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**Narrating Americanization:  
Space and Form in U.S. Immigrant Writing, 1890-1927**

**Peter James Kvidera**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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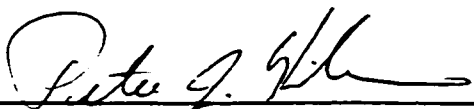
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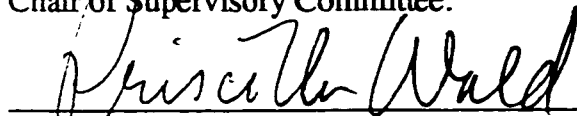
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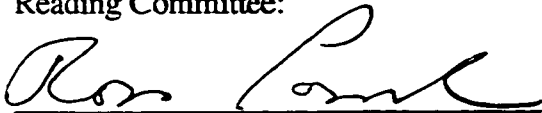
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ABSTRACT

**Narrating Americanization:  
Space and Form in U.S. Immigrant Writing, 1890-1927**

**Peter James Kvidera**

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**This dissertation addresses a component of U.S. immigrant writing that literary scholarship has generally neglected: the relationship between aesthetics and place. Drawing on theories of ethnicity, nation, and space, I argue that the particular features of an immigrant group and the region where it settles produce narratives that complicate how we understand processes of Americanization. I structure my analysis around three major forces of U.S. culture that appear at the intersection of immigrant literary expression and space: labor, law, and landscape. Each of these forces, I contend, exerts distinct pressures on stories of American life and determines the individualized nature of writing by different immigrant groups set in different parts of the United States. While historians and literary critics tend to espouse a unified master narrative of immigrant assimilation, this dissertation argues that multiple versions of Americanization and multiple conceptions of American space emerge as products of the localized aesthetics that the writers of immigrant experience create.**

**To that end, this project focuses on the narratives describing settlement at the turn of the twentieth century by specific immigrant groups in three regions of the United States: stories of Jewish immigrants in New York City's Jewish ghetto (by Abraham Cahan, Rose Schneiderman, and Theresa Malkiel), stories of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco's Chinatown and Angel Island (in *Songs of Gold Mountain, Island*, and by Sui**

Sin Far), and stories of Norwegian and Bohemian immigrants on the Midwest's prairie farmland (by O. E. Rølvaag and Willa Cather). In each chapter I first examine the manner in which particular economic, sociological, legal, and political discourses define these American spaces and dictate perceptions of immigrant identities within. I then analyze the literary methods by which the writers respond to these definitions as they narrate their respective place through immigrant experience. Their work constructs what Henri Lefebvre has called "representational spaces," and in that production they reconceptualize the place and, consequently, their own Americanness. This function of immigrant literature--which, in turn, shapes its form--enriches our perceptions of American identity and our readings of the American nation.

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**In memory of  
Ferdinand E. Kvidera (1927-1994)**

## INTRODUCTION

All the immigrants and their offspring are in the way of becoming "Americanized," if they remain in one place in the country long enough.

--Horace Kallen (1915)

This dissertation arises out of interests and concerns that were crystallized for me years ago in the kitchen of my grandmother's house, just several yards from my own, on the Iowa farm where I spent my childhood. During a conversation about our family background, I made several inquiries basic to personal history and identity: who are we? why are we where we are? and, more specifically, what does this place have to do with who we are? My grandmother retrieved a small notebook from her pantry cupboard and from the scribbles within began to trace out eight generations branching along our family tree, and to tell the tale of the immigrant journey her father took from a small village outside Prague, to New York, and finally to a 160-acre farm in Tama County, Iowa. Deeply invested in this story of immigration, my grandmother explained that she grounded her own identity very much in the language and culture her father brought from Bohemia and, in particular, the ways in which these old world artifacts were shaped according to the struggles and successes he had along the journey toward the physical and social spaces of American life. She suggested that her father's experiences, especially on the Iowa farmstead, had a major impact on how he understood his own American identity. Stories of how this identity came to be, she added, define who we are.

The importance of immigrant stories, of course, is not exclusive to my family history. In more recent conversations, I have discovered that, indeed, narratives of immigrant pasts can deeply influence how people describe their present status as

Americans. When explaining my interest and work on U.S. immigrant narratives to friends and to strangers, our discussions often prompted spontaneous narratives of their own immigrant antecedents. On occasion, I have later received a manuscript detailing an immigrant journey and settlement experience of past relatives, whose stories, in some manner, ground a particular American experience for the person passing on the tale. For instance, an acquaintance presented me the story of her grandfather's brother, Gabriel Doctor, a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, whose letters her cousin "spun into a narrative." The story focuses on how Doctor weathered hunger and poverty as a sweatshop laborer in New York City's Jewish ghetto before settling in Syracuse and eventually opening a successful feed and coal business.<sup>1</sup> Another narrative a friend asked me to read tells a much different story of Irish immigrants homesteading in Minnesota and the Dakota territory. This story of John J. Sullivan, Sr. and his wife Mary Ann Ginnaty, which several of their descendants transcribed from old letters and government documents, concentrates not only on the people arriving in America, but on the land and the experience of "taming the prairie" for farming. Apparently, this experience (and the process of editing the story) allowed the family to weave for themselves a tale of their own emergent American history.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the rich content of each manuscript, what is particularly striking is the shared desire to re-tell and pass on the stories that narrate the political, economic, and social conditions through which immigrant forebears defined themselves as Americans. We need, it seems, narratives that connect us to the material and imaginative roots of our Americanization.

But what characterizes this Americanization, and in what ways do the stories perform the change from old-world to new-world life? This is the fundamental inquiry

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<sup>1</sup>"The Story of Gabriel Doctor: His Youth in Lithuania; His Emigration to the United States of America; His Settling in Syracuse, New York," an unpublished manuscript transcribed and edited by Stewart Doctor and Linda Wolfheim.

<sup>2</sup>"Those Who Came Before: A Story of John J. Sullivan, Sr." an unpublished manuscript transcribed and edited by Thomas G. Sullivan, et al.

that directs my investigation of U.S. immigrant narratives written during the peak period of immigration to America, the decades just before and after the turn of the twentieth century. As my grandmother and the families of Gabriel Doctor and John Sullivan attest, we find that within the notion of "American identity"—often spoken as if a unified and uniformly understandable term—there are myriad definitions that may arise from individual immigrant stories attentive to the impact a certain place has on a certain national and ethnic group settling in the United States. This possibility is precisely what interests me as I examine three sets of immigrant narratives offering a range of cultural and spatial experiences. These stories, I believe, allow us to begin to consider how Americanization is necessarily reviewed and reconsidered from inside the immigrant experience according to the particular conditions that the immigrants encounter and represent in their writing. In this dissertation, I first look at Jewish immigrant stories that address the economic situation of New York City's Jewish ghetto. I then turn to Chinese immigrant narratives that tell how legal conditions determine a confined existence either in the Angel Island Detention Center or San Francisco's Chinatown. Finally, I investigate representations of Norwegian and Bohemian immigrants settling on America's midwestern prairies that explore the impact of homesteading. I choose these three immigrant groups and locations because I believe they reflect the very different social and political responses the U.S. government and majority culture had toward various newcomers (of different "ethnicities" or "races") during this particular period. Moreover, these groups allow me to consider how three concepts central to immigrant life in America were impressed upon and negotiated by the writers telling the immigrant stories: labor, law, and landscape. With these materials, I structure my dissertation around two central questions: How do the cultural contexts of the particular spaces that immigrants inhabit affect the function and form of the stories told? And how does the narrative form provide a means for immigrant writers to create their own concepts of American identity? At the intersection

of immigration, space, and aesthetics, I contend, we can begin to address the nature and the power of different stories of Americanization.

Of course, the question of what constitutes an "American," and therefore the meaning and impact of "Americanization," has been and continues to be a source of active debate. From Crèvecoeur and Tocqueville who considered the mix of cultures within the United States to define an American identity, to Frederick Jackson Turner who saw the frontier as determining national life and American character, to Barrett Wendell who asked "What is American about America?" in his concern over large-scale immigration, commentators on U.S. culture have variously described these terms. Theodore Roosevelt would embark on the same type of inquiry, also in the context of immigration's pressure on the United States. In his 1894 essay, "True Americanism," he revealed his own assumption of a universally understood "American" status by which he believed all immigrants should define themselves. For example, to keep the nation secure he sought "Americans in heart and soul, in spirit and purpose, keenly alive to the responsibility implied in the very name of American, and proud beyond measure of the glorious privilege of bearing it."<sup>3</sup> Although he stressed national over regional interests, what the "very name of American" actually means remained hazy in its connotations.

What defines an "American" continued to be actively questioned in the years following Roosevelt's discussion because immigration pressures and war occasioned national self-consciousness. U.S. Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis, for example, suggested in another investigation of "true Americanism" that the simple evocation of the word "American" conjured up an understanding of the intangible attributes it offered. He subordinated easily perceptible changes (clothes, customs, language acquisition) for common "interests and affections" that are rooted in America. Only then could the immigrant attain "complete harmony" with American ideas and aspirations and "possess

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<sup>3</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, "True Americanism," *The Forum* (April, 1894: 15-31), 18.

the national consciousness of an American."<sup>4</sup> Brandeis, himself a Jewish immigrant, supported the idea of cultural pluralism and believed in "peculiar values" different "races" contributed to the country; however, his meditation on Americanism largely elides or fails to delineate such particularities.<sup>5</sup> In their explanations of Americanism, neither Roosevelt nor Brandeis articulated a clear definition of the term beyond a broad and unspecified universalization attainable after erasure of "European" distinctions. However, Roosevelt complicated the definition of Americanization when he claimed that the status "American" to which immigrants should strive, is based on "spirit, conviction, and purpose, not of creed or birthplace."<sup>6</sup> At the same time he affixed an absolute definition on the term, Roosevelt paradoxically loosened the concept "American" from any stable grounding in a physical document or place. While not the first to do so, he was exemplary in introducing the possibility that wider interpretations of Americanization were required.

Responding to this potential instability undermining a single definition of "American," Horace Kallen offered a revision of Roosevelt's and Brandeis's descriptions of Americanization. In his 1915 essay, "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot," Kallen argued that any "universalization of the inwardness of the old American life" is only a remote possibility.<sup>7</sup> He envisioned, instead, an Americanization that embraced difference rather than aspired to a single term of identity. The "federation of nationalities," which he saw as an alternative social and cultural organization of the United States, would uphold difference and, consequently, direct the nation toward the "harmony" to which Brandeis

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<sup>4</sup>Louis D. Brandeis, "True Americanism" (an address given at Faneuil Hall, Boston, July 5, 1915), published in *Harper's Weekly* 61 (July 10, 1915): 31.

<sup>5</sup>Melvin Urofsky and David Levy discuss Brandeis's position on cultural pluralism. See *Letters of Louis D. Brandeis*, v. III, ed. Urofsky and Levy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1973), 540-541.

<sup>6</sup>Roosevelt, "True Americanism," 29.

<sup>7</sup>Horace M. Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot: A Study of American Nationality," *The Nation* 100. 2590-91 (Feb. 18 and 25, 1915): 190-194, 217-220, (194).

alluded but did not fully define.<sup>8</sup> Kallen believed that these different components, working individually but toward a common goal, were productive for the immigrants (who would strengthen rather than weaken their American personhood) and for the nation as a whole. He argued that America is

a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their kind. The common language of the commonwealth, the language of its great political tradition, is English, but each nationality expresses its emotional and voluntary life in its own language, in its own inevitable aesthetic and intellectual forms. The common life of the commonwealth is politico-economic, and serves as the foundation and background for the realization of the distinctive individuality of each *natio* that composes it.<sup>9</sup>

According to Kallen, immigrants who were Americanized "according to their own kind" would, therefore, add layers of meaning to the term "American" and, simultaneously, would contribute to a diverse artistic life in the nation. In Kallen's estimation, new Americans introduced new aesthetics through the process of Americanization.

It is this possibility for rich aesthetic development through the national and ethnic particularities that interests me. Kallen's work suggests that through art and intellect the immigrant can indeed influence the nation. It also represents the complications and limitations that beset the ways we can imagine this new aesthetic production. In a recent study, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*, Walter Benn Michaels situates the "cultural pluralism" Kallen professed within his inquiry of nativism, troubling Kallen's view of difference by suggesting that it is not unlike the nativist model of national identity. As Michaels notes, such a position becomes a necessary "technology of Americanization" in that it made the cultural and racial distinctions recognizable. Yet at the same time, he implies that it would also necessarily compromise the freedom of

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<sup>8</sup>"Harmony," of course, is a central trope in Kallen's argument. Specifically, he metaphorically describes the different nationalities within the United States forming an orchestra, each part functioning individually but with others creating "harmony." See "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot," especially 219-220. See also Israel Zangwill's play, *The Melting-Pot* which also employs the music/orchestra metaphor.

<sup>9</sup>Kallen, 220.

immigrants to chart their own course toward American self-definition. Michaels, therefore, requires us to question the role this emergent aesthetic has in an immigrant's American experience.<sup>10</sup> Although he himself pays little attention to what the aesthetic response to particular material conditions might look like (such as to those that, in his view, consigned immigrants to racial identification), Michaels does suggest that by not fully exploring the political consequences of pluralism, Kallen limited his vision. Kallen, in fact, did not find that these individual expressions of nationalities affected the politico-economic realm of the nation; rather, he explained that immigrant cultures merely exposed the multi-*natio* composition of America. As David Palumbo-Liu has argued, Kallen does not address the relationship of culture to social and economic institutions. Consequently, his understanding of a cultural federation of nations is compromised because he overlooked the resistances that threatened such a federation's very existence. In other words, Kallen ignored the historical and material realities of the mono-culture that Roosevelt and Brandeis endorsed, a tradition of a single normative "American" being that could be achieved voluntarily, but, in effect, forced a sense of consensus on those, like immigrants, who otherwise remained in the margins.<sup>11</sup>

Other scholars of American cultural life, contemporaries to Michaels and Palumbo-Liu, have shown that the relationship of immigrant aesthetics to the socio-economic discourses of the nation remains a significant topic in studies of immigrant and ethnic peoples. For example, in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe claims that Asian immigrants and the aesthetics they produce are, in fact, fundamental to understanding the racialized foundation of the United States and the development of American capitalism. Specifically, the economic and political imperatives

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<sup>10</sup>Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup>See David Palumbo-Liu's introduction to *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. Palumbo-Liu (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 5.

that excluded Asians from claiming citizenship in America uncovers "race" as a contradictory site of struggle for cultural, economic, and political membership in the U.S. Lowe adds that just as the presence of Asian immigrants trouble universal ideas of national culture, their artistic creations provide subjects and practices that persist outside the narratives of American citizenship. She argues that

[the immigrants'] distance from the national culture constitutes Asian American culture as an alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen in the nation. Rather than expressing a "failed" integration of Asians into the American cultural sphere, this distance preserves Asian American culture as an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articulation.<sup>12</sup>

By recognizing this distance, particularly within the realm of cultural and aesthetic forms, Lowe demands that we pay more attention to the ways in which Asian immigrant groups have used their position to problematize the universalizing efforts of U.S. national narratives. Like Azade Seyhan, whose work on late twentieth-century immigrant writing calls for more awareness of these literary forms to recuperate important American voices otherwise lost, Lowe suggests that Asian immigrants actively contribute to new languages of Americanization.<sup>13</sup> Such is what Palumbo-Liu seems to have in mind when he claims that an American ethnic canon opens up the possibility for other than "already consensually assumed aesthetics." This potential, he adds, lies in the attempt to "maintain a constant mode of revision and reevaluation, qualitatively different from the conservative tradition's kind of 'inclusion' that comes only in an act of submission and 'assimilation' to the (given) strictures of the dominant canon."<sup>14</sup> For ethnic aesthetic

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<sup>12</sup>Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>13</sup>Azade Seyhan, "Ethnic Selves/Ethnic Signs: Invention of Self, Space, and Genealogy in Immigrant Writing" in *Culture/Contexture: Explorations in Anthropology and Literary Studies*, Eds. E. Valentine Daniel and Jeffrey M. Peck (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup>Palumbo-Liu, 14.

forms, Palumbo-Liu therefore envisions tremendous potential in contradiction that is not resolved, in difference that is not smoothed over.

These cultural critiques of Kallen and his legacy provide us new ways to think about "who we are" in terms of culture and race, difference, and aesthetics. Also addressing that question, and more specifically through the function of literature, are such literary scholars as Werner Sollors, Mary Dearborn, and Thomas Ferraro whose analyses of ethnic and immigrant narrative form and structure remain exemplary. As they consider various issues of aesthetics, they remind us that difference remains alive in this literature and must be recognized in its various manifestations. For instance, Sollors's groundbreaking work, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986), introduces a variety of literary forms--often not considered "literary"--produced by immigrant/ethnic writers, and problematizes quick categorization (and summary dismissal) of these texts. As he reads this literature, he argues that the conflict between the contractual and the hereditary that it represents (or "consent" and "descent") is the "central drama in American culture," and thus, he claims that we need to reconsider the importance of immigrant/ethnic stories. Dearborn's study, *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (1986), further opens the field as it importantly outlines a female literary tradition that provides voice for women in a variety of ethnic affiliations. Ferraro's *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America* (1993) also concentrates on the "literariness" of immigrant writing and reveals that interpretation of this work must transcend common claims that it is simply assimilationist in drive and stereotypical in plot and characterization.<sup>15</sup> Each of these studies helps us to begin to understand how ethnic and immigrant literature questions

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<sup>15</sup>Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Ferraro, *Ethnic Passages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

larger national narratives and realigns perceptions of them by telling a different story of Americanization.

The meta-narratives that Dearborn, Sollors, and Ferraro tell about ethnic and immigrant literature also introduce paths in the study of U.S. immigrant narratives that have yet to be traveled. For example, while Dearborn covers important new ground in female ethnic literary studies, she still narrowly brackets difference, "otherness," and ethnicity as the same experience for all ethnic women. Sollors's contributions to the field of ethnic and immigrant studies are, like Dearborn's, remarkably trenchant but also somewhat limited. While he asks readers to pay attention to specific literary forms and their unique functions in ethnic literature, he often relies heavily on a single critical framework (for instance, Puritan typology) as an interpretive device. His analysis, therefore, gestures toward a notion of a unitary American culture (based on a Western European heritage) sacrificing genuine differences that emerge from particular groups and their experiences. Ironically, this is a tendency his study purports to overturn. In fact, Ferraro's work emerges directly out of this limitation. Ferraro stresses the unique literariness that inheres in immigrant literature:

In such texts, what is most ethnically specific and what is most aesthetically compelling will be found at the same narrative sites, working not in separate registers but in allied, mutually interrogative, and cross-fertilizing ways. Such writing challenges the critic to determine how sociological inquiry and literary inventiveness serve one another; where local understandings face off against national constructions of individuality, family, and community; and which strategies of minority-culture self-representation and majority-culture literary forms undergo reciprocal transformations.<sup>16</sup>

Importantly, Ferraro's intention is to bring together the ethnic and the aesthetic as well as the literary and the sociological. He suggests that from these combinations arise possible alternatives to national stories that stand in opposition to the immigrant narrative. Equally

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<sup>16</sup>Ferraro, 3.

important, he highlights the potential for the immigrant to rewrite majority-culture literary representation. Yet, in his effort to explore these possibilities in the immigrant literary texts, Ferraro unfortunately reflects Sollors's tendency to reduce ethnic difference to already established mechanisms of Western literary criticism. Relying on modernism, populist thriller, and feminist post-structuralism (for example), he productively illuminates the literary work; however, this practice forestalls the possibility of more particularized aesthetics latent within the immigrant literature.

It is my contention that we already have sufficient material to form a theoretical/critical base--one that considers the intersections of ethnicity and aesthetics, the literary and the sociological--when we examine immigrant writing in conjunction with the particular cultural contexts in which they are situated. The aim of this dissertation, in relation to the critical legacy I have just sketched out, therefore, is to explore how immigrant writing underscores and maintains difference, as well as grounds its own literariness, through its interaction with particular cultural narratives. As I follow the path of inquiry that these critics have set out, I emphasize that interaction. I believe that literary responses to narratives of economic restriction, legal exclusion, and land distribution generates stories that confront, challenge, and rewrite cultural and spatial orientations within which immigrants have often been perceived and contained. As a result, these immigrant texts advance toward an aesthetic that reveals the construction of identity in face of these narratives. Yet in order to understand fully how that aesthetic forms, I necessarily proceed down a different path, one that has been largely overlooked by the scholars on immigrant literary culture. Recalling my great-grandfather's emphasis on the Iowa farmstead in his stories of identity, as well as the narratives of Doctor and Sullivan that weave particular scenes of settlement into their histories, in this project I pay attention to the spaces from where immigrant writers tell their stories of Americanization. In other words, my study supplements the question "who are we?" with "what does

*where* have to do with *who*?" It makes sense that, when considering the artistic forms of immigrants, we acknowledge the centrality of geography: the space of American settlement must rise to the forefront of their discourse because it importantly sets in relief the distinctions between the old world culture and the new. Their work then becomes part of a conversation that demands a second look from those who ignore the material realities of immigrant experience; at the same time, the conversation discloses for the immigrant storyteller that the new identities they construct increase in complexity when the influence of "place" must include more than memories of the homeland. Their dialogue with the American place through the cultural elements of labor, law, and landscape that reside there inevitably shapes the form of immigrant literature that emerges. In short, space is the key to understanding how the literary and the sociological (and the political and the economic) converge to form an immigrant aesthetics of American identity.

In *The Production of Space*, a study that guides my reading of immigrant association to American space, geographer Henri Lefebvre suggests how space is directly related to the power of aesthetics. As he outlines the features of what he calls representational space, Lefebvre explains that this category of space is "directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols," and therefore is the space of "inhabitants" and "users." In other words, he recognizes that one feature of space is its role in directing the literal, or the everyday functioning of economic, social, and political discourses. But there is more, Lefebvre adds, because among the "users" are artists, writers, and philosophers who "*describe* and aspire to do no more than describe." Thus, these users of space remove it from an everyday realm and place it in a world of aesthetics. Space, then, has power through the imagination. Part of that power comes when its representational use doubles back to reexamine the everyday discourses of its "users." Lefebvre explains, "This is the dominated--and hence passively experienced

space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects."<sup>17</sup> Because the artist can turn what is passively dominated into an element that can "overlay" and re-envision physical space, space itself becomes an important tool, particularly when the artist (writer, philosopher) is the dominated and not the dominator. The immigrant writer, I argue is the dominated, whether in describing labor strife within the Jewish ghetto, legally restricted movement within the borders of Chinatown, or fixed stipulations for productive use of land within a 160-acre homestead. These physical spaces dominate the particular immigrant writers I examine here. But by turning the physical into the representational through their literary endeavors, the writers develop an aesthetic to revise the spaces and, in the process, position themselves to define their own particular terms of Americanization.

Chapter 1 begins my examination of how an aesthetic of Americanization develops with a look at Jewish immigrant narratives written and set in New York City's Jewish ghetto. I first explore the ways in which city borders are both physically and conceptually established, particularly regarding ethnic and immigrant groups. To do so, I read sociological texts describing how urban boundaries are drawn, fixed, crossed, and often redrawn according to the economic systems that put pressure on Jewish immigrant city dwellers. Jacob Riis's survey of the New York City tenement districts serves as my point of departure. Riis represents the manner in which borders between city sectors, as well as between ethnic groups, become absolute and unquestioned in the national consciousness. In particular, the poverty and subsequent deterioration in housing and health that results from difficult and unprofitable sweatshop labor--common among the newly-arrived Jewish immigrants--draws a line between "them" and "us," at least in Riis's formulation. Later sociological work on the city by Louis Wirth questions the

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<sup>17</sup>Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 39, emphasis in the original.

absolute borders (physical and imagined) that Riis establishes. Wirth's study on the Jewish ghetto clarifies how physical borders can be crossed, but also suggests that a separation from ethnic culture, resulting from settlement outside the ghetto after economic improvement, leaves an *anomie* that can be equally constricting. These sociological conceptions of urban spaces allow us to recognize a grammar of Americanization emerging from Jewish immigrant literary texts when the writers confront the economics and labor conditions that determine whether borders are fixed or permeable. Beginning with the fiction of Abraham Cahan, I consider how Jewish ethnicity, according to its placement within the relationship to space and economics, can be variously interpreted. One possibility Cahan offers is that within the borders established by discourses of labor, the Jewish immigrant can realign his or her identity by deepening a relationship with Jewishness. Even though this identification confines the immigrant within the spatial restrictions of the ghetto, Cahan suggests that economic productivity and profitability are possible (and perhaps more so) once one's Jewish identity becomes a marker for Americanization. While this conception of American identity leaves the immigrant with restricted movement, activist writers Rose Schneiderman and Theresa Malkiel envision a different relationship with urban spaces. They make a claim for an enduring Jewish ethnicity and an Americanization beyond the ghetto because, they contend, labor activism, enacts a convergence of "us" and "them," transforming all participants into co-existing "Jewish" and "American" identities. They extend Cahan's Americanizing grammar with an aesthetic that linguistically links traditionally opposed identities in the realm of labor ("immigrant"/"American"; "male"/"female"), and consequently they construct a Jewish Americanness as they transcend prescribed physical spaces by redrawing traditional economic and gender borders.

