White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic Realism

Barrish, Phillip

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CHAPTER THREE

Awakened White Femininity and a Shaping Mexicanist Presence

Since the appearance in 1992 of Toni Morrison’s paradigm-changing *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, critics have striven to respond to her mandate that we develop a new “critical geography.” Offering both eloquent argumentation and brilliantly developed critical examples, Morrison urged that readers must learn to recognize the “informing, stabilizing, and disturbing” role played throughout the United States literary terrain by a “dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence.” That presence has always, since before our nation’s beginnings, helped to constitute “America” as such. If the United States is “the oldest democracy in which a black population accompanied (if one can use that word) and in many cases preceded the white settlers,” then, perforce, “American literature could not help being shaped by that encounter.” *Playing in the Dark* asks, how has the United States’ pervasive Africanist presence helped to organize, to give texture and meaning, to “literary ‘whiteness’”? Trying to answer Morrison’s question has produced remarkable results throughout U.S. literary studies, ranging, for instance, from Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s *Was Huck Black?* to Kenneth Warren’s *Black and White Strangers* to Eric Sundquist’s *To Wake the Nations*.

Despite the vast border Mexico and the United States share, comparatively little scholarship has been devoted to a question that might be taken as analogous to Morrison’s: How has the centuries-old encounter between the United States and what José Limón (following Américo Paredes) calls Greater Mexico helped shape literary whiteness in the body of material that U.S. critics often think of simply as “American literature”? (By Greater Mexico, Limón means people of Mexican descent from “either side of the border,” “with all their commonalities and differences.”) If a black population accompanied and, as Morrison emphasizes, in many
cases preceded white settlers to this country, so too a Mexican population inhabited significant areas of what became the United States long before those areas’ mid-nineteenth-century incorporation. (Roughly 20 percent of the U.S. population now lives on land that was once part of Mexico.) Moreover, of course, Mexican-descended people have continued to inhabit these and other parts of the United States ever since, exercising incalculable influence on the cultural, financial, and political economies of the regions.

In the field of literary studies, much important work has been done by scholars associated with the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project, as well as by other scholars, in locating and elucidating a richly diverse tradition of Mexican American and Chicano literature. Such recovery work, however, does not take literary whiteness as a primary concern. Thus, few scholars working primarily with literary materials have asked how paying fuller attention to the abiding, signing “Mexicanist” presence (adapting Morrison’s terminology) in the United States might also help us reread certain “Anglo” texts, ones that are usually seen as unrelated to the nation’s Hispanic literary heritage. Again, adapting Morrison’s terms, how has “a real or fabricated” Mexicanist presence been used “to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness”?3

The lack of critical attention to the influence of “Mexicanism” on constructions of whiteness is especially striking, given the long and continuous significance in U.S. culture of Mexico, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans. For scholars of what Morrison calls “literary whiteness,” models for understanding textual relationships between it and literary or textual Mexicanism seem an especially important need now, in light of census data from 2000, which reveal that Hispanics, primarily Mexicans and Mexican Americans, already outnumber African Americans in such key states as California and are on the verge of becoming the nation’s largest minority.

Explicitly responding to Morrison’s challenge finally to see American literature’s shaping Africanist presence, the most powerful recent line of argument about Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* contends that the sexual, political, and creative dimensions of Edna Pontellier’s “awakening” all depend upon an unacknowledged “racial midwifery.” Citing, for instance, the domestic labor (childcare, cleaning, cooking, and errands) provided for Edna by “nameless, faceless black women,” Elizabeth Ammons insists that “the very liberation about which the book fantasizes is purchased on the backs of black women.”4
Michelle Birnbaum, who has developed this line of argument about *The Awakening* most fully and subtly, emphasizes in particular how Edna’s access to a freer, richer sexuality is facilitated, even structured, by the many black women who surround her. Highlighting a series of implicit, oblique, and even hidden textual connections, Birnbaum shows that Edna does not only take the physical labor of African American women for granted. She “employs as well their tropological potential, their associations with the marginal and, ultimately, with the erotic.” Birnbaum draws, for instance, on Hortense Spillers’s suggestion that the mere presence of a mulatto in works of American literature serves to evoke illicit sex: the mulatto presence permits dominant white culture “to say without parting its lips that ‘we have willed to sin.’” Using this logic, Birnbaum argues that the “quadroon” nursemaid who frequently appears near Edna carries a “literary inheritance” of libidinal connotation. Despite the fact that in Chopin’s portrayal the nursemaid seems to lack both subjectivity and sexuality, for Birnbaum the aura of illicit sex that hovers about the mixed-race woman’s very existence helps emphasize Edna’s own awakening desires.5

