"I HAD ALWAYS THOUGHT I WAS A YANKEE": CREATING THE REPRESENTATIVE AMERICAN SELF IN 20TH CENTURY ETHNIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by

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Abstract

"I HAD ALWAYS THOUGHT I WAS A YANKEE":
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Adviser: Professor Nancy K. Miller

"'I Had Always Thought I Was a Yankee': Creating the Representative American Self in 20th Century Ethnic Autobiography" questions the common desire to read literary works by ethnic American authors as representing, whether accurately or not, life in a minority culture to readers belonging to outside groups. It argues that such works must instead be read as archetypically American. In the process of negotiation between the writers' ethnic origin and the broader national culture, these autobiographies play out, in a heightened version, the self-invention central to American mythology. A key concept to this dissertation is that of "leaving home," which Robert Bellah names as an essential aspect of American individuation. Americans turn to their peers, not to their parents, for role models, and eventually find some reconciliation between the two, or between "consent" and "descent" in Werner Sollors's terms. The autobiographical act takes self-invention even further. Writers assume critical distance not only from their families but from themselves in order to create a textual self located in a literary tradition, rather than a biological one.

Mary Antin, in *The Promised Land* (1912), establishes herself as an American citizen through processes of self-invention in life and writing, while Eva Hoffman (*Lost in*

Translation, 1990) and Vivian Gornick (*Fierce Attachments*, 1987) create a literary heritage by adapting and criticizing earlier texts like Antin's. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), Jade Snow Wong facilitates her adolescent rebellion by misreading her parents as old-fashioned Chinese; the precarious political position of her Japanese American family during World War II prevents Monica Sone from doing the same in *Nisei Daughter* (1953). Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), another descendant of Wong's book, generated controversy between those who read it as an oppressive parent that limits expressions of Asian American identity, and those who read it as an inspiring ancestor for their own writing. All the writers considered here, in their readings and misreadings of earlier sources, establish their own books as branches of a family tree of American literature.

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Finally, I thank my family, particularly my parents, who let me leave home, and let me return.

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Introduction

Ethnic American authors have often been judged according to their perceived degree of authenticity or the accuracy of their representation of their community. To take only one well-known example, the controversy surrounding Maxine Hong Kingston's 1976 *The Woman Warrior* hinged on issues of authentic representation. Kingston did not translate Chinese terms accurately, her critics argued, nor did she represent Chinese myths and history appropriately; her claims about gender bias in the Chinese community were wildly exaggerated, in the experience of her commentators, or at any rate should not be aired in front of a public already willing to believe the worst of Asians. Frank Chin opposed the work partly according to a belief that autobiography is a form unknown in China, and Ya-jie Zhang disliked it at first "because the stories in it seemed somewhat twisted, Chinese perhaps in origin but not really Chinese any more, full of American imagination" (17). Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong summarizes these criticisms in her article "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese American Autobiographical Controversy," noting that "a number of Chinese-American critics have repeatedly denounced *The Woman Warrior*, questioning its autobiographic status, its authenticity, its representativeness, and thereby Kingston's personal integrity" (29). Clearly, the stakes are high.

However, as *The Woman Warrior* demonstrates, authenticity is at once a more complicated and more straightforward issue than such critics have made it out to be. Kingston famously inquires of her readers, "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with

stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (5-6). The outlines of an authentic Chinese American identity are not easy to draw, since the lives of individuals are affected by so many different factors, and Kingston's concluding question is particularly telling. "Chinese tradition" is the name for the authentic, "the movies" a source of stereotypes and the inauthentic, yet the influence of these sources may be indistinguishable.

The problem of defining authenticity crops up throughout ethnic American literature. Describing his preparation to participate in a U.S./Japan Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship in *Turning Japanese*, sansei David Mura confesses, "For me Japan was cheap baseballs, Godzilla, weird sci-fi movies like *Star Man*" (8), echoing Kingston's thoughts on movies as a source of cultural information. He claims to speak more Yiddish than Japanese, and his parents, when they visit him abroad, fare little better. At a restaurant, they embarrass their son and confuse their Japanese waiter by asking where the *benjo* is, employing a term for "restroom" (really closer to "outhouse") commonly used by nisei but essentially unknown in contemporary Japan (315). The "Japanese" culture Mura's parents have maintained bears little resemblance to the culture they encounter in Japan. When in *Snake Hips* Anne Thomas Soffee takes up belly dance, she worries about the implications for her Lebanese identity if she "was no more able to do the *debke* than I was to do a Hopi rain dance" (178). Authenticity is preferred in the dance community of Soffee's Virginia hometown, but the concept is nonetheless slippery, as when,

> fresh from a trip to Cairo, Jen took to wearing black bicycle pants under her purple *bedlah*, because that's what the dancers in Egypt were wearing. Never mind that they were wearing them to escape the wrath of the *muttawa* should they

> show too much leg. No one in the audience in Richmond knew that. In fact, they didn't even know that anyone in Cairo was wearing bicycle pants. They just thought Jen had lost her mind. (171)

The bicycle pants worn under a revealing costume were, on one hand, authentic, representing dance as actually performed in the Middle East. On the other hand, this costuming represents a particular moment of severity of the religious police, rather than an extended tradition of dance or, presumably, the dancers' own preference. Furthermore, the bicycle pants no longer make sense when transferred from their original context to Virginia, where wearing *bedlah* is not a punishable offense. Although perceived as a serious issue that reflects on an author's trustworthiness, as Wong writes of Kingston's critics, authenticity in practice can be difficult to gauge.

The issue of authenticity is streamlined in *The Woman Warrior* by Kingston's speculations on the elements of Chinese culture her parents maintained, but would not explain: "I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along" (185). Culture, in short, consists not of the maintenance of practices dating back thousands of years, but of the actual day-to-day practices of individuals and communities. Ethnicity, writes Michael M.J. Fischer, "is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and … it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control" (195). In short, whatever one actually does is authentic. "I had always thought I was a Yankee," Monica Sone writes in *Nisei Daughter*, "because after all I had been born on Occidental and Main Street" (18-19). Until she is told otherwise, it does not occur to her that speaking Japanese or eating with chopsticks is

incompatible with being American; they are simply the particular habits of a girl and her family from Seattle. As Kingston suggests, Sone's family too is making it up as they go along.

A better question to ask of *The Woman Warrior* and of other ethnic American texts is therefore not *whether* they are authentic, but *in what contexts* they are authentic. Kingston, for instance, can hardly be expected to write an authentically Chinese text; born in California, she is not Chinese, but American. Zhang, who at first objected to the "American imagination" at work in *The Woman Warrior*, found that she could appreciate the book when she stopped trying to understand it as Chinese: "It is, after all, an American story, not a Chinese one. Some of my assumptions were wrong from the very beginning because I am Chinese" (18). A common tendency in considering Chinese American literature, in this instance, or ethnic American literature more broadly, is to focus on the first half of this compound to the exclusion of the second. Attempting to clear up misconceptions about *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston explains that "When we say we are Chinese, it is short for Chinese-American or ethnic Chinese; the 'American' is implicit" ("Cultural Mis-readings" 59-60). However, the convenience of this usage may be outweighed by the false impressions it permits, as Kingston is compelled to explain that "I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel" (58). In this dissertation, I wish to call attention to the American aspects of ethnic American literature, which are so easily ignored or forgotten, yet essential in understanding these texts.

The concern for authentic representation of ethnic identity tends to be linked closely to a suspicion of the ability of outsider groups (particularly white American) to read

ethnic texts appropriately. This issue played a major role in the *Woman Warrior* debate, and Philip Roth encountered similar objections to the stories in his collection *Goodbye Columbus*. Roth's portrayal of the conniving Sheldon Grossbart in "Defender of the Faith" provoked readers to suggest that the story perpetuated a dangerous stereotype that was likely to lead to another Holocaust, and should instead have been published, according to one rabbi, "in Hebrew – in an Israeli magazine or newspaper" where it "would have been judged exclusively from a literary point of view" (163). These critics seem to expect readers from outside groups (here, Gentiles) to approach ethnic texts as explications of a foreign culture, rather than works where, as in other literature, they both see themselves and learn about others who are not themselves. "It does not occur to the rabbi," Roth writes, "that there are Gentiles who will read the story intelligently" (166). I would add that it does not occur to such readers that Gentiles, or other supposedly "outside" groups, in fact may constitute an "inside" group of readers; that is, all may share an American identity which gives a cultural context for understanding the text. Author and reader may have similar experiences and attitudes, based on common history and myths. Ethnic American cultures are, after all, varieties of American culture. Although the cultural identification may not be complete, it is nonetheless significant. It is true, for instance, that numerous reviewers of *The Woman Warrior* inappropriately exoticized Kingston's experience; at the same time, however, Zhang initially struggled with the book because she is not American.

Keeping in mind that authenticity consists in what individuals actually do in a given time and place, I do not argue that Americanness resides in a particular set of characteristics acquired by immigrants and their descendants. Mura's parents, who

cooked "*futomaki*, *mazegohan*, *teriyaki*, *kamaboko*," are no less American than their son, whose childhood preferences were for "McDonald's, pizza, hot dogs, tuna-fish salad" (8). Nor do I wish to over-emphasize the adage that America is "a nation of immigrants" in which we are all either factionalized into multiple disparate groups or melted into one homogeneous society. Instead, I argue that the negotiation between ethnic origin and broader American culture plays out, in a heightened version, the self-invention that is central to our national mythology.

In his 1835 *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville noted the emergence in America of individualism (as opposed to what "our fathers [knew as] *égoisme* (selfishness)" [587]), a drive to separate from society at large and to function as a distinct entity. The theme threads through much American writing; Ralph Waldo Emerson advocated self-reliance, while Walt Whitman celebrated and sang himself. Tocqueville saw individualism as a fact but not necessarily as a virtue: in a culture governed by this philosophy, "the woof of time is every instant broken, and the track of generations effaced. Those who went before are soon forgotten; of those who will come after, no one has any idea: the interest of man is confined to those in close propinquity to himself" (589). Taking up Tocqueville's diagnosis in terms of twentieth century social science, Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart* identifies two essential aspects of American individuation as "leaving home" and "leaving church," a sometimes-temporary separation from the life and values of one's parents in order to forge one's own distinct personality. "Separation and individuation are issues that must be faced by all human beings," he admits, "but leaving home in its American sense is not. In many peasant societies, the problem is staying home – living with one's parents until their death and worshipping

parents and ancestors all one's life.… For us, leaving home is the normal expectation" (57). One may maintain a warm relationship with one's parents, and return to their home or beliefs, but American culture demands that they be examined critically and accepted by choice. For many native-born Americans, these separations can be somewhat metaphorical, involving perhaps a cross-town move and one's own choice of career. But no one leaves "home" and "church" as dramatically as the new American, whose physical separation from the country of origin and submersion into a new culture create a need to reinvent the self as distinct from parents and heritage.

Even after the literal departure occurring in immigration, the notion of leaving home and church continues to resonate in later generations. Describing his name change from Nudelman in his autobiography *Lost in America*, Sherwin Nuland explains that he and his brother had to convince their father Meyer not to change his name, too. "[T]he transformation of our name was integral to the process of escape. And from what was it that I was trying to escape if not Meyer himself, and his strangeness in this America into which I was so determined to liberate myself? He was the distillation of everything clinging to me, everything of which I so desperately wanted to be rid" (144). The continuing process of assimilation results in the next generation's desire to leave home, to distance themselves from their parents. Such specifically ethnic stories, however, represent manifestations of the American Dream of upward mobility that is common to all, and makes similar demands of individuals regardless of ethnicity. The Ragged Dick of Horatio Alger's novel by the same name is of no specified ethnicity or immigrant generation; because this is a novelistic version of the American Dream, his parents, conveniently and symbolically, are dead at the beginning of the story.

If parents are unsatisfactory role models, then individuals must look elsewhere for instruction. In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors "takes the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral, definitions of American identity – between *consent* and *descent* – as the central drama in American culture" (5-6). In Sollors's terms, we look beyond our parents to discover real or adopted "founding fathers" in the past, making all Americans "third generation" in their habits. Margaret Mead's study *Culture and Commitment*, which illustrates ways in which generations learn from each other, presents an even more radical deconstruction of cultural transmission within the family. She uses immigrant families to exemplify "cofigurative" societies in which children are guided more by their peers than by their parents. This is clearly seen, for example, in Mary Antin's depiction of her parents in her 1912 memoir *The Promised Land*: "In their bewilderment and uncertainty they needs must trust us children to learn from such models as the tenements afforded" (213). Here, identity is developed horizontally, between peers, rather than passed vertically from parent to child, in a pattern Lisa Lowe describes in *Immigrant Acts*. But it should be kept in mind that the cofigurative model has always had a strong presence in America. Native-born Americans are not exempt from the picking and choosing among the values of peers; "if we are to be different from our fathers and also different from the white marble gods they found in Plutarch or the grizzly patriarchs they chose from the Bible, then we must imitate contemporaries" (Sayre 155). Robert F. Sayre cites Scott Fitzgerald, John Adams and even the famously "self-made" Benjamin Franklin as examples of this phenomenon (156), which is not necessarily limited to those new to America. Each generation, as Tocqueville suggested, reinvents itself.

Given this cultural emphasis on self-creation, it's no wonder autobiography plays such a large role in the American literary tradition.[1] From Protestant conversion narratives to Benjamin Franklin to Henry Adams to Gertrude Stein, the American bookshelf is filled with individuals telling their own stories. Jay Parini calls autobiography "the essential American genre" (11); Sayre writes that "autobiography may be the preeminent kind of American expression. Commencing before the Revolution and continuing into our own time, America and autobiography have been peculiarly linked" (147). Evaluating the connection between autobiography and American culture, Sayre considers landmark autobiographies (those of Benjamin Franklin, Walt Whitman, Henry Adams, and Frederick Douglass) rather than "the memoirs of military leaders and statesmen" or unsung private individuals, explaining that "the former is perhaps too much a citizen; the latter takes his citizenship more or less for granted. Thus neither has been so valuable to other Americans as the autobiographers to whom citizenship, in the broadest sense, is a major issue in their total development" (168). Given this criterion, it seems logical to expand Sayre's ideas to include immigrant writing, for perhaps no one is more concerned with citizenship than the immigrant. Here the issues of citizenship are played out explicitly, for high stakes.

Citizenship is central to the autobiography of Richard Rodriguez, another author who, like Roth and Kingston, has come under fire for his representations of ethnicity. The nuns who taught him English also taught him "the great lesson of school, that I had a public identity" (19). In requiring him to speak up in the language of public life, they showed him that he had the right and the responsibility to engage with society at large,

[1] Throughout, I use the terms "autobiography" and "memoir" interchangeably to indicate writing by individuals, in any form, about their own lives.

not only in the private sphere of his family. He was not necessarily "other" in relationship to *los gringos*; instead, he was equal. "At last, seven years old, I came to believe what had been technically true since my birth: I was an American citizen" (22). For other writers as well, such as Mary Antin, public school has been the catalyst for citizenship. While autobiography has often taken the form of the confession, in America, it is perhaps more likely to appear as an education, as in *The Education of Henry Adams* as well as *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. One reason for this may be the close tie between education and citizenship portrayed by Antin and others.

Another reason is the role of education in autobiography. Kingston explains the popularity of *The Woman Warrior* by associating it with the perennially bestselling "how-to" books, as a work that explains "How to Live," "How to be Alive," "How Not to Give Up," "How to Understand One Another," "How to Cut Through Silences," "How to Break Through Blocks in People so that We Can Truly Communicate With One Another," "How to Keep the Family Together" (Fishkin 787). Autobiography serves in part as instruction, and memoirists justify their personal disclosures through gestures toward posterity; Anne Bradstreet wrote "to [her] dear children," while Benjamin Franklin's autobiography is addressed "Dear Son." Franklin's strained relationship with his son, then the Royal Governor of New Jersey, suggests that his intended advisees were "the apprentices and tradesmen, the legions of American 'sons' who might someday read him when they were just starting their businesses" (Sayre 158). Franklin's flexible, selective approach to genealogy is mirrored in the popular description of George Washington as "the father of his country," and since, "in American mythology, ancestors

may be adopted by consent" (Sollors 229), Mary Antin uses Washington to locate herself as an American citizen, distant though he was in time, gender, and ethnicity.

Furthermore, texts themselves produce their own genealogies, in a process that further denaturalizes immigration; this is suggested, for instance, in Rodriguez's choice of title, *The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, which echoes that of *The Education of Henry Adams*. He claims, in the prologue of his autobiography, that his birth parents "are no longer my parents, in a cultural sense" (4), replaced instead by authors like "Montaigne and Shakespeare and Lawrence. They are mine now" (5). In her 1989 *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman takes Mary Antin as a foremother, and Marianne Hirsch writes in "Pictures of a Displaced Girlhood" that "Eva Hoffman's story is my story" (219). Such genealogies are created when readers respond personally to these texts, in what Susan Suleiman calls "'strong autobiographical [reading],' which consists of reading another's story 'as if it were one's own.' *This could have been my story*, to paraphrase the insight of Simone de Beauvoir's heroine in her novel *The Blood of Others*" (8). Strong autobiographical reading can help to contextualize one's own life in history and culture, and "[p]erhaps most precious of all, autobiographical reading can lead to more writing – your own. What I call 'strong autobiographical reading,' leads, in the best of cases, to autobiographical writing" (8). This answers a question raised by Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact, that is, that readers agree to approach a text as autobiographical when the name on its title page is the same as that of its protagonist (13-14): when readers agree to read a work as an autobiography, what, exactly, are they doing differently from reading it as a novel? As more recent critics such as Suleiman

have argued, they are identifying with the text in a heightened way, and using it to define and even to write their own selves and stories.

Such deeply personal identification is not necessarily limited to works in which the reader's experience seems nearly exactly mirrored. In *Getting Personal* Nancy K. Miller concludes her discussion of Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments* with her own autobiographical scene, "Coda: Loehmann's, Or, Shopping with My Mother," in response to "the autobiography that made me want to teach autobiography, and also to write one" (138). The similarities between her life and Gornick's prompt a sense of close identification. Later, in *But Enough About Me*, she expands her discussion not only to other texts which resonate for her on a personal level (Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters* and Hettie Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones*) but also to the ways in which those texts are *unlike* her own experience. In the book, she argues "first, that the subjects of life writing … are as much others as ourselves; … second, that reading the lives of other people with whom we do *not* identify has as much to tell us (if not more) about our lives as the lives with which we do. … [D]isidentification takes us as readers on a (sometimes circuitous, which is the whole point) journey back to ourselves" (xv-xvi). Conversely, an exaggerated sense of closeness to the subject of autobiography may actually hinder "strong autobiographical reading"; "paradoxically," Suleiman writes, "the closeness to the experience may also provoke a reverse reaction, a refusal to read autobiographically, or to read at all" (205).

Issues of identification and representation have been essential to autobiography since its earliest days. Rousseau justified his *Confessions* by explaining that he was "not made like any that exist" (5), while Montaigne wrote personal essays because "each man bears

the entire form of man's estate" (611). Both strands of autobiographical purpose have coexisted and, paradoxically, coincided through the history of the form. "There is a long tradition in autobiography of representing the self as utterly unique and, on precisely this basis, able to stand for others through acts of self-interpretation and self-scrutiny," writes Leigh Gilmore. "Self-scrutiny enables an autobiographer to be representative more than any particular set of experiences" (19). Established though the tradition may be, however, suspicion is sometimes cast on it when ethnicity enters the picture. Yet the processes of identification and disidentification inherent in autobiographical reading apply further to the reading of ethnic literature.

Not only an opportunity to glimpse the exotic, texts of an ethnicity other than the reader's also allow a clarification of the reader's own culture, in its differences and similarities to that presented in the text. "What if the text draws, attracts by virtue of its 'otherness,' another face," Judith Oster speculates of cross-ethnic reading in *Crossing Cultures*, "with each holding the gaze long enough to say: there's something here I recognize, that in its similarity *and* differences helps me to carve out this being that I am" (19). Readers may find commonalities based not in ethnicity, but in other areas such as age or gender, that form a basis for dealing with ethnic difference (witness, for example, the popularity of *The Woman Warrior* in women's studies – readers who are not Chinese American have nonetheless identified with the book's portrayal of discrimination based on gender). Furthermore, the underlying commonalities of American stories may create a bond for American readers of any ethnicity; the radical departures of immigration and assimilation are closely related to the act of self-invention, fostered by leaving home, an experience common to those of majority groups as well.

Identification is an important part of the reading process, but over-identification may in fact fuel complaints that a text is insufficiently authentic or representative: such reactions seem to suggest resentment that a story similar to one's own does not match it in all particulars. Some criticism of *The Woman Warrior*, for instance, seems to be fueled by over-identification, with readers such as Katheryn Fong claiming the right to evaluate the novel because of its similarity to her own life, yet ultimately criticizing it for its differences. Indeed, Suleiman suggests that autobiographical reading may become impossible if the story is *too* close, and urges flexibility in understanding what constitutes identification. "To recognize aspects of one's own life-story in another's is no doubt easier for one who has undergone some of the same experiences, in the same time and place," she writes; "but it would be far too restrictive, and wrong-headed, to suggest that *only* one who has undergone a certain experience can respond to another's story, and to its telling, 'properly' – or, in my terms, autobiographically." (204-05). If we define ourselves in relation and opposition to others, "if we are all other … then we may also explore the otherness in ourselves, which is the theme of many American autobiographical conversion stories" (Sollors 31).

Indeed, it is the theme of any autobiography, as critics have pointed out. Self-estrangement is both a spur toward autobiography, as suggested by Jean Starobinski ("one would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical change occurred in his life" [78]), and an essential element of its creative process, which requires present reflection on a past self. Georges Gusdorf explains that "autobiography is not a simple recapitulation of the past; it is also the attempt and the drama of a man struggling to reassemble himself in his own likeness at a certain moment

of his history" (43). The author of an autobiography is therefore, necessarily, a self-made man or woman, one who has made him- or herself through the text. Lynn Freed, a Jewish South African now living in the United States, broadens this notion to all writers while echoing Bellah's terminology for the key American experience. "Leaving home is perhaps the central experience of the writer's life regardless of whether he or she ever returns," Freed writes. "In a broader sense, being out of the society of home provides the remove at which the writer must live in order to see, in order to write. It is this enigma that informs the writer's perspective – the restless pursuit of a way back while remaining steadfastly at a distance" (100-101).

While the imperative of leaving home is faced by all, the nature of that home may differ widely; consequently, the form of leaving and the possibility of return also vary. Although my argument in this dissertation encompasses American life in general, I have chosen to focus primarily on two ethnic groups, Jewish and Asian American. In selecting two ethnic groups for discussion, I hope to show commonalities in experience between different groups while also contextualizing the specificity of individual ethnic experiences. To include brief discussions of a greater number of ethnicities would run the risk of inadequate contextualization and of a false sense of representativity in which each chapter comes to stand for "the" Jewish American, Asian American, African American, Latino/a, or other experience. Given enough time and space, however, a discussion of ethnic groups beyond those considered here would, I believe, give an even fuller perspective on the commonalities of American lives, and I have occasionally drawn on the writings of other groups when the connections were especially helpful.

Jewish and Asian American texts are my focus here because of their significant differences and sometimes unexpected similarities. Both groups have long histories in the United States, which has also permitted development of significant bodies of literature including work by immigrants as well as later generations. Yet the circumstances of their immigration present important contrasts. Jewish immigration centered on the east coast, and Asian on the west. More important, Jewish immigrants arrived as permanent settlers, while most Asian immigrants expected to return home one day.[2] Yet both have reached similar points of acceptance in American life; Jews are now "white folks," as Karen Brodkin explains, while Asian Americans are the new "model minority."[3]

Furthermore, certain cultural commonalities exist between the two groups, as Judith Oster explains. While Oster writes specifically of Chinese Americans, her formulations can be extended to Asian Americans more broadly defined. "[T]here is a mutual recognition between Jewish Americans and Chinese Americans," she writes, "different as their cultures are, different as they look from one another, removed in history and geography as they have been from one another" (5). Two ancient cultures, both emphasize respect for elders and for education. At home, mothers are dominant figures and food is a dominant discourse. And in both groups, girls have dealt with unequal treatment, while children of either gender have experienced mixed feelings about their

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[2] This difference may be explained not only by personal preferences and cultural differences, but by the extreme inhospitality of American policy toward immigrants from Asia. The 1790 Naturalization Law that restricted citizenship to whites only, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act that was the first regulation to ban immigration based on national origin, made it clear that Asians were not welcome as permanent residents; in the face of such hostility, return was a logical choice. For details on these and other exclusionary policies, see Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*.

[3] Such designations, of course, are problematic. Although positive on its surface, the idea of the model minority is nonetheless a stereotype, and strongly implies judgment on other ethnic groups, as well. Nonetheless, it also acknowledges the connection between ethnic groups and a common American story.

parents' high expectations of them. Most famously and humorously, the groups have been brought together in Gish Jen's novel *Mona in the Promised Land*. When Mona, a teenaged Chinese American girl with many Jewish friends in suburban Scarshill, converts to Judaism, it is not only because the cultures are different, but because they are similar, as her mother eventually observes: "What with their cultures so ancient, and so much value placed on education … and is it true that Jewish mothers are just like Chinese mothers, they know how to make their children eat?" (119) Oster, who is Jewish, writes of "the affinity I feel between the Chinese father in Kingston's *China Men*, who attaches his pigtail to a hook in the ceiling the night before his imperial examination so that he will be forced to stay awake while he studies" (27), an affinity springing from her own father's lack of sympathy for the amount of homework she had as a child; between four and six in the morning, he told her, in the small amount of time he could take away from work, he studied Torah and secular literature, and learned English as well. For Oster, the Chinese and Jewish traditions echo each other, but also classically American legends of self-improvement: "And of course there is Abraham Lincoln and his candlelit study mirrored as well for all who perpetuate the tale" (27).

The image of Lincoln and his rise from a log cabin to the presidency through the virtue of his own hard work and self-improvement also resonates with the autobiographies I discuss here. The works, which span the 20th century, tell stories of self-creation, of becoming American, becoming writers and intellectuals. And this self-creation takes place by way of figures like Lincoln, who model American behavior and establish American roots.

In the first chapter, "'I Speak for Thousands': Writing the Self into Citizenship," I consider the competing demands placed on Mary Antin as an autobiographer. Although she faces pressure not to identify herself with her own life story, making her simply a representative immigrant who reinforces popular beliefs about the melting pot, her newfound American citizenship also allows, and demands, that she speak for herself. Antin first experiences citizenship in the United States, in contrast to her life in the Russian Pale, where as a Jewish girl she was excluded from education and a role in the public sphere. Through her American schooling, Antin develops a public self, distinguishing herself through writing. Citizenship gives her a platform, an audience, and a subject matter, George Washington. The fervor with which she regards this newfound hero leads her to write a poem about him and to deliver it personally to Boston's Newspaper Row for publication.

Washington joins figures such as Louisa May Alcott and Antin's favorite teacher, Miss Dillingham, in a pantheon of adopted ancestors whom Antin uses to define her new American self. Describing her life as a continuing series of self-births, she breaks from her biological parents to create an American life story. *The Promised Land* shows the generational inversion created by immigration, in which children become parents to their parents, teaching them how to function in the new country, and select their own ancestors from history, literature, and even among their peers. In *The Promised Land* we see an archetypal pattern of "leaving home" and "leaving church." Antin's move to Boston constitutes a dramatic conversion experience, yet a second conversion also takes place. Her discovery of natural history replaces her superficial childhood relationship to

Judaism and her later freethinking, and creates a reconciliation that fills the vacuum left by the initial departure from home.

Just as Antin defined herself in terms of historical and literary antecedents, she later becomes an ancestor for other writers, and in the next chapter, "'That Observing Consciousness': Literary Self-Creation," I focus on some of these descendants. While Eva Hoffman is an immigrant from Poland and Vivian Gornick is a second generation New Yorker, both are intellectuals who describe creativity metaphorically in terms of immigration and assimilation. For both, a detached perspective gives them the ability to write, a detachment akin to leaving home which occurs for Hoffman in the departure from Poland and for Gornick in the struggle to separate from her mother. This perspective also makes them American; Hoffman identifies a sense of alienation as common among her peers.

In their autobiographies, Gornick and Hoffman describe the role models available to them as girls in the 1950s. Each examines the available examples of adult womanhood, and the ministrations of their neighbors demonstrate Simone de Beauvoir's maxim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267) – in short, that women are very much self-made. Beyond the language and narratives provided by their families and neighbors, the authors also belong to a textual heritage, responding to other texts as if in a parent/child relationship. Hoffman responds directly to Antin in *Lost in Translation*, and Gornick implicitly rewrites Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*. While they adopt literary forebears, they do so in a critical way, and sometimes purposefully misread the earlier texts in order to show their own distinctiveness. However, the genealogy expands beyond these parent/child dyads, reaching backward to canonically American authors like

Whitman and Thoreau, and forward to writers who respond autobiographically to Gornick and Hoffman themselves.

The second half of the dissertation considers a similar grouping of Asian American writers who have established their own voices by rebelling against and modeling themselves upon both familial and literary ancestors. First, in the chapter "American Daughters: Resistance and Reconciliation on the Home Front," I discuss two mid-century autobiographies of Asian American family life, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*. The texts, so similar in superficial detail that Frank Chin was moved to call the latter (in perverse gender terminology) "son of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*" (xxi), portray the World War II-era coming-of-age of two Asian American girls living on the west coast of the United States. In fact, the narratives are not identical, but mirror images in which American citizenship determines the protagonists' ability to leave home and, eventually, to return. Wong is able to depict her parents as inflexibly, traditionally Chinese in order to create an individual identity in opposition to the one she imagines her parents to hold, selecting for herself which "Chinese" and "American" habits and beliefs she is most comfortable with. In fact, it is clear to the reader that the elder Wongs have made their own similar negotiations, rather than shutting themselves off entirely from the American world around them. Jade Snow begins by demanding recognition of her own individuality, and concludes by acknowledging that her parents, too, are individuals in their own right.

Jade Snow is able to define her parents as Chinese precisely because they are relatively securely American. Although her parents would not attain citizenship until 1943 (ix), general hostility toward Chinese Americans faded when the United States

entered World War II and China became an ally. Upon publication, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was celebrated as a demonstration of what those of Chinese descent could accomplish in America, and Wong represented the U.S. State Department on a book tour through many Asian countries. In contrast, Monica Sone's family, the Itois, were subject to the vilification of those of Japanese descent that accompanied the bombing of Pearl Harbor. To characterize her parents as old-fashioned adherents of Japanese culture would not be productive, as it was for Wong, but potentially dangerous, since the U.S. government already considered them enemy aliens. Indeed, Sone's own citizenship, like that of other nisei, was called into question, and "leaving home" has different connotations for individuals imprisoned in internment camps. At the end of *Nisei Daughter*, there is no triumph parallel to that of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, only an uncomfortable scene in which Sone's parents, seeming more foreign than ever, apologize to their daughter for being Japanese.

The dissertation concludes with another descendant of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, in a chapter entitled "'Out of Hating Range': Distance and the Sources of Identity Formation." Many critics have paired these two texts in order to show Kingston making a radical break from earlier Chinese American writing; in doing so, they characterize *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in much the same way as Jade Snow characterizes her father in that book, and for the same purpose. Kingston has in fact acknowledged Wong's effect on her work, an effect she describes as "help" (Carabi 11). Not only did the work pave the way for further autobiographical writing by Chinese American women, it also provided an example of stylistic innovation. In writing her autobiography in third person, Wong perhaps inspired Kingston's own

experimentation in autobiographical form. One aspect of the controversy surrounding *The Woman Warrior* has been its status as autobiography or fiction, and it seems to me that the book works as autobiography at least in part because of its relationship to models such as Wong. Throughout the work, Kingston indicates the "ancestors" she has chosen in order to create her identity, ranging from family members such as her mother and unnamed aunt, to historical and mythological figures such as Fa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen. She also describes figures such as the "village idiot" and the quietest girl in school who help to shape her identity through ambivalent association and disassociation.

Just as Kingston defines her identity through these models, her readers have defined themselves through identification and disidentification with the book. The controversy surrounding *The Woman Warrior* is between those who read it as an inspiring ancestor, and those who read it as an oppressive parent. That the book is, in fact, autobiographical despite the controversy about genre is suggested not only by its content, but by these intense reactions. If autobiographical reading indicates a heightened state of identification, as critics such as Suleiman suggest, then the book is an autobiography, in spades. Such reading also implies a clarification of both similarities and differences, and thus productive readings of this book acknowledge both. It's also possible to read the book autobiographically and productively, therefore, from any perspective, not only that of a Chinese American female, just as Kingston herself was inspired not only by Jade Snow Wong but also by figures like Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and Virginia Woolf.

As with *The Woman Warrior*, all the autobiographies discussed here have been inspired in some way by earlier works in the American canon, rooting them in an

American literary tradition. Furthermore, these texts have gone on to shape the perspectives of later American writers, regardless of ethnicity. Julia Alvarez, for instance, credits Maxine Hong Kingston with helping her find her voice as a Dominican American. "I gobbled up [*The Woman Warrior*]," Alvarez recalls, "and then went back to the first page and read it through again. She addressed the duality of her experience, the Babel of voices in her head, the confusions and pressures of being a Chinese American female. It could be done!" (168). Such a textual genealogy is one way of understanding the American qualities of ethnic texts, but the connections are still deeper. Authors from Antin to Kingston would not have found Alcott, Whitman, and the others inspirational unless they were able to identify with their writing. Though differing in ethnicity, gender, age, and historical context, these authors found commonality in American experience.

Chapter 1:
"I Speak for Thousands": Writing the Self into Citizenship

The day of Mary Antin's graduation from grammar school ought to have been a high point of her already eventful young life. Just four years after her immigration to America in 1894, possessing little money, little education, and scarcely any English, she is widely acknowledged as a prodigy. Already a published author, she has been invited to deliver an original composition at the ceremony. The story recounts the death of a young cousin who had stayed behind in Russia, and the process of telling it calms her stage fright. "My composition was not a masterpiece," Antin acknowledges, in describing the incident in her 1912 autobiography *The Promised Land*; "it was merely good for a girl of fifteen. But I had written that I still loved the little cousin, and I made a thousand strangers feel it" (220).

Having spoken, she ought to have sat quietly with the rest of her class to listen as the guest speakers offered the graduates pleasantries and platitudes, but one of the last speakers, a member of the school board, is her undoing. "Abandoning generalities, he went on to tell the story of a particular schoolgirl, a pupil in a Boston school, whose phenomenal career might serve as an illustration of what the American system of free education and the European immigrant could make of each other. He had not got very far when I realized, to my great surprise and no small delight, that he was telling my story" (221). Her classmates, too, seem to recognize Antin as this "particular schoolgirl," and to encourage her to acknowledge his praise. With the encouragement in her ears and gratitude in her heart, she stands and begins to speak, but is stopped before she can complete a sentence. "Mr. Swan, the principal, waved his hand to silence me; and then,

and only then, did I realize the enormity of what I had done. My eulogist had had the good taste not to mention names, and I had been brazenly forward, deliberately calling attention to myself when there was no need. Oh, it was sickening!" (221). As Mr. Swan suggests immediately, and the young Antin realizes a second too late, personally acknowledging the praise of the school board member was inappropriate. It disrupted the flow of the ceremony, was redundant if, indeed, the audience already knew the identity of the unnamed schoolgirl, and worst of all, it was vain and boastful. Antin describes the source of the shame in one direct sentence: "I had exhibited myself" (222).

The anonymous story told at graduation was meant to exemplify the possibilities available to European immigrants in America, in other words, to make a political point. As long as no name is attached to the story, it may be treated as generically representative of ideal assimilation by the immigrant into American society. Anyone might achieve it – and anyone who does not may be considered defective in some way, since this story is meant to be every story. Thus, when Mr. Snow silences Antin as she identifies herself as the owner of this life story, he is making a political point about assimilation. As soon as the generic model of the upwardly mobile immigrant life is shown to be produced by an individual, it loses its effectiveness as a reproach to others. He is also educating her about the appropriate way to make her story available to the broader American public; they will not accept it, he tacitly suggests, if she speaks for herself. As long as she is *representative*, however, she remains useful.

