

TERRA INCOGNITA

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Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, often seems to invite us to read it as a statement about all people everywhere at all times. Its references to "human beings," placement of Edna's struggle against confining gender roles in a mythic or ahistorical frame of reference¹ and suggestion, toward the novel's end, that "Nature" in the form of biological drives is the real power behind social convention, all seem to claim universal and trans-historical validity for its analysis of how social conventions and gender roles in particular trap women and men within a narrow range of feeling and behavior. To the extent that it claims universal validity, the novel also articulates a darkly pessimistic view of the possibilities of escaping these conventions and roles. If Edna's oppression and ours is part of what it means to be human, then escaping that oppression can only be accomplished by transcending, either as individuals or as a "race of beings," the human condition itself. After waking up from a long and restorative sleep on the island of Cheniere, Edna playfully imagines that

a new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you [Robert] and me as past relics. How many ages ago did Madame Antoine and Tonie die? and when did our people from Grand Isle disappear from the earth? (85)

Despite the optimism of this particular awakening, both individual escape and the wholesale renovation of the human condition are processes associated with evolutionary spans of time or the timelessness of myth and dream. In contrast, the concrete historical moment seems to offer no hope beyond a transitory escape to be won by the

exceptional individual at great personal cost. Although a remarkable individual like Edna Pontelier can relinquish (metaphorically swim away from) collective codes regulating human roles and relationships, doing so separates her as well from human understanding and an intersubjective ground of being outside of which even the strongest individual cannot survive. If *Cheniere* seems to represent a charmed space from which the social determinations of Grand Isle can be seen as local and arbitrary, much of the time Grand Isle appears to be all there is; to leave it is to enter vacancy, a space of death.

Because Grand Isle, as a metaphor for social existence, often appears to sum up all "real" human options, it is intriguing to speculate about a non-dream space which offers alternatives to the choices laid before Edna. This second terra firma, perhaps only tentatively suggested in *The Awakening*, is not to be looked for "above" in transcendence of all social constructions but "below" in the lower rungs of the social hierarchy and "across," over the border of Mexico. Although the novel sometimes seems to present Edna's gender oppression as a natural and, hence, trans-cultural phenomenon, Chopin also acknowledges distinctions between the social identity of the middle-class white heroine and the social possibilities and expectations which define the condition of the woman of color. The "Spanish"² girl, Mariequita, is a case in point. Mariequita obviously can claim none of the deference and solicitude which are accorded the middle-class white women by the white men of the novel, but for precisely this reason she seems to escape many of the social obligations and constraints imposed upon her white sisters. The girl's brown skin and peasant or working-class social identity exempt her from the middle-class white woman's obligatory modesty or shame: "Her feet were broad and coarse. She did not strive to hide them. Edna looked at her feet, and noticed the sand and slime between her brown toes" (80). Mariequita's class- and ethnicity-based marginality also enables her to question the absoluteness of a value structure which places the institutions of marriage and family above individual well-being and desire. Thus, when Robert tells Mariequita that Edna is not his sweetheart because she [Edna] is married and has two children, the girl talks of a couple who did not let marriage vows stand in their way: "Francisco ran away with Sylvano's wife, who had four children. They took all his money and one of the children and stole his boat" (81).

Mariequita's willingness to place personal desire above the institutions of marriage and family is important, for it is precisely this reversal of hierarchies of value which Robert cannot bring himself to accept when Edna offers to become his lover. Significantly, Robert refuses to hear Mariequita's story of Sylvano's wife and Francisco (he tells her to "shut up"), but Edna, who is excluded from their conver-

sation in Spanish, later invents a story very much like it at the dinner party attended by her father and Dr. Mandalet:

She had one of her own [a story] to tell, of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a piroque and never came back. They were lost amid the Baratarian islands, and no one ever heard of them or found a trace of them from that day to this. (123-24)

Edna's tale is "pure invention," the unique creation of a woman whose class- and caste-defined gender identity renders such a narrative unprecedented (except in the trivial sense of the extra-marital affair inferred by Dr. Mandalet) and almost unthinkable (124). For the working-class brown woman Mariequita, however, pursuing desire in the face of powerful social prohibitions is a real possibility, and this makes Mariequita herself a challenge to the apparent inclusiveness of Grand Isle values. The gender roles and social mores which confine Edna Pontelier are not universal but, at least in part, class based, and there is evidence that both Chopin and her protagonist are aware of this. Edna seems to be fascinated by the Spanish girl who rides in the boat to Cheniere with her ("Edna liked it all. She looked Mariequita up and down, from her ugly brown toes to her pretty black eyes, and back again"), and it is something more than jealousy that leads her to question Robert closely about a woman he knew in Mexico: "Did you visit at her house? Was it interesting? I should like to know and hear about the people you met, and the impressions they made on you" (81, 159). It seems significant that Chopin should choose to have Mariequita at Grand Isle when Edna returns to commit suicide. Without making Edna's dilemma any less tragic or real, Mariequita's presence suggests an alternative to the sacrifice of self required by social convention, or the embrace of solitude and death.

