What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence . . . ?—Toni Morrison

All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight.—Kate Chopin

Upon one of the several literal and figurative “awakenings” in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), Edna Pontellier rouses herself from a “delicious, grotesque, impossible dream to feel again the realities pressing into her soul.”¹ These waking realities—motherhood, marriage, Victorian mores—leave Edna heavy-lidded; in the glare of domestic, religious, and social conventions, she is repeatedly “overcome” (47, 82, 83) and “overtake[n]” (78) by “sleep” and “drowsiness” (82). Her husband attempts to force her “thoroughly awake” by reproaching her with “her habitual neglect of the children” (48), but in the home, as in church (82), she feels pressed into slumber. Although Edna is touted as a woman who “refuses to be caged by married and domestic life and claims for herself moral and erotic freedom,”² her feminine liberation is narcoleptic, a movement in and out of consciousness.

Because the world seems too much with Edna, critics have aligned Chopin’s work with transcontinental “New Woman fiction” preoccupied with the fin de siècle “desire to throw identity away and live beyond culture.”³ Hence Edna’s dozing is seen as an attempt to dispose of “that fictitious self,”⁴ and her ennui as a kind of out-of-culture experience. The result of such an alignment is the critical reinscription of a traditionally Western conceptual duel (and duality) of self against culture, and
the idealization of the self-sufficient individual. Sandra Gilbert, for instance, implicitly endorses the myth of autonomy by arguing that Chopin institutes a “feminist myth of Aphrodite/Venus as an alternative to the patriarchal myth of Jesus.” Just as Venus springs fully formed from the waves, so Edna appears above but not of culture. Represented as a self-made woman and placed in the tradition of an American Adam/Eve, Edna inherits the legacy of what Quentin Anderson termed the imperial self. This characterization, however, tends to preempt investigation of the cultural and, I wish to argue, specifically colonial production of white female selfhood and sexuality in the novel.

In her critical revision of Anderson, Wai-chee Dimock suggests that the imperial self is not a matter of personal character but rather a function of national culture. And as such, the imperial self is also an imperialist: “‘imperial’ not only in consciousness but in conduct. . . . At once autonomous and impregnable . . . the imperial self is quite literally empire-like, his province akin to national polity.” Within this expansionist discourse, the imperial subject is avaricious, colonizing, annexing. To be the “soul that dares and defies,” Mlle. Reisz in The Awakening points out, “includes much,” for “one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one’s own effort” (115). In other words, the independent self cannot acknowledge receipt of gifts it must appear to own a priori; individuality must be a sufficiency unto itself even as it is acquisitive. It is in this context that I wish to interrogate the cultural and racial boundaries of Edna’s “solitary soul,” for as the “regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (145), her sovereignty has gone unimpeached.

Although Edna appears to be the epitome of discrete selfhood—insisting that her sexual “awakening” is the result of “no external” source (79), that she is “self-contained” and feels as though she walks “unguided” (61)—she declares in the same breath that neither does her restlessness derive from any source “within” (79). Rather, she provocatively suggests that she “had placed herself in alien hands for direction” (79). It is this alien touch, a foreign presence that again and again “overcomes” Edna, which goes unnoticed in critical projects that focus only on The Awakening’s movements “beyond culture.” It did not go unnoticed, however, by Chopin’s contemporaries, who commented frequently on her representation of “these semi-aliens,” the diverse residents of Louisiana, remarking that her characters are an “exotic, not-quite-American species.” For Chopin and her readers, there were more compelling images than
Aphrodite—no less mythic and much closer to home—in the historical racial types with which she was quite familiar. In other words, Aphrodite was in Chopin’s own backyard, for those of the “warmer” races had been long considered “well-vers’d in Venus’ school.”

Edna locates in racial and ethnic Others a territory necessary for a liberating alterity: in their difference, she finds herself. The white Catholic Creole society is the most apparent but not the only influence upon Edna (a Protestant Kentuckian). Although Edna admits that she is initially attracted to the “excessive physical charm of the Creole” (57) and to the caresses of Mme. Ratignolle in particular, Creole women in *The Awakening* are also described as emphatically chaste. Edna calls Mme. Ratignolle a “faultless Madonna” (54), a “sensuous Madonna” (55), whose “lofty chastity” is in “Creole women . . . inborn and unmistakable” (53). Instead, Edna first discovers the erotic frontiers of the self by exploiting the less visible constructions of sexual difference associated with the blacks, quadroons, and Acadians in the novel.

By returning these repressed Others to considerations of Chopin’s possessive individualism, one can better understand Edna’s fitful naps. Alternately awake and asleep—sovereign (“unguided” [61]) and subjugated (“overcome” [47])—Chopin’s heroine enacts the paradox of the imperial self who appears to rule while being herself ruled. The unbearable contradiction of being both free agent and yet acted upon is characteristic of the colonizer’s position. And as the myth of self-authorization must involve the erasure of its own authorizing principle, so must Edna repress that which is both the basis for and a threat to her autonomy. As Albert Memmi argues, the colonizer, unable to accept his or her sovereignty as contingent, must eventually seek to “dismiss [the colonized] from his mind, to imagine the colony without the colonized.” In this sense, Edna’s sleep is both passive (in its submission to alien influence) and aggressive (in its effective silencing of any conflict within the self). Her paroxysmal sleep can be seen as an unwitting contribution to what George Washington Cable refers to as the “silent South,” part of the collective amnesia regarding the abuses and uses of the color line in the postwar South.

