

Cursed Waters and Enchanted Isles:  
The Baratarian Archipelago and the Specter of Imperial Transgression in  
Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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## Introduction

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, the mythical world of the Baratavian Islands is both exotic and erotic in its representation. The cast of characters that inhabit these south-eastern Louisiana coastal islands at any given time—both the fashionable New Orleansian resort-guests that descend on the area like flocks of migrating birds and the French-creole residents that must repeatedly adapt to the influx—amplify the sense of foreign-ness at work. This exoticism allows us to approach the story itself as acknowledging overlapping uses of geographical space. The collision of cultural and national ideologies concerned with social and economic interaction highlights Chopin's archipelago as transnational. In her Baratavia Bay, the ghosts of French-Haitian fugitives and outlaws cast their long shadows over the resort of Grand Isle where Spaniards, Mexicans, creoles, and others move in and around its margins. The plot operates, to a large extent, outside of the nation-space of the Southern United States to look at the country's economic and ideological participation within a more global South. And this approach is emphasized by the protagonist's unique situation as both quintessentially American and simultaneously dissatisfied by the demands of that identification. A transplant from Protestant Kentucky, situated squarely within the physical and ideological space of the American nation, Edna Pontellier's interactions with the spaces of the Deep South are marked by a type of existential affectedness rooted in a fascination with the outside, the otherworldly, and the supra-normal. These characteristics of the islands acts upon her sense of agency in her own, normative world. The exoticism that permeates the Baratavian archipelago calls into question Edna's sense of orientation within the French-Creole culture as an outsider, but who is at the same time not totally obsolete within that culture. In this space, the text asks its reader to play a perverse game of 'One of these Things is not like the Others.'

The unique sense of affectedness that Edna must learn to negotiate is problematized because many of the characters belonging to her social milieu do not experience the archipelago's exoticism in the same way. As she immerses herself in the alluring narratives of the archipelago, Edna begins to interact with the romantic subjects of those narratives—pirates, smugglers, doomed lovers, and so on—through a kind of seductive phenomenology. Her ears are caressed by the “whispering voices of dead men and the click of muffled gold” (CW 920). Of the various “awakenings” that take shape in the novella, this rift in the continuity of the story's space and time by these auricular touches is one of the more nuanced and provocative, especially when viewed in conjunction with the Baratania Bay's sense of otherworldliness in the text. Edna's perception of reality in *The Awakening* is repeatedly disrupted by seemingly magical or enchanted interjections from the Baratarian archipelago's romantic past.

The bygone era of the Gulf of Mexico's pirate kings and the Baratania Bay's infamous smuggling rings—an era which precedes the development and instantiation of the nascent American empire along the southern coasts—resurfaces throughout *The Awakening*, and Edna experiences a feeling of proximity to its more legendary figures. Even after her return to New Orleans, Edna seems bound to the waters of the Gulf and the islands of the Baratania Bay. Her attraction to these spaces, though, extends beyond a mere cultural curiosity to reflect a compulsory need to occupy those spaces. When Edna begins to manifest many of the traditional folkloric tropes of victims of magic and enchantment, we are confronted with the possibility that Chopin's Baratarian islands are intertwined with otherworldly or supra-normal qualities that possess their victims with a deep need to constantly seek out those qualities. As *The Awakening* progresses beyond Edna's first moment of interaction with the waters of the Gulf, she increasingly exhibits the hallmarks of one who has been spellbound by some external force. She

perceives disruptions in the orientation of her own existence within the fixed time and space of the novella's reality. Edna occupies a liminal space which is neither firmly set in the world of the novel or in the other-world of the enchantment. The phenomenon of Edna's enchanted liminality points us to Chopin's subversive awareness—whether conscious or unconscious—of the complex dynamics surrounding American imperialism in the global South.

Beneath the surface plot of the novella is a running narrative in which the Baratarian archipelago functions as a space perpetually disrupted by its fraught past of piratical enterprise amid encroaching national boundaries. Chopin makes continual reference to Jean Lafitte and the Baratarian pirates—an elaborate smuggling network made up of free agents from French-Haiti that operated out of the Louisiana coastal islands and along the Texan coastline. As I will argue, Edna's "awakening" which follows her encounter with the "spirit of the Gulf," and is reinforced by recurring legends of Jean Laffite and the Baratarian pirates, reflects anxieties of identity that exist under conditions of cultural encounter and conflict. Edna's enchanted liminality, taken in conjunction with considerations of the archipelago as a historically transnational space, raises the specter of American imperial transgression, and simultaneously marks that transgression as unresolved and self-perpetuating. We are asked to believe, then, that the waters and islands of the text's Baratarian archipelago are sites of encounter with a lingering magic and a dark, cultural mythos that precedes the complexities and barbarities of United States Reconstruction.

Much of the critical conversation of conflict in the novella has primarily been situated within a larger discussion of racial and gender dynamics within the Post-Bellum Continental United States or in relation to a fixed generic tradition of magical realism in the Southern United States. Yet the text's preoccupation with island symbols and figures lends itself to a transnational reading that takes into consideration the problems of imposing national borders on island spaces

and incorporating cultures that do not map easily onto, or within, a cartographic grid. Scholarly discussion of imperial dynamics in light of cultural encounter and conflict has engaged post-colonial discourses in multi-faceted ways. Michele Birnbaum's reading of *The Awakening*, for one, dynamically examines the ongoing process of "collective amnesia regarding the abuses and uses of the color line in the postwar South" through vehicles that she identifies as the "erasure and colonization of race" in the text (303). She views the visible registers of social hierarchy in relation to "less visible constructions of difference associated with the blacks, quadroons, and Acadians" so that the "unbearable contradiction of [Edna's] being both a free agent and yet acted upon [by those constructions of difference] is characteristic of the colonizer's position" (303). While Birnbaum's reading deploys post-colonial discourse in productive ways here, it remains situated within the space of the American South as a contingency of the American nation-state—where the North acts as a colonizing force in relation to the Confederate States during Reconstruction—and her conversation of the socio-cultural complexities of race in the text are also kept within decidedly American national categories. This line of criticism with regards to Chopin's local color stories and novellas has long been a kind of standard for scholars of the American South.

This critical move, though, seems to be giving way to discussions of the text's dealings with a wide array of cultures in light of island theory, which takes into account the archipelago itself as a space both within and beyond the national boundaries of the United States. Understanding Chopin's use of the Baratarian Islands as an exotic, otherworldly space beyond national borders, yet claimed by them, lets us look at *The Awakening* through a transnational, hemispheric lens. This critical vantage point is especially useful if we recognize that the archipelago lies geographically suspended between the North American continent and the

extensive waters of the Gulf of Mexico. By coming to the text in this way, the cultural encounters and conflicts that operate in the text are not viewed exclusively within nationalist paradigms that refuse to create room for alternative narratives of those cultural moments to exist. By approaching Chopin's use of the archipelago as a liminal space with an imperial, multi-national past, we find that the enchanted or magical disruptions of the text's reality through Edna's communion with the archipelago's seductive past are strategies of self-perpetuation. This focus on self-perpetuation signals a preservation of repressed cultural narratives of escape from national imposition, revenge for imperial violence, and freedom of movement across and through geographical and imperial spaces.