Chapter 2 turns from labor to law as a mechanism establishing an immigrant's relationship to space. In this section of my dissertation I contextualize Chinese immigrant

writing within the exclusion legislation and related court decisions that, in the end, restricted virtually every portion of this group's American lives. In fact, I discover that even a relationship to a physical space, such as one that Jewish immigrants experienced in New York's Jewish ghetto, is compromised for the Chinese because of the law. More specifically, as the writers situate their literary work within the spaces they inhabit (Angel Island and San Francisco's Chinatown) and, simultaneously, within the legal context, they discover that the logic of the law destabilizes all physical, social, political, and economic grounding. As a result, they must create a new place for themselves within narratives and, in the process, present a very different conception of space. I begin this chapter by examining how particular topics that the exclusion legislation and court cases emphasized—issues of the Chinese voice and body—are interwoven into the poetry written by detainees of Angel Island and residents of Chinatown. As the series of legal documents accumulate to narrate a story of the gradual but systematic erasure of Chinese immigrant voice and body, I find that the poetry responds with an aesthetic of absence-made-presence. That is, the collected poems collaborate to narrate this loss of voice and body but, at the same time, turn this loss into an opportunity to reinstate a Chinese presence into a new conceptual American space. These immigrant writers aestheticize the physical spaces that the laws denied them—for presence is impossible without voice and body—and overlay them with representational spaces that allow the economic, social, and political prowess of a new presence, the Chinese American. I explore the further nuances of this aesthetic by turning to the work of Sui Sin Far, who likewise narrates the "Chinese American" story but from a position differing in gender, immigrant status, and national affiliation. Sui Sin Far's fictional and autobiographical work is also shaped by the legal pressure on body and voice, but even more than the male poets, she argues for the literary text as the only space where one can ground American existence. Such is her case when, as biracial, she is often not perceived as Chinese. Hence, she must secure

her Chinese identity within her writing: the writer "Sui Sin Far," in fact, exists only within texts. She therefore demonstrates the tenuous nature of a Chinese immigrant's American existence, but at the same time, the great possibilities for self-definition within the power of literature.

In Chapter 3, I investigate another immigrant association with law that provides a radically different spatial orientation for the national/ethnic group. This last part of my dissertation focuses on literary representations of Norwegian and Bohemian immigrants and their relationship with America's midwestern landscape that was enabled by federal land distribution. I investigate the particular connection to space that homestead legislation—with its promise of 160 acres—offered immigrants, those whose presence within the American nation was generally more accepted than that of the Chinese. As the foundation of this chapter, I consider how an emphasis on conformity governed the stipulations for settlement; that is, how the homestead laws presented clear and narrow definitions of land, as well as the people who would settle on the land. The immigrant literary response reflects how deviating from ideals of homogeneity meant potential loss of physical land and, consequently, loss of conceptual grounding within the American nation. We discover, however, that even in its exertion toward making both space and people uniform, the provisions of homesteading were subject to fragmentation: because of particular landscape conditions or (immigrant) individualities that defy standard expectations, the vision of homogeneity could not always be maintained. O. E. Rølvaag and Willa Cather recognize both the homogenizing effort and the possibility that difference will arise to compromise that effort, and they utilize this potential to explore the immigrant's efforts toward American identity through a particularized relationship to the landscape. I argue that Rølvaag carefully discloses the features of this deviation before exploiting them as the source of mediation between immigrants and a nation determined to control the ways they can be defined. Specifically, the differences that immigrant

presence brings to the landscape in opposition to homesteading's model of conformity leads Rölvaag to assert that the local/regional becomes the touchstone for the immigrant within this American space. Cather also highlights the region, but she expands Rölvaag's understanding of Americanization by imagining how the immigrant's physical and intellectual presence on the landscape enables the region to become reincorporated into the nation. Immigrant identity must therefore be defined according to a combination of regional and national attributes. Read through the immigrant story, the nation, she suggests, becomes less monolithic, less universalized in conception, and richer in association for all Americans, immigrant or native-born.

As Cather understands it, the immigrant's relationship to space, and the particular forms of Americanization that then arise from the stories told, clarify how the intersection of immigration, space, and aesthetics is a crucial point of reference for a better understanding of the nation. Put differently, she implies that literary representation of immigrant Americanization, in fact, Americanizes the nation itself. This power of literature to illuminate a culture and a nation becomes evident, I believe, when we take time to consider the particular way a story is created and told. Hence, understanding how U.S. immigrant narratives fundamentally link "who we are" to "where we are" in the development of an aesthetic of Americanization becomes a profitable endeavor that allows us to recognize the multiple, rich representations of the nation and its people within literary America.

## CHAPTER ONE

**TRANSPOSING BOUNDARIES:  
URBAN ECONOMICS AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN  
IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES OF NEW YORK CITY'S JEWISH GHETTO**

The individual is not a mere passive entity reacting to make an environment, but certain of his impulses make him an active agent in the discovery of the adjustment to and the transformation of his environment.

--John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922)

At the turn of the twentieth century, New York City's Jewish ghetto became one of the most densely populated places in the United States.<sup>18</sup> This American space, the first many Jewish immigrants experienced after arriving in the country, likely shaped the attitudes and identities of these people who faced inevitable social and economic change. But at the same time, with a great influx of eastern European Jews settling at least temporarily in this section of New York, the immigrants undoubtedly influenced the physical and social contours of this city space. If John Dewey is correct in his observations of the impact people make on a place, then simply by "discovering" and "adapting" to the Jewish ghetto, these immigrants contributed to how this part of urban America was lived and, consequently, described. In this chapter I examine the nature of that description as it emerges in the narratives of Abraham Cahan, Rose Schneiderman, and Theresa Malkiel. These writers, whose work ranges from fiction to autobiography to labor propaganda, tell stories of the city that both illuminate an immigrant's direct

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<sup>18</sup>See Jules Chametzky, *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 3-4, and Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 69-70. The greatest period of Jewish emigration began in the 1880s and ended in 1924 with the legislation to limit the number of immigrants to the United States. Between 1881 and 1910 alone, over one and a half million eastern European Jews emigrated to America.

experience within the ghetto and expose the potential power the newcomer has in transforming that space. By representing active participation in the institutions that form the ghetto's socio-economic realities, Cahan, Schneiderman, and Malkiel narratively construct (and reconstruct) the urban space and the identities of those who reside within.

To build the ghetto as they discover and describe it, however, these Jewish immigrant writers must recognize other stories of the city that imprint a particular--and often absolute--designation upon this space. In other words, they must respond to various physical and conceptual borders that are drawn around the Jewish ghetto. For example, perceptions of material and moral destitution at the hands of financial want result in stories that explain the need to separate such destructive influence from the rest of the city. A narrative of this sort imposes a sense of restriction upon both physical movement and economic advancement for the inhabitants of the ghetto space. Other stories of the city explain that ghetto borders can be crossed because, in fact, the process of urbanization encourages the movement of capital and thus discourages economic stagnation. However, new barriers disallowing vital cultural affiliations can form, redrawing another border of sorts around an immigrant people. Stories of physical restriction and cultural dispossession, therefore, color the city that these Jewish immigrant writers seek to describe. Cahan, Schneiderman, and Malkiel, I contend, understand the presence and impact of the various boundaries drawn according to economic activity. Moreover, they contextualize their stories of the Jewish ghetto precisely within the immigrant's relationship to these boundaries. As the writers concentrate on the intersection of immigrant ethnicity, space, and economics, they construct a language and a story of Americanization that, in the process, reconceptualizes the ghetto as a *Jewish American* space.

I investigate such a narrative process by dividing this chapter into three sections. In part one I examine the work of Jacob Riis (1890) and Louis Wirth (1928 and 1938) to

demonstrate ways in which capital, labor, and ethnicity define space. Part two continues my discussion of Wirth as I investigate how an association with different spaces, both inside and outside the boundaries established by economic forces, profoundly affects one's identity. In these first two sections I demonstrate how the sociological assumptions informing Riis's and Wirth's work result in narratives of space, ethnicity, and identity that define urban spaces according to physical and psychological borders that are drawn, fixed, crossed, and subsequently re-drawn. Finally, in part three I turn to Cahan, Schneiderman, and Malkiel to consider how their writing addresses the conceptions of the city that Riis and Wirth discuss. Specifically, I analyze a grammar of Americanization that emerges from the literary texts as these Jewish writers question the immigrant's position in terms of economic opportunities. Their characters may re-define the space by casting greater possibilities for Jewish ethnicity within the ghetto, or by securing American identity as they transpose ghetto borders through labor activism. In each case, these authors change the complexion of the Jewish ghetto's urban space as they re-write stories of Americanization.

## **I. Reading Space Through Ethnicity and Labor**

### **Jacob Riis: Drawing Boundaries**

When Jacob Riis discusses New York City's tenement districts, he tells a story about boundaries that must be drawn and fixed.<sup>19</sup> In his 1890 study, *How the Other Half*

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<sup>19</sup>Separation between the tenements and the rest of the city was not his intended project. Yet as I argue here, his altruistic efforts in finding a solution to the problem instead works rhetorically to widen the divide because his photographs and accompanying text turns the destitution of the tenements into a spectacle. The dichotomy of outside/inside remains strong throughout his text and in effect shuts down the possibility for reform. My approach to Riis is consistent with much current scholarship on Riis's work. See, for example, Bill Hug, "Walking the Ethnic Tightwire: Ethnicity and Dialectic in Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*," *Journal of American Culture* 20.4 (Winter 1997): 41-53, and Susan Ryan, "'Rough Ways and Rough Work': Jacob Riis, Social Reform, and the Rhetoric of Benevolent Violence," *ATQ* ns 11.3 (Sept. 1997), 191-212.

*Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, he clearly expresses this view, concluding, "the boundary line of the Other Half lies through the tenements."<sup>20</sup> Riis explains that his project is to document tenement conditions and propose a solution for what, undoubtedly, was a serious problem of urban deterioration. However, as his analysis highlights the tenement buildings, their inhabitants, and the streets of New York where they reside, he proposes that no possible remedy exists. The physical and moral destitution, which to him characterizes this city space, so deeply permeates the area that he believes the boundary line separating the tenements from the rest of New York must, and inevitably will, stay in place. A reason for the absolute borders, he suggests, is the tenants' lack of control over their own situation. He writes, "The causes that operate to obstruct efforts to better the lot of the tenement population are, in our day, largely found among the tenants themselves. This is true particularly of the poorest. They are shiftless, destructive, and stupid; in a word, they are what the tenements have made them" (2). As Riis's tidy summary ("in a word") forestalls any alternative interpretations of the tenement dwellers' condition, he suggests that the economic depravity of the area indelibly marks its residents: since many of them are "shiftless," "destructive," and certainly "poor," the district that made them so must be as well. In other words, economics, at least in part, draws the borders.

Riis suggests that we can comprehend the urban space and the people who dwell within its respective halves in terms of economic activity. David Harvey explains the dynamics of this association. According to Harvey, the city is a space that can be understood by "the shifting flows of labor, power, commodities, and capital."<sup>21</sup> Whoever controls the circulation of capital, he adds, has the power to determine how the

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<sup>20</sup>Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 1. All subsequent passages from this text will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>21</sup>David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 6-7.

urban space will be structured and, correspondingly, understood. In other words, since money value can fix a previously undefined space into a definable place, those in control of the capital also have the power to influence the physical and social landscapes of the urban area. Hence, they can determine the ways of thinking and acting that characterize the life within that space. If we consider the time and location of Riis's discussion, particularly that of Jewish ghetto, we note that capital was often in the hands of entrepreneurs who owned new types of clothing industries--often located in sweatshops--and who used the labor of recently landed immigrants.<sup>22</sup> At the expense of these people, the bosses shaped the urban spaces and, at the same time, defined the social and cultural practices of those within.

Precisely because the tenement dwellers lack control over the circulation of capital, Riis justifies their separation from other city residents both in terms of social class and physical proximity. To support his stance, he situates the results of economic want within other examples of threats to the city. For example, he encloses the "evils" and "sins" of the people and the place within metaphors of disease:

If it shall appear that the sufferings and the sins of the "other half," and the evil they breed, are but as a just punishment upon the community that gave it no other choice, it will be because that is the truth. The boundary line lies there because, while the forces for good on one side vastly outweigh the bad--it were not well otherwise--in the tenements all the influences make for evil; because they are the hot-beds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike; [they are] *the nurseries of pauperism and crime* that fill our jails and police courts...because, above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion. (1-2, my emphasis).

A number of scholars of the Jewish ghetto have discussed both moral and epidemiological "contagion" as a standard representation of immigrants in this space.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>See Howe, 157-159.

<sup>23</sup>For discussion of perceptions of disease in the Jewish ghetto, see Alan Kraut *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace"* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), Howard Markel, *Quarantine!: East European Jewish Immigrants and the New York City Epidemics of 1892* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), and Priscilla Wald, "Geographics: Writing the Shtetl into the Ghetto" (forthcoming). For a general analysis of social discrimination against Jewish immigrants, see John

Riis, therefore, perpetuates common, anxiety-riddled myths. However, he also conflates disease, crime, and pauperism into one indistinguishable condition that both creates and requires the "boundary line." His use of the word "epidemics" discloses his belief that contagious illnesses are indeed a serious threat to those on either side of the border. But the word also becomes part of a larger discourse on production and growth. While disease may be cultivated in a "hot-bed," it is not the only danger nurtured in the tenement. Replicating the production of disease, poverty and criminal activity also grow in this area, and they are, Riis suggests, equally capable of spreading across boundaries, equally destructive to "rich and poor alike." In fact, the point on which he rests his argument is not the danger of physical contagion, but moral contagion. Because the tenements produce and nurture pauperism and paupers, the threat to morality, he implies, stems from this condition of destitution.

Accordingly, Riis more pointedly considers who is to blame for such urban blight, and in the process advances his case for absolute borders around the tenements. He first implicates capitalist greed and "reckless selfishness" (1) as the main culprits. Underscoring the economic over the legal and political as the basis by which we can analyze the situation, Riis writes, "Neither legislation nor charity can cover the ground. The greed of capital that wrought the evil must itself undo it, *as far as it can now be undone*. Homes must be built for the working masses by those who employ their labor; but tenements must cease to be 'good property' in the old, heartless sense" (2, my emphasis). The blame here rests on the forces of capital. Yet a concession that reform is unlikely undercuts the very possibility for change. Part of the reason, which lurks underneath Riis's call for action at the end of this passage, is that space, when it has a market value, is resistant to change. He implies, therefore, that the tenement district may

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Higham, *Send These To Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), especially 138-173.

be capable of only limited transformation, and the story he tells consistently shifts the blame to those who are under the pressure of capitalistic greed. The passage suggests that although the evil bred and born in the tenements may be the offspring of these forces, that same evil is inherent in the place and the people residing there. *They* are the ones who are responsible for the contagion; *they* are the ones who present the threat that demands boundaries to be drawn. Despite the impact poor economic opportunities imposed upon the tenement dwellers, those who live in this urban space are also guilty of an imposition, one just as detrimental no matter how indirect it might be. Riis indicates as much as he begins his first chapter, "Genesis of the Tenement":

The first tenement New York knew bore the mark of Cain from its birth, though a generation passed before the writing was deciphered.... There had been tenant-houses before, but they were not built for the purpose. Nothing would probably have shocked their original owners more than the idea of their harboring a promiscuous crowd; for they were the decorous homes of the old Knickerbockers the proud aristocracy of Manhattan in the early days. (5)

Their imposition, then, was to infuse a cabalistic element onto the space, to write on it in a lexicon that had to be "deciphered," making it difficult if not impossible to read. What is linguistically inscrutable, he suggests, deepens the threat to the city. Significantly, it is the foreign element that does this writing; the expelling of the "proud aristocracy" and their legacy on this space occurs, Riis adds, because of the "tremendous immigration that followed upon the war of 1812." The immigrant influx is thus responsible for shaping the city like it is, and because the result is physical and moral deterioration, there is nothing to be done. As he previously suggests, the ethnic/immigrant people have no control over the flow of capital, so their writing upon the tenement districts creates the very borders that confine them.

Hence, Riis rhetorically solidifies the borders around these spaces by categorizing them according to immigration and ethnicity.<sup>24</sup> The chapter "The Bend," in particular, discloses his narrative strategy of splicing ethnic peoples and particular city spaces. He uses ethnicity as a means to characterize and read an otherwise inscrutable section of New York. For example,

What a bird's-eye view of "the Bend" would be like is a matter of bewildering conjecture. Its everyday appearance, as seen from the corner of Bayard Streets on a sunny day, is *one of the sights of New York*.

Bayard Street is the high road to Jewtown across the Bowery, picketed from end to end with the outposts of Israel. Hebrew faces, Hebrew signs, and incessant chatter in the queer lingo that passes for Hebrew on the East Side attend the curious wanderer to the very corner of Mulberry Street. (49-50, my emphasis)

As "one of the sights of New York," this scene rises to representativeness, a quintessential picture of an urban space. But what in particular becomes a distinct marker for this part of the tenement district is itself designated by ethnicity and its apparent consequence: confusion. Hebrew physical features and, significantly, unintelligible Hebrew linguistic culture at once allows Riis to define the place and to classify it as a "curious wonder." In fact, Riis can only comprehend "the Bend" by its sheer incomprehensibility. Like the mark of Cain, which was initially indecipherable and made the entire tenement district a threat, the characteristics of this scene reveal equal danger. The mingling of a language that cannot be understood, as well as the ethnic characteristics classifying it, suggests that a space defined ethnically is not only another potential threat for further imposition, but one that would deflect integration by those outside its linguistic realm.

What Riis implies in his observations of "the Bend" he clarifies in his chapter "The Mixed Crowd." Here he moves his argument beyond justifying separation of the

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<sup>24</sup>We can discern Riis's focus on ethnicity as a way to define space simply in the titles he uses to designate his chapters. These titles alternate between people ("The Mixed Crowd," "The Italian in New York," "The Street Arab") and distinguishable locales in the city ("The Bend," "The Cheap Lodging-houses," "Chinatown").

tenement district and the rest of New York to suggest that even borders within the district are impermeable. He makes this point by rhetorically fixing the boundaries between ethnic groups: he demarcates ethnicity and race into a cartography of literal color lines. He explains, "A map of the city, colored to designate nationalities would show more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow." While he would divide the tenement districts into mainly two halves and two colors, green for the West Side Irish and blue for the East Side Germans, he adds that "intermingled with these ground colors would be an odd variety of tints that would give the whole the appearance of an extraordinary crazyquilt" (21-22). For example, he notes actual street divisions where "red" marks the Italian section, dull gray the Jewish section, and "a sharp streak of yellow" designates "the narrow boundaries of Chinatown" (22). Consciously, then, Riis establishes distinct borders within the city space according to ethnicity, and by attempting to fix them with a color-coded map (making permanent by drawing in ink, we might say), he suggests that such placement will not change and the colors/ethnicities will not blend.

As he fixes particular spaces according to ethnicity, Riis again relies on issues of economic activity to identify both people and place. He examines laborers and workplaces within the tenement district, and in the process, further isolates an ethnic people within an ethnically marked space.<sup>25</sup> For example, the Russian Jewish immigrants he discusses in "Jewtown" and "The Sweaters of Jewtown" mark themselves and the ghetto space by their ethnicity. He notices their "unmistakable physiognomy" and observes that they "betray their race at every step." Therefore, he can conclude, "no need of asking here where we are .... There is no mistaking it: we are in Jewtown" (85). From the ethnic markings of people, then, follow a definition of the place. Furthermore,

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<sup>25</sup>Again we can glance at Riis's titles to see how some triangulate people, place, and labor and further mark the distinct sections of the city: for example, "The Sweaters of Jewtown," "The Bohemians--Tenement-house Cigarmaking," "The Working Girls of New York."

Riis identifies the people and this section of the tenement district through a discussion of money and business, detailing, for example the peddling trade. However, his explanation of the Jewish ghetto sweatshops offers his clearest argument on the ethnic/immigrant presence that, despite any economic activity, must ultimately remain within set borders. When describing the sweatshops he further clarifies an image of the space through a concentration on the foreign: here he specifies the laborer as immigrant. Speaking of a shop entrepreneur, Riis notes, "Of workingmen he can always get enough. Every ship-load from German ports brings them to his door in droves, clamoring for work. The sun sets upon the day of the arrival of many a Polish Jew, finding him at work in an East Side tenement, reading the machine and 'learning the trade'" (98). Riis highlights the particularities of the immigrant by referring to the arrival scene and, in the same narrative breath, the work scene: the two are nearly simultaneous. Thus, he rhetorically links immigration and economics through time and space, for just as the foreign-born reaches America, he is immediately located within an identifiable immigrant locale.

With this temporal and spatial orientation of the immigrant laborer, Riis marks an inevitability that, to his mind, will nullify any potential for borders to be crossed. He discloses his belief in this absolute separation between the ghetto-dwelling and outside observers like himself when his discourse takes a conspicuous turn from analysis to tourism. That is, Riis momentarily transforms himself and his readers into spectators, looking in at the sweatshops as they take a tour, by train, around the tenement district. He writes, "Take the Second Avenue Elevated Railroad at Chatham Square and ride up half a mile through the sweater's district. Every open window of the big tenements, that stand like a continuous brick wall on both sides of the way, gives you a glimpse of one of these shops as the train speeds by .... The road is like a big gangway through an endless work-room where vast multitudes are forever laboring" (100). Here Riis uses

the "sight" of the immigrant in the tenement sweatshop to narrate a further spatial separation. Set apart by distance, mobility (the tourists, after all are on a train that does not stop), and most importantly economic position (the immigrants must labor "forever"), Riis sees little change possible in the identification of immigrant or their urban space.

While *How the Other Half Lives* is designed for social reformation, it is curiously pessimistic regarding the possibility of reform. In fact, having drawn the boundaries, Riis's narrative tightens them, fixing them and those who reside within according to a perceived status of static moral and socio-economic destitution. As he assesses the situation, he comes to the conclusion, "We know now that there is not way out; that the 'system' that was the evil offspring of public neglect and private greed has come to stay, a storm-centre forever of our civilization. Nothing is left but to make the best of a bad bargain" (1). Regarding the Jewish immigrants, Riis's final estimation is that they, like all inhabiting the tenement district, have no real ability to shift the center of capital control. Therefore they have no power to regenerate themselves or the Jewish ghetto.

### **Louis Wirth: Crossing Boundaries**

In many ways, Riis's narrative of the city reflects the concerns of a journalist writing in the 1890s, a historical moment when worries over the impact of immigration were beginning to grow in the United States. As a result, his story of fixed borders joined others in narrowly defining Jewish immigrants and their socio-economic position in America.<sup>26</sup> A different story of city, by sociologist Louis Wirth, tells another tale. Writing in the 1920s and 30s, his account of Jewish immigrants and the urban spaces they occupy is less characterized by immigrant-based anxiety. Yet Wirth's narrative of city spaces further clarifies elements of the immigrants' urban environment. Wirth also

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<sup>26</sup>See Ronald Takaki on the concerns over rising immigration numbers and especially on the perceived threats of Jewish immigration at this time. In *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 298-310.

addresses the physical, social, and cognitive landscapes--the production of which, he argues, inhere in the process of urbanization--and presents a way to read space through labor and ethnicity that allows a less restrictive interpretation. In other words, Wirth's conception of urbanization mitigates the absoluteness of fixed urban and ethnic borders.

In his 1938 essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life," Wirth challenges the idea of fixed boundaries on which Riis based his discussion of New York City's tenement district. Wirth understands the city as more a product of growth than an instantaneous construction. This gradual development therefore allows residue of previous existence outside the city space to carry over and define urban life. Because varied social and cultural histories are then contained within an urban space, he argues that we cannot think of the city simply in terms of lines on a map. He writes, "As long as we identify urbanism with the physical entity of the city, viewing it merely as rigidly delimited in space, and proceed as if urban attributes abruptly ceased to be manifested beyond an arbitrary boundary line, we are not likely to arrive at any adequate conception of urbanism as a mode of life."<sup>27</sup> To reach a satisfactory understanding of urbanization, to see how the space of the city reaches beyond "arbitrary boundary lines," Wirth argues that we must recognize the transforming power of the social and cultural diversity that is part of the city's growth.

Wirth describes this power by focusing on how diversity leads not to social stagnation, as Riis suggests, but to social regeneration and change. He explains that the remainders of a former (folk) culture often tie an urban dweller to a unified past. Consequently, homogeneous settlements in which people share ways of thinking and acting will emerge. Different city sectors will acquire specialized functions so that "the city consequently comes to resemble a mosaic of social worlds in which the transition

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<sup>27</sup>Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life" in *Community Life and Social Policy: Selected Papers by Louis Wirth*, eds. Elizabeth Wirth Marvick and Albert J. Reiss, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 113.

from one to the other is abrupt" (123). Despite the apparent lack of fluidity between these urban sectors, Wirth adds that the individual groups make up a larger, heterogeneous society, and this heterogeneity promotes interaction among them through competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation.<sup>28</sup> Put differently, they are part of what Harvey calls a "structured space of separation" established by the forces of class, racial, and sexual domination. Harvey notes that challenges to this domination often arise from dissident groups who attempt to liberate space for their own purposes. If in their competition, a group shifts the center of capital by gaining economic control of a business (such as through labor activism), the definition of space can be modified. The city, which Harvey understands as a process in the circulation of capital, then retains the potential for continued change.<sup>29</sup> Hence, under the influence of capital, urbanization continues: space of society is always recreated afresh, and thus, this space continues as a site of social reproduction.

