

## WORKS CITED

- Chopin, Kate. *At Fault*. 1890. Edited with an introduction and notes by Bernard Koloski. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Green, Suzanne Disheroon, and David J. Caudle, eds. *"At Fault": A Scholarly Edition with Background Readings*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001.
- Open Syllabus Explorer*. English Literature. Columbia University. 2020.
- Toth, Emily. *Kate Chopin*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

## Absent Babies and Cosmopolitan Bananas

*Fault Lines, Networks, and Modernity in At Fault*

DEBORAH LINDSAY WILLIAMS

At the conclusion of *At Fault* (1890), Kate Chopin's first novel, the heroine, Thérèse Lafirme, takes the train from New Orleans back to Place-du-Bois, her plantation along the Cane River near Natchitoches. After six months in Paris and a visit to New Orleans that was "filled with pleasant disturbances," she is eager to get home. We first see her in this chapter through the eyes of another female passenger, a "little grey-garbed conventional figure," who admires Thérèse's Parisian fashions. Thérèse doesn't notice the other woman because she's too engrossed in trying to open the train window to let in the fresh air; nor does she notice, a few seats away, "an interesting family group." The family consists of a "husband, but doubly a father, surrounded and sat upon by a small band of offspring. A wife—presumably a mother—absorbed with the view of the outside world and the elaborate gold chain that hung around her neck" (161). A few paragraphs later, "the husband and father had peeled and distributed his second outlay of bananas amongst his family. It was at this moment that Thérèse, looking towards the door, saw Hosmer enter the car" (163). Given that the novel's primary plot has centered on the love triangle of David Hosmer, Thérèse, and Hosmer's ex-wife, Fanny, readers might notice only this moment of reunion, six months or so after Fanny drowned in a flash flood. But there is more than just a lovers' reunion happening in this train car: the vignettes of the car's other occupants serve as concentrated reminders of the novel's key concerns and show us that nothing in *At Fault* is as simple as it seems.

Questions about gender roles, about mobility, and about the relationship between the urban and the rural, run like fault lines through this novel, which has long been overshadowed by the critical acclaim given

to *The Awakening*, published nine years later. Donna Campbell suggests that *At Fault* should be seen as being “about change and resistance to change” (33), but ultimately, I think, change is not so much resisted as it is embraced. Even the simple fact that Thérèse and the “grey-garbed figure” are traveling alone and unchaperoned suggests a change: a new attitude about women in public space. The woman in gray understands the international provenance of Thérèse’s clothing: everything, even Thérèse’s umbrella, “had Paris written plain upon them . . . points likely to have escaped a man” (161). After she inventories Thérèse’s clothes, the woman “betake[s] herself to the absorbing pages of a novel which she read through smoked glasses” (161, 163), which are themselves quite *au courant*. The car has another occupant, whose seat is marked with a “large valise, an overcoat, a cane and an umbrella,” while the owner of these items is “likely to be at present in the smoking car” (161). It seems quite possible that this absent traveler, mingling with the other men in the homosocial space of the smoking car, is a traveling salesman, like Jack Dawson, one of Hosmer’s St. Louis acquaintances. The gray-garbed female traveler underscores the independence of the modern nineteenth-century woman, and the traveling salesman in the smoking car reminds us of the circulatory power of commerce, which brings us novels, smoked glasses, Parisian fashions—and enables the transport of lumber from the mill that Hosmer established on Thérèse’s plantation.

It is the “interesting family group” at the far end of the train car, however, that pulls together the novel’s fascination with networks, exchange, and the shifting roles available to women. We notice that the wife is only “presumably” a mother and seems utterly disinterested in her family. We don’t know what has “absorbed” her attention outside the train window, but whatever it is seems as interesting as the other woman’s novel and far more engrossing than the domestic scene arrayed alongside her on the train seat. We are told twice that it is the “husband and father” who deals with the children, as if to underscore the reversal of conventional nineteenth-century gender roles. Even more interesting than these blurred gender roles, however, are the bananas that the father hands around as a snack—the “second outlay,” no less. How did those bananas get in the hands of that husband and father? And why

bananas, rather than a fruit more local to New Orleans, like satsumas (akin to mandarin oranges), apples, or strawberries? Were his children aware of their great good fortune, to receive *two* outlays of what was, in the late nineteenth century, still a luxury product? Eating their bananas on the train, the family literalizes a Veblenesque demonstration of conspicuous consumption, nine years prior to the publication of *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). By providing these luxurious treats to his children, the man upholds his position as economic provider, even as his caretaking role feminizes him. This family scene illustrates a crack in the façade of conventional nineteenth-century gendered domesticity that runs through the entire novel and results in the unusual marriage between Hosmer and Thérèse that takes place in the final pages of the book. Taken in its entirety, then, the scene in the train car, coming as it does so close to the end of the novel, affirms the novel’s ultimate commitment to change and to finding modes of cosmopolitan engagement with the new.