The nature of enchantment and how it operates in the text,<sup>1</sup> as well as the ways in which specific cultural mythologies are invoked and then perpetuated, offer us entry into Chopin's narrative use and expression of the Baratarian mythos. The functionality of enchantment in the novella points to the specter of American Imperial violence as a source of ongoing historical-cultural silencing. Moments of enchantment vocalize alternative narratives of the construction of nationalism and the push of American expansionism in the global South. This type of vocalization allows for an account of the Caribbean and Haitian influences at work in the

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<sup>1</sup> Many theories have proliferated concerning the 19<sup>th</sup> century dynamics of enchantment in an increasingly secular America. Encompassing mesmerism, humbuggery, stage magic, hoaxes, spiritualism and the nature of belief, these critical theories offer many explanations for the ways in which 19<sup>th</sup> century authors engaged those many facets. For my purposes, I find that the type of enchantment that Chopin makes use of in the text is most readily understood through the critical discourse utilized by John Modern: "To insist upon an enchanted subject is not simply to reverse a traditional boundary of Enlightenment critique but to acknowledge that the boundary itself possesses its own historicity and makes its own special demands. . . enchantment becomes the working assumption, a state of nature that calls into question more static versions of human nature. . . one must recognize the distinction between enchantment and disenchantment as integral to the modern secular imaginary and not as some natural difference between two modes of consciousness" (xvi). Edna's belief in magic—and the belief of islanders in their legendary past and its accessibility—as well as the experience of that magic, are not fundamental impossibilities in a modern world.

Baratarian mythos of *The Awakening*, and to interrogate the ways in which those influences are adapted by dominant historical narratives. Popular 19th century fictions remove the significant ideological challenges of Caribbean intra-colonial subjects to the American imperial project. Chopin, in effect, has used the otherworldly space of the Baratarian archipelago to stage a séance—summoning the ghosts of the Baratarian pirates as imperial subjects who now demand the attention of long-distracted audiences.

### **I. Cursed Waters and Enchanted Isles: The Nature of Enchantment in *The Awakening***

The cursed waters and enchanted isles of Chopin's Baratavia Bay are imbued with a subversive magic that exerts itself through human experience, and this magic works in paradoxical terms. Chopin seems to suggest that the magic of the archipelago is self-perpetuating, existing beyond conscious human production or creation. Yet, at the same time, that magic is also utilizing human narrativity as a vehicle to secure its self-preservation beyond the moment of its temporal and spatial origin. Enchantment resides within the alluring and intricate network of stories and legends that the inhabitants of the Baratavian islands tell their visitors. The erotic fictions of pirates, smugglers, lovers, escapes, and vengeance hang over the archipelago and blur the boundaries between the constructed reality of the novella and those attractive alternatives.

These stories, in many ways, are performances of seduction. The text's understanding of enchantment depends upon the intimate and interpersonal connections between performer and audience. And these connections may alter the sensory perception of the hearer by calling into question their orientation within the text's normative reality. This reality is then continually disrupted by the subjects of the stories themselves. The spell of the islands is cast through a vocal invocation of its past. Stories of the pre-American archipelago are brought to life, and their subjects roam about in Edna's present. Once that spell is put into place, specters of an era that precedes the tourism and materiality of Chopin's Baratavian islands are raised and the magic of the islands takes hold. It aggressively insists on its own preservation. Chopin's story-tellers, through their invocations make the alternative narratives of the Baratavian islands—romantic renderings of a lawless haven for fugitive and outcast peoples—readily accessible to listeners who may or may not become victims of enchanted isles and cursed waters.



The accessibility of these alternative worlds brings to light the other dynamics of the paradoxical nature of magic and enchantment in *The Awakening*. If enchantment works as a matter of auricular seduction, then the enchantment's influence maintains some sense of willful consent or denial on the part of the potential victim—rather than traditional portrayals which “deprive the victim of free will (and thereby reduces their humanity), it simultaneously turns them into an epic personage and renders them incapable of evolving as a person” (Ingemark 17). While enchantment in folklore requires a forceful hijacking of the victim's ability to remain an active agent in the real world, Chopin alters this concept. In an authorial move that develops a much more sinister otherworldly magic, she rewrites victimization by enchantment as a matter of *willful choice* or conscious succumbing. Chopin posits the idea of an enchantment that preserves a subjectivity which keeps some sense of control and human progression.

Thus, when Edna Pontellier encounters the narratives of the Baratarian islands via close contact with Madame Antoine, Robert Lebrun, and others, the signs of magic that begin appearing in her countenance are the result of her choice to consent to the seduction of the enchantment. She considers the potentialities of existing within a romantic age of could-have-been lawlessness, and she attempts to bring that age to fruition within the boundaries of her own temporal space. The text makes multiple references to the fact that Edna is more susceptible to ideas, feelings, and experiences beyond her normative reality. Those around her continually point to the fact that “she is not one of us; she is not like us” or that “she might make the mistake of taking these things seriously” (CW 900). There is a sense of fate, it would seem, which hangs about the events of Edna's encounters with the supra-normal. Edna is chosen by those supernatural forces as a potential invitee to the realm of hidden magic in ways that are not accessible to those that she is ‘not like,’ or better yet, set apart from.

Looking to the text itself, we find the first hints of this enchanted-ness beginning to surface at Grand Isle (one of the larger islands in the Baratarian archipelago) on a summer night when Edna ventures into the waters of the Gulf at “that mystic hour and under that mystic moon” which brings about “a feeling of exultation, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul” (CW 907-908). This encounter with the sublime workings of the sea sparks an acute sensitivity to the otherworldly atmosphere of the islands themselves, as they lie suspended between the expansive waters of the Gulf and the extensive area of the North American continent. The enchantment, though, becomes a matter of choice for Edna, as Chopin notes that “some power of import...had been *given* her.” An enigmatic sense of responsibility for acting as a participatory agent in the otherworldly realm of the islands has been bestowed.

As the novella progresses, it becomes clear that Edna accepts that gift, as the symptoms of enchantment begin to manifest themselves the more often that she comes into contact with the stories of the islands. As Edna contemplates the nature of her encounter with the waters of the Gulf, she voices her perplexity at the rapidness with which change takes place within her. A feeling of dissatisfaction with the demands of her life comes on quickly, and it is destabilizing. Robert Lebrun, after listening to her attempts to parse her experience provides the first direct glimpse at the archipelago’s lingering magic:

On the twenty-eighth of August, at the hour of midnight, and if the moon is shining—the moon must be shining—a spirit that has haunted these shores for ages rises up from the Gulf. With its own penetrating vision the spirit seeks someone mortal worthy to hold him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into realms of the semi-celestials. His search has always hitherto been fruitless, and he has sunk back, disheartened, into the sea. But tonight he found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps she will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence.

CW 909-910

Though Robert offers this tale in jest, it resonates with Edna. She feels acutely the influences of the spaces in which she finds herself, and these solidify the more she is immersed both within the islands and within their narrative tradition. With Robert's story, the magical phenomenology and the mystifying experience of the waters is given form—the nameless sense of disruption that Edna experiences is now attributed to her unwitting communion with supranormal spaces and their otherworldly inhabitants. The “spirit of the Gulf” does indeed fix her within its “penetrating vision” as a kindred soul and a like mind—as a subject who does not easily meld into her own normative reality.

