Kate Chopin's *At Fault*: The Usefulness of Louisiana French for the Imagination

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In a recent essay on *The Awakening*, Elaine Showalter describes three major stages of American women's literature in the 19th century – the domestic novel, local color fiction, and the so-called "New Woman fiction" – in order to link Kate Chopin's outstanding book with a tradition of women's writing. However, the final conclusion of her useful contextualization is that there exists no significant continuity between these traditions and Chopin's novel so that *The Awakening* stands apart as a "solitary book." Since Showalter is exclusively interested in a female tradition, she leaves out the literary movement in which the domestic and local color traditions were carried on, transformed, as well as enriched, namely, the realistic novel of the period. Kate Chopin, as is well known, was strongly influenced by writers like Maupassant, Flaubert, and other realists. Realism, I suggest, is therefore one of the "missing links" that helps to explain her major work. The other is Chopin's own early writing which is closely tied to the three literary traditions outlined by Showalter and thus demonstrates a continuity in the development of her work that is often obscured.

Such a denial of continuity is a logical result, one may argue, of the main function which the rediscovery of Chopin's work has come to serve in current cultural debates: The emphasis on continuities would undermine the pleasing myth of a radical break and would therefore question Chopin's usefulness as a role model for a radical counter-tradition. As a consequence, discussions of Chopin's major work, *The Awakening*, focus again and again on the question whether the book can be considered a truly radical novel, especially in view of its ambivalent ending. Recently, such doubts about Chopin's radicalism have increased under the influence of poststructuralism's critique of representation. Thus, Michael T. Gilmore points out that

> Chopin's feminist narrative marks a turn toward the anti-naturalist, self-referential agenda of modernism as a liberating mode of behavior in life and art. Yet neither Edna nor Chopin achieves such liberation, and not simply because of the heroine's suicide. Both women remain trapped in habits of thought they oppose, conceptual systems that prove so pertinacious that they saturate the very act of opposition. (Gilmore 60)

Is it possible, one would like to know, to escape such complicity? How can one liberate oneself entirely from existing "habits of thoughts," since liberation necessarily implies reference to the phenomenon from which one wants to disengage oneself? In

view of this paradox, it seems more plausible to argue that literary texts (as, indeed, all acts of world making) are always and inevitably negotiations with given ways of making sense of the world. I have tried to provide an example of such ongoing negotiations by tracing the "transgressive impulse" through various phases of Chopin's literary production, thus linking *The Awakening* with a whole body of short fiction from which it is usually separated or with which it is at any rate not meaningfully connected.[1] What I want to do in this complementary essay is to provide another case study for a view of fiction as a form of cultural negotiation by drawing on Kate Chopin's first novel, *At Fault* (1890), which is one of her earliest literary works, written after her husband and her mother had died and after she had taken up writing fiction. As Per Seyersted and others have pointed out, Chopin submitted the novel for publication but was unable to find a publisher and had to publish it privately. Not until the edition of her collected works by Seyersted in 1969 was it widely accessible.[2] This provides another chapter in a, by now, familiar story of neglect of her work, but while the balance has been adjusted with regards to many of her other works, *At Fault* has found relatively little attention. The reason is not hard to guess: Compared with *The Awakening* and most of her other work, Chopin's first novel appears rather conventional, both in terms of subject matter and literary form. The book has, in other words, little or no usefulness for the purpose of radical self-definition. What it can do, however, is to illustrate in an interesting way a negotiation between dominant cultural values and genre patterns on the one hand, and a wish for individual self-assertion on the other, which Chopin pursued throughout her literary career. At the same time, *At Fault* can illuminate the difficulties Chopin encountered at the beginning of this search – difficulties which made ever new renegotiations necessary for which fiction provided a welcome space of experimentation. In this exploration by means of fiction, Louisiana French played a crucial role. Thus, a discussion of Chopin's first novel can also help us specify the uses and complex function which the signifier "French" plays in her work. A clarification of the role of this "French" element, most often represented by Creole culture in her early work, is crucial for understanding not only the course Chopin pursued in her writing but also the problems she ran into.

One of the reasons why literary criticism has not been able to do much with *At Fault* may be that, generically speaking, the novel combines elements of all three of the traditions Showalter mentions. In its setting as well as in its description of plantation life, the novel is clearly a specimen of local color fiction; in its "moral" project, the education of a male to moral discipline and thus to a higher state of civilization, the novel is still working within the tradition of the domestic novel; and yet, in its amazingly explicit suggestions of other possibilities of female behavior, it also shows first hints of a 'New Woman'-perspective.[3] Although these three generic levels clearly

1 See my essay "Tentative Transgressions: Kate Chopin's Fiction as a Mode of Symbolic Action."

2 *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* 739-877. All further references will be to this edition. Since then, the novel has also been published in a paperback edition by The Green Street Press in 1986.