By her Latin School days, as she describes them in *The Promised Land*, Antin has internalized the message delivered so effectively to her at the graduation. Stopping by the Rosenblums' grocery for kerosene, she is, in her words, "forced to stand and hear

[her]self eulogized" (275) as the adult Rosenblums hold her up as a model for their uninterested daughter Goldie. The younger Antin would have accepted such praise as her due, but here, she describes herself as discomfited by a glowing description of herself as a writer and scholar. Furthermore, and somewhat paradoxically, this attempt at self-effacement permeates *The Promised Land*, a published autobiography whose generic purpose is literally to exhibit one's self to the public. Particularly in her introduction, Antin fills the work with rhetorical hedges that allow her to do so.

The opening paragraph sets this tone immediately: "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell. Physical continuity with my earlier self is no disadvantage. I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading" (1).[4] Here, Antin distances from her story by arguing that she is telling that of another, an earlier self. This gesture makes sense in theoretical terms; author, narrator, and protagonist constitute distinct entities in any narrative. Nor is the move unprecedented in the field of autobiography.[5] However, its prominence at the beginning of the work indicates its importance, and it leads into a second variety of self-effacement also presented in the introduction. She downplays the

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[4] "Antin even proposed in a letter of July 19, 1911, to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Ellery Sedgwick, that she would use her own name on the title page, but a 'different name – Esther Altmann, as I have it – in the text'" (Sollors introduction xiv).

[5] Perhaps most famously, this strategy was used by Henry Adams in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), and, uniquely, by Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Among other autobiographers for whom immigration and/or ethnicity are central concerns, Edward Bok (*The Americanization of Edward Bok*, 1920) and Jade Snow Wong (*Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 1950) have also employed this practice. For Bok, the choice had to do with a sense of separation from the self he describes in the work; he explains, much as Antin does, that "The Edward Bok of whom I have written has passed out of my being as completely as if he had never been there … It is easy, therefore, for me to write of him as a personality apart: in fact, I could not depict him from any other point of view." Purposes have varied, however. Wong, for instance, explained that "even written in English, an 'I' book by a Chinese would seem outrageously immodest to anyone raised in the spirit of Chinese propriety" (xiii).

significance of her own individual life: "I have not accomplished anything, I have not discovered anything, not even by accident, as Columbus discovered America" (2). Then she uses this statement to justify her autobiography in a second way. "My life has been unusual, but by no means unique. And this is the very core of the matter. It is because I understand my history, in its larger outlines, to be typical of many, that I consider it worth recording. My life is a concrete illustration of a multitude of statistical facts. Although I have written a genuine personal memoir, I believe that its chief interest lies in the fact that it is illustrative of scores of unwritten lives" (2). This theme is reiterated at various points later in the book in which she says she speaks for immigrants, Jews, those with modern attitudes, and even, occasionally, for the universe.

Antin's careful rhetorical positioning makes her more nonthreatening, and accessible to an American audience that wanted to read her as an example of successful assimilation, as the school board member does at her graduation. Contemporary reviews tended to zero in on, and quote at some length, excerpts from *The Promised Land* that claimed it was a typical story. Indeed, the *New York Times* reviewer's desire to treat *The Promised Land* as a generic story of immigration, rather than Antin's particular story, is emphasized by the lead of the review, titled "The Immigrant": "The immigrants come over on the Ellis Island Ferry and land, perpelxed, frightened groups of them, at the Battery wharf" (288). Ellis Island stood for masses of immigrants, but not for Antin, whose ship docked in Boston, not New York City. The lead subtly refocuses attention from the peculiar outlines of Antin's life to the generic immigrant story, then continues, "We have most of us seen them standing there with their bundles, looking vaguely out into the baffling new world that they have journeyed so far to find. We have had our

more or less sentimental thoughts about them …" (288). Now the review concentrates on reactions of established Americans to this generalized immigration; the focus has shifted off of Antin, off of the story of an actual immigrant, and onto the preoccupations and political attitudes of insular native American citizens.

While the *Times* review and others acknowledged the book's power as a work of literature, they focused most on its potential social and political implications. "*The Promised Land* is the story of one girl's development in mind and spirit through the change from the old country to the new," the *Times* reviewer writes, but added, "It is also the record of the experience of a typical immigrant and her family, and as such it is the more important" (228). The passage continues by elaborating on the "ordinariness" of the Antins and the importance of the book "as a study of the immigrant" (228).[6] It is important to note that the prejudices of the native-born assumed by the reviews were not wholly favorable to America – they pointed out national shortcomings – but the reviews were nonetheless self-centered. They generally discussed what native-born Americans should do in response to what they read in the autobiography to deal with immigration issues, fitting Antin into a predefined framework of the "immigration problem" rather than taking her work on its own terms.

However, Antin spoke not only for the two million Jewish immigrants arriving from Russia and Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1914 (Howe 58), but was also ready to

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[6] Likewise, the review that appeared in both *The Nation* and the *New York Evening Post* quotes Antin, then moves directly to policy implications: "'Although I have written a genuine personal memoir,' says the author, 'I believe its chief interest lies in the fact that it is illustrative of scores of unwritten lives.' What the descendents of the Pilgrim Fathers ought to do for the destitute, illiterate multitudes crushed out of Europe and cast upon our shores, continues to be a subject for troubled thought among legislators" (*Nation* 517). The Christian Science Monitor went a step further, seeing Antin's autobiography as representative not only of Russian Jewish immigrants but of all immigrants to America, including the Irish and Germans. Not only is Antin a generic immigrant in this view, but her benefactor Miss Dillingham ceases to be an individual and becomes the personification of the ideals of the public schools; she "is a symbolic, not an exceptional figure."

position herself as American as anyone else. This position grated on more than one reader, as in Barrett Wendell's much-quoted complaint about Antin's "irritating habit of describing her people as Americans, in distinction from such folks as Edith and me, who have been here for three hundred years" (qtd. Sollors introduction xxxvii). I wish to argue, however, that there should be no question of Antin's right to tell an American story; indeed, *The Promised Land* outlines a quintessentially American story of leaving home in order to develop a public identity. Her early audiences and reviewers may have thought that Antin was telling someone else's story, while in fact, she was also telling theirs.

I. Developing a public voice

The classical division between public and private spheres offers a useful guide to understanding Mary Antin's participation in American public life and politics as described in *The Promised Land*.[7] Hannah Arendt summarizes the distinction in *The Human Condition* (1958). "According to Greek thought," she writes, "the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family" (183). In the city-state, citizens therefore had two lives, the public and the private. The private world was governed by physical needs, and some, including women and slaves, were always associated with this sphere. However, in the public world, adult male citizens interacted as equals free both from dependency and from the responsibility of

[7] Although this aspect of political thought has had a long history, reaching back to Aristotle, it has not escaped critique. Most recently, feminist critics have argued, first, that the "public" is covertly and inextricably linked with male domination, while the "private" facilitates the erasure of women's experiences, and second, that the private and public are not distinct, but entertwined. (See Ackelsberg and Shanley for a detailed summary of such challenges to the public/private division.) The relationship of these arguments to *The Promised Land* will be discussed in section II.

ruling others. Although, or because, citizens were equal, public life presented a distinct struggle in which "everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all (*aien aristeuein*). The public realm, in other words," Arendt explains, "was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were" (194). And, importantly, much of the action of the polis took place through speech: "To be political, to live in a *polis*, mean that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence," the form of command used in the private, or household, world (184). Thus, in *The Promised Land*, we see that two essential turning points in Antin's life, her acquisition of citizenship and her coming to writing, are simultaneous and intertwined. She cannot become a writer without becoming a citizen, and fulfills her role of citizen by writing. Through the catalyst of the public school, Antin is able to develop a sense of herself as a member of the public realm, as her father seems inchoately to understand. "By the simple act of delivering our school certificates," she writes, "he took possession of America" (162). Though her father's possession of America occurs by proxy here, Antin's is direct. Her enrollment in public school begins her career as citizen and author.

First, the public school links citizenship and intellectual life on a literal level. Enrollment is a privilege of citizenship, which Antin receives for the first time in America. Free public education had been denied to the Jews in Russia. For some in Polotzk, the rejection of secular education was mutual; rather than accept gentile education, many Jews withdrew, devoting their scholarly energies away from reading, writing, and arithmetic, and toward sometimes arcane religious pursiuts. This education

was further limited by gender. Boys would attend *heder* and learn Hebrew, but girls were meant to be satisfied with more modest accomplishments. However, Mary's father, Israel Antin, had traveled beyond the Pale[8] and embraced more modern ideas of education, for daughters as well as sons, and he transmitted these ideas to his family. Thus, Mary and her sister were sent to a *lehrer*, or secular teacher, called Isaiah the Scribe (94). The enthusiasm for study was not their father's alone; Antin portrays her younger self as an eager scholar when given the chance, absconding with her sister's Russian text when cautioned not to study because of her poor health (95). However, their parents' extended illnesses and subsequent financial decline cause the girls to withdraw from the school of Isaiah the Scribe. An attempt to win Mashke a scholarship at the private school for girls fails on an unknown "technicality;" her mother's strong suspicion is that she was "refused on account of [her] religion, the authorities being unwilling to appropriate money for the tuition of a Jewish child" (97). It is not lack of desire that keeps the Antins from secular education, but lack of opportunity.

Unable to participate in public education, the young Antin grows isolated from the peers who might have been her classmates. While watching them enviously as they go home from school, she observes, "They had ever so many books in the satchels on their backs. They would take them out at home, and read and write, and learn all sorts of interesting things. They looked to me like beings from another world than mine" (24). Though the young Antin romanticized the children who could attend school, she was well

[8] The Pale of Settlement consisted of 386,000 square miles between the Baltic and Black Seas, (approximately, today's Belarus and Ukraine), to which Russian Jews were confined. Although most Russian Jews lived in the Pale, only about 12 percent of the residents of the Pale were Jewish (Howe 5). This confinement was enforced by law, economics, and sometimes force. Antin recalls her childhood perspective on the barrier as follows: "Russia was the place where one's father went on business. It was so far off, and so many bad things happened there, that one's mother and grandmother and grown-up aunts cried at the railroad station, and one was expected to be sad and quiet for the rest of the day, when the father departed for Russia" (5).

aware of the difficulties they faced. A few Jewish students might be admitted to the high school, according to a quota set by the government, but were held to stricter standards than the Gentile students, and graded unfairly. Matriculating at the universities was still more difficult. Conversely, education in America was readily available; the Antins' second day in Boston finds a neighbor girl volunteering to walk the children to school. "This child, who had never seen us till yesterday, who could not pronounce our names, who was not much better dressed than we, was able to offer us the freedom of the schools of Boston!" (148). In Polotzk, Antin was isolated from children on their way to school, but in Boston, she is immediately included. This connection to others, along with the access to the education that she has always hungered for, means that for Antin, at thirteen years old, public schooling is perhaps the most immediate benefit of citizenship.

Public schooling also introduces Antin to the concept of citizenship itself, particularly through the figure of George Washington, citizenship personified. Paradoxically she feels both humbled and ennobled by this new acquaintance, humbled because no one could be as great as Washington, who was the first president and had never told a lie, yet ennobled because "this George Washington, who died long before I was born, was like a king in greatness, and he and I were Fellow Citizens" (176). Antin's understanding of citizenship is not only historical or intellectual, but emotional and instinctual. "It was not a thing that I *understood*," she recalls; "I could not go home and tell Frieda about it, as I told her other things that I learned at school. But I knew one could say 'my country' and *feel* it, as one felt 'God' or 'myself.' My teacher, my schoolmates, Miss Dillingham, George Washington himself could not mean more than I when they said 'my country,'

after I had once felt it" (177). This was a new feeling for a child of the Pale, who understood that "Russia was another Egypt" (9),[9] a place of exile rather than a home.

Having experienced the "feeling" of citizenship for the first time in her life, Antin becomes aware of its absence in her former life. "What had been my country until now? What flag had I loved?" she asks (178). Though she was aware of herself as a Jew in exile from Jerusalem, the Biblical sources of this noble history seemed too remote from the practicalities of life in the Pale; consequently, she writes, Jews were left without a true sense of nationality.[10] And Russian nationality was out of the question, as the policies of the czars made plain. Czar Nicholas I, who reigned from 1825 to 1855, censored Jewish writing, circumscribed their education, expelled them from their homes, and conscripted Jewish children as young as eight for 25 years or until they died, whichever came first. "Through the following century," writes Irving Howe, "at least until a more scientific precision was developed in the art of murder, the Nicolaitian persecutions would leave a shudder vibrating in the minds of the Jews" (7). His comparatively mild successor, Alexander II, loosened many restrictions, but the assassination of Alexander II and accession of Alexander III in 1881 inspired pogroms and ended the little hope brought by Alexander II, thus beginning the exodus of Jews

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[9] See Exodus 1:15.

[10] In this passage, Antin generalizes her experiences to the entire Jewish community in Polotzk: "So it came to pass that *we* [emphasis mine] did not know what *my country* could mean to a man" (179). However, other American Jewish writers have portrayed the situation differently. Antin writes, "Well I knew that Polotzk was not my country. It was *goluth* – exile" (178). In direct contrast, Anzia Yezierska's 1950 autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* takes a strongly contrasting stance on the location of *goluth*. Among the letters for aid that the newly wealthy Yezierska receives in Hollywood is a reproach from a stranger of the Lower East Side who writes, "I also came from a village in Poland, like you. But to me, America is a worse *Goluth* than Poland. … With all that was bad under the Czar, the synagogue was still God's light in time of darkness. Better to die there than to live here, among the money-making fat bellies – worshippers of the Golden Calf" (91). This letter is thematically central to the autobiography, presenting its title phrase in the assertion that in Poland, "poverty was an ornament on a learned man like a red ribbon on a white horse" (91).

from Russia. Antin's birth in 1881 coincided with this renewed limitation and the beginning of large-scale Russian Jewish immigration to the United States. Forced to display the flag of the czar, her neighbors in Polotzk would vow, "May I know no more of sin than I know of flags" (17), but once she has been transplanted, Antin senses that having a flag to love, having membership in a nation, is an essential element of one's personality, and those denied it are stunted. "So a little Jewish girl in Polotzk was apt to grow up hungry-minded and empty-hearted; and if, still in her outreaching youth, she was set down in a land of outspoken patriotism, she was likely to love her new country with a great love, and to embrace its heroes in a great worship" (179). In short, what Antin missed in the Pale, and what schooling in America enabled her to develop, was the sense of a public self that has its origins in citizenship.

Public individuality and citizenship are closely related concepts, and neither was readily available in the Pale of Settlement. The community's habit of bestowing descriptive labels on its members, rather than using proper names exclusively, demonstrates this. "Family names existed only in official documents, such as passports," Antin explains. "For the most part people were known by nicknames, prosaic or picturesque, derived from their occupations, their physical peculiarities, or distinctive achievements. Among my neighbors in Polotzk were Yankel the Wig-maker, Mulye the Blind, Moshe the Six-fingered; and members of their respective families were referred to by these nicknames" (36). The nicknames imply a community intimacy resembling that of a family, as do Mashke's nicknames of "Mouse and Crumb and Poppy Seed" (83), and register individuals in their family locations; however, they also lock the individuals and their relations into a limited and fixed role. And as Antin knows, not all family

nicknames are affectionate: "My uncle Berl, for example, gave me the name of 'Zukrochene Flum,' which I am not going to translate, because it is uncomplimentary" (55).[11] Likewise, while there is no shame in being known as a wig-maker, Polotzk's citizens also numbered among themselves "Yankel the Informer" (106) and "David the Substitute," who took another man's place in the Russian army for a fee, voluntarily serving the czar and living like a gentile for several years (15). These men and their families atoned for their sins the rest of their lives, and part of their penance was to bear this constant reminder.

By contrast, a full, proper name belongs to one's public self as a citizen, so it is no wonder that such names were seldom heard in Polotzk, whose residents possessed only limited citizenship status. Antin herself, officially named Maryashe, was always nicknamed "Mashinke" or, usually, "Mashke," and she dreaded the eventuality of being nicknamed "Mashke the Short." Conversely, immigrating to America allows the Antins to claim their surname. "I found on my arrival that my father was 'Mr. Antin' on the slightest provocation, and not, as in Polotzk, on state occasions alone. And so I was 'Mary Antin,' and I felt very important to answer to such a dignified title. It was just like America that even plain people should wear their surnames on week days" (150). As "Mashke the Short, granddaughter of Raphael the Russian," Antin was named into an almost familial system in which everyone in Polotzk was on intimate terms with everyone else, but as "Mary Antin" or "Miss Antin," she is directly associated with neither her physical characteristics nor her notable ancestors, and is able to assume the role of a public individual.

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[11] The explanatory notes in the 1997 Penguin edition translate this epithet as "'slovenly' or 'softhearted plum,' or 'plum gone to pieces'" (300).

Therefore, the most important transformation of Antin's name may not be that from Maryashe to Mary (which, indeed, she considered "very disappointing," since it was not a "strange-sounding American name" like her sister Frieda's [150]), but the one that occurs when she first sees her composition "Snow" published in the journal *Primary Education*: "my own words, that I had written out of my own head – printed out, clear black and white, with my name at the end!" (167-68). Antin's narrating voice explains that she has kept the article so many years because of her personal vanity, but the pride is not misplaced; according to Miss Dillingham's preface, the piece was composed after only four months of American schooling, and was a major accomplishment for someone with so little exposure to English. Furthermore, it records a seismic shift in Antin's character. At this moment, the name "Mary Antin" becomes not the name of an immigrant schoolgirl but the name of an author, an intellectual persona who speaks coherently to an unknown audience. The passage in which she recounts the moment is worth quoting at length. "My whole consciousness was suddenly transformed," she writes.

> I suppose that was the moment when I became a writer. I always loved to write, – I wrote letters whenever I had an excuse, – yet it had never occurred to me to sit down and write my thoughts for no person in particular, merely to put the word on paper. But now, as I read my own words, in a delicious confusion, the idea was born. I stared at my name: MARY ANTIN. Was that really I? … If that was my name, and those were the words out of my own head, what relation did it all have to *me*, who was alone there with Miss Dillingham, and the printed page between us? Why, it meant that I could write again, and see my writing printed for people to read! I could write many, many, many things: I could write a book! (168)

Although she is a young girl, new to the United States and to the English language, she has also become a person who can communicate her thoughts and ideas to the public at large, her "fellow citizens." According to classical political thought, speech was one of the most important activities associated with public life, and this idea is echoed in *The Promised Land*, as well as Richard Rodriguez's 1982 autobiography *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, in which he expresses similar attitudes about schooling, speech and assimilation, with the greater freedom afforded by the time in which he writes. Because the public debate on immigration has evolved in the 70 years between the two works, Rodriguez is able to be more direct about certain points than Antin. He does so in political terms similar to Arendt's. The nuns who insisted on addressing young Richard in English, rather than his home language of Spanish, taught him "the great lesson of school, that [he] had a public identity" (19). Rodriguez spoke Spanish in the intimacy of his family, and could count on their sympathetic understanding, but when English was spoken in his classroom, it was directed toward a broader and more heterogeneous audience whose comprehension was not guaranteed. As he became fluent in this new public language, he also gained a sense of himself as a public individual. "At last, seven years old, I came to believe what had been technically true since my birth: I was an American citizen" (22).

Rodriguez emphasizes the role of audience in his ability to communicate as a citizen; he needed to see himself and his audience as equals in order to assume a public role. "In public," he writes, "full individuality is achieved, paradoxically, by those who are able to consider themselves members of the crowd. Thus it happened for me: Only when I was able to think of myself as an America, no longer an alien in *gringo* society, could I seek

the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality" (27). Antin, likewise, must think of herself as an American and not an alien among the *goyim* in order to be a public individual. Her experiences in Polotzk demonstrate the difference. Although Antin portrays her younger self with distinctly writerly characteristics, this potential author is unwilling or unable to communicate her insights. Her ability to see the drama and significance of any everyday event, which "really loomed great and shone splendid in [her] eyes," as well as her tendency to "garnish it up with so much detail and circumstance that nobody who had witnessed [the] small affair could have recognized it as the same" (107), suggests that Mashke has the sensibility of a novelist. She is also portrayed as a thoughtful child who examines the boundaries of her world, questioning her teacher and testing God. But she keeps her intellect to herself, dividing her mental and physical worlds and isolating them from each other. "In one world I had much company – father and mother and sister and friends – and did as others did, and took everything for granted. In the other world I was all alone, and I had to discover ways for myself; and I was so uncertain that I did not attempt to bring a companion along" (106). Antin's withholding of her intellectual world likely owed something to the political climate of Russia. The habit "is curious to me," she writes, considering it in retrospect "because I am not so reticent now. When I discover anything, if only a new tint in the red sunset, I must publish the fact to all my friends. Is it possible that in my childish reflections I recognized the fact that ours was a secretive atmosphere, where knowledge was for the few, and wisdom was sometimes a capital offence?" (68). Etymologically speaking, "private" and "deprived" share a root, and it is in such intellectual secrecy that we see why: Antin in Polotzk, and others excluded from citizenship in other times and

places, "have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times" (Arendt 205).

The distinction Antin describes between her child and adult selves highlights the difference citizenship makes, as does the anecdote of her playmate Zalmen, whose imaginative faculties go unappreciated. "I remember once standing on the river bank with [him]," she writes,

> when a quantity of lumber was floating down on its way to the distant sawmill. A log and a board crowded each other near where we stood. The board slipped by first, but presently it swerved and swung partly around. Then it righted itself with the stream and kept straight on, the lazy log following behind. Said Zalmen to me, interpreting: "The board looks back and says, 'Log, log, you will not go with me? Then I will go on by myself.'" That boy was called simple, on account of such speeches as this. (85-86)

Children in Polotzk were expected to mimic the lives of their parents, due to tradition and to restriction, and when they played, they "copied the life about [them] literally" (85). Other styles of childhood were available in other societies, but, Antin writes, "we had not been to a Froebel kindergarten, and learned to impersonate butterflies and stones. Our elders would have laughed at us for such nonsense" (85). That adults called Zalmen simple suggests that a poetic sensibility was not an asset to a grown-up in the Pale. Interpreting the ideas and motives of inanimate objects could not help him to a position in the adult world of Polotzk. Thus Antin concludes her recollection of Zalmen with the

wistful speculation, "I wonder in what language he is writing poetry now" (86). Zalmen had at least two languages, Yiddish and Hebrew, and perhaps a third, Russian, available to him in Polotzk, but Antin's rhetorical question does not envision Zalmen writing in any of them; she might have written, "Perhaps today he is a great Yiddish poet," but instead his poetic future is in an unknown language, unknown because none of the three languages offered him a platform as a public individual who might speak to unknown fellow citizens, and be heard.[12] In the private sphere of the Jewish community in Polotzk, resources were devoted to survival, and Zalmen's extravagant musings did not contribute to the practical needs of day-to-day existence.

Antin's newfound position as fellow citizen allows her to become a writer; it gives her both a platform, the idea that she might write something for anyone to read or hear,

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[12] Zalmen's unheard poetic voice may be compared to that of Pascal D'Angelo in his 1924 autobiography *Son of Italy*. An Italian immigrant and pick-and-shovel man by trade, he begins to learn English and discovers that his literary and imaginative sense has been awakened. In a passage reminiscent of Antin's description of Zalmen, he writes:

> One glorious winter night I was coming back toward the box car from a trip to Hudson Heights. With me were a couple of brakemen who were on a night shift and were going to work. They were young light-hearted American lads, always ready to joke with me.
>
> I looked up. The sky was thick with stars. I remarked, "The stars are marching over the deep night. With whom are they going to war?"
>
> "Eh? With whom … ?" they asked.
>
> "With the emperor of Eternity."
>
> "And who is he?"
>
> "Death," I said.
>
> They both laughed and took pains to make me understand that I was crazy. (132)

Neither Zalmen nor D'Angelo, a working class immigrant with limited opportunities, has an audience of equals. Though it is noteworthy that D'Angelo has no poetic voice until he arrives in America and learns English, it is also important to keep in mind that his class status prevents others from hearing him as a "fellow citizen."

After giving up his job to write poetry full-time, he sends a letter to *The Nation* inquiring about the status of the poems he has submitted to its writing contest, and encouraging them to give his writing a platform. "This letter is the cry of a soul stranded on the shores of darkness looking for light – a light that points out the path toward recognition, where I can work and help myself. I am not deserting the legions of toil to refuge myself in the literary world. No! No! I only want to express the wrath of their mistreatment. … I am a worker, a pick and shovel man – what I want is an outlet to express what I can say besides work" (164-65). In asking for recognition for his poetry, he is also asking to be acknowledged as an equal who may speak as others do. The letter concludes, "Lift me, with strength of the prize, out of this ignoble gloom and place me on the pulpit of light where *I too* can narrate what the Nature-made orator has to say in me" (167; italics mine).

and a subject for her first large project after "Snow," George Washington. Antin the adult looks back humorously on the efforts of Antin the child, pointing out her awkward problems with composition ("nothing but 'Washington' rhymed with 'Washington'"), content ("presently I gave them news, declaring that Washington 'Wrote the famous Constitution'") and presentation (180): "My pronunciation was faulty, my declamation flat. But I had the courage of my convictions. I was face to face with twoscore Fellow Citizens, in clean blouses and extra frills. I must tell them what George Washington had done for their country – for *our* country – for me" (180-81). Here, authorship is an essential part of Antin's citizenship. She senses that in order to fulfill her public role, she must write, and must speak, to her fellow citizens.

And once she has become a writer, her position of fellow citizen is strengthened. The poem's popularity at the assembly leads someone, perhaps her father, to suggest that it should be published in the newspaper. Antin determines to deliver the poem to Newspaper Row in person. Although she has a bad experience at the Transcript, good luck follows at the Herald, where the editor promises to print her poem. "As I was going," she recalls, "I could not help giving the editor my hand, although I had not experienced any handshaking in Newspaper Row. I felt that as author and editor we were on a very pleasant footing, and I gave him my hand in token of comradeship" (186). Antin's authorial self is on equal footing with the adult American editor, much as Antin the citizen has a relationship with the Father of her Country.

Antin describes the publication of her poem in the Herald as thrilling for herself and her family; her father buys up multiple copies of the issue for distribution and personal mementoes. Although she has already seen her name and writing in print in "Snow," a

sight that seldom grows tiresome, the publication of the Washington poem brings two extra pleasures: it offers wider, more popular distribution than in *Primary Education*, and, importantly, it "was introduced by a flattering biographical sketch of the author – the *author!* – the material for which the friendly editor had artfully drawn from me during that happy interview. And my name, as I had prophesied, was at the bottom" (187). The name and biography are an important accompaniment to the printed poem, which "looked wonderful, just like real poetry, not at all as if somebody we knew had written it" (187). This passage points to the simultaneous anonymity and individuality of the public self; anyone could have written the poem, but the name and biography both indicate the work as Antin's and construct her as an individual. Antin exists because she has others to read her, from both a reader response perspective and that of political science, in which as Arendt writes, "[t]he presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (199). Antin has her own place because she is able to speak from her own place.

She also needs to create that place herself, describing her individual life story to her peers. No private self can write an autobiography; nor does it need to, as it is already understood. When Rodriguez recounts the way he would listen to his grandmother tell stories about her childhood, he describes not the content of the stories themselves, but the situation of their telling. "They were stories so familiar to me that I couldn't remember the first time I'd heard them," he writes. "I'd look up sometimes to listen. Other times she'd look over at me. But she never seemed to expect a response. Sometimes I'd smile or nod. (I understood exactly what she was saying.) But it never seemed to matter to her one way or another. It was enough that I was there" (37). As a private self, one is part of

a network of people with shared experiences; you do not need to tell your life story to your parents, since they have been bound up in it themselves. Nor would an adult Mashke need to present an autobiography to her neighbors in Polotzk, had she lived out her life there; she was already part of a larger story as Raphael the Russian's granddaughter. Antin's autobiography becomes necessary in America not only because of her dramatic conversion experience, that of leaving Russia for the United States, but because as a public individual, she must communicate her story directly to others.

II. Redefining the family

Mary Antin's next imagining of her public self, conceived while browsing in the public library, is that of "Antin, Mary," a name in the encyclopedia rather far from "Washington, George," but near one of her favorite authors, "Alcott, Louisa M." Just as she received a new name, "Mary Antin," at the beginning of her life as an American, she now develops yet another version of her name to accompany the life story she envisions as a future famous author. "I practiced saying my name in the encyclopedic form, 'Antin, Mary'; and I realized that it sounded chopped off, and wondered if I might not annex a middle initial" (202-03). The young Antin's ambition to see her biography published in the encyclopedia, like her pleasure in seeing the sketch of her personal background that accompanied her Washington poem in the newspaper, is consistent with the mindset that could later produce the public, written, autobiographical self that is published in *The Promised Land*. But the encyclopedia fantasy involves a desire not only for personal glory but for new relationships between self and others. It allows her to position herself near Alcott, an important role model for her. Her fondness for Alcott anticipates the transcendentalism she later adopts. Furthermore, Alcott serves as a role model of a

successful woman writer such as Antin intended to become.[13] Through her personae of author and citizen, Antin is able to envision herself among the pantheon of the successful and celebrated. However, her creation of a new family tree that includes Alcott as a foremother occurs at the expense of increased distance from natal or blood relatives.[14] Antin's successful acquisition of American citizenship and habits not only separates her from her parents but also makes her at times their teacher in the new world, resulting in a fundamental confusion of parent-child relationships. Ironically, though, this condition is not limited to immigrant families, only exemplified by them. The transition to adulthood for even native-born Americans is also marked by a choice of role models outside the home. The metaphorical rebirths Antin describes require new metaphorical parents.

In the introduction to *The Promised Land*, Antin describes her narrating self as "the spiritual offspring of the marriage within [her] conscious experience of the Past and the Present" (1), immediately setting up an ongoing motif in which changes in her life consist of new or continuing births. "My second birth was no less a birth because there was no distinct incarnation," she writes (1). The continuing birth process that she ascribes to life occurs in moments of increasing, deepening knowledge, as she explains while recalling a Joycean epiphany one day on the banks of the Polota, a stream in Polotzk. Listening to a peasant's work song as he plowed, she recalls, "Only the melody reached me, but the meaning sprang up in my heart to fit it – a song of the earth and the hopes of the earth. I

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[13] Here, Antin claims a specifically female heritage in choosing Alcott, not Horatio Alger, as her neighbor in the volume, though she writes that she enjoyed Alger's stories and he would have been the closer alphabetical choice.

[14] Here we see one example of the collapse of the distinction between public and private. Antin's development of a public persona is necessarily accompanied by changes to the private relationships of her family. Furthermore, the creation of public identity takes place through metaphorical private associations; the selection of role models is described in terms of private family relations (as, for example, George Washington is "the father of his country").

sat a long time listening, looking, tense with attention. I felt myself discovering things. Something in me gasped for life, and lay still. I was but a little body, and Life Universal had suddenly burst upon me" (71). She uses the incident to illustrate her theory of human development: "We are not born all at once, but by bits. The body first, and the spirit later; and the birth and growth of the spirit, in those who are attentive to their own inner life, are slow and exceedingly painful. Our mothers are racked with the pains of our physical birth; we ourselves suffer the longer pains of our spiritual growth" (72). Whereas another model might, for example, acknowledge both more influence and more suffering for mothers beyond the time of physical birth, this version gives credit to the universe and to the individual. Intermediate figures may be involved, as in this first self-birth prompted by the peasant, but their selection is idiosyncratic, not dictated by custom or biology.

Though it originated by the Polota, Antin's theory stood in contrast to the culture around her. Family heritage was of intense importance to Jewish life in Polotzk. Indeed, it defined the condition of Jewishness itself: "the religion … was simply the belief that God was, had been, and ever would be, and that they, the children of Jacob, were His chosen messengers to carry His Law to all the nations" (33). A central feature of self-identification was that of being a child of Jacob, and the ancient narratives of Judaism were a fixture of contemporary life. "I heard the names of Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah as early as the names of father, mother, and nurse. My baby soul was enthralled by sad and noble cadences, as my mother sang of my ancient home in Palestine, or mourned over the desolation of Zion. I was taught to call myself a princess, in memory of my forefathers who had ruled a nation" (35). Heroines of the Bible served as role models for all girls.

Polotzk's denizens also organized themselves into family groups identified by relationship to one notable member, "as, for example, 'Mirele, niece of Moshe the Six-fingered'" (36), an identification that conferred either distinction or opprobrium upon multiple branches of one family tree. As grandchildren of the prosperous Raphael the Russian, Mashke and her siblings were treated respectfully, but that respect could, in extreme circumstances, be taken away and replaced with scorn. When their father turns down a lighted lamp one Friday night, despite the prohibition against handling fire on the Sabbath, he must do so secretly. "Such an act would not only break the hearts of his family, but it would also take the bread from the mouths of his children, and ruin them forever. My sister and my brother and I would come to be called the children of Israel the Apostate, just as Gutke, my playmate, was called the granddaughter of Yankel the Informer. The most innocent of us would be cursed and shunned for the sin of our father" (105-06). Such naming practices have a distinctly Biblical ring.[15]

As family was so central, marriage and parenthood were essential to an appropriate adult life. "To rear a family of children was to serve God. Every Jewish man and woman had a part in the fulfillment of the ancient promise given to Jacob that his seed should be abundantly scattered over the earth. Parenthood, therefore, was the great career" (30). Both men and women, of course, must marry, but while boys were trained to be scholars, girls were "instructed … in the laws regulating a pious Jewish household and in the conduct proper for a Jewish wife; for, of course, every girl hoped to be a wife. A girl was born for no other purpose" (29). This regularity may have been convenient and

[15] When in the Ten Commandments the Lord cautions followers not to worship idols, he explains that "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6). Also compare Exodus 34:67 and Deuteronomy 5:9-10.

comfortable in some circumstances, but as Antin describes it, it could also be horrifying. She compares the womanhood in store for her with the horse in the treadmill that pumped water into the public baths. "Round and round his little circle he trod, with head hanging and eyes void of expectation; round and round all day, unthrilled by any touch of rein or bridle, interpreters of a living will; … round and round the dull day long" (77-78). Contrasting the life of this horse with the lively and varied, if sometimes difficult, lives of the other horses she knows, she concludes, "How empty the existence of the treadmill horse beside this! As empty and endless and dull as the life of almost any woman in Polotzk, had I eyes to see the likeness" (77-78). As the horse circled endlessly on his treadmill, so generations progressed, with each woman's role being the reproduction of the generational cycle. The full life of author and activist that Antin developed in the United States, like the proper life of a horse which she describes as "adventurous, troubled, thrilled; petted and opposed, loved and abused" (78), would have been impossible for her had she and her family not immigrated. In Polotzk, Antin's role would have been to replicate the life of her mother and grandmother; as the treadmill horse's existence repeated itself from minute to minute and day to day, so the lives of generations of women were to repeat each other.[16]

The regular generational progression of Antin's natal culture exemplifies what Margaret Mead describes in her 1970 *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap* as a postfigurative society. Mead enumerates three models through

[16] While Antin herself escapes the repetitive grind of labor of the private sphere, her older sister remains bound to it even after immigration. While Mary is sent to school, Frieda is sent to work, unrewarded by the public acclaim received by her younger sister despite the fact that her work has allowed her sister to succeed. Criticizing Arendt's description of the labor of the private sphere, Adrienne Rich writes that "it is this activity of world-protection, world-preservation, world-repair – the million tiny stitches, the friction of the scrubbing brush, the scouring cloth, the iron across the shirt, … the invisible weaving of a frayed and threadbare family life, the cleaning up of soil and waste left behind by men and children – that we have been charged to do 'for love,' not merely unpaid, but unacknowledged by the political philosophers" (205).

which generations learn from each other, "*postfigurative*, in which children learn primarily from their forebears, *cofigurative*, in which both children and adults learn from their peers, and *prefigurative*, in which adults learn also from their children" (1). The image of the treadmill horse is a vivid emblem of "postfigurative culture … in which change is so slow and imperceptible that grandparents, holding newborn grandchildren in their arms, cannot conceive of any other future for the children than their own past lives" (1). Leaving a postfigurative society is a radical disruption of one's life, one described by both Mead and Antin as a second birth.

