances in which people of color refer to Biblical figures or appear to conform to the practices of orthodox Christianity usually include some qualifying element. When Aunt Agnes laments the absence of Moses, widely acknowledged as the model emancipator to slaves, she reminds us that slavery had not disappeared but merely taken another shape after 1865. Aunt Belindy, on the other hand, champions the bible’s bad boy Cain, Grégoire, whom she knows would “‘be a raisin’ Cain” (CW 774) on Sundays if the Unitarian Melicent were not in his life. The admiration Aunt Belindy and other African Americans have for Grégoire is admittedly puzzling; especially odd is their apparent support of his shooting Joçint. But, as they know too well, to speak out in defense of the rebel could jeopardize their own position at Place-du-Bois; during slavery, the fear generated by revolts such as John Brown’s raid had made slaveholders even more oppressive. Moreover, by labeling Grégoire “Cain,” with whom blacks had long been compared, Aunt Belindy, like recent scholars, recognizes that Thérèse Lafirme’s nephew has more in common with the black folk than

⁹⁸ Saint Teresa, *The Book of Her Life*, 82.

with whites on the plantation.⁹⁹ The one African American who speaks as though he subscribes to a Christian abiding truth, Uncle Hiram, is the odd man out. But even he is not quite the believer he should be, for at the beginning of the novel when he approaches Thérèse, he “misquotes . . . Scripture” (CW 741). The evangelists apparently have not taught the Word to the black heathens well. Some, like Aunt Belindy, have no use for it. When Hiram criticizes her for her “harshness” and advises her to remember “wat de Scripture tells us,” Aunt Belindy focuses instead on the more pressing concerns in the real world, such as the ruckus Grégoire has been causing by attempting to force a barkeep to serve African Americans. As for the Word at the heart of Christianity, Belindy says point blank, “Whar I got time to go a foolin’ wid Scripture?” (CW 829). It is a question, one suspects, Chopin also asked herself.

The Savior’s Sin: The Crack in “A Dresden Lady in Dixie”

As Chopin’s only story published in a Catholic publication, “A Dresden Lady in Dixie” is an anomaly that slipped through the Papist cracks, for while it seems to promote Catholic values and practices—specifically universal love and the redemption possible through confession—it channels an African “Sperrit” to expose the hypocrisy of both Protestantism and Catholicism in America. In fact, the story takes issue with Christ himself, the Messiah who atoned for humanity’s sins and made eternal life in heaven possible. As depicted by Chopin, the Christ figure is a scapegoat whose redemptive act, whatever it might do for the story’s characters in the afterlife, undermines relationships in this world.

⁹⁹ Susan Castillo, for instance, describes Grégoire as “an intermediate, liminal figure” whose “hands are not as white as those of the ‘office bred’ Anglophone young men of the St Louis belle Melicent’s acquaintance.” Castillo, “‘Race’ and Ethnicity,” 62.

In the story, a twelve-year-old Acadian girl, Agapie, takes the “Dresden Lady,” a figurine highly valued by its owner, the white Creole Madame Valtour, whose young deceased daughter had been attracted to it. Although Madame Valtour finds the statue among Agapie’s belongings, the girl denies stealing it; Madame Valtour, of course, does not believe her and ostracizes her from the Valtour house. The situation is resolved when Pa-Jeff, an elderly former slave of the Valtours who enjoys a close friendship with Agapie, concocts a story featuring himself as the thief. In the relatively sparse criticism of the story, scholars have tended to regard Pa-Jeff as one of several stereotypically faithful blacks in the Chopin canon. Janet Goodwyn’s reading, however, seems to come closer to addressing Chopin’s intent: “Pa-Jeff,” Goodwyn notes, “is not allowed by Chopin to rest so easily within the categorizations of this society. She has him reclaim his full humanity in decisive action, in taking responsibility for making something happen in Agapie’s life.” He assumes a stereotypical role “voluntarily, employing along the way the system of oppositions which have been waiting all his life to define him in spite of his life and his known character.”¹⁰⁰ While Goodwyn rightly describes these “oppositions”—“Satan” and “de Sperrit,” per Pa-Jeff—as undercutting a “Manichean” good/evil, white/black view of the world, the specific warring Manichean forces have yet to be addressed. Within Chopin’s general indictment of white American Christianity is embedded in the story’s details a challenge to both William Greenleaf Eliot and Isaac Hecker and the respective Protestant and Catholic perspectives the two religious leaders represented.

In Pa-Jeff, Chopin has embodied a type that seems to have a specific point of origin: Archer Alexander as described by William Greenleaf Eliot. While Alexander, who died

¹⁰⁰ Janet Goodwyn, “‘Dah you is, settin’ down lookin’ jis’ like w’ite folks!’: Ethnicity Enacted in Kate Chopin’s Short Fiction,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 24 (1994): 8-9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3507879>.

at the age of seventy, was old, Pa-Jeff is ancient, around ninety or, by his estimate, one hundred. Not quite Methuselah, the latter elder nonetheless rivals many a biblical geriatric patriarch. In both cases, the men are still working, although their contributions to their employers are noticeably limited. Alexander takes a break from “half-working [Eliot’s] grass-plot with his sickle” to tell his employer the details of his past; Pa-Jeff, who has begun to “fail visibly,” can do “only a little light hoeing” (CW 348) in the fields in addition to delivering the Valtours’ mail to their house. Most significant is the paternal relationship each character has with a young girl. In a passage doubtless intended to reflect the proper function and place of people of color, Eliot describes Alexander’s taking in a four-year-old, orphaned white girl. While the Unitarian minister seems to appreciate the African American’s magnanimity, he also regards Alexander’s home as unsuitable for a white child and makes more appropriate arrangements for her. After several months, during which Alexander has had no contact with the girl, Eliot takes the former slave to see her. ““Come to your old daddy!”” Alexander supposedly exclaims. But the girl does not know him and “half scared, ma[kes] up a lip, and r[uns] for shelter to her lady protector.”¹⁰¹ Pa-Jeff fares better with Agapie, with whom the roles are even reversed for a time. During the year Agapie is separated from the Valtours, she tends to Pa-Jeff, giving him the attention she once enjoyed bestowing on the Valtour children

Whether Chopin considered Eliot sadistic or simply obtuse in his participation in Alexander’s aborted fatherhood is unclear. But what is obvious is that she did not accept Eliot’s party line concerning racial uplift or the segregation by which he believed the races might coexist. Although Agapie never completely loses touch with the love embedded in her name, the stratified society in which she lives has done little to enhance

¹⁰¹ Eliot, *The Story of Archer Alexander*, 31-2, 84-6.

the spiritual or material life of her and her Acadian family or of Pa-Jeff and other people of color. What Agapie has learned is to long for the trinkets—the Dresden ladies—valued by the nineteenth-century King Davids and Bathshebas.

Still, however compelling the parallels to Eliot’s narrative might be, we cannot ignore the fact that Chopin’s story is set in Louisiana and that Roman Catholicism, not Unitarianism, is the central Christian force in the story. Thus, reunion—of Agapie with the Valtours—depends on redemption achieved through the usual Catholic channel: confession and then communion. That the confession does not come from the white sinner but a black innocent befits a society that had long made people of color scapegoats for all that was wrong in the country. Pa-Jeff embodies the “Negro Problem” that so concerned the contributors to the *Catholic World*.

The Paulist influence on Chopin’s story manifests itself initially in the story’s title. While Goodwyn and others have noted the European significance of “Dresden,” the fact that the figure originated in Germany brings Europe much closer to home, specifically that of Isaac Hecker as well as the Redemptorists with whom he first worked.¹⁰² At the same time, as the country where Martin Luther broke with Catholicism, Germany represents the dis-union Hecker hoped to undo. But to achieve reunion requires that the penitent reject the things of this world, confess, and do penance; he or she (or both, in this case) then might partake of communion. As the *Catholic World* articles remind us, all of this requires education in the ways of white Catholics.

This first step has been well underway, for the soapbox in which Agapie hides the figurine contains “a catechism and a blue-backed speller” with which “the Valtour

¹⁰² As noted earlier, the Redemptorists with whom Hecker worked included Germans, who had come to America specifically to address the needs of German immigrants.

children [have been] making heroic and patient efforts toward Agapie's training"(CW 347). Pa-Jeff's feeling that Agapie treats him "like I her own kin an' color'" (CW 349) has merit, for Agapie and Pa-Jeff are not that dissimilar; like the slave Frederick Douglass, whose first teachers were white boys introducing him to the alphabet, Agapie's education also lies in the hands of children of the ruling class. Madame Valtour then takes charge of two of the remaining steps towards redemption: by removing the Dresden lady from Agapie's possession, she ostensibly turns the girl's attention away from earthly things and then administers the requisite punishment by denying Agapie access to the Valtour children. But Agapie does not admit to her wrongdoing—not even to Pa-Jeff, who must "reason" his way to the truth. Instead, the critical confession is made via the surrogate, Pa-Jeff himself.

We never know if Pa-Jeff completes the ritual and enters into communion with the Valtours, that is, if he drinks the wine that Monsieur Valtour, a.k.a., "Marse Albert," offers him when he arrives at the planter's house or if the planter gives Pa-Jeff absolution. Nor should we. By omitting these details, Chopin exposes the ritual for the sham nineteenth-century American Catholicism had made it. "Marse Albert" does not really want Pa-Jeff to receive communion from or with him; the wine must come from the black female servant Viny, whom Monsieur Valtour "*instruct[s]* . . . to hand to [Pa-Jeff]" (CW 350, emphasis added). So, too, did the Paulists imagine they might best reach African Americans through other people of color trained to be priests. In itself, Rev. Francis Janssens' recommendation that "the permanent improvement of the negro race . . . come from within, . . . be brought about by the best men of their own race" seems reasonable and even ahead of its time, except "best" to Father Janssens and the

Church means “most like whites.” Lest we forget this, Father Janssens reminds us that these “best” blacks “will be stimulated by the example of the white people in whose midst they live.”¹⁰³

In Chopin’s story, what the privileged whites “stimulate” falls far short of spiritual or material uplift. Agapie’s belief that the Valtours’ house signifies “love, comfort and good cheer” is, in fact, a “confused idea of paradise” (CW 346)—as “confused,” one imagines, as that Aurélie experiences at the I’sle des Mulatres. Nor does Pa-Jeff’s magnanimity on behalf of Agapie create a closer connection to her. Although she “gr[ows] up to deserve the confidence and favors of the Valtour family,” her relationship with Pa-Jeff has been skewed: “She redouble[s] her acts of kindness toward [him]; but somehow she [can] not look into his face again.” The reason is doubtless that she feels both guilty for the lie and afraid he might someday tell the truth. Her “acts of kindness,” once natural, now seem a sort of bribe. Even worse is the spiritual war that afflicts Pa-Jeff’s own psyche, for he continues to tell and embellish his tale about the battle between “Satan” and “de Sperrit” and ends up “confused, bewildered, [and] believ[ing] the story himself as firmly as those who had heard him tell it over and over for so many years” (CW 351).

But there may be a saving grace in the shadows Goodwyn intimates in her emphasis on Pa-Jeff’s role as storyteller. The ultimate part he plays might have little to do with white Christianity or America. Instead, as someone who, in his own words, stole “‘dat li’le trick’” (CW 350), he may be one of the many African tricksters who, we will see, populate the Chopin canon and influence people of color in ways white priests do

¹⁰³ Rev. Francis Janssens, “The Negro Problem and the Catholic Church,” *Catholic World* 44, no. 264 (March 1887): 725, at Making of America Journal Articles <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=moajrnl;cc=moajrnl;rgn=full%20text;idno=bac8387.0044.264;didno=bac8387.0044.264;view=image;seq=0725;node=bac8387.0044.264%3A1>.

not: “The negroes especially [seem] never to tire of hearing [Pa-Jeff] relate [his tale]” (*CW* 351).

CHAPTER 2

VOODOO LWA VS. JIM CROW LAW

The African Americans in “A Dresden Lady in Dixie” are not Pa-Jeff’s only listeners. In reading the text, we obviously hear pieces of what the old man says. But as Pa-Jeff’s creator, Kate Chopin was most privy to his tales, just as she was to the spirituality and discourse of real-life models for characters like Pa-Jeff. While the most obvious theological influences on Kate Chopin were Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, her discontent with the tenets of Christianity and practices of nineteenth-century Christians left a gap in the writer’s life. Of course, the late nineteenth century saw the emergence of a variety of religious experiences, such as spiritualism, that could have filled this theological hole. But as an inhabitant of both Missouri and Louisiana, Chopin would have had first-hand exposure to the spirituality and stories Africans had brought to the United States and never relinquished. Like other literary inhabitants of Voodoo territory, such as Charles Chesnutt and George Washington Cable, she could hardly have ignored one of the most exotic and compelling features of the region. Nor could she have escaped the influence of her contemporaries’ writings on Voodoo, many of which predated the launching of Chopin’s writing career by just a few years. Cable’s most famous novel, *Grandissimes*, featuring the Voodoo devotee Palmyre Philosophe, was published in 1880 while in 1886, just three years before Chopin published her first work, his articles “The Dance in Place Congo” and “Creole Slave Songs,” with its section “The Voodoos,” appeared in *Century Magazine*. A less obvious source for Chopin’s interest in Voodoo could also have been the natural and social science texts scholars have used to support claims that Chopin rejected institutionalized religion. In *Descriptive Sociology; or,*

Groups of Sociological Fact, Herbert Spencer addresses some of the basic theological tenets of the “Dahomans,” West Africans forced into slavery in the colonies. While his discussion is limited and predictably condescending, the social Darwinist derived his information from the more nuanced and comprehensive writings of the British explorer, Richard Francis Burton. Published in 1864, Burton’s *Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* could have provided Chopin with an intellectual appreciation for the theological foundation of Haitian and Louisiana Voodoo.¹⁰⁴ The nineteenth-century development of anthropology pioneered by Burton and others contributed to a concurrent interest in folklore. Chopin, who had read Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories, was probably equally familiar with Mary Owen’s description of Voodoo ceremonies published with other papers from the International Folk-Lore Congress in 1891 and the

¹⁰⁴ Herbert Spencer, “African Races,” in *Descriptive Sociology; or, Groups of Sociological Facts, Classified and Arranged by Herbert Spencer*. Compiled and abstracted by David Duncan. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1873); Richard F. Burton, *Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome. With Notices of the So Called “Amazons,” the Grand Customs, the Yearly Customs, the Human Sacrifices, the Present State of the Slave Trade, and The Negro’s Place in Nature*. Vol. II, Second Edition (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1864), <http://burtoniana.org/>. Spencer limits his discussion to one “idol,” Legba, 31-3. In contrast, Burton describes many of the concepts and spirits of the Dahoman religion that were later incorporated into Haitian Voodoo. Like “Africans” who “worship everything except the Creator,” Voodooists do not direct their rituals to the supreme god *Bondye*. Instead, they focus upon spirits called lwa, some of which correspond to deities identified by Burton. Among these are Legba as well as “Hoho . . . a twin fetish” comparable to the Marassa in Voodoo; Ogun, the “iron fetish” that informs Voodoo’s lwa of war of the same name; and “Aydo-whe-do” or “Danh, the Heavenly Snake . . . the rainbow,” which became Voodoo’s important fertility couple Damballa Wedo and his mate Ayida. Besides being more tolerant and comprehensive than Spencer, Burton brings a sense of humor to his subject that Chopin would have appreciated. Ogun, Burton tells us, did not enjoy the same level of respect in all parts of Africa: in “Abeokuta . . . human sacrifices [were] offered to the god. In Dahome it ha[d] not that honour.” See Burton, 135-8 and 143-9. As I will discuss later, tracing the importation and transformation of the African deities is an inexact science. What little is known about nineteenth-century Voodoo rituals in Louisiana has led scholars to believe few of the lwa made their way to America. Haiti’s debt to Africa is better understood. For the evolution of some of the major lwa in their journey from Africa to Haiti and Louisiana, see Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 166-167; and Carolyn Morrow Long, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), 115-6.

1893 collection of African-American tales, *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers*.¹⁰⁵

Although Chopin refers to Voodoo or Hoodoo by name in only a handful of works—“Cavanelle” (1895); “Nég Créol” (1896); “The Locket” (1897); and a series of essays titled “As You Like It” (also published in 1897)—her scattered allusions to stock features of it should cue us to the fact that she, no less than Cable, saw it as an essential factor in the worlds she would create in her regionalist fiction. But Chopin goes beyond Cable, whose accounts of Voodoo folklore and practices exhibit the scorn typical of whites discussing what they consider black “superstition.”¹⁰⁶ Neither does she simply emulate Charles Chesnutt, who drew upon conjure as a trope for the ways African Americans surreptitiously undermined white power. Most of all, in contrast to Lafcadio Hearn, Chopin does not seem to believe that “as a religion—an imported faith—Voodooism in Louisiana is really dead; the rites of its serpent worship are forgotten; the meaning of its strange and frenzied chants, whereof some fragments linger as refrains in negro song, is not now known even to those who remember the words.”¹⁰⁷ In her fiction, she keeps the

¹⁰⁵ Chopin, who compares Harris to Ruth McEnery Stuart in an admittedly problematic passage published in *Lippincott's Magazine*—“Joel Harris . . . [has] not surpassed [Stuart] in the portrayal of that child-like exuberance which is so pronounced a feature of negro character” (CW 711), is noticeably silent about her fellow Missourian. Mary Owen.

¹⁰⁶ George Washington Cable, “Creole Slave Songs,” *The Century Magazine* 31, no. 6 (April 1886): 810. The fact that Cable gets his information about an 1884 St. John’s Eve ceremony secondhand does not stop him from describing it as “an orgy already grown horrid enough when [his informants] turned their backs upon it,” 820. “Horrid” seems to have summed up Cable’s feelings about the African-based religion; the word appears three times in “The Voodooos” section of the article. In “The Dance in Place Congo,” he is similarly dismissive of Voodoo and the dances it inspired, especially the Calinda, which “ended these dissipations of the summer Sabbath afternoons.” Cable, “The Dance in Place Congo,” *The Century Magazine* 31, no. 4 (February 1886): 528.

¹⁰⁷ Lafcadio Hearn, “New Orleans Superstitions.” Originally published in *Harper's Weekly*, December 25, 1886. Reprinted in *An American Miscellany: Articles and Stories*, 2 vols., ed. Albert Mordell (New York, 1924). <http://74.125.155.132/search?q=cache:l2RsGnJB1xcJ:www.sacred-texts.com/af/fr/hearn/nos.htm+%22new+Orleans+superstitions%22&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a>.

faith alive by using the familiar images of conjure as touchstones to invoke the pantheon of Voodoo spirits and honor the people who served them. Embedded in her imagery and characters, Voodoo holds out the promise of a way of being in which the conflicting forces increasingly apparent in America might be reconciled.

It is impossible to identify a single source from which Kate Chopin acquired her knowledge of Voodoo, but several developments converged prior to her embarking on her writing career that could have aroused her sympathy for the religion and its practitioners. As the “littlest rebel” in Missouri who tore a Union flag from her house but then avoided imprisonment when a Unionist neighbor came to her defense, Chopin would have been sensitive to the mask Voodoo has historically been forced to wear simply to endure. A syncretic faith, it has survived by incorporating the icons and practices of other beliefs, especially Roman Catholicism, into its own ceremonies. In Haiti and Louisiana, Voodooists have traditionally included Catholic prayers and rituals in their services and, most of all, appropriated the images and names of saints as a guise for the lwa.¹⁰⁸ In early nineteenth-century Louisiana, Voodoo leaders, such as the famous priestess Marie Laveaux of New Orleans, and their followers would regularly attend mass in the morning and then celebrate the lwa in dance at Congo Square. Cable notes that the festivities in Congo Square ended in 1843, but Laveaux was still a vital presence in New Orleans when Chopin moved there. The Voodoo queen supposedly did not give up her reign until

¹⁰⁸ Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Melville J. Herskovits, “Catholicism and Vodun,” in *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2007), 270-95.

1869, one year before Oscar took his young bride to the city, and continued to minister to the sick and imprisoned for some time after her retirement.¹⁰⁹

The equanimity demonstrated by Marie Laveaux and other Louisiana Voodooists, however, has not characterized the white Christian response to Voodoo. When Pat Robertson described a recent earthquake in Haiti as God's revenge on Haitians for their making a pact with the devil, he simply perpetuated a long-standing bias that equates Voodoo with devil worship. According to anthropologist Leslie G. Desmangles, Voodoo lore about a missing Haitian child helped fuel whites' contempt for the African-based faith in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Despite the absence of any official documents addressing the incident, the press at the time avidly promulgated a story that Voodoo cannibals devoured a Haitian girl, Claircine, who vanished on December 27, 1863.¹¹⁰ In 1877, Isaac Hecker, founder of the Catholic Paulists, picked up the torch in his own journalistic effort to rid America of the spiritual beliefs and practices imported from Haiti and Africa. Titled "Nagualism, Voodooism, and Other Forms of Cryptopaganism in the United States," Hecker's editorial for the *Catholic World* is nothing less than a jeremiad against religious tolerance, at least for non-Christian beliefs, whose "vitality . . . in regaining lost ground, and in rising against truth, shows [their] satanic character." On the basis of such convoluted logic, Hecker proceeded to condemn the "diabolical" nature of three forms of paganism practiced by "inferior races" in the United States: the Nagualism of Native Americans in New Mexico and Texas, the Buddhism of

¹⁰⁹ Cable, "The Dance in Place Congo," 526; Ina Johanna Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 166-9. Isabel Allende recreates the blending of Voodoo and Catholicism and the Congo Square events in her novel *Island Beneath the Sea* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), which traces the development of the biracial slave Tété, whose master takes her from Haiti to Louisiana during the Haitian revolution.

¹¹⁰ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 1-2.

Asians in California, and the Voodoo of African Americans. He was especially fearful that these various forms of paganism would contaminate whites in America. Most ominous was the threat of Voodoo because it was easily passed on through the proximity blacks had historically had to whites. White Southern babies, according to Hecker, had learned the stuff of Voodoo literally at their mammies' breasts. Hecker no doubt considered this a great irony, since he believed "human sacrifices are certainly offered in [the] infamous rites" and, like many of the paranoid masses, probably imagined the victims to be white babies. Consistently dismissive of the syncretism of Voodoo, he ultimately issued the dire warning that in the South, where African Americans "concentrate . . . this voodoo power [could not] but increase and all vestiges of Christianity disappear."¹¹¹

While this vitriolic assessment of pagan beliefs might be, in part, the ravings of a Protestant convert trying to prove his commitment to his adopted religion, it nonetheless echoes the perception of many whites in nineteenth-century America. That Voodoo could survive in a Christian country had long disturbed Hecker's fellow citizens, including female contributors to publications with which Chopin was intimately familiar. In 1872

¹¹¹ Isaac Hecker, "Nagualism, Voodooism, and Other Forms of Crypto-paganism in the United States," *Catholic World*, 25, no. 45 (April 1877): 1-11. In fairness to Hecker, I must note that the rallying point for Haitian rebels was supposedly the impaled body of a white infant. This widely circulated image was introduced by Bryan Edwards, an Englishman and plantation owner in the Caribbean, in his 1797 *Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St Domingo*. See David Brion Davis, "Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions," and "Olwyn M. Blouet, "Bryan Edwards and the Haitian Revolution" in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*. Ed. David P. Geggus. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2001), 5, 44-57. Robertson, however, completely misrepresented the ritual that inaugurated the revolution. The "pact" actually consisted of a ceremony conducted in August of 1791 by fugitive slaves—*maroons*—to invoke the Iwa Ogou so he might help them in their revolt against the slaveowners. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 34; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 99-100. August 14-15, when the ceremony is believed to have taken place, continue to be important holy days for Voodooists. See Terry Rey, "Vodou, Water, and Exile: Symbolizing Spirit and Pain in Port-au-Prince," in *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place*, eds. Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 2006), 208. Robertson also confused "Napoleon III or whatever" with Napoleon I, who unsuccessfully attempted to reinstate slavery in Haiti.

the prolific Mrs. M. P. Handy, whose work appeared in *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and a host of other prominent American journals, lamented, "In vain have religion and the white man waged war against this relic of barbarism; it still flourishes, hydra-headed, and ever and anon the newspapers raise an outcry as some fresh instance of its power and diabolical results is brought to light." In 1875 Marie Williams added her voice to the brouhaha, bemoaning the fact that "in the midst of civilization and Christianity, there still remains a vestige of heathen rites."¹¹² Published in *Youth's Companion*, where several of Chopin's own stories would later appear, Williams's article "St. John's Eve Among the Voudous" terrifies even as it titillates, and the Voodoo practitioner becomes a sort of boogie man or, in this case, woman designed to frighten young Christians into sticking to the straight-and-narrow path. Nor did later characterizations of Voodoo as mere "superstition" mitigate efforts to purge it from America. By the 1880s the *Catholic World* had ceased to emphasize the supposedly demonic component of Voodoo, but still advocated concerted missionary efforts to eradicate the African-American religion, especially as Protestantism became an increasingly powerful rival for the souls of black folk. In 1885, Father C. A. Oliver briefly joined forces with the Episcopalian bishop Right Rev. Dr. Dudley to denounce the "superstition," in which "sacraments are fetiches, . . . worship a wild frenzy, and . . . morality a sham," but then reasserted the primacy of Catholicism by blaming Protestantism for blacks' continued attachment to the African-based faith. According to Oliver, the Protestant denominations had

¹¹² Mrs. M.P. Handy, "Witchcraft Among the Negroes," *Appletons' Journal of Literature, Science and Art*, 8, no. 194 (Dec. 14, 1872): 666-7; Marie B. Williams, "St. John's Eve Among the Voudous," *The Youth's Companion* 48, no. 34 (Aug. 26, 1875): 271. One must wonder at the serendipitous placement of Mrs. Handy's article. Perhaps *Appletons'* editors hoped to buttress Mrs. Handy's crusade by linking the "devil worshipers" to the number of the beast.

“give[n African Americans] a church and afterwards [left them] to practice therein a species of Voodooism miscalled Christianity.”¹¹³ More than a decade after the death of Marie Laveaux in 1881, Voodoo remained a subject of contempt, even among intellectuals receptive to other pagan beliefs. In his introduction to Owen’s 1893 collection of African-American stories, *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers*, folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland describes “Voodooism” as “rel[ying] on daring that which is horrible and repulsive, and, above all, in a perfectly subjective iron *will*.” “Aryan and Red Indian magic,” on the other hand, is a much more benign practice, “based on fasting, contemplation, and ‘prayer.’”¹¹⁴ It is no surprise, then, that at the end of the nineteenth century, lurid accounts of Voodoo rites graced the pages of many prominent newspapers, including the *New York Times*, where one could find such sensationalistic headlines as “Worshippers of the Voodoo: How Southern Negroes Propitiate the Spirit of Evil” (June 25, 1893); “Blackest Art in Washington: Alleys Where Mortals Who Enter Leave Hope Behind” (Sep. 16, 1894); and “Old Southern Voodooism: Amulets Magic Potions, Witch Hazel, Serpents, and Toads—Grisly Orgies of the Negroes” (Nov. 18, 1894). Such purple prose stands in stark contrast to Marie Laveaux’s obituary, written by her daughter Philomene and published in the *Times* on June 23, 1881, which omits any mention of the religion that made the Voodoo queen famous.

For Kate Chopin, who throughout her life had lived among people of color, some of whom were probably among the “devil worshippers,” the distorted image of Voodoo

¹¹³Rev. C. A. Oliver, “The Catholic Church and the Colored People,” *Catholic World*, June 1883, 376. Cited in *Catholic World*, 1885, 87.

¹¹⁴Charles Godfrey Leland, introduction to *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers*, by Mary Alicia Owen (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), vi.

perpetuated by a flagrantly racist press might have seemed a gauntlet she could not ignore. In her 1895 story “Cavanelle,” she makes her first direct reference to the faith when she describes the visit of Pouponne, a black servant, to a “Voodoo priestess,” whom Pouponne “consult[s] . . . as [she would] her father confessor” (CW 371). Although this allusion is problematic because it comes from a flawed first-person narrator, it establishes the African-based belief system as a religion and juxtaposes its essentially matriarchal structure to the patriarchy of Roman Catholicism. In 1897, Chopin assumes a less tenuous theological position when, in a series of essays titled “As You Like It,” she aligns “Hoodoos” (by which she seems to mean any practitioner of Hoodoo/Voodoo) with “explorers.” Far from superstitious or ignorant, both Hoodoos and Theosophists, according to Chopin, are motivated by the basic human urge “to seek to unravel mysteries and things hidden and denied” (CW 715). Noticeably absent from Chopin’s spiritual Magellans—or Richard Burtons—are Christians. Perhaps the dogmatism, if not dogma, that distinguished American Protestants and Catholics led her to conclude that their leaders had abandoned the metaphysical quest.

The many intimations of Voodoo woven throughout her fiction indicate that Chopin recognized the spiritual and literary potential of the African-based religion. In “The Locket,” Chopin initially describes the titular object as a Hoodoo “charm,” while in “La Belle Zoraïde,” the quadroon protagonist meets and falls in love with the slave Mézor as he participates in the Bamboula, one of the most famous Voodoo-derived dances performed in Congo Square. The storyteller of Zoraïde’s doomed affair, Manna-Loulou, seems a thinly veiled recreation of Marie Laveaux, who presided over the Congo Square

activities.¹¹⁵ The linchpin for Kate Chopin's exploration of Voodoo is the short story "Nég Créol," in which the eponymous protagonist, a former slave, espouses "startling beliefs," chief of which is "that 'Michié St. Pierre et Michié St. Paul' . . . created him. Of 'Michié bon Dieu' he [holds] his own private opinion, and not a too flattering one at that" (CW 505). The narrator's bemused stance towards Nég's "fantastic notion" masks the author's serious juxtaposition of Voodoo with Catholicism.¹¹⁶ Indeed, like Nég himself, whose real name César François Xavier is buried beneath the less noble "Nég," "Chicot," or "Maringouin," Voodoo and its spirits have long existed under camouflage, typically that of the Roman Catholicism imposed on slaves in both Haiti and Louisiana. Nég knows wherein he speaks when he claims he is the product of two spiritual entities; forced to lead a dual religious life, slaves were borne of two religious masters. The first, Voodoo, is represented by "St. Pierre" (Peter), code for Legba, the African/Voodoo lwa of gates and crossroads who must descend first at Voodoo rituals so other lwa can

¹¹⁵ Chopin's Mézor, "as straight as a cypress-tree and as proud looking as a king" with a "body, bare to the waist . . . like a column of ebony" that "glistened like oil" (CW 304), resembles an African described by George Washington Cable: "Yonder glistening black Hercules, who plants one foot forward, lifts his head and bare, shining chest, and rolls out the song from a mouth and throat like a cavern, is a *candio*, a chief," "The Dance in Congo Place," 523. However, unlike Cable's "Hercules" and other dancers of the Bamboula who move into an "ecstasy" that "rises to madness," Chopin's Mézor and the titular character Zoraïde fall in love at Congo Square. The "madness" to which Zoraïde ostensibly succumbs does not result from her participation in the "wild" dance described by Cable, but from the cruelty of her white mistress, who tells Zoraïde that the child produced by the quadroon's union with Mézor has died.

¹¹⁶ Nég's ostensibly "fantastic" religion parallels that of another former slave in the Chopin canon, Tante Cat'rinette, who is guided by the spirit of her former master. No more eccentric than Nég's belief, Tante Cat'rinette's highlights Voodoo's reverence for ancestors, who may become lwa themselves. Unfortunately, slavery had so disrupted family relations among African Americans that, at least in Tante Cat'rinette's case, the master supplanted the ancestor who should have been honored. Scholars, however, have generally failed to recognize that in both stories Chopin's criticism is directed against slavery rather than the religion that enabled bondsmen and women to survive. One exception is Eunice Manders, who recognizes that Cat'rinette's "African heritage" informs her deification of former master Vieumaite and that "Chopin, humanizing the stereotype [of the loyal slave], respects Cat'rinette's religion." Eunice Manders, "Kate Chopin's 'Wretched Freeman' in *Perspectives on Kate Chopin: Proceedings from the Kate Chopin International Conference April 6, 7, 8 1989* (Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State Univ., 1990), 43.

appear.¹¹⁷ Although other Catholic saints act as disguise for a multitude of Iwa, St. Paul, to my and apparently Chopin's knowledge, has no Voodoo equivalent. He thus represents one of Christianity's most steadfast evangelists, whose mission to spread the Truth was embraced in the nineteenth century by Isaac Hecker's Paulist order. In the passing allusion to "Michié bon Dieu," Chopin sums up the heart of the story's religious conflict. As "master," "bon Dieu" ("good God") represents the Christian God, the Lord, whom Nég and other slaves could rightly look upon in an unflattering light. But "bon Dieu" also invokes Voodoo's equivalent of a remote but ultimate creator of life, Bondye, whom Nég and Kate Chopin regard as an entity more deserving of his name.

In her description of society's reaction to Nég's "startling beliefs," Chopin immediately garners support for African spirituality. While Voodoo was pummeled verbally by white Christian writers, Nég is literally "thrashed by a robust young Irish priest for expressing his religious views . . . and . . . knifed by a Sicilian" (CW 505). Indeed, "Nég Creole" may be Chopin's most pointed challenge to the Catholicism, for the titular character is not the Vatican's only victim in the story. Even more so is Aglaé Boisduré, a member of the family that had enslaved Nég who the African American nonetheless adores and supports. Seventy-five-years-old and destitute, she, like Nég, has answered to other names, i.e., "Mademoiselle de Montallaine" when an actress in "minor

¹¹⁷ Although the Iwa constitute an ever-changing pantheon, Legba, described by Milo Rigaud as the "chief Voodoo god," is a constant in Voodoo rites and discussions about the African-based religion. See Milo Rigaud, *Secrets of Voodoo* (City Lights Books: San Francisco, 1969), 8-10; Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 101-2; Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 99. However, Legba, like Nég, has several aliases. In Louisiana, according to Carolyn Marrow Long, he has gone by Limba, La Bas, Liba, Léba. See Table 3, "Deities in Africa, Haiti, and New Orleans." Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 115-6.

parts” and now, in her fallen state, “La Chouette” (“owl”).¹¹⁸ Despite the narrator’s attempt to deflect attention from this latter appellation—Mlle. Boisduré came by her name “for no earthly reason unless that she perched high under the roof of the old rookery and scolded in shrill sudden outburst”—we cannot ignore the suggestion of an *unearthly* reason for the epithet. In medieval bestiaries, the owl, primarily due to its nocturnal habits, has been linked to the Jews, “who showed that they preferred darkness to light when they rejected Christ.”¹¹⁹ While Mlle. Boisduré remains true to Roman Catholicism, to the point that she and Nég have engaged in “religious warfare for years” (CW 507), Chopin shows clearly that the Church has not supported her any more than it has Nég. The black man supplies the aged Creole with whatever food he can accumulate for her, but Catholicism offers only the possibility of otherworldly consolation. At best, Mlle. Boisduré seems to hope that, through the prayers of Purgatory Mary, she might be spared some time in the Church’s version of a spiritual labor camp. Rather than the combination of physical and spiritual tonics (“herbs, or *tisanes*, or *grisgris*, or all three” [CW 507]) Nég suggests for her pains, Mlle. Boisduré turns to holy water from Lourdes that Purgatory Mary has provided. Ultimately, both the respective white religion and medicine embodied by the priest and doctor summoned to the Creole woman’s bedside are adequate only for preparing her for death.

Voodoo, however, might have achieved other ends. Although it is impossible to know Chopin’s exact thoughts on herbalism and conjure, in “Nég Creol” she demonstrates a sound understanding of and respect for their practice. When Mlle. Boisduré complains

¹¹⁸ Roger J. Steiner, *Webster’s French & English Dictionary* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1980), 86.

¹¹⁹ “The Medieval Bestiary,” <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast245.htm>. The owl apparently can represent Christ, but Chopin’s allusions to “Hebrews”—one “Hebrew” gives Nég a pail and another provides him with a handkerchief—suggest that she intends for her readers to regard Mlle. Boisduré as an outcast like Nég, although the woman, to her detriment, fails to recognize the parallel.

about a pain in her leg, she does so in words many a believer in Voodoo would understand: “It was all about a pain that lodged in her leg; that crept and acted like a live, stinging serpent, twining about her waist and up her spine, and coiling round the shoulderblade” (CW 507). Disparaged by nineteenth-century white folklorists, such imagery is common in African Americans’ descriptions of conjure, through which creatures, including reptiles, are thought to take up residence in the human body.¹²⁰ While Chopin might not concur with Nég’s obvious acceptance of this possibility—he plans to add some *grigri* to Mlle. Boisduré’s Catholic altar—the outcome of “Nég Creol” suggests she endorsed the metaphorical if not literal significance of this facet of Voodoo. Indeed, the parasite afflicting Mlle. Boisduré is the Catholic Church and the God it worships, for, as described in the story, both exact devotion even as they ignore the devotee’s physical needs. It is a religion of death, a point reiterated by the name of one of the Irishwomen who oversees the Creole’s wake: Brigitte. Like St. Peter, St. Brigitte has been superimposed on a Voodoo lwa, in this case “Big Brigitte, Maman or Mademoiselle Brigitte” whom Alfred Métraux describes as the “authority over cemeteries, particularly those in which the first person buried was a woman.”¹²¹ When Nég visits the deceased Mlle. Boisduré, the Irish Janie aptly assigns yet another name to him—“black

¹²⁰ Yvonne P. Chireau summarizes an account by Charles Chesnutt that sounds surprisingly like the fate experienced by Mlle. Boisduré: “A man . . . had been poisoned when a lizard had entered his system. ‘This lizard, according to the “doctor,” would start from the man’s shoulder and pass down the side of the body to the leg.’” Chesnutt hypothesized that Africans and African Americans developed the idea of such bodily invasion from their understanding of “subcutaneously burrowing insects and parasites.” See Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 105-6.

¹²¹ Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 114.

h'athen'"—but ignores the import of his paganism: the Voodooist survives while the Catholic, despite the “endurance” suggested by her name, does not.¹²²

With few exceptions, critics have interpreted Chopin's allusions to black beliefs as evidence the author regarded African Americans as uneducated and naïve; such interpretations, however, might say more about a continued Western bias against African-based concepts than they do about Chopin's perception. To be sure, her white characters, like Mademoiselle Boisduré, often dismiss black spiritual notions as products of an ignorant and uncivilized people. In *At Fault* Fanny Hosmer similarly ridicules African-Americans for believing that the dead rise from their graves on Toussaint Eve (more commonly known as Halloween) and specifically targets Aunt Minervy, who claims that on such a night “the spirits jerked [her husband] off his horse and dragged him up and down in the water, till he was nearly drowned” (*CW* 818). But Fanny is hardly a reliable commentator on any aspect of Louisiana culture, and her derision actually draws attention to the deference Chopin exhibits in her rendering of “Tous-saint' eve” as a time when supernatural and natural forces feed seamlessly into one another—just as they do in Voodoo.

Aunt Minervy's description of what happened to her husband on such a night might also be code for a very real danger that threatened people of color on all nights in the post-Reconstruction South. Dressed as spirits, Ku Klux Klan members have long terrorized people of color and proven themselves agents of death, although their preferred method has been lynching rather than drowning their victims. Certainly, the attitudes and practices of these all-too-earthly white revenants are those of the spiritually dead. As

¹²² “Boisduré” is a compound of “bois” and “durer” meaning “enduring wood.” Steiner, *Wester's French and English Dictionary*, 63, 134.

Chopin shifts attention to Voodoo's theological and social importance, she creates an extended metaphor through which she attacks a white America increasingly hostile to any shades of difference. At a time when white American Christianity was purging people of color from its ranks, Voodoo, she suggests, was a more genuinely catholic religion than that in which she had been raised.

The Haitian Roots of Chopin's Religious Revolution

“In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of the liberty of the blacks; it will grow back from the roots, because they are deep and numerous.”

Toussaint Louverture¹²³

Kate Chopin's turning to a religion considered Satanic by mainstream Americans was nothing less than revolutionary. As a witness to the blood shed in the name of reuniting the states of America and the subsequent amputation of people of color from the country's body of citizens, she might well have thought that some theological and literary guerilla effort was needed to check the homogenization of the United States. In Voodoo, she would have found a multifaceted religion that not only accepted differences, but even celebrated them. Accounts of ceremonies in Louisiana show that the celebrants were a diverse lot; the frequent presence of white women was especially scandalous. What is perhaps most puzzling about Chopin, then, is not that this white, Southern woman could have been receptive to the ideas and practices of Voodoo, but that she seems to have crossed the Atlantic, at least figuratively, to invoke the more intricate practice and pantheon of Haitian Voodoo rather than restrict herself to Louisiana Voodoo, in which conjure is thought to prevail. As biographers of Marie Laveaux have explained, Louisiana Voodoo was not simply a religion imported from Haiti; slaves from the Senegambia and

¹²³ Cited by Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 278.

Congo regions of Africa brought their beliefs directly into the colony. The Dahomean worship of multiple deities that largely informs Haitian Voodoo would not be a major influence on Louisiana Voodoo until refugees emigrated from Haiti to Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution. Consequently, Ina Fandrich claims, Louisiana lwa form a rather meager group: “New Orleans Voodoo practitioners work with a few Catholic saints and the spirits of the dead but never seem to have developed an elaborate system of lwa or divinities.”¹²⁴ This, however, is a matter of conjecture, for no one knows exactly what transpired at services conducted by Laveaux and other Voodooists in the nineteenth century. The sparse information we have has been gleaned from newspaper reports and a few interviews with octogenarians who knew Laveaux. Conducted long after the Voodoo Queen had died, the interviews describe only the most rudimentary facets of the services and give little insight into the theological foundation of Louisiana Voodoo. The fragments contained in *gris gris* bags might not tell the whole story.

Still, if scholars like Fandrich are correct in maintaining that the focus of Louisiana Hoodoo/Voodoo is magic rather than an intricate worship of multiple lwa, then Chopin would have had to look away from the New Orleans inhabited by Pouponne and her priestess and to the island of Haiti for the in-depth understanding of the nuances of the religion that inform the substrata of Chopin’s fiction. In the nineteenth century, she would hardly have been the only American whose eyes were turned to the new black republic. Both before and after the Civil War, Haiti generated either terror or hope in many Americans. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the United States was preparing to move into Haiti, ostensibly to serve as a stabilizing political force in the

¹²⁴ Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*, 42.

volatile republic.¹²⁵ As a resident and writer of Louisiana, Chopin also could not have ignored the ways Louisiana's social and political history mirrored much of Haiti's. Like the Caribbean island, Louisiana had been subject to a succession of colonizers from Spain, France, England, and America. Louisiana's three racial castes of whites, free people of color, and slaves replicated those of Haiti. And, as in Haiti, Roman Catholicism and Voodoo converged as dominant theological forces for Louisiana's people of color. Chopin therefore uses Haiti's political history as a medium to invoke the religious beliefs that united the slaves and enabled them to oust their oppressors. The Haitian underpinnings of Chopin's exploration of Voodoo manifest themselves as early as 1889 in *At Fault*. As we have seen, in a subplot often dismissed as awkward and unnecessary, Grégoire Santien shoots and kills the Native/African American character Joçint as the latter sets fire to David Hosmer's lumber mill. This, rather than the incursion of the railroad and logging industry into Place-du-Bois or the marriage of Thérèse Lafirme to Hosmer, constitutes the real revolution at work in Chopin's novel; through it, the writer transplants social, political, and religious facets of the Haitian Revolution into Louisiana's Cane River region.

Considered within this context, the *deus ex machina*—Fanny's drowning that frees Thérèse LaFirme to marry David and that has long annoyed critics of the novel—becomes a red herring to deflect attention from the African lwa, who, like the rebellious Joçint, catapult the tidy white spiritual logs from the celestial wagon. Although Joçint

¹²⁵ Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988). That Chopin would have been less than supportive of the American incursion into Haiti is suggested by her restrained response to the aspirations of her sons Felix and Fred to participate in the Spanish-American War of 1898. She might also have been influenced by William Marion Reedy, her friend and editor of the St. Louis *Sunday Mirror*, who criticized America's imperialistic foray into the Caribbean. See Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 313.

dies, his demise does not mean, as some argue, that Chopin regarded the survival of people of color of little consequence. Instead, they remain the actors of the novel's dynamic subtext who must be reckoned with. Even the child Mandy, whom both Thérèse and David mock at the end of the novel as they anticipate her saying "'suppa's gittin' cole,'" reminds the reader of a force that post-Reconstruction white Americans, like the French slaveholders in Haiti, underestimated. Despite his smug assurance, David has not predicted Mandy's words accurately: what she really says is "'Aunt B'lindy 'low suppa on de table gittin' cole.'" Such seemingly insignificant differences undermine a simplistic and sanguine interpretation of Mandy's arrival by re-introducing the older and less docile African-American, Aunt Belindy, and by suggesting that people of color speak a language neither the St. Louis logger nor the white Louisiana Creole has really mastered. Most of all, as a child, Mandy symbolizes the future. That she "retreat[s] at once from the fire of [David and Thérèse's] merriment" does not preclude her invoking the lwa and lighting a fire of her own one day (CW 876) Although David and Thérèse are unable to envision this, Chopin, like Aunt Belindy, lays her cards on the table for the reader to peruse.¹²⁶

As both antebellum and post-Reconstruction Americans were keenly aware, Voodoo fires had roared in Haiti: a distinguishing feature of the revolution was the "conflagration" of the plantations set by both the rebelling slaves and their enemies. The rebels at times ignited buildings and whole plantations so they might retreat in Mandy fashion from whites in pursuit of them. While Haiti had been declared a republic nearly

¹²⁶ Helen Taylor offers an alternate and more typical interpretation of this scene. Far from suggesting the latent power of people of color, Taylor contends, the scene illustrates David and Thérèse's shared condescension towards and mastery over blacks and "mythifies the plantation as a haven of almost complete harmony." Taylor, *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin*, 171.

fifty years before Kate Chopin's birth, the writer would have had ample opportunity to be reminded of its history through many publications. Fluent in French, she could have read Moreau de Saint-Méry's account of the events of his life in pre-revolution Santo Domingue, including his report of a Voodoo ceremony that has served as a starting-point for many studies of the religion. But more immediately accessible for Chopin would have been John Rely Beard's *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, The Negro Patriot of Hayti*, originally published in England in 1853 and reprinted in America ten years later, when Chopin was thirteen-years-old. A British Unitarian minister, Beard used Louverture's own writings to produce a biography that turns the Haitian into a romantic, epic hero; its American printing in 1863 was intended as a tool to spur the North on in its war with the South and bring slavery to an end in the United States. As the editor writes, "The efforts which are now made to effect the abolition of slavery in the United States of America, seem to render the present moment specially fit for the appearance of a memoir of TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE."¹²⁷

While Toussaint Louverture's leadership in the Haitian revolution was truly remarkable, Beard's and the anonymous editor's admiration for the former slave who would spearhead Haiti's transformation into a republic betrays ironic elements of racism that would not have escaped Kate Chopin's attention. According to Beard, Haiti's indigenous people "of the Caribbean race" were "but a few degrees above barbarism."¹²⁸ And despite his support of the revolution and abolition, Beard does not hold a much higher opinion of the people imported from Africa to replace the natives who had been annihilated by the Spaniards. While he grants people of African descent the status of

¹²⁷ Preface to *Toussaint L'ouverture: A Biography and Autobiography* by John Beard and Toussaint L'Ouverture (1863; repr., New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), iii.