**The Erasure of Race**

In one sense “alien hands,” anatomized and anonymous, simply render domestic services; nameless, speechless, shadowy women manumit
Edna from “responsibility” (79), and, as critics have noted, to that extent her sexual awakening is a white middle-class luxury. But the relation between sex and labor is not simply a matter of economic privilege in *The Awakening*, for Edna’s class bias is not her “chief obstacle to freedom of expression.” Critics have argued that the hierarchical class relations in the novel limit Chopin’s feminist project because they interrupt the circuit of female sympathy for those less privileged; however, it is actually Edna’s generalized identification with—rather than her alienation from—the marginalized which both affirms her class position and allows her to critique the sexual constraints associated with it. Equating maternity and slavery, for instance, Edna remarks that her children are her “soul’s slavery” (175). Karen Sánchez-Eppler, in her analysis of early-and mid-nineteenth-century feminist abolitionist works, critiques the appropriation of the imagery of slavery for the purposes of feminine liberation, arguing that the strategic likening of white women to black female slaves promoted “the recognition that personhood can be annihilated and a person can be owned, absorbed, and un-named. The irony inherent in such comparisons is that the enlightening and empowering motions of identification that connect feminism and abolitionism come inextricably bound to a process of absorption not unlike the one they expose.” Not only does identification elide the particularity of white and black women’s exploitations, it actually enables a more subtle form of distancing. By emphasizing and identifying with the subjugation and silencing of the slave, the white woman “asserts her right to speak and act, thus differentiating herself from her brethren in bonds. The bound and silent figure of the slave metaphorically represents the woman’s oppression and so grants the white woman access to political discourse denied the slave.”

By initiating her escape from gender convention through the rhetoric of racial oppression, Edna reinforces rather than razes class and race differences. In fact, class distinctions reflect the structuring of racial difference which enables Edna’s sexual expression. There is no suggestion that she sympathizes with the vague dissatisfaction of the nannies on Grand Isle, who appear “disagreeable and resigned” to their caretaking duties (63). Edna neglects not so much her children, as Mr. Pontellier insists, but the quadroon nursemaid who tends them. When Mr. Pontellier rhetorically asks “if it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth was it?” (48), neither Edna nor her husband seem to recognize the answer revealed by their daily practice: the quadroon’s. Not just of no account, but not accounted for, the quadroon cares for the toddlers morn-
ing to night. It is she who accompanies the children to Iberville when Edna begins her affair with Arobin, and she who takes them for the day when Edna escapes with Robert to Chênière Caminada. Edna's agency is measured against—indeed is contingent upon—the necessarily mute quadroon.

Actually, despite her presence the quadroon is often neither heard nor seen. As Edna awakens, race is rendered narratively invisible. Much of her vacationing on Grand Isle involves the “vacating” of the quadroon, who steps into the narrative ellipses created by Edna's consuming presence. For example, in a rather mundane passage in which the quadroon initially appears, she is inventoried along with the other items of local color as Edna surveys the scene outside her New Orleans house: “The boys were dragging along the banquette a small ‘express wagon,’ which they had filled with blocks and sticks. The quadroon was following them with little quick steps, having assumed a fictitious animation and alacrity for the occasion. A fruit vendor was crying his wares in the street” (104). Such impressionistic note-taking generates the accumulative description often associated with local color literature. The details are listed rather than ranked, and this leveling of the field of signification (with the concomitant implication of the “objective” reporter) has led critics to call Chopin a “quasi-anthropological” writer with an “almost scientific detachment.” Mary Louise Pratt notes that such anthropological portraiture (associated also with travelogue and conquest literatures) “textually produces the Other without an explicit anchoring either in an observing self or in a particular encounter in which contact with the Other takes place”; that is, because the perceiving subject is absent (although the authorial and authoritative voice remains), one never witnesses the interaction of “native” and “non-native.” Hence, the “neutral” reporting masks the often aggressive physical or textual effacing of the Other.

Similarly, in Edna’s account the relationship between the quadroon and herself is made unavailable because it is encoded within established subject positions inherent in the genre. In fact, one begins to understand how the two might function in relation to each other only when Edna recounts her lack of enthusiasm for the world around her, this time ticking off everything but the quadroon: “She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vendor, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (104). When Edna enters the picture, the nanny is, as it were, excused. As an item on a list, the quadroon was
never in relief, but her elision in the passage is significant in relation to Edna’s entrance and heightened self-consciousness. It is the nanny who first betrays a theatrical estrangement from the world in which she appears; her behavior is “fictitious,” she is in but not of the picturesque scene. The quadroon’s playacting suggests the kind of epistemological disjunction that provokes Edna’s own sense of alienation. In becoming “self-absorbed” (104), Edna absorbs as well the split sensibility of the quadroon. When the narrator comments that Edna was “becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (108, emphasis mine), the echo suggests that she has claimed the quadroon’s fictive identity even as she rejects the association. Although the quadroon reinspires her childhood sense of the divided self, the “dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (57), Edna has no recollection of the quadroon at all as she awakens to her new alien-ated self.22

It is no accident that the quadroon is anonymous; she is in effect absent- or, perhaps more accurately, displaced by Edna. The “sweet, half-darkness” (102)23 that Edna seeks is made possible by the partially visible life of the quadroon, a life which may be entered only by remaining unexposed and little understood. After all, Edna does not really want to know the experience of the people of color she sees dimly on the street; her new identity emerges only in the twilight of junctures, in the illicit coupling of her life to theirs. Assuming the “far-away meditative air” (44) which earlier in the novel characterizes her nanny, Edna takes on and takes over the quadroon’s distance from the bourgeois life Edna is eager to leave behind. As a “little negro girl” sweeps with “long absent-minded strokes” (79), as “an old mulâtresse” sleeps “her idle hours away” (163), so Edna is frequently lost in an “inward maze of contemplation or thought” (46) and feels pulled to “lose [her soul] in mazes of inward contemplation” (57). And in direct proportion to her “awakening,” she becomes absent-minded—daydreaming in company (60), acting “idly, aimlessly,” (61) humming “vacantly” (129).