The train car is full of new things—bananas, smoked glasses, French fashions—and new behaviors (single women traveling unchaperoned)<sup>1</sup> that are in transit between the rural and the urban. The train is stillness and motion, a specific site and a liminal space, an “instrument of progress,” as Campbell calls it (37), and an emblem of the status quo in that it is an all-white car, a fact that Chopin takes so much for granted it doesn’t even warrant mention. In the enclosed space of the train car, the unchaperoned white women can travel in safety, although they “undergo the ordeal of having [their] tickets scrutinized [and] commented upon” by the “suave conductor,” who is also white (163). All these passengers enjoy the luxury of individual seats, windows that can open and shut, and the mobility that comes with privilege. Neither transformation nor transportation is readily available for anyone other than whites: the networks that crisscross the landscapes of the novel seem able to bring change to almost everything, except to the constricted tangle of post-Reconstruction racial politics.

Caroline Levine points out that “networks and enclosures are constantly meeting, sometimes sustaining and reinforcing one another, at other times creating threats and obstacles . . . neither form has the final

organizing word—neither always regulates the other” (119). *At Fault* offers myriad examples of the constant interactions between enclosures and networks, and when we track these relationships, we see that far from being suffused in nostalgia, the novel fully engages with the new.<sup>2</sup> It attempts to establish a nonhierarchical relationship between the local and the global, the rural and the urban, that might be seen as enabling a regional cosmopolitanism. Susan Mizruchi argues that at the turn into the twentieth century, “American social life demanded a disposition of cosmopolitanism, which might be characterized as openness to other cultures and to cultural others, as well as to the global interconnectedness that such others implied” (76). The networks and fault lines that run through Chopin’s novel show us that the seemingly hyperlocal world of the plantation is acutely aware of the world of innovation, technological advancement, and the circulation of ideas. *At Fault* is deeply engaged with, and supportive of, modernity, mobility, and transformation; cosmopolitan engagement becomes a cardinal virtue that, if avoided or disregarded, results in dire consequences.

Cosmopolitanism emerges from, and demands, what Mizruchi calls “global interconnectedness,” but those connections are not without complications and difficulties, all of which are neatly emblemized by the bananas being eaten so happily and inconsequentially by the family on the train. Bananas were introduced to the United States at the 1876 Philadelphia World’s Fair, in the Horticultural Hall, where it was possible to buy a single banana for ten cents (a cost that for some, represented an hour’s wages); they remained a luxury item until the early twentieth century. When large-scale production and refrigerated transport became the standard, bananas became ordinary, but in the 1880s,<sup>3</sup> when the novel is set, they were fancy fruit.<sup>4</sup> The fortunes of the banana are themselves a lesson in change and exchange: they were seen initially in the Americas “as a food for slaves [and] became in the nineteenth century an exotic luxury for wealthy and well-traveled North Americans” (Jenkins 57). This history resonates with the history of the slave-owning American South, both in terms of the human cost of capitalist success and in the complex relationship between the rural/agrarian landscapes and the urban spaces of national and international exchange.

The exotic snack that the father offers to his family probably came from a small banana plantation in Central America, perhaps even a family-owned farm similar to Place-du-Bois. By the turn into the twentieth century, bananas were grown on agricultural factory farms, but in 1880, banana plantations were still relatively small operations that were trying to figure out how to capitalize on the innovations of refrigerated shipping and transport. The bananas on Thérèse’s train found their way from the Honduras to a steamship to New Orleans to the hands of a man about to get on a northbound train. The simple action of a father offering a banana to his children ripples outward to signify the novel’s awareness of international commerce and the concomitant need for information networks that support those transactions—information about crops, ports, markets, and consumers.

The networks that result in bananas being available for train rides suggest that there is not a clear-cut relationship between rural and urban, familial and foreign: the fruit is proffered in a moment of domesticity that takes place within a symbol of modern mobility that is itself moving along a track somewhere between rural and urban. The boundaries, in other words, between enclosures (the train car, the plantation) and networks (the train, the shipping industry) are neither fixed nor absolute. People and things are constantly on the move, and while Thérèse’s plantation and Hosmer’s lumber mill seem geographically isolated, they are in fact very much enmeshed in a series of networks—the postal service, the railroad, telecommunications—that mitigate, even eradicate, that isolation.