¹²⁸ Beard, *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, 23.

humans (“the negro is a man”), he does not regard them as the equal to “the highest style of man [i.e., whites].” One cause for this is that “the race . . . has no history.” Beard proves that his grasp of sociology is no better than his understanding of history, for he dismisses black people with the sweeping generalization that “the very excess of [the negro’s] emotional nature unfits it for elevated thought, continuous industry, and lofty achievement.”¹²⁹ Part of Toussaint Louverture’s appeal, then, is that he is *not* what Beard considers the typical African; indeed, “[Louverture’s] great grandfather is reported to have been an African king of the Arradas tribe.”¹³⁰

Critical to John Beard’s esteem for Toussaint Louverture is the Haitian’s Christianity. As someone sent by “Providence” to liberate his people, he had to be well-grounded in the Christian faith; this religious foundation came from Louverture’s godfather Pierre Baptiste, whom missionaries had introduced to “the morality of a divine religion” and thus “enlighten[ed].” Ultimately, Beard proposes, Louverture owed his political and social ascent to this same religion, “that source [from which] he derived more power than from all others.”¹³¹ A source Beard would not entertain was Voodoo. Instead, the Unitarian expresses a surprising sympathy with the Catholic Church, which had been “corrupt[ed]” by the Africans imposing their “gross superstition” upon it.¹³² However Christian Louverture might have been, Voodoo’s role in the Haitian revolution should not be ignored. While Beard predictably omits any mention of the ritual that inaugurated the revolution, historians generally believe a Voodoo ceremony at Bois-Caïman in 1791 marked the official beginning of the rebellion. According to some reports, both the priest

¹²⁹ Beard, *Toussaint L’Ouverture*, “Conclusion.”

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 21.

Boukman and a priestess—either “an old African woman ‘with strange eyes and bristling hair’ or else a green-eyed woman of African and Corsican descent named Cécile Fatiman”—presided over the event, at which they sacrificed a black pig and prayed for successful revenge on the white men.¹³³

In *At Fault*, Kate Chopin seems to reference Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution at several junctures. An obvious parallel exists between the lumber mill established at Place-du-Bois in Cane River territory and the sugar mills developed first in Haiti and later in Louisiana by colonists forced to flee the island. Even more suggestive is the link between the forests being decimated for the lumber mill and Louverture’s famous comparison of himself to a tree whose roots would continue to thrive even after the tree had been cut down—that is, after Louverture had been arrested by the French, deported to the mother country, and imprisoned in a dungeon until his death.¹³⁴ In America, the North’s post-Civil War movement into the South to profit from the latter’s resources corresponds to the many imperial forces—the Spanish, French, British, and, increasingly in the nineteenth century, the Americans—with designs on Haiti. But most telling is the event in the novel that, more than Fanny Hosmer’s alcoholism, exposes the underbelly of the North/South reunion on Thérèse Lafirme’s plantation: the revolution set in motion when Joçint sets fire to the lumber mill on “Tous-saint’ eve.”

On the surface, Kate Chopin’s treatment of this event and its perpetrator suggests that the author, far from sharing John Beard’s support for the Haitian revolution and the

¹³³ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 99-100.

¹³⁴ This echo of L’Ouverture’s tree analogy is not limited to the logging symbolism in *At Fault*. In “Nég Créol,” as we have seen, Chopin returns to this imagery. While it is most apparent in Mademoiselle Boisduré’s name, Nég, called “Chicot” by some, is also associated with trees. Referred to as the “coffee-tree, the chicot is currently not listed as existing in Louisiana, although a popular recreational site in Louisiana is “Chicot Park.” See Harry A. Alden, *Hardwoods of North America* (Madison, WI: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 1995), 53.

elimination of slavery, harbors feelings more typical of Southern white supremacists. Joçint is hardly a picture of grandeur. We know nothing about his grandfather, but his father Morico, who once labored on Thérèse Lafirme's plantation, has become a simple maker of fans. All we know of Joçint's mother is that she was a Native American. With such genealogy, he seems the quintessential "barbarian," to use Beard's language, representative of both Haiti's original Taíno tribes and the Africans brought to the island. Noticeably missing is any white blood to mitigate what whites commonly believed were destructive and inherent African and Native American tendencies, such as the worship of spirits whose province is the natural world rather than the outback regions of heaven and hell. Joçint might even be considered the human embodiment of the flag introduced by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, general of the rebel troops and eventual emperor of Haiti. Determined that Haiti would no longer be controlled by whites, Dessalines is famous for his brutal annihilation of them and later pronouncement that "all Haitians would henceforth be known as 'black.'" To symbolize this elimination of white dominance, Dessalines "tore the white out of [the] French tricolor [flag] and sewed the blue and the red back together again."¹³⁵

That Chopin intends for her readers to sympathize with rather than censure both Haiti's rebels and Joçint is suggested by the latter's attachment to nature. Even Thérèse Lafirme, who enters an almost orgasmic bliss as she watches trees being converted to lumber at the mill, "[can] well understand the open *revolt* of the surly Joçint; for he [rides] the day long on that narrow car, back and forth, back and forth, with his heart in the pine hills and knowing that his little Creole pony [is] roaming the woods in vicious

¹³⁵ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 300, 293.

idleness and his rifle gathering an unsightly rust on the cabin wall at home” (CW 747, emphasis added). Although he continues to work outside in nature, the repetition of his job at the mill makes him the equivalent of a factory worker. Nor does his new employment provide him with sufficient material rewards. As a paid captive, Joçint is less able to provide food for himself and his father, for he cannot hunt as he once did and chafes at taking the handouts Thérèse offers. The mistress of the plantation, however, imagines he should be grateful for such charity and criticizes him for failing to take advantage of it. In the dynamics of her relationship with Joçint, she proves that the paternalistic justification for slavery—people of color need whites to take care of them—was not sex specific and endured in post-Reconstruction America.

By launching his rebellion against such oppression on “Tous-saint’ eve,” Joçint not only channels the spirit of Toussaint Louverture, but also the lwa who nearly a century before had inspired the Haitian slaves’ revolt against the French. For Catholics, the significance of “Tous-saint’ eve” rests primarily in the two days that follow it: All Saints’ Day on November 1 and All Souls’ Day on November 2. For Voodooists, however, the entire month of November is dedicated to the “Gede” family of lwa that preside over death; thus, “Tous-saint eve,” as perceived by the African Americans in *At Fault*, literally signals the opening of the doors to the dead. Joçint does not exhibit the fear of the average “niggah” at Place-du-Bois who, according to Grégoire, “wouldn’t [be] out o’ his cabin [on that night] afta dark to save his soul.” But in a bit of conjure worthy of Charles Chesnut’s Uncle Julius, Joçint attempts to capitalize on Grégoire’s preconceptions by telling the white Creole, “[D]on’ ketch me out de ‘ouse night lak dat fu no man” (CW 813). Later, through his conflagration and death, Joçint inspires other

blacks on the plantation to leave their homes at “two hours past midnight—that very deadeast hour of the night.” In part, Chopin tells us, this stems from the “strong reality” of the situation. But even more important may be “the confidence lent [the blacks] in each other’s company” (CW 822). Among a people who often seem at odds with one another in the novel, Joçint’s individual act has generated a temporary sense of community much as the Haitian *maroons* (runaway slaves) galvanized people of color to unite in their struggle against their French oppressors. Perhaps the people of color value their “soul[s]” more than Grégoire and the other whites at Place-du-Bois realize.¹³⁶

Joçint’s saving grace emerges most in the ritual of his rebellion, in which the morés and images of Haitian Voodoo supplant those of American Christianity. Initially, Chopin plays to her audience’s desire for the stock figures of both local-color fiction and Halloween when she describes the night in frankly gothic terms: “Out in the hills there was no . . . unearthly stillness reigning. Those restless wood-dwellers, that never sleep, were sending startling gruesome calls to each other. Bats were flapping and whirling and darting hither and thither; the gliding serpent making quick rustle amid the dry, crisp leaves, and over all sounded the murmur of the great pine trees, telling their mystic secrets to the night” (CW 819). But the “gruesome” tone is undermined by the juxtaposition of the “unearthly stillness” to the natural music generated by the creatures of the night. The “murmur of the great pine trees” must have been tinged with sorrow since they would soon be silenced by the lumber mill. But for the moment they share “mystic secrets,” much as Voodooists have for generations in late-night gatherings. In fact, the presence of the “gliding serpent” implies that one of the major lwa, the serpent

¹³⁶ Once again I differ with Helen Taylor, who argues that, by “ventur[ing] out on the one night, Halloween, when all Negroes stay home,” Joçint “break[s] the code of the black . . . communit[y].” *Gender, Race, and Region*, 170.

fertility god Damballah, has already arrived. When Joçint, “a human creature,” enters the picture, he is not an intruder but one at home with the forest dwellers, who have been transformed into “spirits of night and darkness.” He, in turn, increasingly assumes bestial characteristics. As a “human hound,” he easily makes his way through the dark woods. The hybrid image, besides reiterating his biracial heritage, also suggests Voodoo possession, during which the Voodooist is considered the horse the lwa rides. This parallel becomes more apparent when Joçint comes upon Grégoire’s horse and can tell from its sweaty presence that Grégoire has been in pursuit of him.

The allusion to Joçint’s “hound” nature, however, anticipates a distressing event in his ritual that has led many critics to vilify him and/or his creator: his hanging of his “yellow skulking dog” that has followed him on his trek to the lumber mill (CW 819). However appalling the act might be to animal lovers, it is symbolic rather than sadistic. Just as a Voodoo mambo might, Chopin uses the scene to awaken her readers to the skewed priorities of America, where the death of a pet can generate more sympathy than that of a human.¹³⁷ On the one hand, since Joçint is a biracial “human hound,” his killing of his “yellow” dog implies suicide and specifically recalls that practiced by Africa’s Igbo. As Chinua Achebe has famously demonstrated through Okonkwo in the novella *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo people had long accepted death by hanging as a means to escape oppression. Such was so much the case among enslaved tribal members

¹³⁷ Barbara Ewell aptly demonstrates the reaction of critics and, one suspects, most readers to Joçint’s treatment of his dog: the “unalleviated wickedness” of the rebel is evident in the fact that he “murders his own dog!” *Kate Chopin* (New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1986), 43. Chopin’s description of a dog in *The Awakening* also seems included as implicit criticism of the sentimentality of the privileged classes. Temporarily divested of both husband and children, Edna Pontellier amuses herself with the “children’s little dog,” later referred to as “doggie” (CW 955-6). Hardly the diction of a realist like Chopin, the diminutive appellation alerts the reader to Edna’s immaturity. The attention with which Chopin’s protagonist briefly showers the dog also stands in marked contrast to the indifference with which she typically treats most humans, especially her children and people of color.

that a common Haitian expression is “*Ibos pend’ dor’a yo*” (“the Igbo hang themselves”).¹³⁸ In *At Fault*, although G goire shoots Jo int, the latter has made this possible by poorly orchestrating the fire and failing to hold onto his gun. While Chopin was hardly a proponent of suicide, she might have understood the impetus that could propel a person towards it, especially when self-annihilation might serve a community. But in post-Reconstruction America, hanging was more often an act imposed on individuals. By emphasizing the loyalty of Jo int’s dog, Chopin attacks the horrific injustice with which more than one African American was rewarded for his or her constancy. Through her allusion to lynching, Chopin indicts both an evil practice and the hypocrisy of an American Christianity that failed to stop or even helped to perpetuate it.

Betrayal then becomes a central theme of the Jo int subplot and an explanation for Kate Chopin’s disillusionment with Christianity. Although her nineteenth-century white audience, like the critic who mistakenly thought the novel’s title referred to Fanny Hosmer, no doubt regarded Jo int as an untrustworthy “savage,” from the beginning of *At Fault* his behavior is transparently consistent; he hates his new employment and, as David Hosmer well knows, has been expressing his disdain by deliberately setting logs loose so they fall from the wagons. A Thoreauvian act of civil disobedience, it is motivated by a legitimate sense of injustice and constitutes only one of many ways in which Jo int attempts to revolt against the white Christian world. Unfortunately, on Tous-saint’ Eve the presence of his dog jeopardizes his work. However unintentional, it,

¹³⁸ Nicholas Awde. *Igbo-English/English-Igbo Pocket Ibo Dictionary & Phrasebook* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1999), 7; Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 58. As a result of their tendency to escape slavery via suicide, the Igbos were considered less desirable slaves. See Timothy B. Powell, “Ebos Landing,” *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:BBhIVgyQ4IJ:www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp%3Fid%3Dh-2895+%22igbo+slaves%22&cd=7&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a>.

not Joçint, is the potential betrayer. By eliminating it, Joçint not only remains temporarily free from detection, but also reenacts the animal sacrifice common to all Voodoo ceremonies. Although a pig constituted the offering at Bois-Caïman, dogs, along with the more common chickens, goats, sheep, and bulls, have played their part in serving the lwa. At the same time, Chopin's description of the hound has biblical parallels. In its refusal to go home when Joçint sends it away twice, it resembles Peter, who betrayed Christ three times. (Joçint ensures that his dog will not have a third opportunity.) Hanged, it recalls the more infamous apostle, Judas Iscariot.

The human equivalent of Judas in *At Fault* is Grégoire Santien, who, with a coldness that far surpasses that of the Native/African American, shoots the unarmed Joçint. Trapped within the fire's flames, Joçint "quake[s]," not simply because he anticipates his own incineration, but also because he has "a premonition of evil," that is, of Grégoire, who "cover[s] him with the muzzle of a pistol" (CW 820-21). In the Haitian Revolution, evil assumed many forms, but in Grégoire Chopin seems to have embedded a surprising source of villainy, the French bishop Abbé Grégoire, who, despite his support of both the French and Haitian revolutions, demonstrated a racial bias similar to that of John Rely Beard and many American abolitionists. While Abbé Grégoire campaigned for the elimination of slavery, he, like other supposedly enlightened thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, subscribed to a cultural hierarchy that privileged Europe. Initially siding with Haiti's biracial free people of color against the purely African slaves, the bishop would later endorse the cause of the more radical black faction but encouraged miscegenation as a means of elevating what he regarded as an inferior race. According to historian Alyssa Sepinwall, for Abbé Grégoire the "regeneration" of black Haitians also

entailed adopting Western values: “Creole and voodoo, both efforts to retain elements of traditional culture, thus appeared to him only as corruptions of French and Christianity that needed to be wiped out.”¹³⁹ As one might expect, the bishop’s vision was that Haitians would unite under the banner of Catholicism.

Chopin’s Grégoire is no less conflicted. While he has a history of terrorizing the people of color at Place-de-Bois, he also interacts with them more than most of the white characters in the novel do. And, like the novel’s people of color, he apparently believes in a complex supernatural world. In contrast to the Unitarian Melicent, who dismisses any suggestion of otherworldly occurrences in the temporal realm, Grégoire is completely credulous as he tells the story of the ghost of “ole McFarlane” who, in payment for his abuse of slaves, must suffer an eternity of haunting the Louisiana swamp. Grégoire’s behavior with Joçint is even more perplexing. Even though Joçint’s disdain for the mill is evident from his first appearance in the novel, Grégoire enlists the rebel as a liaison to arrange for a sentinel at the mill on Tous-saint’ Eve. We learn this when, prior to the Grégoire’s late night encounter with Joçint, the Creole overseer asks Joçint if Woodson had agreed to serve as night watchman. To Joçint’s negative reply, Grégoire swears, ““Sacré imbecile”” (CW 813). Whether Woodson or Joçint is the intended recipient of this oxymoronic insult is not clear.

¹³⁹ Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 195. Elsewhere, Sepinwall succinctly defines the paradoxical nature of the abbé’s position on race and abolition: “The ideal society Grégoire envisioned would have no more prejudice. But neither would it have cultural or racial difference. Through cultural regeneration and mixed marriage, the world could become a harmonious and homogenous ‘universal human family’—whose culture and values would be that of French Catholic republicans.” Sepinwall, “Eliminating Race, Eliminating Difference: Blacks, Jews, and the Abbé Grégoire,” in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, eds. Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 37.

In this brief passage, Grégoire Santien functions as much as conspirator as overseer. First, his choice for lumber-mill security is patently ironic: we should probably not expect a worker named Woodson to protect a lumber mill on Tous-saint Eve or any other night. Nor should we imagine that Joçint would have conveyed such a request. Finally, by describing Woodson and/or Joçint as a “sacré imbecile,” Grégoire elevates the two workers to the status of holy fools, individuals who possess a sanctity and wisdom that the white Creole Grégoire can only long for. One explanation for this narrative paradox is that blacks, especially Joçint, are doppelgängers whose existence reminds Grégoire of his own inferior position in the Place-du-Bois hierarchy; in Louisiana, the possibility also exists that some drops of black blood flow in the veins of the presumably white man. That Grégoire and Joçint occupy a similar social and narrative stratum has not escaped the notice of scholars. Pamela Menke, for instance, considers these two characters, as well as Fannie Hosmer and Marie Louise, “Others” inhabiting the “demonic text” in the novel.¹⁴⁰

Within a religious context, Grégoire Santien’s inconsistency mirrors that of Abbé Grégoire and, more generally, the Catholic Church. Most suggestive of this is the Creole’s course of action following Joçint’s death. Drinking at Grammont’s store, Grégoire orders the proprietor to “[treat] eve’y las’ man roun’ heah at my ‘spence, black an’ w’ite” (CW 832). This enforced integration does not necessarily reflect a real sense of equality. In part, it stems from the Creole’s rage at being rejected by Melicent Hosmer for his murder of Joçint. Even if we are to assume that Grégoire has experienced a change of heart concerning race, his action is still self-serving, for through it he enjoys a sense of

¹⁴⁰ Pamela Glenn Menke, “Fissure as Art in Kate Chopin’s *At Fault*,” 46. Unfortunately, Menke’s allusion to the “demonic text” echoes the Christian bias that, I contend, Chopin is challenging through such characters as Joçint.

power he lacks with Thérèse Lafirme as well as David and Melicent Hosmer. Grégoire certainly does nothing to improve the status of people of color, who now must fear retaliation from Grammont and others of his ilk. Abbé Grégoire, who never resided in Haiti, similarly changed positions regarding the Haitian Revolution. As Jean-Françoise Brière notes, although the bishop had long supported the abolition of slavery, he opposed the revolution until 1802. When he finally aligned himself with the Haitian cause, he did so as a champion of what Brière calls “an emancipatory type of colonization” in which liberation evolves from a European, Christian value system.¹⁴¹ Like Abbé Grégoire, the Catholic Church in post-Reconstruction America could not countenance a spiritual self-determination that might include worshiping the lwa. The Catholic Church had its own agenda that trumped the welfare and desires of people of color.

Of course, the Judas of literature and life only exists in relation to a Jesus. In *At Fault*, Joçint, whose very name resembles that of the Messiah, assumes this role. To date, only Donna Campbell, who writes in passing that in death he assumes “an oddly Christ-like pose,” seems to have noted this detail.¹⁴² What, in Campbell’s industrial reading of the novel, appears an incongruous image functions much less “oddly” within the broad theological context of the work as a cipher by which the “questions” Campbell claims “[the novel] does not answer about racism” can be resolved. More than the position of Joçint’s body establishes the rebel as a messiah, albeit one at odds with orthodox Christianity. Joçint himself considers his burning of the mill a “mission.” Trapped in the conflagration, he imagines that the fire “mock[s] him as a fool and point[s] him out as a target for heaven and earth to hurl destruction at if they would” (*CW* 820-21). So, too, did

¹⁴¹ Jean-Françoise Brière, “Abbé Grégoire and Haitian Independence,” *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 42.

¹⁴² Campbell, “*At Fault*: A Reappraisal of Kate Chopin’s Other Novel,” 40.

Christ feel himself abandoned by both humanity on earth and his Father in heaven. In death, Joçint is finally the crucified Jesus whose “body [lies] amongst the heavy timbers, across a huge beam, with arms outstretched and head hanging down upon the ground” (CW 822).

By transforming one of the most seemingly irreligious characters in the novel into Christ, Kate Chopin is not following the lead of John Beard, who could lionize Toussaint L’Ouverture only to the degree that the Haitian subscribed to the tenets of Christianity. Instead, through the pagan Joçint, she exposes the spiritual hypocrisy and void at the heart of nineteenth-century American Christianity, be it David Hosmer’s Unitarianism or Thérèse Lafirme’s Catholicism. The Christ embraced by Missouri’s “littlest rebel” must revolt against Christianity itself. Thus, the cross which superficially links Joçint to Christianity actually aligns him with Voodoo, in which the cross and crossroads represent the intersection of the spirit with the temporal world. Positioned across the beams, he embodies Legba, who opens the gates to the spirit world and other lwa.¹⁴³ With his death, Joçint has become the “*l’ouverture*” through which the spirits of the dead might truly walk with the living on “Tous-saint’ eve.”

Chopin’s shift from the hollow formulas of Christianity and towards the hallowed practices and beliefs of Voodoo is perhaps most powerfully evoked in Morico’s response to his son’s death. The man who once confessed to Thérèse that ““Jocint is a bad son . . . when even you have been able to do nothing with him”” (CW 756) seems merely to have been playing the obsequious part expected by plantation owners. Even before Joçint’s death, Morico ceases his daytime performance to admit, in the privacy of his moonlit

¹⁴³ Although Legba is most commonly associated with St. Peter, Anthony Pinn has also linked the *lwa* to Christ. See *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 20.

room, that he “misse[s] his boy.” When he finds his son’s body in the flames, he surrenders the role of the black accommodationist completely and indicts the entire plantation community as “murderers.” Unlike the patriarchal God of Judeo-Christianity, the father of Joçint is no supporter of human sacrifice and, in keeping with African beliefs, knows the importance of family relations. Now the Moor his name symbolizes, Morico represents the alternative African faith forced underground in Chopin’s novel just as it was in post-Reconstruction Louisiana. In the last moments of his life, the elderly Morico seems possessed by a Voodoo spirit capable of giving him internal vision and external power: “The whole story was plain to him as if it had been told by a revealing angel. The strength of his youth had come back to speed him over the ground.” Although he dies in the process, Morico single-handedly drags his son from the flames. Christian America does not win this round, for while the rebuilt lumber mill eventually takes over much of the Place-du-Bois plantation and many of its occupants, Morico has ensured that his “*garçon*” does not “burn like a log of wood” (CW 823).

Through Morico, Chopin does more than merely preserve the body of Joçint: she achieves in fiction what Toussaint L’Ouverture had promised regarding “the liberty of the blacks” in history. Neither Joçint’s body nor the rebellious spirit of people of color is a mere log to be destroyed on Tous-saint Eve. But salvation does not lie in the elements of earth and air (“heaven”), the stuff of Judeo-Christianity intent on destroying Joçint. And while Chopin is sympathetic to Joçint’s channeling of the same fiery warrior Iwa Ogun invoked by the Haitian revolutionaries, she also recognizes that such heat can be self-defeating, as it ultimately was in Haiti. So, too, is it for Joçint, for the light of the flames “point him out as a target.” The alternative medium is water, which dominates the second

half of the novel and reminds Chopin's readers of a natural force that knows no racial lines and, more important, serves as a key symbol of Haitian Voodoo. As Terry Rey explains, water has been especially important because it represents the ocean that separated the original slaves from their African homeland. Thus, many Voodooists believe the soul must spend "a year and a day" in the abyss, "at the bottom of a river or lake" before it can return home to Guinea, that is, Africa. According to Rey, many of the lwa have a similarly fluid existence, with "half of . . . the pantheon . . . liv[ing] in, under, or across water."¹⁴⁴ In *At Fault*, the lwa manifest themselves at Cane River.

Chopin foreshadows the shift from earth, air, and fire to water and the lwa that inhabit it in her description of Fanny Hosmer's first meeting with Sampson, the black servant and future conduit through whom Fanny acquires her alcohol. Like much of Chopin's writing, the passage is initially disturbing because it seems to perpetuate bigoted stereotypes. Fanny, the narrator claims, is unable to appreciate the "humor" of the "picture" of Sampson's "elfish and ape like body." But the "picture" assumes a less comic aspect when Sampson "pass[es] his black yellow-palmed hand slowly through the now raging fire" in what Fanny rightly regards as a "salamander like exhibition" (*CW* 796). While this image, as well as the fact that Sampson wears a coat in which Grégoire once tussled with Joçint, anticipates the Grégoire-Joçint conflict at the mill, by the end of the novel it symbolizes the ability of people of color and the African faith to survive. Despite the myth attendant to it, the salamander, like many a Voodoo lwa, is a creature of water, not fire.¹⁴⁵ So, too, does Sampson show an affinity with or at

¹⁴⁴ Terry Rey, "Vodou, Water, and Exile: Symbolizing Spirit and Pain in Port-au-Prince," 204, 199.

¹⁴⁵ With its ties to water and fire, the salamander, especially as it is used here in reference to a person of color, could embody the two primary *nacions* or families of Haitian lwa, the *Rada* and *Petro*. The first, generally considered the cool or more benevolent lwa, are typically associated with water. In contrast, the

least an understanding of water that the white Fanny lacks. On the night of the flood, Fanny crosses the river because the African American has not brought her the firewater she craves. Although he tells her that she “‘brung de rain’” on the night he first meets her, one must wonder if it is not Sampson and other people of color in the text who conjure up the flood at the end of the novel.

Certainly, the flood pits the races against each other and provides the opportunity for some blacks to pay homage to the lwa who preside over the abyss. This is evident in what might seem a simple example of the division that exists among the people of color. Aunt Agnes, who cannot enter the ferry until a “white man” with his horses has done so, is at odds with the black ferryman, Nathan. Consistently deferential to David Hosmer, Nathan is disrespectful of the elderly black woman, who, in turn, tells Nathan, “‘You done cheat Mose out o’ de job anyways; we all knows dat’” (CW 866). While the reference to “Mose”—Moses—has obvious Old Testament significance in keeping with the Biblical tenor of the entire novel, for African Americans it has more specific political and religious connotations. As the representative of emancipation, Moses summons up the specter of slavery. But, like many Catholic saints, Moses is also tied to the lwa, specifically Damballah, due to the Jewish leader’s seemingly magical powers and serpentine staff.¹⁴⁶ While Aunt Agnes could have learned of Damballah in Louisiana,

Petro lwa, considered “hot,” are more commonly linked to fire. The two divisions are discussed in most literature on Voodoo. See, for example, Herskovitz’s description in *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 273-4.

¹⁴⁶ Many texts on Voodoo have addressed this Damballah-Moses connection. Among American writers, Zora Neale Hurston has perhaps most fully explored it in the introduction to *Tell My Horse*, her study of voodoo in Jamaica and Haiti, and *Mules and Men*, in which she documents her own initiation into Voodoo in Louisiana. Melanie J. Wright positions Hurston’s treatment of the Jewish leader against a twentieth-century backdrop in which “Moses figures . . . clash with America’s great twentieth-century Pharaohs, including militarized opponents, such as the USSR and Nazi Germany, and those closer to home who would oppress groups such as African Americans and women.” Wright, *Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4, 54-57.

where he goes by the name Danny Leblanc or variations of it,¹⁴⁷ given her age she might well have come from Haiti, where she could have developed an even greater appreciation for this important lwa. She could even have been a mambo providing a water-filled basin for the lwa in the *hounfour*, the Voodoo temple. As Damballah, Mose would doubtless have been a better ferryman than Nathan.

While Aunt Agnes might be a mambo, she is not the reigning queen in the text. This role belongs to Marie Louise, whose name links her to the Voodoo of both Haiti and Louisiana. Mentioned only in passing in Voodoo texts, the name has been listed among those of Haitian lwa. One source, for example, identifies her as “a famous mystère of the Haitian War of Independence” while Milo Rigaud includes her name among the “Pethro Mystèstres.”¹⁴⁸ At the same time, Marie Louise’s name and function resemble those of Marie Laveaux and her fellow priestess and daughter, Marie Euchariste, also called “Marie Laveaux.” That Chopin’s character is not a plantation toady has been noted. Donna Campbell, for example, describes the refusal of “*Grosse tante*” to move her cabin to higher ground as a “piece of mild rebellion” and David Russell rightly argues that “Marie Louise, through her ability to speak and resist, denies a monolithic view of blackness.”¹⁴⁹ That this “rebellion” has its roots in Voodoo, however, has been overlooked. With her house perched above the river, Marie Louise not only frustrates Thérèse Lafirme but also maintains a connection to the water so important to Voodoo. The African basis for Marie Louise’s appreciation of the river is suggested by her

¹⁴⁷ Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen Marie Laveaux*, 786-87.

¹⁴⁸ Jean Kent, “Voodooorites.” At voodooocan.com. 1970, last modified 9/18/2010 <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:DAkg2oZ367MJ:www.voodooocan.com/voodooorites.htm+%22marie+louise%22+vodou&cd=20&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a>; Milo Rigaud, *Secrets of Voodoo*, 65.

¹⁴⁹ Campbell, “*At Fault*: A Reappraisal of Kate Chopin’s Other Novel,” 29; David Russell, “A Vision of Reunion: Kate Chopin’s *At Fault*,” 3.

reluctance to cross it, for, as Rey explains, “crossing of water is one of the most powerful symbols in Haitian Vodou.”¹⁵⁰ As the medium through which the deceased return to Africa, the river represents death. Kate Chopin seems to have capitalized on this symbolism by titling Chapter IV “Thérèse Crosses the River,” for by moving into Marie Louise’s territory, Thérèse engages in a sort of cultural death. Of course, Fanny proves the literal truth of the African-American belief when she drowns after having arrived at Marie Louise’s cabin. Marie Louise, on the other hand, is willing to venture to the other side in only two capacities: as nurse to an ailing Thérèse or as chef for an important dinner. In the role of healer, which she enacts often to cure Thérèse of headaches, Marie Louise perpetuates the function in Voodoo practiced generally by “root doctors” and specifically by Marie Laveaux. Letting down Thérèse’s hair and massaging her scalp, the African-American even recreates the Voodoo queen’s official profession of hairdresser. But more suggestive of Voodoo is the black woman’s relationship with Père Antoine and attitude towards the medals and other bits of Catholicism the cleric shares with her. Although Chopin’s biographers, following Daniel Rankin’s lead, have assumed that Chopin’s model for Père Antoine was the Cloutierville priest Jean Marie Beaulieu,¹⁵¹ a more likely inspiration would have been Antonio de Sedilla, a.k.a. Père Antoine, famous for his sympathy for people of color and, even more significantly, for his friendship with Marie Laveaux. Together the two ministered to the ailing and imprisoned. But this partnership did not hinge upon Marie Laveaux’s abandoning her African beliefs and practices. Thus, when Marie Louise ascribes the proliferation of roses outside her cabin

¹⁵⁰ Rey, “Vodou, Water, and Exile,” 198.

¹⁵¹ Daniel S. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1932), 100; Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, 147; Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 147.

to Père Antoine's blessing, she is articulating a belief in a magic more in keeping with Voodoo than Christianity.¹⁵²

So, too, does Marie Louise's determinism—"If the good God does not want to take care of me, then it's time for me to go"—seem based in the African faith and has a sense of truth lacking in Thérèse's counterargument that God "wants us to do our share, too" (CW 808). Unlike David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme, whose belief in individualism and self-reliance blinds them to human limitations, Marie Louise, who in the past did agree to having her cabin moved, recognizes that ultimately she is a creature and as such cannot escape death, no matter how many times she might relocate. Even her seemingly commonplace reference to the "good God" has connotations of Voodoo, in which, we have seen, the French translation of the phrase, "*bon Dieu*," probably provided the name of the primary deity, *Bondye*. Marie Louise's relative detachment from "the good God" similarly corresponds to Voodooists' relationship to *Bondye*, whose remote nature precludes their worshipping him. Instead, they direct their rituals and prayers to the host of *lwa*, who, by "riding a horse," communicate immediately and intimately with the community.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 71. Separating Voodoo from Catholic impulses is admittedly difficult because of the syncretic relationship between the two faiths. One practice adopted from Catholicism is the blessing of objects, such as the drums used in Voodoo rituals. But Voodooists, who consider such blessings "baptisms," ascribe much more power to them than do Catholics. As Melville Herskovits explains, the practice ensures "not only that [the objects] may possess proper supernatural power, but more importantly that they may perform their functions in the very serious and African matter of calling the *loa* and placating the supernatural beings of the *vodun* cult." For Marie Louise, the roses may signify that she exists in a sound, reciprocal relationship with the *lwa*. In her encounter with Père Antoine, she assumes a position of power similar to that of the mambo while the priest occupies the less important position of the *prêt' savanne*, who, Herskovits writes, performs Catholic functions during voodoo ceremonies, such as "read[ing] prayers 'from the book' and sprinkl[ing] his holy water." The actual "baptism," however, is performed by the mambo or houngan. See Herskovits, 275. Thus, Marie Louise "calls [Père Antoine] in" and recasts a medal of the Virgin Mary that he gives her into a nature-based spiritual icon, "a silver star."

¹⁵³ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 56.

Ironically, Marie Laveaux and Voodoo manifest themselves most powerfully in the novel in a detail that scholars typically describe as indicative of Kate Chopin's racism—Marie Louise's disappearance during the flood. David Russell, for example, argues that "[t]here is no sign of Marie Louise because she herself is reduced to only a sign, an unstable presence whose very existence requires a reader in the proper political position. . . . The landscape itself becomes a disciplinary mechanism confirming racial difference and hierarchy."¹⁵⁴ Such a reading ignores the fact that the natural setting of the flood scene is the province of the African-American; any "discipline" it enacts is directed against the whites as poetic justice for their abuse of both nature and people of color. David Hosmer's attempt to save Fanny mirrors Morico's effort to rescue Joçint, and, although Hosmer does not die, he is "struck . . . full upon the forehead" by "a great plunging beam" much like that upon which Joçint's body fell; when Thérèse Lafirme encounters Hosmer a year later, his scar still "com[es] out like a red letter" (CW 868, 872). This "red letter," with which Chopin seems to look both backward to Nathaniel Hawthorne and forward to Stephen Crane, is noteworthy because, unlike Hester Prynne's "A," it has been impressed upon Hosmer by nature, not by human society. It also suggests yet another spiritual inversion in the text. While Grégoire Santien is twice described as "raising Cain" and African-Americans had long been considered descendants of Abel's murderer, the white David Hosmer actually bears the mark.

Scarred, Hosmer becomes much more earth-bound than the Unitarian would like to admit, while "*Gross tante*," so called in part for her physical heft, has managed to vanish into the proverbial thin air. Chopin's description keeps the black woman's fate quite open-ended, a fact that has ominous implications for the novel's white characters. As

¹⁵⁴ Russell, "A Vision of Reunion," 8.

history had proven, the missing black person was an entity capable of enacting any manner of mischief upon those in power; this potential contributed to slave owners' demand for the passing and enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. Leaving "no sign" means Marie Louise, like the maroons, cannot be tracked. Rather than cementing a racial hierarchy, Marie Louise's disappearance generates a sense of uncertainty in the novel's subtext that undermines the pat resolution of the David Hosmer/Thérèse Lafirme story.

The cryptic account of Marie Louise's post-flood status also has a supernatural quality missing in Fanny's demise. Indeed, in her mysterious exit from the temporal realm, *Gross tante* emulates none other than the Virgin Mary, who Roman Catholics have long believed did not die but was taken bodily into heaven. Since then, the Virgin has supposedly defied natural law through numerous appearances on earth. Chopin, who reviewed Zola's *Lourdes* and also named the Catholic church in *The Awakening* after the locale of St. Bernadette's vision, was obviously attuned to the famous 1858 apparition in France. *At Fault* suggests she was also aware of a similar but less publicized Haitian event in the 1840s when the Virgin was said to appear in a palm tree near Saut d'Eau ("waterfall") in Ville Bonheur. Before the visitation, the waterfall, created by an earthquake in 1842, had attracted Voodoo devotees, who believed such lwa as Damballah and his wife Ayida Wèdo inhabited it. Although The Haitian government ordered that a chapel be built at the site, historically the Catholic Church has been conflicted about this apparition, even as Haitian pilgrims flock to Saut d'Eau every July.¹⁵⁵ In *At Fault*, the

¹⁵⁵ Elizabeth McAlister, "The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou and Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism," in *African American Religious Thought*, eds. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 953-54. According to McAlister, Saut d'Eau attracts more pilgrims than any other site in Haiti. But the pilgrimage's Voodoo dimension has been problematic for the Catholic Church since the apparition was first announced. During the nineteenth century, the Church was noticeably silent on the subject. *Catholic World*, for instance, which published numerous pieces on Lourdes, including a serialized, ten-part book, makes no mention of Saut d'Eau.

entire scene preceding Fanny's drowning can be read as a reenactment of the Saut d'Eau phenomenon. Severed from the "main body" and momentarily suspended over the raging river, the land with Marie Louise's cabin appears to David Hosmer as "some awful apparition that must soon pass from sight and leave him again in possession of his reason" (CW 867); at least temporarily, the novel's representative Unitarian has been torn from his rationalist moorings. Fanny, who "appear[s] at the door, like a figure in a dream" (CW 867), briefly assumes the pose of the Virgin Mary, although Fanny's death undercuts this Catholic element. The vanishing Marie Louise, however, seems to embody fully both the Catholic and Voodoo aspects of the Virgin's visitation. She is Mary, who reportedly appeared at Saut d'Eau several times but, as in all of her earthly visitations, never remained; and she is the Virgin's black Voodoo counterpart, Ezilie Dantò the Iwa of motherhood depicted in Voodoo iconography as the black Madonna. The Voodoo implications become even more pronounced when we consider Marie Louise's disappearance against a Louisiana backdrop. Her age, the precarious state of her cabin, and Thérèse Lafirme's efforts to get her to leave it have startling parallels in Marie Laveaux folklore: "It is told that when a hurricane passed over [New Orleans] in the later years of her life, she was living in a shanty on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. The wind rocked her cabin back and forth and she was entreated to leave the place and seek shelter in the city. Again and again she refused help, but finally consented to leave her abode, and no sooner was she safely away than the cabin disappeared into the water."¹⁵⁶

Although we do not know that Marie Louise is safe, we also cannot say for sure that she has died. The fate of the second Marie Laveaux (Marie Laveaux's daughter Marie

¹⁵⁶ Ron Bodin, *Voodoo Past and Present* (Lafayette, LA: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1990), 52.

Euchariste) has been equally mysterious. While the 1881 death of her mother was documented in an obituary widely published in America, until quite recently the second Marie Laveaux seemed to have simply vanished. Commonly believed to have assumed the Voodoo duties of her aged mother, Marie Euchariste did have her own Voodoo practice, but, as Fandrich has shown, she could not have taken her mother's place as Voodoo queen, for she died in 1862.¹⁵⁷ To date, however, no one seems to have determined the final resting place of Marie Laveaux 2.

The Voodoo Quest: "And what about explorers, Theosophists, Hoodoos?"

The Souls of Voodoo

When Marie Louise opens the door of her cabin to Fanny Hosmer, she does more than facilitate a denouement in which David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme can freely enter a marriage: she initiates an exposé of the alienation wrought by white Christian America on people of color even as the nation celebrated the reunion of the states after the Civil War. No clearer image of the South's secession might exist than that of the land supporting Marie Louise's cabin breaking away from the "main body." The cabin's occupant, however, is Fanny Hosmer, whose unflagging loyalty to St. Louis and disdain for anything based in Louisiana establish her as the scene's representative Yankee. Her fatal fall into the river culminates a rift begun when she remarries David. Thus, the fairy-tale tone of the novel's concluding description of David and Thérèse's union belies the real discord ever present in an America where the price for harmony is homogeneity. As scholars have noted, the outsiders—Joçint, Morico, Grégoire, and ultimately Fanny—are

¹⁵⁷ Fandrich discovered the date of Marie Euchariste's death in a court document used to establish the fact that Marie Euchariste's son Victor was her only surviving heir. Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen Marie Laveaux*, 179.

systematically eliminated from the novel. Where critics err is in imagining Chopin endorses such rejection of difference, for embedded in the novel's final scene of destruction is also an image of hope. The "cabin"—probably informed by that occupied by the most famous black fictional character of the nineteenth century, Uncle Tom—seems an obvious symbol of the institution that divided the country, and, although Marie Louise's domicile in post-Reconstruction Louisiana is "somewhat more pretentious than others of its class" (CW 806), it remains an emblem of enslavement. Its disintegration during the flood, then, can be read as an image of liberation with the potential for catalyzing a genuine integration of diverse people.

The spiritual anchor for this process, Chopin suggests, is the quasi-polytheistic religion of Voodoo. By admitting devotees as diverse as the lwa, Voodoo constitutes a pluralistic alternative to the one-dimensional world increasingly embraced by white America in the nineteenth century. Such pluralism is evident in the Voodoo perception of the individual. Whereas Christianity, especially that descended from American Puritanism, generally divides humans into two parts, body and soul, Voodoo, Wade Davis explains, regards the "human form" as "the critical and single locus where a number of sacred forces converge." This "form" consists of five components, among which are "the *z'étoile*" ("the individual's star of destiny") and the "*n'âme*" ("a gift from God, which upon . . . death . . . begins to pass slowly into the organisms of the soil."¹⁵⁸ But the elements more readily apparent in Chopin's fiction are "the *gros bon ange*, the *ti bon ange*, and the *corps de cadavre*." As its name suggests, the last is "the body itself, the

¹⁵⁸ Marie Louise may have the *z'étoile* in mind when she compares a medal of the Virgin Mary hanging over the cabin door to "a silver star," especially since the simile appears in the passage in which *Grosse tante* voices her acceptance of her fate, i.e., that if she dies "then it's time for [her] to go" (CW 809).

flesh and the blood” in which the two-part soul—the *gros bon ange* (“big good angel”) and the *ti bon ange* (“little good angel”)—resides. According to Davis, the *gros bon ange* “is the life force that all sentient beings share; it enters the body at conception and functions only to keep the body alive.” In contrast, the *ti bon ange* “is that part of the soul directly associated with the individual. . . . the source of all personality, character, and willpower.”¹⁵⁹

Although Kate Chopin obviously did not have access to Davis’s 1985 treatise on Voodoo, she nonetheless seems to have gained sufficient knowledge of the functions of the *gros bon ange*, *ti bon ange*, and *corps de cadavre* to incorporate the language and concepts within her fiction. Especially important is the relationship between the *gros bon ange* and the *ti bon ange*, in which Chopin would have found a symbol for the integration of the individual in the larger human society and cosmos. While the similarity between the phrase “*gros bon ange*” and Chopin’s repeated description of Marie Louise as “*gross tante*” might be merely coincidental, it becomes potentially more deliberate when we consider the role the word “*ange*” played in both Chopin’s life and fiction. Chopin spent many years on St. Ange Avenue in St. Louis. In 1865, when the Civil War ended and Katie O’Flaherty turned fifteen, the family moved to St. Ange. As an adult, when she returned to St. Louis following Oscar Chopin’s death, she lived at two different addresses on the street. Of course, the avenue’s name had Catholic rather than Voodoo roots, for Holy Angels Church, where Kate and Oscar Chopin were married, is located on the

¹⁵⁹ Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow: A Harvard Scientist’s Astonishing Journey into the Secret Societies of Haitian Voodoo, Zombis, and Magic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 181.

street.¹⁶⁰ But the word *ange* assumes Voodoo significance when we examine it within the context of the fiction and against Chopin's many references to "soul."

The story "A Wizard from Gettysburg" aptly illustrates Chopin's foray into the Voodoo notions of body and soul. Published in *Youth's Companion* in 1892, it concentrates on the aftermath of the Civil War in the lives of a young man, Bertrand Delmandé; his family; and a mysterious tramp, the "wizard" who arrives at the Delmandé plantation approximately twenty years after the war has ended. Bertrand has been summoned home from college because his father and grandmother are not faring well financially, at least not well enough to continue funding Bertrand's college education. Bertrand, however, seems more at home in nature than in the classroom and does not regret returning to the plantation. Despite his natural nursing abilities, which he demonstrates in bandaging the tramp's foot, he shows little enthusiasm for pursuing a degree in medicine, a fate that "had been decided for him" (CW 125). The tramp turns out to be Bertrand's grandfather and namesake who, despite obvious dementia, remembers that he had buried gold before the war and, with the younger Bertrand, unearths it near a "huge pecan-tree, twice the size of any other that was there" (CW 128). The tramp is reunited with his wife and son, and Bertrand Junior, the story implies, will return to school. In one of the most comprehensive critiques of the story, Bonnie Shaker contends that this ending transforms the emasculated Old South via "the 'wizard' who restores privilege to the next generation of his patrilineal line."¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 72, 131.

¹⁶¹ Bonnie Shaker, *Coloring Locals: Racial Formation in Kate Chopin's Youth's Companion Stories*, 40.

Shaker's interpretation falters if we consider the three generations of males, especially the younger Bertrand's father, St. Ange, within the context of Voodoo's concept of the human form and soul. The wizard, the narrator tells us, uses "St. Ange" whenever he "adresse[s] [the younger] Bertrand." The text supplies two possible reasons for this apparent case of mistaken identity. Before we learn that the tramp is the grandfather, the narrator suggests that he "had heard Madame Delmandé address her son by [St. Ange], and fancied [the name]" (CW 127). Later, it seems the grandfather, mentally trapped in the past, simply mistakes his grandson for his son. But given the inherent spiritual connotations of it, "St. Ange" points to more than a mere psychological/social commentary. Like a Voodoo chant, it becomes an attempt to reconnect body and soul in a world where the two have become sorely disconnected.

Throughout the story, the senior Bertrand seems, as his wife ultimately describes him, someone "come back from the dead" (CW 130), that is, a *corps de cadaver*. To emphasize his ominous, unnatural state, Chopin draws upon the common belief that animals can sense the uncanny, for, when the wizard first appears in the tale, Bertrand's "pony start[s] suddenly and violently at *something* there in the turn of the road, and just under the hedge" (CW 124, emphasis added). No longer a vital human being, the wizard, "engaged in stanching a wound in his bare heel with a fistful of matted grass," might have just emerged from the grave. Such funereal imagery symbolizes a death of more than the body. The younger Bertrand later imagines the tramp alienated "in the black desolation of war . . . born again, without friends or kindred; without even a name he could know was his own" (CW 126-27). Although this proves not to be the case literally, spiritually the vision rings true. By inverting the Christian conversion experience, the

passage points to a “black” Voodoo indictment of the white religious influence on the South’s and North’s involvement in the Civil War and its aftermath.¹⁶² Fighting for the Southern cause has transformed the grandfather into a shell of a man. In any true sense, he *is* without friends, family, and identity: the one acquaintance he mentions, Judge Parkerson, has been dead for twenty years; his family does not know him; and, divorced from the present, his identity consists of frayed vestiges of roles played out long ago. As an animated corpse, the tramp represents the most feared and sensationalized feature of Voodoo, the zombie.