Just as Mariequita represents a social space in which middle-class gender definitions and codes of ethics are either invalid or weak, so Mexico represents a privileged geographical space outside of specifically American conceptions of gender identity and morality. Mexico seems to be a freer, more open space not because Mexican society is depicted as less oppressive than American society, but because it is envisioned by the white Americans reacting to Robert's plans to go there as a radically different, "other" place where the rules of their society do not apply. Mexico is a great terra incognita in which the guests of Mrs. Lebrun's Grand Isle boarding house allow fantasy free play, Mrs. Ratignolle defining it as the provenance of a quiet Mexican man who stabbed his wife to death, the lady in black as the origin of prayer-beads possessing special power:

The lady in black had once received a pair of prayer-beads of curious workmanship from Mexico, with very special indulgence attached to them, but she had never been able to ascertain whether the indulgence extended outside the Mexican border. (91)

Whether Mexico is condemned as a country of murderers or idealized as a charmed space, the "indulgence" it offers seems to lie in the fact that it lies outside the familiar and known. Unfortunately, the man who goes to Mexico seems unable to use this indulgence, unable to indulge in its extraterritorial suspension of (U.S.-American) custom and usage. When Robert Lebrun returns from Mexico, he reports that "I've been working like a machine, and feeling like a lost soul. There was nothing interesting" (158). Robert has been able neither to break out of his middle-class American patterns of thought and behavior nor to genuinely experience Mexico as a different place. Though he has apparently had an intimate relationship with a Mexican woman, the experience and the woman, he says, meant nothing: "There are some people who leave impressions not so lasting as the imprint of an oar upon the water" (159). The place which might represent an alternative to conformity (Robert's choice) or death (Edna's choice) is for Robert Lebrun a non-place like the ocean. It is a place which cannot take the imprint of experience and cannot be lived in.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is not unique in its attempt to imagine a privileged place or space in which narrow or rigidified conceptions of human possibilities might be eluded and, perhaps, remade. The longing for a true terra incognita, a land literal or metaphorical which the mind has not already surveyed and colonized, seems ironically strong in the literature of a nation which ostensibly itself embodied this unknown land. Many 19th-century American texts at least seem to be seeking or fleeing such a place—indicating it through indirection as I believe Whitman's "The Sleepers" does, taming and fencing it with a frontier thesis, hunting it into extinction on the Oregon Trail, naming it as the site of death as perhaps *Benito Cereno* and *Huckleberry Finn* do. Always present is a struggle to negotiate boundaries, to use the unknown land without losing it or losing oneself in it, to stretch the mind in its open spaces without allowing that mind to enclose or be overwhelmed by them.

Death and anxiety, even in so exuberantly confident a text as Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, seem to haunt the encounter with uncivilized space, both in the frank admission of the way Euro-American trading and settlement policies led to war and famine among the continent's indigenous peoples, and in the less conscious acknowledgement that the westward progress of American civilization always involved the displacement or destruction of some "lower" form of social organization. Not only the Native

American, but the hunter, trapper and, in his/her turn, the farmer were victims of civilization's "progress." What Turner represents as organic or evolutionary development might as easily be described as an ongoing battle between antagonistic forms of social organization. Indeed, the whole movement across the continent might be seen less as a forward or expansive movement into new territory than as a steady retreat and unsuccessful rear-guard action. And what Turner's courageous nation builders were retreating before was perhaps not only each other but the experience of their own marginality or frontier status. Without the invention of a frontier buffer zone, the American nation would have been itself a border region lying between European civilization on the one hand and a cognitive void on the other. To be oneself on the frontier is also to possess a hybridized identity, to be the demonized "half-breed," in 19th-century terms, the ultimate pariah and evolutionary dead end. We can see the movement westward as the flight from this fate, not a triumphant advance and self-assertion but a defensive maneuver aimed at filling the obscurely threatening western emptiness.