Thus it is not only that the quadroon’s (and the little black girl’s and the mulâtresse’s) physical labor is taken for granted, but that Edna employs as well their tropological potential, their associations with the marginal and, ultimately, with the erotic. In his useful analysis of the figure of the black servant in the visual arts, Sander L. Gilman points out that one of the image’s “central functions in . . . the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to sexualize the society in which he or she is found.”24 From Hogarth’s A Harlot’s Progress (1731) to Manet’s Olympia (1863),
black servants, signifying sexuality though not necessarily overtly sexual themselves, eroticize white women. As Gilman argues in his discussion of Manet's *Nana* (1877), the "sexualized female [functions] as the visual analogue of the black" even where no blacks are present, for "the black servant is hidden in *Nana*—within Nana. Even Nana’s seeming beauty is but a sign of the black hidden within."^^ In Chopin's fiction the quadroon similarly appears divested of subjectivity and, it would seem, of sexuality. And yet like Nana's, Edna's sexuality is brought into relief by the quadroon's literary inheritance of sexual conventions. As Hortense Spillers puts it, the "mulatto in the text of fiction" silently speaks of unsanctioned sex, allowing the "dominant culture to say without parting its lips that 'we have willed to sin.'"^^ The relationship between Edna's willingness to "sin" and the quadroon's is further reinforced by the narrative's own "vocabulary of signs,"^^ signs which provocatively yoke Edna's and the quadroon's mutual distraction, and, thereby, their potential social and sexual deviance.^^

**Oppression by the Oppressed**

The racial midwifery of Edna's sexual awakening is not simply repressed; it is refigured. To the children, the silent and static quadroon is simply a "huge encumbrance, only good to button up waists and panties and to brush and part hair" (51); to Edna, the quadroon and the other servants are equally obtrusive. Indeed, such women are not only in the way; they function as stable counters to Edna's flights. When Edna throws her wedding ring to the floor in a pique of frustration, it is not her husband but the maid who returns it to her, reaffirming the established life that Edna has tried to toss aside (100). Servants and nannies, Chopin implies, are the keepers rather than the victims of traditional Southern society; hence Edna can complain, as she moves out of her husband's house, that there are "too many servants" whom she is "tired bothering with" (134). However, Edna does not live entirely on her own, for her independence is made both possible and appealing because "Old Celestine, who works occasionally for me, says she will come stay with me and do my work. I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence" (134). Her comments suggest that people of another color and class are, paradoxically, both a hindrance to and yet necessary for her liberation. Celestine is one of the bare essentials in life, but too many like her become a basic part of Edna's oppression.

Color itself, not as it is discriminated against but as it functions to
discriminate, becomes oppressive to Edna. The “black,” the “mulatto,” the “quadroon,” and the “Griffe” are subtle indices to social status in the white community. Named according to the ratio of “Negro blood” in their veins, these representative figures function not as indictments of an arbitrary colorline, but as reminders and reinforcements of cultural tiering. At one of many parties that Edna and her husband are obliged to attend, she notes that a “light-colored mulatto boy, in dress coat and bearing a diminutive silver tray for the reception of cards,” admits the guests, while a “maid, in white fluted cap, offered the callers liqueur, coffee, or chocolate” (100). The mulatto boy is one of the prestigious minutiae—like the silver tray, the liqueur, the white cap—that constitute the suffocating drawing-room atmosphere Edna loathes; he is visible as a racial marker (not a victim) of social hierarchies. The oppressed become the oppressors as black subordination becomes an element of white victimage.

The reversal has at least two effects, both of which are most evident in an important but overlooked scene between Victor Lebrun and a nameless “black woman” with whom he has a dispute over opening the door for Edna. The incident, an example of the “offensive” behavior of blacks (owing to what Victor calls “imperfect training”), codes sexual initiation as concern over a servant’s duty. An interesting gloss on Edna’s relationship with the quadroon, the episode suggests the ways in which blacks obliquely structure white sexual experience. Furthermore, because potential debates about civil rights are, in effect, reinscribed as sexual rites, the episode illustrates the process by which race and class conflicts are deflected:

Before she saw them Edna could hear them in altercation, the woman—plainly an anomaly—claiming the right to be allowed to perform her duties, one of which was to answer the bell. Victor was surprised and delighted to see Mrs. Pontellier. . . . He instructed the black woman to go at once and inform Madame Lebrun that Mrs. Pontellier desired to see her. The woman grumbled a refusal to do part of her duty when she had not been permitted to do it all, and started back to her interrupted task of weeding the garden. Whereupon Victor administered a rebuke in the form of a volley of abuse, which, owing to its rapidity and incoherence, was all but incomprehensible to Edna. . . . [Victor] at once explained that the black woman’s offensive conduct was all due to imperfect training, as he was not there to take her in hand. (110–11)
The black woman's resistance is not simply a sign of domestic unrest but a mark of Victor's adolescent incompetence. The argument is potentially threatening to traditional roles, but the debate becomes unrecognizable—"incomprehensible" and "incoherent"—and thus is represented as little more than an entertaining aside: the heteroglossic exchange does not produce social parity, the babble does not level rank. Despite Victor's reference to the woman's need for training, it is her superior knowledge of "natural" hierarchies which eventually reinforces the domestic order as well as an established sexual economy. Although she eventually does go in search of his mother as he asked, she has underlined his social/physical immaturity, thus emasculating him before Edna.

Described as having a childish crush on Edna, Victor's manhood is put in question by the insubordination of one supposedly "under" him. In this curious triangulation of desire, the boy cannot become a man except by overcoming the mother. The black woman acts as a mammy to the boy, but as the presence of his biological mother upstairs suggests, hers is a symbolic maternity. She also, more provocatively, doubles as the "woman before" Edna (she literally precedes her at the door), as a test case of his masculine authority. The black woman is a sexual stumbling block he must overcome before he is man enough for a white woman; in that sense, Victor's seemingly innocuous attempt at verbal domination evokes the history of rape as boyhood initiation. The black woman is used as so many before her, as the measure of a white boy's political power and sexual prowess. She is not allowed direct speech—we know her words, like those of all the women of color in the novel, only as they are mediated through indirect narration—but she is both social arbiter and sexual measure.