Despite the story’s title, the wizard might not even be the focus of the story. At least on one level, he is a tool by which Chopin directs our attention to the significance of the father-son (St. Ange-young Bertrand) relationship. Named for the grandfather, Bertrand seems destined to follow his lead, to assume the old man’s Confederate values. But the boy is more immediately the younger version of his father. Thus, we could regard Bertrand as a small St. Ange, that is, the *ti bon ange*. As a teenager, he is an appropriate representative of this part of the soul, for he is at the stage of life when he would be forging his own personality. The challenge Chopin puts before him is to choose between the dead-end course of his grandfather’s *corps* or the ways of his father, St. Ange, the *gros bon ange*. Unlike the senior Bertrand, whose greed and suspicious attitude towards

¹⁶² Shaker contends that “A Wizard from Gettysburg” is evidence of Chopin’s allegiance to the values of the New South, which emanated from the same “religious discourse” that influenced “white supremacist activists.” While Chopin might have been familiar with the religious leader Shaker cites, “Pastor Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a New Orleans Presbyterian minister” whose Reconstruction writings advocated a traditional, patriarchal family and society, the Catholic author probably would not have adopted the Presbyterian’s beliefs as her own. See *Coloring Locals*, 39. At the same time, Bradley Edwards’s sanguine, pro-Catholic analysis, which equates the wizard with Saint Bernard, does not address the pagan implications of the word “wizard” and the fact that the last line of the story belies Edwards’s claim that the senior Bernard recovers his memory just as he reassumes his supposedly rightful place on the plantation. See Edwards, “Allusion and the Evolution of Artistry in Kate Chopin’s ‘A Wizard from Gettysburg’ and ‘After the Winter,’” *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 138-42.

the blacks mark him as resistant to an inclusive society, St. Ange has managed to maintain a world that, however financially depressed, supports a diverse body of people. “A dark, slender man of middle age, with a sensitive face and a plentiful sprinkle of gray in his thick black hair” (CW 126), he is an amalgam of physical contrasts that further sets him apart from his father, whose “beard was long, and as white as new-ginned cotton” (CW 125). The grandfather, who not only profited from cotton but has even become it, is a one-dimensional figure concerned only with amassing the wealth of this world; St. Ange, on the other hand, apparently has a holistic vision that recognizes responsibilities to a community beyond the individual, physical self. In the absence of the senior Bertrand, he has held together his family and people of color, who still work the fields of the plantation. Most of all, he is more closely aligned with his mother than with his father. Mother and son work as a unit when they seek funding for the younger Bertrand’s education. When they discover the tramp on the porch, they both regard him as an “uninviting . . . intruder” (CW 126). As either a Christian or Voodoo angel, St. Ange is a patriarch whose values seem decidedly at odds with those of the wizard.

But we must remember that the grandfather also was endowed with a *gros bon ange* and a *ti bon ange*. His figurative return from the dead resonates with Voodooists’ belief that the *gros bon ange* of deceased individuals who have not received a proper burial will return home to wreak havoc among the family members. As anthropologist Melville Herskovits explains, the “cult of the dead,” a facet of “ancestor worship” imported from Africa and perpetuated as a distinct and powerful component of Voodoo, manifests itself in “the meticulousness with which the tranquility of the dead is insured, the fear in which they are held, and, above all, their close association with magic as an important sanction

behind this force.”¹⁶³ In “A Wizard from Gettysburg,” Chopin has created the poster child for a Voodoo spirit up to no good. More relic than relative after his long absence from the family, the grandfather makes everyone he meets anxious and executes a sort of disturbing magic at the end of the story that can only ensure a continuation of strife, albeit on an individual rather than national level.

Through such cult-of-the-dead imagery, Chopin critiques war generally and the Civil War specifically, which, historian Drew Gilpin Faust writes, was as much “about the work of death” as it was about slavery or national unity. In “A Wizard from Gettysburg,” Chopin seems to question a “modern American unity” that, according to Faust, was “created” by “death . . . not just by ensuring national survival, but by shaping enduring national structures and commitments.” As Chopin knew too well from the demise of her half-brother George, the Civil War was amazingly proficient at dividing kin from family and souls from bodies: approximately 620,000 soldiers were killed; of these, many were buried hastily, if at all.¹⁶⁴ Chopin’s later story “The Locket” drives home this point in its description of a priest and his black assistant entering a battlefield to assist the wounded and dying. Instead, the two “good Samaritans,” like the vultures flying overhead, must “look to the dead” whom the fleeing soldiers have abandoned. “A Wizard from Gettysburg” gives such devastation a more specific face by referencing the famous site where an estimated 50,000 casualties occurred over three days; that the wizard could live and find his way home from Gettysburg twenty years later is either miraculous or

¹⁶³ Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 207, 261.

¹⁶⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 62. Christians in nineteenth-century America were also concerned that the bodies of loved ones were properly interred. The basis for this, however, was rooted in part in the belief that the body will be resurrected and reunited with the soul at the last judgment. No such fate awaits the *corps de cadavre*, which, at the end of its earthly service, simply decays.

diabolical. The site itself is no less controversial, for as the eventual stage for reunions of former Confederates and Unionists, it came to represent national unity even while the nation detached itself from the people of color in its ranks of citizens.¹⁶⁵ Although Abraham Lincoln memorialized Gettysburg as a point for reasserting the purported values of the American Republic, post-Reconstruction Jim Crow legislation ensured that “the proposition that all men are created equal” would remain mere theory for decades to come.

Such is the implicit message conveyed by the return of the senior Bertrand to his plantation. As a lone vagabond come home to reclaim gold he had buried (without, apparently, alerting his wife to its existence), he subscribes to an American code of individualism and self-reliance contrary to the collective spirit of Lincoln’s address. In “A Wizard from Gettysburg,” Chopin suggests that “a new birth of freedom” is not really possible in a country that, like the wizard, is more than willing to sacrifice its own *gros bon ange* to champion the greed of its *ti bon ange*.

Bokor, Houngan, Mambo Chief

Bokors: Wizards, Witches, and Will

What the Fon and Vodouisants insist is that no living person has the right to possess another, for possession means the mounting and the controlling of a person’s will.

Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*¹⁶⁶

Like other religions, Voodoo provides its adherents with guides, in this case, to assist its followers in maintaining a balance among the *corps de cadavre*, the *gros bon ange*, and the *ti bon ange*. Chief among the religious leaders are the priestess (mambo) and

¹⁶⁵ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xi, xiv.

¹⁶⁶ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 81.

priest (houngan). But not all guides are trustworthy. The press has long publicized the evil wrought by the sorcerers or *bokors* of Voodoo, mambos and houngans more eager to harm than to heal. In “A Wizard from Gettysburg,” one of her few stories with a title overtly referencing the occult, Chopin seems to have created a noticeably white male bokor through which she critiques the black magic being done to rather than for or by people of color. Certainly, the spell the wizard casts has ominous implications for the inhabitants of Delmandé plantation. Nor, Chopin suggests, is this situation unique; as “a wizard,” the story’s eponymous character is apparently only one of many bokors produced at Gettysburg and beyond.

The credibility of the wizard is compromised by an insanity that locks him in the past. He imagines that his two grandchildren are his children and expects his reference to Gettysburg to have an immediate significance for a teenager whose knowledge of the place and battle can only come from history books and hearsay. The wizard’s dementia, however, is not the product of a biological or chemical disorder, but of a “bullet in [his] head” (CW 125). This image is especially negative when read in the context of Voodoo, in which the head serves as a critical receptacle for and symbol of the lwa: those who serve the lwa must undergo a Voodoo baptism called a “*lavé tête*” (“washing the head”) and the Voodooist’s primary lwa, akin to a patron saint, is called the “*maît’ tête*.”¹⁶⁷ As an unnatural entity, the bullet is the obvious antithesis to the herbs and other ingredients used in the baptism; as an instrument of war, it transforms the potentially curative power of the lwa into a destructive force. This nefarious aspect of the wizard becomes even more pronounced when Bertrand compares him to “witches who [come] in the night to work uncanny spells at their will” (CW 129). On the surface, Chopin seems critical of the

¹⁶⁷ Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 144-46.

younger Bertrand's regression to "childish superstition," but the fact that the boy's apprehensions take residence in his "heart" and originate at "some negro's cabin" puts them in a context that makes them worthy of serious consideration. Bertrand is certainly not alone in doubting, however fleetingly, the goodness of the tramp. Although the others on the Delmandé plantation do not regard the vagrant as a wizard or witch, their immediate responses to him range from the "indifference" expressed by his own wife and son to the open disdain voiced by people of color. The housemaid 'Cindy especially resents the young Bertrand's seating the strange man in St. Ange's chair on the porch and bringing him into the house, both actions symbolizing an appropriation of Bertrand's father's identity.

'Cindy's intuitions about the tramp are well founded, for the elder Bertrand Delmandé seems intent on casting a spell to affect a transfer of power from his wife and progeny to himself. When his wife and son first encounter him, he is not merely an unwelcome vagrant: he is an "intruder . . . in *possession*" (CW 126, emphasis added). On the one hand, the word "possession" implies that the wizard is usurping the role of a Voodoo lwa that "mounts" devotees when they enter a trance. But it also has the more Western, commercial connotations of something owned. As a bokor, the elder Bertrand seeks both a godlike position and control of his worldly dominion. But he has not achieved this state without help. He is assisted by a sorcerer's apprentice, his grandson, who early in the story proves himself equally capable of transgressing personal boundaries, at least of the women in the household. Rather than ask 'Cindy for bandages for the wizard, he ransacks his "'gra'ma's closet'" looking for them. Such pillaging links

Bertrand to many soldiers in wars, including the Unionists in the Civil War briefly ensconced in the female-centered O'Flaherty house in St. Louis.

The senior Bertrand's resumed reign is an important metaphor for what Chopin seems to regard as the danger facing the soul of the South and America at large, especially as it had emerged in relation to people of color. During the wizard's absence, the African Americans have remained on the plantation and are working the fields with "*uplifted, polished hoes*" (CW 125, emphasis added) when he reappears. While the language of racial uplift is problematic, Chopin seems to use it to show that blacks have risen to some degree in social and financial status, a fact made possible, perhaps, by St. Ange's willingness to take his son out of medical school rather than terminate the employment of some of the black workers. Young Bertrand's introduction of the tramp into the family home threatens the tenuous arrangement between the races. When 'Cindy complains that she would be held accountable if the vagrant were to steal anything, she does more than lament the distrust with which whites commonly viewed their black servants: she resurrects the memory of another "wizard" whose bigotry resulted in dire consequences for people of color. Commonly called the "wizard of the saddle," the Confederate soldier Nathan Bedford Forrest proved a bokor of the worst sort for African Americans both during and after the war. As one of the Confederacy's most celebrated military commanders, he came by his epithet fairly for the genius he brought to his fight for the Southern cause. Unfortunately, he was also known as a "devil," a reputation earned in the 1863 battle at Fort Pillow, in which the men under him massacred close to three hundred Union soldiers attempting to surrender, of whom the majority were people of color. After the war, Forrest found an outlet for his racism in the Klu Klux Klan, in which some

believe he served as the first Grand Wizard.¹⁶⁸ The massacre at Fort Pillow was not an isolated event. At Poison Spring, Arkansas, another black regiment was subjected to similar brutality overseen by a different Confederate officer. Racism, however, was not simply the province of white Confederates. As the movie *Glory* has shown, Unionists were not necessarily welcoming of the people for whom they were supposedly fighting. Faust points out that, at least initially, the 180,000 African Americans in Yankee ranks “served under white officers and were overwhelmingly assigned to labor details and fatigue duty rather than entrusted with the responsibilities of combat.”¹⁶⁹ By linking the wizard of her story to Gettysburg, Chopin extends her critique to the North as well; as both Chopin and ‘Cindy seem to know, in the long run the Emancipation Proclamation eliminated slavery in name only.

The conclusion of Chopin’s story points to the wizard’s continued domination, albeit through a different medium than whips, chains, or guns. ““The war’s over—money! Money!”” the wizard says and celebrates the materialism that has long divided Americans. Exhumed from its “resting place” in a “tin . . . bound round and round with twine, rotted now and eaten away in places,” the gold is the stuff of the spiritually dead, of a nineteenth-century King Midas, but not the monarch as fashioned in the “wonderbook” recalled by the younger Bertrand (*CW* 128-29). This is no Hawthornian penitent who realizes blood is more important than bullion, but a zombie whose return from the dead will only infect the Delmandé household with his continued misplaced focus on gold and what it can buy, including education in a Jesuit college. When Bertrand Senior demands that the long-deceased judge be called to the house, one hand remains

¹⁶⁸ “Nathan Bedford Forrest,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/index.php?pg=about.htm>.

¹⁶⁹ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 45, 44.

immersed in the gold, as it does when Madame Delmandé asks him, “[D]o you know me—your wife?” (CW 130). Nor does Chopin grant the younger Bertrand the grace and escape of Midas’s daughter as described by Hawthorne. Instead, he, too, seems to have entered the land of the dead, for the last image of him is that of his standing “pulseless almost, like a young Actaeon cut in marble” (CW 130).¹⁷⁰

A Catholic Houngan: Père Antoine

The character Chopin creates as a contrast to America’s bokors and link to the mambo healers of Voodoo is a representative of Roman Catholicism: the priest Père Antoine, whose role in the fiction is not limited to a cameo appearance in *At Fault*. In the opening of “The Locket,” Chopin hints at the syncretic relationship between Catholicism and Voodoo when a Tennessee Confederate imagines that the titular object is “a charm . . . one o’ them priests gave [Edmond, one of the story’s protagonists] to keep him out o’ trouble” (CW 560). This allusion to “priests” anticipates the later appearance of the Catholic cleric and his African-American assistant moving onto the battlefield to attend to the dead. Although the priest is unnamed in this story, he and his helper are performing tasks similar to those of Antonio de Sedella and Marie Laveaux, who together routinely visited the inhabitants of prison cells and hospital rooms. When Chopin’s priest takes the locket from a dead soldier and returns it to Edmond’s beloved Octavia, he blurs the distinction between Catholicism and Voodoo and becomes a sort of houngan initiating a less ominous magical outcome than that orchestrated by the wizard. Of course, as is so often the case in Chopin’s fiction, the symbolic significance of the locket is ambiguous. On one level, it is a *memento mori* that serves as a reminder of and

¹⁷⁰ The reference to Actaeon, turned into a stag by Artemis and devoured by his own dogs, reinforces the male/female division in the text.

connection to both Octavia's deceased parents, whose pictures are framed within the locket, and the presumably dead Edmund. In this respect, it corresponds to the "ancestor worship" that distinguishes Voodoo. But the surprise ending, in which we learn Edmund is still alive, transforms the locket from *memento mori* into the "charm" the Tennessee soldier had imagined it to be and the priest into a purveyor of magic. For Edmund reappears after Octavia has received it: if it has not summoned him back from the dead, it has at least announced his arrival.

Elsewhere in her fiction Kate Chopin more directly invokes the spirit of the historical Père Antoine. Appearing by name in only two works besides *At Fault*—"For 'Marse Chouchoute" (1891) and "Love on the Bon Dieu" (1892)—he has typically been dismissed by critics as indicative of Chopin's disdain for Catholicism and clergy.¹⁷¹ A close look at "Love on the Bon-Dieu," in which he makes his last and longest appearance, suggests there is more to Père Antoine than meets the eye. As in *At Fault* and "The Locket," intimations of Voodoo dovetail on Catholicism, although the two religions initially seem warring factions. This is implied by the apparently antagonistic relationship the priest has with an old woman, Madame Zidore, who, he claims, had been preventing her granddaughter, Lalie, from attending mass on Sunday until he confronted grandmother about her "'imperil[ing] the salvation of another'" (CW 156). Père

¹⁷¹ Thomas Bonner equates Père Antoine with Lorenzo Worthington in *At Fault* and claims that Marie Louise "gives the priest a near minstrel-like image." Bonnie Shaker, on the other hand, regards the monk, ministering to the ill Madame Verchette in "For Marse Chouchoute" as a representative white Southerner "confirm[ing]" Madame's white status. In her analysis of "Love on the Bon Dieu," Garnet Ayers Batinovich describes the priest as "gossipy, coercive, and lacking in Christian compassion. . . . his indifference to Lalie, a young girl who lives on the outskirts of town, is the central issue, but Chopin's early critics apparently did not perceive her message that the priest was a questionable character." See Bonner, "Christianity and Catholicism in the Fiction of Kate Chopin," *The Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 20.2 (Winter 1982): 122; Shaker, *Coloring Locals*, 35; and Batinovich, "Storming the Cathedral: The Antireligious Subtext in Kate Chopin's Works," 78.

Antoine's sentiments about Madame seem to match those of the community, which has forced her and her granddaughter from "the island" because Madame has supposedly been stealing and damaging others' property. Butrand, a worker for the priest, sums up the Christian perspective, "'It's neither God nor the Devil that wants her!'" (CW 154). But the priest twice observes that he does not "'know how true'" the stories about Madame are. Also, as we have seen, islands can symbolize an insulated and, in post-Reconstruction America, racially segregated life Chopin did not endorse. Both Père Antoine and his creator cue us to look for spiritual truths within the story that diverge from those of mainstream Christianity. Featured in the opening and closing of the story, Père Antoine serves as a frame and camouflage for a narrative about the protagonist Azenor's encounter with the nature-based faith embodied by Chopin's version of Cotton Mather's "rampant hag." In fact, the Capuchin monk steers Azenor into the woods where the young man will eventually hear the "weird chant which Madame Izadore [is] crooning—to the moon, maybe" (CW 162).

On the surface, the priest's efforts are part of a Catholic mission to rescue Lalie from poverty and her grandmother's abuse. The fair maiden must have her knight, that is, the "stalwart" carpenter Azenor, whom Père Antoine grooms for the quest by directing the young man's attention to Lalie's hardships. Lalie, who meets Azenor on the priest's veranda on Holy Saturday, has come to ask for a note as backing by which she can get Easter shoes on credit. After she has gone, Père Antoine emphasizes the rough life she leads: "'You saw how shabby she is—how broken her shoes are? She is at Chartrand's now, trading for new ones with those eggs she brought, poor thing!'" (CW 156). The

priest's machinations succeed in generating Azenor's pity for Lalie. Thus, on Easter, the carpenter criticizes other women who refer to Lalie as a "real canaille," a ruffian (CW 158), and presents Lalie with a decorated egg, a "pink one, dotted with white clover-leaves" (CW 157). But while he has begun to sympathize with Lalie's plight, Azenor lacks the tact and courage to act directly on her behalf. Instead, he enlists the aid of his black servant Tranquiline to take a small breakfast to the young woman returning home from church. Only at a later date, when Père Antoine tells him that Lalie has not come to church because she is sick, does Azenor venture into the woods, from which he brings Lalie to an earthly "salvation."

The process, however, is not complete until Père Antoine reenters the story, which ends with Tranquiline's fetching the priest to officiate over the union of Azenore and Lalie. This is perhaps the most telling correspondence of Chopin's character with Antonio de Sedella, for the Capuchin monk was famous or infamous for defying social and religious rules and proferring the sacraments, including marriage, to all people, regardless of their race or standing in the community.¹⁷² (In her criticism of the priest, Garnet Ayers Batinovich overlooks the fact that the first definition of "indifference" is "impartiality."¹⁷³) The good priest's presiding at what in Catholic circles is the mixed marriage of *At Fault's* Thérèse Lafirme and David Hosmer foreshadows Père Antoine's participation in the more radical union of Azenor and Lalie, representatives of distinct classes and, I would argue, races. Although the story seems to work against notions of racial blurring and miscegenation (Lalie and her grandmother live in a cabin in which

¹⁷² Caryn Cossé Bell, "French Religious Culture in Afro-Creole New Orleans, 1718-1877," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 8-9.

¹⁷³ *OED Online*, s.v. "indifference," <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/>.

“not a negro on [Le Blôt’s] place but has refused to live in” [CW 155]), the very comparison of the women to African Americans raises the issue of race. Later, as he carries the ailing Lalie to his own abode, Azenore resembles “a surefooted . . . panther” (CW 162) and thus absorbs the blackness of Tranquiline. Metaphorically, at least, Lalie will wed a black man. That Père Antoine will marry Azenore and Lalie in Azenore’s home furthers the suggestion of miscegenation. A public, legal wedding between a black and white would have been impossible in Père Antoine’s day, but the real-life monk privately blessed such unions, the most famous of which was supposedly that between Marie Laveaux and her white, common-law husband, Christophe de Glapion.

Mambos, not Mammies

However sympathetic the Capuchin padre might have been to the Voodoo cause, Kate Chopin’s real spiritual power brokers are mothers, not fathers. This point bears repeating, for much of the scholarship, informed by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, has argued that the Chopin heroine is an individualist defying conventional roles, chief of which being that of mother; thus, the icon for this particular critical denomination, *The Awakening*’s Edna Pontellier, does not drown in the Gulf of Mexico but swims away from her children and into a shrine erected on Aphrodite’s half shell. While more recent criticism has taken a less sanguine view of Edna and, in rare cases, even defended her “woman-mother” foil, Adele Ratignolle, the matriarchy Emily Toth and others have envisioned seems primarily of a white hue. Stymied by what appear stereotypical renderings of black women, scholars lament Chopin’s unfortunate idealization of mammies, whose docility hardly qualifies them to be liaisons between humanity and gods. But, as Ina Fandrich explains in her biography of Marie Laveaux, the mother in

African-American culture occupied a position of power distinct from the more subordinate part of “angel of the house” enacted by white women. The source of such respect—the importance “procreativity” played in “the survival of the kin group” in Africa—doubtless resonated with the many enslaved Africans and their descendents in America whose “kin groups” were routinely ruptured by slaveholders. According to Fandrich, women Voodooists in New Orleans also continued the African practice of forming strong ties with other women and sometimes founded “secret societies” that included “not only . . . free women of color . . . but also . . . women from all walks of life and . . . occasionally even well-to-do white women.”¹⁷⁴ Although Chopin’s appreciation for female connections originated with her upbringing in a household dominated by strong women, the matriarchies she creates in her fiction might owe more to African-American, female collectives. By the same token, embedded in the varieties of “*gross tantes*” who people her fiction might be mambos in mammy garb. The conjure woman, as Charles Chesnutt makes abundantly clear, is nothing if not a trickster.

In “Love on the Bon-Dieu,” Chopin herself seems a devious mambo, for her creation is a Voodoo joke on Azenor and her reader that stars the three women—Lalie, Tranquiline, and, most important, Madame Zidore—who in their own right form a sort of secret society to serve the Iwa. Just as Père Antoine’s indifference seems a ruse by which Azenor is finally forced to act on behalf of his beloved, so, too, is the Catholic medieval knight’s tale a mask and conduit for a different spiritual force, one that facilitates Azenor’s as much as Lalie’s salvation. One clue to this is the similarity between Zidore’s and Azenor’s names. The male protagonist’s name is actually that of a female Celtic

¹⁷⁴ Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 58, 54.

saint.¹⁷⁵ Madame Zidore, on the other hand, is known only by her husband's name, a derivative of "Izadore." Through such gender blurring, Chopin seems to anticipate Carl Jung's "anima" and "animus," but a more contemporary influence would be Voodoo, whose lwa do not always discriminate against or for a specific sex when they mount their "horses."¹⁷⁶ At the same time, the feminine nature of Azenor's name implies that he has yet to develop fully the masculine side of his *ti bon ange*. Paradoxically, to find his manly soul, he must leave the male-dominated Catholic church and enter the forest on the fringes of society. Père Antoine might begin the process, but completion lies in the company of women.

That Azenor's awakening is more Voodoo- than Catholic-based is suggested by the story's title, for within the phrase "Bon-Dieu," Chopin conflates several meanings. The literal Bon-Dieu was a tributary of Red River. At the same time, the Easter context of the story situates the direct translation—"Good God"—within Roman Catholicism. But Lalie, who first appears in the story as "behind the vines" on the porch of Père Antoine's cottage and whose name mimics the sound of "lily," is such a child of nature that she describes the watery Bon-Dieu as a sentient being; discussing recent rain in the region, she notes, "'it's on'y to-day you can cross *him* on foot'" (CW 154, emphasis added). In this way, she demonstrates the animism typical of Voodoo. When Père Antoine later expresses his surprise that Azenor does not know Lalie since the carpenter's house "'lies

¹⁷⁵ According to legend, Azenor was sent adrift in a cask, where she gave birth to St. Budoc. Sabine Baring-Gould and John Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints: The Saints of Wales and Cornwall and Such Irish Saints as Have Dedication in Britain* (London: Charles J. Clark, 1907), 331-3, http://openlibrary.org/books/OL6995854M/The_lives_of_the_British_saints.

¹⁷⁶ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 96. In nineteenth-century New Orleans, African Americans also challenged male/female distinctions in parades they created as alternatives to what they called "the 'white parade season,' that is, Mardi Gras. Featuring "cross dressing" and "obscenity," the parades invoked the same disdain from mainstream society as did Voodoo rituals. See Michael Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Co., 2007), 74.

on her way to the Bon-Dieu” (CW 155), the priest says more than Azenor realizes, for Lalie’s path leads to both the water and Voodoo’s supreme deity, Bondye, to a spiritual world presided over by the mambos Tranquiline and Madame Zidore.

The Voodoo ritual begins much as it does when a lwa is served: with an offering. At this stage, however, Azenor has yet to achieve sufficient empathy for either the lwa or Lalie; he is oblivious to the humiliation his “pineblank” donation of coffee and breakfast might cause the young woman. Tranquiline, however, understands the importance of protocol. No less cunning than Père Antoine, the black woman first asks Lalie about a fugitive calf and thus creates the impression that the young woman might give rather than receive assistance.¹⁷⁷ Almost as an afterthought does Tranquiline say, “You look plum wo’ out. Set down dah on dat bench, an’ le’ me fotch you a cup o’ coffee.” Although Azenor temporarily remains sequestered in the shelter of Catholicism—he reads under a tree “from the first sound of the Vesper bell . . . till the Angelus” (CW 158-59)—Tranquiline has opened the doors to Lalie, love, and the lwa that will enable the carpenter to claim his soul.

In contrast to Tranquiline, Madame Zidore seems a mambo run amuck. Azenor refers to the grandmother as a “wretch,” a word easily read as “witch,” and even Lalie, who typically does not malign her “grand’mère,” describes the old woman as someone who “ain’ got her right head” (CW 160). But the Voodoo implications of the comment suggest something different. First, as someone with apparently more than one *tête*,

¹⁷⁷ Tranquiline’s bovine story is more than subterfuge by which the black woman connects to Lalie. The fictive animal, a “yalla calf wid black spots,” easily represents the two Louisiana castes—blacks and people of mixed races—whose “t’arin’ down de lane” whites had long feared. Lalie’s response, however, identifies the real lost sheep or, in this case, cow: “one li’le w’ite calf tie by a rope” (CW 158), symbolic of Azenor and other whites whose religious and social institutions enabled the race to remain fettered to its biases.

Madame Zidore falls squarely within the role of the “two-headed doctor,” i.e., the conjurer/healer. Secondly, the two opposing forms of abuse to which Grand’mere subjects her granddaughter—keeping the young woman in the cabin and forcing her to work picking cotton—are, if not excusable, understandable. The elder woman apparently worries that her granddaughter will follow the disastrous path of Lalie’s mother and become the “canaille” the townspeople already consider her; one way of preventing this would be to keep the granddaughter at home. Unfortunately, the only resource Grand’mere seems to have for survival is Lalie; so her granddaughter must also work.

Grand’mere’s ““want[ing] to be out in the wood’, day an’ night”” (CW 160) might be less a sign of dementia than of a petition of the lwa for help. With a name meaning “gift of Isis,”¹⁷⁸ Madame Zidore is directly tied to pagan magic, the balliwick of the conjurer. Coupled with her “weird chant,” her so-called abuse seems to have worked well in summoning Lalie’s earthly savior to the cabin, where Azenor finds his beloved in a feverish state comparable to that of a Voodooist in a trance. Lalie’s “disjointed” discourse about “the cotton . . . all turning to ashes in the fields, and the blades of the corn . . . in flames” even suggests the enactment of a personal revolution comparable to the political strife that liberated Haiti. Like the healer, the revolution has two heads, for while Azenor saves Lalie and validates the humanity of her flesh in a way the larger society has not, he also embraces his animal spirit and the courage to rise above the constraints of American Christianity (CW 162).

¹⁷⁸ Patrick Hanks, Kate Hardcastle, and Flavia Hodges, "Isidore" in *A Dictionary of First Names* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Oxford Reference Online, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t41.e1531>.

The three women in “Love on the Bon Dieu” demonstrate Chopin’s appreciation for the complexity of the black mambos, especially Marie Laveaux, who kept the African belief system alive even as white Christian America worked to eradicate it. Like Lalie, the Voodoo queen was equally at home in the Catholic cathedral and the bayou; like Tranquiline, she brought nourishment to the hungry; and like Madame Zidore, she could instill fear in mainstream society. Kate Chopin might have regarded Laveaux as an especially attractive spiritual model because the life of the biracial Voodoo queen was, in some ways, not that dissimilar to Chopin’s own. The literary realist who scorned crusaders and embraced the full catastrophe of life would have found a kindred soul in the woman described by Fandrich: “Laveaux was not the type of heroine who sacrificed her own life for a ‘greater cause.’ She did not die of an unnatural cause like Joan of Arc or like any of the female martyrs of the early church. Instead, she led a long and happy life, was blessed with two marriages, and had many children and grandchildren who stood by her bedside when she passed.”¹⁷⁹

Chopin’s own upbringing in a house dominated by women would undoubtedly have made the author sympathetic with the maternal impulse informing the Voodoo role played by Laveaux and Louisiana’s other queens. Like Chopin’s mother and grandmother, who held the family together through such earthly trials as the Civil War, mambos and the lwa they serve are expected to remedy the physical, mental, and spiritual ills of their communities in *this* world. Beneath the semblance of subordination, Chopin’s black and white female characters often share more than variations on the name of Marie Laveaux. In their own way, they stage forms of resistance much like that Fandrich attributes to the Voodoo queen, who “represented the African heritage defiantly surviving

¹⁷⁹ Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 8.

the hegemonic strategies of a white-supremacist culture; . . . functioned as an assertion of female power in a patriarchal society; and . . . embodied outrage over the unjust distribution of power, wealth, and privilege in a profoundly class-stratified environment.” Although Fandrich claims that the “movement” in which Laveaux played such a central role “slowly disappeared after the end of Reconstruction,”¹⁸⁰ in the fiction of Kate Chopin, the voice of the mambos can still be heard.

Especially in the antebellum South, motherhood could be as revolutionary as Haiti’s liberation from France. To give birth to and raise a child other than the bastard sired by a master was a radical feat for women who, living under the dictates of slavery, were often separated from their children. In her treatment of motherhood, Chopin seems especially sensitive to this nefarious product of Code Noir. As someone who, upon the death of her husband, Oscar, had to petition the courts to gain custody of her children, she could have had a glimpse into the angst and anger of women whose children had been taken from them and sold.¹⁸¹ But even more influential on Chopin’s work might have been Article X of the Louisiana Code Noir, which addressed the status of children born to slaves. If, as the article dictated, the mother’s status determined that of her children, then mothers could be a source of freedom as well as slavery.¹⁸² As spiritual “mamas,” mambos have long functioned in this capacity: the appropriate ritual and gris gris, Voodoo devotees believe, might release them from illness, destructive relationships, or the institution of

¹⁸⁰ Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 2.

¹⁸¹ Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 161.

¹⁸² “If the husband be a slave, and the wife a free woman, it is our will that their children, of whatever sex they may be, shall share the condition of their mother, and be as free as she, notwithstanding the servitude of their father; and if the father be free and the mother a slave, the children shall all be slaves.” “Louisiana’s Code Noir,” in *Historical Collections of Louisiana: Embracing Translations of Many Rare and Valuable Documents Relating to the Natural, Civil, and Political History of that State*, ed. B. F. French (New York: D. Appleton, 1851). At BlackPast.org, v. 2.0., 2007-2009 <http://74.125.155.132/search?q=cache:Gy8P1KviIZgJ:www.blackpast.org/%3Fq%3Dprimary/louisianas-code-noir-1724+%22code+noir%22&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a>

slavery itself. According to Marie Laveaux lore, the Voodoo queen was remarkably adept at fighting for freedom. Through magic and/or chicanery, she supposedly secured the freedom of some prisoners she regularly visited; a few even escaped death at the moment of their execution—at least temporarily.¹⁸³

Chopin's two most famous stories overtly concerning race and children—"Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde"—illustrate the convergence of Voodoo, motherhood, and liberty.¹⁸⁴ In the former tale, the protagonist Désirée, who gives birth to a child with African features, is ostracized by her husband and, with her infant, must leave his plantation. Although most scholars regard Désirée as a tragic victim of the racist, antebellum South, Dale Taylor describes her with language from the conjure tradition: "trickster." As Taylor explains, people of mixed race (a group which might or might not include Désirée) have historically played this role in their efforts to pass for white. But despite his terminology, Taylor centers Désirée's defiance firmly within the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is understandable due to the biblical suggestions in the story. Most compelling is the way the last image of Désirée carrying her infant son towards the "bayou" resembles the biblical account of Moses in the bulrushes.¹⁸⁵ But as we have seen, Chopin's intimations of the Jewish leader can have African Voodoo significance.

¹⁸³ The Voodoo queen supposedly summoned a storm that interfered with the hanging of two men convicted of murder. See Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 2003, 69-71.

¹⁸⁴ The experiences of the titular characters in the two stories also have surprising parallels with reported events in Marie Laveaux's life. According to Fandrich, Laveaux at one time had relations with a white man other than her common-law husband Christophe Glapion and gave birth to a daughter Delphine, whom Laveaux gave to a nursemaid to raise as white. When Delphine later married a white man and gave birth to a child with African American coloring and features, she supposedly claimed the baby was dead, when, in fact, she had sent the baby to Laveaux to raise. Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 156.

¹⁸⁵ Dale Taylor, "The Discourse of Interracial and Multicultural Identity in 19th and 20th-Century American Literature." PhD diss. (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2007), ProQuest (AAT 3257969), 35, 74. Taylor is not the first to recognize the religious aspect of the story. As early as 1972, Robert Arner described Désirée as a "Pure Maiden, a Savior Woman" who, like one of the many female martyrs in

That this is the case in “Désirée’s Baby” is implied by the central character’s development in the story, which concludes with Désirée, like Marie Louise in *At Fault*, simply “disappear[ing]” (CW 244). While this ending has stirred up some controversy in the critical waters, the consensus has been that both she and her baby die in the bayou. Instead, Chopin’s most widely published story is one of initiation starring three characters—Armand Aubigny, Madame Valmondé, and Désirée—who must come to come to terms with the baby’s development of African-American features. Only Désirée rises to the occasion to assume her position as both biological mother and spiritual mambo.

Incapable of accepting Désirée, his son, and his own black blood that he inherited from his mother, Armand fails the test he has resisted his entire life. Madame Valmondé, on the other hand, seems to transcend the prejudice of the day when she advises her adopted daughter to “[c]ome back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child” (CW 243). Despite the apparent maternalism in the passage, Madame’s reply has its own shadow side that brings her altruism into question. First, her love apparently does not extend to the child, whom she references only as an adjunct to Désirée. Second, Madame does not do as Désirée asks, “[T]ell them it is not true,” that is, refute the claim of Armand and others that Désirée is black (CW 243); the mistress of Valmondé plantation follows the party line that the mother determines a child’s race. To some degree, this colors Madame Valmondé as a hypocrite, for the woman who has never given birth has likewise escaped the racial scrutiny to which she and the rest of her society subject Désirée and the baby. Most disturbing is that Madame Valmondé might want Désirée to

Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*, “will be rewarded in heaven.” Arner, “Pride and Prejudice: Kate Chopin’s ‘Désirée’s Baby,’” *Mississippi Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 139.

be black. As such, the young woman can remain a possession—a gift from “Providence,” a.k.a., a pseudo-slave—the plantation mistress can reclaim. At the very least, Madame Valmondé seems intent on perpetuating Désirée’s childlike state. The refuge offered the young woman is like that extended by a mother superior to a novice: a cloistered realm where the child need never grow up.

It is to Désirée’s credit that she declines Madame Valmondé’s invitation. But she might owe her independence to other mother figures in the story: the enslaved women Zandrine and La Blanche, who respectively nurse Désirée’s child and indirectly awaken the ingénue to the baby’s African-American features. Together the two women initiate Désirée’s evolution into adulthood and the role of Voodoo mambo. They are in an auspicious position to accomplish this because paganism rather than Judeo-Christianity seems the spiritual heritage of the “idol” Désirée. For this reason, she may be more susceptible to the magic the black women work on her. While one cannot know if Kate Chopin actually believed in *mojo*, a seemingly minor detail in the text—Zandrine’s trimming the baby’s fingernails—points to the possibility that conjure figures into the baby’s metamorphosis, for a common Voodoo belief is that personal possessions, especially parts of the body, can be used to “fix” an individual. That Madamé Valmondé detects the changes in the baby soon after Zandrine has groomed the child may not be a coincidence. While Madamé examines him, the black woman assumes two poses indicative of both the cunning and power of a Voodoo queen. As the still unenlightened Désirée coos over the “real fingernails” of her baby, Zandrine “bow[s] her turbaned head majestically,” ostensibly to confirm her mistress’ claim about how quickly the child has grown. But two details undermine the subordination implied by the “bow”: the “majesty”

of the gesture and Zandrine's *tignon*, the colorful headcovering that African-American women wore in bright colors to defy legislation preventing them from dressing in fine jewelry and clothing.¹⁸⁶ Madame Valmondé then compares the baby to the slave, "whose face was turned to gaze across the fields (CW 241). In both positions, Zandrine manages to avoid eye contact, just as one engaged in some form of subversion would. The magic Zandrine weaves comes to a climax when Désirée sees that her child looks like the son of La Blanche. At this moment, Désirée realizes her child is part black.

As critics have noted, even more important than the baby's resemblance to the young slave might be that of Désirée to La Blanche. Like many slaveholders, Armand could well have had sexual relations with La Blanche and sired her child.¹⁸⁷ While the parallel between Désirée and La Blanche seems to reiterate the "tragic mulatta" type, it functions more as a Voodoo revision of the Madonna of Christianity. As the story's title suggests, Désirée's challenge ultimately is not to accept her blackness, but her child: she must become the mother rather than the mothered. What transpires in the story from the first image of Désirée as a new mother to the last in which she and her child vanish from the text constitutes an initiation remarkably comparable to the *kouche* a novice into the

¹⁸⁶ In 1786, the governor of Louisiana, Rodríguez Miró, passed legislation that prohibited women of color from wearing flamboyant attire and required them to cover their hair with a scarf, the *tignon*. The "tignon law" backfired, for the scarves attracted the very attention Miró hoped to curtail. See Joan W. Martin, "Plaçage and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*: How Race and Sex Defined the Lifestyles of Free Women of Color" in *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, ed. Sybil Kein. (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2000), 62.

¹⁸⁷ See Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line*, 128; Teresa Gilbert, "Textual, Contextual, and Critical Surprises in 'Désirée's Baby,'" *Connotations* 14 (2004/2005): 38-67, <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/connotations/gibert1413.htm#>; Peel, Ellen Peel, "Semiotic Subversion in 'Désirée's Baby,'" in *Louisiana Women Writers: New Essays and a Comprehensive Bibliography*, eds. Dorothy H. Brown and Barbara C. Ewell (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1992), 60. Although names in the story, as elsewhere in Chopin's work, have obviously metaphorical significance, in creating the male antagonist and his apparent mistress, Armand and La Blanche, the writer may have been less creative and more realistic, for an 1815 record documents the sale of a slave named Armand Aubigny from the LeBlanc family in Iberville, Louisiana. See Gwendolyn Hall, "Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1718-1820," <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/individ.php?sid=62845>.

Voodoo priesthood undergoes. According to Karen Brown, the *kouche*, meaning “to lie down, to sleep, to make love, to give birth—less commonly, to die,” reduces novitiates to a child-like state so they can then grow into new, spiritually enlightened adults.

Initiates are therefore sequestered in a room where they will literally lie for a requisite number of days until their new selves emerge. The process consists of four steps:

1. The *lave tet*—the headwashing.
2. The *kanzo*a—the “ritual trial” designed to make the individual resistant to harm.
3. The *sou pwen* (“on the point”)—the identification of the individual’s “*mèt tet*” (“head god” or patron lwa), which can include “charms or medicines composed of words, objects, gestures, or some combination of the three.”
4. The presentation of the *assan*—the assigning of the rattle symbolic of a person’s position as a Voodoo priest or priestess.¹⁸⁸

The lying-in part of a Voodoo *kouche* has an almost direct parallel in the scene in which the African-American heritage of the baby first manifests itself. Still “recovering” from giving birth, Désirée “lay full length, in her soft white muslins and laces, upon a couch.” White gowns, which appear in several of Chopin’s works, need not, as critics ubiquitously assume, indicate race, for the color distinguishes many features of Voodoo, including novitiates’ dresses.¹⁸⁹ Although no actual *lave tet* occurs in “Désirée’s Baby,” the story includes several allusions to the head that suggest this critical first step in a

¹⁸⁸ Karen McCarthy Brown, “Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study,” in *Invisible Powers: Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, eds. Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 14-5. Although Brown’s observations pertain to Haiti, the general practices seem to have continued in Louisiana.

¹⁸⁹ As Fandrich notes, “White is . . . the color of festive ceremonial outfits in most Afro-Atlantic diaspora religions, regardless of the occasion and the divinity that is honored at the respective time.” Accounts of Voodoo dances, for example, often allude to white handkerchiefs. The color is also associated with certain lwa, including Damballa and his wife Ayeda-Wedo. Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 135.

Voodoo initiation. Most significant is the focus placed on both the baby's and Désirée's head as the baby's African-American characteristics begin to emerge. Madame Valmondé, for example, becomes aware of the change as she leans over Désirée to kiss her, probably on her cheek. Blind to the implications of Madame's comments about the baby's metamorphosis, Désirée blushes "happily" and then "draw[s]" Madame's own "head down to her" to tell Madame Valmondé about Armand's new tolerance for his slaves' behavior. But, of course, the face is most important as the canvas on which the baby's black heritage appears. In fact, reading faces constitutes a significant part of the story, for while her society studies both hers and her child's, Désirée examines Armand's "dark, handsome face" for signs of disapproval. When she realizes her baby is part black, "her face" is "the picture of fright" (CW 242).

The second step of Désirée's initiation, the trial, is obviously the baby's gradual transformation and the rejection it incites. As in many dark nights of the soul, this stage leads Désirée to the brink of despair: she is "miserable enough to die" (CW 242). But she does not. Instead, she moves to the third step, the *sou pwen* ("on the point"), when she realizes that her baby is biracial. While the appearance of La Blanche's son is the primary catalyst to Désirée's epiphany, the scene includes *pwen* specific to Africa. With a "great soft fan" consisting of feathers from the most regal of birds, the peacock, the boy attends to the baby, much as African tribes acknowledge royalty. To be sure, this detail could simply emphasize the irony that Désirée's baby is actually of the same race as La Blanche's. But it can also be part of a Voodoo call to Désirée to listen to her *met tet*, her patron lwa. So, too, does the letter from Madame Valmondé serve as *pwen* that enables Désirée to reconnect with her pagan heritage. No longer docile, she uses the letter to

force Armand to take a position. No less than Madame Valmondé, he fails to realize he has free will and can choose to defy his racist society. Instead, by rejecting Désirée, he imagines that he wreaks revenge on the “Almighty God [who] had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him” (CW 244). Although Désirée is obviously hurt by his decision, she has already begun to move into a new spiritual state based in paganism, a fact suggested by Chopin’s comparing her to “a stone image: silent, white, motionless” (CW 243). Once again an “idol,” Désirée now actively assumes the pose that signals her ability to endure and the spiritual force that makes this possible. As she stands riveted to the spot, she seems a Voodooist entering the state of possession—of herself and her baby.

Thus, when she leaves Armand’s *faux* shelter of “*L’Abri*,” she does not follow the option embraced by Chopin’s most famous protagonist, Edna Pontellier, and abandon her child. Instead, she finds Zandrine who, “pacing the somber gallery,” seems to have been waiting for this moment when Désirée finally “[takes] the little one from the nurse’s arms with no explanation” (CW 244). This exchange in a story about transfiguration signals Désirée’s final movement into the role of mambo whose *asson* is not the usual rattle, but the literal symbol of motherhood, the baby. Within the context of Voodoo, the shredded “thin white garment” and “slippers” that have led scholars to assume Désirée and her baby are headed for certain death can indicate Désirée’s finally assuming a role of power. Rather than follow the well-traveled path of mainstream society, “the broad, beaten road” to the home of Madame Valmondé, Désirée finally ceases to be a child herself and assumes the maternal role that, throughout the story, she has delegated to others. Unlike the baby’s father, who, despite or because of the black blood in his veins, rejects his wife and son, Désirée accepts the mixed-race child as her own and thus aligns herself with

people of color. But she does not conform to the prescribed roles imposed upon blacks. While “the negroes [are] picking cotton,” she walks to St. John’s Bayou, where Marie Laveaux held her own Voodoo rituals. With the “golden gleam” produced by “the sun’s rays” in Désirée’s hair (CW 244), the Iwa seem to fashion their own version of a halo to crown yet another queen.

Unfortunately, the mother and child of “La Belle Zoraïde” experience a more tragic and realistic outcome, although for Zoraïde, no less than Désirée, motherhood still functions as a form of defiance. As both slave and godchild of her mistress Madame Delarivière, Zoraïde is prohibited from marrying Mézor because Madame Delarivière has decided Zoraïde must wed the mulatto Ambroise. Obviously intent on perpetuating the three castes of Louisiana, Madame Delarivière is aghast at the thought that the mixed-race Zoraïde would wed a “negro” whose body is “like a column of ebony” (CW 304-5). To prevent this, the slaveholder arranges for Mézor to be “sold away into Georgia, or the Carolinas, or one of those distant countries far away” (CW 306), but before this occurs, Zoraïde becomes pregnant with his child. When Madame Delarivière punishes her goddaughter for such rebellion by removing the baby and telling her the infant has died, Zoraïde, apparently driven insane by the information, transfers her maternal affection to a ragdoll. The quadroon later refuses to accept her real daughter, whom Madame Delarivière has brought back.

The Voodoo import of the story reveals itself at several points. Early on Chopin uses setting to replicate the historical relationship between Voodoo and Catholicism: while Madame Delarivière imagines Zoraïde marrying Ambroise in the Cathedral, the protagonist herself is falling in love with Mézor in Congo Square, where he dances the

Bamboula and Calinda. Such duality distinguished Marie Laveaux's own religious practice, for after attending mass on Sunday, she would then proceed to Congo Square to preside over Voodoo-based festivities, including the dances enjoyed by Mézor. With his pure black skin, Mézor represents Africa and the indigenous spiritual beliefs of its people.¹⁹⁰

Even more indicative of Voodoo is the ragdoll Zoraïde creates. Widely considered an emblem of Zoraïde's madness, it functions much like the Hoodoo locket that reconnects Edmund to Octavia and makes the similarity of Chopin's story to Charles Chesnut's "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" less "superficial" than scholar Rosslyn Elliott contends.¹⁹¹ The conjure that enables a mother to keep her daughter in Chesnut's story is no less active in "La Belle Zoraïde" and inspired by identical maternal impulses. While some critics have recognized that the doll and madness it ostensibly represents enable Zoraïde to "escape" marriage to a man the slave detests,¹⁹² they err in taking Zoraïde's new name, "la folle," at face value, for the same society that assumes it can dictate whom the woman weds has imposed the label of "fool" upon her. Instead, to assume a power she has been denied, Zoraïde follows the same theatrical course of a Voodooist possessed by a lwa and subsequently appears as the Voodoo "horse" doubtless does to the uninitiated: mad. In the nineteenth century, even the most culturally ignorant reader of Chopin's story might

¹⁹⁰ Both Rebecca Nisetich and Elfenbein aptly note that Zoraïde's attraction to Mézor is rooted in his explicit ties to Africa. Nisetich, "From 'Shadowy Anguish' to 'The Million Lights of the Sun': Racial Iconography in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," in *Kate Chopin in the Twenty-First Century: New Critical Essays*, ed. Heather Ostman (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 131; Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line*, 134. The implication of this, according to Elfenbein, is that Chopin "violate[s] . . . the racist notion that only white blood could beautify the African,"¹³⁴. More specifically, I would argue, Chopin reiterates her challenge to the racism of such Christian leaders as Abbé Grégoire.

