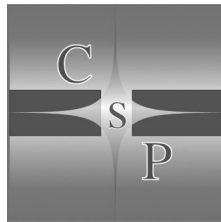


Kate Chopin in the Twenty-First Century

Kate Chopin in the Twenty-First Century:
New Critical Essays

Edited by

Heather Ostman



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For Ralph Spafford

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INTRODUCTION

READING KATE CHOPIN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

HEATHER OSTMAN

The French established New Orleans in 1718, and since then—even until the 1990s—the city was regarded as America’s European city.¹ Through the centuries, New Orleans has sustained a varied and somewhat complex racial composition; it has been home to residents white and black, French and American, Creole and Cajun, Spanish and Latino, Native American and mixed ethnicity. And until 2005’s Hurricane Katrina—even though it was not the first massive hurricane to hit the area—New Orleans was commonly viewed as an exotic city, which inspired writers and moviemakers to tell stories of illicit desires and “clandestine activities” (Taylor 76). Without the gaudy flash of Las Vegas or the hardness of Manhattan, it has been a unique American city that has captured imaginations for more than two hundred years.

New Orleans certainly captured Kate O’Flaherty’s imagination. A St. Louis native, she first visited the city in 1869, and she returned just over a year later to marry Oscar Chopin, a resident, and then made her home there for nine years. She recorded her first impression of the city in her diary, stating New Orleans “I liked immensely; it is so clean—so white and green.”² Maybe this was true where Chopin stayed during her trip, but in a parenthetical note Helen Taylor regards the author’s comment as “so far off the mark as to be laughable; the city was at that time notoriously filthy, sewage-filled, and full of an array of peoples of many hues, hardly any of them white” (74). In the nineteenth century, middle-class homes prevented residents—in particular women residents—from suffering the uglier side of city conditions, such as: sewage-flooded roadways, yellow-fever epidemics, and illegal activities (Taylor 73). Nevertheless, Chopin’s diary note reveals her fascination with the city, where she set many of her short stories and one of her two novels—texts she wrote twenty years later, when she moved back to St. Louis as a widow.

In addition to Taylor, several scholars have written about Chopin's relationship with New Orleans: Emily Toth, Bernard Koloski, Tom Bonner, Barbara Ewell, and Suzanne Jones, among others. After Hurricane Katrina devastated the city, a flurry of calls for academic papers, panels, and discussions about Chopin and New Orleans occurred, which raised the question: How does New Orleans in a post-Katrina (and post-Rita) context enrich or inhibit our readings of Chopin's work? The city of Chopin's texts is largely idealized, with little emphasis on tensions between races and castes. Taylor claims that in Chopin's work, "The city, spreading its influence outward to rural Louisiana, is a bringer of life, change, vitality and sexuality, rather than capitalist exploitation, corruption and disease" (76). In several instances, the city is a place of contrasts, where protagonists make realizations about themselves that enable them to draw conclusions about their lives they couldn't realize in other places: Edna Pontellier recognizes a new change in herself that does not allow her to live in the city as she once did before her summer at Grand Isle; Athenaise understands she is pregnant and thus returns to her husband, whom she had earlier rejected. The notion of gaining new perspective may help us understand how post-Katrina New Orleans affects the ways we read Chopin today. In fact, it may extend to something more complex. In April 2007, New Orleans's *Times-Picayune* Op-Ed writer Jarvis DeBerry claimed that city inhabitants, under national and international scrutiny, now viewed themselves with double vision: as insiders and as outsiders might see them.³ This model of double vision will help frame how we may read Chopin now: we read her work as readers trained in academic literary approaches or as readers who appreciate her work as art (or both), but we also read her work self-consciously as readers within a twenty-first century context. In other words, we read with the knowledge that much has drastically changed since the turn of the new century, and our old frameworks for understanding texts may be less than adequate.

So what kind of lens does present-day New Orleans now provide? In April 2007, the *New York Times* reported that 64,000 people were still living in temporary trailers in Louisiana, and many schools and hospitals were not functioning.⁴ In the beginning of 2007, hopelessness had begun to cripple the efforts of many courageous returning residents, who were faced with excessive rents, insurance premiums, and crime, in addition to slow action on the part of political leaders (A26), and this was more than eighteen months after Katrina. This is not to mention the chaos that followed the hurricane, when lawlessness—looting, rape, and murder—steadily rose in the city. Each day, the news revealed new tragedy: bodies floating in flooded streets and rivers; thousands finding themselves newly

homeless; people living outside the Astrodome in Texas because the shelter inside was already full. Many who lived nowhere near the Gulf Coast viewed with horror television images of suffering, making it impossible to ignore the deep inequities of race and class in New Orleans. What made those images worse in some ways was that they raised a mirror to the presence of these inequities in any American city.

