“Bonbons in Abundance”:
The Politics of Sweetness in Kate Chopin’s Fiction

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Critical writing on the fiction of Kate Chopin is marked by culinary inattentiveness. Unlike Chopin’s representation of sexuality or urban space or medical practice, her mappings of complex food cultures in Creole and Cajun settlements in late-nineteenth-century Louisiana have failed to generate significant interest. Compared with critical fascination with the vestimentary in her work—there is a veritable hermeneutics of Edna Pontellier’s bathing suit in The Awakening (1899)—the alimentary has fared badly.¹ This chapter addresses, therefore, a major deficit in Chopin scholarship. Reserving for another occasion analysis of the politics of jambalaya, gumbo, and other savo- ries mentioned by Chopin, we take sugar consumption as our subject instead and pursue references to sweet foodstuffs across not only The Awakening but also the earlier novel At Fault (1890), the story collections Bayou Folk (1894) and A Night in Acadie (1897), and several uncollected short fictions. The sugary will be interpreted here as key to Chopin’s negotiation of regional, national, racial, ethnic, gender, and class identities. In claiming such cultural significance for this food type, we follow the example of sugar’s foremost historian, Sidney Mintz: “Studying the varying use of a single ingestible like sugar is rather like using a litmus test on particular environments” (Sweetness and Power 7).
The nineteenth century witnessed, in the United States as elsewhere, the democratization of sugar. No longer monopolized by elite classes, sugar became a staple foodstuff, cherished across social boundaries as both a sweetener of coffee and tea and a highly adaptable ingredient in making cakes, breads, desserts, and confectionery. One scholar records that, by the early 1870s, “the average American consumed almost 41 pounds of (mostly imported) sugar a year, over six times what his or her counterpart had eaten in the 1790s” (Woloson 5). There is evidence in Chopin’s fiction itself of this universalization of sugar intake. Opening a parcel of fish, potatoes, herbs, and butter in the short story “Nég Créol” (1897), Mamzelle Aglaé asks disappointedly: “Pas d’ sucre, Nég?” (Chopin 427). While registering sugar’s social dispersal, however, we resist any suggestion that this amounts to the banalization of the substance in Chopin. On the contrary, sugar is still charged here with plural, even antagonistic meanings. It remains what Mintz calls “a versatile, one might say protean, substance,” susceptible not merely to culinary but to complex cultural molding (Sweetness and Power 77). For historian of confectionery Laura Mason, sugar performs a “strange alchemy” (10); and it is precisely the substance’s mutability in Chopin—its ethnic ambiguity, mixed gender signals, Janus-faced nostalgia and progressivism—that this essay explores.

Our focus is upon manufactured sweetness, the multiple forms that sucrose takes in Chopin’s fiction after it is subjected to either domestic or industrial processing. Thus we pass over the significance of naturally occurring sweet things: the eponymous fruits in “Ripe Figs” (1893), say, or the peaches central to the undated story “Ti Frère.” Yet at the same time as involving this tactical omission, our approach to sugar in Chopin is inclusive. Jane Dusselier argues that in “the last half of the nineteenth century, America’s primary association with sweetness began a slow, uneven transformation from ‘sweet dishes’ made in the home to candy produced in factories” (15–16). Something of this transformation is witnessed in Chopin: if sweetness has a privileged delivery system in her work, it is indeed confectionery rather than cakes or desserts. While we discuss the increasing importance of confectionery, however, we do not isolate it from other modes of sugar consumption. If there is an ideology of the bonbon in Chopin’s fiction, so too there is a politics of the doughnut.

**Bonbons at the French Theatre**

Reviewing Chopin’s story collection *Bayou Folk* in 1894, the *New York Times* described its Louisiana Creole characters as an “exotic,