Chopin's use of the term “penetrating” here is significant. Emphasized by the obvious sexual connotation of the word, the “penetrating vision” of the spirit of the Gulf crosses the division between normal and supra-normal to eroticize Edna's encounters with the islands themselves—making those encounters appear more attractive, alluring, and desperate. Further, the “penetrating vision” may be extended to the auricular penetration that is the unavoidable product of the act of listening. The sensory stare of the Gulf spirit translates into the romantic whispers and hushed tones of multiple story-telling voices as that spirit straddles the two spheres of normative reality and magical reality. Edna, in hearing the stories of the Gulf spirit, becomes nearly possessed by a voraciousness for more intensely felt contact with the world of those stories. She is increasingly enamored with the possibilities that the existence and communion with such a spirit represents. Those possibilities intensify as Robert, again, gives shape to their enigmatic forms. In a nonchalant conversation about their plans for the next day, Robert suggests, “I'll take you some night in the pirogue when the moon shines. Maybe your Gulf spirit will whisper to you in which of these islands the treasures are hidden—direct you to the very spot, perhaps.” To which Edna enthusiastically replies, “And in a day we should be rich...I'd

give it all to you, the pirate gold and every bit of treasure we could dig up. I think you would know how to spend it. Pirate gold isn't a thing to be hoarded or utilized. It is something to squander and throw to the four winds, for the fun of seeing the gold specks fly" (CW 916). For Edna, the legendary Gulf spirit offers the potential for an unrestrained life that need not adhere to demands set into place by those around her. As she becomes invested in the alternative world of the Baratavian archipelago via Robert's "spirit of the Gulf," she becomes more attracted to the possibilities that the world of the enchantment can offer. She is drawn in by the promise of a removal from the confines of her life—leading her to seek out the legends of the place through multiple voices.

This concept of auricular penetration as a vehicle for the casting of enchantment is the focal point of the second of *The Awakening's* Baratavian Islands, and is amplified by that island's own nature as a type of spiritual, spatial conduit. It is an enchanted place in possession of active magical force beyond human origin or creation. Unlike Grand Isle, a place that has been transformed into a spatial commodity by resort developments, Chopin's Chênrière Caminada retains a bit of its pre-American imperial world. At the Chênrière Caminada—for both local inhabitants as well as tourists—the spatial and temporal spheres of reality and of the island's enchanted past are in a continual state of collapse, so that the island works as what Ingemark refers to as a "*multispatial* site." Spaces where the magical other-world is written into the text's reality, "multispatial sites" may refer to "certain spots in the local landscape [that] have a reputation for repeatedly constituting sites of alteration [between spaces] and are recognized as conducive to an encounter with the supranormal" (10). The island itself seems to be home to an external magical agency that is only controlled by its inhabitants insofar as it may be invoked by them. Edna seems to understand, as well, the significance of the Chênrière to the local and

cultural imagination.

In an episode that mirrors the phenomenon of fairy-stories and folk-tales wherein the protagonist falls into a spellbinding or enchanted sleep, Edna—overtaken by exhaustion—seeks out the small (though idyllic) house of Madame Antoine as a place of security and rest. However, when Edna awakes “it is with the conviction that she had slept long and soundly,” asking Robert, “How many years have I slept?...A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics.” Robert, playing along, answers, “You have slept precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers” (CW 919). In this re-imagining of the Sleeping Beauty fairy-tale, Edna revels in the possibility of awaking to another temporality that would strip her of relevance in her own time and allow her to exist externally to the socio-cultural expectations of it. In a similar way, as Edna continues to seek out connections to the enchanted other-world of the islands, the temporal space between the novella’s reality and the temporal space of the island’s legendary past begin to intertwine after Edna rejoins the waking world. Her fantasy of moving toward a world of romantic lawlessness becomes less of a complete impossibility. It becomes nearly tangible, and her desperation to enter into it is all the more frantic.

But Chopin’s decision to place this pivotal moment of Edna’s movement into the realm of enchantment within Madame Antoine’s own house, and in the Madame’s own bed, is certainly a significant one. The Madame is the island’s famed story-teller and story-collector, and seems to function almost as a charmer or conjurer. This notion is solidified upon Edna’s first meeting with the small woman who maintains a palpable sense of mystery, especially as we are told that the Madame spoke only French—requiring Robert to act as intermediary. She remains veiled from Edna through a cloaked linguistic interchange. And Madame Antoine’s insistence in remaining

on the island, that “all her years she had squatted and waddled there upon the island, gathering legends of the Baratarians and their sea,” does call to mind caricatures of revered local conjurers and conduits who recognize the curious nature of some spaces as supranormal and conducive to bridging the gaps between temporal spaces (CW 920). Thus, the Madame—in conjunction with the Chênière as a multispatial site—possesses the complex magic of the story-teller where she is able to invoke the spirit of the Gulf and of the Baratarian pirates through her vocalization of them. Here, again, we turn to the notion of auricular penetration as *The Awakening*’s primary mode of enchantment.

When Edna begins to move about the Chênière after her slumber, she encounters Madame Antoine herself, who has “been talking all the afternoon, and had wound herself up to the story-telling pitch.” Edna and Robert, then, seat themselves very near her:

And what stories she told them! Of the Baratarians and their sea... The night came on, with the moon to lighten it. *Edna could hear the whispering voices of dead men and the click of muffled gold... misty spirit forms were prowling in the shadows and among the reeds, and upon the water were phantom ships, speeding to cover.*

CW 920, emphasis added

Madame Antoine’s voice possesses a particular kind of magic which not only crosses temporal boundaries, but boundaries of language as well. Dingleline astutely observes of the Madame, “When she returns to them in her ‘story-telling pitch,’ there is no indication that Robert must act as translator, whereas earlier Chopin points out that she ‘could speak no English.’ Although this may be a simple oversight... it does serve to enhance the overall magical quality of the story-teller, a woman who can transcend the normal boundaries of language” (203). After waking, Edna—if we agree with Dingleline’s assertion—is able to comprehend Madame Antoine without mediation. The veil between them has been lifted. This occurrence, though it should not

exist in normative reality, exists on the Chênrière. The Madame's voice directly penetrates Edna both in terms of audibility and in terms of meaning.

It is, of course, Madame Antoine's voice, amplified by her fixedness on the Chênrière and in its narrative culture that gives her the functionality of a conjurer. Making use of the island as conduit or multi-spatial site, she calls forth images and spirits of a long-lost era. But this fantastical ability is not without its anxieties. Echoing a 19th century preoccupation with the voice and vocalization, the Madame reflects Schmidt's observation: "That the voice was intimately connected to the continuities of personal identity, to the trustworthiness of social perception, and to the essentials of gender made the slippery, slithering multiplicity of voices whether mediumistic or staged, all the more dangerous—and alluring" (171). Madame Antoine's voice offers a seductive performance of the islands' romantic history, but there is a danger that lies beneath its allure. When the Madame utilizes such penetration, it carries with it connotations of magical possessions that, while portrayed as more benevolent than the occultish concept of the occurrence, nevertheless is poised to enact a kind of harm. The temporal spaces of the Chênrière Caminada break apart and bleed into each other, so that the seductive qualities of the Baratarian islands manifest through otherworldly or supra-normal happenings. In this case, the sounds of dead men's voices and clinking gold, along with the presence of ghosts and visions of phantom ships begin to materialize in Edna's world, and she must either learn to negotiate those manifestations in her own reality or be subsumed by their demand for her full participation in their own.