3 On this perspective cf. Forrey and Showalter 40-41. In the following argument I want to use the term New Woman fiction to refer to a body of work emerging in the 1880s and 1890s in which the search for female independence without moral condemnation is a central issue. The category

overlap in the text and cannot always be neatly separated, they nevertheless constitute three different, often contradictory, perspectives and should be kept apart in a discussion of the novel. The uneasy coexistence of these levels provides one important explanation for the continuing difficulties critics have had with *At Fault*. Because of the text's tentative, undecided mixture of several generic codes, readers obviously cannot easily determine what attitude to take toward it.

Most of the early aspects of the novel point in the direction of local color fiction. *At Fault* begins with the description of a Louisiana plantation owned and run by Thérèse Lafirme, who has undergone a fate many of Chopin's heroines experience, namely, the recent death of her husband. As in most other instances of this kind in Chopin's work, although presented here in a more subdued and "conventional" manner, this enforced separation is not only conceived as loss, but also as the opening up of new possibilities – a point of departure that links the novel with later texts and identifies it as an early version of a constellation and conflict to which Chopin returned time and again. This scenario of a "new found freedom" and the ensuing problem of how to use it, is, however, still presented in a fictionally much more disguised form than in later texts by Chopin. The main difference lies in the heroine Thérèse Lafirme, a thirty-five-year old Creole woman. As mistress of Place-du-Bois she is, from the start, placed in a position to enjoy her independence and to assert it almost as a side-effect of her professional tasks. Thus, her behavior has not yet any elements of programmatic self-assertion, because the novel has put her in a position of (social and moral) mastery from the start. Neither is her independence still untried and untested when the novel opens, nor are there any obstacles that she has to overcome in asserting her independence. Quite on the contrary, the novel, in its beginning, unfolds as a pleasant daydream scenario of mastery.

Thérèse's activities are all designed to present the image of a "complete woman who knows who she is, what she wants, and where she belongs" (Skaggs 75). What divides Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* is still almost effortlessly united in Thérèse. Whereas Edna's identity is split into "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin 893), Thérèse does not have to make any painful decisions because the novel has put her in a position in which she seems to be able to get everything she wants. If the book is not to be suffocated by the perfect daydream quality of this fantasy of a "perfect" woman, however, something has to happen that will challenge and test her mastery. In true local color fashion, the challenge which gets the actual narrative going is introduced in the form of an intruder from the outside, the engineer Hosmer, who rents part of her land in order to run a mill.

Conforming to a familiar pattern of local color fiction, this encounter is also a clash between two different cultures: Hosmer is a Yankee, while Thérèse is described as a true flower of Creole culture, speaking not only French but also enjoying life as supposedly only a French person can. The Louisiana French element in her identity, as preserved and transformed in Creole culture, adds a dimension of tradition and "joie de vivre" that Protestant America appears to be lacking. Thérèse therefore "treasures those

is not strictly applicable to *At Fault*, but it can serve to identify certain tendencies that point to New Woman fiction, most obviously in the "bachelor girl" Melicent.

traditions and values that add warmth and beauty to life" (Skaggs 86). Clearly, it is the function of the Louisiana French element in this context to suggest a fullness of being in which individual and social, material and spiritual aspects of life effortlessly merge under the influence of "wholesome Creole custom."[4] The reaction of the initially hostile Fanny, Hosmer's first wife, reveals to what extent this "French" element in Thérèse is considered a source of enrichment: "Thérèse affected her forcibly. This woman so wholesome, so fair and strong; so un-American as to be not ashamed to show tenderness and sympathy with eye and lip, moved Fanny like a new and pleasing experience" (801). Such a definition of the other as enrichment is repeatedly illustrated in the novel when Thérèse manages to achieve what the Americans, left on their own, fail to do: "Thérèse with her pretty Creole tact was not long in bringing these seemingly incongruent elements into some degree of harmony" (843).[5] Her roots in Creole culture provide Thérèse with a broader and more liberal understanding of life and thus serve as an important ingredient of her superiority.