¹⁹¹ Rosslyn Elliott "Other Worlds," 251.

¹⁹² Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line*, 131; Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt, "The Cane River Characters and Revisionist Mythmaking in the Work of Kate Chopin," *Southern Literary Journal* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 18.

have connected the doll to the stereotypically pin-pricked icon of Voodoo; a white Creole, like Madame Delarivière, could have regarded it with a certain degree of fear. Neither does Zoraïde's rejection of her real daughter confirm insanity or loss of maternal love.¹⁹³ After all, Madame Delarivière, whose very name—"mistress of the river"—reflects the slaveholder's belief that she manages nature itself, might easily separate mother and daughter again or even subject the grown girl to a loveless marriage like that the mistress had planned for Zoraïde. Returning the child to Zoraïde indicates Madame's continued belief that she controls her goddaughter's heart and mind as well as body. The mistress's motives, however, probably have little to do with a concern for Zoraïde's welfare. If Madame Delarivière gives Voodoo any credence, she may actually hope to preserve her own well being by getting Zoraïde to relinquish the ragdoll and the magic it can channel. More than Désirée, Zoraïde may have used Voodoo to liberate both her daughter and herself; however physically chained they might be by institutionalized slavery, they have the chance to maintain power over their souls. Like Shakespeare, Kate Chopin seems to have known that fools can be the wisest characters in a play.

While Désirée and Zoraïde represent the mambo as liberator, other characters in the Chopin canon emphasize the conjurer's more widely recognized role of healer. "La Belle Zoraïde" features both aspects of the Voodoo priestess, for Chopin's mouthpiece and narrator of Zoraïde's plight, Manna Loulou, offers whites the opportunity to heal themselves and the skewed world they had created in slavery and continued to build through Jim Crow legislation. Yet another incarnation of Marie Laveaux, Manna Loulou

¹⁹³ Elfenbein contends that this development in the story "calls into question the sentimental nineteenth-century notion about the redemptive powers of the child." Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line*, 134. But many of Chopin's stories celebrate the healing potential of the child. That the daughter does not function in this capacity in "La Belle Zoraïde" might say more about Chopin's contempt for slavery and notions of white supremacy than about her attitude towards motherhood and children.

shares more than a similar name with the Voodoo priestess. When the story opens, she has just “brushed her mistress’s beautiful hair”—a service also performed by Marie Louise in *At Fault*—and thus acts as the beautician Marie Laveaux. As an “old negress,” Manna Loulou resembles the descriptions and drawings of Laveaux and other mambos circulated when Kate Chopin was writing.¹⁹⁴ And while her “black as night” complexion sets her apart from the biracial Laveaux, it, like Marie Louise’s and Mézor’s coloring, reinforces her ties to Africa and African-based spirituality.

This last aspect appears most in the religious allusions and imagery Chopin uses to describe Manna Loulou. Rather than the acculturated mammy many critics think her, Chopin’s “manna” is a mambo whose compassion and wisdom highlight the absence of such virtues in the Christianity espoused by many nineteenth-century Americans. By ascribing Judeo-Christian images to Manna Loulou, Chopin gives a theological face to the racial subversion Ellen Goodwyn more generally describes as at work in the canon.¹⁹⁵ That the spiritual malaise of Manna Loulou’s immediate audience and mistress, Madame Delisle, proves incurable does not negate the spiritual potential embodied by the black woman.

To appreciate the religious importance of Manna Loulou, we first need only consider her name, which, besides indicating the dual nature of Chopin’s story, transforms the black woman into one of God’s most famous gifts to humanity. The woman and the role of storyteller she enacts, Chopin suggests, are nothing less than manna from heaven. But Chopin then shifts from the Old to the New Testament with an image critics have condemned as proof of Manna Loulou’s docility and her creator’s racism: before she tells

¹⁹⁴ One such drawing was included with George Washington Cable’s article “Creole Slave Songs,” 819.

¹⁹⁵ Goodwyn, “‘Dah you is, settin’ down lookin’ jis’ like w’ite folks!’” 1-11.

her story, Manna Loulou “ha[s] already bathed her mistress’s pretty white feet and kissed them lovingly, one, then the other” (CW 303).¹⁹⁶ While the act is undeniably subservient, it is theologically noteworthy as a recreation of Christ’s washing of his apostle’s feet on Holy Thursday. Although Joçint in *At Fault* might have failed in his mission, Manna Loulou and other mambos hold out the possibility of a more successful, if less obviously staged, revolution and path to salvation. In fact, Manna Loulou’s story comes about much as Chopin described the process by which she wrote her fiction—as a fortunate and uncalculated event. The inspiration for Manna Loulou literally “floats” its way to her when she hears a “man . . . singing a song” in a boat below her window. Sung in Manna Loulou’s own Creole patois, the refrain sums up the sadness that comes with the loss of a loved one.

’Lisett’ to kite la plaine,
Mo perdi bonhair à moue ;
Ziés à moue semblé fontaine,
Dépi ni pa nuré toué’ (CW 303).

Lisette has left,
I’ve lost my happiness;
My eyes are like fountains,

¹⁹⁶ Although she overlooks the religious significance of the gesture, Susan Castillo departs from the path of other critics to offer a nuanced assessment of the scene: “It may be the case . . . that Chopin was aware of the difficulties she would encounter in publishing the story and that this image of servility is calculated to reassure nervous strait-laced editors of the Genteel Tradition that what follows is merely a story of quaint old plantation days. This is clearly not the case, and the tale has many layers of meaning.” Castillo, “‘Race’ and Ethnicity in Kate Chopin’s Fiction,” 64.

Since I can't look at you.¹⁹⁷

As an oral rather than written transmission, the verse sets the stage for a morality tale divorced from the Word that informs Christian theology and situated within the tradition of Louisiana Voodoo. Manna Loulou's own telling of Zoraïde's story is more song than sermon, for "the soft Creole patois" in which she tells it has a "music and charm no English words can convey" (CW 304). But Manna Loulou's allegiance to the lwa is most apparent in her assessment of Madame Delarivière's intrusion upon the mother-child relationship: "Madame had hoped, in thus depriving Zoraïde of her child, to have her young waiting-maid again at her side free, happy, and beautiful as of old. But there was a more powerful will than Madame's at work—the will of the good God, who had already designed that Zoraïde should grieve with a sorrow that was never more to be lifted in this world. La Belle Zoraïde was no more. In her stead was a sad-eyed woman who mourned night and day for her baby" (CW 306). On the surface, Manna Loulou's sentiments seem more the stuff of Christianity, even New England Puritanism, than Voodoo. But we must remember that "La Belle Zoraïde," with its layered stories and languages, demands that we consider multiple and often conflicting meanings. Although the passage seems to cast Zoraïde in the mode of an Anne Bradstreet, expected to accept the death of her grandchildren as a providential event, the irony of a "good God" requiring such acquiescence undercuts the legitimacy of the Christian doctrine. Manna Loulou is hardly blind to the fact that the real force causing Zoraïde's grief is the quite human, if not humane, Madame Delarivière. But the more nature- than heaven-based Voodoo "good God," Bondye, does seem to play a role in the passage. Separated from her child, Zoraïde

¹⁹⁷ Trans. Bernard Koloski in explanatory notes to *Bayou Folk and A Night in Acadie*, by Kate Chopin. Ed. with an introduction and notes by Bernard Koloski (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 362.

suffers what Chopin seems to have regarded as a natural and therefore predetermined grief. As such, it also proves an emotion over which Madame Delarivière's "will" has no power.

It also transforms the Catholic goddaughter into a Voodoo mother figure, the Iwa Ezili Dantò, the equivalent of the Black Virgin of Poland or the Mater Salvatoris. As Elizabeth McAlister notes, a key difference between the Catholic Madonna and the Iwa is that Ezili Dantò carries a daughter, not a male messiah. Believed to dwell with the Virgin Mary at Saut d'Eau, Ezili Dantò is a "single mother, a hard-working black woman, and a powerful warrior and fighter. A symbol of nationalist pride, she is said to have been a leader in the slaves' victorious war of independence against Napoleon's army, when she earned the scars she carries." Most of all, as her correlation with the Madonna suggests, Ezili Dantò is the protector of children.¹⁹⁸ Rather than madness, Zoraïde's rejection of her daughter might be the consummate act of maternal love, for in this way the woman may hope the girl will be sent away again and thus avoid the manipulation and grief Zoraïde has experienced at the hands of a godmother who is far less than god- or motherlike. To some degree, Zoraïde's plan comes to fruition because Madame Delarivière does in fact return the daughter to the plantation.

By sharing Zoraïde's story with the pampered Madame Delisle, Manna Loulou doubtless hopes to awaken a maternal and humane feeling heretofore lacking in the childless woman. But Madame Delisle remains true to her own infantile ways and says what few mothers would: "'The poor little one! better had she died!'" (CW 307). The

¹⁹⁸ Elizabeth McAlister, "The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou and Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism" in *African American Religious Thought*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Claude Jr. (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 955; Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 59.

story, however, does not end here. Instead, Chopin recasts the line in French, suggesting that perhaps another auditor of the tale will feel what Madame Delisle cannot.

Certainly, other characters in the Chopin canon are more receptive to the curative powers of mambos. In obvious contrast to Madame Delisle is the eponymous protagonist of “Athénaïse” whose rebellion against marriage ends when she learns the quite literal facts of life from her landlady Sylvie, a “portly quadron of fifty or there-about” (CW 440). After a four-week retreat in New Orleans from husband and responsibility, Athénaïse, who believes she “is not herself” because “the climate of [the city does] not agree with her” (CW 451), discovers instead that she is pregnant. That Chopin regards this as more than a biological epiphany is evident in the religious terminology she incorporates throughout the tale, especially in her description of Athénaïse’s reaction to the diagnosis: “in a wave of ecstasy,” Athénaïse looks at herself in a mirror and finds her “face . . . transfigured . . . with wonder and rapture.” Later, when Gouvernail, Athénaïse’s admirer and fellow boarder at Sylvie’s house, drives the young woman to the train station, she is as “embarrassed as Eve after losing her *ignorance*” (CW 451-2, emphasis added). Chopin’s revision of the conventional “losing her innocence” undermines the equally conventional Christian belief in original sin while it positions the “very wise” Sylvie as the conduit through which the young Acadian acquires an alternative spiritual awareness.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ The religious allusions have not escaped the attention of scholars, but to date no one seems to have considered the specific “pre-Christian” theology implied by Chopin’s adaptation of Judeo-Christian imagery. Even Heather Kirk Thomas, whose seminal article establishes Sylvie as one of Chopin’s most powerful African-American female characters, stops short of aligning Sylvie with the equally forceful black women in New Orleans’s history, the Voodoo queens, especially Marie Laveaux. See Heather Kirk Thomas, “‘The House of Sylvie’ in Kate Chopin’s ‘Athénaïse,’” in *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G.K.Hall & Co., 1996), 207-17; Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, 132; Avril Horner, “Kate Chopin, Choice and Modernism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 141-2.

To appreciate Sylvie's role as a mambo, we must consider the black woman as a foil to Gouvernail, the surrogate father confessor to Athénaïse during her stay at Sylvie's. Despite critics' admiration for a man generally deemed liberal and sophisticated, Gouvernail appears as, if not more, egocentric and detached from reality than Athénaïse is.²⁰⁰ When the young Acadian woman first meets him, he, like many a Church father, is "absorbed in his own editorial on Corrupt Legislation," although the journalist's concern with "corruption" is admittedly of a civic rather than Catholic nature. Even more telling is Gouvernail's monk-like existence, which he extends to Athénaïse. A resident for three years in Sylvie's house, he typically does not "deliberately . . . seek the society of women" and, when Athénaïse asks him "if he ha[s] ever been in love, . . . he assure[s] her promptly that he ha[s] not" (CW 445, 449). These seem the words of a celibate, not merely a confirmed bachelor. Under Gouvernail's supervision, Athénaïse, who once considered becoming a nun, lives a cloistered existence: in "plac[ing] himself all day at the disposition and service of Athénaïse," the journalist "replace[s] home and friends" for her. To be sure, Athénaïse, who feels a "need [for] caution and secrecy" lest her husband Cazeau learn she is in New Orleans, has isolated herself and consequently "has made no new acquaintance and . . . [does] not seek out persons already known to her" (CW 449). But in Gouvernail, she finds a willing accomplice and safe substitute for her other male confidant, her brother Montéclin.

While Gouvernail configures his relationship with Athénaïse into that of a quasi-couple divorced from the rest of humanity, Sylvie connects the young woman to the

²⁰⁰ Avril Horner offers one of the most glowing descriptions of the journalist: "Gouvernail represents a free-thinking, educated and very modern approach to life and is an attractive character who anticipates more liberal twentieth-century attitudes to relationships between men and women." Horner, "Kate Chopin, Choice, and Modernism," 142.

much larger human family, symbolized most graphically by the fetus growing in Athénaïse's womb. A nun, the female parallel to a Roman Catholic priest and Gouvernail, would obviously be of little use in this respect, but a mambo, like the black midwives who often attended white women in childbirth, is more than able to enlighten Athénaïse, who, despite her name, sadly lacks the wisdom of the pagan goddess. Moreover, the landlady called "Madame Sylvie" by other people of color has ties to the "Widow Paris," Marie Laveaux, who in her own life apparently gave birth to only five children, at least with Christophe de Glapion, but raised many more.²⁰¹

That Sylvie's house might be, at least symbolically, more than a pleasant boarding house is suggested by the house's three floors. Indeed, the number three occurs at several points in the story. At the beginning of the story, Athénaïse has left her husband Cazeau and returned to her childhood home, where she stays for three days. When Montéclin proposes that his sister go to New Orleans, she takes three days before she agrees to his plan. Given the Judeo-Christian language in the text, Chopin's secular use of the number could simply signal her rejection of the concept of the Trinity and Christ's descent into hell following his death. But Sylvie's presence points to other trinities ever present in Louisiana. As an African-American woman with her own business, she represents Louisiana's third caste, the free people of color who throughout the state's, especially New Orleans's, history had long undermined efforts to enforce a strict color line. Theologically, the third floor points to an equally renegade religion, Voodoo, the alternative to the Roman Catholicism of the state's Spanish and French inhabitants and the Protestantism brought in largely by the Americans after the Louisiana Purchase. What

²⁰¹ Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 158.

Thomas compares to the “House of Lords” (based on the three men in Athénaïse’s life) might actually be the House of Lwa.²⁰²

Although Thomas rightly honors Sylvie’s power in the story, she and other scholars go astray in positing a reverse dichotomy in which the white woman is the slave the black woman once was.²⁰³ The comparison falters because little indicates that Sylvie was ever a slave; in all probability, she had long been a free woman of color. Nor does the story suggest that Chopin regards the Acadian as her husband’s chattel. By insisting that his relationship with his wife hinges on her coming to him “of her free will” (CW 439), Cazeau seems determined to free not only the young woman but also himself from the legacy of his slaveholding father and the other patriarchs in the story: Gouvernail, Montclín, and Athénaïse’s father, Monsieur Miché. Thus, upon her return to Cazeau, Athénaïse is in “her husband’s embrace” when she hears a black woman’s baby cry and, with an empathy totally lacking in Madame Delisle, “wonder[s] w’at is the matter with it.” She can do this because, through Madame/Mambo Sylvie’s intervention, “the country” and its inhabitants are now a “balm to her vision and to her soul” (CW 453-4); the flesh and the spirit have ceased to war with one another. Certainly, in New Orleans the mambo has the last word, for Sylvie awakens not only Athénaïse but also Gouvernail—who “could not conceive or dream of [Athénaïse’s marriage] making a

²⁰² Heather Kirk Thomas, “The House of Sylvie,” 210.

²⁰³ Thomas contends “that the evaluation that the story equates marriage with women’s enslavement seems unduly harsh,” but she simultaneously identifies several narrative elements ostensibly furthering this equation. Noteworthy is her description of Sylvie’s offering of “an heirloom ‘set of pattern’ (apparently for maternity or infant garments) analogous to the designs Adèle Ratignolle imparts to Edna [in *The Awakening*].” While Thomas recognizes that the gift “expresses a sororal bond transcending race,” she argues that “the very nature of [Sylvie’s] gift as well as its ominous, allegorical name portend the young woman’s future,” “House of Sylvie,” 215, 212. Such an interpretation, like that of many modern, white female scholars, ignores the precarious state of black mothers and their children in nineteenth-century America. As Chopin demonstrates in “La Belle Zoraïde,” the ability to have and keep a child for whom one might use a “set of pattern” was a right denied many women. I would argue that the “pattern” is more of a merit badge than a “portent.”

difference”—to the facts of life. Just as Père Antoine needed Marie Laveaux, so, too, does Gouvernail need Sylvie. And Chopin’s white readers need the vision of mambos too often mistaken for the mammies of the Old South.

Calling Down the Lwa

Animism in Kate Chopin’s Fiction

In contrast to Christians, whose consolation for earthly suffering has traditionally been the promise of heavenly rewards, Voodooists invoke the lwa to effect practical changes in the here and now. Athénaïse, we have seen, needed Sylvie’s advice on how to be in the world, not Sister Marie Angélique’s admonition that she accept the religious “vocation” and attendant separation from life. Devotees of Voodoo do not pray for the grace to rise above human nature and towards divine perfection, but beseech the lwa to descend to earth and assume the shape of humans, that is, in Voodoo parlance, “to ride my horse.” The horse image used to describe such Voodoo possession reflects the faith’s inherent animism. Although animals in the Chopin canon often seem merely evolutionary links, the creatures low on the Great Chain of Being sometimes assume human features and abilities, much as they do in the folktales collected by the writers’ contemporaries Mary Owen and Joel Chandler Harris.²⁰⁴ However, Chopin does not incorporate such folkloric elements into her fiction merely to augment its local color appeal, but draws

²⁰⁴Addressing Chopin’s animal imagery, Wehner initially seems to move towards a spiritual animism when he writes that “Darwin’s nature does not entirely encapsulate Chopin’s nature, which remains too sensuous for the scientific animal kingdom of Darwin,” but he, like Bert Bender, ultimately reiterates a naturalist perspective: “The animal imagery figures as important because if humans connect intimately to animals, then they must have instincts.” Wehner, “‘A Lot Up For Grabs’: The Idiosyncratic, Syncretic Religious Temperament of Kate Chopin,” 161-2. As I have noted, Wehner’s dissertation and article are surprising for the syncretic religion they do not consider, Voodoo, in which animals have historically played a significant role.

upon them to confront contemporary social and racial injustice and advance values more in keeping with Voodoo than Christianity.

The Hoodoo in the short story “The Locket,” for instance, may be linked more to a vulture observing the skirmish between the Unionists and Confederates in Part I of the story than to the eponymous charm. Like Manna Loulou in “La Belle Zoraïde,” the “big black bird,” “an old solitary and a wise one,” establishes a parallel narrative that undercuts the supposed glory of the Lost Cause implied by the war narrative of Part I. As the first representative of blackness to appear in the story, he is both conjured and conjurer, a Hoodoo who—with his opening question ““What’s it all about?””—becomes the reader’s guide to spiritual and political truths. As he watches the mayhem on the battlefield, he first thinks that the soldiers are ““children playing a game.”” Chopin seems almost prescient in this reference to children, for in 1898 her son Fred and his fellow Battery A soldiers would write a naïve and disturbing posting about one of their preferred pastimes: ““We are fond of war pictures. Those that represent us as facing bursting shells and walking over the mangled remains of our comrades and dead horses, and that have vultures in the air, are especially fascinating to a young soldier in camp.”²⁰⁵ Like the Confederates of his mother’s story, Fred and the rest of white America would have done well to have paid more heed to the vultures, for when the smoke rises in “The Locket,” the “wise one,” unlike the “stupid birds” who imagine the dark air indicates “it [is] going to rain,” realizes the significance of the battle and “with a flap of his great, black wings . . . shoots downward, circling toward the plain” (CW 561).

From a purely earth-bound perspective, the vulture represents the life cycle at its most naturalistic: the battle has resulted in his good fortune, for he will dine on the bodies of

²⁰⁵ Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 314.

the dead. But, like the raptor of one of Chopin's last published stories, "White Eagle," he also has connotations of the eagle sent to pluck out the liver of the proud Prometheus.²⁰⁶ This mythical dimension becomes more specifically religious as the African-American who assists the priest enters the scene. Only "the vultures and the good Samaritans" remain "to look to the dead" (*CW* 562). It is probably no coincidence that, rather than the priest, the African American "bearing a bucket of water and a flask of wine" more closely resembles the biblical figure who similarly brought oil and wine to a casualty, a Jew waylaid by bandits, for the oppression experienced by blacks at the hands of whites in nineteenth-century America was much like that to which Samaritans had been subjected. In his willingness to minister to defenders of slavery, the priest's assistant seems to have embraced an ethic of compassion many of those most loudly claiming Christ as their savior had not.

In Part II of the story, blackness and theology move through a chain of being that ends with Octavie, the beloved of the Confederate soldier Ned, and that signals an alternative to the warfare of Christians in Part I. Unlike the first part, in which the male-dominated scene is set in autumn, Part II opens in the spring and is immediately colored black through references to a "fat, black coachman" in a carriage pulled by "fat, black horses." The seeming condescension of these parallel descriptions is negated by Part II's

²⁰⁶ The white eagle, a bit of painted statuary, becomes increasingly animated and darker as Chopin's narrative unfolds. Initially lawn art, it is inherited by an anonymous woman who keeps it with her until her death, when it is stationed as a sentinel/tombstone over her grave. In the course of the story, she experiences a steady social, economic, and psychological decline: in the last stage of her life, she believes the bird winks and pecks at her. With the title, Chopin seems to expand the racial/religious theme—implied by the "white face" the bird originally has and then loses—to include Native Americans and their own nature-based beliefs. While Chopin was living in Louisiana, White Eagle ("Ke-tha-ska"), head chief of the Ponca tribe, gained attention from the press when he protested his tribe's forced relocation from their "lands in Dakota" in 1876. The event was widely publicized; in 1879 the assistant editor of the *Omaha Daily Herald* published a book-length account of the event that included White Eagle's own letter to the people of the United States. See Thomas Henry Tibbles, *The Ponga [Ponca] Chiefs* (Boston: Lockwood, Brooks, and Company, 1879), http://www.archive.org/stream/ponchiefsanindi00tibbrich/ponchiefsanindi00tibbrich_djvu.txt.

darkest image, that of Octavie who, having received the locket and a letter from the priest, believes Edmond is dead. Thus, she wears “a plain black dress” and “an old black veil of her Aunt Tavie” (*CW* 562-563).

In this guise, Octavia thinks in religious terms and seems to embrace the teachings of Roman Catholicism—upon reading the priest’s letter, she imagines Ned in a position of “supplication,” and her “resignation” to the situation is “blessed” (*CW* 562-563). But her dark clothing links her to the coachman and, more important, the priest’s assistant. Indeed, Chopin’s circuitous statement that Octavie “appeared not unlike a nun” skirts a one-to-one correspondence of Chopin’s character with a member of a Catholic religious order. A more exact comparison lies between Octavie and her namesake, Aunt Tavie, whose walk the former has “unconscious[ly]” begun to mimic. Most puzzling about Aunt Tavie is Chopin’s claim that “youthful affliction had robbed [her] of earthly compensation while leaving her in possession of youth’s illusions” (*CW* 563). Due to some unidentified difficulty, “Mademoiselle Tavie” never married. Although many factors might have contributed to her single state, an element implied by the black veil is race. By donning it, Octavie has in effect put herself in black face and, perhaps, begun to share in the experience of her relative. But it is an experience destined to be aborted.²⁰⁷ When Judge Pillier collects Octavie in his carriage to drive her to his house, he asks her to remove the veil because it is “out of harmony . . . with the beauty and promise of the day” (*CW* 563). Unbeknownst to Octavie, the judge is taking her to meet Edmond, and the mourning weeds are inappropriate. On one level, then, the judge simply wants Octavie to meet his son as a young lover should. But if the veil, as I contend, is a symbol

²⁰⁷ With its suggestion of the integration of a piano’s white and black keys, the name Octavie—that is, “octave”—also indicates a racial substrata of the story.

of miscegenation, it *must* be removed for Octavie to be able to be united with the white Edmond. To her credit, she is annoyed at the judge's request, for it implies that "he wishe[s] to debar her from share and parcel in the burden of affliction which ha[s] been placed upon all of them" (CW 564). While this "affliction" seems the grief everyone who had lost a loved one in the war experienced, as an echo of Aunt Tavie's undisclosed trouble, it implies a deeper meaning, that is, the common humanity of all people, regardless of race.

The ending of the story admittedly seems to reenforce the primacy of white Christian America. Prepared by the judge to experience "miracles," Octavie discovers that Edmund is alive. With the resurrection of her lover, she feels "as if the spirit of life and the awakening spring had given back the soul to her youth and bade her rejoice" (CW 564). On the other hand, Voodoo may really have the final word. In the midst of their rapture, Octavie and Edmond both think of the dead soldier who stole the locket, but their visions are quite different. Edmond sees "the one who had lain far back in the shadow," an image whose darkness is threatening. But Octavie imagines the soldier just as she had Edmond, "in an agony of supplication" (CW 563, 565). In this way, she seems to recognize, as Edmond does not, the arbitrariness of such labels as "Unionist" or "Rebel," "white" or "black." The image of "supplication" also reflects her awareness that humans are creatures dependent upon some divine force. But the greatest Voodoo triumph might lie in Octavie's reunion with Edmond: the relationship denied Aunt Tavie is at last realized in that between Edmond and her namesake. The story's resolution affirms a Voodoo worldview that honors difference and recognizes the codependence of opposites: black and white, body and soul, and life and, as the "big black bird" knows so well, death.

As the officiating Hoodoo of “The Locket,” the vulture, who attains a lwa-like wisdom, emphasizes the need for humans to abandon their own agendas so they might become mounts for the lwa and similarly tap into divine understanding. But the horse imagery pervading much Kate Chopin’s fiction, including the two novels that frame the greater part of her writing, indicates that the author was well aware of the more specific animal metaphor, the *cheval*, with which Voodooists describe their channeling of the spirits. Most telling are two stories never published in Chopin’s lifetime: “A Horse Story” and “Ti Démon,” both of which feature a character called “Ti Démon.” In the first work, Ti Démon is an anthropomorphized equine who answers to a different name, “Spitfire. In the second, a single event transforms the titular character, whose given name is Plaisance, into the “démon” of the epithet. Read together as a literary version of a Voodoo ceremony, the stories suggest that Chopin’s repetition of the moniker “Ti Démon” is more deliberate and less lacking in creativity than it might seem. Despite its suggestion of demonic possession, “you devil” coupled with the characters’ given names points to a duality that undermines a Judeo-Christian interpretation and endorses Voodoo possession.

Beneath its childlike tone, “A Horse Story” demonstrates the liberating potential of Voodoo in a racist and classist society. Due to his age and Native American associations, Spitfire inherently occupies a fringe position in the Acadian setting of the tale. Once the “spirited” creature implied by his official name, he has become “a dejected looking sorrel pony” whose exact breeding—“Indian, Mustang, or Texan”—is unknown. But he has served his owner Hermione well through the years, and the two enjoy a loving connection. When she calls him “Ti Démon,” she does so with obvious affection. This is

probably due, in part, to Hermione's awareness of her own lowly position, although the young Acadian aspires to rise in the social ranks. Indeed, the story opens with Hermione riding Spitfire through a pine forest towards the "summer home in the hills" of the planter Monsieur Labatier. While her mission has a practical impetus—she will sell eggs and vegetables to Labatier—Hermione also imagines herself dining with the Labatier's fine guests and, most of all, enjoying the attentions of his aptly named son, Prospère.

Spitfire, who becomes lame along the way, interrupts Hermione's reverie and foreshadows the reality that Hermione will experience at the Labatiers' home. However, at this point in the story, the young woman is still trapped in illusions and transforms the obstacle into an element of a romantic plot: she will walk the three miles to the Labatiers' and Prospère will lend her his horse and accompany her home. Instead, Hermione is "scarcely noticed" when she arrives at the summer home. Although she is "permitted to dine with [the Labatiers' guests]," she is obviously an outcast and "even perceive[s] that Prospère is no more attentive than Hermione's other dinner companions.

In the meantime, her horse has been escaping the bondage of the rope with which Hermione has tied him to a tree and, more important, channeling the lwa that will similarly free the Acadian from the chains of romance. The religious language, including the epithet "Ti Démon" used to describe Spitfire, clues us to the horse's spiritual significance. Favoring his injured leg, he resembles "a veritable martyr" while the rest that makes it improve is "a blessed relaxation" (*KMC* 14). As elsewhere in the Chopin canon, such phrasing can be misleading, for it suggests a Judeo-Christian sensibility, but additional details indicate that Spitfire serves the lwa, not the Lord. A telling feature is his limp, which he shares with the Voodoo devotee of another story, "Nég Creol," and

with the lwa of the crossroads, Legba. A symptom of Legba's old age, the limp can be taken to the extreme in some of the lwa's incarnations: as Legba Pié Cassé, he has "paralyzed legs with arms held stiff and crooked before him." The lwa's attire, much like that of Nég Creol, consists of the dress worn by peasants, "jeans and work shirt" or even "tatters." To compensate for his disability, Legba typically carries a cane.²⁰⁸ Although Spitfire obviously does not wear the usual uniform of the lwa, his appearance suggests an equine equivalent, for "his coat was worn away to the hide. In other spots it grew in long tufts and clumps" (*KCM* 13).

While such depictions emphasize Legba's ties to people at the margins, they belie the lwa's power. The emblem of Legba's ostensible infirmity—the cane—is a revised version of the exaggerated phallus distinguishing the god as he exists in Africa; Herbert Spencer and others used the icon's enlarged penis as evidence with which they could deride the primitive nature of Africans. The cane also represents the *Poteau-mitan*, the pole at the center of a Voodoo temple where the spirit and temporal worlds are thought to intersect.²⁰⁹ Such potency embedded in the trappings of oppression highlights the trickster role commonly attributed to Legba and equally evident in Chopin's Spitfire and, I would argue, many people of color fighting for survival in post-Reconstruction America. The infirmity that prevents the horse from carrying Hermione to the Labatiers, causing her to appear of an even lower caste than she actually occupies, mysteriously disappears after the horse has rested briefly. So, too, does he know machinations to untie the rope, although modern inventions, "newfangled padlocks," later prevent him from literally opening gates as a Legba mount should. Figuratively, however, his trickster

²⁰⁸ Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 20; Herskovits, Melville J. *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 319.

²⁰⁹ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 109.

capacity makes possible a relationship that otherwise might never have occurred. When he is discovered back home with his saddle dragging but without Hermione, the young woman's longtime friend Solistan heads up into the hills to find her. What transpires is common Chopin fare—Solistan realizes how much he cares for Hermione and, within a few short pages, marries her.

The conclusion, however, demonstrates that Solistan is not the animist/Voodooist Hermione is. From the story's opening, she talks to Spitfire and later, upon discovering he has escaped, laments that she cannot share her disappointment about the Labatiers with him. Solistan, on the other hand, talks *about* Spitfire and unwittingly prompts the horse to take his final departure from Hermione and Chopin's story. Although Solistan recognizes Spitfire's trickster capacity, he, in keeping with white Christian ideology, equates it with danger and even recommends the horse be shot. Since the horrified Hermione would never let this happen, Spitfire lives but—like African slaves looking forward to their eventual return to "*Guinée*," the "Island Below the Sea"—becomes determined to leave for the world that would welcome him home, the "Indian Nation."²¹⁰ Although he dies before he reaches his destination, his story remains a testament to the power the lwa.

In "Ti Démon," the Voodoo mount serves more obviously as a metaphor with which Chopin challenges conventional notions of good and evil, especially as they have been applied to oppressed people. The usual behavior of the protagonist, Plaisance, fits his

²¹⁰ The title of Isable Allende's novel is taken from the Voodoo notion of the world of the spirits. But Maya Deren describes the amalgam of Mount Olympus and Hades in words that also might have corresponded well to the nineteenth-century writer Kate Chopin's own understanding: "In the waters of the abyss [is] the source of all life. Here is *Guinée*, Africa, the legendary place of racial origin. Here, on the Island Below the Sea, the loa have their permanent residence, their primal location. To it the souls of the dead return, taking marine or insect forms until their reclamation into the world, their rebirth, as if the ancient myth of racial origin had anticipated the statements of evolutionary science." Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 35-6.

given name, for he is easygoing and has “eyes that reflect . . . a peaceful soul.” So congenial is he that even the appellation “Ti Démon,” with which his mother christened him because he cried so as an infant, “identifie[s] itself with his personality and bec[omes] almost a synonym for gentleness.” But much in the story suggests that Plaisance is in need of a transfiguration that only the Iwa might produce. The complacency that makes him pleasant also undermines any heartfelt connection he might have with the world; in his relation to his fiancée Marianne, he occupies the oxymoronic position of being “happy in a certain unemotional way that [takes] things for granted.” In part, what he takes for granted is exploitation by Marianne, on whose behalf he wishes he were rich. At a drugstore, he gazes at ribbons and other “things appeal[ing] distinctly to the feminine taste” and experiences “longings [for them]” “on Marianne’s account” and “through Marianne” (CW 623-4).

A single event results in Plaisance permanently becoming Ti Démon, at least in the eyes of his community. On a Saturday night (the traditional time of Voodoo rituals), he accompanies his friend Aristide Bonneau to “Symond’s store,” a “shanty” catering to “young men” in search of a “more *spirited* diversion than the domestic and social circle offered them” (CW 624, emphasis added). Engaged in drinking and gambling, Plaisance forgets the time and does not leave for Marianne’s house until 10:00 p.m. When he discovers his fiancée with Aristide, who had left the shanty hours earlier, Plaisance brutally attacks him. Only blacks living nearby are able to prevent the “peaceful soul” from killing his friend. From then on, Plaisance’s society regards him as the demon he has been called his entire life.

On the surface, the story is a Christian indictment of the male violence so pervasive in the American South. But Chopin seems to have something different in mind, for the community is as mistaken about the adult Plaisance as his mother was about the baby. Just as the infant's "bawling" was based in natural rather than Satanic causes, so, too, does the lover of Marianne respond from understandable, if not excusable, natural urges. His sense of betrayal is not entirely inaccurate: Marianne has no qualms about playing the coquette with Aristide and one must wonder if Aristide deliberately diverted Plaisance's attention away from the young woman. Nor does Plaisance's violence signal a permanent change in his character. When Aristide threatens to shoot him, Plaisance gets an antiquated pistol for defense but views carrying it as "a sore trial and inconvenience." As described by Chopin, the community's reaction rather than Plaisance's temporary loss of control constitutes the truly "inexplicable" element in the story.

In fact, on the Saturday night of his lapse, Plaisance exchanges control for "consciousness." At Symond's, he "is more excited than he ha[s] ever been in his life"; "never before ha[ve] the fluctuations of the [card] game so excited him." Most important, walking to Marianne's, he is "seized as he had never been in his life before, by a flood of tenderness, a conscious longing for the girl." The factors that contribute to his epiphany seem a blending of natural and supernatural elements, such as "the subtle *spirit* of the caressing night, the soft effulgence [of] the moon . . . , [and] the poignant odors of the spring" (CW 624-5, emphasis added). In fact, an added force is flagrantly at odds with the Judeo-Christian teaching that one achieves awareness by transcending temptation. Instead, according to the narrator, Plaisance's "moment of weakness and disloyalty" that

causes his delay in visiting Marianne might have made him more sensitive to how much she meant to him.

This is possible because the environment that from a Judeo-Christian perspective seems hell—Symond’s store is distinguished by “foul-smelling oil lamps” and “rude tables whose grimy tops bore the stale and fresh marks of liquor glasses”—might be code for *hounfour*, the Voodoo temple where possession takes place. Unlike Garmache’s drugstore, where the most riveting event is the purchase of sundries, the “shanties” of which Symond’s is a part constitute an underworld ruled by the rhythms of the night. A place for gambling and drinking, the store offers amenities, such as cards and alcohol, that also have their place in the Voodoo/Hoodoo culture.²¹¹ The suggestion of Voodoo is heightened by the specifically racial connotations of the word “shanties.” While such run-down buildings generally signify the oppression of the people forced to reside in them, for people of color in antebellum America, “Shanty Town” indicated a point of freedom. Located in Cumberland, Maryland, it served as an important stop on the Underground Railroad. Like Symond’s, it also was where workers congregated to indulge themselves as Plaisant and Aristide do and, moreover, was noteworthy for the integration of races.²¹²

Unfortunately, the stratified society in which Plaisance resides makes the protagonist ripe for his breach with the community’s morés and the subsequent pariah state he must endure following his attack on Aristide, “a creature . . . worshiped by susceptible women”

²¹¹ Chopin more directly aligns “shanties” with Voodoo in “Nég Créol,” in which Nég purchases a charm “at Mimotte the Voudou’s shanty” (CW 509). Of course, Christians have typically looked askance at any Voodoo accoutrement, be it *gris gris*, cards, or alcohol. Mary Owen, for instance, disparages one conjurer, “King Alexander,” for “spraying” a charm with whiskey and “a copious addition of saliva.” Mary Alice Owen, “Among the Voodoos,” in *The International Folk-Lore Congress 1891 Papers and Transactions*, ed. Joseph Jacobs and Alfred Nutt (London: David Nutt, 1892), 23.

²¹² Vernon Roberts, “Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Cumberland, Maryland” in *Beneath the Underground: The Flight to Freedom and Communities in Antebellum Maryland*, Maryland State Archives (June 8, 2010), <http://www.msa.md.gov/msa/mdslavery/html/casestudies/fifeec.html>.

(CW 624). Inherent to this world is an injustice with which people of color were all too familiar. Chopin emphasizes the distinct difference in the treatment of the races in her play of light and dark in the story, specifically in an image that reappears in *The Awakening*. As Plaisance makes his way to Marianne's house, he first sees his fiancée and Aristide as an indistinguishable couple "passing slowly in and out, in and out of the shadows." Plaisance only recognizes them when Aristide puts "a white spray" of flowers in Marianne's "black braids" (CW 626), that is, when the aristocrat makes his worshiper sufficiently white for the moment. (Aristide, we learn later, had no permanent designs on Marianne and does not marry someone he doubtless believes is beneath him.) During the fight that ensues, "the negroes [are] all standing . . . in helpless indecision" (CW 626)—as they were often forced to do in reality. While their sympathies might be with the man lower on the social ladder, they can ill afford to turn their backs on Aristide. At the same time, intervening in the romance among whites in any way puts their own well being in jeopardy. Later they give the event mythic proportions by "describ[ing] it in language that made children and timid women shriek and tremble and . . . men look to their firearms" (CW 627); to them, Plaisance, now officially Ti Démon, seems to have attained the status of a lwa, albeit a vengeful one. Like the Haitians invoking Ogun, the lwa of war, they may actually have been awaiting Ti Démon's full emergence. The white community, on the other hand, keep their distance just as they keep Plaisance in his place by categorizing him as "dangerous," even though "other men [have] fought and brawled and bled and quietly resumed their roles of law-abiding citizens" (CW 627). While this might be true for whites, the same, Chopin reminds us, was not the case for people of color or others who moved in the shadows and hearkened to the call of the lwa. One

suspects that all Plaisance/Ti Démon has to look forward is a return to his own form of Guinée when he dies.

Angels and Lwa

What Plaisance/Ti Démon seems to have forgotten is something the lwa have always known: as spirits of a religion condemned as Satanism or dismissed as superstition, they must disguise themselves with masks acceptable to the white Christians dominating the worlds inhabited by the lwa's devotees. Although the most common camouflage has been the images of Catholic saints, biblical figures also have done their part to serve the spirits. For instance, Damballah, the serpent fertility lwa, hides under the visage of St. Patrick and, as we have seen, Moses.²¹³ Kate Chopin's fiction repeatedly demonstrates an appreciation for the necessity of such Voodoo subterfuge. Some lwa reveal themselves through what seems Judeo-Christian rhetoric. Others enter the text as a creature, color, or action associated with the god. And at times, Chopin uses a name that only thinly veils the presence of a Voodoo spirit.

The general presence of the lwa manifests itself in the fiction in Chopin's repeated use of the word "angel," whose Haitian equivalent is "*ange*." In addition to describing aspects of the human soul, "*ange*" indicates the *mysteres*, that is, the lwa.²¹⁴ The "avenging angel" that enables Morico to pull his son's body from the flames in *At Fault* is no Michael or Gabriel. And "the angels in heaven" who "weep" for Zoraïde (*CW* 306) would probably feel more at home in a *hounfour* than a cathedral. In "Cavanelle," Chopin establishes a duality in which the word "angel" most clearly signals a movement away

²¹³ Since St. Patrick purportedly drove snakes out of Ireland, the association of Damballah with the saint seems ironic. As with other saint/lwa combinations, a chromograph rather than hagiographic legend informed Voodooists' adoption of St. Patrick as front man for the fertility god. See Herskovitz, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 281-84.

²¹⁴ Elizabeth McAlister, "The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited," 954; Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 82.

from white Christianity and towards the African-based faith of people of color. A first-person account told from the perspective of a privileged socialite, the story describes the efforts of the merchant Cavanelle to support his frail sister until she dies, at which point he takes in a similarly needy aunt. The “limping old black” servant Pouponne also might be more recipient than provider of assistance in Cavanelle’s milieu. In the story’s opening, the narrator portrays Cavanelle as equally attentive to herself, for “if he was not mistaking [her] for the freshest and prettiest girl in New Orleans, he was reserving for [her] some bit of silk, or lace, or ribbon of a nuance marvelously suited to [her] complexion, [her] eyes or [her] hair.” Although she seems unaware of her narcissism, she is not blind to Cavanelle’s generosity. That “he always began to talk to [her] of his sister Mathilde” cues the narrator to identifying Cavanelle as “an angel” (CW 369).

At this point, the angel imagery seems rooted in an American Christianity in which good works should show a profit, for the narrator believes Cavanelle “worked so faithfully, so energetically” on behalf of Mathilde because his efforts would result in a payoff, that is, his sister, who supposedly “ha[s] a voice,” would become an opera star. The merchant, however, does not remain in this initial angelic state. In a private concert for the narrator, Mathilde falls far short of Maria Callas caliber and causes the narrator to re-envision Cavanelle as “a fool,” “a lunatic,” or even “under a hypnotic spell” for his inability to assess Mathilde’s talent or lack thereof objectively. The only explanation the narrator can entertain is that “[he] loved Mathilde intensely, and we all know that love is blind, but a god just the same” (CW 372).

On the one hand, the narrator’s explanation is simply a cliché, part of the same solipsistic romanticism that informs her buying of silk and lace at the merchant’s store.

At the same time, it hints at a polytheistic alternative to the monotheism embraced by her and other white American individualists for whom the profit margin is measured in dollars and cents. That Cavanelle occupies a more communal, Voodoo-based realm is suggested by the role played by Pouponne, whose “presence, in some unaccountable manner, seem[s] to reveal . . . much of the inner working of this small household.” Indeed, the “manner” is literally not “countable,” and this fact disturbs the narrator, who cannot understand why Pouponne “would rather work in a *petit ménage* in Goodchildren street for five dollars a month than for fifteen in the fourth district” (CW 371).²¹⁵ Viewed in the context of race and Voodoo in Louisiana, the black woman’s function in Cavanelle’s world and Chopin’s story becomes less mysterious. With a name simultaneously suggestive of “baby” and “dote,”²¹⁶ Pouponne points to a *pietà* quite distinct from Michaelangelo’s, one in which the son does not languish in the lap of the mother but instead supports her. Certainly, a story so focused upon female relatives—the sister Mathilde and, at the end of the story, Aunt Félicie—should make us wonder if the black woman is really the *surrogate* mother the narrator and critics have imagined her to be.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ The narrator resembles Melicent Hosmer, who similarly could not understand why people of color would turn down the opportunity to work for and make money from her.

²¹⁶ *Poupon* means “baby” while *pouponner* means “to dote,” i.e., as a mother would on her child. See <http://ets.freetranslation.com/>.

²¹⁷ The allusion to “Aunt Félicie,” with its form of address Southern whites have long accorded older black women, further colors Cavanelle’s household as does the fact that Aunt Félicie hails from Terrebonne. Located in the heart of the sugar-cane region of Louisiana, Terrebonne Parish and surrounding areas erupted in violence in the late nineteenth century when freedmen struck for higher wages. One strike occurred in 1874, the same year that Oscar Chopin and other members of the White League participated in the Battle of Liberty Place in New Orleans, while a more tragic labor dispute broke out in 1887. The latter left “at least thirty black sugar workers . . . slain in a hailstorm of violence in and around Thibodaux.” Women, typically the wives of workers, also were employed in the sugar mills during peak seasons. Were Aunt Félicie a wife and/or worker, she could have experienced her “affliction . . . an’ deprivation” during the strikes. Her migration to New Orleans would have coincided with the travels of many other blacks who “fled the [Thibodaux] area altogether, never to return.” See John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane*

Even if we assume Pouponne is a recreation of the Southern mammy, we cannot ignore the link between her maternalism and the matriarchy of Voodoo. Indeed, the priestess she visits might not be the only mambo in the story. While the narrator considers Cavanelle “a hampered child who does not recognize the restrictions hedging it about” (CW 373), Pouponne’s presence challenges the individualist mindset that equates service to others as slavery and reminds the reader of the real loss of freedom people of color had long experienced in the United States. What both the narrator and scholars mistake for self-sacrifice in Cavanelle is a system of reciprocity rooted in Pouponne that enables each of the characters to survive, at least for a while: the “baby” as a mother, the anemic singer as a “nightingale,” and finally the ailing aunt as the bearer of a “blessed privilege” to Cavanelle.²¹⁸

Ultimately, the black woman opens the door to the lwa with whom devotees experience a similar reciprocal relationship. Having learned that the merchant now is caretaker to Aunt Félicie, the narrator concludes by reiterating her original assessment of Cavanelle: he is, once again, “an angel.” Although the narrator, described as riding various street cars to and from encounters with the merchant, seems chained to a linear train of thought that cannot truly value natural or supernatural cycles, Chopin seems to have brought the story full circle in hopes that her readers might appreciate a world view in which *anges*—the lwa—can manifest themselves at any moment, perhaps in the body of a simple seller of ribbons and bows.²¹⁹

Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes 1862-1880 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 90-1, 161-4, and 183-7.

²¹⁸ Barbara Ewell, who writes that “devotion to others is Cavanelle’s peculiar means of self-assertion,” most succinctly articulates the way Cavanelle’s behavior merges the individual and community. See Ewell, *Kate Chopin*, 102.