Although Wirth does not focus specifically on the circulation of capital, he understands that great potential for social change and social reproduction rests in an economic competition between the city's individual groups. Moreover, he observes that through this type of interaction the cultural basis for homogeneous groupings within the city will also be transformed. This change proceeds because the great diversity of cultural backgrounds within an urban space leads to a weakening of traditional kinship bonds; previously strong solidarity is substituted by competition and formal control mechanisms. New kinships emerge, based on consent rather than descent, and are more complicated, fragile, and volatile than what they replaced. This social interaction breaks down rigid class lines, but at the same time it transforms familial and cultural affiliations. The agent for this change, Wirth notes, is the city's economic foundation. He observes

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<sup>28</sup>Wirth's "minimal definition" of the city is based on social group identification: "a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals" (116).

<sup>29</sup>Harvey, 177.

that where large numbers of diverse people gather, a process of "depersonalization" or "leveling" results. This process, he reveals, is determined by economic activity. Specifically, the rise of the factory is the force behind this change because of its standardized processes and products. He adds,

Progressively as cities have developed upon a background of this system of production, the pecuniary nexus which implies the purchasability of services and things has displaced personal relations as the basis of association. Individuality under these circumstances must be replaced by categories. When large numbers have to make common use of facilities and institutions, those facilities and institutions must serve the needs of the average person rather than those of particular individuals. The services of the public utilities, of the recreational, educational, and cultural institutions, must be adjusted to mass requirements. Similarly, the cultural institutions, such as the schools, the movies, the radio, and the newspapers, by virtue of their mass clientele, must necessarily operate as leveling influences (125).

As Wirth suggests, the individuality that an ethnic identification secures loses its function in the industrialized workplace. The unique identity one takes into work is made common. At the same time, when the people who are depersonalized make "common use of facilities and institutions" these facilities and institutions must conform to the needs of the users: they too become "common" and, as a result, promote further depersonalization when subsequently used. Therefore, the people and the city place, particularly in a volatile economic environment, will always be faced with the potential of some transformation. Such a possibility was the case with the changing work situation in New York's Jewish ghetto. Although the shops had not yet reached the stage of industrialization, they were being transformed by a quickly modifying clothing industry, an industry that Jewish immigrants themselves had a great impact in changing.<sup>30</sup> If Wirth

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<sup>30</sup>Perhaps Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* presents the best example. Levinsky's shop is a continual innovator in the manufacturing of cloaks. As a result of the innovation, Levinsky gains wealth and moves away from his immigrant, ethnic beginnings. Yet, in that movement away, he yearns more for what he feels he has lost. In this way, Levinsky experiences the trauma of cultural loss accompanying "leveling" and "depersonalization." For analysis of the impact Jewish immigrants had on the garment trades see Oscar Handlin, *Immigration as a Factor in American History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 55-66; Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 59-70.

is correct, then the interaction of a heterogeneous people and economic infrastructure re-shapes the identity of the people and, in turn, presents a different conception of the city.

With depersonalization, the type of identity that a Riisian view marks as constricting and immutable dissolves. The same boundaries characterizing the city can no longer remain as clearly identifiable divisions between urban sectors or between individuals comprising and defining different districts. This mutual transformation arises from the impact of the various structures of the city, from recreational to educational, yet it stems mainly from urban economics. Wirth's representation of the city, then, carefully intertwines the fate of people and place with economic processes. He states, "The city as a community resolves itself into a series of tenuous segmental relationships superimposed upon a territorial base with a definite center but without a definite periphery, and upon a division of labor which far transcends the immediate location and is world-wide in scope" (131). The process of urbanization as Wirth explains it, leads to further separation between groups of people, resulting in a sharp contrast between highly differentiated modes of life. Yet, this conception of the city blurs the absolute divisions. The city's indefinite periphery suggests a certain fluidity between groups inhabiting various urban areas despite the differentiation. This blurring is augmented because of the world-wide reach, because of a division of labor that is constituted by ethnic peoples originating far from American shores.

## **II. The Relationship Between Space and Identity**

Both Riis and Wirth recognize the determining factor ethnic groups have on the city itself. As a contrast to Riis's picture of ethnicity in New York's tenement districts, in his social history of the Jewish ghetto Wirth offers a more complex and textured image of ethnicity within an urban space. In his 1928 study, *The Ghetto*, Wirth analyzes this city

space and observes that it importantly secures a cultural identification for its inhabitants. He finds a synthesis in the reciprocal influences between people and place and, more specifically, an example of how space and identity coalesce. He writes,

The history of the ghetto may show the various processes that enter into the origin and the growth of community life in general and the ways in which the community fashions the personality types and the cultural institutions that it harbors. In every community there goes on a process of specialization and integration resulting in the division of labor and co-operation which tie the life within an area into a unit and give it its organized character. (9)

Wirth understands the ghetto as a model of the ways communities in general grow and notes that what occurs inside the particular space importantly defines both the location and its inhabitants. Specific to the ghetto, he suggests that we read this city space both as producer and production of the attributes and activities of the people within its borders. In other words, the ghetto determines a social and cultural organization through its process of growth, importantly through a "division of labor," and at the same time creates a mode of living that defines the space itself. In this process of growth, the ghetto promotes a type of social isolation to match its physical separation from other parts of the city. However, Wirth adds that this social-spatial orientation importantly grounds a solid cultural identification. As a defense mechanism for a minority outside the larger population's mode of life, Wirth claims that the ghetto "illustrates picturesquely the ways in which a cultural group gives expression to its ancient heritage when transplanted to a foreign setting, the constant sifting and resifting of its members, and the forces through which the community maintains its integrity and continuity" (5).

Wirth finds, however, that the vital cultural touchstones by which the Jewish ghetto provides "integrity and continuity" do not guard its residents against potential difficulties that arise from territorial and social isolation. Because the economic basis of the urban process promotes competition across a city's spatial, social, and, cultural borders, the ghetto residents will inevitably venture beyond its boundaries, exploring a

broader range of labor possibilities. This endeavor, of course, is part of the social change the heterogeneity within cities encourages. In such economic activity, Wirth claims, the ghetto residents quickly become aware of their previous isolation and, consequently, develop a "keen sense of self-consciousness" which they often express in "awkwardness" when encountering strangers from outside the ghetto. Wirth believes that such a person will be overly shy or aggressive but adds, "In either case he is seldom himself. He finds himself haunted by loneliness in the outer world, and when he returns to his familial hearth he is restless and anxious to escape" (73). Hence, the security of cultural identification an inhabitant of the ghetto receives within this space is challenged by other concerns that inhere in the process of urbanization and that question the absolute boundaries between city sections and individuals. The ghetto, therefore, becomes a site of contradiction.

Wirth believes that residents of the Jewish ghetto suffer as a result of this contradiction between cultural security and social isolation. As their lives are constantly re-created by the dynamic processes of urbanization, this re-creation follows old patterns of life because they cannot (even voluntarily) escape past experience and the heritage that previously shaped the environment where they lived. However, because of an urbanization that promotes border crossing and thereby creates an uneasy desire to remain outside the ghetto, Jewish identities are re-shaped and, Wirth claims, this particular urban space is necessarily changed. In fact, it begins to disappear as a distinguishable feature of the city. He finds this result inevitable, observing that "the ghetto demonstrates the subtle ways in which this cultural community is transformed by degrees until it blends with the larger community about it, meanwhile reappearing in various altered guises of its old and unmistakable atmosphere" (5). Once residents of the ghetto begin to cross its

physical boundaries through successful labor, social boundaries also begin to dissolve.<sup>31</sup> The subsequent leveling that commences with economic activity, strips away ghetto identity and ethnic uniqueness. Moreover, with the crossing of previously fixed borders, the ghetto as a physical space, as it was originally formulated by and for these Jewish residents, simply ceases to exist as it had previously. Yet the contradiction remains, especially when the secure cultural affiliation is still desired. This means toward personal identification is difficult to attain, Wirth claims, without the original ghetto present. The story that Wirth tells, in contrast to Riis's totalizing view of space and ethnic identification, is liberatory in its understanding of physical movement beyond the ghetto space and economic possibilities that enable such movement. However, it is a story that also suggests the difficulty in losing Jewish cultural identification once those possibilities are embraced. If an ethnic people escape one set of physical and social boundaries, Wirth suggests, new psychological barriers quickly replace them. The result is *anomie* that can be equally constricting. Wirth's narrative of the city, then, inadvertently draws another set of border lines.

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The assumptions of sociology, concerned with drawing and re-drawing boundaries, allow a narrative of the city that, in the end, leaves the Jewish ghetto and its immigrant people within certain constraints, both physical and psychological.

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<sup>31</sup>Both Wirth and Cahan discuss a second settlement of the ghetto. Near the end of Wirth's study, he writes, "The rise and decline of the ghetto seems to be a cyclical movement," suggesting that for a time a resident will leave, but often feels inclined to return (*The Ghetto*, 279). Yet even though some form of the ghetto remains, both in physical location and in emotional attachment, when Wirth explains that boundaries dissolve and the ghetto ceases to exist (at least as it was known), he indicates an important moment when the breakdown of community and ghetto space becomes an anxiety-producing possibility. It is within this moment that depersonalization enters in and seems to be detrimental to ethnic identification.

Consequently, both Riis and Wirth present stories that seem to offer little latitude for imaging alternative interpretations. However, in the course of their narratives both Riis and Wirth suggest that different ways of reading these urban spaces are possible. Riis, for example, shifts into metaphoric language when he notes that the tenements are "ubiquitous": just as he reviles the crime and poverty within this city space, he suggests that the tenements are everywhere, or that they represent conditions that will always be with us. Likewise, Wirth places the Jewish ghetto in the realm of the imaginary, arguing that even after borders are crossed, it remains "a state of mind," and presumably will also be variously understood as it is individually imagined. In each case, these writers move their subjects into the representative and open the discussion for narrative renderings different from the rest of their analysis. In other words, the urban space of the Jewish immigrants, they suggest, can be more than what they directly observe. In this possibility, Jewish immigrant narratives enter the discussion of the city to tell a different story. The assumptions of fiction and autobiography--an assertion that the borders drawn can be transposed by a literary re-imaging of space, identity, and economic opportunity--allow Abraham Cahan, Rose Schneiderman, and Theresa Malkiel to offer other versions of the tale. Their stories arise out of the need to question the restrictive sociological claims of fixed borders and the contradictions between ethnic identification and socio-economic activity. In the process, these writers re-cast the intersection of Jewish ethnicity and labor into a site of ethnic cultural production.

### **III. Grammars of Americanization**

#### **"Business" Within Ghetto Borders: Cahan's *Yekl***

In his fiction, Abraham Cahan reveals his awareness and concern that the Jewish ghetto can be read as a contradiction between cultural identification and social isolation.

Understanding the forces behind urbanization, he explores possible alternatives to these conditions, considering if and how economic activity challenges the potential stagnation of fixed borders while at the same time protects against the consequences of depersonalization. The role of economics in positioning an immigrant within a city space, then, forms the foundation of his 1896 novel *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*. Cahan's effort to re-interpret the story of the city and construct a different narrative of space and American identity within New York's Jewish ghetto leads him to several fundamental questions: where can Americanization occur? what type of transformation is it? and how does a relationship to the economic base of the urban area help to create new identities and situate them either within or without ghetto borders? Cahan proceeds in his inquiry by examining different approaches to assimilation, particularly as they are refracted through the lens of "business." Ultimately, he determines that, in relation to economic activity, one can only enact a self-directed course of Americanization by demonstrating some control over the forces of capital. Yet he also discloses that such economic power often remains elusive, particularly when it requires a Jewish immigrant to move beyond the ghetto's physical and economic borders. From this struggle for control over economic possibilities, types of Americanization emerge and, consequently, ways of re-reading Jewish ghetto space arise.

Cahan opens *Yekl* in a Jewish ghetto sweatshop and thus, introduces the force of "business" on people and place. Because his main character Yekl (now Jake in America) emigrated from Russia out of economic necessity rather than persecution, Cahan establishes work as the central motivation for the American experience.<sup>32</sup> This sweatshop environment, in fact, serves as a composite of the people and the concerns that ghetto

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<sup>32</sup>Persecution by the government and fear of military conscription (which often lead to death) were in fact some of the most common reasons for immigration to the United States. See Cahan's autobiography for a general discussion on the various motivations Jews had to leave Eastern Europe. In *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, trans. Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan and Lynn Davison, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), Part I.

business affects. Economic stability is one of the concerns, and accordingly, as the novel begins, the Jewish immigrant laborers wait for their boss in the hope that he will return with work for them. As piece-workers in the garment trade, no work means no pay.<sup>33</sup> In addition to revealing this reality of the Jewish immigrant's economic lives, Cahan's characters in the sweatshop illustrate the various types of Jewish immigrants for whom labor was livelihood. These representatives include Bernstein, the "rabbinical-looking man" studying English; Fanny, one of the "daughters of the ghetto"--watching Jake with romantic interest, and Jake himself, extolling the "comparative merits" of Boston and New York. As ghetto types in this particular place, these characters demonstrate that the "sweatshop" has an impact on each immigrant's "American" identification. Furthermore, because they are involved in particular activities as antidotes to the work they do not have, this scene also illustrates the necessity for them to attain something other than sweatshop labor for a measure of socio-economic control. In this case, each indicates an attempt to define their identities in this American setting. Bernstein might deflect stereotypical and pejorative classifications of Jewishness through the English language. Fanny might shun the crudities of the world of labor through romance. And Jake might present himself as Americanized through his knowledge of American places. The sweatshop backdrop, then, sets in relief the desires for personal transformation that, to some degree, require the workers to escape their economic vulnerability.

In this composite, however, Cahan suggests that the workplace presents barriers to means of control. The narration itself demonstrates the potential frustration in actively pursuing goals of economic growth. Cahan begins his tale in this way: "The operatives of the cloak shop in which Jake *was employed* had been idle all the morning. It was after twelve o'clock and the 'boss' had not yet returned from Broadway, whither he had

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<sup>33</sup>See Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet: The Income and Outlay of New York Working Girls* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 95-118; and Howe, 154-159.

betaken himself two or three hours before in quest of work."<sup>34</sup> The passive grammatical structure reflects the general conditions of the sweatshop: Jake and the other laborers, as piece-workers in an industry prone to seasonal slowdown, often went without work. Furthermore, their opportunity for labor was controlled by the boss who could provide or withhold work at whim. While these sweatshop laborers all eventually receive work after the boss returns, the narrative clarifies that their economic prosperity is never certain. Because work and the workplace so greatly direct their American experience, the inability to influence their own economic destiny necessarily puts in doubt the extent to which they will have control over the transformation that the new country and this particular ghetto space will inevitably enact.

If the sweatshop seems to take away the potential for Jewish immigrants to direct their American transformation, then a ghetto dancing school would appear to offer an alternative. Or so Jake believes. Yet in fact, Cahan demonstrates that the world of labor permeates all sections of the Jewish ghetto. "Business" arises to characterize even a dancing hall and further complicates potential paths toward Americanization for the Jewish immigrants. We discover that the school itself is located in a building constructed specifically for business and is located on a floor that formerly housed a sweatshop. Hence, residue of labor and work enter into this ghetto institution as well. As Cahan describes the dancing hall he reveals its origins to be carefully tied to the economic environment of the Jewish ghetto. The history of the place underscores a past associated with labor:

The room was, judging by its untidy, once-whitewashed walls and the uncouth wooden pillars supporting its bare ceiling, more accustomed to the whirl of sewing machines than to the noises which filled it at the present moment. It took up the whole of the first floor of a five-story house built for large sweatshops, and until recently it had served its

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<sup>34</sup>Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), 1, my emphasis. All subsequent citations from the novel will appear in the text.

original purpose as faithfully as the four upper floors, which were still the daily scenes of feverish industry. (15)

Material and aural remnants of this room's prior existence as a workplace linger. In fact, the present conglomeration of bodies, whose activity signals the attempt to forget daily laboring lives, is only partially successful in hiding the dancing hall's past. Just as paint on the walls betrays its identity, the room is still "more accustomed" to the sounds of work. Moreover, the "feverish industry" that remains in other parts of the building is simply replaced by the chaos of dancers. Although apparently "unfaithful" now as a dancing school rather than a sweatshop, the room instead replicates its "original purpose" in another form.

As Cahan describes it, the business of dancing is work. He writes, "And while the general effect...was one of boisterous hilarity, many of the individual couples somehow had the air of being engaged in hard toil rather than if they were dancing for amusement. The faces of some of these bore a wondering martyrlike expression, as who should say, 'What have we done to be knocked about in this manner?'" (15-16). Jake is one who finds amusement in this setting, particularly because, for him, the school represents a means toward Americanization. Despite its location in the heart of the Jewish ghetto, it appears to him as a retreat from his ghetto life of labor. Because Jake's interests lie in American places and activities often outside ghetto borders, he seeks ways to break through the constrictions he finds within this city space.<sup>35</sup> Yet like the sweatshop, that path toward Americanization in this ghetto institution also runs through the world of labor. As a school, the place is more than a venue for entertainment. It is a business, and like others demands workers for its survival. Shortly after arriving from his sweatshop labor, Jake, in fact, labors for the dancing school. When the owner sees an embodiment of "business" in one of his guests--a "beesness man"--he asks Jake to

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<sup>35</sup>The ghetto dancing school has been discussed as a site of Americanization for Jewish immigrants. See, for example, Howe, 127-129.

intervene. Jake's "work" is to convince another dancing school regular, Mamie, to dance with the "beesness man," and hence, to secure profits for the owner. While Jake appears to take control over the situation--he successfully persuades Mamie--he receives little compensation for his efforts. If the dancing school directs Jake toward an American identity, then this path replicates the course the sweatshop represents: both Jake's economic security and control over his own endeavors are compromised.

Control over business and the setting where it occurs, therefore, characterizes Jake's possibilities for Americanization. His choices, however, include more than just the sweatshop and the dancing school. Cahan introduces another ghetto space also marked as a "business," yet one that serves as a contrast in the course of Americanization it offers. This space is the tenement, and it becomes a locale for economic activity after the arrival of Jake's wife Gitl and their son Yossele, whom Jake left behind in the old country to search for work in the United States. Because a wife and child require Jake to supplement his sweatshop income, he demands that Gitl work as well in this ghetto setting by taking boarders into their apartment.<sup>36</sup> As a site of ghetto business, the tenement also appears to deny its individual laborer socio-economic control: Gitl, who steadfastly retains her old-world ways in this new-world setting, suffers initially from her loss of privacy. However, the tenement introduces a different relationship to economics in this ghetto space and, hence, an alternative path toward American identity. The tenement, through the examples of Gitl and her boarder Bernstein, represents a business

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<sup>36</sup>This practice, in fact, is a common topic in Jewish immigrant histories and literary works. For example, Cahan further explores the dynamic of taking in boarders in *The Rise of David Levinsky* and several of his short stories collected in *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York*. In particular, see "Circumstances." Anzia Yezierska also describes the business of boarding in several of her short stories, including "'A Bed for the Night" and "Brothers" as well as in her novel *Bread Givers*. Yezierska's portrayals often focus on the degradation one experiences by having to take in boarders and by sacrificing one's privacy when having to live, often, in a common room shared by all the family. On the issue of boarders see Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door*, 99-103 and Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 60-76. On how Jewish immigrant women defined themselves in the domestic sphere see Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *World of Our Mothers* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1988), xx.

that remains within the ghetto's boundaries, clearly marked with Jewish ethnicity. In contrast, the dancing hall, through Mamie, represents a business that promises freedom from perceived constrictions within this city space. Ultimately, these are the two choices Jake faces in his quest for Americanization.

Jake's exertions toward American identity, intensified by a growing distaste of Gitl's inability to embrace new-world ways, direct him toward Mamie. The example of assimilation she offers seems to guarantee an alternative to the ghetto spaces that Jake finds restrictive. That is, Mamie ostensibly presents an escape from the sweatshop and the tenement, or more precisely, from the reminders of his past life housed in the tenement--particularly Gitl and her retention of Jewish ethnicity--that require Jake to remain a garment worker. However, as Cahan reveals, Americanization through Mamie takes Jake down a different path regarding socio-economic control. Rather than exceeding the limits of economic stagnation he experiences in his ghetto labor experiences, Jake's choice further underscores a condition of passivity in relation to both business and the ghetto space that such business informs. Thinking he is escaping the realities of his labor in Mamie, she in fact re-energizes the force of business over his life. For example, after Jake flees Gitl's model of Jewish ghetto life, he seeks refuge in Mamie. What begins as a romantic liaison, however, quickly turns into a business negotiation ending with a contractual arrangement: Mamie will provide \$300 of her savings as a payment to Gitl and will support Jake in his separation from his wife until their divorce. By agreeing to these terms, Jake has, according to Mamie, signed a contract. She informs him, "This is as good as a marriage certificate, do you understand?" (82) Even romance in this ghetto space is subsumed into the world of business.

As the romance transmogrifies into a business transaction, Cahan deepens Mamie's connection to labor and highlights the consequences of Jake's choice for

Americanization. Specifically, in terms of the contractual arrangements and decisions on their future together, Jake increasingly retreats into a stance of passivity:

To all...Jake kept nodding approval, once or twice interrupting her with a demonstration of enthusiasm. As to the fate of his boy, Mamie deliberately circumvented all reference to the subject.... His heart bled at the thought of having to part with [his son]. But somehow the courage failed him to touch upon the question. He saw himself helplessly entangled in something foreboding no good. He felt between the devil and the deep sea, as the phrase goes; and unnerved by the whole situation and *completely in the shop girl's power*, he was glad to be relieved from all initiative--whether forward or backward--to shut his eyes, as it were, and, leaning upon Mamie's strong arm, let himself be led by her in whatever direction she chose. (81-82, my emphasis)

At this point in the text, Cahan provides the first direct acknowledgment in the narrative voice that Mamie is a laborer. However, he suggests even more. Rather than simply explaining that Mamie works in a shop, at this moment she is not called Mamie at all but classified by the general label "the shop girl." In Cahan's narrative construction, therefore, Mamie is made the representative, a human manifestation of the shop. And at the same time, Jake is completely under her control. He can only assent. Significantly, Jake's own voice drops out of the narrative, reflecting lost authority over his own expression, his familial duties, and his ability to follow a course for identity that seemed correct for his situation. Ultimately, he surrenders all agency and lets the "shop girl" determine his future course. Further demonstrating his transformation in the face of economics, at this point Jake is infantilized by Mamie who begins to call him in the diminutive, "Jakie." As a result, he loses control over the persona he has carefully constructed as "Jake" in the new world.<sup>37</sup> His attempt to expand the ghetto boundaries for himself and escape the ties to old-world ethnicity does ensure his ticket out of the ghetto--Mamie temporarily sends him to Philadelphia--but it comes at personal cost.

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<sup>37</sup>This marks a return of the diminutive when naming someone. Jake did the same as the novel opens when discussing American boxers. He calls them "Cholly" and "Jimmie," and demonstrates his enthusiasm and pride "in the diminutive proper nouns he flaunted" (2). The change from his applying the diminutive to having it applied to him further displays his transformation.

Without economic power, he has no ability to dominate space, and thus the ghetto setting continues to dominate him. As Jake attempts to escape the totalized world Riis observes, he directly collides with the *anomie* Wirth describes.

Hence, through the example of Jake, Cahan demonstrates the complexities in the processes of Americanization as well as the difficulties in understanding the possibilities of threat or security in the Jewish ghetto. Jake has classified Gitl as the threat to a satisfactory Americanization. His business arrangement with Mamie has, in fact, presented a different danger. Yet it is not "Mamie" per se that traps, infantilizes, or wrenches away personal control from Jake. Rather, it is a representative of the shop--and labor in general--that does this: Jake succumbs precisely at the moment when Mamie is unequivocally identified by her connection with the sweatshop world. This is not to say that the shop girl herself is a complete master over her situation. Cahan, as an early activist in the labor movements among Jewish immigrants of the ghetto, was well aware that working immigrant women were often at the mercy of unreasonable bosses forcing them to work at low wages in unsafe conditions.<sup>38</sup>

"Business" is the real culprit here. As Mamie's example demonstrates, the "shop" ultimately takes over. Mamie herself is not so much the source of entrapment as are the various "business" deals that follow from the contractual arrangements Jake initiates by accepting her money. Furthermore, we discover that business is at the center of the divorce proceedings through the words and language of Mrs. Kavarsky, Gitl's neighbor and chief support. Referring to herself in the third person, she laments, "Mrs. Kavarsky will no more *bodder* her head about you, depend upon it. It is not enough for her that I neglect *business* on her account" (88). She speaks mostly in Yiddish but with two exceptions that Cahan highlights with italics: "business" is a notable choice for Mrs.

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<sup>38</sup>On Cahan's interests and activities in labor and unionism, see Chametzky, 14-15 and Ronald Sanders, *The Downtown Jews: Portraits of An Immigrant Generation* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 163-170.