The Yankee Hosmer, on the other hand, is stiff, silent, and, at least when we first meet him, engrossed in work to such an extent that he has to be tactfully initiated into the forgotten pleasures of life by Thérèse. This pattern is repeated in the contrast between Thérèse and Hosmer's sister Melicent as well as his former wife Fanny. When Fanny enters the alien world of Creole culture, she shrinks from this world and retreats to her own private realm of perverted pleasure, her alcoholism. The superficial society girl Melicent, on the other hand, indulges in the attractions of the new realm, until she is almost overwhelmed by its intensity and depth of feeling. In response, she withdraws rather cowardly from her social and emotional commitments. Thus, another split opens up in the cultural confrontation which the novel pursues. Whereas Melicent has no "depth" of character,[6] the representatives of Creole culture – some of whom, like Thérèse's old mammy Aunt Belindy, are not of Creole descent themselves but decisively shaped by the Creole value system – possess such depth in abundance; so much so, in fact, that they are constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by it.

Thérèse takes on social responsibility, while Melicent does not. Similarly, Thérèse responds warmly to other people, while Fanny does not. Such examples suggest that

4 See Leary for whom the novel offers a "contrast between Northern (and vulgar) sophistication with the more natural and wholesome Creole customs" (70). This contrast is most strongly illustrated in the dinner that brings together the Worthingtons, representatives of the sophisticated, but spiritually impoverished St. Louis society, and the Duplans, representatives of the rich civilization of the South that suffers, however, from an unwillingness to face social change.

5 When Thérèse visits the old and deserted Morico she is able to cheer him "as no one else in the world was able to do." "Old Morico," Skaggs observes, "clearly sees Thérèse as the complete woman, the embodiment of all things good and true" (76). As Leary points out, there are certain similarities to Madame Ratignolle in *The Awakening* who is described as "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm" (62). In both cases, the Louisiana French element is used to enrich the heroine of the domestic novel and to provide her with an attractive dimension of social grace and sensuousness.

6 Cf. the characterization of Melicent by Skaggs: "Always conscious of the picture she presents and always seeking a satisfying role to play, she regards life as a stage and herself as the star performer" (78).

the attraction of Creole culture is part of a cultural contrast in which the shortcomings and remaining deficits of American culture are supposed to emerge more clearly. Although women like Melicent or Fanny's female friends in St. Louis are specimens of the "modern" woman and more sophisticated than their Creole counterparts, they are also spiritually and emotionally impoverished[7] and respond to this lack with a variety of strategies, ranging from alcoholism to adultery and from ostentation to false intellectualism. It is equally characteristic of these women that they no longer seem to accept in their family life those social and moral responsibilities for which the description of life at Place-du-Bois and especially of Thérèse's behavior serves as a supreme example in the novel. In a word, the basic shortcoming of these women is that they have become selfish.

This, in turn, may explain the underlying logic of one of Thérèse's strongest and, as some critics have argued, strangest acts in the novel: her advice to Hosmer to remarry his former wife Fanny from whom he became divorced after an unhappy marriage. It is Hosmer who – from the point of view of the book – appears morally deficient, which is revealed when he falls in love with Thérèse and has to admit to her that he is divorced. In principle, he would thus be "free" for (the widowed) Thérèse but this is not the way Thérèse sees it. For while the loss of husband may be considered a morally acceptable way for starting a new life, divorce is not. On the contrary, Thérèse condemns divorce as moral cowardice, even in the case where both partners may have agreed to separate, because it is the easy and thus "selfish" way out of a commitment, a way, in other words, to get rid of one's moral and social responsibilities instead of bearing them "manfully." With her advice Thérèse thus assumes a responsibility Hosmer has abnegated and at the same time effectively frees herself from all suspicions of selfishness which may be created by her own interest in Hosmer.

It is at this point that the novel has to shift from local color fiction to the code of the domestic novel, for the task that emerges is to correct Hosmer's loss of moral sense by making him honor his contract to his wife.[8] He who has failed once is given a second chance to demonstrate moral self-discipline and, as is usually the case in the domestic novel, this task can be best fulfilled by self-denial and self-sacrifice – an act that also extends to Thérèse who, without a moment's hesitation, has given up Hosmer for the programmatic reinforcement of a crucial moral principle. Contrary to later heroines of Chopin, her rejection of Hosmer is thus not an act of self-assertion directed against moral convention, but an affirmation of her own will power and independence in the service of a higher principle.

The emergence of the code of the domestic novel within the text relegates its other generic codes to a subordinate position. Fanny's subsequent fate confirms this dominance, for it is determined by a deplorable lack of moral fibre. Although one sympathizes with her because of the loss of the easy social comraderie which she

7 As is Hosmer in whose "dulled emotional life" one catches a glimpse of the age's familiar criticism of the moral and emotional shortcomings of the American businessman. Ewell (38-39) sets Hosmer in relation to other literary versions of the businessman in the Gilded Age.