²¹⁹ With her concluding reference to the Prytania street car, Chopin may be taking issue generally with white Protestantism and more specifically with her Protestant contemporary, George Washington Cable. A

Rada and Petro *Nacions*

The lwa imported to Haiti and subsequently into Louisiana are grouped into various families called *nacions*, the most dominant of which are the Rada and Petro. Although Voodooists do not believe in absolute concepts of good and evil like those that distinguish Christianity, the Rada and Petro lwa, considered water/cool and fire/hot deities respectively, generally reflect constructive and destructive energies. This is not to say that the Petro lwa do not serve important ends. In eighteenth-century Santo Domingue, the *maroons* invoked what are generally considered Petro spirits to support the rebellion against the slaveholders. Also, the same lwa can have both Rada and Petro incarnations. In Haiti, even the warrior lwa Ogou is regarded as a liaison bridging the two *nacions*. Karen Brown explains that this porous nature of the spirits provides ethical options for Voodooists, who, it is believed, “will choose a right way to behave . . . in a given situation when they have sufficient insight into that situation.” Such “situational morality,” an anathema to many Judeo-Christian theologians, has its roots in the precarious position of people of color enslaved in the Americas.²²⁰

Through such characters as Joçint and Ti Démon, Kate Chopin shows herself to be sympathetic to legitimate desires for the descent of the more violent lwa. While Plaisance seems mounted by Ogou on that single fateful night, the community rather than Chopin’s protagonist more fully exhibit the rigidity characteristic of the Petro spirits. Nonetheless,

historical landmark on Prytania Street in the Garden District of New Orleans, the Prytania Street Presbyterian Church employed Cable as a Sunday-school teacher and deacon. See Ronald C. White, Jr. *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel: 1877-1925* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 53. Although Cable would use these positions to indict segregation, including that within Presbyterianism itself, Chopin may have regarded his early ties to the church, like his censorious depictions of Voodoo, as contradictory, if not hypocritical.

²²⁰ Karen Brown, “Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting: Ogou in Haiti,” in *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 65-89.

Chopin, who saw the work of Ogou far too well in the Civil War, seems to advocate a general shift away from the Petro *nacion* and towards the Rada, just as she subordinates the patriarchal point of view to the matriarchal. At least in the Americas, Chopin suggests, the Petro lwa have left a far too bloody and destructive mark upon the earth and their devotees. What is needed in their stead is the harmony largely represented by the Rada spirits, the community they inspire rather than the individualism of the Petro lwa that, taken to the extreme, results in the very annihilation of the self the Petro devotee seeks to avoid.

Damballah and Ayida Wèdo

Most representative of the harmonious yet pluralistic world Kate Chopin seems to imagine is the Voodoo serpent couple, Damballa and Ayida Wèdo. As noted earlier, even those who contend that Louisiana Voodoo honors few lwa recognize the important role Damballa has played in America's bayou country. One of the most sensational aspects of Voodoo rites described in newspaper articles was the presence of the snake, a fact that led many to equate Voodoo with snake worship or "ophiolatry."²²¹ Although the spirit embodied by the snake in Louisiana would later be called the "Grand Zombi," it seems to have an obvious correlation with Damballah, called "Blanc Dani, Danny, Daniel Blanc, Cambarra Soutons" in New Orleans.²²² In Haitian Voodoo, Damballah is a "multicolored snake" depicted in ritual *vévés* (drawings) as one of two serpents, the other being his female complement, Ayida Wèdo. Together they act as archetypal parents whose roots extend back to Dã of Fon mythology, "the living quality expressed in all dynamic motion

²²¹ Métraux traces this to Moreau de Saint-Méry's account of the Haitian Voodoo ritual, which George Washington Cable incorporated into his own description of Voodoo. Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 38.

²²² Long, "Deities in Africa, Haiti, and New Orleans" (Table 3) in *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess*, 115-6.

in the cosmos, in all things that are flexible, sinuous, and moist, in all things that fold and unfold, coil and recoil.”²²³

In Voodoo rites, Damballa and Ayida Wèdo are invoked soon after Legba, a fact Kate Chopin seems to have known, as is suggested in the opening scene of “Desirée’s Baby.” In it, the foundling Desirée is discovered by Monsieur Valmondé when he “rid[es] through [his plantation’s] gateway,” the province of Legba. As Desirée awakens in his arms, she “beg[ins] to cry for ‘Dada’” (CW 240). Interpreted by some as a hint that Monsieur Valmondé might be Desirée’s biological father, the exact phrasing implies something different. If she is already in her father’s arms, she has no reason to “cry *for* him.” Instead, her invocation of “Dada” initiates a spiritual quest for “Papa Damballah” that ultimately leads Desirée to the bayou with her baby, who himself seems destined to be the mount for Moses—i.e., Damballah—that none of the men in the story can or will be.

The search for Damballah is even more evident in “A Wizard from Gettysburg.” In contrast to the patriarchy and the Petro lwa represented by the “wizard” is the matriarchy over which Madam Delmandé presides. This alternative physical and spiritual world is signified towards the end of the story by the cooperative polishing of the family silver performed by Madame Delmandé, the servant Cindy, and, in her own way, the little granddaughter. When the senior Bertrand Delmandé, clasping his box of gold, enters the kitchen and identifies himself, Madame Delmandé is far from elated. Instead, she “give[s] a sharp cry, much as might follow the plunge of a knife” and “drag[s] herself as a wounded serpent might to where the old man [stands]” (CW 130). It should be no surprise that while she “knows” him, he does not realize who she is. As the “serpent” in

²²³ Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 125.

the story, she is Ayida Wèdo, but the man, whose talent for “wounding” infects even his relationship with his wife, is no Damballah or devotee of the life force. Feared by people of color on the plantation, he can hardly be the “multicolored snake” of Voodoo.

In “The Locket,” Chopin similarly draws on serpent imagery to suggest Ayida Wèdo, although the description initially seems based in Judeo-Christian ideology rather than Voodoo. Appearing in Part 1 just before Ned Pillier and his company go into battle, the “serpent,” the chain attached to Ned’s “Hoodoo charm,” slips along Ned’s neck when his fellow Confederate steals the locket: “Ned dreamt of a serpent coiling around his throat, and when he strove to grasp it the slimy thing glided away from his clutch” (CW 561). To Chopin’s largely white Christian audience, the image doubtless represented Satan. But as an element of a dream, an important pagan conduit for communication with the spirits, it loses its Biblical connotations and becomes more closely aligned with Voodoo. In this context, the reference to the “slimy thing” is simply inaccurate since those more at home with nature, such as the mambos of New Orleans, know snakes are neither inanimate “things” nor “slimy.” The Voodoo/mambo link becomes even more pronounced when we recall that the chain and locket are really Octavie’s. Although Ned’s attempt to “grasp” the chain may indicate that he, like the “wizard,” lacks Voodoo sensibilities and values possessions more than the life force symbolized by the snake, Octavie seems clearly an incarnation of Ayida Wèdo. Whether Ned ever becomes Damballah’s mount remains doubtful at the end of the story. That Chopin’s Ayida Wèdos want and need their serpentine counterpart, however, is never called into question.

Loko

One lwa not considered part of the Louisiana pantheon and, in discussions of the Haitian spirits, given less attention than other lwa, such as Damballah and Ayida Wèdo, is Loko, whose name resonates with the title of Chopin's story "Loka," in which the titular character, a "half-breed Indian girl," is taken in by the Padues, an Acadian family in Natchitoches. The racial and class import of the story has been addressed, but scholars typically regard the protagonist as signifying the "savage" side of a nature/civilization dichotomy; with proper handling, the young woman will find her place in white society.²²⁴ In fact, the character's name might well have contributed to such a reductive reading of the story. Just as they have done concerning Père Antoine, scholars have followed the lead of Emily Toth, who links Chopin's character to another "Loca," a.k.a. Lodoiska DeLouche, the wife of Chopin's supposed lover, Albert Sampite. Although Loca Sampite ultimately left her abusive husband, her years of suffering coupled with Toth's exegesis probably influenced Bonnie Shaker's interpretation: "Perhaps, as her name suggests, what is 'crazy' about Loka is that she chooses to stay in a physical place that manifests her cultural place as indentured servitude."²²⁵

In her allusion to "a physical place," Shaker unwittingly points to an alternative spiritual reading of the protagonist's name, character, and story that undermines the tale's ostensible racial stereotyping. In fact, "Loka" has roots in both the Theosophy and Voodoo Kate Chopin references in her "As You Like It" essay. In *The Theosophical*

²²⁴ See Ewell, *Kate Chopin*, 69, 81; Castillo, "'Race' and Ethnicity," 66-7; and Shaker, *Coloring Locals*, 64-70.

²²⁵ Toth, *Kate Chopin*, 165-6; Shaker, *Coloring Locals*, 68. This is not to suggest that Chopin did not have Loca Sampite in mind at all. Albert Sampite apparently makes a cameo appearance in the story when Loka thinks of her life before coming into town and remembers "Choctaw Joe and *Sambite* play[ing] dice" (CW 215, emphasis added). But the multiple layers of Chopin's fiction allow for multiple influences, some of which might supercede the writer's purported affair with Sampite.

Glossary, Madame Blavatsky defines “Loka” as “[a] region or circumscribed place. In metaphysics, a world or sphere or plane.”²²⁶ Madame Blavatsky’s definition has obvious significance in a story about a Native American attempting to fit into a “circumscribed place” quite distinct from her natural home, just as numerous tribes were forced to adapt to life on reservations. But a Voodoo reading connects Loka’s name to a specific spirit rather than a place. According to Anthony Pinn, who provides one of the most detailed descriptions of this lwa,

Papa Loko [is] guardian of fields and ‘king of vegetation.’ Because of this close relationship with the land and its produce, Papa Loko plays a central role in healing and health issues. This control over the land and its produce also relates to his sense of balance—justice and equality. It is easy to understand the importance of this loa because of Haiti’s need for the land’s produce and communal cooperation: ritual activities are not strictly individual in nature but are communal and relate to the land. As a result of this. Loko . . . is also understood as the protector of ritual space, and patron of the priesthood.²²⁷

Although Chopin’s Loka believes she “belong[s] on Bayou Choctaw,” she arrives “one day at the side door of Frobissaint’s ‘oyster saloon’ in Natchitoches, asking for food” (CW 212). Like Désirée’s appearance at the Valmondé’s plantation, Loka’s abrupt entrance into Natchitoches and the story has more in keeping with a lwa’s mounting of a human than with Loka Sampite’s withdrawing from her husband. In this way, Chopin inverts the surface layer of the story to establish Loka as a commentator on rather than a recipient of the reforms initiated generally by the town’s white Ladies of the Band of

²²⁶ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1892), <http://theosophicalglossary.net/>.

²²⁷ Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 23.

United Endeavor and specifically by the Acadian Madame Padue. That Loka's "swarthy face" is "without a *redeeming* feature, except eyes that were not bad" (CW 212, emphasis added) might well be a point in her favor in a world where redemption often carried a hefty price. At the same time, as Loko's mount, Loka has much to teach Madame Padue.

Throughout the story, the Acadian woman looks with disdain on the "half-breed Indian girl." As slow as Madame Padue is fast, Loka speaks English and Choctaw but not Madame Padue's French. But what supposedly most distinguishes Loka from Madame Padue—the Native American's "savagery"—appears common ground. While Loka's physical violence enacted at Frobissaint's is readily apparent, Madame Padue, "a small, black-eyed, aggressive woman," engages in more subtle psychological and spiritual assaults that may also be more destructive. Even her family finds her exacting nature less than "agreeable" (CW 213). Loka and Madame Padue diverge in their ability to nurture, but it is the Acadian, not Loka, who ultimately appears deficient.

On a day when the Padues go to town, the ostensible "*sauvage*" of the story proves herself both a rightful mount for the lwa and the mother/healer Madame Padue is not. Left alone with the Padues' baby Bibine, Loka could escape to the woods she sees from the Acadians' home. When her "gaze . . . [fastens] upon the woods," she seems to enter a state of Voodoo possession in which she relives her time away from civilization. But the woods form only part of the panorama before her. Also in the picture is Laballière's plantation, where Baptiste Padue is a sharecropper on a bit of land. Loka's vantage point has a clear correlation with Loko's connection to "fields" and other "vegetation." But it is Loko's role as healer and understanding of the communal nature of land that most tie Chopin's "half-breed" to the lwa. Emotionally attached to Bibine, she is vigilant in her

attentions to the baby. She sways him to sleep in his *branle* and then “lets down the mosquito net, to protect the child’s slumber from the intrusion of the many insects that [are] swarming in the summer air” (CW 214), even though Loka herself has been the victim of an intrusion of human mosquitoes into her own life. When she temporarily leaves the house, she does so with Bibine, who Baptiste Padue later describes as Loka’s ““guarjun angel”” but who early on bonds with Loka not through conventional angelic means but by “savagely biting her chin” (CW 213). Although “[Loka] [can] not go and leave Bibine behind” (CW 216), the same cannot be said of Madame Padue, who entrusts her youngest and doubtless most vulnerable child with someone she considers nothing short of barbaric.

Reduced to tears when she arrives home and initially finds Loka and Bibine missing, Madame Padue is given a taste of the lwa Loko’s sense of justice, but the full flavor of it is expressed through the Acadian’s husband, who orders his wife ““to listen to the truth—once fo’ all””— that he is the ““masta in this house”” (CW 217). This is not the “truth” of Kate Chopin or Voodoo, but Baptiste Padue’s claim to authority puts Tontine in the position of pseudo-slave she has imposed on Loka. Most of all, it demonstrates for Chopin’s readers that the myriad forms of enslavement are still, if not even more, present in post-bellum America.

Ezili

One of the most complicated lwa for Kate Chopin as well as some researchers of Voodoo is Ezili, who in her most common manifestation as Ezili-Freda corresponds to the goddess of love, Aphrodite/Venus. A Haitian creation, Ezili-Freda is a consummate coquette who demands all of the luxuries of a privileged woman: perfume, jewelry, fine

wine, and, of course, numerous lovers. In fact, Voodooists who dedicate themselves to Ezili-Freda must “enter a mystic marriage” to her. One of her most problematic features is that she assumes the form of a biracial woman representing the upper class rather than the peasants of Haiti. Joan Dayan, who considers Ezili-Freda “a mimicry of excess,” thus takes issue with the positive gloss Zora Neal Hurston and others have accorded the lwa of love and notes that possession by Ezili-Freda “has less to do with a ‘gorgeous, gracious, and beneficent’ woman, who gives herself ‘in radiant ecstasy’ to men (Hurston’s description), than with the continued invitation to retain or repel these extravagances.”²²⁸

While Kate Chopin balked at Christianity’s rejection of the things of this world, she seems to have shared Dayan’s perspective on Ezili-Freda. Most disconcerting for the mother of five sons and one daughter seems to have been Ezili-Freda’s self-absorption, a state made possible by the fact that this lwa has no children.²²⁹ Many of Chopin’s characters, especially some we have already visited, must move through an Ezili-Freda state before they can emerge as other-centered adults, that is, as Ezili-Dantòs. Désirée, Zoraïde, and Athénaïse all fall within this category. Nonetheless, the essence of Ezili is love, which, has the potential for inspiring a human redemption quite distinct from that offered by the American Christianity of the nineteenth century.

As with Loko, Ezili appears most clearly in Chopin’s fiction in a name, Azélie, that serves to identify both the title and female protagonist of a story in which the religious significance is readily apparent. The daughter of an Acadian sharecropper, Azélie must buy her family’s provisions at a company store managed by Polyte but owned by the

²²⁸ Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 64-65.

²²⁹ Dayan notes that in one song Ezili-Freda is described as having a child Ursule who “disappeared under the waters of the Caribbean sea.” Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the God*, 63. But the child’s convenient vanishing only further emphasizes the fact that Ezili-Freda is a lover, not a mother.

planter Mr. Mathurin. This odd trinity of characters enters the tale in a physical arrangement emphasizing a theological as well as social hierarchy. Mr. Mathurin, who appears only at the story's opening and conclusion, is positioned on the gallery of his house looking down first at Azélie and then at 'Polyte, whose store is in "one corner of the lower house" (CW 289). Azélie, the complete outsider, must literally look up to Mr. Mathurin to communicate with him and metaphorically to 'Polyte to access what she needs and/or wants on credit. While Mr. Mathurin tolerates Azélie's family's requests, he does not do so with any great compassion; he plans to put up with the "Li'le River gang" only for the remainder of the season. As the plantation owner standing on a gallery "supported" by "large whitewashed pillars," he enjoys a white Christian Godlike vantage. This is not surprising since his name means "Trinitarian."²³⁰

For the first half of the story, 'Polyte is a model of the Protestant work ethic. He is noted for his industry and in his dealings with Azélie draws clear lines between necessities and luxuries, the latter of which he refuses to supply the young woman. His lifestyle also resembles that of a religious ascetic, for he seems to have no companions besides his dogs. His lodgings befit a monk, for they consist of only a corner in the back of the store that, with the exception of vines "screen[ing] his windows and doors," has little suggestion of life. His one indulgence is lying in a hammock, a symbol suggesting 'Polyte's suspension between two spiritual ways of being. The keys and pistol the clerk carries with him and buries under his pillow at night further indicate a division between spiritual life and death.

Azélie represents the African-American Voodoo alternative to white Judeo-Christianity. Although she is identified as an Acadian, the story includes allusions that

²³⁰ *OED Online*, s.v. "mathurin," <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/>.

link her to black practices and beliefs, if not skin color. Taking her supplies home, she places her pail on her head in a pose reminiscent of many images of African women. She also makes the only reference to blacks in the story when she complains that ““Son Ambroise”” who is ““on’y a nigga”” is given more than her father. While this might seem evidence of the Acadian’s allegiance to the white world, one could argue that she wants her “popa” and herself to be grouped with blacks so the two of them can enjoy the same benefits as “black souls” do. But theologically this is not necessary because Azélie embraces the ethos of the African-based religion. Among the items ’Polyte refuses to give her for her father is whiskey, which “Popa” needs ““count o’ his pains that’s ’bout to cripple him”” (CW 291). To the Christian redeemer ’Polyte seems to imagine himself, such a request is appalling. Azélie, however, is ruled more by mercy than righteousness. Moreover, as we have seen, alcohol is an important ingredient for many Voodoo rituals. In her eyes, it may be a spiritual necessity, not the decadent luxury ’Polyte imagines it to be.

The spiritual turning point in the story occurs when ’Polyte discovers Azélie in the store at night, the moon-time favored by the lwa and mambos, to gather the goods ’Polyte had refused during the day to give her, most of which are items for her “Popa.” ’Polyte does not hesitate to label her a “thief,” a designation Azélie rejects. By reiterating an accusation commonly applied to people of color, ’Polyte’s claim further situates Azélie among African Americans. But, given the Trinitarian context of the story, it also establishes Azélie as one of the two thieves crucified with Christ, perhaps the one *not* guaranteed a Judeo-Christian salvation by the messiah. By removing the thief from his cross, Chopin asks us to look at the earthly and spiritual world from a different

perspective than that required by mainstream churches. By naming the thief Azélie, the writer specifically asks us to consider the Voodoo pantheon, especially its spirit of love, as a replacement for the Christian Trinity.

Thus, the disabled “Popa,” Azélie’s father Arsène Pauché, is Legba, whom Azélie/Ezili honors with accessories, a pipe and tobacco, traditionally used to define the lwa of the crossroads. In fact, Arsène Pauché indirectly functions as the lwa’s mount when he instigates Azélie’s breaking into ’Polyte’s fortress-like store. Despite the clerk’s precautions, Azélie has found a portal, in this case a window rather than a gate, through which she can penetrate the domain of white Christianity but, more important, through which ’Polyte can leave it. Following Azélie’s escapade, he falls in love with the young woman and imagines that through his adoration he might rescue her from a family he regards as lacking in even rudimentary values. But Azélie, who is not the coquette Ezili-Freda but the family-oriented Ezili Dantò, cannot imagine abandoning her father, grandmother, and brother. Instead, ’Polyte follows them to “Li’le River,” which he rightly regards as a place of death—the death of the old devotee to the individualism of American Christianity.

That Chopin would value the Petro Ezili Dantò over the Rada Ezili-Freda points to an appreciation of family, specifically of children, that has little to do with Darwin, essentialism, or Victorian notions of motherhood. Although the writer might have turned away from the overt physical violence of the male warrior Ogou, she seemed to believe that human versions of Ezilie Dantò have not only the right but also the responsibility to fight for their children’s survival. Through her recreations of the fierce mother/warrior represented by the Black Madonna, Chopin demonstrates a keen understanding of the

horrors mothers of color had to endure in America, both before and after the abolishment of slavery. To discount the value of children, Chopin suggests, is at best a white luxury and at worst a travesty that flies in the black face of women and men denied the very right to parent their own offspring. As we have seen in “Cavanelle,” the call to motherhood in the broadest sense is not sex specific. In some fashion, we must all be mothers to ensure the spiritual as well as physical survival of the human race.

Marassa

The African influence on Kate Chopin’s appreciation for children reveals itself most in the number of twins, both figurative and literal, who populate her fiction. Typically such duplication has been interpreted as symbolic of tension and division, primarily between the spirit and the flesh. Such is the case with “Two Portraits,” in which the same character appears as a whore and a nun. But Chopin’s incorporation of biological twins in her work, such as the Farival girls in *The Awakening*, suggests a different worldview in which separate entities—regardless of skin color, sex, or social status—maintain their individuality but are simultaneously united by what Voodooists recognize as a common soul. As in Africa, twins in Haiti are considered sacred due to the unusual nature of their birth (although they also have gained this distinction because in Africa, which has the highest rate of twin births in the world, they are not uncommon). A more mundane and sad explanation for the special attention given to twins is a high mortality rate, especially in Haiti, where in certain sections up to “50 percent of the children do not reach the age of five.” This tragic state of affairs has contributed to the twin lwa, the Marassa, being linked to the lwa of death, the Gede. Still, hope is inherent in the pluralism signified by twins, so, as Florence Bellande-Robertson writes, the concept of the “Marassa symbolizes

abundance, plurality, wholeness, healing, innocence, and newness.”²³¹ In one of Chopin’s most child-centered stories, “Boulôt and Boulotte,” these Marassa qualities converge to offer a Voodoo cure to the racist ills of post-Reconstruction America.

The story features an Acadian set of twelve-year-old fraternal twins Boulôt and Boulotte who set off for town on a Saturday to buy what is apparently their first pair of shoes. Although this is a family affair—the decision for this momentous event is made through a “family council” —the cast of characters consists entirely of children. The tale turns on a humorous development in the story: having made their purchase, the twins do not wear but instead carry their shoes back home. The reaction of their siblings, at least of the eldest, Seraphine, is ridicule: ““You bof crazy *donc*, Boulôt an’ Boulotte,’ screamed Seraphine. ‘You go buy shoes, an’ come home barefeet like you was go!’” (CW 152). But while Seraphine’s comment causes embarrassment for the boy Boulôt, his undaunted twin sister replies, ““You think we go buy shoes fur ruin it in de dus’?” (CW 152). Embedded in what seems merely a light-hearted tale for a young audience is the complex message of the Marassa. First, the sobering suggestions of death cannot be ignored. Both Seraphine’s image of the twins’ going and returning barefoot and the allusion to dust in Boulotte’s rejoinder are grim reminders of the fate that await all of us: we enter and leave the world barefoot and then we turn to dust. But the story’s humorous tone softens this blow and diverts our attention to the lesson central to Voodoo and Chopin’s canon—that which matters most is not the end time but the here and now. In the miniature community

²³¹ Florence Bellande-Robertson, “A Reading of the *Marasa* Concept in Lilas Desquiron’s *Les Chemins de Loco-Miroir*,” in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, & Reality*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 104; Marilyn Houlberg, “Magique Marasa: The Ritual Cosmos of the Twins and Other Sacred Children,” in *Fragments of Bone: New-African Religions in a New World*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 16, 22;

featuring Chopin's Marassa we see key indicators of values that might facilitate the harmonious co-existence of individuals. Certainly, the twins, who walk home "hand in hand" are united despite the obvious differences determined by their sex. But such bonding is not limited to the Marassa. That the simple task of buying shoes is cause for a "family counsel" reflects a world in which community trumps the individual, as it must among people with limited resources.

The most important lesson seems that taught through another coupling in the story, that between Boulotte and the youngest angel of the house, the baby Seraphin. As the other children head inside, Boulotte remains outside with Seraphin in a shared indifference to the whole shoe excursion. Bonding in this way, they form a youthful parallel to the Ezili Dantò image of Désirée walking towards the bayou with her own child in her arms. Like the twins, Désirée will soon be barefoot because her fragile slippers are disintegrating with every step. But perhaps there is much more to be said for bare feet firmly planted in the earth where the lwa might descend than for arms grasping for a divine state mere humans never can attain.

CHAPTER 3

AT THE CROSSROADS IN *THE AWAKENING*

The theological underpinnings of *The Awakening* have received surprisingly little attention in the more than one hundred years since the novel's publication in 1899. Those scholars who have addressed the topic have concentrated on the Protestant/Catholic division and the mythic alternative to which Edna Pontellier allegedly turns. In "The Second Coming of Aphrodite," Sandra Gilbert set the spiritual standard by which many critics have continued to view Chopin's protagonist. But within the context of race, Edna's transformation is not an unconditional good. While the sexual awakening links Chopin's character to women of color, "for those of the 'warmer' races had been long considered 'well vers'd in Venus' school,"²³² the supposed liberation she enjoys was obviously not the experience of many African Americans or Africans taken into bondage. Sara Baartman, the famous "Hottentot Venus" exhibited before a voyeuristic white audience in early nineteenth-century England and France, knew too well how confining the role of the goddess of love could be.²³³ Nonetheless, in a recent article on religion in

²³² Michelle Birnbaum, "'Alien Hands': Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race," *American Literature*, 66, no. 2 (June 1994): 303, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9831%28199406%2966%3A2%3C301%3A%22HKCAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>. Birnbaum succinctly exposes the flaw in Gilbert's and others' glorification of Edna Pontellier as Venus and articulates my own reservations: "This characterization . . . tends to preempt investigation of the cultural and . . . specifically colonial production of white female selfhood and sexuality in the novel," 302.

²³³ An African who attracted attention because of the shape of her buttocks and genitalia, Sara Baartman ultimately died in poverty as a prostitute. Her body was then dissected and parts of it displayed in the Musée de l'Homme; in 2002, the remains of Baartman were returned to Africa. Her story has been widely disseminated. See, for instance, Sadiah Qureshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus,'" *History of Science* 42 (2004): 233-57. Although Baartman died in 1815, thirty-five years before Kate Chopin was born, references to the "Hottentot Venus" were commonplace in Chopin's lifetime. For instance, in an 1872 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, a writer apparently referring to the bustle advised women not to wear "a gown . . . [that] project[ed] backward like the reverse side of the Hottentot Venus" while in an 1896 edition of *Appletons' Popular Science Monthly*, M. F. Regnault argued that "many peoples . . . are addicted to the practice of flattening their noses, and sometimes, as in the case of the Hottentot Venus, they break the nose." See "The Common-Sense of Dress," *Harper's Bazaar* 5, no. 31 (Aug. 3, 1872): 515, American Periodicals Series Online; and M. F. Regnault, "Exaggeration as an Aesthetic Factor," *Appletons' Popular Science Monthly* 49 (1896): 821-2,

Chopin's fiction, David Wehner expands upon Gilbert's valorization of Edna to argue that Chopin, influenced by Darwin, cobbles together her own "idiosyncratic" religion sanctifying instinct and sensuous experience; thus, Edna and Chopin's "other characters [achieve conversion] by taking up nature and nature's appetites." To be sure, her American protagonist undergoes a conversion experience; less convincing are Wehner's and others' assessments of the process and its end result and significance.²³⁴

In the surface layer of *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin revisits the Protestant/Catholic division she addressed in *At Fault*. However, she now juxtaposes the French Catholic, Louisiana world in which Edna Pontellier resides with a Protestantism more immediately linked to America's Calvinistic roots, the Presbyterian Church of Edna's Kentucky/Mississippi homes. This is not surprising since the author, despite her eventual rejection of Roman Catholic orthodoxy, had in her commonplace book ready reminders of the battle between Protestants and Catholics generated by the Reformation and continued in the United States well into the nineteenth century. But in *The Awakening*, the adult Kate Chopin lays down the Christian cross to journey to the *crossroads*, the point where the living might commune with their ancestors and the African-based deities

<http://www.archive.org/stream/appletonspopular49youmrich#page/n5/mode/2up>.

²³⁴ David Wehner, "'A Lot Up for Grabs': The Idiosyncratic, Syncretic Religious Temperament of Kate Chopin," 158. Wehner does an admirable job of establishing the specifically Augustinian context of Catholicism informing Chopin's work and showing that Catholicism, no less than Protestantism, privileged spirit over body. In fact, as we have seen, when Chopin was writing the Catholic Church had become increasingly detached from the flesh just as Protestantism moved further away from the spirit. But despite his nod to syncreticism, Wehner does not posit a truly eclectic belief system, for, like Edna Pontellier, he thinks in black and white terms and advocates a replacement dogma that embraces instinct and nature without qualification. For people of color in the nineteenth century, such a position had frightening implications. Instinct rather than reason undoubtedly incited many of the lynchings of African Americans, and the rise of social Darwinism helped make segregation possible. What people needed was a religion in which flesh and spirit, the natural and supernatural could coexist. As I have shown, Chopin did not have to create her own religion for this.

imported into the American South by slaves.²³⁵ The crossroads is an especially apt image for the spiritual conflict experienced by Edna Pontellier, who finds herself at a juncture where she must choose between the Judeo-Christian faith of the fathers and the mother-centered ways of the African religious beliefs propagated in Louisiana Voodoo. Unfortunately, Edna proves too resistant to the call of the African lwa and drowns in the font of American Christianity. Chopin, however, seems to hope that her readers might embrace the more inclusive essence of the ancient beliefs of her African-American characters as an alternative to the divisions, which on the surface, appear irreconcilable in *The Awakening*.

The numerous religious allusions in *The Awakening* should not only cue us to Chopin's long-standing interest in theology, but also to the more important fact that *The Awakening* is a confession of faith written at a time when the leaders and other practitioners of Christianity in America too often betrayed the less dominant members, especially people of color, in its ranks. The religious heart of the novel is most evident in the single date referenced, August 28, the night when Edna Pontellier swims on her own and ostensibly liberates herself from her patriarchal society. As the feast day of St. Augustine it has a more specifically spiritual importance and points to the theological layers embodied by the Bishop of Hippo: his African, pagan roots; his conversion to Catholicism and subsequent title of doctor of the Church; and his influence on Catholicism's Protestant rivals, especially American Puritans. That Chopin excavates all three strata in her novel is supported by the work's original and revised titles, "A Solitary Soul," descriptive of Edna Pontellier's final spiritual state, and "The Awakening,"

²³⁵ For a discussion of the significance of the crossroads in Voodoo, see Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," 153-154.

suggestive of the Great Awakenings that took hold of New England in the eighteenth century and spread to the South in the following century.²³⁶ Denuded of “great,” Chopin’s title implies that the events described by Jonathan Edwards as “the surprising work of God”²³⁷ were more pedestrian than the Northampton minister and his successors would have us believe. They might even have been detrimental to the country’s collective soul, for by perpetuating the Puritan notion of predestined election, the awakenings buttressed the American individualism and separatism implicit in the discriminatory laws imposed on people of color in the post-Reconstruction United States. As Chopin’s representative “American woman,” Edna Pontellier proves herself loyal to the doctrine of the nation’s Puritan founders and unable to accept a worldview in which opposites coexist in an interdependent rather than antagonistic relationship. In her final swim, she is doomed by her own millinealist movement into the rapture. But Chopin includes a subtext beneath the tale of Edna Pontellier that mimics the cyclical nature of Voodoo.

²³⁶ Michael T. Gilmore links the titles to the American revivals but regards Edna Pontellier as subverting her Presbyterian heritage and goes so far as to describe the novel as a “narrative of an antireligious awakening.” Gilmore, “Revolt Against Nature: The Problematic Modernism of *The Awakening*,” in *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 61. While David Wehner describes the novel as a “conversion narrative,” he, too, dismisses the influence of the nineteenth-century revivals, claiming Edna Pontellier’s “awakening does not replicate Jonathan Edwards’ Great Awakening.” Wehner, “‘A Lot Up for Grabs’: The Conversion Narrative in Modernity in Kate Chopin, Flannery O’Connor, and Toni Morrison.” But the glorification of nature, which Wehner ties to Emerson, is equally evident in Jonathan Edwards’s personal writings. In describing his own conversion experience, Edwards finds God in nature in ways not that distinct from the Transcendentalist’s experience: “God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity, and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature.” *Memoirs of the Rev. Jonathan Edwards, A.M.*, comp. Samuel Hawkins and ed. John Hawksley (London: James Black, 1815), 53-4, <http://www.archive.org/stream/memoirsrevjonat00hawkgoog#page/n0/mode/2up>. In his seminal work *Errand into the Wilderness*, Perry Miller, while noting that the Calvinist and the Transcendentalist had distinct agendas, nonetheless contends that “the gulf between Edwards and Emerson is not so deep nor so wide as a strictly doctrinal definition would have us believe.” Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1956), 185. The gulf into which Edna Pontellier ultimately swims is fed by the theological wellspring of Edwards as well Emerson.

²³⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,” in *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow (New York: New American Library, 1978; first published in 1737), 97-103.

Whatever the fate of Edna, nature endures as do the people much of American society sought to avoid. The sea laps at the land; blacks weave in and out of Louisiana's white society. And Voodoo remains a means by which individuals might still connect with nature, one another, and divinity. Most of all, it reminds the reader that issues of race and spirit are multifaceted and as such do not lend themselves to simple solutions, especially in the complex Louisiana setting of *The Awakening*.

The Solitary Soul on the Celestial Railroad

The Sick Soul²³⁸

Chopin's critique of nineteenth-century American spirituality manifests itself in the novel's numerous references to physical frailty. While not a sick book, as one of Chopin's contemporaries claimed,²³⁹ *The Awakening* exposes a malaise requiring a cure rooted in more than the pleasure principal. At forty-seven, the age when she began writing *The Awakening*, Chopin was no doubt keenly aware, as her protagonist is not, that the flesh divorced from the spirit is but a hollow and too, too mortal shell, while the soul

²³⁸ While the phrase "sick soul" comes from William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, I do not propose that Chopin's spiritual position would have been completely in concert with that of James, who delivered his lectures only two years before Chopin died. But to divorce both Kate Chopin and Edna Pontellier from institutionalized religion, Jane Thraikill cites James at length and specifically applies the following Jamesian proposition to Pontellier and Chopin: "The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about has arrived." Thraikill, *Affecting Fictions*, 157, 164. Such a sentiment betrays James's own millennialist leanings and Thraikill's failure to account for the fact that the "eternal present" of people of color in late nineteenth-century America was hardly conducive to "happy relaxation." In fact, for Thraikill, the "sick soul" is a feature of *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, not *The Awakening*.

²³⁹ An anonymous reviewer for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* described *The Awakening* as "not a healthy book," May 13, 1899, cited in "The Awakening: Some Contemporary Responses," <http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam854/summer/awcritf.html>.

without its body simply does not exist in this world. But just as Edna Pontellier is seduced poetically by the sea and more prosaically by the various men in her life, scholars have been lured by Chopin's extensive knowledge of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer as well as the Transcendentalists Emerson and Whitman into imagining the author, like Edna, has deified the body and its passions and impulses. Instead, the manner in which Edna Pontellier pursues physical gratification highlights the fact that two prominent forces in nineteenth-century America—free-love advocates and Protestant evangelists—had become strange bedfellows whose beliefs depended on a similar denial of corporeal facts. Like the flamboyant feminist Victoria Woodhull, the Claflin sister Chopin most likely encountered on her honeymoon, Edna gives little consideration to the possible ramifications of her sensuous indulgences. But she did not need to look to Woodhull for guidance, for American Protestantism would have already drilled her well in illusions of physical transcendence.²⁴⁰

Such academic luminaries as Sandra Gilbert who have applauded Edna Pontellier's transformation into Aphrodite ignore both the fact that Americans have long envisioned a movement into a godlike state and that the admission into Paradise on earth carries a hefty price: Edna must deny the significance of human mortality and suffering just as nineteenth-century believers in postmillennialism did.²⁴¹ Thus, the protagonist who

²⁴⁰ Like Per Seyersted, David Wehner implies that Chopin would have supported the Free Love movement embraced by Woodhull. Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, 144; Wehner, "The Conversion Narrative in Modernity," 77-9. This position, like Woodhull's, is based in a white context that does not take into account the plight of African-Americans denied access to the rights of marrying and bearing children. Even Susan B. Anthony distanced herself from Woodhull when the latter's advocacy for free love and manipulations for power began to jeopardize the feminist cause. Chopin might also have considered Woodhull's spiritualism, like that of the infamous Fox sisters, a sham quite distinct from the Voodoo practiced by people of color. See Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998).

²⁴¹ Although she does not link Edna Pontellier's delusions of grandeur to American Christianity, Angela Hailey-Gregory parts company with Gilbert and other scholars to argue that Edna's assuming the

supposedly embraces the body actually betrays an antipathy to its limitations and the needs of the larger corpus of humanity. Chopin alerts us to this from the moment of Edna's entrance into the novel. While they rightly ascribe Léonce's concern about Edna's sunburned skin to his proprietary sensibilities, scholars overlook Edna's obvious detachment from physical realities. Until her husband directs her attention to her sunburn, Edna is oblivious to the epidermal changes that signal the body's inherent vulnerability. Later, she similarly discounts his fear that his sons might have a fever, despite the omnipresence of yellow fever and malaria in Louisiana. Even the threat of sexually-transmitted diseases seems to have escaped the consciousness of Edna. While she cringes at the dueling scar that exposes the full humanity of her lover, Alcée Arobin, and perhaps makes the integrity of the rest of his body suspect, the woman who scoffs at Adele Ratignolle's sewing of protective nightshirts seems hardly the sort to ask her lover to don a condom.²⁴² Edna herself, Chopin repeatedly tells us, suffers from a "fever," albeit of the psychological/emotional sort attendant to betting on horses at the racetrack, and is prescribed a tonic by the pharmacist Alphonse Ratignolle when Edna visits the Ratignolles in New Orleans. Coexistent with Edna's "fever" is a "blindness" that, despite critics' paeans to instinct, often overtakes Chopin's protagonist when she most indulges

role of the mythic Aphrodite contributes to her undoing: "She is a mere mortal trying to achieve something available only to the gods." Hailey-Gregory, "'Into Realms of the Semi-Celestials': From Mortal to Mythic in *The Awakening*," 296. Marth Fodask Black more directly attributes Edna's downfall to unrealistic expectations influenced in part by Presbyterianism: "Edna's repressive Protestant training and romantic illusions create a dilemma that leads to her tragic death." Black, "The Quintessence of Chopinism" in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered Beyond the Bayou*, eds. Lynda S. Boren and Sara de Saussure Davis (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1992), 107.

²⁴² That Chopin was sensitive to the rise of STDs is evident in "Mrs. Mowbray's Reason," which Barbara Ewell maintains is connected to "contemporary concerns about venereal disease in its plot and themes." Ewell, *Kate Chopin*, 48. In fairness to Edna, I must note that the 1873 Comstock Laws, named for Anthony Comstock and established to prevent the "Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use," would have made it difficult for her to access condoms. See "Anthony Comstock" at *Kate Chopin*, 2009, <http://www.loyno.edu/~kchopin/index.htm>.

her impulses.²⁴³ Even Dr. Mandelet, who regards the young woman as physically robust, considers her “impressionable” and therefore emotionally ill-equipped to assist Adele Ratignolle during the Creole’s labor. As he escorts Edna home, he urges her to visit him for what seems a form of psychoanalysis or counseling.²⁴⁴ What Dr. Mandelet cannot give Edna is the willingness to assume *fully* “her position in the universe as a human being” (CW 893).

That Edna “recognize[s]” but rejects her position is apparent during her visit to Our Lady of Lourdes Church at Chênrière Caminada. By joining the group on Beudelet’s boat, she seems ready to take her place in the human procession, which—with such obviously allegorical characters as the young lovers, the woman in black, and “old” Monsieur Farival—recalls the medieval *danse macabre*. Edna, however, persistently inhabits a twilight, half-life state, so it is no surprise that she becomes suddenly ill during mass and must leave. Although the scene might function as a commentary on the Catholic Church’s, specifically the Virgin Mary’s, failure to serve humanity adequately, it seems even more to reiterate Edna’s inability to accept the physical self completely. Imperfect humanity in need of healing—not the chosen few confident of an earthly Paradise and/or immanent bodily ascension into heaven—make pilgrimages to Lourdes. In the “gothic”

²⁴³ Edna Pontellier’s vision or lack thereof has been a controversial subject. While Suzanne Jones contends that “[t]he ability to see herself other than as society sees her helps Edna transcend society’s viewpoint,” others cite Edna’s episodic bouts of blindness as indications of her limitations. Anna Shannon Elfenbein positions this specifically within the context of race. For instance, when Edna rides in the boat with Robert and Mariquita, the racially exotic woman who may have been Robert’s lover “‘mak[es] ‘eyes’ at Robert”; the image, Elfenbein argues, “introduces what will become an insistent reminder of Edna’s blindness.” See Jones, “Place, Perception, and Identity in *The Awakening*” in *Perspectives on Kate Chopin: Proceedings from the Kate Chopin International Conference April 6, 7, 8 1989*, 63; Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line*, 149.

²⁴⁴ The word “impressionable” is curious because, given the time in which Chopin was writing, a doctor might have been more likely to diagnose Edna as suffering from hysteria or neurasthenia. With its artistic connotations, however, the word calls attention to Edna’s creative, if not medical, limitations. Were Edna the artist she imagines herself to be, she would welcome impressions as did one of the leading female Impressionist painters, Mary Cassatt, who earned her fame by painting exactly the sort of scene—that of mother and child—Edna seeks to escape.

church, the message of *danse macabre*—that one’s body can and will deteriorate—finds concrete expression in Edna’s momentary feelings of faintness, but Chopin’s protagonist only flees such intimations of mortality.

So, too, does she try to avoid the visceral realities of life’s beginnings represented by Adele Ratignolle’s labor. To Edna, it is a “scene of torture” (CW 995), an image reminiscent of the Inquisition and, by association, the Catholic/Protestant dichotomy in the novel. But childbirth, especially to a nineteenth-century woman, would represent even more the potential death attendant to the act. This overwhelms Chopin’s protagonist, who, although she remains with Adele through the duration of the labor, ultimately removes herself completely from terra firma. While a stereotypically vain woman might skirt mortality by simply lying about her age, twenty-nine-year-old Edna imagines she can out-swim death by paddling far from the reminders of time passing. As she drifts from shore, she rejects her children, the “antagonists” destined to take her place one day, and briefly returns to the scenes of her youth.

Through Edna Pontellier’s aversion to biological facts, Kate Chopin levies an important criticism against the American social and political body, for just as Edna scorns the scarred flesh, so, too, does she discount and avoid the country’s inhabitants whose bodies and lives had been most abused by the forces in power. However dark her skin might become under the sun’s rays, Edna will never be ostracized as others of an even lighter complexion increasingly were in the United States. That she is “burnt” rather than “tanned” only emphasizes her obviously Anglo heritage and allegiance to white notions of superiority.²⁴⁵ Thus, throughout the novel she proves herself a staunch supporter of

²⁴⁵ Michelle Birnbaum argues instead that the changing color signals Edna’s adoption of sensibilities typically attributed to African Americans and even links Edna to Palmyer in George Washington Cable’s

racial segregation. Such is the case when, hunting for Mademoiselle Reisz at Mademoiselle's former address on Bienville Street in New Orleans, she encounters a "respectable family of mulattoes" with "*chambres garnies* to let." In response to Madame Pouponne's testament to the good character of her renters, Edna scurries off rather than "linger to discuss class distinctions" (CW 940-941). Later in the novel, Edna ships the quadron and children to the country just as Jim Crow legislation forced undesirables out of sight and mind. The one person of color Edna keeps in her employment when she moves to her "pigeon house" is "old Celestine," whose name might remind Edna of the celestial spheres to which she expects to ascend while the servant's age enables Edna to imagine she, in contrast to the elderly woman, remains eternally youthful. To allay the concerns of her sons, who ask about the future of the other black servants, Edna claims they will be looked after by "the fairies" (CW 978). So, too, might Edna imagine that, freed from the restraints of the problematic quadron and children, the chariot of Helios will swoop down to carry her into the heavens.²⁴⁶

The Grandissimes. Birnbaum, "Alien Hands," 303, 314. Rebecca Nisetich similarly notes that "as [Edna] embraces her sexuality, factors out of her conscious come into play; her skin begins to 'glow.'" Nisetich, "From 'Shadowy Anguish' to 'The Million Lights of the Sun': Racial Iconography in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," 124. Although she errs in ascribing Edna Pontellier's sense of white supremacy to Chopin, Allison Berg seems to offer a more accurate assessment of the supposed transformation of Chopin's protagonist: "Even as [Edna] . . . become[s] increasingly associated with the body . . . [she] remain[s] distinct from other female characters who, by virtue of their color or class, provide examples of 'naturally' animalistic nonwhite womanhood." Berg, *Mothering the Race: Women's Narratives of Reproduction, 1890-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 72.

²⁴⁶ To my knowledge, only Hailey-Gregory has touched on the parallel between Edna and Medea, but the scholar regards Edna's final swim as "a sacrifice for herself" that constitutes "an inverse of Medea's choice to sacrifice her children in order to exact revenge the man who spurned her love." Hailey-Gregory, "Into Realms of the Semi-Celestials," 310. Hailey-Gregory's interpretation falters on several fronts. First, while Edna's intentions at the end of the novel remain a subject of controversy, little seems to support the idea that she regards her swim as a "sacrifice." What *is* evident is that she lacks affection for her sons, her "antagonists." Certainly, her thoughts as she swims into the Gulf of Mexico are those of a woman scorned and wanting revenge, not merely on Robert, the man who got away, but on "Léonce and the children" who, she imagines, "thought that they could possess her, body and soul." An even more compelling link to Medea may be the "wavelets" that "[coil] like serpents about [Edna's] ankles" (CW 1000), an image suggestive of the two dragons that take Medea away in her chariot. (As we will see, the serpents in *The Awakening* have an alternative spiritual significance.) Most of all, Edna seems motivated by the distorted

Edna's Millennialist End Time

“This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman” (CW 893).

More American Medea than Venus, Edna Pontellier proves incapable of “remember[ing] the children” or anyone else as Adele Ratignolle urges. Instead, she clings to the role of Presbyterian child of God she assumed in her old Kentucky home. While scholars have recognized Edna's ties to American Puritanism, they have ignored the degree to which the Presbyterianism of nineteenth-century Kentucky functions as a governing force in *The Awakening*. In the one detailed consideration of Kentucky, Roberta Maguire focuses instead on the state as an emblem of the romanticized, male-dominated South.²⁴⁷ But as the site of Edna's upbringing, Kentucky has specific theological implications that supersede “Old South” symbolism. At the very least, it positions Edna's idealism in the postmillennial beliefs spawned by the Cane Ridge revival that officially marked the beginning of the Second Great Awakenings.²⁴⁸ In fact, with the allusion to the Bluegrass State, Chopin capitalizes on a geographical as well as theological duality, for while Cane Ridge functioned as ground zero for reborn Kentucky Presbyterians, Cane River was home to Louisiana's Catholic Acadians. And the pun does not stop there. The seat of Cane Ridge's Bourbon County is Paris, albeit a place markedly

notion of artistic nobility urged upon her by Mademoiselle Reisz, whose injunction—“the artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies”—Edna recalls. With each stroke, albeit of the arm rather than the paintbrush, Edna seems to imagine she moves closer to being the “reine” the mademoiselle once called her. As Medea exits Euripides's play in the chariot of Helios, she, too, aligns herself more with royalty (in this case, the Greek gods) and less with mere mortals.