The question—what kind of lens does New Orleans now provide?—assumes that present-day New Orleans offers a context that is fraught with sociopolitical and cultural meaning, in light of the things described above. But also, Kate Chopin herself found her way into the American literary canon because of critical trends that stemmed from sociopolitical movements of the late twentieth century. However, as Koloski notes, “Chopin would have been contemptuous of efforts to identify her fiction with ideological movements for social change.”⁵ Asking this question runs the risk, of course, of reading politics into the meaning of the city or the meaning of Chopin’s work and the relationship between the two things, which raises other questions. But *how we read* literature now is a different question, and that is where we can begin to see how present-day New Orleans reframes our study of Chopin’s texts.

Before we go further, we should acknowledge that if we are looking to reconcile the interdependent issues of race and class, such as were revealed by Hurricane Katrina, Chopin will not be much help, even though her work has enabled many scholars to articulate aspects of these issues, as well as the more apparent issues of gender inequities. Several scholars have studied the author’s perceptions and representations of race: Ewell points out that Chopin was ambivalent on the topic, that she internalized the current racial attitudes of her time. While Taylor claims Chopin was very racist, other scholars note that Chopin’s racism was complex and nuanced, and Toth suggests that Chopin was more open minded regarding race than her contemporaries. Most scholars agree that whatever Chopin’s exact inclinations were, she was typical of white middle-class women of her time (Koloski 44-46). And her assumptions about class might be viewed the same way, as her representations of class did not include examinations of white or unearned privilege, although she frequently wrote stories about the poor.

So we cannot make broad generalizations about Chopin and these issues, even as post-Katrina New Orleans forces many of us to acknowledge the inequities within this city and other urban centers of the United States. But let’s approach the question and think of it in parallel terms. For instance, do we now read New York-based texts, such as *Sister Carrie* or *The Great Gatsby*, any differently after 9/11? Mikhail Bakhtin

notes that “the work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers.”⁶ Viewed in this light, the answer to our question, then, is yes: our present “real world” has entered our readings of these texts of the past—wherever they are based: New Orleans, New York, London, Paris, or anywhere else. The catastrophes of the twenty-first century—including the multiple wars and terrorist attacks in the US and abroad—reframe how we read Chopin and how we read, period. The key is summed up in Taylor’s earlier point regarding Chopin’s New Orleans as a primary location of “life, change, vitality, and sexuality,” where, as Koloski states, much of “her fiction ... is regularly focused on the way that people shaped by their social environment seek to carve out better lives for themselves” (8). Whether or not Chopin wanted to be considered a writer whose work is identified for social change is beside the point, and while Koloski’s claim may have meant one thing prior to the twenty-first century, when Chopin’s work was very much a part of a cultural moment of such reflections on women’s and other marginalized groups’ participation in society, his claim sheds light on how present-day New Orleans provides a framework for reading Chopin today.

Specifically, whatever New Orleans meant before 2005, when someone now utters the name of the city, new meanings abound, and very often these meanings reflect new understandings of the social contexts of the city and the broader society. When we think of New Orleans today, maybe we are reminded of the city’s European sensibilities; maybe we recall the abandonment of city inhabitants by a federal government and a nation preoccupied with other things; maybe we share Spike Lee’s sentiments, expressed in his film *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006); maybe we see a divine punishment; maybe we see the results of white privilege and an enforced black underclass; maybe we understand more clearly how no complex thing is resolved easily, if at all; or maybe our relationships with the city—as it happens so often with any city—are so intimate and so personal, the theories set forth by so-called experts and outsiders are an intrusion.

Whatever New Orleans means to you, its significance likely has changed in some way in the last few years. In a 2007 opinion piece, which appeared in the *Times-Picayune*, Judy Walker emphasized the importance of context and perspective. She describes how a visitor to her neighborhood rode by on a bike “not long ago [and] paused to say something to me about how sad it looked.... He was probably trying to be

sympathetic,” she allows, but his comments led her to point out how the neighborhood, judged in the light of progressive change, was doing quite well:

To those of us living in the neighborhoods that flooded, that big pile of trash on the curb is not an eyesore. It’s temporary, and a definite sign of progress. If you lived here, you would be able to read, like tea leaves, the stage of remodeling indicated by stuff on the curb. (They now have a roof ... they just got their flooring ... they finally have appliances!)