This is true, to the extent that racist cultural assumptions linking African American women and ungoverned sexuality can never be far away when African American women appear in a text such as *The Awakening*, which deals explicitly with a white woman’s emerging desires. It is important, however, to recognize the differences in how *The Awakening* treats its African American women characters and how it treats Mariequita, a local “Spanish” or Mexican girl on Grand Isle.6 For instance, Chopin gives no mention or even hint of active sexual desire on the part of any African American women in the book. But Mariequita, by contrast, explicitly regards Edna as a sexual rival for Robert and, later, Victor, both of whom, as the text openly implies, she has had some previous sexual connection with. With her “round, sly, piquant face” and “coarse” bare feet with the “sand and slime between her brown toes” that especially draw Edna’s gaze, Mariequita is the one female character in the novel who takes adulterous sex for granted as an ever-present possibility. She says as much to Robert when she asks if Edna is his “girlfriend,” and she teases Victor later in the book that she “could run away any time she likes to New Orleans with Céline’s husband.”

Why does it matter if African American women connote unsanctioned sex in *The Awakening* because of the book’s literary and cultural context while Mariequita more directly denotes it? It matters, I suggest, because there is a shaping Mexicanist presence in Chopin’s novel, one that is not simply collapsible into the larger category “women of color.” *The Awakening’s* Mexicanist presence works complementarily with the Africanist presence that Birnbaum and Ammons, following Morrison in
this case perhaps too literally, have helped elucidate. But the novel’s Mexicanist presence also has its own different valences, its own specificities. The most striking of these centers on the book’s constructions of white gender identity, both feminine and masculinel.

Consider, for example, the freighted question of Robert Lebrun’s masculinity. Part of what, at least initially, makes Robert a good catalyst for Edna’s emerging desire is that he stands somewhat outside the paradigm for normative bourgeois masculinity represented by Edna’s husband. But this also makes his masculine status uncertain. Léonce Pontellier is an eminently desirable man, both sexually and financially. Edna’s marriage to him makes her the “envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier” (48). The group of ladies who hover around the box of “toothsome” sweets that he sends to her choose “with dainty and discriminating fingers, and a little greedily,” as they declare “that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world” (9). By contrast to Léonce, who leaves home every weekday for eight hours of hard but lucrative work on “the street” (Carondelet Street, the center of New Orleans’s financial district), Robert Lebrun’s primary occupation seems to be assisting his mother to run her hotel. He never visits the local men’s club, Klein’s, where the vacationing Mr. Pontellier goes to smoke cigars, gamble, and talk about business. A grown man of twenty-six years, the “boyish” Robert is permitted to flirt with his mother’s female guests only because, as Edna’s friend Madame Ratignolle humilitatingly reminds him, nobody thinks of taking his attentions seriously. When he protests—“Am I a comedian, a clown, a jack-in-the-box? . . . Am I always to be regarded as a feature of an amusing programme?”—Madame Ratignolle squelches his complaint: “You speak with about as little reflection as we might expect from one of those children down there playing in the sand” (38).

Unlike Alcée Arobin, for instance, a bachelor whose attentions to a woman always arouse sexual suspicions, Robert’s removal from the categories that Edna’s society associates with grown-up masculinity makes him a “safe” male companion for Edna. He can spend endless hours with her without it even occurring to Mr. Pontellier to object. Yet while Robert’s innocently juvenile status smooths the way for the early stages of his and Edna’s relationship, this status must alter for him to develop into the central object of her mature and acknowledged sexual desire. How does Robert’s figuration shift to that of an adult, sexualized masculinity? This shift, which also enables a crucial jump in Edna’s awakening (specifically, her conscious recognition of her desire), occurs via The Awakening’s Mexicanist elements.

