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For the Record:
Gendered Collective Memory in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far and Abraham Cahan

DISSERTATION

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for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Hillary R. Branman

Dissertation Committee:
Chancellor’s Professor Brook Thomas, Chair
Associate Professor Arlene R. Keizer
Associate Professor James Kyung-Jin Lee

2015
DEDICATION

To

the Storytellers
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CURRICULUM VITAE
HILLARY R. BRANMAN

Education

Ph.D. English, University of California at Irvine, March 2015
  Specializations: late 19th/ early 20th century American literature; memory studies; women’s studies; minority studies; rhetoric and composition
  Dissertation: For the Record: Gendered Collective Memory in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far and Abraham Cahan
  Committee: Brook Thomas (Chair), Arlene R. Keizer, James Kyung-Jin Lee
M.A. English, University of California at Irvine, 2008
B.F.A. Creative Writing, Chapman University 2006
B.A. French, Chapman University, 2006
Cours de Langue et Civilisation Francaises de la Sorbonne, Paris, France, 2004

Honors, Awards and Fellowships

AGS Travel Grant, University of California, Irvine, 2013
Summer Dissertation Fellowship, University of California, Irvine, 2013
Regents’ Fellowship, University of California, Irvine, 2007-2008
Provost Academic Scholarship, Chapman University, 2002-2006
Anna Marie Jardini Award, Chapman University, 2006
Gray Key Award, Chapman University, 2006
Sigma Tau Delta (National English Honor Society), Chapman U., 2004-2006

Professional Activities

Colloquium Organized
Co-chaired the UCI English Graduate Colloquium (Spring, 2010). “Anonymous Johnson” presented by Prof. Robert Folkenflik
Co-chaired the UCI English Graduate Colloquium (Winter, 2010). “Paul's TheoRhetoric: Interpretive Politics in Law and Religion” presented by Prof. Steven Mailloux

Colloquium Presenter
Humanities Research Colloquium (Spring 2013): “A Time-Stained Chain of Evidence”: Pauline Hopkins and the Work of Public Talk”
Conferences and Panels
“Graduate Studies in the Humanities.” Cal State University, Fullerton, April, 2013.

Departmental Service
Mentor, Undergraduate Conference in Critical Theory, UCI, 2011
English Department, Graduate Student Mentor, UCI, 2009-2010
English Graduate Association, Graduate Committee, UCI, 2009-2010
English Department, Campus-wide Marathon Read Event Organizer, UCI, Spring 2009
English Graduate Association, Fundraising Chair, UCI, 2008-2009
Chapman U. Chapter, Sigma Tau Delta (National English Honor Society), President, Chapman U., 2005-2006

University-wide Service
Writing Center, UCI, Spring 2012
SCORE (Southern California Outcomes Research in English) Reading Assessment, UCI, 2011
Writing Placement Examination, UC-wide, 2010-present
Volunteer Intern, Teaching Learning Technology Center, UCI, 2010-2011
Annual Undergraduate Writing Contest, Judge, UCI, Spring 2010

Teaching
Instructor, University of California, Irvine
   Department of Humanities: 2012-2015
   Department of English: 2010-2013
   Composition Program: 2008-2011
Tutor, Writing Center, UCI, Spring 2012

Courses Taught
**Humanities 1A** — Discussion section of UCI’s nationally recognized program, HumCore, an interdisciplinary academic series fulfilling general education requirements in the areas of Lower Division Writing, Arts and Humanities, and Multicultural Studies. I worked as a liaison between students and faculty in literature, history, and philosophy, clarifying lecture material (ranging from Homer to African folk tales). I also provided a comprehensive introduction to college writing and research, culminating in an independent research paper on a topic crafted by each student.
W139, Upper Division Writing — An advanced, combination writing and research class that fulfills the upper-division writing breadth requirement for students in any major. I developed and taught “Re-membering the Collective Past,” a course which asked students to engage with questions raised by collective memory theory in the context of literary and film analysis: how and why narratives about the past are created, and how these narratives shape our understanding of the past, the present, the future, and ourselves.

English 28 C: Realism and Romance — Introductory, survey course for English majors analyzing the conventions and historical contexts of prose fiction. I developed and taught “The Outside,” a course exploring the interconnections between the trope of the outsider and genre/narrative form and perspective.

WR 39C: Argument and Research — Instructed undergraduate students in the conventions of conducting and evaluating academic research. Emphasis on the rhetorical context of academic arguments, democratic debate, and researching current policy issues.

WR 39C Online — Instructed undergraduate students in the conventions of conducting and evaluating academic research through new media, including interactive library tutorials, chat sessions, and online writing tools.

WR 39B: Critical Reading and Rhetoric — Instructed undergraduate students in textual analysis (including film and print media), writing, and revision with a view towards developing effective argumentation and critical reading/thinking skills. Course themes I developed and taught included “Bawdy Humor and Body Politics,” “Comedy and Satire as Social Critique” and “Intersections of Race and Gender.”

WR 39A: Fundamentals of Composition — Instructed undergraduate students in the fundamentals of textual analysis, writing, and revision. Course emphasis was upon sentence-level mechanics, paragraph development and basic principles of rhetoric.

Publications

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

For the Record:
Gendered Collective Memory in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far and Abraham Cahan

By

Hillary R. Branman

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Ecology

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Brook Thomas, Chair

“For the Record” makes use of collective memory theory, paired with the tools of literary analysis, in order to examine the role of gendered collective memory in the literature of the Progressive Era—a time when the question of who could, and who could not belong to the American “nation-family” was tied, inextricably, to debates about racial and cultural “inheritances,” integration, assimilation and the codification of a coherent American identity and memory tradition. My various chapters exploring the works of Pauline Hopkins, Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far, and Abraham Cahan consider the ways gendered memory produces, and is, in turn, produced by works of literature. This dissertation shows how these texts act, formally, as records of gendered memory, and how these records offer readers alternative forms of Americanness than the formations allowed by a “competitive” approach to collective memory and identity, predicated upon racial and gender hierarchies. By eschewing this competitive approach and, instead, adopting a “multidirectional” perspective, these records posit new possibilities for an
evolving, inclusive, multicultural American selfhood and tradition. My first chapter, examining Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*, considers the problems of gendered violence, silencing and subjectivity in the creation of an integrated American identity and memory tradition. My second chapter examines four short stories written by Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far, and considers the plasticity of selfhood and its relation to questions of transnationalism, imperialism and to figurations of the national family at the turn of the century. My third chapter looks at two stories by Jewish-American author, Abraham Cahan, and considers how these texts highlight the ways immigrant characters’ relationships with the maintenance of Jewish tradition, and with Americanization, are informed by tradition-specific ideals of gendered performance—particularly, female performance. Elucidating these texts’ various negotiations of gendered collective memory and its relation to group and national identity serves to reorient understanding of the dialectical relationship between storytelling, record-making and theories of American nationalism during The Progressive era.
INTRODUCTION

“I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”
—Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory

 “[T]he position of woman in society determines the vital elements of its regeneration and progress.”
—Anna J. Cooper, A Voice from the South

Collective Memory Studies is, as its name implies, concerned with social retrospection; and yet, the question of how people—as individuals and together—are shaped by the past is a question which, as Jeffery K. Olick puts it, “directs our attention to issues at the heart of contemporary political and social life, including the foundations of group allegiance and the ways we make sense of collective experience in time (“From Collective Memory” 152). Memory theorists have long posited that group identity is built upon the framework of collective memory; this memory serves as “both a mirror and a lamp—a model of and a model for society” (Swartz in “Social Memory Studies” 124) and, in the hands of the nation-state, representations of a national past often become a primary form of organizing a (seemingly) coherent, “inevitable”1 social identity. As scholars in African American, Asian American, Jewish American and women’s studies have argued, however, collective memory is, in fact, very much a “contested space”—the vision of a unified national memory and identity are complicated by “counter-narratives” of ethnic and racial experience. But what about gendered memory within

1 In his 1882 essay, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” (“What is a Nation?”), Renan notes that nations tend to forget they are not inevitable, but rather, are formed under specific historical circumstances and contingent upon an act of choice among people that must be consistently reaffirmed.
these groups? Critics often speak of gender as a key element in the construction of otherness—which, indeed, it is—and yet, the ways that gender intervenes in a group’s, or a nation’s collective memory are far more complex and irresolvable than this figuration.

The complications to national identity and memory that gender provokes have a long history in America. While the nation itself is often figured, linguistically and iconographically as a woman, in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address (1863)—one of our most cited moments of national collective memory—for example, the president begins by evoking the founding “fathers” who “brought forth...a new nation, conceived in Liberty.” This image of “the birth of a nation” relies heavily upon the trope of family life—foregrounding the father’s role—and espouses a nationalistic ideology of patriarchal procreativity; the image is infinitely familiar to us, but, nevertheless, it conveys confusing gendered connotations: fathers do not, in point of fact, give birth, and yet the national family is, by this account, motherless. And this example is in no way unique: as Sylvia Paletschek has argued, analysis of “the shaping of national identities during the nineteenth century” reveals the extent to which national memory “mirrors the bourgeois gender model and implies a male bias, despite its claims to universality and inclusiveness” (165).

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2 Broadly speaking, gendered memory considers how gender figures in acts of remembrance and of transmission of memory. This may include, but is not limited to study of the ways gender may shape the interpretation of events, the telling of a group’s stories, the practices of representation, commemoration, celebration, disavowal and denial, and the examination of what memories can tell us about gender as an axis of power, difference, and collectivity.

3 Lady Liberty, for example.

4 See also Anne McLintock, Cynthia Enlow, Elleke Boehmer, Nira Yuval-Davis and Flora Anthias all of whom explore ways that nations, nationalism and the idea of the national family depend upon powerful constructions of gender, and (male) gender power.
Moreover, using the trope of “family life” to help maintain white patriarchal hegemony through seemingly naturally-occurring “lines of descent,” is common in nationalistic discourses.\(^5\)

Turning to literature, we find similar instances where, often unintentionally, gender works to highlight anxieties and contradictions in the formation of unified national identity and collective memory at the turn of the century. Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman*, for example, illustrates that, even amongst “white” Americans, the question of who could, or should be included in the narrative of the national family was complicated. In his efforts to incorporate the Scotch-Irish into the story of (white) American nationalism\(^6\)—indeed, to render them as the “American of Americans” (Macintosh 105)\(^7\)—Dixon’s novel relies not only upon clear

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\(^5\) As Betty G. Farrell explains, the trope of family, “helps maintain social order...by its capacity to place people in social systems. It does so by providing them with identifiable kin and establishing lines of legitimate succession and inheritance that mark their economic, political, and social position in society. Because individuals are located in an established social hierarchy by their birth or adoption into a particular family group, the nature of power and access to resources in society remain largely intact from one generation to the next. Thus, one meaning of the family as a central institution of the social order is that it reinforces the political and economic status quo. Families ensure that the distribution of resources both to the advantaged and the disadvantaged will remain relatively stable, since the transmission of wealth, property, status, and opportunity is channeled along the lines of kinship” (7).

\(^6\) See Brook Thomas’s “*The Clansman’s* Race-Based Anti-Imperialist Imperialism” and G. K. Peatling’s “Thomas Dixon, Scotch-Irish Identity and ‘the Southern People’.”

\(^7\) In *The Clansman* (which Dixon dedicated to “the memory of a Scotch-Irish leader of the South, My uncle, Colonel Leroy McAfee, Grand Titan of the invisible empire, Ku Klux Klan.”) Dixon suggests strongly that it was the Scotch-Irish who in fact made America:

Ulster county [South Carolina] was settled by the Scotch folk who came from the North of Ireland in the great migrations which gave America three hundred thousand people of Covenanter martyr blood, the largest and most important addition to our population, larger in numbers than either the Puritans of New England or the so-called Cavaliers of Virginia and Eastern Carolina; and far more important than either, in the growth of American nationality. To a man they had hated Great Britain. Not a Tory was found among them. The cries of their martyred dead were still ringing in their souls when George III started on his career of oppression. The fiery words of Patrick Henry, their spokesman in the valley of Virginia, had swept the aristocracy of the Old Dominion into rebellion against the King and on into triumphant Democracy. (187)

This passage demonstrates how Dixon is engaged in his own form of negotiation between an “ethnic” and a “national” identity. In rendering these two potentially differing positions as one through the creation of a new collective memory with roots in both identities, Dixon breaks down any potential divide between the Anglo-Saxon and Scotch-Irish identities in favors of racial and “spiritual” commonalities. At the same time, Dixon’s identification of the origins of American nationalism with one specific ethnic group reveals what Peatling calls the “racially exclusive and intolerant nature of certain aspects of national and ethnic identity that can arise in any context, irrespective of the particular nation with which an identification is articulated” (252).
demarcation of non-white bodies, but also upon clear, circumscribed, often representational
roles\(^8\) for non-male bodies. Dixon’s gendering is writ broadly in his narrative: the South, the
United States Constitution, these entities are gendered as females “under attack” by Northern
Reconstructionists and African Americans alike, who need Southern white men (of Scotch-Irish
descent) to come to their aid. More specifically, in proclaiming the Klan as the protectors of
white womanhood—the “biological reproducers of the members of [the] national
collective” (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 7)—against the black male “beast,” Dixon not only fends
off a literal threat of miscegenation,\(^9\) he also establishes, symbolically, through these women, the
nation’s need for white, male protectors\(^10\) who will police “the boundaries of national groups
(through restrictions on sexual or marital relations)” (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 7).

At the same time, however, the clear “othering” which allows white male American
identity to rein supreme in *The Clansman* is complicated by the prominent figure of black
womanhood, Lydia Brown. On the one hand, Brown is depicted, like the “black beast,” as just
another form of predator—her “reigning” presence as “first lady” within Stoneman’s “black
house” (*The Clansman* 90-91) meant as a warning to the reader against allowing the African
American, or, indeed, the woman in her domestic “kingdom,” to chart the course of the nation;

\(^{8}\) As Anne McClintock notes, “All too often in male nationalisms, gender difference between women and men serves
to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men. Excluded from direct action as
national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric
limit…construed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but…denied any direct relation to national agency” (62).

\(^{9}\) As Reverend Durham in *The Leopard’s Spots* puts it, “The future American must be an Anglo-Saxon or a Mulatto.
We are now deciding which it shall be. The future of the world depends on the future of this Republic. This Republic
can have no future if racial lines are broken and its proud citizenship sinks to the level of a mongrel breed of
Mulattoes” (200).

\(^{10}\) As Paletschek argues, because gender is both a product and a producer of collective memory, “the question of
gender in memory culture [also] addresses the issue of representational power and access” (165).
yet, Dixon’s depiction of Brown also, inadvertently, presents a problematic scenario wherein blackness is not a barrier to being a “lady” and white manhood is capable of being placed in the position of victim which Dixon prescribes for white womanhood. That Dixon ultimately “frees” Stoneman from Brown’s influence cannot fully erase the ways her figuration disrupts the limits that Dixon attempts to place on racial and gendered identity, and, by extension, upon the collective narrative of the nation in the post-Civil War years.

As demonstrated in my short analysis of Dixon, this project makes use of collective memory theory paired with the tools of literary analysis in order to examine the role of gendered memory in the literature of the American Progressive Era—a period\textsuperscript{11} when the question of who could, and who could not belong to the American “national family” was tied, inextricably, to debates about racial and cultural “inheritances,” integration, assimilation and the codification of a coherent American identity and tradition. This dissertation is, in many ways, a historicizing project: it assumes that the fictions being examined are best understood by considering how historical circumstances informed their production. My work offers a comparative look at fictions composed within a very limited number of years (1898-1912)—and thus, dealing with many common social and legal issues—from authors from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds: Pauline Hopkins, Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far, and Abraham Cahan. In examining the ways gendered memory produces, and is, in turn, produced by these works of literature—some of which are well known to literary scholars, and some of which have been given very little critical attention—this dissertation shows how the texts themselves act, formally, as records of

\textsuperscript{11} The Progressive Era, sometimes called the “Era of Reform” which spanned approximately two decades from 1890-1920, is viewed, generally, as a collective national response to the mounting ills of urban poverty and political corruption, the influx of immigrants, ongoing racial tensions, and the expansion of American interests abroad.
gendered memory. These records, I argue, offer readers alternative forms of Americanness than
the formations allowed by a “competitive” approach of to collective memory and identity
predicated upon racial and gender hierarchies: nativism, melting-pot assimilation, or even the
extremes of cultural pluralism. By eschewing this competitive approach and, instead, adopting a
multidirectional perspective, these “productive” rather than “privative” (Rothberg 3) records
reveal dynamic interaction between group and national memory and identity, and thus, posit new
possibilities for an evolving, inclusive, multicultural American selfhood and tradition.

Between “Inwardness” and Collective Memory

In his chapter in Cultural Memory Studies, Jeffery K. Olick lays out three key principles
for the analysis of collective memory: first, we must bear in mind that “collective remembering
is a highly complex process, involving numerous different people, practices, materials and
themes”; second, we should recognize that the act of remembering “is always a fluid negotiation
between the desires of the present and the legacies of the past”; third, we must understand that
collective memory itself is less a “precise operational definition” than it is “a wide variety of

12 And thus, as memory artifacts.

13 As defined by Rothberg, competitive memory is the belief that groups must compete “over whose history and
culture will be recognized” by society and thus, that “the only kinds of memories and identities that are…possible
are ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others” (5, 20).

I argue that, when taken to its logical conclusion, this approach to memory can lead individuals, groups, or nations,
posit innate and inalienable divisions between past and present, between contemporaneous groups and their cultural
traditions, and between the roles of men and women.

14 Multidirectional memory—a term coined by Rothberg in Multidirectional Memory (2009)— posits that collective
memory is in fact an evolving phenomenon, “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing
[ between and amongst cultures]” (3).

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mnemonic products and practices”: “memory is a process, not a thing, a faculty rather than a place” (158-9). This framework for collective memory studies, which guides my own work, helps make sense of the often overwhelming variety of ideas which have been grouped under the banner of “collective memory” in recent years. At the same time, acknowledging the breadth and diversity of the issues engaged by this rubric speaks to the ways that collective memory—both its products (including stories, rituals, books, statues, records, speeches, and images) and practices (including representation, commemoration, celebration, disavowal and denial)—can serve as a general concept which enables, rather than forecloses interpretive possibilities, including the reframing of the perceived contrast between individualist and collective approaches to memory itself.

Logically, remembrance—and, by extension, forgetting—seems subjective, belonging to the inner life of the individual and helping to distinguish that individual from others. This view, which has been supported by numerous philosophers and psychologists,\(^{15}\) has been referred to by Paul Ricoeur as the “tradition of inwardness” (Memory 96-120). The (seemingly) antithetical notion of memory as a collective entity can be traced, at least in contemporary usage,\(^ {16}\) to sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs and his groundbreaking Social Frameworks of Memory (Les cadres sociaux de la memoire) (1925). Memory, for Halbwachs, is variable—framed as much in the present as it is in the past—and is mediated and structured by society: “it is in society that

\(^{15}\) Augustine, building on the tradition articulated by Aristotle, claimed that the memories of an individual are not those of others and that when one remembers, one always remembers oneself, which leads to the notion of reflexivity.

\(^{16}\) The first explicit use of the term, “collective memory” appears as early as 1902: Hugo von Hofmannsthal refers to “the damned up force of our mysterious ancestors within us…piled up layers of collective memory” (qtd. in Schneider 2).
people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (*On Collective Memory* 38). In other words, collective memory provides the narratives (potentially myth-like in nature) within which individual identity is formed and rooted.

This view of memory as a kind of collective consciousness is not, of course, the only answer to the question, “To whom should memory be attributed: to the group or to the individual?” In the introduction to his book, *Cultural Trauma*, Ron Eyerman discusses the approach taken by the “collective behavior school” which explores a “loss of self” and, in its place, “the formation of new, collectively based identities as the outcome of participation in collective behavior like social movements” (5). More recently, Paul Ricoeur has posited that the relationship between individual and collective memory can be pictured as a kind of intermediate space between two poles wherein exchanges between the memories of individuals and those of the communities to which they belong can occur (*Memory* 131-132). In a similar, though more expansive view, scholars like Joël Candau emphasize the ways individual and group memory can mutually influence one another via a “a conversational process” which occurs between the various discourses found within the individual (sexual, racial, historical) and the cultural and national memory “within which individuals locate themselves” (Eyerman 7).

**Memory, Imagination and the Possibilities of Fiction**
It is the intermediary view of memory which is of primary interest for the study of collective memory in fictional narratives, and of the ways that literature functions as the embodiment of a “space of exchange” between an author, the social groups to which that author belongs (whose collective memory informs the text), and the reader. While some theorists, Halbwachs included, have argued that writing and memory are, fundamentally, incongruous, literary critics have often highlighted the roles that literature has played in remembrance; these roles include historically or even psychologically-minded reconstructions of the past in fiction, as well as “memory genres” like biography and memoir; they also include the ways texts themselves can preserve the ‘memory’ of previous texts (as explored by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*) and can be used to form canons which are, themselves, involved in the creation and maintenance of cultural memory. These critics have shown that the writing process can act as both a means of recovering “lost” or “erased” collective memories, and as a means of understanding or reinterpreting the past in light of present circumstances.

Even if we grant that the act of writing can indeed support the work of memory, however, memory as a “real” representation of the past must, it seems, remain opposed to the imaginative nature of literature. But such a view requires that we maintain a belief that memory is always correct, and can generate wholly-intact representations of the past, and as de Certeau and others have argued, memory is, in truth, fragmentary and evolving. Collective memory, much like history itself, is “as much invented as found” (White qtd. in *History Made* 23). This is not to say that memory contains no objective truth or tie to the real—like literature, collective memory is

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17 *The Collective Memory* pp. 68-70

“linked to the social reality and collective consciousness of a given nation or social group and therefore bound to the real world” (Lavenne et al. 6); rather, acknowledging memory’s fundamental plasticity points to its congruence with fiction. Fiction has the capacity to both preserve/recover collective memory and make interventions in our understanding of the past without separating it from the present or otherwise rendering it a “dead” artifact. As David W. Price puts it,

conventional historical narratives generally concern themselves with...an explanation of what occurred in the past ...[but fictional writings] concern themselves with axiological questions. By posing questions of value, these novels attempt to establish an understanding of what occurred in the past...through acts of figuration in the form of characters and situations that embody values associated with historical (f)acts. ...[T]he very structures of the narratives produce and promote certain values; and in doing so, they indicate that history as a form of writing necessarily produces values (i.e. there is no neutral, value-free history). ...[N]ovels of poetic [sic] history allow us as readers to experience the struggle to create values...[and] provide us with the means to reimagine the reality of the past. (History Made, History Imagined 2-3)

In this sense, I would argue that fiction enables both author and reader to “detect unactualized potentialities of the historical past,” such as the validity and import of racial, gendered and

19 See Ricoeur pp. 361-369.
hybridized memory and identity, by means of “the mode of imaginative variations” (Ricoeur 559-560, fn. 49). Literature can, therefore, do more than simply foster memory: it can serve as a memorial site in and of itself—an alternate, more inclusive kind of record of the collective past, particularly in times and places where traditional, non-fictional “histories” exhibit exclusionary bias.

Who is an “American”?

The question of who could, and who could not be a part of the American national family and its tradition of memory was no mere philosophical inquiry in late 19th and early 20th-century America. Even as the U.S. sought to expand its economic and political influence abroad, at home, anxiety over delineating a coherent national identity was reaching a fever pitch. Peter Burke has argued that “the later nineteenth century…[was] an age of a search for national traditions, in which national monuments were constructed, and national rituals…devised…. The aim of all this was essentially to justify or ‘legitimate’ the existence of the nation-state” and to assert national reunion following the Civil War (CMR 191). As Burke suggests, the connection between nationalism and collective memory appears to have been particularly important,

20 Moreover, in instances of the traumatic past, literature can help to articulate the “unspeakable” through the creation of fictional characters and plots and, sometimes, “the transposition to another temporal and spatial frame” (Laveene et al 8).

21 Much of the contemporary criticism focused on literature as a memorial artifact is located in Holocaust Studies—for an overview of this literature see After Representation: The Holocaust, Literature and Culture, R. Clifton Spargo and Robert Ehrenreich, eds. (2009).

allowing the “contested and contingent nation” to secure “the false unity of a self-same national subject evolving through time” (Duara in “Social Memory Studies” 117) and, thus, maintain a cohesive “social fabric and social order” (Hobsbawm in “Social Memory Studies” 118). This notion of a kind of “essential,” inevitably-occurring nationalism may be a false construct—as theorist Ernest Renan argued in his 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne in Paris, nations are not permanent fixtures throughout history, but rather, contingent entities, born under specific historical circumstances and reaffirmed, constantly, by the present-day desire to “continue a common life” (“What is a Nation?” in CMR 80-83); nevertheless, the idea of an essential national selfhood was imbued in the language of turn-of-the-century American nationalism, which was, itself, “deeply implicated in anxieties about racial difference” (Lee 8).

Responses to massive foreign immigration and to the migration of Southern-born African Americans to northern cities ranged widely during the Progressive Era. Nativists, of course, saw these developments as a threat to America’s cultural coherence—possibly even to democracy itself—and their perspective was supported, in varying degrees, by a number of exclusionary legal decisions: Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), Chae Chan Ping v. U.S. (1889), and Downes v. Bidwell (1901), among other examples. But even amongst those who were open to the possibility of including ethnic and racial bodies in the American national family, options were divided as to the best way to deal with these groups’ non-Anglo cultural traditions. Some

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22 Between 1891 and 1920 more than 18 million immigrants entered the United States (Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970).

23 Nativists like Henry Cabot Lodge argued that foreign-born immigrants, particularly those of “inferior” races, “Italians, Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Greeks, and Asiatics…with which the English speaking people have never hitherto assimilated, and who are most alien to the great body of the people of the United States” (Lodge, “The Restriction of Immigration” in The North American Review, Jan., 1891: pp. 27-36).
favored the “melting pot” solution: the elimination of ethno-cultural distinctiveness through indoctrination and assimilation of the foreign “type” into Anglo-American culture—what Horace Kallen describes as “the adoption of English speech, of American clothes and manners, of the American attitude in politics…[and] a transmutation by ‘the miracle of assimilation’ of Jews, Slavs, Poles, Frenchmen, Germans, Hindus, Scandinavians into beings similar in background, tradition, outlook, and spirit to the descendants of the British colonists, the Anglo-Saxon stock” (“Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot” 192). Others considered the possibility that “[Anglo-American civilization [might] profit from the gifts of other races” and their “wealth of traditions” (Scudder 80-81). This later view is what we refer to, commonly, as the doctrine of cultural pluralism, which is often framed as the alternative to the “melting pot.” The pluralistic perspective is, however, no more immune to the logic of competitive memory than nativism or melting pot assimilationism. Indeed, in its efforts to resist “the complete cutting-off of the ancestral memories of the [non-Anglo] American populations” (Kallen *Culture and Democracy* 112), the pluralist perspective can lead to notions of cultural exclusivity and the belief that ethnic traditions are, by nature, stagnant—views which undercut possibilities for American unity and for the evolution of ethnic traditions through interaction with American culture.

Some Progressive Era thinkers did, however, conceive of another approach to the “problem” of ethnic memory and identity. Philosopher John Dewey, for one, argued for “a recognition of the rights and privileges of each nationality” but, at the same time, asserted that “one provides nationality for interchange, for give and take of culture” (“The Principle of Nationality” in *ED* 205-6). Dewey’s understanding of Americanness is, like the understanding
of collective memory itself, less an exact definition than it is a rubric of ideas—but a rubric
which, notably, breaks with a competitive view of collective memory in favor of a
multidirectional perspective. Dewey argued that those who would attack the hyphenated
American were operating under the delusion that there is “something already in existence called
America to which [ethnic identity] may be externally hitched on” (“Nationalizing Education” in
ED 267). Moreover, Dewey imagined that the American’s true multicultural “essence,” and the
“hyphenated character…international and interracial” (Dewey “Nationalizing Education” in ED
267) that is the true representation of American nationalism,24 would be revealed and
“perpetuated…by language and literature” (“The Principle of Nationality” in ED 204).

The centrality of literature in Dewey’s vision of multiculturalism is paramount to my
understanding of the ways that many fictions of the Progressive Era work to forge discursive
relations between and amongst traditions of memory and conceptions of Americanness. These
literary representations of cultural mixing are, perhaps, made most apparent in some minority
literature, where the flux of dialect self-consciously parallels the conditions of selfhood:

“America for a language and dod’ll do for a language!” (Cahan, Yekl 44). But even without this
trope, the notion of the hyphenated self emerges—sometimes staged as a theatrical-style “trying
on” of roles: Cahan’s Jake/ Yekl may express a more repressive Americanization, but his wife,
Gitl, represents, as Wilson puts it, “an unnerving fluidity” (33); appearing at one moment like “a
squaw” (34) and at another, like “an Italian woman,” (37) Gitl’s identity, and thus, her ability to
act as a clear “sign” of Jewish identity or tradition, is called into question. Her so-called

24 See Ronald Kronish, “John Dewey and Horace M. Kallen on Cultural Pluralism” (Jewish Social Studies, Vol. 44,
“essential” self is revealed as both constructed and open to change. At the same time, the asymmetries of power which can limit the flexibility and potential hybridity of the more racially-marked subject become evident in texts like Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*: Janet, with her pale beauty and tragic dignity, may embody a direct refutation of the myth of the irrefutable, “essential” identity of whiteness, but this cannot save her from being denied her “father’s name...[and] wealth” or her half-sibling’s “sisterly recognition” (246). Meanwhile, the white rogue, Tom Delamere, can put on and take off the identity of his African American servant, Sandy, with impunity—a freedom which William James linked, conversely, with imperialist violence and the boundedness of populations white America could only imagine “as if they were a painted picture, an amount of mere matter in our way,” lacking “inwardness” (qtd. in *The Uses of Variety* 61-2).

But these examples, like Dewey’s definition of Americanness, do not account for other points of contention in Progressive Era discourses of the national family: the role of women in the life of the nation, and the expression of gendered experience and memory. Female activists of the Progressive Era played upon gendered traditions which framed women as the “moral center” of family life to assert their “natural” right to leave the private sphere, and to intervene in public issues in the name of safeguarding national values. As my chapters on Hopkins and Eaton will discuss in more detail, however, the “sisterhood” between white women’s rights activists and women of color was “deeply ambivalent, at once presupposing identification on the basis of gender and competition on the basis of race” (Chapman 979). White female reformers often ignored issues of racism or, in some instances, made use of racist (and classist) ideology in order
to shore up their own legitimacy—both as women,\(^{25}\) and as reformers.\(^{26}\) Efforts to express gendered memory in this period, and to inscribe them into visions of American nationalism—both within literature and without—were, thus, caught in the crosshairs of both patriarchal laws and traditions (including traditional gender roles), and racist ideas.

Acknowledging these limitations have not prevented some critics from characterizing Progressive Era minority-authored fictions—like the ones addressed in this dissertation—which focus upon domestic settings and the experiences of female characters, and which make use of the tropes of romantic fiction, as insufficiently political.\(^{27}\) These criticisms are not wholly without merit in the sense that these fictions do trade in stereotype (in varying degrees), and feature plots driven by the drama of courtship and marriage; but these assessments also misread the subversive nature of many of these texts. For a number of thinkers in the Progressive Era, literature was believed to have a unique ability to “enable all to share vicariously in the life of each” (Park 207) and, in so doing, to generate empathy and establish common ground. If we

\(^{25}\) While Progressive Era feminists railed against separate spheres ideology—one of the key tenants of cult of “True Womanhood”—they, nevertheless, often relied upon other stereotypes of “womanliness” as a means of granting legitimacy to their social reform efforts.

\(^{26}\) Mary Chapman has argued that white feminists often used the Chinese as a negative counterpoint to their efforts to gain equal rights: “suffragists frequently mobilized nativist rhetoric that asserted that native-born white American women were more fit for citizenship than inassimilable Chinese men and their ‘backward’ female relatives” (“A Revolution in Ink” 980).

\(^{27}\) See, for example, Sean McCann’s characterization of Eaton’s domestic fictions in “Connecting Links: The Anti-Progressivism of Sui Sin Far.”

See also critical assessments of Pauline Hopkins’s Contending Forces: In her 1968 “Afterword” to Contending Forces, Gwendolyn Brooks argues that “Pauline Hopkins consistently proves herself a continuing slave, despite little bursts of righteous heat” (in Invented Lives 434). Also notable among negative assessments of the political aspects of Hopkins's work is that by Houston A. Baker, who claims that the novel preaches “strict moral rectitude, white-faced mannerliness, and black northern achievement” and works as a “courtesy book for a new era” (28). Even when critics laud Hopkins’s work, we find this admiration paired with equivocations—“[Contending Forces] is far from an unproblematic text. At the very least, it should remind us of how difficult it was for Black writers to reject widely accepted concepts of race and culture that were frequently employed to denigrate Blacks and to justify racial oppression” (Yarborough xli)—and questions like “Why is Hopkins still a prisoner to an ideology that ultimately supports white superiority?” (Washington 79).
understand this perspective, it becomes clear how “family-minded” fictions can in fact serve as highly effective political tools for inserting female experiences and memories into public discourse. By foregrounding female experience in the context of family life, these texts disrupt the “natural” equation of the white, male memory paradigm with Americanness/ the American national family, and model possibilities for a more inclusive American nationalism.