"Strange, New Voices"

This kind of sexual work in the novel is rendered either by domestics, like the quadroon and the "black woman," or by various "servants-at-large." Women of another color or class tend to serve as sexual coaches, their homes as sexual "safehouses." Often older than their pupil—and thus putatively removed from sexual competition—they authorize white sexuality and self-knowledge. In Chopin's fiction, the experienced woman is always of a lower racial or ethnic status than her novitiate: if the heroine is white Creole, her mentor may be Acadian; if she is Acadian, her guide may be "black." The "black as the night" (195) Manna-Loulou in "La Belle
Zoraïde” (1894), for instance, enlightens her mistress about sex beyond the pale. In “Athénaïse” (1896) the quadroon landlord, Sylvie, instructs the Acadian heroine in the ways of sex and motherhood.  

Thus it is not altogether unusual that Edna in *The Awakening* names Mme. Antoine, her hostess on *Chênière Caminada*, as the source of an after-dinner tale of adultery (124). A counter to Dr. Mandelet's didactic tale of a woman's errant love “seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source” (123), Edna’s version of illegitimate sex is ascribed to an author other than herself. Although the story is Edna’s and not the Acadian’s, she betrays the ethnic precedent of her own narratives.

Arguably, Manna-Loulou's, Sylvie's, and Mme. Antoine's stories are examples of Chopin “giving voice” to these women, granting them, with their supposedly more “worldly” knowledge, conditional authority over white women. Yet Mme. Antoine speaks “no English” (83). And earlier when Edna is napping in the woman's home, she perceives only Mme. Antoine's son’s “slow, Acadian drawl” (which she says she does not understand) and Robert's French (which she understands only “imperfectly”) among “the other drowsy, muffled sounds” (84). Robert in a sense assumes Mme. Antoine's voice, translating and brokering Edna's exchanges with her. Edna uses her cultural illiteracy to her advantage, however, for Robert's translations (very much like Victor's) stand between her and the natives or servants, performing an enabling interference. In effect, the translation of Mme. Antoine's patois offers Edna the immediacy of the spoken word without the responsibilities and required give-and-take of conversation. Patricia Yaeger points out that “Robert's knowledge of several languages” gives him “the power to control what others hear and speak.” Nevertheless, his “attentions, his services, his affection” are, as Cynthia Wolff suggests, “extensions of [Edna's] own will or desire.” In this case, Robert's linguistic negotiations both dramatize and sustain Edna's own ambivalent role with the locals by providing, as George Steiner describes it, the “dialectic of impenetrability and ingress, of intractable alienness and felt 'at-homeness’” which remains “unsolved, but expressive” in translation. Erotic in their elusiveness, the strangeness of the languages “lull[s] her senses” (84). The sensual voices are muted, then, but usefully so because the “drowsy” (84), secondhand talk allows her to be both “in” and yet not implicated in a culture which she finds appealing only to a point.

Most important, these narratives precede and are therefore not the
result of her romantic longings, as Edna herself seems to suggest when she compares being moved by beautiful music and memories of Robert to an earlier time when she “had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her” (116). She is, admittedly, obsessed with “the spiritual vision [of] the presence of the beloved one” (145), but she misses Robert when he leaves for Mexico because she links him with the “brightness, the color” (95, emphasis mine) he brings to her life. His attractiveness derives from his status not as a lover but as a guide to this “local color.” Critical focus on Edna’s male partners rather than the indistinct voices on the islands masks the primacy of the latter in her sexual awakening, for the men function more to mediate than to initiate Edna’s “latent sensuality” (163).

The Colonization of Race

Within the codified hierarchies of race and class in post-Reconstruction Louisiana, Acadians were considered “lesser” whites. Their lower class status and rural lifestyle set them apart economically, ethnically, and linguistically from Creole society; in Chopin’s fiction, they are often represented as both primitive and passionate. Hence Edna’s dozing in Mme. Antoine’s house on Chênière Caminada reflects, paradoxically, her desire to be one of the “folk” and yet to remain stretched out “in the very center of the high, white bed” (84), the “snow-white” (83) bed. The scene dramatizes Edna’s sense, articulated later when she moves from her husband’s house, of having “descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual” (151)—but what to make of a white “lady” (83) on a whiter bed?

White bourgeois entitlement, reiterated by the white on white iconography, is clearly one tradition Edna does not reject. It is in another’s home and in another’s bed—the site of both birth and sexuality—that Edna feels “invited . . . to repose” (83). Much later, Edna recalls that she “liked then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many a sunny, sleepy corner, fashioned to dream in. And she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested” (109). The strange and unfamiliar corners Edna finds, however, are sometimes occupied—a point easily forgotten, for women such as Mme. Antoine are apparently “all eagerness to make Edna feel at home” and (ironically, given who is intruding upon whom) “unmolested” (83). In similar fashion, when Edna shows up unannounced at Victor’s house “for no purpose but to rest”
(173), she nevertheless expects to have dinner, and, if they have it, fish in particular. Victor volunteers his own room, although she assures him that “any corner will do” (174).

