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# Criticizing Local Color: Innovative Conformity in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction

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THOMAS L. MORGAN

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# Criticizing Local Color: Innovative Conformity in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction

It is the height of art to conceal art.

Kate Chopin, *Commonplace Book*

I wonder if the editor, the writer, and the public are ever at one.

Kate Chopin, "As You Like It"

ONE OF THE DIFFICULTIES IN USING REGIONALISM AS a descriptive category to discuss late nineteenth-century literature is the series of shifting relationships it has with other terms describing literary production. Not only is there regionalism's implied connection to realism, there is naturalism, romance, and even local color to consider, if one desires to distinguish between types of regional literary production. Added to this initial framework are the unspoken assumptions concerning intersecting definitions of generic form: the novel is implicitly connected to realism (and later naturalism), while the short story is traditionally associated with regionalism. Further complicating both sets of terms is the implied hierarchical relationship between the realist novel and the publishing industry on the one hand, and the regionalist short story and periodical culture on the other. Collectively, these terms create a series of unequal and asymmetrical relationships that, while informing our current discussions of literature, also exert unseen influence on those debates, primarily because they are more often silently perpetuated than consciously recognized.

This essay will not necessarily resolve these issues; I do not intend to do away with my critical predecessors, or offer a newer and, by proxy, better theoretical framework to explain the difficulty of negotiating lit-

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erary form and history. Rather, my interest is in the ways the silent relationships informing discussions of late nineteenth-century literature—silent because those in the present are no longer directly privy to the debates of the past—continue to impact contemporary critical analysis of these literary categories. My particular interest is in the development of an aesthetic definition for regional short stories by *Atlantic-group* periodical editors (as opposed to regional short fiction published in book collections, often by the exact same publishing houses), precisely as these literary definitions impacted authors' ability to produce and publish work. Nancy Glazener observes in *Reading for Realism* that "classification is always an intensely ideological activity, and the classification of fiction in the late nineteenth century is no exception" (1); I would extend this ideological classifying to the positioning of authors by institutional forces like those embodying *Atlantic-group* periodical editors (hereafter, *Atlantic-group*), as well as to the strategic responses authors used to circumvent and question these organizations' ideological imperatives.

The mainstream popular success of regionalism and short story writing in periodicals led to increased editorial control. *Atlantic-group* editors in search of local color had specific ideas about the stories they wanted; they collectively viewed the regional short story as an apolitical form focusing on America's rural byways, one that offered a pleasant ending with a positive moral message. Although exceptions did appear, this definition increasingly governed editorial decisions. During the 1880s and '90s, it also created potential differences in content between stories published in periodicals and those in short story collections; in focusing on location as well as the mimetic fidelity and authenticity of characters, the explicit political dimensions of *Atlantic-group* stories were elided in favor of documenting cultural and regional difference. Thus, while the growth of periodical culture created new opportunities for authors, these opportunities came with specific parameters regarding the formal possibilities available to authors. Although the novel had its own set of formal limitations, the political efficacy of the form more readily allowed authors to circumvent the stringent limitations of periodical short fiction. Editorial prescriptions represented a material reality that short story authors had to learn to negotiate. For authors simply interested in getting published, this consideration represented one hurdle. Authors interested in publishing work challenging established social hierarchies, however, had to learn to disguise any type of political

commentary with narrative innovations that would allow their work to circumvent editorial censure.

Kate Chopin's emergence as an author was governed by both these concerns. Although she was by no means the only author to experience the influence of *Atlantic*-group editors—Charles Chesnutt, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and even Hamlin Garland had similar experiences—Chopin's negotiation is instructive in understanding the narrative strategies authors like these developed to subtly hide their political commentary within the framework of regional writing in general, and periodical culture in specific. In the interaction between authors, editors, and audience in the *Atlantic*-group culture's construction of the literary, my interest is in the strategies authors created to negotiate editors and audience. In *Cultures of Letters*, Richard Brodhead argues that "literary production [is tied] to a group with a distinct social character [and that] differently constituted social publics did not just provide different audiences for writing. They provided audiences for different kinds of writing: each supplied a public for the particular selection or version of writing that spoke to its cultural identity and social needs" (6). While I broadly agree, there are also slippages between production and consumption, between, for example, an author's internalized sense of the literary and the audience's reception of that work. Certainly, each particular audience consumes a "different type of writing" that speaks "to its cultural identity and social needs." But while authors are constrained by that "version of writing," they are not exclusively bound by that vision. Instead, they are free to manipulate their work within the cultural expectations created by institutional power structures, specifically when interested in challenging structural inequality. My focus is thus on production *in relation to* consumption—in unpacking the relationship between authorial production and editorial governance as mediated by authors' and editors' assumptions regarding audience reception and consumption. In Chopin's case, mapping out the slippage between her literary interests and those of her audience gives us insight into the problems created by reception for authors interested in using short fiction as a means to intervene socially or politically.

In *The Problem of American Realism*, Michael Davitt Bell argues that Sarah Orne Jewett's current status as a realist is a product of critics positioning her professional identity as more important than her regional affiliation. For Kate Chopin, the problem is the exact opposite: regional

affiliation trumps professional identity, both then and now. It is her choice of subject matter that informs her local color designation. As Eric Sundquist observes:

Economic or political power can itself be seen to be definitive of a realist aesthetic, in that those in power (say, white urban males) have been more often judged “realists,” while those removed from the seats of power (say, Midwesterners, blacks, immigrants, or women) have been categorized as regionalists. (503)

The implicit hierarchy linking the novel with realism and the short story with regionalism is connected to the institutional and “political power” represented by *Atlantic*-group culture. Because the categories of realism and local color—rather than the novel or the short story—govern the debates contemporary critics use to position authors like Chopin, her place in the canon depends on the texts critics examine; those focusing on her short fiction turn to local color, while those examining *The Awakening* point to a limited connection to realism.<sup>1</sup> Neither group, however, appears happy with these designations, in part because the asymmetrical generic relationships between the novel and the short story that influence discussions of realism and regionalism are silently reproduced. In Chopin’s case, examining her work in conjunction with its publishing history can provide an understanding of the way these literary categories continue to exert undue influence on our reading practices.

Chopin’s private comments about the aesthetic function of art as well as her published critical essays highlight her commonalities with realist *Atlantic*-group editors like William Dean Howells and Richard Watson Gilder. At the same time, her public reception by editors and critics marked her as a local color writer. While she espoused aesthetic sensibilities more in tune with realist literary production, she used local color writing to break into print. Consequently, her designation as a regional writer by reviewers had a disproportionate effect on her work’s reception. Analyzing Chopin’s aesthetic beliefs in relation to the role established for the regional short story by *Atlantic*-group editors clarifies the seemingly critical contradictions found in her work. Rather than treating her short stories as merely local color—rather than subsuming regionalist short fiction into *Atlantic*-group editors’ larger project—I locate Chopin’s work in the context of the period’s literary hierarchies

that positioned regionalism and the short story as less important than the authoritative space granted to both realism and the novel. Articulating Chopin's particular literary compromise requires a different reading practice, one that can account for the aesthetic norms created by *Atlantic*-group culture while also recognizing the influences affecting authors of periodical short stories as opposed to those facing authors of novels or even short story collections. The problem with locating Chopin's correct "place" in American literature stems from the disparate reading practices applied to short stories and novels,<sup>2</sup> a dilemma that continues to influence the reading of her work more than a century later.

#### REGIONALISM'S ROLE

My focus on *Atlantic*-group culture draws on both Nancy Glazener's definition of *Atlantic*-group magazines in *Reading for Realism*,<sup>3</sup> and Michael Elliott's examination of the connections between Franz Boas-influenced definitions of culture and literary realism in *The Culture Concept*. Glazener documents high-culture periodicals' institutional power, arguing "The *Atlantic* and the other magazines that sponsored realism comprised an institution comparable to the Lowell Institute, or Harvard University, or the Museum of Fine Arts, insofar as they exercised the elite privilege of cultural outreach" (33–34). Elliott's interest in "the shifting definitions of culture at work in American writing" (xii) and his description of that culture as "a configuration of manners, mores, and beliefs peculiar to a people" (xiii), or in this case, a particular social institution, resonate with the established power embodied in *Atlantic*-group culture. In this sense, as Elliott argues, "ethnography and literary realism developed similar strategies of publication that responded to problems related to the textual representation of group-based difference" (xiv). Or as he later clarifies, "The introduction of the culture concept affected not only *what* stories Americans might tell about their social divisions, but also *how* they might tell those stories" (13–14). As might be expected, the *what* and *how* were institutionally specific.