Or, for example, if three FEMA trailers on one block already have been moved, that’s a huge positive change in the life of three families who have been able to move into their home, and it’s great for the neighborhood, too. But visitors see only the white boxes that remain, not the thousands that have moved to trailer heaven, or Arkansas, or wherever FEMA is storing them.⁷

Walker locates meaning in the signs of progress: the trash on the curb reflects improvement; the lack of trailers indicates that more people are home. With a resident’s perspective, she argues, you can see a new landscape, where—to borrow from Taylor—life, change, vitality, and sexuality can flourish, and are already rooting themselves once again in the city. Walker’s point recalls DeBerry’s argument that New Orleans residents view themselves through two lenses: a subjective lens and a newly contextualized lens. She contrasts the perspective of the residents against the perspective of the outsider. Her point about the people of New Orleans is comparable to the theme Koloski identifies in Chopin’s texts about her characters, who, though “shaped by social environment,” try to make new lives for themselves anyway. Walker, in a sense, is describing this very theme: she and her neighbors, under the scrutiny and pity of outsiders, under the yoke of bureaucracy and deep-seated prejudice are “carving out better lives.”

This is not to belittle people’s suffering or make neat, quaint parallels between reality and fiction. Until last year, thousands of people still could not go home. But if we can draw symbolic meaning from their loss, we might say that we, as readers, cannot go back, either. The social context in which we all read has changed forever. We cannot go back to reading Chopin or any author the way we once did. In only a few years, the world—the American landscape alone—has changed dramatically. We are forced to contend with a world fraught with extreme ambiguity. And these recent American losses are located on its own soil, reshaping the physical landscape. Thus, the social landscape is inevitably affected: it is at once grounded in loss and molded by new technologies that shape how we

communicate with each other and how we experience loss (among other things), such as through the mediums of the Internet, Ipods, cell phones, text messages, and television. We simultaneously move closer and further apart through these technologies, as sudden, human-made and natural disasters change our lives. We have changed as a nation—as a world—therefore, how we process what we read must inevitably change.

The essays in *Kate Chopin in the Twenty-First Century* respond to these changes and update Chopin scholarship, creating pathways, both broad and narrow, for study in a new world. Given Chopin's atypical literary career and her frequent writing about unconventional themes for her time—such as divorce, infidelity, and suicide—she may have approved such approaches as the essays here suggest. When she published *The Awakening*, the United States was undergoing enormous social change—not unlike today in some regards. For women, workers, and city dwellers, the transformations were remarkable. Social reformers, such as Susan B. Anthony and Jane Addams, sought to further transform the moral and social landscape for women's greater participation in society. Feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote *Women and Economics* (1899), which identified economic reasons for women's subordination, and anarchist Emma Goldman advocated free love, to release women and men from the constraints of traditional marriage. The turn of the twentieth century saw the New Woman emerge, further transforming women's roles—a shift from the angelic, domestic woman of the Victorian age to a more independent, self-sufficient woman for the new age. A new world required new women characters, which Chopin delivered in her stories. These characters showed a brave face to the world, some refusing to accept the constraints of tradition, walking away from the expected roles and behavior for women.

While Chopin had been well known by contemporaries as a regional story writer, her first self-published novel, *At Fault* (1890), told a story about Louisianan men and women, struggling with issues of religion, divorce, and alcoholism. The novel was not well received, and another Chopin novel *Young Dr. Gosse* was never published. Nevertheless, her short stories enjoyed a much broader reading audience, and many of these stories depicted women—and men—struggling to assert their autonomy and their own identities. These themes also emerged in *The Awakening* (1899), where its protagonist, Edna Pontellier, increasingly resisted conventional gender roles and even became involved with men outside her marriage.

Chopin's other, edgier subject matter may have contributed to her disappearance from the American literary scene. While a few earlier

scholars and a biographer wrote about Chopin during the first half of the twentieth century, Chopin's reputation was revived and grew larger than anything she had enjoyed during her lifetime once Per Seyersted published *A Critical Biography* and *The Complete Works*. Both were published in 1969, in time with the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Interest in Chopin's work multiplied as feminist critics and readers identified sympathetic themes in her work, such as women's desires for freedom, self-determined identity, and sexual freedom. This interest continued through the last four decades since Seyersted's earlier work, until the present day, and includes significant biographical and critical work by Toth, Koloski, Ewell, Jones, and Taylor, as mentioned earlier, in addition to Thomas Bonner, Mary Papke, John May, Sandra Gilbert, Janet Beer, Wendy Martin, Barbara Solomon, and Andrew Delbanco, among others. The essays in *Kate Chopin in the Twenty-First Century* build on earlier critical work and break new ground, much like Chopin herself did. Paralleling a similar spirit of social and cultural change seen in Chopin's era, this collection of essays offers readers newer, and at times bolder or even competing, ways of thinking about Chopin's works. Exploring many of her short stories, her lesser-known novel, *At Fault*, and her best-known work, *The Awakening*, the essays share a central theme: the exploration of the new in Chopin criticism.