8 Ewell (36-37) offers an excellent analysis of the significance of marriage and divorce within the context of the novel. See also Stein 170-171.

experienced in St. Louis, the unfailing support and sympathies she receives from her new-and-old husband Hosmer and Thérèse should provide ample compensation. Her move to a new place is also a new chance she blunders away, which is quite in keeping with the domestic novel and illustrates the destructive consequences of a lack of moral principle. That there is, again in keeping with the code of the domestic novel, something like a moral universe handing out well-deserved rewards and retributions is confirmed by the fact that Fanny's death finally opens up the way for a union between Hosmer and Thérèse who have denied their own "selfish" longings for the sake of moral principle.

This reaffirmation of the domestic code not only reflects the persistence of a powerful convention, but is also useful in solving a structural problem of the novel into which Chopin's encoding of female self-definition in terms of Southern local color fiction was bound to run. Usually, in local color fiction of this type the newcomer and "greenhorn" represents the perspective held by civilization. The local color character's world view may be more lively and "colorful" but it is also a morally more deficient one. If Thérèse is to be the spokesperson for a higher and more enriched form of civilization, she must therefore be elevated above the level of a mere actor in a regional comparison, which can be best achieved through the domestic code. Chopin had to draw on this code at this point of the novel in order to save Thérèse from the fate of being just a local color character.

The domestic code, however, useful as it may be to encounter any suspicion of selfishness in the heroine, also has one basic disadvantage: It thwarts all wishes or impulses that cannot be accommodated by its strict moral norms. Thus, it is ill-suited to secure the fulfillment of Chopin's "French" fantasy, the outline of a fuller existence in which social responsibility and individual wishes would be happily united. The domestic code may be ideally suited to elevate its heroine to a pedestal but it also tends to keep her there and thus stands in the way of any prospect of fulfilling her "other" wishes, as, for example, the wish to get Hosmer. One can argue, therefore, that the dominance of the domestic code in which Chopin has neutralized Thérèse's desire also creates a renewed need for other generic options in which individual wishes, maybe even of a transgressive nature, can find expression.

Another code, then, is needed to articulate and act out wishes of the female self that cannot be accommodated by the domestic code. For this purpose, there are basically two genres available in the novel, local color fiction and a surprisingly realistic and suggestive depiction of urban life that points toward the New Woman fiction of the following decades in which a new perspective on the question of female self-assertion and independence was introduced. This narrative is unfolded when Hosmer returns to St. Louis to remarry his wife and enters a world which provides Chopin with a chance to point to certain realities of modern urban life. Fanny, Hosmer's former and future wife, is an alcoholic, while one of her female friends is linked with suggestions of adultery. It is characteristic of all the marriages in this social circle that they are no longer held together by emotional bonds but by convention. In contrast to the requirements of the domestic code, however, Chopin refuses to represent the loss of a moral dimension in melodramatic terms. Other moments and aspects of the novel

confirm this de-melodramatization. Melicent, for example, although superficial and "selfish" in her consumerist attitude toward life, is never condemned, only pitied. In a way, she is a predecessor of Edith Wharton's Lily Bart. Another indication of this de-melodramatization of the urban challenge is that the alcoholism of Hosmer's wife, although clearly conceived as a moral flaw of the first and, especially for a woman, worst order, does not seem to be self-destructive within her social circle in St. Louis. What anchors this world is that all of its social actors have their weaknesses and thus show in their strategies to hide and yet to live with them a certain degree of tolerance toward each other. As soon as Fanny is taken out of this social realm, however, and reenters the moral project of the domestic novel staged at Place-du-Bois, the necessity of a moral melodrama must reassert itself. In terms of the domestic code, Fanny's moral weakness must be declared self-destructive and must lead to her death.

The challenge to the domestic novel which Chopin's presentation of social life in St. Louis implies can also be found in other parts of the book. Critics like Jane Tompkins have pointed out that the world of the domestic novel is one of such small pleasures às the celebration of the daily tea hour. There are glimpses of this, especially in a scene between an exhausted Thérèse and her former nurse and attendant from infancy, Marie Louise, where coffee is served in a cozy little cabin sheltered from the rest of the world. On the whole, however, Chopin takes pride in going beyond such Protestant scarcity. There are, among other things, festive dinners reminiscent of the novel of manners, numerous rides into a luscious country-side, a trip to Paris, and, scattered throughout the text, repeated references to the various pleasures of the senses which would be quite out of place in the world of the domestic novel. Even more striking is the book's different treatment of religion. In the domestic novel, religion provides the supreme source of moral authority. In *At Fault*, a total surrender to religion characteristic of a book like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* occurs only in one instance, Belle Worthington's daughter Lucilla, who is a silly little girl that compensates for her parents' lack of attention by escaping into her own fantasy of joining a convent. The novel's attitude toward such forms of self-sacrifice and toward religion in general is best expressed by the black cook, Aunt Belindy, who says at one point in the book: "Religion – no religion, whar you gwine live ef you don' live in de worl'?" (841) Thus, religious self-sacrifice and strict adherence to moral principle can, in Chopin's view, easily turn into a denial of life which she regards with suspicion.