Mme. Antoine’s “strange, quaint bed” (84) is just right for Edna in this erotic fairy tale, and there are no returning bears angry with Goldilock’s trespassing. Nevertheless, she is not content with her status as guest; she would rather her host disappear altogether. Upon rising from her own nap, she narrates her own apocalyptic fantasy in which she condemns most everyone else to an eternal sleep: “How many years have I slept? . . . 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?” (85). Edna is not Rip Van Winkle, however, but Snow White, dwarfing those around her in order to live out her fantasy of solitude in the lap of “native hospitality” (83). Like Lyndall in Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of An African Farm* (1882), who tells her lover “I will not go down country ... I will not go to Europe. You must take me to the Transvaal. That is out of the world,” Edna perceives *Chênière Caminada* as otherworldly—both primitive and timeless: “How still it was, with only the voice of the sea whispering through the reeds that grew in the salt-water pools! . . . It must always have been God’s day on that low, drowsy island, Edna thought” (83). Rendered static, the indigenous land provides at once a stable and ancient site for self-discovery, although Edna must imaginatively purge her utopian world in order to occupy it. Her “narrative of personal progress,” as Wai-chee Dimock might term it, allows her to “impose a ‘manifest’ harmony on what might otherwise appear naked conflict.” This progress toward independence both justifies Edna’s presence on the “colony” and simultaneously naturalizes any conflict, for she is as welcome as “the sunlight” (83) in Mme. Antoine’s cot.

Nevertheless, her bid for the right of self-possession subtly entails native dispossession. The burden her patronage places on others is the less obvious because those obliged are so very compliant. The “fat” Mme. Antoine—who, after all, had only unproductively “squatted” and “waddled” (87) during her years on *Chênière Caminada*—is quite pleased, we are told, to have ventured out during Edna’s nap. Robert speculates that she has gone to Vespers and to visit friends (86); hence, Edna’s arrival and Mme. Antoine’s leaving are presented as acts of mutual liberation. Yet it is noteworthy that Mme. Antoine makes such an effort not for her own sake but because she “thought it best not to awake” Edna (86).
Edna does finally find a place of her own, but even that bears the shadow of the Other. As Spillers argues, in the nineteenth century passion lay beyond the “precincts of the father’s house,” usually in the slave cabins with the mulatto/a. Notably it is only after Edna’s move from her husband’s estate and his “precincts” (140) to the “pigeon-house” around the corner that she begins her affair with Arobin. The pigeon-house resembles the Grand Isle cottages where Edna experiences the first stirrings of rebellion and which Gilbert suggests represent a “female colony.” But perhaps more important than the homosocial appeal is a past of racial bondage, for the cottages are ex-slave quarters. The Pontellier’s place of summer retreat was a sugar plantation prior to 1866—“the main building” of which is still “called ‘the house’” (44). As Frederick Stielow points out in his study of the Louisiana leisure class, Grand Isle “included a selection of buildings dramatically altered from their previous duties. . . . Interestingly, the most prized accommodations were thirty-eight refurbished slave cabins, set in double rows.” Lafcadio Hearn, describing a visit to Grand Isle after the war, also notes this peculiar conversion: “It makes a curious impression on me: the old plantation cabins, standing in rows like village streets, and neatly remodelled for more cultivated inhabitants.” A new twist on the old plantation as imaginative refuge, Edna leaves the patriarchal house but most certainly not the grounds. The pigeon-house in New Orleans, while not homologous with the Grand Isle cabins, nevertheless recreates the sexual cartography of the plantation: Edna leaves the Big House in town and is subsequently more free to entertain both Robert and Arobin.

The erotics of race not only govern the place but afford the principal basis of Edna’s awakening. Although Edna finds the Ratignolles “very French, very foreign” (105), she also decides that they lead a rather “colorless existence” (107). In contrast to Mme. Ratignolle’s “embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (51), Edna’s frank arousal leaves her “unwomanly” (165) in her lack of “repression in . . . glance or gesture” (123); at best, she admits, she is a “devilishly wicked specimen of the sex” (138). Her “unwomanly” behavior does not unsex her—quite the opposite, it allies her with the putatively feral and libidinous races. The cult of true womanhood (whose tenets of purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity, Mme. Ratignolle as a “mother-woman” to some degree represents) sets race against gender; females of the physical and promiscuous race by definition fall outside the bounds of womanhood—as does Edna. Her sexual awakening is couched in the same terms as
those conventionally used to define the woman of color in the 1890s. She becomes “some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun” (123); her lover “appeal[s] to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (133). Even her dining habits assume a bestial air as she tears at her bread with “her strong, white teeth” (85). Chopin writes of a similar animal in “Emancipation: A Life Fable” (1869), often referred to as a precursor to *The Awakening*. Basking in the sun, a beast with “strong limbs,” “handsome flanks,” and “sleek sides” (177) escapes its caged and well-fed life. Written only four years after the Civil War, the vignette employs antislavery discourse—rejection of the cage’s dubious protection—in order to critique the sheltered confines of the bourgeois marriage. Joining woman and beast, Chopin finds deliverance from Victorian convention in felinity. Edna resembles the quadroon Palmyre in Cable’s *The Grandissimes* (1880), a “barbaric beauty” whose “grace and pride was inspiring but—what shall we say?—feline? It was femininity without humanity—something that made her with all her superbness, a creature that one would want to find chained.” Awakening to this new and more colorful identity, even Edna’s skin is illumined with “myriad living tints” (145), in contrast to the alabaster cast of the more conventional Mme Ratignolle. The tan which her husband complains at the outset of the novel burns Edna almost “beyond recognition” (44) is not only a rebuttal of the “fair lady” image but a foreshadowing of her awakening into a “native” sexuality.

As Calvin Hernton notes, despite the fact that the “Negro woman is denied virtually all the ‘privileges and graces’ of American culture . . . according to the myth of Negro sexhood, it is the black woman who is endowed with an irresistible sexual attraction and enjoys the sex act more than any other creature on earth.” White women’s desire for sexual expression, therefore, may lead to a sympathetic admiration nevertheless predicated upon racialist notions of sexuality: as Manna-Loulou tells her mistress in “La Belle Zoraïde,” “you know how the negroes are. . . . There is no mistress, no master, no king nor priest who can hinder them from loving when they will” (198). The famed uprising of *The Awakening’s* Edna, then, cannot be seen as an uncharted move into what Freud tellingly called the “dark continent” of female sexuality. If hers is a radical departure from the repertoire of white women’s sexual norms, it is nevertheless quite in keeping with scripted conventions of racial behavior. Given these conventions, some white women may “not only envy Negro females,” as Hernton suggests, “but actually want to be black.”