I have mentioned already the novel’s suggestion of a previous sexual affair between Robert and Mariequita. The suggestion is made most
strongly just after Robert has left Grande Isle for the long trip to Mexico that keeps him absent until almost the end of the book. The artist Mlle Reisz tells Edna an anecdote about Robert thrashing his handsome younger brother Victor a year or two earlier over “a Spanish girl, whom Victor considered that he had some sort of claim upon.” When Edna asks, “Was her name Mariequita?” Mlle Riesz answers yes, continuing, “Oh, she’s a sly one, and a bad one, that Mariequita” (68). In addition to emphasizing Robert’s physical strength and triumph in combat, the anecdote places Robert as intimately involved with a “bad” woman, one whom men fight over. Visioning Robert in a sexual relation with Mariequita helps Edna bring him into focus as the man whom her own “impassioned, newly awakened being” craves. Robert’s connection with Mariequita allows him to appear to Edna as an active sexual agent. Toward the end of the book, when Edna is moving toward her attempt at seducing Robert, a similar triangle—this time involving “a transcendently seductive vision of a Mexican girl” whom Edna jealously fantasizes Robert having met during his trip—adds to Robert’s status as a sexually experienced, sexually desirable man (97). Just as important, Edna’s imagination of this “seductive . . . Mexican girl” helps fire up her own determination to act as an assertive sexual agent.

*The Awakening*’s specific setting in and around New Orleans, and in particular the book’s frequent allusions to nineteenth-century New Orleans’s highly systemized indices of African American identity, helps explain why Chopin’s novel places Mexicanist women more explicitly into the racist slot of darkly lustful than it does Africanist women. As Birnbaum suggests, one effect of placing the book’s black servants and nannies onto a fixed grid of racial ratios and hierarchies (categories *The Awakening* deploys include “mulatto,” “quadroon,” and “griffe”) is paradoxically to make them serve as “stable counters to Edna’s flights.” By contrast to Edna’s rebellions against a conventional social order, New Orleans’s complex but rigid traditions of racial hierarchy render “the mulatto” and “the quadroon” into, as Birnbaum has explained it, “reminders and reinforcements of cultural tiering.”

As is symbolized by Mariequita’s first introduction on an unanchored boat, however, as well as by the fact that the “transcendent” Mexican seductress whom Edna later imagines is supposed to live in far-away Vera Cruz, the novel’s Mexican women do not bear this same association with New Orleans’s traditional order. The Mexican women are thus free to represent a wild space, one outside the regular rules and denominations of New Orleans society. At the same time, however, this wild space is literally contiguous with New Orleans. The “seductive,” “sensuous” sea that figures so prominently in Edna’s awakening is, after all, the Gulf of Mexico (14).

We see none of Robert’s actual sojourn in Mexico, but his trip there plays
a key role in his assumption of a socially readable, full masculinity. When he returns, Edna perceives in Robert’s attentions “an added warmth and entreaty that had not been there before” (93). Mexico has long functioned in the southern and southwestern U.S. imaginary as a liminal zone for American males, a place from which American boys return as men to be reckoned with. This U.S. figuration of Mexico has been operative at least since Civil War-era discourse about the Mexican War. There, we find Confederate and Union officers’ experience in the invasion of Mexico described as transformational in their development into formidable fighters and leaders. (Civil War enlistment posters invited potential recruits to fight side by side with the “heroes of the Mexican War.”) The trope of Mexico as a site for the passage of (white) boys into manhood has remained important, especially for Westerns and other genres that locate themselves near the border.

In addition, as befits New Orleans’ nineteenth-century status as the primary port for U.S. trade with Mexico, Robert’s ostensible motive for his trip is finally to enter the male world of business and moneymaking. When his mother’s guests express disbelief about his forthcoming trip, Robert protests in the same tone of frustratedly defensive pique in which he had responded to Madame Ratignolle’s assumptions that his flirtations could never be serious: “‘I said all along I was going to Mexico; I’ve been saying so for years!’ cried Robert, in an excited and irritable tone” (40). Once it is clear that Robert really is going, Mr. Pontellier himself confirms Robert’s achievement of recognizable masculinity, finding it “altogether natural” for a “young fellow . . . to seek fortune, and adventure in a strange, queer country.” As he narrates to Edna, when he encountered Robert making final preparations for his trip on Carondelet Street, the two of them “had gone ‘in’ and had a drink and a cigar together” (45). The extra quotation marks that Chopin places around the word “in” within Léonce Pontellier’s speech call attention not so much to Pontellier’s use, in conversation with his wife, of a polite euphemism for drinking establishment. Instead, the emphasis on “in” here signifies the adult masculine space into which Robert finally gains inclusion by heading off on a Mexican quest.