The collection is divided into three parts: the first part introduces interdisciplinary themes for reading "culture" in Chopin, including urban living and theatre as a lens for viewing New Orleans's social and class stratifications; the importance of music—a central interest of Chopin's—in her texts; and the cultural relevance of *Vogue* magazine, where eighteen of Chopin's stories were first published.

In Donna and David Kornhaber's "Stage and Status: Theatre and Class in the Short Fiction of Kate Chopin," we see that for Chopin the theatre served as a shorthand way to convey the class status and social aspirations of her characters and as a forum to explore the complex social cauldron of turn-of-the-century New Orleans. This chapter explores the myriad ways in which Chopin used the theatre to cast her personal stories in a larger social context. For New Orleans, theatre was far more than a simple recreation: it was a high-stakes venue in which the upper classes of the city sought to assert their place in the greater pantheon of American cultural centers. Though New Orleans was the fourth largest city in the United States, it never ranked as one of the top theatrical cities in the country, or even in the South. But understanding the theatre's role in turn-of-the-century New Orleans and Chopin's careful use of and references to that role is essential to understanding Chopin as a writer of personal

revelations as well as a keen observer of contemporary social tensions and trends.

Within the contexts of “A Mental Suggestion,” “A Matter of Prejudice,” “The Storm,” “Lilacs,” “A Sentimental Soul,” “At Chênrière Caminada,” and *At Fault*, among other Chopin stories, Jane F. Thrailkill extends the notion of culture to include its salves for the difficulties of “modern” life. In her essay, “Chopin’s Lyrical Anodyne for the Modern Soul,” she explores Chopin’s wonder and appreciation of music, as well as novels, religion, meditation, and sex, as they manifest in her work. In several stories, Chopin not only uses music thematically, but tries out the forms of music, like repetition, rhythm, and sound, a literary experimentation that points to her deeper fascination and appreciation of humanity and the role of the aesthetic in daily life.

Heidi L. Johnsen, in her essay “Chopin in *Vogue*: Establishing a Textual Context for *A Vocation and A Voice*,” explores the cultural significance of *Vogue* as a primary publisher of Chopin’s stories. Ten of the nineteen stories published in Chopin’s *A Vocation and A Voice* appeared within the pages of *Vogue*. Written between 1893 and 1900, these stories experiment with themes, form, and subject matter that reflect a more mature, confident Chopin. Their experimentation paralleled *Vogue*’s own: the magazine often portrayed women in a variety of roles—a risky thing to do at the end of the nineteenth century. The possibilities for women to explore different directions was greater here than with any other magazine at the time. In this essay, Johnsen compares individual stories (including “The Story of an Hour,” “The Kiss,” “Her Letters,” “Two Summers and Two Souls,” and “The Unexpected,” among others) with the advertisements, fiction, and other articles that appeared in the original publication to provide insight into the textual moment for *A Vocation and A Voice*.

In the second part of the collection, the essays identify important and overlapping concerns of religion, race, class, and gender within the contexts of selected short works. Chopin’s two novels and numerous short stories are indeed feminist in their portrayals of women struggling for freedom and individuality in patriarchal Victorian America. But Garnet Ayers Batinovich, in “Storming the Cathedral: the Antireligious Subtext in Kate Chopin’s Works,” offers a closer study of Chopin’s stories, which reveals an even deeper subtext: religion as the primary source of women’s oppression. Batinovich claims that Chopin points specifically to Christianity within the contexts of marriage and the Church, as the source of America’s patriarchal society and by extension the source of women’s subjugation. This essay discusses the anti-Catholic undertone of Chopin’s

first novel, *At Fault*, and compares it to the anti-Christian theme that runs through her later novel, *The Awakening*. Indeed, Batinovich demonstrates how the same theme exists in several of Chopin's short stories, including "The Going Away of Liza," "Love on the Bon Dieu," "Madame Célestin's Divorce," and "A Sentimental Soul."