The metaphor of rebirth may be applied to immigration with little distortion; the connections are almost literal. When they arrive in Boston, the Antins are renamed. "A committee of our friends, several years ahead of us in American experience, put their heads together and concocted American names for us all" (149). The naming takes place as if they were new individuals first entering the world, not people with some maturity simply progressing through a moment in their lives (albeit a dramatic one). New names are given with some reference to the old, "retain[ing] the initials" (149), in a manner suggestive of Ashkenazic Jewish practice in naming babies. Traditionally a name suggestive of, but not identical to, that of a recently deceased relative is given, honoring the person's memory while allowing for the new person's distinct personality. Thus, the Antins' new names are given as if their old selves had died, giving birth to new incarnations in which their previous Russian selves are acknowledged but cleared away. The new immigrants are also reeducated, becoming like children in their ignorance of the workings of daily life. Antin explains, "The most ignorant immigrant, on landing, proceeds to give and receive greetings, to eat, sleep, and rise, after the manner of his own

country; wherein he is corrected, admonished, and laughed at, whether by interested friends or the most indifferent strangers … The process is spontaneous on all sides, like the education of the child by the family circle" (143). Even adults revert to toddlerhood in terms of their cultural awareness, no matter how mature or experienced they may be in the terms of the culture of their first birth, and are no longer able to model culturally appropriate adult behavior for their children.

Significantly, the immigration of the family group flattens the pre-existing generations of parents and children into one, with all reborn, renamed, and reeducated simultaneously. The parents have little advantage over their children in cultural knowledge, and this lack of information causes them to lose advantage in other ways. Immigrant families like Antin's are therefore Mead's chief example of cofigurative societies, and in *The Promised Land*, Antin illustrates personally what Mead describes scientifically. Home life in the slums of Dover Street was chaotic, she writes, because her parents no longer understood or represented the life their children were to adopt. Without personal principles to rely on, they simply copied the outward forms of their neighbors' child-rearing practices. "My parents knew only that they desired us to be like American children," Antin explains;

> and seeing how the neighbors gave their children gave us boundless liberty, they turned us also loose, never doubting but that the American way was the best way. In public deportment, in etiquette, in all matters of social intercourse, they had no standards to go by, seeing that America was not Polotzk. In their bewilderment and uncertainty they needs must trust us children to learn from such models as the tenements afforded. (212-13)

In this passage, both adults and children participate in cofigurative development. The adult Antins copy the other parents of their neighborhood, and their children are unleashed to follow the example of their peers on Dover Street. By coining and defining the word "cofiguration," Mead offers useful terminology for discussing societies of rapid change in which grandparents do not provide a model for their grandchildren's lives, and "the child's experience of his future is shortened by a generation and his links to the past are weakened" (34).

However, I would point out that immigrant families provide not only an example of cofiguration in Mead's terms, but of prefiguration as well. Not only has the generational progression been flattened, by turning both adults and children into cultural neophytes, but it has been reversed, making children into parents, and parents into children.

> [T]hey must step down from their throne of parental authority, and take the law from their children's mouths; for they had no other means of finding out what was good American form. The result was that laxity of domestic organization, that inversion of normal relations which makes for friction, and which sometimes ends in breaking up a family that was formerly united and happy. (212-13)

Mead hints at this, writing that "in time, the experience of the children of immigrants became the experience of all American children, who now were the representatives of a new culture living in a new age. As such, they stood in a position of considerable authority and model setting vis-à-vis the parent generation" (44). She does not make much of this important observation, but it describes the family's transition depicted in *The Promised Land*.

When the Antins first arrive in Boston, rejoining their father after a three-year separation, Israel Antin is still the head of his family. "My father found occasion to instruct or correct us even on the way from the pier to Wall Street, which journey we made crowded together in a rickety cab. He told us not to lean out of the windows, not to point, and explained the word 'greenhorn.' We did not want to be 'greenhorns,' and gave the strictest attention to my father's instructions" (146). The father offers the children's first introduction to such novelties as bananas and rocking chairs, but soon the children's knowledge overtakes his. They are more adaptable to the new society, and move more easily through it; they bring American habits into the home and become their parents' teachers. This scenario finds literal expression in Abraham Cahan's 1917 novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, which is often paired with *The Promised Land* as a more skeptical version of the assimilation story. When Levinsky moves in to the apartment of his business partner Max Margolis, he sees that Max's wife Dora is learning to read, with her daughter Lucy as her teacher and Lucy's First Reader as her text. "At first she pretended to treat it as a joke, but inwardly she took it seriously from the outset, and later, under the intoxicating effect of the progress she was achieving, these studies became the great passion of her life" (168). Dora's relationship with Lucy is vexed; her daughter represents her hopes for achievement in the new world, but she becomes unhealthily dependent on Lucy.

It is natural for Dora's and Lucy's situation to be discomfiting, since it represents a near total inversion of the parent/child relationship. Children in any culture may represent some degree of hope for the future, but this dependence on children to educate their parents is something distinct and unsettling. "And when I discovered my own

friends, and ran home with them to convert my parents to a belief in their excellence," Antin writes, "did I not begin to make my father and mother, as truly as they had ever made me? Did I not become the parent and they the children, in those relations of teacher and learner?" (1). Here Antin's explanation of the new relationship between herself and her parents more closely matches Mead's description of prefiguration, in which the older generation learns from the younger. Mead intends prefiguration to serve as an explanation for the generation gap between the adolescent baby boom and their parents, in which migration takes place not in the third dimension of physical location, but the fourth, of time. "Even very recently, the elders could say: 'You know, I have been young and *you* have never been old.' But today's young people can reply: 'You have never been young in the world I am young in, and you never can be.' This is the common experience of pioneers and their children. In this sense, all of us who were born and reared before the 1940s are immigrants" (49). Tellingly, Mead uses immigration as a metaphor for scrambled generations; the two models are, perhaps, not as distinct as her terminology suggests.

If Antin becomes parent to her parents, then she herself must find parents outside her home. Such a practice is not unique to Antin. For example, the Americanization of Edward Bok, in the 1920 autobiography of the same name, seems to consist primarily of studying the lives of great men to find out how they rose from obscure positions like his own.[17] Nor is it unique to immigrants. As Werner Sollors asserts in *Beyond Ethnicity*,

[17] The young Bok, like Antin, pores over biographies in the Encyclopedia, then determines to write directly to the people he has read about, beginning a collection of autographed letters to serve him "in his struggle for self-education[.] Not simple autographs – they were meaningless; but actual letters which might tell him something useful. It never occurred to the boy that these men might not answer him" (11). Bok and Antin have similar pluck, or chutzpah, in this respect; compare Antin's visit to the newspaper offices of Boston.

"in American mythology, ancestors may be adopted by consent" (229). Sollors distinguishes consent relationships, adopted by contract, from descent relationships, which have a biological basis. The common strategy of claiming consent ties allows individuals to rebel against their parents while claiming grandparents or other ancestors whose ideals are worth fulfilling, and is closely linked with the rhetoric of the American Revolution, in which the rebellious colonies rejected their British "parents" in favor of American ancestors, the New England puritans (227). Styling one's self as the heir of illustrious ancestors has a long tradition in the United States, as does reliance on peers for cofigurative guidance. "If we are to be different from our fathers and also different from the white marble gods they found in Plutarch or the grizzly patriarchs they chose from the Bible, then we must imitate contemporaries," explains Robert F. Sayre, who cites Scott Fitzgerald, John Adams and even the famously "self-made" Benjamin Franklin as examples of this phenomenon (155-56). Thus, in the course of her autobiography Mary Antin acknowledges the teachers and friends who helped her throughout her life, but chief among her new relatives is one she has never met, George Washington. Washington's greatness humbles her; his standard of honesty and bravery seem out of her reach, and of course, no one but Washington could be the first President.

> But the twin of my new-born humility, paradoxical as it may seem, was a sense of dignity I had never known before. For if I found that I was a person of small consequence, I discovered at the same time that I was more nobly related than I had ever supposed. I had relatives and friends who were notable people by the old standards, – I had never been ashamed of my family, – but this George

> Washington, who died long before I was born, was like a king in greatness, and he and I were Fellow Citizens. (176)

Here Antin participates in a well-developed American literary tradition in which "George Washington appears as a spouse and a name giver, an adopted ancestor (by consent) who is superior to a blood relative since he symbolizes Americanness by achievement" (Sollors 255-56). The adoption of Washington gives Antin a lofty goal, an ancestor to imitate in the Americanization that takes her away from her parents, and a specific point of kinship with her native-born Fellow Citizens.

It is important to keep in mind here that Antin does not completely abjure her descent ties in favor of those springing entirely from consent; the passage defining her relationship to Washington continues, "I knew from my father how he was a Citizen, through the process of naturalization, and how I also was a citizen, by virtue of my relation to him. Undoubtedly I was a Fellow Citizen, and George Washington was another" (176). Antin's attachment to Washington proceeds through a blood relationship, that of father and daughter. Likewise, the teenaged Antin has a particular interest in her newly acquired siblings and nephews that links her consent and descent relationships. Her sister May, for instance, "was born an American, and it was something to me to have one genuine American relative," and she also sees the particular charms of Frieda's son, "an American-born nephew, who might become a President" (246). Even in her descent ties, however, Antin participates in a prefigurative generational inversion, redrawing her family tree to place emphasis on younger relatives, more distant branches, and anyone who might strengthen her claim to Americanness.

Antin's Americanization is demonstrated not only by the relatives she chooses, but by the fact that she feels entitled to choose them at all. By taking herself as the center of her universe, and collecting others around herself, she participates in the individualistic tradition identified by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. Individualism, he writes, was created by Americans. "Our forefathers knew only of egoism," or selfishness, but the American style of individualism "is a calm and considered feeling which persuades each citizen to cut himself off from his fellows and to withdraw into the circle of his family and friends in such a way that he thus creates a small group of his own and willingly abandons society at large to its own devices" (587). And the small circle Tocqueville depicts here should not be interpreted as a tight-knit family group; he narrows that image later in the chapter to exclude one's parents, children, and siblings. Mead gestures briefly toward such isolation when she describes cofigurative and prefigurative relationships as characteristic of modern America, but Tocqueville is still more direct: in America, "the thread of time is ever ruptured and the track of generations is blotted out. Those who have gone before are easily forgotten and those who follow are still completely unknown. Only those nearest to us are of any concern to us … Not only does democracy make their ancestors but also hides their descendants and keeps them apart from their fellows," he writes. "It constantly brings them back to themselves and threatens in the end to imprison them in the isolation of their own hearts" (589).

III. Leaving home and religion … and returning to them

When she describes the anarchic life adopted by her family on Dover Street, Mary Antin characterizes it as common to "almost any immigrant family of our class and with our traditions and aspirations. It is part of the process of Americanization; an upheaval

preceding the state of repose" (213). However, the complicated lines of influence between parent and child are also common to American life more generally, and part of the Americanization of the native-born as well as the foreign-born. A useful formulation of Tocquevillian individualism was produced some 150 years after *Democracy in America* by Robert Bellah et al. In *Habits of the Heart*, the researchers surveyed Americans in order to reexamine some of Tocqueville's assessments from a late-20th-century perspective and determine whether those concepts still held true. In their interviews, these researchers concluded that a "common moral vocabulary" of individualism and self-reliance (20) maintains a strong presence in contemporary life, and saw that these values produce an American life path with two essential turning points: "leaving home" and "leaving church."[18] "Separation and individuation are issues that must be faced by all human beings," they write, "but leaving home in its American sense is not. In many peasant societies, the problem is staying home—living with one's parents until their death and worshipping parents and ancestors all one's life. … For us, leaving home is the normal expectation" (57). This process may take place with more or less conflict, and may end with a more or less dramatic result (for example, living in one's own house in the same town as one's parents, and deciding not to take over the family business), but it consistently does take place. Such separation occurs not only in secular life, but in spiritual life as well. "One may continue to belong to the church of one's parents. But the expectation is that at some point in adolescence or early youth, one will

[18] A word on "church." The researchers' sample was somewhat stunted in comparison to the full range of American life; "with a small research team and a limited budget," they apologize, "we decided to concentrate our research on white, middle-class Americans. … Though we were able to include considerable ethnic diversity, we were not able to illustrate much of the racial diversity that is so important a part of our national life" (ix). This "ethnically diverse" sample did include Jewish Americans, and "church" as the authors use it is intended as a catchall term to convey a religious belief system, regardless of whether worship takes place in a church, synagogue, mosque, etc. For the sake of consistency, I will follow this practice, although for Antin a more precise term might be "leaving shul."

decide on one's own that that is the church to belong to. One cannot defend one's views by saying that they are simply the views of one's parents. On the contrary, they must be particularly and peculiarly one's own" (62-63). As in Tocqueville's definition, individualism permits group membership, but that group is selected by choice by its individual members.

Bellah et al. limited their study to middle class white Americans (with "white" encompassing various ethnic groups including Jews), and the country's ethnic makeup was differently constituted at the time of Tocqueville's study. But in fact, the model they produced in this manner, consisting of the twinned practices of leaving home and leaving church, is anticipated by Antin in *The Promised Land*. As a story of immigration, its central concern is leaving home. The Antins' transatlantic journey takes place in chapter eight of a twenty-chapter work widely acknowledged to be split into two halves, Russian and American, making the physical process of leaving home into the literal center of the book; thematically, it is essential, as the autobiography describes Antin's transformation from Russian Jew to American. Her emergence as a public individual, accompanied by a profound rearrangement of her ties as a private individual, has already been described, and constitutes Antin's "leaving home."

The importance of leaving home is clear, but leaving church is equally significant in *The Promised Land*, and not only as part of the transformation from Russian Jew to American, although Antin's loss of religion and Americanization are conflated to an extent. The autobiography has often been read as two distinct sections, Russian and American, but as Kathleen Ashley points out in her article "Mary Antin's 'Biomythography,'" "even a cursory reading of Antin's autobiography will show that the

narrative is carefully constructed as a triptych, with not one but *two* conversion experiences" (46). As Ashley reminds us, the chapter "My Country," which describes Antin's secular conversion, is immediately followed by the chapter "Miracles," which takes on religious adaptation to America; later, in "The Burning Bush," Antin marks her second conversion experience: "I have reached what was the second transformation of my life, as truly as my coming to America was the first great transformation" (251). What was this great transformation? "I began the study of natural history outdoors" (251). Antin's discovery of natural science allows her to reintegrate her sense of her place in the spiritual world.

At first, America simply supplants Judaism, in which Antin was already losing interest. She describes her religious persona in younger days as "something of a fraud" that depended on passing moods and social situations rather than an unshakeable faith (101), and during her extended visit with relatives in Vitebsk just prior to her immigration to America, she becomes absorbed in reading secular literature to the exclusion of religious devotion. At this point, Antin's personal religion seems doomed. "America loomed so near that my imagination was fully occupied … It was more to me that I was going to America than that I might not be going to heaven" (190). In turning her attention to the America of her future, she simultaneously turns away from the Judaism of her past.

"And yet," she writes, "if the golden truth of Judaism had not been handed me in the motley rags of formalism, I might not have been so ready to put away my religion" (190). At first, Antin conflates the secular and spiritual, as we see when the young Antin begins a schoolyard altercation by declaring herself a freethinker. Horrified that Antin will not

stay home from school for Passover, Rachel Goldstein enlists Kitty Maloney and Maggie O'Reilly to convince her of God's existence. This ecumenical lynching mob "made a circle around me, and pressed me with questions, and mocked me, and threatened me with hell flames and utter extinction" (191). Though the issue of religion was not foremost in her mind, which was then filled with secular concerns, the condemnation by her classmates makes Antin eager to argue. She frames the situation not as a religious debate about the nature of God, but as a political one about the nature of individual rights. "I knew, from my father's teaching, that this persecution was contrary to the Constitution of the United States, and I held my ground as befitted the defender of a cause. George Washington would not have treated me as Rachel Goldstein and Kitty Maloney were doing! 'This is a free country,' I reminded them in the middle of the argument" (191). Antin's chief concern in this dispute is not the religious issue at hand, but the political terms that frame it. Politics had framed religion in Russia, in which Jews and Christians were divided by custom and law. "As I look back to-day I see, within the wall raised around my birthplace by the vigilance of the police, another wall, higher, thicker, more impenetrable …" Antin writes. "This wall within the wall is the religious integrity of the Jews, a fortress erected by the prisoners of the Pale, in defiance of their jailers; a stronghold built of the ruins of their pillaged homes, cemented with the blood of their murdered children" (26). Antin's youthful rejection of Judaism is thus simultaneously a rejection of the political system that shaped religious practice. If she understands religion as a response to oppression, then she has no need for it as a "fellow citizen."

Ironically, her renunciation of Judaism does not facilitate her integration into American society during this schoolyard debate, although she is showing Rachel

Goldstein and Kitty Maloney what *they* have in common with each other and with the American mainstream. The argument concludes with instruction in appropriate secular behavior. "[Miss Bland] made me understand … that it was proper American conduct to avoid religious arguments on school territory. I felt honored by this private initiation into the doctrine of the separation of Church and State, and I went to my seat with a good deal of dignity, my alarm about the safety of the Constitution allayed by the teacher's calmness" (192). Miss Bland's instruction helps to settle the secular side of Antin's religious exploration, but the spiritual side is not resolved until she joins the natural science club.

This club does not merely provide a new academic interest. Instead, it is a way for Antin to reframe her ideas about the world. "For what enthralled my imagination in the whole subject of natural history was not the orderly array of facts," she explains, "but the glimpse I caught, through this or that fragment of science, of the grand principles underlying the facts" (258). Natural science offers Antin a new version of spirituality that replaces not only the orthodox Judaism of her childhood but the atheism of her early adolescence. At first, the "busy years" of adolescence, in which she "was preoccupied with the process of becoming an American" (259), distracted her from religion, but once she attained a degree of comfort with those roles, spiritual questions once again rose to the surface.

> I asked once more, How did I come to be – and I found that I was no whit wiser than poor Reb' Lebe, whom I had despised for his ignorance. For all my years of America and schooling, I could give no better answer to my clamoring questions

> than the teacher of my childhood. Whence came the fair world? Was there a God, after all? And if so, what did He intend when He made me? (259-60)

This second conversion experience serves to settle and reintegrate the first, that of immigration. Although leaving home and church are central features of American life, some return or reconciliation is also necessary to attain a sense of satisfaction and maturity. The situation of one's youth is not to be simply abandoned, but to be examined critically and, perhaps, accepted by choice. Antin is unable to return to Russia (and leaving was, in any case, her parents' decision), but she is able to return to the questions that perplexed her there, and to find her own answers to them.

Bellah et al. emphasize that in leaving church, it is not important to find a radically different way to worship; what matters is the reevaluation and conscious decision to reject or accept one's parents' religion. Likewise, this should be kept in mind in understanding Antin's relationship to Judaism as she describes it by the end of *The Promised Land*. It is easy to read the autobiography as a wholesale rejection of everything that belonged to her childhood in the Pale, but in fact, the case is more subtle. Clues are scattered through the American half of the work, as, for example, the dinner in which Antin's principles of free thought are challenged by a slice of ham (196-97). In writing *The Promised Land*, Antin had the choice of formulating this incident as a confident demonstration of assimilation, or of leaving it out entirely. Instead, she confesses that her inability to eat the ham without discomfort shows that she maintains, after all, some core of Jewish identification.[19] Ashley argues that the chapter "The

[19] An additional element of this incident goes unexplored in the text, as Allan Mazur points out: "Mary Antin, even as an adult writer of this reminiscence, does not question the motive or judgment of her adored Miss Dillingham in serving ham to a Jewish child invited as a guest into her home" (44).

Burning Bush" ties Antin's experiences in the natural science club back to Judaism through the imagery of the chapter title. "[T]he framing narrator uses the metaphor of the 'burning bush' to incorporate all forms of mystical experience. Her autobiography is structured from the very beginning to validate the essence of Jewish faith while transforming it into something wider" (51). The natural science club leads Antin to wed Judaism and the Transcendentalism she adopts by way of Josephine Lazarus and Louisa May Alcott into a form of spirituality particularly suited to her needs.

Ashley reads this spiritual strategy as belonging to the realm of "biomythography," a term Audre Lorde proposes for her autobiography *Zami* which Ashley defines as "a creative *rewriting* of history to produce a powerful new myth" (42; italics in original), and I differ from Ashley in my understanding of the significance of the move. What I would emphasize is that Antin is not producing a radically new philosophy so much as she is participating in an *established* American drama of individuation in which one fashions religion for one's self, often with a strong dose of Transcendentalism.[20] Thus, while others may read *The Promised Land* as a new model for American Judaism, to adopt it would simply be to "leave church" once more, making a conscious choice about spirituality.

Conclusion

The Promised Land concludes as a teenage Antin stands on the steps of the public library after an expedition with the natural history club, musing about her place in America, her past, and the future to come. Nothing is written of her marriage, the birth of

[20] One "widely quoted formula" Bellah et al. encountered in their survey of American spirituality was that of ecology activist and Unitarian Cassie Cromwell: "You are a child of the Universe" (63). Antin fills *The Promised Land* with similar rhetoric. The popularity of the formulation may be explained by its consistency with democratic ideals; "this formula confirms our individual rights instead of calling for our obedience to God's authority" (64).

her daughter, her later life in New York, or her visit, as an adult, to Polotzk. For Betty Bergland, this is an issue of concern: "For historical Antin, dominant cultural discourses provided no language for these positions, rendering them unimaginable; consequently, narrator Antin lacked a language for articulating the positions of the historical Antin" (142). Bergland reads this as an issue of American containment of a minority woman who is unable to portray her own maturity due to the constraints of majority culture. I would suggest rather that adolescence is central to *The Promised Land* not because Antin is being excluded from majority American culture, but because she has adapted to it so effectively. Adolescence is associated with leaving home and leaving church, in which individuals define themselves as distinct from parents and others. Furthermore, it is a state consistently relived by American adults who persist in the notion that they may reinvent themselves at any time. "In the United States," writes Tocqueville, "a man will carefully construct a home in which to spend his old age and sell it before the roof is on; … he will clear a field and leave others to reap the harvest. He will take up a profession and then give it up. He will settle in one place only to go off elsewhere shortly afterwards with a new set of desires" (623). The notion of self-creation leads to a common state of quasi-adolescence in which adults envision new possibilities for their lives. Antin's concluding stance on the library steps thus suggests not regression, but an American adulthood in which, realistically or not, individuals continue to believe that their future is as malleable as it is in adolescence. Such adulthood may be restless, but maturity is nonetheless achieved at the end of *The Promised Land*; the very existence of the autobiography implies it.

Leaving home and church are essential steps toward American adulthood, which is achieved by separating from and examining one's past, then using the critical examination of the past to build one's individual life. For Antin, this involves new answers to old questions, while for others, as we will see, a conscious return and acceptance resolves the departures. While leaving home and church are common to all, Antin and the other authors participate in a third, parallel departure with its own resolution, that of autobiographical writing, which also requires that one assume a critical distance from one's past in order to build it into a coherent narrative. Paul John Eakin locates autobiography as a "third and culminating phase in a history of self-consciousness" in which individuals develop identity through language and narrative (8). "In this developmental perspective," he writes, "the autobiographical act is revealed as a mode of *self-invention* that is always practiced first in living and only eventually – sometimes – formalized in writing" (9, emphasis mine). Although autobiography has existed in various forms, times, and places, the American quality of its "self-invention" would have appealed to Mary Antin. Having created a public identity as an American citizen, inventing herself through the assistance of adopted historical and literary ancestors, she is well-positioned to create herself again through autobiography.

Chapter 2:
"That Observing Consciousness": Literary Self-Creation

Throughout Eva Hoffman's 1989 autobiography *Lost in Translation*, it is clear that the author views her history as an immigrant from Poland to Canada to the United States and her development as a scholar and writer as intimately connected aspects of her life. Toward the end of this memoir, when she has become successful at both incorporating herself into American society and communicating her insights in this context, Hoffman recollects a scene that shows the close link between these two abilities: "'Where did you learn how to be a critic?' an editor of a magazine for which I've written an article has asked me, while treating me to lunch in a chic midtown Manhattan restaurant. 'At Harvard, I guess,' I answered. 'No,' he said, 'there's something else.' 'I suppose it's that I'm an immigrant,' I said. 'Ah yes,' he said. 'That must be it'" (226-27). Though Harvard surely did play an important role in Hoffman's intellectual development, and in her assimilation, the editor's response resonates with Hoffman's own description of her critical ability. At several points in the memoir, Hoffman insists that the immigrant, outsider perspective offers a special vantage point on the world; simultaneously, she considers this observant, critical view to be not different from the native, insider perspective, but simply a more intense version of the mechanism necessary for anyone to cope with modern American life.

One instance of Hoffman's argument for Americanness-in-immigration occurs as the memoir reaches its conclusion, and as Hoffman reaches a reconciliation of the Polish and American parts of her life, when the author opens a window on her writing process, relating the way she begins to write a story in her journal. Once the multitude of false,

distracting voices in her mind quiets, she locates in silence "the white blank center, the level ground that was there before Babel was built, that is always there before the Babel of our multiple selves is constructed. From this white plenitude, a voice begins to emerge: it's an even voice, and it's capable of saying things straight, without exaggeration or triviality" (275). This voice may grow and evolve, but it "always returns to its point of departure, to ground zero. This is the point to which I have tried to triangulate, this private place, this unassimilable part of myself" (276). Here, Hoffman means by "unassimilable" not that part of herself which maintains rhapsodic memories of childhood in Cracow, as described in the book's first section, "Paradise," and which she fiercely defends from Vancouver's polite assaults in the book's middle section, "Exile." Rather than sloughing off a false, assumed "American" exterior in order to find this unassimilable place, Hoffman instead depends on her experiences of trying on, resisting, wrestling with and shaping her identity in the various contexts of her past in order to find that part of herself which she feels is most authentic.

In the book's third section, "The New World," the thesis and antithesis of the previous two sections, Poland and North America, synthesize to produce the mature Hoffman. "I could not have found this true axis, could not have made my way through the maze, if I had not assimilated and mastered the voices of my time and place – the only language through which we can learn to think and speak," she writes (276). Hoffman is able to use her medley of influences to create both a self and a speaking voice, and this speaking voice depends not on remaining uncorrupted by assimilation but on finding a common medium that allows her to communicate with an audience. "It's only after I've taken in disparate bits of cultural matter, after I've accepted its seductions and

its snares, that I can make my way through the medium of language to distill my own meanings; and it's only coming from the ground up that I can hit the tenor of my own sensibility, hit home" (276). Although to an extent a stock phrase, "hit home" is an important expression here. "Home" refers not to a particular country (Poland, Canada, the United States) and its codes and customs, but is instead located in Hoffman's self and voice. Furthermore, it is located not by isolating itself but by venturing from itself, and returning, enriched. This describes immigration rather closely, as an immigrant literally leaves the home of his or her birth and must evaluate new customs and reevaluate old ones in order to produce a self that can function in the world. However, Hoffman emphasizes that such a process is necessary for all: "We all need to find this place in order to know that we exist not only within culture but also outside it. We need to triangulate to something – the past, the future, our own untamed perceptions, another place – if we're not to be subsumed by the temporal and temporary ideas of our time, if we're not to become creatures of ephemeral fashion" (276). And this triangulation is even more essential in contemporary America, which Hoffman depicts throughout the book (with attitudes ranging from disgust to affection) as filled with sometimes trivial multiplicity.

Hoffman here seems to echo the necessity of leaving home in order to create an American self, as discussed in this dissertation, with an additional emphasis on the role of writing. Vivian Gornick also takes up this theme in her 1987 memoir *Fierce Attachments*, from a second-generation American perspective. If the archetypal American is self-made, then the autobiographical American is doubly so, for the creative process of living one's life is mirrored and duplicated in the creative process of writing one's life; furthermore,

the process of seeing and telling one's life as a story, conversely, affects the way the life itself is lived. This chapter traces Hoffman's and Gornick's self-creation in life and in literature from their descriptions of adolescence, in which they must find appropriate models of American womanhood and learn to perform them, to their use of storytelling which allows them to live creatively and transcend these models. Though disparate in their beginnings – Hoffman, with her parents and sister, immigrated to North America from Cold War-era Poland,[21] whereas Gornick's forebears came to New York's Lower East Side during the mass Jewish migration from Russia around the turn of the century – the two are only a decade apart in age, causing them both to experience a 1950s American adolescence, and their autobiographies are only two years apart in their publication. And though Gornick was born in the Bronx, she not only continues to confront issues of upward mobility, but also continues to frame her story in the language of immigration. Both authors share an interest in creativity, and in fact, a discussion of the creative process, defined in terms of immigration and citizenship, forms part of the climax of each work.

Throughout her memoir, Gornick locates her creative ability in a rectangular space that "begins in the middle of my forehead and ends in the middle of my groin. … On days when thought flows freely or better yet clarifies with effort, it expands gloriously. On days when anxiety and self-pity crowd in, it shrinks, how fast it shrinks!" (103). The physicality of this creative sensation is not unique; composition theorist Sondra Perl

[21]Hoffman's story has an unusual feature as an American immigration narrative, the fact that her family went first to Canada, though Hoffman herself moved to the United States to attend college and has lived much of her adult life here. While it is important to keep the national distinctions in mind, it is also important to keep in mind that for Hoffman's family at the time of immigration, such distinctions were almost entirely collapsed. Hoffman's parents did choose Canada specifically, but as one more outpost of the American dream: "We don't have the remotest idea of what we might find or do there, but America – Canada in our minds is automatically subsumed under that category – has for us the old fabulous associations: streets paved with gold, the goose that laid the golden egg" (84).

would probably consider it an instance of felt sense, a concept from philosopher Eugene Gendlin that she applies to the writing process: felt sense is a mind-body connection that "calls attention to what is just on the edge of our thinking but not yet articulated in words" (xiii) and for experienced writers it is "a place we can turn to – and turn to reliably – as the source of new thinking" (xiv). What's distinct about this rectangle is Gornick's identification, in a session with her analyst, of this rectangle with citizenship, and the significance of this identification to the book. "Why only that small bit of good writing inside a narrow space, and all around the rhetoric of panic and breathlessness," the analyst asks. "That rectangle, I finally explained. It's a fugitive, a subversive, an illegal immigrant in the country of my being. It has no civil rights. It's always on the run. … I can't naturalize the immigrant" (190). The therapist seems not to understand the metaphor, redefining its terms in her follow-up questions, and indeed, the issue is slippery. The rectangle suggests both a blank sheet of paper and the map of a country expanding or contracting as it conquers or is conquered, a sunny window and the slit in a fortress wall. Throughout the memoir, Gornick seems terrified both that the rectangle will close and that it exists at all.

However, the identification of this creative space with citizenship is apt. As the example of Mary Antin in *The Promised Land* shows, citizenship consists in a verbal exchange of ideas with equals in the public realm, and thus is an important element in writing that is intended to be read by others, particularly the unknown others who consume published works. Furthermore, it contrasts with the private realm of home and family in which one may be caretaker or cared-for, but never equal, a realm most associated with women. Thus, in order to write, one must step away from private roles in

the home, perhaps a special challenge for women, who have been so closely associated with the private, domestic sphere.[22]

Although this is the first time in the work Gornick uses the metaphor of citizenship to describe her writing, it is her fourth reference to the rectangle, and its properties, as she describes them, clarify both the importance of developing a public self, and the challenges of doing so. First, the rectangle initially reveals itself to her only after her marriage and during her graduate education, at a time in her life when she has achieved some distance from home, through education and through new personal allegiances. Gornick herself identifies the marriage in these terms, writing, "I began leaving home at nineteen and kept leaving until I was married in the living room at twenty-four in a noisy act of faith that announced the matter accomplished" (128), and this scenario also echoes Werner Sollors's formulation of marriage as forming a consent relationship outside the descent relationship of the family. Second, the rectangle of creativity consists precisely of those elements which Gornick's mother's presence suffocates. Her personality, emotions, and demands are described as chloroform (4) and dye (12), oxygen-depleting (56) and etherizing (80); Gornick's first description of the rectangle is of "light and air inside" (102), and when it disappears, "all is vapor and fog, and I have trouble breathing" (103). Finally, although she does not apply the term "citizenship" to it until the book's conclusion, her descriptions of the rectangle suggest that its prerequisites are freedom and equality. Gornick must respect the contributions of others if the rectangle is to flourish, as she discovers after mistakenly dismissing the intellect of two tourists at the Whitney

[22] Simone de Beauvoir writes, for example, that "for the young woman … there is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female. And just here is to be found the reason why adolescence is for a woman so difficult and decisive a moment. Up to this time she has been an autonomous individual: now she must renounce her sovereignty" (336).

Museum. And the ideal writing situation, for Gornick, is when "the work had carved out of the larger body of a free self the shape and extent of the territory it needed to occupy" (173). The necessity of a free self also implies that of a public self and in order to develop a public persona, some distance from the mother needs to be achieved; otherwise, the self plays an entirely private role in the context of the family, ruled only by emotional relationships.

Gornick's rectangle of creativity is a rectangle of entirely personal space, "beyond influence" (103), and it is "on the run" because of her fierce yet not always healthy connection to her mother. "The air I breathed was soaked in her desperation, made thick and heady by it, exciting and dangerous," Gornick writes. "Her pain became my element, the country in which I lived, the rule beneath which I bowed. … I longed endlessly to get away from her, but I could not leave the room when she was in it" (77). The simultaneous push and pull, attraction and repulsion of the mother's presence do not provide the stability and freedom necessary for the rectangle to flourish, and when her analyst asks why she can't "naturalize the immigrant," Gornick recalls, "I saw myself standing in the foyer with Mama and Nettie [her childhood neighbor and idol], the pale light full of threat and anxiety falling on us. That foyer. It is an essence, a kind of perfumed ether. I breathe it in. It thrills and sedates me. I stand in the foyer, aroused and attentive, suspended and immobilized" (190-91). Here, the idea of immigration is that of separation and individuation, finding a distinction from one's earliest role models, and naturalizing that immigrant might be analogized to finding the voice of the "white blank center" that Hoffman successfully locates by the end of *Lost in Translation*, and that transcends the clutter of influences in order to form one self, one speaking voice.

The central struggle in *Fierce Attachments*, that between mother and daughter over the daughter's life and on which Gornick's "rectangle" depends, reaches only an ambivalent conclusion. The book closes after an argument, when

> My mother breaks the silence. In a voice remarkably free of emotion – a voice detached, curious, only wanting information – she says to me, "Why don't you go already? Why don't you walk away from my life? I'm not stopping you."
>
> I see the light, I hear the street. I'm half in, half out.
>
> "I know you're not, Ma." (204)

In terms of immigration, the scene dramatizes the desire both to let go of and hold on to what might literally be called here the mother culture. The mixed feelings here are a moving and fitting conclusion to the content of *Fierce Attachments*, but in a larger context, I would suggest that the question may be closer to settled than this ending implies, and that Gornick really has achieved a healthy detachment from her mother, or the work itself would not have been possible. The central insight of the memoir, as Gornick states it in her 2001 *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, is that "I could not leave my mother because I had become my mother" (21), yet the thesis of *The Situation and the Story* is that experience, in life writing, must be shaped, and writers must put space between their selves and their subjects. "In fact," she writes, "without detachment there can be no story" (12). In writing *Fierce Attachments*, Gornick recalls, she had to "pull back – *way* back – from these people and these events to find the place where the story could draw a deep breath," and from this distance, she realized that "this point of view could only emerge from a narrator who was me and at the same time not me" (22). This included rejecting a diary she had written at the time of the events

described in *Fierce Attachments*. "The writing was soaked in a kind of girlish self-pity – 'alone again!' – that I found odious" (22). To write her memoir, Gornick rejected the "alone again!" that was a recorded part of herself in order to create a distinct persona and a coherently crafted book. This sculpture of raw material into a coherent story, when applied to one's own life, is an act of self-creation on paper.