Even as this Mexican trip helps change Robert’s status into that of a man among men, the conventional masculinity into which the trip allows him to enter will also, ironically, motivate the novel’s and Edna’s own final refusal of patriarchal structures and assumptions. Edna’s suicidal swim out into the ocean constitutes a rejection of—even an escape from—all the other scenarios she sees as open to her. Most notably, and often surprising to students, she refuses any possibility for a familiar love story ending, one that would allow her and Robert, having finally declared their feelings for one another, to be together happily ever after.
Edna does not fear that Mr. Pontellier would never agree to a divorce—she concurs with Robert that “we have heard of such things” (102). Nor does she fear public opinion, as is made clear by her actions since the relatively early moment when she simply stops attending her own Tuesday reception hours. Rather, she gives up on the possibility of a future with Robert because she senses that his passage into socially recognizable manhood implicates him in a system that can only ever imagine her as an object of exchange, whether as a wife or as a mistress. Robert’s voyage to Mexico, where he will supposedly seek “fortune, and adventure in a strange, queer country,” allows Mr. Pontellier to invite him “in,” as he puts it, to share a cigar, but once Robert has been thus recognized as a full member of the grown-up men’s club, he also joins Mr. Pontellier as a potential owner and exchanger of women.

When, having returned from Mexico, Robert proposes to Edna that perhaps her husband will set her free so she can become his wife, Edna responds, “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both.” Robert is as disturbed as Mr. Pontellier himself would be at Edna’s explicit withdrawal not merely from one particular marriage but from the culture-shaping system of female exchange that marriage subsumes: “His face grew a little white. ‘What do you mean?’” (102). The whitening of Robert’s face here indicates not only his shock but also his by now complete identification with the entitlements of adult white masculinity. (After his trip to Mexico he makes it a point that he now buys his own cigars, “a whole box” at a time; before the trip, the still-boyish Robert had smoked symbolically less phallic cigarettes because “he could not afford cigars” [100, 5].)

Similarly revealing a certain structural equivalence between Robert and what had previously seemed to Edna the contrasting significations of patriarchal entitlement is Alcée Arobin’s conversation with Robert about the alluring beauty of Mexican women. In his early discussion with Madame Ratignolle, Robert enviously cites Arobin as a man whose advances toward women are, unlike his own, taken to have a genuine force to them. After Robert’s return from Mexico, however, Arobin himself expresses a friendly jealousy over Robert’s apparently having gotten “so deep in their regard” that one of Vera Cruz’s “stunning girls” had given him a silk pouch (96). (The hint of sexual imagery here—a silk pouch supposed to represent, like a trophy, Robert’s having gotten “so deep in” with Mexican women—further reinforces the idea of his Mexican trip as a rite of masculine passage.) Edna’s witnessing this moment of classic male bonding between Robert and Arobin, her seeing the two men connect, however casually, over the girls of Vera Cruz, prepares for her recognition,
just before committing suicide, that even the strength of her feelings for Robert will not lift her above the options of wife or degraded mistress: “'Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me.’” “She even realized that the day would come when [Robert], too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (108).

Mexico and Mexicans, even when they are only invoked in conversation or in a character’s imagination, play a key role in defining both Robert’s white masculinity and Edna’s “awakened” femininity, the latter both in its empowering mode of sexual agency and desire and in its final mode of despairing insight. I want now to consider a brief yet complex moment in the text where the invocation of Mexico serves somewhat differently to further The Awakening’s articulation of gendered whiteness. I am interested here in how the text’s Mexicanist presence helps position Edna to serve, as she would for many readers in the 1970s and 1980s, as an icon for a specifically national, as well as specifically liberal, white feminism, albeit one that unselfconsciously assumes its own cosmopolitan universality. Although scholars who have written on whiteness in The Awakening do not emphasize this complicating factor, the book itself often reminds readers of the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences between Edna’s Kentucky Protestant identity and the New Orleans “Creole” society in which she finds herself, a white Catholic aristocracy descended from Louisiana’s first French and Spanish settlers. How does the novel’s emphasis on these white ethnic differences intersect with the Mexicanist presence in the book to create space for a New Woman, a universalized figure seemingly beyond ethnicity? Defined in part against the emphatically white Creole identities of New Orleans, Edna emerges ready for adoption by a later generation of white American feminists who sometimes ignored their own relation to white privilege.