Syntactically, the bananas and Hosmer are linked: the narrator tells us that the father “distributed his second outlay of bananas amongst his family. It was at this moment that Thérèse . . . saw Hosmer enter the car” (163).<sup>5</sup> We don’t know why Hosmer is on this train—he’d left Place-du-Bois months earlier, to take Fanny’s body to St. Louis for burial, and then he’d fallen ill and gone to the seashore with his sister to recuperate. His sudden presence is as surprising as his unheralded arrival at the Place-du-Bois train station at the beginning of the novel, when he appears on Thérèse’s veranda with a “moneyed offer for the privilege of cutting timber from [Thérèse’s] land” (8). How had he known the timber was there? Some unspoken but efficient information network

must have been at work, bringing details about Louisiana timber to St. Louis and setting Hosmer's plans in motion. Technology—the conveyance of information, ideas, and people—collapses the distance between his office in St. Louis and Natchitoches Parish.

Trains are the most visible network in the novel, and it is easy to imagine an oppositional relationship between the train and the fixed pastoral space of the plantation—the dialectic that gave rise to Leo Marx's famous configuration of the "machine in the garden." But as Levine reminds us, networks and enclosures—such as the bounded space of an estate—function together; neither has the final word. This linked relationship is what we see in *At Fault*, in which enclosure and network come together in such a way that we need to rethink oppositional relationships and instead see how rural and urban, local and global, come together and blur any clear distinctions. The relationship between enclosures and networks enables cosmopolitan encounters that reaffirm the novel's commitment to modernity and change. Thérèse herself is "not disposed to rebel against the changes which Time brings" (30): she is a "clever enough businesswoman" to recognize the benefit of Hosmer's offer, for example, and after a brief bout of tears in her "beloved woods," she settles the deal. In her shrewdness and independence, Thérèse challenges conventions not only because she is a woman who refuses to stay a disconsolate widow but also because she is not afraid to remake the world as she thinks it should be. As her last name implies, Thérèse is formidable and firm in all things: if grieving about her husband is going to become such a distraction that people can steal from her, she will put aside her sorrow and "awaken unsuspected powers of doing" (6); if someone wants to buy lumber rights on her property, she will sigh and sign the contract; if she no longer likes the view from her house, she will build a new house with a different view.

Thérèse's huge plantation—four thousand acres—stretches farther than the eye can see, and while the bayou on its far side is "sluggish," life on and around the plantation moves briskly. Even Thérèse is always on the move: Marie Louise, her former nanny, says, "Why do you run about so much, *Tite maîtresse*? You are always going this way and that way; on horseback, on foot" (90). Everything circulates: people,

books, fashion, fruit, information, and even voices, through the use of telegrams and telephones. Hosmer "speaks a few words through the telephone which connected with the agent's desk at the station" (13), almost as if the telephone is an extension of the train line, and at another point, "certain late telegrams" arrive at the plantation (32). In a curious coincidence, the telephone was introduced at the same world's fair as the banana, two very different objects that signify the development of networks bringing the remote into contact with the local. Telephone service in the South lagged behind the rest of the country (Fischer 89), which suggests that the presence of a phone at Hosmer's mill is all the more remarkable, but it is presented without comment. Place-du-Bois is connected to the world beyond its immediate borders; it is in the vanguard rather than trapped in some nostalgic haze of yesteryear.

The only other person who uses a phone is Jack Dawson, a traveling salesman whose wife, Lou, is a friend of Fanny's, and whose phone calls ensure that people and goods stay in constant movement. When he's at home in St. Louis, Dawson's activities turn the household "inside out and upside down" (56). He uses the telephone to call a "large circle of acquaintances who happened not to be on the road," so that he can plan card parties, picnics, and other social activities (56). With his cronies, Dawson talks business and refers to being "in Houston, Texas, the other day" or "over in Albuquerque," itself glancing reference to movement beyond national borders—New Mexico did not become a state until 1912. Dawson's counterpart in the novel is the bookish Mr. Worthington, another St. Louis friend of Fanny's. Worthington has a job at the customs office, a post he's maintained through "various changes of administration," although it's not clear if his longevity is due to being "unobtrusive" or to his "many-sided usefulness" (54). He works in the office that regulates the flow of goods coming into St. Louis—he may even be the person who notes the tariffs on the shipments of bananas headed for St. Louis grocery stores. The customhouse is an enclosure, a fixed entity through which goods circulate. Dawson and Worthington embody the links between enclosures and networks that enable the flow of goods and ideas, offering the possibility of cosmopolitan engagement.