These later sorts of fictions, which I will be examining in this dissertation, do not, as a rule, provide uncomplicated or even entirely resolved responses to how one ought to incorporate gendered experience into national or even group memory, nor do they always offer clear-cut answers as to how America should balance cultural blending with cultural protectionism. As John Dewey writes, true “hyphenism” is a matter of “extracting from each people its special good, so that it shall surrender into a common fund of wisdom and experience what it especially has to contribute.” This sort of relation requires that “each factor” refrain from trying to “isolate itself…live off its past, and then attempt to impose itself on other elements, or, at least, to keep itself intact and thus refuse what other cultures have to offer” (“Nationalizing Education” in ED 267). Dewey’s acknowledgement of the gain (“contribution”) and the loss (“surrender”) inherent in cross-cultural interaction, is notable in that it implies both aspects must be shared by both “sides” if the exchange is to be successful—a view shared, generally, by Hopkins, Eaton and Cahan. At the same time, his warning against “isolation” does not fully capture the extent to which this cross-cultural exchange may challenge and remake the unique histories and peculiarities of certain traditions of memory (for better or for worse).
This dissertation looks, specifically, at fictions by three Progressive Era authors: Pauline Hopkins, Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far, and Abraham Cahan; each of these authors was a prolific journalist, who made the choice to turn to fiction-writing as an alternate means of reaching the American public with his or her critiques and analyses of racism, gender bias, and American nationalism. As I have noted previously, the fictions being examined all make use of the tropes of domestic fiction and focus on the experiences of female characters in order to make manifest certain social and political issues—specifically, the negative impact of racial and gendered exclusions in American life—and to offer multidirectional alternatives to their readers. The challenges of this undertaking register differently, sometimes contradictorily, across these texts. Like Dewey’s hybridity or collective memory itself, the authors share a framework of questions and ideas more than one “precise operational definition” of how gendered memory affects group and national memory and identity, and what an alternate record of multidirectional Americanness might constitute or signify.

My first chapter examines the problems of gendered violence, silencing and subjectivity in the creation of an integrated American identity and memory tradition. Pauline Hopkins’s novel, Contending Forces, is, in many ways, an expression of her belief in the need for a “record” of African American “growth and development…all the fire and romance…in our

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28 This is not to try to claim that Hopkins, Eaton and Cahan are all “Romance-writers”—indeed, Abraham Cahan publicly denounced Romance as a useless art-form (“The Younger Russian Writers”). I do argue, however, that these authors knowingly made use of certain tropes of romance in their writings for a variety of reasons: as a means of making their message more palatable to the reader; as a means of bringing “female” life and experience to the fore; in order to expressly critique the romanticizing of destructive aspects of American life.
history” which is “as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race” (13-14). While “our history” might easily indicate a desire on Hopkins’s part to create a “record of growth and development” (13) for African Americans alone, in *Contending Forces*, Hopkins makes it clear that, in fact, “our history” has more inclusive connotations. Hopkins’s call for readers to create bonds “among all classes and all complexions” (*CF* 13) and to look to “the history of the past” (*CF* 14) in seeking solutions to race-based violence in the post-Reconstruction present posits the remembrance of the past, through the acts of writing and reading, as a potentially universalizing endeavor, which has the capacity to cross racial, gendered and class-based boundaries. In exploring Hopkins’s insistence upon putting questions of justice at the core of her text, this chapter considers how Hopkins’s vision of an integrated history, articulated both narratively and formally in the novel, imagines a way that racial, and, perhaps even more importantly, gendered experience “may be at once memorialized and redeemed” (Sundquist 38) and hybridity celebrated.

Several critics have already suggested how Hopkins’s novel and its heroine, Sappho Clark, serve as a means of political intervention and as a mode of correcting the gaps in white American history; I argue, however, that *Contending Forces*’s “domestic” narrative also serves as an embodiment of and a model for an alternate mode of remembrance than that of traditional historical revisionism: the creation of an evolving collective memory through inclusive “public
“talk” (CF 17). The inclusive nature of this “talk” is paramount. Understanding how Sappho, who is trained as a stenographer—a recorder of discourse—moves from a place of silence about her traumatic past to revelation in the public sphere illustrates the personal and communal cost of patriarchal socio-legal conventions which limit the scope of black women’s “talk” to the private sphere. For Hopkins, the notion the separate spheres of “public” and “family” life (which, in turn, functions metonymically as the life of the national family) risks duplicating the logic of racism in that such separation requires women to keep to pre-prescribed roles they had little voice in creating. Alternately, when public reexamination of the meaning of the past is allowed for both male and female members of the community, it creates a “living” record whose inherent capacity for evolving meaning can challenge national hegemonic definitions of Americanness and reunite the divided American “family”—both within and beyond the novel’s pages.

My second chapter examines four short stories written by Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far and considers the plasticity of selfhood and its relation to questions of transnationalism, imperialism

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29 In his essay, "Bonds of Brotherhood: Pauline Hopkins and the Work of Melodrama," Sean McCann stresses this idea of “public talk” in Hopkin’s Contending Forces; he argues that “Public talk ... refers not so much to the deliberative rationality celebrated by theorists of civil society, but to the capacity of potent story to form mystically constructed communities of feeling...by moving and moving between listeners” (ELH 64.3 (1997), 809). For McCann, however, the community created by “talk” is exclusively masculine: African American men create their “bonds” with one another over Sappho Clark’s unconscious body, which acts representatively as collective memory incarnate.

30 As the Preface indicates, for Hopkins, “community” can extend across racial lines.

31 While Maurice Halbwachs saw living memory and written texts in opposition to one another—to record memory was only necessary, he argued, once the memory itself was dead, i.e., there are no longer any witnesses of the past event left—other memory theorists such as Joel Candau and D. L. Schacter argue that written texts serve as “memory extensions” (Candau 99) and that the process of writing can in fact lead to memory construction and re-emergence.

32 As Elizabeth Ammons has argued, fiction, which serves as a site of sharing between the author and reader, extends the community created within a text beyond that text to encompass the reader; see Short Fiction by Black Women 1900-1920 p. 12.
and to figurations of the national family at the turn of the century. Focusing on the impact of Mary Chapman’s recent discovery of more than ninety uncollected works—including two short stories which will be examined in this chapter, “The Success of a Mistake” (1908) and “The Alaska Widow” (1909)—my analysis of Eaton’s stories offers proof that to read Eaton’s body of writing too narrowly, focusing exclusively upon her work as “the voice” of marginalized, turn-of-the-century Chinese-Americans, is to fail to appreciate both the diversity of Eaton’s oeuvre and the careful framing of domestic life in her fictions as an allegory of and challenge to the dominant racial and gendered politics and culture of collective memory of turn-of-the-century America. If, as George Lakoff has argued, our national politics are informed by our idealizations and conceptualizations of family, then, contrary to certain critics’ claims that Eaton’s stories eschew politics, Eaton’s focus upon familial ties and relations may in fact be seen as deeply political; indeed, we cannot fully comprehend Eaton’s works without recognizing that they offer incisive critiques of America’s Progressive Era conceptualizations of the national family, of the racist and gendered hierarchies which shaped and were shaped by this metaphor, and of the

33 Eaton herself remarked that she did not write for the purposes of “put[ting] a Chinese name into American literature” (Letter to the Editor of the *Westerner*, Nov. 1909, qtd. in White-Parks 154).

34 Both national and international.

35 “[I]t is a common metaphorical conception...the Nation As Family, with the government, or head of state representing the government, seen as an older male authority figure, typically as father. We talk about our founding fathers. George Washington was called ‘the father of his country’...” (*Moral Politics* 153).

36 In “Connecting Links: The Anti-Progressivism of Sui Sin Far,” Sean McCann writes that “everything that counts in [Eaton’s] writing occurs far from the world of statecraft and civic virtue and well within the realm of the ordinary, the mundane, and the domestic” (81).

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national collective memory—comprised of both cultural mythologies and so-called “inheritances”\(^\text{37}\)—which undergirded these exclusionary discourses.

Though Eaton’s domestic stories are most commonly known for their exploration of the obstacles to or pressures inherent in Americanization for Chinese or mixed-race characters, often with tragic effects,\(^\text{38}\) the stories that will be examined in this chapter, focus, in the main, upon white, female characters who interact with the racial “other” in the context of family life. By locating these interactions within this traditionally female domain, Eaton, like Hopkins, asserts the significance of women “[as] individuals, not merely the daughters of their parents, the wives of their husbands” (Eaton qtd. in White-Parks, 294); however, while Hopkins’s domestic fictions privilege “public talk,” the stories examined in this chapter demonstrate Eaton’s belief that “private” action and discourse are valid, effective models of political agency and collective memory re-invention, especially for women.\(^\text{39}\) Within the stories themselves, we certainly see how private talk reveals the fictive nature of commonly accepted “public facts”—mutually exclusive racial, gendered and geographical “inheritances” and identity-boundaries—and how private acts have very public effects. But even more than this, the white protagonists’ interactions with the racial “other” trouble gender hierarchies by asserting women’s capacity to choose their identity and relationships (rather than wait to be chosen), and showcasing the

\(^{37}\) In his book, *Civic Myths*, Brook Thomas argues, “A widespread and dangerous civic myth is that, through a mystical process, a nation’s culture and history can be racially inherited” (201).

\(^{38}\) See, for example, “The Wisdom of the New” or “Its Wavering Image” (*Mrs. Spring Fragrance*).

\(^{39}\) Unlike Hopkins, Eaton posited that women could indeed effect the public sphere and its discourses—including the realm of law—through discourse and other “renovating” work in the private realm. Mary Chapman has argued that Eaton’s views were influenced strongly by both a “Chinese version of the American Republican Mother, that is, the sentimental self-sacrificing mentor of the nation’s citizens” and the male journalist and leader of the Chinese Reform Party Liang Qi Chao (1873–1929), who “believed that popular domestic fiction could ‘redefine the social order’” (“A Revolution” 977-8).
unacknowledged hybridity and plasticity of white American identity—and of the national collective memory undergirding that identity—by revealing the constructed nature of so-called “inherent” racial characteristics. In this way, Eaton not only shows racist and gendered expressions of American identity to be false oppositions—which can remain intact only so long as the juxtaposing (and equally false) construct of “the other” stands—but also, records a new mythology of Americanness, multicultural and egalitarian in nature, and with it, an alternate means of asserting American identity and “belonging” to the national family. This “alternate means,” as we shall see, is not premised upon birth or blood, or upon choosing between or amongst mutually exclusive racial or cultural identities; it is, instead, based upon the individual’s freedom to claim Americanness on his or her own terms—a circumstance which, as Eaton’s stories indicate, is made possible through recognition of the natural affinities between people, regardless of race or gender, and by the subsequent acknowledgement that a nation is a nation by “consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life” (Renan 83).

My third chapter looks at two stories by Jewish-American author Abraham Cahan, “The Apostate of Chego-Chegg” and “The Daughter of Rev Avrom Leib,” and considers how these texts highlight the ways immigrant characters’ relationships with the maintenance of Jewish tradition, and with Americanization, are informed by tradition-specific ideals of gendered performance—particularly, female performance. These two stories are, I argue, Cahan’s most focused explorations of the constrictions, contingencies and exclusions faced by Jewish

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40 As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, society places certain practices into constructed (rather than naturally-occurring) gender categories/ roles which are, in turn, cemented through mandated, repeated performance.
women,\textsuperscript{41} who, as Goldstein and Hyman have argued, were expected to act not merely as biological progenitors, but also as the keepers of Jewish memory and tradition in America. Understanding how these expectations (most often produced by Jewish men in Cahan’s stories) shape the choices available to the female protagonists of “The Apostate” and “Rev Avrom” provides insights into how gender acts as a fundamental dynamic in intra-ethnic manifestations of the “competitive” view of traditions of memory and group identity—which, among other things, underlies and is produced by the premise that adopting American behaviors means abandoning Jewishness. As those charged with maintaining Jewish identity and tradition, Cahan’s female protagonists are, far more than their male counterparts, made to feel the negative consequences of the belief that Jewish history, culture and identity are rigidly unique, and thus, that “the only kinds of memories and identities that are…possible are ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others” (Rothberg 5).\textsuperscript{42} At the same time, the inside/outside position of these women, within both Jewish and American cultures, grants them a perspective and experience with Jewish tradition\textsuperscript{43} which enables them to serve as primary vehicle for arguing an alternate, more “multidirectional” perspective which I am calling Cahan’s “practical tradition.” This practical tradition is resistant to dichotomic readings of Jewish identity and tradition in America—that Jewish particularity can only be retained at the expense of a

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\textsuperscript{41} While \textit{The Imported Bridegroom} does take readers “inside the mind” of a Jewish woman—Sophie—this story does not, I would argue, make the same critiques of female-gendered constrictions, contingencies and exclusions within Jewish life, mostly because Sophie herself is unconcerned with being displaced from the Jewish community (she is more concerned with being displaced from her perceived involvement in American life and culture).

\textsuperscript{42} According to Rothberg, this belief can be a key component of the competitive view of/ approach to memory.

\textsuperscript{43} Excluded from positions of authority by virtue of their sex and race these women occupy a position akin to that which is ascribed to African Americans by Du Bois in \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}: troubled by a lack of “true self consciousness” because they are “always looking at [themselves] through the eyes of others” (10-11).
coherent Americanness—which run parallel to static and exclusionary understandings of Jewish tradition by Jews themselves—understandings which posit innate and inalienable divisions between past and present (Old World vs. New World), between contemporaneous groups and their cultural traditions (Jewish vs. American) and between the roles of men and women. What remains once this competitive framework has been dismantled is, by contrast, a record of Jewish-Americanness which is evolving and discursive in character, combining validation of Jews’ distinct history and unique experience within the American scene with a broad understanding of how that cultural heritage and experience can inform a larger national narrative of evolving, cosmopolitan modernity premised upon “build[ing] new worlds out of the material of older ones” (Rothberg 5).

In some ways, Cahan offers a darker image of ethnic memory and its capacity to limit individuality than either Hopkins or Eaton. Cahan’s criticism of the intra-ethnic manifestations of the competitive model of memory in these stories may appear to be aimed solely at Jews who cling to “dead” traditions and fear adaptation to American life; but when we consider Cahan’s presumed Gentile readership (given his choice to write in English rather than in Yiddish), it’s clear that these stories can also be seen as a condemnation of the mirror images of rigid Jewish exclusivity: American nativism and the doctrine of total assimilation which, in the name of a coherent Americanness, allows the ethnic immigrant no claims to particularity whatsoever. Cahan’s practical tradition defies the logic of this sort of universalizing by continuing to allow Jews to make claims to a unique selfhood and tradition, but his approach also contends that
Jewish history and memory can, and should, cut across the boundaries of time, place, race and gender and be made to serve a useful, revitalizing purpose in the American context—a sort of public resource with the potential to engender a more creative and productive nation. Looking at how Cahan’s analyses of competitive memory within the Jewish community work to critique national narratives of belonging—which, as Rothberg puts it, treat “the interaction of different collective memories” as “a zero-sum struggle for preeminence” (3)—offers us additional avenues for exploring the connections between Jewish identity, Americanization, and gender issues in Cahan’s oeuvre.

By focusing attention upon the nuanced logics of how Hopkins’s, Eaton’s and Cahan’s alternate records engender sharing and communication amongst traditions of memory, and between the text and the reader who engages in its narrative, this project works to understand the aspirations of this select group of Progressive Era authors whose fictions challenge the ontology of essential selfhood and embody a reflexive and evolving view of tradition and American nationalism. In choosing to isolate and interrogate the aspects of this literature which are less patent than their function as counter-narratives, I aim to produce a basis for criticism which moves beyond past work to dismantle the “myth-symbol school” notion of America as a discrete, culturally-exceptional locale, and which sheds new light upon the dialectical relationship between storytelling, record-making and theories of American nationalism during this period in history.

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Chapter One

Re-Membering a “Record of the Race”: Violent Memories and “Public Talk” in Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*

“If I were to remember other things, I should be someone else”

—N. Scott Momaday, The Names: A Memoir

“One important witness has not yet been heard from. The summing up of the evidence deposed, and the charge to the jury made—but no word from the Black Woman”

—Anna J. Cooper, A Voice from the South

I.

Pauline Hopkins served as the editor for the groundbreaking publication, the *Colored American Magazine*, from 1900-1904; *CAM* was, for those prolific years of her writing life, Hopkins’s primary outlet for reaching and developing a readership for her works, including her first novel, *Contending Forces* (1900), which was promoted in *CAM*, though published independently. Hopkins states in her biographical profile for *CAM* that the intended audience for her work consists of “all classes of citizens” even those who “never read history or biography” (*CAM* 1, Sept. 1900: 195-6). In her Preface to *Contending Forces*, Hopkins refines these goals further, expressing the need for a “record” of African American “growth and development…[of] all the fire and romance…in our history” which is “as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race” (13-14). At first glance, “our history” appears to indicate a

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[^44]: Lois Brown argues that Hopkins defined “romance” as “a state of existence that persisted in the face of oppression” which helped to stave off “moral, physical and emotional damage in the face of social and political evil” (291).

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desire on Hopkins’s part to create a “record of growth and development” (13) for African Americans alone—much as one of the stated purposes of the Colored American Magazine was to express a “history of the negro race” which would “intensify the bonds of racial brotherhood” (CAM, May 1900: 2, 60). Yet, as the Preface continues, it becomes clear “our history” has more inclusive connotations. Hopkins’s call for readers to create bonds “among all classes and all complexions” (CF 13) and to recall “the history of the past” (CF 14) in seeking solutions to race-based violence in the post-Reconstruction present posits the remembrance of the past as a potentially universalizing endeavor, which has the capacity to cross racial, gendered and class-based boundaries.

The significance of Hopkins’s “call,” and of the means by which she pursued remembrance of “the history of the past” in Contending Forces was, for many years, ignored or discounted. Critics proclaimed Hopkins’s mixing of genres to be artless and argued that her fictions pandered openly to the bourgeois “tastes of her [white] fiction-reading audience” (Rich 72). More recently, however, feminist critics such as Claudia Tate and Hazel Carby have offered alternate assessments of Hopkins’s “domestic” fictions, identifying them as significant

45 This view persists, among some critics, even in more recent years: in his book, Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel (1997) Bryant claims that the novel “lacked fundamental narrative skills” (100).

46 See Gwendolyn Brooks’s 1968 “Afterword” to Contending Forces, in which Brooks argues that "Pauline Hopkins consistently proves herself a continuing slave, despite little bursts of righteous heat" (434). Also notable among negative assessments of the political aspects of Hopkins's work is that by Houston A. Baker, who claims that the novel preaches “strict moral rectitude, white-faced mannerliness, and black northern achievement” and works as a “courtesy book for a new era” (28). Even when critics laud Hopkins's work, we find this admiration paired with equivocations—"[Contending Forces] is far from an unproblematic text. At the very least, it should remind us of how difficult it was for Black writers to reject widely accepted concepts of race and culture that were frequently employed to denigrate Blacks and to justify racial oppression" (Yarborough xli)—and questions like “Why is Hopkins still a prisoner to an ideology that ultimately supports white superiority?” (Washington 79).
discourses of liberation and political intervention for African American women in the post-Reconstruction era. In their respective analyses of Hopkins’s life and works, Lois Brown and Hannah Wallinger have argued, similarly, that Hopkins’s concern with “refuting the prevalent stereotypes of black women as mule, mammy or whore,” must be understood within the context of her interest in “establishing her ‘Americanness’ …her tradition, her heritage” (204 in Black Imagination). By pairing her critique of negative figurations of black womanhood with the goal of historical recovery (Brown 286, 513), Hopkins was not only able to show “an African American subject whose legitimacy was a function of participation in the legal history of the nation” (Moddelmog 103)—that is, a subject that was not created out of thin air by virtue of the Fourteenth Amendment, but rather that has always been a part of the “story” of the United States—but, further, to establish a place for the voices and experiences of individuals doubly excluded from the public record: black women.

Building upon the insights of Tate, Brown, Modelmogg and others, this chapter examines how Hopkins’s “domestic” narrative and its heroine, Sappho Clark, challenge mainstream

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47 Albeit, within the private sphere. Tate and Carby claim novelists like Hopkins are “intervening” in political arguments in their “domestic” fictions by “plotting new stories about the personal lives of black women and men” (Tate 9) in the context of family life. While these critics are speaking specifically against those who would dismiss these fictions with their (often) idealized private, matriarch-centered focus as lacking in, socio-political insight, there is also an implied argument that the characters (particularly the women) who speak and act in the private realm in the narratives, are working on an extra-narrative level as models for or critiques of real-life, public-realm socio-political issues. I agree with the claim that Hopkins does indeed use her “domestic” characters in her novel, Contending Forces, in a representative manner for the purposes of real-world socio-political intervention, but I would argue against a reading of characters’ interactions—particularly those of female characters—in the novel’s private realm as functioning, in Hopkins’s view, as equitable “stand-ins” for public speech and action. On the contrary, Hopkins appears to use female characters’ interactions in the private realm as a way to locate and critique their voicelessness in the public sphere.


discourses which pit African American memory against white nationalism, and which divide African Americans themselves along gender lines, by modeling an alternate mode of intervention and remembrance than that of traditional historical revisionism: the creation of an evolving collective memory through inclusive “public talk” (CF 17). Such “talk” may be defined as a process of giving voice to and receiving remembered experience, and of balancing that remembrance of the past—including the traumatic past—with present action. This process not only forms the heart of Hopkins’s vision for black female participation in “agitation” against racism and in the fight for women’s rights, it is also an enactment of the ideal dialectical relationship between the individual, his or her community, and the nation. Hopkins did not believe that simply bestowing rights—like the franchise—upon all men and women would end black oppression, generally, or ensure equal opportunities for black women amongst white feminist institutions (like the General Federation of Women’s Clubs) who wished to “keep out the colored sisters” (Hopkins “Educators” 174). Prejudices—both racial and gendered—must be challenged first and collective enlightenment achieved. Both goals, Hopkins posits, are made possible through public talk such as the sort enacted within and embodied by her novel.

Understanding how Hopkins’s heroine, Sappho, who is trained as a stenographer—a recorder of discourse—moves from a place of silence about her traumatic past to revelation in

50 In his essay, “Bonds of Brotherhood: Pauline Hopkins and the Work of Melodrama,” Sean McCann argues that “‘Public talk’...refers not so much to the deliberative rationality celebrated by theorists of civil society, but to the capacity of potent story to form mystically constructed communities of feeling...by moving and moving between listeners” (ELH 64.3 (1997), 809). For McCann, however, the community created by “talk” is exclusively masculine: African American men create their “bonds” with one another over Sappho Clark’s unconscious body, which acts representatively as collective memory incarnate.

51 Hopkins writes biting commentary about the barring of the (black) Woman’s Era Club from the General Federation of Women’s Clubs’ convention in 1902 in several of her CAM pieces.
the public sphere, illustrates the personal and communal cost of patriarchal socio-legal conventions which limit the scope of black women’s “talk” to the private sphere. For Hopkins, the notion of separate spheres for “public” and “family” life (which, in turn, functions metonymically as the life of the nation-family) risks duplicating the logic of racism, in that such separation requires women to keep to pre-prescribed, socially and intellectually-limited roles they had little voice in creating. To fail to make both men and women’s memories and experiences a matter of public discourse is just as willful a misunderstanding or misconstruing of the past and, by extension, the present, as African Americans’ exclusions from white American society and history on the basis of race. Alternately, when public reexamination of the meaning of the past is allowed for both male and female members of the community, it creates a “living” record whose inherent capacity for evolving meaning can challenge national hegemonic definitions of Americanness and reunite the divided American “family.” But while the act of reading extends the community and collective memory created within the novel to the reader, the “talk” of the text must be enacted—not simply received—to avoid becoming a mere sepulcher for the past. Thus, the lack of full resolution inherent in the novel’s “happy

52 As the Preface indicates, for Hopkins, “community” can extend across racial lines.

53 While Maurice Halbwachs saw living memory and written texts in opposition to one another—to record memory was only necessary, he argued, once the memory itself was dead, I.E., there are no longer any witnesses of the past event left—other memory theorists such as Joel Candau and D. L. Schacter argue that written texts serve as “memory extensions” (Candau 99) and that the process of writing can in fact lead to memory construction and re-emergence.

54 As Elizabeth Ammons has argued, fiction, which serves as a site of sharing between the author and reader, extends the community created within a text beyond that text to encompass the reader; see Short Fiction by Black Women 1900-1920 p. 12.

55 Collective memory, as embodied by the novel, is always evolving by virtue of ongoing “public talk,” which allows for continued reevaluation of the past and new possibilities for identity and the future.
ending”—a facet of the text which has not received critical attention—reads not as a failure of “public talk” or of collective memory, but as a catalyst for continued “talk,” which is necessary both for ongoing interpretation of the “record of the race” and for reimagining Americanness.

It is not immediately clear that Hopkins is indeed proposing an alternative form of record-making in Contending Forces. What is apparent is that Hopkins takes great pains to emphasize traditional history and her own credentials as a historian when introducing the fiction she is “offer[ing]” (Dedication) the reader. She notes that the “incidents portrayed in the early chapters of the book actually occurred,” and that “Ample proof may be found in the archives of the courthouse at Newberne, N.C., and at the national seat of government, Washington, D.C.” (C.F. 14). At the same time as Hopkins is emphasizing the work’s factual nature, however, the fact remains that this “real” history is placed into a fictional context. Thus, a subtle insinuation is made that “objective” history may not in fact be antithetical to fiction-writing, or to the subjective acts of imagination and interpretation. Hopkins supports this view when she asserts that fiction, like history, acts as “a preserver of manners and customs—religious, political and social” (C.F. 14). Moreover, Hopkins adds, it is fiction, not history which “will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro” which history has allowed to “lie dormant” (CF 14). Fiction and imagination are, therefore, presented not as obstacles to remembrance of the “real” past, but rather, as the means of providing necessary interventions in

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56 As Hayden White put it, history is “as much invented as found” (qtd. in History Made 23).

57 While Paul Ricoeur makes a sharp differentiation between memory which, he argues, is directed toward “the real,” and fiction, which is not (5-55), others, including Maurice Halbwachs and Joel Candau argue for memory’s plasticity, seeing it more as a reconstruction, constantly being updated, rather than a true reconstitution (see Candau p.5). Notably, Ricoeur does admit fiction and history often pursue similar aims, and indeed, when confronted with events which seem inexpressible in the discourse of conventional history, Ricoeur advocates the exploration of other modes of representation, capable of preserving those memories (257-261).
and corrections to “the record” that are not fully possible within the confines of conventional history. The Preface indicates that a fictionalized record of the past, does not preclude use of factual evidence, but rather, allows the so-called “facts” of the white historical narrative to be put into dialogue with the experiences (real or imagined) of those excluded from that narrative.

Still, the methodology of remembrance present in Contending Forces is not a mere matter of using fictional characters to insert racialized and gendered voices into the white, patriarchal historical record. To simply bring the past into the present and to transmit a racial or gendered legacy is not sufficient to reconcile the present-day “contending forces” of prejudice and gender hierarchy, or to reconcile tensions between the traumatic past of slavery and the hoped-for future of a unified American identity and community. Rather, articulating a past which can help with modern “contentions” requires a multidirectional approach: looking forward toward the desired, united American future as much as turning an unprejudiced eye upon the nation’s “mixed” heritage. The novel enacts this past-future dynamic by demonstrating how characters, cultures, and indeed, records themselves, must strike a balance between an openly acknowledged and remembered past, and a future which is only possible if that past is not allowed to control or “fix” present meaning or identity. This notion, akin to the Nietzschian idea of Active

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58 Hopkins indicates in her CF Preface that fictional narratives may in fact be the most useful format for challenging readers’ assumed knowledge of “the past” by offering new perspectives and interpretations of events, and presenting new possibilities for the future, including the incorporation of “uncommon” voices into the official record.

This point of view is supported by David W. Price, who argues in History Made, History Imagined that while “conventional historical narratives generally concern themselves with...an explanation of what occurred in the past...[novels]concern themselves with axiological questions. By posing questions of value, these novels attempt to establish an understanding of what occurred in the past...through acts of figuration in the form of characters and situations that embody values associated with historical (f)acts. ...[T]he very structures of the narratives produce and promote certain values; and in doing so, they indicate that history as a form of writing necessarily produces values (i.e. there is no neutral, value-free history). ...[N]ovels of pioetic [sic] history allow us as readers to experience the struggle to create values...[and] provide us with the means to reimagine the reality of the past” (2-3).

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Forgetting, posits that both individuals and cultures need to negotiate between “knowing and not knowing, between remembering and forgetting the past...[and between] reflection and experience” (Ramadanovic 51). As Sappho’s character arc in Contending Forces illustrates, there must be allowance for acts of self-determination and growth without disavowal of racial or cultural descent and experience. The need for self-determination without disavowal is particularly true when dealing with a traumatic past: a legacy of racial and gendered violence and subjugation. Traumatic memory often expresses itself as something “inarticulate, without meaning, unrepresentable,” which “undermines the possibility of a coherent self” (Witness and Memory 15); but within the bounds of Hopkins’s novel—which, in defiance of the exclusionary boundaries dictated by the competitive model of memory, moves back and forth in time and space, and back and forth across the color line—even traumatic memory can be re-membered and re-inscribed with healing and useful meaning.

In Contending Forces, Hopkins asserts that the past is less a fixed entity than it is an act of re-membering: an opportunity for individuals and communities to reinterpret the past via memory. As de Certeau argues in The Practice of Everyday Life, memory “derives its interventionary force from its very capacity to be altered... Far from being the reliquary or trash can of the past, it sustains itself by believing in the existence of possibilities and vigilantly

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59 Discussed in Ramadanovic’s “From Time to Time” in Forgetting Futures. Ramadanovic quotes Neitzsche’s “On the Uses and Disavantages of History for Life” from Untimely Meditation (1983): “the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture” (UD 63).

60 From pre-Civil War Bermuda and the American South to post-Reconstruction Boston, MA.

61 See Schacter pp. 112-116 and pp. 345-350: Contemporary neuroscience research has shown memory stores only fragments of the past that later serve as the grounds for reconstructions of past experience. Also, as Maurice Halbwachs has argued, present concerns shape and can modify our memory of the past (57-66).
awaiting them, constantly on the watch for their appearance” (86-7). Multidirectional collective memory, founded upon the constantly evolving stories—real and imagined—which a community tells about itself, is revealed as necessary for challenging racial and gendered prejudices and for and reinterpreting the past in useful and liberating ways. It is this kind of record, Hopkins’s novel illustrates—dialectic in nature, never “finished,” and in which the proper degree of remembering and forgetting is never settled—which has the power to not only address the national trauma of slavery and its legacy, but to also reimagine⁶² the possibilities for the present and future in ways which will allow for new, inclusive figurations of American civic life, community and identity.

II.

*Contending Forces* is set in two time periods: a pre-Civil War Southern past—which focuses upon the experiences of the Montfort family—and post-Reconstruction Northern present, which follows the Montforts’ descendants, Ma Smith, Dora Smith and Will Smith. Between these two periods, silence prevails (the narrator provides minimal details about what occurs during these years, but, in general, the thoughts and feelings of individuals go unrecorded). This structure establishes the questions which lie at the heart of the novel’s concern with collective memory and “public talk”: questions about the significance of remembering and forgetting, the toll of gendered silence and the “unknown” upon individuals and communities, and the

⁶² As Toni Morrison argues in her essay, “The Site of Memory,” “The act of imagination is bound up with memory,” (quoted in *History and Memory in African American Culture*).
limitations of the “official” record. Sappho Clark, the central female figure in Contending Forces, first appears in the the post-Reconstruction portion of the novel, set in late nineteenth-century Boston. She is described as a beautiful, refined, light-skinned, and above all, mysterious figure who “passed in and out each morning with a package of work in her hand; and all day long, from nine in the morning until late at night sometimes, the click of the typewriter could be heard coming from the ‘first front-square,’ which interpreted meant the front room on the second floor” (97). This busy, charming demeanor masks a tragic and traumatic past, however: Sappho’s abduction, rape and abandonment, as a girl of fourteen, by her white uncle.63

Sappho’s personal reticence, which persists until just after the climactic American Colored League scenes, is juxtaposed in the early part of the novel with the communal atmosphere of the boarding house where she is lodging. Ma Smith’s64 boarding house, which is depicted in warm terms as an “inviting nest” (88) is populated by educated tenants, like Sappho, and with “unlettered people” (102) like Ophelia Davis—a former slave who, when her mistress fled the plantation during the war, took all that she could carry from the “big house” without qualm. The narrator notes that Ma Smith and her daughter, Dora, host regular “musical evenings

63 As a beautiful, cultured mulatto woman, the character of Sappho Clark’s near-whiteness functions, many critics have argued, as “both a rhetorical device and a political strategy” in that she allows Hopkins to visually display the social and sexual history that exists between the races and to “insinuate into the consciousness of white readers the humanity of a people they otherwise constructed as subhuman—beyond the pale of white comprehension” (duCille 7-8).

Other critics have taken the idea that Sappho might serve as a black counterpoint to the white female domestic heroine as evidence that Hopkins’s novel is largely an escapist fantasy, claiming that while characters (and thus, Hopkins herself) “declare their loyalty to the race,” they are in fact busy “imagi[ing] a quasi-white world in whose refined culture they fit easily with” (Bryant 101). But even if the near-white Sappho was somehow attempting to align herself with Victorianesque white womanhood and its ideals, Hopkins herself is not in the least coy about how these supposed “ideal” qualities are inescapably problematic for Sappho, both as an African American and as a woman: her womanly purity and beauty, when taken in combination with the known presence of black blood makes Sappho her uncle’s ideal whore—as Sappho herself notes, “what has beauty been to me but a curse?” (321).