The institutional power wielded by high-culture periodical editors thus influenced the ways authors imagined their work. As Richard Brodhead notes:

Writing has no life separate from the particularized mechanisms that bring it to public life. . . . Each of these schemes of

literary production is bound up with a distinct social audience: in its production each addresses and helps call together some particular social grouping, a portion of the whole potential public identified by its readerly interests but by other unifying social interests as well. (5)

Brodhead's connections between production and reception articulate the culturally sanctioned definitions of the literary, a connection Glazener further qualifies: "Only certain kinds of writing in certain cultural locations could count as literary, Brodhead emphasizes, and I would add that only certain ways of reading could count as literary" (2). This notion of literary reading—what Glazener deems reading for realism—was shaped in part by periodical book reviews, again emphasizing the institutional power of *Atlantic-group* culture: book reviews "not only endorsed certain ways of reading that shaped the reception of texts, but they also affected authors' ways of reading and authors' understandings of the readings their works were likely to receive, understandings that in turn were registered in the authors' productions" (15).

Further shaping the context of production and consumption is literary access. Brodhead observes that regionalism was "so structured as to extend opportunity above all to groups traditionally distanced from literary lives" (116), before clarifying that "Regionalism, we could now say, made places for authors but made them *in a certain position*. By virtue of its historical situation, when writers came into authorship through this genre they were placed in inevitable relation with the field of forces that structured its social place" (137–38). Glazener observes that in "the wake of numerous literary histories emphasizing that realism opened up literature to populations previously excluded from it, we risk losing sight of the fact that realism could constrain representation as well as liberate it" (23). Both note the tension between opportunity and conformity for authors; when this tension is applied to *Atlantic-group* culture, access hinges upon editors' and authors' differing expectations. For *Atlantic-group* editors, granting access through publication rewards work that mirrors the beliefs of that institution, whereas for authors interested in challenging established hierarchies, gaining access through publication indicates the successful masking of political commentary intended to question that institutional power, whether their work ultimately achieves that end result or not. My argument thus builds on

Stephanie Foote's in *Regional Fictions*, where she asserts that "regional writing developed strategies to transform rather than passively resist the meaning of the social and economic developments of late-nineteenth century urban life" (3). These strategies allow Chopin and others to consciously engage the publishing paradigms created by *Atlantic*-group culture; by modifying their narrative tactics, authors could engage the audiences they were interested in transforming.<sup>4</sup>

Access therefore creates a series of relational possibilities, specifically as it applies to the work of individual authors and/or their relationships with different editors. On the one hand, short fiction and articles published by *Atlantic*-group editors "promoted the recognition of groups normally outside the center of highbrow literature but also stressed their separation from that center, an idea that granted those groups integrity yet enforced upon them a kind of stasis" (Elliott 59). Here, editors present readers with regional difference, but bracket it off as timeless and unchanging, ultimately unable to participate in current configurations of American life. On the other hand are stories like the ones Charles Chesnutt published in the *Atlantic*: "Although these stories dramatize the injustice and violence of slavery, they also extend the plantation tradition of writing, which readers had been trained by authors such as [Thomas Nelson] Page to recognize as a form of nostalgia" (78). Chesnutt, like Paul Laurence Dunbar,<sup>5</sup> saw the short story as a means to challenge white racism; while Chesnutt's efforts met with only limited success, his journals and correspondence clearly signal his political intentions.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, this slippage between Chesnutt's subversive political message and his audience's actual reception is crucial for understanding Chesnutt's negotiation of *Atlantic*-group culture as well as the strategies employed by other authors interested in questioning institutionalized inequality. Drawing on Glazener's previous comments, I would add it was not only "authors such as Page" who trained readers to recognize Chesnutt's work; book reviews and editorial columns also sanctioned the public function of Southern plantation stories in *Atlantic*-group periodicals.

The problems facing authors like Chesnutt, Dunbar, and Chopin were the supplemental expectations *Atlantic*-group editors had for the regional writing they published. Local color's role in periodical culture was to help build the sympathetic bonds necessary to heal the post-Civil War nation, mapping out regional differences to build a unified



national audience. The explicit linking together of sympathy and local color writing is common in the critical work of the period. As Brander Matthews explains in his "Introduction" to *The Short-Story* (1907), "For more than threescore years now [a host of American writers of the local color short story] have been exploring these United States; and they have been explaining the people of one state to the population of the others, increasing our acquaintance with our fellow-citizens and broadening our sympathy" (33). Matthews positions the short story as the means to construct and promote a unified national consciousness for the United States, connecting its diverse population by allowing citizens to replace scorn with sympathy in building a collective relational identity. Further, Matthews sees this sympathy as both "useful" and "necessary" (33), in part because it allows authors to "deal directly with that special part of an immense country with which any one of them chanced to be most familiar" (32). For Matthews, this expanded sense of sympathy would allow existing differences to fall away in favor of an increased collective knowledge of American life.

Although Matthews's explanation clarifies the role of sympathy in regional writing, this appeal only requires readers to find connections with an imagined community of readers (read: white and middle class) in the United States, and not with those being depicted in *Atlantic*-group periodicals. While such an identification moves readers away from sectional affiliation and toward envisioning the United States as a unified whole, it does not erase the distinctions between those being represented and those enjoying the representations—as described by Elliot, those depicted remain separate from readers by an "enforced . . . stasis" (59). Sympathy instead connects middle- to upper-class readers across the country by creating sentimental attachment to the quaint and picturesque lower-class groups documented for their enjoyment. By turning the short story into an acceptable art form, by giving it a "necessary" and "useful" purpose in depicting those on the margins, the clash of sectional difference is transformed into the sympathy of national inclusion. Matthews's notion of sympathy simultaneously overcomes the differences between members of the upper middle class while still maintaining those distinctions between the upper and lower classes, foregrounding the interests of one group at the expense of the other.

Howells' editorship of *Harper's Monthly* made him a spokesman for regional writing as a form of national democratic inclusion. His com-

ments on regional writing in his September 1887 "Editor's Study" column sound strikingly similar to Matthews's:

Men are more like than unlike one another: let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity. . . . [A] great number of very good writers are instinctively striving to make each part of the country and each phase of our civilization known to all the other parts; and their work is not narrow in any feeble or vicious sense. (96-98)

Using the word "instinctive" grounds Howells's literary project of democracy and inclusion in biological necessity, with "each part" knowing "all the other parts" serving as the natural outgrowth of a common national imperative. Again, a focus on the work being done at the expense of those represented foregrounds that the gains are for the readership Howells addresses. As Foote remarks in *Regional Fictions*, "Howells devoted column after editorial column to elaborating regional writing's connection to the idea of a strong, democratic national identity. . . . In championing the local, and the local-color story, Howells directly yokes the project of regional writing to the project of democracy" (7), a project based upon building a broad national sympathy for *Atlantic-group* periodical readers.

In order to avoid the discussion of taboo subject matter and maintain an apolitical stance, *Atlantic-group* editors regularly touted the social responsibilities accompanying their roles, as well as the moral obligations periodicals had as cultural institutions.<sup>7</sup> The young and virtuous female reader allowed editors to justify publication standards different from those applied to stories in collections. Howells discusses the relationship between editors and young female readers in his June 1889 "Editor's Study" column: "Between the editor of a reputable English or American magazine and the families which receive it there is a tacit agreement that he will print nothing which a father may not read to his daughter, or safely leave her to read herself" (199).<sup>8</sup> Rather than seeing this as a limitation, Howells indicates that America's reading public has "grown comparatively decent" (198), expecting increasingly refined work and subject matter from authors. He continues, "[The] editor did not create the situation; but it exists, and he could not even attempt to change it without many sorts of disaster. He respects it, therefore, with

the good faith of an honest man" (199). His language redirects the engrained mores of periodical culture back onto authors themselves, implying that those who complain are unable to get in tune with America's new literary standards.<sup>9</sup> In absolving the editor for performing his job in "good faith," however, Howells intentionally downplays his role in shaping those same readerly values.

Surprisingly, not all authors agreed with Howells. Frank Norris notes in "The Decline of the Magazine Short Story" that "the great merit of the stories of these 'magazinists'—the one quality which endears them to the editors, is that they are what in editorial slang is called 'safe.' . . . It is the 'young girl' and the family center table that determine the standard of the American short story" (28). Contrary to Howells's claim to editorial "good faith," Norris sees the young female reader and her reciprocal editor as silencing the creative opportunities available to short story authors.<sup>10</sup> His comments argue for keeping the creative control of literary material in the hands of authors, not editors. However, Howells's editorial comments articulate the social function of the literary from the perspective of *Atlantic*-group periodicals; unsympathetic or objectionable representations that did not maintain an aesthetic focus complicit with their institutional interests were excluded. While established (and white) authors like Norris could criticize the boundaries imposed by editors under the guise of "protecting" female readers, others scrupulously respected these standards to stay in editors' good graces.