This is confirmed by a development in the story that brings us closer to its major drama and actual interest. For, in a certain sense, Thérèse may be blamed for Fanny's sorry fate, because her insistence on the priority of moral principle is responsible for taking Fanny out of her social realm (in which she seemed to live quite comfortably) and for transferring her to a world in which she feels displaced and is clearly at a social and psychological disadvantage. One interesting point of the novel is that Chopin is not unaware of the problem. In fact, she takes care to explain the logic of Fanny's gradual breakdown of self-discipline, for example, during a joint excursion on horse back, in which Fanny, who has never learned to ride a horse and is thus put on a lame mare, is literally "left behind." Similarly, there are moments in which Thérèse seems to be in doubt about her own advice to Hosmer. Fanny and Hosmer may be "at fault," but so, it

turns out, is Thérèse because she has interfered in other people's lives in a self-righteous manner. This is an interesting moment of moral complication in the novel and it is this dramatization of "moral complexity" that I consider to be the book's central project and a significant link with Chopin's later fiction. What is dramatized here, similar to her later work, is the conflict between two impulses: a commitment to the idea of a moral norm or higher principle, still very conventionally defined through the code of the domestic novel, and, at the same time, a wish to escape the self-denial of the domestic code, that is, the search for a way to express one's own wishes and longings without the stigma of "selfishness."

As I have argued, the code of the domestic novel is not suited to permit the heroine such self-assertion because this would seriously undermine her effectiveness as the voice of a higher moral principle. It may be said, in fact, that the novel's main move of resemanticization – its shift from a moral condemnation of Hosmer's divorce to the cautious admission of Thérèse that she, too, may have been "at fault" – is a response to this collision of codes. If the text is to be of any value for Chopin's pursuit of the possibilities of female self-realization, the novel must bring Thérèse down from the pedestal on which she has been placed at the beginning. It is here that the local color code serves its purpose, for it provides a spectrum of "deviant" characters standing in various relations to the moral center of the book. This is, in fact, one of the main functions of local color fiction in the transition from the domestic novel to nineteenth century American realism. Because Thérèse cannot be allowed to act out certain impulses and wishes, Chopin has to introduce other and more "typical" local color characters in order to provide a contrast to the noble drama of principles unfolding at the top of the social ladder. In this strategy of narrative doubling, the novel contains three types of characters that illustrate three versions and possibilities of transgression: black, half-breed, and Creole. Significantly, they also represent three shades of dark. There seems to be a semantics of race and color at work in the book which also decisively affects Chopin's treatment of the Louisiana French.

In the context of *At Fault*, Chopin's use of African American characters proceeds along conventional local color lines. Her, on the whole, rather stereotypical treatment of the plantation's child-like "darkies" provides much better evidence for the fact that Chopin was, at least to a certain degree, "complicit" with her culture than her inability to radically transcend an ideology of literary representation. This "complicity" is also another illustration of the by now well-known phenomenon that people with "progressive" views in one area of life may nevertheless lack a similarly acute awareness in other areas. I think that the uncanny effect her portraits of the plantation's blacks as shiftless and irresponsible, but good-humored creates today is due to the fact that their presentation remains entirely controlled by the local color code, as can be seen in the attempt to accurately represent the blacks' supposedly funny ungrammatical ways of speaking.[9] Because they are "subhuman" in the sense of living on another

9 One should add, however, that this is not the whole story as far as Chopin's treatment of African Americans in her literary work is concerned. On this point see the discussion of Per Seyersted in his critical biography of Chopin: "That some of Kate Chopin's Negroes are stereotypes is hardly

plane of existence, however, their portrait can also remain benevolent. They are not considered participants in a moral drama but standing outside of it, often shrewd observers, yet never players themselves.

This is different in the case of the half-breed Joçint who, in contrast to his well-meaning father, does not accept the new situation that develops after the arrival of Hosmer. Joçint finally responds to the discipline required by the new stage of industrial production with raw counter aggression when he burns down Hosmer's mill. Critics have, as a rule, tactfully overlooked the fact that in this case, too, Chopin remains trapped by local color stereotypes. In the world of the plantation, in which the river and a natural, almost seasonal, sequence of growth and decay provide metaphors for an organically conceived world, the half-breed signals a violation of the concept of organic and, thus, of seemingly natural laws. As in many other examples of local color fiction, he turns out to be the supreme villain of the story, who, because of the impossibility of organic integration, has to be violently eliminated from the social body in order to make its regeneration possible.