Through these innovations in telecommunication, the rural spaces of lumber mill and the plantation are engaged in two conversations—literally, with those at the other end of telecom systems, and symbolically, with the very concept of modernity itself. In *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Anthony Appiah stresses the importance of conversation, a word that he says connotes “not only . . . literal talk but also a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. . . . [These] encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another” (85). Encounters with difference happen throughout the novel, in face-to-face conversations, through telecoms, and through what Appiah calls “imaginative engagement” with books. The material objects that circulate through the novel—or are themselves the means of circulation—reveal the networks of commerce and exchange that make Place-du-Bois a full and vital participant in global conversations.

But these networked conversations also occur through the vehicle of “imaginative engagement” that Appiah mentions: books. Chopin’s books themselves were marketed as conduits for encounters with “cultural others,” to use Mizruchi’s term, as the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin* notes: “The publisher’s advertisement for [Chopin’s] first collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, in 1894, drew attention to the fact that Chopin’s characters were ‘semi-aliens’ and featured in narratives ‘quite unlike most American tales’” (Beer 1). The world of New Orleans was seen as a bit of Europe in the United States, and Creoles, according to Helen Taylor, “talk[ed] as if they were Parisians; they read French newspapers, visited French relatives, and discussed French politics” (149). Books can be seen as commodities to be bought and sold—Mr. Worthington has “small hoard [of books] which he had collected at some cost,” for example—but as the contents of Thérèse’s bookcases demonstrate, books also further challenge the distinction between the rural and the urban. When the Worthingtons visit Place-du-Bois from St. Louis on their way to “Muddy Graw” in New Orleans, Mr. Worthington is entranced by the sight of Thérèse’s bookshelves. At home in St. Louis, he has to hide his books in a closet,

lest his wife use them to prop up wobbly tables or smooth out wrinkled linens. As he looks at Thérèse’s books, he notices some titles in French, “to him an unfamiliar language,” as well as Balzac, the Waverly novels, Racine, Moliere, Bulwer, Shakespeare, and “five imposing volumes in dignified black and gold, bearing the simple inscription, ‘Lives of the Saints—Rev. A. Butler’” (133). Hundreds of miles from both cosmopolitan New Orleans and modern St. Louis, this bilingual bookshelf speaks to the transatlantic perspective of the Lafirme household; French language and culture do not stop at the New Orleans border.

Taylor claims that in the late nineteenth century, New Orleans was “cosmopolitan but still in thrall to its rural hinterland” (149), but this characterization seems to rely on the urban assumption that the rural is always somehow laggard. Chopin’s novel demonstrates the need to see both urban and rural as valuable; the one needn’t dominate the other, and cosmopolitanism was not exclusively urban. Even in a small town like St. Martinville (or Saint-Martinville), which is more than one hundred miles from New Orleans, for instance, French language and culture were so pervasive that it was known as Petit Paris. Networks, as Levine points out, are “neither consistently emancipatory—freeing us from a fixed or dominant order—nor always threatening—trouncing sovereignty or dissolving protective boundaries” (115). The cosmopolitan city and the rural hinterland are linked in this novel but not necessarily in tension or in conflict. Instead, the novel presents us with the idea that encounters with difference can be mutually transformative; “conversations” between rural and nonrural might present problems, but they can also offer new possibilities for those who are willing to engage.

Books provide the opportunity for Hosmer and Worthington to engage in the sort of conversation about religion and philosophy of which Appiah would approve, in that the two men explore their differences of opinion without trying to convert or demean one another. Their conversation is quite different from the way Worthington’s daughter Lucilla talks to Aunt Belindy, one of Thérèse’s servants. Aunt Belindy asks about the paper that Lucilla carries with her, which is “stuck with myriad tiny pin holes” (128). Lucilla tells the older woman that each pinprick represents an act of virtue and with enough acts—“thousands

and thousands”—she will gain “twenty-five years of indulgence” and thus not spend as much time in Purgatory. The novel appears to mock Aunt Belindy’s seeming inability to accept pinpricks as representations of acts and her apparent lack of knowledge about Purgatory; Campbell reads this scene as another instance of the novel’s “stereotyped humor” around the African American characters (40). But the scene also mocks Lucilla’s facile religious sentiment: she cannot explain what an “act” is, for example: “an act is something you do that you don’t want to do—or something you don’t want to do, that you do—I mean that you don’t do. Or if you want to eat something and don’t. Or an aspiration; that’s an act, too” (128). It’s no wonder that Aunt Belindy is confused, although she asks a question that strikes right to the heart of the matter: how does Lucilla know that these pinpricks will result in avoiding Purgatory? Lucilla’s only response is “because I know.”