Chopin's short fiction reflects an understanding of the literary conditions established by *Atlantic*-group editors. It also reveals an awareness that her authorial intentions would not necessarily alter her audience's perceptions. While Chopin does not always engage the political components of her subject matter in her work, when she does, she does so indirectly; she is cognizant that her short fiction needed to conform to editorial expectations. Thus, even though Chopin's writing publicly participates in the local color production of difference, at the same time she attempts to disrupt those categories from within. Her private bristling at restrictions imposed by editors and the reading public clarifies the necessity of considering the slippage between production and consumption when examining her negotiation of editorial paradigms. By mapping the literary and social relations found in her stories, my goal is to identify the institutional logic influencing short

story writing in *Atlantic-group* culture in specific, and late nineteenth-century literary production in general.

CRITICIZING LOCAL COLOR: 'LA BELLE ZORAÏDE' AND  
'A GENTLEMAN OF BAYOU TÊCHE'

Chopin's learning curve in regards to the mores of periodical editors was swift. After the failure of her self-published first novel, *At Fault*, in 1890 she turned to short stories. By mid-1893, she had published nine stories, with four others awaiting publication, including one in the *Century*, edited by Richard Watson Gilder.<sup>11</sup> Gilder's advice for revising "A No-Account Creole" in July 1891 was part of Chopin's introduction to the editorial standards governing *Atlantic-group* culture; as Emily Toth describes in *Kate Chopin*, Gilder's comments "showed Kate Chopin how to make her story conform to the genteel tradition" (203). Chopin's letter accompanying the revised story notes that she made the "girl's character clearer. . . . to convey the impression of sweetness and strength, keen sense of right, and physical charm beside" (*Miscellany* 106). In addition, she "further changed and eliminated passages that seemed to me crude" (106), corrections that indicate her interest in bringing her writing in line with Gilder's vision. In closing, Chopin admitted, "your letter has given me strong hope that you may find the story worthy of publication" (106), a "hope" rewarded by Gilder's acceptance of her story with "sincere pleasure" (107). This early experience marks Chopin's initiation into the literary distinctions necessary for success in *Atlantic-group* periodicals.

Chopin's first short story collection, *Bayou Folk*, was published on 24 March 1894. Subsequent reviews identify her work as local color. Reviewers celebrate her insights into a previously untapped source of literary inspiration, lauding her artistic skills in relation to the expectations for such writing. As an anonymous reviewer for the *Critic* asserts:

It is in the folk that inhabit these taciturn wildernesses that Miss (?) Chopin introduces to us in her unpretentious, unheralded little book. She is evidently familiar at first hand with the illiterate Creoles, the old broken-down plantations, the queer *patois* people, the bayou landscapes to which she leads us in these simple tales, whose very simplicity increases their verisimilitude. . . . Personal familiarity with much of this unique

region tells us that Miss Chopin's work is true to nature and often singularly dramatic in substance. . . . there is photographic realism, shrewdness of observation and a fine eye for picturesque situations: which is only saying that Miss Chopin is herself, and nobody else. (300)

The reviewer's comments focus on the fidelity and accuracy of Chopin's representations: the "simplicity" of character and storyline subsequently reinforces the cultural norms expected from this setting. While the reviewer focuses on the differences characters display in the text—they are described as both "illiterate" and "queer" in comparison to those who will read the stories—it is Chopin's acquaintance with her subject matter that creates her "verisimilitude," that makes her characters "picturesque" examples for readers to enjoy. This descriptive terminology is indicative of the linked set of discursive terms traditionally describing local color writing in periodical reviews; as the collective language found in reviews of Chopin's collection suggests, the "simplicity" of her writing makes it "charming," "fresh," and "novel," simultaneously allowing her to record her characters with an "exactness" and "fidelity" that is "true to nature."<sup>12</sup>

Three other reviews contribute to the terminology articulating regional writing's public function. While all three play with the same language outlined above—simple, unified writing that creates a pleasant and enjoyable conclusion—they also position Chopin's work in regards to the role the regional short story played in the *Atlantic*-group. The *Hartford Daily Courant's* reviewer asserts that, in *Bayou Folk*,

we get another of those collections of short tales which are fast enriching American literature by furnishing faithful, artistic transcripts of picturesque local life. These Louisiana sketches with their intimate knowledge of Creole, darkey and Southern white, their quaint dialogue and romance among unsophisticate[d] forms of life, are very charming in themselves and will be in time of value as historic documents. ("Literary Notices. Recent Fiction" 10)

The reviewer's choice of "transcripts" implies a recording of subject matter for the sake of posterity; coupled with "faithful," the merit of Chopin's work is not so much artistic as it is in chronicling regional

lifestyles for a collective national posterity. While this local color “enrich[es] American literature,” Chopin’s work has, in the language of the reviewer, more “value as historic documents.”<sup>13</sup> Much like the previous review, pleasure found in the work does not break down the differences between readers and those represented; instead, it creates bonds between readers who can enjoy the aesthetic “value” this work holds for future generations by emphasizing the differences between readers and “unsophisticate[d]” local subjects.

The other two reviews foreground Chopin’s short story construction. Both reviewers couch their commentary in the language of regional writing, commending elements that transcend local color writing in order to connect Chopin’s work to periodical culture’s definition of the short story. In the first, the *Public Opinion* reviewer asserts:

The author is . . . thoroughly familiar with creole character . . . Romance, pathos, humor, nobility and meanness, weakness and strength, are so mingled and shaded as to produce most pleasing and artistic effects. And best of all, the threads are so woven in that the close of the story leaves an agreeable impression—things come out right. (“Bayou Folk” 35)

Closer to home, a review from the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* remarks that readers

will find an added charm in this collection. There is a unity, a completeness here, which gives one the impression of a single picture, a connected narrative and heightens the pleasure derived from a reading of the separate tales. . . . The most noticeable feature in these stories is the author’s clear perception of the essential characteristics of her subject, the good understanding of her people, which is only the other side of loving appreciative sympathy. (“The Book Table” 32)

These reviews highlight the enjoyable aesthetic effect of Chopin’s short stories in the same language as previous reviews, but they also document the constitutive components expected from regional writing. In the first review, it is the “pleasing and artistic effects” of Chopin’s work that allows “things to come out right.” The unified effect of a “single picture” in the second review builds upon commonly accepted expecta-

tions attributed to short stories; not only do individual stories have a unified conclusion, the collection should achieve “a unity, a completeness” of its own. The focus on pleasing and agreeable literary representations foregrounds a descriptive style of writing that allows middle-class readers to see and experience those depicted as different, but not to necessarily understand them as anything other than exotic.

The connection between personal knowledge and sympathy in the *Post-Dispatch* review points to the problems created by sympathy without identification. Here, Chopin’s personal knowledge of her subject matter—her “good understanding of her people”—“is only the other side of loving appreciative sympathy.” This sympathy functions in two very different but complementary ways in the review. On the one hand, this sympathy is authorial; it is Chopin’s personal investment in faithfully documenting her subject matter. On the other, this sympathy is the audience’s response to Chopin’s writing; because they do not have the requisite personal knowledge to understand characters as she does, they must instead respond with sympathy. These two possibilities are flip sides of the same coin: Chopin’s faithful recording of pleasant, simple characters creates the sympathetic response of her audience.<sup>14</sup> Or as described in the first review, her “pleasing” art allows “things to come out right.” This was the limitation imposed by *Atlantic*-group editors: stories were expected to be picturesque and pleasant while representing regional difference in nonthreatening ways. Norris’s objections to short fiction as imagined by “magazinists” thus mirror Matthews’s claims that the purpose of regional writing was “increasing our acquaintance with our fellow-citizens and broadening our sympathy” (33); both respond to the role regionalism and the short story played in consolidating a national middle-class reading audience.

The cumulative effect of these reviews was to limit the narrative interventions possible in periodical short fiction. Regional authors were positioned as faithful recorders—and not interpreters—of the life surrounding them,<sup>15</sup> documenting information for future generations in charming and picturesque prose that editors and reviewers certified as authentic. Short stories were for the entertainment and enjoyment of a national reading audience, one that wanted the pleasantness of daily life reinforced, not challenged. Sympathy was based on representations creating aesthetic enjoyment, not on the local color characters depicted in stories. And, by and large, reviewers saw Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* directly

participating in this project. But besides offering a glimpse of those living on the outskirts of American life, Chopin's initial foray into local color writing also implicitly critiques the exploitative nature of regionalism as a representational strategy. While the majority of *Bayou Folk* participates in the literary project advocated by *Atlantic*-group editors, two stories in particular, "La Belle Zoraïde" and "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche," critique the logic informing local color writing. Both stories come, not surprisingly, at the end of Chopin's collection, located openly in the place most likely to be missed.