The role of African Americans and the half-breed Joçint may help to explain why characters of French origin play such an important role in Chopin's fiction. In the available spectrum of local color characters they are best suited to express "transgressive" impulses in a sympathetic and thus acceptable way. Of these Louisiana French characters, it is Grégoire Santien who is most emphatically portrayed as a character combining all the strengths and weaknesses associated with Creole culture. Whereas Hosmer has difficulties showing his feelings, Grégoire is open and enthusiastic, always ready to act, sing, or shed a tear. His courtship of Melicent is in many ways a reverse image of the courtship between Hosmer and Thérèse. While the latter are inhibited by the norms of the domestic code, Melicent and Grégoire indulge in some of the colorful possibilities inherent in a courtship in the picturesque setting of the Louisiana countryside. What is positive in Grégoire, however, as, for example, his open expression of feeling, also signals a moral weakness, namely, an inability to exercise self-control. As a consequence, he can never become the central character of the novel, especially as long as the domestic code prevails. When he is rejected by Melicent, because he has acted out his rage about the arsonist Joçint by shooting him on the spot, Grégoire is unable to control himself. He falls into a series of self-destructive acts until he is finally killed in a shooting incident and thus meets the typical fate of the unreformed and unreformable deviant in local color fiction. This lack of moral discipline, however, also makes him the ideal complementary figure to

surprising. What is remarkable, meanwhile, is that she accepted the colored people as persons worthy of serious study, and that she in her writings treats them as people and with little condescension. She obviously could not see the whole Negro .... Her picture of the Negro is thus somewhat limited. But it is truthful as far as it goes, and she often succeeds in making him into a full, convincing human being. She endows him with a basic vitality which includes not only such traditional qualities as irresponsibility and a blind fidelity, but also a sound scepticism and a sense of reality, qualities then more attributed to, say, the French, than to the Negroes" (79-80). – In his study *New Orleans Writers and the Negro*, Frisby discusses some of the stories in which African Americans are treated more individually and provides support for Seyersted's cautious attempt at differentiation.

Thérèse (to whom he is related by distant family ties). While she only allows her wishes and longings to come out in protected and secluded moments so that they never, at any given moment, endanger her social authority, he acts out his impulses without restraint.

Grégoire is the book's supreme example for a second function of Creole culture in Chopin's work. He stands for a readiness to express his own wishes spontaneously and without inhibitions – a behavior made possible by a lack of self-discipline that would be intolerable in the moral center of the book but provides a continuous reminder of pleasures and possibilities denied by the domestic code. As the most colorful representative of Creole culture in the novel, Grégoire combines both its potential and its dangers. In his depth of feeling, generosity, and strong commitments he stands in positive opposition to the emotionally impoverished and selfish world of St. Louis. But in his lack of self-control he also illustrates the dangers of an often self-complacent tradition which derives moral norms from social conventions.[10] In contrast to the uprooted Americans of the book, Grégoire may be nourished by an elaborate cultural tradition, but it is a code of civilization which is doomed to decline, because of its inability and unwillingness to adjust to social change.

The ambitious cultural and literary project of the book thus emerges more clearly. Culturally, it seems to be Chopin's goal to turn the clash of the two deficient civilizations into a new synthesis which would be able to solve the problem of an individual torn between the conflicting demands of these two cultures. On the literary level, this would mean to forge a new genre out of the literary codes from which *At Fault* takes its point of departure, a genre which would be able to link social commitment and individual wish more convincingly than existing generic codes and would thus also provide new possibilities of self-definition. There must be a third way between the questionable freedom of the self in the New Woman world of St. Louis and its subordination in the domestic rituals of self-sacrifice. In the celebration of the social and sensual pleasures of Creole culture, local color fiction initially seems to offer such an alternative by confronting these deficient worlds with the image of a richer and fuller existence derived not from the postulates of religion but from the customs of an organically developed culture. Chopin, however, also uses the domestic code and the urban world of St. Louis to confront Creole culture with the dangers of a lack of moral discipline and a complacent provinciality that appears unfit to meet the challenge of the new industrial world entering with Hosmer and the railroad. A similar