64 Ma Smith’s family history makes up the pre-Civil War portion of the novel.
or reception nights” so that the Smiths’ tenants “might have a better opportunity of becoming
acquainted with each other” (102). This diverse and inclusive picture of black community stands
in stark contrast to Sappho’s rigorous adherence to privacy, silence and hiding, which is
emphasized even in the description of how Sappho chooses to decorate her room at the boarding
house:

The iron bedstead and the washing utensils were completely hidden by drapery curtains
of dark-blue denim, beautifully embroidered in white floss; a cover of the same material
was thrown over the small table between the windows; plain white muslin draperies hid
the unsightly but serviceable yellow shades at the windows; her desk and typewriter
occupied the center of the room, and a couch had been improvised from two packing-
cases and a spring, covered with denim and piled high with cushions; two good steel
engravings completed a very inviting interior. (my emphases 98)

The fact that Sappho chooses to hide her room’s imperfections reflects her conflicted inner state.
On the one hand, her efforts to beautify the room reads as an expression of her personal agency
—the creative drive to move forward with hope for the future which allowed to her to leave her
former identity behind and to reinvent herself as Sappho Clark. On the other hand, Sappho’s
covering of all that is unsightly within her personal space parallels the denial of the past—most
notably, her denial of the son born from her rape, Alphonse—which Sappho feels she must
continue if she wishes to have a future.
And, at first, it seems Sappho is well-justified in her choice to hide her past. Though the female-centric gatherings which are the focus of the chapters, “Friendship” and “The Sewing Circle,” and their parallel, the male-centric American Colored League meeting, illustrate the Boston community’s concern with the problem of black female rape, these scenes, rather than model the kind of community-building and open discourse regarding African American women’s issues which Hopkins values, in fact reveal the ways these goals are thwarted: first, by the prohibitions of patriarchy which circumscribe “public talk” and discourage inclusion of black female voices in the public sphere; second, by the either/or choice offered to the African American community—and by extension, the nation—to cling to the past, or turn away from it completely. When placed alongside one another, both of these attempts at community-building and open discourse regarding African American women’s issues, reveal the problems with the social and legal exclusion of black female voices from the public sphere when it comes to the creation of an effective, inclusive collective memory. Hopkins does not preclude the idea that “talk” about public issues may occur in private, but these scenes challenge the notion that the private realm is the only proper space for black women’s discourse. Through Sappho, Hopkins questions how the “talk” which occurs in the private realm can be separate from but still equal to the “public talk” of the male-centric public realm when private sphere “talk” does not

65 As Moddelmog argues, “the exclusion of black women’s voices from the public sphere…expose[s] the law’s failure to adhere to its own standards [specifically, the rights of citizens]” (121).

66 Allusion to Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). The exclusion of women’s voice from the public sphere on that logic that they have their “own” sphere/ space in which they may converse freely repeats the racially-based (fallacious) logic of “separate but equal.”
translate to the public forum, and when both private and public discourse are controlled by the prohibitions of patriarchy.

The chapter prior to “The Sewing Circle,” titled, “Friendship,” sets up the discussion which takes place in the “Sewing Circle” and “League” scenes by introducing the main tensions underlying both: female silence vs. female participation in the public sphere. In “Friendship,” Dora and Sappho exchange political opinions, with Sappho making claims both Du Boisian and feminist in bent, which stand in stark contrast to Dora’s confession that she “generally accept[s] whatever the men tell me as right” (125). Sappho’s politics, though bold, are, notably, limited to her bedroom audience of Dora—a fact which is emphasized when Dora wonders if Sappho would have “preferred teaching” (127) to her daily work is as a stenographer. Sappho may produce original discourse in the confines of her private room, but in the public realm, as a stenographer, Sappho does not record her own “talk” for public consumption, but rather, the “talk” of white men. And while it’s arguable that the novel itself, in a sense, makes Sappho’s ideas a part of the public record, as Sappho elaborates on the circumstances of her employment, it becomes clear that, for Hopkins, a textual back-door entrée into the thoughts and feelings of African American women, is not, in and of itself, a solution to the problem of black women’s exclusions from key areas of social and political life.

“Friendship” also illustrates how, for black women like Sappho, who, by and large, enter the public realm by virtue of financial necessity, earning power alone cannot guarantee personal safety—evidenced later in the text by the fact that Sappho’s financial independence cannot
protect her from John Langley—nor offer protection against the indignities of racism and lechery; as Sappho tells Dora:

I shall never forget the day I started out to find work: the first place that I visited was all right until the man found I was colored; then he said that his wife wanted a nurse girl, and he had no doubt she would be glad to hire me, for I looked good-tempered. At the second place where I ventured to intrude the proprietor said: 'Yes; we want a stenographer, but we've no work for your kind.' However, that was preferable to the insulting familiarity which some men assumed. (CF 128)

Dora’s acknowledgement that Sappho’s “talk” is unable to penetrate the public sphere becomes, in this moment, more than an ideological conundrum. Much as Sappho argues in “Friendship”67 that, if African Americans “lose the franchise, at the same time we shall lose the respect of all other citizens” (CF 125), her workplace experience reveals how black women like herself, without a voice or vote in the public realm—and thus, without opportunities to legally, or otherwise shape the ideas and circumstances which affect their working lives—are being denied a practical necessity, which, in turn, weakens the overall power of African American “talk” in the life of the nation. Moreover, as the revelation that Sappho’s violation came from within her family and the setting of John Langley’s later attempt to blackmail Sappho (in her very own

67 In response to the “false” claim, made by Dr. Lewis—a clear gloss of Booker T. Washington—that giving up the vote “would be better for us; the great loss of life would cease, and we should be at peace with the whites” (CF 125).
room) make clear, the assumption that if African American women are able to remain within the private sphere, they will be protected, is proved false as well.

In the subsequent domestic scene, “The Sewing Circle,” the limits to the “openness” and effectiveness of women’s discourse, even in a same-sex environment, are emphasized. When Sappho ventures to ask the Sewing Circle women’s opinions about “the illegitimacy with which our race has been obliged, as it were, to flood the world,” she is told, “we shall not be held responsible for wrongs which we have unconsciously committed, or which we have committed under compulsion. We are virtuous or non-virtuous only when we have a choice under temptation” (CF 149). This response, though it does address the fact that black women are not responsible for their sexual victimization offers no real practical help in dealing with either the feeling of responsibility or with the reality that the victim of sexual exploitation is often blamed, unjustly, for her fate.68 Sappho points to this omission when she asks a follow-up question about “sin” that is committed “under the pressure of circumstances which we cannot control... the taint of it sticks and will not leave us, and we grow to loathe ourselves” (154). To this new inquiry, Mrs. Willis, the unofficial leader of the group, responds with the same information once more: “We are not held responsible for compulsory sin, only for the sin that is pleasant to our thoughts and palatable to our appetites” (154-5).

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68 Hopkins herself makes this argument in “Club Life Among Colored Women,” when she discusses Southern white women’s “intolerance” toward “the victims of her husband’s and son’s evil passions” (184).
While Mrs. Willis’s invocation of a “mother’s law”⁶⁹ (Tate 174) is a change from the Victorian ideals of True Womanhood which are founded, in part, upon patriarchal law’s privileging of sexual chastity, it is not its antithesis—at least insofar as the “mother’s law” is enacted in the Sewing Circle: as a series of moral platitudes. The women of the Sewing Circle gesture toward open discussion of such topics as miscegenation and black female rape, but in actuality, they wish merely, as Dora puts it, to “cover” (100) the situation and thus, arguably, to ignore and forget the problem. Sappho recognizes that the empathy the women offer one who has “sinned,” as Sappho feels she has, is “forced and insincere” and thus, a “cold black shadow [comes] between them” (CF 61)—that is, between Sappho and those who she is tempted to confide in about her past. This divide between Sappho—for whom the topic of rape and miscegenation is no abstract philosophical or political “talking point”—and the community, which encourages Sappho’s ongoing silence, reveals that the women are either unwilling or unable to properly listen to and empathize with Sappho’s “talk” and thus, to accept her experiences a part of their own collective memory. And indeed, the text offers clear indications as to why this is the case.

The maxims Mrs. Willis and the others offer Sappho assuring her that “sin under compulsion” ought to have no effect on character or womanliness position Sappho’s selfhood in direct relation to her ability to be “honorably married”—if she will just “do her duty” and keep quiet about her past. The advice to keep silent speaks to the influence of patriarchal judgements upon the women’s discourse, effectively undercutting the argument that the women’s private

⁶⁹ “Mother’s law,” according to Tate, “metes out reward and punishment in direct proportion to the moral character of one’s deeds,” and “serves as a broader basis for redefining a virtuous woman other than on grounds of sexual chastity” (174 Domestic Allegories of Political Desire).
discourse can influence public prejudices against and exclusions of black women and their experiences in any meaningful way; it reasserts, in spite of the “mother’s law” which would call the rape victim guiltless, that there is in fact a need for, at least, the appearance of sexual purity in the male-controlled public sphere, which in turn implies the rape victim is, in some way, irrevocably tainted. While Hopkins is not averse to the notion of placing black womanhood under the same “protective umbrella of chastity and virtue” (duCille 31) that is, by default, afforded to white women, she resists the idea that in order to grant black female morality, the community must ignore “the long history of racist violence and sexual exploitation...that compromised the nation’s (not just black people’s) inheritance” (Ammons 29). To commit oneself to covering the past, as the Sewing Circle women advocate, and as Sappho tries to do when she adopts the identity, “Sappho Clark,” prevents Sappho—and by extension, the black community and indeed the nation as a whole—from incorporating gendered perspectives into collective memory through “public talk” and thus, from using the power of collective memory to create new, inclusive national narratives.

Though the American Colored League meeting which follows the Sewing Circle scenes is, ostensibly, a cross-racial gathering on the subject of recent lynchings, the “talk” which occurs also finds itself focused upon Sappho’s rape. The League chapters are also, more than any other in the text, where lines between the imagined and the historical, and between the individual, the communal, and the national experience of racial and of gendered violence become blurred in a notable fashion. The stories told during the meeting are the least fictionalized in the novel,

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70 Mrs. Willis goes so far as to tell Sappho that a woman who chose not to confess past experiences to her future husband “did her duty” (156)
offering a gloss of two real lynchings, the first of which helped launch Ida B. Well’s anti-lynching campaigns, and was recorded by Wells in her pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892). Of the fate of the three black men who were lynched in Memphis after they fired upon a group of white men, hired by a white competitor, who burst into their grocery store, Wells notes:

There was no law on the statute books which would execute an Afro-American man for wounding a white man, but the “unwritten law” did. Three of these men...were secretly taken from jail and lynched in a shockingly brutal manner. “The Negroes are getting too independent,” they say, “we must teach them a lesson.” (*Southern* 35-36)

A man named Luke Sawyer gives an account of the violence visited upon his own family (his father was lynched when his store began taking business away from a white competitor) which mirrors Wells’ account in many key respects; meanwhile, his tale of the horrors inflicted upon another family, the Beaubeans, parallels the experiences of Frazier B. Baker, a South Carolina postmaster who was burned alive in his home, along with this family, by a lynch mob. The League meeting depicted in the novel is itself modeled on real meetings that occurred in the wake of Baker’s death (*CAM*, May 1900: 10).

In these chapters, Hopkins appears to be calling upon “real history” for validation of certain political assertions made by her characters—most notably, for Will Smith’s call for “agitation” (272) and arguments about the importance of the vote in the fight for African
American’s legal rights. And yet, the way that Hopkins chooses to re-tell these real events makes it clear that she feels revision to the record is necessary. The “right” to a public voice is not explicitly granted to women by the 15th Amendment, but if, as Lincoln stated, it is “the mystic chords of memory” which help bind a nation, then, Hopkins indicates, black women’s memories must be a part of the “talk” in the public forum. The main story that Sawyer relates at the meeting is centered, specifically, around black female experience—Sappho’s (known to Sawyer as “Mabelle”) abduction and rape—though Sappho herself is silent throughout the meeting. This revelation of Sappho’s past is valuable in that it puts her experience “on record” in a public forum, and shows connections between past traumas (which the narrator calls, poetically, “the tracings [which] remain upon the sands of life” (241)) and present circumstances—both in terms of Sappho herself, and in terms of making connections between Sappho’s experiences and those of the Montfort family.

The parallels between the story that Sawyer relates about the Beaubean (Sappho’s) family and the Montforts’ story, which the reader already knows, are telling. Though the Montforts are pre-Civil War slave-holders and the Beaubees are the post-Reconstruction descendants of slaves and their white masters, both Charles Montfort and Monsieur Beaubean are wealthy and well educated, and Mabelle/Sappho, like Grace Montfort, Charles’s wife, is “a most lovely type of Southern beauty” (40). But the attempts by both families—whether by virtue of the supposed superiority of white blood, or of elevated economic status—to remain “at a convenient distance” from the violence of slavery, and to ignore the fact that “the stately white mansion” of their

privilege is “embowered” (43) in slavery’s shadows are, in the end, thwarted. Mabelle Beaubean is raped by her white uncle, and her family is brutally murdered by a mob. Grace Montfort’s life is undone by the villainous Anson Pollock—who lusts after her body and her husband’s property—when Pollock perpetuates a rumor (never verified) that Grace has “a black streak in her somewhar” (41) and succeeds in “convict[ing]” (54) Charles Montfort as a race-traitor.

Charles Montfort’s perceived refusal to bow to the “law” of the color line—as Pollack’s lackey, Bill Sampson puts it, the “rules in this commonity that we all mus' 'bide by ef we want t'veoid trouble” (57)—serves, ultimately, as the excuse for the forceable reversal, by the white community, of the Montforts’ white identity and of their rights as citizens: Charles Montfort loses his life and wealth, Grace loses her protected status as a white woman and is slated to become Anson Pollock’s mistress, and the Montfort children, following “the condition of the mother,” make the sudden transition from white persons to black “property.” No such “reversal” occurs for the Beaubeans, but it is no accident that it is Monsieur Beaubean’s claim to citizen’s rights—his own refusal to bow to the “law” of the color line when he tells his white half brother that he will “carry the case into the Federal courts and appeal for justice” (261) for the rape of his daughter—which incites the white community to mob violence.

Like Charles Montfort, Mabelle/ Sappho’s father’s financial prosperity cannot save “non-white” women or their children from the racial and sexual violence that is inflicted upon them by the “law” of the color line, which supersedes constitutional rights to the “privileges and immunities” of citizenship, and blocks access to the gendered “protections” of white male chivalry. The illustration from the text (see figure 1) of the moment where Grace Montfort is
transformed from a white mistress to a slave woman, and then whipped, works to emphasize this point: Grace’s placement on the ground, her nakedness, and the play of light and shadow in the image highlight both her white skin, and her vulnerability in contrast to the two standing, fully-clothed men:
Fig. 1: “He Cut the Ropes that Bound Her…” by R. Emmett Owen (Contending Forces 1900)
This bloody image, which serves as the novel’s frontispiece, in conjunction with the graphic description that accompanies it, has lead critics like Claudia Tate to read the scene as a symbolic rape:

With all his mighty strength he brought the lash down upon the frail and shrinking form. O God! was there none to rescue her! The air whistled as the snaky leather thong curled and writhed in its rapid, vengeful descent. A shriek from the victim—a spurt of blood that spattered the torturer—a long, raw gash across a tender, white back. Hank gazed at the cut with critical satisfaction, as he compared its depth with the skin and blood that encased the long, tapering lash. (69)

Inversely, Mabelle, who is already a racialized subject, is first raped, then, after, as an added degree of separation from her attacker, made into a “slave” by virtue of the language (as reported by Sawyer) used by Mabelle’s uncle when his crime is discovered:

[W]hatever damage I have done I am willing to pay for. But your child is no better than her mother or her grandmother. What does a woman of mixed blood, or any Negress, for that matter, know of virtue? It is my belief that they were a direct creation by God to be the pleasant companions of men of my race. Now, I am willing to give you a thousand dollars and call it square. (261-2)
The fact that Mabelle’s white uncle connects her to the “condition” of her mother, exclusively, and his particular use of the word, “damages,” to describe his rape of his niece, would, in all probability, recall to many readers that, in the “Old South,” a slave woman (whose status as a slave always followed the “condition of the mother”) could not, legally, be raped: “If a rapist was suspected of the sexual assault of a slave woman, he was charged with ‘assault and battery’ and, in the case of conviction, damages were paid to the owner, as would be the case in any other ‘property damage’” (Clinton in *History and Memory* 206).

The idea of “repayment” or “justice” for trauma also takes on a secondary meaning in light of Mabelle’s story: while Hopkins dismisses Sawyer’s notion of Old-Testament “justice” (262), she also expresses her skepticism of the idea that financial restitution can indeed serve as a sufficient means of correction and healing for trauma. In situating Mabelle, through her white uncle’s words, in the context of slavery, Hopkins not only shows the power of the past in shaping present conditions, and how easily the identity of those without a voice can be framed by those with political agency, she also reveals how embracing an economically-based notion of citizenship may duplicate the logic of slavery: whether or not they are slaves, black bodies are commodities, rather than inherently-valuable human beings. The notion of repayment for “damages” does not solve the problem of silencing, and, once again, allows the possibility of ignoring the past, or of declaring that it is no longer pertinent to present concerns.

In spite of the significance for the record of Sawyer’s public revelation of Sappho’s past, the problematic manner in which Sappho’s past is framed by Sawyer during the meeting allows for pointed critique of female voicelessness in the public sphere, which, in turn, complicates the
Preface’s assertion that “the civility of no race can be perfect whilst another race is degraded” (20). Foremost among these problems is that Sappho’s experience is not being articulated and interpreted by Mabelle/ Sappho Clark herself (or even by a woman). The language Sawyer uses to describe Mabelle’s experience, and his figuration of Mabelle, post-rape, while evocative and emotional, stands in notable contrast to the figurations of violated womanhood—limited though they might have been—that the Sewing Circle women offered in the earlier chapter. While in the later instance, a woman like Mabelle/ Sappho is still seen, by the women, as virtuous, in Sawyer’s figuration, Mabelle is transformed from a girl worthy of being “worshipped” (CF 258) to a “poor, ruined, half-crazed creature in whom it was almost impossible to trace a resemblance to the beautiful pet of our household” (my emphasis 260). Although Sawyer is not intending harm, his rhetoric, which paints Sappho as both reduced to and made irredeemable by the violence done against her once-pure womanhood, has alarming parallels to the reductionist framing of Mabelle’s selfhood (in terms of race and economic worth) which her white uncle enacts.

In light of Sawyer’s reduction of Mabelle’s identity to her violated body, it is not surprising that that, like Grace Montfort, who committed suicide after her “rape,” Sawyer’s tale ends with the declaration that Mabelle “died when her child was born!” (261), nor is it difficult to see why Will Smith, the next speaker, feels he may use Mabelle’s experience to “‘cemen[t] the bonds of brotherhood’ among the novel’s masculine political agents” (McCann 817). But to see Mabelle/ Sappho’s identity and experience in the manner implicit in Sawyer’s “talk”—as the embodiment of passive discursive space for male community members to use as they will—is to
miss the irony inherent in the moments following Sawyer’s declarations, when Sappho Clark is carried, “in a fainting condition” (261) from the auditorium. Sappho may be physically removed from the scene, but the act of her removal, which halts the meeting’s “talk,” works to highlight and critique how she has been excluded from the telling of her own story—a move which, in the end, is no chivalric gift, but rather, that which renders her “dumb and submissive beneath her martyrdom” (CF 354). Moreover, by calling attention to Sappho at this particular moment in Sawyer’s speech, the reader has the opportunity to recognize what the novel’s characters do not: Sawyer’s figuration of Mabelle to the League audience as first “ruined,” and then dead, contradicts the fact that Mabelle—unlike Grace, but, notably, like Grace’s mulatto half-sister, Lucy—survived and, in many ways, thrived after the violence she experienced. While Mabelle does, in some sense, cease to be after the birth of her son, the fact that her “death” is more a moment of rebirth than a fulfillment of Victorian and white sentimental fiction’s “rules” that the ravished heroine must perish, shows black womanhood can, and indeed must, resist both negative representations by whites, and limiting patriarchal figurations.

The necessity for this resistance is further emphasized when Will Smith takes the podium after Sawyer has finished speaking. Will’s speech to the crowds who have moved from “cries and groans” to “universal silence” (258, 262) appears, at first, to be solely focused upon attacking the color line, and and with it, the theory of a race-based moral/immoral divide between whites and African Americans. When speaking of Mabelle’s uncle, Will argues that “the wanton passions he revealed and which it has taken centuries of white civilization to develop, disclos[es] a dire hell to which the common crime of the untutored Negro is as white as
alabaster (269). This assessment, of course, undercuts the rationale behind the practice of lynching: the “passion” that is supposedly roused in white men as a result of rapes of white women by black men is revealed as a cover for systematic dismissal of the law: “it is but a subterfuge for killing men” (270). But by refocusing his audience upon white male lawlessness and the falseness of the idea of the black male beast, even as he discusses the fact of rape, Will ends up figuring experiences like Mabelle’s as resulting from racial prejudice alone: “Rape is the outgrowth of a fiendish animus of the whites toward the blacks and of the blacks toward the whites. ...Irony of ironies! The men who created the mulatto race, who recruit its ranks year after year by the very means which they invoked lynch law to suppress, bewailing the sorrows of violated womanhood!” (270-271). Will’s summation of black female rape as synonymous with the violence of lynching is not incorrect, but it does downplay the gendered aspect of these crimes, including the ways that the sexual exploitation of black women by white men acts as a force which oppresses and divides women, generally. As Hopkins notes in “Club Life Among Colored Women,” while the there ought to solidarity amongst women of both races in the fight against the system of patriarchal oppression which affects them all, too often, white women choose to blame the victims of their husbands’ sexual exploitation: “like Sarah of old, she wreaks her vengeance on helpless Hagar” (277).

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The fact that Will cannot see the crime of rape in gendered terms, coupled with Sawyer’s figuration of Mabelle as “ruined,” reveals that if the “mother’s law”\(^\text{73}\) has any authority to redefine black female selfhood, that influence has no sway in a public forum where women do not speak for themselves. The law of the nation may, at times, fail to live up to its principles of equality and inclusion, but then again, the only hope for the law to ever function properly is when all the evidence is available to be heard and understood correctly. While Hopkins does believe that, where silence prevails, history is doomed to “repeat itself,”\(^\text{74}\) it is not enough that black women embody certain elements of the legacy of slavery, which can then be transmitted into public discourse by men to use as they wish. Indeed, rather than prevent historical repetition, the League men’s limited interpretations of Sappho’s past actually incite repetition of the past’s sins: it’s no accident that John Langley’s attempt—acting in the spirit of his ancestor, Anson Pollack\(^\text{75}\)—to blackmail Sappho to be his mistress comes on the heels of the League speakers’ declarations of Sappho’s “ruined” state. The North Carolina-born Langley’s passion for “wealth and position” (336), and for Sappho—described as both a determination “to bend her to his will” and “the thought which absorbed his waking hours and haunted him even in sleep” (274)—echoes the desires of Pollock whose “ruling...covetousness” (49) of gold is

\(^{73}\) “Mother’s law,” according to Tate, “metes out reward and punishment in direct proportion to the moral character of one’s deeds,” and “serves as a broader basis for redefining a virtuous woman other than on grounds of sexual chastity” (174 Domestic Allegories of Political Desire).


\(^{75}\) “The youngest woman had a child while in slavery, by Anson Pollock, Jr., a grandnephew of old Anson Pollock, whom we all have so much reason to remember. The poor woman seems much distressed over this boy, who, it appears, was taken from her when he was but six months old, and sold with many others to a man who farmed Negro babies for the market. She asked me if I had ever in my distant home met a young man called John Pollock Langley. He is her son!” (380).
matched only by “his determination to possess the lovely Grace Montfort at all hazards” (45). The parallels between the two men works, on the one hand, to further underscore Will’s earlier assertion that, if the black man is a brute, “he but reflects the nature of his environments...the white man's refined civilization!” (272), which, in turn, supports his claim that brutality or virtue are not race-specific traits. At the same time, Langley’s repetition of his ancestor’s sins reinforces the notion that even if the “talk” in the League scenes did allow a “hidden” part of black female experience to be expressed publicly, the talk’s effectiveness was thwarted by its male exclusivity.

In rejecting her “Mabelle” self, and the past that accompanies it, Sappho gains the freedom to create her own identity (her “unhistorical” self), but that freedom is circumscribed—only free insofar as Sappho is able to keep the past “locked” (CF 117) away. But, ultimately, Sappho cannot stop the hidden past from returning, and, in the end, from physically breaching her sanctuary. Though Sappho’s choice not to capitulate to the traditional, predestined fate of “ruined” womanhood—that is, death or concubinage—serves as a first step in breaking down the tenets of patriarchal law, it is an incomplete one. Sappho is fierce in her condemnation of Langley’s character, but she is equally condemnatory of her own position: “Infamous villain!...you abuse my forlorn condition. Leave me! Never till this moment have I realized the depths of my degradation!” (320). Though Sappho resists Langley’s unscrupulous proposal, because of the identity-defining figurations of that past which she sees reflected back to her by her community, Sappho feels helpless to stop her “secret” from taking control of her present and future. In her confrontation with her past, she loses sight of her reinvented self, and with it, the possibility of
having a future with Will, and all that he represents. The persona of “Sappho Clark” cannot exist if Mabelle does, because, for Sappho, the past is a fixed entity, and its eternal meaning is “degradation.”

III

If it is true that that individuals depend upon their fellow group members (real or fictional) for confirmation of identity and verification of collective memory, and that, in this way, culture is tied to social dimensions of memory—constructed and reconstructed in response to changing circumstances—then the Sewing Circle and League scenes reveal precisely what is at stake in “public talk” about the meaning of the past: namely, the effect of that past meaning upon the present and future possibilities for an individual, a people, or a nation. In linking Sappho’s past, thematically, to the Montforts’ experiences, and thus, to the Smith family’s history, Hopkins reveals the ways in which Sappho’s present “martyrdom” is tied, intrinsically, to and supported by the kind of negative, circumscribed “talk” occurring in the community; moreover, Sappho’s own unwillingness to acknowledge her past properly is indicative of a national problem of how to relate to the past—particularly, gendered memory. The rhetoric in both scenes implies that one can have either remembrance of the past, or plans for the future, but not both.

76 Maurice Halbwachs in his groundbreaking work, The Collective Memory (1925)

77 As Paul Ricoeur would argue, “expectation and memory possess extension.” From Time and Narrative (1984) in History and Memory in African-American Culture (eds. Genevieve Fabre, Robert O’Meally)
In “How the Colored American League was Started,” Hopkins quotes John C. Freund, a friend of Booker T. Washington:

You must cease to speak of yourselves as a proscribed people. You must cease to dwell upon your wrongs in the past, however bitter, however cruel. How shall the barriers that hold you in be broken down, if you insist upon living behind them? Your duty is to forget the past, at least, to put it behind you and to advance bravely, with your faces to the dawn and the light.

Freund, like the various community members in Contending Forces, offers two options to the African American and, by extension, to the nation: cling to the past, or turn you back upon it and seize the future. In Contending Forces, this choice seems, at first, to be simple: while the hero and heroine, Will and Sappho, have their eyes fixed on the future and the “element of a new and coming civilization” (298), characters such as the white supremacist Senator from Alabama, who appears in the Canterbury Club scene, idealize the antebellum past, and attempt to ignore post-war black advancement in favor of the view that, for African Americans, “the mystery of government will always remain a mystery; and the hope of assimilating many things which are...”


79 While she offers no commentary in “How a New York Newspaperman...” on Freund’s speech, in personal correspondence, Hopkins she discusses her displeasure with the fact that Mr. Freund, who had taken control of the Colored American Magazine at the request of Booker T. Washington, insisted that “there must not be a word on lynching, no mention of our wrongs as a race, nothing that would be offensive to the South [in CAM] Letter to William Monroe Trotter, April 16, 1905, published in Daughter of the Revolution (ed. Dworkin) courtesy of Fisk University Franklin Library Special Collections.
second nature to the white man, will never become a reality to your race” (295). But this competitive, either/or dichotomy—the choice of embracing only the past or only the future—is problematic in practice for white and black communities alike. To cling to the past alone is to let the past control the present and future unreservedly. But to deny the past entirely is to deny its power to heal wounds and to create community through shared memory—a power which Hopkins sees as useful, even when (or perhaps especially when) the shared memory is traumatic. As Cathy Caruth argues, “the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound’’ (in Forgetting Futures 112).

If we grant that Sappho, and her experiences, may be read, to a certain extent, in collective terms, it becomes more problematic than ever that she spends so much of the novel trapped in silence—the direct consequence of disavowal—unable to share her “wound” with her community. While Sappho’s rejection of her past is the focus of the first part of the Boston narrative, after Langley attempts his blackmail, Sappho makes the choice to turn away from her future with with Will, and instead, to tie herself to her past exclusively. Sappho appears to be taking a positive step forward in revealing her past to the Smiths—that openness, reflected both in Dora’s discovery that “the key” to Sappho’s room is “on the outside, the door unlocked” (326) and in Sappho’s letter wherein she finally tells her story in her own words.80 But the journey to full liberation from past traumas not only involves acknowledging the past, but also finding ways

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80 As Roth puts it: “recognizing and giving voice to one’s suffering is a necessary stage in moving past that suffering” (11).
to incorporate the past into the present and future in useful rather than shameful ways—neither an easy nor a straightforward task.

Like the decision to “put the knife to [the past’s] roots” (Nietzsche 22), Sappho’s rejection of her “unhistorical” self is, ultimately, another form of fixing meaning—the antithesis of multidirectional memory, which offers a mix of “the unhistorical and the historical [which] are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture” (in *History Made* 32). Therefore, when Sappho leaves the Smith house, reclaims her once-disavowed son from her Aunt, and returns to New Orleans, this choice is problematic, not only for Sappho, but for the Boston community at large, from whom she separates herself, literally and figuratively. It is true that Sappho’s reclamation of the son born from her rape, for whom she “had felt nothing...but repugnance” (342), has some very positive effects: it offers Sappho “relief,” “peace,” and “a new and holy love which was the compensation for all she had suffered” (345, 347). But by, effectively, re-baptizing herself as Mabelle—first in the convent, where she “relives” Alphonse’s birth via the fever that she suffers, and next, in the home of Monsieur Louis, who “reminded her of her father” (353-4) and whose house “recalled her childhood's happy home” (353)—Sappho allows the fixed, negative meaning of her past to overshadow her love for her son such that she ends up approaching motherhood as “a martyr” (344) who had “borne up bravely” (347) and “did not mind anything now” (348). Thus, Sappho’s reverse migration narrative reads not as the product of a healthy desire to meld her past with her present, or to make the past useful for the future, but like her former disavowal of her past, as merely another form of fixing the meaning of the past in absolute terms.
Though she remains “quiet and subdued” (351), Sappho’s return to the South is not a seamless regression, however; Sappho finds she cannot quite let go of her Boston self, in spite of her best efforts to do so: many nights she “lay awake hungering for the sight of [Will’s] face, the touch of a hand, the glance of an eye” (354); and, when Monsieur Louis proposes, she experiences “a strange feeling of suffocation” (358). These fissures within Sappho’s new “martyr” identity hint at the possibility of reinterpreting past experience and of bringing the past together with present and future goals, but Sappho cannot accomplish this possibility by herself, divorced from the community. The actions of the Smith family in seeking out and reincorporating Sappho into the community—with Ma Smith representing the pre-War generation, and Will and Dora representing the post-Reconstruction generation—are paramount in this process. The Smiths’ acceptance of Sappho’s past and their view of her traumatic “sufferings” not as defining characteristics of her being (she is not “ruined” or otherwise made less as a result of her experience), nor as mere symbolic embodiments of the legacy of the “terrible curse of slavery” with its “sting of degradation” (230) enacts the kind of “talk” which the community fails to do properly in either the Sewing Circle or League scenes. The Smiths do not ignore either the gendered or the personal nature of what Sappho has experienced, and do not deny connections between the past and present: “Oh, that poor, miserable girl! think of her sufferings—of the weight of the secret she carried with her. What a crucifixion for a proud spirit like hers! This terrible curse of slavery! shall we never lose the sting of degradation?” (330). At the same time, even before Sappho is reunited with Will, and becomes Sappho Smith, she is presented with an identity by Alphonse—who is representative of the future of the community—
which successfully brings together her Mabelle and Sappho selves: “Mamma-Sappho” (356).

Thus, even while Sappho’s past is being allowed as a part of herself once again, and acknowledged as a part of the African American community’s, and by extension, the nation’s past—the gendered legacy of slavery—that past has been brought into the present in such a way that does not preclude Sappho’s self-created identity, or, by extension, the capacity of the African American community for self-determination and change.

*Contending Forces*’s denouement, in which we see the Smiths’ reconnection to Charles Montfort Jr.’s descendant and subsequent wealth, Sappho’s marriage, and a departure to England, continues to present the ways that inclusive “public talk” and the creation of a multidirectional collective memory offer uniting and liberating possibilities for personal, communal and national identity. And yet, key parts of the novel’s ending, the Supreme Court decision and the voyage to Europe, have a double-voiced quality which undercuts the conclusiveness of the “happy ending.” This lack of conclusiveness allows Hopkins to remind the reader that “public talk” and the creation of collective memory are never truly “finished” acts, and also, to highlight the need for the reader’s own participation in the “talk” if evolutions in law and society are to continue.

While Sappho is in the process of becoming “Mama-Sappho,” the Smiths themselves are reconnecting with their own lost family: the Montforts. The white and black Montfort descendants, Mr. Withington and Ma Smith, come together through the act of storytelling, which allows mutual understanding across the color line. After Ma Smith recounts her family history, Mr. Withington exclaims:
'Your story is a revelation to me, madam. Are there many histories like yours among your people? In what a different light you would appear as a race, if the statements made by your detractors could be stripped of calumny and deception. Believe me, you have my heartfelt sympathy, and I shall do all that I can to promote kindly feelings in England for our unfortunate black brother in America. And it is against such spirits of nobility and self-sacrifice that many would close the entrance door to the higher education of the century! Blind and foolish prejudice! Monstrous injustice!’ He paused a moment to collect himself and overcome his indignation. (373)

This act of storytelling, and of listening, coupled with the letters between the two brothers, Charles Montfort Jr. (Mr. Withington father) and Jesse Montfort (Ma Smith’s father), which have been “preserved as a sacred legacy” (376), are shown to act, like the novel itself, as a “time-stained...chain of evidence” (384). This “evidence”—spoken and written—is both an enactment of public talk and a vessel for multidirectional memory. As such, it helps create legal and spiritual “kinship” ties which cross both gendered and racial lines. Taken in this light, the the Smiths’ departure from American to Europe—premised upon the connection that is made between the white and the black, the male and the female descendants of the Montforts—may be understood as an expression of a kind of universal kinship and shared collective memory. Even Will Smith’s claim that “for a man to gain true self-respect and independence must not be hampered in any way by prejudice” (389) need not read as either a denial of racial ties or an abandonment of the fight for the black community’s rights. The Smiths’ are merely expanding
that fight to include the white community, and those living beyond America’s borders: a broader, and, perhaps, more future-oriented sense of “racial uplift” than the Tuskegee-type work undertaken by Dora and Dr. Lewis, who seek to impart “practical knowledge of...useful industries” (388) to their race.