The danger of the islands' enchantments, and of the Madame's voice, is perpetuated even long after Edna leaves the Chênrière Caminada and the Grand Isle resort for the season. She continues to exist within these spells and possessions of enchantment, as she feels disruptions of

time and space by those spectral figures and disembodied sounds. She is forced to operate in an isolation of affectedness, where the qualities of reality begin to echo the supra-normal experiences of her mystic swim in the Gulf and her enchanted sleep on the Chênrière. Even music takes on a different relation to her as it becomes “strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive, and soft with entreaty...she arose in some agitation” (946). Her awareness of those qualities forces her to function apart from those around her, as the reality which surrounds her is no longer satisfactory and becomes a fraught source of overwhelming hyper-awareness of her own differences. Indeed, she begins to suffocate inside of it to the extent that her behavior seems erratic to others.

Her husband wonders if she has not become mentally unhinged, and her confidant, Adele Ratignolle, has such difficulty understanding the change in Edna’s demeanor that the two “did not appear to understand each other to be talking the same language” (929). Edna is forced to grapple with a particular type of affectedness that plagues her sense of existential orientation, how she situates herself in relation to others. To return to the mainland of Louisiana—to the mainland of the American nation—is constricting to her. As a victim of enchantment, Edna occupies a liminal space which makes existing and moving through her own reality both burdensome and painful. However, forced to straddle two opposing modes of existence, Edna is neither obsolete in her own rigid world nor is she fully active in the other-world of the enchanted Baratarian islands. Existing in a certain degree of isolation, Edna as a victim of enchantment experiences “difficulty...in relating to others—especially other humans—and to [her] surroundings” which may be due “to a lack of addressivity, which is correlated with the simultaneous self-containment imposed upon her by the enchantment” (Ingemark 21). Edna’s desire to remove herself from the demands of a reality in which she still has relevance, in favor



of another world where she has no means of participation, results in her continual attempts to insert herself into that other world and to create for herself the possibility of active intervention in it.

Her methodology for doing so, though, is especially significant. In an effort to grasp at the supra-normal and alternative possibilities of the Baratarian islands, Edna takes to storytelling. She mirrors the practice of Madame Antoine, but without adhering to the parameters of the Madame's collections of stories. During a formal dinner in her home with her husband and father, who have spent the majority of the evening retelling the glories of their youths, Edna interjects with a story of her own—one that has its basis in a more distant time than her childhood with subjects not nearly as innocent:

Their stories did not seem especially to impress her. She had one of her own to tell, of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back. *They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands*, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this. *It was a pure invention*. She said that Madame Antoine had related it to her. That, also, was an invention. Perhaps it was a dream she had had. But every glowing word *seemed real to those who listened. They could feel the hot breath of the Southern night; they could hear the long sweep of the pirogue through the glistening moonlit water, the beating of the birds' wings, rising started from among the reeds in the salt-water pools; they could see the faces of the lovers, pale, close together, rapt in oblivious forgetfulness, drifting into the unknown.*

CW 953, emphasis added.

The enchantment of the islands is—for Edna—linked to an escapism, and her own conceptualization of the islands prioritizes a permanent state of removal or exteriority. In Edna's re-imagining of the Baratarian mythos, the magic of the islands is found in their invitation to move freely throughout their spaces. The fact that Edna presents the idyllic state of her narrative subjects as that of being "*lost amid the Baratarian Islands*" privileges transience over

permanence and outsidedness over inclusion. The enchanted nature of the islands offers the possibility of unrestricted *being* in a space that is, by nature, physically removed from fixed boundaries. The Baratarian archipelago is fluid—its coastlines change constantly with the natural forces of the Gulf. Edna's fixation on the unknown and unregistered as a viable mode of escape can certainly be read as a symptom of encounter with enchanted spaces, where those spaces insert themselves into their victim's consciousness as more desirable than the confines of reality.

But perhaps more significant than Edna's narrative subjects is her impulse to fill the role of story-telling conjurer. To exist between the magical world of the Baratarian Islands and the real world is no longer bearable, and Edna attempts to reconstruct that magical world around her through projecting its possibilities via her own voice. As a victim of the Gulf spirit's enchantment, Edna's desire to become fully active in the supranormal world of the Baratarian archipelago demands that she extends its sphere of influence, at least to an extent that allows her to once again make meaningful connections with the people and places that surround and overwhelm her. To that end, Edna joins the tradition of Baratarian legend-keepers who possess the peculiar power of conjuring mythical images into reality, first by invoking the name and presence of the islands' enchantress—Madame Antoine—and second by disrupting the social and cultural order of things through her decision to tell a story of such erotic nature in a space that demands propriety. Edna's recasting of the Baratarian enchantment in her performance of narrative seduction attempts to mediate the circumstances of her liminality through simultaneously creating a narrative touchstone for herself in the other-world of the islands, and with her listeners in an attempt to ease the tension of her isolation. However, her attempts at solidifying that touchstone are necessarily futile, as she lacks the multi-spatial site of the Chênrière. Without a physical conduit, she cannot successfully participate in conjuring. Thus, her

attempts at relieving the dissonance of her existence through story-telling is ineffective, and she remains isolated.

It becomes painfully obvious that Edna's degree of isolation as a victim of enchantment has more sinister connotations than those accompanying a self-imposed solitude. Though she actively removes herself from the oppressive spheres of her existence, she does so in favor of a supra-normal world that challenges those structures that demand her compliance. In a critical move which echoes the Marxist philosophy of Althusser, Gray attributes Edna's liminal position to a clash of ideologies and their subjects: "Good subjects adhere to the dictates of dominant ideology through the recognition, acceptance, and maintenance of its practices. Bad subjects rebel against dominant discourse, often by adopting alternative or oppositional ideologies, and are 'punished' through mainstream societal ridicule or ostracism" (56). Edna's impulse to vacate her place within the French-Creole culture and to occupy the supra-normal world of the Baratarian islands signals a disavowal of that culture's demands as well as its adherence to decidedly American hierarchical ideas of social and cultural interaction. Enchantment, in this case, serves to disrupt an established ideological code and to create space to challenge the foundations of that code's functionality. Because enchantment's purpose in the text is to disrupt systemizations of ideology, victims of the Baratarian enchantment are placed into enforced exile by those around them—ultimately leading to compulsory violent self-destruction by the powers that cast the enchantment.

Remarkably, though, the character of Chopin's enchanted isles seems reminiscent of tropes in Caribbean folklore where magic resides with active specters and imaginative spaces of

freedom.<sup>2</sup> The desire of those who encounter magic in these tales is escape in some form—a desperate run to freedom. Such an escape, though, works deeper than a removal from an oppressive socio-political circumstance. Where magic in these cases certainly makes its victims aware of the oppression under which they reside, it also forces them to confront their position within the body of the oppressed. Benitez-Rojo outlines it best when he speaks of “another kind of repression, and this is the one that every Caribbean person experiences within himself and which impels him to flee from himself and, paradoxically, which leads him finally back to himself” (249). This circular destiny forces the Caribbean subject into a proverbial corner, where the only means of escape is self-destruction. Of course, Edna Pontellier is a far cry from the Caribbean subject that Benitez-Rojo is concerned with, and I do not believe that even making a direct comparison between the two would be politic. However, Edna comes into contact with active specters of the Caribbean subject, and is possessed by a fraught awareness of that subject’s plight as liminal. Acting out of a pathological sympathy—a type of sympathy elicited out of manipulation by the enchantment—Edna desperately seeks to mediate her place of material privilege with the violent past of the Baratarian islands and its fugitive populations. Her problematic position of advantage was obtained through that violent past, and this dissonance leads to her aligning herself with those fugitive populations, which in the text include pirates, escaped bondsmen, doomed lovers, and the cursed spirits of both.