10 As Leary points out, Grégoire is a type and a person whom Kate Chopin would sketch again in her short stories: "Grégoire's older brother, Placide, is the title character in 'A No Account Creole,' his oldest brother, Hector, is a central character in 'In and Out of Old Natchitoches,' and Grégoire is gallantly the hero of 'In Sabine,' the first three stories in Mrs. Chopin's *Bayou Folk*" (64n.). A more detailed analysis not only of the repeated reappearance of the Santien brothers but also of other Creole characters is provided by Lattin in her essay on "Kate Chopin's Repeating Characters." On Grégoire, Lattin remarks: "An exaggeration of all the traits of the clan, good and bad, the youngest brother Grégoire completes the family portrait and adds significantly to the social reality of Chopin's Cane River world" (22). A comprehensive survey of the appearance and reappearance of all characters in Chopin's fictional world is given in Bonner's book *The Kate Chopin Companion*.

qualification applies to the Creole version of the self. Whereas the domestic novel denies the physical and sensuous side of the self, the local color character, guided and justified in his behavior by tradition, often remains a prisoner of his inner drives and "undisciplined desires" (800). For Chopin's purpose, all three worlds must therefore be considered unsatisfactory in the final analysis, all three can and must be used to put each other in perspective.

Similarly, all of the three literary codes which Chopin found at her disposal when she began to write have their limitations and cannot provide a satisfactory definition of the female self. *At Fault* is a remarkable novel in that it registers this impasse and sets out to create not only a synthesis between opposing cultural perspectives and definitions of the self but also to develop a new literary model which would be able to offer a convincing literary expression of this ideal synthesis. In this project, the prospect of a new use and function of fiction emerges: Whereas the domestic novel needs fiction to reaffirm the validity of a moral structure and local color fiction to disguise and then act out a temptation in a sequence of disturbance and reintegration, the potential function emerging in Chopin's scrutiny of the usefulness of given generic codes for the purposes of female self-definition is the use of fiction as a space in which the possibility of an independence that does not yet exist can be explored and mapped out.

As the subsequent history of the novel's reception suggests, however, *At Fault* failed in its attempt to develop this new genre. The major problem of the book remains that it can only achieve a new synthesis of cultural responsibility and individual wish by a highly arbitrary plot construction and by drowning Hosmer's unfortunate wife, Fanny. The broadening of the self's possibilities at the end is thus not "the inevitable result of the heroine's actions throughout the novel" (Koloski 91)[11] but an easy fictional reward for those who have upheld the values of civilization and moral discipline. Fiction is used not only to symbolically restructure and disguise a wish but also to dissolve the potential conflict so that no blame can be attributed to the heroine who, in turn, never has to make any painful decisions. In typical popular culture fashion, a tension or conflict within the self – in this case, between the wish to be morally blameless, if not superior, and the wish for social and sexual self-fulfillment – is turned into a first-next sequence so that both wishes can be realized without getting into each other's way. With this strategy, Chopin squanders away fiction's potential to explore and mediate tensions within the self more openly. Instead, "Thérèse finds it possible to satisfy her need for love without, like the other women in *At Fault*, sacrificing the fulfillment of one of her needs" (Skaggs 87).

Behind this "painless" reconciliation of potentially conflicting wishes one may see a longing for a unified, yet undivided existence that provides a link between Chopin's early novel and *The Awakening*. But such a link also suggests an important difference. Whereas Edna Pontellier's sense of unity, achieved in her swimming into the wide open sea, marks the final point of her awakening and is thus "earned," Thérèse's unity of self is preserved and protected by a benevolent fate in reward for her moral

11 See also Fletcher: "In the conventional ending, Thérèse, after 'following what seemed only right,' appears to have proved that constancy and patience can bring happiness" (123).

discipline. It is exactly her "triumph," in other words, which draws attention to the main reason why *At Fault* failed in its ambitious attempt to develop a new genre for the purposes of female self-definition. While *The Awakening* takes its point of departure from the acknowledgement of a split in the female character between outward existence and inward life, in *At Fault* this split is not yet openly acknowledged.

It remains the main problem of the novel that it pulls in two directions. On the one hand, Thérèse, because of her insistence on Hosmer's remarriage, is "at fault" and the domestic novel's code thus criticized for being life-denying. On the other hand, Chopin continues to accept a code which allows the expression of mutual attraction only within the context of an exemplary civilizing mission. On the one hand, local color fiction is used to provide an alternative to the world of the domestic novel, an alternative in which an idealized version of Creole culture serves as a means for criticizing the self-denial demanded by the domestic code. On the other hand, Thérèse cannot remain a local color character, because this would also imply a certain degree of inferiority. Therefore, Chopin continuously draws on the domestic code to elevate her heroine above the local color world and to turn her into the supreme spokesperson for an ideal state of civilization. However, the idealized mastery of this morally almost transcendent figure also threatens to suffocate the temptations which the local color world of Louisiana French offers. In short, the novel wants to indulge in a fantasy of mastery but it also strives to take its heroine down from a stance of complete superiority in order to open up new possibilities of life for her.