Lucilla’s simplistic certainty sounds similar to Thérèse’s assertions about Catholicism and morality, claims that seem at first to be implacably conservative. When Hosmer seeks her out in the seldom-used parlor of her house and confesses that he loves her, Thérèse rebuffs him because he is divorced, a status that her “moral principles” cannot accept. Although he tries to engage her in an intellectual discussion about her morals, suggesting that her principles might be mere “prejudices [that] may be set aside by an effort of the will” (36), she refuses to entertain his perspective and remains adamant that hers is the only correct view. She loves Hosmer but insists that he return to St. Louis and remarry Fanny, to “face the consequences of his actions” (39); she ignores his evident misery at this request, and after one passionate kiss, Hosmer leaves the parlor—and Place-du-Bois—in “blind submission” to her command. It is easy to see this scene as Thérèse falling back into the narrowest and most local of ideological perspectives here, relying on a moral absolutism that we see nowhere else in the novel.<sup>6</sup>

If we think about the space in which this scene happens, however, we might see Thérèse’s refusal in a slightly different light. The parlor, which the servants view as a “holy sanctuary,” is the most conventional room in Thérèse’s house and is decorated with “tasteful pictures” that alternate on the walls with “family portraits [that are] stiff and unhand-

some” (35). In this sanctuary, where Thérèse imagines herself “secure from intrusion,” it is difficult to imagine how a relationship with such an unconventional suitor—northern, Unitarian, industrial—might flourish. The “miserable story” that Hosmer tells about his first marriage does nothing to suggest that a more positive marital narrative is possible, especially when we consider that his description of young Fanny as “pink and white and merry blue eyes and stylish clothes”—makes her sound quite similar to Thérèse herself, who is fair-skinned, blue-eyed, and fashionably dressed. Hosmer’s marriage story ends with the death of his young child, his wife’s descent into alcoholism, and her subsequent request for divorce. In refusing Hosmer’s affections, Thérèse seems appalled by the sordid misery of his tale; she chooses the solitary life of her two namesakes—sixteenth-century Teresa of Ávila and nineteenth-century Thérèse of Lisieux, “Little Flower of Jesus”—who renounced domesticity and marriage in order to live contemplative and scholarly lives. Her decision seems to favor tradition and conservatism over the risk of a new love affair.

If we consider Thérèse’s legal status as a widow, however, which allows her full control over her plantation and her finances, the conservatism of her decision seems less absolute. Louisiana property laws in the late nineteenth century did not give a married woman full right to property; if she were to remarry, she could stand to lose her financial independence.<sup>7</sup> So while on the one hand, we could see her rejection of Hosmer as uncharacteristically retrograde, her decision also reaffirms her status as an unconventional woman who is “not steeped in the agony of remorse which many might consider becoming in a widow of five years” (31) and who is steadfastly, unapologetically, childless, a detail that is mentioned in the second sentence of the novel and never again. Refusing to marry Hosmer and then sending him away (perhaps to avoid the temptation of further passionate embraces) can be seen an “effort of the will” to challenge conventional behavior, even as it is also an illustration of Thérèse’s inability to imagine any possibility outside that convention. It seems no accident that when the two are finally reunited—and then married—the only scene we have of them is outside on the veranda, a less confined space and one that is not watched over by stiff portraits of ancestors.

Thérèse's decision might look like a refusal to change and, in a sense, it is: she wants to remain fully in control of her property. She loved to "walk the length of the wide verandas, armed with her field-glass, and to view her surrounding possessions with comfortable satisfaction" (6). Her insistence on independence, couched in the language of religion, however, suggests that while she appreciates the need for complexity and change in her professional life, she cannot imagine similarly complex or unusual possibilities in her emotional life. Her single-mindedness about Hosmer makes her, according to a letter that Chopin wrote to the *Natchitoches Enterprise*, the character most at fault because she has given into "blind acceptance of an undistinguishing, therefore unintelligent code of righteousness" (quoted in Campbell 30). Thérèse cannot imagine any narrative for herself other than what she already knows—a conventional marriage and a sense of right and wrong she'd always assumed was "easy of interpretation" (127). Thérèse's apparent failure of imagination could be seen in terms of Appiah's ideas about "contamination": "Cultural purity is an oxymoron. The odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more" (135). Through networks of commerce and innovation, Place-du-Bois is situated in this cosmopolitan context, contaminated, as it were, by ideas that come from many places, not just the local. And in a similar fashion, Thérèse's refusal of Hosmer also resists easy definition: it is both an instance of moral absolutism and a modern insistence on female autonomy. The lovers are reunited only after Fanny's death and after both Thérèse and Hosmer experience "staggering doubt" (127) about their choices.<sup>8</sup>