Furthermore, ethnic autobiographies offer especially clear examples of the creativity necessary for telling American life stories. As seen in *The Promised Land*, the detachment from earlier versions of one's self inherent in immigration and naturalization is a creative process, as assimilation is a reenvisioning and remaking of the self, and probably no American is more archetypal than the "self-made" man or woman. And if this preference for self-made individuals means that we feel we cannot count on immediate, clear understanding of the personalities, attitudes, and backgrounds of those we meet, then the detached perspective of the immigrant, negotiating life within a new, unfamiliar culture, may be especially resonant. For Hoffman, such "multiple perspectives and their constant shifting" constitute the modern American condition (164), and also the way in which she comes to see herself both fitting into it in life and explaining it through writing. "Who, among my peers, is sure of what is success and what failure? Who would want to be sure? Who is sure of purposes, meanings, national goals?" she asks (164), naming as "her peers" not only immigrants but the American Baby Boom generation with which she came of age and with whom she is, after all, able to identify through a shared world view, even if this view is that little can be shared.

> Perhaps it is […] my cherishing of uncertainty as the only truth that is, after all, the best measure of my assimilation; perhaps it is in my misfittings that I fit.

> Perhaps a successful immigrant is an exaggerated version of the native. From now on, I'll be made, like a mosaic, of fragments – and my consciousness of them. It is only in that observing consciousness that I remain, after all, an immigrant. (164)

I. Creating one's own life

Hoffman's identification of detachment and alienation as defining American attitudes makes particular sense if we take leaving home and leaving church to be a central drama of American life. An archetypal life path founded on instances of departure, as a road to individualism, can just as easily be a road to isolation. Thus, Hoffman comes to consider the project of assimilation to be one of "assimilat[ing] to … the very splintering itself" (197). The task as she defines it for herself and for her generation of American peers, who share "an acute sense of dislocation," consists of "the equally acute challenge of having to invent a place and an identity for myself without the traditional supports. It could be said that the generation I belong to has been characterized by its prolonged refusal to assimilate – and it is in my very uprootedness that I'm its member" (197). Notably, even the native-born Canadians and Americans of Hoffman's circle feel that they are on their own in the project of defining their individual identities, a project related to the ideal of the "self-made" man or woman.

This concept did not exist for the Wydra family in Poland. "Of course, both my parents want 'something better' for their children," Hoffman recalls. "But neither of them is very clear about how you get to those other things, whatever they may be – how much work you need to do, how much discipline is required" – the irrationality and corruption of the Socialist People's Republic precludes not only the idea of the work

ethic, but the possibility of employing it (15). "It's clear enough to everybody that you don't get anywhere by trying. Working hard in your 'chosen profession,' when the profession is most often chosen for you, when there's no reward and no possibility of improving your conditions, and when anything may happen tomorrow, is for fools or schlemiels" (15). True, it was possible to elevate one's condition, and particularly one's financial status, as a party member, but belonging to the established prewar gentry was still preferable, and not only because of the popular skepticism toward the government. "[L]ineage gives a solidity, a depth that such newly minted success cannot bestow; it implies a moral uprightness and the dignity of not having to prove yourself, of being somebody to begin with – and being, by the still preindustrial standards of this particular society, is far preferable to striving" (44). Hoffman's father was able to keep his family within the range of middle class through his own ingenuity and effort, but ironically, this middle-class respectability is achieved through various illicit projects. Because his special talent is for outsmarting the system, he flounders in Vancouver, where there is no obvious system to outsmart.

In contrast to Polish life as Hoffman depicts it, American life strongly emphasizes individual effort to "get ahead," with an intrinsic element of alienation. The two are closely related, as we see in *Lost in Translation* and *Fierce Attachments*, where Eva and Vivian break from their parents and look outside the home for role models in order to prepare for adulthood. Eva has the added challenge of assimilating, but Vivian, too, rebels directly against her mother and takes advice from her neighbor, Nettie. Both also must cope with the stringent requirements of femininity placed on women in the 1950s; the struggle to understand and apply these rules, common to young women at the time as

the narrators and their friends make clear, is a clear-cut instance of self-fashioning. This sculpture of girls into young women takes place, as we see in these works, through surrogate mothers, resulting in stresses upon and redefinitions of family life.

After immigrating, Hoffman can no longer depend on her parents to provide appropriate guidance that would allow her to function in the society around her. Instead, she requires new "parents" or role models, and their acquisition constitutes a kind of second birth. Hoffman describes her immigration as being "born into the new world" (104), much as Mary Antin does in *The Promised Land*, but for Hoffman, unlike Antin, the birth is terrifying. Shortly after arriving in Vancouver, she recalls, "I have a nightmare in which I'm drowning in the ocean while my mother and father swim farther and farther away from me. I know, in this dream, what it is to be cast adrift in incomprehensible space; I know what it is to lose one's mooring. I wake up in the middle of a prolonged scream" (104). The terror of this dream has to do not only with the near-death scene but with being unmoored from her parents, whose own lives will no longer converge with hers in expected ways and provide guidance on becoming an adult.

Instead, others begin to claim parental roles, beginning on her first day at school, when in a "careless baptism," Ewa and her younger sister Alina, nicknamed Alinka, are renamed. "All it takes is a brief conference between Mr. Rosenberg [the Wydras' temporary benefactor] and the teacher, a kindly looking woman who tries to give us reassuring glances, but who has seen too many people come and go to get sentimental about a name" for Ewa to become Eva and Alina to become, "after a moment's thought," Elaine (105). Although it goes unremarked in the text, "baptism" is a curious way to describe the naming of Jewish girls. Nonetheless, its specific implications make this

invocation of Christian imagery appropriate. Religious baptism, apart from its naming aspect, is intended to purify infants and/or converts and to admit them into the religious community; the sisters' baptism here "cleanses" them of foreignness and gives them access to the New World. In both cases, the event symbolizes embarkation on a new (way of) life. Furthermore, the metaphor positions Mr. Rosenberg and the teacher as godparents who, as the sponsors of this "baptism," agree to provide the girls' religious (here, cultural) education and to care for the children if they are orphaned (here, metaphorically). Mr. Rosenberg, particularly, makes a highly detached parent, kicking the Wydras out of the nest after about a week, but though cruel, his lesson is appropriate; he knows, as the Wydras do not, that self-sufficiency is the law of the land. That the baptism causes a "rebirth" for the sisters is especially clear since their new names, no matter how similar to the old, refer not to the same people they always used to be, but to new selves. "Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can't yet pronounce, are not us. ... We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves" (105). If detachment and alienation are central to American life, then these new names immediately Americanize the sisters, since the names cause the girls to lose their sense of stable, unquestioned identity.

However, the sisters will also grow into these names, which will come to signify adolescents and adults whose experiences and attitudes would not have been possible in Cracow, had they grown up there under their original names. "Elaine" and "Eva" are new creations, and are created in the context of possible American identities. Told by a classmate in graduate school that "This is a society in which you are who you think you

are. Nobody gives you your identity here, you have to reinvent yourself every day" (160), Hoffman understands that the job of reinventing one's self is done not in a vacuum but by evaluating and assimilating specific qualities of the characters around you. "[S]omehow, invent myself I must," she writes, "But how do I chose from identity options available all around me?" (160).

From the Wydras' arrival in Canada, they are confronted with options of possible immigrant identities (let alone fully assimilated identities). On the train to Vancouver, a fellow passenger tells them, in Yiddish, "the story of a Polish Jew who came to Canada and made a fortune – he's now a millionaire! – on producing Polish pickles" (100). Rather than being an exception, this pickle magnate is presented as a model for success. "Pickles! If one can make a fortune on that, well – it shouldn't be hard to get rich in this country. My father is energized, excited by this story, but I subside into an even more determined sullenness. 'Millionaire' is one of those fairy-tale words that has no meaning to me whatsoever – a word like 'emigration' or Canada'" (100). The seeming simplicity of the get-rich scheme, hinging as it does on such an ordinary product, makes similar success seem easily achieved, and this Polish-Jewish millionaire an inspirational model for the father to emulate. The daughter's reaction, though hostile, is just the inverse of the father's reaction. By saying that the word seems like a fairy tale, she acknowledges its archetypal power; besides, she rejects "emigration" and "Canada" as well, to no effect at all as she is now on the train to her new home in Canada.

The Horatio Alger model has a flip side, though, as Eva is well aware. Her family's precarious position gives her fear in the form of "vague images of helplessness and restriction and always being poor. 'The Bowery,' I come to call this congeries of

anxieties. The Bowery is where I'll end up if I don't do everything exactly right" (157). To arrive at the literal Bowery, Eva would have to travel back across the continent, but as a model of unsuccessful immigration, the image gets straight to the point. It captures an economic reality opposite from and yet more common than that of the immigrant who became a millionaire by selling pickles; "[l]iving there meant that you had somehow fallen off the treadmill of the moneymaking world, beyond striving—you'd hit the literal embodiment of the phrase *rock bottom*" (Press). And as a street through or bordering Chinatown, Little Italy, Kleindeutschland, and the Jewish Lower East Side, the Bowery was also intimately associated with immigrant fates.

In between these two extremes, of course, are achievable and respectable models of immigrant identity. Eva's piano teacher, Mr. Ostropov, has embraced, perhaps for lack of alternatives, the familiar persona "of an émigré eccentric – a lovable, temperamental, slightly mad Russian artist" (155). The matrons of Vancouver's Polish-Jewish community, with their suburban homes, finned automobiles, and modulated voices, are a more assimilated option. "They're a version of what I might become, and even a temptation for what I might want to be: a woman who has the comfort of living within the perfectly knowable orderliness of middle-class convention," Hoffman recalls (143), but without wholehearted acceptance. "'Pretty soon, you should find a nice husband, a smart, talented girl like you,' they tell me. Indeed, why should I have the arrogance to have different aspirations? And what, exactly, should my aspirations be? Theirs is an immigrant success story, and that's the story of their own lives that they accept" (143). These women, she suspects, might tell a different story of themselves from what their surface appearance suggests, "if they had the words to say just what they feel" (143); they

fit into the society around them, but are not able to bring any of their own individuality to their interactions in that society.

These women, longer established in the community than Eva's mother, provide a more nurturing environment than Mr. Rosenberg did, although their ministrations focus more on the body than the mind or heart. They take Eva under their collective wing, shampooing, painting, plucking, shaving, and dressing her almost as if she were a doll. "'If you were my daughter, you'd soon look like a princess,'" one of the women tells her, not only insulting her appearance, as Eva takes it, but also "implying an added deficiency in my mother" (109). A number of these women decide to fill the vacuum they perceive in Eva's parenting; Mrs. Lieberman, in an entirely self-appointed role, shaves Eva's armpits, and Mrs. Steiner "semiadopt[s]" her (110), inviting her home for entire weekends, arranging her piano lessons, and having long conversations with her, "mostly about my problems and my life" (112). Mrs. Steiner makes an appealing surrogate mother. Being Polish, she is a type, and has a worldview, that Eva understands and that simultaneously understands Eva; being "fabulously rich" (110), she is able to give Eva a taste of high-class life, aiding her assimilation. Still, Mrs. Steiner, like the other mothers, offers reproaches to Eva's parents, whether direct (as when she criticizes Eva's father for quitting his job), indirect (seldom inviting them to visit), or unintentional (by inviting invidious comparison as highly successful Polish immigrants).

Eva is uncomfortable with the feminine paraphernalia urged upon her by these deputy mothers who aim to sculpt her into an assimilated teenager from the outside in, with bouffant, lipstick, and high heels.

> Inside its elaborate packaging, my body is stiff, sulky, wary. When I'm with my peers, who come by crinolines, lipstick, cars, and self-confidence naturally, my gestures show that I'm here provisionally, by their grace, that I don't rightfully belong. My shoulders stoop, I nod frantically to indicate my agreement with others, I smile sweetly at people to show I mean well, and my chest recedes inward so that I don't take up too much space – mannerisms of a marginal, off-centered person who wants both to be taken in and to fend off the threatening others. (110)

But while Eva attributes her problem to assimilation, from an outside vantage point it is easy to see her reaction as normal for any girl first encountering the trappings of young-womanhood. Marianne Hirsch, who otherwise considers her own history to have been highly similar to Hoffman's, is skeptical, asking, "Were my discomfort and Hoffman's the result of our cultural displacement, or were they due to a chronological transition that teenage culture and the demands of adult femininity have made inherently and deeply unnatural for even the most comfortably indigenous American girl?" (221). Hirsch's insight squares with that of Simone de Beauvoir, who famously declared that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267). The experiences of Hoffman's peers consistently clarify the fact that such femininity is constructed, not organic; her college roommate knows the rules well enough to advise Eva on makeup, but their group of friends continue to hash out the semiotics of dating. "The vexing question of femininity continues to come up on many occasions," Hoffman recalls (178), and when she offers her own view on the situation, commonsensical to her, her friends are astounded. "I never thought you had to do anything special to be feminine – surely, it's enough to be a

woman, isn't it? – but this belief, which seems a given to me, strikes my college-mates as very sophisticated" (178). This take on femininity is of a piece with the Polish worldview as described throughout *Lost in Translation*, in which identity is not constructed, but preexisting and of no conscious concern. Likewise, the classmates' surprise shows that for American girls, and especially those growing up with the rigidly defined gender roles of the 1950s, the idea of constructing a female identity is equally ingrained, and simply one specific branch of the project of deciding what you want to be, and learning how to perform your way into that chosen identity.

Nor is discomfort with that role unique to Hoffman. Beauvoir elaborates the way in which the physical changes of female adolescence effect psychological change as well: "The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her … it becomes foreign to her; and at the same time she becomes for others a thing: on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible; it frightens her to become flesh and to show her flesh" (308). Such discomfort can either be suppressed or acted upon; Wini Breines points out that the girls of the 1950s grew up to be the feminists of the '60s and '70s, and that "the exaggerated contradictions of the fifties, especially the narrowness of gender norms, meant that girls rebelled and explored. Camouflaged by an apparent and cheerful stability, they were attracted to various forms of difference and to new feminine lives" (11). This rebellion consisted partly in conscious decisions not to copy their mothers' lives, but to look elsewhere in deciding how to live.

The sexual repressions of the 1950s are paralleled by a contemporary postwar American identity crisis, in which clean, smiling suburbs masked deep anxiety.

Communists at home and abroad, and the threat of atomic war, created fear that expressed itself in covert ways such as movies in which aliens invade the Earth. According to Breines, both national and sexual anxieties were linked: "Fears of communism and female sexuality melded, leading to a policy of containment for both" (10). Given this popular conflation of the political and sexual, it is no wonder that metaphors of adolescence may also have a political or national tinge. Referencing Carol Gilligan's 1990 *Making Connections*, Hirsch focuses on Gilligan's political terminology for describing girls in the process of becoming adolescents, in which "most girls leave their 'home'" (222). "Whatever knowledge they preserve from their earlier selves must go underground; if they want to conserve or to perpetuate it they must 'join the resistance.' Gilligan describes this underground world as a 'remote island,' implying that every transition into female adulthood is a process of acculturation to an alien realm – or, could one say, an experience of emigration?" (221). Such language draws close parallels between the self-making of adulthood and the self-making of immigration.

Because of the relationship between adolescence and immigration, both of which require leave-taking from home and parents, it is unsurprising that the breakdown of the Wydra's previous family life plays out on the field of adolescence. When Alina adopts makeup, leg-shaving, and beatnik gear, in Polish terms she is behaving inappropriately, but in American terms such "rebellion" is culturally sanctioned, and a facet of leaving home. "Altogether, Alinka seems to be striving for a normal American adolescence. The only trouble is that none of us knows what that's supposed to be, and my sister pains us with her capacity for change, with becoming so different from what she was. She is leaving us abruptly, leaving us to find her own pleasures" (144). Because their parents

have no way of evaluating whether their children's friends are good or bad influences, since the previous guidelines no longer seem to apply, the daughters are left largely to their own devices. "They don't try to exercise much influence over me anymore," Hoffman recalls of this period. "'In Poland, I would have known how to bring you up, I would have known what to do,' my mother says wistfully, but here, she has lost her sureness, her authority. … She has always been gentle with us, and she doesn't want, doesn't know how, to tighten the reins. But familial bonds seem so dangerously loose here!" (145). Mrs. Wydra's lament echoes that heard in *The Promised Land* for "this sad process of disintegration of home life [that] may be observed in almost any immigrant family of our class and with our traditions and aspirations" (212) in which parental authority is undermined as children look elsewhere for role models. This rebellion, if necessary and unavoidable, is certainly not painless for children, either. "Truth to tell," Hoffman writes, "I don't want the fabric of loyalty and affection, and even obligation, to unravel either" (146). Aware of her parents' vulnerability, Eva wants to protect them, and encourages her sister to do the same.

While Eva and Alina's challenge is to develop new identities without hurting their parents, the challenge Gornick paints in *Fierce Attachments* has a different shade. Because she was born in the Bronx, to a mother who lived most of her life in New York City, she has a close vantage point on the kind of adult she might become. However, this is not necessarily advantageous. In a sense, Eva and her sister had the luxury of feeling protective toward their parents, because the separation, though painful, was unavoidable, and also, ultimately, wished by the parents. Conversely, Vivian must struggle, sometimes brutally, for a separation, precisely because her mother already offers one

model of a possible American life. In other words, it is harder to leave home when one's home is already culturally acceptable, even if that same culture expects such a rebellion in the form of class mobility through education.

Gornick's mother understands that the prerogative of American children is to rebel against their parents; when a former upstairs neighbor named Cessa cut off her long hair and was punished by her father and husband, Gornick's mother recalls, " 'I say to her, "Cessa, tell your father this is America, Cessa, America. You're a free woman." She looks at me and she says to me, "What do you mean, tell my father this is America? He was born in Brooklyn" ' " (5-6). Being American, Gornick's mother suggests, entitles people to throw off their parents' old traditions and make their own choices. Cessa's response highlights the continuing problem of separation from the parents; even though her father was born in Brooklyn and the family is therefore American, she is not exempt from this process. Although her father's stance on the haircut may not be rooted directly in Russian ideas, she still must break away from his opinions and practices, and establish her own. Being American means not that Cessa, or anyone, can or should follow the "American" lives of her parents, but that it is up to her to negotiate between the life her parents prefer and the life she would like to live.

Understandably, however, Gornick's mother has a blind spot when it comes to applying this principle to her own relationship with her daughter, and Vivian's competing desires to escape and to stay with her mother form the center of *Fierce Attachments*. In the first place, the mother thinks she's telling Cessa to rebel against unacceptable Russian attitudes, but doesn't necessarily see the need to rebel against parents who are American and therefore acceptable. And because she so confidently sets out for Cessa a picture of

what being American entails, it is safe to assume that she considers herself fully American. Furthermore, she impels Cessa to reject her father's expectations about an appropriate woman's life, expectations that are external because he is not, himself, a woman. Thus, to rebel against these expectations is to rebel against a system of rules. Vivian's rebellion, however, is ultimately the rejection of her mother, who lives by the standards she sets. These standards may not always be clear-cut rules, like the one Cessa was encouraged to oppose; fighting her mother's influence is like fighting mist, as it is all-pervasive.

For Gornick's mother, proper parent/child relationships are exemplified by her own birth family. "My mother died in my sister's arms, with all her children around her" (44), she rebukes her daughter, implying strongly that she is insufficiently loved by Vivian and her brother. In this model, love both demands and is signified by constant presence of family members. Vivian's retort shows that this attitude is as culturally inappropriate as Cessa's father's: "Your sister hated your mother, and you know it. She was there because it was her duty to be there, and because she lived around the corner all her married life. It had nothing to do with love. It wasn't a better life, it was an immigrant life, a working-class life, a life from another century" (44). This response is influenced partly by the arrogance of the present toward the past and partly by the outrageousness that the mother often seems to bring out in her daughter, but Vivian's response reiterates her mother's response to Cessa in identifying obligatory family bonds with immigration. That her mother's family existed in a liminal, not-yet-American stage is clear to Gornick precisely because of its attitudes toward family life. In the modern American schema, even family relationships must be built, she explains to her mother: " 'I'm saying that

nowadays love has to be earned. Even by mothers and sons' " (45). Continued relations between adult children and their parents depend not on making the best of the past and of genetics, but on conscious choices about how, and whether, to relate to them at all. The parent/child relationship is thus not a pre-existing structure but must instead be constructed.

Furthermore, additional parent/child relationships may be constructed outside the traditional family structure. One of the central driving conflicts of *Fierce Attachments* is the competition between the mother and Nettie, who both see Vivian as a potential disciple. Nettie, the next-door neighbor, is red-haired, Ukrainian, and a near-total mismatch for her Jewish Bronx neighborhood. Under the protection of Vivian's mother from the building's anti-shiksa sentiment, she nonetheless presents competition for Vivian's affection. Beautiful, sensuous, and not at all domesticated even once her son is born, she "was touched with promise and allure" (51). Vivian is attracted to Nettie, but also apprehensive of her; at her father's funeral, Vivan seeks refuge with Nettie, but her seductive physicality becomes frightening. "In a matter of seconds the power of Nettie's drowsy allure had been dissipated. I shivered inside myself as though I had made a narrow escape. … Mama was where I belonged. With Mama the issue was clear: I had trouble breathing but I was safe" (70-71).

But the battle isn't resolved here; instead it intensifies into open war when Vivian is seventeen and Nettie decides that she, and not the mother, is best equipped to prepare Vivian for womanhood.

> What she knew about men and women, life and the marketplace, education and the right husband would get me from the working-class part of the Bronx to the

> middle-class part of the Bronx. Every mother on the block knew that was the goal – Selma Berkowitz had the first nose job anyone had ever heard of because the Berkowitzes were planning to move to the Concourse and get her 'a doctor for a husband' – and Nettie thought she could do better by me than any of these women. (111)

Here we see "self-made" young women attempting to improve their social and economic standing through self-improvement strategies of more or less drastic degree. Selma Berkowitz's nose job is a permanent physical remaking of her self, whereas Vivian's attempts have more to do with style, but the experiences of both, like Hoffman's, show that proper adult womanhood is not developed naturally, but consciously and according to particular rules and patterns. Gornick later describes her lessons with Nettie as "woman-making sessions" (113).

But Gornick's own advancement story doesn't take that route; she moves not to the middle-class part of the Bronx but to Manhattan. Her own aptitudes clashed with those of her available models. "Nettie wanted to seduce, Mama wanted to suffer, I wanted to read. None of us knew how to discipline herself to the successful pursuit of an ideal, normal woman's life. And indeed, none of us ever achieved it" (114).

II. Creating one's own story

Gornick's particular talents take her instead to the City College of New York, where her experiences demonstrate more actively a major dilemma commonly associated with immigration. The greater opportunity available for each new generation, often envisioned in terms of education as it is, for example, in *The Promised Land*, necessarily creates a separation between parent and child. Vivian's mother is, when challenged, a

staunch supporter of her daughter's education, informing an uncle that "'[S]he's clever, she deserves an education, and she's going to get one. This is America. The girls are not cows in the field only waiting for a bull to mate with" (107). Here she reiterates her advice to Cessa, now informing her own family that "This is America," where different rules are in operation. But instructing one's neighbor, a peer or even an inferior (given her aloof status in the building), is easier than having such advice turned on one's self. If the statement "this is America" is a kind of code for "children shouldn't be bound by their parents' rules," then Vivian's mother here unwittingly sets herself up as the antagonist in an epic battle framed in terms of immigration. "Benign in intent, only a passport to the promised land, City of course was the real invader," Gornick writes.

> I lived among my people but I was no longer one of them. I think this was true for most of us at City College. We still used the subways, still walked the familiar streets between classes, still returned to the neighborhood each night, talked to our high-school friends, and went to sleep in our own beds. But secretly we had begun to live in a world inside our heads where we read talked thought in a way that separated us from our parents, the life of the house and that of the street. We had been initiated, had learned the difference between hidden and expressed thought. This made us subversives in our own homes. (105)

Education is an almost unquestioned value, prized in struggling ethnic families for its potential to help the younger generation "get ahead," but the other side of the equation, typically unrecognized until it happens, is that if the child is getting ahead, the parent is being left behind. This is true of Gornick's family; she recalls that her mother "hadn't understood that going to school meant I would start thinking: coherently and out loud.

She was taken by violent surprise. … I had never before spoken a word she didn't know" (108). The daughter's new authority, gained through her education, undermines that of her mother, producing a scenario similar to what Mary Antin describes as "that inversion of normal relations which makes for friction, and which sometimes ends in breaking up a family that was formerly united and happy" (212-13). For the elder Antins, there was at least the benefit of becoming Americanized through their children; for Gornick's mother, who had no such need, her daughter's new form of self-assertion must have particularly rankled.

The college-aged Gornick's new use of language drives a wedge between her and her mother, whose rage springs in part from the fact that "I had never before spoken a word she didn't know" (108). In addition to contesting her mother at the level of vocabulary, Vivian questions her narratives as well. The mother is convinced that the daughter will emerge from college a teacher; the daughter has other plans. City College allows Gornick to frame her identity in new terms, to conceive of herself not as a daughter or future wife but as an intellectual being. Her classmates, from similar homes in Brooklyn and the Bronx, share this experience, and its importance is also clarified by the numerous neighborhood women in *Fierce Attachments* who attempt, with varying degrees of success, to sculpt lives based outside the kitchen. Creative use of language and narrative is also essential to *Lost in Translation*, as Matthias Schubnell explains:

> The idea that we are all made of words, that we are constantly meta-morphosing our selves as we write and rewrite, draft and revise the text that delineates who we are, is at the very heart of Hoffman's work. We are the writers of our lives, even as this continual act of creating our identity distances us from our immediate

> experience and renders us, in a sense, all exiles in a world of constantly shifting meanings and circumstances.

The biblical framework of paradise and exile in *Lost in Translation* is defined not only locationally, but linguistically.

Part of what makes Poland a paradise, for Hoffman, is that it is the home where she first acquired language, and where signifier and signified were therefore united, and fully entwined in her, intellectually, emotionally, and physically. "The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue," she writes of acquiring English in adolescence. "'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'River' in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me" (106). Acquiring a new language, in which familiar things gain new, unfamiliar signifiers, creates a split in which, Hoffman writes, she learns that "words are just themselves" (107). However, this simple addition of possible signifiers does not seem to explain this split fully; after all, Hoffman was also acquainted from childhood with both Yiddish and Russian, as well as Polish, and would thus have already encountered multiple names for the same objects.

Rather, Eva's sense of "radical disjoining" (107) between word and thing, present and past self, which comes about as she learns English, probably has to do with her acquisition of English as a specifically public language. In this way, *Lost in Translation* resonates with Richard Rodriguez's *The Hunger of Memory*, as several critics have noted;

both are concerned with the nature of public and private languages.[23] As, for Hoffman, a public language, English stands in contrast to Yiddish, "the language of money and secrets" (14), and Polish, in which she spoke to her family and friends. Furthermore, at this time, Polish was also a language of political resistance. Although "according to speeches by the principal and other personages, […] learning the international language of Communism," Russian, "is something we should naturally want to do" (61), both students and teachers are manifestly uninterested in this idea. The mandatory Russian classes, in Ewa's experience, are brief and perfunctory, and for a significant portion of the allotted time, "the teacher chats with us – in Polish – about other things" (62). Just as the teachers reject the Russian language, they reject the Russian/communist narrative of Polish history that they are expected to teach. Although Ewa's teacher first recites the party line about the tyranny of King Wladislaw II, he then explains that the king was a great patriot and lists some of his accomplishments. "When he tells us such things," Hoffman recalls, "his voice gains more warmth, and he leans forward at his desk, giving us to understand that this is between him and us – he's telling it to us straight" (62). Here, Polish is being used privately, "between him and us," and although the teacher's goal is to establish a public identity in the students, that of pride in Polish heritage, he must do so by offering a counter-narrative in opposition to the official government line.

Postwar politics, however, are still more complicated in Poland, the site not only of national occupation by the Nazis but of much of Hitler's war against the Jews, a trauma

[23] Hoffman and Rodriguez have been compared on multiple occasions; Matthias Schubnell focuses specifically on the ways the authors cope with bilingualism, while Petra Fachinger adds an emphasis on the authors' nostalgia.

still more private.[24] Thus, Ewa's relationship to private, family language and stories is likewise additionally complicated. The Holocaust is often understood to be unspeakable; Giorgio Agamben, for instance, determined in reading the testimony of survivors that it "contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to" (13). This lacuna, he writes, cannot be encompassed in language and is instead filled with "non-language" (39). Furthermore, even if words can be found, the illogic of the event prevents it from being shaped into narrative, which depends on cause and effect. "To make a sequential narrative of what happened would have been to make indecently rational what had been obscenely irrational," Hoffman writes in *After Such Knowledge*, her 2004 meditation on the Holocaust. "One was not to make a nice story out of loathsome cruelty and of piercing, causeless hurt" (15). Although it was not until after writing *Lost in Translation* that Hoffman came to see the Holocaust as a major force in her life, and the "second generation" as part of her identity, her observations in *After Such Knowledge* help make sense of its shadowy presence in the autobiography. Her father, for instance, resists narrativizing his past as a survivor, she recalls: "dignity for him is silence, sometimes too much silence" (23). What he does reveal, he treats superficially: "My parents tell me little about their prewar life in Zalosce, a small town near Lvov, as if the war erased not only the literal world in which they lived but also its relevance to their new conditions. 'Well, we were just ordinary mass men,' my father once tells me in reply to some

[24] Later, in *After Such Knowledge*, Hoffman recalls, "The neighbor in our building who had fought in the underground army spoke about it in lowered tones and allusive phrases; but he spoke through gritted teeth with a fervor of fury and pride. I sensed, on the other hand, that what happened to my parents and their Jewish friends was a more obscure matter, the kind of secret one wraps in a cocoon of silence, or protects like one protects an injury" (25). By limiting discussion of the Holocaust in *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman seems to have taken this message of its unspeakability to heart; in *After Such Knowledge*, she is able to examine that decision from a greater distance.

question, dismissing the significance of that chunk of their lives" (8). His use of the term "ordinary mass men" in order to evade the request for his own story is significant, particularly as the phrase sounds unnatural in English. In addition to carrying the ring of more common phrases such as "mass destruction" or "mass murderer," it indicates a lack of differentiation, a large group of people as a whole rather than people individually. Since Jews were, to say the least, excluded from citizenship, they were also excluded from the public selfhood that entails individuality, as seen in Mary Antin's experiences in Russia that are described in *The Promised Land*. A private sense of self among family could indeed be present, but without a willingness or ability to tell one's life story, already compromised by trauma, or a public audience willing to receive it, that story could never become public.

Nonetheless, it is essential that Ewa receive the story. The Holocaust is a major force upon her experiences and character, although she was born after the war, and thus language and stories are her link her to her parents' experiences and to those of their family and community wiped out during the war. Her name itself, "after both my grandmothers – Ewa, Alfreda – two women of whom I have only the dimmest of impressions" (8) forms such a linguistic bond, and stories from the Holocaust and before also forge connections between Ewa and her mother, as Ewa, "to atone for what happened, [tries to] relive it all with her" (25). This connection, however, is problematic, as Ewa can never relive what she did not first experience, and as circling around the past will not create a future.

The mother's stories in Ewa's childhood create a kind of stasis. "I can't go as near this pain as I should," Hoffman writes. "But I can't draw away from it either" (25). But

the simultaneous immediacy and distance of the Holocaust for the second generation may also be productive, Hoffman explains in *After Such Knowledge*. "The urge to rescue, to repair and salve, which we felt so painfully in our early transactions with wounded parents, can transform itself – if it is contained in sufficient frameworks of emotional safety – into the re-creative and reconstitutive urge, into the desire for creativity and interpretation" (191). When her father dismisses an incident from his past, "making an impatient gesture with his hands, as if to throw off these memories. What does it matter? It happened, it happened, what can you make of it?" (24), he in fact gets to the heart of the matter; as the next generation and as a writer, it is precisely Hoffman's job to make something of the past, to find a purpose in it and use it to move forward. Told about her mother's young sister, who had to dig her own grave before entering the gas chamber, young Ewa understands this already, if in a childish way. "That strikes me as a fairy tale more cruel, more magical than anything in the brothers Grimm. Except that this is real. But is it? It doesn't have the same palpable reality as the Cracow tramway. Maybe it didn't happen after all, maybe it's only a story, and a story can be told differently, it can be changed" (7). A story is all in the telling, and while the facts may remain facts, the connections between them and the perspective through which they are viewed may be changed for different purposes and effects. As an adult with a postgraduate education, Hoffman's understanding of narrative theory is more mature, yet she still confronts the same issues from her childhood, as when she learning for the first time about her aunt and cousin whose hiding place was betrayed by a fellow Jew. "There's no way to get this part of the story in proportion," she writes. "… I need seven-league boots to travel from this to where I live. And yet, this is what I must do" (253). Marianne Hirsch describes

this as the job of postmemory: "It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and thus of inscribing them into one's own life story. This form of identification means the ability to say, 'It could have been me; it was me, also,' and, at the same time, categorically, 'but it was not me.'" ("Marked" 76). Hoffman must create an individual identity that nonetheless includes her family's Holocaust experiences.

Although in Poland language connected Hoffman to her family, in America, it separates her from them. "My mother says I'm becoming 'English,'" Hoffman writes, and the mother's adjective is a good one, because the personality changes she refers to are rooted in the new language. "This hurts me, because I know she means I'm becoming cold" (146). At first Hoffman rejects this characterization, stating that she is only "learning to be less demonstrative" (147), but later she considers that the form of expression eventually comes to define its content. Suppressing the external "storminess of emotion" (147) characteristic of the Wydras may have led to internal suppression as well. Compounding the issue is Eva's limited ability in the language; unable to speak fluently or to catch jokes, her "English" personality seems solemn (118). The two problems meld as she tries to understand her Canadian friends. Hoffman recalls:

> When my friend Penny tells me that she's envious, or happy, or disappointed, I try laboriously to translate not from English to Polish but from the word back to its source, to the feeling from which it springs. Already, in that moment of strain, spontaneity is lost. And anyway, the translation doesn't work. I don't know how Penny feels when she talks about envy. (107)

Different words in English and Polish are intrinsically linked to different attitudes.

Ewa's development into Eva takes place both through language, in which different shades of meaning color her experience of the world, and through narrative. Small autobiographical acts within *Lost in Translation* suggest Hoffman's early attempts at building a life story through writing. For example, writing a letter to her friend Basia, she describes not her unhappiness but a beautiful landscape outside her window. Claiming that her "social life is, you might say, 'blooming,'" she puts a positive spin on her experiences in Vancouver not only for Basia's sake, but for her own. "I am repeating a ritual performed by countless immigrants who have sent letters back home meant to impress and convince their friends and relatives – and probably even themselves – that their lives have changed for the better. I am lying," Hoffman writes. "But I am also trying to fend off my nostalgia" (116). Although the letter is, in one way, a confidence trick (as she suspects later, when a classmate explains the principle of self-invention to her [160]) as well as a clichéd script of immigrant life, writing it gradually causes her to *become* it, if only by forcing the nostalgia down. Even if vestiges of nostalgia remain, she creates a public, written self that overlays her hidden, nostalgic self. This public self may begin as a lie, but it becomes the truth as others, and Eva herself, become accustomed to it and come to believe in it.

The turning point at which she becomes convinced by her public self occurs when a friend gives her a diary as a birthday present, and she must decide whether to use English or Polish when writing in it. Although she alone is the audience, she "finally choose[s] English. If I'm to write about the present," she explains, "I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self" (121). Because English feels impersonal to her, she eschews typical adolescent musings and turns instead to

impersonal subjects: "I set down my reflections on the ugliness of wrestling; on the elegance of Mozart, and on how Dostoyevsky puts me in mind of El Greco. I write down Thoughts. I Write" (121). When, as an adult, Hoffman explains that she learned how to be a critic by being an immigrant, she may have been thinking of the persona developed in this diary. "I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self," she writes. "Refracted through the double distance of English and writing, this self – my English self – becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives. … This language is beginning to invent another me" (121). Similar to the continuing process of self-birth that Antin describes, Hoffman writes her way into a new conception of herself and, eventually, into a life story as writer and critic.