Thérèse's potential transformation from moral guardian into developing subject actually points in the direction of a realist *Bildungsroman*, one, in which the moral dichotomies of the domestic code would be replaced by a more complex version of inner development. Thérèse's insight into the pitfalls of self-appointed moral guardianship promises such a process of growth and moral complication, and it may indeed be argued that the main challenge Chopin faced in writing *At Fault* was to find ways of sustaining this complication. She fails because this complication would endanger her heroine's superiority. In the choice between mastery and complication, Chopin finally opts for the former in order to secure the moral structure of the novel. Nevertheless, in its shifts and meanderings between generic levels and its doubling of the Creole self, *At Fault* indicates an emerging conflict – a conflict that was acted out much more openly in following texts, until it finally emerged in remarkably radical and courageous versions. In this sense, *At Fault* is a "missing link," not only in the gradual development of Chopin's project but also in its still uncertain and somewhat uneasy search for generic and narrative models that would be suitable for the dramatization of a conflict around which Chopin's whole work came to be centered.

In this search, Louisiana French played an essential role. One should add, however, that it is not necessarily the role most critics seem to have in mind. The problem is closely linked with an assessment of local color fiction in general which is, after all, the literary code in which references to Creole culture and other aspects of Louisiana French assume their function in Chopin's work. But what is this function? There is a continuing tendency to see the purpose of local color fiction in its "graphic" portrayals

of regional customs, characters and dialects.[12] Yet, as our discussion has shown, the primary interest in Chopin's treatment of Creole culture does not lie in a record of local customs. Rather, it should be attributed to the usefulness of Creole culture for the imagination to deal with certain conflicts within the self without having to acknowledge them openly. To read Chopin's work as a more or less truthful representation of Louisiana French and its Creole and Cajun culture would be to miss the main function of the signifier "French" in her work. It would also mean to repeat a move by which literary criticism has neutralized the book's challenge and would be a reenactment of *At Fault*'s effort to distance and disguise its own inner divisions.

To simply argue that local color fiction is mainly of interest because it provides us with the portrait of a "colorful" region and to thus restrict its significance to a dubious mimetic merit, is to miss its major point, which is the staging of a drama between two cultural codes. The depiction of a regional culture in American local color fiction usually serves a fictional scenario in which a conflict between the perspective of Victorian civilization and a tempting, as well as threatening, otherness is acted out in a way in which this conflict need not be openly acknowledged but can be effectively disguised as an encounter with local custom or colorful regional eccentricity. In this sense, local color fiction was the privileged genre in the Gilded Age to dramatize division and doubleness. This, I claim, is also the primary function Creole culture serves in *At Fault*: to allow a "doubling" of a self that is torn by conflicting wishes and employs fiction as an imaginary space to explore the possibilities of a mediation between cultural norms and individual wishes.

In *At Fault*, Chopin draws on an idealized version of Creole culture to redefine the domestic self as a "fuller" being combining moral principle with social mastery. At the same time, the local color character can represent impulses and wishes that cannot be openly acknowledged. He or she thus emphatically asserts the reality of passion without tainting the heroine. In this sense, Grégoire, for example, serves as a kind of double of Thérèse – offering a version of the self that has to be violently expunged in Chopin's search for a synthesis that would neither be characterized by the passionlessness of the domestic code, nor by the potential for passionate excess characterizing Creole culture. Thus, Creole culture serves a paradoxical double function: to tempt the self with social mastery but also to frighten it with the prospect of self-destructive passions. Or, to put it differently: to create an awareness of the

12 This view is most strongly emphasized by Ringe: "A novice at writing fiction, Chopin seems, rather, to have drawn freely upon her own experience in Natchitoches parish to develop in her earliest fiction a picture of the social world of northwest Louisiana in the years immediately following the Civil War and Reconstruction" (157). Similarly, Lattin writes: "Viewed broadly, Chopin's repeating characters serve to flesh out the skeleton of her central fictional world, creating a full and rich social reality. This is particularly true when she writes of the members of the three Creole families, the Santiens, Laballières, and Duplans" (21). – The fact that Louisiana French can also have another function in Chopin's work is more readily acknowledged in the case of *The Awakening*. See, for example, May: "These elements of local color – absence of prudery, familiarity, and open expression of affection – are all crucial to the atmosphere that causes Edna's 'awakening,' and they are qualities taken as a whole that seem quite unique – in America at least – to the French culture of the Creole society of Southern Louisiana" (1033).

necessity of moral principle in response to the temptations which the description of Creole culture helps to acknowledge and articulate. It is in these moments of cultural negotiation and generic interplay that I find fiction to tell us most about social reality.

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