²⁴⁷ Roberta S. Maguire, “Kate Chopin and Anna Julia Cooper: Critiquing Kentucky and the South,” *Southern Literary Journal* 35, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 123-137, <http://lion.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu>.

²⁴⁸ In 1801, the revivals that had been unfolding since the Great Awakening of the 1740s arrived in the state with a vengeance that marked what Paul K. Conkin has described as the “climax” of the Second Great Awakening. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 68.

different from the city influencing the manners of Louisiana's Creoles. Unlike the French Republicans, the Presbyterians of antebellum Paris, Kentucky, revolted against their national church because they were committed to a course privileging individualism over the greater good and religion over politics. Refusing to support abolition, as their Northern brethren demanded, the Kentucky faction joined the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. Politics, the Kentuckians claimed, had no place in religion. In Louisville, the Kentucky Presbyterians drafted a manifesto formally articulating their break with the Northern church: *Declaration and Testimony against the Erroneous and Heretical Doctrines and Practices That Have Obtained and been Propagated in the United States during the Last Five Years*.²⁴⁹ In Mississippi, to which Edna Pontellier's father relocates, the Presbyterian church took an even more active stand against blacks by encouraging biblical exegesis supportive of slavery. Historian Randy J. Sparks notes that the majority of Protestant "proslavery writers" were Presbyterians, a fact he attributes to the religion's essential Calvinism, which "was free of the Arminian doctrine of free salvation equally available to all believers."²⁵⁰ Although her sexual escapades might seem to cast Edna in the camp of libertines so despised by John Calvin, her disregard for the situation of blacks in post-Reconstruction Louisiana suggests Edna remains true to her Puritan heritage, at least to the elitism implicit within the faith.

More telling, however, is Edna Pontellier's recreation of the revival conversion

²⁴⁹ Preston D. Graham, Jr., *A Kingdom Not of This World: Stuart Robinson's Struggle to Distinguish the Sacred from the Secular during the Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002). The conflict between the Northern and Southern Presbyterians did not end with the defeat of the South in the Civil War. Instead, Graham writes, the two leaders of the break with the North, the Reverends Stuart Robinson and Samuel Ramsay Wilson, took their crusade to Kate Chopin's hometown, St. Louis, where on June 4, 1866, they presented their position at a meeting in the Mercantile Library Hall.

²⁵⁰ Randy Sparks. *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi for the Mississippi Historical Society, 2001), 120.

experience. In both the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, the awakenings were orchestrated as a means to enflame the waning faith of Americans. The Puritan theocracy that had served as the foundation for the Massachusetts Bay Colony had been losing strength as people moved westward and Deism edged God and Providence into the background of the colonists' psyches. Some theologians, such as Jonathan Edwards, thought the religious leaders were engaging the emotions of their congregations less and less. To counter spiritual complacency, Edwards organized revivals in which such passionate sermons as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" were meant to stir the hearts rather than the minds towards salvation. Edwards' efforts, however, were confined to New England. As people moved beyond the Appalachian Mountains, Protestant ministers realized that, if the city on the hill were to endure, they would need to reach the pioneers in the wilderness whose faith was especially tenuous.

Until the Second Great Awakening, Kentucky Presbyterianism had been based more in intellectual contemplation than the emotional outpourings common to Methodists and Baptists. But as Presbyterian ministers began to lose influence and church members, they reconsidered their approach to reaching the masses. The results of the fiery camp meetings of other denominations in the South slowly led the Presbyterians to embrace the revival as a means of inspiring religious fervor and expanding the Protestant foundation of America. The benchmark of Second Great Awakening revivals, that at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, had the largest turnout of any Presbyterian revival, with an estimated thirteen ministers preaching to anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 people. What firmly established

the Cane Ridge event in the hall of fame of awakenings was the passionate intensity with which those present embraced and manifested the conversion experience.²⁵¹

The tendency of nineteenth-century Kentuckians to excess was already well documented. The name “Bourbon County,” after all, suggests that its people were susceptible to intoxicants of all sorts, and religious fervor did not necessarily preclude secular overindulgence. Like the first minister to the Cane Ridge congregation, Robert Finney, who was prone to drunkenness,²⁵² Edna Pontellier’s father seems to feel alcohol, if not politics, mixes well with religion. Scholars, however, have been reluctant to include Edna in the Protestant fellowship.²⁵³ Certainly, on the surface, she seems the consummate apostate, willing to marry a Catholic in part for the mere pleasure of annoying her father and straight-laced sister Margaret. In a discussion with Adele Ratignolle, Edna cannot remember the specific event that occasioned her walk in the Kentucky meadow but speculates that “it was Sunday . . . and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of” (CW 896). Edna’s alleged rejection of her father and the faith he represents apparently continues in New Orleans, for she is glad when, after an extended visit, he “takes himself off with . . . his Bible reading, his ‘toddlies’ and ponderous oaths” (CW 954). But like the

²⁵¹ Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 64-68, 90-91.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁵³ In the minority camp is Cynthia Wolff, who recognizes that Edna’s “ambiguously religious family” exerts more control over Edna than is commonly thought. As Wolff notes, “In the 1870s and continuing through the end of the century, the Presbyterian Church in America suffered a crisis over the role of women that might well be defined by the question, ‘Shall Women *Speak?*’” Cynthia Wolff, “Thanatos and Eros, 450; and “Un-Utterable Longing: The Discourse of Feminine Sexuality in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” in *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era*, eds. Alike Barnstone, Michael Tomasek Manson, and Carol J. Singley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1997), 183. The Church’s quandary, however, developed long before the 1870s. A major concern of the more conservative reporters of the early nineteenth-century revivals was that women had too great a voice in the events. The Rev. Robert Davidson, for instance, bemoans the fact that “another disorderly procedure, in open violation of the apostolic canon, consisted in women’s exhorting.” Rev. Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 157.

prodigal child, Edna never really breaks with the parent. At the races, which she and her father have enjoyed with a revivalist's intensity and which she continues to attend even after the Colonel has left New Orleans, Edna, although she "[does] not perceive [it] . . . [talks] like her father" (CW 957). Alcée Arobin most succinctly acknowledges the father-daughter bond when, at the dinner hosted to mark Edna's break with the past, he toasts the Colonel and "'the daughter whom he invented'" (CW 971)

In reality, the Colonel's Presbyterianism informs Edna's thoughts and action from the beginning to the end of *The Awakening*. Despite her disdain for his Bible-thumping, Edna admits to Adele that "during one period of my life religion took a firm hold upon me." And, although she has not thought of it, she realizes that hold has continued from the time she was twelve "until now" (CW 896). The influence of her religious heritage initially betrays itself in small ways. Talking about the upcoming wedding of her sibling, Edna comments that Léonce's winnings will buy a good gift for "Sister Janet," a phrase that might simply reflect the Southern culture's familial form of address but also has connotations of Christian fundamentalism. More telling is Edna's embarrassment at the Catholic Creoles' free discussion of the body and sex. As has often been noted, Edna cannot escape the Creole sensuousness that manifests itself in talk of risqué books and dubious liaisons. Scholars err, however, in thinking that the French Catholic culture inspires Edna to reject Puritan sensibilities and adopt a healthy acceptance of her sexuality. Instead, the sensuous unfolding of Chopin's protagonist follows a course based more in the beliefs and process of the Great Awakenings than in Roman Catholic laxity.

Geography again serves as an important symbol, in this case, of the theological gulf separating Edna Pontellier from the Creoles. For the Creoles, *Grand Isle* is primarily a

natural extension of their New Orleans home, a refuge from heat and disease. For the Kentucky Presbyterian, the island is supernaturally significant as the setting for a reenactment of the *Great Awakening*. Kate Chopin facilitates this time travel back to the Protestant past by describing the Gulf Coast resort in terms equally applicable to the Cane Ridge camps. Although probably not as rustic, the cottages that once housed slaves and now make up the resort owned by Madame Lebrun resemble the revivalists' tents and wagons. The main house, connected to the cottages via bridges and visited by all of the resort's guests, might easily be the stage from which ministers preached to the multitudes. As Edna and Adele move back and forth between each other's cabins, the sense of personal space seems to collapse, just as it doubtless did when at least 10,000 people converged for conversion at Cane Ridge. On the evening of the Saturday recitals, the Grand Isle scene even more closely resembles the Cane Ridge camp described by one observer as consisting of "ranges of tents," "fires reflecting light, amidst the branches of . . . towering trees," and "candles and lamps illuminating the encampment."²⁵⁴ The rooms of the Lebrun house, decorated with the same "orange and lemon branches" that by day merely accentuate the lushness of the island, could be the Kentucky forest, for the "dark green of the branches stood out and glistened." And as a reflection of New Light Presbyterianism, the house is "ablaze" with "every lamp turned as high as it could be without smoking the chimney or threatening explosion" (CW 903).

Of course, at the revivals the earthly lights only had meaning when they helped ignite the flames within the soul that could lead it to salvation. Preparing for the descent of the spirit, revivalists would sometimes engage in sobbing, singing, and shouting so loud that

²⁵⁴ John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 67.

the “noise was like the roar of Niagara.” Then, like the disciples at Pentecost, they would receive the Holy Ghost’s sanctifying grace, manifested in unusual physical “exercises,” such as the “jerks” (convulsive movements) and “falling” (in which, as the word suggests, people literally collapsed). One of the primary distinguishing traits of the Cane River revival was the sheer number of individuals who “fell to the ground like men slain in battle.” These outbursts, however, were not universally accepted as signs of election. To some, they represented mere anarchy that had little to do with God or spiritual growth. Rev. Robert Davidson, for instance, describes some of the exercises, such as “barking,” as frankly “absurd” and more generally criticizes the fact that “animal excitement was exalted into an evidence of grace.” An environment in which “feeling was . . . everything” inevitably allowed for expressions disconnected from the supernatural world. As a result of “nocturnal assignations” in which men and women were more intent on communing with each other than with God, one minister ordered that “the sexes . . . be separated” and supervised when they stayed in the meeting house.²⁵⁵

In Chopin’s novel, Edna projects this New Light model of the conversion experience onto Grand Isle’s world. The Saturday night setting and performances enjoyed by the other guests acquire grandiose proportions for the novel’s representative Presbyterian, as is most apparent in her response to Mademoiselle Reisz’s playing. Before the pianist even touches the instrument’s keys, Edna has begun to assume the position of one of the Puritan elect, for Robert Lebrun assures her that the island’s notorious malcontent, who no doubt would have scorned a request from others, will perform for Edna. The mademoiselle even asks Edna to select the music, a responsibility that Edna declines but

²⁵⁵ Boles, *The Great Revival*, 65, 67, 62; Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky*, 152-63.

that further emphasizes the individualism inherent to nineteenth-century America and its Puritan heritage. Most suggestive of the Second Great Awakening is the emotional turmoil Edna experiences when Mademoiselle Reisz begins to play. Despite her reserved nature, Edna, as she does often in the novel, succumbs to violent sensations that replicate those felt by participants at the Great Awakenings. In fact, the very first chord sends a “keen tremor down Edna’s spinal column.” This worn yet deliberate image calls into question the novelty of Edna’s experience, of which Chopin writes only, “*Perhaps . . . it was . . . the first time [Edna’s] being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth*” (emphasis added). The reality is that, like the revivalists who repeatedly partook of the “truths” dispensed at camp meetings, Edna had been a frequent visitor to her father’s Presbyterian services and knows her part well. Thus, the tempest that ravages “her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body” leaves her as spent as anyone on the brink of conversion: “[she] tremble[s], she choke[s], and the tears [blind] her.” At the end of this scene, Mademoiselle Reisz officially recognizes her as one of the chosen few, indeed, “the only one worth playing for” (CW 906-907). The reward for such election is ironic, for Edna gains “blindness” rather than spiritual insight. When Mademoiselle Reisz later assumes a more prominent role in Edna’s life, one must wonder if the pianist might more accurately have said that Edna is “the only one worth playing with.”²⁵⁶

²⁵⁶ Some ministers noted the powerful role music played in the revivals of the Second Great Awakening. The Presbyterian Davidson, who generally blamed the Methodists for the excesses unleashed at camp meetings, writes that “those who have ever reflected how great are the effects of music, and how probable it is that the ballads of a nation exert more influence than their laws, this will be acknowledged to have been of itself a potent engine to give predominance to the Methodists, and to disseminate their peculiar sentiments.” Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Kentucky*, 141. While Chopin had a high regard for music and certainly would not have subscribed to the tenets of Davidson, she might have also recognized that music, like any art, could be used for destructive ends.

At this point, however, Edna's conversion is orchestrated by the man whom the American adopts as her personal savior, Robert Lebrun. In Robert, Kate Chopin encapsulates the lineage of church fathers responsible for the continental divide between body and spirit, human and god, woman and man, black and white. He is Paul, advocating a conversion experience that throws you from your horse and simultaneously distinguishes you from the rest of the animal kingdom; Augustine, envisioning a City of God built along a Manichean fault line; Martin Luther, breaking Christianity in two; John Winthrop and his fellow Puritans, transforming New England into the New Jerusalem; and Jonathan Edwards and his successors, believing the day of reckoning was at hand. Like many Judeo-Christian patriarchs, Robert Lebrun divides to conquer. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Grand Isle revelers' late-night march to the sea following the musical performance. Although he cannot part the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, he does separate the lovers, who elsewhere in the novel seem welded together. In fact, Robert accomplishes the task of "monitoring and checking that these lovers do not deprave the flesh" that David Wehner ascribes to the woman in black.²⁵⁷ This act is especially puzzling since one imagines a man touched by Cupid's arrows, as Robert supposedly is, would encourage the lovers' bonding. Chopin's allusion to the possible "malice" motivating Robert links him to other violent incidents involving women, such as his fight with Victor over Mariequita as well as his attempted "robbery" of Edna from her husband, Léonce. When Edna foils Robert's plan to marry her, he dissolves their pseudo-relationship with the hollow explanation: "'Because I love you'" (CW 997). On one level, Robert is doubtless driven more by envy and vengeance than love, a Moses who,

²⁵⁷ Wehner, "'A Lot Up for Grabs': Conversion Narrative," 41.

“direct[ing]” rather than “lead[ing]” the Grand Isle procession to the Gulf, chafes at God’s refusal to grant him access to the promised land.²⁵⁸

Like the first Puritans voyaging to America, Robert Lebrun takes license with the Biblical type and ventures into the wilderness with a keen sense of entitlement. Most symbolic of this is his brief migration to Mexico for financial gain, an act that for Chopin’s readers could have easily recalled the American appropriation of Mexican territory and creation of the state of Texas.²⁵⁹ But more telling of his allegiance to American expansionism and Protestantism is his interaction with Edna Pontellier, which propels her on the path of the “the solitary soul.” In his attentions to her, Robert not only feeds her tendency to romantic infatuation, but also encourages the sense of spiritual uniqueness at the heart of American individualism. His early designs on Edna are typically overlooked due to the novel’s opening focus on Léonce Pontellier. But when Edna and Robert join Léonce, we learn that the swim has already been the catalyst for Edna’s removing and leaving her wedding ring with her husband. This suggestion of marital rupture is paralleled by the physical damage, the sunburn, incurred by Edna during her swim. Such signs of breakage, often interpreted as symbols of Edna’s defiance of male dominance, suggest instead the transference of power from one father figure to another, from papist to Protestant authority.

²⁵⁸ As we have seen, the Moses image has potentially racial and Voodoo significance, but at this juncture Robert/Moses is a type born of American Puritanism rather than African-American Voodoo.

²⁵⁹ According to Phillip Barrish, Mexico serves as both site and “trope” for Robert Lebrun’s becoming a white, adult male: “Mexico has long functioned in the Southern and Southwestern United States imaginary as a liminal zone for American males, a place from which American boys return as men to be reckoned with. This U.S. figuration of Mexico has been operative at least since Civil-War era discourse about the Mexican War.” Barrish, “*The Awakening’s* Signifying ‘Mexicanist’ Presence,” *Studies in American Fiction* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 3, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xro=\[qo;res_ver=0.2&res_od=xro;opm-is&rft_od=xro;opm\]ft”abe;”R00795896:0](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xro=[qo;res_ver=0.2&res_od=xro;opm-is&rft_od=xro;opm]ft”abe;”R00795896:0). As we will see, what Barrish overlooks is that Mexico also played a significant role in the lives of African-Americans, although of a different sort than that enjoyed by white men.

In his supervision of Edna's swims, Robert firmly establishes himself as minister presiding over the American's conversion. When she attempts to beg off from an afternoon dip, he "reache[s] up for her big, rough straw hat . . . and put[s] it on her head" and—turning recreation into duty—advises her that she "'mustn't miss [her] bath'" (CW 892).²⁶⁰ More than any other character, Robert is frustrated by Edna's early failure to respond to his swim lessons, just as Protestant ministers lamented their initial inability to curb spiritual declension. But ultimately, Robert has his day or, rather, night. "At the mystic hour and under that mystic moon" of the feast day of St. Augustine, Edna discovers she can swim and likens her former self to a baby—in short, she is born again. Rather than use her new skills to join the others at play in the Gulf, Edna, "intoxicated with her newly conquered power" (CW 908), isolates herself from the rest of the guests to the point that she fears she might not be able to regain the shore. She then abandons the group entirely to return to her cabin and dismisses them with a Puritan "wave" of a "dissenting hand" that further distinguishes her from the others, who had not raised a "dissenting voice" when the swim was proposed (CW 909, 907). Although Edna's perception is faulty (her swim is neither as far from shore nor as unsupervised as she imagines), Robert Lebrun reinforces her notion of election and even injects a millennialist twist to the equation with his suggestion that, since the gulf spirit has claimed Edna, "she will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine

²⁶⁰ Although he does not tie Robert Lebrun to the revival ministers, John Carlos Rowe does connect Robert's control of Edna's hat to the power her Presbyterian father has had over her: "The 'sun-bonnet of Kentucky or Grand Isle always belongs to the father, to the world of feminine decoration, to the masculine lover, and thus to a certain blindness, an incapacity to see as a woman.'" John Carlos Rowe, "The Economics of the Body in *The Awakening*," in *Perspectives on Kate Chopin: Proceedings from the Kate Chopin International Conference April 6, 7, 8, 1989*, eds. Grady Ballanger et al (Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State University, 1990), 5.

presence” (CW 910). This hypothesis assumes the sense of prophecy later in the novel when Edna gradually divorces herself from much of the New Orleans Creole society. Robert, however, remains a constant in the rest of her life. As he accompanies her to her cottage the night of her epiphany, his mastery over Edna seems complete.

Under Robert Lebrun’s tutelage, Edna Pontellier becomes most ensconced in the path of the Protestant elect and, like the religious optimists of the nineteenth-century, begins to behave as though she has attained the permanent state of grace necessary for those about to meet Christ in the Second Coming. In such a lofty position, she separates the wheat from the chaff or, at Chênrière Caminada, the Protestant from the Catholic. At Our Lady of Lourdes Church, both the building and belief are so “stifling” that Edna begins to lose her sense of having awakened. Instead, she is overcome by a “feeling of oppression and drowsiness” that only dissipates outside where she is “greatly *revived*” (emphasis added) by water served to her in a “tin pail.” Like a good nineteenth-century evangelist, Robert simultaneously consoles and chastises Edna with the words, ““It was folly to have thought of going [to mass] in the first place”” (CW 917). A Kentucky Presbyterian, he implies, has no business in papist territory. Later, when Edna awakens at Madame Antoine’s, she teases Robert with the following apocalyptic vision: ““A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics. How many ages ago did Madame Antoine and Tonie die? and when did *our* people from Grand Isle disappear from the earth?”” (CW 919, emphasis added). While scholars recognize the Edenic nature of both Madame Antoine’s abode and Catiche’s garden café in New Orleans, they mistakenly think these images represent a secular new beginning.²⁶¹ The Presbyterian,

²⁶¹ Scholars typically regard the scene as an inversion of Christian ideology. John Carlos Rowe, for example, notes that Edna throws an orange at Robert as though in a “parody [of] some more dramatic

one should remember, took his or her Bible literally. Edna's apparent joke regarding Madame Antoine betrays her creationist leanings and belief that only a few will enter Paradise following the last judgment. As Roman Catholics, Madame and her son Tonie obviously are doomed. The Creole Robert, on the other hand, whom Edna includes among "our people," has apparently fled the ranks of the papists.

It is not surprising then that Robert's exodus from Edna's life affects Chopin's protagonist as only the loss of one's spiritual guide might. What Léonce Pontellier and Adele Ratignolle regard as natural sadness at losing a friend generates the same loss of control in Edna as the music that first propels her into religious rapture: she "bit[es] her handkerchief convulsively, striv[es] to hold back and to hide, even from herself as she would have hidden from another, the emotion which [is] troubling—tearing—her. Her eyes [are] brimming with tears" (CW 926-27). Although she recognizes her feelings as the same "infatuation" she experienced as a young girl, she is locked in the eternal present of the saved and cannot or will not act on this knowledge. Instead, her feelings take the form of "possession" that deprives Edna of the "brightness" she, as a New Light convert, has come to expect in her life.

Christian of sin." Rowe, "Economics of the Body," 18. While others acknowledge the elitist significance of the passage, they divorce Edna's flagrantly racist and classist sentiment from American Protestantism. Alison Berg bases the passage in Darwinism and nineteenth-century eugenics: "[Edna's] fantasy rests on popular interpretations of Darwin that posited a progressive evolution of races from barbarism to civilization and assumed that only Anglo-Saxons and other 'advanced' white races had reached the pinnacle of this progression. The assumption that darker races represented stages supplanted by the Anglo-Saxon was accompanied, however, by a fear of the weakening effects of 'over-civilization' and an effort to recapture the untrammled vigor of less civilized peoples." Berg, *Mothering the Race*, 73-4. Michele Birnbaum, who similarly uses racial grounds to challenge Gilbert's and others' glorification of Edna as an American Venus, closes in but fails to land on the Second Great Awakening mark when she describes Edna's reverie as an "apocalyptic fantasy in which she condemns most everyone else to an eternal sleep" but then adds that "Edna must imaginatively purge her utopian world in order to occupy it." Birnbaum, "'Alien Hands,'" 312. As we have seen, the Second Great Awakening had a thinly veiled sexual subtext that anticipated the more overt sexuality of later utopian movements.

Robert Lebrun's departure catalyzes a relationship between Edna and someone who superficially seems both Robert's and Edna's antithesis: Mademoiselle Reisz. Unlike Edna, who began her relationship with Robert in regular swims and who has consistently found solace in the Gulf, Reisz has an almost unnatural aversion to water, a fact the other guests on the island attribute to her "artistic temperament" or, less flatteringly, the "false hair" she wears (CW 929). When Reisz intrudes upon Edna as the young woman walks to the ocean, the mademoiselle assesses the Farival twins and others in the scathing terms one has come to expect from the pianist. At this point, Edna wonders how "she could have listened to her venom so long" (CW 930). Certainly, the pianist's invectives are an odd replacement for the gentle fantasies Edna has enjoyed with Robert. Nor does Reisz offer Edna the affection Chopin's protagonist has experienced with Robert and Adele Ratignolle. The mademoiselle seems quite simply more viper than dove, more devil than god.

Edna Pontellier, however, ignores such satanic implications and casts the mademoiselle in the role of religious successor to Robert Lebrun.²⁶² When Edna returns to New Orleans, she not only tolerates Mademoiselle Reisz's caustic banter and manipulations, but actively seeks them out with the persistence of a zealot. The disdain both Reisz's former grocer and Adele Ratignolle feel towards the pianist does not detour Edna from her mission. And when Edna finally locates Mademoiselle Reisz, the pianist

²⁶² This is consistent with the nineteenth-century evangelical movement, in which women, picking up the torch introduced by male ministers, organized reform efforts and even preached. In the South, such missionaries followed the conservative lead established by the men. See Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985). As someone who has not married, Mademoiselle Reisz could be the Southern Protestant complement to the Catholic nuns featured elsewhere in the Chopin canon. (Andrew Delbanco includes Mademoiselle Reisz among the Creoles, but Chopin does not specify the pianist's ethnicity or religion. While her Germanic name does not automatically link her to Protestantism, it does put her outside of the French Creole community. See Delbanco, "The Half-Life of Edna Pontellier" in *New Essays on "The Awakening,"* ed. Wendy Martin [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 92.)

takes the stage as a spiritual authority in her own right, for embedded in her proclamations about love and art are the sentiments of orthodox Puritanism. Indeed, in her oft quoted description of the artist, she relies on language that could easily come from a minister's treatise on sanctification: "One must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover . . . [one must] possess the courageous soul" (CW 946). Although the most common reading of this is that Reisz represents an artistic ideal beyond the reach of Edna, the word "soul" casts the sentiment into a spiritual arena in which the Catholic concept that grace can be earned through good works has no place. The elect attain neither salvation nor damnation through any acts of their own. Nor can the saved be demoted. Edna's later inability to regard herself as "a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex" might be more in keeping with "the codes which [she is] acquainted with" (CW 966) than she realizes.

Such Calvinistic teachings, Kate Chopin suggests, can only generate hubris or despair, the two states between which Edna Pontellier constantly vacillates. When she is convinced of her election, she feels nothing less than godlike, as Angela Hailey-Gregory argues, but this divine state is not that of the Greek or Roman gods scholars imagine. In fact, the odd trio of Robert Lebrun, Mademoiselle Reisz, and Edna Pontellier might be interpreted as an earthly rendering of the Christian Trinity. As the initiating and then distancing force in Edna's transformation, Robert constitutes the Father, whose abandonment of Jesus occasionally caused the god-made-man an anxiety equivalent to that Edna experiences. Mademoiselle Reisz, who imagines she has the wings of the "courageous soul" and wreaks havoc with Edna's psyche, parallels the Holy Spirit. Edna, the woman-turned-God, then, can only be Christ—not the inversion that Sandra Gilbert

and others envision, but a female incarnation of all that the Son of God represented, especially in American Christianity.²⁶³

Certainly it is this role she assumes when she hosts her last supper in the house on Esplanade. But despite the claims of Mademoiselle Reisz as well as many critics, the dinner is not a crowning moment for Chopin's protagonist.²⁶⁴ Instead, it is fraught with a hypocrisy and irony that undermine any sense of glory. Most of the "very select" group of ten people who participate in the fete are at best frivolous and at worst decadent artistes and their devotees. When Alphonse Ratignolle attempts to link the rarified group to ordinary society, he encounters hostility, such as that of Alcée Arobin, who, to a question about employment, answers, "There are so many inquisitive people and institutions abounding . . . that one is really forced as a matter of convenience these days to assume the virtue of an occupation if he has it not" (CW 971). In this virtual position, Arobin is appropriately officed on Perdido Street, a place that, at least metaphorically, several of Edna's guests no doubt also frequent.²⁶⁵ In fact, with its ten participants, rather

²⁶³ Joyce Dyer, for instance, claims that Edna assumes the roles of both Eve and Christ when the Presbyterian and Robert Lebrun visit Madame Antoine at Chênieré Caminada. In the scene, Chopin purportedly incorporates images of the "Transfiguration of Christ" as well as the sacrament of communion to undercut Catholicism and simultaneously empower Edna, who "is resurrected to a greedier hunger for life than she has ever known before." Dyer, *The Awakening*, 61-3. Dyer, however, ignores the fact that the death of Edna, if nothing else, makes Chopin's protagonist a literal rather than ironic Puritan type of Christ.

²⁶⁴ Described by Sandra Gilbert as "a Swinburnian Last Supper" and by Chopin's character Alcée Arobin as a "*coup d'état*," Edna's dinner has been a controversial point among scholars. Some, following Gilbert's lead, regard it as Edna's moment of triumph, however short lived. Others consider it an ironic commentary on Edna's delusions of grandeur. The first camp includes Dyer, *The Awakening*, 66-7; Elaine Showalter, "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book," 51; Gilmore, "Revolt Against Nature," 62; and Anca Parvulescu, "To Die Laughing and to Laugh at Dying: Revisiting *The Awakening*," *New Literary History* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 477-495, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pql:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion-us&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:abell:R03583657:0. Among those in the second camp are Delbanco, "The Half-Life of Edna Pontellier," 102; and Hailey-Gregory, "Into Realms of the Semi-Celestials," 306.

²⁶⁵ John Carlos Rowe's description of Arobin might be applied equally well to many of Edna's guests as well as Edna herself: "Arobin is cynical, not only regarding the value of women, but regarding himself. It is a 'self' that is based on nothing, lacking substance, a phantom of the more substantial powers of natural transformation, of social productivity, that in our own fantastic postmodernity have become quaint memories," "The Economics of the Body in *The Awakening*," 24.

than the thirteen one would expect, Edna's dinner seems less a reenactment of the last supper and more of a reminder of the lost ten tribes of Israel,²⁶⁶ although only Alphonse Ratignolle and Governail appear cognizant of this. Chopin must have tongue firmly in cheek when, in church-lady fashion, she describes the dinner as distinguished by a "feeling of good fellowship" (CW 972).

Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, takes her dinner seriously and, at least for a while, holds court as reine, basking in the flattery with which her guests shower her. There will be no washing of feet at this meal. Instead, while embarking on what she imagines is the independent life, she allows Léonce to pay for the dinner and proudly wears the diamond headdress he has given her for her birthday. Nor can Edna tolerate any challenge to her royal state. When Victor Lebrun begins to sing the lyrics she has adopted as her mantra—"si tu savais"—Edna reacts with an emotional outburst remarkably similar to that which distinguished her supposed awakening when she first heard Mademoiselle Reisz's music. On the one hand, Edna's response might stem simply from the fact that she resents Victor's appropriating the verse from her beloved and trivializing it. But by adding the more sentimental line "*Ce que tes yeux me dissent*" (what your eyes tell me) to "*Ah! si tu savais,*" (Oh! If you knew), Victor exposes the refrain to which Edna has ascribed mystical import as little more than part of a common romantic ballad. The added reference to eyes further undermines the ethereal quality of the refrain by connecting it to the body. At the same time, it shifts the ability to see away from Edna and into the young Creole's court, for her "eyes," as the song implies, are objects that convey rather than perceive truths. In fact, before Victor begins his song, he is described in terms befitting

²⁶⁶ Although David LoShiavo does not reference the lost tribes, his cogent interpretation of the dinner as a Jewish Seder establishes a context by which we might read the scene in such a light. See LoShiavo, "A Matter of Salvation versus Freedom," 83-90.

an oracle. The champagne, like hallucinogens employed by shamans, moves him out of his normally talkative mode and induces a trancelike state, a “reverie,” by which he seems “to be seeing pleasant visions in the amber bead” (CW 972).²⁶⁷

Most of all, Victor Lebrun’s riff on his brother’s ditty demotes Edna and her beloved to the level of mere mortals. Robert is neither God the Father nor his earthly representative, but only a simple man fond of the top ten tunes of his day. Edna, too, is exposed as quintessentially human. Her outburst, during which she “blindly” puts her own glass of champagne on a table, causing the glass to “shatter” and the beverage to spill, is the stuff of melodrama that only accentuates Edna’s lack of vision, both during her party and throughout the novel. With little manipulation of the word, the *reine* becomes *rien*, that is, nothing, a natural reality that awaits all of us but that the newly turned twenty-nine-year-old Edna cannot accept. When Robert returns from Mexico, she can “see before her . . . only the promise of excessive joy” (CW 987). Encountering him in the out-of-the-way garden, she attributes the meeting to an act of “Providence.” It is no less than one might expect from someone for whom “all sense of reality ha[s] gone out of her life” (CW 988).

The one person capable of redirecting Edna’s attention to the temporal world, at least briefly, is Adele Ratignolle.²⁶⁸ Just as she early in the novel reminds Robert that Edna

²⁶⁷ Although often equated with the god Dionysus, Victor Lebrun has yet to be considered as an oracle/prophet. Hailey-Gregory comes closest to this point when she notes that Victor, as “the god of tragedy,” “sing[s] the song of Edna’s tragic flaw,” and “ultimately [will] be the ‘victor’ in the play.” Hailey-Gregory, “Into Realms of the Semi-Celestials,” 306-7.

²⁶⁸ While they recognize Adele as a catalyst for Edna’s potential development, scholars routinely interpret Adele Ratignolle as representative of the conventional role Edna Pontellier must ultimately reject. The most notable exception is Kathleen Streater, who argues that “Adele’s interior subversion is far less dramatic than Edna’s total rejection, yet, as the saying goes, Adele ‘lives to tell the tale,’ and thus, through Adele’s character, Chopin offers an affirmation of feminist possibility.” Even more intriguing is Streater’s claim that “Adele is a great performer” who “reveals her strength and feminist identity by working the patriarchal system to her advantage.” Streater, “Adele Ratignolle: Kate Chopin’s Feminist at Home in *The*

“is not one of us” (CW 900), the Creole recognizes that Edna has not outgrown the habits and beliefs of her Presbyterian youth and continues to behave “like a child . . . without a certain amount of reflection . . . necessary in *this* life” (CW 979, emphasis added). In fact, Edna religiously avoids such reflection because it would interfere with her purely emotional responses. Her attempts at intellectual contemplation are desultory and, in the case of her reading of Emerson, put her to sleep—suggesting that she has taken the Transcendentalist’s advice too much to heart and “sternly subordinated”²⁶⁹ even Emerson’s work to the sands of sleep. This is hardly an exercise in self-reliance, for Edna is more than happy to allow spiritual guides tell her what she needs to know, as Robert does when, during the garden meeting, he spares her the trials of finishing the book she has begun reading.

By asking Edna to assist her in the delivery of her child, Adele gives the American the opportunity to leave the pedestal of the saved and attend to the needs of others: in short, to grow up. In her unconditional acceptance of Edna, Adele is no less a mother to the young woman from Kentucky than she is to her biological children. When Edna finally reciprocates by leaving Robert to minister to the physical as well as emotional needs of her friend, she briefly reenters the natural world in which both pain and obligations to others are facts of life. At the most elementary level, she remembers her children, those beings whose existence ties Edna to the past as well as the future and makes living in an eternal present impossible.

Awakening,” *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 406, 408. That Streater’s description of Adele Ratignolle also fits many people of color living under Jim Crow laws might not be a coincidence.

²⁶⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” at American Transcendentalism Web, <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/amscholar.html>.

Unfortunately, Edna aborts her movement into adulthood. As she has her entire life, she finds in Dr. Mandelet yet another man to save her from genuine introspection and understanding, for, in his brief talk with Edna, he seems most concerned that she not “blame” herself for anything other than a failure to meet with him at a later date to discuss her troubles and, one suspects, once again avoid responsibility. This is not surprising, since as the representative of modern Western medicine and science, the physician might well eschew theological concepts, such as sin. For someone like Edna, who believes she has already transcended issues of “wickedness,” Dr. Mandelet is obviously an attractive refuge.²⁷⁰ Thus, although she briefly resists his advice and continues to “think of the children,” her discovery of Robert Lebrun’s note easily moves her back into her imagined position among the chosen people, a group so select that in the end it consists of only one member, Edna Pontellier.

After a night spent in wakefulness in her own garden of Gethsemane, Edna completes the circular track she has been on all along and returns to Grand Isle, where, completely divorced from reality, she imagines she can liberate her soul by eliminating the body. At least initially, Edna seems *not* to envision her swim as suicide. Before she enters the water, she tells Victor she would like fish for dinner, as though she, like Christ, might

²⁷⁰ The impact of biological determinism on women has been widely discussed in regard to Edna Pontellier. Priscilla Leder, for instance, maintains that Edna “[e]vidently . . . does not wish fully to experience herself as a biologic instrument, a mechanism for adding to ‘the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go’ (994). With Edna’s revolt, Chopin goes beyond the limitations of the naturalist’s world view, which imagines individuals, especially women, as controlled by nature.” See Leder, “Land’s End,” 243. But the apparent Darwinian implications of Dr. Mandelet’s famous comment regarding Nature’s machinations “to secure mothers for the race” (*CW* 996) seem irrelevant to Edna. Chopin’s protagonist has obviously found ways of circumventing the demands of nature, for she has only two sons, the youngest of whom is four years old. With both a nanny and a mother-in-law serving as surrogate mothers, Edna has escaped the maternal obligations of less privileged mothers. Rather than championing biological determinism, I would argue, Adele Ratignolle, on one level, merely reminds Edna of the adult obligations one has to the children already brought into the world.

with a word turn nothing into enough to feed the multitudes—or at least herself. At the Gulf, she imagines she has finally attained Paradise on earth, for she “[feels] like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (CW 1000). However, the “disabled” bird falling into the ocean is hardly the Pentecostal bearer of saving grace. Instead, it anticipates the natural reality that Edna will soon experience as her strength leaves her and signals her regression back to where her delusions all began: the Presbyterian world dominated by the sounds of “her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s” and the “spurs of the cavalry officer [clanging] as he walked across the porch” (CW 1000) of Edna’s old Kentucky home.

To be sure, the significance of the swim is ambiguous. For some scholars, it represents Edna Pontellier’s ultimate act of defiance against patriarchy; for others, it is her admission of defeat. What has been largely overlooked is that Edna, despite her claim that she will not sacrifice herself for her children, does just that.²⁷¹ Swimming to her death, she believes she escapes them even as they, with the other males in her life, crowd her thoughts. Moreover, Edna’s death by drowning resonates with suggestions of the Old Testament foundations of her Presbyterianism and the emphasis on sacrifice and punishment attendant to it. Although God promised he would never again eliminate his people with water, Edna, like Fanny Hosmer in *At Fault*, seems not to have heard this part of the Word. On the one hand, she has cast herself in the role of the wicked denied access to Noah’s ark. If her death is deliberate, she even assumes the role of the New

²⁷¹ I do not believe, as Leder does, that “Edna dies for her children as she had declared herself willing to do.” According to Leder, Edna has even chosen to die by drowning so her suicide will appear an accident and thereby spare her sons the shame they would otherwise experience. See “Land’s End,” 243-244. This interpretation is at odds with the “antagonism” Edna feels toward her children. Instead, the fact that Edna thinks of Raoul and Etienne as she swims from shore seems Chopin’s ironic comment on the futility of attempts to avoid reality.

Testament's most famous villain, Judas Iscariot, in whom her despair and betrayal of her children have obvious parallels. But when viewed as a sacrificial lamb, Edna proceeds in the direction of nineteenth-century spiritual progressives, who believed humanity might become gods. In her final baptism in the Gulf of Mexico whereby she presumes to maintain what is "essential," Edna dies for an abstraction and, in so doing, consummates her recreation of herself in the image of Christ. The American woman has at last become the man-made-God.

Catholicism: The *Pont* to Voodoo

Although *The Awakening* reserves its most scathing criticism of religion for American Protestantism, Roman Catholic beliefs and practices hardly escape censure. After all, St. Augustine, whose feast day marks the rebirth of Edna Pontellier in the ways of her Presbyterian father, was the doctor of the Catholic Church, not Protestantism. In the Cane River region, Kate Chopin might have received what Henry James termed a *donnee*—in this case, the realization that St. Augustine, whose teachings influenced Puritanism's patriarchy and rejection of the temporal world, could also represent the Catholic Church's similarly skewed attitude towards the physical self, especially as embodied by women and people of color. There on Isle Brevelle (the "Isle of Mulattoes" Chopin references in "A Little Free-Mulatto"), the free man of color Augustin Metoyer founded St. Augustine's Church; the "original chapel," according to Gary B. Mills, included "a pair of paintings, one of St. Augustine, the patron saint of the man who conceived the idea of establishing the church and donated the land for it, the other of St. Louis, the patron saint of the chapel's builder" and, of course, Chopin's hometown.

Although populated primarily by free biracial people, Isle Brevelle, like the rest of antebellum Louisiana, was subject to a three-caste racial system, a fact evident in the seating (or standing) arrangement at St. Augustine's. Slaves, belonging to both white and mixed-race masters, could not sit in the sanctuary but were allowed "in the galleries" while the "white friends [of Metoyer] had a place of honor in "eight pews . . . located directly behind his own pew." Until racial tensions developed in the nineteenth century, whites commonly attended St. Augustine's. The pilgrims to Our Lady of Lourdes Church could easily parallel the white Catholics who, after their own church in Natchitoches burned in 1823, traveled to Isle Brevelle to worship. In the history of St. Augustine's, Chopin would have found a ready emblem of the complex and conflicted relationship between the Church and its African American members.²⁷²

Just as it does in *At Fault*, the Augustinian influence manifests itself in the Catholic layer of *The Awakening* primarily through Chopin's female characters. Although she does not directly reference St. Monica in her second published novel, Chopin creates inverted facsimiles of her as well as of the Virgin Mary, especially as the two women have traditionally been depicted in relation to their sons. These mother-son relationships, revered by the Vatican and the Renaissance painters it employed, seem as at odds with reality as the millennialist's belief in an immanent apocalypse; certainly, Chopin, the mother of five sons and one daughter, must have looked askance at religious types that, rather than affirming the sensuous connection between mother and child Chopin celebrates in her commonplace book, demand the subordination of the flesh to spirit and,

²⁷² Mills insists that the Isle Brevelle colony was entirely devoted to Catholicism and that Voodoo "made no inroads in the French Catholic society of Cane River." See Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 144-62.

even more damning, the sacrifice of one's child to heavenly mandates.²⁷³ Within this process, the mother is reduced to the servant of the male-dominated Church and the means by which patriarchal prophecies are fulfilled. Monica, like the mother of Augustine's illegitimate son, gradually becomes a footnote in the Augustinian canon. The position of the Virgin Mary is even more problematic, for, despite her prominent position in Catholicism, the mother of Christ earned her status in part by acquiescing to his brutal crucifixion, a fate that God the Father spared Abraham and Isaac. The Catholic Church, Chopin implies, values its mothers most if they act *least* on their maternal inclinations, that is, if they protect their children no better than Edna attends to the needs of Raul and Etienne Pontellier.²⁷⁴ Most appalling to Chopin is the Church's glorification of those women who do not have children at all, that is, who remain virgins or at least virgin-like.

As scholars have rightly noted, the most obvious and absurd representative of Catholicism in *The Awakening* is the woman in black. Like other Chopin widows and nuns, she has turned her back on the things of this earth to exist in a semi-cloistered state. As a result, she ignores the large issues of life to focus on spiritual minutia. When Robert

²⁷³ In a May 22, 1894, entry commonly used by scholars to classify Chopin as a Naturalist, the writer describes the birth of her son Jean in terms at odds with the Christian maternal ideal represented by the Virgin Mary: "The sensation with which I touched my lips and my finger tips to his soft flesh only comes once to a mother. It must be the pure animal sensation; nothing spiritual could be so real—so poignant," (*PP* 183). While the language highlights the writer's rejection of arrangements such as that God the Father demanded of Mary, Chopin's experience harmonizes with an alternative "spiritual" system, Voodoo, in which "pure animal sensations" work in tandem with metaphysics.

²⁷⁴ I part company with Jarlath Killeen, who, drawing upon the writings of twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist theologians, "attempt[s] to reconfigure Chopin's novel as operating along two competing levels of discourse: a realist, naturalist language influenced by Protestant scientific traditions (particularly Darwinism, that legitimates a 'masculinist' version of the universe (even when refracted through liberal feminism); and an irrational, impressionistic language of Catholic motherhood, that challenges phallogocentric culture and also the direction of bourgeois feminist thought whether of the New Woman or the 'second wave.'" Killeen seems to go especially astray in her evaluation of Edna Pontellier, who supposedly "bridges . . . two versions of gender process; Mary too is a bridge between the purely natural world and heaven, a co-redemptrix assisting Christ in bringing the human world into closer communion with the divine." Killeen, "Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," 413, 433-4. While Edna, we will see, assumes aspects of the Virgin Mary, Chopin's rendering of both figures contrasts with Killeen's depiction.

Lebrun announces that he is leaving for Mexico, the anonymous woman is not concerned about his welfare, as Adele Ratignole is, but instead asks that he inquire about her unusual “Mexican prayer beads.” The woman fears the “indulgences” she could expect from a typical rosary might not “extend . . . outside the Mexican border” (CW 923). For her, God apparently is a custom’s agent.

The allusions to “prayer beads” as well as Our Lady of Lourdes Church direct our attention to Mariology, the knowledge of the Virgin Mary that is so much a part of Roman Catholicism. Edna Pontellier even appropriates the Catholic’s reverence for Mary when she regards Adele Ratignolle as “some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color” (CW 891). From this as well as Adele’s nurturing nature Jarlath Killeen has concluded that Kate Chopin is committed to Catholicism or to a feminist interpretation of the Virgin Mary. But Mary, especially as a nineteenth-century presence, is problematic because she represents a detachment from the flesh and human nature. While the virgin birth is the most obvious violation of natural laws, other Catholic teachings further dehumanize the mother of Jesus. In addition to the feast day of Augustine, August ushers in the feast of the Assumption (August 15), which celebrates the belief that at the end of her earthly life, both Mary’s body and soul were taken into heaven. As David Wehner aptly demonstrates, one development to which Chopin might have been especially attuned was the 1854 encyclical *Ineffabilis Deus* by which Pope Pius IX declared as dogma the immaculate conception—that is, Mary was conceived without sin. The Church had long embraced this belief; St. Augustine, in discussing original sin, exempts “the Holy Virgin Mary, of whom, for the honour of the

Lord, [he] will have no question whatever where sin is concerned.”²⁷⁵ With his pronouncement, Pope Pius IX officially raised Mary above the realm of common folk and helped fuel the challenge of Mariolatry, the worship of Mary, leveled by Protestants against Catholicism in the United States.

In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin’s Presbyterian behaves as an ironic adherent to this Roman Catholic dogma. While American Protestantism provided Edna Pontellier with the idea of godlike transcendence over human frailty, Catholicism served up the female embodiment of the idea in the Virgin Mary. Edna’s transformation of Adele into Mary is actually a continuation of a take on Catholicism that the American begins by marrying Léonce and perpetuates at Grand Isle and in New Orleans. To better understand this Presbyterian’s dalliance with Catholicism, we might turn again to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s American Protestant immersed in a Latin Catholic world, Hilda of *The Marble Faun*, who, in some ways, so resembles Edna that one suspects Chopin had Hilda in mind when she created her protagonist. A New England artist visiting Rome, Hilda resides in a dovecote, the equivalent of an artistic and spiritual ivory tower, where she keeps a light dedicated to the Virgin Mary aglow. When Hilda’s friend Miriam teases her about practicing Catholicism, Hilda defends herself by claiming that she is merely honoring the representative of “divine Womanhood.”²⁷⁶ Edna Pontellier’s quest for female divinity and artistic self-expression similarly suggests itself through the architecture of her new abode where “there was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual.” But to Kate Chopin, if not to Edna,

²⁷⁵ Wehner, “The Conversion Narrative in Modernity,” 47-8; Frederick Holweck, “Immaculate Conception,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07674d.htm>.

²⁷⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1961), 46.

Hilda, and, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the concept of “divine Womanhood” must have seemed an absurd oxymoron, for, as she does throughout the novel, Chopin undermines any attempt to read Edna’s perceptions in absolute terms. On the one hand, the author seems to validate Edna’s feeling, for in the same passage Chopin adds that her protagonist is “[beginning] to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life” (CW 977-978). Edna, however, is often portrayed as a novice who quickly aborts her forays into awareness. A more realistic assessment of her understanding, or lack thereof, is implied by the name with which her servant Ellen christens Edna’s equivalent of a dovecote: the “pigeon house” (CW 968).