Kavarsky to articulate in English. Clearly, Cahan suggests that part of Americanizing inheres in the language of economic activity. Mrs. Kavarsky pronounces "business" as part of her American English lexicon and suggests that it is something indeed to "bother" over. Although she claims otherwise when she chides Gitl, she clearly retains an interest in Gitl's life and, in fact, makes *it* her main business. She reminds Gitl that her future holds promise because of an impending marriage with Bernstein, an association that is as much about business as it is about romance. From this divorce, Gitl gains \$300 and Bernstein as Jake's replacement, but more importantly, with the money and new husband, she will open a grocery, her own ghetto business. She realizes the opportunity to gain socio-economic control over a ghetto space that she will, in turn, transform through a developing American identity. Cahan writes, "Already on her way from the rabbi's house, while her soul was full of Jake and [Mamie], there had fluttered through her imagination a picture of the grocery business which she and Bernstein were to start with the money paid to her by Jake" (88-89). Hence, business remains at the center of these characters' American experiences, yet the possibilities it offers to Gitl present a striking contrast to what it takes from Jake.

As a dream for a new American life flutters through Gitl's imagination, Cahan proposes that a different relationship to business comes from a different relationship to space. And in that difference, he suggests, lies the potential for control over the process of Americanization. Whereas Jake searches for social and economic avenues outside Jewish ghetto borders, Gitl will remain within this city space. The location of her future grocery business is not clear; however, if Mrs. Kavarsky is to retain her influence over Gitl's financial prospects, it likely will be near their tenement building. But in addition to the impact of space on Gitl's emerging American identity, her example demonstrates that ethnicity, what Jake attempts to cast off, also plays an important role. Certainly by the

time of her divorce, her transformation had already commenced. Jake notices the differences from the "greenhorn" wife he remembered in the tenement:

The rustic 'greenhornlike' expression was completely gone from her face and manner, and, although she now looked bewildered and as if terror-stricken, there was noticeable about her a suggestion of that peculiar air of self-confidence with which a few months' life in America is sure to stamp the looks and bearing of every immigrant .... Jake...eyed Gitl quite frequently, with a kind of malicious curiosity. Her general Americanized make-up, and, above all, that broad-brimmed, rather fussy, hat of hers, nettled him. (83-84)

The trauma of the divorce and the prodding of Mrs. Kavarsky are possible reasons for Gitl's change. Yet her "air of self-confidence" undoubtedly comes from a different source. Ironically, the money that marks Jake's acquiescence to the power of business, provides her the capital to overcome those same forces. But further, the divorce payment is the direct link to Bernstein. Earlier in the narrative, a few minor flirtations transpire between Gitl and Bernstein. However, it is only through the money and the potential for owning a business that Cahan explicitly unveils their association. Their relationship, based on money, also indicates the importance of Jewish ethnic affiliation that inevitably will contribute to Gitl's "self-confidence" and, thus, Americanization. Bernstein, as we've discovered, learns English but remains "rabbinical." He avoids the dancing school and, instead, remains largely in the tenement. As a result, he presents Gitl a form of Americanization based on Jewish ethnicity within the borders of the Jewish ghetto. Moreover, the combination of Bernstein's Americanizing influence and Gitl's monetary control over her own future business suggests that this new American identity emerging in this particular American space will be ethnically based and, importantly, self-directed.

Their potential to define their own terms of Americanization arises, then, not from disregarding Jewish-marked space or ethnicity, but incorporating both into their American lives. Hence, Cahan suggests that a collaboration between old and new worlds is desirable in the transformation of Jewish immigrant identities. He illustrates his belief

through language, a grammar of Americanization residing within his text. The language his characters use demonstrates how space and identity require elements of Jewishness as they become American. At the beginning of *Yekl*, Cahan foregrounds the defining features of language. In the sweatshop, Jake employs a Boston Yiddish that, we are told, is "more copiously spiced with mutilated English that is the language of the metropolitan Ghetto in which our story lies" (2). Cahan thus suggests that the levels at which English and Yiddish co-exist will have a bearing on his tale and on his own evaluation of different processes of Americanization. Jake provides another example that illustrates metaphorically how an emphasis on the Yiddish/Jewish culture must, in the end, play a role in self-definition. Throughout the text, Jake repeats a phrase at moments when he hopes to affirm his own self-definition as an American. He asserts, "Once I live in America...I want to know that I live in America. *Dot'sh a'kin' a man I am!*" (5). Significantly, he directs his words at Bernstein who questions his methods of Americanization. In his defense, Jake speaks mostly in Yiddish, but the italicized words and phrases--as Cahan presents them--are English. The English phrase he speaks, "Dot'sh a'kin' a man I am," reflects a certain anxiousness about what kind of man he actually is. Jake's journey through this narrative is precisely to answer that question for himself. In Jake's subsequent rearticulations of this assertion, Cahan clarifies that Jake uses English. He also highlights the "I" so that Jake's claim (or plea) becomes a continually more anxious attempt to construct his own identity in America. The last time Jake voices the same claim/plea presents a contrast that discloses the fragility of Jake's identity, as he creates it in this English phrase. Feelings of entrapment within the tenement lead to this final declaration: "I am an *American feller*, a *Yankee*--that's what I am" (70). Jake still uses English words here, and these are significant precisely because they explain what he claims he is: "American feller"; "Yankee." However, they are part of the identity he has yet to attain because his words "that's what I am"--what he

articulated in English before--are now spoken in Yiddish. This change in language does not necessarily mean that he cannot attain a level of Americanness. It indicates, however, that the manner in which he seeks such status may have to take a different linguistic course--through Yiddish before English.

Jake's personal example of the complicated mix of languages that informs the production of American identity reflects an English/Yiddish syncretism used throughout the ghetto. The dancing school, for instance, promotes such a linguistic phenomenon. This ghetto institution demonstrates how integral language is to this narrative of immigrant experience and Americanization, particularly in its intersection with labor and space. Cahan presents the amalgamation of English and Yiddish to simultaneously show what Jake believes is required for Americanization (the use of English) and what remains necessary for this to occur (a retention of Yiddish). In the dance hall, for example, there are different levels of language marking the people's American experience. Cahan writes, "English was the official language of the academy, where it was broken and mispronounced in as many different ways as there were Yiddish dialects represented in that institution" (17). By the mixture of Jewish types who congregate in that space, the "official" language receives a new texture as it is interspersed with various Yiddish dialects. In fact, it only reaches "official" status when it includes both English and Yiddish. The presence of these dialects indicates that elements of Jewishness brought over to America from various old-world origins will become part of the new identity formed within the particular American space. In this case, language has a conspicuous role in the city and in the workplace and thus joins the features that shape the immigrant identity into some form of "American." Language as a narrative device in *Yekl* allows us to recognize that the borders enclosing Jewish ethnicity and the Jewish ghetto can be crossed, whether in dialects or business ventures. But ultimately, boundaries must stay in place as reminders of a distinct Jewish location; just as a distinct Jewish lexicon will

enter into and alter the English language, just as a distinct Jewish business promises the greatest promise for self-determination

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This combination of language, labor, and space, which shapes the production of American identities, therefore reveals that a mixture of old and new worlds is essential to the process. We can return to Jake and Mamie for an illustration. As Cahan introduces Jake, he devotes some time to his physical features as well as to his manner of talk. We learn from the narrative that Mamie's and Jake's facial characteristics can be clearly identified as Jewish. As for Mamie, the narrative informs us that she has "a pretty face of the most striking Semitic case in the whole gathering [at the dancing school]" (19). Like hers, Jake's features are "strongly Semitic naturally," and

they became more so each time they were brightened up by his good-natured boyish smile. Indeed, Jake's very nose which was fleshy and pear-shaped and decidedly not Jewish (*although not decidedly anything else*) seemed to join the Mosaic faith, and even his shaven upper lip looked penitent, as soon as that smile of his made its appearance. (3, my emphasis)

Because Jake is generally noted as Semitic, Cahan suggests that dispelling an old world past for an American present will be that much more difficult. However, in this passage Cahan also argues that when something is marked as Jewish, it has crucial identifying qualities. For Jake, such qualities are not available in his nose: it is not Jewish or anything else and thus, Cahan implies, not anything at all. We can extend this formulation to a broader cultural field. If one claims not to be Jewish, will one then be "not decidedly anything else"? Will one be decidedly *anything*? Anticipating Horace Kallen's belief that immigrants become nothing if they lose cultural particularities, Cahan envisions a profound personal erasure in America if Jewishness is discarded. While he

raises such questions at the beginning of his story, they remain as an undercurrent throughout his entire narrative.<sup>39</sup>

These questions underlie the anxiety characterizing Jake's subsequent effort to secure his place in this American setting when he states, "Once I live in America...I want to know that I live in America" (5). As his words suggest, if any uncertainty of his presence in America as an American arises, then it follows that he will become nothing, at least in the realm of what can be considered "American." Furthermore, Mrs. Kavarsky notes the danger of becoming not anything when the general conditions of America potentially lead to a cultural amnesia. Advising Gitl how to act toward Jake she says, "In America one must take care not to displease a husband. Here one is today in New York and tomorrow in Chicago; do you understand? As if there were any shame or decency here! A father is no father, a wife, no wife--*not'ing!*" (57) She locates the source of the potential trouble in Gitl's refusal to throw away her trappings of Russian life and Americanize, yet the culture of America, as if it strips away the "decency" of their tradition, becomes even more culpable. Furthermore, the mobility undergirding the American dream (socio-economic and physical movement) also leads to erasure. When one follows the path directly away from culture and custom, one loses identifiable markers such as "father" and "wife" and becomes nothing. Indeed, Mrs. Kavarsky's observation corresponds with Jake's actual condition. As the story concludes and Jake denies the parts of him that are definably Jewish--including wife, son, and ghetto home--his agency in controlling his own fate dissipates. If Mrs. Kavarsky is correct, then his disregard of old world "decency" will lead to his being not decidedly anything.

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<sup>39</sup>Cahan also anticipates an inquiry by Theodore Roosevelt, which he explores in "True Americanism." Roosevelt claims that if an immigrant attempts to remain European in America, he or she cannot retain old world status and will not be an American either, but instead "becomes nothing" (22). See also Kallen's "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot, 193.

According to Cahan, therefore, in between the old and new worlds lies a realm where one escapes the danger of becoming "nothing" in America. He hints at the need for a middle ground where a Jewish immigrant can escape the restrictions of the ghetto but, at the same time can avoid depersonalization in this state of nothingness. Jake and Mamie are one example of the depersonalizing extreme. Even Mamie, whose persona becomes no more than a cipher as the representative "shop girl," lacks control over her situation in the economic sector of New York. As a contrast, Gitl and Bernstein achieve some measure of economic power by remaining within the borders of the Jewish ghetto, within a space where Jewish ethnicity and identity continue to be cultivated. Cahan makes it clear that their model holds the most promise for the Jewish American future.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, I would argue that even this conclusion leaves room for further inquiry into Americanization for the Jewish immigrants in New York's Jewish ghetto. While Cahan celebrates the ghetto and sees it as a starting point for assimilation, his narrative also underscores the disadvantages in lacking economic power and control, the general condition his ghetto characters experience. His novel, therefore, invites other stories that investigate methods of controlling business and Americanization, other stories that offer a means by which one can cross over the boundaries of the ghetto without losing cultural contact, and finally, other stories that locate that middle ground between constriction and depersonalization. These stories, consequently, can describe new possibilities for economic control and reconceive living and working spaces for Jewish immigrants. Because of their participation in labor movements that addressed these issues of city space, and their corresponding efforts to expand physical and economic ghetto boundaries, Rose Schneiderman and Theresa Malkiel provide such narratives.

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<sup>40</sup>As editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Cahan responded to many of the concerns that appeared in letters to his newspaper's advice column, the "Bintel Brief." On questions regarding issues of Americanization, Cahan consistently replied that retaining ties to Jewish culture was the best course to take. See *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward*, ed. Isaac Metzker (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

### **Solidarity and Americanization: Schneiderman's "A Cap Maker's Story"**

Rose Schneiderman is a pivotal figure, a literal (and literary) point of transition between the ghetto world that Cahan presents in *Yekl* and the possibilities for transforming that ethnically marked space through labor activism that Malkiel outlines in *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*. Schneiderman was born in Saven, (Russian) Poland and emigrated to New York in the summer of 1890, the year Riis published his reflections on the same Jewish ghetto into which her family moved, and just six years before Cahan would examine life and labor in this ethnically defined space. Once in America, the Schneiderman family set up a household in New York City's Lower East Side and struggled against both the physical conditions of tenement-house life and the economic hardships accompanying sweatshop labor. At first, the family relied on Schneiderman's father for survival, but his death in 1892 determined the fate of his wife and eldest daughter Rose.<sup>41</sup> Deborah Schneiderman was forced to work outside the home to provide the family income, and eventually Rose followed her mother into the workplace, beginning a lifelong association with labor, labor activism, and trade unionism.

Enthusiastically involved in the labor strikes and union movement that marked New York City's garment industry in the first decades of the twentieth century, Schneiderman importantly contributed to the narratives of the New York Jewish ghetto. What Cahan employs as an important backdrop in his tale of ghetto business and Americanization comes to the forefront in the story Schneiderman tells. Her story of the city focuses directly on labor and labor activism and argues that these activities are the

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<sup>41</sup>See Rose Schneiderman's autobiography, written with Lucy Goldthwaite, *All For One* (New York: P. S. Eriksson, 1967). For a discussion of Schneiderman's life and work see Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *A Generation of Women: Education in the Lives of Progressive Reformers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 116-131.

most crucial and conspicuous factors in the process of Americanization. Through the eyes of Schneiderman, economics, as it affects the immigrant sweatshop workers, forges a unique version of solidarity in this particular space; new associations with fellow workers, rather than traditional cultural affinities, become the building blocks upon which immigrants can construct their American identities. Or more precisely, the infusion of economic realities and activist responses into an institution marked by Russian Jewish immigrant culture is essential in the formation of an American, particularly when it allows one to cross the boundaries that Riis believed contained an immigrant within an prescribed space, completely apart from American socio-economic life.

In her 1905 autobiographical sketch, "A Cap Maker's Story," Schneiderman explains how labor activism allows one to upset economic boundaries and to close the divide between immigrant and American. This narrative of her life details the city's economic pressures that defined Jewish immigrants and their identities and presents solutions to overcome these pressures. Her story, written as a response to a successful cap makers strike, joins *Yekl* in the collection of narratives depicting the creation of an American identity through the immigrants' engagement with the labor conditions in New York City's Jewish ghetto. Schneiderman's essay attempts to bridge the personal to become a broader tale of all individuals in the whole of the Jewish settlement. Her story accomplishes this goal by directing its focus on elements of society that bound all the various Jewish peoples of different extraction: the American city and the world of work. Accordingly, she begins her story not in the Polish village from where she emigrated as a young girl, but with a memory of New York: "I was born in some small city of Russian Poland. I don't know the name of the city, and have no memory of that part of my childhood. When I was about five years of age my parents brought me to his country and settled in New York. So my earliest recollections are of living in a crowded street

among the East Side Jewish, for we also are Jews."<sup>42</sup> She introduces herself immediately as an immigrant: other than her name, the first information the readers receive is the fact that she was born in Russian Poland. Although she thereby implies that her immigrant status is central to the narrative structure of this piece, it remains as an undercurrent. Just after Schneiderman discloses the fact, she retreats from her position as foreign-born insofar as she never refers to herself directly again as an immigrant. Thus, she begins a process of simultaneously embracing and rejecting immigrant status. Her strategy suggests that in order to become American, one must have at least point of comparison to mark the difference from which one has come.

While immigrant status directly and indirectly informs the story as a whole, from the outset Schneiderman positions herself solely in New York City, on the Lower East Side, and subsequently grounds her life narrative with the relationship of ethnic identity to space. These two features, space and ethnicity, enabled Riis to draw borders around the Jewish enclave, but Schneiderman's retelling of the Jewish immigrant's story effectively punctures those constrictions. Certainly within this narrative of her early years in America, Schneiderman does not move far from her family's original settlement on Eldridge Street: she identifies her school, Houston Street Grammar, as well as her first job as a cash girl in Ridley's and her second job as a cap maker at Hein & Fox, both within the Jewish ghetto. Although she neglects to map out the locations of the latter two, we can assume that Schneiderman's work experience was consistent with the majority of Jewish immigrants in New York. Few ventured far from their tenement homes for work.<sup>43</sup> Yet her involvement in labor activism offers her the means to expand her previously limited borders. Her narrative informs us that she begins to make relatively good money once she gained skill as a cap maker. However, unreasonable

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<sup>42</sup>Rose Schneiderman, "A Cap Maker's Story," *The Independent* 58 (March 20, 1905), 935-938.

<sup>43</sup>See Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994), 204.

demands (having to buy sewing machines on an installment plan) and uncertain economic futures (unprofitable piece-work and the potential for fires) replicates the economic hopelessness Riis reports bounding the Jewish immigrants' lives. While Schneiderman admits that "we were helpless, no one girl dare stand up for anything alone," and that "matters kept getting worse" especially when the bosses systematically reduced their pay, her narrative demonstrates that she and her sister workers did not remain in a helpless condition for long. Through organization, she and others, mostly female Jewish laborers, challenged the economic boundaries that confined and defined them with an insufferable space--the walls of the sweatshop. As a result, her narrative becomes a story not just of her life, but of the process of expanding borders as space, ethnicity, and labor activism collide.

This collision and its corresponding boundary breaking occurs in the narrative structure of "A Cap Maker's Story" and illustrates the first way Schneiderman's narrative challenges the Riis-like restrictions placed upon ethnic and economic identification of a Jewish immigrant. Throughout this autobiographical sketch, a bildungsroman that doubles as a history of the Jewish woman workers, Schneiderman traces her path to maturity through various stages of labor activities. It is a process presented as a natural growth, each step a clear and necessary precursor to the next. As we have already seen, the process begins with an immigrant background, but one firmly transplanted in the urban space of New York City. From there the chronology of Schneiderman's life follows a typical, and to some degree unremarkable pattern, one that becomes representative for many of those like her. For example, Schneiderman first experiences work responsibilities at a young age with domestic labor, particularly necessary after her father died. As a consequence, she was required to leave school and assist at home, especially to watch her younger brothers and sister. That this world of work was a type of prison for Schneiderman is clear when she then adds, "I was finally *released* by my

little sister being taken by my aunt and the two boys going to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum" (935-936, my emphasis). Only in losing her family, however, Schneiderman gains her freedom to return to school.

Yet family obligations again change her plans when shortly thereafter she had to leave school once more out of family necessity. In the course of the narrative, her schooling, while clearly important to her, receives very little attention. In fact, her return to school is succinctly described within one paragraph and takes a minor role in the chronology when placed next to her labor activities. Moreover, the narration of her schooling, reflecting her actual experience there, is quickly interrupted by economic realities.<sup>44</sup> After a brief description of school, Schneiderman's story has the following transition and topic sentence into the next phase of the story and of her life: "Then I had to leave [school] in order to help support the family" (936). Thus, the chronology is again propelled by the elements of labor. Labor marks time *and* space both in the immigrant's American life and in the structure of the narrative telling that life.

As Schneiderman's story unfolds, work as a marker of time and space dominates the very language of her life's chronology. Just as the "then" points to another stage in the life of the young immigrant girl, adverbial indicators of passing time, usually mundane grammatical characters, take on more interest and greater significance as they march Schneiderman's narrative through stages of work and their corresponding urban locations. From her beginning in a sweatshop to unionization, striking, and ultimate victory over the boss, her story moves through a clearly marked series of events: having "then" to leave school and support her family, she discloses that she took a job in Hearn's as a cash girl, "and *after* working there three weeks changed to Ridley's where I

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<sup>44</sup>For discussion of young women forced to work in sweatshops to support their families, see Glenn, particularly chapter 4. See also Barbara Mayer Wertheimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Anzia Yeziarska's short stories are full of accounts of young women being sent to labor in factories. Of particular note are "America and I" and "Dreams and Dollars."

remained for two and half years" (936). When she realized that this last job promised little economic security she moves on, and she writes, "*So* I got a place in the factory of Hein & Fox" (936). As the chronology continues she employs the same narrative strategy: "I learned the business in about two months, and *then* made as much as the others"; "*After* I had been working as a cap maker for three years it began to dawn on me that we girls needed an organization"; "*Then* came the big strike" (937); "*After* a time I became a member of the National Board [of the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers]"; "*During* this strike period we girls each received \$3 a week"; "*While* the strike lasted I tried to get work in a factory that was not affected." Even when the strike is over and won, the chronology continues because the struggle against difficult labor conditions remains a necessity: Schneiderman makes her assessment of the situation clear when she ends her narrative, "*So* we must stand together to resist" (938). Schneiderman's choice of language in outlining the chronology--the regularity (and, we might add, monotony) of transitional words revealing these stages--lulls the reader into a complacency regarding the inevitability of the order of events. Because the narrative leaves little room for questioning the sequence of activities that shaped Schneiderman's life or the causality behind them (one simply leads to the next), the reader takes for granted that this progression is indeed natural and expected.

But why notice a simple grammatical feature, a common autobiographical narrative strategy? Why is it important that this narrative strives to present Schneiderman's life chronology as natural, as an unquestionable progression of events, one growing from another? One reason is that the story casts a degree of normality on what by many accounts is an extraordinary American life. It is extraordinary because Schneiderman represents the intersection of labor and immigrant ethnicity that ultimately had a broadly felt impact on the economic environment of New York City. In a remarkably short time, her story reveals, Schneiderman rose from obscurity of the

Jewish ghetto to relative prominence in the labor sphere. She therefore models one form of the potential that immigrants dreamed of as they set course for American shores.

Simply put, hers is a story that suggests a first step in the stereotypic "rags to riches" saga so often part of the immigrant history (and indeed mythology) in the United States.

Yet "rags to riches" is not integral to "A Cap Maker's Story." At the very least Schneiderman does not invest such dramatic extraordinariness into her tale. Instead, she focuses on a "normal" chronology that accomplishes two things, both significant in troubling the absolute borders Riis's narrative establishes. First, it makes the extraordinary the ordinary--the great potential of immigrant success is then everywhere and always a possibility. Hers is not an experience to be only seen from the outside looking in; her rise from the tenements to become a public voice for labor pushes against the boundaries of her ghetto existence and the economic constraints sealing the Jewish immigrants within a prescribed city space. Second, Schneiderman's chronology suggests that what occurred to her can and should be the experience for all who labor and struggle with the conditions of work. In this way, Schneiderman's story begins to move beyond the boundaries of her own personal experience and become representative. Furthermore, what is natural for Schneiderman then *naturally* characterizes the progression of labor conditions in the city. In other words, she positions herself in direct relation to a part of New York City's economic history. Hence, her life cannot remain isolated, the space where she struggles and succeeds cannot stay impermeable to change, and her narrative cannot be marginalized when it is central to and defines one of the city's own stories.

Schneiderman's success story thus challenges the economic and spatial restrictions placed upon immigrants in the Jewish ghetto. As it rhetorically expands the borders surrounding her social and economic space of New York City, it also offers an opportunity to break through boundaries between immigrant groups that Riis found

impermeable. In other words, her personal chronology provides a template by which all immigrants can be Americanized. We can see this function by examining her use of pronouns. When following the chronology one not only moves naturally from labor to unionization to striking to victory; one also, and equally as crucial, moves from "they" to "we." Theodore Roosevelt had already demonstrated the significance of grammar to the narrative of assimilation in his 1894 essay "True Americanism." In his essay, Roosevelt offers his prescription for what constitutes an American identity as he focuses on the immigrant. He questions if an immigrant can retain cultural identification from an old-world past and contribute to a new-world present. His answer is an emphatic no. Certainly national interest forms a major part of Roosevelt's concern: he argues that any residue of "alien elements," whether they be habits of speech, custom, or thought bodes ill for national life. Yet he also finds that a failure of an immigrant to assimilate to American citizenship (the characteristics of which he leaves paradoxically undefined) is equally bad on the personal level: the immigrant who fails to be Americanized becomes "nothing at all."<sup>45</sup> This observation interestingly and starkly contrasts what Wirth will suggest years later when he claims that one loses old world ethnicity after encountering the forces of a broader American life (often economic); one is depersonalized, and as I argue, moves toward an invisibility, a nothing-ness.<sup>46</sup>

But not so according to Roosevelt. In fact, his prose indicates the potentially destructive and morally dangerous division between "us" and "them." For instance, he employs a standard rhetoric of suspicion and anxiety when he explains that "the mighty

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<sup>45</sup>Again, Kallen uses this same language in his "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot."

<sup>46</sup>In terms of retaining or discarding ethnic culture, Randolph Bourne is also at odds with Roosevelt and his idea of what constitutes nothing-ness. In "Transnational America," Bourne does not suggest that a depersonalization occurs *per se*, but he argues that the nation is generally impoverished without the rich array of cultures different ethnic peoples bring to it. He observes a process of assimilation resulting not in a "washing out" of old world memories but in old world culture that becomes "more and more intensely real" (248). And, he believes, the ultimate result is not an undesirable outcome. See *The Radical Will: Randolph Bourne--Selected Writings, 1911-1918*, ed. Olaf Hansen (New York: Urizen, 1977).

tide of immigration to our shores has brought in its train much of good and much of evil."<sup>47</sup> He continues, "Whether the good or the evil shall predominate depends mainly on whether these newcomers do or do not throw themselves heartily into our national life, cease to be European, and become Americans like the rest of us."<sup>48</sup> The "us" then indicates the inclusion and exclusion that occurs within the grammar of the passage.