The ultimate prize of escape, of a flight to imagined spaces of freedom, in these types of ghost-stories-come-to-life is only gained through violence. The other-world, the could-have-been-world of the islands’ lost histories with all of its silenced rebellion can exist to some extent

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<sup>2</sup> For a good reading of these types of Caribbean folkloric tropes, see Benitez-Rojo’s analysis of *Los Panamanes* in *The Repeating Island*, beginning on page 210.

only so long as it can be articulated. Chopin's choice to represent that could-have-been-world through Madame Antoine's "legends of the Baratarians and their sea," or the Spirit of the Gulf, raises the ghosts of Jean Lafitte and the Baratarian pirates—a band comprised of Haitian refugees and poor French-Creoles. This choice seems especially telling if viewed in conjunction with those Caribbean folkloric traditions of piratical vengeance. To invoke the piratical is to necessarily invoke its brutality and hostility in the face of aggressive imposition by imperial laws and capitalist restrictions at work in the archipelago. Chopin cannot limit the images of Jean Lafitte and his tribe to mere wanderlust or child-like greed, where gold coins are thrown "to the four winds, for the fun of seeing the gold specks fly." As Benitez-Rojo has so adeptly argued, behind the pirate's ghost story, regardless of the way in which it is creatively or aesthetically manipulated,

lies the *the historic violence of the meta-archipelago, which the story itself tries to dispel*...[the] mystification of piracy should be seen as an attempt to authenticate through the narration itself an entire field of allusion...which speaks of sackings and kidnappings, of buried treasure and secret maps, of the gallows and the plank, and of ransoms, lookouts and alarm bells...it has been impossible to effect a complete elimination of the violence that lies deep in the marrow of this or any other Caribbean historical theme.

214-215, emphasis added

The specters of the pirates and of those condemned lovers continue that Caribbean tradition of violence by leading their victims to a desperate need of inhabiting their own supra-normal world to self-annihilating ends.

Once the victim's (or subject's) position of liminality, and their subsequent ostracism from the realm of the normative real, becomes unyieldingly fixed, the only method of becoming a fully active participant in the other-world of the enchantment and totally obsolete in their own world is the compulsory performance of violent self-annihilation or vengeance. The price of an

existence beyond definable socio-political categories is self-sacrifice. In Edna's final days, she returns to Grand Isle, but finds that the magical and enchanted world of alternative possibilities that she knew—and has been so desperately trying to restore—is unable to be actualized. Edna's single opportunity for her escape from the demands of her reality into the world of pirates and doomed lovers is irretrievably lost, and the symbolic actions of her fictions about the enchanted realm are no longer enough to sustain her thwarted desire to move fully into that world. Upon her return to the point of her encounter with the Gulf's magic, she brings its inevitable curse to fruition:

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.

*CW 999*

The great tragedy of Edna as an enchanted individual, and of the specters that act as enchanters, is an inability to “engage in the dialogical movement between identification and separation, since they have no place from which they can go, to which they can go, or to which they can return” (Ingemark 22). For Edna, becoming a victim of the Gulf spirit's enchantment—being subject to penetration by audible and visual manifestations of the archipelago's piratical past, as well as being enamored with them inside of an existence that has taken on a thorny and overwhelming type of character—requires her to participate in the impossible recovery and projection of the islands' violent other-world into the real. And it is this impossibility of the task, in conjunction with the desire to fulfill it, which leads to her permanent outsideness, resulting in suicide.

But Chopin's adaptation of magical realism, which straddles a specific generic tradition while adapting much older folkloric devices, raises questions regarding its unique purpose. Though other writers of the American Post-bellum—such as Charles Chestnutt, Mark Twain, and others—made extensive use of magical realism, Chopin does so in a way that is decidedly removed from the American nation as she takes into account the exoticism of Louisiana as a space both claimed by that nation as well as foreign to it. The magic of *The Awakening* is tied to the foreignness of the Louisiana coast as it seeks to negotiate that coast's constant cultural fluctuations. It is inhabited by constantly moving trans-imperial bodies in a space only peripherally recognized as belonging to the nation at large.

And those bodies that both inhabit and move through the liminal space of the archipelago are problematized by the collision of the physical and the spectral bodies in the text. In this way, it would seem that the perception of the piratical specters by Edna denotes a “state of perceptual memory and perceptual anticipation” where “perception as of bodies requires systematic relations to *transtemporal* utilizations of perception” (Burge 447). The cultural memory at work in the Baratarian narratology as embodied by Madame Antoine functions as a “transtemporal utilization of perception,” so that the spectral bodies of Haitian pirates and escapees—through storytelling—become the objects of “perceptual anticipation.” In this way, the spells cast through storytelling work to call forth memories (both magical and spectral) of American imperial enterprise that had been pushed to a national periphery in terms of both physical location and consciousness. Thus, the enchanted victim whose body signifies a quintessentially Western tourist in a space that once actively denied entry to national capital and its marketplace confronts the spectral bodies of an old outlaw vanguard which protects that space from such encroachment.

The shadow plot of the text, then, resides with a Baratarian temporal space which precedes the solidification of the nascent American empire, yet rests within the French colonial project. This presents us with a kind of Caribbean phenomenon that Benitez-Rojo observes is a “double performance, a representation containing another representation”:

The first, or rather the most visible, is directed toward *seducing the Western reader*; the second is a monologue that returns toward the I...intending to mythify and at the same time...to assume its own marginality vis-a-vis the West and to speak of its own Otherness...deriving from the violence of conquest, colonization, slavery, piracy, war, plunder, occupation, dependence, misery, prostitution, and even tourism.

210, Emphasis added.

Beneath the surface plot that deals heavily with Edna’s “awakening” and her movement toward a model of self-realization beyond the strictures of a hierarchy that she does not fully understand, as well as a the latent demand for patriotism the denotes participation in that hierarchy, lies the shadow plot of the archipelago’s island subjects who must continually come to grips with the violent nature of their subjectivity across time.



## II. Transgressive Action and Spectral Bodies: Problematizing Historiographies

The Baratarian islands, as Chopin has represented them, are both an extension of the permanence, or the ‘known,’ of the American nation as well as the projected ‘beyond.’ She challenges the notion of mapping the nation both cartographically and ideologically onto spaces that are not easily adapted to geographical boundary as the dictation of recognized imperial places and functions. The Baratarian archipelago does not easily lend itself to the action of national spatial claiming. The archipelago as a geographical formation “represents a challenge to the traditional models of state formation and national configuration...given that archipelagic systems lacked a center of power or operation that is easy to identify” (Martinez-San Miguel 21). And Chopin seems to demonstrate an awareness of this—first, by re-imagining the popular tourist destination of Grand Isle as a supra-normal space that raises the ghosts of a pre-imperial mode of spatial occupation, and second, by retroactively situating the story of Edna’s awakening in a nationally claimed space that was destroyed by environmental forces and never resettled. Lying at the physical intersection of the profound natural wilderness of the ocean and the looming capitalist aggression of the American South’s tourist market, Chopin’s Baratarian islands continually call into question the imposition of geographical acquisition as a political-economic project that undermines previous iterations of a space’s utilization and the agency of that space’s subjects beyond capitalist empire.