In "'So the storm passed...': Interrogating Race, Class and Gender in Chopin's 'At the 'Cadian Ball' and 'The Storm,'" Lisa Kirby recognizes these two lesser known Chopin stories as revolutionary as *The Awakening*—not only in their questioning of traditional, cultural expectations of gender and marriage but also in their representation of local color and community. Though these stories are often read through the lens of romance, sensuality, and women's liberation, Kirby argues that there are more subtle nuances of identity, nation, and locale that are equally important. Often the gendered and regional aspects of Chopin's writing are explored as separate entities, as seemingly unconnected themes that reflect the diversity of Chopin's own interests. However, there are important and rich connections between the culturally diverse community of which Chopin was writing and her independently minded feminist characters. These two stories, Kirby claims, show that Chopin was not only calling into question traditional notions of womanhood but also interrogating cultural and ethnic values in nineteenth-century America.

And in Meredith Frederick's "Extinguished Humanity: Fire in Kate Chopin's 'The Godmother,'" we see how a close reading of the symbolic use of fire in "The Godmother" reveals Chopin's exploration of humanity and its loss. The movement from the literal blaze present in the beginning of the story to the extinguished fire at the conclusion parallels protagonist Tante Elodie's character changes and reveals the transformation of her spiritual charisma to her lost humanity and grace. By highlighting the intricacies of this text, Frederick brings not only new contextual meaning, but accentuates Chopin's craftsmanship, as well as extends the limited criticism of this short story.

The third and final part of the collection offers fresh readings of *The Awakening*. One essay uses the lens of race, and the other uses the lens of class to reconsider protagonist Edna Pontellier's transformation and her dependency upon the "rights" of privilege within a specific cultural context. Rebecca Nisetich, in "From 'Shadowy Anguish' to 'The Million Lights of Sun': Racial Iconography in *The Awakening*," contends that while the majority of Chopin criticism has used feminist approaches to *The Awakening*, the issue of race has been largely ignored. And even when critics have focused on race, few have captured the nuanced differences in the way Chopin approaches race in her own texts. Nisetich demonstrates

how racial imagery in the novel works as a literary device that propels protagonist Edna Pontellier's sexual awakening. Seen in this way, Edna's suicide reaffirms racial difference at the end of the novel—but criticism thus far has neglected to acknowledge the various and at times contradictory ways Chopin uses racial tropes in her novel. Nisetich contends that this problem stems from the author herself: in the novel the issue of race is purposefully glossed over by the narrator. Readers and critics, however, do not have to follow along in this manner, and this chapter provides a critical approach to analyze Chopin's use of racial images, symbols, and tropes in *The Awakening* to deepen our understanding of the novel both in terms of Chopin's artistry and as a product of American society.

Finally, Li-Wen Chang bases her argument in "*The Awakening: Chopin's Reading of Women and Economics in Ourland*" on Thorstein Veblen's socio-psychological economic theory and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's analysis of marital economics to explore Chopin's *The Awakening*. Using this blended approach, she explores the tension between woman's growing sense of an autonomous self and man's adherence to institutionalized habits of thought. To Gilman, so long as women could be liberated from the four walls of the domestic sphere, they could be self-conscious producers and contribute their skills to both the family and the nation. Through the lens of Chopin's work, though, what had trapped women in the Progressive Era was not the geographical or physical space but the patriarchal ideologies that claimed a woman's role was to glorify and complement a man's role in the home and in the public sphere. Thus, Chang examines the conflicts between subjectivity and social expectation, showing how the economics of marriage ultimately overpower Chopin's protagonist Edna Pontellier.

All of the essays in this collection, by both established and newer scholars, help to usher Chopin's work into the twenty-first century, and they share a common objective: to break away from the familiar trends of feminist considerations of her work in order to allow her humanity to emerge. Chopin was not simply a "woman's" writer, as many critics have claimed her to be in the last forty years. Much more than that, Chopin was a writer who lived in the world and represented the needs, desires, and despairs of the people she observed in that world.

So the answer to the question of how we read Chopin in this new context, then, may be this: with all that has happened since the turn of the new century, up to and beyond the natural disaster(s) in New Orleans, we are forced to read with a similar kind of double vision as the one DeBerry identifies. On the one hand, we can continue to read her work in the ways

we are used to: as people who appreciate literature, who are perhaps trained in theoretical approaches, and who look for meaning in language. But, on the other hand, the real world, as Bakhtin indicates, has infiltrated and changed everything. We now read with the mirror of today's New Orleans shining the light in our eyes. We are reminded to view ourselves from the outside, as readers within a moment of ambiguity and sudden loss—a moment that can change how we see Edna's final swim or Calixta's stormy tryst or Athenaise's return in ways we never saw before. So maybe it is not even double vision with which we read Chopin—maybe it's more kaleidoscopic vision: we read with competing meanings and contexts that are constantly revised, such as we see demonstrated by the essays in this collection.