Even more suggestive is his following discussion:

The immigrant of to-day can learn much from the experience of the immigrants of the past, who came to America prior to the Revolutionary War. *We* were then already, what *we* are now, a people of mixed blood. Many of our most illustrious Revolutionary names were borne by men of Huguenot blood.... But the Huguenots were, on the whole, the best immigrants *we* have ever received; sooner than any other, and more completely, *they* became Americans in speech, conviction, and thought.<sup>49</sup>

Roosevelt does not dismiss mixed blood as unacceptable—in fact, it partially forms what composes the "we." He implies that there is an element existing already in the original American population stock (the English immigrant, we presume) that did not require the transformation into the "we." As an already-established standard, all others consequently become "they." These others face the burden of proving themselves worthy to become part of the "we" in speech, conviction, and thought. Thus, Roosevelt leaves open the possibility that there can be a merging of the "we" and the "they."<sup>50</sup> He envisions this happening through a loss of the culture that immigrants carry over from their old-world home.

The grammar of Schneiderman's narrative also indicates a division between "Americans" and the foreign-born, between "us" and "them," but it presents a different

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<sup>47</sup>By the time Roosevelt wrote this essay, Congressional discussions on immigrant issues had already made this rhetoric commonplace. "Wave" and "tides" of Chinese immigrants (or so the "invasion" was characterized by various senators) prompted the Chinese exclusion acts. Roosevelt anticipates Henry James who, in his oft-quoted passage from *The American Scene* (1907) discusses the "swarms" of Jewish immigrants in New York's Jewish ghetto.

<sup>48</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, "True Americanism," *The Forum* (April 1894), 26.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 28 (my emphasis).

<sup>50</sup>This merging, of course, is for select, European immigrant groups. Noting the unassimilable "race" of the Chinese, Roosevelt implies that not all immigrants can be part of the "we."

stance on the process of assimilation. Her use of pronouns points not so much to the national interest undergirding the issue of assimilation; rather, it suggests that personal growth through labor and labor activism enables an immigrant to cross the divide between third and first person identification in the nation. As a result, Schneiderman's grammar, along with the chronology, provides a clearer blueprint for becoming an American. It promises that the division can and will dissolve, and in fact, such a merging already occurs within her prose. For example, when recounting the success in the cap makers' strike, Schneiderman reports, "The result was a victory, which netted *us--I mean the girls*--two dollars increase in our wages on the average" (936, my emphasis). By redefining the first person "us" as the third person "girls," she conflates the two, rhetorically linking herself with the other laborers, and them with her. In this way she extends her story to all. While this change in person suggests a way that the immigrant can become "American," her first person is not necessarily so inclusive. Her narrative stresses that one can only become part of "us" after being tested in the same crucible of labor experience, sharing the same steps of her own chronology.

She highlights this feature in her conception of worker solidarity when she distinguishes herself from newly-landed immigrants, those who followed Schneiderman and many of her fellow "working girls" to America by only a few years. She writes, "In order to take in newcome foreigners *we* have for *them* cut the initiation fees down to one-half what *we Americans* have to pay, and we trust them till *they* get work and their wages" (938, my emphasis). Simply by her separation of "we"s and "they"s, Schneiderman appears to impose a Riis-like boundary between the two: she indicates both a national divide (which at the height of immigration especially was partially understood as an ethnic divide) and economic difference. While the combination of ethnicity and economics formed the foundation of Riis's border drawing, Schneiderman's conception of ethnic and economic difference is more fluid, a temporary

state only. The boundaries between "we" and "they," she implies, have an ever-present potential to change because the work experience that made the other "girls" and her part of the "we" will also naturally structure the history of the immigrants' working lives in America. Although it seems presumptuous for Schneiderman to cast off her immigrant status and designate herself as "American," in the realm of her narrative this is possible because of her involvement in the world of American labor. According to this story, that experience is enough to define a person's identity as such. Schneiderman thus outlines her unique version of Americanization: American identity is created by work and by joining a group of workers. The "newcome" immigrants also will inevitably proceed through the stages of labor and labor activism, and this path will secure them a position in the American "we." Schneiderman's life chronology will be their own route to Americanization.

As her narrative ends, Schneiderman further broadens the scope of her inclusive process of labor-based assimilation. This piece, consistent with her other written work and speeches, serves a definite political function: Schneiderman was renowned for her unwavering enthusiasm as she embraced the union cause. Accordingly, she consistently addressed her readers and listeners as interlocutors. The same is true here. Although "A Cap Maker's Story" is very much an autobiographical re-telling of her American life, it is also a call for her readers to consider more widely the labor situation, particularly as it has an impact on women. And because a majority of the working women were immigrants, it also asks that readers consider labor's impact on the foreign-born.

Ultimately, the combination of narrative features suggests that Schneiderman's slim autobiography is more than just a propaganda piece. A collaboration of the practical, political, and propagandistic features of this story, its self-conscious grammar, strategic use of time and space centering around economics, as well as its emergence as a representative tale all compose a document that is more literary than most critics might

argue. In that literariness, the author has the power to fold the readers within its representativeness. Because women and immigrants are important signifiers, Schneiderman's readers must form an association with them (at least narratively) in order to comprehend their situation. As a result, they would (vicariously) participate in the same chronology of work, the same Americanizing experience. Hence, she proposes that all, including recent immigrants, including the general reader of her sketch, will join the "we." Schneiderman concludes her sketch as follows, directing her words as much to the reader as to her union of working women: "So we must stand together to resist, for we will get what we can take--just that and no more" (938, my emphasis). Now as part of the "we," her readers have also been Americanized according to her terms and drawn into the labor movement; through her story they have, like Schneiderman, suffered the harsh labor conditions to become an American. The narrative, in other words, is not so much about her life as it is about the transformation of her individual experience into one for a collective "we." Thus, her story opens the community's borders for a more inclusive group. As Schneiderman presents it, the process inevitably erases the prior strong ethnic affiliation, and to this extent, "A Cap-Maker's Story" proves Wirth's thesis of leveling correct. Yet, depersonalization is not the end to the chronology Schneiderman presents. By joining the "we" as an American laborer, she substitutes the solidarity of ethnics with the solidarity of laborers--a different, yet still identifiable class. The active role in making oneself an American by participating in unionizing and striking offers an alternative to the potential meaninglessness of life within the laboring forces of the city.

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If Schneiderman overcomes depersonalization through conversion to worker status, what role might ethnicity play? In "A Cap Maker's Story," ethnicity is apparently

understood as inherent in immigrant status, in the space defined as Jewish (living among the "East Side Jews"), and in family bonds and obligations. Yet as the story unfolds, Schneiderman largely elides the issue of ethnicity. Paradigmatic of that narrative strategy, Schneiderman's family, an important shaping force in her early life, soon drops out of the story completely. Replacing the biological family is the family of workers--the group one must become part of to be "American"--so that by the end of the story, the most important sympathies are among work associates, not family members. Suggestive of Wirth's claim that new kinships follow from processes of urbanization, just before her conclusion that assimilates all into the laborers' "we," Schneiderman writes, "The girls and women by their meetings and discussions come to understand and sympathize with each other, and more and more easily they act together. It is the only way in which they can hope to hold what they now have or better present conditions" (938). What might have been the provision of the familial bond, an ease in relations and sense of togetherness, has been carried over to the realm of the workplace and carried out by her "sister workers."<sup>51</sup> As Schneiderman conceives it, ethnicity, if based on the immigrant family, therefore becomes less of a determining feature than is work in the process of Americanization. The division of what might be termed immigrant ("ethnic") and "American" is part of a political and rhetorical strategy, and thus remains as a necessary subtext for Schneiderman to revise her notion of what constitutes Americanization. While Schneiderman obliquely introduces ethnic designation as part of the process, she consigns it to secondary importance.

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<sup>51</sup>"Sister workers" is a phrase common in Schneiderman's writing and speeches for labor causes. See for instance her Metropolitan Opera speech, which she delivered on April 3, 1911 at a mass meeting called by the WTUL to respond to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911. Her speech was published in a *New York Times* article, "Mass Meeting Calls For New Fire Laws," 4 April 1911.

**Ethnicity, Labor, and Assimilation: Malkiel's *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker***

If only secondary in the estimation of Schneiderman, the role of ethnicity in the creation of an American identity is primary in a further revision of Americanization that Theresa Serber Malkiel presents in *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*. In many ways Malkiel's narrative builds on the foundation Schneiderman establishes in "A Cap Maker's Story": it also re-considers American identity but insists on re-incorporating ethnic identification into a model of Americanization. In doing so, *The Diary* is consistent with history. As a result of the predominant Jewish immigrant presence in the garment trades, when we understand labor as playing a central role in the process of assimilation, we also must acknowledge that ethnicity occupies a parallel position. That is, considerations of ethnicity have always played a role in determining what constitutes an American. Certainly Theodore Roosevelt had this in mind when he provided a template for the American "we." Regarding this intersection of ethnicity and labor, Cahan's narrative considers what the more satisfying, positive form of Americanization is, and he provides us at least two alternatives: one, an attempt to throw all old world culture aside to escape the boundaries and become part of an economic sphere outside traditional Jewishness, and two, an attempt to remain in the ghetto associated with an ethnic-specific business within an ethnic-specific space. His narrative choice is ethnic identification. In contrast, Schneiderman suggests that immigrant status, as well as ethnic and familial affiliation naturally become less important as one takes on an "American" identity through labor activism and, in fact, something to be overcome as the "they" must be changed into the "we" of laboring Americans. Malkiel's position on Americanization extends both Cahan's and Schneiderman's as a combination of the two models: her story argues that Jewish immigrants can radically break economic borders, *and* they can (and must) retain

a sense of ethnicity in doing so.<sup>52</sup> In the process, as Malkiel's narrative demonstrates, they are then able to break all the boundaries to re-define personal identity and, in the process, re-envision the city space.

Ethnicity and labor come to the forefront of Malkiel's exploration of Americanization because these two elements of immigrant life were central to the way she defined her own American identity. Like Schneiderman and Cahan, Malkiel was a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe, arriving in the United States in 1871. According to labor historian Françoise Basch, soon after settling in New York, Malkiel began sweatshop work in the cloak-making trade and gained interest in labor activism relatively quickly. In 1892 she joined the Russian Workingman's Club and in 1894 began working for the unionization of her shop. On a class and economic level, her life then dramatically diverged from the path Schneiderman followed. Malkiel married a lawyer and subsequently lived in relative comfort without the need to work herself. Though distant economically from the sweatshop workers at this stage in her life, Malkiel remained with the immigrant working women in spirit, mostly through her interest and involvement in socialism, a movement strong among a variety of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe.<sup>53</sup> In fact, one of Malkiel's goals through her activism in socialism was to direct the party's attention to the plight of the working girl. She carried out this goal by her journalistic efforts as a writer for the socialist *New York Call*. As a writer for this newspaper, Malkiel gave a voice to the working girls participating in the shirtwaist strike

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<sup>52</sup>In some sense, Malkiel's contribution to this conversation on Americanization is a narrative representation of Wirth's and Cahan's notion of second settlement: economics boundaries are transcended but not at the absolute cost of ethnicity.

<sup>53</sup>See Hubert Perrier, "The Socialists and the Working Class in New York, 1890-96" in *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 122-124; Howard Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992), 174-176; and Glenn, 179-186.

of late 1909 and early 1910: parts of what would later be published as *The Diary* appeared in that paper in serial form as the strike was underway.<sup>54</sup>

The full version of *The Diary* was published in 1911 after the strike had been resolved, a resolution that left several of the working women, particularly those in the large shops without the concessions for which they spent thirteen weeks on strike. While little is known about the publication of Malkiel's book, we can assume that she felt a continued need to raise the public's awareness about the plight of the working women. Examined on one level, the book appears simply as over-wrought praise for Jewish women workers and their cause. However, if we can see beyond the propagandistic prose—a task made possible by Cahan's and Schneiderman's literary consideration of the important intersection of work, immigration, and Americanization—we find that Malkiel's book does much more. Despite its didacticism and one-dimensional rendering of characters as sounding boards for strike rhetoric, *The Diary of the Shirtwaist Striker* is a story about the centrality of ethnicity to the processes of becoming an American. As in the case of Cahan and Schneiderman, imbedded within the language is this new way of looking at Americanisms, a new way of understanding both American identity through ethnicity and immigrant experience and, correspondingly, a new way of understanding a cityscape as it both affects and registers the impact of those Americanized within its boundaries.

To understand how this narrative of the shirtwaist strike goes beyond mere propaganda and emerges as a literary text, we can first look at the story's narrator. This choice by Malkiel is the most obvious narrative strategy used to revise the way Jewish immigrants and their ghetto setting are understood. Mary, Malkiel's narrator, is not a Jewish immigrant like the author who created her. Rather she is a "free-born" American

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<sup>54</sup>See Francois Basch's introductory essay in her edited version of *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1990) for a discussion of Malkiel's life, 49-62.

woman who is a shirtwaist worker, laboring not out of the economic desperation that forced her Jewish counterparts into the sweatshops, but to supplement an already comfortable lifestyle. As Mary begins her diary, her words display an air of flippancy regarding her own labor, her participation in the strike, and the goals of the Jewish women workers who were able to inspire the approximately 20,000 shirtwaist workers to leave their jobs.<sup>55</sup> In her first entry on November 23, 1909, Mary writes:

Ha, ha, ha! that's a joke. By Jove, it is. I'm a striker. I wonder what Jim'll have to say to this?

I must say I really don't know why I became one--I went down just because everyone else in the workroom did. They did try to explain it all to us girls, but all I could make out from the woman's speech was when she raised her eyes to the ceiling and exclaimed, like they do on the stage: "Sisters, mine, we are all with you!"--the lot of good it'll do us.<sup>56</sup>

Mary, beginning the story looking from the outside in, sees the strike as entertainment, and her striker status as a novelty. More importantly, she describes a cognitive division when it comes to the meaning of the strike: she cannot understand much of the woman's speech that incites the strike. The unintelligibility of the speech to Mary perhaps reflects the historical fact that at the Cooper Union meeting the previous evening (Nov. 22, 1909), the majority of the speeches were in Yiddish.<sup>57</sup> If the leader in Mary's shop is Jewish (most leaders in the shirtwaist strike were), the speech could also very well have been in Yiddish, thus creating a linguistic divide between Mary and the other strikers. However, this gap in languages is only a symbol of a larger separation: as a non-Jewish,

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<sup>55</sup>The origin of many labor unions is linked often with Jewish leaders, people such as Cahan who was a devoted socialist/anarchist in first in Lithuania and remained an activist in New York after emigration. See *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, 300-305. Also, the shirtwaist strike itself came largely as a result of Jewish leadership in the New York Local 25 of the Ladies Waistmakers Union, a subdivision of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), which was headed by Jewish organizers. For the history of the origins of the strike see also Wertheimer, Woloch, and Clark and Wyatt.

<sup>56</sup>Theresa Serber Malkiel, *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press/Cornell University, 1990), 81. Subsequent references to Malkiel's book will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>57</sup>According to *The Survey* (Dec. 18, 1909), the speeches were mostly in Yiddish, and once the general decision to strike was reached, all who filled the Cooper Union rose and said the Jewish oath. See McClymer for the *Survey* article and other primary and secondary analyses on the meeting.

non-immigrant worker, Mary can neither understand the need for the strike nor comprehend the suffering of the immigrant women that led to it.

Because of this division from what the strike means and how it is understood by the narrator, we must ask of Malkiel's text some fundamental questions. Why use a non-immigrant, a non-Jewish narrator to tell a story that, in the end, is about a strike strongly characterized as ethnically Jewish? Why use an American-born woman to narrate the processes by which Jewish immigrant laborers become "Americans"? And why locate a process of Americanization in striking, an activity with its socialist affiliations that were often considered strongly un-American? Basch argues that the American-born narrator is part of an anti-racist pedagogy that Malkiel employs in her narrative. In other words, an Anglo-American character telling the story that appears to be primarily about Jewish immigrant concerns serves several functions. First and perhaps most obvious, Malkiel apparently felt that such a spokesperson would offer a more objective, more palatable message to a wider variety of readers. Basch adds that by this choice Malkiel is able to "stress the place of the ghetto in American society."<sup>58</sup> Mary's growing appreciation for the Jewish people, then, turns a seemingly disinterested eye toward one of the ethnically-identified city spaces Riis described with horror and scorn and, with her focus on Jewish labor activism, grants the place legitimacy in the national consciousness. Such a narrative focus, Malkiel implies, allows her to address the paradox through which strikers become Americans. While raising the point, however, Basch fails to explain how Mary, in spite of her status as a non-Jew and non-immigrant, can illustrate the importance of a people and a place both identified as ethnically Jewish. What we find in the narrative is that Malkiel alters the standard Americanization story so that to become American, one must attain a closer identification with that considered un-American: appreciation for people, place, and an activity all identified as Jewish is the first step, Malkiel suggests in that

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<sup>58</sup>See Basch's introduction to *The Diary*, 65-66.

conversion. Furthermore, Mary's narrative position allows Malkiel to demonstrate that this form of Americanization must include clear inter-ethnic, and even inter-religious relationships. For instance, the reformulation of Christianity and Judaism into a shared religion of trade unionism provides a cultural support to this process.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Mary's role demonstrates the need to recognize ethnicity in defining a people and a place. The American-born narrator, who is presented without ethnicity, so to speak, ironically proves that through Jewishness and labor activism an American people and an American place are created.<sup>60</sup>

As we have seen, Mary begins without understanding the Jewish concerns. Yet even though her narrative position as an observer of the Jewish strikers remains in place, she gradually begins to identify with the cause and see value in the features of these women strikers she clearly defines as Jewish.<sup>61</sup> Throughout her diary, Mary thus enacts a simultaneous identification with and distancing from Jewish immigrant concerns. To understand how this seemingly contradictory viewpoint reveals an alternative Americanization, we must begin again with language. Like Schneiderman's model in her 1905 autobiographical sketch, the dynamic of Americanization through labor and Jewishness here lies within the grammar that Malkiel uses. If we return briefly to her opening diary entry (November 23, 1909), we find that she identifies a division between groups of people formed because of language (or inability to communicate across ethnic lines): "*They did try to explain it all to us girls, but all I could make out from the woman's speech was when she raised her eyes to the ceiling and exclaimed... 'Sisters,*

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<sup>59</sup>For discussions of the role of religion in Jewish immigrant life and how it figured (or in most cases was replaced by) Jewish labor activism see Cahan's own account in *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, as well as Chametzky and Gary Edward Endelman, *Solidarity Forever: Rose Schneiderman and the Women's Trade Union League* (New York: Arno Press, 1982).

<sup>60</sup>Basch also importantly notes that another reason Malkiel may have used an American-born worker to tell the story of the strike is in anticipation of an anti-Semitic reaction (66).

<sup>61</sup>Although Basch also notices the simultaneous identification and distancing Malkiel writes into Mary's character, she sees this mainly as part of Malkiel's anti-racist pedagogy and not, as I argue, an integral part of the author's re-consideration of identity and space as American.

mine, we are all with you!" (81, my emphasis). It is useful to note that Mary is not even yet part of a collective "we" that might be opposite of the "they." She remains an isolated individual. Furthermore, Mary does not name the "they"; she only identifies them later in the passage as women. The division is even wider because they are yet unnamed, unidentified. Their anonymity is not insignificant in terms of Malkiel's general project to raise awareness of the conditions the strikers faced. She suggests that one of the difficulties Jewish immigrant women, especially those in demeaning sweatshop jobs literally hidden from the light of day and recognition, is that they had no identity. She says as much in the book's dedication: "To the nameless heroines of the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike this Diary is lovingly dedicated by the author...." Malkiel directly responds to a general public that either ignored the strike or was unwilling to understand the labor conditions that prompted it. Here, Mary simply reflects those commonly held attitudes.<sup>62</sup>

This original separation from the linguistic and/or cognitive world of the strikers soon gives way to a steady breakdown of that distance on Mary's part. Even within the same entry she goes on to provide names (Ray Goldovsky is the speaker), and ethnic identities. As a result of Mary's quickly changing position regarding the strikers and, consequently, the strike itself, her diary mirrors Schneiderman's story of self-growth through labor activism. The strike and the coinciding affiliation with the Jewish women, propels a new maturation process for Mary. She writes, "And yet, it's a good thing, this strike is; it makes you feel like a real grown-up person. But I wish I'd feel about it like

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<sup>62</sup>McClymer observes that the *New York Times* was largely critical of the strike and, as a result, were slow to report on it or identify any of its participants. The general strike that included at least 20,000 shirtwaist workers began on November 23, 1909, but McClymer reminds us, smaller strikes were already underway before the mass work stoppage. These small work stoppages got no media attention, he reports, until Mary Dreier, a prominent woman in New York society and president of the WTUL, was arrested on November 5, 1909. See McClymer's *The Triangle Strike and Fire*, 26-27. See also Alice Kessler-Harris who discusses the general difficulty Jewish women labor organizers faced in finding support for the union cause. In "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and their Union," *Labor History* 17.1 (Winter 1976): 5-23.

them Jew girls do. Why, their eyes flash fire as soon as they commence to talk about the strike" (81). At this point Mary's words reflect a deep division between herself and the others, but simply by indicating who speaks and what their speech reveals about the Jewish strikers' character, she begins to pull herself into their ranks. In fact, work becomes an equalizer of what ethnicity apparently separates, or so she implies in her November 25th entry in which she further exemplifies what "the speaker" says. She demonstrates that through a feature of work (here the strike), the ability to communicate, to understand improves: "The speaker justly said that it makes no difference to what nationality we girls belong, or of what religion we are, so long as we have to work one is as good as the other, for all have one and the same interest--to make life a bit easier" (86). Malkiel demonstrates that the religion of labor--undergirded certainly by the dogma of socialism--is the first step in bridging the gap between an inscrutable "they" and an isolated "I." In Mary's estimation, labor is the reference point that enables the two opposites to exist alongside each other in the common "we."

Among the direct results of the joining of "they" and "I" is bridging the divide Mary discloses in her opening entry. At first she found the speaker's language and ideas incomprehensible. Yet in a later entry we learn that these two representatives of the divide, Mary and the speaker, Ray Goldovsky, have now joined forces: first "Ray and I were walking about near Hayman's shop too frightened to say much to anybody" and then "Ray and I stayed out until after 12 o'clock" (90). The (conjunctive) merging between the opposites suggests that, as labor writes them, the native-born and the foreign-born are not fundamentally different. The language of the narrative joins the two more closely as Mary concludes this day's entry. She explains how she reacted to her fiancé's cool response to her labor activism by meditating on the strike, "Yes, it's ours, mine as much as the others" (91). Not only has she begun to associate with the other

strikers, but she has taken possession of the strike, and thus has further advanced Malkiel's scheme of cross-ethnic identification via labor.

In fact, the grammatical structure of labor relations begins to subvert and replace the language representing other associations, most noticeably familial bonds. A month after the general strike commences, Mary mediates on what constitutes the family. Contemplating her father's sure anger at her potential arrest (the threat from the police is another binding force among strikers), she writes, "I'm most beginning to think that blood ties ain't everything after all. There's my own sister, Sis. We were nursed by the same mother, brought up under the same roof, and yet we've absolutely nothing in common" (147). Here Mary argues that neither the same domestic setting nor familial nurturing is enough to bind one to another. In particular, these traditional forms of collectivity, of defining the place for the "we," are insufficient and inefficacious for the personal maturation when set against the realm of work relationships. Supporting this new understanding of family, Mary continues,

While I was at home and as giddy as [Sis] herself we used to scrap at every opportunity. Since I grew up and became interested in other things we scarcely spoke to each other. But here's little Ray--no blood relation of mine--a different religion, from another land, and still and all I'm sure she's more to me than any sister could be.... It seems to me that this world of ours will be a better place to live in when people grow less selfish, stop thinking only of themselves and their flesh and blood and share their affection with all good people, tie or no tie. (147)

It is at this point that the merging of the divergent cultural and social polarities introduced at the beginning of the narrative appears complete. Ray and Mary have become the "sister workers" to whom Schneiderman refers: their relationship through labor activism and striking has created a stronger bond than family. Consent *is* stronger than descent.<sup>63</sup>

Within that consent, the merging of the Jew and non-Jew into a new type of family bond through labor, the worker has matured. According to Schneiderman, this is

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<sup>63</sup>For a discussion of "consent" and "descent" see the introduction to Werner Sollors's *Beyond Ethnicity*.

the relationship that enables one to claim an American identity. Malkiel suggests something similar. Like in Schneiderman's story, the family relationship becomes secondary to the work relationship, and it is only through the latter that one can truly be an American. In *The Diary*, work also becomes the transforming force. Since labor is the great equalizer (erasing class and ethnic distinctions), it also is the reason that the Jewish immigrant becomes an American. Consequently, the merging of the native-born and the foreign-born enables the immigrant to adopt characteristics of an American identity. Therefore, when the narrative continues to take the initial "they" and "I"/"we" and blend them into "us [working] girls" (110, 116 and 139), it seems as if the progression has moved the "they" into the "we." Yet, Malkiel's book makes it clear that the movement goes the other way as well, and in this way advances Schneiderman's model of Americanization. As the journal entries accrue, we find that a distinct feature of this merging is not an erasure of immigrant and ethnic characteristics at all. Rather, when the blending occurs, Jewish ethnicity comes to the forefront; it is, in fact, intensified rather than diluted by the emphasis on the American workplace, on labor activism. In this way, Malkiel presents a step beyond the notions of assimilation that both Cahan and Schneiderman offer, particularly in light of dominant narratives of the city established by the sociological frames from which Riis and Wirth write. Malkiel's alternative in *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker* suggests that the simultaneous movement between "they" and "we"—the coinciding identification and distancing that her narrator provides—enables an economically and culturally profitable assimilation to occur, one that expands the previously restrictive boundaries through labor activism, *and* one that retains ethnicity in the process. In fact, Jewish ethnicity becomes an inextricable component of this new American identity. The relationship between Mary and her co-workers demonstrates the evolution of this identity.