Looking first to historical models of imperial interaction and cultural conflict in the Barataria Bay of the text, the inhabitants and visitors to the islands are forced to reckon with a past in opposition to the solidification of an American imperial economy in spite of attempts to completely overwrite that past with the hallmarks of tourism—where pirates’ barracks are turned into bathhouses, smugglers’ coves into marinas, and ports into merchandise markets. But such

writing-over, which creates a kind of narrative palimpsest, begins before the eradication of piracy from the Gulf of Mexico in 1825.<sup>3</sup> The American acquisition of Louisiana's coastal islands came with the territory's purchase from Napoleon at the onset of the Haitian Revolution. It is the significance of extending the cartography of the American nation to include spaces both a part of, yet beyond the continent itself which points to the nascent processes of cultural and economic over-writing in that area. Looking backward to Renaissance practices of cartography in light of the "grand discovery" of the "New World," Martin's reading of the impulse to geographically categorize on the part of Old World imperial nations proves rather apropos and is worth quoting at length:

Like the perspective grid of Renaissance artists, then, Ptolemy's cartographic grid imposed an immediate mathematical unity on what it depicted; the most far-flung places could now be conceived of in terms of a series of fixed relationships and proportionate distances. At precisely the time when new information was becoming available concerning the 'outside' world, the Ptolemaic grid gave Europe a perfectly expandable cartographic tool for the collection, collation, and correction of geographical knowledge. *Thus, in many ways, the cartographic grid came to enable a new discourse of the 'Other': no longer that which was despised from within (the Jew, the pauper, etc.), the 'Other' could now be projected as something that lay 'beyond.'* At the same time, although nothing was known of it, *terra incognita* would now be susceptible to the same rational, qualitative measurement as the inhabited world. The cartographic grid provided not only the means by which the Renaissance could visualize the 'Other' in terms of a new discourse, but also the means of inscribing this difference in terms of an economy of the same: a series of geometrically defined places.

159, Emphasis added

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<sup>3</sup> See Davis.

What interests me here is the relationship between extensions of cartographic practice onto spaces that resist such practice—both in terms of inter-colonial activity that involved social and economic movement among different national colonies and geographical locations—and the mode of ‘othering’ that such practice necessitates. As the United States amassed geographical space, the Baratavia Bay more specifically, the nation utilized its new conscriptions of borders to reconceptualize national and cultural otherness as a category that resides “south of South” in the Francophone island spaces of outlaws and fugitives. Among those coastal islands, everything and everyone remains in a continual state of ‘in-between’—in between colonial outliers, in between continents, in between islands, in between bodies of water, and in between national identities. The islands of the Baratavia Bay, in a kind of Caribbean microcosm, are themselves the subject of geographical ‘othering.’ They are co-opted into resort spaces which reflect the exoticism and alluring foreignness of island *paradisos*. And simultaneously, their inhabitants become colonial subjects under the American flag—not easily adapted to American hierarchies of “otherness,” but relegated to the status of permanent outsider all the same.

The archipelagic system, however, pushes back against the quintessentially American configuration of sovereign states so that the alternative narratives of the other that are systematically over-written function as narratives of inter-colonial conflict. What Chopin’s Baratavian islands manage to do, despite their romanticizing of Jean Lafitte and the piratical, is to recall modes of economic enterprise and spatial navigation that refuse to meet the satisfaction of the American nation-state in terms of commodity production and investment capital. For Edna, pirate gold defies instantiated and ideological notions of wealth. Rather than something to be hoarded, invested, or amassed, the economic model of the archipelago’s other attacks those national attitudes toward wealth by flooding the nation’s markets with contraband and

threatening the stability of its capitalist hierarchies. The piratical other, as Martinez-San Miguel observes, “refers to the dark side of imperial expansion or to the impulse of the free market in the configuration of the colonial archipelago...referring also to displacements taking place within colonial/imperial networks that cannot be contained within notions of sovereign states of modern nations” (19). The figure of the pirate—the smuggler who moves among imperial spaces without ever identifying as a citizen of any or expressing any sort of allegiances—operates as a constant reminder in the national consciousness of its inability to dictate the ideological narratives of its claimed spaces. And, further, piracy demonstrates the reign of the capitalist free market taken to its most extreme ends in a space where it cannot readily be quelled. Piracy in the Barataria Bay privileges dislocation over proto-imperialisms, but notably, not as a replacement idea of a national project, instead prioritizing the radical freedom that comes with liminality and the ability to move quickly among restricted colonial areas.

The characterization of the pirate as outlaw seems closely linked to the word’s etymology, where “pirate” is derived from the Greek *peirates*, or “the one who attacks.”<sup>4</sup> To exist in a liminal space beyond the laws of imperial nations, but to simultaneously move through spaces where those laws are enacted is to necessarily attack both the laws themselves as forms of imperial imposition as well as the means of their enforcement. Because the archipelagic system lacks an identifiable power center—both geographically and in terms of governance—the pirate is able to manipulate that absence of center in order to challenge the exploitation form of settler colonialism. The pirate as fugitive and outlaw, through inverse action to settler colonial rule, utilized the archipelagic landscape without raping it of its resources, instead using its

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<sup>4</sup> See Martinez-San Miguel

natural formations to evade bodily capture and proprietary confiscation. Ironically, though, the pirate takes part in that inverse action by participating in exploitation—though without participating in settlement. Acting as free agents, the pirates of the Gulf exploited imperial economic structures to find legal sanction for their activities of smuggling and importation of contraband into the various island colonies of warring imperial nations. They constantly bated the competing expansionist factions against each other for their operative convenience.

Again, Martinez-San Miguel's work is particularly useful for this discussion, especially given the propensity of Chopin to highly romanticize the act of piracy without directly addressing the significance of the activity as decidedly criminal:

My work circumvents the modern and romantic reappropriations of the figure of the pirate as an icon of the free-spirited men and thinkers that configure a predominantly nationalist imaginary in order to explore a more nuanced argument: *the pirates are those who question the imperial order but not necessarily to expose a national project or a communal identity based on the idea of a singular form of political or cultural belonging*. As subjects who roamed freely within and beyond the confines of more than one empire, pirates also represent the chaotic nature of the multiple displacements taking place to configure the quintessential translocal identities of the Caribbean.

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Piracy, in its insistence to “question the imperial order,” refuses to offer an alternative national or communal discourse in favor of maintaining spaces of free socio-economic operation. In practice, this approach to understanding piracy in its many representations allows for the transnational and trans-imperial figure of the outlaw and criminal pirate to push against the paradoxical notion of the free-thinking corsair who is, in actuality, the embodiment of the most quintessentially American ideals of capitalist free enterprise and ingenuity. But just as the archipelago remains in a perpetual state of liminality despite efforts by imperial nations to

control it ideologically, economically, and legally, the pirate reflects that type of liminality and utilizes that condition of the space itself. In the case of the Baratarian archipelago, however, the solidification of the young American empire in the Southern states and their coastal islands led to the eradication of piracy in the Gulf of Mexico and the eventual adaptation of the archipelago and its pirates to the national narrative described by Martinez-San Miguel.