The rediscovery and reincorporation of Sappho into the Smith family following the Montfort-Smith reconnection becomes, then, a further act of inclusion—both in terms of the Boston African American community and “We the People” of the nation. While Hopkins works hard to free her readers of the belief that “descent” equals identity, she does not concede that disavowal of descent is desirable. To cut ties to one’s racial or ethnic community is, as Sappho’s narrative shows, as great a violence to identity and full “Americanness,” as Jim Crow exclusions. Thus, the names which Sappho has adopted by the novel’s end, “Mamma-Sappho” and “Sappho Smith,” link Sappho’s selves, and link her identity to that of the community without conflating them. The multiplicity of identities is not quite akin to the Du Boisian notion of “double consciousness”—though Hopkins was clearly familiar with this idea and, like Du Bois, was influenced in her ideas about identity by the writings of William James—but rather, the multiplicity seems to embody the opening up of the “possibilities” of identity described by

81 From Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address
Nietzsche. Sappho’s new identities are not “fixed” or controlled by her past: they acknowledge the past while still remaining open to possibilities for meaning and interpretation, which is, for Hopkins, the key to the evolutions in personal and collective identity necessary for black womanhood, and to also for the establishment of an effective collective memory that can challenge and reshape fundamental ideas of Americanness.

On the other hand, the private Supreme Court ruling on the Smith/Montfort case, which comes shortly before the Smith’s voyage to Europe, forces the reader to reconsider the conclusiveness of this “happy ending.” The court decision may appear to be the proper extension of the “talk” which occurred in the privacy of the Smith household to the public sphere, however, the text hints that this is not in fact the case. The ruling points more to the continuance of public silence about the legacy of slavery than to open discourse:

The case of Smith vs. the United States did not come to a public trial; it was heard privately before a court composed of the judges of the Supreme Court of the United

82 As Ramadanovic explains in “From Haunting to Trauma”:

The question [Nietzsche raises] is not whether remembering can recreate the forgotten or whether forgetting can fully erase what is remembered. The question is rather of the possibility of a balance between remembering and forgetting, the historical and the active as Nietzsche envisions them. ....The individual is in harmony with the collective, so that there is not simply a resolution of dialectic relationships but also a balance between individual interest and group needs. ...Forgetting...marks the renunciation of the self and especially of the possessive pronoun, mine. A forgetfulness in which "I" is not placed between the opposites of remembering and forgetting, past and future, singularity and heterogeneity, life and death, but in which "I" is becoming in the return to itself through an immeasurable number of other possibilities. The forgetting which makes action, history, and signification possible is here displaced from a Platonic immemorial past to a moment (Augenblick) when the being's presence to itself is interrupted. The moment is not an instant between the past and future, but an ecstasy of time, a now at once in the past, in the future, and in the present. In the anamnestic now, "I" remembers its multiplicity, its being outside "I," and forgets itself and becomes open to the radical alterity of unrealized possibilities. The call for active forgetting is hence the call for a difficult break in the opposition between past and future, presence and absence, remembering and forgetting, being and not-being, thinking and acting. With it we are brought to the verge of understanding that what tradition has handed down to us as opposites—remembering and forgetting, history and action—do not necessarily exclude or repress one another. (12, 14, 30)
States. ...The records of real estate transfers, chattels, etc., were all found intact among the files of the courthouse at Newberne, North Carolina. Jesse was traced from the time he fled from Anson Pollock until he settled in Exeter, New Hampshire, and married Elizabeth Whitfield. By this woman he raised a family of twelve children, five of whom, including Mrs. Smith, were born in Exeter. ...As Mr. Withington had said, the letters in his possession from Jesse to Charles Montfort, yellow and time-stained, completed a perfect chain of evidence. The sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars was awarded to Mrs. Smith as the last representative of the heirs of Jesse Montfort. Justice was appeased. (383-4)

The Supreme Court proceedings do create a record: the outcome of the trial is published in the newspapers and the details of Ma Smith’s family history, which were previously unknown, are presented to the reader. At the same time, as with Sappho in the Sewing Circle scene, the full record is not made public within the world of the text, and thus, only a small portion of the experience (the trial’s outcome) becomes part of its “public talk” or collective memory. The choice to have the Smith-Montfort case heard in private works to accentuate the fictional nature of Hopkins’s depiction—the Supreme Court would never have heard a case like this in private. But this choice highlights how the racial and gendered legacy of slavery, and the ongoing exclusions suffered by African Americans, particularly black women, continue to be ignored, in large part, by the law and by white American “public talk.” Moreover, it gives a double-voiced quality to the final words on the case, “Justice was appeased” (384). If the Smiths, like Sappho,

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are on some level representative characters, it is significant that, although the “perfect chain of evidence” is presented and authenticated, the full record lives and dies within the confines of the court. Effective collective memory—the sort that can transform a nation—is premised upon inclusive public dialogue. The Supreme Court’s private hearing, with its heavily truncated public record, does not, therefore, model Hopkins’s ideal, multidirectional approach in which all Americans face the nation’s traumatic past openly, together, and are thus, able to heal from their shared “sorrow.”

The idea that the hearing and “one hundred and fifty thousand dollars” constitutes “justice” becomes even further problematized when taken within the context of the narrative as a whole. Thinking back to Mabelle’s uncle’s offer to pay her father for “damages”, it’s clear that Hopkins views the notion of financial restitution in lieu of full public acknowledgement of wrong-doing as akin to the covering of “unsightly” things. It is arguable that the Supreme Court ruling and the government’s payment at the novel’s end are more acceptable than the offer of payment in Mabelle’s case, for the reason that the money comes only after the evidence (including the “eye-witness” account of Lucy, Grace Montfort's foster-sister) of the “atrocious crime” (379) is revealed in full. At the same time, the money paid out to Ma Smith—her “claim to the estate” (378)—rests upon proofs of white male ancestry: her descent from the white slave-owner, Charles Montfort. Furthermore, the “estate” itself was comprised, in large part, of black bodies (slaves) who had no legal claim of ownership to their own worth. Thus, even the reparations paid by the U.S. government may be understood as an authentication of white male citizens’ rights alone, and not, in fact, acknowledgement of equal rights under the law for black
citizens or for women. If indeed the ruling may, on some level, model appropriate “reparations” for the sufferings of slavery and its legacy, it is, at best, an incomplete enactment, indicating to the reader that further “talk,” and further action is necessary for true healing and “justice” to take place.

In light of this reading of the court case, which undercuts the seeming conclusiveness of the “happy ending,” the fact that the novel ends before the Smiths actually arrive at their European destination appears more relevant and fitting. Will and Sappho have hopeful plans to “work together to bring joy to hearts crushed by despair” (401), but this work is, quite literally, at sea, when the novel ends. Contending Forces’s ending reinforces the idea that the novel is, by design, incomplete: revealing gaps of silence that still need filling, and experiences that still require reinterpretation and action by the reader, and the by nation, beyond the novel’s pages. The persistence of these omissions could be misinterpreted as a failure on the text’s part, in the end, to truly enact and be a locus of inclusive public talk and of multidirectional collective memory. In fact, however, this choice points to the novel’s role: rather than serving simply as a corrective to the white, patriarchal record, the novel models and, by its inconclusiveness, acts as a catalyst for the ongoing creation of multidirectional memory through inclusive “public talk”—talk which can not only shape a better present and future America, but which, as the journey across the sea indicates, can have transnational implications. The work of public talk, like the problem of racism itself, is not bound to a particular locale or to a specific group: it is the work, and the problem of the world. A finished text, with all ends tied up, would not support this view, nor would it truly model collective memory creation at all, but its antithesis: implying the end of
“public talk” and thus, foreclosing future opportunities for the reevaluation and evolution of national memory. The novel’s ending illustrates how, as a finite artifact crafted by a single author “speaking for” her community, a text can only create multidirectional collective memory to a certain extent. The ongoing dialectic of remembering and forgetting must be taken up and enacted by readers—black and white, male and female—who are willing to speak and listen to one another’s stories. Such a record is ongoing, unfinished, and forever full of possibility.
Chapter Two

Reinventing the National Family:
Eurasian Imagination in the Works of Edith Eaton/ Sui Sin Far

Only when the whole world becomes as one family will human beings be able to see clearly and hear distinctly. I believe that some day a great part of the world will be Eurasian. I cheer myself with the thought that I am but a pioneer. A pioneer should glory in suffering.

—Sui Sin Far [Edith Eaton], “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian”

[A Nation] presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present, tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life.

—Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?”

I.

Edith Maude Eaton, known more commonly by her pen-name, Sui Sin Far, wrote and published many short stories, essays and journalistic pieces critiquing racism in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Though, like Pauline Hopkins, Eaton spent most of her working life writing non-fiction for newspapers and engaging in “support writing”—mainly stenography—for professional men, since her rediscovery by literary scholars in the 1980’s, Eaton has frequently been cast as the “mother” of Asian American literature. Her “authentic” presentation of herself as a “half-Chinese” subject, frequently contrasted with her sister, Winnifred’s Japanese persona, and her dedication to sympathetic portrayal of Chinese-American

83 As per Farens, Eaton wrote under other names, such as Sui Seen Far and Wing Sing, and at times, anonymously—as we see in pieces like “The Persecution and Oppression of Me” which is signed, “By a Half Chinese.”

84 See Frank Chin and Xiao-Huang Yin. This assertion is made at least somewhat ironic by the fact that Eaton was never an American citizen—though she lived in various places in the United States and abroad, she always considered Canada to be her home.
immigrants and to biracial identity during the height of the U.S. “Yellow Peril” hysteria led to Eaton’s canonization in Asian American studies and, for many years, shaped the critical discourse surrounding her works. Due, in large part, to the small handful of stories available for study initially, early Eaton scholars focused their attention on her depictions of mixed-race characters, American Anti-Chinese racism, and Chinese-American cultural oppositions. While critics lionized Eaton for her self-proclaimed desire to “break down prejudice, and to cause the American heart to soften and the American heart to broaden towards the Chinese people now living in America,” (Letter to the Editor of the Westerner, Nov. 1909, qtd. in White-Parks 154) early scholarship tended to explain away what might appear to be a troubling aspect of Eaton’s authorship: what Patterson has called Eaton’s self-positioning “as in insider informant, offering white readers an exotic Other to appropriate and consume” (105). Eaton’s seeming willingness to act as a “purveyor of knowledge about the Chinese” (Ferens 97), is one central reason Mrs. Spring Fragrance was, upon its initial publication, seen as a work of ethnography by some reviewers.85

In recent years, as more of Eaton’s works have come to light, critical views have, by necessity, expanded as well. Former critical blind spots, including Eaton’s use of “essentialist” discourse in her fictions, have become sites of inquiry for critics such as Wo Wang, Dominika Ferens, Mary Chapman and Martha H. Patterson, who have used them as a springboard for questioning the rhetoric of authenticity surrounding Eaton’s texts, and for exploring her works

85 As Ferens notes, Mrs. Spring Fragrance was reviewed by an anthropologist writing for the American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal, who “treated it as a contribution to ethnographic knowledge” with an emphasis on “what the book contributed to the knowledge of Chinese character; to what extent the Chinese were capable of assimilation; and finally, what the status of ‘half-breed American-Chinese’ was” (Edith and Winnifred 50).
from a number of new angles, including rhetorical and cultural studies, and ethnography. In 2002 and 2004, respectively, Dominika Ferens’s disclosure of a daily column Eaton wrote between 1896 and 1897 (68) for *Gall’s Daily News Letter*, a Jamaican newspaper, and Martha J. Cutter’s discovery of a short story, “Away Down in Jamaica,” which focuses on a tragic love triangle between two white men and a mulatta woman, effectively challenged the Anglo-Chinese duality associated with Eaton’s works. More recently still, Mary Chapman has uncovered more than ninety uncollected works by Eaton, which, as she states, include “journalism written in Montreal, Northern Ontario, California, and Washington; fiction depicting Native Americans, Persians, ‘Arabians,’ and Japanese; middlebrow magazine fiction; syndicated sensation fiction; children’s fiction; and much more” (“Cross-Cultural” 156).

These newly rediscovered works, including two short stories which will be examined in this chapter, “The Success of a Mistake” (1908) and “The Alaska Widow” (1909), offer proof that to read Eaton’s body of writing too narrowly, focusing exclusively upon her work as “the voice” of marginalized, turn-of-the-century Chinese-Americans, or upon Eaton herself as the “mother” of Asian American fiction, is to fail to appreciate both the diversity of Eaton’s oeuvre and, as I will argue here, the careful framing of domestic life in her fictions as an allegory of and challenge to the dominant racial and gendered politics and competitive collective memory culture of turn-of-the-century America. If, as George Lakoff has argued, our national politics are

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86 Eaton herself remarked that she did not write for the purposes of “put[ting] a Chinese name into American literature” (Letter to the Editor of the *Westerner*, Nov. 1909, qtd. in White-Parks 154).

87 Both national and international.
informed by our idealizations and conceptualizations of family,\(^88\), then, contrary to certain critics’ claims that Eaton’s stories eschew politics,\(^89\) Eaton’s focus upon familial ties and relations may, in fact, be seen as deeply political; indeed, we cannot fully comprehend Eaton’s works without recognizing that they offer incisive critique of America’s Progressive Era conceptualizations of the “national family,” of the racist and gendered hierarchies which shaped and were shaped by this metaphor, and of the national collective memory—comprised of both exclusionary cultural mythologies and belief in so-called “inheritances”\(^90\)—which undergirded these competitively-minded discourses.

At the same time, to argue that Eaton is seeking to simply tear down national memory or abolish the “national family” is to miss the multidirectional possibilities which emerge from her critique of these entities. Like Pauline Hopkins, Eaton used her “private” fictions to embody and model the creation of a new American “public” memory—one premised upon the recognition that “Americanness” is not an exclusive “inheritance” which must “compete” with ethnic tradition and identity, with but rather, an inclusive and evolving identifier, “partly inherited, partly modified…partly invented” (Lowe 65) and always open to reinterpretation. By examining Eaton’s professed motives for writing her “half-Chinese stories” (“A Half-Chinese” 290)—including her potent image of the Eurasion body as a bridge between the races and nations

\(^88\) “[It] is a common metaphorical conception…the Nation As Family, with the government, or head of state representing the government, seen as an older male authority figure, typically as father. We talk about our founding fathers. George Washington was called ‘the father of his country’….” (Moral Politics 153).

\(^89\) In “Connecting Links: The Anti-Progressivism of Sui Sin Far,” Sean McCann writes that “everything that counts in [Eaton’s] writing occurs far from the world of statecraft and civic virtue and well within the realm of the ordinary, the mundane, and the domestic” (81).

\(^90\) In his book, Civic Myths, Brook Thomas argues, “A widespread and dangerous civic myth is that, through a mystical process, a nation’s culture and history can be racially inherited” (201).
(“Leaves” 230)—and by tracing how the private, familial dramas enacted in “The Success of a Mistake” (1908) and “The Alaska Widow” (1909), and in the more mature works, “Pat and Pan” (1912) and “The Inferior Woman” (1910), function synecdochically to intercede in and reimagine the racial and gender hierarchies shaping public, turn-of-the-century ideals of the national family, this chapter makes specific interventions in how critics have, thus far, defined and understood Eaton’s “domestic politics” and their relationship to dominant Progressive Era discourses about nation-making, race, and gender roles.

The question of who could, and who could not belong to the “American family” was no mere theoretical inquiry in the Progressive Era. As Peter Burke has argued, “The later nineteenth century…[was] an age of a search for national traditions, in which national monuments were constructed, and national rituals…devised…. The aim of all this was essentially to justify or ‘legitimate’ the existence of the nation-state” (CMR 191) in the post-Civil War years. Even as America sought to expand its economic and political influence abroad, at home, anxiety over delineating a coherent national identity was reaching a fever pitch. In many ways, Theodore Roosevelt’s 1915 speech, in which he declared that, at the risk of “preventing all possibility of continuing to be a nation” the people must understand that “there is no room in this country for hyphenated Americans” (“Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated”), encapsulated the nation’s competitive approach to culture. Although Roosevelt was speaking about American involvement in the First World War in Europe, his statements reveal how the language of American nationalism, though it might imply American identity is the result of adherence to certain democratic principles, was in fact “deeply implicated in anxieties about racial difference” (Lee 8)
—no more so than when dealing with what *Harper’s Weekly* described as “the lowest and in every way the least desirable portion of nations, the most alien to us and our civilization” (Aug. 1867): the Chinese immigrant.

The *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (1886) decision, which ruled against San Francisco’s “arbitrary and unjust discrimination against the Chinese race” (qtd. in Thomas, *Plessy*, 50), and the *U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) decision which stated that any person born in the United States was an American, had radical implications for Chinese immigrants who were forbidden by U.S. law from becoming naturalized citizens. The decisions gave “legal and symbolic sanctions to the idea that Chinese could indeed be members of the American nation” (Thomas, *Civic Myths*, 197), but this new legal designation did not grant those of Chinese descent who were not born in the United States a path to citizenship; moreover, it did not contradict the continuance of the notion that to be truly American is to be “Americanized.” Thus, those who resisted, or who were seen as incapable of being assimilated into American culture due to perceived biological or cultural factors, continued to function as a kind of counter-narrative to the tradition which defined American identity. As Julia Lee puts it, “The right to participate in the nation’s politics did not necessarily grant one the right to participate in its national mythology” (31).

This sense of national exclusivity also informed the United States’ relationship with its territories, such as Alaska (purchased in 1867), Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico (all annexed in 1898), and its “Open Door” policy with China—a nation framed almost uniformly in American popular culture as the “ancient” antithesis to American modernity. As the article “Our Chinese Neighbors” states, and as figure 2 (below) implies, while the early Chinese
lived “in a high state of civilization,” modern Chinese were seen as having “only just awakened to the value of Western progress” (*Harper’s Weekly*, May 1886).

Fig. 2. “The Last Addition to the Family.” *Harper’s Weekly*, Sept. 25, 1869: 624. China is depicted as an infant being coddled by the Republic.
Imperialist rhetoric which posited China and its culture as “backward” also had gendered connotations. Placed in relation to the United States—China’s self-proclaimed protector⁹¹ in the years following the military defeats which placed China at the mercy of foreign powers, including France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Japan, Russia—China was seen as a “feminized” nation. China’s perceived lack of autonomy was, in turn, exploited as a metaphor for disenfranchised white feminists in America, who drew parallels “between Chinese women—domestically confined, sexually exploited, and despotically treated by patriarchs—and the U.S. women restricted by separate spheres ideology” (“A Revolution” 979)⁹². At the same time, however, as with African American women, any supposed “common ground” between white feminists and Chinese-American woman, was, more often than not, thwarted by assertions of white racial superiority. Several Eaton stories, including “The Success of a Mistake” and “The Inferior Woman,”⁹³ are highly critical of this form of feminism, which, rather than promote true egalitarianism, at best, marked some women are superior to others by virtue of class or race, and, at worst, made use of nativist rhetoric and American cultural mythology to assert that “native-born white American women were more fit for citizenship than inassimilable [sic] Chinese men and their ‘backward’ female relatives” (“A Revolution” 980).

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⁹¹ While China was a key focal point for this rhetoric, similar views applied, generally, to all the lands (and the peoples therein) bought or annexed by the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

⁹² The irony of such rhetoric being that even as U.S. feminists seized upon the image of the subservient Chinese woman with her bound feet as a metaphor for the hierarchical relations of men and women around the world, China was in fact undergoing a powerful feminist revolution, with reformers lobbying both for women’s enfranchisement and for “rejection of many traditional gender practices, from foot binding and sex slavery to educational restrictions and marriages arranged for money rather than love” (“A Revolution” 977). See also Elizabeth Croll, Feminism and Socialism in China, (Boston: Routledge, 1978); Louise Edwards, “Women’s Suffrage in China: Challenging Scholarly Conventions,” Pacific Historical Review 69.4 (2000): 617–38; Ono Kazuko, Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850–1950 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989).

⁹³ See also “The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese” and “Her Chinese Husband.”
The significance of a nation’s mythology in shaping its identity has been asserted by scholars in a variety of fields, from History and Sociology, to Literary and Cultural studies; in the field of Collective Memory studies, it is a generally accepted that there is a kind of cyclical exchange that happens between the sense of self originating from collective memory, and the collective memory which is itself shaped by present identity and events. Too, there is an interplay between the ways an individual understands him or herself in relation to the past, and the way a nation does likewise:

Memory is not simply the storage of past ‘facts,’ but the ongoing work of reconstructive imagination. …the truth of memory lies in the identity that it shapes. …It lies in the story, not as it happened, but as it lives on and unfolds in collective memory. If ‘We Are What We Remember,’ we are the stories that we are able to tell about ourselves. …The same concept of a narrative organization of memory and self-construction applies on the collective level. Here the stories are called ‘myths.’ They are the stories which a group, a society, or a culture lives by. (Assmann 211)

Eaton’s writings express her understanding of the ways that the mythology of American identity and the nativist assertions underlying America’s national and international politics—that the histories, values and cultures of “American” and racialized “others”94 are diametrically opposed and essential—are both founded upon and shaped by the stories “We, the People” tell about

94 Including, but not limited to Chinese immigrants.
ourselves. Eaton reports that when she was just eight years old, a particular teacher impressed upon her the idea that “the true fathers and mothers of the world were those who battled through great trials and hardships to leave the future generations noble and inspiring truths,” (“A Half-Chinese” 290). It is in this image of the ways “truths” told to others can shape realities that Eaton locates her desire to write her own “half-Chinese” book. At the same time, the question of what Eaton means exactly by “half-Chinese” stories is more complex than it first appears.

Critics have often viewed Eaton as a kind of imaginative “translator,” seeking to explain cultural differences and cultivate “understanding” between races in her storytelling. While I do not disagree that Eaton is, at times, engaged in acts of cross-cultural “translation,” I would argue that Eaton’s own understanding of the central purpose of her “half-Chinese” writings goes beyond translation. As Eaton muses upon the problem of racial prejudice in her semi-autobiographical work, “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian,” she states her belief that, in truth, “people are all the same”:

My mother’s race is as prejudiced as my father’s. Only when the whole world becomes as one family with human beings be able to see clearly and hear distinctly. I believe that some day a great part of the world will be Eurasian. I cheer myself with the thought that I am but a pioneer. A pioneer should glory in suffering. (“Leaves” 224)
This assessment is notable in its assertion that the solution to “prejudice” lies not in helping one
race understand the other, but rather, in the races, becoming, in some way, a part of one other.
Indeed, Eaton was well aware of the ways that cross-cultural “understanding” could be
appropriated by competitive logic: in “Leaves,” Eaton details her experiences in Jamaica,
“surrounded by a race of people, the reputed descendants of Ham, the son of Noah, whose
offspring, it was prophesied, should be the servants of the songs of Shem and Japheth.” She
notes that, as “a descendant, according to the Bible, of both Shem and Japeth, I have a perfect
right to set my heel upon the Ham people,” and explains how she is encouraged to solidify her
alignment with the white colonists by “following out the Bible suggestion” (225). In “The
Persecution and Oppression of Me,” by contrast, Eaton relays, through her white landlady, how
African Americans make use of the prejudice against the Chinese to assert their own place in the
racial hierarchy: “Do you know what that negro woman who cleans the house every Thursday
said to me? She said, ‘I wouldn’t be seen speaking to a Chinese’” (448).

Rather than accepting cross-racial alliances based upon excluding some other group from
the fold, or encouraging the idea of one race or culture assimilated into the other, Eaton puts
forth a vision of the world becoming “as one family,” by means of a Eurasian body—specifically,
her body—serving as a bridge between races: “I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my
left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant
‘connecting link’” (“Leaves” 230). The image is quite visceral—intimately tied to her personal
experience as a mixed-race body, and, indeed, biological manifestations of “Eurasianness” are,
quite often, what critics have focused upon in Eaton’s fictions; at the same time, however,
Eaton’s insistence upon her physical weaknesses—detailed both in “Leaves” and the *Globe* article—appears to be a deliberate effort to de-emphasis the physical body a vehicle for this connection. Thus, I argue, we would do better to view Eaton’s image of her multi-racial, linking body in conjunction with her notion of “planting a few Eurasian thoughts into Western literature” ("A Half-Chinese" 288)—that is, in textual and ideological terms which can take “Eurasianness” beyond mere biological manifestations. Eaton’s physical body may not be capable of “bridging” the divisions between people groups, but her stories, which embody and model her vision of personal hybridity and a multicultural “American family” can do this work.

Though Eaton’s domestic stories are known most commonly for their exploration of the obstacles to or pressures inherent in Americanization for Chinese or mixed-race characters (often with tragic effects\(^5\)), the stories that will be examined in this chapter, focus, in the main, upon white, female characters who interact with the racial “other” in the context of family life. By locating these interactions within this traditionally-female domain, Eaton, like Hopkins, asserts the significance of women “[as] individuals, not merely the daughters of their parents, the wives of their husbands” (Eaton qtd. in White-Parks, 294); however, while Hopkins’s domestic fictions privilege “public talk,” the stories examined in this chapter demonstrate Eaton’s belief that “private” action and discourse are valid, effective models of political agency and of collective memory re-invention, especially for women.\(^6\) Within the stories themselves, we certainly see

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\(^5\) See, for example, “The Wisdom of the New” or “Its Wavering Image” (*Mrs. Spring Fragrance*).

\(^6\) Unlike Hopkins, Eaton posited that women could indeed effect the public sphere and its discourses—including the realm of law—through discourse and other “renovating” work in the private realm. Mary Chapman has argued that Eaton’s views were influenced strongly by both a “Chinese version of the American Republican Mother, that is, the sentimental self-sacrificing mentor of the nation’s citizens” and the male journalist and leader of the Chinese Reform Party Liang Qi Chao (1873–1929), who “believed that popular domestic fiction could ‘redefine the social order’” (“A Revolution” 977-8).
how private talk reveals the fictive nature of commonly accepted “public facts”—including mutually exclusive racial, gendered and geographical “inheritances,” and identity-boundaries—and how private acts have very public effects. But even more than this, the white protagonists’ interactions with the racial “other” trouble racial and gender hierarchies by showcasing the unacknowledged hybridity and plasticity of white American identity—and of the national collective memory undergirding that identity—and thus, revealing the constructed nature of so-called “inherent” racial characteristics, and by demonstrating both white and Chinese female characters’ capacity to choose their own identities and relationships. In this way, Eaton not only shows racist and gendered expressions of American identity to be false oppositions, which can remain intact only so long as the juxtaposing (and equally false) construct of “the other” stands, but also records an new mythology of Americanness, multidirectional and egalitarian in nature, and with it, an alternate means of asserting American identity and “belonging” to the national family. This “alternate means,” as we shall see, is not premised upon birth or blood, or upon choosing between or amongst mutually exclusive racial or cultural identities; it is, instead, based upon the individual’s freedom to claim Americanness on his or her own terms—a circumstance which, as Eaton’s stories indicate, is made possible through recognition of the natural affinities between people, regardless of race or gender, and by the subsequent acknowledgement that a nation is a nation by “consent”: “the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life” (Renan 83).
II.

“The Success of a Mistake” (1908), was originally published in the Seattle monthly, *The Westerner*. The story, a reimagining of a non-fiction piece, “Brothels in Chinatown,” which Eaton wrote for the *Los Angeles Express* in 1903, tells the tale of a white newspaperwoman, Miss Lund, whose mistaken facts in her report of a Chinese betrothal lead to her play matchmaker to two Chinese characters. Miss Lund’s article reports that a Chinese mother has gone from Los Angeles to San Francisco to find a husband for her daughter; as it turns out, however, the mother was seeking a wife for her son, not a husband for her daughter. The repercussions of Miss Lund’s misreporting seem rather dire for the Chinese family, who are shamed by the implication that “something not right with the daughters if the Seattle Chinamen not want them” [sic] (273); as it turns out, however, Miss Lund’s mistake clears the way for the daughter to escape her arranged marriage and marry another man—the one she truly loves.

On its surface, “The Success” seems to cast Miss Lund and her interference in the lives of the Chinese characters in the light of benevolent imperialism. She is a precursor to Adah Raymond (“The Americanizing of Pau Tsu” and “The Wisdom of the New,” 1912), who encourages Chinese subjects to embrace American views and customs, including the freedom to marry for love, even as she trades on their exoticism for her news stories. But, as the title suggests, this story’s plot hinges upon a reversal of expectations, and upon the unfixing of the reader’s belief that the meanings of things—specifically, of identity and heritage—are both readily apparent and innate. In seeing how a “mistake” may become a “success,” this story presents us with a world in which both “facts” and “misconceptions” are subject to scrutiny.
This unfixing of meaning calls into question both the “essential” qualities of American culture and identity—which the reader would imagine to be embodied in the person of the white protagonist—and the supposed opposition of Chinese people and culture in relation to that identity. This is not to say that Eaton equates facts with mistakes. While Miss Lund’s central (though not sole) mistake proves key to the happy ending, that end does not negate the mistake itself. On the contrary, the text keeps this mistake, and others, before the reader’s eyes at all times as a reminder that meaning may be transformed, or new meaning created, without necessarily canceling out original meaning: both things may stand together, side by side. To “be American” in Eaton’s view, is not to deny one’s cultural heritage (what we might call one’s “original” meaning), but to recognize that heritage is not, ultimately, the sole determinant of one’s identity, nor are traditions mutually exclusive. In this sense, Eaton’s storytelling allows groups to maintain a sense of cultural integrity,\(^\text{97}\) while at the same time, arguing for cultural plasticity, specifically, the natural cultural reciprocity which occurs between groups’ collective memories and traditions in an interactive society. Such exchanges, which acknowledge that national identity is in fact “a matter of gradual growth and acquisition, not formal promulgation” (Shils 403), allow for modifications to cultural memory and identity. These, in turn, create opportunities for new, multidirectional approaches to the present and future: within the fictions themselves, between characters, and in the exchange of experiences between a text’s author, and its reader.

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\(^{97}\) This refers to what Halbwachs calls “a record of resemblances” (147, CMR) wherein a group focuses on its commonalities, without recognizing that what they have “in common” might be slowly “transformed” over time.
If the title does not, in and of itself, indicate that Eaton is out to challenge readers’ expectations, the introduction of the protagonist, Miss Lund, may serve the purpose. Eaton herself was a sometime news reporter, and like her protagonist, charged with reporting the affairs of Chinatown—a job that presupposes an exploitive relationship between the white, or in Eaton’s case, the Eurasian reporter and her subjects. “The Success of a Mistake” does not downplay that exploitive premise, but, while Miss Lund turns her critical, interpretive gaze upon the Chinese characters, the text, meanwhile, turns the reader’s critical, interpretive gaze upon Miss Lund, the presumed representative of Americanness. As a female reporter Miss Lund is, from the first, a potentially problematic representative of American culture and of national family mythology. While female reporting in the Progressive Era wasn’t an anomaly—scholarship on women’s journalism has established that the female reporter had achieved nearly archetypal status at turn-of-the-century\(^98\)—the newswoman’s presence in a male-dominated profession signals a fraught relationship with traditional gender roles. In this sense, Miss Lund’s professional identity can, in and of itself, be seen as a “border” phenomenon\(^99\)—an idea that is further exacerbated in “The Success” by the ways that her role as a representative of white American culture implies a “masculine” dominance in relationship to the “feminized” Chinese.\(^100\) To maintain this

\(^{98}\) See Lutes’s *Front Page Girls* (1-11 and 101–06), and Fahs (17-55). Neither of these studies of women’s journalism includes Eaton, who, as Lutes notes in “The Queer Newspaperwoman” appears to be missing entirely from scholarship on American newspaperwomen.

\(^{99}\) Lutes argues in her analysis of “The Success,” as a “queer” text, female journalists’ “professional roles blurred gender distinctions as least as frequently as they upheld them. Although their female identity often acted as the very foundation of the so-called woman’s angle they were charged to provide, that identity itself was far from fixed” (281).

\(^{100}\) The trope of figuring of an ethnic minority’s subservient relationship to the dominant culture/race in the discourse of gender, especially of the ethnic male as feminized in relation to the majority male, has been noted by critics in several fields of study.

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“dominant” role, Miss Lund, and, by extension, the reader, must then downplay her sex in favor of her identity as an American. Thus, from the start, Miss Lund is understood “properly” only through an act of selective interpretation which, arguably, reverses or disrupts her identity as a woman.