Edna’s racial surrogacy is at once less explicit and more inclusive,
for it is not only black women who become representative of alternative sexual experience. She is intrigued, for instance, by Mariequita, a "vulgar" Spanish girl with "pretty black eyes" and "ugly brown toes" (81) who is sexually associated with both Victor and Robert (98). As alter egos, the two women are mutually fascinated and mildly competitive with each other. In fact, Edna moves from her usual indifference to momentary jealousy when she imagines Robert and the "transcendentally seductive vision of a Mexican girl" (161). Edna appropriates this vision, however, becoming by the novel's end the transcendentally seductive object of Mariequita's jealousy (173).

This conversion entails the translation of racial or ethnic difference into the idiom of contested selfhood. Seeing "with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment" (88), Edna turns inside out what W. E. B. Du Bois referred to in 1903 as "double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." Du Bois's "second-sight" (364), imposed by the "other [white] world," forces color upon him—he must see himself as others do; Edna's "different eyes," on the other hand, let her see herself as others do not. Her borrowed vision is a lens turned upon the world and herself, but unlike Du Bois she does not look at herself looking. The double vision for both, however, "yields no true self-consciousness" (Du Bois, 364); Edna can only vaguely "realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way different from the other self" (Chopin, 88). Her inner confusion becomes an "indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow... It was strange and unfamiliar" (49). She assumes this alien presence is simply a "mood" (49), although as something foreign within, her ambivalence reproduces the political stance and emotional tenor of Southerners who first imported and then felt invaded by blacks. Internal colonization—usually a reference to the North American colonization of Native and African Americans—is in Edna's case actually the internalization of the colony. In other words, Edna interiorizes the intimate distance marking most Southern interracial relations, circumscribing within the arena of selfhood the tension of racial and ethnic influence.

White Beaches

The critical emphasis on and frequent celebration of Edna's quest for "solitude" mask these inner struggles as existential angst and thus rep-
licate the character's own fictions of social identity. Yet possessive individualism, with its myth of the inalienable self, is precisely what makes it so difficult to see the investment in race upon which the white female subject capitalizes. Behind her claims to self-sufficiency and "self-containment" (61), Edna's authority derives from and is frequently threatened by that which comes "upon her like an obsession . . . independent of volition." This superfluity, the "extraneous" (145), shadows her life as well as her death.

There is no racial or ethnic presence in the final scene on the beach. And yet Edna's image of the "white beach" where there "is no living thing in sight" (175) reveals anxiety about the influence of the Other. "Certain absences are so stressed," argues Toni Morrison, "so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves, arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them." The population textually held at bay in the last scene is implied by the emphasis on Edna's "white body" and "white feet" on the "white beach" (175–76). (Edna's earlier trial swim shares this preoccupation: as waves like "white serpents" play at her feet, she breathes the scent of "white blossoms" and the "white light" of the moon dispels the "weight of darkness" [73] around her.) This fetishization of whiteness perhaps suggests not only a defensive insistence on racial privilege (such as Mme. Antoine's "high, white bed") but an attempt to blanche her self of those "myriad tints" (145). Her final thoughts of childhood during the fatal swim might suggest this kind of denial, for they predate her arrival on the islands and therefore also her sexual awakening. More likely, though, is the possibility that the overdetermination of color reflects an attempt to resolve the heightening tension between Edna's sexual indebtedness to racial/ethnic difference and her fundamental commitment to the status of whiteness. An extension of her earlier fantasies of solitude, this resolution involves not the imagined death (85), but the total absorption of the "population held away."

Given the sexual logic of the novel, this incorporation of the ethnic and racial Other is to a certain degree predictable. Edna moves back and forth between racial models of womanhood (alternately "tanned" or "tinted" to unequivocally "white"), but liberation is represented, finally, only in terms of a colonizing whiteness. "White" moves from an adjective to an assertion of race in a process of assimilation perhaps most vivid in a later story, "The Storm" (1898). The Spanish Calixta, whose hair is "kinked worse than a mulatto's," (179) becomes suffused with whiteness during
lovenaking: with her “white neck,” “white throat,” and “whiter breasts,” she is as “white as the couch she lay upon. Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily. . . . The generous abundance of her passion . . . was like a white flame” (283-84). It is not sex per se but the climax of whiteness which temporarily frees Calixta—as it does Edna. Orgasm is the context for Calixta’s freedom, but the realization of her sexual “birthright” (284) is incumbent upon her momentary escalation from a “dark” woman to “white” woman. Albescence, then, represents an attempted resolution of the “antithetical sexual natures of white women and dark women,” a move which in The Awakening similarly enables Edna to be “new-born” (175). Although of course transcendent whiteness leads not to petit mort but to death for Edna, debatably both sex and suicide are modes of liberatory release.

Edna may be transformed by the white subsumption of the Other, but women like Mariequita or the quadroon or the “black woman” do not and cannot change in the novel. Precisely because Edna’s break with gender constraints is dependent upon representations of racial and ethnic difference, those differences—in order to be available in the first place—must remain intact. As sexual “catalyst[s],” the serviceable equations of race and sex make possible a Victorian erotics, but they are also subtly tied to the Jim Crow legalisms predicated on similar constructions of difference—an irony which nevertheless might explain the subtle necessities and sufficiencies of race for whites in American culture.