Of course, Turner valorizes the encounter with the wilderness, suggesting that American identity has been forged on the line between wilderness and civilization and that the American character is, in fact, a kind of happy amalgamation of traits retained from Europe and others adopted in the struggle with the land. But to suggest that American identity was made and continues to be made on the frontier indirectly admits that this identity does not yet exist, that it is constantly receding or, perhaps, being left behind. An American identity that is truly processual in character, continually elaborated in an encounter with negation or emptiness, is something Turner cannot allow. For all his assertions that American identity is fashioned on the frontier of wilderness and civilization, Turner locates the achieved form of that identity to the rear of the frontier, in an eastern social establishment secured or consolidated with each successful distancing of wilderness. The "continental page" narrating America's evolutionary development, Turner insists, is to be read from west to east (34). It is in the east and in a west made like the east that the denouement or resolution of the national story is to be found. Afraid of the unsettled, extraterritorial space he ostensibly celebrates, Turner seeks both to fill and contain it with a narrative of national development that brings the journey toward nationhood full circle. Discovering its end in its beginning, this narrative goes nowhere. Not a narrative of departure and striking out, it is a story of staying home or, perhaps more accurately, of defining home by striking out.

A similar enclosure or containment of alien western space is carried out in and by Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* and Washington Irving's *A Tour of the Prairies*. Since both Parkman and Irving

journey into the west with the object of writing about their experiences of the land and its people, there is a sense in which this containment is an inevitable result of their literary projects. For both writers there is an assumption that the west has a meaning and that this meaning can be captured between the covers of a book. Their relationship to the unexplored space they enter is necessarily that of surveyors, fence builders, colonizers. Beyond this superficial similarity in the assumptions necessary to writing about the west, there is a great difference in how the two writers approach their topic. Irving draws freely on European cultural paradigms in trying to make sense of the new experiences he has in the west. Native Americans are described as having "Roman countenances" or resembling Roman and Greek statuary; a forest scene is reminiscent of a "Gothic cathedral" (421, 436). So openly and unapologetically interpreting or "framing" what he sees from a European perspective, Irving seems to be more at liberty to closely observe and sympathize with what he does see. Completely secure in his adopted European identity and point of view, he doesn't need to disparage or deny what he witnesses; he can afford to be tolerant and humane, to understand and even, through the multiple allusions to European cultural artifacts, to indirectly acknowledge the limits of the perspective from which he understands.

By comparison, Francis Parkman is in a much more difficult and, perhaps, more prototypically "American" position. Contemptuous of Europeans (in the person of a much-scorned English traveler) and the effete manhood of the east on the one hand and of the west's brute beasts and "savages" on the other, Parkman occupies a frontier space that he is unaware of, a narrow psychic space that must be defended on two sides against powerful models of organized human life. From this embattled psychic space, Parkman cannot allow himself Irving's humane tolerance. Though he cultivates an observer's role, his observation is neither neutral nor benign but intrusive, critical, even violent. An aggressive seeing precedes and compliments the acts of violence Parkman commits on animals and imagines committing on humans. Parkman's response to the alien western landscape he encounters is not only to impose his culturally-specific expectations and models upon it, though he does that too, but to visually lay it waste by seeing it as waste, emptiness, or mere material to be exploited.

In Turner, Parkman, and Irving we find attempts to define, contain, or close an open and alien western space, which challenges or threatens identity, by articulating it in language. In Melville and Twain, there is an emphasis on the persistence and nearness of unmapped space which now is only metaphorically represented as geographical space—the ocean in the case of *Benito Cereno*, the Mississippi River in the case of *Huckleberry Finn*. The space which threatens in these works is the void of non-being that underlies the

culturally-constructed "real" we inhabit, a void always ready to open up and reveal itself when cultural constructions fail to command belief in their inevitability or naturalness. In both Melville and Twain, these constructions are arbitrary and oppressive but essential. Beyond these constructions lie emptiness and death—the blank gray of the ocean in *Benito Cereno*, the blank white of the fog that envelops Huck and Jim in their flight from society, the unmapped "territories" into which Huck disappears when, at the novel's conclusion, he leaves the social and cultural space of the text. For all the fatuous sentimentality and insistent obtuseness with which Captain Delano clings to an inadequate and misleading set of cultural codes for interpreting the events aboard the *San Dominick*, his implicit faith in those codes ensures his survival, while Benito Cereno's inability to preserve belief condemns him to death. What deprives Cereno of his life is an insight into the conventional and arbitrary nature of all human structures of meaning and identity. Forced by Babo to play himself as a role and to act as though the apparent relations aboard ship were real, Cereno is exposed to the corrosive knowledge that human life consists of fiction and appearance. Deprived of the credulity or trust that allows us to believe in the reality of our world, that allows us to live, Cereno comes to occupy a space of death bounded by the surveying stare of Babo's severed head and the interred corpse of Babo's white enemy, Don Alexandro.