But even if we are not to go so far as to unsex Miss Lund, her “border” presence in “The Success of a Mistake” calls attention to the active forgetting and acts of reconstructive imagination that must take place in order for a coherent, fixed (rather than evolving) sense of white American identity to be maintained. As the story opens, Miss Lund has come to a Chinatown mission hoping to scrounge some news from her “friend,” Wah Lee. Eaton’s brisk description of the place finishes with the image of “an illuminated card on which was printed The Lord’s Prayer in Chinese characters” (270). This artifact serves as a set-up for the questions of selective appropriation, hybridization and interpretation—specifically, of who is allowed to appropriate or hybridize culture and to interpret meaning—which is emphasized as Wah begins his “report.” Although Wah admits that he has “something to tell,” he places the burden of interpretation upon Miss Lund: “perhaps you call it news” (270). Wah’s reluctance to claim the right to determine meaning may be read in a couple of ways; on the one hand, Wah’s remark implies a deference to Miss Lund’s perspective—her ability to discern and understand. At the same time, however, Eaton indicates that this understanding is only valid insofar as the reader accepts Miss Lund’s “right” to determine correct meaning. Though he offers Miss Lund the opportunity to define his knowledge as “news” or not, Wah also hints that determining meaning is both an active and subjective undertaking: “I think what I say” (270). In offering Miss Lund
the chance to define, Wah does not in fact place her definition in a superior position to another point of view, but rather, emphasizes the idea that meaning may be multiple, or may differ depending upon the point of view.

What Miss Lund sees in Wah’s story about Mrs. Wong and her children, Anna and Charlie, is Wah’s fascination with the beautiful Anna. But this “clarity” of vision on Miss Lund’s part is undercut, almost immediately, as Miss Lund takes the opportunity to plunge into the realm of cultural differences:

It is the first time I have heard a Chinaman acknowledge that he paid any attention to things feminine. I remember that when I called upon Tsing Leang soon after his wife came to America and inquired as to how she was, what she looked like, how old, if she dressed in American or Chinese clothes, and so forth, that his answer to each and every question was ‘I don’t know.’” (271).

Wah, however, refuses to support this attempt at defining Chinese men and, more broadly, establishing a boundary between white and Chinese cultures: “Perhaps you ask same question of American man, he says he not know, too” (271). Wah’s retort not only works to undercut Miss Lund’s claim, but, moreover, displays Wah’s own ability to “see” truths. While Miss Lund believes she is making an objective observation about the Chinese, Wah turns the critical eye back upon Miss Lund, highlighting the unspoken assumptions in her words: that she both understands and has a right to critique “Chinamen,” and that Chinese men are, in some intrinsic
way, different from white men. Miss Lund is clearly aware the critical gaze has shifted—“The reporter flushed” (271)—and takes steps to reestablish her claims of cultural distinction: “But you understand, Wah, that when we Americans ask questions of Chinese people that it is because we want you to enlighten us on subjects about which we are ignorant, and not with the intention of being rude” (271). In couching her right to ask such questions in her identity as an American, Miss Lund articulates a cultural hierarchy in which, as a white American, she may gaze freely upon the Chinese, invading their privacy for her readers’ consumption without in fact being “rude;” too, Miss Lund also reasserts the correctness of her interpretation, and with it, her right to determine meaning. The image accompanying the scene in the original text (figure 3) highlights this sense of Miss Lund’s power over Wah Lee, who appears both smaller and more feminized than the buttoned-up reporter, in his loose, flowered robe.
But again, the text works to disrupt Miss Lund’s position when she returns to Chinatown several weeks after publishing her story, this time to speak with Mrs. Wong. Mrs. Wong is described by Wah as a “very smart woman, all same American woman and Chinese woman too—and all same lawyer” (270). This description makes Mrs. Wong not only the most resistant of all the text’s characters to any kind of easy categorization, but also, it established that she, like Miss Lund, is a “border” figure: a woman employed in a male profession—and, stranger still, one which has been predicated upon the idea of Chinese exclusion from American citizenship.\footnote{See Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its various extensions.}

As the scene reveals, Mrs. Wong is also just as likely as Miss Lund to being blinded by prefigured assumptions. When Mrs. Wong meets Miss Lund, she assumes that Miss Lund is “connected with some missionary work” (271); too, she assumes that whoever wrote the incorrect report on her San Francisco trip was a man: “I say to my husband this morning, ‘Find me the man that wrote that most wicked lie and I pluck his heart out’” (273).

Eaton does not belie the import of Miss Lund’s mistake: Mrs. Wong’s definition of the article as having “ruined” not just one, but all of her daughters is not challenged in this moment, nor is her claim that “it is not the same to write that I go to get wife for son as to say I go for husband for daughter” (273). At the same time, by allowing Mrs. Wong to be “mistaken” about various particulars in connection with the news story at the same time as Miss Lund’s own mistake is being revealed, Eaton lends support to Mrs. Wong’s remark that “The Chinese people have same feelings as the American people, only the American people they not seem to understand that” (273). In the light of Miss Lund’s knowledge that both she and Mrs. Wong have
been wrong, the idea of the “sameness” between (white) Americans and the Chinese truly hits home for the reporter: as Miss Lund muses to herself, “If I had only made some enquiries of the Chinese mother as I would have of an American mother before sending in the article, this mightn’t have happened” (273). It is only by displacing her sense of shame onto Wah, that Miss Lund is, once again, able to re-distance herself, emotionally and otherwise, from the Chinese woman: “‘That wicked Wah to tell me such a story,’ she mentally exclaimed and promised herself that she would punish him” (273).

In shifting the blame for her mistake to Wah, Miss Lund not only reestablishes her former position of distance from, and superiority to the Chinese characters, with herself on the side of righteousness; she is also able to reinterpret the Wong family’s “ruin” as a joke, which she is eager to share with her friend, Miss Hastings: “the situation appealed to her sense of humor and she could scarcely repress an hysterical giggle when in answer to her rap at the Mission door, the Missionary, Miss Hastings, appeared” (273-4). Although Miss Hastings is initially “serious” (274) when Miss Lund describes what has happened, her bantering repurposing of a racially-charged epithet—“You heathen!” (274)—applied to and “ignored” (274) by Miss Lund, and her observation that Miss Lund’s “lying” article had “certainly driven away” the arranged fiancé Anna had “abhorred” (275), satirize the missionary’s claims not to “approve of anything like deception” (275). Nevertheless, the shift from drama in the scene with Mrs. Wong to laughter with Miss Hastings, could imply authorial support for Miss Lund’s reinterpretation of her mistake as unimportant—a move which would complicate the previous scene’s usefulness as a critique of nativist views of the Chinese as irremediably foreign. In the given context, the
epithet, “heathen,” which would seem to link Miss Lund with the Chinese men and women whose lives she has been disrupting, in fact reemphasizes the divide between Miss Lund—whose American identity is not in the least imperiled by the epithet—and men like Wah, for whom even the suspicion of falsehood is enough to “deprive” him of white “sympathy” (274). Likewise, the information about Anna, who is “happy as a bird” (275), allows Miss Lund to fully, albeit jokingly, remit any remaining guilt over the consequences of her article: “My conscience is quite relieved” (275).

An alternate reading of this scene can be found, however, by examining its overarching structure which, I argue, functions much like a classic joke. First, there is the set-up, in which Miss Lund and Miss Hastings analyze and pass judgement upon Wah. Both women are unabashed in their mutual understanding that though Wah may have left “his own country” with “no intention of returning there,” shown he is “able to make his little laundry yield him an independence,” and “embraced Christianity in all sincerity” (274), his Americanization is a facade. When Miss Hastings remarks that Wah “is such a good honest fellow,” Miss Lund replies that, “He has always appeared so to me” (274); but, this “appearance” will, ultimately, be negated by Wah’s race: “Would the embracing of Christianity interfere with a Chinaman’s other actions?” (274). The punchline comes, of course, when it is revealed that “Wah was all right” (276)—in short, that Miss Lund, not Wah, was the origin of the mistake, and indeed, that the “impossible” (275) is a fact. As is the the case with any joke, the punchline only works because it confounds the expectations established by the set-up. In this scene, both Miss Lund and the reader are confronted with, and thrown off balance by the “proof” (275) of Wah’s
rightness, found in Miss Lund’s own notebook, with the effect that the reader, like Miss Lund herself, must “beg [Wah’s] pardon” (276)—a move which calls into question the women’s “readings” of the Chinese presented in the set-up.

It is not coincidence that, in the end, Miss Lund has recorded the facts of her story correctly in her private notebook, but not in public sphere: “‘I told you that what you wrote in your book,’ assented the Chinaman, ‘but not what you wrote in the paper’” (275). Taken within the larger context of Eaton’s storytelling, Miss Lund’s actions speak to the nation’s exclusion of the Chinese based upon questionable readings of the facts—among them, stereotypes about the deviant Chinese sexuality prevalent in male-dominated Chinese communities. When Miss Lund accuses him of lying, Wah remarks, “If you say I am a bad Chinaman, Miss Lund, then a bad Chinaman I be, but I not tell you any stories that not be true” (275). Wah insists Miss Lund’s definition of a “bad Chinaman” does not apply because he never lied to her, but, at the same time, he admits that he cannot control what she calls him. The nation, Eaton indicates, has approached Chinese immigrants along the same lines as Miss Lund has Wah: displaying the arbitrary nature of its “sympathy” (274), and of the means by which it chooses to ignore or mistake the fact that the Chinese have embraced America’s culture—and perhaps more important still, its spirit—and have, thus, ceased to be “sojourners.”

But even as Eaton critiques America’s “emotional” attitude toward the Chinese, “The Success” complicates the simple analogy that emotion lies while facts speak plainly. As Jean Lutes has argued, it’s possible to read Miss Lund’s “mistaken” news story as true if we recognize

102 US immigration policies prevented most Chinese men from bringing their wives to America; moreover, strict miscegenation laws discouraged interracial relations with non-Chinese women. Thus, as Lutes has noted, Miss Lund’s question to Miss Hastings, “Why doesn’t [Wah] get married?” (274) is a highly charged inquiry.
that Miss Lund has, perhaps, seen and subconsciously internalized Wah’s fascination with Anna, and that it is this “emotional” insight which causes her to make Anna, rather than her brother Charlie, the subject of her report. Indeed, in several key instances in the story, emotion does not result in blindness to fact, but in insight into hidden truths, not about the differences between races, but in their common ground. Although Miss Lund works hard to maintain her distinction from and dominance over the Chinese characters with whom she interacts, the text indicates that, in spite of these efforts, these interactions have given Miss Lund the opportunity to see alternate perspectives—a fact which becomes increasingly clear once her “mistake” is revealed to be the result of her own faulty record-making. Miss Lund’s talk with Anna Wong—the accidental subject of the reporter’s story—which immediately follows Wah’s “redemption,” continues to build upon this idea: that alternate truths and perspectives can trump what is defined as “fact” by white Americans like Miss Lund. In fact, by the time she actually interacts with Anna, personally, it appears as if Miss Lund has abandoned at least one “fact” she has maintained thus far in the text: though she maintains a condescending tone—calling Anna a “little girl” (276)—and expresses surprise that Anna “think[s] differently” (276) than her parents about male-female friendships, it becomes clear that Miss Lund has, perhaps subconsciously, dropped race as the signifier of identity, choosing instead to define Anna based on other factors.

Anna is a much more fluent English speaker than Wah—a fact which Miss Lund herself notes: “Wah Lee is a clever boy, but he does not speak as well you do” (276). Moreover, as Anna herself remarks, “When a Chinese girl is born in America and learns in an American school, how can be the same as a Chinese girl who is born and brought up in China?” [sic] (276). Miss Lund
seems quite willing, if not eager to accept these things—language and birth—as the defining markers of American identity, even going so far as to call Anna “an American girl” (277). But while reinterpreting Americanness in terms of factors other than race allows Miss Lund to include Anna in the American “family,” she is, nevertheless, reasserting that it is she, not the Chinese girl, who has the right to define or redefine that identity—a view which Anna, like Wah and Mrs. Wong, actively resists. When Miss Lund attempts to differentiate between Anna and Wah based upon their English fluency, Anna challenges her claim that language is a useful indicator of Americanization: “[Wah] has had to work all day while I have been at school” (276). By reminding Miss Lund, and by extension, the reader, that Wah has the “American” quality of industriousness, Anna offers her own, more inclusive definition of what makes an American. Wah’s material contributions to the nation are, Anna indicates, as much, if not more important to claiming American identity than the capability to speak English fluently. Curiously, however, Anna follows this alternate definition of what makes an American with a claim which appears to negate the radicalness of her argument: when Miss Lund refers to Anna as “an American girl,” Anna retorts, “No, I am Chinese and so is Wah Lee” (277).

Anna’s insistence upon identifying herself as “Chinese,” even in the context of refusing to grant white America the power to define her, is a circumstance which requires careful consideration. On the one hand, it could be read as a moment of reassurance to white readers that, in spite of Miss Lund’s sudden willingness to accept a Chinese American character as simply American, the status quo of competitive collective memory and identity are not in fact being challenged. But to read this moment in that light is to miss the more drastic challenge
inherent in Anna’s denial, namely, Miss Lund’s implication that assimilation is the key to “belonging.” By claiming to be “Chinese” and yet, at the same time, pointedly differentiating herself from “a Chinese girl who is born and brought up in China” Anna asserts her right to a multicultural identity—“I am Anna Wong. That is my American name. My Chinese name is Mai Gwi Far, which means a rose” (276)—while at the same time emphasizing that it is America, not China, that she calls home: “the fear of my life [is] that my parents would marry me to some Chinaman who would take me away from America. This is the country in which I was born. I know no other” (278). Anna’s refusal to let go of her Chinese identity can also be seen as a refusal to ignore the fact that, historically, America has, by law and custom, framed the Chinese as “unassimilable.” Despite the fact that Miss Hastings and Miss Lund have, in the previous scene, derided the “Chinese…idea of caste” (274), Anna is well aware that America has a caste system as well. Anna may be a class “above” Wah by virtue of her schooling, but, as Miss Lund herself indicates when she brushes aside Anna’s objection that her parents “would not approve of my marrying a man who is a slave in China” (277), all the schooling in the world won’t prevent Anna and Wah from occupying the same racial caste in the white American mind. Anna’s choice to embrace this racial classification may, thus, be seen less as a negative form of double consciousness than as a rejection of assimilation as a viable (or desirable) mode for Chinese Americans in the face of white American racism. Instead of assimilation into white American identity, Anna advocates a selective appropriation of American culture and identity, and, by extension, a reinterpretation of Americanness itself to encompass multiple subjectivities—an action which is represented in her own translation of her Chinese name, “Mai Gwi Far,” into the
English word, “rose,” which is distinct from her American name, “Anna,” which, in turn, means “grace.”

Although Anna’s reimagining of the meaning of Americanness appears to interest Miss Lund only insofar as it is relevant to the marriage plot she is hatching, the ideas of transference, appropriation and multiplicity of meaning are key to understanding the story’s denouement. By the time Miss Lund meets Anna, Wah’s love for Anna has already led Miss Lund to replace Charlie with Anna at the center of her news story. In the scene with Miss Hastings, Miss Lund goes a step further, expressing a conscious desire “to meet this little Anna” (275) and see for herself “the red vine leaf mouth, the long black eyes and pretty form Wah Lee had so admirably described” (277). In these earlier scenes, the implied transference of Wah’s desire for Anna to Miss Lund frees Anna from the limits of racial categories, and instead, offers a universal basis for her appeal: Anna’s beauty is something that can be admired by both the white woman and the Chinese man. In her actual interaction with Anna, however, the fact that Miss Lund has, seemingly, “inherited” Wah’s desire takes on further shades of meaning. Although she approaches Anna with an imperialist, assimilationist view, in the end, Miss Lund is not simply a white woman attempting to challenge the Chinese practice of arranged marriage by advocating that Anna marry for love; instead, Miss Lund finds herself engaged in the very “Chinese” act of matchmaking. Although, in her 1903 article, “Brothels in Chinatown,” Eaton emphasized the old-fashioned, un-American quality of arranged marriage\(^\text{103}\) in this interaction between Anna and Miss Lund, Eaton turns the tables on the white American reader. When Miss Lund allows Anna

\(^\text{103}\) “The Chinese firmly believe that heaven decides who are to be husband and wife, which is one reason why the parties most concerned have little, if anything to say, concerning the event, and why it is left so much in the hands of the fortune tellers and go-betweens” (“Brothels” 201).
to be mistaken about what Wah did, or rather didn’t do, in order to make certain that Anna would
“reveal her love” (278), the reader can see, as Miss Lund cannot, that even as she is advocating
the American ideal of “marriage for love” Miss Lund is, ironically, doing everything in her
power to arrange a marriage. In this sense she is not only appropriating a Chinese custom and
reinterpreting it for American use, she is also appropriating Mrs. Wong’s role in her daughter’s
life, and thus, arguably, placing herself within the Chinese “family” even as she is trying to make
Anna into an American “daughter.”

The idea that Miss Lund is not only engaging in a traditional Chinese practice, but also,
adopting a “Chinese” identity, can be argued further if we consider the other role Miss Lund is
taking on in her scene with Anna: that of the Chinese lover. If we pay close attention to the
language and structure of this scene, it’s clear that Miss Lund ceases to “channel” Wah’s feelings,
and begins to channel Wah himself, wooing Anna in his stead. The scene employs classic
courting tropes: the lover (Miss Lund) pleads with the beloved (Anna) using both emotion
—“From what Wah Lee has said to me I am sure that he cares for you” (277)—and logic:

“…you have always lived in this country and can have no wish to live in China. …If
you marry Wah Lee, you can stay here always, for he tells me he will never return to
China.”

“But my parents!”

“No matter what they have said, I do not think they will object to Wah Lee now. Have
you not just now told me that their great fear is that no man will take you from them.”
“Ah, yes.”

“Naturally then they will be very glad if Wah Lee makes an offer. And when you are safely married other Chinamen will come forward for your sisters. You will help your family by becoming Wah Lee’s wife.” (277-8)

In taking on Wah’s role, Miss Lund’s status as a “border” figure once again comes to the fore, as the text flirts openly with both the possible transgression of heteronormativity (perhaps it is Miss Lund, not Wah who more closely fits the stereotype of “deviant” sexuality) and with an unfixing of racial boundaries.

Just as the hybridity of both Miss Lund and Anna’s racial and cultural identities are revealed over the course of their interaction with one another, the questions of objective truth and right of interpretation once again come under fire in the story’s final scene: a conversation between Miss Lund and Miss Hastings. Miss Lund’s choice to allow “another mistake”(277) in the service of “All’s well that ends well” (279) is criticized, jokingly, by Miss Hastings as “wicked” (278). While it’s clear neither woman has renounced her stance of moral and cultural superiority, the fact that neither of the two women take Miss Hastings’s criticism seriously encourages the view that a shift in narrative perspective has occurred from the story’s beginning. Where once it was taken for granted that the “record,” as created by Miss Lund, distinguished the possible from the “impossible” (275), the record has proven to be open to mistakes. And while both Miss Lund’s and Anna’s “mistakes” persist until the story’s end, the underlying “truth” of Anna and Wah’s love has changed the meaning of those mistakes. It is because of this
reinterpretation, that the story’s final lines may also be read as something other than a straightforward reassertion of white American cultural condescension.

Miss Lund’s determination to bring about a “romantic” end for Wah and Anna, even if it means “another mistake” (277)—this time, Anna’s belief that Wah deliberately told Miss Lund incorrect information to “save” her from her arranged marriage—is, arguably, just another manifestation of her “benevolent imperialism.” By telling herself (and Miss Hastings) that, without this second mistake, the marriage would never have come to pass, Miss Lund reassures herself, and the reader, that the ends of white American intervention into Chinese lives justify the means: “Wah would never have dared to reveal what he felt had he not received some encouragement. As to Anna—how could I rob her of the proof to her of her lover’s love?” (278-9). Further still, the story’s final lines appear to satirize the Chinese characters, who are blissfully unaware that their lives have been manipulated by their friend: “Even as she said this, Wah Lee and Mai Gwi Far were telling one another that their coming together had surely been ordained by Heaven” (279). But again, the text invites the reader to question such pat conclusions. While it is undeniable that Miss Lund played a significant role in bringing Anna and Wah together, the degree of control which Miss Lund has wielded is questionable, and her actions bear the imprint of Chinese influence. Her mistaken report was not the result of her cunning; it was either purely accidental (Heaven perhaps?), or it was the result of Wah’s ability to transfer his desire, and of Miss Lund’s own plasticity, which enabled its receipt. Likewise, Miss Lund’s direction of Anna toward Wah would not have been possible had Miss Lund not adopted the Chinese role of matchmaker/ lover, or if Anna not been both Chinese enough to
accept her matchmaking and, simultaneously, enough of an “American girl” to “reveal her love”
to the Wah “before he had spoken himself” (278). The “truth” of how Anna and Wah’s marriage
comes about is, thus, revealed to be a decidedly multidirectional entity: the result of shared
desire, of cross-cultural hybridization, and of the reinterpretation of American cultural
mythology.

III.

If, in “The Success of a Mistake,” Eaton aims to dislodge the white American sense of
racial, moral superiority while, at the same time, also disrupting assumptions about what makes
an individual a part of the American family, in “Pat and Pan,” we see something similar occur as
Eaton juxtaposes the innocent love between Pat and Pan with Anna Harrison’s “persistent
ambition” (162) to Americanize Pat. Though, ostensibly, a children’s story, the eventual
publication of “Pat and Pan” alongside “Mrs. Spring Fragrance” suggests an adult readership as
well, and, perhaps, a deliberate attempt on Eaton’s part to show, through “the mind of the child,
with its less rigid racial categorizations and hierarchies…how adult readers might reconfigure
their own limited racial, cultural and sexual ‘identity’” (Cutter, “Empire” 32). Anna is not a
“border” figure like Miss Lund, nevertheless, her interference in the lives of a Chinese family
serves to highlight the hybrid identity of another white American—in this case, the white male
child, Pat, “given up as a babe” (164) to Mr. and Mrs. Lum Yook. Moreover, Anna’s decision to

104 Published as a part of a collection "Tales of Chinese Children."
reincorporate Pat into the American (white) national family by separating him from his Chinese parents and sister challenges the notion that identity stems from birth, blood, or essential cultural “inherence,” and indicates instead that one’s sense of self is in fact an ongoing “process of interpretation that…takes place within particular social surroundings” (Zerubavel 222). To this end, the story depicts two distinct versions of family: one, the embodiment of essentialist, competitive logic, and another, the expression of multidirectionality, understood as, and through cross-cultural bonds of love. In presenting these two versions of family, Eaton continues the conversation about the purpose and meaning of family and home begun in “The Success”, and allows the reader—adult and child alike—to consider which “family” seems more natural, and to which they would rather belong.

As with “The Success,” “Pat and Pan” begins with the imposition of a white woman, Anna Harrison, into a Chinese family’s life. We can, perhaps, see echoes of Miss Lund’s friend, Miss Hastings, in Anna, the “Mission woman” (160) who takes it upon herself to “rescue” the white boy, Pat, from his Chinese family and ensure that he is “raise[d]…as an American boy should be raised” (164). When Anna first sees Pat and his sister Pan “sound asleep in each other’s arms” (169) she is, we see, deeply concerned for Pat, who she views as being caught between two competing identities—his racial identity, which she defines as American, and his cultural identity, which is Chinese: “For a white boy to grow up as a Chinese was unthinkable” (161). While Anna’s claim recognizes that there is, indeed, a risk that a white boy could “grow up as a Chinese,” at the same time, her presumption of moral superiority and of her right to interfere in Pat’s life is premised upon racial and cultural boundaries between white
“Americans” and the Chinese—a truth expressed most forcefully in Anna’s recognition that Pat cannot, in her words, “speak his mother tongue” (161). Anna’s insistence upon English as Pat’s “mother tongue,” in spite of his inability to speak a word of it, points to her clear-cut view of Pat’s racially-preordained Americanness, which stands in tension with the lichi man’s identification of “a sleek-headed, kindly-faced matron in dark blue pantalettes and tunic, wearing double hooped gold earrings” (161) as Pat’s “mother.” Too, it assigns the same sorts of connotations to English which Miss Lund applied to her analysis of Mai and Wah’s respective “Americanness,” based on their language fluency.

As with “The Success,” the schoolhouse/mission house becomes a locus point for Eaton’s challenge to the race-based underpinnings of Anna’s beliefs about identity. As Anna quickly discovers, it is Pan, not Pat who is most easily able to “learn” Americanness (as defined by mastery of language): “In a year's time, although her talk was more broken and babyish, she had a better English vocabulary than had Pat. Moreover, she could sing hymns and recite verses in a high, shrill voice; whereas Pat, though he tried hard enough, poor little fellow, was unable to memorize even a sentence” (162). Pat’s resistance to Anna’s lessons becomes evident as he stays away from school in order to display his skill at tops—described as a “Chinese feat” (163)—and interferes in Anna’s punishment of Pan for lying to cover for her brother’s absence: “Pat bounded from his seat, pushed Pan aside, and shaking his little fist in the teacher's face, dared her in a voice hoarse with passion: ‘You hurt my Pan again! You hurt my Pan again!’” (163). The significance of Pat’s defense of Pan is left open to the reader’s interpretation: on the one hand, it expresses one of the arguments for U.S. imperialism in China, specifically, the notion that it is
benevolent: a strong nation “protecting” a weaker one. On the other hand, Pat (a white boy) is interfering with another white person’s enforcement of Chinese obedience, and thus, this moment may in fact be read as a critique of imperialist logic which dictates Pan must suffer for Pat’s sins, and as a model for resistance against such policies. As Pat shows the reader, white Americans can (and maybe should) stand up for the Chinese, who are being oppressed. Ultimately, however, the confusion over Pat’s role as imperialist/anti-imperialist reflects a natural hybridity of identity, which sparks a realization in Anna’s mind: that Pat must be physically removed from Pan, and the rest of his Chinese family, if his Americanness is to be made complete.

In the second half of Pat and Pan, we see this separation played out, and with it, the recognition that Pat’s status as an American is founded not only upon his “learning” American culture and language, but also upon his capacity to internalize American racist beliefs, represented by Pat’s rejection of “his” Pan. The narrative description of Pat’s separation from his Chinese family dwells upon both the unnaturalness and the tragedy inherent in the race-based division:

To the comfortably off American and wife who were to have the boy and “raise him as an American boy should be raised,” they yielded him without protest. But deep in their hearts was the sense of injustice and outraged love. If it had not been for their pity for the unfortunate white girl, their care and affection for her helpless offspring, there would have been no white boy for others to “raise.” (164)
Pat’s own assertions that he “is Chinese too!” (164), which may be read as an attempt, once again, to assert a hybrid identity in spite of his non-Eurasian body, are ignored, and Pat is “driven away” (164).

Presented to the reader through a series of interactions between Pat and Pan, now living apart, the denouement of the story reveals the final steps that Pat must take in order to learn to be American. The first step, in his own words, is to learn “lots of things” that Pan does not “know anything about” (165). The vagueness of this statement allows the reader to fill in the blanks of what exactly those “things” might be, but Pat’s attitude speaks to the myth of American identity as being, in some semi-mystical manner, unavailable to those of Chinese descent. Americanness, Pat has found, consists of more than learning English and Christian values—things which Pan has proven can cross racial lines. Pan’s reaction to Pat’s changing allegiances is notable in that it locates the change in Pat’s having “forgot to remember” (165) their mutual past; Pan’s assertion that it is this “forgetting” more than Pat’s new knowledge which is driving them apart implies a choice on Pat’s part to substitute one past—their past together—with another past rooted in the competitive view of American identity and tradition, predicated upon drawing lines between races and cultures. While the reader will understand that Pat is a victim—that this “choice” is being pressed upon him—the text, nevertheless, emphasizes, through Pan, that Pat’s new view of identity is reliant upon the deliberate dissolution of what would otherwise be naturally-occurring affinities and familial ties amongst all those who choose to embrace America as “home.”

This recognition makes Pat’s ultimate, public rejection of Pan, and her sorrowful analysis, “Poor Pat!…He Chinese no more; he Chinese no more!” (166) all the more tragic.
Pan’s final words are not only an acknowledgement that she and Pat are no longer family, they are also an assessment of what Pat has lost in his “adoption” into Anna’s competitive conceptualization of the American national family. Clearly, Pan feels that Pat, for all his newfound sense of superiority, is to be pitied: “Poor Pat!” By cutting himself off from Pan, Pat has also cut himself off from the joy and love which the text locates in the actions and attitudes of the Chinese family, represented by Pan—the girl who “instead of putting [treats] into her own mouth” (161) put them into Pat’s, and thus, offered another, more inclusive and affectionate image of family.

IV.

“The Alaska Widow,” written by “Edith Eaton” (rather than Sui Sin Far), is, like “Pat and Pan,” a story that denaturalizes systemized identity-boundaries by placing them in juxtaposition with cross-racial affinities—though, unlike “Pat and Pan,” in an international context. The story, first published in the April 1909 issue of New York’s *Bohemian* magazine is, as Mary Chapman notes, unusual in a number of ways: it features no Chinese or Chinese-American characters; it explores not one, but two scandalous features: divorce and mixed-race eroticism; and it refers openly to American colonialism in two key locales far from Chinatown: the unofficial US territory of Alaska during a late nineteenth-century gold rush and the Philippines during the period of military occupation following the Philippine-American War (1899-1902). Like Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*, “The Alaska Widow” is a story of love (nearly) thwarted by
secrets and rumors: although Howard Crathern loves the beautiful stenographer, Nora Leslie—“she with the slender white hands” (164)—when another stenographer tells him that Nora is an “Alaska widow,” who divorced her gold-miner husband, Frank Beale, the day after their wedding, the news shakes Crathern’s faith in his love. After verifying the stenographer’s story with the official court record, Crathern makes the choice to leave Seattle (and Nora) and take a government position in the Philippines. Seven years later, Crathern, now Governor of Luzon, hears another version of Nora’s history from his friend, Captain Lorimer, who hears it from a dying soldier who, as it happens, is Nora’s Frank Beale. Beale’s relation of the events surrounding his divorce, which Lorimer describes as a “message of confession” to the woman “who married, but refused to live with him, and sent him away to another woman on their wedding day” (166), reframes the facts of Nora’s separation from her husband, substantially:

The ceremony was completed, when in walked an Indian girl with an infant in her arms. She considered herself [Beale’s] wife, having been given to him, at his request, by her dying father. The outcome was that Nora refused to live with Beale; but she made no fuss, simply stated what she would do and what she would not do and requested Beale to marry the young Indian, who was a handsome girl in her way, and most embarrassingly faithful to the faithless (166-7).

Though Beale, “confounded and ashamed” (167), returns to Alaska with the Indian woman, he never does uphold his promise to Nora to marry her. Crathern, himself ashamed of his
misjudgment of Nora, returns to Washington to find her and apologize. In the end, she forgives him, and they marry.

The concept of an “Alaska Widow” did not, of course, originate with Eaton, and it is interesting to consider how these “widows” were framed by other texts. One unsigned editorial titled, “Who is the Alaska Widow?” appeared in the Dawson Daily News in 1906—a reprint from the Seattle Sunday Times. 105 That piece provides a portrait of the “Alaska Widow” which, like the figure of the female reporter depicted in “The Success,” simultaneously confronts and contains her potential as a disruptive figure in society. Like the newspaperwoman, the Alaska Widow is a “New Woman” figure, who occupies a “border” identity in society: she is “real and a widow, but not both.” She is “happy…[but] dares not be too happy or people will talk about her.” Finally, and most distressingly, though she does not venture to Alaska itself—which is “no place for a woman anyhow” she does not “sit [at home] and wait” for her wandering husband to return, but “oftener she automobiles while waiting” (7). This portrait of married womanhood does not fit the classic image of the keeper of the hearth and home, but she does, notably, fulfill her role in the family as the focal point of her husband’s conspicuous consumption106:

“Is she proud…of such a husband?”

105 While there’s no way of knowing if Eaton saw the original piece, she was living, on and off, in Seattle in 1906.

106 As defined by Thorstein Veblen, the term refers to consumers who buy expensive items to demonstrate one’s wealth and social status rather than to cover real needs; more specifically, “the wife, who was at the outset the drudge and chattel of the man, both in fact and in theory--the producer of goods for him to consume--has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory; for the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the unfree servant” (The Theory of the Leisure Class).
“Yes, but only about half way, until he shows her the furs he has brought her, and the Indian baskets for the cosy corner.”

“Then is she glad?”

“Then she is full of joy, for they are handsomer than any that the other women have.”

Another work, the 1912 poem by Alice Harriman, “An Alaska Widow,” frames her, similarly, as a woman balancing “the wealth [her husband] would bestow” with the “gibes and sneers” she must endure (11).

Turning from these pieces to Eaton’s story, it’s curious to see how Eaton makes use of the imperialistic elements inherent in the public image of the Alaska Widow, while, at the same time, viewing this insider-outsider figure in ways parallel to that of the Chinese immigrant: as a negative object of cultural mythology against which the American identity can be articulated by nativist, and gendered discourses. While in “The Alaska Widow” Eaton is less concerned than in “The Success of a Mistake” with dismantling specific negative stereotypes, and by extension, American racism, she is, nevertheless, similarly invested in revealing the ways “public truths” about people and cultures—racialized and gendered mythologies, which encourage production of stereotypes—form in the first place. Specifically, “The Alaska Widow” charts the process by which “private” stories shape and are shaped by commonly accepted “public” truths, which, in turn, foster competitive, exclusionary modes of understanding at the expense of human empathy. Like “The Success of a Mistake,” “The Alaska Widow” hinges, in many ways, upon a central misunderstanding founded upon misinformation made official in some manner (the newspaper cxviii
story, the court record). The story’s happy, if somewhat bittersweet outcome is, likewise, the result of a series of complex rhetorical maneuvers in which the affinities between Nora and the Native Alaskan woman illustrate contradictions inherent in the nation’s investment in maintaining and naturalizing binary oppositions between the American and “the other”—a project with both racial and gendered connotations.