Notes

¹ Helen Taylor, "Walking through New Orleans: Kate Chopin and the Female Flâneur," *Symbiosis* 1, no.1 (1997): 70. Subsequent references to this work are included in parentheses in the text.

² Emily Toth, "Kate Chopin's New Orleans Years," *New Orleans Review* 15, no. 1 (1988): 53.

³ James DeBerry, "Not Quite American; New Orleans Forced to See Itself through the Eyes of Outsiders," *Times-Picayune*, April 22, 2007, <http://proquest.umi.com.library.esc.edu> (accessed May 7, 2008).

⁴ *New York Times*, "Broken Promises to a Broken Gulf," April 17, 2007, <http://proquest.umi.com.library.esc.edu> (accessed May 7, 2008). Subsequent references to this work are included in parentheses in the text.

⁵ Bernard Koloski, *Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), xiii. Subsequent references to this work are included in parentheses in the text.

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1981), 254.

⁷ Judy Walker, "To Visitors It's a Mess; To Us, Progress," *Times-Picayune*, April 28, 2007, <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed May 10, 2008).

PART I:

READING “CULTURE” IN CHOPIN’S WORKS

CHAPTER ONE

STAGE AND STATUS: THEATRE AND CLASS IN THE SHORT FICTION OF KATE CHOPIN

DONNA KORNHABER AND DAVID KORNHABER

In the preface to his collection *Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Bernard Koloski cites a curious morsel of commentary from Chopin on the defining characteristics of great literature:

Human impulses do not change and can not so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began. It is why Aeschylus is true, and Shakespeare is true to-day, and why Ibsen will not be true in some remote to-morrow, however forcible and representative he may be for the hour, because he takes for his themes social problems which by their very nature are mutable.¹

For Koloski, Chopin's comments are a reflection on the heart of what makes for enduring art. "Kate Chopin did not write in service of an ideology," he explains. "She wanted her work to be measured by historical and international standards" (xiii). But what Koloski leaves unsaid, and what many subsequent commentators have overlooked, is Chopin's choice of examples in her argumentation. A writer of prose, both fiction and non-fiction, her entire life, Chopin references here as the premier examples of enduring authors two playwrights: Aeschylus and Shakespeare. Never mind her well-known affinity for fiction writers like Guy de Maupassant and Gustav Flaubert. And despite Chopin's public disregard for Emile Zola (she wrote in an 1894 review that his work was full of "prosaic data, offensive and nauseous description, and rampant sentimentality"), it is the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen that she turns to as an example of "art-for-the-hour"—though any of the former's socially-conscious novels might have served as equally valid examples (Koloski 7). In this instance at least, when thinking about what constitutes literature, both great and misguided, Chopin seems to think specifically of the theatre.

Not surprisingly, the theatre proved to be a significant influence on Chopin's writing and her thought. Chopin herself, unlike some of her contemporaries in narrative fiction like Edith Wharton, never ventured into dramatic literature. But she was herself a regular theatre-goer in her adopted home of New Orleans, and references to the great European playwrights permeate her private papers. Shakespeare—whose long canonization as the preeminent writer of English literature was well-secured by the 1890s and who was correspondingly less associated with the theatre proper than other writers for the stage—is Chopin's most constant reference. Quotes from the various plays are to be found throughout her notebooks, often alongside lengthy analysis. "In these words, I imagine, will be found the key [sic] Hamlets' whole procedure," she writes after a few lines from the tragedy. "To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it."² But she shows a persistent awareness of and regard for other playwrights more readily linked to the stage than to literary anthologies. "The reading of Shakespeare kindled in him an enthusiasm for the drama, and he began some pieces which were afterwards burned," she writes in some biographical notes on the German playwrights Johann Crisoph Friedreich von Shiller (Toth and Seyersted 75).

Chopin's notable affinity for the theatre has not been entirely overlooked by commentators on her work. Daniel Rankin in *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* explains the theatre's role in her life: Chopin "loved the theater and cherished her memories of the magnetic power of the stage."³ Likewise, Koloski includes it among the author's most pertinent influences, writing that "she drew inspiration from French opera and theater" (xii). But most considerations of Chopin in relationship to the theatre essentially stop at the point of influence. Next to nothing has been said in the critical literature on the way that theatre functions *within* Chopin's own work—i.e., the way that Chopin herself is not merely influenced by theatre artists but how she as an author utilizes, comments upon, and explores issues of the theatre, and how these explorations impact and inform other themes and issues within her fiction. (Indeed, writes Koloski, "recent biographers have not dwelled much on Chopin's interest in opera and theater" [57].) While issues of the stage are, admittedly, not a central concern of Chopin's fiction in the same manner as contemporaries like Theodore Dreiser, who would make the world of the stage his subject in *Sister Carrie*, they do appear pointedly nonetheless in her short fiction. And a careful analysis of these references helps to underscore not only Chopin's relationship to the stage itself but her views

on and treatments of the larger social, cultural, and economic issues which theatre overtly and implicitly helped to mediate in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. In short, to better understand Kate Chopin's relationship to the stage is to better understand her relationship to the messy social cauldron that was nineteenth-century New Orleans.