Of course, Chopin was by no means the first American author to romanticize Jean Lafitte and the Baratarian pirates, but her romanticization does not deny them their agency as it existed outside of the imperial as does many of their renderings in nineteenth-century American popular culture. To a great extent, these renderings leave room for an interrogation of their appropriative strategies in terms of narrative representation. The act of constructing such fictions functions as a mode of symbolic action where the American cultural consciousness—rooted in a teleological sense of exceptionalism—claims the *history* of the Baratarian space to legitimize the nation's claim to its physical and legal possession. Beginning not long after the close of the Gulf to piracy, various publications of Jean Lafitte's multiple biographies began to surface within the continental United States. Authored by both men and women alike, these manifestations of the pirate appropriate the figure to reflect their decidedly American context. Ranging from John Ingraham's 1836 iteration *Lafitte: The Pirate of the Gulf*, to Mary Devereux's 1902 *Lafitte of Louisiana*, and Richard Penn Smith's 1830 production *Lafitte, or, the Baratarian Chief: An American Tale*, American popular culture dictated the terms for the representation of the pirate and his operations. The Americanized version of Lafitte and the Baratarian pirates disregards both their French-Haitian heritage as well as their criminal activities committed against the young American empire. Instead, these modes of protest against the ensuing claustrophobia of rapid American expansion are ignored in favor of a narratology that represents the total

Americanization of the pirates under a new black flag of commodity fetishism and constructed ingenuity in the ‘free’ market.

But these historiographical accounts are able to reframe the figure of the pirate only by placing emphasis on particular activities of the Baratarian tribe that can be re-spun as ‘acceptable’ in terms of nationalist sentiment. And this becomes all the more troubling when those nationalist renderings hinge on a constructed appreciation for the American free market model. These reconstructed portraits of Jean Lafitte hinge on the pirate’s participation in the War of 1812 as a naval force for the side of Andrew Jackson and the United States at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. However, Lafitte’s participation in the affair was the result of political maneuvering on the side of Jackson and the federal government—coercing the Baratarian pirates into an uneasy alliance in return for pardon for their smuggling operations in the far South and for the return of Lafitte’s vessels by the United States’ navy.<sup>5</sup> In these accounts of the pirates, we are confronted with the problem of the “authenticating” power of historiographical narrative that requires vigilant interrogation. Here, it will be useful to turn back to Benitez-Rojo’s *Repeating Island*:

It’s true that history’s legitimating narratives, like those of any learned professions, are laborious, arbitrary, and paradoxical. *But we must agree that they are institutionalized*, a fact that gives them prestige and, above all, power... Whatever the voice may be that the text chooses as most ideologically effective in constructing its story, this will not make itself heard as a single voice, but rather as an ensemble of different voices, at least a duet, attempting to sing a (dis)ordered harmony.

256-257

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<sup>5</sup> See Davis.

The institutionalized versions of Lafitte demonstrate their ideological power in their capacity to effectively silence the “ensemble of different voices” which are continuously attempting to make the disorder of those institutional voices apparent. The historiographically ‘authenticating’ variations of the pirate’s activity go so far as to ventriloquize Lafitte himself. And this is most evident in various attempts to forge his memoirs and journals—contrived schemes to reconstruct the pirate chief’s own views concerning his participation in the Battle for New Orleans and the collapse of his smuggling empire in the decade thereafter as some kind of American national providence of divine proportions.<sup>6</sup> Underneath the historicized versions of Lafitte drafted by Ingraham, Devereux, and Smith, though, lies the unappropriated voice of the pirate that favors the self-imposed status of dispossession.

The shadow plot surrounding Jean Lafitte of legal coercion into an unwilling national alliance is, then, effectively codified if taken in conjunction with the known circumstances of Jean Lafitte’s death in 1823. Notably, Lafitte’s assumed date of death coincides with the closing of the Gulf of Mexico to piracy by the imperial and island nations that utilized it for merchant shipments—with Cuba, Mexico, the United States, France, and Spain issuing sanctions against non-commissioned sea raids within just a few years of each other. The act of piracy had been transformed by imperial nations into a means of attaining economic power over their counterparts. Purported to have committed suicide in the midst of an attempt to capture two Spanish merchant vessels following the collapse of his final outpost—Campeche—Jean Lafitte managed to narrowly avoid his becoming obsolete in a world that no longer had liminal space in

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<sup>6</sup> See Groom.



which he could function.

Which returns us to Chopin's Baratarian islands, where the potential still exists for spaces to function in a state of liminality relative to national and cultural impositions. Chopin's utilization of the generic intersection of local color and magical realism—subsections of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realist genre that emphasize the peculiar characteristics of certain localities and their subjects—provides a creative space outside of the legitimizing narratologies of the American historiographical tradition. Fictional representations of space and spatial subjectivities do not need to participate inside of obligatory rhetorics of ideological sanction. And these fictional representations—if working within the tradition of magical realism as *The Awakening* does, even peripherally—are better equipped to critique even the processes of a nationalist historiography's legitimating power. By refusing to cater to the paradigms of romantic historical writing,<sup>7</sup> magical realism challenges the basis of those paradigms and calls into question the established teleologies of the American empire in the global South by posing renderings of would-have-been, could-have-been narratives that deny the mainstream portrayals of the colonial project. Chopin's take on magical realism—where enchantment exists in terms of both magical manifestations and in the personal orientation that recognizes the *potential* for those manifestations to emerge in normative reality—opposes the conditions of historiography where “it is more predictable and bearable to live by the historiographic world's norms than by those of fiction, where everything

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<sup>7</sup> The tradition of American “romantic history,” or historiography was well-established by the mid-nineteenth century as the push for Westward expansion required a teleological and ideological basis in the face of conflict with marginalized and colonized peoples. Ranging from Prescott to Parkman to Irving, American romantic historiography depends upon “legitimizing” or “authenticating” narratives to avoid the moral pitfalls of an expansionist state. Greer articulates this well when he explains that the American plots of nationalist histories “revolve more consistently around struggles against nature and natural, non-civic, humanity. The tendency... is to naturalize colonization, so that the conquest, subjugation, and marginalizing of Indigenous peoples appears as a normal and necessary prelude to the full emergence of the already latent settle nation state” (697).

that can be imagined has license to exist and be at hand” (Benitez-Rojo 256).

Chopin’s Baratarian islands are spaces at once within and without American national and cultural projects of geographical and ideological ownership. And the islands are spaces that are only accessible through fictional renderings of pre-American-nationalist and pre-American-materialist cultural memories that trans-temporally collide with the conditions of the islands under economic coloniality and the development of their spaces as commodities. But the trans-temporal nature of Chopin’s Barataria takes on a third veil, as the action of the novella is retroactively mapped onto spaces which were no longer inhabited by the time of the text’s composition.

The final scene of *The Awakening* takes place in the very early spring of 1893, just months before a hurricane would ravage the Louisiana Gulf Coast and devastate the Baratarian islands well beyond hope of resettlement. The Barataria Bay that Chopin knew at the time of the text’s composition was far removed from the resort haven of her earlier biographical experiences of the space. Familiar structures and personal landmarks were no longer in existence when Edna’s movements in and through those spaces were being set to paper. Grand Isle and the Chênière Caminada are places within the space of Chopin’s Baratarian archipelago that, as Ewell and Menke have noted, are “part of a past...irretrievably lost, the kind of place to which [you] could only return in memory—and in fiction. The Great Storm...might well have focused for her just those kinds of losses: the loss of places saturated in memory, the destruction of which prohibits any hope of return or recovery” (4). For Chopin, the islands, while tied to sentimental memories of familial excursions to the resorts at Grand Isle, are also tied to memories of narrative encounter with a time without strict borders in any sense. But Chopin’s move to make the Baratarian archipelago accessible via fiction signals a departure from established or typical

responses to geographical and proprietary destruction.