In “The Alaska Widow,” as with “The Success of a Mistake,” the key to denaturalizing racial and gendered oppositions and hierarchies lies in the recognition of the validity of alternate interpretations of “the facts,” including the meaning of Nora’s “widowhood.” The forces at work upon Nora in the text appear, at first, to be external—a form of border-keeping by both male and female characters. Nora, as a divorcee, is placed in a potentially disruptive role in male-dominated society; at the same time, however, as with Hopkins’s Sappho Clark, sexual double standards prevent Nora from exercising full control over her own identity, and thus, that disruptive power is “contained.” The rival stenographer who informs Crathern that Nora is an “Alaska widow” is careful to frame Nora’s title as a “Miss” as a polite fiction which “does not prevent her from being…a woman, whose husband, instead of being dead, is in Alaska” (165). The girl’s decision to place Nora’s identity in the context of her former husband is necessary for her insinuation that Nora’s divorce was a result of her infidelity to Beale during their engagement: “Men are terribly jealous…. He was away a year. And—Oh there isn’t a word that can be said against Nora Leslie, I’m sure” (165). At the same time, it’s significant that this framing of Nora also denies her any identity outside of her former husband: to be “Miss Leslie” is to also be an “Alaska widow”. Her personhood is, effectively, swallowed by the signifier—a
circumstance which continues even once Nora leaves the city to become a school-teacher: as one local argues, “There’s widows and widows” [my emphasis] (168).

Placed together with Nora’s role as a stenographer at the law firm where she and Crathern work, the import of the rival stenographer’s framing of Nora’s “widowhood” provides the set-up for both Crathern and the reader’s view of Nora—specifically, her subjectivity to the “judgements of men” (170), and the ways that those judgements can curtail her, and her ex-husband’s Native Alaskan “wife’s” freedom and happiness. Mary Chapman has argued that both Nora and the Native Alaskan woman (who remains nameless) are “virtually silent” characters, who “articulate their positions and emotions primarily through their performative bodies” (159). This is an accurate assessment in many ways. Like Pauline Hopkins, Eaton was acutely aware of the negative ramifications of gender hierarchies in America. These hierarchies, which often resulted in the discounting of women’s experiences, or, at the very least, their right to interpret those experiences, meant that gendered subjects were denied control of the stories told about themselves, and were, thus, forced to live within socio-cultural paradigms they had little agency in helping to create. Though Nora is able to return Beale to his native “wife” at the crucial moment, this is the only power she has at her disposal: less a right to act than to resist, and one which destabilizes her own social position in white, patriarchal American society, and by extension, her own capacity to control her narrative. In this sense, both Nora and the Alaskan woman share a “space of noncitizenship” (Chapman 159) which parallels the exploitative, hegemonic nature of U.S. nationalism and imperialism.

107 I speak in the plural here in recognition of the fact that beyond the male-female binary, there were hierarchies within genders: as stated in the introductory section of this chapter, Eaton both recognized and reviled in-gender divisions on the basis of class and race.
At the same time as Nora’s lack of proactive agency can be read as imperialistic, patriarchal oppression, the revelation of Nora’s act of resistance on her wedding day proves, upon close examination, to be problematic to those self-same exclusionary external forces at work in the first part of the story. Indeed, the significance of the ways that Eaton derives parallels between Nora and the Alaskan woman extends beyond critique of how they are both silent, passive, “non-wife wives.” Nora and the Alaskan woman’s mutual acts of resistance against their silencing dramatize a national dilemma in which the law, aimed at protecting America against the incursion of “the other,” finds itself in tension with what Pan has called “the globalizing drive of a capitalism-without-borders at the beginning of the American century” (91). While turn-of-the-century global capitalism was framed as an exchange between trading partners (particularly between China and the U.S.), fundamentally, this “exchange” was viewed by the U.S. as a matter of “exporting excess production and a socio-cultural program to maximize American influence over the region” (Pan 96) while, at the same time, strictly limiting what was imported to America, particularly when those imports took the form of a “foreign” body or culture. In the wedding scene of “The Alaska Widow,” the consequences of imperialism, which would normally be depicted as working outward—the adventurous white male going abroad to exploit foreign resources (including women)—are curiously inverted: the foreign “resource,” follows the American adventurer home, and thereby disrupts the foreign/native binary: “[The Alaskan woman] had come down on the same steamer with Beale, but unbeknown to him” (166).

The Alaskan woman appears at the wedding with a permanent sign of her connection with Beale: their mixed-race baby; as Lorimer explains, “She considered herself his wife” (166).
The mixed-race child in this story is unusual in Eaton’s oeuvre. Unlike “It’s Wavering Image” or Eaton’s “Leaves,” both of which dramatize the forces at work upon the mixed-race subject to “choose” to identify as white, or as a member of the racial group, the significance of the presence of the mixed-race baby in “The Alaska Widow” is not as obvious. The child is framed by Beale, during his deathbed confession, as somehow important to understanding his story: Beale gives Lorimer a picture of the child to give to Nora, stating “Perhaps it will help to make it plain” (116). But how or why the picture would make anything “plain” is not, initially, clear. The child, like his mother, remains a silent presence. He vanishes after the climactic wedding scene, and is not mentioned again in the story. By locating the child in the midst of the wedding scene, which falls in the exact middle of the story, however, Eaton indicates he does play a central role in the drama and is, perhaps, the key to understanding the complexity of Nora’s, and indeed, Eaton’s identification with, and critique of U.S. imperialism abroad, and exclusionary nationalism at home.

While we can, by and large, read Nora and Eaton as resistant to imperialism and to the exploitation of native peoples that results from its agenda, we cannot ignore the fact that Eaton herself was a “product” of British influence in China: “My father, who was educated in England…was established in business…at the Port of Shanghai, China. There he met my mother, a Chinese young girl, who had been educated in England, and who was in training for a missionary” (“The Half Chinese Writer 288). As for Nora, “The Alaska Widow” ends with her going to live in the Philippines as the wife of its governor, Crathern, implying her resistance to imperialism is not a blanket stance, but a refined one: resistant to exploitation and other effects of
racism, perhaps, but not to the spread of other American ideas and ideals to other parts of the world. Within the wedding scene itself, Nora appears to recognize the child both as living proof of Beale’s infidelity and as the extralegal validity of the woman’s claim to Beale—a view which stands in stark contrast with Beale himself, who, on his deathbed, seems to imply the child is in some manner the excuse for not marrying its mother. Nora’s recognition leads her to challenge traditional, legal definitions of marriage by appealing to a “higher authority” than the law: “Those whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder!” (167). Nora’s call to equity over law demands a recognition of the practical realities and hypocrisies of imperialism, embodied by the child, which have been ignored by both church and state; too, it displays the racially-based contradictions in a law which would call her Beale’s wife, but would consider his consummated relationship with the native woman a kind of fiction.

Nora’s use of the quotation from the Bible to prove her point indicates a synecdochical, symbolic relation between marriage—which is predicated upon both the “law of God” and the law of the land—and nation-building, and reveals how the seemingly straightforward idea of who is, and who is not “joined together” may in fact be open to interpretation and transcendence of the law. Too, while the text does not deny that Nora suffers as a result of Beale’s actions, and from the “judgements of men” (170) that follow her decision to divorce him, Nora’s choice to assert her independence from Beale—a move which may also by read as a bond of sympathy with the Alaskan woman and her plight—serves to de-naturalize hierarchies of racial superiority and gender. Indeed, Nora’s “reading” of the meaning of marriage as a “joining” that goes beyond, and indeed above the law, has the effect of placing the Alaskan woman’s claim as
Beale’s “wife” above that of the clergyman who argues “it was Nora’s duty to cling to the man whom he called her husband” [my emphasis] (167). In this way, Nora denies the racial and cultural binary between herself and the Alaskan woman, and, at the same time, places Beale in the position of the excluded “other,” who cannot remain in America, but must go “out into the wilds again” (167).

The effects of Nora’s repositioning of Beale through her alliance with the Alaskan woman appear to be mixed: on the one hand, “[Beale] continued kind, and cared for [the Alaskan woman] until life’s end” (167); on the other hand, he never does marry her, hence his need to “confess” to Nora that “he failed to keep that promise” (166). Beale’s failure to make his relationship with the Alaskan woman “legal,” which he appears, in his “confession” to link, in some manner, to the image of his child, may be read as a critique of those who would deny the reality of multiculturalism, or downplay the consequences of being excluded from the national family—as Julia Lee notes, the language used in conjunction with American identity at the turn-of-the-century had strong parallels to the vocabulary used to describe romantic relationships, but “loving America isn’t the same thing as belonging to it” (105). Such readings help to shed new light on the meaning of Captain Lorimer’s remarks that Beale’s failure to marry was mainly due to the wishes of the Alaskan woman who found “the white man’s legal formality… unnecessary”(167). This assertion, taken at face value, appears to validate racist assumptions about the native Alaskan woman as a person “beyond the pale of civilization” (167); taken in the broader context of the story, however, Lorimer’s assertion appears deeply problematic. First, as

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108 Arguably, Beale’s resistance to marrying the Alaskan woman is a last “defense” against acceptance of the reality of multiculturalism, as embodied in his child.

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the story as a whole suggests, the ability of white men to interpret the motives and meanings of women’s actions correctly is questionable. The Alaskan woman’s silence means that her motives can never be fully understood. Even if Lorimer is correct that it was the Alaskan woman who did not wish to marry, is just as arguable that her reasonswere rooted in either her rejection of the idea that marriage can serve as an adequate substitute for the full rights of American citizenship, or in her belief that, as Nora argued, the law is not what makes a marriage “real.” In the end, all of these readings are speculative. What the text does make clear, however, is that Beale’s final plea for forgiveness, which he ties, irrevocably, to the image of his child, is less a true apology for not marrying the Alaska woman, and more, like Lorimer’s remarks, an attempted excuse for not recognizing his relationship with the Alaskan woman as a “real” union with a shared outcome: the child. For Beale, such a recognition would mean the undoing of his own imperialist identity, which is predicated upon masculine dominance, and exploitation of the racial and cultural “other.”

Following Captain Lorimer’s revelation of the truth of Nora’s “widowhood,” Crathern embarks on his own journey to “beg forgiveness” (170) of Nora. In the interim between Crathern’s departure to the Philippines we find Nora has changed her work from stenography to teaching—a choice which cannot be overlooked when examining the last section of the text. Eaton herself was a stenographer, and while in later stories, such as “The Inferior Woman,” she would present stenographers as intelligent, articulate women, by Eaton’s own admission, to be a stenographer is to submit oneself to dictating the thoughts of others, rather than communicating one’s own vision of the world. In her biographical story for the Boston Globe, “Sui Sin Far, the
Half Chinese Writer Tells of Her Career” (1912), Eaton asserts that though working as stenographer “had its advantages” in terms of bringing her “into contact and communion with men of judgement and mental ability,” the work itself is “stultify[ing]” and “torturing to one whose mind must create its own images” (292). It is true that Nora is not explicitly described as a creative soul; nevertheless, the independence of spirit shown in the wedding scene, along with her capacity and willingness to reinterpret the meaning of Mark 10:9, reveal that Nora shares Eaton’s desire to articulate her own “image” of the world.

Nora’s full transformation from dictation to discourse is not accomplished, however, until the penultimate scene of the story. While she is vindicated via Lorimer’s recounting of Beale’s story, she is still at the mercy of the “clattering…tongues” (169) of public opinion. As Crathern rides the stagecoach toward Nora he experiences this “clattering” first-hand, as the local women discuss the perceived moral shortcomings of the various schoolteachers that have worked there, including Nora: “She’s the limit. The men folks are all on her side—and that’s not any too good a sign” (169). Though Crathern is quick to intercede in the conversation on Nora’s behalf, indicating the power of alternate narratives to challenge dominant ones, Nora herself recognizes that such “third-party” interventions are merely the lesser of two evils. While Nora thanks Crathern “not only for your kindness bringing me this message from—the dead, but also for the friendly feeling which prompted you to speak for me to the good wives on the stage” (169) she does not accept his explanation that he spoke because he could not “sit in silence and hear you unjustly condemned by those whose cruel judgments of the unfortunate of their own sex are proverbial” (170). Such an explanation, Nora recognizes, allows Crathern to ignore his own
responsibility for helping to shape such “judgements” (170) against her character, both in terms of his individual decision to desert her years ago, and, more broadly, in terms of the ways his rejection of her, based on rumors of sexual impropriety, is founded upon standards of virtue for women which men do not apply to themselves—as evidenced by Crathern and Lorimer’s acceptance of Beale’s sexual history as “The usual thing” (166).

Nora’s assertion that the “judgements” of the “good wives” simply reflect and are, indeed, less “cruel and unjust than the judgements of men” (170) not only emphasizes how those who speak from a position of dominant privilege have, in essence, a trickle-down effect upon society at large, but also critiques how claims to the authority of the “proverbial” may cover a multitude of sins. Much as the priest attempted to use the language of the marriage ceremony to supersede the reality of Beale’s Alaskan “wife,” those who would attempt to argue for the truth of a competitive view of American identity and tradition rely heavily upon a seemingly objective rhetoric—terms like “inferior” and “superior,” “ancient” and “modern”—which have, at their core, deeply racist and gendered beliefs. By refusing to allow Crathern to ignore his guilt, and likewise, disallowing his appeal to the “proverbial,” Nora insists upon the power of words to shape experience, particularly for persons deemed “inferior” by dominant discourses. In Nora’s case, a combination of rumor and record placed her “outside” of mainstream American life and into the confines of the stereotype of the “Alaska widow;” but here, at the end of the story, Nora once again reverses the roles. Crathern appears, in his own way, in the guise of the imperialist, but upon his arrival, Crathern finds Nora “unaccessible” (169). It is only once he has accepted
her rebuke and “beg[ged] forgiveness” (170)—positioning himself in the subservient position—that he can make her his wife.

V.

Unlike the other stories examined in this chapter, “The Inferior Woman” appears, on the surface of things, to not be concerned with race at all. The story, which is, like “The Success,” a matchmaking tale—albeit an inversion of that story’s structure, with a Chinese matchmaker for two white lovers—narrates Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s efforts to bring about the marriage of Alice and Will, who are kept apart by Will’s disapproving mother, Mrs. Carman. Like Mrs. Wong in “The Success of a Mistake,” Mrs. Carman looks down on the working class, and is eager for her child to wed the person of her choosing: the well-off, well-educated and socially-prominent Ethel. Alice refuses to marry Will without his mother’s approval, while Ethel, who is well aware of Will’s affections for Alice, declares herself uninterested in marriage at all—or at least not for a good ten years. Most analyses of “The Inferior Woman” pay close attention to Alice and Mrs. Spring Fragrance, but too often, Ethel is relegated to the sidelines, or set up as simply “the opposite of Alice.” Naturally, Alice is important: she allows for biting critique of exclusionary feminism, and indeed, of the nature of prejudice in any form—whether based in class or in race; too, Mrs. Spring Fragrance, the “interpreting” figure who claims to be writing a book about Americans for her Chinese friends, provides a unique opportunity for the reader, and

109 Of the titular story of Eaton’s collection, “Mrs. Spring Fragrance.”

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the white characters, to experience an inversion of “the gaze” that is normally directed at the racial other. Nevertheless, any reading of this story which does not pay close attention to Ethel misses something significant. Much as “Pat and Pan” ended with the dissolution of the nuclear family as a picture of the nation under the influence of racism, “The Inferior Woman” ends with a surprising announcement by Mrs. Spring Fragrance which, I argue, posits, yet another multidirectional image of the nation, and model for national belonging in the person of Ethel—the so-called “Superior Woman.”

The use of the terms, “Superior” and “Inferior,” are notable not only because of what they imply about how America’s middle-class elite\textsuperscript{110} truly views the working class—in spite of the mythological lionization of the man (or woman) who works his or her way up the social and economic ladder—but also because these monikers are given to Alice and Ethel by Mrs. Spring Fragrance. The fact that it is the racial figure who is establishing the category is unique, but the inference in this story remains the same as it did in “The Alaska Widow”: once a stereotype or representation has been established, it hardly matters about how well an individual conforms to it—he or she is subsumed in and by the representation. Alice herself gives a nod to this destructive, “all encompassing” capacity in her recognition that “prejudices…are like diseases” (46); for her part, Ethel declares the ideas of “Superior” and “Inferior” have become problematically inverted in the modern age:

\textsuperscript{110} The “reformers” of the Progressive Era were, by and large, educated, middle-class whites. This group did not, generally, wish to disrupt the social hierarchy wherein white native-born Americans were at the top and the poor along with the “darker-skinned” were at the bottom, but, as Eleanor Roosevelt noted, the middle class believed they had a “duty” to the less fortunate: “In that society you were kind to the poor, you did not neglect your philanthropic duties, you assisted the hospitals and did something for the needy” (4).
Women such as Alice Winthrop who, in spite of every drawback, have raised themselves to the level of those who have had every advantage, who are the pride and glory of America. There are thousands of them, all over this land: women who have been of service to others all their years and who graduated from the university of life with honor. Women such as I, who are called the Superior Women of America, are after all nothing but schoolgirls in comparison. ...her heart and mind are better developed. She has been out in the world all her life, I only a few months. (34-36)

By presenting the details of Alice’s “rise” through hard work and humility in conjunction with Ethel’s self-proclaimed lack of originality—“I have studied one hundred books on the subject and attended fifty lectures. All that was necessary was to repeat in an original manner what was not by any means original” (36)—the reader becomes convinced that Mrs. Spring Fragrance has mis-categorized Alice and Ethel. Clearly, it is Alice who is the “Superior Woman.” What this understanding of the message of the story takes as a given, however, is the innate nature of the categories themselves; moreover, it ignore the multidirectional character of the woman who is using these monikers. Mrs. Spring Fragrance is, of course, a kind of trickster figure who moves easily amongst and between the identity categories of “American” and “Chinese” and who mocks the idea that education trumps industry when it comes to herself and her Chinese husband: when he confesses his sense of inferiority in relation to the much lauded young scholars from China, she tells him not to be “concerned that men do not know you; be only concerned that you do not know them” (31). In light of this, Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s repeated
use of categorizing monikers rather than names when referring to Alice and Ethel only makes sense if it is read as Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s mocking-appropriation of America’s competitive perspective. Moreover, assuming Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s assignment of the titles, “Superior” and “Inferior,” is incorrect is to fail to recognize that these categories can only be maintained through their perceived opposition—indeed, while the text works to disrupt the meaning of the categories by calling into question Alice’s so-called “Inferiority” and Ethel’s supposed “Superiority,” the notion of opposing categories itself seems inviolate.

This blindness on the part of the reader is, I would argue, in large part what makes the story’s final lines such a surprise: though Mrs. Spring Fragrance has been successful in helping Mrs. Carman to overcome her prejudice against Alice, she nevertheless declares her hope that her own daughter, should she have one, would “walk in the groove of the Superior Woman” (41). This conclusion has been read as Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s recognition that, though America presents itself as the land of opportunity for all, in the end, no amount of hard work by the poor or immigrant subject can compete with the “divine rights” given to those born of the “superior” race and class (Julia Lee). But this class-based reading does not take into account what Alice refuses to do: even though she recognizes the negative impact of “all encompassing” categorizations, she will not fight to transform the social and political structures which deem her to be “inferior;” she will simply submit—as she does to Mrs. Carman—and wait for others, like Ethan and Mrs. Spring Fragrance to speak and act on her behalf. Even if we concede that Ethel’s overt, public agitation for women’s suffrage does not fall within the scope of Eaton’s belief that “private” action and discourse may be the best means for women to affect political change, the
fact remains that Alice’s passive acceptance of Mrs. Carman’s judgements, and the hierarchical status quo that they represent, is even further removed from Eaton’s ideal. I suggest another way of viewing the ending—one which points the reader toward recognizing the negative realities of American life created by the boundaries of race and class, and also, toward one way of transcending those categories.

Buried amidst her praise of Alice in her one “speaking” scene in the story, Ethel declares her personal determination to “love, live, suffer, see the world, and learn about men (not schoolboys) before I choose one” (36). This remarkable assertion is a unique counterpoint to Alice’s eventual happy ending, but also to the fates of the women in the other stories that have been examined thus far. Unlike Mai, Nora, Alice and the Alaska woman who, though they assert their independence, do commit to a marriage (or marriage-like) relationship with a man, Ethel, like Eaton herself, images her solitary self “roam[ing] back and forth across the continent” (“Leaves” 230). Drawing the parallel between Ethel and Eaton suggests the meaning of Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s final “choice” is not in fact a choice between the proffered categories at all, but rather, the expression of an alternative to the essentialist rhetorics of belonging and the competitive views of tradition that have been raised and critiqued in all of the texts that have been examined in this chapter. If Ethel is indeed “Superior,” it is not because she fits within a predetermined category of white, upper-class womanhood, or because she adheres exclusively to American tradition (as Alice arguably does\footnote{While Alice’s working woman is certainly not a fulfillment of bourgeois ideals of womanhood, her role within that context—in service to men, not claiming her own creative voice—is decidedly traditional.}), but rather because she resists the competitive logic governing these categories.

\footnote{While Alice’s working woman is certainly not a fulfillment of bourgeois ideals of womanhood, her role within that context—in service to men, not claiming her own creative voice—is decidedly traditional.}
Ethel is determined to chart her own path, and to choose her own alliances. Similarly, Eaton is adamant in her decision to create “connecting link[s],” and in so doing assert that “Individuality is more than nationality” (“Leaves” 230). In placing individual identity above nationality, Eaton is not rejecting the notion of belonging to a national family entirely; rather, she is simply rejecting competitive definitions of the nation (like the definitions of “inferior” and “superior”) which rely upon hierarchies, borders and exclusions, and with it, the belief that nationality means denying the individual who confounds essentialist categorizations, or who refuses to forget his or her unique heritage. This rejection does not ignore the suffering that those who resist categorization—particularly mixed-race individuals—may be forced to endure; what can be gained from embracing the “hybrid” self and national family, however, is precisely what we see in Eaton’s stories, which serve as a record of cross-racial and cross-gender affinities which run counter to the prevalent, competitive national mythologies of American identity. As Renan argues, “Writing and print are not powerful enough to stop the spread of myths of this kind. What they can do, however, is to preserve records of the past which are inconsistent with the myths, which undermine them” (192). If literature provides us with a means of reflecting on ourselves, and upon our national collective memory, it is also the site of reimagining and transformation of these things. Edith Eaton’s writings embody both the multidirectional work and spirit of the “connecting link”: a powerful tool capable of reconciling turn-of-the-century America’s “presupposed” past, with a “Eurasian” vision of its present, and, in the process, bringing the nation more fully to life.

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Chapter Three

In Search of a Practical Tradition:
Gendered Performance in the Works of Abraham Cahan

_A work of art must also be a work of education. ...[T]he story-teller who does not make his fiction a criticism of life.. [is]something like a public officer who betrays his trust._

—Abraham Cahan, “The Younger Russian Writers”

_I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well._

—_The Rise of David Levinsky_

I.

For a great many years, Abraham Cahan was best known for his work as a non-fiction author, as the editor-in-chief of _The Jewish Daily Forward_, and as a seminal political leader for the Social Democratic Party, not as a fiction-writer. To this day, a number of his non-English language works remain untranslated; his five-volume autobiography, _Bleter fun mayn lebn_, has only been translated in part, and there is no complete collection of his short stories in English. Nevertheless, Cahan has often been described as the voice of the late 19th/ early 20th Jewish-American experience; as Nathan Glazer remarks, “If one had to select a single person to stand for East European Jews in America, it would be Abraham Cahan” (68). Following a revival of interest in Cahan’s fictions in the 1970’s—in particular, _Yekl_ (1896), the collection, _The Imported Bridegroom and Other Tales of the New York Ghetto_ (1898), and his acclaimed novel, _The Rise of David Levinsky_ (1917)—Cahan’s works emerged as a touchstone for study of the ambivalence surrounding Jewish assimilation in America at the turn of the century. More recently, a small
handful of critics have expanded analysis of Cahan’s oeuvre to include lesser-known stories like those I will be examining in this chapter; this move has allowed new insights into his works in English and has raised new questions as to how Cahan envisioned the fate of Jews in America—or if, on the contrary, Cahan was in fact actively resisting “plotting” such an end.\textsuperscript{112} Still, little critical attention, past or present, has been paid to the role of gender in the conflicts surrounding Jewish identity and memory in Cahan’s fictions.

Critics have not, of course, ignored gender in Cahan’s fictions altogether; indeed, many scholars have noted how Cahan’s female characters function, at times, as a screen for male immigrant’s anxieties about assimilation, and the resulting rejection of Jewish tradition. But such arguments are too limited in scope, particularly given the recent scholarship by historian Paula E. Hyman and anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell, who argue for the interdependence of traditional gender roles and Jewish identity, and posit that it is this understanding which led Jewish immigrants to view Americanness—and the acceptance of or resistance to abandoning Jewish tradition and identity—in similarly gendered terms. As Motley notes, for Jewish immigrants, “performing these gendered customs—ritualized performances involving dress, diet, and other activities—could identify someone as a Jew or a Yankee” (6). Building upon these insights, this chapter considers how two of Cahan’s stories, “The Apostate of Chego-Chegg” and “The Daughter of Rev Avrom Leib,” highlight the ways immigrant characters’ relationships with the maintenance of Jewish tradition, and with Americanization, are informed by tradition-
specific ideals of gendered performance—particularly, female performance. These two stories are, certainly, not the most famous of Cahan’s works, nor his most complex articulations of the Jewish immigrant experience. These texts are, however, Cahan’s most focused explorations of the constrictions, contingencies and exclusions faced by Jewish women, who, as Goldstein and Hyman have argued, were expected to act not merely as biological progenitors, but also as the keepers of Jewish memory and tradition in America. Understanding how these expectations (most often produced by Jewish men in Cahan’s stories) shape the lives of the female protagonists of “The Apostate” and “Rev Avrom” provides insights into how gender acts as a fundamental dynamic in intra-ethnic manifestations of the competitive view of collective memory, tradition and group identity—a view which, among other things, underlies and is produced by the premise that adopting American behaviors means abandoning Jewishness.

Looking at how Cahan’s analyses of competitive memory within the Jewish community work to critique national narratives of belonging—which, as Rothberg puts it, treat “the interaction of different collective memories” as “a zero-sum struggle for preeminence” (3)—offers us additional avenues for exploring the connections between Jewish identity, Americanization, and gender issues in Cahan’s oeuvre.

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113 As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, society places certain practices into constructed (rather than naturally-occurring) gender categories/roles which are, in turn, cemented through mandated, repeated performance.

114 “Rev Avrom” in particular: it has never been anthologized and has received scant attention by Cahan scholars.

115 While *The Imported Bridegroom* does take readers “inside the mind” of a Jewish woman—Sophie—this story does not, I would argue, make the same critiques of female-gendered constrictions, contingencies and exclusions within Jewish life, mostly because Sophie herself is unconcerned with being displaced from the Jewish community (she is more concerned with being displaced from her perceived involvement in American life and culture).
As those charged with maintaining Jewish identity and tradition, Cahan’s female
protagonists are, far more than their male counterparts, made to feel the negative, self-limiting
consequences of the belief that Jewish history, culture and identity are rigidly unique, and thus,
that “the only kinds of memories and identities that are…possible are ones that exclude elements
of alterity and forms of commonality with others” (5). At the same time, these women’s insider-
outsider positions within both Jewish and American cultures grants them a perspective and
experience with Jewish tradition which enables them to serve as primary vehicles for arguing
an alternate, more multidirectional approach, which I am calling Cahan’s “practical tradition.”

This practical tradition is resistant to dichotomic understandings of Jewish identity and tradition
in America—that Jewish particularity can only be retained at the expense of a coherent
Americanness—which run parallel to static and exclusionary understandings of Jewish tradition
within the Jewish community itself—understandings which posit innate and inalienable divisions
between past and present (Old World vs. New World), between contemporaneous groups and
their cultural traditions (Jewish vs. American) and between the roles of men and women. What
remains once this competitive framework has been dismantled is, by contrast, a record of Jewish-
Americanness which is evolving and discursive in character, combining validation of Jews’
distinct history and identity with broad perspective on how that cultural heritage and experience
can inform a larger national narrative of evolving, cosmopolitan modernity premised upon
“build[ing] new worlds out of the material of older ones” (Rothberg 5).

116 Excluded from positions of authority by virtue of their sex and race these women occupy a position akin to that
which is ascribed to African Americans by Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk: troubled by a lack of “true self
consciousness” because they are “always looking at [themselves] through the eyes of others” (10-11).

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Like Pauline Hopkins, Cahan’s fictions showcase an ethno-cultural group torn between the desire to make claims for a unique history, worldview and experience and the belief that a sharp divorce between past and present is required. Among the majority of young Jewish intellectuals in turn-of-the-century New York, it was thought to be inevitable that Jewish distinctiveness would find its end in America. Of the roughly twelve million immigrants who came to America between 1880 and 1910, nearly 2.5 million were Jews (Miller and Faux 101-02). In his article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, “The Russian Jew in America” (July 1898), Cahan paints a vivid picture of the forces at work behind Jewish immigration to America in the late nineteenth century:

We have striven to adopt the language and manners of our Christian fellow countrymen; we have brought ourselves up to an ardent love of their literature, of their culture, of their progress. We have tried to persuade ourselves that we are children of Mother Russia. Alas! we have been in error. The terrible events which have called forth this fast and these tears have aroused us from our dream. The voice of the blood of our outraged brothers and sisters cries unto us that we are only strangers in the land which we have been used to call our home; that we are only stepchildren here, waifs to be trampled upon and dishonored. There is no hope for Israel in Russia. The salvation of the downtrodden people lies in other parts,—in a land beyond the seas, which knows no distinction of race or faith, which is a mother to Jew and Gentile alike. In the great republic is our redemption from the brutalities and ignominies to which we are subjected in this our
birthplace. In America we shall find rest; the stars and stripes will wave over the true home of our people. To America, brethren! To America! (128-9)

As Cahan reminds the *Atlantic*’s readers, America was seen as a salvation from the “the epidemic of anti-Jewish riots” (“The Russian Jew” 129) throughout Russia and in certain parts of Europe; in the face of these persecutions, America loomed in the Jewish imagination as new iteration of the Biblical “promised land.” For educated, politically engaged immigrants like Cahan (most, like him, Socialists), the move to America also carried the added hope of an end to the “Jewish question,” and with it, the rise of a universalist workers movement. As Cahan writes in his autobiography, he and his fellow revolutionaries were not “running away like…ordinary immigrant[s]” (in Lipsky 204); rather, they were on a mission to “erase all divisions between Jew[s] and non-Jew[s] in the world of workers.”

Though some extreme anti-Semitism appeared in certain quarters—both literary and political—in the late 19th century, Jews themselves were not, generally, disliked by their Gentile peers: “[I]n the late nineteenth century a remarkably friendly attitude toward Jews still

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117 From a statement issued by the Hebrew Federation of Labor, *Arbayter Tsaytung*, 10 Oct., 1890 qtd. in Levin 98. Cahan was elected as organizer of the Federation, which lasted less than a year.

118 Antisemitism was particularly prevalent within the grassroots Populist movement of the late 1800’s; see, for example, William Hope “Coin” Harvey’s *A Tale of Two Nations* (1894)—a fictional critique of American financial practices in which the key villain, Rogasner, is a thinly disguised stereotype of the Jew out to ruin the Caucasian race. See also the letters of Henry Adams.

In terms of law, the Immigration Restriction League, lead by Henry Cabot Lodge, sponsored a literacy bill requiring that every immigrant be able to read the language of his country of origin which passed Congress in 1896-7; the final bill withdrew the ‘country of origin’ requirement—which would have prevented Russian Jews who were only literate in Yiddish from entering the country—and, ultimately, Grover Cleveland vetoed it, but the ethnic discrimination behind the bill was clear and reflected beliefs about the “unassimilatability” of specific groups of immigrants. (Higham 221)
prevailed” (Higham 101). Nevertheless, as was the case with the Chinese, the “essentialist”
assumption that the Jews were a “pre-modern folk rooted in a circumscribed place and a timeless
origin” (Joseph 27) and were, thus, incompatible with American modernity, was equally
widespread.119 Pressure upon Jews to prove their capacity for historical progression and to
establish their place within modern society by choosing to identify solely as Americans was
increasing.120 And with this desire—shared by the Jewish intelligentsia—to have the Jewish
immigrant set aside Old World culture and “dress like an American, look like an American and
even…talk like an American” (Howe 128) came a rigid adherence to the “assimilationist”
perspective on the fate of Jewish identity and tradition—a position with which Cahan became
increasing uncomfortable toward the end of the 1890s.

Cahan recognized that, while most Jews wanted to learn English and otherwise adapt to
their new home, total assimilation was “extremely complicated for Jews because of the
indistinguishability of traditional Jewish cultural identity from Jewish religious faith” (Motley 4).
But, as Hutchens Hapgood121 explains, Cahan’s alienation from the “narrow socialist” belief in
assimilation was solidified, at least in part, by the Socialist Labor Party’s refusal to

119 These beliefs were often reflected in the illustrations that were chosen to accompany Cahan’s stories. These
120 See Goldstein.
121 Cahan and Hapgood met while both were working for The Commercial Advertiser. As Joseph notes, “When
Hapgood set out to write his book on the spiritual and intellectual side of the Jewish quarter, he relied heavily on
Cahan as a guide” (29).
unequivocally denounce the continuance of European anti-Semitism.¹²² This decision led Cahan to reassess some of his views on the “Jewish question,” and to consider the possibility that the maintenance some aspects of a unique Jewish tradition—including its “figures of memory” which allow the Jewish tradition to transcend the “temporal horizon” (Assmann 213)¹²³—could actually help the immigrant to be a better American citizen. At the very least, he expressed a growing skepticism that retaining Jewish identity was an insurmountable barrier to modern Americanness, or a threat to American institutions:

I am sure that our city has to-day no better and no more loyal citizen than the Jew, be he poor or rich, and none she has less to be ashamed of. …When Senator Fairbanks speaks of ‘that immigration which does not seek to build homes among us’¹²⁴ as the most objectionable element, as one whose ‘exclusion will be no loss,’ he surely cannot refer to the Russian Jew (The Russian Jew 130, 134).