The inability to change, as Donald Ringe points out, is dire: those who resist—Grégoire, Joçint, even Fanny—perish. Joçint, the son of African American Morico and a Native American mother, resents having to work at Hosmer's mill because his "heart is in the pine hills" (13). In his rage and powerlessness, Joçint sets fire to the mill (after first killing his dog so it doesn't betray his whereabouts by barking) but is caught in the act by Grégoire, Thérèse's handsome but feckless Creole nephew. Grégoire kills Joçint, and when Morico sees his son's body in

the fire, he tries to pull Joçint to safety and is killed in the process. Hosmer's sister Melicent hears Grégoire say that Joçint "ain't goin' to set no mo' mill afire," and thinks that perhaps Grégoire "arrested" Joçint, but Thérèse suspects the truth (105). There are no legal consequences for killing a "half-breed" in the middle of committing a crime; in this novel, there seem only to be laws governing business, marriage, and property. Grégoire is sure that he's done the right thing in killing Joçint and does not understand why Thérèse and Melicent are so appalled. He is sure that Melicent, with whom he fancies himself in love, will get over her disgust at his actions and "melt, perhaps, to the extent of a smile or one of her old glances" (111). But instead, she leaves Place-du-Bois with an icy good-bye, and Grégoire leaves soon after. He ends up dead in a bar-room brawl in Cornstalk, Texas, information that is conveyed to Thérèse by Rufe Jimson, a man who stopped by Place-du-Bois while he was "in transit" to tell her the news. Thérèse realizes that Grégoire was "killed by the hand of a stranger with whom perhaps the taking of a man's life counted as little as it had once counted with his victim" (140). Neither Grégoire nor Joçint are willing (or able) to adapt to the changing world; they both pay the ultimate price as a result.

Ringe includes Marie Louise in his list of those who resist change, but this easy interpretation of her death does not necessarily render the full picture, which we can see if we think about the network of history that brought Marie Louise to live on the bank of the Cane River in the first place. She drowns when the river floods and washes away the bank where her house stands. She had refused to have the house moved, despite Thérèse's entreaties. Prior to the flood, Thérèse had said that she was going to "insist on having [the] cabin moved back; it is silly to be so stubborn about such a small matter. Some day you will find yourself out in the middle of the river—and what am I going to do then?—no one to nurse me when I am sick—no one to scold me—nobody to love me" (90). Marie Louise, unlike Hosmer, refuses Thérèse's attempts to manage her life, telling her "*Non—non, Tite maîtresse, Marie Louise 'prè crêver icite avé tous son butin, si faut* (no, no, *Tite maîtresse*, Marie Louise will die here with all her belongings if it must be)" (91, translation in original). Her refusal, in the language that she and Thérèse share, be-

comes Marie Louise's assertion that she will do what she likes with her body.<sup>9</sup> In the aftermath of slavery and Reconstruction, this claim of physical autonomy seems particularly significant. Were she to move, it would be the second time: the first time is at the behest of Thérèse's husband, Jérôme. Marie Louise reminds Thérèse of that fact, telling her, "I said [to Jérôme], Marie Louise will move no more; she's too old. If the good God does not want to take care of me, then it's time for me to go" (91). Perhaps her religious faith is an illusion, a certainty that leads to her undoing. But it is also possible, if we think about the history that brought her to this cabin, that this former slave is claiming the right to live (or die) as she sees fit rather than according to the needs of her former owner. When we situate Marie Louise's death in this fashion, her decision becomes a demonstration *of* change rather than the refusal *to* change and an indication that the fault line of race is so deeply entrenched that it will not be easily bridged or repaired.

Marie Louise's decision to control her own fate thus seems similar to Thérèse's refusal of Hosmer and her rejection of conventional domesticity. Thérèse defies local expectations about femininity because she successfully manages her vast estate and because she is childless. As a seemingly devout Catholic, Thérèse might be expected to express concern about her childless state, but she never mentions it. There are, in fact, very few children in this novel: Hosmer and Fanny had a son who died at the age of three; the Worthingtons have Lucilla; Thérèse's friends the Duplans have a daughter named Ninette; Joçint is Morico's adult son. Thérèse's plantation may be "rich in its exhaustless powers of reproduction," but the people themselves are not (6).