The legible, spatial signs of the resort as both an exotic retreat for the American elite and as a material commodity were erased—leaving only the Chênière Caminada’s small graveyard and a brief collection of sparse federal plaques identifying the Baratarian islands’ importance to “pirates, fisherman, and farmers.”<sup>8</sup> These plaques, though, are indicative of a broader national-historical process, where geographical claims of nationality are perpetuated long after the space has been rendered obsolete by external forces. Rather than concede the utility of the islands to anything other than the nation, the strategy was to reinforce the imperial claim on the space by ironically demarcating where Americans *had* lived and where they *had* died for an American public audience that would not return to the space either because of sheer inaccessibility or threat of recurring natural destruction—leaving plain, wooden markers to dot the Baratarian landscape with empty signifiers pointing to an already historically suspect signified. While the federal markers off-handedly mention the Bay’s significance to piratical enterprise, that significance is undercut by the nationalist rhetoric of the markers that would emphasize the loss of the American lives on the Chênière and Grand Isle. Again, marginal pasts of the islands’ utility that exist beyond the pithy narrative of federal historic landmarks are overwritten in favor of a not-so-subtle reminder of the nation’s persisting geographical claim on the space itself. But these markers cannot ensure total erasure of alternative narratives of a pre-American Baratarian space.

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 1.

## Conclusions

The islands are inhabited now only by the dead, and the presence of spirits and ghosts in *The Awakening*'s representations of the Baratarian islands speaks to its author's understanding of the islands' peculiar enchanted-ness in light of the archipelago's palimpsestic history. The ghostly specters of a colonial past haunt the text's spatial representations—calling up images of imperial transgressions against the archipelago itself. Just as “misty spirit forms were prowling in the shadows and among the reeds” at Edna's Chênrière Caminada, the misty forms of trans-imperial entities (both human and spectral) loom in the American cultural memory to threaten the stability of a contrived narratology that would lay them to rest for good.

In the prologue of his book *Secularism in Antebellum America*, John Modern performs a stunning reading of *Moby Dick* that examines the novel as a modern ghost story - one that seeks to navigate the complex intersections of secularity and all of the facets of enigmatic human experience. In an analysis that considers the collision of opposing ideologies, Modern offers a prescient discussion of Melville's first chapter title “Loomings,” that, I think, can provide a useful lens through which to view Chopin's “misty forms” and “phantom ships” which operate at the peripheral edges of the novella's plot:

That which looms is threatening because it calls into question one's point of orientation, that is, one's foundational assumptions of order; clarity, and legibility. Loomings are anathema to immediate comprehension. They undermine one's capacity to distinguish, for nautical purposes, the horizon from one's immediate circumstances. *Loomings are also those things that becloud commonsense visions of self and society, those things that run against the grain of a quickly conjured systematicity.* They are, for lack of a better phrase, *neither subjective nor objective.*

Xviii, emphasis added.

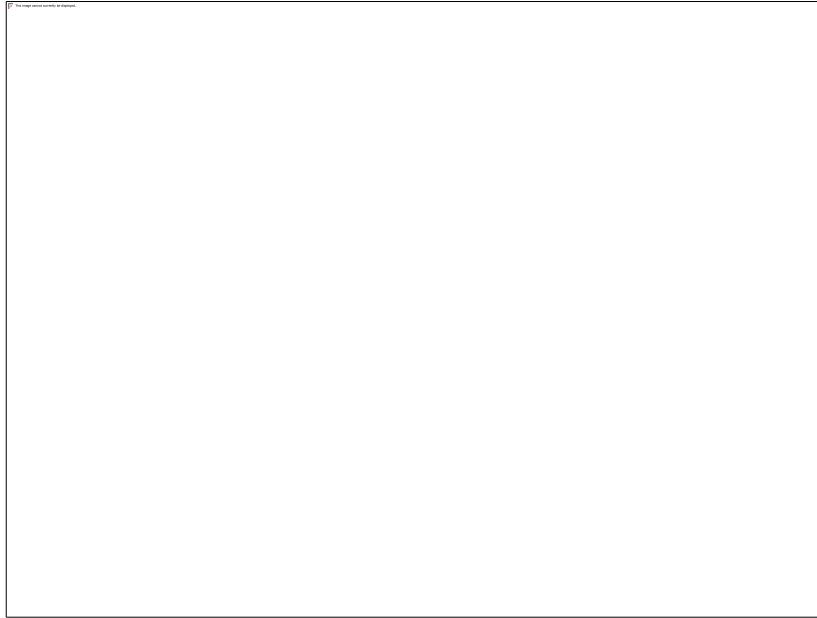
The Gulf Spirit's "misty forms" in *The Awakening* represent a move to undermine the immediate circumstances of an American geographical commodity to obfuscate those circumstances in favor of calling into question "assumptions of order; clarity, and legibility." The text's depictions of the magical, the enchanted, and the compulsory collapse of those spheres with the normative real recall the position of the figure of the pirate as "neither subjective nor objective"—moving through and existing in between controlled spheres in the same way as spirits, making their manifestations as ghosts in the text all the more poignant.

Ghosts and specters are, by nature, illegible—their very existence the result of transgression or violent action committed against their corporeal selves. Condemned to liminality by violent acts of historical silencing and the denial of their first or original selves as outside of colonial subjectivity, Chopin's "misty forms" and looming phantoms obviate the violence inherent in the forceful implementation of hierarchical and economic systems of the colonial project and in the resultant models of rebellion against those systems.

Chopin's Baratavia Bay is a locus of uncertainty. The possibility of direct interaction with destructive forces is always imminent—of destructive forces of the environment, of the slow march of the victors' histories, and of the violent specters who demand recognition through taking spell-bound victims. And Chopin is expressing the unique type of dissonance that occurs when the awareness of such imminent destruction is bound to a desire to exist at the crux of that impending collapse. *The Awakening* gives a representation of the dynamics that prohibit the fulfillment or realization of active resistance against the social structures and historical systems that dictate the standards of participation in the national or imperial populace. This is the reason that Edna's "awakening" into the liminal space of the enchanted, into an awareness of the unsatisfactory conditions of the systems that surround her, and into an uncomfortable knowledge

that her resistance against these impossible forces is futile, is so short-lived. Where the influences and conflicts of empire assert themselves, the agency of newly-minted colonial subjects and spaces slowly suffocates. That agency can only exist in retrospect, in memory, or in fictional renderings of a pre-colonial past. Chopin's Baratavia Bay asks for a type of restoration of that agency—to bring about an “awakening” to the demands of marginal histories of liminal spaces as “points of departure for the articulation of an alternative cultural imaginary that circumvents the problematic relationship with legal and political nationalism” (Martinez-San Miguel 136).

## Appendix 1



“Settled by Indians, “Isle of the Chitamaches” was later owned by Francisco Caminada. Known “Chico Isle,” as “Chito,” as Caminadaville, it was home to pirates, fisherman, and farmers. On Oct. 1, 1893, a fast moving, late season hurricane from the southwestern gulf swept in winds, a tidal surge, and waves that destroyed all but 13 of over 300 family homes and killed over 750 of the 1300 inhabitants. Some were swept out to sea. Most were buried in mass graves in this cemetary. Some surviving relatives resettles in the area. Most moved to form new communities in Lafourche and Jefferson parishes.”

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