Before appearing in *Bayou Folk*, "La Belle Zoraïde" was published in *Vogue* on 4 January 1894. Like most of the stories Chopin published in *Vogue*, it was accepted upon its initial submission. *Vogue* was not a part of the same literary crowd as the *Century*, the *Atlantic*, or *Harper's Monthly*; as Toth describes, *Vogue* "was launched in early 1893 as a New York fashion, society, and fiction magazine" (*Unveiling* 171). Josephine Redding, *Vogue's* editor, courted fashionable female urbanites by combining upper-class perspectives with "new woman" sensibilities. It would go on to publish the majority of the stories Chopin is famous for today, including "Desirée's Baby," "The Story of an Hour," "A Respectable Woman," and "An Egyptian Cigarette." And as critics Helen Taylor, Sandra Gunning, and Kate McCullough all note, the majority of these stories reflect the concerns of *Vogue's* readers—they foreground the needs of middle- and upper-class white women at the expense of those existing on the periphery.<sup>16</sup> But I would read "La Belle Zoraïde" differently. That is to say, while I agree Chopin is not always addressing the peripheral nonwhite female characters appearing in her fiction, and that the primary concern of *Vogue's* reading audience was their own needs as white women, these connections are not mutually constitutive: authorial meaning and audience reception are not required to function in tandem. Uncritically applying such a reading strategy to all of Chopin's *Vogue* stories collapses the distinctions between author and audience, conflating her intentions with the way in which *Vogue's* readers understood her work. Chopin's "La Belle Zoraïde" offers several textual clues that this story is one such exception to the rules.

The story is a framed tale; it recounts the story Manna-Loulou tells her mistress, Madame Delisle. Manna-Loulou's narration highlights the social differences between Loulou and Delisle; while Loulou finishes her domestic work, Delisle "[lies] in her sumptuous mahogany bed, waiting



to be fanned and put to sleep to the sound of one of Manna-Loulou's stories" (*Bayou* 152). For Delisle, Loulou's stories represent a pleasant and soothing closure to her day. Loulou's role as a storyteller thus serves as an outgrowth of her function as a servant; Delisle is to be amused by those who exist to serve her needs, and "would hear [no stories] but those which were true" (153). In both quotes, the focus is on the auditory nature of the stories themselves—indicated by "sound" and "hear"—rather than the meaning potentially contained in the stories. Loulou is also aware of Delisle's expectations—she thinks of the story she will tell Delisle as she completes her work. In this story, however, sleep is not the end result of Loulou's tale. This disruption is one of the main clues Chopin is interested in more than just appeasing Delisle's, and by proxy her audience's, desire for suitable bedtime material. The incompatibility between the supposed purpose of Loulou's story and its actual results not only disturbs Delisle's usual easy slumber, it allows Chopin to implicitly foreground and critique the structural framework that white middle-class readers use to understand regional writing.

The story keeping Delisle awake is the story of Zoraïde, the beautiful and graceful body servant to Madame Delarivière. While Zoraïde is a slave, she is pampered by her mistress, and "her elegant manners" and "her *svelte* and graceful figure . . . were the envy of half the ladies who visited her mistress." Delarivière will not, however, allow Zoraïde to choose whom she can marry; whereas Zoraïde has set her heart upon marrying the field hand Mézor, Delarivière has chosen M'sieur Ambroise, the servant of her own suitor, Doctor Langlé. Zoraïde is forbidden to see Mézor, but as Loulou tells Delisle, "There is no mistress, no master, no king or priest who can hinder them from loving when they will. And these two found ways and means" (154). When Zoraïde confesses her transgression, Delarivière not only induces Langlé to sell Mézor, she takes Zoraïde's child and tells her it died during childbirth. Loulou calls Delarivière's actions "a wicked falsehood that must have caused the angels in heaven to weep" (155). Delarivière's actions derive from her desire to "have her young waiting maid again at her side free, happy, and beautiful as of old," but as Loulou asserts "there was a more powerful will than Madame's at work—the will of the good God, who had already designed that Zoraïde should grieve with a sorrow that was never more to be lifted in this world" (156).

By itself, Zoraïde's story would merit a different reading. Readers

would be required to find meaning in the story that is told; instead, meaning is framed within a story that is about another story. As such, the main focus is on the outer frame, on how Loulou tells the story and how Delisle receives the story, even as this comprises a fraction of the narrative. While Loulou's story has a potentially disruptive message contained within it—the realization that Zoraïde's personal happiness is controlled by another—Chopin elides the potential narrative tension between the inner and outer tales in the conclusion of the actual story itself. After finishing her story, Loulou asks Delisle if she is asleep; Delisle responds "No, I am not asleep; I was thinking. Ah, the poor little one, Man Loulou, the poor little one! better had she died!" (157). Rather than having this exchange conclude the story, however, Chopin repeats these lines in the "soft Creole patois" (153) that the characters converse in: "But this is the way Madame Delisle and Manna-Loulou really talked to each other:—'Vou pré droumi, Ma'zèlle Titite?' 'Non, pa pré droumi; mo yapré zongler. Ah, la pauv' piti, Man Loulou. La pauv' piti! Mieux li mouri!'" (157). This shift not only leaves Delisle's incorrect assessment of the story intact, it returns the story to the local color tradition through reemphasizing the linguistic difference depicted in the story rather than the actual meaning of the story. Chopin's conclusion highlights the centrality of sound over meaning in local color writing, metonymically mirroring Delisle's earlier emphasis on the auditory relationship between hearing and truth.

Chopin's narrative thus packages one story inside another, limiting her reader's attention on the specifics of the inner narrative frame<sup>17</sup>—she realizes that directly challenging her audience's beliefs would mark her story as unsuitable for publication. To be published, she had to maintain the appearance of catering to her audience's whims; in this case, it was through offering a vicarious excursion into the sex life of the help. But in this story, Chopin, however, is not so quick to abandon those that she represents in the content of the tale. Her awareness of her audience's needs mirrors Loulou's awareness that Delisle "would hear [no stories] but those which were true" (153). For both Chopin and Loulou, their audience's conception of the truth governs the manner of their telling. Both must recognize the social mores of their respective audience's cultural milieu in order for their stories to be heard. While Chopin's story plays with socially accepted beliefs about black sexual excess in the figure of Zoraïde, it does so to bring those

beliefs into confrontation with the story that Loulou actually tells: Zoraïde's supposed freedom amounts to nothing when she cannot choose her love. Zoraïde's recognition of her position comes midway through the story, when she "respectfully and gently" tells Delarivière "I am not white. . . . Since I am not white, let me have from out of my own race whom my heart has chosen." As Loulou subsequently informs Delisle, it comes as little surprise that "Madame would not hear to that" (154).

Delisle's reaction to Loulou's story also reflects Chopin's deft negotiation of regionalism's constituent forms. While Delisle is left awake and "thinking" (157), her reaction indicates that she accepts the story as true. However, because Delisle misses the clues Loulou provides to help guide her understanding of the story,<sup>18</sup> she instead locates her sympathy on the now motherless child of Zoraïde. At the same time, Delisle's misreading is indicative of the reading practices outlined in the period's reviews: her interpretation is informed by her assumptions about the purpose of these stories. Not only are they to be "true," they must be pleasant and nonthreatening. As a consumer of such stories, she is unable to recognize the structural inequalities that exist between Zoraïde and Delarivière, the very ones creating Zoraïde's plight. To recognize Zoraïde's fate as a product of white privilege would not only be unpleasant, it would challenge the structure of the system allowing Delisle to be fanned asleep by Loulou. While Loulou controls the story as she tells it, providing numerous asides that should direct Delisle elsewhere, Delisle literally cannot *hear* or understand the story in any other way. As a product of the system that Loulou's story critiques, Delisle interprets the story through foregrounding her needs as a reader. The three sets of hierarchical power relations in the story—between Zoraïde and Delarivière, Loulou and Delisle, and Chopin and her audience—are all dialogically interrelated; all three mirror one another in the narrative framing of the tale for how they present information to their respective audiences.<sup>19</sup>

Chopin's story thus plays to its readers. Those who, like Delisle, are after vicarious entertainment will find it in the outer frame of the narrative, and will place their sympathy with Zoraïde's motherless child. This sympathy is outlined earlier in the essay: a sympathy of privilege for white middle- to upper-class readers. At the same time, Chopin's story also makes those readers complicit in the aesthetic consumption of local color. Anna Shannon Elfenbein makes a similar observation in *Women on the Color Line*:

In “La Belle Zoraïde” (1894), Chopin demonstrates that the “separate spheres” maintained at such cost . . . are cultural constructs. The tragedy of la belle Zoraïde . . . lies in the perversion of human relationships by conventional codes. In depicting the shared powerlessness of Madame Delisle, who hears, and la belle Zoraïde, who lives the tragic story, Chopin casts light on the function of the story for a white audience titillated and at the same time terrified by the traditional tale and its variations. (131)

Elfenbein’s emphasis on “the function of the story for a white audience” highlights the strategic intervention between author and audience. Others like Gunning are more critical; in *Race, Rape, and Lynching*, she observes:

Though Chopin seems to be engaging in racial disloyalty by validating black female maternal rights, she sets in motion turn-of-the-century discourses about racial inferiority that deny black capacity to exercise those rights. Zoraïde might reproduce, but she is ultimately unfit for parenting even when a regretful Madame Delarivière returns the child.