Weighing "the lack either of narrative or of language to the formation of new women's lives," Carolyn Heilbrun writes, "I would unquestionably emphasize narrative" (43). For Heilbrun, it is essential for women to share their stories in order that new women's stories might be written. We see this importance of narrative both in Hoffman's successful attempts at writing herself into the life story of an American intellectual, and in Vivian Gornick's evaluation in *Fierce Attachments* of the various women's lives around her. Gornick sifts through the models available to her in order to learn from them, but also to transcend them, creating a public identity while the women around her are limited to the private sphere. The women in Vivian's building who remain most vivid in her memory are those who struggled against their predetermined role of homemaker, often without fully succeeding. In this struggle, women's creative ability, which might have been put to better use, is suppressed by traditional roles. Without any clear outlet for their creative energies, they seem simply crazy.

The downstairs neighbor, dotty Mrs. Kerner, is acknowledged by all as part of the neighborhood's cast of "holy fool[s]" (25), but is also a "born storyteller – that is, the one for whom every scrap of experience is only waiting to be given shape and meaning through the miracle of narrative speech" (28). After elaborating some dramatic circumstance, Mrs. Kerner would be carried on this wave of energy to the piano, where she "sat down with the exaggerated motions of an artist at the piano, raised her arms high in the air, and brought her fingers down" not into the compositions of Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and Mozart (which she had intended her daughter to learn to play) but "into the opening bars of 'The Volga Boatmen.' That was it. That was all she could play. The opening bars of 'The Volga Boatmen.' These she repeated ten or twenty times with no diminution of interest" (29). Filled with enthusiasm, Mrs. Kerner nonetheless runs into a wall, able to begin but not to finish a creative project. Indeed, she is never able to finish anything, including her housework, which is continually interrupted by her creative inspirations. Thus, in her own eccentric way, Mrs. Kerner is able to exempt herself from the appropriate role of a woman in her neighborhood; her intellect and creativity keep her from spending her days behind the vacuum cleaner. However, this exemption comes at the expense of being recognized by all as the building's crazy woman. Although she is definitely intelligent (her flights of fantasy are prompted by subjects such as radiation and Russian literature), her intellect is stunted for lack of a life path that could make use of it. Just as she never finishes the vacuuming or "The Volga Boatmen," she is not able to define an identity that fully exempts her from the Bronx and its standards.

Similarly, Nettie's genuine talent for lacemaking soothed her nerves and entertained her, but was never planned out or sustained for any project larger than an antimacassar.

"If you watched her working you could see that it interested her – the designs seemed to emerge from her hook, they took her by surprise, she wanted to know how a piece of work would come out – but the interest was not sustained; one moment intent and concentrated, the next shrugged off, discarded, easily forgotten" (52). Her lacemaking existed in a kind of vacuum, and its distinctness from her daily life is clear by the fact that she used it to "recover[] from motherhood" (52); it may calm her to go on with the job of motherhood, but doesn't solve the underlying problem of Nettie's basic unfitness for her lifestyle. It does, however, stimulate simultaneous flights of storytelling, just as Mrs. Kerner's stories inspire her to sit down at the piano. Her stories, developed in the context of her usual reading material, paperback romances, began "Wouldn't it be wonderful if …" and continued with Nettie, the heroine, coming upon a thousand dollars or a kind, handsome, unmarried doctor (52-53). As Gornick recalls, "her fantasies were simple, repetitious, and boring" (53). Though they allow Nettie to imagine herself in a situation outside those generally available in the Bronx, the stories do not show her acting through her own volition or allow her to develop any agency, and so like Mrs. Kerner's renditions of "The Volga Boatmen," they never go anywhere.[25] Recovering or escaping from one's life is not the same as attempting to change it, and in these fantasies, Nettie only reiterates the pattern of her destructive relationships with men. Also like Mrs. Kerner, Nettie is able to defy the neighborhood through playing by her own rules, but at

[25] Nettie is effectively diagnosed by Simone de Beauvoir in her description of girls' habits upon discovering that they cannot behave as boys do: "In girls the exuberance of life is restrained, their idle vigor turns into nervousness; their too prissy occupations do not use up their superabundant energy; they become bored, and, through boredom and to compensate for their position of inferiority, they give themselves up to gloomy and romantic daydreams; they get a taste for these easy escape mechanisms and lose their sense of reality; they yield to their emotions with uncontrolled excitement; instead of acting, they talk, often commingling serious phrases and senseless words in hodgepodge fashion. Neglected, 'misunderstood,' they seek consolation in narcissistic fancies: they view themselves as romantic heroines of fiction, with self-admiration and self-pity" (296).

the expense of the community's disapproval. The uniqueness of Nettie's personality – a disastrous housekeeper in a building of experts, a shiksa in a building of Jewish women, and the most openly sexual woman in the neighborhood – makes her appealing to Vivian; while Mrs. Kerner has a role in the neighborhood, that of "village idiot," Nettie at times seems to escape the grid.

Out of all the women Vivian knowns, her mother comes the closest to developing a life that makes use of her individual gifts, yet ultimately accepts a script based on traditional romantic love. Unlike Nettie, whose fantasies about her own life hinge on random future events, she is able to order and define her life into a coherent story that functions according to certain guiding principles, that is, into a meaningful narrative. However, that narrative depends chiefly on "Papa's love," which offered an explanation for how she found herself in her current life. "Countless sentences having to do with all in her life she found less than satisfactory began: 'Believe me, if I didn't love your father,' or 'Believe me, if it wasn't for Papa's love'" (23). Papa's love provides such a useful framework that she continues to structure her life with it even after his death. "In refusing to recover from my father's death she had discovered that her life was endowed with a seriousness her years in the kitchen had denied her. She remained devoted to this seriousness for thirty years. … Mourning Papa became her profession, her identity, her persona" (76). Thus, Gornick's mother has a deeply useful theme for explaining and organizing her life.

But the theme, however useful, is not fully adequate to its task. First, it's straight from central casting, being no more or less a fairy tale than Nettie's stories about available doctors. Therefore, this life story based on "Papa's love," although convenient

in being prepackaged and readily understandable to others, is inadequately explanatory of her full personality. In fact, before the birth of her children, she had been the head of Tenants' Council 29. "By the time I was born she had stood on soapboxes in the Bronx pleading for economic and social justice. It was, in fact, part of her deprivation litany that if it hadn't been for the children she would have developed into a talented public speaker" (17). Although she blames her family for taking her away from this life, she attempts to submerge her desire for it in a conventional plot in which her family compensates for everything she has given up. "She would speak openly of how she had hated to give up working when she got married (she'd been a bookkeeper in a Lower East Side bakery), how good it was to have your own money in your pocket, not receive an allowance like a child, how stupid her life was now, and how she'd love to go back to work. Believe her. If it wasn't for Papa's love" (23). This ready-made romantic plot obscures the real facets of her personality, explaining why she gave up working and public speaking, but not why she found them appealing in the first place. It also prevents her from developing a life story that is truly suited to her personality and abilities. The confines of this domestic plot allow her to reach adulthood without ever realizing that she likes thinking (33).

Although they betray a resentment about family life, these stories form a bond with her daughter, who puts in requests for favorites ("Ma, remember Mrs. Kornfeld? Tell me that story again" [6-7]). Part of the stories' appeal may lie in the shadow narrative beneath the conventional domestic romance. Until her marriage, Gornick's mother did have a public life, and Vivian absorbs both the excitement of that life and her mother's contempt for the life of "woman's work" she has accepted instead. "Gornick's [narrator]

must reject – as a pattern for her own life – the story her parent's life has written," writes Janet Burstein. "In Gornick's work, the plot of the mother's life is the romance of domestic love. Gornick's narrator rejects that plot. But she grasps at the same time a maternal gift that lies beneath it" (237). That gift, like Brave Orchid's gift to her daughter in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, is the gift of storytelling. Burstein writes, "The preciousness of this shared gift will carry Gornick beyond the kitchen window into the life of a professional writer. More valuable to her than the paradigm of domestic romance her mother has wanted to transmit, the pleasure of storying that she has learned from her mother surpasses all other pleasures" (238).

For 14-year-old Gornick, storytelling becomes a path for escape. "It was the year after my father's death, the year in which I began to sit on the fire escape late at night making up stories in my head," she recalls (54).

> A hungry fantasizing went instantly to work as soon as I was seated with my back to the apartment, my eyes trained on the street. This fantasizing was only one step removed from Nettie's "Wouldn't it be wonderful," but it was an important step. Mine began "Just suppose," and was followed not by tales of immediate rescue but by imaginings of "large meaning." That is: things always ended badly but there was grandeur in the disaster. … It was an adolescent writer's beginning: I had started to mythicize. (55-56)

As with her mother's stories, she is able to use the form of Nettie's stories as vehicles for her own content. Invited by Nettie to participate in the "Wouldn't it be wonderful if" game, Vivian volunteers, "'Wouldn't it be wonderful if there was a flood or an epidemic or a revolution, and even though I'm this little kid they find me and they say to me, "You

speak so wonderfully you must lead the people out of this disaster."' I never daydreamed about love or money," Gornick explains, "I always daydreamed I was making eloquent speeches that stirred ten thousand people to feel their lives, and to *act*." (54). Although Nettie is made uncomfortable by these stories, which are so different from her own, she, like the mother, has given Vivian a basis to imagine herself speaking and acting in the public arena.

III. Locating literary ancestors

For Hoffman and Gornick, as for Antin, the development of an intellectual and writerly persona results in a separation from their birth families; the opportunities provided by education foster assimilation and create class differences. Simultaneously, these authors are inscribed into a literary heritage. Their responses to previous texts mimic family structures, in which the forebears that make their work possible are also misread and rejected; that is, just as adolescents distinguish themselves from their parents, Hoffman and Gornick distinguish their own work from that of their predecessors. Even as they distinguish themselves, they are also establishing their roots in the American canon. In looking back to Antin, for instance, Hoffman becomes part of a chain linking to Antin's influences including Jewish writers such as Josephine and Emma Lazarus, but also the Boston Transcendentalist circle and figures such as Louisa May Alcott. Gornick, similarly, has roots in Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau by way of Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*.

Well-read from childhood and a graduate student of literature, Eva Hoffman identifies a number of influential authors, but in an extended passage at the end of section two, "Exile," she claims Mary Antin as her most significant "ancestress" (162). In Antin's

autobiography, *The Promised Land*, Hoffman sees herself: "in certain details it so closely resembles my own, that its author seems to be some amusing poltergeist, come to show me that whatever belief in my own singularity I may possess is nothing more than a comical vanity" (162). As a reader, Hoffman may take pleasure and comfort in seeing a life like her own. And as a writer, she has an advantage over Antin, who has already done the difficult job of publishing the life of a bright young Jewish girl who immigrates to America. The basic legitimacy of this kind of story has already been established, leaving Hoffman free to focus on particularities of her choice that demonstrate her own individuality.

Thus, Hoffman elaborates the plot of *The Promised Land* primarily in order to distinguish her own story from the previous work: "this ancestress also makes me see how much, even in my apparent maladaptations, I am a creature of my time – as she, in her adaptations, was a creature of hers" (162). While Hoffman is self-deprecating here, emphasizing the lack of clarity in her own postmodern life, her reading of Antin presents *The Promised Land* as a Potemkin village that conceals a true experience as painful as the one Hoffman describes. The two women may have had similar experiences, Hoffman writes, but their interpretations of those experiences are radically different, "[f]or, despite the hardships that leap out from the pages, Mary insists on seeing her life as a fable of pure success: success for herself, for the idea of assimilation, for the great American experiment" (163). Antin's optimism, she writes, is indicated by the book's title, *The Promised Land*, and by the heroine's apparently triumphant pose at the end of the story.

As a trained literary critic, Hoffman examines closely a passage from the preface to *The Promised Land* which suggests that Antin has repressed an interpretation of her

history that more closely aligns with Hoffman's own. According to Hoffman, it is the only time Antin betrays ambivalence about her Americanization.

> "Happening when it did," Mary writes, "the emigration became of the most vital importance to me personally. All the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul. I felt the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy of it. I can never forget, for I bear the scars. … It is painful to be consciously of two worlds. The Wandering Jew in me seeks forgetfulness. I am not afraid to live on and on, if only I do not have to remember too much."
>
> Being a close reader of such remarks, I can find volumes of implied meaning in them. But it is exactly the kind of meaning that Mary Antin was not encouraged to expand upon. And so there it is, a trace she never follows up on: a trace of the other story behind the story of triumphant progress. (163)

Her reading is astute, but also contains more than a strictly intellectual interpretation. In Hoffman's reading of Antin we see all the emotional tension that would be proper to a family relationship; it includes intimacy and affection, as well as contempt (bred by familiarity?) and the conviction common to younger generations that *they* will not commit again what they see as the mistakes of their forebears. Her decision to refer to Antin by her first name, Mary, emphasizes this complex familial quality, managing to be simultaneously companionable and condescending.

We also see a clear case of poetic misprision, as defined by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Although Bloom's warlike metaphors in this book were intended to apply only to the great male poets of the Western canon, Hoffman, too, enacts this drama

here.[26] Bloom's theory places authors in generational relationships to one another, and understands such relationships in Freudian terms. Just as Oedipus had to kill his father, and just as children in the throes of the family romance imagine that their parents are not really their own, authors must redefine their forebears. Poets create, he writes, "by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (1028), and this is a major use to which Hoffman puts Antin.[27] Apart from certain factual errors,[28] Hoffman's reading of Antin's pure faith in her own success seems to me mistaken. The uneasiness of her graduation from grammar school, which turns from a moment of triumph to one of shame; the torment of her first taste of ham; and her admission that, when older sister Fetchke went to work so that Mashke could go to school, "I was so blind that I did not see that the glory lay on her, and not on me" (159), all suggest that Antin has, at least in retrospect, reservations about her American career that are, in fact, incorporated throughout the work rather than buried in the preface. Hoffman is by no means the first or only reader to read Antin as wholly and overly optimistic, but in this instance, her agenda is that identified by Bloom, that of "clear[ing] imaginative space"

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[26] Critics have expressed skepticism about the usefulness of Bloom's theory for female authors; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that women instead experience an "anxiety of authorship" in which they seek female forebears who prove that women, too, may write. Hoffman, however, has such a clearly defined foremother in Antin that her experience seems to be different from that described by Gilbert and Gubar. Antin has already accomplished a project that Hoffman sees as very like her own; thus, Hoffman's task is not to legitimize such a story but to distinguish her own from a preexisting autobiography.

[27] Bloom's theory was fashioned for all literature in English, but does have a particularly American edge; in considering "the immense anxieties of indebtedness" which come from the struggle with one's literary influences, he writes, "what strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to *create himself*?" (1028, emphasis mine). In this formulation, an author creates not only a text, but an entire identity or persona, and this is described with a Franklinesque air. This seems especially true of autobiography, in which Hoffman, by reading and reinventing Antin, is shaping not only a text but a life.

[28] For instance, she writes that Antin "came to America with her mother and younger brother" (162); younger sister Deborah does not feature strongly in the plot of *The Promised Land*, making her omission here somewhat understandable, but it is curious that Hoffman entirely elides Antin's older sister Fetchke, who is so important for Antin in defining her own personality and role in the family. All the more curious, because Hoffman's story itself features a sister relationship.

(1028). Invoking Antin situates her in a literary tradition, but her particular reading of Antin is intended to make Hoffman's own authority clear. Defining Antin as a kind of Jewish Pollyanna allows Hoffman to show her own postmodern intellectual sophistication.

Hoffman also excludes from her summary the entire first, or "Russian," half of *The Promised Land*, focusing instead on the second, "American," section. Although this, too, is a common temptation, it also constitutes a misreading, and we must ask why Hoffman does not discuss Antin's Polotzk chapters. The two share some fundamental commonalities prior to immigration – both were bright, thoughtful girls growing up Jewish in Eastern Europe – but a more thorough comparison shows that Antin's story is not Hoffman's, after all. The distinctions of their original environments go a long way toward explaining the tones of their responses to immigration. For instance, Ewa and Alina are allowed to go to church with their Gentile friends; their parents, not observant themselves, consider this only harmless child's play. Mashke, however, has no gentile friends. She and her Jewish friends "played Gentiles" (85), but this game was an uncomfortable one, particularly when it involved approaching a church. "I don't think we girls liked each other much after playing [Gentiles]," Antin admits. Afterward, "we suffered a mutual revulsion of feeling, as if we had led each other into sin" (86). Antin's isolating, frightening experiences as a Russian Jew, detailed thoroughly in the early chapters of *The Promised Land*, go a long way toward explaining her positive response to immigration; she perceives that she had never before had a country of her own (178-79). Hoffman, in contrast, occasionally acknowledges that she has been the subject of discrimination, but remains primarily Polish in feeling and allegiance. Leaving out the

Russian sections of *The Promised Land* allows Hoffman to characterize her own response to immigration as a sophisticated improvement on the simpler past. "I cannot conceive of my story as one of simple progress, or simple woe," she writes, implicitly indicating that Antin has done so. "Any confidently thrusting story line would be a sentimentality, an excess, an exaggeration, an untruth" (164). Hoffman streamlines the complications of Antin's story, and of its relationship to her own, in order to distinguish herself from her literary forebear and to create in Bloomian fashion her own individual literary identity.

Gornick, too, rewrites an earlier text in *Fierce Attachments*: *A Walker in the City*, Alfred Kazin's 1957 memoir of his childhood in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Although in this case the genealogy is implicit – Gornick does not pause to do a reading of the earlier text as Hoffman does – it is nonetheless instructive. The two autobiographies are similar in both content and structure: both narratives of growing up Jewish American in New York City's outer boroughs that progress to intellectual careers in Manhattan, the works are organized around literal walks through the city that are the occasion for metaphorical, lyrical walks through the authors' past. Furthermore, Gornick borrows Kazin's title in order to describe "[m]y mother, an expert walker in the city" (58), a usage that seems intentional given the extent and quality of Gornick's reading and the infrequency of the phrase in general daily use. The phrase here suggests descent both from the mother and from a literary antecedent.

A Walker in the City details Kazin's childhood efforts to escape Brownsville, a Jewish ghetto on the fringes of the city, whether on foot in expeditions "Beyond!" (87) or mentally at school and through books and art. Both paths lead him to "the real America" (27), which he locates by reading *The Boy's Life of Theodore Roosevelt* and *Theodore*

Roosevelt's Letters to His Children (27); viewing paintings by Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, and John Sloan in the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and walking past the old buildings of New York City. Young Alfred locates himself as an American through writing, art, and architecture, yet significantly, his America is inclusive. The paintings he most embraces are those of New York itself, a city that has been home to people of all ethnicities and classes; the people who most fascinate him are not the well-to-do, but the vagrant: "once I followed one up the Bowery, strangely sure that he would lead me back into my own, lost, old New York" (98). Most significant to him, though, are writers, particularly of the 19th century.

> The present was mean, the eighteenth century too Anglo-Saxon, too far away. Between them, in the light from the steerage ships waiting to discharge my parents onto the final shore, was the world of dusk, of rust, of iron, of gaslight, where, I thought, I would find my way to that fork in the road where all American lives cross. The past was deep, deep, full of solitary Americans whose careers, though closed in death, had woven an arc around them which I could see in space and time – "lonely Americans," it was even the title of a book. (171)

The teenage Alfred accesses this American past through reading, and in this way "think[s] that I had at last opened the great trunk of forgotten time in New York in which I, too, I thought, would someday find the source of my unrest" (172). He, as Hoffman writes later of her own experiences, associates America with isolation, and is able to connect to America as an intellectual:

> I felt then that I stood outside all that, that I would be alien forever, but that I could at least keep the trunk open by reading. And though I knew somewhere in

> myself that a Ryder, an Emily Dickinson, an Eakins, a Whitman, even that fierce-browed old German immigrant Roebling, with his flute and his metaphysics and his passionate love of suspension bridges, were alien, too, alien in the deepest way, like my beloved Blake, my Yeshua, my Beethoven, my Newman – nevertheless I still thought of myself then as standing outside America. I read as if books would fill my every gap, legitimize my strange quest for the American past, remedy my every flaw, let me in at last into the great world that was anything just out of Brownsville. (172)

Kazin here seems to foreshadow Hoffman's later pronouncement that "it is in my misfittings that I fit" (164). For both authors, the world of the intellect allows access to America and the company of fellow aliens.

At this point in his life, Kazin writes that "I still thought of myself then as standing outside America," suggesting that he later came to feel incorporated. And *A Walker in the City* is in fact rooted in the American literary canon. He takes as his epigraph a selection from Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and bearings – on the walk in the street, and the passage over the river," showing that he walks, in part, in Whitman's footsteps. Furthermore, Jerry Schuchalter suggests in his essay "What Makes Alfred Walk?" that the autobiography is, in the words of the article's subtitle, "a rewriting of Henry David Thoreau's 'Walking' essay," and part of "a common cultural narrative that illuminates the invisible workings of American culture and its discourses" (24). Thoreau's essay informs readers, "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again … then you are ready for a walk" (481), and

Schuchalter observes that Kazin has performed this, but gone a step further. "Kazin's narrator, while also ultimately tied to place and origins in Brownsville, has spatially severed the boundaries of his birth place. He has followed Thoreau's advice literally, but then added a new dimension to the narrative. First, the narrator in Kazin's memoir leaves his home to find the world and then he returns to his origins to find himself" (29). Here we see both the process of autobiography in which authors revisit the past by writing about it, and the literal process of leaving home and returning to find reconciliation. Significantly, Schuchalter makes clear that Kazin is doing something classically American: "For both texts belong to a long-established cultural narrative that demands nothing less than a rebirth from the constraints and complacencies of American orthodoxy. Both Thoreau and Kazin ultimately find a place in the familiar American narrative of individual renewal rather than in the less prominent narrative of societal or collective regeneration" (35).

Just as Kazin rewrites Thoreau, Gornick rewrites Kazin. In a sense, *Fierce Attachments* constitutes a woman's version of *A Walker in the City*; the two books visit similar physical and cultural sites, but in ways that highlight the difference gender can make. For instance, the kitchen is significant for both authors, though in different ways. Kazin titles an entire chapter "The Kitchen," explaining, "In Brownsville tenements the kitchen is always the largest room and the center of the household. As a child I felt that we lived in a kitchen to which four other rooms were annexed" (64). For both authors, too, the kitchen is associated with the mother. The young Alfred spends time in the kitchen with his mother while she works at her sewing machine and consults with the women who come to her for dressmaking expertise. It is difficult to read these passages

about Kazin's family kitchen without wondering how the scene would have affected a daughter instead, how the mother's talent and authority, combined with the obvious hardships of her life, would have served as role model or warning. *Fierce Attachments* tells one version of this story, in which the daughter is drawn to the kitchen, and to her mother, but also aware of her mother's scorn for the kitchen and the lifestyle it represented. "The kitchen, the window, the alley. It was the atmosphere in which she was rooted, the background against which she stood outlined. Here she was smart, funny, and energetic, could exercise authority and have impact. But she felt contempt for her environment. 'Women, yech!' she'd say" (15). Rather than witnessing neighbors who come to be advised by her mother the modiste, Vivian is initiated into femininity by a neighbor.

At a more foundational level, the two books also display the division between masculine and feminine autobiographical style. Mary G. Mason writes that, in contrast to male autobiographies of individual achievement, "the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other'" (210). Gornick has thus in a sense written the "relational" version of *A Walker in the City*. While Kazin walks alone, Gornick walks with her mother. Her struggle to define herself takes place not against numerous semi-anonymous others, but through powerful maternal attachment, identification, and dis-identification. These gender differences leave much "imaginative space," which may be one reason Gornick's autobiography resonates implicitly with Kazin's, rather than pausing to draw distinctions directly, as Hoffman does with Antin.

Conclusion

Just as Hoffman and Gornick locate their own literary ancestors, they have also produced their own descendants. Thus far, several scholars have responded to these autobiographies through personal criticism, using them as prompts for their own autobiographical writing. In *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch describes her intense identification to a story of an adolescent girl's emigration from Eastern Europe: "Eva Hoffman's story is my story, and the only lens through which I can read it is an utterly unreconstructed form of identification – a response quite disconcerting to someone who has been studying and teaching literature for twenty-five years, and one which makes me uneasy" (219). Similarly, Roy Goldblatt, in his essay about the role of Brooklyn in *A Walker in the City* and Daniel Fuchs's 1930s "Williamsburg Trilogy," reads the texts through his own experiences in Brooklyn thirty years later, feeling enough affinity for the authors to entitle the article "Danny, Allie and Me," much as Hoffman refers to the author of *The Promised Land* as Mary. And Nancy K. Miller writes in *Getting Personal* of teaching, "probably with more feeling than critical distance, a book I have come to think of as 'my' autobiography – its 'I' is New York, Jewish, middle-aged, intellectual, difficult, etc. – *Fierce Attachments*" (136). Despite some differences between the two – growing up in Manhattan versus the Bronx, for instance – she writes, "I felt written by this book" (136). Miller, Goldblatt, and Hirsch have all in the sense been "written by" the autobiographies to which they feel so close, yet the story does not end there: they still respond in turn by writing autobiographically, creating a literary family tree.

It is not only the similarities between earlier and later stories that produce descendants; it is also their differences that help readers to understand their own lives,

and to come to write about them. In writing about *How I Became Hettie Jones* in *But Enough About Me*, Miller finds that her own experience is clearer to her through the differences between her life and Jones's (for example, parenthood: "I didn't do that particular fifties thing; I went to Paris instead" [11]). Likewise, Hirsch comes to distinguish her own story from Hoffman's after her initial rush of overwhelming identification. On further reading, she writes, "I begin to notice the pervasive nostalgia that clings to everything Polish. Suddenly alienated by the way she has constructed her story, I resist identification, start shaking my head in disagreement, resent her for breaking the ease with which I had been making my way through her book" (223). Reading Hoffman's response to immigration clarifies Hirsch's own, different response. Rather than a story of exile, she writes, "I chose a different strategy, that of the border" (239).

These authors are engaged in what Susan Suleiman calls "'strong autobiographical [reading],' which consists of reading another's story 'as if it were one's own … [and] leads, in the best of cases, to autobiographical writing" (8). Although such reading involves close identification, it also requires some degree of distance. We see this in the response of Gornick's mother to a biography of Josephine Herbst, "a thirties writer, a stubborn willful raging woman grabbing at politics and love and writing, in there punching until the last minute" (73), given to her by her daughter. Vivian had expected her mother to appreciate the familiarity of the setting, the ferocity of the heroine, but gets a negative response. "'Listen,' my mother says now in the patronizing tone she thinks conciliatory. 'Maybe this is interesting to you, but not to me. I lived through all this. I know it all. What can I learn from this? Nothing. To you it's interesting. Not to me'"

(73). After Vivian bites back a harsh response, and replies instead that she may not enjoy the book, "But don't say it has nothing to teach you. That there's nothing here. That's unworthy of you, and of the book, and of me" (74), and after walking several blocks in silence, her mother offers an honest response of "strong autobiographical reading."

> "That Josephine Herbst," my mother says. "She certainly carried on, didn't she?"
>
> Relieved and happy, I hug her. "She didn't know what she was doing either, Ma, but yes, she carried on."
>
> "I'm jealous," my mother blurts at me. "I'm jealous she lived her life, I didn't live mine." (74)

At first, she claims that the story is too close for her to read. In the end, the discomfort is actually that Herbst's life was too unlike her own, that Herbst followed her own rallying cry from her days in the Communist party ("Then we would organize, and carry on" [17]) which she gave up for marriage. Although reading Josephine Herbst's life was painful, it pushes Gornick's mother toward an understanding and admission about her own life. And as Gornick in *Fierce Attachments* creates and evaluates her own life in terms of her relationship with her mother, readers of *Fierce Attachments* are prompted to examine the same issues. In "Loehmann's, Or, Shopping with My Mother," Miller recalls her own' mother's resolution, so similar to that of Gornick's, to get a genuinely *hot* cup of coffee at a diner, and through it revises both her memory of the scene and her self-conception. "What I saw now through Gornick's then was my mother's imperious, personal determination to get what she wanted. At least within this circumscribed realm of daily life, she got her hot coffee. And I?" (141).

The sense of identification necessary for strong autobiographical reading may reside in common ethnicity between writer and reader, and this forms part of the connection Hirsch, Miller, and Goldblatt find with the earlier texts. However, connections may be forged across ethnicities, as, for example, in Kazin's affinity for Walt Whitman. And Kazin himself has inspired writers of other ethnicities. Eulogizing Kazin's death in 1998, Rodriguez vividly recalls his reading of *A Walker in the City* during his childhood in California. "I was a [full] generation and several thousand miles away from Kazin's New York," he says. "There was Spanish in my house, not Yiddish. But in that wonderful way that books allow, one life sharing with another, I walked with Alfred Kazin through Brooklyn." For Rodriguez, it seems, Kazin's story showed him his own life in its particular details through both differences and similarities. "I remembered Alfred Kazin, a boy in Brooklyn, myself a boy as reader, the two of us intent on assuming an American voice, on joining our voices to the chorus that has sounded through generations before us." It is perhaps not surprising that Rodriguez found a connection to the story, or that numerous critics have brought Rodriguez's work to their discussions of Eva Hoffman, as all tell stories of the development of an American intellectual voice.

Chapter 3:
American Daughters: Resistance and Reconciliation on the Home Front

In his 1943 autobiography, *Father and Glorious Descendant*, Pardee Lowe describes the challenge of "be[ing] a filial Chinese son and a good American citizen at one and the same time" (142-43). The issue comes to a head when Pardee, the Glorious Descendant of the title, first enters American public school and becomes infected with what he describes in hindsight as "presidential fever." Looking upon his teacher Miss McIntyre as a substitute for his own busy parents, he becomes inspired by her description of George Washington and her declaration to the class that "[E]very single one of you can be President of the United States someday!" (132). Young Pardee conflates the President with both God and his own father, of whom he is in awe, commenting on the similarities between Father and Theodore Roosevelt: "Big as life, with his grinning mouthful of teeth, eyeglasses gleaming, and his mustache bristling in the breeze of the political opposition – he looked the spitting image of Father" (132). Defining Roosevelt in the image of his father, Pardee melds his ancestors of consent and descent in forming his ambition to become President.

On learning of this goal years later, however, Father is horrified. He attempts to persuade twelve-year-old Pardee of the advantages of attending boarding school in China, but meeting with firm resistance, he instead requires Pardee to spend extra time on his Chinese schooling in America. Pardee is ultimately "cured" the next year when he is unable to secure a summer job with a Western firm, whose "help wanted" ads continue to appear after he is told the position has been filled. Although the realization that he "didn't have a 'Chinaman's chance' of becoming President of the United States" (147-48)

is a hurtful lesson, the significance of the incident lies not only in the fact that Pardee was the victim of prejudice. The struggle between Pardee and his father over this highly symbolic goal is also instructive.

With the benefit of hindsight, Lowe is able to define his father's perspective in moving his family away from Chinatown and into one of San Francisco's "American" neighborhoods.

> At long last the visions and dreams for his offspring, present and potential, would be realized. His family would rub shoulders with Americans. They would become good American citizens albeit remaining Chinese. They would inhabit a hyphenated world. By some formula, which he never was able to explain, they would select only the finest attributes of each contributory culture. They would reflect everlasting credit on him and on the name of Lowe. (128-29)

Although Father strongly advocates for Chinese training as a cure for "Presidential fever," making him seem an avatar of the old world while his son reaches for the new, as we see here and elsewhere Father is also a proponent of America. From the time we meet him in the book's first chapter, he is staunchly American: "When questioned, he would be most belligerent about his citizenship, asserting testily, 'I am an American!'" (4). While being partly Chinese implies maintaining a culture passed on by his father, the father himself insists that he is, simply, American, eschewing the idea of hyphenation that he espouses for his children. Thus, the problem of being both Chinese and American which Lowe recalls feeling at the time is not in retrospect so cut-and-dried. Lowe writes, responding to his own former dilemma, "For many years I used to wonder why this was so, but I appreciate now it was because I was the eldest son in what was essentially a

pioneering family. Father was pioneering with Americanism – and so was I. And more often than not, we blazed entirely different trails" (143). The Americanism that Pardee and his father have in common consists in an ideal of self-creation that involves a search for role models outside the home; this similarity is what ultimately causes them to forge their own distinct paths. It also connects them to the families we have seen before: Gornick's mother expected her to pursue an advanced education, but felt threatened when she did, while Antin, too, adopted a president in her search for an American identity.

For Mary Antin, citizenship created the possibility of a public self. Simultaneously, of course, such public development was accompanied by fragmentation in her family life, as her selection of American founding fathers for ancestors implied that the family of her birth had little to teach her. A series of texts that appeared in the immediate post-World War II period take up this scenario of public gains and private losses in reverse, rooting their stories in the relationship between family and citizenship. Where for Antin, citizenship is the main concern and "the sad process of disintegration of home life" (212) is treated as an unfortunate side effect, in these texts, family is central. In a period of ten years we see the appearance of Pardee Lowe's *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943), Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), and Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953). George Danton, in his review of *Father and Glorious Descendant*, identifies the book as a member of "the father-son school" of literature, and a descendant of Clarence Day's 1935 memoir *Life with Father*,[29] and Wong and Sone work in a pattern established by Lowe. Constituting among themselves a kind of family of influence, the books' family

[29] In comically describing upper-crust WASP life in New York's Upper East Side, *Life with Father* tells, ultimately, no less an ethnic story than its Asian American descendants. Another famous relation is *Mama's Bank Account* (1943), Kathryn Forbes's account of growing up Norwegian American in San Francisco. Though critically neglected, it was wildly popular in its day, spawning a TV show, a play, and a Broadway musical.

focus is immediately evident from their titles alone. As the younger generation in these works grow to adulthood and assume public roles, they constantly and consciously refer back to their parents and, by extension, to their homes. Although the protagonists leave home, they find that they must also return in order to make their peace with home in order to attain maturity.

While Lowe may be considered the founder of the Asian American line of "father-son" autobiographies, the stories of two daughters exemplify its possibilities and its limitations. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* has been treated as the female version of *Father and Glorious Descendant*,[30] and *Nisei Daughter* as the Japanese American version of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Here, I focus on the daughters' texts, whose superficial similarities mask fundamentally different underlying narratives.

Fifth Chinese Daughter and *Nisei Daughter* seem at first to be twin texts; drawing parallels between the two is a simple exercise. Both authors are from the west coast, Wong from San Francisco and Sone from Seattle. Both are second-generation Asian Americans, Wong's heritage being Chinese and Sone's Japanese. Near contemporaries, with Wong born in 1922 and Sone in 1919, they both grew up during the Great Depression and came of age during World War II. Likewise, both wrote autobiographies describing their experiences at this time, from early childhood to the moment of passage from adolescence to adulthood, and their books are similarly titled, emphasizing these connections.

Critics have also seen similar contents and attitudes in the two texts, as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim does here: "Monica Sone's autobiography … shows the same pressure to

[30] Critics who connect the two dwell on what they see as the authors' accommodationist attitudes toward majority readers. See for example Kim ("Defining"), Chin et al who call them "propaganda-as-autobiography" (xx).

explain to a foreigner those special features of the author's Asian world that we find in Wong's book; similarly, this necessity is in danger of being corrupted by nostalgia and elegiac sentiment. Explanation comes close to exploitation of the past for its exotic elements" ("Twelve" 62).[31] In such comparisons, Sone's text is sometimes seen as slightly more politically evolved, though still not actually progressive. The *Aiiieeeee!* editors echo this sentiment in laying out the genealogy: "[F]rom *Fifth Chinese Daughter* came son of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, a book remarkable for maintaining its Japanese American integrity in spite of its being, in the publisher's eyes, blatantly modeled on Wong's snow job" (xxi).

Chin's perversity in describing an obviously matrilineal descent with the term "son," while probably originating in the masculinist perspective displayed throughout the introduction to *Aiiieeeee!*, does have the unexpected advantage of hinting at something off-kilter in the pairing of Wong's and Sone's texts. Rather than being a slightly more radicalized version of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *Nisei Daughter* offers instead the inverse of the earlier text. The authors' distinct experiences as Chinese and Japanese Americans, particularly during the World War II period, result in two distinct coming-of-age stories.