¹²² In 1891 Cahan travelled to Europe to attend the second congress of the Socialist International with the aim of convincing the delegates to denounce all anti-Semitism. As Cahan later recalled in memoirs, after resisting pleas that he withdraw his motion, the congress, rather than risk appearing to explicitly defend the Jews, passed a weak resolution against both anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic ‘incitement.’ (Abraham Cahan, Blieter fun mayn lebn 3: 149-185; Cf. also Edmund Silberner, “Anti-Semitism and Philo-Semitism in the Socialist International,” Judaism 2.2 (1935): 117-122.)

¹²³ I will discuss this idea further in my analysis of “The Apostate.”

¹²⁴ It’s probable that Sen. Fairbanks is referencing the Chinese. Cahan refers to the Chinese Exclusion Act earlier in The Russian Jew, when quoting those who believe the Jewish immigrant might constitute a threat to American labor (133).
In 1987, Cahan helped to found *The Forward*—a new socialist newspaper which he hoped would express “the potentialities and contradictions of the entire immigrant experience” (Howe 525) rather espouse ideological rhetoric. Cahan’s cofounders did not agree with this stance—leading Cahan to leave the paper mere months later (though he would return for good in 1902)—but this shift toward what Cahan himself called a “practical Socialism” coincided with the beginnings of his most prolific period of fiction-writing in English. The stories written during this time, including “The Apostate” and “Rev Avrom,” are, I argue, indicative of Cahan’s desire to deliberate alternate outcomes for Jewish identity and tradition in America than the either/ or alternatives allowed by the competitive framework—a circumstance which Cahan dramatizes by means of classic conventions of romantic fiction. In these stories, the heroine must choose between two possible lovers, as is the case in “The Apostate,” or between her father’s desired outcome for her future and her own, as is the case in “Rev Avrom.” And yet, this proffered choice is revealed to be illusionary: the enclosed

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125 In French Strother’s 1913 article, “Abraham Cahan, A Leader of the Jews” (in *The World’s Work*, August 1913), Cahan is quoted as saying, “I am preaching practical [rather than ideological] Socialism,” as a way of explaining how *The Forward* looks to present Socialism “not as an end, but as a means advocated by enlightened people…to make ourselves and our neighbors happy” (473). Cahan’s view of politics as a process, measured in usefulness rather than ideology has informed my understanding of his views on Jewish tradition and Americanization.

126 As Joseph argues, writing for a non-Jewish audience gave Cahan more freedom to “reconsider the outcome of of the Jewish exodus to America…[without] betray[ing] any such uncertainty in front of a Jewish audience” (62) amongst whom ‘socialism in its narrow sense’ and, with it, the doctrine of assimilation, prevailed.

127 I discuss Cahan’s views of romance and romanticism later in this chapter.
framework of the story itself, and the role that the heroine is forced to play within it—her identity and performance dictated and subsumed by fathers or husbands—guarantees stagnation and lack of autonomy, whichever way she goes.

Cahan’s criticism of the intra-ethnic manifestations of competitive memory in these stories may appear to be aimed solely at Jews who cling to “dead” traditions and fear adaptation to American life; but given his choice to write in English, rather than in Yiddish, we must consider the significance of Cahan’s depictions of female characters grappling with the expectations and limitations of gendered performance in the context of Jewish tradition for his presumed Gentile readership. When we consider this readership, it becomes clear that these stories can also be seen as a condemnation of mirror images of rigid Jewish exclusivity: American nativism, and the doctrine of total assimilation—which, in the name of a coherent Americanness, allows the ethnic immigrant no claims to particularity whatsoever. Cahan’s practical tradition defies the logic of this sort of universalizing by continuing to allow Jews to make claims to a unique selfhood and tradition, but his approach also contends that Jewish history and memory can, and should, cut across the boundaries of time, place, race and gender

128 Many critics have argued about the “enclosed” nature of Cahan’s tales. For Cahan, the private space of domestic and/or ethnically-exclusive family life appears to be equal parts nurturing (providing the lonely immigrant with a strong sense of belonging) and claustrophobic. He often traps his characters within the ghetto—“public” contexts are still confined within the borders of the Jewish community—and within that space, in other enclosed locales—sweatshops, apartments, etc. Moreover, the stories themselves have a kind of circular pattern: characters frequently find themselves at the story’s end in much the same place/ circumstance, if not worse, than at the story’s start. As Susan Kress puts it, “The city seems to promise expansion, space, opportunity but the reality is…a street which is not a passage, but a cul-de-sac” (35).
and be made to serve a useful, revitalizing purpose in the American context—a sort of public resource with the potential to engender a stronger, more creative and productive nation.

II.

“The Apostate of Chego-Chegg” was originally published in Century Magazine in November, 1899. It is the story of a Jewish woman, Michalina, (Hebrew name, Rebecca) who marries a Gentile man, Wincas, as a means of escaping her shrewish stepmother, and, with her new husband, emigrates from Poland to America. This marriage, which renders Michalina “an apostate, a renegade, a traitoress” (94) in the Old World Jewish community continues to affect her even after she and Wincas have settled in Long Island, New York, in the largely Polish village dubbed “Chego-Chegg.” Wincas and Michalina are both lonely in their new home, and Michalina finds herself yearning for her past—a feeling comprised of an odd admixture of yearning for “her Gentile husband and their common birthplace,” desire for “her father’s house,” and longing for the company of her “former coreligionists” (96) who reside in the nearby village of Burkdale. One afternoon, Machalina encounters Nehemiah, an extremely religious rabbi, and follows him back to Burkdale “as if he were tied to her heart” (97); though she is, ultimately, identified as a “meshumedeste” and chased away by the village’s inhabitants, “her pursuers and the whole Jewish town [become] dearer to her heart than ever” (98). Months later, she meets Nehemiah again, only now, he has repudiated Judaism in favor of an equally fervent atheism and “Americanism.” In spite of this change, he remains, in Michalina’s mind, an embodiment of
Jewish tradition: “his words were echoes from the world of synagogues, rabbis, purified meat, blessed Sabbath lights” (100). When Nehamiah informs her that, according Jewish law, her marriage to Wincas is invalid, Machalina, who has already tried “playing the Jewess” (101), becomes caught up in the idea that she might leave Wincas, marry Nehamiah, and regain her former status as a Jew. With the help of the women of the Burkdale settlement, she makes her plans, but, at the last minute, changes her mind and returns to her Gentile husband. As a result, the Jews who rallied for her return to the community ostracize her all over again.

Of all of Cahan’s stories for the English-speaking American literary market, “The Apostate” is, perhaps, the most explicit in terms of both its explication of what Jan Assmann has called “figures of memory” in Jewish tradition—that is, “fateful events of the past” that constitute “fixed points” which “do not change with the passing of time” and thus, transcend the “temporal horizon” (213)—and its examination of the “binding and reflexive character” (215) of Jewish collective memory. In presenting us with Michalina, a female insider-outsider in both Jewish and Polish worlds, Cahan asks readers to consider what happens to Jewish collective memory and identity when it is no longer ensconced within a homogenous Jewish community, and bolstered by the kinds of institutions which solidify Jewish unity and peculiarity. Is Michalina’s opening statement, “So, this is America, and I am a Jew no longer” accurate? Or does the story challenge this claim, and the resulting implication that the persistence of Jewish cultural inheritances in the American context is an impossibility? In raising these questions, Cahan’s text is not simply exploring the problem of how the Jewish immigrant, or indeed the Jewish writer, might relate Jewish memory to “an actual and contemporary situation” (J.
Assmann 214), nor is “The Apostate” merely portraying how Old World boundaries and authorities are challenged by interaction with American life—though, undeniably, Michalina’s intermarriage with Wincas and the subsequent birth of a child bring bring late 19th-century debates about how marriage relates to the racial and religious “integrity” of Jewishness to the fore; rather, the story brings the “competitive” premises that frame Michalina’s narrative under scrutiny, by presenting a thorough analysis of the ways that gender and gendered performance both underlie and are produced by a romanticized logic of exclusion.

If, as Goldstein and Hyman have argued, American Jewish women were often figured by (male) Jewish leaders not merely as biological progenitors, but also as the keepers of Jewish memory and tradition in America, Cahan’s depiction of Michalina’s apostasy becomes more than a question of racial or religious integrity or an intellectual inquiry into whether or not Michalina, personally, can retain both her cultural inheritance and her Gentile husband; instead, Cahan’s portrayal of Michalina’s double stigmatization—dismissed as a failed Jew and, thus, a failed woman—becomes a case study of the limitations, not only of intra-ethnic competitive memory, which demands that individuals subsume their selfhood in a static, exclusionary group collective memory, but upon a national tradition which is, likewise, bent upon “reproducing already given entities that either are or are not ‘like’ other already given entities” (Rothberg 18).

“The Apostate” is an unusual story in Cahan’s oeuvre, in that it takes place outside of the New York City ghetto—a choice of setting which has the curious effect of appearing to

129 In The Price of Whiteness, Goldstein discusses how, in response to non-Jewish commentators who were apt to “make national belonging conditional on biological ‘fusion’” (99)—that is, intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles—Jews found themselves alternately treating marriage as “a key factor in Jewish racial preservation” (98) and downplaying racial exclusivity in favor of “religious integrity” (100).

130 Hyman, Gender and Assimilation; Goldstein, The Price of Whiteness.
downplay, while in fact amplifying the American context. The collection of Long Island settlements, Jewish and Polish, at a remove from New York, and yet linked to it by train, form a patchwork, pluralistic, rather than a melting-pot image of American immigrant life. Right from the beginning, readers are told that each group keeps to itself, interacting with one another and with non-immigrant Americans only in the course of commerce. This would appear to make both groups equally foreign to the magazine’s readership, and to the American way of life, nevertheless, there are contrasts between the two communities which go beyond ethnicity. While Chego-Chegg, the Polish village, “was surrounded by farms which yielded the Polish peasants their livelihood…[of] about a dollar a day” plus the potatoes which “they got from their American employers free” (96), the Jewish village of Burkdale eschews this Old World-style pseudo-feudalism in favor of independent, modern industry: “Some tailoring contractors has moved their ‘sweatshops’ here, after a prolonged strike in New York, and there were, besides some fifty or sixty peddlers who spent the week scouring the island for custom…. The improvised little town was lively with the whir of sewing-machines and the many-colored display of shop windows” (98). Thus, in spite of their remove from the city and adherence to “ancient” religious and cultural traditions, the Jewish immigrants appear infinitely more adaptable to modern American life, including—as evidenced by the allusion to labor disputes—modern politics. By contrast, the Polish immigrants, who would, presumably, present less of a challenge to a unified American identity than the culturally distinct Jews, are a vision of cultural backwardness; this point is emphasized when the reader is informed that, in Chego-Chegg, the main “civilizing and Americanizing” influence is a “young negro, lank, tattered, and grinning…
twanging a banjo to a crowd of simpering Poles” (100). As Joseph notes, this racially-charged alignment of the Poles with the “young negro” has the effect of “suggesting a combined racial and temporal separation between the [Polish and Jewish] populations” (78). This choice may seem somewhat ironic given Cahan’s resistance to competitive discourse, but given that turn-of-the-century tensions over Jewish distinctiveness were centered, in part, around the question of whether or not Jews were to be counted as members of the white race (Goldstein), the text’s alignment of the Poles, rather than the Jews with blackness—and its incumbent negative associations—may be read as an attempt downplay the racial aspect of Jewish identity, making it less of a threat to a cohesive American nationalism.

In the midst of this division, Michalina is a singular figure: an outsider in both Chegog-Chegg and Burkdale who passes “among the people of the place like a lone shadow” (101). Michalina’s confined liminality is embodied both by her physical movements, and by her identity as a “meshumedeste”—a “terrible untranslatable word” (98) without one distinct meaning in “Gentile speech” (94). Like Sappho Clark, Michalina moves between two key geographical spaces which represent the seemingly irreconcilable division between her past identity as a “Jewess,” and her present one as a “Christian woman.” Michalina also spends much of her time too at the train station linking Long Island with New York—a locale which further underscores Michalina’s state of being stuck “between” identities. Like “Sappho” and “Mabelle,” Michalina’s sense of inner division is premised upon the idea that each self is mutually exclusive: she must choose, she is told, and believes, between the past and the present; she can’t
have both: “You are a Jewess no longer” Michalina tells herself; “you are a Gentile woman” (94).

Michalina’s inability to set aside her Jewish self fully when she marries her Gentile husband, Wincas, is established from the story’s opening lines. While both Wincas and Michalina are homesick for “their common birthplace” in the Old World, Michalina is, in addition, beset with memories and feelings which transcend time, place and even personal experience, which she refers to as “her Jewish past.” As she sits at home waiting for her husband to return from work—a circumstance which highlights, subtly, her abandonment of traditional, Old World Jewish femininity in favor of the American bourgeois ideal—Michalina finds her attempts to cut herself off from her past to be “as painful as they were futile” (94):

Wincas kept buzzing in her ear that she was a Catholic, but he did not understand her. …

The bonfires of the Inquisition had burned into her people a point of view to which Wincas was a stranger. Years of religious persecution and enforced clannishness had taught them to look upon the Jew who deserts his faith for that of his oppressors with a horror and a loathing which the Gentile brain could not conceive. (AC 94)

Just as her status as a meshumedeste has no definition outside of the Jewish communal context, Michalina’s worldview cannot, it appears, be divorced from the Jewish “figures of memory” which shape her perspective despite changes of geography and her religious conversion. In fact, the text indicates that, in the American context, the power of this memory to bolster a distinctly
Jewish sense of self grows, rather than diminishes: Michalina recalls that though she had been raised to look at the Polish Gentiles as “a race like unto an ass,” in the Old World, “she could afford to like them;” in America, however, these Gentiles “were repugnant to her” (99). Cahan, thus, presents a form of Jewishness which appears to countermand the notion presented by both his fellow Jewish socialists and by non-Jewish Americans, that cultural assimilation and intermarriage\(^{131}\) will cause Jewish distinctiveness to disappear, “naturally.”

In establishing the intractability of Michalina’s distinctly-Jewish memory, in spite of her intercultural marriage, Cahan is, of course, acknowledging fears that Jews’ unique identities and collective memories may be an insurmountable barrier to their full assimilation into American life. The marriage context does more than this, however: as a wife whose outward identity is transformed through her marriage, but whose inner identity appears unchanged, Michalina dramatizes the gendered nature of both literal, and figurative elements of Jewish identity at the turn of the century. Paula Hymn notes that “Jewish leaders [in the late 19th and early 20th centuries] often perceived women solely in terms of their maternal role and projected onto mothers responsibility for the decline in Jewish culture and family life and for rampant assimilation” (157). Once established as the “guardians of Jewish survival” (Goldstein 15), Jewish women’s options for diverging from traditionally-determined gender roles and practices, and for negotiating their own public citizenship, were constrained by their symbolic status as the barometers for the community as a whole. Indeed, the idea that this competitive, static model of collective memory-keeping has a stifling effect upon women’s individuality and voices is hinted

\(^{131}\) Goldstein notes that while non-Jews favored the “solution” of intermarriage to the “problem” of Jewish racial-religious peculiarity (89, 91), Jews themselves, even when they favored assimilation, tended to resist the notion that Jews “needed to be physically absorbed in order to become an integral part of white America” (90).
at quite strongly; though Michalina feels “soothed” when she attempts to “prepare food or to bless Sabbath light as they did over in Burkdale” in her Gentile home, her belief that her actions are that of “a thief” render her incapable of reciting the benediction: “she could not speak after the third word” (101).

This great “responsibility” of keeping an unchanging tradition is, thus, paired, proportionally, with a limiting of personal agency—a dynamic which we see enacted in Michalina’s marriage: unlike the other “sinner” in the story, Nehemiah, Michalina does not choose a new tradition or identity, but rather, chooses a husband who transforms “Rebecca” the Jewess into “Michalina” the Christian woman. Such a circumstance—that a marriage may lead to a complete change of identity—is a distinctly female dilemma; as Susan Kress notes, “Michalina is treated as an outcast by her Jewish community, but, ironically, she is only doing what every married woman must do…” that is, lose her “individual identity and autonomy in marriage” (30). At the same time, however, Michalina’s experience may also be read as something common to all Jewish immigrants. In the context of immigrant’s “marriage” with America, all Jews may be said to play the feminine role when facing the limitations of the only choice they are offered: will they allow Jewish identity and memory to be eradicated by Americanization, or will they resist this process and face the consequences of remaining “unmarried”—permanent outsiders in their new homeland?

132 As Rothberg notes, while a multidirectional view of collective memory and its traditions “acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites” (11), the competitive view frames collective memories “as a scarce resource” and sees “the interaction of different collective memories… [as] a zero-sum struggle for preeminence” (3).
Yet, even as it illustrates the “problem” presented by the persistence of Michalia’s Jewish memory, “The Apostate” complicates the dichotomy inherent in her identity-crisis by illustrating how the “Jewish past” gives Michalina a useful perspective on America, and a capability to adapt, which Wincas cannot grasp. When Wincas complains about American food and farming, and moans that, in America “Everything looks as it should, but you just try to put it into your mouth, and you find out the swindle” Michalina draws upon the Jewish history of persecution and diaspora to soothe him: “Wait till we get used to it. Then you won't go, even if you are driven with sticks from here” (99). Being perpetual travelers, “driven with sticks” from one place to the next throughout history, is, of course, why Jews, historically, located their identities not in national ties but in their distinct, ethno-cultural tradition. Nevertheless, as Michalina indicates, it is this experience of diaspora and persecution which allows Jews, perhaps more so than other immigrants, to survive and make the most of America, even if it is not quite the “promised land” that they hoped it would be (“The Russian Jew” 129).

Given the sometimes-harsh realities of American life, Michalina’s characterization argues for more than just Jewish capacity to survive, however; indeed, as Cahan points out in “The Russian Jew,” quoting his friend, Jacob A. Riis,

[Jews] do not rot in their slum, but, rising, pull it up after them....As to their poverty, they brought us boundless energy and industry to overcome it....They brought temperate habits and a redeeming love of home. Their strange customs proved the strongest ally of the Gentile health officer in his warfare upon the slum. (130)
Michalina is, in many ways, also a perpetrator of the “strange customs” to which Riis alludes—most particularly, she challenges the bourgeois ideal of the “lady” which held sway in America at the turn of the century. In the traditional Jewish society, “women had long displayed themselves to public gaze as participants in the struggle to earn a livelihood” while men, ideally, recused themselves from economic imperatives and “devoted themselves to Talmud study” (Hyman 156). This practice goes at least as far back in Jewish tradition as the writing of Proverbs 31 in the Hebrew Bible, which scholars contend occurred somewhere between 200 and 1000 B.C.E.133 Michalina’s own character appears to follow this tradition: it is she, not Wincas, who moves their family from the heart of Chego-Chegg to “a shanty on the outskirts of the village, within a short distance of Burkdale” (101); it is she who persuades Wincas to shop with her in the Jewish town, who “forbade Wincas to write to his father” (101) and who urges her husband to “learn to press coats, which was far more profitable than working on a farm” (101). Although Michalina herself appears only conscious of acting so-as to get as close to the Jewish community as possible, the reader cannot deny that Michalina’s actions, “strange” though they may be, have the effect of pushing Wincas to to be more cosmopolitan and economically savvy than his fellow Gentile Poles. In this way, Cahan indicates, even seemingly alien “Jewish” values and perspectives can

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133 In this proverb the ideal wife is described, albeit poetically, as the active force of the Jewish household: “She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. …She perceives that her merchandise is profitable…She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. …She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant.” (verses 16, 18, 19, 24). This woman’s husband, by contrast, spends his time sitting “among the elders of the land” (verse 23).
work in accord with American modernity—indeed, retaining a Jewish worldview\textsuperscript{134} may, in fact, serve as a vital force in helping America to be its most prosperous self.

Michalina may have imaginative access to the collective memory of being “driven with sticks,” but she herself is not driven from the Old World to the New by Cossacks; rather, her coming to America is the result of the actions of her “sorceress of a stepmother” (94). The absent-present stepmother who “drives” Michalina “into the arms of a Gentile lad and to America” (94) is often overlooked in analyses of “The Apostate,” but the parallel between these two events—the forced diaspora of the Jewish people, and the driving out of Michalina personally—is important. After all, it is the stepmother, in conjunction with the Jewish “figures of memory,” who serves as the primary backdrop, so to speak, against which Michalina defines herself. (It is certainly not coincidental that, after receiving a letter from her stepmother, Michalina looks upon her husband as a stranger: “Who is this Gentile?” (101).) Again and again, the stepmother appears, specter-like: physically remote and yet capable of “speaking” to Michalina about her sense of divided self, reminding her that she is both alienated from and linked inextricably to her Jewish past. At times, this “speech” even takes on literal form: as Michalina notes upon receipt of yet another letter from her father wishing her “damned soul” and “impure limbs be hurled from one end of the world to the other” (10), it is her stepmother voice’s being transmuted through her father: “she gets him to curse this unhappy child” (102). This persistence in demonizing Michalina for apostasy, even in her new American home, is a clear critique of how a too-insular Jewish identity and tradition can pit “the soul of a people” against

\textsuperscript{134} Naturally, for Cahan, this worldview includes Socialism. As he writes in “The Russian Jew,” in response to those who “dread…socialism,” “It is the Jewish socialist who leads the neighborhood in its fight against the political and moral turpitude which the politician spreads in the tenement houses” (137-8).
“the Modern Spirit” of America. It is the sense of competition, Cahan indicates, rather than American culture itself, which puts Jewish selfhood and tradition at risk of dying on “the dust-covered shelves of history…like a flower transported to uncongenial soil” (“The Late Rabbi Joseph” 314).

Moreover, the figures of memory and the stepmother share another characteristic in Michalina’s mind: their apparent static quality. While all other women, including Michalina, can resist the “contaminating” influences of the new American context for only so long, the stepmother’s physical absence from the New World ensure that, like the figures of memory, she exists, in some way, outside of history. Thus, the stepmother remains, for Michalina, as a kind of inviolate entity, representing both what Michalina loves and fears about Jewish insularity. But such a view of an individual, much less the entirety of Jewish memory and identity is, Cahan indicates, romanticized rather than realistic—and, as his critical writings reveal, Cahan rejected romance on both moral and aesthetic grounds. In his analysis of Russian literature in “The Younger Russian Writers” (1899), for example, Cahan, praises realism’s capacity to educate the reader and serve “a criticism of life” (120); meanwhile romance—“the story of adventure and plot”—and its kin, the “purpose novel” whose narrative “sails” are “trimmed to suit the wind which blows in the direction of the author’s preconceived moral” (121) are derided as “the aesthetic diet of children” (119).

But what does a “realistic” view of Jewish memory and identity look like? Michalina’s marriage to Wincas, and her almost-relationship with Nehemiah are presented, both to Michalina and to the reader, as possible answers to this question, in that both appear to be possible solutions
to Michalina’s sense of divided self; but each man proves incapable of serving as such a solution, because each, in his own way, perpetuates the competitive model of identity and memory.

Wincas, as previously discussed, is shown to be a failure at Americanization, and to be unable to understand and accommodate Michalina’s Jewish memories and perspectives. At the same time, Michalina and Wincas’s daughter, Marysia, who “bore a striking resemblance to Wincas” (100) could be the embodiment of a practical solution to her parents’ division: a literal embodiment of multidirectionality via her multicultural bloodline. This notion is troubled, however, by Michalina’s initial reaction to her child: just as her father and stepmother rejected her, Michalina finds herself viewing her daughter as a stranger: “a shikse (Gentile girl), a heap of defilement” (99). Even once this sense of alienation has passed away, the idea that the child’s identity must fall on one side or the other of the ethno-cultural divide remains. When Michalina’s belief that her child is a Gentile is countered by a rabbi (figure 4135), his assurances to Michalina that she remains a Jew—“You were born a Jewess, and a Jewess cannot marry a Gentile. …the laws of our faith say you are not married” (103)—and thus, that her child is, likewise, Jewish—“children follow their mother” (103)—merely reaffirms the competitive model by stressing that identity cannot be changed or hybridized.

135 This is one of the few moments in the story that The Century chooses to illustrate, and one which emphasizes, in contrast to the ambivalence of the text itself, that Michalina is a decidedly Old World, Jewish figure.
Fig. 4 “But I am Married to a Gentile” by Louis Loeb (“The Apostle of Chego-Chegg” 1899)
Given the rabbi’s reading of Michalina’s situation, it would seem that leaving Wincas and marrying Nehemiah would be the most straightforward means for Michalina to no longer be torn between her Jewish past, and her married identity. There are, however, a number of obstacles to this return to Jewishness, including Nehemiah himself, and the law of the land. Nehemiah is, of course, a biblical figure: a cup-bearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes, who, with the king’s blessing, rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and, in conjunction with Ezra, re-instituted Mosaic Law—including the dissolution of marriages between Jews and non-Jews (unless the non-Jews converted). As a former yeshivah student, Cahan would have been aware of Nehemiah’s significance within Jewish history; thus, it’s difficult not to see “The Apostate’s” Nehemiah as a farcical shade of this great figure. When Michalina first meets Nehemiah, he is rigidly correct in his personal adherence to the minute of Jewish Law; moreover, he takes it upon himself to remonstrate, melodramatically, with other Jews who take a less orthodox approach to Sabbath piety: “‘Woe! Woe! Woe!’ he exclaimed. ‘Do throw it away, pray! Are you not children of Israel? Do drop your cigarettes’” (98). Unlike the biblical Nehemiah who was an authoritative, masculine figure, able to lead his fellow Jews out of their sin and back to the beliefs and practices commanded by God, Cahan’s Nehemiah is framed as the embodiment of turn-of-the-century stereotypes of the “feminized” Jewish man, and his intense legalism is viewed as a joke amongst the Burkdale residents. When he is teased by some young men, the figure of authority who steps forward to rescue him is a woman, Sorah-Elka—and even she criticizes

136 See the Biblical book of Nehemiah, Chapter 10.

137 Hebrew school.

138 As Hyman remarks, Paula E. Hyman remarks, there “was the conflation of Jewishness and femininity in Western societies, with the consequent anxiety of Jewish men about their own masculinity” (Gender and Assimilation 9).
Nehemiah, telling him, “You look for trouble and you get it” (98). But in spite of Nehemiah’s obvious weaknesses of both mind and body, Michalina is still fascinated by “the pious little man,” (97) who, in her mind, represents the clear-cut, traditional Jewishness that she yearns for from her past.

When Michalina meets Nehemiah for a second time, however, he has shed his outward signs of Jewish identity—the text notes that he now appears as just “an insignificant little man, clean-shaven, with close-cropped yellowish hair…a derby hat and a sack coat” (99). This new iteration of Nehemiah shuns Jewish tradition in favor of a new American identity and belief system—for indeed, in Nehemiah’s hands, American nationalism is a “religion” (AC 101), to be approached with the same degree of zealotry as his former Judaism. In the course of their various meetings at the train station, Nehemiah attempts to present himself to Michalina as a fully-assimilated American man, scornful of his Jewish past: “I had ears, but could not hear because of my ear-locks; I had eyes, and could not see because they were closed in prayer. Now I am cured of my idiocy” (100). Nehemiah’s rebirth as an appikoros (atheist) is notable for a number of reasons, but what is most immediately apparent is that, despite Michalina’s excitement at encountering “another sinner” (100), Nehemiah is in no way in placed in the same kind of position as Michalina, in terms of his relationship with the Jewish community; as the narrator notes, “Disclaim Judaism as Nehemiah would,” unlike Michalina, “he could not get the Jews to disclaim him” (101). On the surface this distinction between Michalina and Nehemiah’s positions reads as the result of the fact that Michalina has not only “disclaimed Judaism,” but has converted to Christianity; but as Nehemiah mouths the American rhetoric of social equality
—“There are no Jews and no Gentiles, missus. This is America. All are noblemen here, and all are brothers” (100)—another, more telling view emerges.

Nehemiah’s assertion of universal brotherhood in America may appear to be the exact opposite of the exclusivity demonstrated by the Jews of Burkdale, but it quickly becomes evident that this American inclusiveness is premised upon establishing other forms of exclusivity. In the first instance, there is the male-gendered nature of the group; like the “brotherhood” in Contending Forces, the brotherhood in “The Apostate” is no mere turn of phrase, but rather, a literal exclusion of women, and of women’s voices, from the process of defining group, or national identity—a fact which puts American nationalism in much the same camp as traditional Judaism. Furthermore, Nehemiah’s pursuit of Michalina reveals the extent to which his own “freedom” to choose to reject the beliefs and practices of Judaism is dependent upon women like Michalina having a distinct lack of choice in shaping their own narratives, and thus, in determining their own identities and relationships to Jewish tradition: as long as Jewish woman are responsible for serving as the domestically-located, living receptacle of changeless tradition, and Jewish men retain their ties to those women, then Jewish men may feel free to “become Americans” in their public lives without fear of losing their Jewishness in its entirety. And it seems that Michalina herself, on some subconscious level, believes in the validity of this male exceptionalism. The narrator explains that, even when he is preaching a godless Americanism, Nehemiah’s “words were echoes from the world of synagogues, rabbis, purified meat, blessed

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139 As Foote has argued, in Cahan’s fictions “the category of ethnicity is returned to an ideal space of the private, in which one’s "real" self can remain intact” (50).
Sabbath lights” (100) to Michalina, signaling her belief that Nehemiah’s new American identity is not in fact a true change or challenge to his fundamental Jewish character, such that it is.

As for the actual wooing itself, this is framed, from the start, by a pre-established romantic narrative in which Michalina is “cast” as the “Laura” to Nehemiah’s Plutarch: “She was married to another man…yet the stranger loved her. …Maybe you are Laura? Laura mine!” (100). Nehemiah’s choice of narrative is quite telling: the real-world Plutarch, of course, never knew Laura, only loved her from afar. Similarly, Nehemiah is less interested in who Michalina actually is or what she wants (“[o]f herself she never spoke” (100)) than in who—or what—she can represent for him: the way her belonging to him carries symbolic weight. This “symbolic weight” could be read as part and parcel with Nehemiah’s pursuit of being a “real American”; it’s certainly arguable that Nehemiah’s use of the Plutarch-Laura story is meant to serve as a direct counterpoint to traditional Jewish marriage, which is based not on romantic love, but on the preservation of communal ties140. Such a reading is untenable, however, once we recognize that the kind of symbolic “Laura” Nehemiah desires is one who serves to shore up and maintain his ties to his Jewish identity. Though Nehemiah repeatedly asserts “I am an atheist, and religion is humbug,” he nevertheless feels the need to cement Michalina’s identity as a Jew:

According to the Jewish law, you are neither his wife nor a Gentile woman. You are a Jewess. Mind, I don't believe in the Talmud; but, according to the Talmud, your marriage

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does not count. Yes, you are unmarried! …You can marry a Jew 'according to the laws of Moses and Israel,' and be happy. (102)

The fact that the assertion of “Jewish law” stands in direct conflict with the laws of the land to which Nehemiah has now, supposedly, pledged his primary allegiance does not trouble him, but by highlighting these sorts of discrepancies in Nehemiah’s understanding of Americanness—some of which, the text indicates, may be due less to Nehemiah’s incompetence than to the hegemonic tendencies of nationalism itself—Cahan also questions the quality of the Americanness that Nehemiah is modeling. Where once he was theatrically fanatical about Judaism, he is now theatrically fanatical about Americanism, or, to be more specific, about the ideological elements of American nationalism—a point which is emphasized when we learn Nehemiah the Atheist is so busy “scouting religious ceremonies, denouncing rabbis and preaching assimilation with the enlightened Gentiles” that he “neglect[s] his business” and runs around “half-starved” (101). This description not only underscores Cahan’s larger point that setting aside Jewish identity entirely (assuming such a thing were possible) for a theoretical Americanism does not automatically make one a “good American” in practice; indeed, almost every Jew who retains his or her sense of Jewishness in “The Apostate” is shown to be a better American in practice than Nehemiah—a clear argument in favor of Cahan’s practical tradition. It also emphasizes how Nehemiah’s embrace of Americanism, which is predicated upon allowing no ethnic peculiarity whatsoever, is as romanticized and unpractical as his former Jewish exclusivity.
Regardless of Nehemiah’s personal shortcomings, Michalina finds herself entertaining the possibility he has held out to her: that she might return to her former identity. Finally, Michalina makes the decision to leave her husband and marry Nehemiah—a move which not only necessitates that she reject her earlier assessment, “I am a Jewess no longer” (94) in favor of “once a Jew, forever a Jew” (103), but also, that she leave America (where a second marriage, without a divorce would be viewed as bigamy). The ease with which Michalina is accepted back into the Jewish community following this decision is striking: “The pious souls were all taken up with the young woman they were ‘rescuing from impurity’” (103). In spite of the fact that the marriage has not even taken place yet, Michalina is “restored to her Hebrew name” (103), and throughout the final scene of the story, she is referred to, both by her fellow Jews and by the narrator as “Rebecca” or the diminutive “Rievele” or “Rieva,” not as Michalina. The narrator’s acceptance and use of Michalina’s new/ old name in this final scene occurs without fanfare, but the characters themselves seem strangely emphatic about the name: “‘Rievele dear’” and ‘Rieva, if you please’ flew thick and fast’ (103). Though Michalina’s capability to exceed the categories of “Jewish” or “Gentile,” “Old World” and “New World,” are demonstrated throughout the story, the Burkdale women’s almost frantic emphasis on Michalina’s identity as “Rebecca,” which is, in turn, undercut in the story’s very last lines by a switch back to “Michalina,” reestablishes the competitive framework governing Jewishness, and the story overall. Unlike Sappho/ Mabelle who can become Mama-Sappho, there appears to be no reconciling of Michalina’s two selves, and Michalina’s final choice not to marry Nehemiah, and to return to Wincas, is not a triumphant end; as she is cursed by the Jewish women and forced, once again, to flee from Burkdale (an echo of her first visit there), Michalina is, we are certain, not running toward any great happiness.
At the same time as Michalina’s sad end works as a final critique of the negative consequences of rigid adherence to a competitive model of memory and identity, the final line of this final scene functions as a reminder to the reader that another approach to tradition is in fact possible. This line, “A meshumedeste will be a meshumedeste” (104) recalls both the story’s opening line, “this is America and I am a Jewess no longer” (94), and the New York rabbi’s assertion, “Once a Jew, forever a Jew” (103). But this line also points us to a moment that occurs a little earlier in the story: in the midst of Nehemiah’s attempts to woo Michalina and Michalina’s daydreams about “becom[ing] a Jewess again” (102), Michalina’s state of being “between” identities becomes an identity in and of itself; Michalina the meshumedeste becomes a new “institution” for the Jewish community: “Burkdale without...a convert seemed as impossible as it would have been without a marriage-broker, a synagogue, or a bath-house ‘for all daughters of Israel’” (101). None of the characters seem aware that this shift has occurred, but the implications of what is recorded cannot be ignored: Jewish tradition and identity, embodied in and by the town of Burkdale, cease to be static, and begin to be productive. The town and its people have demonstrated an ability to see Michalina with the kind of “double vision” which marks multidirectionality—as a meshumedeste she is “theirs” and yet, as a convert, she does not belong to the group alone—and to accommodate this challenge to their narrowly-drawn communal boundaries without losing their distinctive, Jewish perspective; indeed, arguably, one would need a Jewish perspective in order to understand Michalina’s new role within the community fully. Likewise, the story’s final assessment of Michalina as “a meshumedeste” does not place her either in the category of “a Jewess no longer,” or “Once a Jew, forever a Jew;” rather, Cahan opens up a space where both assertions are true—where
Michalina can be understood as distinctly Jewish and as a cosmopolitan American figure—and thus, makes an argument for the validity of his practical tradition and its productive possibilities.