Nineteenth-century medical discourse would have attributed Zoraïde’s madness not only to her grief over the loss of the child, but to her “impure” racial identity. (133)

While Chopin’s story may set in motion “turn-of-century discourses about racial inferiority,” this response reflects audience expectations, not the story Chopin tells. Delarivière and Delisle are both blind to the humanity of those who serve them; their perspective, however, is challenged by Loulou’s story. Even though the unequal perspective between teller (Zoraïde, Loulou, and Chopin) and listener (Delarivière, Delisle, and Chopin’s audience) is maintained at the end of the story, it does not mean that the listener’s perspective is shared by Chopin. Gunning’s comments about the “medical discourse” of the period are undoubtedly correct, but she turns to qualifications *outside* the story to ascribe meaning to it. In doing so, Gunning foregrounds the meaning the audience brings to the story over the actual meaning that Chopin offers in the story, meaning that intentionally counters the audience’s engrained perspective. Again, Gunning’s reading collapses distinctions between

author and audience, making the author culpable for the authoritative framework that governs her or his ability to produce fiction. Such a reading reciprocally requires ignoring those parts of the plot invalidating these conclusions: Zoraïde's comment that she is not white and Loulou's attempts to consciously manipulate the story to steer Delisle both challenge this reading.

For readers looking beyond the interpretation supplied by Delisle, Chopin's framing strategy offers a scathing critique of sentimentalism and sympathy in regional writing. Delisle's sentimentality is her vice; she wants the truth, but only when pleasant and enjoyable. While she has been kept awake by Loulou's story, it is only long enough to react sympathetically, to ease her own conscience that she has been a good listener. Sound and context trump any of the auxiliary parts of Loulou's story: Delisle hears what she wants to hear. This realization highlights Chopin's critique of the practices readers use to understand local color writing. Delisle's truth, and by proxy the truth of Chopin's audience, is in the entertainment value these stories provide: to be considered truthful, stories should sound pleasant and unthreatening to the audience, even when they are not. Publication in *Atlantic*-group periodicals required these careful machinations to mask political subtext, even if, as in "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche," editors were aware of an author's desire to deviate from their prescriptions.

Chopin's "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche" has a less fruitful but more interesting publishing history prior to its appearance in *Bayou Folk*. Written in early November 1893, it was initially sent to *Youth's Companion* and then to the *Atlantic*, both of which rejected it (*Private Papers* 167). The *Atlantic's* rejection is worth noting, coming as it does when Houghton, Mifflin & Co. was looking to print a story of Chopin's to coincide with the publication of *Bayou Folk*. On 30 September 1893, during the compilation of *Bayou Folk*, a letter to Chopin from Houghton, Mifflin closes with "Permit us to ask if you have ever sent any of your stories to the *Atlantic Monthly*? The present editor does not remember to have seen any mss from you, and would at any rate be very glad to consider anything you might think best to send" (*Miscellany* 108). Over the next three months, Chopin sent two stories to the *Atlantic*, first "At Chênrière Caminada" and then "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche." Editor Horace E. Scudder responded to "At Chênrière Caminada" on 7 November 1893: "I am bound to say that though this story

has in it the tone of your work, it is by no means one I should select with which to introduce you to the readers of the *Atlantic*" (109). On 25 January 1894, Scudder responded to "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche" in a similar manner: "I liked it, and under some conditions would gladly have printed it. But I did not quite like to issue it in the *Atlantic* as your first contribution there, either as a herald of the book, or as a specimen of it. So it will appear first in the collection along with *La Belle Zoraïde*" (111).

Scudder's dislike of "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche" as a "herald" of Chopin's forthcoming collection not only points to the potentially subversive nature of the story, but also to the complex relationship between periodical and book publishing ventures. After all, while the story was not acceptable for publication in the *Atlantic*, it was suitable to publish in Chopin's collection. As a periodical editor, Scudder's job was to mediate between authors and audience—it was to select and publish fiction reflecting the perceived expectations of his middle-class reading audience. Scudder's comments indicate his dual role as editor; publishing the wrong story in the *Atlantic* could potentially affect the sales of her collection as well. As Scudder's comments imply, "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche," like "*La Belle Zoraïde*," plays with the readerly expectations advocated by *Atlantic*-group periodicals, criticizing the sympathetic attachments created by both regional writing and short stories for a national reading audience. Chopin's careful layering of the markers of race, class, and gender highlights the process through which picturesque representations of regional populations were displayed for the enjoyment of America's burgeoning middle- to upper-class audience. In this sense, her story parodies the process Matthews advocates as the "useful" and "necessary" purpose of the short story in unifying the United States; it represents the type of subtle political commentary criticizing *Atlantic*-group local color standards that editors were expected to weed out.

The story features Mr. Sublet, "who was staying at the Hallet plantation . . . [and was] an artist looking for bits of 'local color' along the Têche" (*Bayou* 158). He finds his object in Evariste, a local 'Cadian man he instructs to return the next day looking "like [he] come out de swamp" (159). Neither Evariste nor his daughter, Martinette, can fathom Sublet's "eccentric wishes" for Evariste to appear in his dirty clothes. However, since Sublet paid in advance, the deal seems fair to both Evariste and his daughter. Later, when Martinette proudly tells

Aunt Dicey, a local African American woman, that her father's picture will appear in "one fine *Mag'zine*," Aunt Dicey informs Martinette that the picture will ridicule her father: underneath it will appear the caption "Dis heah is one dem low-down 'Cajuns o' Bayeh Têche!" (159). Martinette returns the money to Sublet, during which she detects a "smile of intelligence" passing between Sublet and Hallet (162). When she turns to leave, however, she runs into her father, who has just saved Sublet's son from drowning. After hearing the story, Sublet now insists upon making Evariste's picture, declaring "I want to place it among things I hold most dear, and shall call it 'A hero of Bayou Teche'" (163). While Evariste defers, embarrassed by the title of hero, he is finally convinced when told he will be able to title his portrait. Evariste's final words, rendered in dialect and in turn the title of the story, still identify him as an object of local color derision: "Dis is one picture of Mista Evariste Anatole Bonamour, a gent'man of de Bayou Têche" (164).

As with "La Belle Zoraïde," an apparent happy resolution concludes the story's larger frame. Sublet's initial bargain with Evariste is made in economic terms; he gives Evariste "a couple of silver dollars to *show* that his intentions were fair, and that he *expected* the 'Cadian to keep faith with him" (158; emphasis added). Sublet's outward behavior seemingly embodies a gesture of good faith, but his subsequent "smile of intelligence" indicates otherwise. When Evariste saves Sublet's child, however, Sublet's interest in representing Evariste as a denigrating bit of local color is replaced with his genuine desire to place Evariste's picture among his most valued possessions. And yet, this transformation does not discard Evariste's placement within the still-commodifying structure of local color depiction; it merely elides this process in Sublet's movement from veiled derision to sentimental attachment. These two choices function as the range of responses available to those of Sublet's class when confronted with local color—his response is, quite literally, the "other side of loving appreciative sympathy." However, the movement from one to the other in no way actually modifies Sublet's relationship to Evariste as a person; in both cases Evariste remains an object. While Evariste is transformed from an object worthy of scorn to one that, as a picture, Sublet can "place . . . among *things* I hold most dear" (163; emphasis added), Sublet's actions maintain the unequal hierarchy existing between the two men: he merely replaces ridicule with romantic objectification. That Sublet has done nothing more than

shift the terms of his objectification highlights the problem of local color writing as a representational strategy based on inequality, allowing Chopin to satirize the process of “explaining the people of one state to the population of the others” (Matthews 33) that regional writing provided for *Atlantic-group* audiences.<sup>20</sup> For Evariste, however, there is no middle ground; he is in turn a buffoon or a hero, but not a fellow gentleman.