The protagonists begin life with opposite pictures of themselves as Americans. The Wong children experienced little of the Western world before entering public school, instead trailing their father through the family's factory/home while he instructed them in Chinese language and literature. The Itois,[32] in contrast, interacted regularly with the

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[31] See for example Kim's "Asian American Literature and the Importance of Social Context."

[32] Monica Sone was born Kazuko Monica Itoi; she began to use her middle name, Monica, with curiously little fanfare on leaving the camp where she was interned, and later took the surname of her husband, Geary Sone. I refer to the subject of the text as Kazuko or, after she changes her name, as Monica, and the author of the text as Sone.

Western world. As proprietors and residents of a Skid Row hotel, the family was in close contact with an ethnic if not economic cross-section of Seattle. Young Kazuko dreams of becoming a detective, then a ballet dancer, and the Itoi children are "rabid fans of Mickey Mouse" (52). When the family returns to Japan, it is clearly only a visit. Yet the United States' alliances during World War II make Chinese Americans like Jade Snow Wong into heroes and Japanese Americans like Kazuko Itoi into enemies.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, is a major turning point in *Nisei Daughter*, which devotes an entire chapter to the event and its immediate repercussions, while *Fifth Chinese Daughter* skips over the bombing, describing it in passing and in retrospect as Jade Snow ponders what to do after graduation. "Caught in the war fever" (178), Jade Snow takes a war job in a shipyard, an experience that not only lets her show her patriotism but also speeds her assimilation by bringing her into contact with "the American work world – commonly known as 'a man's world'" (193) – a population formerly mysterious to Jade Snow. Kazuko's part in the war effort, however, was defined by Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, which defined the west coast as a restricted military area and ultimately led to her internment in Idaho's Minidoka camp, where she and the other residents were isolated from the rest of American society. Apart from some expected wartime shortages, Chinatown flourished, as "the eager tourists with the flush pockets of 1944 created enough of a demand to make Chinatown an economically prosperous community" (212). Meanwhile, most Japanese Americans lost their livelihoods upon internment. Even if Japanese American-owned businesses had not been forcibly sold during the war, they certainly would not have become fashionable, as Chinatown establishments did.

The text of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* concludes on a triumphant note, in which Jade Snow has achieved success in the Western world and fulfillment of her family's trajectory. The book's reception upon publication only extended the triumph. "To my astonishment," Wong recalls in her introduction to the 1989 edition, "readers and literary critics responded with great interest" (vii). Another party to take great interest in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was the U.S. State Department, which translated it into numerous Asian languages and in 1953 sent its author on a tour through from Tokyo "onward through forty-five more Asiatic stops" to Karachi (*No Chinese Stranger* 54). She explains, "I was sent because those Asian audiences who had read translations of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* did not believe a female born to poor Chinese immigrants could gain a toehold among prejudiced Americans" (viii). While the book does include recollections of discrimination, its overall trajectory is upward and the end result is that discrimination has been overcome. In contrast, the ending of *Nisei Daughter* is problematic (an issue I will discuss more fully), and the book's reception comparatively spotty. Contemporary reviews were generally positive, and focused on Sone's "straightforwardness, humor, and absence of bitterness" (Yamamoto 152), but it was not long before the book went out of print. Sone's introduction to the 1979 edition of her book describes, not its triumph as an American public relations device, but contemporary efforts to cause the government to acknowledge the internment of Japanese Americans.

The most instructive aspect of pairing these two books, which have so many immediate similarities and such deep differences, is to consider the effect of American citizenship on maturing from adolescence to adulthood. Wong eventually grows to take possession of an adult identity as a writer and owner of a pottery shop, becoming a public

figure both in Chinatown and the Western world. She accomplishes this by defining herself against her parents, whom she sees as inflexibly, traditionally Chinese. Resolution is achieved at the end of the book by a reconciliation of Jade Snow's individual identity with her family's attitudes, which are not so different from hers after all; having left home, Jade Snow is at last welcomed back with open arms. The situation is more complicated for Kazuko, who is stripped of both her legal rights and her home by Executive Order 9066. The internment experience, by all accounts, distorted family life, and when Kazuko leaves "home" for college, and later returns for a visit, it is Minidoka where she must find reconciliation with her parents. Her inability to do so in a satisfactory way can be traced to the government's refusal to acknowledge the citizenship of Japanese Americans. For various reasons, unlike Jade Snow she is unable to define herself productively against her parents, and thus her separation from them, and then her acceptance of them, is fragmented and disorderly.

I. Reevaluating Jade Snow's rebellion

Fifth Chinese Daughter concludes with a triumphant scenario in which Jade Snow discovers her vocation as writer, ceramicist, and entrepreneur. Throughout the book, she has searched for recognition as "a person, besides being a female" (110), and as "an individual besides being a Chinese daughter" (125); when the book closes, her business has been written up in the newspaper, "she [is] driving the first postwar automobile in Chinatown" (244), and she and her work are on full view every day in her rented storefront window where she makes and sells her pottery. Her most important audience, though, is her family, particularly her father, who gets the book's last word. He tells Jade Snow how pleased her grandfather would be to see her working with her hands and

running her own business, adding that her success is consistent with his goals in remaining in America rather than returning to China: he hoped to give his daughters a better opportunity in America, which "allows women their freedom and individuality" (246). Wong recalls that he "turned and looked at her kindly. 'And who would have thought that you, my Fifth Daughter Jade Snow, would prove today that my words of many years ago were words of true prophecy?" (246).

This speech may seem surprising coming from Jade Snow's father, who literally whipped discipline into his children, was never effusive about their successes or solicitous about their desires, and would not contribute financially toward Jade Snow's college education. Indeed, throughout the course of the book, Jade Snow struggles against her father, doubting his fairness in refusing to help pay her tuition and outright defying him in going out with her friend Joe without permission. Many critics have therefore been uncomfortable with the book's ending, which strikes them as a diminution of Jade Snow's successful rebellion. "It is sad to observe her desperate struggle to succeed, never receive any encouragement from her parents, and yet bestow the credit of all her accomplishments on the family patriarch," writes Leela Kapai (389). Such readings are bound up in a view of the book as polarized between Chinese and assimilated American identities and attitudes; Kapai writes that the work's theme of "the conflict between the generations" is "very much complicated when it is between the values of the Old World of the immigrants and those of their American children" (388-89). Identifying Jade Snow and her parents as diametrical opposites leads to a further

reading in which Jade Snow is an anti-feminist who capitulates to the conservative Chinese patriarchy embodied by her father.[33]

These evaluations of Jade Snow's father, however, seem to me extreme; a closer look at the text shows that he has not deliberately frustrated his daughter's ambitions, but instead supported them. While he will not fund Jade Snow's college education, this is due more to his limited resources in the Depression-era economy than to the unfairness that Jade Snow then suspects (108-09). He also spends a great deal of his time, another resource in short supply, introducing the basics of Chinese study when Jade Snow is young, helping her puzzle through advanced words as she progresses through school, and inculcating good study habits that carry over to her western schoolwork. Furthermore, "he saw to it that each [of his children] had his own essential tools for orderly living and studying," providing her with her own desk, "exactly like his," a light, and a pair of scissors (69). Although the Wongs' residence was too cramped to provide a genuine "room of one's own," this act certainly comes close.

In order to understand the book's conclusion, to which so many critics have objected, it is important to keep in mind the complicated nature of autobiography, in which narrator and protagonist are one, yet not one. Although there is continuity between the earlier self recalled in the text and the present self who authors the text, the protagonist-self is consciously shaped by the author, and the author her- or himself has evolved in perspective during the time after the events that are recounted. Indeed, the removed perspective and self-examination necessary to produce autobiography itself may produce

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[33] Further examples of such readings include those by Patricia Lin Blinde, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Amy Ling. Elaine H. Kim, too, is inclined to see the book in terms of cultural opposites, although she, unlike Kapai and Lim, sees Wong as surrendering not as much to Chinese patriarchy as to racist American demands; defining *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in these polarities leads her to conclude that the book is "rather pathetic" (72).

a change in the writer, in addition to those changes produced in the act of living. In the case of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, the young Jade Snow inside the text sometimes views her father in a negative light, and her opposition to him and the rest of her family drives much of the action. However, this perspective is not objectively accurate; instead, it is a useful part of her own psychological processes in creating an independent self and maturing to adulthood. As she explains in the text, "paradoxically, when her family voiced doubts or objections, she always mustered supreme self-confidence both to defend herself and to forge ahead. But at other times, when nothing seemed to stand in her way, she cried out in loneliness, questioning why she should have embarked on such an endless quest for individual freedom" (154). It is easier for her to define herself against her family when the division between the two is clear, and thus she casts her parents in a polarizing light.

The positive view of her father at the conclusion of the book can also be accounted for by the retrospective organization and interpretation performed when Jade Snow Wong writes her autobiography. From her writerly perspective, Wong has included numerous clues in the text that portray her father as far from restrictive and inflexibly "Chinese," and her own adolescent perspective on him as skewed. If we have been attentive to these descriptions throughout, then the reconciliatory scene at the book's close, in which her father says she has fulfilled his own hopes that she become a strong individual, should come as no surprise. The significance of this moment is not in Jade Snow's father's behavior and attitudes, but in her own. She attains maturity when she is able to give up her false pictures of her family and to see them, too, as individuals. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is indeed a story of Americanization, but not because it recounts a break from a

fully Chinese heritage; instead, it is the same Americanization experienced by all. While *Fifth Chinese Daughter* shows Jade Snow's negotiation between consent and descent, in Werner Sollors's terms, it also shows that her parents themselves have made similar choices. The theme of the culture clash, exemplified by a domineering Daddy, is only a useful tool to allow Jade Snow to distinguish herself; in fact, her parents are also American. In short, the important split in the book is not between a Chinese self and an American self, but between a textual and an authorial self.

The essential creativity of Jade Snow Wong's self-presentation has not always been given full credit. It is important to bear in mind that Wong was both a writer and a ceramics artist, and made her living and reputation through imagination and craft. That Wong's autobiography and art should be equated is suggested by the title of the penultimate chapter of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, "A Life Plan Is Cast," which describes her vocation in terms of her handcrafts. Wong's life plan is certainly original; no one she knew had a career quite like hers, and the fact that she stopped traffic by working a pottery wheel in a store window shows just how surprising Wong's choices are. Jade Snow causes her neighbors to rethink the nature of success, for instance when one of her essays wins a prize and is printed in all the local newspapers. "Everywhere I went to purchase groceries today," her father reports, "my fellow countrymen were congratulating me, and saying, '… You must be very satisfied to have your family name so glorified by a female'" (196). Her accomplishments show that women, not only men, can bring honor to their families, blurring traditional gender roles. In rejecting the marriage plot (through a humorously passive-aggressive response to a proposed fiancé)

and deciding instead on a path of art and entrepreneurship, Wong is highly original, although too infrequently recognized as such.[34]

Many misreadings of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in which the work's creativity goes unrecognized originate in pairings with Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.[35] Critics have been inclined to build up the latter by disparaging the former, as if literature progressed according to a strict evolutionary scale. While Kingston has said she was influenced by Wong,[36] she has not elaborated on the ways in which *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was influential to her; however, she refers to Wong as a source of "help," suggesting fundamental similarities rather than differences. Kathleen Loh Swee Yin and Kristoffer F. Paulson offer a strong corrective to the oversimplified view of Wong as lower on the evolutionary scale than Kingston, writing that she "reveals her successful integration of identities in a masterful blending of the autobiographical and of her natural modesty which is derived from the Chinese culture which demands the literal submergence of the individual. … The result is a rarely used and unusual form – the third person autobiography" (53-54). This unusual strategy should also serve to emphasize the distinction of author and narrator, Yin and Paulson explain – a distinction which, I argue,

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[34] In a section of her article "Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature" headed "Inventing New Plots," Lim is nonetheless unsatisfied by Wong's own new plot. Hesitant to accept this new vision because she interprets Jade Snow's father as "compelled finally to change his views on the inferior status of his fifth daughter," she writes that "Wong offers an alternative ethnic/gender plot in which the patriarch retains his position and the daughter represses her female subjectivity in order to succeed in her ethnic identity as her father's *son*" (584, emphasis in original). Rather than seeing Wong's "masculine" success as a rejection of female identity, however, I believe it is better read as expanding the notion of what constitutes female identity.

[35] For examples, see Blinde, "The Icicle in the Desert: Perspective and Form in the Works of Two Chinese-American Women Writers" and Lim, "The Tradition of Chinese American Women's Life Stories: Thematics of Race and Gender in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*."

[36] "I am not sure that I got help from a former generation of Chinese-American writers except for Jade Snow Wong," Kingston has said in an interview; "Actually her book was the only available one" (Carabi 11).

is essential for understanding the text. In theorizing third person autobiography, Philippe Lejeune writes that the strategy produces a "distancing of the narrator, that is to say, miming of the forms of another's discourse on oneself," in which "the cleavage of the enunciation corresponds to a gap in perspective. This gap … can be simply that which exists between an aged autobiographer-narrator and the life of the protagonist that he was" (40). Wong's choice of third-person narration helps to clarify the significant distinction between her self as narrator and her self as subject of the text, a distinction that might otherwise be collapsed by use of the more conventional "I." Between living and recounting the events of the autobiography, Wong has experienced a change in perspective, a change that lies at the heart of the work.

The third-person autobiographical form, in this case, is also thematically essential because it relates closely to Jade Snow Wong's relationship with her parents, particularly her father. Her author's note to the original edition of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, which explains her choice of third person, describes Chinese forms of address through the specific example of communicating with her father. Her second book, *No Chinese Stranger* (1975), picks up in third person where the first book left off, but changes to first person after the death of her father. Wong explains, "After Daddy's death the habit of referring to myself in the third person could gradually be changed to the use of the first person" (152). Whereas Part I of the book is called "'To the Great Person of Father,'" suggesting both address and dedication, Part II is called "First Person Singular," suggesting both her style of narration and her new life without her father. "Something crucial is ruptured in our idea of self when a parent dies," writes Nancy K. Miller, adding that writers may search for new narrative styles in response to the death. In Wong's case,

the response seems to suggest that her sense of identity is altered by the fact that she can no longer go home to her father and be his child, and no longer has to define herself against him, but stands alone, entirely individual.

In Jade Snow's adolescent musings, she imagines herself to be the first of the Wongs ever to experience a conflict between familial expectations and personal desires. After arguing with her father about her college tuition, Jade Snow considers that "[s]he was trapped in a mesh of tradition woven thousands of miles away by ancestors who had had no knowledge that someday one generation of their progeny might be raised in another culture" (110). Yet her immediate conflict is not with her ancestors, but with her father, who is fully aware that the family lives in the midst of another culture. Furthermore, her father and mother themselves have faced the sometimes-conflicting requirements of retaining Chinese culture and adapting to mainstream American life, and have made their own choices which ultimately create a hybrid identity much like that which Jade Snow works to develop.[37] Far from being the first of her family to formulate her own identity in opposition to her parents, she actually reiterates the pattern of her parents; all must work individually to create an American identity.

Perhaps the most important key to the father's identity is his pronouncement in the book's second chapter that he wishes his children to call him by a distinctly American term. "One day when the family was at dinner," Wong recalls, "Father broke the habitual silence by announcing a new edict: 'I have just learned that the American people

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[37] Curiously, historians have recognized this fact more readily than literary scholars. In arguing for "The Meaning of Ethnic Literature to the Historian," Roger Daniels writes that "Even Jade Snow Wong's father, who seems almost stereotypically patriarchal, is an atypical Chinese American," adding, however, that "*pace* Emerson, I am never really sure what representative men or women are" (37). Likewise, Ronald Takaki agrees without question that "her father had cultivated a spirit of independence in Jade Snow. He was himself Western in many ways" (261).

commonly address their fathers informally as 'Daddy'! The affectionate tone of this word pleases me. Hereafter, you children shall address me as 'Daddy'" (12). Although the authoritarian tone of this announcement does stand in contrast to its content, the decision is significant. One's name is an essential part of one's identity, and here, Wong Hong chooses for himself a distinctly American signifier. Jade Snow Wong takes much time throughout *Fifth Chinese Daughter* to elaborate Chinese customs regarding family names, given names, and interpersonal address, and highlights her own name by writing in the third person, so when Daddy selects his own name, its importance is emphasized by the centrality of names in the work. Furthermore, if American people address their fathers as "Daddy," then the Wong children, too, will participate in an American custom, fostering their hybrid identity.

The groundwork for this announcement, early though it is, has already been laid in the book's first chapter. The immediate implication of Wong's description of her family life is that its habits are traditionally Chinese; indeed, their methods of family order, respect, and discipline have a long history, and Jade Snow's father begins to teach her Chinese history when she is a preschooler tagging along with him in the denim overall factory which occupies much of the Wongs' home. "Father said that all Chinese children in America should learn their ancestral language, and one did not dispute one's father if one were a dutiful little girl taught to act with propriety," Wong recalls (4). While painting this picture of a traditional home atmosphere, though, Wong is already indicating that her father has adapted. "While most Chinese women in San Francisco still had to conform to the Old-World custom of staying at home," she writes, "her father believed that according to New-World Christian ideals women had a right to work to

improve the economic status of their family" (5). He thus instituted a system in which homebound "Old-World" women could work from home, installing and maintaining sewing machines for them, dropping off materials and picking up the finished product. Daddy takes a similar approach to his daughters' education. When Jade Snow's oldest sister was young, girls were not permitted to attend Chinese school, so he instructed Oldest Sister Swallow himself, explaining to Jade Snow, "Many Chinese were very short-sighted," believing that because daughters left the family upon marriage, educating them was not a priority. "But my answer," he continues, "was that since sons and their education are of primary importance, we must have intelligent mothers. If nobody educates his daughters, how can we have intelligent mothers for our sons?" (14-15).

Compared to other American Chinese in the book, also, Daddy is more progressive. Jade Snow's high school "chum" Gold Spring is particularly sympathetic to her complaints about housework and sibling rivalry: "Her parents were even more old-fashioned and traditionally Chinese than the Wongs" (91). And when Fourth Older Sister weds her fiancé Prosperous State, she is marrying into a more conservative Chinese family. When Jade Snow inquires about the traditional customs Fourth Older Sister's in-laws require her to perform at her wedding, such as kneeling before her husband's parents, Daddy's explanation is ethnographic in tone: "'Superstition combined with economic reasons account for many of the formalities you witnessed today, but because most Chinese do not analyze or question symbols, they are blind followers of tradition'" (144). Mama's description of the Chinese custom of throwing firecrackers into the bride's bedroom to scare away evil spirits is even more telling. She points out that it also serves "to prepare the bride for her new role of submission" (145), reading behind the

tradition to consider its unstated purposes and showing her own support of women's rights, and distances herself and her family from those who continue to practice the custom. "'As your father explained to you," she says, "they do not interpret it according to our ideas'" (144). Here Mama describes her own and Daddy's values as entirely different from those that are held in China, creating a contrast between "their" ideas and "ours." Wong here depicts her parents as significantly more Americanized than many readers assume; she also shows, simply, that there is more than one way to be American Chinese, further calling into question the idea that Jade Snow is rebelling against one monolithic, easily defined culture.

Daddy's particular objection to the older marriage ceremony is rooted in his Christianity, as one "was never to kneel before anyone but God" (140). And for Wong Hong, conversion to Christianity was a major factor in Americanization. When he first immigrated, alone, to San Francisco, he was taken under the wing of the Cumberland Presbyterian Chinese Mission. "The mission not only taught him English at night school, it introduced him to hymns and sermons, and educated him in a new doctrine of individual dignity and eternal personal salvation which revolutionized his traditional Chinese thinking, centered around reverence for his ancestors" (72). Christianity enabled him to understand America on both linguistic and cultural levels, and gave him the same world view we see his daughter develop, that is, a belief in his own individual dignity. By letter, he instructed his family in China to incorporate these American concepts: "'Do not bind our daughters' feet. Here in America is an entirely different set of standards, which does not require that women sway helplessly on little feet to qualify them for good matches as well-born women who do not have to work. Here in Golden Mountains

[America], the people, and even women, have individual dignity and rights of their own'" (72).[38] Thus, far from clinging to ancient Chinese concepts, Daddy begins to Americanize his family before they even set sail for San Francisco.[39]

Although Daddy has adopted specific American philosophies and behaviors, perhaps the most American aspect of his adaptations is the fact that he feels entitled to, and does, select for himself his own particular path; in Sollors's terms, he negotiates an identity based on both consent and descent. Rather than rejecting his own parents' attitudes wholesale, he lives according to his own combination of Christianity and Confucianism. "It was a blend which was infused into all his children, by example as well as instruction, from the time they were old enough to distinguish 'Yes' from 'No.' His stern edict to Jade Snow, 'Respect your older sister in all matters,' was somewhat softened by his addition of 'Love your brother and sister, according to Christ's teaching'" (73).

Therefore, to define Jade Snow's parents as purely Chinese, and her adolescent struggle as one of rejection of China in favor of America, is to oversimplify matters drastically. Her parents, too, have made their own cultural negotiations and created their own hybrid identities as American Chinese. Certainly, the teenage Jade Snow is misreading her parents, and readers may be taken in by this picture and perpetuate the misreading. For instance, Patricia Lin Blinde writes that "In this strange new land the Chinese called 'Gold Mountain,' Wong's family, like thousands of other migrant Chinese families including Kingston's, tried desperately to conserve the manners, habits,

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[38] Bracketed explanation in original.

[39] Although I have focused primarily on Jade Snow's father, both because the text itself emphasizes this relationship and because her mother seems to have had less interaction with the outside world, her mother too is Americanized, and not only through her relationship with Daddy. For instance, as an occasional treat, "[s]he took her children to the 'foreign' movies. At the neighborhood theater a few blocks from their home, the attractions of Western life or jungle thrillers were supplemented by the serial, which was one of Mama's greatest passions" (71).

and values of a country they had left behind" and worked to "stem[] the encroachment of American ways of life into their own existences" (57). Perhaps such readers might be forgiven, for the work's original dust jacket proclaimed, "Here is the curious dissonance of a largely Americanized young lady seeing her purely Chinese family life from both her and their points of view" (qtd. Chin 18), thus encouraging such oversimplification. Still, these readings stand in contrast to the Daddy of the text who works and worships as an American by choice. The difference is that Jade Snow is misreading productively, in order to ensure separation and individuation. As an adult, she is able to give up her misconceptions and see her parents more clearly, thus including in the text both her extreme portrayals of them, and their actual, more moderated stances.

Before Jade Snow reaches maturity, we see her progress in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* from a childish view of her parents, powerful and infallible, to a totally opposite adolescent view. Jade Snow's teenage rebellion is inspired in part by a sociology lecture in which the professor describes changing American attitudes toward children, from a view of them as additional laborers for the family farm to one in which "young people also have their rights" (125). Turning this idea over in her mind, she relates it directly to her own experience and muses, "Could it be that Daddy and Mama, although they were living in San Francisco in the year 1938, actually had not left the Chinese world of thirty years ago? … In short, was it possible that Daddy and Mama could be wrong? For days Jade Snow gave thought to little but her devastating discovery that her parents might be subject to error" (125-26). Moving from a childhood picture of omnipotent parents, Jade Snow here paints them as incompetents in need of enlightenment; her adolescent conclusion on this subject is to "tell Daddy and Mama that they needed to change their

ways" (126). At the turning point of the book, she reaches maturity upon recognizing that her parents are neither of the above, but instead, adults who are individuals in their own right.

As a child, Jade Snow knows surprisingly little about the individual members of her family. She has been thoroughly educated in her ancestral history: "She knew all of the branches of the Wong family, the relation of each to the other, and understood why Daddy must help support the distant cousins in China who bore the sole responsibility of carrying on the family heritage by periodic visits to the burial grounds in Fragrant Mountains" (131). But the members of her immediate family are mysterious. She discovers only upon applying to Mills College that "Oldest Sister had worked her way through that college for a degree when Jade Snow was a mere baby" (148). Here we see further evidence that Jade Snow, contrary to her own earlier suppositions, is by no means the first of her family to rebel against Chinese expectations of women – she is not even the first in her family to work her way through Mills College. Likewise, the family has a history of interest in handcrafts which Jade Snow learns only upon graduation from Mills. She has never discussed this work with her family, and Daddy is surprised and pleased to see examples of his daughter's pottery, weaving, and metalwork. "'You may not know this,' he said, 'but my father, your grandfather, was artistically inclined and very interested in handwork. … He would have been happy to see your work'" (179-80). And after she has established her business, he tells her that her grandfather would also have been pleased to see her as an entrepreneur. Both of these stories about Grandfather are accompanied by tidbits from Daddy's own life, which also come as revelations. Jade Snow's maturity involves learning about the accomplishments, preferences, and desires

of her family as individuals, rather than as figures who deserve respect only for the roles they play as parents.

Even more significant is Jade Snow's realization of her parents' emotional individuality. Upon graduating from Mills College, Jade Snow could easily have gloated, "[b]ut now, in her moment of triumph, … she could feel no resentment against the two who had no words of congratulation – Daddy, who wanted so much to record a picture of her and her college president, nor Mama, working with tears of mingled joy and sadness in her eyes" (181). Although critics have wished for anger rather than acceptance from Jade Snow at this point in the book, anger would not move the story toward resolution. The scene is significant because it shows Jade Snow abandoning her false pictures of her parents' attitudes in order to see their actual emotional reactions. Closely related to the graduation scene is the discussion of the mother's pregnancy with Youngest Brother Prosperity from Heaven, both because it keeps her from attending graduation and because it offers another perspective on Jade Snow's emotional maturity. The pregnancy, her ninth, is difficult, and Jade Snow talks her into receiving prenatal care, offering to go with her to the doctor. The gesture is not of a daughter to a mother, but one between adult women. "As if a veil separating her from her mother were lifted for a moment," she writes, "Jade Snow saw clearly that at this time Mama did not need from her grown daughter the respect which she had fostered in all her children so much as she needed the companionship which only one woman can give another" (185). This is the same kind of sympathy and attention with which she treats her parents at her graduation, by considering them as individuals rather than representations of the roles of "mother" and "father."

Wong expresses the meaning and importance of this change effectively herself in her second volume of autobiography, *No Chinese Stranger*, in a conversation with the now-teenaged Prosperity from Heaven. As the two sort through their father's books and papers shortly before his death, which include the early Chinese language practice of all his children, Prosperity rejoices in the fact that he has been able to stop attending Chinese school. His older sister admonishes him for forgetting all the effort Daddy put into his education, saying,

> "We must admire him for rearing us with success when he didn't even know how to write an English letter."
>
> "Well," admitted Youngest Brother, "I never thought of it that way!"
>
> Jade Snow thought: Here is the baby son adored by all, yet he has not perceived that Daddy too has had a right to be himself. (147)

Prosperity's response is not surprising, considering that he is at the same rebellious age his sister depicts in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Jade Snow's thought process clarifies the difference between adolescence and maturity; she gives her father respect for his accomplishments and individuality, just as she wished to receive them from him. Rather than demanding such respect, it is given reciprocally.

The rebelliousness of both Jade Snow and Prosperity from Heaven can be understood as an instance of "leaving home," and the Wongs' example shows that such departure is ultimately necessary in order to foster a warm adult relationship between children and parents. The notion of "home" is central to *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, encompassing both the Wong family and their values, and the geographical and cultural surroundings of

Chinatown. Jade Snow's physical departures and homecomings are also significant, and shed light on the book's central themes.

Critics have objected to the chapters of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in which Wong seems to pause her personal narrative in order to describe Chinatown, seeing them as an instance of pandering to audiences hungry for the exotic. Elaine H. Kim, for example, has pointed to Jade Snow's discovery at junior college "that her grades were consistently higher when she wrote about Chinatown and the people she had known all her life" (132) as proof of Wong's accommodations to white audiences.[40] However, context suggests a different interpretation. The next sentence reads: "For the first time she realized the joy of expressing herself in the written word" (132) – a statement that focuses on her own creative processes rather than external approval. Aspiring writers are famously told to write about what they know, a useful maxim that may account for both Jade Snow's improved grades and her personal satisfaction. Outside readers may indeed have found satisfaction in the "alien" world of Chinatown; nonetheless, the chapters "Rediscovering Chinatown" and "The Sanctum of Harmonious Spring," which describe Chinatown landmarks and characters, also serve a narrative function. Rather than bringing the story to a halt, they help it come to fruition.

Wong herself comments in the text about the notion of Chinatown tourism. World War II made Chinatown an attractive destination; Wong writes that "the eager tourists with the flush pockets of 1944 created enough of a demand to make Chinatown an economically prosperous community" (212). And while she does not mention it, Chinese Americans were also approved by the mainstream because of the United States' alliance with China in opposition to Japan. Thus, she is aware that outsiders find the community

[40] For further variants of this argument, see for example Frank Chin et al. and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong.

appealing. However, she also seems to have a barometer for the "fake" equal to that of the *Aiiieeeee!* editors. Wong explains that because the war restricted availability of imports, many Chinese goods were no longer available. Rice, soy sauce, tea, other foods and tableware all required substitutes, and "The mellow look in Chinese store windows gave way to a bazaar aspect as display gaps were filled with Mexican pottery and glass, glittering costume jewelry, flimsy baskets, and humorous souvenirs" (212). Here Wong is clear that while San Francisco's Chinatown of 1944 may be entertaining to visitors, much of it is neither culturally homogeneous nor authentic: although the costume jewelry is enticing, it is nonetheless false. Wong acknowledges much of the area as a construct aimed at tourists, writing that "Jade Snow never entered the novelty bazaars, except when visiting friends insisted" (212). The Chinatown which she describes in these chapters is instead that which she actually frequents herself, including a shoe repairman, a watch repairman, the opera, and the herb doctor. Since Wong is so clear about the distinction between the tourists' Chinatown and the Chinese Americans' Chinatown, it is hard to accuse her of intentionally encouraging such tourism.

Instead, these chapters constitute a part of her Jade Snow's maturation. Her visit to the theater exemplifies this change. "As a child," she writes,

> Jade Snow had been to the theater once or twice, but she didn't have any real understanding of the opera and the language of the stage was not their daily Cantonese. However, she delighted in the brilliant costumes, the bizarre make-up, snow-white or jet-black artificial hair and beards, and jeweled headdresses. Now, returning as an adult, she was able to pick out the plot and to see the audience as well as the performance with new eyes. (215)

Although Jade Snow as a child seldom left Chinatown, her youthful reaction parallels that of the tourist, taken in by the glittery, "bizarre" trappings. Her adult understanding of the theater more closely resembles her mature relationship with her parents, in which her new appreciation depends on looking beneath the surface. Just as she rejects her parents, yet later accepts them consciously as adult individuals rather than absolute authority figures, she returns to Chinatown with an adult perspective, able to see it as a source of nourishment rather than oppression. She accepts it purposively rather than uncritically, and now works with it rather than against it. Significantly, it is her newly-developed relationship with Chinatown that permits the establishment of her storefront pottery business – a literal manifestation of Chinatown's symbolic function as a necessary home base.

The evolution of Jade Snow Wong's attitude toward home, encompassing both family and location, is encapsulated in two related homecomings. Wong writes that while living on campus at Mills, she avoided visits home. At school, she explains, she enjoyed living independently according to "a wholly Western pattern" (168), and at home, she had to take up her childhood role again. "On the rare occasions when she arrived there with her little overnight case, she first looked for Mama to report to her, then Daddy, as she had been taught to do since childhood. Now, as always in the past, they would look up from whatever they were doing and remark simply without expression, 'So you are home again'" (168). The last lines of the book, however, portray a revised situation. Now that Jade Snow is established on a career path, "for the first time in her life, she felt contentment. She could stop searching for that niche that would be hers alone" (246). And most significantly, "when she came home now, it was to see Mama and Daddy look

up from their work, and smile at her, and say, 'It is good to have you home again!'" (246). During the visits from Mills College, the parents' lack of overt joy in Jade Snow's homecoming is explained in part by Jade Snow's own lack of enthusiasm for the visit. But at the end of the book, her notion that she has "found herself" (246) allows her to appreciate her parents, rather than resent them. Her parents' smiling statement, which closes *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, is of a piece with Daddy's benediction of Jade Snow and her quest for individuality, which takes place just before this final homecoming. In both episodes, the significance is not that the elder Wongs' attitudes toward their daughter have changed; instead, what matters is that Jade Snow herself has changed.

It is a truism that the writing of autobiography is motivated by a major change in the author's life, and attentiveness to the particular features of the genre of autobiography allows us to read *Fifth Chinese Daughter* most effectively. If we take Jade Snow's change in attitude toward her home and family to be the center of the autobiography, we are also able to join her in reevaluating our understanding of her parents' cultural location. Rather than viewing the Wongs as traditionally Chinese, we see that they not only show us the Americanness of the text, but let us reconsider what constitutes an American identity. And when the idea of a Chinese/American dichotomy within the book is complicated, the fundamental creativity of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is revealed, proving that the rich heritage of Asian American literature extends well into the past.

II. At "home" in Minidoka

The idea of the generation gap, while important in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, forms a central part of Japanese American history and thus of Sone's autobiography. The 1924 immigration act which prevented any new arrivals from Japan created an unusually

stratified, community-wide generation gap. This break was significant enough to warrant its own terminology; the first generation became "issei," the second "nisei." Whereas the issei recreated many aspects of a Japanese environment in their homes in America, explains S. Frank Miyamoto in his introduction to the 1979 edition of *Nisei Daughter*, "basically, the Nisei were Americans. They spoke English, knew its idioms and slang; they knew the popular songs and danced the latest dance steps; and their idols were the favorites of all Americans: Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, Clark Gable, and Katharine Hepburn" (x-xi). The title of Sone's autobiography, *Nisei Daughter*, thus emphasizes not only her Japanese ancestry but her location in regard to the Japanese American generation gap.

However, the most significant aspect of the gap between issei and nisei in this book is not cultural, but legal. Indeed, the elder Itois are portrayed as seamlessly adapting Japanese and American customs into their own blend, a blend passed along to their children.[41] The nisei, born in America, were citizens by birth, whereas their parents were prohibited from naturalization by the 1790 law that reserved the privilege for whites only, a law not repealed until 1952, and after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, this fact takes on major significance. Sone recalls the whirlwind of conversation among her nisei peers immediately after they learned of the bombing: "One girl mumbled over and over again, 'It can't be, God, it can't be!' Someone else was saying, 'What a spot to be in! Do you think we'll be considered Japanese or Americans?' A boy replied quietly, 'We'll be Japs,

[41] Their menus are one example. "Father had a robust, mass-cooking style which he had learned in the galleys of Alaska-bound ships and he leaned heavily toward ham and eggs, steaks and potatoes, apple and pumpkin pies. Later Mother picked up the technique of authentic Japanese cooking herself and she even learned to cook superb Chinese dishes" (13). Both parents learned to cook in America, and thus any "traditional" menu elements are an even later acquisition. A wide variety of issei personalities are portrayed throughout the book, from Kazuko's calm, serious father, to her free-spirited mother, to the principal of the Japanese school, Mr. Ohashi, whose emphasis on discipline out-Japaneses the Japanese. Thus it is important not to overstate the cultural distinctions between issei and nisei.

same as always. But our parents are enemy aliens now, you know'" (146). As useful as it was for Pardee, Jade Snow, and even at times the younger Kazuko to react against parents who represented the old world, when this divide is reified, and parents become literal rather than figurative enemy aliens, it ceases to function in the same productive way. Instead, orderly family life is scrambled by the American government's policies toward Japanese Americans during World War II, with serious consequences for Kazuko's maturation and the story she tells about it.