Still, no matter how much Chopin attempts to clip her protagonist’s wings, Edna continues on a course by which she cannot imagine herself as a flawed human being. Although Chopin would not want us to adopt Puritan sensibilities and declare Edna depraved, the author does call into question her protagonist’s dualistic spirituality that admits only two states of being—the saved and the damned. By eliminating herself from the latter, Edna positions herself fully within a world inhabited by those few souls who, like the Virgin Mary, have escaped human corruption. In this state, Edna again resembles Hawthorne’s Hilda, who imagines she can soar from the dovecote. Hilda, however, says only in jest that she feels she could “attempt a flight from the top of [her] tower” and takes the advice of her friend Miriam to heart: “If it should turn out that you are less than an angel, you would find the stones of the Roman pavement very hard; and if an angel, indeed, I am afraid you would never come down among us again.”²⁷⁷ Unfortunately, Edna regards Robert Lebrun’s similar suggestion of her heavenly ascent as gospel.

²⁷⁷ Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, 46-7.

Edna's link to Mary would explain the Presbyterian's unusual decision to make the pilgrimage to Our Lady of Lourdes Church: rather than one of the many seeking solace from the Church's most important intermediary, she attends the mass as the Virgin's soul sister. Later, as reine presiding over her dinner in New Orleans, Edna has most clearly made herself over in the image of "Regina" Mary. That Edna would feel a sense of "oppression" during the service at the Chênière Caminada church is therefore puzzling. As I have previously argued, one explanation is that her latent Presbyterian self chafes at the Catholic ritual and the idea of saintly intervention between God and humanity. Another possibility hinges on the word "oppression" and its specifically racial connotations. Unlike the churches of post-Reconstruction New Orleans, which were beginning to heed the call of Jim Crow and divide congregations according to the color line, those in the country were not in a position to segregate its members easily. Even the building, "gleaming all brown and yellow with paint in the sun's glare" (CW 916), is painted in colors that suggest the spectrum of people who populate *The Awakening*. The novel's Kentucky Presbyterian, who routinely distances herself from people of color and whose childhood churches would have been segregated, could only have been appalled by open defiance of Jim Crow legislation at Chênière Caminada. One senses that the "new race" Edna later imagines at Madame Antoine's is free of African blood.

In this respect, Edna Pontellier parts company with the Virgin Mary, especially Our Lady of Lourdes, whose legend pivots on inclusion. As humans rather than gods, the saints, especially the mother of Christ, are approachable in a way the members of the Trinity are not. Even more important, they might approach you. Such is the message of Lourdes and the many other shrines dedicated to sightings of the Virgin Mary recorded in

the annals of the Church. Although Lourdes is most famous for the appearance of the Virgin to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, in Roman Catholic lore Marian intervention at the village extends as far back as Charlemagne and has specific ties to people of color. According to an 1875 *Catholic World* article, a battle between Charlemagne and a Moor, Mitar, was resolved via the Virgin, whose influence led to the Moor's conversion to Catholicism. Nor, supposedly, was this the first instance in which Lourdes was linked to Africans. Legend has it that the village was founded by an "Ethiopian princess" whose sister Tarbis became smitten with none other than the leader of the Jewish people, Moses, and asked him to marry her. Rejected, she and her sister are said to have left Ethiopia to settle "in the obscurity of the Pyrenean valleys." Of course, the inclusive spirit of Lourdes is most evident in the supposed healing properties the Virgin is said to provide her ailing pilgrims, who, according to a writer for *The Catholic World*, "sometimes amount[ed] to five hundred thousand a year."²⁷⁸

Although Edna Pontellier rebels against the magnanimous spirit of Our Lady of Lourdes, the Presbyterian nonetheless takes comfort from the Virgin's counterpart at Chênière Caminada, Madame Antoine Bocaze. In Madame Antoine, Kate Chopin reconfigures both St. Monica and the Virgin Mary to emphasize maternal power rather than subservience. Like Monica and Mary, the madame is the mother of a son, Tonie, whose fishing proclivities link him to the fisher of men, Jesus Christ. But Tonie is a diminished Christ figure bowing before the more imposing Madame Antoine. As her name suggests, she assumes a level of masculinity and superiority lacking in her "shy"

²⁷⁸ "Notre Dame de Lourdes," *Catholic World* 21, no. 125 (1875): 682, 684, at Making of America Journal Articles <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pagevieweridx?c=moajrnl;cc=moajrnl;q1=lourdes;rgn=full%20text;view=image;seq=0686;idno=bac8387.0021.125;node=bac8387.0021.125%3A12>.

son who does “not willingly face any woman except his mother” (CW 920). Nor does Madame Antoine fit Edna’s and the Catholic Church’s romanticized image of the Virgin. Firmly rooted to the earth of the peninsula, she has left Chênière Caminada only three times in her life and welcomes Robert Lebrun and his friend with “native hospitality.” As Edna lies in Madame’s bed, she drifts in and out of sleep to the sound of the waddling Acadian’s footsteps. Although the reader might suspect Chopin of creating an Acadian caricature, the added details regarding Madame Antoine suggest otherwise. Tucking Edna into an “immaculately clean” room, lowering the mosquito net over the ailing woman as she sleeps, and leaving the ingredients of a peasant’s Eucharist for her, Madame Antoine demonstrates a real-world sympathy on a par with any Our Lady of Lourdes might bestow on her followers. When Edna awakens, she discovers that Tonie’s mother, who has missed mass, nonetheless attends vespers on August 29, the feast day of the “decollation” or beheading of John, the Baptist.²⁷⁹ One cannot help but wonder if Madame Antoine’s central role in *The Awakening* on this solemn day in the Church’s liturgical year constitutes Chopin’s figurative “beheading” of the Catholic male hierarchy.

At the same time, Madame Antoine Bocaze’s existence in the remote region of Chênière Caminada resembles the nun’s cloistered life, of which Kate Chopin was so critical. Madame’s “cot” that serves as a haven for Edna Pontellier performs a similar function for the Acadian, who, we learn in “At Chênière Caminada,” “had been more than glad to get back to the Chênière” (CW 313) following her two visits to Grand Isle and one trip to Grand Terre. Language also insulates Madame Antoine, for both she and

²⁷⁹ Butler, “August 29: The Decollation of St. John the Baptist,” in *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints*, Vol. 8, <http://www.bartleby.com/210/>.

her son speak only French. Neither the secluded world of Chênière Caminada nor Catholicism, however, is an adequate foil to the spiritual and physical ills of the world. One of the greatest ironies in *The Awakening* might be Kate Chopin's subtle allusion to a hurricane of 1893 that is embedded in Edna Pontellier's imagining "'the whole island seems changed'" when she awakens at Madame Antoine's house (*CW*, 919). Edna's observation and implied death wish for all but herself and Robert Lebrun had a tragic parallel in the reality following the 1893 tempest that assaulted Chênière Caminada: of its 1471 residents, Rev. Father Grimaux reported to the *Daily Picayune*, 779 were dead.²⁸⁰ Isolation, despite its Edenic allure, Chopin suggests, is not a solution.

The Lwa's Ride

Despite her limitations, Madame Antoine represents a woman- and nature-based spiritual alternative in the novel. That the madame is a key figure in a matriarchal spirituality is hardly noteworthy today. Where scholars have gone astray, however, is in their emphasis on Greek and Roman mythology as Kate Chopin's answer to American Protestantism and Catholicism. To be sure, as Sandra Gilbert has famously documented, Edna Pontellier does appear as a recreation of Aphrodite/Venus, at least from the perspective of Victor Lebrun, who describes her as "Venus rising from the foam" (*CW* 997). Following Gilbert's lead, critics have added other characters to the pantheon, such as Victor himself, a stand-in for Dionysus at Edna's dinner party. Chopin's allusions to classical gods and goddesses coincide with the Augustinian undercurrent running throughout the novel, for much of *The City of God* is dedicated to debunking the

²⁸⁰ *Daily Picayune*, October 10, 1893.

Romans' "superstitious" beliefs. By resurrecting them in her own opus, Chopin seems to return the saint back to his pagan roots.

North Africa, however, not Italy or Greece, was Augustine's birthplace and home and it is Africa that serves as the source of a religious alternative in *The Awakening*. To date, only David LoShiavo seems to have considered this possibility in his brief discussion of the African goddess Oshun as a model for Edna Pontellier.²⁸¹ But St. Augustine's feast day, the midnight swim, and the Gulf of Mexico all converge at the point of Edna Pontellier's ostensible rebirth to recall the world from which the ancestors of the novel's chorus—the quadroon and other people of color—came. Unlike Edna, who imagines her excursion into the gulf waters as a quintessential exercise in American individualism, the other inhabitants of Madame Lebrun's resort approach their swim as a collective act; Madame Lebrun even worries that Edna's "capriciousness," evident in the American's separation from the group, might "put an end to the pleasure" of Madame Lebrun and the rest of the bathing party (CW 909). They also seem to feel at home in the water to a degree Edna does not. Although the latter has learned to stay afloat, she behaves as one working in competition rather than concert with the sea; it, like her "power," is something to be "conquered." However white Madame Lebrun and the others might be, their comfort with the gulf and night seems akin to that of African-American slaves and their descendents, who believed that in death they would make the voyage back to "Guinea" (Africa) and that a spiritual "Guine" housed the gods at the bottom of the ocean. The religion that made belief in this possible was not that channeled down from Mount

²⁸¹ Although he focuses on the role of Judaism in the novel, LoShiavo posits that "perhaps a similar key to Chopin's African-American symbology exists for the astute reader." David LoShiavo, "A Matter of Salvation Versus Freedom: Understanding Edna's Conflict through Hebrew Metaphor in *The Awakening*," 86-7. I am happy to pick up the gauntlet.

Olympus, the Vatican, or the City on a Hill, but the African-based Voodoo of Louisiana. While the Christian dove falls into the Gulf of Mexico, the Grand Zombi serpent winds its way through earth and water in Kate Chopin's novel and remains afloat, one suspects, long after the Presbyterian has taken her last stroke.

But Chopin even gives her representative American the opportunity to hear and respond to the call of the Voodoo lwa. Most indicative of this is the horse imagery attendant to both Edna Pontellier's Kentucky past and Louisiana present. Considered merely evidence of the Darwinian or Freudian influence on the novel,²⁸² Chopin's equine references seem a summons to "ride my horse," that is, to surrender to Voodoo possession by becoming the mount of the lwa. This spiritual option presents itself in what has been widely considered a key step in Edna's "awakening," the memory she relates to Adele Ratignolle about "walking through the grass" to escape her father's Sunday sermon. Not merely a youthful rejection of her father's Presbyterianism, Edna's movement suggests a nod towards Voodoo, for her path across the meadow is "diagonal," a direction signifying spiritual bifurcation. At the same time, the setting is doubtless part of the pastureland the Colonel lost (much to Léonce's Pontellier's chagrin) where horses grazed.

Edna Pontellier's connection to horses becomes even more pronounced in New Orleans, where her bets at the racetrack provide part of the money that enables her to move into her pigeon house. But unlike the child moving across the field away from her

²⁸² To date, scholars have not focused on the specific horse imagery connected to Edna. Instead, her general development of animalistic attributes in the novel have led critics to group Chopin with American Naturalists. See Bender, "The Teeth of Desire: The Awakening and *The Descent of Man*," 117-28; and Erik Margraf, "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as a Naturalistic Novel," *American Literary Realism* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 93-116.

father, the adult Edna attends the races *with* the Colonel and even joins him in lambasting Léonce for the latter's criticism of their betting fervor. The horses, once in the pastoral setting of Kentucky bluegrass, now are confined to a turf where they are expected to win big for the humans in the stands. Although Dr. Mandelet imagines her as "sleek animal waking up in the sun" (CW 952), Edna is actually the thoroughbred removed from nature and positioned on a circular track that denies the creature any real progression. No less than Secretariat, Edna is a commodity most valued when she conforms to the expectations of her increasingly mercenary, white American world. There is a certain justice in this since Edna uses horses for commercial gain much as Léonce takes advantage of the games at Grand Isle. It is no surprise, then, that Edna Pontellier is more the mount of men than of gods, specifically Alcée Arobin, who meets Edna at the race track and does all in his power to keep her confined in its metaphorical boundaries. Even after the Colonel has left the Pontellier home, Edna continues to attend the races with Arobin. As she becomes more entangled in her affair with him, the two ride in his carriage at night to avoid detection. However much Edna might like a horse with a certain "mettle," she, like the stallions under Arobin's reins, has surrendered her will to the white man officed on "Lost" Street.

In the year of her twenty-ninth birthday, Edna Pontellier commits herself to being the vessel of not-so-holy spirits. But had the young Kentuckian continued walking, Chopin suggests, she might have found her way to spiritual growth and become a mount of the Iwa. At least for the people of color in *The Awakening*, allowing the gods to ride their horses is a source of strength as Jim Crow begins to fly in post-Reconstruction Louisiana.

Waking Up with Jim Crow

The African-American content of *The Awakening*, while gaining more attention, remains a controversial subject. Even those scholars who see signs of sympathy in Kate Chopin's rendering of blacks regard the author as, at best, conflicted over the issue of race. But at the intersection of race and religion in the novel, Chopin reflects a greater awareness of racial injustice than has been acknowledged. Most indicative of this might be what does *not* occur in the novel: none of Chopin's obvious people of color in *The Awakening* attend a Protestant or Catholic church or demonstrate any other ties to Christianity. While we can speculate that African-Americans attend mass at Our Lady of Lourdes, neither the quadroon nor any of the other nannies are on Beaufort's boat traveling to Chênieré Caminada. Nor does Mariequita, the least "white" of the travelers, join the procession to the church but instead heads to an unspecified destination where her basket of shrimp would no doubt be a more appropriate accessory.

Rather than a reflection of Kate Chopin's inability to see people of color as spiritual beings, this separation of her black characters from the Judeo-Christian faith signals the author's allegiance to realism and sensitivity to the ways both Protestants and Catholics had betrayed African-Americans. On the biblical day of rest, the black servants at Grand Isle, like the black girl sweeping the porch on Sunday, work while Edna and her fellow pilgrims worship. Such hypocrisy emanated from the religious institutions themselves, a fact Chopin could not have ignored in the years just prior to her writing of *The Awakening*. As described by James Bennet, the efforts to segregate the churches in New Orleans after Reconstruction came to fruition in the 1890s; St. Katherine's, the church built by the archbishop of New Orleans to filter people of color out of the cathedral,

opened in 1895.²⁸³ In response to this event, Chopin's biracial contemporary Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote, "It won't be long before such gentle means as a quiet discrimination all along the parishes will force the colored worshippers into the "Jim Crow" church."²⁸⁴ Chopin might have looked similarly askance on the archbishop's new edifice and other developments for exclusion endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church in America.

However, as we have seen, Louisiana blacks were not destitute of spiritual resources. Voodoo remained an accessible, if clandestine, alternative for blacks and whites alike in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In *The Awakening*, the touchstone for this is again Madame Antoine. With the name "Antoine," Madame recalls "Père Antoine" or Padre Antoino de Sedella, the pastor of St. Louis Cathedral who defied both Church and government injunctions against serving people of color. But as she nurses the weakened Edna back to health, Madame Antoine also resembles the healer and mambo Marie Laveaux. Through this amalgam of Catholic priest and Voodoo priestess, Chopin turns our attention away from a Christianity that had become increasingly detached from the lives of Louisiana's people of color and towards the African-based faith that had sustained them during slavery and continued to be an important spiritual force in the face of rising Jim Crow oppression.

The Three Mambos of *The Awakening*

Madame Antoine would seem to lack an essential ingredient to be a nineteenth-century Voodoo mambo: African blood. But she is obviously distinct from the white Creoles and on a social level closer to that of people of color. While some critics have

²⁸³ Bennet, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans*, 175.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

interpreted Chopin's less than glamorous description of Madame as an example of the writer's class as well as racial bias, the positive role Madame Antoine plays overshadows the Acadian's bulk and clumsiness. That, I would argue, is Chopin's point. Unlike America's Christian leaders and their white supremacist followers, Chopin refuses to equate spiritual worth with physical appearance.

As a result, in *The Awakening*, as in "Désirée's Baby," "La Belle Zoraïde," and much of the Chopin canon, what you see is not necessarily what you get. Beneath the narrative layer dominated by Edna Pontellier is a subterranean world established, in part, by Madame Antoine, whose role as storyteller to Edna Pontellier parallels that of Manna Loulou to Madame Delisle in "La Belle Zoraïde." And just as Manna Loulou cannot expect Madame Delisle to return kindness for kindness, neither will Madame Antoine's generosity to Edna be reciprocated. Edna Pontellier will never be tucking Madame Antoine into a bedroom at either the house on Esplanade or the *pigeonaire*. This is not due to the fact that Madame Antoine is Acadian. Instead, the parallel of Madame Antoine to people of color is more deliberate than scholars have recognized. In fact, against the *blackdrop* of people with obviously African blood, Chopin has conjured a trinity of Madames—Antoine, Lebrun, and most important, Ratignolle—to remind us of the third caste omnipresent in Louisiana and most indicative of the speciousness of the concept of race: the Louisianans of color whose complexions and features defy racial profiling. As people of mixed races, Chopin's trio of women are true to the theological history of both Haiti and Louisiana, for in Haiti the "maroons" marshaled the forces of Voodoo to incite the revolution and in New Orleans the "mulattoes" led the fight, albeit unsuccessfully, to stop segregation, including that of the Christian churches.

One cannot ignore the racial and ethnic diversity evident in the novel, especially at Grand Isle. In the work's brief span, Chopin touches on nearly all of the races/ethnicities central to Louisiana's history and the United States' political developments at the end of the nineteenth century: the Creoles, recalling the Spanish and French rule; Edna Pontellier and her social circle, representing the American takeover of Louisiana; Mariequita, pointing to America's conflicts with Mexico and Cuba; and, most important, people with varying degrees of African blood, reminding readers of slavery and its complicated legacy. The quadroon who shadows Edna Pontellier symbolizes both the Louisiana *plaçage* that spawned generations of racially-mixed individuals and the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow laws that insisted on a black-white division of humanity. Chopin's color line emerges almost as a mirror image of the absurd racial ruler by which people with as little as 1/32 of black blood in their veins were classified as black. At the darkest end of the scale might be the black girl, who, early in the novel, manages the treadle of Madame Lebrun's sewing machine, while the most multiracial character is Josephine, the Griffé nurse who tends to Adele Ratignolle during her labor.²⁸⁵ What has not been acknowledged is that Chopin's obvious people of color, like the Griffé, could also have been Creoles. By the same token, all of her Creoles need not be white.

²⁸⁵ "Griffé," like "Creole," is an ambiguous term. Citing two separate sources, the *OED* defines a Griffé as either a "mulatto" (that is, half black and half white) or the offspring of "a negro and a mulatto" who thus "contain[s] one fourth white blood, and three fourths black." But Gwendolyn Hall notes that the Spanish in Pointe Coupee, the port of entry for many slaves to Louisiana, defined *grif* as someone with "a mixture of black and Indian" blood. This definition is important, not merely for its addition of another race to *The Awakening*, but also because it reminds the reader of an added complication to slavery and Jim Crow legislation: "Indian slavery was prohibited under Spanish law, and therefore, slaves descended from Indian women were legally entitled to their freedom." *OED Online*, s.v. "griffe"; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 262. The "Voodoo Queen" Marie Laveaux, was often described as a "Griffé."

The novel's central Creole women, Madame Lebrun and Adele Ratignolle, are admittedly unlikely women of color, especially if one regards nineteenth-century biracial women as the "tragic mulatto" first envisioned by Lydia Marie Child and perpetuated by Kate Chopin's contemporaries, including George Washington Cable. Chopin, in her criticism of one burgeoning writer's retelling of the story, did not reject the subject but maintained that it must "be handled artistically or with originality."²⁸⁶ In *The Awakening*, Chopin seems to have taken her own advice to heart, for amidst the apparent stereotypes of black women, she has created two characters who belie the myth created by Ms. Child. Hardly tragic, Madames Lebrun and Ratignolle survive well despite increasing social and political efforts to deprive them of their power. The characters and author, however, must live and "tell [their] truth . . . slant" as, another woman, Emily Dickinson advocated. Scholars have doubtless been duped by the apparent whiteness of the women, suggested especially by the women's marriage to white men; under Code Noir and later Jim Crow laws blacks and whites could not marry. What is overlooked by modern readers of the novel is that, during Reconstruction, blacks and whites enjoyed a rare marital window of opportunity when laws against miscegenation were rescinded under the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and a Louisiana statute of 1870. Many people took advantage of this, for an 1880 census lists one hundred and seventy-six white men married to women of color. Some of the men used the relaxed rules to legitimize their relationships with their concubines met through *plaçage*, arrangements that even before the new legislation were considered common-law or, as the Creoles of color would say, "left-handed" marriages. Others,

²⁸⁶ Chopin, *Private Papers*, 180.

especially men from foreign countries, such as France, simply wed woman of color as they would a white woman.²⁸⁷

Aline Lebrun and Adele Ratignolle might well have married their husbands during this relaxation of marital restrictions. Although brief, the details regarding Madame Lebrun's relationships (with her husband; would-be lover, Montel; and children, Robert and Victor) hint at complex racial and social dynamics that scholars have ignored in their haste to stereotype the madame as a devoted white widow, for whom "it was a fixed belief . . . that the conduct of the universe and all things pertaining thereto would have been manifestly of a more intelligent and higher order had not Monsieur Lebrun been removed to other spheres during the early years of their married life." But in the paragraph immediately following this passage, Chopin modifies the loss of Monsieur Lebrun, for we learn that Montel's "vain ambition and desire for the past *twenty years* had been to fill the void which Monsieur Lebrun's *taking off* had left in the Lebrun household" (CW 902, emphasis added). "Taking off," even for an ironist like Chopin, seems a crude way of describing the death of a loved one and transforms Monsieur Lebrun's leaving into a voluntary act.²⁸⁸ More perplexing is the twenty-year duration of Madame Lebrun's mourning, for it suggests either that Monsieur Lebrun departed soon after the conception of his younger son or that the nineteen-year-old Victor is not his son at all, a fact that could explain the animosity between Robert and Victor. Finally, *Madame Lebrun's* marital situation has a historical parallel in the life of the mixed-race Voodoo priestess *Marie Laveaux*, whose husband, Jacques Paris, "a free quadroon from

²⁸⁷ John W. Blasingame, *Black New Orleans: 1860-1880* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 206.

²⁸⁸ The phrase might also be simply Chopin's preferred way of describing death; in *At Fault*, she also alludes to Jerome Lafirme's "sudden taking off" (CW 741).

Saint Domingue” disappeared and was later declared dead. No one really knows what became of Paris. Marie Laveaux subsequently became involved with a white man, Christophe Glapion, with whom she cohabited and produced seven children; the two remained “a couple for approximately thirty years,” until Christophe’s death in 1855.²⁸⁹ Perhaps Montel has another ten years in which to woo Aline Lebrun. Chopin seems even to have inverted the races of husband and lover, for the omission of “Monsieur” before “Montel” implies that the second rather than the first man in Madame Lebrun’s life has black blood. Robert might be the product of *plaçage*, but his father, unlike Christophe Glapion, rejected both his concubine and son and “took off” for higher, whiter ground. On the other hand, the surname, “the brown,” implies that even the monsieur was a person of color.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 155-8.

²⁹⁰ Elfenbein argues that the name “Lebrun” merely “reinscribes [Robert’s and Victor’s] dark proclivities,” i.e., attraction to women like Mariequita. Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line*, 149. Anna Brickhouse, however, makes the more interesting observation that “amid a French Creole culture of complex ethnic designations, the vessel for Edna Pontellier’s initial arousal to her once dormant desires is Robert Le Brun, whose name suggests a racially ambiguous counterpart to that of the light-skinned slave La Blanche in ‘Desiree’s Baby.’” Brickhouse, “The Writing of Haiti: Pierre Faubert, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Beyond,” *American Literary History* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 433, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0896-7148%28200123%2913%3A3C407%3ATWOHPF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0>.

The history of Natchitoches supports Brickhouse’s speculation. In colonial Natchitoches, “a mulatre named Jeannot Lebrun dit Mulon, lived alone in a separate domicile from whites.” A translator for whites dealing with Native Americans, Jeannot Lebrun was the father of Francoise, the only Natchitoches slave who successfully sued for her manumission in the colonial period. Robert Lebrun might have inherited his gift for languages from Jennot Lebrun while Aline Lebrun’s business sense correlates with Francoise Lebrun’s cunning. H. Sophie Burton and F. Todd Smith, *Colonial Natchitoches: A Creole Community on the Louisiana-Texas Frontier* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 91, 98-99, 101. Chopin seems to have anticipated this play with race and names as early as 1891, when she published the short story “The Harbinger.” In it, Chopin contrasts the painter Bruno’s idealized memory of his model Diantha with the image he has of her when he stumbles upon her wedding to another man the next summer. With a name derived from the German word for brown, *brun*, Bruno shares an obvious link to the Lebruns. Moreover, like Robert Lebrun, Bruno will never marry the woman he has idealized; instead, he is only “loves harbinger.” With her opening emphasis on the colors of segregation—“Bruno did very nice work in black and white”—Chopin cues us to the reason for Bruno’s fate: Jim Crowe legislation against miscegenation. Although, in the relaxed country setting, Diantha could “pose for him when he wanted” and assume all of the colors of nature, when she exits the doors of the church, she seems “a white robed lily” (CW 145-46). So too, I will argue, might Robert Lebrun enjoy a flirtation with Edna Pontellier at Grand Isle but never walk down the aisle with her.

Kate Chopin reserves her more radical racial coup for her creation of Adele Ratignolle, broadly discounted by both feminists and postcolonialists. To the former, she is the Victorian angel of the house and represents all that the New Woman, like Edna Pontellier, must rebel against. To the latter, she is the fair Southern belle, whose mere existence was used by white supremacists to justify the enactment of Jim Crow laws. The few scholars who have come to Adele's defense do so primarily by echoing Edna Pontellier's perception of the Creole as the "sensuous madonna," the stock character of Catholic Mariolatry. Such readings revolve on superficial evidence: that Adele is a Creole, speaks French, nurtures her husband and children, and has blond hair.²⁹¹ To assume one knows her through such limited data is to fall victim to the same myopia of those who, presuming the smallest amount of African blood was readily apparent in both body and mind, drafted the blueprints for determining the race of an individual. In fact, Adele's name recalls that of many Creole women of color, including one who, in Louisiana in 1810, successfully sued her master Beauregard for her freedom on the basis that she was "Colored" rather than "Negro" (that is, of pure black blood).²⁹² Adele's union with Alphonse Ratignolle might be one of the 29% of interracial marriages between women of color and French men included in the 1880 census,²⁹³ a fact supported by the couple's "very foreign . . . manner of living" (CW 936) as well as the French accent that colors their English. The Ratignolles' link to France also reminds Chopin's

²⁹¹ In "At the Cadian Ball," Kate Chopin had already exposed the unreliability of blond hair as an indicator of race: as many scholars have noted (often to both Chopin's and Calixta's detriment), Calixta has "flaxen hair that kinked worse than a mulatto's close to her head" (CW 219).

²⁹² Mary Gehman, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction* (New Orleans, LA: Margaret Media, Inc., 1994), 132. Frank W. Sweet, *The Rise and Triumph of the One-drop Rule* (Palm Coast, FL: Backintyme, 2005), 204-5.

²⁹³ Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 206.

readers of the revolution, both on the continent and in Haiti, that, at least in theory, granted people of all races equality.

Adele's true colors manifest themselves most in two interactions with Robert Lebrun. Discussing his trip to Mexico, she betrays a racial bias, not towards African-Americans, but "Mexicans, who[m] she consider[s] . . . a treacherous people, unscrupulous and revengeful" (CW 924). Phillip Barrish uses this passage (the novel's only direct expression of racism) and Adele's subsequent remark that she "trust[s] she [does] them no injustice in thus condemning them as a race" (CW 924) to position Madame Ratignolle in the role of the "bygone heroine" who "embod[ies] an unnatural Old World whiteness."²⁹⁴ But Barrish's interpretation does not account for the obvious "trust" Adele places in other people of color, such as her servant Cité, whom the Creole asks to look for Alphonse Ratignolle's missing handkerchief. (Barrish's stereotypical Southern matron might have more readily accused Cité of being a thief.) Adele's allusion to the possible "injustice" of her attitude also betrays an awareness, at some level, that she is biased, while her prejudice is mitigated by the fact that, until a Mexican acquaintance stabbed his wife, she apparently harbored no animosity towards the people.

One cannot deny that Adele, unlike any other character in the novel, brings the issue of race out into the open. She does so, I would argue, because, unlike her foil Edna Pontellier, she has much more of a reason to be sensitive to ethnicity. Thus, embedded in her remarks is not white supremacy but a sense of betrayal, no doubt like that African-Americans experienced when they sought refuge in Mexico in the nineteenth century. Among colonization ventures was one led by the African-American H. Ellis, who, in 1894, took eight hundred and sixteen blacks into Mapimí, Mexico, where they were to

²⁹⁴ Barrish, "The Awakening's Signifying 'Mexicanist' Presence," 73-4.

receive land and other compensations for work for the Agricultural, Industrial and Colonization Company of Tlahuallo. The endeavor resulted in three hundred and twenty-six of the people returning to the United States; others died or became lost along the way.²⁹⁵ Although recent scholarship shows that some Louisiana Creoles of color actually succeeded in establishing themselves in and around Vera Cruz, where Robert Lebrun joins Montel,²⁹⁶ Kate Chopin seems to regard Mexico as an emblem of American imperialism and racism. Since Robert Lebrun, like those followers of Ellis, returns to America after his own fruitless business venture to Mexico, Adele Ratignolle might be more seer than bigot.

The Creole woman's powers of divination, however, have even greater significance regarding the burgeoning relationship between Robert Lebrun and Edna Pontellier. Whatever motivation one might ascribe to Adele's advice to Robert to suspend his flirtation with Edna, who is "not one of *us*" (emphasis added), one cannot ignore the fact that Edna would probably have fared better had Robert heeded the Creole's warning. Even more significant is Robert's response: in what is an obvious effort to distinguish

²⁹⁵ Michael D. Olien, "United States Colonization Programs for Blacks in Latin America during the 19th Century," *Latin American Anthropology Group Contributions* 1, no.1 (1976): 10, 13-4, www.anthrosource.net. The migration of African-Americans into Mexico was publicized in *The New York Times* from 1889 through 1895, the years when Kate Chopin emerged as a professional writer and just prior to her writing *The Awakening*. In an August 12, 1895, article, "Negro Colonists Stampeded," chronicling the sad conclusion to the Mapimí project, one sees that for some African-Americans, the experience in Mexico, was not that removed from what slaves had endured in the United States: "Mozos" working for the administrator in Mexico controlled the remaining members of the "shipment of negroes" by "lassoing [them], a proceeding that seemingly had the effect of filling them with awe. The negroes were thereupon brought back to the plantation, instructed as to the points of the compass, and allowed to depart well provided with rations and water." *New York Times*, August 12, 1895, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=102468720&sid=1&Fmt=2&clientId=17675&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

²⁹⁶ Mary Gehman, "The Mexico-Louisiana Creole Connection: A Scholar Researches Descendants of Creole Émigrés Who Fled Racial Prejudice," *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* (Winter 2001-2002), <http://www.margaretmedia.com/mexico-creole/connection.htm>. In 1896 a group of African-Americans, "the New-Orleans Society of Emigration," published their intention to relocate to Mexico and Haiti. See "A Land for the Negro," *The New York Times*, July 13, 1896, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=104159337&sid=2&Fmt=1&clientId=17675&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

himself from Adele and her kind, he exclaims, ““You Creoles! I have no patience with you!”” Although this might be his way of distancing himself from the entire Creole—white and black—culture, it assumes racial significance in what follows: ““Am I a comedian, a clown, a jack-in-the-box?”” (CW 900). Unlike the question’s first two complements, which seem merely synonyms for a silly person, “jack-in-the-box” has the added suggestion of something that goes in and out of hiding. As such it has ties to the “jack-in-the-box machine” incorporated into the “Jim Crow machine,” a planing tool so-called for “its peculiar motion in reversing itself and working both ways.”²⁹⁷ Indeed, Robert’s reaction to Adele shows him “reversing” himself away from Adele’s “us.” His effort to distance himself from her society seems that of someone rejecting his roots, someone—like Armand Aubigny of “*Désirée’s Baby*”—intent on passing for white.²⁹⁸ At the same time, the encounter reflects Adele Ratignolle’s keen awareness of the danger to all concerned should a man of color encourage the infatuation of a white woman, especially the wife of another man.

But this protective tendency has not endeared either Madame Ratignolle or Madame Lebrun to scholars, especially as it is most commonly symbolized in the novel: through sewing. In one scene, typically considered an incriminating instance of racism, Madame Lebrun sews at a machine with a nameless black girl working the treadle because, Chopin

²⁹⁷ Joseph Gregory Horner, *Lockwood’s Dictionary of Terms Used in the Practice of Mechanical Engineering Embracing Those Current in the Drawing Office, Pattern Shop, Foundry, Fitting, Turning, Smiths’ and Boiler Shops, Etc., Etc.*, second, revised edition in 8 vols (London: Crosby, Lockwood, and Son, 1892), 197, http://books.google.com/books?id=BkEOAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA197&lpg=PA197&dq=%22jack+in+the+box%22+%22jim+crow%22&source=web&ots=iG_SpSrlUC&sig=4111-JEZKtZt41nSZhJ3c8PgmU&hl=en#PPA196,M1.

²⁹⁸ The racial situation of Armand Aubigny is a matter of much debate. Most critics contend that he does not know of his African American heritage until he discovers his mother’s letter at the end of the story. I, however, agree with Margaret D. Bauer, who argues that Armand has known all along that he is biracial. Bauer, “Armand Aubigny, Still Passing After All These Years: The Narrative Voice and Historical Context of ‘*Désirée’s Baby*,’” in *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), 161-83.

tells us, “the Creole woman does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperiling her health” (CW 901). To interpret this as an indictment of white Creoles hinges on several assumptions. First, such a reading overlooks the fact that Creoles of color employed and, in the antebellum years, even had enslaved other blacks. But more telling is Chopin’s comic allusion to the Creole’s concern for her health. Rather than satirizing Aline Lebrun, as critics imagine, the comment seems directed against the champions of Western medicine and science that informed racial as well as sexual discrimination. In an article of the *New Orleans Medical Surgery Journal*, physicians describe the sewing machine as a potential source of mental, if not physical disease, for, according to the wise male doctors, it can sexually arouse a woman and subsequently induce hysteria. As late as 1894, New Orleans doctor A.J. Block recommended clitorectomies as a preventative measure or cure for this problem.²⁹⁹ One doubts that either Chopin or Madame Lebrun, a reader of the sensualist Goncourt brothers, would give either the threat or cure much credence. The focus on “treadle” also has specifically racial connections, that is, to the “griff frame” used in another textile art, weaving.³⁰⁰ Within the context of this imagistic equation, if the treadle represents the black girl, then the “griff frame” linked to it logically symbolizes a “Griff,” in this case, Madame Lebrun.

Adele Ratignolle has likewise come under fire for her needlework. Joyce Dyer, for example, regards it as a symptom of the Creole’s pathological concern with the health of the family that has ironic results, for the “night-drawers” Adele produces for her children,

²⁹⁹ “Influence of the Sewing Machine on Female Health,” *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* 20 (November 1867): 359-60; John Duffy, “Clitoridectomy: A Nineteenth Century Answer to Masturbation,” presented at The First International Symposium on Circumcision, Anaheim, California, March 1-2, 1989, http://209.85.173.104/search?q=cache:dY_WJB_4LD0J:www.nocirc.org/symposia/first/duffy.html+Clitoridectomy:+a+nineteenth+century+answer+to+masturbation&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=3&gl=us.

³⁰⁰ *OED Online*, s.v. “griff frame.”

according to Dyer, are stifling and can only retard the growth of the Ratignolle children.³⁰¹ A closer examination of the clothing casts both Adele and her offspring in an entirely different light or, should we say, darkness: “a marvel of construction,” they are designed “to enclose a baby’s body so effectually that only two small eyes might look out from the garment, like an Eskimo’s” (CW 888). First, as garments to be worn at night, they replicate the theme of waking and sleeping that defines Edna Pontellier’s experience. In this respect, Chopin might be using the clothing to symbolize Edna Pontellier’s inability to grow up, for the American also participates in the sewing, but, like a child, only to humor Adele. On a more ominous note, especially in a book written during the rise of Jim Crow, the drawers have distinctly racial connotations. Resembling clothing non-white people, Eskimos, might wear, they are ostensibly meant to protect the children from natural elements, but the “treacherous drafts” and “insidious currents” that constitute the dangers seem oddly human and suggestive of the winds of change originating with white supremacists. In fact, the protective clothing, which allows only the eyes to be seen, mirror the sheets members of the Ku Klux Klan have historically donned to terrorize people of color. If Adele is biracial, the fashion “marvel” she has created could symbolize both the amazing love and brilliance possible in the “mother-woman”: to protect her children, she dresses them in the attire of their oppressors. At the very least, Kate Chopin’s suggestion of Klan masquerades reminds her readers of the real danger that threatened African-Americans while it simultaneously indicts Klan members for their perverse immaturity. Moreover, Chopin’s repeated allusions to both Madame Ratignolle’s and Madame Lebrun’s sewing imbue the Creole women with the mythic

³⁰¹ Dyer, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*, 41.

dimensions Dyer and others ascribe primarily to Edna. Like that of Clotho or Nona, their sewing seems the stuff of life. Or perhaps the two Creoles are mere mortals, like the sly Penelope, and use their needlecraft to keep the wolves at bay.

With the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the passing of Jim Crow legislation, Madame Lebrun's and Madame Ratignolle's relationships with whites would have become more difficult and urban life more precarious. Thus, although they enjoy a tremendous amount of freedom and power at Grand Isle, their movement is noticeably circumscribed in the city; Edna must come to them. Madame Lebrun, for example, appears only once in the New Orleans' portion of the novel, at her "prison-like" home. Adele and Edna continue to "[see] each other with some frequency since their return to the city" (CW 936), but the Creole seems never to venture into the Pontelliers' house on Esplanade and, during her one visit to Edna's "pigeon house," tells Edna, "I shan't be able to come back and see you; it was very, very imprudent to-day" (CW 980). While the "imprudence" seems tied to Adele's visible "condition" and the scandal brewing about Edna's affair with Alc e Arobin, these details do not prevent the Ratignolles from regularly holding soir es in their home, one of which Edna and her father attend. L once Pontellier, on the other hand, avoids the Ratignolles' "*soir e musicale*" because, he claims, "the music [is] too 'heavy,' too far beyond his untrained comprehension" (CW 951). But as a white Creole, he, unlike Edna and her father, could realize the racial complexity in the Ratignolles' relationship and, ever concerned with appearances, adhere to Jim Crow prohibitions against socializing with people of color. The absence of both Madames Lebrun and Ratignolle from Edna's dinner party is especially odd. One can only assume that their male stand-ins—Victor and Alphonse—

enjoy a respective recklessness and freedom that enable them to attend a social event two women of color could not.

As is evident in the legends that surround Marie Laveaux and other mambos, Voodoo endowed black women with a power otherwise denied them. But by the time Kate Chopin wrote *The Awakening*, the African-based religion in Louisiana had been forced underground just as people of color had been pushed to the margins of society. Marie Laveaux had died in 1881 and, in the obituary composed by her daughter Philomene, was portrayed as a good Catholic woman who had given up her pagan ways. Through Madames Lebrun, Antoine, and Ratignolle, Chopin resurrects the heart of Voodoo and honors the priestesses that kept its practice alive. As women of color dominating the subtext of *The Awakening*, the three women assume the roles of mambo and/or mount by which they affirm lives too often discounted and a faith too readily dismissed as superstition in Christian America. Certainly, the women seem detached from the Catholicism of their respective cultures, for, like the more obvious African-Americans in the novel, they are not among the pilgrims at the mass at Our Lady of Lourdes. (Even Madame Antoine goes only to vespers.) Adele Ratignolle more directly distances herself from Christianity when, responding to Edna Pontellier's philosophizing about the "essential self," she says, "A woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so" (CW 929). As in the exchange with Robert Lebrun, the pronoun skews the meaning of the passage, which on the surface seems to reflect the Creole's own allegiance to Christian scripture. But if read with an added emphasis on "your," the clause places Edna and Adele in different theological camps, a possibility made probable when Chopin writes that "the two women did not appear to

understand each other or to be talking the same language” (CW 929). The Word, while a significant force in Edna’s past, does not seem to enjoy a comparable position in the Creole’s present. That Chopin’s trio of mambos perform their liturgies at more secular sites than Our Lady of Lourdes Church—a resort at Grand Isle, a cottage at Chênière Caminada, and an apartment over a pharmacy in New Orleans—should come as no surprise.

At Legba’s Gate in Grand Isle

Kate Chopin begins and ends her extended Voodoo rite appropriately enough at Grand Isle, for with this setting she recreates the Voodoo heartland, Haiti, whose remoteness enabled slaves to revolt and, in 1804, create their own republic. With its similar geography, Grand Isle also separates its residents and visitors from mainstream institutions, including religion. The pilgrims who travel to Sunday mass following the Saturday festivities and swim make their trip to Chênière Caminada because there is neither church nor priest at Grand Isle.

Instead, a priestess, Madame Lebrun, officiates at Grand Isle events. That Madame Lebrun should introduce the Voodoo component of the novel is fitting because, as her name suggests, the family god most connected to the Lebruns seems Legba, the lwa of the crossroads. Chopin reinforces this parallel with the architecture of both the resort and the Lebrun house in New Orleans. The cottages at Grand Isle are extensions of the main house where the Lebruns hold court and serve their guests while, in New Orleans, Victor must open the gate to admit Edna Pontellier to the house’s garden. At Grand Isle, the call to Legba is not a bell’s ringing, as it is in the city, but rather a sound closer to that of the drumming traditionally employed to summon the spirits: the “clatter” of Madame

Lebrun's sewing machine. In a scene Joyce Dyer dismisses as superfluous to the narrative, Madame Lebrun talks to Robert while she sews on "a ponderous, by-gone make" of a machine. Hardly unnecessary, the "clatter, clatter, clatter, bang!" it emits for "five or eight minutes" has an obvious rhythm and resembles the beat essential for encouraging the lwa and their human mounts to converge. The production of the sound is also distinguished by an integration of elements missing in its counterpart at Grand Isle, Mademoiselle Reisz's performance at the piano. In Madame Lebrun's bedroom, work and music, black and white, youth and age merge as the black girl and ostensibly white woman operate the machine together, the woman on the equivalent of the central, large Voodoo drum, the child on the smaller drum.³⁰² Together they create a harmony never enjoyed by the mademoiselle and her novitiate, Edna Pontelleier. Later, "sweeping the galleries with long, absent-minded strokes of the broom" [CW 913], the "little negro girl" might be demonstrating her lack of interest in her work, as scholars have argued, or continuing a trance-like state induced by the ritual of the night before. As a Voodoo initiate, she wields an important symbol in African beliefs, the broom, to eliminate the dust that could work against the good *mojo* generated the night before. Finally, with the sewing machine, Chopin strips Voodoo drumming of the "cacophony" journalists often attributed to it and honors the rhythm of domestic, everyday life, just as Voodoo itself was and remains intertwined with the ordinary lives of its believers.

³⁰² According to George Washington Cable, of the two drums, "one was large, the other much smaller," "The Dance in Place Congo," 519. But, according to Jessie Gaston Mulira, the City of New Orleans ruled that the drums could only be used in Congo Square. To circumvent this ordinance, Voodooists resorted to "hand clapping, leg patting, and foot stomping." Jessie Gaston Mulira, "The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 44. Perhaps Madame Lebrun and the child are simply exceptionally innovative.

Through Legba, Madame Lebrun opens the door to other lwa, who manifest themselves at the Saturday soirée and midnight swim.³⁰³ Again percussion music dominates, although this time the source is the piano. The music produced on it by and for the children and the “dancing and . . . recitation,” the “entertainments furnished” to the guests, assume metaphysical significance when Chopin changes the secular “furnished” to “offered” and thus turns the partiers into prospective mounts for the lwa (CW 903). As part of the offering, the refreshments likewise acquire added importance and seem designed to meet the dietary preference of the next lwa to appear at a voodoo rite, the Marassa. In his obsessive control over the preparation of the cake and ice-cream, Victor Lebrun seems attuned to the sugar cravings of these young twin divinities willing to resort to mischief should their needs not be met. Their obvious representatives in *The Awakening* are the Farival girls. That the girls have been “dedicated to the Blessed Virgin at their baptism” (CW 904) and thus practice Catholicism does not preclude their simultaneously serving the Voodoo lwa; in fact, the identical blue and white dresses that Chopin shrewdly links to the Virgin are equally symbolic of the novel’s water imagery and La Siren, the female lwa who presides over the sea. When the twins later dance only with each other, they adhere to the Voodooist assumption that, since they share one soul, their primary allegiance is to one another rather than to a member of the opposite sex.³⁰⁴ Chopin continues to invoke the Marassa by a further doubling of children at the soirée, as with the brother and sister orators and, perhaps most important, the Pontellier sons. Not literally twins, Raoul and Etienne nonetheless often function as a unit, as they do when they “permit” the other children present to “look . . . at the colored sheets of the comic

³⁰³ Although specific days are assigned to individual lwa, Voodoo rituals typically take place on Saturdays.

³⁰⁴ Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 205-06.

papers” (CW 903)—just as Chopin gives the sensitive reader a glimpse of the “colored” ritual unfolding at Grand Isle. As two boys, the Pontelliers correspond best to the chromograph of the saints Comas and Damien traditionally used to depict the Marassa.

While Voodooists ascribe considerable power to twins, the child born next enjoys a higher position, so icons depicting the Marassa often consist of three figures. The star of the soirée, therefore, is the girl who performs after the other children. Through her appearance—her “black tulle . . . and . . . tights,” her “toes” that are “black-shod,” and “her hair . . . like fluffy black plumes”—she reminds the reader of the predominant race of believers in Voodoo; through her performance, she recreates the ritual that continued to give them hope and a sense of power. As “mistress of the situation,” she inverts the classes contrived through slavery, and, with her feet “[shooting] out and upward with a rapidity and suddenness which [are] bewildering,” she seems to kick Jim Crow far from Grand Isle’s shores (CW 904). Nor does she do this alone, for her mother, the accompanist/mambo, watches her every move. Neither a caged bird, like the parrot and mockingbird at the opening of the novel, nor an isolated dove plummeting to its death, this creature, whose hair suggests the Aztec plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl or its Voodoo counterpart, Damballah,³⁰⁵ finds her power in communion with others.

The Grand Isle ritual culminates in the swim in the gulf. While water has generic female connotations, in Kate Chopin’s Louisiana it is intimately linked to Voodoo lwa. Even the Protestant Edna Pontellier senses the descent of the gods into their human mounts at the gulf, for she tells Robert Lebrun that ““the people about me are like some uncanny, half-human beings. There must be spirits abroad to-night”” (CW 909). But the procession to the sea even more specifically suggests the summer pilgrimage made by

³⁰⁵ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 69.