The rest of the story clarifies the lack of change in Evariste’s status. Evariste and Martinette are positioned as separate from both upper-class whites, represented by Sublet and Hallet, and African American characters, represented by Aunt Dicey and her son, Wilkins. They are outside of and apart from the “smile of intelligence” (162) that passes between Hallet and Sublet, and they also lack the awareness that Aunt Dicey exhibits in her distrust of similar attempts to take her picture.<sup>21</sup> Dicey’s attempt to pass this information onto Martinette only partially succeeds; Martinette affixes a literal source to Dicey’s information via Wilkins, who works for Hallet: “I reckon it’s Wilkins tells you how the folk they talk, yonda up to Mr. Hallet’s” (160). She misses the larger invocation in Dicey’s claim to know “dem kine o’ folks” precisely because she does not have a history of experiencing white racism, as do Aunt Dicey and the African American community. That Dicey even attempts to inform the Acadians of the larger intentions of Sublet points to their shared condition as exploited minority groups, though that shared condition is not yet realized by the Acadians.

Further, Sublet embodies both the unequal conditions of local color writing and the transformed relationship it was supposed to create for readers. Sublet’s conversion from derision to sentimental attachment is predicated upon his realization of the “value” Evariste holds in rescuing his son, a value that still leaves Evariste an object of local color production. Sublet thus *experiences* the change his work is supposed to bring about *through* portraying Evariste as the object of local color representation. Sublet’s newfound sentiments for Evariste also cause him to miss the quaint sketch of local color presented to him via his rescued son, who is “grotesquely attired in garments far too large for his diminutive person—the rough jeans clothing of some negro boy” (162). For Sublet, clothing does not create the difference of local color, even as his original interest in Evariste’s appearance relies on such distinctions. This moment marks Chopin’s parody of local color’s representational strategies. Sublet’s socioeconomic class marks him as above the poten-



tial insult offered in the caricature of his son, while his newly discovered sentimental vision of the “hero of Bayou Têche” (163) allows him to instead focus on the worth Evariste holds as a piece of local color.

The lack of actual change becomes apparent as space is cleared for Martinette and Evariste at the breakfast table: “It was with visible reluctance and ill-disguised contempt that Wilkins served them” (163). Evariste’s value as local color may have gotten him a warm meal and an increased “eagerness” on Sublet’s part to render his likeness, but Wilkins still resents the Acadians’ intrusion. As an embodiment of his white master, Wilkins resents the slight of having to serve poor white trash at his master’s table. The argument that Wilkins is yet another African American character who is aware of the larger stakes being acted out—that white privilege is being consolidated before his very eyes—misses Wilkins’s “visible reluctance and ill-disguised contempt” for the Acadians. Not only is his white master above these two, Wilkins thinks himself superior to them as well. It also misses Aunt Dicey’s earlier criticism of her son’s behavior, one that further marks his collusion with whiteness. Either way, though, Wilkins literally brings the issue of race and class back to the table. This point silently conditions Evariste’s revised portrait. Evariste may now choose the words to describe his picture, and even dress himself up in his best clothes, but Sublet still views Evariste through the sentimental lens of local color, one that uses sympathy to create an imagined whole for readers while leaving “others” on the outside.

These two stories offer a compelling interrogation of the terms of *Atlantic-group* local color short story production.<sup>22</sup> Both stories outwardly conform to short story expectations: they have a unified structure with a pleasant resolution designed to entertain readers. At the same time, they include implied meaning that deviates from *Atlantic-group* editorial definitions of the regional short story and instead questions the institutional logic sustaining their project. Chopin’s inclusion of subtle political commentary—her use of narrative indirection that requires paying attention to the structure of her stories to understand their meaning—demonstrates her interest in circumventing the period’s accepted literary mores. In both stories, she unpacks the regional writing’s constitutive mechanisms, deriding the sympathetic framework intended to transform local color consumption into the collective consciousness of a national reading public. While her politicized content kept these stories from being published in *Atlantic-group* periodicals,

her rewriting of local color nonetheless indicates the value in exploring the tensions between production and reception.

THE RESENTMENT OF INNOVATION

Chopin's response to the critical reception of *Bayou Folk* offers an interesting return to the tensions of locating her as a writer. On 7 June 1894, she writes in her journal:

In looking over more than a hundred press notices of "Bayou Folk" which have already been sent to me, I am surprised at the very small number which show anything like a worthy critical faculty. They might be counted upon the fingers of one hand. I had no idea the genuine book critic was so rare a bird. And yet I receive congratulations from my publishers upon the character of the press notices. (*Miscellany* 96)

Rather than enjoying the success of her first published collection, Chopin focuses on the lack of "worthy critical faculty" among her peers. The "and yet" of the last sentence clarifies her awareness of regional writing's public function; critical reception stands in for the subject matter her work contains, or, put more directly, context trumps content. The collective narrative role of local color writing in *Atlantic-group* periodicals, embodied in the creation of a sympathetic middle-class reading audience, conditions Chopin's reception, not the meaning presented in that work. While she responds to reviews of her collection as opposed to individual stories, the reading strategies eliciting her response apply to both regional collections and individual stories: it is the limitations on subject matter in periodicals that differentiates the two.<sup>23</sup> As with "La Belle Zoraïde," where sound matters more than meaning, Chopin found her collection publicly positioned in the very manner her stories criticized.

Chopin's comments also clarify the differences between her vision of authorship and the reciprocal perspective of her editors and audience. This discrepancy highlights the importance of understanding the slippage between production and consumption in *Atlantic-group* regional short fiction, specifically in regards to those authors whose political values don't mesh with those of their genteel editors. Again, the beliefs authors internalize as the impetus to write and the position

they are placed in by the reading public are *not always* one and the same. Similarly, the content of an author's writing and the audience's context for understanding that writing are *not always* one and the same, even when both are a product of the same cultural and institutional milieu. Comprehending Chopin's reaction to her interpellation as an author requires balancing her understanding of authorship—both from the perspective of her beliefs as a writer as well as how these beliefs influence the construction and content of her writing—with the response provided by *Atlantic*-group editors and critics. Chopin's response to her local color designation was to begin producing literary criticism. And it is in this work her aesthetic beliefs clearly emerge; she employs the discursive language of realism and weighs in on the same literary shortcomings favored by realist critics: sentimentalism, conventionalism, romanticism, and didacticism.

In the journal entry immediately following her comments on *Bayou Folk*, Chopin reviews the annual meeting of the Western Association of Writers in Springs Fountain Park, Indiana. Published in the *Critic* on 7 July 1894, her review lampoons the pretensions of these writers for their refusal to move beyond the limits of their region. She begins by pointing out the provincialism that “stamps the character of this association” before moving on to arraign “their often too sentimental songs,” their “clinging to past and conventional standards” and “almost Creolean sensitiveness to criticism,” their “singular ignorance of, or disregard for, the value of the highest art forms,” and “their earnestness of purpose” (*Complete* 691). This laundry list of literary shortcomings identifies the artistic perspective missed by these writers: “It is human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it” (691). For Chopin, the failure to focus on “human existence” limits the aesthetic vision of the entire conference. Her tone as well as her comments distance her from the literary project such writing embodies. This review, coming as it does in the journal entry right after her remarks on the emptiness of critical commentary regarding her own work, signals her interest in publicly vacating the literary role she had been assigned by editors and reviewers alike.

Chopin also contributed three short pieces to the *St. Louis Life* between 6 October and 17 November 1894. Her review of Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols* notes that unlike the Western Association of

Writers, he “is surely a representative Western man of letters” (*Complete* 694). While he “undervalues the importance of the past in art and exaggerates the significance of the present,” he nonetheless “sounded a true note” (693). Chopin’s main caveat against Garland is that “social problems, social environment, local color and the rest of it are not of *themselves* motives to insure the survival of a writer who employs them” (693). As Chopin’s comments indicate, art requires form to give content greater meaning, and art that merely focuses on “local color” will not transcend its historical moment. Chopin’s criticism of the “social” elements in Garland’s work leaves her sounding a lot like Howells in one of his more famous edicts: American authors should “concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests” (41). In both Chopin and Howells, the distraction of “social interests” is identified as an aesthetic deficiency; further, Chopin’s focus on “human existence” in her previous review mirrors Howells’s claim to seek “the universal in the individual.” As much as Chopin chastises Garland, however, she closes with the observation that “he is one of us” (694). Her use of the plural pronoun points to her belief in a shared aesthetic perspective between the two.<sup>24</sup> Again, Chopin’s piece documents the aesthetic differences between her work and regional writing, articulating her particular artistic vision.