III.

Like “The Apostate,” “The Daughter of Reb Avrom Leib” (1900) uses a female protagonist, Sophie, and certain tropes of romantic fiction as a means of breaking down the limiting dichotomies that emerge from a competitive view of collective memory and identity formation. “The Daughter of Rev Avrom Lieb” is divided into eight parts, over the course of which Cahan leads his (presumed) non-Jewish reader through one full cycle of the Jewish year, including High Holidays and sabbath days, and into another.141 This structure, like the Plutarch-Laura tale in “The Apostate,” extends formally to the developments in the romance between Sophie and her sometime-fiancé, Aaron Zalkin. In the first part, “Welcoming the Bride,” we meet Zalkin, a thoroughly Americanized Jewish manufacturer, at the precise moment when “His heart began to yearn for the Jewish quarter, his old home” (53). Zalkin heads downtown and wanders into a synagogue (something he has not done in fifteen years); there, he hears the cantor Reb Avrom Leib perform, and sees Reb Avrom’s lovely daughter, Sophie. In this second section, “Sabbath of Comfort Ye,” Zalkin returns to the synagogue and decides he must “be introduced into the cantor’s home” (54) as a prospective husband for Sophie. Though Zalkin and Sophie are disappointed with one another upon their first meeting, Reb Avrom himself falls “in love with his

141 Because “The Daughter of Rev Avrom Leib” has never been anthologized, I’ve included a more detailed story summary.
daughter’s suitor” (55) as the two men engage in Talmudic debate. The marriage is announced on the Sabbath of ‘Comfort Ye’—a traditional time of looking forward with hope following a nine-day mourning period for the destruction of the temple; Sophie is cheerful during the betrothal celebration, but finds herself battling a sense of “homesickness” afterward as she thinks about leaving her father after her marriage.

In the third section, “Yom Kipper Eve”—the day when religious Jews confess their sins—Sophie confesses to Zalkin that for “a day or two I had thoughts against you…[and] I thought I didn’t care for you” (58). Though she asks his forgiveness, Zalkin is dismayed and ends their engagement. Zalkin soon regrets his decision, however, and, in the fourth section, “The Rejoicing of the Law,” he returns to the synagogue during the celebration of the completion of the annual reading of the Torah. Zalkin and Sophie begin their courtship anew, but by the fifth section of the story, “Blessing the Dedication Lights,” (Hanukkah) Reb Leib has fallen ill, and Sophie and Zalkin’s engagement is off broken yet again. In the sixth section, “Reb Avrom’s Last Composition,” it is July; Reb Leib is on his deathbed, composing a final melody intended for the “Days of Awe”—a time of serious introspection during which one considers the sins of the previous year before Yom Kippur. By the time the “Days of Awe” (section seven) have arrived, Reb Leib has died, and Sophie is seen trying and failing to persuade other cantors to perform her father’s final composition. The high holidays pass in misery for Sophie and her brothers. In the story’s eighth and final section, “Rejoicing in the Law Once More,” Sophie and Zalkin meet again. Zalkin proposes again, and Sophie, drawn to Zalkin by his ability to “share her grief and
her ecstasy over her father’s memory” accepts, and “hasten[s] to bind herself” by swearing on her father’s memory that, this time, she will follow through with the marriage (63).

As was the case with “The Apostate,” Sophie’s function as a “case study” of Jewish assimilation is presented in the context of a romantic quandary—namely, whether or not to marry the man her father has chosen for her. Like Michalina, Sophie finds that the institution of marriage codifies a process of exclusion: an expectation that the woman will give up autonomy, subsume herself within the representational roles of bride or wife, and bolster a static, competitively-framed collective memory though this gendered performance. Unlike Michalina, however, Sophie is no newly arrived immigrant, nor is she an outsider in the Jewish-American community. Rather, Sophie’s position as Rev Avrom Leib’s daughter places her at the core of the Jewish-American community of New York’s Lower East Side. Sophie’s status as a consummate insider in the Jewish-American community would appear to place her at the opposite end of the spectrum of socio-cultural belonging than Michalina, but “The Daughter of Rev Avrom Leib” works to systematically undercut this seeming opposition by focusing attention upon the dependent nature of Sophie’s position. Cahan emphasizes this dependence through Sophie’s physical enclosure within ethnically-exclusive spaces—the synagogue and her father’s house—in all but one key scene in the narrative, and by virtue of her silence: for the first quarter of the story, Sophie does not speak, and we are given very little sense of her internal life. This initial silence draws attention to the ways that, as story’s title indicates, Sophie’s identity is shaped and made meaningful by her relationships with the men in her life—whose own perspectives are shaped by the Jewish memory tradition—rather than by her own views and desires. Even when

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Sophie’s consciousness and voice do, eventually, emerge and become the primary perspective in the narrative, the degree to which her status as a cultural insider is predicated upon these relationships remains unchanged. As the story’s final sections reveals, if she fails to maintain these ties, Sophie risks becoming as displaced from the Jewish community as Michalina.

But Sophie’s insider status also allows Cahan to approach the question of how Jewish collective memory and tradition might comport with American modernity in a different way than in “The Apostate”: Rev Avrom Leib’s original “tunes,” inspired by modern American life and culture, but used for age-old Jewish prayers in a traditional synagogue setting, are as much a character in the story as Avrom, Sophie and Zalkin. The tensions between what the tunes in fact are—multidirectional entities crafted by Rev Avrom but, notably, made manifest in written form by Sophie—and what characters wish them to represent form a parallel narrative to Sophie’s struggle between her desire not to marry Zalkin, and her fear of displacement from the community. Sophie, like the tunes she records, may in fact transcend her predetermined, performative role, but neither she, nor the tunes, can escape the significations placed upon them by her father, by Zalkin, and by the competitive view of group memory and identity which turns the joys of tradition, and the possibilities for reimagining what it means to be a member of the Jewish community, into a funereal “wail” by the story’s end.

The opening scene of “The Daughter of Avrom Leib,” has certain parallels with “The Apostate”: Aaron Zalkin, who has become separated from the Jewish tradition and community at some point in the past, is longing for a reconnection with both in the present. Michalina was able to the locate this separation in both the intangible figures of memory which she cannot seem to
Zalkin’s sense of homelessness bears some direct relation, we are told, to his physical estrangement from the “native town” (53), left behind in the Old World, and the New York ghetto where he lived as a younger man: “The dazzling affluence of the [up-town] stores and cafes amid which he always felt at home seemed like a practical joke on him. …His heart began to yearn for the Jewish quarter, his old home” (53). Unlike Michalina, however, Aaron Zalkin’s separation is not enforced by the Jewish community. Thus, while Michalina must maneuver strategically to locate herself near her “former coreligionists,” Zalkin merely has to ride the downtown elevated train and allow the first synagogue he sees to draw him “into its fold” (53).

Unlike “The Apostate’s” superficially Americanized Nehemiah, Zalkin appears to have undergone a quite thorough assimilation. Although the Jews in the synagogue don’t appear to question his presence there, Zalkin, much like Eaton’s Miss Lund, views the house of worship and its inhabitants from an outsider’s perspective, with a particular eye toward its quaint, “local color” attributes: “Zalkin surveyed the holy ark, the golden ‘shield of David’ on its velvet curtain, the illuminated omud, the reading-platform in the center, the faces of the worshipers as they hummed the Song of Songs or chatted in subdued tones” (53). But Zalkin’s detachment from the scene cannot remain, and indeed he welcomes the moment when these objects begin “singing of his childhood to him” (53). Zalkin may believe, in this moment, that he has at last “come home,” but when the title character, Reb Avrom Leib, is introduced, the reader is
reminded that Zalkin’s enthusiasm toward the synagogue, and toward its inhabitants, is premised upon its capacity to conform to the ideal of the past which he has come there seeking.

Rev Avrom is described as “a plump, narrow-shouldered, florid-faced bustling little man with a massive grizzly beard which disturbed one’s sense of equilibrium” (53). While the narrative lays no specific claims to reflecting Zalkin’s thoughts in this moment, its difficult to imagine whose “equilibrium” besides Zalkin’s is at stake in this moment. How the cantor disrupts Zalkin’s desired experience in the synagogue, exactly, is not initially apparent, but once Rev Avrom begins his performance of the sabbath prayers, Zalkin himself identifies the problem. When Reb. Leib chooses to sing “[t]he ancient hymn…in a tune of the cantor’s own composing” (54), Zalkin is highly critical; the narrator notes that Zalkin prefers the “traditional melody” and finds fault with Reb. Leib’s interpretation:

> He reflected that Reb. Avrom Lieb’s song had little or no bearing upon the text. Some of his gesticulations inclined him to laughter, while his abrupt transitions jarred upon his nerves. As to the cantor’s composition, Zalkin thought he could point out in it Hebraized snatches of popular operas and recent street music. (54)

In Zalkin’s view, the cantor’s song is all wrong, but for the specific reasons that it fails (unlike the inanimate objects which also “sing” to him) to faithfully replicate the traditional melody; the fact that the cantor gives himself “free reign” (53) in his interpretation of the ancient prayer, mixing music of the present moment with the traditional chants, means, for Zalkin, that the tune

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cannot function properly as an artifact of his past, and thus, cannot help him to recapture his own
lost sense of Jewish identity and communal belonging.

In spite of his negative reaction to the tune, however, Zalkin finds himself drawn to the
cantor himself, and to the man’s “tall, good-looking daughter” (53) who gives the service a
“fresh charm” (54) even after Zalkin’s “first flush of exhalation had died down” (54). The next
week when Zalkin visits the synagogue, the reasons behind this attraction take more concrete
form, and, ironically, meld in Zalkin’s mind with the very same music that he decried the week
prior. This time, when Zalkin hears the cantor’s tune, he “recognized it with a quiver of pleasure,
and mentally proceeded to sing along with the cantor,” all the while looking “up at Sophie again
and again” (54). Zalkin ceases to critique the cantor’s musical innovations, but, in so doing, he,
very tellingly, imagines himself in the cantor’s own role—both within the congregation, and in
relation to Sophie. Though both the tune and its singer began, for Zalkin, as disruptions to his
desire to reconnect with his past, in this moment, they become linked, inextricably, in the person
of Sophie:

Reb. Avrom Lieb’s hymn rang in his brain. The melody had sparkling eyes, a healthy
girlish face, and a preoccupied ‘housewifely’ smile. He seemed to hear every word of it,
yet try as he would, he could not recall it. His heart craved to hear it once more. Even
when his attention was absorbed in business, the synagogue song seemed to dwell in him,
filling his every limb and whispering to his heart as the soul of something living,
femininely lovable, luring, unrelenting (54).
Although Jewish men served in all positions of religious authority in America, just as they had done in the Old World, Hyman has argued that, in the late nineteenth century, “the association of religious sensibility with women” had effectively created a “‘feminization’ of the synagogue” (156). Perhaps then, it is not very surprising to see how easily Sophie becomes, for Zalkin, a physical embodiment of Reb Avrom’s “synagogue song”—she is both the song and the tradition from whence it comes. And yet, Zalkin’s choice to see Sophie as the song, and the song as the voice of tradition, is inherently problematic; after all, the song itself is not a pure re-presentation of Jewish tradition, but an amalgamative re-interpretation, melding ancient scriptures with the sounds and stylings of the New World. That being the case, in order for Sophie, and the song that she embodies in Zalkin’s imagination, to act as a means of reclaiming his past in the present, Zalkin must exclude the aspects of each—the girl and the music—which exceed this static, circumscribed designation.

This dehumanizing aspect of Zalkin’s attraction to Sophie—that is, his propensity toward seeing her less as a person than as a representative of the Jewishness that he hopes to re-acquire (like the good, commodity-minded American that he is)—is further emphasized as he begins his pursuit of her. Zalkin chooses to use a marriage broker to contact Reb Avrom Leib about Sophie, not because he believes this is what she, or even her father, would desire, but because it seemed “more old-fashioned and old-country-like” (54) to Zalkin himself, and more fitting to the traditional part of “the suitor” that he desires to play. And Zalkin’s inability to see Sophie as more than a cultural commodity that will enable him to, ultimately, take on the even greater role
of the Jewish patriarch that he imagined for himself back in the synagogue, becomes clearer still when they meet. Zalkin is, we are told, “struck” by the realization of the “slight resemblance she bore to the image which he had formed of her at a distance” (54). Sophie is, he concedes in an apt choice of words, “‘domestically’ pretty—just what he was looking for—but she seemed quite another girl” (54) [my emphasis].

As Zalkin is assessing Sophie, Cahan gives us our first insight into the girl herself—her view of Zalkin, in all its unfavorable glory: “‘Not good looking at all, and oh, what a figure!’ she said to herself” (55). This glimpse into Sophie’s mind is, however, brief. The men take control of the narrative once again, as Reb Avrom Leib speaks to Zalkin about the fact that his sons are not following in their father’s footsteps:

‘What is the use of it all?’ resumed the cantor, seriously, with a wave of despair at the open prayer book. ‘When their father is gone, they won’t turn their tongue to a Hebrew word. They are American boys, don’t you know, and I am a hen breeding duck’s eggs. Only Sophie and I are alright.’ (55)

The cantor’s assessment of his daughter as “alright” in contrast to his “American boys” is notable in that it reveals that the cantor, like Zalkin, may be seeing what he wishes to see in Sophie, rather than what is in fact there. In spite of her love for her father, the text gives no indication that Sophie is in fact the “old fashioned” girl of Reb Avrom Leib and Zalkin’s fantasies (55); indeed, once she is alone with Zalkin, her complaints about “how helpless her father was and
how she had to take care of him and the whole house” coupled with her “confidential heartiness of tone and manner” (55-6) appear to contradict this claim. Further still, the cantor himself seems to recognize Sophie’s limitations, on some level, when he qualifies his assessment:

“Besides…a girl need not be over-religious” (55). This assertion, though it might be read as a traditional view of the Jewish woman’s role in the family—she is meant to support male religious learning and practice, not aspire to learn herself—may also indicate to the reader that Sophie is in fact just as Americanized, and as distanced from Jewish collective memory as her brothers.

At the same time as Sophie is being cast as a romanticized, traditional figure for Zalkin and Reb Avrom, another dynamic in Zalkin’s pursuit of Sophie emerges. As Zalkin and the cantor engage in Talmudic debate, “Reb Avrom Lieb fell in love with his daughter’s suitor on the spot” (55). This move into the rhetoric of romantic love is, to some degree, matched by Zalkin who, as he gazes upon Sophie and “her old father, all gesticulations and radiance, by her side,” is filled with an overwhelming desire to “kiss them both” (55). The use of the modern language of romantic love—particularly in a same-sex context—is, at first blush, rather curious. As Cahan’s autobiography describes, “the word ‘love’ was not used [in the Old World] in reference to Jews. If a Jewish bridegroom loves his bride, one said, ‘He wants her,’ or ‘She pleases him,’ or ‘He faints for her.’ But love—love was for gentiles, primarily, wealthy gentry” (in Joseph 75). Moreover, as Joseph asserts, the idea of romantic love “posed a clear danger” to Jews seeking to maintain “and reproduce orthodox communities” (74) in America in that it encouraged extra-communal attachments. Nevertheless, as I argued in my analysis of Eaton’s stories, the idea of
using the language of love in the service of illustrating other sorts of bonds, such as the idea of
the national family, was prevalent at this moment in history. In Cahan’s texts, specifically, the
language of romantic love is often used to comment upon the boundaries which, supposedly,
delineate and consecrate Jewish identity and tradition. The “love language” between Zalkin and
the cantor emphasizes the fact that, because female identity is bound up in that of her father or
husband in Jewish patriarchal tradition, it hardly matters whether or not Sophie is attracted to
Zelkin; female desire can be pushed to the periphery without compromising the Jewish
“familial” bond.

Furthermore, Zalkin and Reb Leib’s “love” blossoms in a very specific context: the
Jewish domestic space which itself is emblematic of the larger Jewish “family” and its memory
tradition. As Chaim I. Waxman remarks, “In Jewish history and tradition, the family is
considered to be the most important institution for shaping ethnic and religious identity and
transmitting Judaism’s basic norms and values. . . . it is the institution primarily responsible for
Jewish continuity” (59). In this domestic context, romantic love’s disruptive possibilities and
other “contaminating” American influences can be contained by the insularity of Jewish family
life—a point which is further underscored by Sophie’s attempts to perform her father’s music on
the family piano. Like her religious education, Sophie’s music education is, we are told, “barely
sufficient” (55). She can play “by ear” and “had a knack for memorizing…and picking [a tune]
out on the piano” but she struggles to “represent the keys she touched by notes and ‘accidentals’”
or to indicate “time and phrasing” (55). Zalkin recognizes that “her playing was a poor
performance” (55) but by focusing his attention upon neither the quality of the performance or
the non-traditional tune, but rather, upon “the room” in which the performance takes place, Zalkin is able to read this moment as the epitome of “‘heaven fearing’ peace and affection…the ancient Judaism and the family warmth to which [Zalkin] had been a stranger since a boy” (55).

As section two draws to a close, Sophie’s silence works to underscore how Jewish femininity can be bounded as much by inclusion in, as it is by exclusion from the insular Jewish community. She is silent externally as Zalkin “rattle[s] on, without letting her answer his questions” (56) and muted, similarly, internally: “She was forever bubbling over with the solemn consciousness of being on the eve of the greatest event of her life, but she was haunted by a dim impression that there was an annoying tang to her otherwise complete happiness. What that was, she never paused to ask herself” (56). As was the case in “The Apostate,” Sophie’s ambivalence toward her marriage may be seen as a metaphor for Jewish ambivalence about assimilation: on the one hand, the desperate desire for inclusion in American life; on the other hand, fear of what will be lost in such a “marriage.” But, unlike Michalina, Sophie appears to have found, in the thoroughly Americanized, Jewish Zalkin, a match which would preclude her from needing to choose between Jewish and American traditions and identities. Nevertheless, Sophie’s silence on the course her life is taking speaks to the sense that, as a woman, her destiny (marriage) is not a choice at all, but rather, an inevitability—a view emphasized by the language used by the cantor to describe Sophie’s “transference” from being her father’s daughter to being Zalkin’s fiancé: “Do you know what you are taking from me? Merely a daughter? No. It is a treasure” (57). The notion that Sophie may, indeed, must be “taken” from one man by another underscores the lack of participation on Sophie’s part; a similar point is made by Kress, who, looking at the
language of “Rev Avrom” notes that terms “like ‘predestined one’ to describe the suitor” points to Sophie’s inability to choose an alternate outcome for her life (32).

In this way, Sophie’s silence reveals how the context of marriage places her in precisely the same circumstance as Michalina, transforming her from an autonomous individual into a representative, commodity-type entity for the community at large. Upon Sophie’s first public appearance in the synagogue following her engagement, “overdressed and with Zalkin’s huge diamond brooch flaming at her throat,” Sophie herself acknowledges her commodification: “So I am a bride and everyone is looking at me and my brooch,’ she said in her heart’ (56). Sophie’s own consciousness of the ways her new role as “a bride” is tied to the brooch at her throat indicates an understanding of how this gendered role functions, like Reb Avrom’s domestic space, to both contain her own selfhood within the Jewish memory tradition and to modify any excessive representational significance. In the context of “a bride,” the object which might represent American materialism—the brooch—is transformed in the eyes of those who are “staring,” into a mark of adherence to tradition and, thus, to the “predestined” fate of Jewish womanhood; “the bride” will shore up tenuous Jewish male identity and preserve Jewish collective memory, even as she is excluded from full participation in Jewish religious life by virtue of her sex. The cantor himself highlights this point when he asserts his own commitment to tradition to Zalkin: “I pray to God as my father did. None of your written music! None except what [Sophie] will scribble down to start her father on a forgotten tune once in a while.” (55).
Sophie’s “scribblings,” may enable her father to adhere to the tradition of his father(s), even if this role as transcriber, not creator, emphasizes her own limits within that tradition, but, at the same time, the text hints at an irony in her actions: while the cantor equates his tunes with Jewish tradition, Zalkin has asserted previously that they are nothing of the kind. If we accept Zalkin’s view, Sophie’s transcriptions are not, in fact, a recapitulation of the tradition of Rev Avrom’s father(s); rather, her transcription of her father’s tunes functions much like the text itself: to make a record of a new, evolving, modernized Jewish tradition—one which epitomizes multidirectional interactions between cultures. This tantalizing moment of possibility is, however, fleeting—thwarted by Zalkin and Rev Aroma’s romantic views of an “authentic,” unchanging tradition, embodied in the person of Sophie, and marked by the “flaming” brooch.

And yet, even as the brooch appears to cement Sophie’s tie to tradition, and her representational role therein, the fact that Zalkin takes the brooch back from Sophie each time her true feelings are articulated, and her engagement to Zalkin is, as a result, broken, reveals the artificial and precarious nature of this “fixing” of Sophie’s identity—like the brooch, or even her status as “a bride,” the identity is not inherent to her being. At the same time, Sophie’s assertion of her voice cannot free her from the representational identity Zalkin and her father desire her to perform. Her words do have an impact—her Yom Kipper Eve confession to Zalkin about her ambivalence towards him is particularly disruptive to his romantic fantasies: “I thought I didn’t care for you…I cursed you in my mind” (58)—and she does, briefly, cause Zalkin to call off their engagement; nevertheless, both Zalkin and Rev Avrom appear to view her words with a certain patronizing air, and neither man takes them as absolute. Zalkin convinces himself that Sophie’s
indifference to him is “all a foolish fancy in her, and once she is my wife it will wear off and she will get to love me. They are all like that” (61). For his part, Rev Avrom’s “attachment” to Zalkin causes him to ignore the fact that Sophie “was sincerely congratulating herself upon her deliverance from the match” (58-9) and, instead, to continue to push his daughter to accept Zalkin.

Given these circumstances, an additional facet of Sophie’s record of her father’s tunes must be considered—namely, that the record is Sophie’s attempt to resist the choicelessness thrust upon her by virtue of her sex. Rather than giving birth to a multicultural child like Michalina, Sophie works to create a written text which reflects a multidirectional tradition. If her verbal protestations against her “fate” will be treated with condescension, perhaps she can be taken seriously and defy the limitations of competitive memory by claiming the authority of the written word. Her written record of the music, meant to accompany Hebrew prayers¹⁴² during the Days of Awe is, significantly, the kind of artifact which, in Jewish tradition, is the production and purview of men. As Anita Norich asserts in her article, “Yiddish Literature in the United States,” the Jewish textual tradition is associated “with religious learning, midrash¹⁴³ and

¹⁴² As distinct from the prayers written by and for women, which were, traditionally, in Yiddish, not Hebrew. See, for example, Samuel Niger’s often-cited essay in 1913 (“Di Yidishe Literatur un di Lezerin” [Yiddish literature and the female reader]) in which he asserted the significant role of women in Yiddish letters as readers and writers, contrasting it with the role Hebrew assumed for male readers.


¹⁴⁴ “Statements that are not Scripturally dependent and that pertain to ethics, traditions and actions of the Rabbis; the non-legal (non-halakhic) material of the Talmud” (Jewish Women's Archive. "aggadah." (Viewed on December 4, 2014) <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/glossary/aggadah>).

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aggadah⁴⁴. Men...could associate storytelling with tradition; they could tell their stories in the prayer house, between prayers, even as prayers. Women, for the most part, could not.”

And yet, even as Sophie attempts to find an alternative to the fate her father, Zalkin, and her community at large have charted for her, the difficulty standing in the way of her independence raises itself, wrapped in the rhetoric of death. In section five, Sophie and Zalkin have ended their engagement for the second time, and Sophie confronts her father, who is, once again, pushing her to marry:

“I know, I know—you won’t rest until I have married him. You are my murderer, papa.”

“Is it my fault that he has grown into my heart and that I want to see you happily married? Do I want him for myself?”

“‘You are my murderer, papa!’ she gasped.” (61).

What Sophie recognizes, of course, is that her father does, most certainly, want Zalkin “for himself,” and is willing to sacrifice his daughter’s desires in order to get him. From this perspective, it would seem that Sophie’s only chance to avoid “death” is to break her tie with her father completely. But if her father is indeed, “her murderer” he is also her touchstone. While Sophie recognizes that marrying Zalkin is a dead end, she cannot conceive of a truly independent selfhood, nor does the story itself give any sense of how Sophie might distinguish clearly between what she wants for herself, and what she desires (and does) as a result of her tie to Rev
Avrom. Even her record of her father’s tunes cannot be seen as fully autonomous, predicated as it is upon Rev Avrom for the actual creative act. Thus, as Rev Avrom falls ill and weakens, Sophie finds herself growing “faint with terror” (61), intimating her recognition that, once her father dies, Sophie will, herself, suffer death—a different sort of death-of-the-self than that which occurs for women via marriage, but a death nonetheless: as a woman without a father or a husband, and thus, without a predetermined role to play, Sophie will be left without a place in the Jewish community.

And indeed, upon Rev Avrom’s death, Sophie’s feared displacement does come to pass. Feeling “like the daughter of a forgotten general while the forces of her country mustered and paraded on the eve of war” (63), Sophie wanders the “squalid” streets (62) of the tenement in the story’s penultimate scene, attempting to interest other cantors in her father’s final composition, and failing: “they would not even unroll her music” (63). The sense of intra-communal containment which bespoke cosy domesticity and quaint evocation of the past in the first part of the story is transformed into something “cruel” and “terrible” (63) and the “voices of a synagogue choir” (62) speak now of exclusion. Though the text makes it clear that the cantors’ professional jealousy and personal vanity play a large part in the rejection of Sophie’s music, the rejection of the tunes also signal a larger communal dilemma. Sophie’s music has the potential to bring ancient tradition and modern Jewish life together, transforming them both. Like Cahan’s own stories, the music underscores the fact that a multidirectional, inclusive tradition is possible;
but the texts alone cannot bring about a transformed understanding of collective memory and identity: it is up to readers to “unroll” the text and act upon what they find there.\footnote{As many critics have noted, Cahan’s Howellsian Realism was premised upon the notion of revealing the world as it is in order to provoke social change.}

While Sophie bemoans the fact that, for the community at large, her father is “gone—gone and forgotten, as if there had never been a Reb Avrom Leib” (63), for Sophie herself, Rev Avrom’s memory is omnipresent. Like Michalina’s stepmother, the specter of Rev Avrom works upon Sophie’s mind, and guides her actions in ways that suggest his memory has greater power than the man himself ever did. But while Michalina raged against her condemning specter, Sophie embraces her ghost in a “transport of sorrow and piety” and with a wish to “do anything, anything to please him” (63). Sophie’s idealization of her father, though in many ways a direct inversion of Michalina’s vilification of her stepmother, has very similar effects—making her, like Michalina, a slave to a memory that does not change, that cannot evolve. When Sophie turns to Zalkin in the story’s final scene, it is not because she misses her sometime-lover or needs his money to survive, but rather, because she believes that he “appreciated her father and his tunes” and that he can “share her grief and her ecstasy over her father’s memory” (63). Sophie’s inability to distinguish between what the tunes once represented to her—a possible means of asserting her independence—and what they meant to Zalkin, and have come to mean for her—a tie to the past—indicates the degree to which Sophie has allowed her father’s memory to dictate her perspective. It is certainly with the memory of her father foremost in her mind that, when Zalkin proposes again, Sophie, once more, accepts him:
“Yes, yes,” she answered, impetuously. The street was dark. From the synagogue came the hum of muffled merriment. It sounded like a wail. “Yes, yes,” she repeated in a whisper. And as if afraid lest morning might bring better counsel, she hastened to bind herself by adding, with a tremor in her voice: ‘I swear by my father that I will.” (64)

This final vow, accompanied by the funereal “wail” from the synagogue is, like the language of death that precedes it, a clear warning that to bind oneself unreservedly to an unchangeable past is to risk cutting oneself off from the future. This is not to say Cahan is wholly critical of Sophie maintaining a relationship with the past. It’s not wrong that Sophie misses her father or wishes to honor him, but, as the text makes clear, fear of displacement can masquerade as love; so it goes with the romantic idealization of tradition. But to reject tradition entirely is to accept choicelessness from the other side—to accept the assertion that the immigrant must choose between ethnic and national memory and identity. Moreover, it is to miss the benefits that the past can offer the present. In one descriptive passage of “The Russian Jew in America,” Cahan, though himself in no way religious, argues, nevertheless, that Judaism and its incumbent traditions can, in fact, prove to be highly useful, both as an antidote to to the sufferings of modern life, and as a locus for positive social change that can transcend the Jewish conclave:

The orthodox synagogue is not merely a house of prayer; it is an intellectual centre, a mutual aid society, a fountain of self-denying altruism, and a literary club, no less than a
place of worship. The study-rooms of the hundreds of synagogues...are crowded every evening in the week with poor street peddlers, and with those gray-haired, misunderstood sweat-shop hands of whom the public hears every time a tailor strike is declared. So few are the joys which this world has to spare for these overworked, enfeebled victims of "the inferno of modern times" that their religion is to many of them the only thing which makes life worth living. ...they sing beautiful melodies, some of them composed in the caves and forests of Spain, where the wandering people worshiped the God of their fathers at the risk of their lives; and these and the sighs and sobs of the Days of Awe, the thrill that passes through out the heartbroken talith-covered congregation when the shoffar blows, the mirth which fills the house of God and the tenement house upon the Rejoicing of the law, the tearful greetings and humbled peacemakings on Atonement Eve, the mysterious light of the Chanucah candles, the gifts and charities of Purim, the joys and kingly solemnities of Passover,--all these pervade the atmosphere of the Ghetto with a beauty and a charm. (138)

That, as Cahan puts it, “the sweat-shop striker and the religious enthusiast are found in the same person” (138) may seem odd to the non-Jewish reader, but this is only because the belief in the competitive model of memory prevails, not just within the Jewish community, but nation-wide. Sophie, like Michalina, is not able to escape her circumstances, but in these tragic endings,
Cahan is not only showing things “as they are,” but, further, “why they are.” To adopt a multidirectional approach to memory will not preclude the restrictions and constrictions that the immigrant—and women in particular—may face, however, “The Apostate” and “The Daughter of Rev Avrom Leib” both reveal Cahan’s understanding that the way forward for America lies not in asking the immigrant to choose between keeping or abandoning an idealized, mutually exclusive group memory, but in pursuing practical, productive, intercultural traditions.

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146 As Kress argues, “the critical realism encouraged by [Cahan’s friend and champion] Howells would show things as they are and thus provoke social change” (37). See also Chametzky’s discussion of Howells, pp. 22, 34, 37, and Thomas’s analysis of Howellsian realism, pp.123-5.
Conclusion

Writing in a milieu that had long espoused a nationalistic ideology of white patriarchal hegemony, the authors of the literature I have been examining in this dissertation were looking to imagine and record new, race-and-gender-inclusive possibilities and paradigms for national collective memory at the turn of the century. As my three chapters show, the articulations of gendered memory in these reconfigurations were diverse, but each author, in his or her own way, was committed to offering readers alternative forms of Americanness than the formations allowed by a “competitive” approach of to collective memory and identity. Hopkins’s argument in favor of inclusive “public talk” as the basis for an integrated and more ethical collective memory challenged hegemonic definitions of Americanness, and worked to reunite the divided American “family”—both within and beyond her novel’s pages. Eaton’s analysis of the plasticity of selfhood, and her critiques of the exclusionary discourses governing America’s racial and gendered hierarchies, its foreign imperialism and its figurations of the national family offered a vision of Americanness based upon the individual’s freedom to claim Americanness on his or her own terms—a circumstance made possible through recognition of the natural affinities between people, and by the subsequent acknowledgement that a nation is a nation by “consent” (Renan 83). Finally, Cahan’s explorations of gendered performance in intra-ethnic manifestations of the “competitive” view of memory, tradition and group identity, posited an alternative sort of Jewish-Americanness which is evolving and discursive in character, combining validation of Jews’ distinct history with a broad understanding of how that cultural heritage and experience can inform a larger national narrative of evolving, cosmopolitan...
modernity. In each case, elucidating the texts’ various negotiations of gendered collective
memory, and its relation to group and national identity, serves to reorient understanding of the
dialectical relationship between storytelling, record-making and theories of American
nationalism during The Progressive era.


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