Haitians to Saut d'Eau, where both Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the Voodoo lwa Ezili Danto supposedly appeared. Ezili Danto, who appears as a fierce, black, country woman devoted to her daughter, might have mounted the mother of the young dancer at Grand Isle, but neither mother nor daughter is mentioned as being among the revelers at the gulf. A more likely candidate would be Adele Ratignolle, the island's most maternal figure, whose children include a daughter carried, at one point, by Robert Lebrun. Ezili, however, more commonly manifests herself as Ezili Freda, the Voodoo Venus. The obvious mount for Ezili Freda in *The Awakening* is Edna Pontellier; indeed, in what is perhaps one of the greatest ironies of the novel, the woman who profits from her bets on the racetrack's thoroughbreds becomes the horse doomed to the perpetual love cycle of Ezili.

More than mere human foils to one another, Edna Pontellier and Adele Ratignolle represent the two aspects of Ezili, the Voodoo lwa most linked to the plight of women of color in Haiti and America. As Ezili Freda, Edna aligns herself most with the slaveholders or white supremacists; as Ezili Danto, Adele, despite her Caucasian features, is the black, maternal, and revolutionary manifestation of the lwa. This intimate connection between Edna and Adele is aptly illustrated by the two families' adjacent bathhouses. In fact, throughout the novel, but especially at Grand Isle, Kate Chopin bifurcates architecture in much the same way railroad cars were divided to accommodate Jim Crow segregation. Mademoiselle Reisz, for example, enters the novel in a pique as she "drag[s] a chair in and out of her room" to escape the "crying of a baby, which a nurse [doubtless a woman of color] in the *adjoining* cottage was endeavoring to put to sleep" (CW 905). Later in the novel, Edna Pontellier, in a similar state of irritation incited

by Robert Lebrun's departure for Mexico, "grumble[s] at the negligence of the quadroon, who was in the *adjoining* room putting the children to bed" (CW 924). This parallel between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz highlights Edna's link to Ezili Freda and the contrast between Adele and Edna. Unlike Ezili Danto, Ezili Freda is not a mother. According to Joan Dayan, the one child the latter is believed to have had, also a daughter, "disappeared under the waters of the Caribbean sea."³⁰⁶ Although Edna has borne two sons, her connection to them is tenuous; noticeably absent in her life is a daughter, who, one imagines, would only arouse envy in a Kentucky belle afraid of aging. Most of all, as the mount of Ezili Freda, Edna proves once again the validity of Adele Ratignolle's warning that she "'is not one of us.'" Edna Pontellier, who imagines she has an "essence" she can preserve even as she eliminates the body, really does speak a "language"—a theological tongue—distinct from that of Adele, who recognizes that, in this world, "essence" and body are intimately connected. As a good Voodooist, the Creole knows that humans are mere vessels for the gods and that the temporary merging of human and lwa is intended to benefit the community as well as the individual in this world. Edna's enactment of Ezili, on the other hand, continues for the duration of the novel and ultimately disconnects the American woman from human society and quotidian spheres. While even Dr. Mandelet recognizes Edna for the mount—the "beautiful sleek animal" (CW 952)—she is, she mistakenly believes she has, in fact, become the lwa Ezili.

The Mystic Marriage at Chênrière Caminada

Within the context of Voodoo, Edna Pontellier's and Robert Lebrun's rendezvous at Chênrière Caminada resembles the spiritual marriage devotees of Ezili are expected to

³⁰⁶ Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 63.

enter. Of course, a mortal cannot really mate with a god anymore than a black man could freely bed a white woman in late nineteenth-century Louisiana, but throughout the novel Chopin's American protagonist ignores this reality as she fantasizes about a relationship with Robert. Chopin, on the other hand, imagines her reader is more in touch with the facts of life or, at least, of her novel: yet another irony in *The Awakening* is that Edna and Robert never consummate their relationship. A theological explanation is that he cannot have a physical relationship with someone who, in his own words, "will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence" (CW 910). Within the pagan metaphor is a serious social commentary about the Jim Crow gods who decreed people of color inferior and "unworthy" of any form of intercourse, sexual or otherwise, with whites. As a Kentucky white woman channeling Ezili, Voodoo's palest goddess, Edna naturally laughs at Robert Lebrun's later proposal of marriage, for beneath the New Woman mask is a racist scoffing, not at the shackles of marriage, but at the idea that she might wed a man of color. When she tells him he has been a "very foolish boy" (CW 992), she might well be back on the plantation, chastising a slave. Later, returning from the Ratignolles, Edna fantasizes about "possessi[ng]" Robert as only a slaveholder or god might do.

At Chênrière Caminada, then, the bed and feast Madame Antoine prepares are for Ezili Freda, not the human Edna Pontellier. Readily apparent in Kate Chopin's description of Madame Antoine's bedroom as well as numerous other scenes in *The Awakening* is white imagery. Scholars have erred in regarding this as symbolic only of white supremacy. Instead, it reiterates the duality of the novel's narrative, for, in addition to suggesting the white race, this non-color plays a central role in the Voodoo of African-

Americans. Women voodooists, especially novices, dress in white. White is also associated with some of the lwa, including Ezili Freda. And, as a bride's color, it is the logical choice for the setting of Ezili's spiritual marriage. Even more telling of this lwa's descent at Chênière Caminada are the accessories Madame Antoine has provided. By leaving the "*poudre de riz*" (rice powder) for Edna, she addresses Ezili's vanity, while the "odor of laurel" in the bed linens shows that Madame Antoine knows the trees associated with the lwa of love. To be sure, Ezili would have preferred a less rustic meal than she consumes at Madame Antoine's, but she must wait until Edna, more fully transformed into the lwa's mount, hosts her own dinner to enjoy champagne, the offering more typically served to Ezili.³⁰⁷

This metamorphosis into Ezili Freda seems near completion when Edna awakens from her nap and expands her imaginary bond with Robert Lebrun, whose propensity for violence makes him a fitting representative of Ezili Freda's spouse, Ogun Badagri, the lwa of war. Like Ezili, Ogun is a problematic spirit with special ties to Haiti. His violent propensities might have served the Haitian rebels' cause well, but his divisive tendencies contribute little to relationships, whether between sexes or races. Nonetheless, this is the role Robert assumes at Chênière Caminada. Positioned outside of Madame Lebrun's house, he seems a sentinel practicing, however jokingly, the "heroics" of which Adele Ratignolle will accuse him when he heads off to Mexico. Edna, already a committed mount of the spoiled Ezili, does not realize she, rather than Robert, is the possessed party in this Voodoo equation and during her stay at Chênière Caminada assumes a proprietary

³⁰⁷ The colors given for Ezili's dress vary. Alfred Métraux claims the lwa prefers dresses in red and blue, colors that correspond to the "old blue gown" and "red silk handkerchief knotted at random around her head" Edna wears as she prepares to move into the pigeon house (CW 968). The handkerchief also resembles the *tignon* women of color wore in Louisiana. See Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 110-2.

stance with the Creole. When she is finally back at Grand Isle, she is confused by Robert's leaving her, for she cannot imagine that "he might have grown tired of being with her the livelong day" (CW 921). The shock Edna later experiences when Robert announces his travel plans and the tenacious grip she maintains on her illusory bond are those of Ezili defied.

By recreating themselves in the images of Ezili and Ogun, Edna Pontellier and Robert Lebrun doom themselves to a platonic relationship: in Haitian Voodoo lore, according to Donald Cosentino, Ezili "remain[s an] unattainable object of Ogun/Ogou's frustrated libido."³⁰⁸ Contributing to this Voodoo version of the Tristan and Isolde tale are Robert's rivals, including his brother Victor, who, in one aspect, functions as another, less truculent manifestation of Ogun, Ogun Feraille, lwa of iron and smiths. One can see Victor's link to Ogun Feraille in his tempestuous outbursts and banter with Monsieur Farival. When Victor briefly flirts with Edna at his mother's house in New Orleans and later sings the refrain of the song Edna had come to associate with Robert, he is more overtly sexual with Chopin's protagonist than Robert ever is. At his mother's house, Victor taps into Edna's essentially white Southern self, for, listening to his accounts of his rendezvous in the city, she feels like a "confederate in crime" (CW 943); in her home on Esplanade, she reacts to his singing "*si tu savais*" by dousing him with champagne, as though she might make the lwa and his insinuations dissolve. However, what Victor knows and Robert and Edna ignore is the message of the Ogun/Ezili metaphor: the two will never be real lovers.

³⁰⁸ Donald J. Cosentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Voodoo* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 303.

Given the unpromising prospects for Edna Pontellier and Robert Lebrun, one must wonder why Madame Antoine encourages Ezili Freda's continued mounting of Edna Pontellier. Once again, Kate Chopin seems to use the madame to comment on the dangers attendant to an isolated, cloistered, or segregated existence. Unlike Madames Lebrun and Ratignolle or their real-life counterpart, Marie Laveaux, Madame Antoine seems ill-equipped to adapt to the shifting economic, social, and political climates of late nineteenth-century Louisiana. Her power is confined to the provincial world of Chênrière Caminada. In some ways she may be as detached from reality as Edna is; the romantic stories she weaves for Edna and Robert might well be for herself. Through Madame Antoine, Chopin also avoids the pitfall of romanticizing the African-based religion and thus undermining its challenge to the idealism of Judeo-Christianity. Just as the lwa mirror the complex personalities of their human mounts, so, too, is the faith a fluctuating force that can be accessed for good or ill. Rather than initiating the American into the adult world, Madame Antoine, just as she has with her own son, reduces Edna to the level of a child, sitting at her feet, listening to ghost stories. However well intentioned, Madame Antoine's ministrations to Edna perpetuate a spell by which the New Woman seems increasingly a representative of not only Ezili, but of the Zombie, who lives but never wakens.

The Lwa in New Orleans

White Witch, Black Magic

The possession of Edna by Ezili, however, does not begin with Madame Antoine. Instead, Mademoiselle Reisz is the conjurer who first invokes Ezili and continues the spell all the way through Edna's final swim. Swimming away from the shore and men in

her life, Edna simultaneously believes she moves into the challenge posed by the mademoiselle: she has finally become, or so she imagines, the “courageous soul.” In reality, Edna has been bewitched by the Voodoo bokor, the sorcerer, of the novel, whose advice to rise above the “level plain of tradition and prejudice” (CW 966) falls flat when one realizes how traditional and biased the pianist is. Such duplicity, in contrast to the directness of Madame Lebrun or Adele Ratignolle, is what one would expect from a Hoodoo “two-headed” doctor in the nineteenth century. That Mademoiselle Reisz seems not to be counted among the Creoles is indicated by her German name; that she not only has no African blood flowing through her veins but scorns those who do is reflected in her exodus from Bienville Street where people of color, like the landlady Edna encounters, have taken up residence.³⁰⁹ In fact, Mademoiselle Reisz, unlike the novel’s other major characters, never interacts with an obvious person of color, except to try to escape the quadron struggling to quiet a crying baby in an adjacent cottage. One might note, too, that other children, especially the Farival twins, hold a similarly cold spot in Mademoiselle’s heart. Although Edna Pontellier initially cringes at the “venom” that distinguishes the pianist’s attitude towards society, the American, who shuns her own black servants, shares Reisz’s antipathy towards at least one segment of the Louisiana

³⁰⁹ One could also argue that, in leaving her old neighborhood, Mademoiselle Reisz exhibits the anti-Semitism that had become increasingly common in nineteenth-century America. According to David LoShiavo, the Bienville neighborhood “was, at the time [of Edna Pontellier’s search for Mademoiselle Reisz], the only Jewish community in New Orleans.” LoShiavo, “A Matter of Salvation Versus Freedom,” 86-87. LoShiavo uses this detail to illustrate the Jewish influence on *The Awakening*. What he overlooks is that neither Edna nor Mademoiselle Reisz remains in the area. The name “Reisz,” after all, resembles “Reich”; Chopin would not have forgotten the hasty departure from Europe she and Oscar were forced to make as France prepared for the invasion by the Second Reich’s armed forces. And the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich was well established in the Second. On the other hand, Mademoiselle Reisz’s might have fled the Bienville neighborhood because she is, indeed, Jewish but, like Robert Lebrun, attempts to distance herself from her own ethnic group.

population. With Reisz as her guide, she also soon learns to view children, especially her own, with a similar contempt.

That Mademoiselle Reisz represents the black magic potential in Voodoo is implied by the unworldly image Chopin creates of her from the beginning to the end of the novel. Although other characters, like the Farival twins, seem more allegorical than realistic characters, none is couched in as much mystery as the pianist. She visits a beach resort—but detests water and the other guests. Unlike the black servants, called by first names, Mademoiselle Reisz seems to have only a surname. Nor is her malignant image the result of a flawed perception, such as that Edna Pontellier so often imposes upon the world around her. While Edna casts Adele Ratignolle into the role of the idealized Madonna, it is the authorial voice that describes Reisz in flagrantly ominous terms. She lives in a hellish top-floor apartment “filled with soot and smoke” (CW 944) where the dusty bust of Beethoven “scowl[s]” (CW 962). Her laugh is “wriggling” (CW 946). Her face is “twisted” (CW 964) and her figure assumes even more of “an appearance of deformity” (CW 946) as she plays Frederick Chopin’s beautiful music. In Mademoiselle Reisz, Kate Chopin seems to have borrowed again from Nathaniel Hawthorne to create a Louisiana Roger Chillingworth for her Kentucky Puritan.³¹⁰

Certainly, what Mademoiselle Reisz gives Edna Pontellier are only “minor chords,” not simply of Chopin’s “Impromptu” but also of the Petro Iwa she invokes, represented primarily by Robert Lebrun. This, and not the role of artistic mentor, is Mademoiselle

³¹⁰ My interpretation of Mademoiselle Reisz builds on that of Lynda S. Boren, who, most succinctly addresses the pianist’s demonic nature. Boren, “Taming the Sirens: Self-Possession and the Strategies of Art in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered Beyond the Bayou*, eds. Lynda S. Boren and Sara de Saussure Davis (Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press 1992), 186-90.

Reisz's function in the novel. Scholars who insist that Mademoiselle Reisz serves as a model for Edna ignore the fact that she gives the American little artistic encouragement. Although Edna brings Adele Ratignolle her artwork, to which the Creole responds enthusiastically, one never sees the budding artist present her drawings to the pianist, even though it is Mademoiselle Reisz's manifesto on the arts that helps to propel Edna farther out into the Gulf of Mexico. What Edna really seeks from the pianist is the charm to maintain an infatuation with Robert Lebrun. And Mademoiselle Reisz is only too ready to supply Edna with the conjurer's staple, the equivalent of a love potion. Mademoiselle Reisz's motive, however, is as unclear as is the basis for her friendship with Robert Lebrun. The relationship does not stem from family connections; she looks with disdain on Madame Lebrun and Victor, the son who, according to Mademoiselle Reisz, most resembles the Grand Isle matron. Robert's difference, perhaps his greater whiteness, might explain the pianist's tolerance for him. Or perhaps Robert has sought out Mademoiselle Reisz's services. Just as he leads Edna to Madame Antoine, so, too, does he create the link between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz. Had the mademoiselle not taunted Edna with Robert's letters and worked her musical spell on the American, Edna might have grown out of her obsession with Robert. Instead, Chopin's protagonist becomes a creature governed by moods that bind her to not only Robert/Ogun, but also to Alcèe Arobin. Although Arobin tells Edna that some people regard the pianist as "demented," Mademoiselle Reisz's influence seems to work well for him, for he finally succeeds in seducing Edna immediately after this exchange. Perhaps only the promiscuity of Ezili could satisfy the stunted mademoiselle's desire for a vicarious sexual life.

Rebirth of the Rada Nation

The foil to Mademoiselle Reisz is Adele Ratignolle. Unlike Mademoiselle Reisz, who, stricken with a cold, must be nursed by Edna Pontellier, Adele, even in the midst of pregnancy, is a picture of health, although she uses her condition when necessary to orchestrate desired outcomes. To lure Robert Lebrun away so she might counsel him about his flirtation with Edna, Adele conjures a pretense of “cramp in her limbs”; Robert later makes amends for his volatile response to Adele’s advice by bringing the Creole bouillon and crackers, which she receives by “thrust[ing] a bare, white arm from the curtain which shielded her open door” (CW 901). As a physical barrier, the mosquito netting simply shows Adele to be sensitive to the threat of disease in a way Edna, who ignores Léonce’s warning that “[t]he mosquitoes will devour you” (CW 911), is not. But the synecdoche of the “bare, white arm” adds racial and mystical connotations to the scene. The arm, a part of Adele, is white; the rest, hidden from view, might not be. Moreover, behind the curtain Adele has separated herself from the world in much the same way oracles and, at times, mambos do to commune with the spirits; Robert’s delivery of food might be as much an offering for the lwa as the refreshments served at the Lebruns’ fete or Madame Antoine’s cottage.³¹¹

In New Orleans with her husband, the pharmacist Alphonse, Adele Ratignolle becomes even more of a conjurer devoted to the healing arts. A telling scene is that in which Edna takes her drawings to Adele. When Edna arrives, Adele is sorting laundry but then surrenders the task to the servant Cité, whom Adele describes as being ““able to do it as well as I””; the work is actually Cité’s ““business”” (CW 937). The passage has been generally interpreted as an example of racism, in which Adele, a white mistress, issues

³¹¹ The image also suggests the Lady of the Lake, who extends her arm to reclaim King Arthur’s sword, Excaliber. In her early reading of the works of Sir Walter Scott, Kate Chopin would have met the lady’s acquaintance.

orders to a black woman in a servile role. But the scene, like that in which Madame Lebrun sews with the black girl and even that in which Victor Lebrun quibbles with a black servant about opening the gate to the Lebrun house, is noteworthy for integrating blacks and whites in some form of work. In fact, Adele is doing Cité's job. (In contrast, Edna explains to Mademoiselle Reisz that Celestine "will do my work" in the pigeon house [CW 963]; only in her preparations to leave the house on Esplanade does Edna work briefly with the maid Ellen, who seems destined to be unemployed following Edna's move.) More intriguing is Adele's request that Cité check to see if Alphonse's missing handkerchief has been included with the laundry. As a personal item that could be used in a spell against the pharmacist, a missing handkerchief implies much more than a wife's dereliction of duty.

But the Ratignolles are bound by more than a handkerchief to New Orleans Voodoo. In the nineteenth-century, a pharmacist would have distributed herbs and potions to Voodoo root doctors as well as to practitioners of Western medicine, such as Dr. Mandelet. The tonic Alphonse produces for Edna Pontellier could have easily been made from a conjurer's recipe, as might the potion he creates for Adele during her labor. Unlike the drink created by Edna Pontellier's father, a colorful beverage serving the egos of aesthetes, Alphonse's "red liquid" is an elixir intended to heal the body. Its color corresponds to that of the blood of sacrificial animals, whose lives are offered so the Iwa might respond by bringing about positive changes in the lives of their earthly subjects. Adele, on the other hand, supplies the spiritual and psychological import necessary for a Voodoo cure. Scholars who have noted Adele's role in initiating Edna Pontellier's awakening at Grand Isle tend to undermine her function as counselor in New Orleans.

But in the city, she remains a voice of wisdom and, at least in one case, says what even the practitioner of Western medicine, Dr. Mandelet, thinks when, sensing Edna is having an affair, he “hope[s] to heaven it isn’t Alcée Arobin” (CW 953). Warning Edna about Arobin’s reputation, Adele seems both mambo and divine intercessor.

It is during Adele Ratignolle’s labor that two major lwa of the Rada nation descend to challenge the division pervading *The Awakening*: the fertility spirits, Damballah and his wife Ayida Wèdo, whose union suggests a more positive, integrated image of the cycle of life than the racetrack on which Edna Pontellier travels. In calling down these lwa, Kate Chopin once again uses architecture as a symbol—in this case, the two-story building that houses both business and home for the Ratignolles. This arrangement, in which the pharmacy lies beneath the Ratignolles’ dwelling space, mirrors the earth-sky duality inherent to Damballah and Ayida Wèdo, the respective water and rainbow spirits of the Voodoo pantheon. As a symbol of the porous relationship between Adele and Alphonse and the two lwa, the architecture also challenges the concept of “public” and “private spheres” at the heart of much feminist criticism of nineteenth-century American culture. Unlike Edna, Adele is never completely separated from her husband’s work nor is Alphonse isolated from the domestic world. During Adele’s labor, Alphonse can make his medicine and deliver it to his wife long before Dr. Mandelet arrives for the birth of the fourth Ratignolle child.

Even more important is the snake imagery implied by Alphonse’s position and directly applied to Adele. Outside of Alphonse’s apothecary is doubtless the caduceus, the staff with two snakes entwined that has long adorned medical establishments. And during her labor, Adele undergoes a Voodoo transfiguration distinguished in part by her

serpentine braid. Through Damballah and Ayida Wèdo, Chopin reforms the snake imagery associated with Mademoiselle Reisz's "venom" as well as Edna Pontellier's "writhing" in a hammock at Grand Isle into the "golden serpent" of Adele Ratignolle's hair. Its color, suggestive of the snakes Edna Pontellier and Robert Lebrun only imagine watching at Grand Terre,³¹² links Adele to the "great earth" and a renegade spirit in a way neither Edna nor Robert experiences. Most of all, the snakes associated with Adele and Alphonse mirror those of the *verve* drawn to invoke Damballah and Ayida Wèdo: two snakes, sometimes facing each other or even wrapped around each other much like the serpents of the caduceus.

Mounted by Ayida Wèdo, Adele Ratignolle no longer functions as a mambo but, instead, must be assisted by the novel's most overt recreation of Marie Laveaux, Josephine. Like the Voodoo queen, Josephine is both a griffe and a nurse. And as mambo, she negotiates with the lwa to maintain order. When Adele laments that she is "neglected by every one" and even suggests the need for a human sacrifice (Dr. Mandelet should be "killed"), Josephine responds with the fierceness only a mambo could summon: "Neglected indeed!" In this "familiar" territory, the nurse/mambo is able to convince Adele/Ayida Wèdo that many people are present for her and that she should return to her bedroom. Josephine's confidence in this domestic terrain even

³¹² Chopin obviously borrowed this allusion to Grand Terre from Catherine Cole, who, in *Louisiana Voyages*, describes her own encounter at Grand Terre with "lizards sun[ning] themselves[a] and a "little gray and gold snake coiled like a lady's bangle." Catherine Cole, "Grand Isle," in *Louisiana Voyages: The Travel Writings of Catharine Cole*, comp. Martha R. Field, eds. Joan B. McLaughlin and Jack McLaughlin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 13. However, the golden snake associated with Adele Ratignolle has longstanding mystical implications. In his poem *Adonais*, the elegy written for the physician/poet John Keats, Percy Shelley includes an image especially germane to a discussion of Voodoo in *The Awakening*: in his grief, Shelley can only bemoan the spring's rebirth symbolized by "the green lizard, and the golden snake" that "like unimprisoned flames, out of their trance awake." Shelley, *Adonais*, st. 18, lines 161-2. If Chopin is borrowing from Shelley, the person most aligned with life and awakenings is not Edna Pontellier, but Adele Ratignolle.

suggests a familial connection to Adele reiterated by the fact that the nurse is filling in for Adele's sister. While white Southern women commonly employed black midwives to deliver their children, Josephine's week-long stay with the Ratignolles implies that Adele might not be the white Creole critics have imagined. The "vague dread" Edna feels when the birth is imminent could have less to do with her memories of her own labor and more to do with her emerging realization that key people in her life are not members of the white elect. Indeed, her anxiety resembles that of Désirée, Armand Aubigny's wife, as she slowly becomes aware of her own child's African features. More important, Edna's "vague dread" is exactly the same feeling that, according to Alphonse Ratignolle, Adele experiences when he must leave his pregnant wife alone to attend Edna's dinner party. As a witness to the birth of Adele/Ayida Wèdo's child, Edna is initiated into an empathy that transcends skin color. Adele's advice that Edna "'think of the children! Remember them!'" (CW 995) thus seems both a reminder of the dire ramifications that might result should a white woman have intimate relations with a black man and a plea for the children of color suffering under the constraints of Jim Crow legislation. To "remember" is to undo the figurative and literal dismembering that people of color in America, like Désirée's baby, had long endured and continued to experience in nineteenth-century America.

The Gede Guides

For a brief time, Adele/Ayida Wèdo is able to counter Mademoiselle Reisz's spell. Leaving the Ratignolles' home, Edna Pontellier realizes that "one has to think of the children some time or other." The comment assumes racial significance with Dr. Mandelet's gloss: "The trouble is . . . that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a

provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the *race*. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of *arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost*” (CW 996, emphasis added). Unfortunately, Edna’s attention span is brief, and she continues to imagine she might “trample on . . . the prejudices of others” with impunity.³¹³ On the steps of her pigeon house, she anticipates waking Robert Lebrun with a kiss. In fact, Edna “hope[s] he . . . [is] asleep”—that is, she wants him to assume the state she has inhabited for most of the novel. Robert, however, seems to have awakened to the realities of the world in which he lives. His explanation for leaving—“because I love you”—might be the stuff of truth. Robert might also have come to accept who he is—not Ogun residing with Ezili but a biracial man who must resist Edna’s efforts to turn him into what so many people of color had been: a “possession.”

Unable or unwilling to grow out of her illusions, Edna Pontellier, guided by Papa Gede, the lwa of death, returns to Grand Isle. In fact, Gede has been with her for much of the novel in the guise of Mademoiselle Reisz. By seeking out Mademoiselle Reisz in November, Edna unconsciously invokes the lwa who, like the spirits of the dead of many cultures, is most associated with the month. The mademoiselle has much in common with Gede: she is fond of black and purple, symbolized by the faded violets she wears in her hair; no water spirit, she never ventures into the sea; she flaunts rules of etiquette.³¹⁴ Most

³¹³ In her use of the word “trample,” Edna Pontellier seems to move out of Protestant territory and into Catholicism. Teresa of Avila repeatedly advocates “trampling” on anything that separates a person from God. One passage in particular echoes feelings Edna ultimately has about her own children, the “antagonists”: “One needs arms to defend oneself against devils, and persons in this state do not yet have the strength to fight against them and trample them under foot as do those who are in the state I shall afterward speak about.” Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, 119. We might note, too, that here and elsewhere in her emphasis on “courage” Teresa of Avila bears a striking resemblance to Edna Pontellier’s most vocal advisor, Mlle. Reisz.

³¹⁴ Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 112-4.

of all, like Papa Gede, she is a trickster. Her wig, indicative of the theatricality of Voodoo, also suggests the duplicity inherent to a trickster lwa, as does the “double theme” the pianist plays with her cold fingers “upon the back and palm” (CW 944) of Edna’s hand when Edna first ventures into Mademoiselle Reisz’s apartment in New Orleans.

With Edna, Gede’s play, as it commonly does, focuses on sexuality. Papa Gede is fond of obscenities and, according to Maya Deren, often directs his vulgarity towards people uncomfortable with their own sexuality.³¹⁵ Edna, of course, is a perfect specimen. The lwa of death might even have had a hand in Edna’s participation in Adele’s labor, for, in his duality, he also promotes the welfare of children and is petitioned by women seeking to become pregnant. But just as Edna does not understand the complexity informing a relationship with Robert Lebrun, so, too, does she ignore Mademoiselle Reisz’s/Papa Gede’s refusal to take her sentimentality and “pretenses” seriously. Papa Gede’s banter and life-affirming side are only wasted on the Puritan who, true to her culture, never gets the joke. Despite Mademoiselle Reisz’s last words to Edna—“*soyez sage*” (“be wise”)—the American Presbyterian, imagining she might enjoy eternal life, remains on a one-way track towards death. Thus, Gede manifests himself during a ritual for a figurative death: Edna’s dinner party, signifying the end of her life on Esplanade. In this scene, Mademoiselle Reisz annoys her hostess by speaking French to Alphonse Ratignolle and thus excluding Edna and her American guests from the conversation; in so doing, the mademoiselle, for the first time in the novel, fully aligns herself with the Creole culture. When she exits the party with Monsieur Ratignolle, she is a representative of an important part of *black* Creole culture, Voodoo’s Papa Gede uniting with

³¹⁵ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 103.

Damballah just as the end of life is inextricably bound to its beginning—a fact Edna denies to her death.

Agwe Victorious

When Edna Pontellier enters the gulf waters for her final swim, she is not alone. Instead, she is accompanied by “foamy wavelets” that “[coil] like serpents about her ankles” (CW 1000). Into this image, Kate Chopin compresses both the manacles that enslaved people of color and the symbol of the Voodoo faith that helped them endure, if not escape, the dictates of white America. While the dove (representing both the Holy Spirit and offerings to Ezili) falls in isolation into the sea, the lwa do not desert Edna, although she proves incapable of admitting their lessons into her life. However naked she might be, her sense of being “some new-born creature” is merely a reiteration of the feeling she experienced the night of St. Augustine’s feast day. If she has absorbed any Voodoo concepts, they are those of the bokor who alienates rather than of the mambo who unites. Like the witch in a “Skinnee Don’tcha Know Me?” story,³¹⁶ who leaves her skin at night to wreak havoc in the lives of others, Edna, who finds her bathing suit still hanging in the bath house, first puts it on and then takes it off. To remain in the suit is to stay in the uncomfortable, flawed, but real world. Swimming far from shore, she will never put her “skin” on again.

³¹⁶ A staple of African-American folklore is the belief that witches leave their skin at night to perform their nefarious deeds. By tampering with the skin, one could eliminate the witch. In her annotation of the article “Negro Superstitions” in an 1870 edition of *Lippincott’s Magazine*, Catherine Yronwode explains that such stories were called “Skinny Don’tcha Know Me” tales because the witch, finding her skin ruined when she returns, asks it this. Catherine Yronwode, *Southern Spirits: Ghostly Voices from Dixie Land*, 2004, <http://www.southern-spirits.com/norris-negro-superstitions.html>.

Instead, she will die a watery death and become a sacrificial offering for the Iwa, specifically Agwe, lord of the sea.³¹⁷ It is not Ezili or Aphrodite who presides over the conclusion of *The Awakening*, but Agwe and his mate, La Siren, represented by Victor Lebrun and Mariequita.³¹⁸ Although his threat to “hammer [Celine’s husband’s] head into a jelly” (CW 998) suggests a continued link to Ogun, Victor, the one Lebrun who lives at Grand Isle throughout the year, ultimately is the mount of Agwe. In response to Edna’s request for fish for dinner, he initiates a search for it, as is appropriate for the Iwa typically depicted as St. Ulrich with fish in hand. Agwe also appears in Voodoo rituals as a captain or admiral of a ship, a role the younger Lebrun son, who typically tries to dominate situations, replicates throughout the novel. He enjoys an especially contentious relationship with Monsieur Farival, with whom he verbally spars during the dinner held the night of Robert’s departure for Mexico. In response to Madame Lebrun’s impatience with Victor, Monsieur Farival claims that “Victor should have been taken out in mid-ocean in his earliest youth and drowned” (CW 923), an ironic suggestion since, by the end of the novel, only Victor and Mariequita stand firmly on the Grand Isle beach; in tune with nature and its seasons, they even advise Edna against swimming in the gulf’s cold waters. And, as Agwe, Victor could not drown. Monsieur Farival is obviously not serious about his remedy, for later at the Lebrun meal, he listens appreciatively to the young man’s story about an encounter with a Mexican girl. (In contrast, when

³¹⁷ Agwe is distinguished from the other Iwa, in part, by the way offerings are made to him. Food and a sheep are sent adrift on a barque into the sea. When the barque sinks, Voodooists know Agwe has accepted the offering. Edna seems to have fashioned herself into both barque and sacrifice. For a detailed description of Agwe and offerings to him, see Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 120-25.

³¹⁸ I differ with Boren and Lant, whose sirens include Adele, Edna, and even Mlle. Reisz, but not Mariequita. Boren, “Taming the Sirens,” 180-96; Lant, “The Siren of Grand Isle: Adele’s Awakening,” 167-75.

Mademoiselle Reisz shares her ill feelings about Victor with Edna, the pianist seems genuinely to wish a more brutal and racially suggestive end to Victor: lynching.)

In this brief allusion to Victor's risqué account about a Mexican woman, Kate Chopin suggests that the younger Lebrun is more lover than warrior, more lwa of sensuous waters than of fire and iron, and more able to adapt to reality than his older brother. With Mariequita at Grand Isle, Victor seems to achieve what neither Robert Lebrun nor Edna Pontellier can: he moves beyond mere stories and fantasies of relationships to enter one with an actual person. Hardly the spoiled Ezili/Aphrodite embodied by Edna, Mariequita enters the novel trailing "sand and slime between her brown toes" (CW 914) as one at home with real oceans and mud might. With her basket of shrimp, she seems just to have arrived on land. And, in this, she is a fitting La Siren for Victor's Agwe. As described by Marilyn Houlberg, La Siren is a "composite creature," not simply because she is a mermaid, but because "[s]he can be a seductive coquette or an angry, demanding mistress" and, most important for Chopin's purposes, because "[s]he is part-European, part-African."³¹⁹ Mariequita, whose exact heritage is never revealed, seems an apt example of this wedding of opposites. Through her, Chopin even reminds readers of yet another group of people of color in her Louisiana setting: the Chinese workers at Chênière Caminada who, in removing the heads and feet of the crustaceans, were said to "dance the shrimp."³²⁰ Mariequita's basket might have been meant for them. The dance, however, is for the reader.

³¹⁹ Marilyn Houlberg, "Water Spirits of Haitian Vodou: Lasirèn, Queen of Mermaids," in *Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*, ed. Henry John Drewal (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum, 2008), 143-157.

³²⁰ Lynn W. Schonberg, "Barataria-Terrebone: A Glorious Past, A Fragile Future," *Louisiana Environmentalist* (Sept.-Oct. 1995), <http://www.leeric.lsu.edu/le/cover/lead095.htm>.

What seems obvious is that Mariequita/La Siren is meant for Victor/Agwe and that the couple represent Chopin's final challenge to Jim Crow segregation. In the remoteness of Grand Isle they interact freely with one another and the people of color working with them, such as Philomenel. Indeed, with the reference to Philomenel and her mother, Chopin might be paying homage once again to the Voodoo queen and her daughter, Philomene, who managed to circumvent arbitrary rules regarding race in their time. This ability to maneuver one's way in an inhospitable world, not the escapism of Edna Pontellier, is the true triumph in *The Awakening*. To create her "Victor," Kate Chopin had to look no further than the survivors in her own family. As described by Emily Toth, Victoria or Victoire Charleville, Chopin's great-grandmother, connected Chopin to her French roots through instructions in the language and stories about her relatives, including the member of "The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis." While Edna Pontellier swims to sea and imagines she frees herself of her present and future, Kate Chopin, in true Voodoo spirit, honors the ancestors of her past, who, in their own ways, triumphed over racial oppression and held out hope that others might in an America ruled by Jim Crow law. The maternal spirit critics recognize in the image of the Gulf has a much more immediate referent than they realize, for in the sea and the powerful women in her life, Chopin, unlike the protagonist of *The Awakening*, found the amalgam of Africa's Mami Wada—"Mommy Water."

CONCLUSION

MOSE'S JOB

For Kate Chopin, a literary artist and musician, healing the faith could not end with the simple validation of America's people of color and the African-based religion many of them served. Instead, the values embraced by Voodooists must find their way into Chopin's notions of the role of art itself. Although scholars have focused primarily on the artistic elements in *The Awakening*, especially the role of Mademoiselle Reisz,³²¹ the Iwa actually descended much earlier to guide interpretations. Indeed, they made their appearance in the Chopin's first published story, "Wiser Than a God."

In the tale, the protagonist, the pianist Paula Von Stoltz, feels forced to choose between her musical career and marriage to the passionate George Brainard. Unlike Edna Pontellier, who ostensibly faces a similar dilemma, Paula survives to establish herself as a "renowned" musician. Her professor Max Kuntzler even remains with her to await the time when Paula will return *his* love for her. To the few critics commenting on the story, Paula represents what Edna fails to become, the "artist" described by Mademoiselle Reisz who "possess[es] the courageous soul," who "dares and defies" (CW 946). At the same

³²¹ Often regarded as the model for women artists, Mademoiselle Reisz, critics admit, poses a problem for women seeking to integrate the arts with other facets of their lives. Edna Pontellier's downfall is commonly ascribed to the impossibility of achieving this. The major dissenting voice has been that of Lynda S. Boren, who, emphasizes Reisz's "demonic" appearance and behavior and destructive influence on Edna Pontellier, whose "lack of control over her [own] emotions" makes her easy prey for Reisz. Although others continue to argue in Reisz's defense, I essentially concur with Boren's reading. Especially compelling is her claim that *Chopin's* art, rather than that of Edna or Reisz, constitutes the real victor in the novel. I however, would extend Boren's claim to argue that the beauty of Chopin's art lies in its incorporation of Voodoo values., which privilege life over art. See Lydia S. Boren, "Taming the Sirens: Self-Possession and the Strategies of Art in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," 180-196.

time, Chopin is generally considered to have become more “courageous” herself between the writing of this early work and *The Awakening*. As a result, she is less willing in the novel to resolve the artistic conundrum as succinctly as she does in “Wiser than a God.”³²²

Unfortunately, the art versus love division has distracted readers from a more pressing conflict in the story: the theological war implied from the outset by the story’s title. As is readily apparent, one faction is polytheistic, against which Paula Von Stolz seems to have launched a crusade. Unlike Edna Pontellier, who is possibly infused with an overdose of grace from the Holy Ghost, Paula faces a pantheon or a member of it whose wisdom falls short of her own. At least, this is her perspective. But if she is not a believer in the unnamed polytheistic faith, then she might be more like Edna than first appears. Indeed, as “Paul,” the pianist seems to channel one of the most famous converts from paganism to Christianity. Through Paula’s Germanic ethnicity, Chopin once again extends the Christian track through history, first to Martin Luther and then to the representative of both Protestantism and Catholicism, Isaac Hecker. As is often the case, Chopin’s ultimate indictment is of the Mother Church. We see this most clearly in the question Paula raises in response to George’s proposal: ““Would you go into a convent, and ask to be your wife a nun who has vowed herself to the service of God?”” (CW 47). George does not hesitate to answer “yes”; one suspects Chopin would only approve of the young man’s determination.

Within such a theological context, the supposed nobility of Paula’s choice and art become suspect. As her surname suggests, Paula Von Stoltz, like her parents, is driven by

³²² See, for instance, Allen F. Stein’s introduction to *Women and Autonomy in Kate Chopin’s Short Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), 1-7.

pride and anticipates becoming one of the musical elect.³²³ Her parents seem to have prepared her for this much as the “proud” parents of Aurélia in “A Little-Free Mulatto” attempted to keep their daughter from being contaminated by white or black children: through isolation. It is clear that, although the Von Stoltz family lives in America, their allegiance has remained to “Liepsic,” Germany. Enrolled in a Conservatory whose German faculty ensure that Paula, again like Aurélia, need only be with people “just like herself” (CW 203), Paula inevitably assumes her parents’ prejudice towards anyone outside her enclave. As she prepares to perform dance music at the party where she will meet George, she assures her mother that ““those people”” are actually ““swell,”” but their major attraction seems that they are ““awfully rich.”” Nonetheless, her ailing mother remains aghast at the prospect of Paula reducing herself to such “banal servitude,” for Mrs. Von Stoltz’s daughter is intended for better things. The mother proves herself a less than reliable judge, as is indicated in her parting comment to Paula, ““Your music has done for me what Faranelli’s singing did for poor King Philip of Spain; it has cured me”” (CW 41). Although Faranelli (Carlo Broschi) supposedly was able to alleviate the king’s depression, his own physical state makes Mrs. Von Stoltz’s reference ironic: Faranelli obtained his magnificent voice via castration, as was commonly inflicted on poor boys in Italy.³²⁴ More incriminating is the fact that when Paula returns from the

³²³ I differ with Per Seyersted, who argues that Paula’s pride “does not manifest itself in a haughty attitude toward her admirer.” Paula seems equally “haughty” with everyone except her mother. See Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, 104-5.

³²⁴ Even in death Faranelli continues to be exploited by those who demand beautiful music. In 2006, his body was exhumed so scholars can explain why his voice was so powerful. In this, he seems to be following in the footsteps of Sara Baartman. See “Castrato Superstar Disinterred,” *BBC News*, Wednesday, 12 July 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5171892.stm>. Chopin’s allusion to the Castrato also implies an additional criticism of the Catholic Church, which castrated boys for its choirs.

party, Mrs. Von Stoltz has died. Apparently Paula's music has not yet achieved the healing properties of the Castrato's.

The mother's influence, however, is minimal compared to that of Paula's father and surrogate fathers. In fact, Mrs. Von Stoltz seems the prototype for many of Chopin's undeveloped female characters. During her brief appearance in the story, she is never anything but the "invalid" who derives pleasure only from the memories invoked by Paula's playing. The real driving force behind Paula is the dead father, who early in the young woman's life declared, "I want that Paula shall be at the head" (*CW* 39). In his stead, other men have stepped in to keep Paula on the path of righteousness, such as old Engfelder, a teacher at the Conservatory; Poldorf a fellow pianist; and Max Kuntzler, whose name casts him in the role of art itself.

But it is an art of dubious value, for it abides by the father's edict that it be born of the "head." Despite her claims of "flights of originality" and "genius," Paula's orientation to her art seems decidedly cerebral. She is insulted at the party when she thinks "her auditors [do not] appreciate in the performance the results of a life study, of a drilling that had made her amongst the knowing an acknowledged mistress of technique." Then, when the commoners prove more appreciative of her music than she expects, she is annoyed by "[e]ach inane compliment." At George's suggestion that she take a break from her work, she describes the possible ramifications in the words of a scientist who has little knowledge of living organisms: "Rest would mean deterioration." This is the crux of the matter, for in her approach to her music, Paula has rendered herself, if not her art, lifeless. George's claim that she must have known he loved her "unless [she has] been without bodily perceptions" points to a reality he prefers to ignore. Thus, he accepts the ruse she

presents to him—that she will give him an answer to his marriage proposal in a week—and “kiss[es] the white lips back into red life” (CW 43-6). What George does not realize is that Paula is the product of a musical counterpart to the Church, the Conservatory, whose hierarchy would never admit him into the fold.

The alternative to Paula’s music is not pretty, at least by the Conservatory’s standards. During the party, George’s sister sings in flagrant defiance of “old Engfelder” who dismissed her with the cutting comment “that his *system* was not equal to overcoming impossibilities” (CW 40, emphasis added). But the spotlight falls on George, whose friends beg him to play his banjo. In her description, what is striking is how much Chopin focuses on movement rather than sound. In fact, George’s moves captivate his audience, who marvel at “the proficiency . . . he display[s] in the handling of his instrument, which [is] now behind him, now over-head, and again swinging in mid-air like the pendulum of a clock and sending forth the sounds of stirring melody” (CW 43). With her sheets of music, Paula could adequately play waltzes for the party-goers. George, on the other hand, is so comfortable with his instrument that music and dance become one. And his movement inspires others, such as the “black-eyed fairy” he eventually marries, to join in the dance as well. The dance, of course, has its dark side for the very reason that it consists of movement, of change. With his clocklike banjo, George both makes time passing bearable and inevitable.

Through George, Chopin shifts our attention away from the Conservatory and to settings in which music has long been used to do more than exact awe from listeners, settings such as Congo Square. Certainly, George’s music is more the product of the American South than it is of “Leipsic,” the German city of Paula’s birth and eventual

return. Today one can see Zydeco musicians performing gymnastics with their instruments to rival the machinations of George. And the black-eyed fairy learned her dance, “a Virginia breakdown,” as one should, “from life.” In and of themselves, none of these details point to either an African American or a Voodoo influence. What does lead to Congo Square is George’s choice of instrument, the banjo. Although modern readers regard it as a staple of white bluegrass music, its roots are African. Like Voodoo, a close facsimile of the banjo was imported into the United States by the slaves, whose names for their instruments—“banjar,” “banjil,” “banza,” “bangoe,” “bangie,” “banshaw”—obviously influenced the word we now use.³²⁵

Although drums are the primary instruments used in Voodoo rites, George’s banjo achieves the same sense of community that Voodooists enjoyed as they danced the bamboula. In fact, what most distinguishes George’s music from Paula is not the instrument or technique. Instead, it is that his music emanates from and supports humanity. Like the titular character of “Cavanelle,” George encourages his sister, the Conservatory’s pariah, to sing. However inaccurate their judgment might be, the family is of the firm conviction “[t]hat Miss Brainard possessed a voice” (CW 43). Paula Von Stoltz’s quest for musical fame has the opposite affect. Following her rejection, George no longer plays the banjo, so no one will have the chance to dance to his tunes. This is a moot point because his wife has also ceased to dance. Paula has taken music itself from them. But people can listen to her fine performance or at least read of her success. Indeed, in the story’s conclusion, Chopin’s narrator moves outside the narrative structure to address the reader directly and further emphasize Paula’s detachment from humanity:

³²⁵ Bill Reese, “Thumbnail History of the Banjo,” 2/15/98, <http://bluegrassbanjo.org/banhist.html>.

“You have seen in the morning paper, that the renowned pianist Fraulein Paula Von Stoltz, is resting in Leipsic” (CW 47). Chopin’s reader is twice removed from the performer. But this may be of little importance, for one wonders if her rest will result in her deterioration, if the moment of leisure will transform her into her heir apparent, Mademoiselle Reisz.

This reading, of course, departs from the common belief that the Paula Von Stoltzes and Mademoiselle Reisz represent Kate Chopin’s spokeswomen for the arts. Instead, I would argue, through such characters Chopin indicts yet another Western icon, that of the cloistered artist cultivating his or her “genius” in a garret. Such isolation, Chopin suggests, only obstructs the metaphorical and literal miscegenation that furthers life. The music played by George had obviously assumed different shades, the mark of true creativity, many times. Such, one suspects, is not the case of Paula’s virtuoso performances. That Kate Chopin invokes the music of Frédéric Chopin in both “Wiser than a God” and *The Awakening* may only reflect her well honed trickster skills. On the one hand, he *is* the icon, the revered one. But perhaps in the composer’s eclectic piano pieces, Kate Chopin found a reminder of what Paula and Mademoiselle Reisz seem to have forgotten: that dance music, such as the polonaises and mazurka, can maintain and forge important connections.³²⁶ A woman who seemed always willing to embrace the full catastrophe of life, who wrote but also raised six children, who lived fully in a world

³²⁶ Although Nicole Camastra makes a compelling argument regarding similarities between Mademoiselle Reisz and Frédéric Chopin, her basic contention that Mademoiselle Reisz is therefore a positive influence on Edna Pontellier is less convincing. So, too, is Camastra’s claim that Kate Chopin persistently “pays homage” to the Polish composer. Especially disturbing is Camastra’s discussion of Kate Chopin’s decision to compose a polka. Rather than simply accept the fact that Chopin wanted to produce a “buoyant” folk dance without reference to the maestro, Camastra ties the “Bohemian” genre to Frédéric Chopin’s first teacher, Wojciech Zwiny. Thus, “Kate Chopin [also] pays homage to the composer through recognition of his primary mentor in a piece that celebrates Zwiny’s homeland.” See Camastra, “Venerable Sonority in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” *American Literary Realism* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 154-66.

despite its obvious failings, who, in her own words, would rather have been a “dog” than a nun, could be an excellent mambo but never an artist like a Paula Von Stoltz or a Mademoiselle Reisz. There were too many waltzes to be danced or polkas to be written, one for the child that Chopin, at least, never forgot.³²⁷

³²⁷ Kate Chopin’s published one piece of music, the “Lilia Polka” named for her only daughter. See Chopin, *Private Papers*, 195-99.

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