The train that Thérèse takes back to Place-du-Bois at the end of the novel not only reunites her with Hosmer but also provides one of the few images of a seemingly happy family, if, that is, we disregard the presumable mother's disinterest in the "small band of offspring" on the train seat next to her. This mother, staring out the window, adds to the novel's subtle and ongoing interrogation of femininity, marriage, and motherhood. In her disaffection, the presumable mother seems similar to Fanny, who is seen earlier in the novel enroute from St. Louis to Place-du-Bois (the only other scene in the novel actually set inside a train).

After Fanny remarries Hosmer, she greets his announcement that they will return to Place-du-Bois with "martyred resignation" (65). And although she initially thinks of the journey as holding "the promise of novelty," the novelty fades, and she sees out the windows only "an unfamiliar country whose features were strange and held up no promise of welcome." She takes no pleasure in the modernity of the journey, and she is mystified by the fact that Hosmer recognizes "the faces of those who loitered about the stations at which they stopped" (73). He shakes hands, exchanges greetings (using the few words of French he's learned), and makes it clear that what to Fanny is "unfamiliar country" is no longer strange to him. Hosmer comes to Place-du-Bois in search of commerce but made the decision to engage, not merely observe. He has been changed by his time in Louisiana, which Fanny cannot imagine, and their differing experiences on the train suggest that there will be no happy ending waiting for them at the conclusion of their journey. Theirs is yet another in a series of unconventional marriages that the novel portrays.

The white women in *At Fault* enjoy the luxury of mobility, which speaks to their relative affluence, and to the networks that enable their movements. Thérèse goes to New Orleans and Paris; the Worthingtons go to New Orleans from St. Louis; Melicent comes to Place-du-Bois after going "North, West, or East as alternating caprice prompted" (14), and the last we hear of her, she is planning an expedition to the American Southwest with a female friend; Bert Rodney, with whom Lou Dawson has an affair in St. Louis, does so while his wife and child are vacationing in Narragansett. These peripatetic women are enabled in their travels by the additional fact that most of them are childless (the "training and education" of the Worthingtons' daughter have been taken over by an aunt [55]). It is as if in this novel, Chopin can imagine a world in which "woman" does not necessitate "mother," an option that she does not extend to Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. We might even imagine that the presumable mother on Thérèse's train, "absorbed with the view of the outside world and the elaborate gold chain that hung around her neck," foreshadows Edna, chafing at the elaborate leash of her marriage and daydreaming about what's happening outside the enclosure of domesticity.

When we consider the ambivalent portrayals of marriage and motherhood in *At Fault*, the portrayal of Thérèse and Hosmer's happy domesticity in the novel's final pages becomes a slightly more complex affair, particularly because they have no children, a fact that has gone unremarked in most critical commentary. Some critics, such as David Russell, read the novel's conclusion—Thérèse and Hosmer reunited at Place-du-Bois—as negative: “a hierarchical geography in which the plantation is restored as the primary unit of social organization” (9). For the most part, however, the novel's conclusion is seen as a happy union of opposites—the northern industrialist reunited with the southern agrarian; the Unitarian and the Catholic; the urban and the rural. Ringe says that with the marriage of Thérèse and Hosmer, the “Cane River past flows into a future that is filled with promise” (165). But Place-du-Bois is a place of the future long before Thérèse and Hosmer marry. They do not usher in this new future; they are in fact recipients of it. The final scene of the novel takes place on the veranda: the now-married lovers have escaped the gaze of the staid family portraits in the parlor. Just as the veranda is both a public and private space, so too does their marriage make space for both public and private selves. When Hosmer tells Thérèse he has investors in the lumber mill, which will give him more time to spend with her, she thinks he wants to be more involved in running the plantation, but he assures her that's not the case: he will “not rob [her] of [her] occupation . . . put no bungling hand into your concerns” (167). His comment makes clear that in their marriage there is room for professional success, even as the novel's final image also suggests sexual intimacy. Hosmer whispers something in Thérèse's ear that makes her blush, and the narrator asks, “can that be Hosmer? Is this Thérèse? Fie, fie. It is time we were leaving them” (170). Our last vision of the married pair, then, is of the two of them canoodling on the veranda at twilight. At the moment of transition between day and night, in the liminal space of the veranda, this unusual couple seems to have achieved their unconventional version of a “happy ending.”