My point, then, is not that Edna fails to pierce the veil of stereotypes—a critique which irresistibly dichotomizes ontological categories as well as power structures: real/false, self/other, colonizer/colonized—but rather that racial figuration is intimately involved in the warranty and production of her “self.” To the extent such troping is in a sense “productive” as well as repressive, race is constitutive of Edna’s new identity. In this light, the racial politics of womanhood in Chopin’s novel must complicate, if not compromise, our celebration of a nineteenth-century white woman’s sexual liberation.

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Notes

I am especially grateful to Johnnella Butler, Amy Kaplan, Mark Patterson, Ross Posnock, and Hortense J. Spillers for their thoughtful responses to earlier versions of this essay.
1 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, in *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, ed. Sandra Gilbert (New York: Penguin, 1984), 78. Subsequent citations from this work and Chopin’s other short fiction refer to this edition and are parenthetically noted in the essay.

2 Quoted from the backjacket of the cited edition.


4 *The Awakening*, 108.


9 From a Houghton Mifflin advertisement for Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* in *Publisher’s Weekly* (17 March 1894), 450; quoted in Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 223. Chopin’s Northern audience included Creoles as well as Acadians and blacks in this category. Southern reviewers, while sensitive to the social and cultural distinctions among ethnic groups, did not consider these populations to be “alien” in this same sense.

10 From the review, “Living Tales from Acadian Life,” *New York Times* (1 April 1894), 23; quoted in Toth, 226.


13 Cable explains the implications of the “silent South” in “The Freedman’s Case in Equity”: “It means to recommit [racial inequity] to the silence and concealment of the covered burrow. Beyond that incubative retirement, no suppressed moral question can be pushed” (*The Silent South Together with the Freedman’s Case in Equity and the Convict Lease System* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889], 3). Cynthia Griffin Wolff similarly suggests that Edna uses sleep and daydreaming as a strategy of repression, arguing that Edna’s internalization of the contradicting images of womanhood (the mother-woman and the vixen) is in part what leads her “to produce an ‘identity’ which is predicated on the process of concealment” (“Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, ed. Nancy A. Walker [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993], 235). Wolff’s psychoanalytic perspective leads her to the conclusion that this contradiction arises
from the differences between Edna's sisters, Margaret and Janet, rather than from the sexual contradictions established between white women and women of color that Edna also internalizes.


17 Sánchez-Eppler, 31.

18 There are many other instances of black labor: Mme. Lebrun has a “little black girl” sit on the floor and work the “treadle of the [sewing] machine” so she need not imperil her “health” (66); “two black women” spend their afternoon making ice cream for a whites-only party (70); Mme. Ratignolle points out to Edna that laundry is “really [the] business” (105) of her black maid, 'Cité. While one may interpret as ironic comment on Creole gentility Mme. Lebrun’s insistence on protecting her “health,” there is no suggestion elsewhere that white women should assume their servants’ labor.

19 “Race” of course is a slippery expression and, though I invoke it throughout the essay without quotations, it is used with the assumption that its legitimacy lies not in science or biology but in its application as a trope of difference. In the 1890s, race was frequently and loosely applied not only to people of color or to people of a certain class but to people of various religious identifications (especially Catholic) as well. For discussions of the history and debates surrounding this term, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981); Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982); and Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from “The Tempest” to “Tarzan”* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).

20 Gilbert, 16, 17.


22 Wai-chee Dimock, in “Rightful Subjectivity” (*Yale Journal of Criticism* 4 [1990]: 25–51), argues that the “quadroon’s ‘off-centeredness’ complements the centered subjectivity that is Edna’s”; hence the subjectivity of both the quadroon and Edna’s husband, Dimock suggests, are similarly “adduced and dismissed” (42). My point is that the quadroon is not simply a foil but fundamental to Edna’s sense of self.
Gilbert quotes a similarly provocative line from Chopin’s travel journal which refers to the “sweet, half-seen pagan life” (33), using it to support her argument that Chopin drew on Greek imagery. Yet the South itself was commonly orientalized in the period’s fiction. See Hortense Spillers, “Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse: or Mrs. Stowe and Mr. Reed,” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 25–61.

Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward An Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, 228.


The quadroon in *The Awakening* also brings to mind the infamous quadroon balls of New Orleans, still held with some regularity in the 1890s. The *plaçages* or liaisons (often more like common-law marriages) between wealthy white men and these much-courted quadroons and octoroons might have seemed appealing to a white woman questioning traditional marital and sexual arrangements. For a discussion of the *plaçage*, see John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860–1880* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973); see also George Washington Cable, *Madame Delphine* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 5–6, for his reverence for these women whom he saw, paradoxically, as “chaste sirens.”

In Chopin’s fiction, explicit allusions to class relations and the need to preserve social hierarchies are often made by “mulattoes.” In *The Awakening*, for instance, the mulatta Madame Pouponne wishes to “discuss class distinctions” (110) with Edna; in *Athénaïse*, the quadroon, Sylvie, believes “firmly in maintaining the color line, and would not suffer a white person, even a child, to call her ‘Madame Sylvie,’—a title which she exacted religiously, however, from those of her own race” (245). In New Orleans in the 1880s and 1890s, intraracial discrimination was common, but because in Chopin’s fiction blacks—and almost never whites—conspicuously support the class hierarchies based on color, they deflect attention from white discrimination. Like the nannies and servants in *The Awakening*, Sylvie and Madame Pouponne become representatives of status quo class relations even though Sylvie, for instance, is associated with sexual experimentation.

After having run from her husband’s sexual attentions, Athénaïse is revealed to herself after a chat about life’s facts with the “very wise” (257) quadroon: “She stayed . . . quite stunned, after her interview with Sylvie. . . . Her whole being was steeped in . . . ecstasy. When she finally arose . . . and looked at herself in the mirror, a face met hers which she seemed to see for the first time, so transfigured was it with wonder and rapture” (257).
Sylvie is "knowing," perhaps, because she runs a "house" which caters to "discreet gentlemen" who wish an evening "outside the bosom of their families" (247)—men who want, like Athénaïse, to escape domestic confines. Sylvie's place, then, is a kind of border crossing where sexual enlightenment is a "discreet" possibility.