Chopin’s critical work, however, created no real change in her public image. She was attacked for her criticism of local color writing in “The Western Association of Writers,”<sup>25</sup> and the *St. Louis Life* was too small a publication to give her national visibility. Local literary friends were aware of her views, but *Atlantic*-group editors and readers were not. Her writing after *Bayou Folk* displays a clearer sense of the role she was expected to play as a local color author. In the few critical pieces published after 1896, Chopin satirizes her own experiences in the publishing world. These works mark a shift in tone; rather than trying to demonstrate the aesthetic values informing her work, she mocks the conventions positioning her as an author. This is best seen in the six pieces Chopin published in the *Criterion*, a local St. Louis magazine, from 13 February to 27 March 1897. Having previously roasted editors’ stupidity, readers’ gullibility, writers’ “fidelity” to their subject matter, and reviewers’ misleading influence, in the final installment, Chopin takes aim at American magazines’ predictable nature:

Among the magazines there are always the old reliables. We almost know beforehand what they are going to say. In all events, we know in advance that, while they are going to entertain us, possibly to amuse us and instruct us, they are not going to shock us. They hold no surprises in reserve; we should very likely resent the innovation if they were to take upon themselves any such new departure. (*Complete* 718)

Chopin's comments engage the same sentiments as Norris in "The Decline of the Magazine Short Story." Though she speaks as a reader, her sarcastic tone concurs with Norris's remarks regarding the vacuous nature of periodical fiction. In speaking for her audience, she highlights the interests driving both editorial decisions and the reading public: "entertainment" matters most, followed by "amusement and instruction" as a distant and almost unnecessary second. Shocking readers is out of the question; in knowing "beforehand what they are going to say," Chopin mocks the catering to safe subject matter Norris rails against. The claim that readers would "very likely resent the innovation" of anything new further points to the limitations created for regional authors in *Atlantic*-group culture. While the joke is on the institutional expectations positioning Chopin as a regional author, it is a joke that falls on deaf ears; in this, the sympathy she expresses for her audience's needs is as empty as the sympathy of local color. Chopin's underlying narrative is the story of her interpellation as a local color author; she plays the role she has been given, but lashes out at the conditions affecting the reception of her work in an acerbic and biting manner.

Chopin's experiences reveal the problem of exclusively focusing on realism and regionalism at the expense of the other generic relationships informing literary production. While she held formal concerns and aesthetic values similar to those of realist luminaries like William Dean Howells and Henry James, her aesthetic refinement—traditionally the measure according one realist status—was not recognized, because it deviated from the political standards advocated by *Atlantic*-group editors. Even though Chopin saw her early work as aesthetically driven, its form and subject conditioned its reception. The latent commentary within her work—her unveiling of the ways in which regionalism's sympathetic bonds secured benefits for the few—was elided by foregrounding the cultural and regional differences found in her stories,

as well as the fidelity and authenticity of her representations. Still, Chopin's writing could be made "useful," to use Matthews' phrase, by foregrounding the difference in the story over the meaning of the story; meaning was mitigated by making regional difference serve the larger national good. Chopin's writing, no matter how realistic in form, did not participate in maintaining the preferred fictions of burgeoning national middle-class life advocated by *Atlantic*-group editors.

Nonetheless, understanding the tensions between production and reception also helps explain other gaps in Chopin's career. For example, the *Atlantic*'s publication of "Athénaïse" in 1896 seems to provide *Atlantic*-group institutional sanction to questions concerning women's rights to self-determination, at least from the perspective of an author who had previously questioned their tenets regarding local color.<sup>26</sup> The acceptance of "Athénaïse" by Horace Scudder—the same editor who rejected "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche"—precedes Chopin's subsequent explorations of similar issues in *The Awakening*. While Chopin's assessment of the *Atlantic*'s endorsement regarding women's rights was incorrect, this lapse is silently maintained in the dearth of feminist criticism—and criticism in general—on "Athénaïse." Instead of connecting the production and reception of "Athénaïse" with that of *The Awakening* to understand Chopin's trajectory as an author, critical commentary tends to focus solely on *The Awakening*. As a herald for *The Awakening*, however, "Athénaïse" engages the same themes, albeit in the form of a regional short story framed by local color characters as opposed to that of a realist novel. The asymmetrical relationships between subject matter (New Orleans local color vs. women's autonomy and independence), literary school (regionalism vs. realism), and form (short story vs. novel) continue to unduly influence the aesthetic distinctions informing contemporary critical debate regarding these two texts. Thus, while "Athénaïse" contains both local color characters/subject matter *and* an examination of a women's right to choose, its packaging as a regional short story influences its reception—both then and now—more than the content it contains. These tensions indicate the importance of separating the norms positioning Chopin as a writer from those she internalized as an author, as well as understanding the ways in which authorial meaning and audience reception do not always function in tandem.

Further, the slippages between production and consumption also

highlight the developing political dimensions of literary form as they played out in the consolidation of *Atlantic*-group publishing values, specifically as these values began to stand in for those of the nation. While authors like Kate Chopin, Charles Chesnutt, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Abraham Cahan, and Paul Laurence Dunbar were constructing narrative strategies for the short story intended to circumvent the censure of *Atlantic*-group editors, editors were developing institutionally specific definitions for the form that would reciprocally influence authorial contributions by making them serve their institutional needs. Consequently, the increased access and opportunity provided by regionalism and periodical culture to traditionally underrepresented authors was simultaneously curtailed by the social and political conformity expected by *Atlantic*-group editors. In this sense, periodical short story publication also operated as a gateway to the publication of collections: new authors who were unable to publish their stories in periodicals were not going to get their work published as a collection either. Understanding the literary strategies authors develop to incorporate veiled political commentary while maintaining an outward veneer of acceptability to *Atlantic*-group editors requires critical strategies that can balance production with consumption as well as context with content. The authorial practice of refiguring literary space as a means to navigate both editorial prescription and readerly reception may be the critical truism that allows new art to blossom, but our historical remove from *Atlantic*-group production values has obscured the political dimensions of narrative form governing the relationships between authors, editors, and readers. While it may be “the height of art to conceal art,” as Chopin recorded in her *Commonplace Book* in 1869, her ability to successfully mask her political interventions ultimately frustrated her aesthetic objectives, specifically when she had to work with editors and readers only interested in the subject matter of her work.

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#### NOTES

1. E.g., McCullough and Holtman both conclude that the label of local color is inadequate for understanding the complexity of Chopin's work, implied in the “stretching” and “failing” of their titles (as well as the “criticizing” of mine). When Chopin is accorded realist status, it is traditionally through marking the *type* of realism Chopin pursued, as with Toth's “radical realism” (279) in *Kate Chopin*, or Elfen-

bein's "sexual realism" (117). For these critics, Chopin's examination of transgressive subject matter locates her outside of realism as it was "properly" conceptualized by editors like William Dean Howells and Richard Watson Gilder. While Toth and Elfenbein see Chopin's work as realistic in form, it nonetheless requires particularizing adjectives to position her contribution to realism's literary project.

2. Glazener argues: "Realism was not a coherent entity, but was rather a term that acquired a repertory of uses as a result of its competing appropriations. Since these appropriations are almost always made relationally, in the course of a reviewer's or author's distinguishing realism from some other form, it is necessary to examine the construction of realism in relation to the construction of other categories of fiction. . . . [Because] realism was promoted by a literary establishment, readers had a powerful incentive to read for it; however, because it was defined variously and relationally, reading for realism was not a uniform operation that we can reconstruct on the basis of reviewers' prescriptions. Indeed, it was almost always described in general and highly figurative language relying on distinctions that we no longer make readily" (13-14). Extending Glazener's "various and relational" processes, different generic forms develop their own reading strategies that offer slightly different practices, although connected under the rubric of realism. While the difference between novels and short stories is the most obvious, I am interested here in the distinctions in content between regional short stories in *Atlantic-group* periodicals and those in book collections.

3. See Glazener's Appendix (257-66) for a full listing of *Atlantic-group* magazines.

4. Foote later observes that an "analysis of regional writing's literary strategies becomes even more important when we realize how many of our contemporary ideas about the value and status of a particularized cultural (or local) identity are derived from regional writing's strategy of protecting local identities by preserving them in literature" (4). While my argument is interested in the way authors simultaneously structure their writing to elide editorial governance and engage their audience, it is guided by Foote's evocation of the need for "analysis of regional writing's literary strategies."

5. Dunbar notes in his correspondence that though the *Century* accepted numerous poems, it never accepted his short stories. In a 2 February 1898 letter to Alice Ruth Moore, he discusses his experiences with editors: "I have just had one ms. that I thought particularly good returned three times. It was written at the order of the *Ladies Home Journal*, but the editor returned it saying that they had one just like it & would I please write them something a little lighter and brighter. Then I sent it to Mr. Gilder and he returned it saying that it was the best story of mine he had ever seen but he was over run with short stories already. Then it went to *Harp-er's* and came back with one of those blessed printed slips, and yet I think the story is good" (Metcalf 417-18). In a 15 September 1900 letter to Paul Reynolds (his literary agent), Dunbar states: "I send you herewith the last of the batch of stories. I do not know whether *The Century* would take it or not. I have so often tried them



with my stories but I can only get them to handle verse" (Dunbar D 20). Finally, in a 24 December 1900 letter to Reynolds, Dunbar notes: "Enclosed please find two stories which Mr. Johnson of the *Century* did not take and which the *Saturday Evening Post* has also seen. Mr. Johnson took three poems and as usual sent the stories back" (Dunbar D 29). For more on Dunbar's authorial strategies for his short fiction, see Jarrett and Morgan.