Sone immediately establishes her younger self as entirely at home in America, and this identity is only reinforced by her parents' decision that she and her siblings are to attend Japanese school. Sone's descriptions of her two schools suggest where her real affinity lies: "At Bailey Gatzert School I was a jumping, screaming, roustabout Yankee, but at the stroke of three when the school bell rang and doors burst open everywhere, spewing out pupils like jelly beans from a broken bag, I suddenly became a modest, faltering, earnest little Japanese girl with a small, timid voice" (22). While Kazuko's two personae obviously align with Yankee and Japanese stereotypes, the description of her Japanese persona as "faltering" and "timid" suggests discomfort as much as authenticity.[42]

Furthermore, it becomes clear both to Kazuko and to the reader that Japanese school is so named not only because the students study the Japanese language, and not only

[42] Sone presents a different picture of high school, where, she writes, she was too shy to participate in class discussions. "Although I had opinions, I was so overcome with self-consciousness I could not bring myself to speak. Some people would have explained this as an acute case of adolescence, but I knew it was also because I was Japanese. Almost all the students of Japanese blood sat like rocks during discussion period. Something compellingly Japanese made us feel it was better to seem stupid in a quiet way rather than to make boners out loud" (131). Here, she is "faltering" and "timid" in American school where before, she had been rowdy, and associates this with feeling more Japanese than American. In contrast to Eva Hoffman, who associates her teenage difficulties entirely with immigration, Sone considers adolescence as a possible explanation for her discomfort. Although she dismisses this idea, focusing instead on Japanese aspects of identity, the contrast she presents between elementary and high school suggests otherwise.

because the students are of Japanese extraction, but because the school is intended literally to teach the students to be Japanese. The teachers, operating with "a driving spirit of strict discipline," instructed the students both to speak and write Japanese and to "talk and walk and sit and bow in the best Japanese tradition" (24). The students, or at least Kazuko, had little natural aptitude or prior training for such demands, and the students are often disciplined for faults such as fidgeting, "each one of us feeling terribly guilty for being such an inadequate Japanese" (26). Japaneseness thus is not located in Kazuko's blood, but must be learned and performed.

This statement about what constitutes Japaneseness is reinforced when Kazuko and her family travel to Japan to visit Grandfather Itoi and his family. This journey is described in chapter five, tellingly titled "We Meet Real Japanese." Japan, not America, is the proper setting for the behavior learned in Nihon Gakko: "Somehow in this setting, bowing looked graceful and natural" (91). But despite her training in Japanese school, Kazuko is unable to sit properly on the floor at mealtime, to take a Japanese bath, or to be as "mannerly and quiet" as her cousin Yoshiye (94), whom Kazuko slaps for making fun of the way she talks. The altercation with Yoshiye is only the first of several fights the American Itois become involved in over their nationality. "[T]he neighborhood children had taken an immediate dislike to us. We felt tense and unhappy as they surged around outside the fence, yelling at us, 'American-jin! American-jin!'" (97). Finally, both Henry (Kazuko's older brother, then eight years old) and, to the Japanese children's astonishment, Kazuko, respond to the taunts with physical violence. "I was pulling hair and gouging at eyes as I had learned to do in alleyways back home," Sone writes. "We were tiring fast, but we knew this was no ordinary fight. The land where we were born

was being put to a test" (98). To all the children involved in this fight, it is clear that Henry and Kazuko are not Japanese, but American; the Japanese children mock them for this, while the Itois themselves see it as a point of pride. "They do not fight for admission into what they see as a closed society," writes Warren D. Hoffman of this scuffle, "but rather to defend their identity as Americans" (240). The nisei children, not "really" Japanese, do not belong in Japan, a point that becomes especially significant during World War II, when it is suggested that the nikkei should be sent "back" to Japan.

Despite intelligence reports demonstrating that Japanese Americans were no less loyal to the United States than "any other racial group in the United States with whom we went to war" (qtd. Takaki 386), the internment progressed under the assumption that racially unmixed Japanese could never be fully American. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial proclaimed, "A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched – so a Japanese American, born of Japanese parents – grows up to be a Japanese, not an American" (qtd. Takaki 388). Therefore, it was said, removing Japanese Americans from the west coast would prevent espionage and sabotage.[43] Another, less immediately obvious rationale for the internment was that, in the camps, Japanese Americans would learn self-government, training them to participate in democracy and therefore assimilate into American life (Sumida 230). In complete contradiction to this aim, however, one result of the internment was to Japanize the nikkei more thoroughly.

Isolated in camps in remote locations from California to Arkansas (in the Itois' case, Minidoka, Idaho), the internees, Sone writes, "had drifted farther and farther away from

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[43] Clearly, motives beyond national security were in play. On the mainland, the internment was supported by California agricultural interest groups who wished to avoid competition despite the small percentage of Japanese Americans in the area. In contrast, internment was avoided in Hawaii, due in part to the major role the nikkei played in the local economy. For more information, see for example Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*.

the American scene. We had been set aside, and we had become adjusted to our peripheral existence. The great struggle in which the world was engaged seemed far away, remote from our insulated way of life" (198). Unlike Jade Snow, who is able to contribute to the war effort through her job in the shipyard, Kazuko is considered a threat to the war effort through her very existence. This officially enforced "peripheral," "insulated" community reinforced not the American aspects of the nikkei community, from which they were excluded, but their Japanese habits and preferences, large and small. Residents cope with Minidoka's mud not in galoshes but in stilted *geta* sandals, which become positively trendy among the nisei. Similarly, in Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, the trend at Tanforan is for "*goh* and *shogi*, Japanese games somewhat similar to our chess and checkers. … Interest was so great that children learned to play, and sometimes beat their grandparents" (105).

More important than the issei's sandals and board games, though, is the dignity with which they approach life in internment. Sone describes the peaceful scene:

> In the deepening blue shadows, people hurried to and fro, preparing for their first night in camp. The Issei men stomped along in their wooden *getas*, their loose suspenders swinging rhythmically with each step, while the Issei women in cool cotton print *yukatas*, Japanese house kimonos, slipped along noiselessly. They bowed to each other, murmuring, "*Oyasumi nasai*. Rest well." These familiar words echoing in the alien darkness of the prairie were welcome sounds. I suddenly saw that these people were living their circumstances out with simple dignity and patience, and I felt ashamed of my own emotional turbulence. (193-94)

Here, Kazuko comes to appreciate the kind of quiet restraint that so infuriated her in her cousin Yoshiye. The Japanese values demonstrated by the issei become a subject of admiration, rather than something to reject. Emulating their parents may, ironically, even make them good American citizens, as her friend George Sawada explains to his father. "'You said wisely: "[The internment] is for the best. For the good of many, a few must suffer. This is your sacrifice. Accept it as such and you will no longer be bitter." I listened, and my bitterness left me. You, who had never been allowed citizenship, showed me its value. That I retained my faith and emerged a loyal American citizen, I owe to your understanding'" (235). George credits his father with his desire to enlist in the army.

Although in this sense the nisei may form a stronger attachment to the issei, in other important ways, family life is destroyed by the internment experience. This fact is universally discussed in autobiographies about the internment, as well as in historical documentations of the event.[44] Mess hall meals eliminated the ritual of family togetherness common at dinnertime, while overcrowded quarters put families into contact that was too close for comfort at all other times. Children were often left to their own devices, particularly until schools were organized; parents lost their authority in being infantilized by the internment.[45] Perhaps the most affecting expression of family breakdown is seen in Jeanne Wakatsuki's father in *Farewell to Manzanar*. A fisherman

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[44] In *Desert Exile*, Yoshiko Uchida observes of her nursery school charges at Tanforan that "Whenever the children played house, they always stood in line to eat at make-believe mess halls rather than cooking and setting tables as they would have done at home. It was sad to see how quickly the concept of home had changed for them" (88). Miné Okubo adds, "Family life was lacking. Everyone ate wherever he or she pleased. Mothers had lost all control over their children" (89).

[45] "In camp," writes Ann Rayson, "men became as women in the hierarchy where all were in actuality treated as children. No one was forced to work; people lined up in the mess hall for meals. The roles behind the traditional family unit no longer had substance" (46).

wrongfully accused of supplying fuel to Japanese submarines, he is removed from his family and imprisoned at Fort Lincoln in North Dakota. When he rejoins his family, he is shattered. The disgrace and humiliation of his imprisonment on charges of disloyalty "brought him face to face with his own vulnerability, his own powerlessness. He had no rights, no home, no control over his own life. This kind of emasculation was suffered, in one form or another, by all the men interned at Manzanar" (72). He becomes alcoholic, idle, pointlessly violent but ultimately impotent, and his angry outbursts threatened the family, "forcing distances between us" (117).

The generations were also divided by politics. While we often associate the idea of a generation gap with a difference of political opinion between parents and children, the issue took on particular seriousness for families like the Itois, who had to avoid political conversations in order to maintain peace. "Henry and I used to criticize Japan's aggressions in China and Manchuria," Sone recalls, "while Father and Mother condemned Great Britain and America's superior attitude toward Asiatics and their interference with Japan's economic growth. During these arguments, we had eyed each other like strangers, parents against children. They left us with a hollow feeling at the pit of the stomach" (148). And these arguments are not limited to the Itois. When Kazuko's and Henry's friend Dunks Oshima volunteers for the army, his mother stops speaking to him. Beyond the emotional divisions created by these arguments, there was also the threat of physical separation. "Incorrect" responses to the loyalty oath administered in the internment camps might cause some family members to be jailed or repatriated to Japan. The loyalty oath, asked of all adult Nikkei interned in the camps, contained two controversial questions: Question 27, "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of

the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?" and Question 28, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?" These forced either/or decisions could leave respondents with no home at all (for instance, issei renouncing Japanese citizenship would become stateless), and furthermore were a false description of reality, painting unlikely pictures of people's real loyalties, which were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Family life is further scrambled by the fact that the nisei, while still interned, are nonetheless citizens and have legal authority that their issei parents lack. Yoshiko Uchida explains in her internment narrative *Desert Exile*, "As the oldest citizen of our household, my sister now had to assume responsibility for managing our business affairs, and it was not an easy task. … My father had always managed the business affairs of our household, and my mother, sister, and I were totally unprepared to cope with such tasks" (49). Nisei were often, by necessity, thrown into the head-of-household role, whether or not they were prepared for it and whether or not their parents were ready to relinquish it. When Jeanne Wakatsuki's father is taken to Fort Lincoln, her brothers, "like councilors in the absence of a chief" (15), had to take on his role as head of the family, and even after the war, the roles are humiliatingly reversed. "While Woody [Jeanne's oldest brother] grew, Papa seemed to shrink, losing potency. … Before the war he had been the skipper. Now he depended more and more on Woody, who had youth and a citizen's mobility, who could license the boat or cross borders easily" (166). Even for issei who felt up to the task and could find some sphere in which to legally or practically exercise

influence, to do so might very well have been considered a sign of disloyal agitating (Sumida 230).

While in this aspect the nisei benefit from the citizenship that their parents lack, simultaneously they too are treated as enemy aliens, imprisoned without trial. This causes the generations to be flattened, with issei and nisei grouped together in the infantilization of all. "Because they were denied it," writes Stephen Sumida, "the issei spent their lives in America achieving not their own but their children's U.S. citizenship. To the issei, the nisei's coming-of-age was not simply to be the attainment of adulthood; it was to be the nisei's entrance into full and mature rights, privileges, and duties of American citizenship" (233-34). The issei's hopes for their children made the internment particularly painful, then, since it showed that their children were not to be treated as citizens, after all. Surely this is what Mr. Itoi has in mind when he contemplates the possibility of losing his hotel while interned at Minidoka:

> "I've never talked much about the hotel business to you children, mainly because so much of it has been an uphill climb of work and waiting for better times. Only recently I was able to clear up the loans I took out years ago to expand the business. I was sure that in the next five or ten years I would be getting returns on my long-range investments, and I would have been able to do a lot of things eventually. … Send [Henry] through medical school … and let Kazu and Sumi study anything they liked." Father laughed a bit self-consciously as he looked at Mother, "And when all the children had gone off on their own, I had planned to take Mama on her first real vacation, to Europe as well as Japan." We listened to Father wide-eyed and wistful. It had been a wonderful, wonderful dream. (161-62)

It had also been the American Dream, and its loss represents a setback not only for the issei, but in turn for the nisei and even sansei, who must attempt to regain the material foothold stolen from the issei instead of building upon their efforts.

While all generations, Japanese American or not, pass away in time, Executive Order 9066 caused this particular passage to be unusually painful and not always timely. Stephen Sumida explains this phenomenon in relationship to *Nisei Daughter*. "To come of age is difficult enough (Sone became twenty-three in 1942 when the internment began)," he writes. "To be imprisoned and thus unable to enjoy or to hoist and carry the status of adulthood is worse still. To have to assume, however, a forced and unnatural responsibility because one's alien parents are suppressed and are no longer in charge is a peculiar inversion of order" (229-30). While most critics read Henry and Minnie's wedding as a frivolous, inappropriately comic episode that takes the place of a more suitable demonstration of serious hardships,[46] Sumida understands it as a climactic demonstration of the issei's and nisei's role reversal. "[F]or these nisei," he writes, "it is perhaps the first time they themselves have had to play the host – and play the host not simply to their peers but now most importantly to their elders" (232). Sumida explains that the scenes depicting the wedding and reception show the nisei assuming adult responsibility and ultimately maintaining their identities, families, and visions of the future despite all the forces of internment that would work to destroy them.

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[46] For instance, Rayson writes, "The short section [of *Nisei Daughter*] on the actual internment concentrates on her brother's wedding and the anecdotal trip to 'town' to find the bride's wedding gown," explaining this seeming omission as "a combination of levity and avoidance" (50). Shirley Geok-lin Lim echoes, "The narrator turns away from the racial break between Japanese and white American (a radical and more dangerous examination of racial strife in which both sides were murderously and unforgivably engaged, to a less dangerous, a comic and trivialized inconsequence, the cultural misunderstanding about social rituals between first- and second-generation Japanese Americans" ("Japanese American" 297). It is my intention to show that this generational conflict is informed by the "racial break" Lim describes, and is equally as serious in informing Kazuko's development of an adult identity.

Having begun to assume an adult role through the wedding, Kazuko leaves Minidoka to take a job in Chicago. Apparently an instance of leaving home, the issue is complicated by the fact that she is leaving not her childhood home, but the site of her internment. The description of her cross-country journey, in a chapter titled "Eastward, Nisei," mirrors, in reverse, that of the westward migration of American pioneers. It also echoes conventional descriptions of immigration. Anticipating the move, Sone writes, "*Now that I had shed my past*, I hoped that I might come to know another aspect of America" (216, emphasis mine). This statement indicates a radical break similar to the rebirths described in both *The Promised Land* and *Lost in Translation*. For Antin and Hoffman, the ocean voyage is a liminal state between two identities, and the internment seems to function in this way for Kazuko. Ewa is cleansed by water (as in the ocean journey, her dream of drowning while her parents swim away from her, and her description of renaming as a baptism) in order to become Eva, and Kazuko is cleansed by fire (the burning of her Japanese books, music, and knickknacks) in order to become Monica, the name she assumes in Chicago. As "Monica Sone," the author, she writes about her earlier self, "Kazuko Itoi," in much the same way that Antin remarks that she could have written in the third person, as the distance from her earlier self is so great.

Nor is "diaspora" an inaccurate description of the journey of the nikkei from the west coast to the camps, and then from the camps to locations across America.[47] Previously concentrated in Japantowns on the west coast, the nikkei were encouraged to disperse across the country and assimilate further. Here Monica participates in the diaspora envisioned by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in which nikkei would be "scattered

[47] "In 1940, 85 percent of Japanese-Americans lived in the three West Coast states; in 1950, 69% did; in 2000, only 42% did" (Edmondson).

around on the farms and worked into the community" in locations across the country (qtd. Takaki 404). This "scattering" was aided by the fact that many former internees had no home to return to. Monica's father reports to her that "things were not going too well with his business in Seattle;" seemingly, someone is embezzling from the business while Mr. Itoi is unable to supervise it (232). Still, he considers himself better off than friends like Mr. Kato, all of whose property had been stolen by men who claimed they were moving it into government storage. "[F]ormer internees were met with hostile signs," writes Ronald Takaki: "No Japs Allowed, No Japs Welcome. When they finally saw their homes again, many found their houses damaged and their fields ruined" (405). The possibility of homecoming for Japanese Americans was severely damaged.

When Monica returns "home" at the end of *Nisei Daughter*, over the Christmas vacation during her second year at Wendell College, she returns not to Seattle but to her parents' barracks in Minidoka. Coming at the conclusion of the work, this return is where a reconciliation is expected, and where one is found in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Jade Snow embraces, and is embraced by, her family and Chinatown. But for Monica, no such welcome is possible. Although she has lived there, Minidoka is not a home. "When I stepped into our old barracks room, I felt as if I had returned to a shell of a prison," she writes (231); the emptiness of the room, too bare even to constitute a functional prison, gives no sustenance. It is not a source of heritage, but a place where culture and identity have been stripped away.

The awkward relationship to place is reflected in Monica's uncomfortable exchange with her parents at the end of her stay, as she departs for college. As they see her off, her parents remark that the departure is not sad, as all children grow up and the young Itois

have established happy lives. "When the war came and we were all evacuated," her mother confesses, "Papa and I were heartsick. We felt terribly bad about being your Japanese parents" (236). This statement suggests the generational disarray created by the camps. While under other circumstances, Jade Snow was able to rebel against her parents, and then find strength in her inheritance from them, Monica's parents crumble due to the weight of the internment and apologize for their legacy.

The discomfort of the parents' statement is matched by that of Monica's reply:

> No, don't say those things, Mama, please. If only you knew how much I have changed about being a Nisei. It wasn't such a tragedy. I don't resent my Japanese blood anymore. I'm proud of it, in fact, because of you and the Issei who've struggled so much for us. It's really nice to be born into two cultures, like getting a real bargain in life, two for the price of one. The hardest part, I guess, is the growing up, but after that, it can be interesting and stimulating. I used to feel like a two-headed monstrosity, but now I find that two heads are better than one. (236)

She goes on to offer a paean to democracy and the American way of life, saying that individuals and not the government are responsible for their own fates. This long speech is unsettling not only as a response to the internment, but as a resolution to the book, which began with a unified, harmonious view of Japanese American identity. Until this point, Sone has not described a conflict of identity, particularly not in these terms. Furthermore, the ways in which she describes the resolution of this conflict are unsatisfying, such as the weak adjective "nice" and the silly, stale metaphors.

The declaration is disappointing if read as Monica's sincere summary of her own beliefs, and even more so if taken as the "moral" of the book (coming, as it does, in the final pages). But it is effective in one way, as a comfort to her parents. Her opening request, "don't say those things," suggests that everything that follows is an attempt to prevent her parents from such apologies, and the attempt is successful. When she pauses, "Father beam[s], 'It makes us very happy to hear that'" (236). Here, parent and child reverse roles. While Monica has been able to leave Minidoka to begin an adult life, the elder Itois remain in camp, where they have been infantilized. Thus Monica takes on the job of reassuring her parents, as an adult would do for a child. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade Snow is able to locate her roots in Chinatown, returning physically and emotionally; she reconciles with her parents and gains strength from them. In *Nisei Daughter*, the Itois have been torn from their roots, which may explain why Monica's last glance at them before returning to college finds them "like wistful immigrants" (237). Her final comments, which attempt to negotiate a new version of hybrid Japanese and American identity, seems to be an attempt to create a home for her parents, a new source of strength and pride that can sustain them in America.

Conclusion

Sone's response to the internment, as she portrays it at the end of *Nisei Daughter*, is to attempt to recreate a hybrid identity blending Japanese and American elements. Others chose to accept the government's designation of the nikkei as unassimilably Japanese, and to move to Japan. This is the strategy of Kazuko's acquaintance Dick Matsui, an electrical engineer who elects to avoid the increasing anti-Japanese prejudice in the early years of World War II by accepting a job with a Japanese firm. Mrs. Matsui, a friend of

the Itois, bursts with pride as she tells them of his decision. Sone recalls, "When Mother wondered how Dick would like Japan, a country which he had never seen, Mrs. Matsui said, 'Dicku feels that it's the place for him. He would work himself right up to the top without having to fight prejudice'" (122). Here, Mrs. Matsui transposes the American ideal of advancement through hard work to Japan. The scene in which Dick sets sail from the Pacific coast provides a similar inversion: "It was no longer the shining shore where the Issei had eagerly landed many years ago, but the jumping-off place for some of their young, looking to Japan as the land of opportunity" (124). Again, American myths are reversed, with a journey west across the Pacific Ocean in the hope of a better life.

But Mrs. Itoi's question about how Dick will like Japan is prescient; another good question, asked by fellow nisei, is how Japan will like Dick. "'Dick's a fool,'" says Jack Okada, Henry Itoi's friend from college. "'He thinks he's going to be kingpin out there with an American education. Those big companies can make use of fellows like him all right, but Dick's going to find himself on a social island. The Japanese hate us Nisei. They despise our crude American manners'" (122-23). The nisei cannot count on finding a home in Japan, a fact also made clear by the Itois' visit during Kazuko's childhood, and by the end of the book, Dick Matsui hopes to return to the United States (233).

Dick's story is just one manifestation of the inverted story line found in *Nisei Daughter*. Although Sone seems to inherit a pattern of autobiography developed by Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong, by the end it is clear that their stories are fundamentally different. As Warren D. Hoffman notes, "Sone's text is part ethnic *bildungsroman*, part internment memoir" (229), and the element of internment disrupts the triumphant arc which the earlier stories were able to describe. After internment, Sone

describes a topsy-turvy world in which loyal Americans become enemy aliens, parents establish roots through their children, and eastward, not westward, motion is the direction of manifest destiny. *Nisei Daughter* thus provides a test case that shows the significance of citizenship in American autobiography; when it is denied, as in the case of the internment, the ability to create and write one's life is profoundly affected.

Chapter 4:
"Out of Hating Range": Distance and the Sources of Identity Formation

Since its publication in 1977, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has been wildly successful, ultimately becoming the most commonly taught book by a living author (M. Chin 68) and earning a longstanding place as one of the few literary works on a bestseller list filled with "how to" books (Fishkin 787). Not coincidentally, it has also been a lightning rod for controversy. The splash created by the book's publication suggested that nothing like it had been seen before, that *The Woman Warrior* was entirely sui generis. "With the exception of Maxine Hong Kingston, most scholars of American literature are at a loss to name Chinese American women writers," writes Amy Ling in her article "Chinese American Women Writers: The Tradition behind Maxine Hong Kingston." "Yet Kingston is not an isolated Athena (or Hua Mulan) springing full grown from Zeus's (or Buddha's) forehead. A line of Chinese American women writers dating back nearly a century preceded her" (136). Ling traces that line to Edith and Winnifred Eaton, through World War II-era and mid-century writers, while critics including Patricia Lin Blinde and Shirley Geok-lin Lim locate the foremother of *The Woman Warrior* in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Wong, like Kingston, is born in California to a working family (for Kingston's family, a laundry; for Wong's a denim overall factory) and struggles, like Kingston, with issues of identity formation and gender bias. The connection between the books is apt; Kingston has said that *Fifth Chinese Daughter* did influence her work (Carabi 11). However, the connection has usually been drawn in order to show not the evolution and development of a tradition, but a radical break from what has gone before.

Blinde, whose article was one of the earliest to discuss *The Woman Warrior*, thoughtfully explicates the relationship between the work's content and its distinctive form. "For Maxine Hong Kingston," she writes, "the flux of social and racial determinations contributes to a self image which is correspondingly fluid," and this contributes to an equally fluid approach to genre (53). "This is a contrast to Jade Snow Wong," Blinde adds, "whose self image coalesces early in life and whose mode of exposition is a fixed literary form" (53). In order to demonstrate Kingston's creativity, she characterizes Wong as shallow, conventional, and unaware of the role of prejudice in her life. Lim, who takes a similar position, summarizes this perspective: "Between *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* is a breathtaking leap in female consciousness" (263). Rather than assuming that Kingston's originality stands on its own, these critics first define her forerunners, then attempt to demonstrate how she has surpassed them.

The Woman Warrior appeared concurrently with a number of projects that set out to delineate an Asian American literary heritage, including the anthology *Aiiieeeee!* along with the first book-length study of Asian American literature, Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature*, and these articles about *The Woman Warrior* seem to be another manifestation of that contemporary canon-building impulse. A consistent feature of all these books and articles is the impulse not only to recover pre-1970s Asian American literature, but also to judge it according to 1970s standards. Ling, for instance, lauds authors like Sui Sin Far and Adet, Anor, and Meimei Lin, but treats others more harshly, most particularly the few authors who met with some degree of popularity, including Winnifred Eaton (who wrote romances under the name Onoto Watanna) and, again, Jade

Snow Wong. Popularity seems to have been synonymous, at this time, with inauthenticity, of capitulation to the demands of a white reading audience at the expense of creating and portraying an Asian American sensibility. Chin et. al. and Kim offer similar judgments on Wong and other earlier popular Asian American authors, and Kim's comment on Pardee Lowe is particularly telling: "Modern Asian American readers, more secure in their identities and numbers, might wish that it had not been *Father and Glorious Descendant* that first broke Chinese American 'silence'" (65). The search for literary ancestors contemporary with and sometimes directly linked to the publication of *The Woman Warrior* has as much to do with the demands of readers' personal identities as with the intrinsic qualities of the texts. There seems to have been a fear, in reading these popular early works, that one antiquated version of Asian American identity has become fixed in the mind of the public, leaving contemporary authors with an uphill battle in writing about their own experiences. They do not wish for others to see them as like Jade Snow Wong, nor do they wish to see *themselves* that way.

If early Asian American texts are taken to be ancestors, then responses to them may be described according to Werner Sollors's formulation of generations. The second generation attitude, he explains, is characterized by the rejection of one's parents, while a third generation perspective seeks ancestors whose ideals can be fulfilled. Both attitudes, Sollors explains, may exist in one person, whose perspective might change over time; furthermore, he writes that all Americans are, in a sense, third generation because of their habit of adopting historical ancestors. The negative characterizations of Jade Snow Wong in conjunction with positive reviews of Maxine Hong Kingston therefore suggest a rebellious second generation response, in which Kingston's peers show their difference

from their immediate forebears and attempt to surpass their literary parents. The main issue is that of anxiety of influence, misreading precursor texts in order to make space for new work. But if all Americans are third generation, and in search of ancestors to fulfill, then it is not surprising that critics and writers seeking literary grandparents are uncomfortable with the idea that early Asian American writers do not always live up to modern standards. This problem corresponds with the anxiety of authorship, the need to find earlier authors whose work one can continue.

The work of the current critical generation, it seems to me, is to view early Asian American canon formation in a second generation light. While it fulfilled the needs of its time period, we must also acknowledge that it often painted with broad brushstrokes, calling attention to pernicious stereotypes that still needed to be eradicated, without always observing the creativity of early writers' responses to those stereotypes. That writers such as Jade Snow Wong can serve as ancestors to be fulfilled in a third generation response, rather than repudiated in second generation fashion as writers like Blinde have suggested, is made clear by the example of Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Woman Warrior*.

Asked in an interview for her perspective on the beginnings of the Chinese American literary tradition, Kingston commented, "I am not sure that I got help from a former generation of Chinese-American writers except for Jade Snow Wong; actually her book was the only available one" (Carabi 11). This statement gives extra validation to the idea that Wong's and Kingston's books may be considered together, with Kingston's book evolving in some ways from Wong's. However, it is not clear that the usual perspective on this influence, in which Kingston vastly improves on Wong, is accurate. Although she

does say that *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was the only available book, not exactly a ringing endorsement, she also characterizes Wong's influence as "help," implying that she was able to take something positive away from the book so many of her contemporaries have criticized.

Part of the help Kingston received from Jade Snow Wong likely involved their similarities, the same similarities that have caused critics to link their autobiographies together. Wong had already paved the way for a Chinese American woman to write her life story, and for publishers and readers to accept that life story, thus lifting some of the pressure for Kingston that accompanies being the first.[48] Beyond these similarities, the differences between Wong's life and her own may have motivated Kingston to write her autobiography. "What seems to connect memoir writers and their readers is a bond created through identifications and – just as importantly – disidentifications," Nancy K. Miller writes in *But Enough about Me* (3). The initial likenesses between writer and reader ultimately highlight the differences between them, leading to a greater understanding of the reader's life and, perhaps, to more autobiographical writing that fills the gap between these two experiences, as Susan Suleiman explains (8).

Furthermore, Wong may have offered artistic inspiration for the writing of *The Woman Warrior*. Far from being stylistically predictable, as Blinde argued, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* presents its author's development of a blended cultural identity in a highly unusual form, that of third person autobiography. Kathleen Loh Swee Yin and

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[48] This ethnic version of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar termed "the anxiety of authorship" is also seen, for instance, in Frank Chin's liberating discovery of John Okada: "I didn't want to be the first yellow to write. I didn't want to be the first yellow to write in Seattle. I didn't want to be a freak and I didn't want the responsibility for being deep and true that comes with being the first of your people to do it with words. For me, the discovery of John's 1957 novel was like a white writer feeling gloomy and alone in a literary history, discovering Mark Twain. *No-No Boy* proved I wasn't the only yellow writer in yellow history. The book was so good it freed me to be trivial" (254).

Kristoffer F. Paulson elaborate on this inventive self-presentation in "The Divided Voice of Chinese-American Narration: Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*," which serves as a corrective to Blinde's reading. "[I]n her haste to elevate Kingston's work," they write, "Blinde uses Wong as a convenient whipping girl, seemingly unwilling or unable to recognize the fragmentation, the frustration and the awareness of a divided consciousness that is part and parcel of Wong's existence and overwhelmingly evident in the divided narrative 'voice' throughout *Fifth Chinese Daughter*" (57). Yin and Paulson show that the reading is based on Blinde's own needs as a reader, needs that spring from a "second generation" perspective.

Kingston, however, seems to have been able to approach *Fifth Chinese Daughter* from a "third generation" perspective in which the earlier text inspires her own. Part of the "help" Kingston received from the book may have been the example of a creative redefinition of the parameters of autobiography. Just as Wong takes a more distant perspective on her autobiography by examining her younger self as a third-person character divided from her adult, authorial voice, Kingston too holds herself, in the text, at a critical distance. She, like Wong, includes third-person autobiographical elements, as in "At the Western Palace," focalized through her mother and aunt Moon Orchid: "There was indeed an oldest girl who was absent-minded and messy. She had an American name that sounded like 'Ink' in Chinese. 'Ink!' Moon Orchid called out; sure enough, a girl smeared with ink said, 'Yes?'" (131). In most of *The Woman Warrior*, her strategy is to tell her own story largely through those of others (family, classmates, famous heroines).

The experimental form of the work has led to another branch of controversy in which the autobiographical status of *The Woman Warrior* is at issue. Such arguments are

effectively summarized and evaluated by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong in "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?" and Deborah Woo in "Maxine Hong Kingston: The Ethnic Writer and the Burden of Dual Authenticity." The term "autobiography" does suggest a commitment to the "real," Wong acknowledges, but asks, "what if the 'real' that an autobiography is bound by is the 'imagination' of the protagonist?" (31). In short, *The Woman Warrior* is largely a story of internal creative development, which is not necessarily verifiable in terms of outside facts. If the work tells the story of how its author came to be a writer, then childhood daydreams, for example, are relevant.

Furthermore, the form of *The Woman Warrior* can be understood as autobiographical in describing the various sources and models with which Kingston has shaped her life. If American culture demands that individuals create themselves, rather than following automatically the example of their parents, then they must find role models for themselves among history, literature, and their peers, as Robert F. Sayre has suggested. Parents may furnish models, but only if examined critically and accepted by choice; Kingston has to get "out of hating range" of her family in order to accept and make use of her mother's gift of talk-story. *The Woman Warrior* is organized around possible models for identity, whether the no-name aunt, Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, a silent Chinese American classmate, or the poet Ts'ai Yen, and functions as autobiography in part because it shows the sources of Kingston's self-creation. Nor is such autobiographical structure unique to Kingston; Teresa Hak-Kyung Cha, for example, divides her experimental but autobiographical *Dictee* into sections named after the muses of Ancient Greece and describing precursors including her mother and a Korean heroine. These works are simply more detailed and more fragmented versions of the common convention

of describing one's grandparents and parents at the beginning of an autobiography, or of Eva Hoffman's extended discussion of Mary Antin. Paul John Eakin writes that autobiography "testifies to a belief that the models of the self in a culture – in its art and literature and philosophy – exert a decisive influence on the form and content of the self in any individual," and that this influence is reflected in autobiographical writing by authors including Mary McCarthy, Henry James, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. A central theme of *The Woman Warrior* is that individuals invent their culture ("maybe everyone makes it up as they go along" [185]), and the form of the book reveals the building blocks with which Kingston has done just that.

I. Sources of selfhood

Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, the protagonist attempts to define her identity in the absence of obvious cultural guidelines and in the face of conflicting expectations. From her mother's stories, young Maxine infers that Chinese girls could grow up to be slaves or swordswomen (19), but these stories have nothing to say about what Chinese American girls could grow up to be, in a country that presents different challenges and different opportunities. "My American life has been such a disappointment," Maxine recalls:

> "I got straight A's, Mama."
>
> "Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village."
>
> I could not figure out what was my village. And it was important to do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China. (45-46)

If she could have identified her village, her problems would have been solved because her role would have been clear. But instead, she is influenced by multiple "villages," her mother's stories from China and the expectations of the world around her in California. Straight A's are a realistic accomplishment for an American schoolchild, but one for which Maxine has no context at home. Likewise, the goal of "saving her village" does not have an obvious analogue in the world of public school. "One of the most critical contradictions facing the Chinese American woman in *The Woman Warrior* is the relationship between her perceptions of her Chinese heritage and American realities," Elaine Kim writes (201). Faced with vague, imagined demands of a China she has never seen, young Maxine feels the need to invent ways to meet these demands in her American context.

Under other circumstances, Maxine could simply choose to follow in the footsteps of her mother, Brave Orchid. A larger-than-life figure admirable for her strength and storytelling, Brave Orchid is heroic in a number of respects but still not thoroughly suitable as a model for her daughter. Although she, too, is a Chinese American woman, Brave Orchid spent the first 40 years of her life in the context of only one culture, whereas Maxine faces sometimes conflicting cultural guidelines at home and at school. Given the distinct circumstances of the lives of mother and daughter, as well as the American imperative of creating one's self, it is necessary for Maxine to locate other role models from the ranks of history, stories, her family, and friends. Just as Mary Antin adopts George Washington, Louisa May Alcott, and her favorite teacher Miss Dillingham, Maxine Hong Kingston chooses and invents numerous forebears who can guide her life.

The Woman Warrior functions as autobiography in large part because of the way it reveals Kingston's source materials which she has used to create herself.

The book's first chapter, "No Name Woman," establishes the framework for Kingston's definition of her own heritage. It begins as Brave Orchid tells her daughter of an aunt in China who became pregnant years after her husband had sailed for Gold Mountain, was rejected by the village, and finally drowned herself. The story makes a different impression on Maxine than her mother expects. "Don't let your father know that I told you," Brave Orchid cautions. "He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful" (5). The father's denial of his sister suggests the malleability of the family tree, while the mother's resurrection of the story suggests how ancestors may be used to guide one's life – in this case, as a bad example. Maxine's reaction is a blend of her father's and mother's, choosing this unnamed woman as a significant ancestress, but attaching new morals to the old story, not taking her mother's version as the last word.

And the moral is the point of the story for Brave Orchid, who does consider that she has uttered the last word. "If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, 'Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?' I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life" (6). Sau-ling Cynthia Wong takes "necessity" as key to understanding Asian American literature, representing the "contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded" lives of the immigrant generation; she contrasts the term with "extravagance," indicating "freedom,

excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism" (*Reading* 13). And the aunt's story as Brave Orchid tells it, guided by necessity, is useful for getting by in a threatening world, whether in China, the setting of the original story, or even as an immigrant in America; "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. …" Kingston explains. "Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home" (5). While necessity is the province of the first generation, extravagance is associated with the second. But the binary, as Wong notes, is "deconstructible" (13), and the second generation, whose basic needs have been provided for through the hard work of their parents, face other struggles. "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhood fits in solid America" (5). Necessity means something different for Maxine; in the process of creating a Chinese American identity and becoming a writer, she needs a useable past to build on, in "extravagant" fashion, more than just a cautionary tale.