Babo's power as a figure of death is not some inexplicable occult power exerted by bottomless malignancy or evil; it is itself socially constructed, arising from Babo's marginality and oppression as an enslaved Black man. What both *Benito Cereno* and *Huckleberry Finn* reveal is that the fabrication of reality is a collaborative endeavor for which confidence or trust in one's fellow human beings is an essential prerequisite. When Huck convinces Jim that their dangerous encounter with fog on the river was only a dream, he gains power over Jim at the expense of the trust necessary to intersubjectively grounded meaning and identity. Huck's violation of trust admits symbolic death into the tiny raft society, identifying Huck with "trash" and heaping "dirt on de head" of Jim (84). Babo subverts the reality of Benito Cereno in a similar way and in a similar bid for power. Unlike Huck, however, he has nothing to lose by attacking a "collective" construction of reality that marginalizes him. Since slavery excludes a whole class of persons from the bond of trust that underwrites (imperfectly) collective fictions of reality, it represents a threat to those fictions. Babo's calculated imitation of his role as solicitous Black servant, even without the coercion of Benito Cereno to play the complementary role of white master, undermines Cereno's social identity because that identity is inextricably intertwined with his own. In a similar way, Adolf and Jane's affectation/appropriation of the mannerisms and

attire of their white master and mistress in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (or, for that matter, Black Sam's imitation of dutifulness when assigned to help Haley) is keenly double-edged, affirming the superiority of the white model at the same time that it undercuts all claims to authenticity and identity:

It must be observed that, among other appropriations from his master's stock, Adolph was in the habit of adopting his name and address; and that the style under which he moved, among the colored circles of New Orleans, was that of Mr. St. Clare. (321)

Though unacknowledged in Stowe's novel, the subversive power of Black imitation of white identities and white conventions seems as real there as it is in *Benito Cereno*. Like Cereno, Mrs. St. Clare suffers from hypochondria, an inability to distinguish real from illusory symptoms of disease that multiplies their presence, making disease and the threat of death pervasive. Like Cereno, Mr. St. Clare is afflicted with a chronic and fatal ambivalence.

Though the power of Black imitation to expose the arbitrary and consensual nature of white cultural constructs is real, *Benito Cereno* makes clear that the ultimate power lies with white ideology through its monopoly of the resources of language and cultural production. This power is made manifest in the importance of testimony and court transcripts in assigning the events on the *San Dominick* a definitive meaning. Against the power of language and narrative to recuperate or co-opt resistance, the last refuge of this resistance is silence, a refusal to assist in constructing an explanation. In his embrace of silence and refusal to defend himself at his trial, Babo resembles Melville's silent rebel, Bartleby, and, surprisingly perhaps, the articulate Frederick Douglass. For all his "masterful" use of language in his *Narrative*, Douglass is also capable of using silence to his advantage, withholding information about his mode of escape to assist Blacks who still remain in slavery and to confound the slaveholder: "I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave. I would leave him to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormentors, ever ready to snatch from his infernal grasp his trembling prey" (138).

Although Douglass's relish of the slaveholder's confusion and fear may identify his silence, like Babo's, with death, this silence also creates a space where the linguistic tools of white domination cannot reach, hence, for the fleeing Black person, a space of freedom and life. In this valorization of silence, Douglass's *Narrative* joins a short list of other 19th-century American texts which insist that there are silences, absences, unmapped and unmappable places that are not equivalent to annihilation or death. The marriage of Lydia Maria

Child's heroine to a Native American in *Hobomok* is outside the Euro-American imagination and her own narrative, yet it is from this space outside Euro-American culture and narrative that a new generation and, implicitly, a new cultural vitality emerge. Thoreau's *Walden* finds freedom and meaning in the interstices of the social weave. Whitman's persona in "The Sleepers" harvests sleep and dream for what they can contribute to the waking world, while "Leaves of Grass" makes peace between the cosmos and the book. Finally, the sea in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is not, or not only, the site of death. As Edna Pontellier's association with Venus suggests, the sea surrounding the island of socially-constructed reality is also the place of birth.

Notes

- ¹ Edna's moonlight swim witnesses, according to Robert, her union with an ageless Gulf spirit that transports her "into realms of semi-celestials" (75).
- ² The word "Spanish" may refer to Hispanic or Latino ethnicity rather than to nationality.

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