6. See the 16 March 1880 (124–28) and 29 May 1880 (136–40) entries in Chesnutt, *Journals*. His correspondence with Walter Hines Page in "To Be an Author" details the publication of his stories in the *Atlantic* as well as the subsequent collection of stories, *The Conjure Woman* (1899). The tension between the stories included in the collection and those excluded (e.g., "Dave's Neckliss"), specifically when considering Chesnutt's recent public outing as an African American author, points to another conflict between authorial production and editorial governance, even though in this case Page was sympathetic to Chesnutt's literary mission (in ways that Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Chesnutt's previous *Atlantic* editor, was not).

7. For further discussion of editorial obligations, see Ziff.

8. The quoted material in both columns later appeared in *Criticism and Fiction*, further validating the aesthetic and cultural imperatives *Atlantic*-group editors began in the pages of *Harper's Monthly*.

9. This gesture is a common one with Howells; e.g., Foote points out that Howells "becomes both the editor who controls the production of representations of 'most Americans' and the representative of 'most Americans.'" Pleading for fiction to represent people as they 'really' are is a democratic appeal, as it asks literary representation to bear the symbolic responsibility of democratic representation. But such a unitary image of 'most Americans' collides with the rhetoric of 'different interests,' and Howells's manifesto exposes problems in literature's relation to democracy, as well as the local's (different interests) relation to the national ('we all know')" (7–8).

10. Boyesen shared Norris's concerns, describing the young female reader as the "Iron Madonna who strangles in her fond embrace the American novelist" (49), and notes that mediating between the young female reader and the "inexorable force called public taste" sits "the editors of the paying magazines" (49). For more on the Iron Madonna, see Campbell's "Dreiser, London, Crane, and the Iron Madonna" in *Resisting Regionalism*; her reading of *Martin Eden* notes that Eden, like Norris, "displaces his considerable wrath at genteel standards onto magazine editors" (126).

11. For the titles and dates of the stories Chopin published, see her "Manuscript Account Books" in *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* 136–75.

12. The quoted language is collectively drawn from three other reviews of *Bayou Folk*: "Recent Fiction" from the *Nation*, "The New Books" from the *Review of Reviews*, and "Mrs. Kate Chopin, Author of *Bayou Folk*" from *Current Literature* ("General Gossip").

13. Lutz makes a similar observation regarding Sarah Orne Jewett; he discusses an *Overland Monthly* (1886) review praising “Jewett as a social historian: since she is depicting events from a decade earlier within a disappearing group, a reader realizes ‘how great is the mere historic importance, apart from the purely humane or artistic value, of these stories’” (35).

14. This language also appears in the *Critic* review; the reviewer notes his “personal familiarity with much of this unique region” (“Bayou Folk” 300) to validate her work as well as his sympathy with it.

15. While realism also advocated mimetic fidelity, the generic possibilities for political commentary in novels (as opposed to short stories), when connected to realism and regionalism, created specific hierarchical differences. Elliott’s connection between Boasian anthropology and literary realism indicates some of the tensions for authentically recording difference in regionalism works. For more on the positioning of regionalists as faithful recorders, see “Introduction: American Word Culture” in Elliott (xi–xxviii), “Regional Accents” in Glazener (189–228), and “The Reading of Regions” in Brodhead (107–41).

16. These critics identify Chopin as advocating a limited vision of female independence, one that either ignores or abandons African Americans in the quest for increased rights for white women. See “Kate Chopin” in Taylor (138–202), “Rethinking White Female Silences” in Gunning (108–35), and McCullough.

17. In this sense, it is appropriate to read “La Belle Zoraïde” in the same manner as Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius stories. Just as Chesnutt purposefully manipulates his reading audience’s beliefs concerning African Americans through Julius’s storytelling, Chopin plays her audience’s expectations against the actual story that Loulou tells.

18. Loulou’s repeated invocations of “the will of the good God” (156) as more powerful than Delarivière’s goes unnoticed by Delisle. Thus, while Loulou’s story provides numerous clues that Delisle’s focus should be on Zoraïde and *not* on the now motherless child (e.g., quotes from 154–56), her comments fall on deaf ears.

19. In making this assertion, I am *not* claiming the black female subject position for Chopin’s use. Rather, it is Chopin’s awareness of regionalism’s formal limitations that leads her to use such narrative approaches. This seemingly small claim to difference is important for understanding turn-of-the-century relationships between authors, editors, and audience in *Atlantic-group* culture. Framing the literary strategies of authors intervening in the system of production requires such specific attention.

20. Garland offers a similar critique of the exploitative nature of local color representation in *Main-Travelled Roads*. “Hamlin Garland’s Provincial Literature” in Lutz (65–78) analyzes Garland’s critique of the consumptive fantasy local color represents for cosmopolitan-minded former rural inhabitants. In “Up the Coulee,” Howard, a famous New York actor, returns to his rural Wisconsin home, while in “God’s Raven,” Robert Bloom, an editor in Chicago, also returns to rural Wisconsin

village life. Both characters allow their cosmopolitan perspectives to govern their interactions: Howard offends his brother, who remained on the family farm; Robert alienates his new neighbors. As Lutz documents, "Robert's over-romanticized view of the village swings to contempt and back to respect. . . . His wife's last words suggest that even she doubts the understanding he claims to have actually achieved" (75). Garland's subsequent movement away from *Atlantic*-group periodicals and toward the *Arena* (see Glazener's "Regional Accents") indicates his own negotiation of editorial expectations in regard to his short fiction's masked political commentary. See also Howells's September 1891 review of Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads*, which was subsequently included as an "Introduction" to later published editions of Garland's collection (Howells 333).

21. In offering a tripartite class structure within the story, Chopin is also marking her awareness of the complexity of racial categories in Louisiana; she does not just represent it as a simple black and white dichotomy. Shaker notes that Chopin's writing actively contributed to transforming Creoles and Cajuns into white subjects, thus effacing the tri-class racial system. In this story, though, I do not see such a transformation. Evariste and Martinette continue to exist as separate and apart from both groups at the end of the story; as lower-class figures of local color representation, they instead create sympathetic bonds between the upper-class figures, Sublet and Hallet.

22. The last story of *Bayou Folk*, "A Lady of Bayou St. John," can also be read in a similar manner to these two stories. Madame Delisle returns, and whether we read this story as a prequel or sequel to "La Belle Zoraïde," Delisle's decision to embrace the figure of her dead husband, Gustave, rather than the live figure of Sépincourt further demonstrates Delisle's misplaced sympathy in "La Belle Zoraïde."

23. As Glazener points out, "A magazine like the *Atlantic*, in turn, was an asset to a publisher not only because of the extra book sales that might be generated by its insider advertising, but more fundamentally because it helped to create a market position of the publisher" (26). This tension clarifies the difficulty in parsing the distinctions between the types of content that could be published in *Atlantic*-group periodicals compared to publishing house story collections even as it reveals the similarities in the reading strategies applied to both.

24. Chopin's identification with Garland is noteworthy considering his ability, as a white male, to negotiate the divide between regionalism and realism, a possibility that was not extended to Chopin. The similarity between their narrative critiques of local color (see note 20), in conjunction with their different experiences as authors in *Atlantic*-periodical culture, is another direction for exploring the variances and slip-pages between authorial production and audience reception; there is a much closer allegiance between their aesthetic vision than I would have initially suspected.

25. See, e.g., the response in the *Minneapolis Journal*: "Kate Chapin (sic), in the Critic, writes unkindly and bitterly of the Western Association of Writers, because it is provincial enough to stick to Indiana and meet every year at Springs

Fountain park. Kate says these literary people have a 'singular ignorance of, or disregard for the value of the highest art forms,' and are not students of 'true life and true art'" ("Books and Authors" 11). The reviewer takes Chopin's comments as a personal attack upon local color writers instead of seeing it as a critique of the aesthetic norms governing the production of local color art.

26. In a 12 July 1895 letter to Chopin, Horace Scudder informs her: "I have been delayed in reading *Athénaïse* and am sorry to have postponed so much pleasure. I am delighted with the story, and so I am sure will be the readers of *The Atlantic*" (Miscellany 124). "*Athénaïse*" was published in two parts in the *Atlantic*, in August and September 1896.

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