That Chopin proved interested in the theatre and specifically in its role in mitigating complex social issues and relationships is perhaps not at all surprising, given the historical and cultural circumstances in which she came of age as a writer. She was, as is commonly acknowledged, known in her day primarily as a writer of local color. For most writers of this movement, providing "local color" was largely a matter of "capturing in prose the folkways and speech patterns" of their local geography, as Koloski explains (12). For Chopin, immersed in a tense world of "Protestants among Catholics, blacks among whites, 'Cadians among Creoles," as Koloski describes it, it arguably proved a more complicated affair (9). Indeed, critics like Edmund Wilson, Larzer Ziff, and Emily Toth are careful to define Chopin as not just a bi-lingual but, more importantly, a bi-cultural author. Inheritor of two languages and traditions from her French mother and Irish father, Chopin sought to combine "French limpidity with Irish grace," Wilson writes.⁴ Her work (and most prominently her short fiction) explored not the meeting of languages or even nationalities but that far more tricky affair of culture: an amalgamation of traditions, histories, outlook, and, not coincidentally, status. Koloski in fact compares Chopin in some way to her New England contemporary Henry James, who "explores the consequences of socialization by positioning Americans among Europeans" (9). But he is sure to distinguish between the ultimate projects of the two writers. "James's great theme is international, Chopin's is intercultural," he writes. "Chopin positions the dominated among the dominant, those coming into their own among those losing what they have ... the dispositions, the inclinations, the tastes they have received from the people around them, from the groups within which they function" (9).

For Chopin, more so than for other local color writers, the meeting of cultures in the unique context of her nineteenth-century Louisiana home was in many ways a highly complicated affair. In *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach would describe life in nineteenth-century Louisiana as "living on the edge of the world—between cultures, between languages, and between races."⁵ More so than a simple multi-ethnic mix, it was a world of often overlapping and indeterminate class and status affiliations. For other writers in the local color tradition, explicating an area's "color" was essentially a process of providing access to lower-class habits and

characteristics to the predominantly white, relatively affluent readers of such fictions. It was, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, often an exercise in simplification for the benefit of those with a “monopoly on power,” an effort to “impose a vision of the social world ... on a whole group, and in particular ... the identity and unity of the group, which creates the reality of the unity and the identity of the group.”⁶ For Chopin, it was a somewhat different, more nuanced matter. As Nina Baym explains about Chopin’s Creole characters, “while they were rural, they still had a European sophistication which might well be beyond that of the average American; where most local color characters were more primitive than the assumed reader, the Creole was in many ways more sophisticated.”⁷ Chopin’s project could not simply be that of imposing the “identity and unity of the group,” as her chosen subjects were inimitably complex: rural yet sophisticated, poor yet cultured.

Nowhere is this intercultural complexity more apparent, perhaps, than in the first short story Chopin ever penned: “A No-Account Creole,” the much-lauded first entry in her debut collection of short fiction, *Bayou Folk*. The piece was perhaps most interesting for readers at the time for its detailed portraits of the “exotic” ways of Louisiana’s Creole population: the descendants of the original French settlers of the region. Eighteen-year-old Euphrase Manton, the main character of the piece, divides her time between the Duplans, a well-to-do Creole family who care for her after her mother dies when she is young, and her father Pierre, a more impoverished Creole who helps mind a dilapidated and nearly abandoned Louisiana plantation. Chopin provides detailed portraits of both breeds of this distinct Louisiana population, describing both the “pretty arts of manner and speech” instilled by Mme. Duplan, “the Lady Bountiful of the parish,” and the “rickety condition of the cabins” of her father’s estate.⁸