One way Jewish ethnicity comes to the fore in Americanizing through labor is education. The Women's Trade Union League made the education of women a primary goal, particularly in the strategies and advantages in trade unionism. Like Schneiderman, who as president of the New York chapter of the WTUL promoted educational programs, Malkiel also supported the WTUL's goal of education.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, *The Diary* discloses her interest in an education for women centered squarely on labor and union activity. But Malkiel also challenges how the WTUL envisioned the educational process. The League's leaders--mostly American-born, middle- and upper-class women--believed it would have to educate the immigrant workers. In contrast, Malkiel's narrative explains that the Jewish immigrant workers provide all the education other strikers and leaders of labor organizations would need. Mary, for instance, finds that her education comes not through any offering of the WTUL, but by the daily example of the Jewish women strikers. Early in the strike, Mary refers again to the speakers, no longer as women she cannot understand, but women who now are her teachers. She writes that "one of these talking women" claims that distance from work may allow time and space for reflection on their labor situation, an opportunity "to see and learn things that we could have never known anything about." Mary finds this statement logical and continues, "What I've learned in these last two days is enough to put me wise to many a wrong" (84). Specifically, she has learned that the strike is beneficial because it "teaches us self-respect" (88). In addition, education, like work, performs an equalizing function. At the

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<sup>64</sup>From "A Cap Maker's Story" to her later autobiography *All For One*, Schneiderman's written works clearly demonstrate that she saw hope for immigrant women workers through education. For example, she was a strong promoter of the WTUL's summer institute for working women at Bryn Mawr College. See *All For One*, chapter 14. It is also important to note that while Malkiel believed in many of the WTUL's goals, she remained somewhat suspicious of its intentions, especially since its leaders before Schneiderman, to Malkiel's mind, did not always understand the working woman's plight. On this concern, Mary becomes her mouthpiece, occasionally criticizing the failure of the wealthy to contribute more substantially to dwindling strike funds. Of course, Malkiel had to temper her criticism because she too was not required to work to support her family. Here again, Mary's position as a free-born American works to Malkiel's advantage. See McClymer who discusses Malkiel's suspicion of the wealthy WTUL benefactors, 49-50.

beginning of the strike, Mary believes that she must experience a *devolution* if she is to have any association with the majority of strikers. However, when she later acknowledges an equality with the Jewish immigrants, an equality created in part through labor-based education, she admits to her *evolution* to a higher moral standard. Elsewhere she writes, "As I come to think of my first entrance into this battle I can't help wondering at the amount of knowledge I've gained" (168). Her new awareness of the economic situation around her soon merges with a greater self-knowledge and self-respect, complexities in her character she could not understand simply as a "free-born American."

As Malkiel suggests, Mary's new identity through labor activism and education necessarily includes ethnicity. While labor activism itself helps to create a unified body of women workers (the "us"), it also creates unification *through* association with the Jewish experience. Although the WTUL proposes to be the force for education, the Jewish immigrants actually teach Mary methods of survival in the city's economic sector. Throughout the narrative, when faced with the very real difficulties of hunger, arrests, and humiliation, it is the Jewish women who instruct the others how to act and retain integrity. As Mary puts it, "I'd like to show the cops and everybody else that the Jew girls aren't the only brave and sensible ones--us Americans are beginning to see a thing or two, which is bound to knock the foolish pride out of us. We, too, can stand up for a principle" (94). If one is to adopt a character fit to this American labor situation, it seems, one must become like a Jew. In this sense, the issue of education clearly demonstrates Malkiel's scheme of identification as an important component in the process of creating American identities. As Schneiderman suggests, labor activity in America's economic environment necessarily creates a type of American. Malkiel goes one step further in suggesting that if Jewish ethnicity characterizes that environment, the resulting Americanism will include some component of Jewish identity. In fact, this moment in the text reveals the distinction of Jewish ethnicity that remains in suspension. In this

case, the "we," made up of workers, is not yet the collective "we" of dignified Americans that the Jewish immigrants are becoming. As Mary portrays it, one must become like a Jew, but it is in taking on that designation that one becomes "American." That is, Malkiel presents an Americanization that is built upon distinct ethnicity. The process of creating a new American identity begins with joining a family of workers but is not attained until one enters a new form of solidarity through a deeper awareness of Jewish ethnicity. Rather than disavowing ethnic identification, accepting it through the labor activism and the education it provides enables one to survive the harsh labor conditions of New York's economic landscape and, ultimately, become a better American. Malkiel's narrative therefore employs a reverse-assimilation of sorts: to become a dignified American, one first must be a worker, and second must be like a Jewish worker. In order to demonstrate this, Malkiel again relies on her narrator's position as an "free-born American" telling the story of Jewish immigrant women. As her identification with these laborers and their concerns heightens throughout the narrative, Mary, in effect, becomes an exemplary Jew. Only then does she become most American because, finally, she fully participates in the labor practices that, as Wirth implies, releases one from the type of isolation characterizing immigrant status. But at the same time, her distance as a non-Jew is also significant. If she becomes more American by sympathizing with that outside her own cultural purview, she also recognizes that a group has much to gain by maintaining ethnic ties, and that an immigrant group, such as Jewish women laborers, can and will direct their own Americanization. In the process, Mary understands, they will also shape the setting in which they live as Jewish *American* women.

This new definition of Jewish American women through a native-born striker has ramifications beyond redefining immigrant and non-immigrant identities. This labor-oriented, ethnically-characterized "American" also helps to re-write the city. At one point in the course of Mary's newly emerging persona as American through Jewish labor

activism, she travels outside New York City and draws attention to the numerous boundaries characterizing the city around her. She ponders the condition of fellow strikers as they are defined by the city's harsh labor conditions: "How many of [the working girls] are pining away in the close, stifling air of our big city, where the buildings are growing even taller, the number of people larger and the ways of earning a living harder" (170). To this point in the narrative, Malkiel has concentrated on the actors in the strike; however here she redirects her attention to the setting. In so situating the laborers within the physical and economic boundaries of the city, she highlights three elements crucial to her own narrative and to the history of this strike's impact on New York: one, the insufferable conditions working women experienced in the city; two, the impact of immigrants on a growing urban population; and three, the city itself as an animate being, changing according to the pressure of capital and labor. Up to this point in the narrative, New York as a city has had little significance; it exists as a non-specific, non-essential space. But when appraised by Mary, a working girl seeing it through the lens of the strike, it becomes a place of importance to both strikers and their cause. In her observation, the city is transformed. After labeling it a center of oppression, Mary juxtaposes on that image a sentimental fondness: upon her return from a fundraising trip for the strike, she exclaims, "After all, there ain't no place like little old New York" (172). Although the city denotes suffocation, it also promises the security of home, a touchstone for personal identification. Malkiel's narrative suggests that once the city becomes a "place" and the city's impact on the worker recognized, the city and the boundaries within which it confines the laborer are not absolute; they can be re-defined.

Thus, through her participation in the strike, through her identification with the Jewish ethnicity as a marker of differences and sameness, Mary re-sees the city. She recognizes the psychological weight with which its economics burdens the immigrant, and at the same time she finds positive potential in the sense of "home" it provides. The

condemnation and sentimentalizing yoked together in Mary's observation suggests a joining of the security Cahan's Gitl foresees in her ghetto grocery shop and the freedom Schneiderman's collectivity of workers claim in their successful strike against the binding of the ghetto sweatshop. Malkiel's narrative then offers a composite of the various ways that these conceptions of American identity, once constituted via labor and economics, interact with their environment and, ultimately, shape the city through their unique narratives.

Malkiel foregrounds this interaction between geography and identity as Mary's growing activism in the strike puts her in daily proximity with the Jewish workers and with the street scenes that form the setting of the event. On December 3rd, for example, Mary discusses a parade of strikers to the mayor's office and specifies the connection between personal identification and place. She writes, "But you never can tell what changes may come over us--here I was, a real born American, marching in broad daylight through the Bowery, a big sign in hand and as proud as I could be, for I was on my way to stand up for my rights, and didn't our forefathers stand up for theirs! They not only marched through the Bowery, but fought on it" (103). Mary again notes that her status as "American" undergoes a transformation, but particularly significant here is how the setting equally promotes that change: *who she is* is determined by *where she is* and *what she does* in that place. In addition, her activity becomes part of a continuum of rebellion that occurred on this place, that characterized this place. Although her analogy to the revolutionary soldiers may appear strained, Malkiel clearly stresses that place as a location of activism importantly constitutes America and Americans: the forefathers helped to determine what the nation was by fighting on the Bowery. Furthermore, the activity in making certain claims regarding identity--whether it be for an independent American people or for viability as "American" workers--confers a certain meaning on the setting of that activity. With this odd juxtaposition of current strikers and prior

revolutionaries, Malkiel strives to re-see the Bowery as not just a part of the Jewish ghetto, but as a center and foundation of Americanism, or more accurately, a new Americanism characterized by a Jewish immigrant cause.

Mary's association with the strike allows a further re-seeing of the city that she reveals by crossing the various borders it establishes and enforces. Mary begins by narratively underlining the physical boundaries around the Jewish ghetto as she moves beyond them. On Christmas day, Mary takes her fiancé on a tour of the area, first to that representative of the Russian ghetto destitution and then to that suggestive of a Wirthian depersonalized center of economic success (Fifth Avenue). Leaving the scene of the strike, Mary leads Jim up Fourteenth Street to the Salvation Army headquarters to witness the poor begging for food. In her diary she notes how the extreme poverty of the people opens Jim's eyes to a world from which he had also been isolated. The knowledge she gains, therefore, allows boundaries that isolate different centers of existence—inside and outside the Jewish ghetto—to be seen. Yet at the same time, they dissolve as they are crossed. She writes, "As I looked at him it struck me for the first time that Jim was what he had been because he knew no better, because he didn't take the trouble to see all sides of life" (150). This dawning awareness on Jim's part is the first of many that Mary notes: he now can see her as a laborer, a striker, an associate with Jewish immigrants, and a woman. Malkiel suggests, therefore, that this physical border crossing breaks the path for crossing related social barriers, particularly one's understanding of ethnicity and gender.

By crossing these various borders, Malkiel also demonstrates that one can move from just re-seeing the city to re-creating it. Mary discloses this potential when she reports the impact of their continued walk to Fifth Avenue where they go, she states, "to let [Jim] note the difference" (150). The scene they encounter there is not detailed; we only hear about it through the words of Jim, now recoiling from "these people" that

"gorge themselves with all good stuff, while most of the others have to stand in line in order to get their leavings" (150). Malkiel thus implies that the decadence is simply imbedded in the signifier "Fifth Avenue" itself, but additionally, that what needs to be observed and described (and defined) regarding this space, should come from the eyes of those just liberated from constricting boundaries. It is in the one transformed that the city is truly seen. Of course, Jim's reaction is easily predictable now that his sympathies have been converted; Mary's success in "awakening another human heart" begins to sound very much like a cliché. More interesting, however, is the fact that the difference can be recognized once one has experienced the process of assimilation that Mary has begun to go through: it is only by being a striker that the scene on Fourteenth Street makes sense, and only by understanding this destitution can one actually see what happens on Fifth Avenue. Therefore, the strike experience allows one to cross over both physical and cognitive barriers. In this way, one can see the city for the first time and in that seeing, create it as well. Or at least one outlines the economic extremities that characterize different parts of the city in order to lay a foundation for an alternative, one between the destitution Riis sees and the depersonalization Wirth intuits. This foundation enables Mary both to *distance* herself from the city as a site of economic hardship for the working girls and to *identify* the space as home when she names the city for the first time in her diary: "After all, there ain't no place like little old New York" (172).

But how is one to actually re-create the city? Toward the end of the diary, Malkiel suggests a possibility by turning our attention to the journal itself. Multiple references to the "notebook" at this stage of the story suggest that narrative and its particular language have the power to shape identity and space. In a meta-textual turn, Mary considers the immediate impact of her diary if it could be read by those of whom she has spoken critically, but more broadly the role of the narrative to construct the "truth" as it is seen by one at the intersection of labor, ethnicity, and gender. She writes,

Lord! it's a good thing that nobody reads this notebook of mine--I scarcely think they could make anything out of it. Some might think me quite mad, and yet I'm keeping as closely to the subject as I possibly can, but I'm speaking of life as it strikes me every minute of the day and there're so many different things to think of that I'm at times quite puzzled to know what is of the most importance.

But then there's hardly anything I meet with now-a-days that ain't worth while recording--some day it may help to steady the ground under my children's feet. Us girls are the pioneer fighters for the women's rights, for them rich women don't do much except talk a lot, while us girls show in reality how women can stand up for their rights.

I talked over the injunction business with Jim today. He was just furious that these men should have to rob us of our freedom and forbid us to tell the truth. "Don't worry over it, Mary," Jim tried to console me, at the same time, "A new truth never had the majority with it; it's the dreamers, Mary, it's them that have dragged us up to our present position. I'm willing for them to call me a dreamer to sneer and laugh at my ideals; he laughs best, Mary, who laughs last. (196-197)

I have quoted this passage at length because, despite the clichés scattered throughout Mary's words, it reveals a richness in the narrative beyond the propagandistic surface, a surface deflecting most serious attempts at literary criticism. With the assistance of Jim, who as we've already seen is changed via labor and ethnicity, Mary outlines a new process for telling the truth, and this process relies on one's being a "dreamer." One can and must record what she sees, and everything is worth recording; but at the same time everything is worth seeing through the lens of her interpretation. And, as I've argued, her focus on the elements of this New York cityscape is determined by a reorientation into the status of a Jewish worker. Although she may be "puzzled to know what is of the most importance," she is still the recorder, the namer of people and city. As such, she determines a future of interpretations as well. Most significantly, she performs this task by means of a literary text. Thus, Malkiel's tale, often read as a piece far from literary, in the end bases its potential to inspire change in the literary. It is the power of narrative and its language that enables the Jewish immigrant experience, in its direct engagement with labor strife, to re-write the city and re-write American identity.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Hutchins Hapgood and Artistic Preservation of the Jewish Ghetto**

*The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker* unarguably sets out to influence early twentieth-century readers' feelings toward the insufferable labor conditions of the New York City garment district. In that goal, it also strives to condition an understanding of the dignity and importance of the Jewish immigrant as well as the locale in which they live. Ultimately, Malkiel suggests that the power to accomplish these tasks resides in the narrative. Hutchins Hapgood concurs. In *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York*, originally published in 1902, Hapgood's investigation of this particular people and place circulates largely around artistic production and its role in the negotiation between old world memories and new world imperatives. He observes, for example, how the impact of the new space on Jewish immigrants experience, New York City, is portrayed through various media: Yiddish newspapers, the Jewish theater, systems of education, and a spectrum of poetry and fiction written by educated and uneducated working-class authors. With such emphases for his "study" of the Jewish ghetto, Hapgood suggests that an understanding of the ghetto and its inhabitants best emerges from these various representations. He therefore underscores the function of the literary by broadening the category of representation to a much larger field. Importantly, he focuses on what might have been previously cast off as non-literary, as simply a form of propaganda (such as the various political newspapers), for their narrative powers particular to the ghetto setting and the situation of its immigrant population. He finds equivalencies in the Yiddish newspapers with Yiddish drama, both of which tell a story about the changes wrought by Americanization. He writes,

Another way in which the life of the old Jew is affected by his New York environment, perhaps the most important way as far as intellectual and educative influences are concerned, is through the Yiddish newspapers, which exist nowhere except in this country. They keep him in touch with the world's happenings in a way quite impossible in Europe. At Yiddish

theatres, too, he sees American customs portrayed, although grotesquely, and the old orthodox things often satirized to a degree; the "greenhorn" laughed to scorn and the rabbi held up to derision.<sup>65</sup>

These two forms of "art" contribute to what Hapgood sees as the larger (literary) project all these media perform: that is, an attempt at realism in whatever form.

Realism is the quintessential literary quality of the types of writing he finds in the Jewish ghetto, but it also displays some of the limitations of ghetto artistic representation. Hapgood suggests that Jewish artists have yet to acquire the means for portraying the beautiful, a reason being, he argues, that the harsh conditions in America continuing for many Jewish immigrants prohibits that level of artistic representation. He notes, "In nearly all the Jews of talent I have met there is the same intellectual consumption, the excitement of beauty, but no employment of pure beauty of form. The race is still too unhappy, too unsatisfied, has too much to gain, to express a complacent sense of the beauty of what is" (110-111). Thus, in Hapgood's estimation there is still the need for development of the arts for the Jewish people, and significantly, that development is interwoven with the conditions of the place in which they live.

This observation follows a general concern with which he ends his study. He sees the transformation of the Jewish ghetto, and like Wirth, believes that the physical existence of the ghetto is transient--a time will come when it will no longer exist. He fears that not having an artistic foundation strong in the "plastic" arts will cause the ghetto to fade from memory and imagination as it physically disappears. He writes,

The New York Ghetto is constantly changing. It shifts from one part of town to another, and the time is not so very far distant when it will cease to exist altogether. The sweat-shop will happily disappear with advancing civilization in New York. The tenement-houses will change in character, the children will learn English and partly forget their Yiddish language and peculiar customs. In spite of the fact that the Jews have been at all times and in all countries tenacious of their religion, the special character of the

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<sup>65</sup>Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 12-13. The pages of subsequent passages will be noted parenthetically in the text.

Ghetto will pass away in favorably conditioned America. The picturesqueness it now possesses will disappear. Perhaps, however, by that time an art will have been developed which will preserve for future generations the character of the present life; which may thus have historical value, and artistic beauty in addition .... Certainly the interest of that Hester Street life, and of the tenement-houses that line it, is deep enough to inspire some serious man of plastic genius. And then it is not improbable that some great sombre pictures will be painted. The conditions for such a significant art are ripe, and it may find its master in one or another of the young men who are passionately "doing" Hester Street. (269-272)

Here Hapgood undoubtedly calls for the visual arts--painting--as the best way to preserve the beauty of the Jewish ghetto. Yet despite his preference for the efficacy of a certain type of artistic representation to secure the memory of the ghetto, his entire study--in which he concentrates on the various ways in which the ghetto story is told--suggests the general importance of the literary narrative in providing another locale to which the ghetto can move and preserve this particular "space." As implied in this passage, Hapgood continues to look for the particular artistic "form" by which this preservation can best take place. That form, I contend, arises from the collaboration of the people and the structures which cause the ghetto to transform, cause its boundaries to shift, cause its people to feel both trapped and that they have a path to transcend its very constrictions.

In short, I would argue that the immigrant literature, particularly when it arises from the intersection of space and labor, provides a form that, while perhaps not presenting the visual beauty for which Hapgood calls, does in fact offer the means for preservation and closer definition of the Jewish ghetto culture. The literary representations of Cahan, Schneiderman, and Malkiel demonstrate that the narrative of immigrant experience, particularly when filtered through the pressures of a city's economic structure, offer not only a means but a blueprint for the changes that enable the imagining of preservation. The new notions of Americanization and the cultural production of American identities that these authors outline in their work challenge and transpose (re-write into a different language, a different mode) the various borders that

threaten Jewish existence in New York. In view of an eroding physical grounding, through struggles with social and economic personhood in America they discover an ethnic, cultural grounding. Because of the shifting control of capital, the ghetto as these immigrants found it when they arrived may indeed fade, or at least transmute into some new spatial form; yet as they place their immigrant characters into the center of New York's economic structure as a means toward Americanization, these immigrant writers participate in creating a new space for themselves: a cultural space occupied not by Jewish *immigrants* but by Jewish *Americans*.

## CHAPTER TWO

"I ROAM AMERICA UNDOCUMENTED":  
 LEGAL NARRATIVES AND LITERARY SPACE IN THE  
 POETRY AND PROSE OF EARLY CHINESE IMMIGRANTS

*Representational spaces: space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users," but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated--and hence passively experienced--space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.*

--Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

Grievances fill my belly; I rely on poetry to express them.  
 --anonymous poet of Angel Island

Etched into the barrack walls of San Francisco Bay's Angel Island Immigration Station, a poem expresses the common spatial confinement shared by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinese immigrants in America. It reads,

The sea-scape resembles lichen twisting and turning for a thousand *li*.  
 There is no shore to land and it is difficult to walk.  
 With a gentle breeze I arrived at the city thinking all would be so.  
 At ease, how was one to know he was to live in a wooden building?<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>The author of this poem, like most from Angel Island, is unknown. His is the first in a collection of poems rescued from the barrack walls, and collected in *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, translated and edited by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 34. Subsequent passages quoted from the poetry in this volume will appear parenthetically in the text with their enumeration (as designated by the editors) and page number in the collection. Of the 135 poems they record, the editors place 69 for the book proper and 66 are attached in an appendix. Because the respective sets both start with the #1 and because I examine both sets of poems, I add the page numbers to my citation.

This verse is one of hundreds scribbled on and inscribed into the barrack walls of Angel Island between 1910 and 1940 by immigrants held in detention after the passage of federal exclusion laws limited their access to the United States. Highlighting the inherent restrictions in the voyage from China to America--no shore to land, little room to walk--this speaker describes a common condition he shared with other Chinese who arrived in America. He lacks both grounding and freedom of movement. While such restrictions characterize his experience on the sea, he poetically transposes them onto U.S. soil in his surprise at his detention in the wooden building. The confinement inherent in the actual immigration, he suggests, remains in his American experience.<sup>67</sup> Further explaining this lack of grounding and mobility in the United States, another poet places the blame on laws: "Sadly, I listen to the sounds of insects and angry surf. / The harsh laws pile layer upon layer; how can I dissipate my hatred?" (#18, 56). His poetic inscription points out that, like the incessant sounds of insects and surf, the accretion of laws soon becomes oppressive and has two results: it erodes any form of "shore" the speaker may have found in America, and it necessitates that he find a way to release the pressure of his emotional response.

When we add a third poet's lines, we see how a specific set of laws are at the root of the immigrant's confinement and how literary expression can be the means toward such a release. This poet writes, "I came...to North America, where the harsh exclusion laws cause me worry. / Allowing you to enter the place of imprisonment" (12, 153). Identifying the "exclusion" laws as cause of his own confinement, this poet also understands their impact to reach beyond his personal experience. By turning the

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<sup>67</sup>I use the masculine pronoun because it is likely that the poets were male, or so believe the editors and translators of *Island*. They argue that this is the case because the majority of immigrants were male, most Chinese women were not educated, and, most convincingly, the quarters where most of the women stayed (in the Center's administration building) burned to the ground in 1940. See their introduction to the poems in *Island*, 25-27. This is not to say that women were not also writing verses during their detention on Angel Island. Unfortunately, if poems existed we have no evidence.

reflection from himself ("I") to others ("you"), he invites readers to share the same sense of groundlessness augmented when they are allowed to enter prison, *not* the United States. In his reference to the exclusion laws, the poet brings readers into his physical space by writing them into a literary space: he places them within his confinement as he articulates his resentment upon the wooden wall. These poems, narrating the intersection of law and literature, begin then to detail three major issues in early Chinese immigrant literary texts: first, a re-defined sense of space that is both confining and unsettled; second, the role of laws in that new definition; and third, the emergence of a literary space as a result of the exclusion law's pressure.

To demonstrate the extent to which confinement and exclusion defines expression, I briefly turn to a fourth example, a poem written by one granted the right to land in the United States. This poem is from the anthology *Songs of Gold Mountain*, one of 1,640 vernacular folksongs written by anonymous male poets of San Francisco's Chinatown and published in 1911 and 1915.<sup>68</sup> Although these authors were not writing from a condition of detention like those on Angel Island, a similar engagement with the exclusion laws runs deep in their narrative expression:

I roam America undocumented.  
 White men blackmail me with many demands.  
 I say one thing, and they, another;  
 I want to complain of injustice, but my tongue stutters.  
 At a loss for words--  
 I wrack my brain for a solution, to no avail.  
 Thrown into a prison cage, I cannot fly away.  
 Don't you think this is cruel? Don't you think this is cruel?<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>The poets remained anonymous following traditional Chinese practice in which writers using the vernacular were not identified. Marlon Hom speculates that these pieces may have been written as part of a collective writing activity in Chinatown. See Hom's introduction to the *Gold Mountain* poems in *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 57.

<sup>69</sup>*Songs of Gold Mountain*, poem #14. Of the 1,640 poem, Hom presents 220 in his translated edition, numbering them 1-220. I retain Hom's enumeration and hereafter will list the number of the poem in the text.