Given the novel's emphasis on networks, mobility, and change, however, it is difficult to see this happy relationship as “the future.” It is only a node on a network—one marital possibility among many. Thérèse and

Hosmer have no children, and it seems unlikely that they will, given that when they marry, Thérèse is thirty-six and Hosmer is in his early forties. Nor is there any sense that anyone other than Thérèse will be able to run the plantation: the “impecunious old kinsman” she'd left in charge of Place-du-Bois while she traveled spent his time hunting and fishing, with the result that “things had not gone well” in her absence (163). What, then, will be the legacy of this modern marriage, which is undergirded by cosmopolitan engagement and offers the space for a woman to be professionally powerful and *not* be a mother? The narrative of marriage that Chopin creates for Thérèse and Hosmer is all the more unusual when we compare it to other marriages in the novel and to Edna Pontellier's marriage in *The Awakening*. Edna cannot reconcile the competing tensions of wife/mother/woman; the power of conventional narratives defeats her. The power of that narrative—that a woman unsatisfied by marriage or motherhood has no options—perhaps explains why *At Fault* has languished at the margins of Chopin's career: Thérèse's radical reinvention reverberates along a fault line that still exists.

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of the single woman traveler in the United States during this period, see, for example, Catherine Cocks, *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850–1915* (2001), or Karin M. Morin, *Frontiers of Femininity: A New Historical Geography of the Nineteenth-Century American West* (2008).

2. Place-du-Bois is often seen as a pastoral space that is “ruptured” by progress, as Alice Petry Hall says in her introduction to *Critical Essays about Kate Chopin*, a view that is echoed by Donald Ringe characterizing modern industry as an “intrusion” into the Cane River Valley. Nostalgia takes on a slightly different cast in Sandra Gunning's view of the novel, in which Place-du-Bois is a “white domestic haven” (120) and Thérèse is a symbol of respect for “traditional racial codes and racial balances of power [as well as] the Southern white need for black labor” (122).

3. Donald Ringe, for example, estimates that the novel is set in 1881 because that's when the Texas and Pacific Railroad reached Natchitoches.

4. United Fruit, which would come to dominate the tropical fruit industry, was not formed until 1899. At the moment of the novel's composition—and even more so at the time the novel is set—bananas were still a luxury item.

5. We wonder if Chopin chuckled as she created this syntactically racy image, linking Thérèse's would-be lover with bananas.

6. It is interesting to note that after her nephew Gregoire dies, Thérèse pays for masses to be said on his behalf, "not that Thérèse held very strongly to this saying of masses" (143), yet another indication that her Catholicism seems to be strategic rather than foundational.

7. Suzanne Lebsack notes that "major statutory changes in the law of married-women's property in . . . Louisiana awaited the 1880s and beyond" (215).

8. When Thérèse tells him that he's a coward for leaving Fanny, Hosmer suddenly sees himself differently, even though he was not eager "to accept a view of the situation that would place him in his own eyes in a contemptible light" (39). Her words "carried an element of truth" that forces him to reconsider his actions and his attitudes.

9. Marie Louise's self-assertion results in her death, in a way similar to Edna Pontellier's decision at the end of *The Awakening*, in which her decision to swim out to sea is an act of self-destructive autonomy.

## WORKS CITED

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Baron, Mathew. "A History of Bananas." August 21, 2017. <https://gourmetnutsanddriedfruit.com/a-history-of-bananas>.
- Beer, Janet, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Campbell, Donna. "At Fault: A Reappraisal of Kate Chopin's Other Novel." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, edited by Janet Beer, 27–43. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Chopin, Kate. *At Fault*. 1890. Edited with an introduction and notes by Bernard Koloski. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Cocks, Catherine. *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850–1915*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Fischer, Claude S. *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Gunning, Sandra. *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890–1912*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Hall, Alice Petry. *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1996.
- Jenkins, Virginia Scott. *Bananas: An American History*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2000.
- Lebsack, Suzanne D. "Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women." *Journal of Southern History* 43, no. 2 (1977): 195–216.
- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

- Mizruchi, Susan L. *The Rise of Multicultural America: Economy and Print Culture, 1865–1915*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- Morin, Karin M. *Frontiers of Femininity: A New Historical Geography of the Nineteenth-Century American West*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008.
- Ringe, Donald A. "Cane River World: Kate Chopin's *At Fault* and Related Stories." *Studies in American Fiction* 3, no. 2 (1975): 157–66.
- Russell, David. "A Vision of Reunion: Kate Chopin's *At Fault*." *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 46, no. 1 (2008): 8–25.
- Taylor, Helen. "'The Perfume of The Past': Kate Chopin and Post-Colonial New Orleans." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, edited by Janet Beer, 147–60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.



THE  
NEW VIEW  
FROM  
CANE RIVER

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON  
Kate Chopin's  
*At Fault*

*Edited by* Heather Ostman

*Louisiana State University Press  
Baton Rouge*