But the real thrust of the story lies not in the exposition of the unique outlooks and traditions of its Creole characters but in the subtle conflict of cultures that ensues when Euphrase falls in love with the well-to-do Wallace Offdean. In contrast to the rural Creoles in Chopin’s story, Offdean is a city-dweller—a resident of New Orleans, and an affluent one at that. Though Chopin notes he has only a “beggarly” inheritance of \$25,000, the story opens with Offdean discussing investments with a friend outside a New Orleans gentlemen’s “club-house” (80). Offdean is immediately associated with the Anglo-American well-to-do governing class of New Orleans. Gentlemen’s clubs were not traditional to New Orleans’s original French culture but an inheritance from London high society by way of America’s eastern cultural centers: they were specifically a manifestation of the Anglo-American culture that came to

rule New Orleans after the Louisiana purchase. That Offdean is off to inspect a plantation his firm is reclaiming from its bankrupt Creole owners essentially enacts in miniature the broader attempts of New Orleans's Anglo-American elite to lay claim to and dominate the formerly French-influenced region. The budding love and courtship that ensues between Euphrase and Offdean as she shows him around the plantation is not simply a matter of love across lines of economic stratification; it is, more pertinently, a meeting of cultures in a highly asymmetrical relationship.

That Chopin would choose the theatre as one of the primary means to both highlight and mediate this clash of cultures is not at all surprising. References to the theatre are brief in "A No Account Creole" but they are pivotal nonetheless. Having fallen in love with Euphrase during his sojourn in the countryside, Offdean resolves to take her to the theatre upon her very first visit to New Orleans. "When Offdean learned that Euphrase was coming to New Orleans, he was delighted to think he would have an opportunity to make some return for the hospitality which he had received from her father," Chopin writes. "He decided at once that she must see everything: day processions and night parades, balls and tableaux, operas and plays" (92). To understand the significance of this decision—and its placement as one of the first activities the two lovers are to pursue in the city—it is necessary to understand the unique role that theatre played in mediating cultural tensions in nineteenth-century New Orleans.

It is a role explored in detail by Joseph Roach in his seminal study of what he calls the "circum-Atlantic world." Roach posits in *Cities of the Dead* a circular interaction of cultures in the realm of the Atlantic Ocean to replace the more traditional view of a "trans-Atlantic" interchange. "The concept of a circum-Atlantic world (as opposed to a transatlantic one)," he writes, "insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity" (4). It is a view, he claims, that more properly acknowledges the deep anxieties and cultural tensions that animate so much of the history of the region: "While a great deal of the unspeakable violence instrumental to this creation may have been officially forgotten, circum-Atlantic memory retains its consequences, one of which is that the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible" (Roach 4). To speak of the circum-Atlantic, in other words, is to pay heed to the turbulence a cultural exchange that occurred in far more than two directions—a far more dynamic, and often destructive, process of multi-cultural interaction than the concept of the trans-Atlantic will allow. And it is a view that gives priority to New Orleans as one of the locations where

this exchange and the subsequent efforts to control it were most pronounced.

New Orleans, in Roach's view, is "a plural frontier of multiple encounters," remarkable among American cities for its participation "in the formation of the complex identities of the circum-Caribbean rim, even as it negotiated its incremental assimilation into the hypothetical monoculture of Anglo North America" (182, 10). It is a city with a dual past: a major hub of Caribbean culture, with its unique combination French and African roots, and a major transfer site of an encroaching American culture, informed more by Protestant and English traditions than by Catholic and French heritage. Indeed, New Orleans is perhaps the site *par excellence* where the Anglo-American tradition met and sought to control a native Latin-Catholic influence within its own borders. The region, in Roach's estimation, essentially enacted within the American nineteenth century the same kind of turbulent efforts at assimilation and repression regularly seen by scholars of early modern London, where a Protestant regime struggled against a perceived internal and external Catholic threat. The city, according to Roach, represented America's "historic opportunity to accept or reject an alternative to the bloody frontier of conquest and forced assimilation: the paradigm of creolized interculture on the Caribbean model"—a paradigm of multiracial and multicultural interaction that the country ultimately rejected in favor of the "long 'Americanization' of Latin New Orleans" (182). With the advent of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Roach explains, an Anglo-American rulership began the arduous process of asserting legitimacy over a primarily Latin-Catholic population. A new social order had to be established, supplanting the open "interculture" of the French-Caribbean residents with a stern Anglo-American "monoculture" (182).

One of the primary cultural locus points for the enactment of these tensions and the legitimation and transmission of new cultural norms was, as in Elizabethan England, the theatre. More so than what we might call the theatre proper, Roach contends that it was the less regimented performance traditions that best chronicled and galvanized New Orleans's cultural exchange. Citing Mikhail Bakhtin, Roach contends that "the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries" and subsequently focuses most of his attentions on New Orleans's various modes of street theatre and public performance (187). But the focus of Roach's own study needn't prohibit the application of the trends that he considers to the realm of the "theatre proper," or "legitimate" theatre. Indeed, the establishment and development of legitimate theatre in New Orleans throughout the nineteenth century proved to be an area of notable