In the position he describes, this poet more clearly reveals the complex spatial orientation of the Chinese immigrant facing the pressure of exclusion laws. Although the speaker "roams," he is still imprisoned. The immigrant might imagine unlimited movement throughout many American spaces, yet freedom remains only imaginary for those detained on Angel Island. For this Chinatown poet who hearkens back symbolically to detention, freedom also appears to be elusive: he figuratively points toward an analogous confinement within Chinatown's borders. He also acknowledges that even if mobility were a possibility, documentation of one's legitimate claim to be in America is required; without the proper affidavit, he has no legal standing, he is vulnerable, and his movements are hampered as if he were in prison. The danger that inheres in the "undocumented" state then suggests that to "roam" in America means something different than moving from place to place. It also connotes groundlessness and meaninglessness, an undesirable position that, this writer implies, is difficult to explain. Underscoring the lack of expression that accompanies lack of grounding in America, the speaker explains that if he could voice his concern, he then would be able to provide the proper documentation legitimizing his American existence, despite no American "shore to land." Hence, the immigrant's concern over documentation joins the topics of grounding, space, and expression.

These are the spatial, cultural, and literary components emerging from the Chinese immigrant texts that I examine in this chapter. The poetry of Angel Island and Chinatown, as well as the prose of Eurasian immigrant writer Sui Sin Far (written 1895-1912), all reveal an acute sense of loss as their authors use these texts to navigate possible ways to define their American lives and ground an American personhood in an era of severe anti-Chinese legislation. As the poems suggest, this loss comes in part from the impact of Chinese exclusion laws, passed at the end of the nineteenth century. While designed to prohibit future immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States,

these laws affected the Chinese community in America broadly presenting at least the potential of their community being all but wiped off U.S. soil. Hence, combined with general anti-Chinese sentiment and legislation that limited social, economic, and legal possibilities in America, the exclusion laws functioned to take away the concept of American space, in any location, from the Chinese. The writers of the Chinese immigrant community, therefore, were faced with a very different relationship to American space than even the Jewish immigrants, whose contentious association with New York City's Jewish ghetto formed the aesthetic of Americanization in the writing of Cahan, Schneiderman, and Malkiel. The poets and essayists of the Chinese immigrant community may have also had to consider physical borders. However, even their hold on this space was severely compromised by the impact of the laws. In addition to a different relationship to space, the Chinese often had a much different relationship to immigration status. The majority of Chinese considered themselves as sojourners rather than immigrants: most had no intention to stay in America permanently but to return to China after gaining riches. Again, the impact of American law forced a different status on them, transforming them into immigrants because of the exclusion restrictions. The loss of physical grounding and the transformation of personal status thus contributed to the spatial features of the Chinese and inevitably became part of the developing aesthetic by which Chinese immigrant writers attempted to write themselves into an American space.

What that aesthetic is and how it serves to reconstruct American space for the Chinese sojourners-turned-immigrants is my concern here. Because the condition of the Chinese in America was so dominated by the pressure of law, these writers felt compelled to scrutinize the impact that the Chinese immigrants directly felt. They used their literary texts to position themselves as "inhabitants" and "users" of this space otherwise dominated by U.S. law to make symbolic use out of it by "describing" it. In

their description, they re-write this discourse, appropriate and change it, and provide themselves a very different type of space to base their American identity. Having lost a sense of grounding in the United States, these Chinese immigrant writers must aestheticize the physical spaces in which their presence is unwelcomed and transform them into representational spaces that allow the possibility of economic, social, and political power. Revising the general "undocumented" status—one that destabilizes any locale as a center to situate their Americanism—through such literary documentation, these writers therefore, add a supplemental documentation the dominate American law through their literary texts. As these writers demonstrate, the literary text creates the space where they can address the constant threat of loss and establish a foundation by which they can define an American personhood.

To consider the nature and the source of this literary space for the Chinese immigrant stories of Americanization, I first discuss the legal history of the Chinese in America at the turn of the twentieth century. Specifically, I consider how a legal narrative of the Chinese experience in American, particularly one characterized by exclusion legislation, shapes a literary aesthetic emerging from the Chinese immigrant writers conscious of the law. With the laws establishing certain spatial conditions, I examine how the male poets of Angel Island and San Francisco's Chinatown narrate the position of the Chinese in America, some relying on absence for their literary aesthetic, others moving from absence to presence as their literary works create representation spaces that allow them to argue for a legitimate Chinese position in America that defies the legal constrictions. I conclude by examining the writing of Sui Sin Far whose literary aesthetic reflects the writing of the male poets, but adds a different set of national, racial, and gender conditions that require a more urgent exertion to establish Chinese grounding in America through literary space. Taken together, all the writers and their literary responses to the lack of American space contribute to an aesthetic that describes a unique

Americanization for immigrants whose legal status in America was often beyond their own definition.

### **Chinese Immigrants and American Legal Narratives**

As Clifford Geertz observes, law functions as narrative that defines time, people, and places.<sup>70</sup> From their first arrival in America in the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese found themselves written into a legal narrative, often with little chance to contribute to their own story. The story that was told revealed a people who increasingly had the potential to disappear from America's economic, social, and geographical map. In the early stages of immigration, the Chinese were generally welcomed, particularly by a booming California in desperate need of laborers. However, with growing fear that the Chinese would saturate the lucrative mining industry, the treatment of them quickly changed.<sup>71</sup> In 1852, the California legislature passed the Foreign Miners' Tax, which stated that any alien who did not intend to become an American citizen was required to pay a licensing fee to work in the mines. Already denied the potential of citizenship by the 1790 Naturalization Act, the tax targeted the Chinese workers. Similar treatment of the Chinese followed, including the Commutation Tax of 1852 on Chinese immigration, a 1855 California state bill placing limitations on immigrants unable to be naturalized, and 14 ordinances between 1873 and 1884 passed by the San Francisco Board of Health to restrict Chinese laundries. Because many Chinese laborers came to the United States out

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<sup>70</sup>Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 175.

<sup>71</sup>For instance, in 1852, shortly after the Chinese began arriving in response to the California gold rush, the *Daily Alta California* called them a "worthy integer of our population" and California Governor John McDougal praised them as "one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens." See Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 80-81.

of economic need, the combination of these statutes and ordinances placed undue hardship on their American lives.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to weakening Chinese economic standing, California state law and judicial review in its supreme court impaired Chinese legal standing. In 1854, for example, the case *People v. Hall* marked the first time the question of a Chinese person's right to testify as a witness came before an authoritative tribunal. Furthermore, this case introduced a trend toward silencing the legal voice of the Chinese. In his opinion, Chief Justice Hugh C. Murray argued that a California State Criminal Proceedings Act of 1850, which denied blacks, mulattos, and Indians the right to testify for or against a white man, could also be applied to the Chinese because they could be classified as Indians. Or more precisely, he claimed that Indians had been and must continue to be classified as Mongolian. In his view, the Chinese and the Indian, therefore, shared the same legal status. Murray based his opinion on the "legal significance" of words as they had been previously defined by the law. These legal definitions were incontrovertible, he claimed, and had to be followed otherwise the very foundation of law would be shaken. Hence, *People v. Hall* demonstrates how the law tended toward strict definitions of words (and of the Chinese people), leaving few alternatives outside these legal designations. This case then added legal restrictions to the economic limitations already in place. Together they began to undermine America as a space for the Chinese to easily and profitably exist.<sup>73</sup>

The story of such anti-Chinese legislation, passed mostly at the state level in the early years of Chinese immigration, eventually was challenged with other laws and legal

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<sup>72</sup>On the Foreign Miners' Tax see Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 81-82; on the taxes, bills, and ordinances see Charles McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle Against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 12-18, and Sucheng Chan, *Asian American: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne, 1991), 94-95.

<sup>73</sup>See *People v. Hall*, California Reports, vol. 4. For discussion of this case see McClain, 20-22 and Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 102.

action. The Civil War amendments marked a constitutional shift in which legal protection of people in "races" other than white was guaranteed. The Fourteenth Amendment, for example, confirmed that all those born in the United States were considered citizens and thereby privileged to rights that status guaranteed. This amendment also extended "due process" and "equal protection of the laws" to all people within the jurisdiction of the United States, including those who could not become citizens. The 1868 Burlingame Treaty between the United States and China underscored these protections and, furthermore, officially recognized the "free migration and emigration" of the Chinese to America. Also contributing to the legal rights of the Chinese in America, the Civil Rights Act of 1870 voided such discriminatory legislation as the Foreign Miners' Tax and provided that all people within U.S. jurisdiction would be granted the same specified rights as white citizens. From these legal protections and opportunities, the Chinese were able to successfully challenge discriminatory laws and denials of citizenship through the U.S. Supreme Court. As a result, this community recovered elements of their economic and legal standing that had been taken away. The 1886 decision on *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* upheld the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause as the court agreed that the Chinese defendant, owner of a San Francisco laundry, was subjected to arbitrary enforcement of a city ordinance. In 1898, the Supreme Court also referred to Fourteenth Amendment rights when ruling in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* that a Chinese person born in the United States, even with permanent residence outside the country, was indeed a citizen. These cases demonstrate that if the Chinese were defined by American legal narratives, then the story and its characters could change through particular progressions in the law. With certain constitutional freedoms, therefore, America as a space for settlement arose as a more attainable and tangible goal.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>On the Fourteenth Amendment see William E. Nelson, *The Fourteenth Amendment: From Political Principle to Judicial Doctrine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), especially 86-87 and 113-

Yet, the story of American law and the Chinese immigrants becomes more complicated when we consider the broad impact of federal exclusion legislation and related court decisions. This part of the story reveals other legal action that forestalled the economic, social, and legal grounding *Yick Wo* and *Wong Kim Ark* secured. The first of the exclusion laws, which one *Gold Mountain* poet called "more ferocious than tigers" (#11), was passed by Congress in 1882 and followed by a series of amendments in 1884, 1888 (Scott Act), and 1892 (Geary Act). In general, these laws were intended to prohibit continued immigration of Chinese laborers. That goal proved attainable since shortly after the law went into effect, the Chinese population began an immediate decline that continued throughout the period of exclusion. The falling numbers had an impact beyond just the laboring class as this method of exclusion imposed a devastating sense of isolation on the entire Chinese community.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the exclusion laws continued the inquiry into the legal definition of the word "Chinese"--which *People v. Hall* highlighted--and initiated a series of certification requirements. The combination of these two provisions, as the different versions of the statute reconsidered and revised them, more clearly uncovers the danger in roaming America "undocumented," and discloses a growing loss of legal grounding and personhood of the Chinese in America.

The 1882 exclusion law initiated increasingly rigid requirements placed on immigrants already in the country by requiring certificates as evidence of their American

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114; see also Earl Maltz, "The Federal Government and the Problem of Chinese Rights in the Era of the Fourteenth Amendment," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 17.1 (Winter 1994): 223-252. On the Burlingame Treaty see Takaki, *Stranger from a Different Shore* 114, and Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York, Twayne, 1991). 54, 56. On the Civil Rights Act of 1870 see Maltz and McClain, 40-42. Section 16 of the 1870 Civil Rights Act is most clearly aimed at insuring the rights of the Chinese. See Act of May 31, 1870, (ch. 114, 16 stat. 140). On *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* see Dan Kaylor, "Orders That Wouldn't Wash: Historical Background of *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*," *Lincoln Law Review* 11.2: 205-210 and McClain, 124. On *U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark* see Brook Thomas, China Men, *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, and the Question of Citizenship, *American Quarterly* 50.4 (Dec. 1998): 689-717 and McClain.

<sup>75</sup>The population of Chinese in America, in fact, dwindled from 105,465 in 1880 to 61,639 in 1920. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 111-112.

residency before they traveled abroad. Without re-entry papers, a Chinese laborer would be subject to detention and deportation. Although the statute concentrated on the laboring class, it extended the certification requirement in another form to merchants and scholars, who could still immigrate to the United States but had to be "identified as so entitled by the Chinese Government" through a "certificate." In other words, no Chinese person could enter the United States without documentation of some sort. Being without papers would constitute an unlawful presence in the United States, leaving one subject to removal.<sup>76</sup> Hence, to be "undocumented" put an immigrant in danger of being cut off from his means of financial support, a problem both for himself and his family in China.

We can see how this danger and condition becomes another form of silencing through its representation in a literary text. Focusing on what it means to roam the country without papers and essentially without legal presence, poem #14 illuminates the tangible consequences of having no voice as well as no listener. The poet writes, "I say one thing, and they, another; / I want to complain of injustice, but my tongue stutters. / At a loss for words-- / I wrack my brain for a solution, to no avail. / Thrown into a prison cage, I cannot fly away." Prying into the wider realities of exclusion beyond incarceration, this poem connects the "undocumented" condition with the question of a right to articulate and witness to one's own physical and legal reality. Without this ability to document oneself, the poet suggests, the Chinese immigrant loses the right of self-determination. Neither the person nor the person's words are satisfactory to claim legitimate presence in America. Instead what "they" say--the collector at a customs-house

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<sup>76</sup>Act of May 6, 1882 (ch. 126, 22 stat. 58). It is likely that many *Gold Mountain* poets were of a higher social class than laborers, yet they undoubtedly felt the pressure of the certification process from the first exclusion act's stipulations. When they speak poetically in a detained laborer's voice, they represent a general anxiety over physical confinement and legal restrictions that affected all social levels of the Chinese immigrant community. For the extension of the certification requirement to classes other than laborers, and their danger of deportation with such documentation see sections 6 and 12.

where the immigrant was to apply for the certificate--determines his legitimacy.<sup>77</sup> If roaming undocumented constitutes both a temporal and personal instability, then that status includes being without a voice, without words.

As this poem clarifies the broader impact of the first exclusion law, it also helps us to refine our readings of the law's later versions, particularly stipulations that on the surface may appear innocuous, but, in effect, undergird the already substantial effort to silence the Chinese immigrant. For example, the later acts increased the requirements attached to the re-entry certificate and strengthened its importance as a form of documentation. The 1884 act states that the "said certificate shall be the *only evidence permissible* to establish [one's] right to re-entry" making the document, granted by a collections officer, the lone way of "speaking" for the Chinese laborer's defense.<sup>78</sup> In addition, the 1888 amendment made it more difficult for the Chinese to speak even through the certificate because of increased demands for proof. The applicants had to prove that they had family and/or property in the United States, both of which were often impossible because of anti-miscegenation laws, laws excluding Chinese women, and anti-Chinese legislation that damaged their opportunity to gain wealth.<sup>79</sup> Finally, the 1892 act demanded that the Chinese laborers carry a "certificate of residence" with them at all times when in the country, a certificate that if lost meant deportation. Furthermore,

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<sup>77</sup>Alan Kraut reveals an example of the problems the Chinese faced in going "undocumented." During a 1900 quarantine of San Francisco's Chinatown after the case of bubonic plague was discovered there, the U.S. Surgeon General ordered that the entire population of the Chinese quarter to be inoculated with an experimental vaccine known to cause severe side-effects. The forced and discriminatory inoculation was serious problem in itself, but in addition, government officials then demanded that the Chinese carry certificates of inoculation when they traveled on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Furthermore, the undocumented were to be stopped by specially dispatched federal inspectors at the borders of California and surrounding states (Arizona, Nevada, and Oregon); see Kraut, *Silent Travelers*, 89-90.

<sup>78</sup>Act of July 5, 1884 (ch. 220, 23 Stat. 115), 116, my emphasis.

<sup>79</sup>The applicant had to provide proof of parents, wives, or children in America, or proof of owned property or debts of at least \$1000. Act of September 13, 1888 (ch. 1015, 25 Stat. 476), 476. On the exclusion of Chinese women and anti-miscegenation laws see Sucheng Chan, "The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943" in *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

it could only be replaced with evidence by "at least one credible *white* witness" proving that he had lived in the United States before the exclusion acts were passed.<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately, the requirements for certificates severely compromised freedom of movement, a particularly crucial hindrance to the many who left wives and parents behind in China. The peril of denied re-entry made return visits to China nearly impossible for many of the laborers. As the law defined them, therefore, the Chinese status of sojourner often changed to immigrant. Unable to return to China without losing their American employment (and often only source of income), many of the sojourners/immigrants failed in their filial duty to both support the family in China and return home to them.

These requirements for documentation enforce a type of silencing because the proof of identity is essentially out of the hands of the Chinese person himself. As a result, the Chinese in America would have less latitude in proving, on their own terms, their right to an American personhood and American space. The 1884 statute, for instance, offers another conscious appraisal of a word's legal power. While again this act is directed toward excluding laborers, it also endeavors to clarify "the meaning of the word 'merchant.'" In the process, it conflates "merchant" and "laborer" under a broad definition of what it deems "Chinese."<sup>81</sup> According to the law both are simply "subjects of China and Chinese, whether subjects of China or any other foreign power."<sup>82</sup> With this clarification, the act's language does more than merely open up the term to broaden the restrictions. It separates the word "Chinese" from China, from its original spatial moorings. The 1888 law also defines the term "Chinese" following the trend toward

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<sup>80</sup>Act of May 5, 1892 (ch. 60, 27 stat. 25), 26, my emphasis.

<sup>81</sup>The law stresses a particular classification of "merchant" mostly to avoid broad definitions that might allow some laborers the relative freedom of entry merchants enjoyed. The act narrows the meaning of "merchant" by dramatically increasing the detail required on the certificates, including statements of "estimated value," reasons for traveling, and most crucially, endorsements from U.S. officials both home and abroad who have the power to determine the "truth" of both his certificate and the identity the document claims. See the 1884 Act, 116-117.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid*, 118.

broader inclusivity, barring "any Chinese person" from entering the United States. In fact, this act revises the 1884 version to make explicit what was only suggested previously; that is, the Chinese are to be regarded as racialized. While retaining the designation of "the words 'Chinese laborers,'" this act expands the definition to include "all persons of the *Chinese race*, whether subjects of China or other foreign power."<sup>83</sup> What the law's previous version simply suggested is stated more directly here: the move toward defining the Chinese in racial terms takes away their physical grounding--they may or may not be identified with the land mass of China--and thereby leaves it a more unstable term. Furthermore, by underscoring the Chinese as subjects of a foreign power, the law suggests that they cannot be subjects within American politics. Thus, if a sojourner becomes an immigrant through exclusion, he is apart from the government under which he can be a subject. But at the same time, as a (sometimes unwilling) permanent resident in the United States, he is also separated from a status as subject. The exclusion laws, thus, severely limited the position of the Chinese in America regarding subjectivity in the eyes of the law.

The efforts to racialize and thereby separate the Chinese from potentially voicing self-definition over their own subjectivity in America is taken one step further in the 1888 statute with a more explicit focus on the Chinese body as a mode of documentation. The 1888 law states, "Before any Chinese passengers are landed from any such vessel, the collector, or his deputy, shall proceed to examine such passengers, comparing the certificates with the list and with the passengers."<sup>84</sup> Bodily evidence matching the certificate was now necessary. In this way, the language of the law gradually shifted the focus from the Chinese immigrant to the Chinese immigrant *body*, and in so doing, further disassociated him from a position to voice his own self-definition and legitimacy

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<sup>83</sup>Act of September 13, 1888 (ch. 1015, 25 Stat. 476), 476, my emphasis.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid, 478.

in America. The new emphasis on appraising bodily evidence and on more solidly placing the right to testify outside the immigrants' reach marks yet another relationship between the Chinese immigrant and the law. By the time the last version of the exclusion law was in place, the Chinese immigrant's body was all that remained to testify because of the systematic silencing of his voice. Yet the role of the body and the voice becomes complicated and requires further investigation, particularly when the question of documentation moves beyond the legislative to the judiciary--to U. S. Supreme Court cases that arise in the aftermath of the exclusion laws.

Although *Yick Wo* and *Wong Kim Ark* seemed to solidify an important legal voice for the Chinese, other U.S. Supreme Court cases considering the constitutionality of exclusion policies present a different course in their American legal narrative. These cases, *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* (1889), *Fong Yue Ting v. United States* (1893), and *United States v. Sing Tuck* (1904) are important for the legal story of the Chinese in America because they support the trend toward silencing that the exclusion legislation introduced with its effort to strictly define and document the Chinese. First, this silencing in court illustrates further erosion of legal grounding. This is a crucial result that later inspired the Chinese immigrant authors to describe the legal conditions and rewrite Chinese physical presence and socio-economic possibility back into American existence. Second, these cases illuminate the importance of a key legal defense on which the Chinese community commonly relied from the beginning of exclusion through 1904 in order to prevent the immediate deportation of many detained on Angel Island. This defense, the writ of *habeas corpus*, enabled the Chinese to take legal advantage of their bodies, which the exclusion laws began to emphasize, in order for their voice to be heard in court.<sup>85</sup> Meaning literally "you have the body," *habeas corpus* recognizes the presence

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<sup>85</sup>Chinatown's civic leaders were well aware that *habeas corpus* was often the last resort for the Chinese defendant scheduled for deportation. Because it was invoked so often for detained immigrants by these high profile members of the community, many of whom likely participated in the poetry circles from

of a body as it is held without proper warrant. With this defense, the Chinese person that exclusion legislation apparently absented by silencing the voice and focusing on the body, is made present through the body. While *habeas corpus* proved to be a successful legal tool, these particular cases demonstrate how the defense gradually weakened for these defendants until it no longer ensured the Chinese a voice in court. This part of the legal story also played a role in the literary story of the Chinese because body and voice also are crucial elements in the poetry and prose. While the literature does not necessarily rehearse the legal use of *habeas corpus*, its emphases makes it clear that this legal narrative, as it is extended and exemplified through the exclusion laws and Supreme Court cases, presents a discourse that the Chinese immigrant writers had to acknowledge in their attempts to find a new grounding for the Chinese immigrants in literary space.

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*Chae Chan Ping v. United States* of 1889 begins this trend in which the immigrants' reliance on body and voice as a means of establishing an acceptable "documentation" was written out of American law. At issue in this case was whether or not a Chinese laborer, who had obtained the proper certification under the 1884 exclusion measures, could re-enter the United States after the stiffer 1888 requirements were approved during the time he was abroad. In his majority opinion, Justice Stephen Field ruled against the Chinese appellants, suggesting that because they constitute a threat to national integrity they cannot be allowed in the United States. He claimed that if the

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which *Songs of Gold Mountain* emerged, the legal use and manipulation of voice and body that we can trace through important Supreme Court cases, undoubtedly had an impact on the Chinatown literature. See Marlon Hom's introduction to *Songs of Gold Mountain* for a discussion of the Chinatown community leader's involvement in the poetry contests that led to the 1911 and 1915 anthologies. See also L. Eve Armentrout Ma, "Chinatown Organizations and the Anti-Chinese Movement, 1882-1914 in *Entry Denied*, ed. Chan.

immigrant were allowed to return contrary to the language of the current law, one must then question the ability of the United States to expel foreigners, placing the nation at stake. In other words, if the government could not exclude aliens, it would in effect be subject to another country's control.<sup>86</sup> Field also clarified that rulings on exclusion policies would not necessarily follow other types of judicial review of Chinese claims. Whereas the court in *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* ruled against discriminatory application of laws, Field's opinion makes clear that in some situations, arbitrary decisions are justified. He invoked Congressional power to override treaties with China, even if the U.S. position seemed arbitrary.<sup>87</sup> His belief implies that the Chinese, particularly in relation to exclusion laws, could be understood as a national threat, and thus, their presence in America could be sacrificed.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, he questioned the legality of the Chinese individual's voice to complain, arguing that the complaint against entrance stipulations must be made by the Chinese government to the U.S. government: "therein," he said, "lies its only remedy." Understanding the tendency toward arbitrariness in the judicial review of exclusion policy, a *Gold Mountain* poet would later write, "O, it's hard to bear the hundred cruel regulations they devise at will" (#10).

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<sup>86</sup>For a history of Justice Field's long and complex relationship with judicial review of anti-Chinese legislation, see Christian Fritz, "Due Process, Treaty Rights, and Chinese Exclusion, 1882-1891" in *Entry Denied*, ed. Chan, 41-42. Field's concern over the integrity of the nation resonates with other supreme court decisions addressing minority groups in the United States. Priscilla Wald discusses such rhetoric in her analysis of the opinions in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831) and *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857). See her *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 20-46.

<sup>87</sup>He argues, "Whatever license, therefore, the Chinese laborers may have obtained previous to the Act of Oct. 1, 1888, to return to the United States after their departure, is held at the will of the Government, revocable at any time, at its pleasure." *Chae Chan Ping v. United States*, 609.

<sup>88</sup>Field's ease at justifying arbitrary decisions are surprising when placed next to Justice Stanley Matthews's majority opinion in the 1886 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*. Matthews finds the genesis of the laundry ordinance suspect, based on a division between types of buildings that is not fair but based "merely by an arbitrary line, on one side of which are those who are permitted to pursue their industry by the *mere will and consent* of the supervisors, and on the other those from whom that consent is withheld, at the *mere will and pleasure*" (my emphasis). Field's words mirror his, but point toward a radically different conclusion. See *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*. 118 U.S. 356.