Given only sparing details, Kingston is left to devise the kind of ancestor who would be most useful to her. She imagines the aunt as a rape victim or a rebellious, sensuous woman, considering various permutations of the story that might explain the aunt's behavior and offer guidance to Maxine. "At the mirror my aunt combed individuality into her bob," Kingston writes (9), imagining an aunt who possesses a characteristic highly valued in her niece's American surroundings and, by positioning her in front of a mirror, shows how she and the aunt reflect each other's personality and desires. The aunt, as Maxine envisions her, acts out her niece's own secret desires and fears: "The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them"

(13). In addition to the separate life of the second generation, which stands in contrast to that of the immigrants, Maxine nourishes an interior life of the imagination, which separates her from her siblings and peers. (Later in the book, Maxine asks her sister whether she, too, talks with "adventurous people inside my head" [189]. "'Do I *what*?' she said. 'Never mind,' I said fast. 'Never mind. Nothing.' My sister, my almost-twin, the person most like me in all the world, had said, '*What*?'" [190].) Kingston identifies with the idea of the aunt's secret life, while simultaneously expecting a similar punishment. Her ancestress "had betrayed the family" (13), a betrayal Kingston repeats by telling the family's private stories in a published book.

Although this chapter ostensibly tells the story of the aunt, it is very much a story about the narrator, as King-Kok Cheung explains. The aunt's voice is imagined, but still absent; therefore, "[n]ot the aunt's but the narrator's subjectivity is unfurled" (*Articulate* 85). Cheung goes on to describe the ways in which the narrator subverts the idea of ancestor worship, such as disobeying her parents' wishes in telling the aunt's story and claiming descent through a female line. I would add that Kingston further fractures the idea of descent by focusing not on a mother/daughter relationship but on an indirect aunt/niece relationship. "Finally, in place of origamied objects the narrator offers pages of her own writing," Cheung concludes, "appropriating a textual privilege that has been predominantly male. Containing her own words rather than inherited scripts, these pages herald a new – Chinese American – tradition" (85).

"No Name Woman" lays out a pattern for the design of the rest of the book, which presents numerous models by which Kingston shapes her identity, models that are simultaneously shaped by Kingston for her own use. "Unless I see her life branching into

mine," Kingston writes of the No Name Woman, "she gives me no ancestral help" (8), and this statement seems to apply also to figures from Chinese history, myth, and legend, including Fa Mu Lan, whom Kingston depicts in the second chapter, "White Tigers," and the poet Ts'ai Yen, whose story closes the book. Kingston's retellings of these stories have generated criticism; Laureen Mar, for instance, described them as "the perversion of the real myths of the Chinese and Chinese-American people, beyond cultural recognition" (qtd. Woo 184-85). However, it is important to note that Fa Mu Lan and other stories, though historical in origin, exist in multiple versions in Chinese literature,[49] demonstrating that Chinese culture is not so fixed as Kingston's critics depict it. "I defend myself by saying that if the myths don't change, then they die," Kingston explains. "… I think that mythology has always been like that: Legends change from one speaker to another speaker, and there is no definitive version" (Carabi 10). The objections to Kingston's take on Fa Mu Lan and other figures are related to the equally common charges of fictionalization, but in fact, in revising these stories, she shows the development of her own Chinese American identity by depicting the ways in which the old stories are useful to her today.

The adaptation of the Fa Mu Lan story, although based on a famous figure, works as autobiography precisely because of the intensity of imagination it demonstrates. The rich, vivid story, an example of the inner life which her sister finds so peculiar, may not refer directly to the outer world, but does portray one element of Kingston's development as a person and a writer. As all autobiographies are, in a sense, the stories of how their authors come to write their own lives, this elaborate daydream constitutes an important

[49] According to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "The Fa Mu Lan story itself, which many of Kingston's critics take to be a fixed and sacred given, actually exists in a multitude of Chinese texts differing from each other in purpose as well as detail" ("Autobiography" 47).

moment in that process. Young Maxine's imaginings are no less important to her growth than external events are; indeed, they may be more important since they mark her early on as a storyteller. The variations on this famous story are also significant, not only demonstrating Kingston's belief that old stories must be reenvisioned by new tellers, but also emphasizing the importance she places on writing, even at a young age. To the most common version of Fa Mu Lan, "Mulan Shi" or "Ballad of Mulan," Sau-ling Cynthia Wong notes, Kingston has added elements of "the well-known tale of Yue Fei, whose mother carved four characters (not entire passages) onto his back, exhorting him to be loyal to his country" ("Autobiography" 33). This addition facilitates the transfer of the story from its Chinese origins to Kingston's American context.

As the warrior woman prepares to go into battle, her parents "carve revenge on [her] back," explaining, "Wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know your sacrifice. … And you'll never forget either" (34). These words serve both as a weapon and as a link to her family: "They had carved their names and address on me, and I would come back" (37). The words on the warrior woman's back show, and assist, her filiality. And ultimately, it is as a writer that she is able to attempt heroism in an American context. "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar," she writes. "May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (53). Here, as in the chapter "No Name Woman," Kingston tries to reconcile the issues of filiality and writing. Whereas in the earlier section, writing (and the life of the imagination which accompanies it) is seen as a betrayal of the family, here

it is an instance of revenge carried out on behalf of the family. If Kingston has no army of "eighty pole fighters" (49), she nonetheless has "words in red and black files, like an army, like my army" (35), and is able to expose the injustice faced by her family and others in China and America. And as a writer herself, rather than the written-upon heroine in the story, she is able to go a step further, reimagining numerous details of a story essentially conservative and patriarchal in its most traditional versions, as Wong points out: "All in all, working within the constraints of internalized values, the protagonist has done her best to make of unpromising material an inspiring, if not entirely radical, tale" ("Autobiography" 46). In this sense, Kingston enacts revenge upon stories that too narrowly define women's roles, by claiming them as her own, then shaping them to her own needs.

Likewise, Kingston selects and alters the story of Ts'ai Yen for her own purposes. While Fa Mu Lan served as a childhood heroine, Ts'ai Yen reflects Kingston's adult self, writer and pacifist; "[a]t the end of the book," writes King-Kok Cheung, "her tutelary genius has changed … from warrior to poet" ("Woman" 125). The exiled Ts'ai Yen adapts the sound of her captors' whistling arrows to songs sung for her children, communicating stories about China in a medium she has invented herself. This story, too, has been the subject of revision, as Wong explains. Here, Ts'ai Yen's departure from her "half-barbarian" children and return to the Han is downplayed.

> Herself a half-barbarian to her China-obsessed parents … the narrator might have found such a detail too close for comfort, and too contrary in spirit to her own undertaking of forming a Chinese-American self. Thus we find a shift of emphasis: the last pages of *The Woman Warrior* celebrate not return from the

> remote peripheries to a waiting home but the creation of a new center through art. (46)

The moral of the story, and the end of the book, has been shaped to emphasize a departure from home, and the importance of telling one's own story. Just as Kingston imagines her aunt "comb[ing] individuality into her bob" (9), here too she ascribes values from her life in America to earlier lives in China.

Significantly, Kingston's retelling of all three stories grows out of her mother's storytelling, a connection elaborated by authors including Sidonie Smith and Paul John Eakin. Whether they are tales of caution or of inspiration, they have all the significance of the words at the warrior woman's back. "At last," she writes, "I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (19-20). Brave Orchid, like Vivian Gornick's mother in *Fierce Attachments*, gives her daughter the gift of narrative. While the narrators must first leave home in order to appreciate this gift, the ability to tell stories is what allows them both to forge their own identity and, ultimately, to maintain a connection to their mothers. Throughout the book, Kingston collaborates with Brave Orchid. The first two and a half pages of the book record her monologue about the nameless aunt, a monologue whose gaps Kingston attempts to fill in throughout the rest of the chapter. Recalling her mother's bedtime stories as "White Tigers" begins, she writes, "I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (20). In "Shaman," which recounts Brave Orchid's experiences in medical school in China, mother and daughter give their own versions of the night Brave Orchid spent in a haunted dormitory room. And the book concludes with another collaboration, a story about Kingston's grandmother, a fan of the theater, and

Ts'ai Yen the poet: "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (205).[50] Talk-story is perhaps Kingston's most significant inheritance from Brave Orchid, and not only because the mother modeled story-telling and gave her daughter a bank of stories to draw on.

While Brave Orchid talked-story avocationally, she was trained as a doctor, and in her profession, facilitates that of her daughter: "the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue."

> "Why did you do that to me, Mother?"
>
> "I told you."
>
> "Tell me again."
>
> "I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it."
>
> "But isn't 'a ready tongue an evil'?"
>
> "Things are different in this ghost country." (164)

Brave Orchid, a surgeon, has the anatomical knowledge and steady nerves required to cut her daughter's frenum. And the cutting, a separation and loosening, is suggestive also of the splitting between mother and daughter. Brave Orchid suspends her more typical

[50] The fourth chapter, "At the Western Palace," constitutes a collaboration with Kingston's siblings, as she explains in the next section ("In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs" [163]), as well as focalizing in third person primarily through Brave Orchid.

Chinese motto, "a ready tongue [is] an evil," to allow her daughter to speak other languages and to operate in an American context where speech is prized over silence.

While Kingston ultimately benefits from the Chinese heritage her mother imparts, the splitting implied by the cutting of the frenum is essential; Kingston is able to deal with that heritage only after distancing herself from it, and from her mother. Just as the warrior woman of "White Tigers" must leave her home and spend 15 years training with the old couple in order to gain the strength and skill needed to return and avenge her village, the narrator must leave home in order to appreciate and use the Chinese culture imparted to her by her family and fellow villagers. "I live now where there are Chinese and Japanese, but no emigrants from my own village looking at me as if I had failed them," Kingston writes of Hawaii, where she lived while writing *The Woman Warrior*. Recalling family sayings such as "When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls," she writes, "I had to get out of hating range" (52), not specifying whether she is protecting herself from her family's hate, or from her own hate for her family and the misogyny they espouse.

Getting out of hating range involves not only physical distance, but emotional and intellectual distance. As in Gornick's *Fierce Attachments* and Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, leaving home is associated with education, books, and the life of the mind. Recalling a fight with her mother in which Brave Orchid calls her "Ho Chi Kuei" and orders her to "get out," she writes, "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. I enjoy the simplicity" (204). From a distanced perspective, she is able to contextualize her own place in her family and among the fellow villagers. Not knowing

the meaning of "Ho Chi Kuei," and having no one to ask from whom she can get a straight answer, she attempts to look the term up. The results are inconclusive:

> So far I have the following translations for *ho* and/or *chi*: "centipede," "grub," "bastard carp," "chirping insect," "ju-jube tree," "pied wagtail," "grain sieve," "casket sacrifice," "water lily," "good frying," "non-eater," "dustpan-and-broom" (but that's a synonym for "wife"). Or perhaps I've Romanized the spelling wrong and it is *Hao* Chi Kuei, which could mean they are calling us "Good Foundation Ghosts." The immigrants could be saying that we were born on Gold Mountain and have advantages. (204-05)

Her inability to reach a conclusive answer is nonetheless productive. If there is no single, agreed-upon definition of "Ho Chi Kuei," then the idea of a unified Chinese culture, and Maxine's own inability to conform to it, loses its grip. She is free to select among many possible meanings, to make up her own Chinese American identity. Indeed, the element of inconclusiveness, of not knowing, is part of an accurate representation of Kingston's experience of second-generation life; responding to critics of Kingston's sometimes inaccurate translations, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong writes that "the so-called distortions of traditional Chinese culture found in the text are simply indications of how far removed from it the protagonist has become" ("Autobiography" 44). The intellectual perspective is a form of leaving home, but one that permits an eventual return. Kingston writes, "I like to look up a troublesome, shameful thing and then say, 'Oh, is that all?' The simple explanation makes it less scary to go home after yelling at your mother and father. It drives the fear away and makes it possible someday to visit China, where I know now they don't sell girls or kill each other for no reason" (205).

Both mother and daughter have mixed feelings about Maxine's leaving home. Near the end of a visit, Brave Orchid asks her daughter, "How can I bear to have you leave me again?" Her daughter's mental response is an echo, "How can I bear to leave her again?" (100). Verbally, however, she insists on leaving, promising to return soon. Still, this does not convince Brave Orchid. "Yes, I know you," she says. "I know you now. I've always known you. You're the one with the charming words. You have never come back. 'I'll be back on Turkeyday,' you said. Huh." (101) Although Maxine promises a physical return, her mother sees through to the deeper issue, her daughter's emotional distance. This perception is sharpened by Brave Orchid's own experience. She has just received a letter from the villagers in China, asking to take over the family's land, and it is now conclusive: they will not return to China. As Brave Orchid explains, "We have no more China to go home to" (106). Her own mixed feelings about leaving China, and the finality with which it is now surrendered, surface in her concern about her daughter's departure.

Kingston highlights the similarity, writing, "The gods pay her and my father back for leaving their parents. My grandmother wrote letters pleading for them to come home, and they ignored her. Now they know how she felt" (108). Yet the likenesses between mother and daughter developed over the course of this conversation are also what ultimately allow Brave Orchid to give her daughter her blessing to leave. She concludes the conversation suddenly, with agreement.

> "It's better, then, for you to stay away. The weather in California must not agree with you. You can come for visits." She got up and turned off the light. "Of course, you must go, Little Dog."

> A weight lifted from me. The quilts must be filling with air. The world is somehow lighter. She has not called me that endearment for years – a name to fool the gods. I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years. I am practically a first daughter of a first daughter.
>
> "Good night, Little Dog."
>
> "Good night, Mother."
>
> She sends me on my way, working always and now old, dreaming the dreams about shrinking babies and the sky covered with airplanes and a Chinatown bigger than the one here. (109)

Both women are Dragons, and almost first daughters, and both, in their own ways, have left home. Brave Orchid's capitulation may spring from her recognition that she herself has done what Maxine is about to do, and in a more drastic way. Paradoxically, in calling her daughter by a childhood endearment, she recognizes her adulthood. And for Maxine's part, it is only her ability to leave home, acknowledged at last by the mother, that reminds her of their similarities. At the end of the passage, the phrase "working always and now old" seems to describe both mother and daughter, and the dreams she dreams are those rooted in Brave Orchid's talk-story and elaborated throughout *The Woman Warrior*.

II. Second- and third-generation autobiographical reading

Much of *The Woman Warrior* draws on figures with which Kingston has chosen at various points to identify, the warrior woman figure, the no-name aunt, the mother. The work builds an autobiographical picture by telling the stories of the ancestors she has adopted, whether from myth and legend or from among the ranks of her biological family.

Simultaneously, the work is haunted by figures the narrator does not choose, yet fears others will associate with her: a collection of "crazy women" such as Pee-A-Nah, a silent girl whom Maxine bullies in the school lavatory, a hulking retarded boy who sits in the family laundry. These, too, shape her identity, though she does not choose them and has a negative response to them; furthermore, they may give insight into the critical controversy that met *The Woman Warrior* upon publication, in which some readers seemed to feel that the book had co-opted their ability to define themselves.

The "witchwoman" Maxine's brother calls Pee-A-Nah, known to all as the village idiot, is terrifying to her not as much for her wild appearance and collection of strange plants in the slough as for her perceived ability to steal others' identity. According to the children's superstition, Pee-A-Nah could "touch you on the shoulder, and you'll not be you anymore" (188). Although suggestive of magical powers, this erasure of identity functions in an everyday if nonetheless frightening way – if Maxine came too close to the village idiot and witch, she would become associated with her, and ultimately turn into her successor as the next village idiot. "I had invented a quill pen out of a peacock feather," Kingston reports, "but stopped writing with it when I saw that it waved like a one-eyed slough plant" (189). Whereas in the book's first chapter, the narrator derives power from the rebellion of the no-name woman, here the opposite situation is shown, and identification with a woman considered inappropriate is silencing. Maxine attempts to forestall her own classification as "crazy girl" by hiding any possible similarities to the "village idiot" (189). Whereas the aunt's story provided a framework on which Maxine could elaborate, Pee-A-Nah is cast into a stereotypical role determined by the community. No one knows the aunt's story, but all feel they know Pee-A-Nah's.

Her encounters with her silent classmate and the retarded boy in this chapter are related to that with Pee-A-Nah and the other "crazy women" Kingston describes. Maxine's verbal and physical assault on the silent, anonymous Chinese American girl proceeds from and at times demonstrates their similarities. "I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team," Kingston writes. The girl's silence is extreme, but so is Maxine's; she reports "total" silence for three school years. And by the time the other girl's sister comes to rescue her, both she and Maxine are crying. As Sidonie Smith explains, "An exaggerated representation of the perfect Chinese girl, this girl becomes a mirror image of Kingston herself, reflecting her own fears of insubstantiality and dumbness" (77). Maxine's rage springs not only from the similarity between the two girls, but more importantly from the possibility that others might see a similarity, whether real or not. Describing her objections to the quiet girl, she reports that "people and she herself probably thought I was her friend" (173). Because she represents a stereotypical Chinese girl, quiet, tidy, and delicate, this girl is a particular danger to Maxine's sense of self; in being identified with her, she is losing self-definition not only to another person, but to a stereotype. Although the encounter in the washroom has been described as a split between the part of Maxine that is Chinese and the part that has internalized American values,[51] it also seems to be Maxine's attempt at what Lisa Lowe describes as horizontal negotiation of ethnicity (as opposed to vertical reception of ethnicity from one's parents), or what Margaret Mead described as "cofiguration." In this case, her sense of what it might mean to be Chinese American comes not from a parent, but from a peer, and the one-sided fight is an attempt to affect the way a Chinese

[51] See, for instance, Cheung in *Articulate Silences* (88-90), Oster (49), Smith (76-77).

American identity is presented to the world and to forestall the perpetuation of stereotypes in favor of self-definition.

This silent classmate is not the only figure that Maxine fears association with. "At Chinese school there was a mentally retarded boy who followed me around," she reports, "probably believing that we were two of a kind" (194). Just as she tries to distinguish herself from the quiet girl, through black clothes, callused hands and dirty nails, and long hair grown to hide any delicate features, she abandons the antisocial habits she has adopted to prevent her parents from arranging a marriage for her, such as laziness, sloppiness, clumsiness, and an intentional limp. "I studied hard, got straight A's, but nobody seemed to see that I was smart and had nothing in common with this monster, this birth defect" (195). Again, the objection is not only to the boy, but to the idea of their perceived similarity. And again, the scenario culminates in an outburst of rage, this time in an argument in which Maxine finally pours out all the secrets she has been saving to tell her mother, blaming Brave Orchid for all her troubles.

These negative doubles join Kingston's positive role models in giving shape to *The Woman Warrior*, and both kinds of identification are useful in understanding the critical debate surrounding the book. The work is autobiographical both in terms of its presentation of Kingston's individual development, which proceeds through an accumulation of sources of life stories, and in much of the critical commentary that surrounds it, which depends on the intensely personal reactions of autobiographical reading. Supporters and detractors of *The Woman Warrior* both frequently base their opinions on the book's similarity or difference from their own personal experience, with results ranging from creative inspiration (similar to Kingston's stories about the no name

aunt and the warrior woman) to angry outbursts (like the fights in the lavatory and with Brave Orchid).

The Woman Warrior has inspired a subsequent generation of Asian American writers and women writers who have taken the book as authorization to write about their experiences, and a jumping-off point for their own work. Poet Marilyn Chin, interviewing Kingston in the journal *MELUS*, confessed to her subject that "When I discovered *The Woman Warrior* I recognized Brave Orchid as my grandmother and Moon Orchid as my sad, sad mother. And my father was Moon Orchid's doctor-bigamist husband. My whole family was in that book. … But it was wonderful. I think it gave us permission to go on. That book set precedent" (62). Suzi Wong responds similarly, writing that "[i]n a strange, yet gratifying way, Maxine Hong Kingston's story slowly revealed itself to be my own … The author reaches into memory and unerringly retrieves precisely those details most evocative of my own childhood" (165). For these authors, the book's value is made apparent at least in part by its close affinity with their own recollections, a closeness that (at least in Chin's case) inspires further writing, just as in Susan Suleiman's definition of "strong autobiographical reading" (8).

Detractors of the work, ironically, often respond in the same register, if negatively. Katheryn M. Fong, who personalizes her open letter to the author "Dear Maxine," argues for her special ability to comment on *The Woman Warrior* as a Chinese American of the same generation as Kingston. "I feel there is enough similarity in our backgrounds for me to comment on your book from a perspective and sensitivity your white feminist reviewers cannot reflect," she writes (67), but as the review continues it is clear that Fong does not find them similar enough. For instance, she writes that the anti-girl sentiment

portrayed throughout the book "seems to me to be over-exaggerated" (68), a comment apparently based on Fong's individual experiences. To her, "[t]here is a culture and history and a state of mind called Chinese America" (69), one uniform experience which can be expressed either accurately or inaccurately. In addition to objections about gender relations as portrayed in the book, critics have been similarly concerned about Kingston's revisions of Chinese stories, translations of Chinese language, and other cultural practices. Ya-Jie Zhang in "A Chinese Woman's Response to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*" argues that Kingston does not capture the proper flavor of the Chinese word for "ghost." "And I disagreed with Kingston on some other points in the book," she adds. "For instance: 'The Japanese though "little" were no ghosts, the only foreigners considered not ghosts by Chinese." This is not true; actually we Chinese did use the derogatory meaning of ghost for Japanese invaders as well" (18).

Kingston anticipates such comments in *The Woman Warrior* itself, particularly in the moments when she discusses her library research on Chinese language and culture. "I read in an anthropology book that Chinese say, 'Girls are necessary too'" she writes; "I have never heard the Chinese I know make this concession. Perhaps it was a saying in another village" (52-53). Kingston indicates a logical way to deal with disputed points of authenticity in which neither party is cast as ignorant, untruthful, or pandering. Customs may vary at the local level, with authenticity depending on actual practice rather than abstract ideal.

And ultimately, it is such acknowledgement of differences that allows productive readings of *The Woman Warrior*. Zhang, for instance, initially responded as a Chinese woman (indicated by the title of her article), with negative reactions to the aspects of the

book that diverged from her own experiences of Chinese writing, such as the telling of the legendary stories and the use of the word "ghost." "[T]he stories in it seemed somewhat twisted," she writes, "Chinese perhaps in origin but not really Chinese any more, full of American imagination" (17). The key to her change of heart lies in this initial statement of disapproval; understanding the book as *American*, and therefore quite different from her own experience as a Chinese woman, allows her to appreciate it: "Chinese emigrants must have gone though tremendous difficulties, bearing the old world's superstitions and mysteries, entering into the new world's liberty, reason, science, and technology. What a mixture. No wonder it is hard for me, a Chinese, to share the imagination of a Chinese-American" (18). Focusing on the differences, rather than the expected similarities, between the two experiences allows Zhang not only to enjoy the work and appreciate its artistry, but also to build on *The Woman Warrior* by sharing her own experiences. Only after she has acknowledged the divergences between her life and Kingston's is she able to write, "'No Name Woman' reminds me of dozens of true stories I know about – to which I would like to add at this time" (19). The article concludes with several anecdotes inspired by *The Woman Warrior*, as well as a call to action against continuing sexism in China.

Indeed, a Chinese American and a Chinese citizen are highly unlikely to have identical attitudes and experiences, if their main point of connection is a common gene pool; only a biologically deterministic view could ignore the impact of immigration and the prejudices and opportunities met by the Chinese immigrants in America and their descendants. Yet subtler distinctions also exist, while perhaps being glossed over in readers' expectations of similarity. "[A] lot of Chinese-Americans get mad, because they

say my experience is nothing like theirs," Kingston comments in her interview with Marilyn Chin. "Of course, they may come from a different class of people; they come from a different generation of migration; they're a different generation American" (68). Male and female experiences have also been different. Men who emigrated from China labored to little recognition on the railroad, in mines, and on plantations, and were pushed into roles as launderers and cooks, traditionally female occupations. In addition to these emasculating roles, "Oriental" men were popularly stereotyped as effeminate; women, on the other hand, were seen as silent, servile sex objects. The process of countering stereotypes has made gender an important battlefield in the response to *The Woman Warrior*, as Cheung explains: "Astute, eloquent, and incisive as [writers and editors such as Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan] are in debunking racist myths, they are often blind to the biases resulting from their own acceptance of the patriarchal construct of masculinity" ("Woman" 116). Gender differences are only one source of the feud.

Frank Chin, one of its most famous combatants, argues that Kingston has written not from experience or tradition, but from the available pool of Asian American stereotypes. "Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, Betty [sic] Bao Lord are the most important and influential writers in Chinese America today," he writes. "All from the Christian autobiographical tradition. All fake it" (110). Such an essentialist view, in which Chinese Americans are held to standards of the China they or their ancestors left and are thus judged "fake" for writing about American experiences in non-Chinese forms, is surprising for Chin, a fifth-generation American of Chinese heritage. His fascination with and insistence on a turn to Chinese culture, as in his essay "This Is Not an Autobiography," may be understood as a manifestation of Hansen's Law, "what the son

wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember," originally formulated by historian Marcus Lee Hansen in 1938. Regardless of the amount of truth we impute to this saying in its particulars, it seems clear that second-generation and fifth-generation Americans have different needs, experiences, and interests. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston tells a second-generation story in which understanding the Chinese culture imported by her parents, and reconciling it with her American surroundings, are primary concerns. For Chin, being Chinese American presents a different set of issues, making others understand that he is not foreign in America (one page of *Aiiieeeee!* is devoted to the statement, in bold-faced type, "We Are Not New Here" [59]) while defining a Chinese American identity in the absence of a direct connection to China by way of his parents. In criticizing Kingston for writing about stereotypes, he is saying that her writing is not based on reality; that is to say, it does not match his *own* experiences. But it should not be surprising that Kingston and Chin have had different life experiences. Even beyond the issue of gender, which has been carefully examined elsewhere by writers such as Cheung, the issue of generations is significant.

Hansen's law also suggests a more general point about responses to *The Woman Warrior*, in which the reader's sense of closeness to or distance from the story affects the degree of hostility or sympathy of response. The reader must be, to borrow Kingston's phrase, "out of hating range" of the text. According to popular stereotype, the second generation repudiates its ethnic parents, while the third generation looks back to its grandparents, those rejected by the second generation, in order to reclaim their ethnic identity. The parents are too close for comfort, while the grandparents are distant enough to become inspirational. This progression from second to third generation does not

necessarily hold true in real life, according to Werner Sollors in *Beyond Ethnicity*; instead, his analysis suggests that both attitudes may exist in any given generation or any given individual, and that an individual's perspective may change over time or in response to a crisis (as Kingston, for example, is able to follow in Brave Orchid's footsteps once she has left home and achieved a degree of physical and intellectual separation). "Hansen developed not a 'law' of historical progression but a moral choice between a wholesome third and a deficient second generation," Sollors explains (221). Yet the concept, while not an accurate depiction of generations themselves, persists because it is useful. "The melodrama of numbered generations obscures the tension in human desire between the wish to escape ancestors and the wish to fulfill them" (221). These desires are also reflected in readers' responses to *The Woman Warrior*.

Thus, we may think of Frank Chin and readers like him as reading the book from the spirit of the second generation. Chin goes to great lengths to distinguish himself from Maxine Hong Kingston. His contrariness encompasses, for instance, the title of an essay repudiating *The Woman Warrior*: "This Is Not an Autobiography." Ironically, Chin's un-autobiography can be read as very much an autobiography on the model of Kingston's; in it, he indicates the inspiration he takes from Sun Tzu and Wu Chi, invents a conversation between himself and Kwan Kung, a historical general and hero of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and includes a few more traditionally autobiographical passages in which he confronts prejudice as a Chinese American. Although he explicitly rejects the Christian, confessional model of autobiography, he and Kingston have similar solutions to the questions of representing the complicated and sometimes conflicting identity of Chinese American. Indeed, it is a question they define in similar terms.

While Kingston inquires, "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (5-6), Chin and his co-editors in the anthology *Aiiieeeee!* say that Asian American "means Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans, American born and raised, who got their [xi] China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture …" (xii). In some fundamental ways, the authors are engaged in the same project; Elaine Kim writes that "Kingston shares more with Chin than he would probably care to admit" (*Introduction* 199).

In terms of immigration generations, Chin and Kingston are widely separated, with Kingston a second-generation and Chin a fifth-generation American, but in terms of historical generations, they are contemporaries, both born in 1940. Paradoxically, this close relationship in historical generation leads to Chin's "second generation in spirit" reaction to *The Woman Warrior*. Because of certain immediately obvious similarities between the two, he attempts to forestall total identification in order to maintain his individual identity. Just as young Maxine attacks the quiet girl in the school washroom, changes her habits to avoid resemblance to the "witch" Pee-A-Nah, and erupts in rage about the retarded boy, "monster" and "hulk," who sits at the family laundry, Chin reacts violently and self-protectively against the possibility that Kingston's book might co-opt his opportunity to define himself. He rejects her portrayal of one Chinese American life story in fear that others will take it to be *the* Chinese American life story, interpreting him and his work in terms of what Kingston has written.

This struggle takes place in large part because of the fact that the two are both writers. To immigration and historical generations, we can also add literary generations. Eva Hoffman's response to Mary Antin, and then Marianne Hirsch's response to Hoffman, form one example of literary generations. Although Hoffman and Hirsch are historical contemporaries, they take on metaphorical parent/child roles when the latter responds to the former's text, a metaphor developed by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. A similar pattern is seen here. In order to make space for his own writing, Chin rejects Kingston's book, a difficult task because of its popularity. The authors' written works thus fall into a family tree in which the later writings respond to the earlier ones; Kingston's 1989 novel *Tripmaster Monkey* parodies Chin in the figure of Wittman Ah Sing.

Conversely, third generation "in spirit" responses to *The Woman Warrior* are also possible, and are likely to occur when readers perceive themselves to be distant enough from the text that it will not bind or wound them. While second generation responses assert distance, third generation responses assume it as a starting place, and are thus able to take inspiration from literary forebears. Marilyn Chin's comments to Kingston in their interview are one example. Chin reports that she first read *The Woman Warrior* as an undergraduate in Amherst, Mass., while "wallowing between law school, and becoming a poor starving poet" (62). The recognition she felt upon reading it, that "[m]y whole family was in that book" (62), is tempered by a clarity about difference. Asian American culture and community differ between the east and west coasts, Chin points out, and also, she wanted to be a poet, not a novelist or memoirist. For her, then, *The Woman Warrior* seemed not to drown out her own voice, as for Frank Chin and other second generation

respondents, but to pave the way for her own work. "[F]or a long time I was in despair," she writes.

> I thought there was no audience for my voice. And the narrator, the protagonist in *The Woman Warrior*, she was working hard to let her voice out. She had to wade through the contradictions of this dual culture, this heavy-duty heritage. If she had the power and the fortitude to continue her "pressed duck" voice, to eke out that voice, I said, perhaps so must I continue my struggle. (62-63)

Here, Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Woman Warrior* provide a role model for other authors with similar concerns, functioning in the same role that George Washington, for instance, has performed for so many. Sollors writes that Americans tend to see themselves as part of an idealized third generation, transcending their parents "by invoking real or imaginary grandparents or founding fathers" (230). In this case, Kingston has become an ancestor for many younger writers. Frank Chin's response mirrors that of Maxine's to the silent girl; for Marilyn Chin, she functions more as Fa Mu Lan.

Conclusion

Critical responses to *The Woman Warrior* as well as the text itself demonstrate that some degree of distance is essential for a productive response. Figures such as the no-name woman and Fa Mu Lan are useful for the young Maxine because they are so separate in time and space. Had she lived with the aunt and witnessed the raid on the house and the suicide, the story might not have been as interesting or productive; the fact that Maxine knows so little about the aunt allows her freedom to imagine the kind of ancestor who is most useful to her. Characters like Pee-A-Nah and the silent girl, on the

other hand, are too close for comfort, and Maxine rushes to distinguish herself from them before others can assume they are alike. Both elements are present in her relationship with Brave Orchid, perhaps her most significant influence; she is able to use her mother's gifts of talk-story only when she is far enough from home. Likewise, critics have been able to take *The Woman Warrior* as inspiration when they acknowledge both its similarities and differences to their own lives, taking the similarities as inspiration and the differences as available space in which to write their own story. When readers object to the dissimilarities between *The Woman Warrior* and their own lives, expecting that Kingston should have written a story closer to the reader's own (usually on the grounds that readers will take the book to be *the* experience of every Asian American), only anger is produced.

Despite the fear of many critics that readers who are not Chinese American will read *The Woman Warrior* as a history lesson about an exotic group, rather than the autobiography of one woman's experience, it is also possible for "outsider" audiences to use such distance productively. Many readers have indeed produced poor responses to the book, a number of which are catalogued in Kingston's article "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers." But many have also found it productive, such as the young African American woman who wanted to thank Kingston for inspiring her to write. "So she gave me a rap," Kingston recalls. "She did it, and the audience snapped their fingers along. It was a poem in praise of me, with my Chinese name – Ting Ting – she played on the rap rhythms, and it was just lovely" (Chin 63). The woman may have seen commonalities between Kingston and herself because both are women, or she may have identified as a member of a minority group, if not Asian American. The difference in

ethnicity may have helped her to view her own experiences from a new perspective. While inspired by *The Woman Warrior*, she also finds ways to transfer that inspiration to other genres (in this case, the rap). "Difference does engender curiosity," writes Judith Oster; "boredom with the same old plots and locales and conflicts does engender a search for the 'different,' hence the 'exotic.' But … what is seen, perhaps what is being sought, is also connection. … I would like to suggest that at the same time there is attraction both by what is different and by what is similar" (20).

While distance is necessary, some sense of identification is also required for a productive response. Reflecting on her predictions about reception of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston recalls that "I did not foresee … the critics measuring the book and me against the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental. About two-thirds of the reviews did this" ("Cultural Mis-readings" 55). Of all the reviews, positive and negative, which characterized *The Woman Warrior* as "inscrutable," most egregious is "Michael T. Malloy's unfavourable review in *The National Observer*: 'The background is exotic, but the book is in the mainstream of American feminist literature.' He disliked the book *because* it is part of the mainstream. He is saying, then, that I am not to step out of the 'exotic' role, not to enter the mainstream" (56). Kingston goes on to spell out the difference between "American," "Chinese," and "Chinese American," and the ways in which her book is thoroughly American, for the surprisingly numerous reviewers to whom this is not clear. Rather than seeking the exotic and unfamiliar in *The Woman Warrior*, American readers of all ethnic backgrounds ought to be able to find points of connection to the story. The story of development, of defining one's self in opposition to

one's parents, yet finding at last a reconciliation with them, is common to all; the pattern of "leaving home" is found throughout American culture.

Additionally, Kingston tells the American story of *The Woman Warrior* with the aid of distinctly American influences. Within the story, her role models and adversaries are Chinese or Chinese American, but her writing has been shaped by canonical American figures, not only by Jade Snow Wong. Although she is a Chinese American woman, she has found commonalities between herself and other writers distant in time, ethnicity, and gender, putting a different slant on what, per Amy Ling's article, constitutes "The Tradition behind Maxine Hong Kingston." Describing her influences in an interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Kingston says, "I feel that I descended from Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Virginia Woolf" (790). Woolf, a cornerstone of literature in English though not an American writer, inspires Kingston through her flexibility:

> I just love the way she can make one character live for four hundred years, and that Orlando can be a man, Orlando can be a woman. Virginia Woolf broke through constraints of time, of gender, of culture. I think an American writer who does that same thing is William Carlos Williams. I *love In the American Grain* because it does that same thing. Abraham Lincoln is a 'mother' of our country. He talks about this wonderful woman walking through the battlefields with her beard and shawl. I find that just so freeing, that we don't have to be constrained to being just one ethnic group or one gender – both those writers make me feel that I can now write as a man, I can write as a black person, as a white person; I don't have to be restricted by time and physicality. (784-85)

These influences show not only Kingston's grounding in an American literary tradition, but also the flexibility of approach that she sees in, and adopts from, that tradition. Just as Kingston wishes to put herself, as a writer, in a different ethnic or gender position, the best responses to *The Woman Warrior* have occurred when readers have assumed that same flexibility, identifying with the narrator across ethnic and gender boundaries and ultimately producing autobiographical writing of their own, continuing a literary heritage in which Kingston serves as ancestor.

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