When Robert surprises his mother and her summer guests by announcing that he will be leaving that very afternoon for Mexico, it provokes among them a “general and animated conversation . . . concerning Mexico and Mexicans” (43). As with most of the participants in this conversation, Madame Ratignolle’s contribution seems almost comically irrelevant to the purposes of Robert’s trip. Her comment is noteworthy, however, as the most explicitly racist reference in the book:

Madame Ratignolle hoped that Robert would exercise extreme caution in dealing with the Mexicans, who, she considered, were a treacherous people, unscrupulous and revengeful. She trusted she did them no injustice in thus condemning them as a race. She had known personally but one Mexican, who made and sold excellent
tamales, and whom she would have trusted implicitly, so soft-spoken
was he. One day he was arrested for stabbing his wife. She never knew
whether he had been hanged or not. (41)

Most crucial here, I believe, is the slightly mocking indirect discourse with
which the narrative voice distances itself from Madame Ratignolle's
remarks. The narrative voice compresses Ratignolle's lurid anecdote into
flat reportorial language and continually reminds readers that the conclu-
sions drawn from it are hers and not its own by such phrases as "she con-
sidered," "she trusted," and "Madame Ratignolle hoped." The distancing
note in this paraphrase serves two functions. For one, it allows the narra-
tive voice to signal its own allegiance to the generous liberalism supposed
to characterize the high realism championed in the U.S. at the time by
William Dean Howells. The narrative voice, that is, wants it to be clear
that only Madame Ratignolle, not itself, "trusts" that she does Mexicans
"no injustice in thus condemning them as a race" despite her having per-
sonally known "but one Mexican."

In addition, however, Madame Ratignolle's grasping after crude stereo-
types and her obvious failures of empirical reasoning emphasize the limits
that inhere in her particular version of white femininity. Like Howell's
idealized "cardboard" grasshopper, which he famously adduced as an
example of the romantic artifice that literary realism must move beyond,11
Ratignolle's "mother-woman" or domestic angel is set up from the start as
foil to Edna's progressively awakening real female self. (Chopin emphasizes
Madame Ratignolle's almost allegorical status as antitype to Howellsian
realism by saying that her appearance suggests "the bygone heroine of
romance and the fair lady of our dreams" [9].) But Ratignolle's silly and
biased remark about "Mexicans" also provides an opportunity to cast her
domestic angelicism as, so to speak, too white. Ratignolle's artificially pro-
tected whiteness embodies an innocence that actually translates into
embarrassing provincialism, or even offensive ignorance. Implicitly creat-
ed is a space in which Edna's version of awakened white femininity can lay
claim to a femaleness not overtly marked as white, a femaleness that lends
itself to being taken as both natural and universal.

Throughout the book, Madame Ratignolle's whiteness is underlined
not only by her description as "pure white," "the fair lady of our dreams"
with "spun-gold hair" and blue eyes, and not only because she personifies
the Creole woman's "lofty chastity," but also because she is visibly "more
careful of her complexion" than Edna (9, 10, 15). By contrast to Edna,
Madame Ratignolle always wears veils and gloves so as not to tan, and she
never forgets to carry a protective parasol when outside. I suggest that
Madame Ratignolle's "lofty" display of ignorance about Mexico and
Mexicans, along with her insistence that she has only ever come into contact with one representative of the Mexican “race,” connote the same thing as does her overscrupulous protection of her complexion—that is, an over-careful, even forced, and thus marked white femininity. The Creole woman functions in Chopin’s text to embody an unnatural Old World whiteness, proper only to a “bygone heroine.”

When the Creole woman is put into relation with Edna, as well as with the text’s “real or fabricated” Africanist and Mexicanist presences, the Creole woman allows Edna’s American Protestant whiteness to appear as simplified, contemporary, nonethnic, and normative. This normative whiteness has been accepted not only by those readers who have tended towards treating Edna as representative of “woman” under patriarchy. It has also been accepted, in a sense, by more recent “whiteness studies” analysts of *The Awakening*. Construing Edna’s whiteness as part of a binary system whose other member is “of color” is the flip side of treating the latter as synonymous with African American.