32 Wolff, 239. Although Arobin is Edna's lover, he similarly assumes an attitude of "subservience" (133) and dons a dust-cap to help Edna clean her pigeon-house (141).


34 In the companion story, "At Chênière Caminada" (1894), for instance, Mme. Antoine is described as kind but with "coarse hands"; her son, Tonie, is a "rough fisherman" with a "bronzed" face and flesh as "hard as a horse's hoof" whose love for a mainland girl fires the "savage instinct of his blood." See also "At the 'Cadian Ball" (1892) and "The Storm: A Sequel to 'The 'Cadian Ball'" (1898). For a historical genealogy of the Acadian presence in the South and an account of the changing attitudes towards Acadians in the nineteenth century, see Carl A. Brasseaux, Acadian to Cajun: The Transformation of a People, 1803-1877 (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1992).

35 Such homes, seen also in Chopin's novel At Fault, are represented as an open invitation to the white women. For a discussion of the nostalgia among white women in particular for this romanticized interracial sisterhood, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988).

36 Dimock, Empire for Liberty, 20.

37 Edna's "most authentic act of self-definition" (30), according to Gilbert, offers a similar example of strategic occupation without conflict. At the coup d'état of her dinner-party, Edna is enthroned in and thus usurps the patriarchal seat at the head of the table. But her husband's seat is already vacant since he is out of town on a business trip; hence she stages the "spectacle" (173) of her self-ordination without the effort of direct confrontation.

38 Spillers, "Tragic Mulatta," 173.

39 Gilbert, 25.


42 For a discussion of the idealization of the plantation as a utopian social and economic model, see Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of
the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890 (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1985), 141–46.

43 For an insightful discussion of the interdependence of race and gender in the cult of true womanhood, see Hazel V. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 20–39. As Carby makes clear, the interdependencies of race and class make gender identification alone an insufficient (at the very least an inconsistent) basis for political resistance.


45 Calvin Hernton, Sex and Racism in America (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 50–51.

46 For an analysis of the relationship between Freudian constructions of (white) female sexuality and race, see Gilman, 256–57.

47 Critics have pointed out the contrast between sexual expectations for white women and women of color, especially black women, in the nineteenth century and in Chopin’s fiction. See Wendy Martin, “Introduction,” New Essays on The Awakening (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 16; and Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, xxv. For works which more extensively examine the role of race in Chopin’s fiction, see Elfenbein, 117–158, and Helen Taylor, Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), 138–203. Elfenbein and Taylor criticize Chopin’s racial stereotyping, while Emily Toth argues that Chopin appropriates racial stereotypes in the service of a broader social critique, in “That Outward Existence Which Conforms: Kate Chopin and Literary Convention” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1975). This essay hopes to move beyond the question of stereotyping in order to examine some of the stranger satisfactions race affords Edna, and the ways in which Edna’s sexuality works in conjunction with—and not despite—troubling constructs of racial difference. For a discussion of the need to reconsider the role of “race” in biographical studies of Chopin, see my review essay, “‘The Rogue in Porcelain’: Feminism, Race, and the Representation of Kate Chopin,” Genre 24 (Winter 1991): 461–67. For a critique of white feminist theory which points up the necessity to factor race into analyses of gender relations, see bell hooks, Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

48 Hernton, 51.

49 Elfenbein suggests that, for Edna, “Mariequita appears stereotypically dark and carefree” (149), but that her reinforcement of Victor’s romanticized image of a “mythic Edna” means that Mariequita remains “untouched by Edna’s awakening” (157). Like other “dark” women in the novel, Mariequita is not elevated by Edna’s “awakening”; in fact, by reinforcing the representation of Edna as a social belle (“who gave the most sumptuous dinners in
America”), she is represented as complicit with the social expectations Edna seeks to evade.

50 See W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” in The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Library of America, 1986), 364; hereafter cited in text. Although I see Edna’s double-vision as both vertiginous and appropriative, Chopin is praised for her representation of a similar mode of “seeing” in other novels, for her adoption of the “point of view of [New Orleans] working-class men—one white, one black—into whose consciousness a decorous lady like Chopin herself might not have been expected to enter” (Gilbert, 16), and for being a “daughter of slave owners” who looked on “the thoughtless white world through the eyes of a woman of color” (Toth, Kate Chopin, 222).


53 Calixta figures both in the companion story, “At the ‘Cadian Ball” (1892) from which this quote is taken, and in “The Storm” (unpublished in Chopin’s lifetime) where her hair is “kinked more stubbornly than ever” (282).

54 Elfenbein, 141. Indeed, Calixta’s act would only be considered liberatory if she is a (vicariously) “white” woman; as a “dark” woman, her sexual passion would be viewed as commonplace. Elfenbein argues that the “story suggests more about the limitations of bourgeois marriage” than about sexual antitheses, although I suggest that it is this dialectic which forms the very basis of a critique of white middle-class marriage.

55 Clearly, the politics of race in The Awakening need not have complete explanatory force throughout the novel, nor does it exhaust the reasons for Edna’s death; it does, I suggest, reframe the controversy surrounding it.

56 Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), vii. Morrison further points out that examining the ways in which constructions of racial or cultural difference “ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in [white-authored] literature” (viii) helps us understand “literary whiteness” as well as “literary blackness” (xii).

57 See Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South (1892; reprint, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988). Writing in 1892, Cooper offers a scathing critique of legislation based on perceived differences between white and black women, citing as an example the segregation of public toilets labeled “For Women” and “For Coloureds.”