By upholding arbitrary regulations and ruling against individuals' rights to complain, Justice Field made *Chae Chan Ping* an important judicial marker, initiating the gradual excision of Chinese from courtroom voice and presence. Justice Horace Gray, in *Nishimura Eiku v. United States* (1892), presented another, demonstrating how the guarantee of a court presence for the Chinese can be taken away simply by supporting the final judgment of customs officials on claims to enter the United States. This case represents the general unraveling of the immigrants' "due process" guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Gray ruled that after the customs official's decision, the immigrant did not need a court appearance for "due process" to be achieved. Consequently, the excluded immigrant faced an increasingly impossible situation: although the burden of proving one's right to be in America was required, the legal logic invalidated methods of doing so.<sup>89</sup>

This same claim of "due process," satisfied without the "body" in court, was one of the important issues of *Fong Yue Ting v. United States*, a case heard by the Supreme Court in 1893. This case also demonstrated that the court began to question two topics quickly becoming critical to the Chinese: the credibility of Chinese testimony and their right to a trial by jury. This case tested the 1892 exclusion law requirement that Chinese immigrants carry "certificates of residence" at all times. The case originated with writs of *habeas corpus* by three Chinese laborers arrested for not carrying such papers. The decision, also written by Justice Gray, illustrates that the issue of being "undocumented" remained at the center of the legal focus on exclusion. Gray argued that the 1892 requirement of a white witness did not jeopardize the law's constitutionality. Of the three writs in question, two laborers offered no evidence, but the third "could produce *none but* Chinese witnesses to prove the residence necessary to entitle him to a certificate"

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<sup>89</sup>*Nishimura Eiku v. United States*, 142 U.S. 651. Although not specifically on the legal rights of the Chinese in America, this opinion was important (and frequently cited) in later judicial review of Chinese exclusion cases.

which, according to Gray, put this defendant at an equal amount of fault.<sup>90</sup> Gray reiterated the earlier decision that granted customs officials the right to final decision on exclusion cases without compromising the litigant's due process. Furthermore, he interpreted the law to read that the official is not required to take testimony from the person in question. With the immigrant's bodily presence and voice in court taken away, this decision exerted a further silencing by also undermining the credibility *and* the very existence of the Chinese immigrant's testimony.

By shutting down these possibilities, Gray's decision reveals how, at the level of the word, legal rhetoric forms a narrative of contradictions for the Chinese that contributed to their gradual absenting from court. One of the reasons Gray believed that the right of due process had been satisfied was that "deportation," as he defined it, did not necessarily mean punishment. Only when facing punishment does due process constitute a court appearance. His understanding of the word had as devastating an effect: within his interpretation, the legal voice and body, despite *habeas corpus*, were significantly weakened.<sup>91</sup> Another particularity of Gray's rhetoric added to the impossible legal position he placed the Chinese defendant in, and thus he further negated the immigrant's legal voice and body. He presented a contradiction within his language that eliminated any possibility of a legal stance from which the immigrant might mount a defense. First, Gray ruled against the appellant because this person could not offer evidence, yet at the same time, he acknowledged the impossibility for the Chinese to

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<sup>90</sup>*Fong Yue Ting v. United States*, 149 U.S. 698, 732, my emphasis.

<sup>91</sup>Recognizing the implications therein, Justice David Josiah Brewer, who dissented in this case, subsequently wrote in a similar dissenting opinion to *United States v. Ju Toy* (1905) that "banishment of a citizen not merely removes him from the limits of his native land, but puts him beyond the reach of any of the protecting clauses of the Constitution. In other words, it strips him of all the rights which are given to a citizen." This case addressed the question of admittance regarding a man of Chinese descent (the appellant) who claimed U.S. citizenship by birth but was denied entrance because he lacked proper certification. The majority decision ruled against him. See *United States v. Ju Toy*, 198 U.S. 253, 279.

provide proof: a white witness is necessary. Second, Gray used contradictory logic to rule on Constitutional protection. He wrote,

Chinese laborers, therefore, like all other aliens residing in the United States for a shorter or longer time, are entitled, so long as they are permitted by the government of the United States to remain in the country, to the safeguards of the Constitution, and to the protection of the laws, in regard to their rights of person and of property, and to their civil and criminal responsibility. *But* they continue to be aliens, having taken no steps toward becoming citizens, and incapable of becoming such under the naturalization laws; and therefore remain subject to the power of Congress to expel them, or to order them to be removed and deported from the country, whenever in its judgment their removal is necessary or expedient for the public interest.<sup>92</sup>

Gray conceded that the Chinese did have rights in America; however, as he presented their rights in his decision, the conjunction "but" rhetorically subverts a guarantee of protection. As he blamed the Chinese laborers for not pursuing a course of citizenship, he upheld an 1870 naturalization law blocking that very path. Gray realized that contradictions between public expectations and legal possibilities existed, but at the same time he ruled against the Chinese because of it. Such contradictions served to shut down the immigrants' legal options and to take away any rhetorical space they might have retained through judicial review. Moreover, the logic of Gray's discourse was one of absolutes that underscore the contradictions. He understood the 1892 exclusion act to define only two classes of Chinese: those "not lawfully entitled to be or remain in the United States" and those "entitled to remain in the United States."<sup>93</sup> As Gray read and verified the legal description, there was nothing between these two extremes.

Grounding themselves in an American personhood and writing themselves back into this designation after facing the erasure of legal narratives like Field's and Gray's opinions, became a significant task for the immigrant writers. Using their literary voice to re-define words and to re-position themselves with American personhood was

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<sup>92</sup>*Fong Yue Ting v. United States*, 724, my emphasis.

<sup>93</sup>1892 act, qtd. by Gray, 725.

especially crucial given the litigation that followed the majority decision of *Fong Yue Ting*, including *United States v. Sing Tuck* in 1904, which was among the last of the Supreme Court decisions on the issue of exclusion and served to squeeze the Chinese out of the courts completely. This case tested the customs officers' jurisdiction and impact on "due process," a point clearly contested within the *Gold Mountain* poetry. One poet's thoughts on the constitutionality of this "review" are summed up in these lines: "I am jailed unjustly across the bay, / Enduring the unendurable tyranny of immigration officials" (#10). Another charge emerges from the lines, "Immigration officers cross-examined me; no way could I get through. / Deported to this island, like a convicted criminal" (#4). In both, this form of silencing leads to futility, as well as an indictment of injustice: being convicted on the presumption that all Chinese are unlawful.

*Sing Tuck* demonstrates one of the extremes of silencing that took away the presence of voice and body of the Chinese in courts; it marked the end of the Chinese defendants ability to use *habeas corpus* as a way to be heard in court when threatened with deportation. This case considered defendants detained at the port of entry who claimed to be U.S. citizens but lacked proper proof; they were held and ordered to be deported. Significant in this case was the fact that the majority of the 32 represented in the litigation remained mute when interrogated by the inspector at port. In his decision for the court, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes dwelled on their silence, finding it an oddity and thus incriminating. Given the accumulative silencing impact from the many anti-Chinese laws, the detail is indeed remarkable. The defendants may have remained silent because perhaps they were not citizens. If that was the case, however, it is more likely they would have been prepared or "coached" to offer some explanation.<sup>94</sup> The fact that they were mute, therefore, reverberates with all previous silencing inflicted upon them

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<sup>94</sup>See Lai, Lim, and Yung who in their introduction to *Island* discuss "coaching" of "paper sons," those who attempt to enter the United States with an assumed identity, 20-22.

and embodies the erasure of the Chinese American voice in America. Without a voice, a Chinese immigrant is left completely at the mercy of the court as if he were invisible, a non-person. Holmes's decision illustrates this phenomenon:

If the person satisfies the inspector, he is allowed to enter the country without further trial. Now, when these Chinese, having that opportunity, saw fit to refuse it, we think an additional reason was given for not allowing a *habeas corpus* at that stage. The detention during the time necessary for investigation was not unlawful, *even if* all of these parties were citizens of the United States and were not attempting to upset the inspection machinery by a transparent device.<sup>95</sup>

Holmes's use of the subjunctive does little to mitigate the implication of guilt, and instead plays into the same stereotypical suspicion of the Chinese that labeled them as untruthful in court. He also placed blame on the Chinese for not using what he deems a fair judge, the immigration officer.<sup>96</sup> His decision, therefore, rested on the notion of "exhaustion": the Chinese defendants had no right to present their case in court because they did not utilize all possible prior judicial means. Blind to the symbolic meanings residing in the "mute" defendant, he upheld the decision of the officer as final.<sup>97</sup> The tongue that "stutters" had been finally silenced in the court of law.

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<sup>95</sup>*United States v. Sing Tuck*, 194 U.S. 161, 169, my emphasis.

<sup>96</sup>Along with newly authorized limitations on testifying through enforcement of the exclusion measure, the Immigration Act of 1891 codified restricting court access to Chinese immigrants by bestowing judicial authority on collectors of customs and immigration officers at ports of entry. See Lucy Salyer, "'Laws Harsh as Tigers': Enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Laws, 1891-1924 in *Entry Denied*, ed. Chan, 61-62.

<sup>97</sup>The dissenting opinion in *Sing Tuck*, written by Justice Brewer, is also worth noting because it articulates how this case virtually wipes away a viable personhood of the Chinese within American legal culture and anticipates the legal injustices noted in the *Gold Mountain* poems. First, castigating the majority opinion for assuming the Chinese applicants were not citizens, Brewer adds: "The most notorious outlaw in the land, when charged by the United States with crime, is, by constitutional enactment...given compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor and the assistance of counsel for his defense, but the Chinaman --although by birth a citizen of the United States--is thus denied counsel and the right of obtaining witnesses" (177).

### ***Aesthetics of Absence and Presence: The Poetry of *Island* and *Songs of Gold Mountain****

In the story of the Chinese that is told through the legal narratives, we receive a picture of this immigrant group shaped according to attempts to narrowly tailor a reading of a people. As a result, both the exclusion laws and the related Supreme Court cases demonstrate the attempt to reach a strict definition of the term "Chinese." In that effort follows the legal silencing when the person fails to fit the definition or procure the proper documentation that, legally speaking, allows him to remain in America. The literary discourse of the Chinese immigrant writers, on the other hand, operates on different assumptions. These writers observe potentially detrimental effects of the exclusion laws, particularly as they attempt to enclose the Chinese into narrow definitions and make subsequent demands that their actual, socio-economic position would not allow them to satisfy. For example, a laborer could not produce a family with the exclusion of Chinese women and anti-miscegenation laws; and he could not pursue American citizenship when no legal options for that course were available to him. Such are the conditions that the poets of Angel Island and Chinatown understood and variously translated into their poetry. While for some, the position of the Chinese character in relation to American exclusion law can be one of negation: their personhood is taken away when they have "no shore to land." An aesthetic of absence characterizes their work. In contrast, other poets realize also that the laws have the potential to create such absences, but by describing their legal situation in their texts and transforming the constrictions into representational spaces, they turn the absence into a presence. Theirs is a literary discourse that seeks a position beyond strict legal definitions in order to present a new socio-economic grounding for the Chinese American constructed within the imaginative space of their literary texts.

As we examine the whole of *Island* and *Songs of Gold Mountain*, we must note that both the aesthetic of absence and of absence-made-presence appears throughout. These works collaborate, in fact, to provide a broader view of the reactions to the legal narrative and to suggest why the writers would feel compelled to write themselves into an American existence within narrative space. Two examples from the walls of Angel Island demonstrate how images of absence generated by the condition of detention form an aesthetic that responds to and reflects a silencing of voice and body and a corresponding absenting from an American space. In one poem, the poet outlines the impact of the body's inability to promote one's presence in the space it inhabits. The writer outlines the failure of the body as well as the limitations of personal stature in general in the face of exclusion:

I, a seven foot man, am ashamed I cannot extend myself.  
 Curled up in an enclosure, my movements are dictated by others.  
 Enduring a hundred humiliations, I can only cry in vain.  
 The person's tears fall, but what can the blue heavens do? (#24, 60).

Rather than locating the grievances within the body, this poet makes the body itself a summation of the complaints about restrictions. These lines associate the body with expression: he can "only cry in vain." The reduction of stature is central to this focus on the entire confined person. Because he cannot extend himself, the speaker cannot be fully present. Historical record reveals that the barracks were extremely cramped, so this speaker voices a legitimate complaint, exacerbated by poetic hyperbole. It is unlikely that he is seven feet tall, but nonetheless, the physical conditions and degradation of detainment that compress the body metaphorically stifle the spirit, which itself could gain such a large stature. Significantly, he also laments loss of control over his body: others direct his movements. As this poem suggests, the conditions upon Angel Island reduce the full stature of man in both physical form and in self-determination.

Reduction from full stature does not, however, match the extremity of absence another poem enacts. The poet of this verse reveals the Chinese body as completely silenced and person as absent; he addresses a corpse:

Shocking news, truly sad, reached my ears.  
 We mourn you. When will they wrap your corpse for return?  
 You cannot close your eyes.  
 Whom are you depending on to voice your complaints?  
 If you had foresight, you should have regretted coming here.  
 Now you will be forever sad and forever resentful.  
 Thinking of the village, one can only futility face the Terrace for Gazing  
 Homeward.  
 Before you could fulfill your ambition, you were buried beneath clay and  
 earth.  
 I know that even death could not destroy your ambition. (#55, 106)

This poem laments a metaphoric and literal dead-end awaiting some Chinese immigrants in their voyage to America. The reduction to the purely material body--the return to the clay and earth--marks a complete loss of agency: not being able to close one's eyes (or have a relative from the home village perform this for the dead) represents the extreme sadness when dying away from home, particularly when wishes and desires have yet to be fulfilled. Although this endpoint could give rise to regret in leaving China, it is as regrettable having to surrender the power even to express one's own wishes and desires.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the poet translates confinement into its ultimate form, the death shroud and the coffin. Here again we see the dual failure of body and voice. In this case it is more deeply felt because one cannot even attempt to make a one's body fit into a space of confinement, one cannot even choose to remain silent. Although this poem seems to suggest an ongoing subjectivity and ambition that does not die (a point to which I will return), on a basic level its subject inhabits a position that cannot change. The deceased cannot be but dead.

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<sup>98</sup>I am indebted to Shu-ling Chen for pointing out the nuances in the original Chinese translated as "You cannot close your eyes" and "Whom are you depending on to voice your complaints?"

This condition of absence is not, however, the final word on the possibilities of expression and of inhabiting an American space. Another poem also concentrates on the body, but rather than focusing on the voice-less body—which would reflect the final judgment on Chinese presence in court by *Sing Tuck*—this poet narratively re-writes the potential of the voice to speak through the body. By doing so, he provides a way to see how other poems on the walls of Angel Island and composed in Chinatown reverse the legal narrative's trend toward absence and silence. The poet promotes another literary process: he acknowledges the body in the text for purposes of narrative reconstruction, revision, and replacement in American legal, social, and economic space. This poem offers a curious combination of stark reality, philosophical musings, and fantasy, all centered around an acute awareness of the bodily condition and the need to express that knowledge:

For days I have been without freedom on Island.  
 In reduced circumstances now, I mingle with the prisoners.  
 Grievances fill my belly; I rely on poetry to express them.  
 A pile of clods bloat my chest and I wash it with wine.  
 Because my country is weak, I have become aware of the laws of growth  
 and decay.  
 In pursuit of wealth, I have come to understand the principles of  
 expansion and diminution.  
 When I am idle, I have this wild dream  
 That I have gained the western barbarian's consent to enter America.  
 (#31, 157)

This selection contains a compendium of issues that dominate the Angel Island poems: loss of stature in imprisonment, the weakness of China in face of U.S. immigration laws, a hope that the detention will end in successful entrance, and the journey to America as both a negative and positive learning experience.<sup>99</sup> The poet's placement of the

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<sup>99</sup>Of course, we must keep in mind that these poems are in translation and their metaphorical language may indicate common Chinese expression. However, the consistency in which voice and body appear in conjunction in both the Angel Island and *Gold Mountain* poems, particularly in the latter whose authors were likely better informed of the legal defenses available to detained immigrants, suggests that some knowledge of the immigrants' legal conditions is generally filtered into the poetry. See Lai, Lim, and Yung's note on translation in their introduction to *Island*, 31.

complaints that accompany these topics within the body ("grievances fill my belly") and the claim that poetry enables expression of them, demonstrates how the poet imagines the literary text as a space from where he can be heard--thus deflecting the devastating legal silencing--and a space in which he can ground a personhood in America. Just as that awareness reveals the importance of literary expression, it allows a measure of philosophical reflection. Importantly, its meditation on "principles of expansion and diminution," spatial terms marking the disjunction between grand aspirations and a reality that threatens his very being, in turn pushes this poetic response to the realm of possibilities beyond the immediate discourse of the laws. Starting from that point, once the bodily condition is filtered through poetry, the dream is possible. The entrance to America that the "barbarians" allow occurs in the discourse he provides, within poetic reflection.

This poet suggests that despite the absence of his body in the United States, poetry allows him to imagine a presence in America. Hence, his poem functions as a useful introduction to the aesthetic of absence-made-presence that is at the foundation of several groups of poems in *Songs of Gold Mountain*. The poetry in these 1911 and 1915 Chinatown collections were arranged according to various topics, from detention experiences to economic prospects to women and sex. These reflections, meditations, and fantasies are universally informed by the various legal restrictions that defined Chinese life in America. While many lamentations directly address the absences created by the law, others seek to reverse the losses by rewriting the American condition so that the Chinese can reclaim a physical presence on U.S. soil and exert a successful social and economic personhood. These narrative endeavors through poetic forms then create representational spaces that describe and argue for new relationships with American law and a new potential for physical, social, and economic grounding in the country of their sojourn, the America often transformed into their permanent home. Thus, these poems

turn absence into presence and, as a result, replace a contentious relationship with American space into a secure grounding in literary space through the recognition and celebration of voice and body in a new American identity.

To locate points of intervention in the legal discourse and subsequent re-creation of American personhood, we can return to the closing utterance of poem #14: "Don't you think this is cruel? Don't you think this is cruel?" At first, the line functions merely as a recognition of the abject condition of detention. But in the repeated question, the poet moves beyond simple reflection to assert a new position: he appeals directly to the reader, giving himself the voice to ask--or more accurately demand--that one be conscious of him and the situation imposed on him, and thereby act to relinquish his agony. In this way, the repetition gives different meaning to the speaker's earlier complaint: "I want to complain of injustice, but my tongue stutters. / At a loss for words--" Whereas this line clearly portrays the problem of laws silencing the detainee, the words are, in fact, spoken. The poet places his speaker and his poem in the position between the two questions repeated at the end and as a result translates the negative stuttering (silencing) into a positive uttering (voicing the compliant). From this space between absence and presence the words can be spoken. Within the literary space, the body is still imprisoned, but the words, even if remaining unsettled in the form of stuttering, emerge to draw attention to what has been absented. The lamentation asserts itself in the form of a new voice which carries beyond the immigration officials and judges influenced by exclusion policy. The poet positions his character, then, to regain the voice voided in the earlier state of stuttering and present a new identity that supplements the one dominated by American law. The repeated question, then, is the literary space from which cultural difference is contested, and the reinscribed Chinese immigrant can emerge.

Once the voice breaks through for a positive form of stuttering/uttering, the speaker reinstates the important body-voice dyad given and taken away by U.S. law.

The poem above clarifies that connection because it is not the person who speaks, it is the "tongue," a synecdoche for the voice *and* the body simultaneously. This poem, like others in the *Gold Mountain* collection on the topic of detention, highlights parts of the body when discussing issues of expression and confinement. With this association carefully in place, the Chinatown poets can then more freely discuss the greater possibilities of their bodily presence in America beyond the restrictions of law.

Throughout this set of poems, spaces open when a speaker recognizes his silenced state and re-imagines an alternative, an identity worthy of notice, an identity constituted within the physical body. Even when set within detention barracks, these poems metaphorically speak to the continuing oppression and constraint felt in Chinatown. They also consider the possibilities once one is able to break through the restrictions. The following poem reveals both representations:

I am a man of heroic deeds;  
 I am a man with pride and dignity.  
 My bosom encompasses the height of Heaven and the brilliance of Earth;  
 Everywhere they know me as a truly noble man.  
 In search of wealth--  
 Greed led me on the road to Gold Mountain  
 Denied landing upon reaching the shore, I am filled with rage.  
 With no means to pass the border, what can a person do? (#15)

The poem ends with the familiar lamentation, the futility of not being able to cross physical and legal boundaries. The body is detained, and while the exclusion laws play an obvious role, the manner in which the second part of the poem plays off the first discloses that the speaker is also at fault for his predicament. That is, the stature with which he identifies himself in the first lines of the poem has inspired his sojourn to America. Although he pays for his greed, he offers something supplemental to the ordinary portrayals of detention offered by legal narratives. Because he exerts agency and is to some degree the cause for his confined condition, he does not give up all to the

arbitrary will of American law. In retaining causality, he therefore draws attention to his presence and personality that must be recognized within the detention walls.

Further, the speaker's lingering sense of agency mitigates the despair ending the poem. That, in addition to the self-praise with which the folksong begins, marks this poem as conspicuously outside the expected lamentation. The poem's opening, a remarkable Whitmanesque celebration of self and body, exerts something new by dramatically supplementing the law's prior reading of the Chinese immigrants' inferior position in the United States. As a supplement, it allows the immigrant author a presence and justification to narrate his own state of being within the American nation. Significantly, the speaker does this by indicating his "bosom" as the vessel for his greatness. By drawing attention to the body, whether it be by explicit reference or simply by highlighting personal agency that denotes the body's presence, the poet highlights it as a means of expression to gain recognition and to expand the parameters of a space containing an identity. In this way, the author questions the "border" that retains him by also giving it a presence in the narrative. Homi Bhabha offers one explanation for this form of supplementation. He discusses the cultural boundaries of the nation which contain "thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production."<sup>100</sup> This speaker, in fact, does more than Bhabha suggests: the border he reveals both refers to cultural prerogatives of the nation--determined by exclusion laws and represented by Angel Island--and to the border of his personal identity contested by legal narratives. Therefore, the speaker creates a new boundary for himself. In fact, he draws attention to the boundary as he crosses it. He maps out a new presence, and in the process he also demands awareness of the space he inhabits and transcends. By re-establishing and revising the boundary, he creates the need to look

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<sup>100</sup>Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.

over the line of limitation, and through that interrogation of the threshold he embarks on a new identity.

Beyond narrating boundaries exposed and crossed, poems addressing topics other than immigration and detention also strive to re-establish positive identity while re-articulating the lost Chinese immigrant voice. The exploration of topics on social and economic existence builds on the attempt to break out of legally confined identity through further re-definition of terms. The verses portraying dreams of financial success, for instance, create a space to challenge the dominant discourse in the recovery of the original goal: attainment of the desired and necessary financial rewards that were denied through discriminatory laws and arbitrary enforcement of regulations. In these *Gold Mountain* poems, the poets participate in a discourse like the Jewish immigrant stories of urban economics: their literary efforts respond to the cultural narratives that attempt to keep them in place both physically and financially. Whereas Jewish immigrants such as Schneiderman and Malkiel argued for a labor- and Jewish-centered Americanization secured through economic grounding, money and work function differently in these Chinese immigrant texts. The mere fantasy of wealth situated within a literary narrative provides important components in their personas' emerging American identities because it narratively challenges the legal measures that restricted this possibility. Certainly wealth was obtained by some Chinese immigrants, but for many it remained only a fantasy. Several selections from *Song of Gold Mountain* attest to this fact.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the poems are the certification of having "made it" financially in America. The literary space, in part, becomes the locale of their Americanization.

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<sup>101</sup>See Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories, 1828-1988* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1988) which offers several accounts of Chinese immigrants who found social and financial success in the United States during the period of exclusion and anti-Chinese sentiment.

One poem on financial success reveals that the fantasy of wealth remains just that: a fantasy. As money takes over for the centrality of the body, it too lingers within the realm between absence and presence:

The very moment when the Wealth Star favors me,  
 Wealth will come naturally.  
 Wealth will arrive without sweat and toil;  
 Wealth will bring more wealth through its wide and open road.  
 The air of wealth will soar.  
 Wealth will bring me recognition.  
 A man of wealth is famous, a generous spender;  
 Wealth will make a rich tycoon out of this poverty-stricken soul. (#94)

In its simplicity, this poem reveals the aesthetic emerging from the narrative engagement with legal culture. The opening line, for instance, recognizes the remaining distance between reality and desire in the "when": that moment of wealth is still to happen. The future tense throughout underscores how wealth, now, is still absent. Yet, the incessant repetition of the word signals the attempt to make present what is lacking. In that way, the repetition deploys the word as an oppositional, antagonistic weapon against restrictive economic regulations, and just as the laws pile "layer upon layer," the image of wealth does the same. This accumulation then forces one to look at wealth differently. For instance, the poem suggests that wealth, when it arrives after severe hardships created by the period of exclusion, would appear to come "naturally" and "without sweat and toil." So what seems to be simply a fantasy (riches without effort) is not necessarily so when placed in the historical context of regulation. The poet suggests that compared to the present difficulty which led to little gain, any other occupation must be relatively easy.

Additionally, the relentless meditation on wealth through repetition insinuates an obsession that removes the speaker from pure Chinese ideals: his desire for money rests on personal gratification rather than on filial duty. This poem denotes the approach toward a Chinese American identity, an inevitable result because the utterance is placed within an American context with concerns inspired by the American voyage, no matter if

undertaken as a sojourner or an immigrant. This supplemental identity emerges, in part, because the repetition requires a slight redefinition of the term. Wealth begins to define who the person is: the folksong marks the transformation from a simple goal to a means of describing the person. Since the American sojourn placed primary importance on financial gain, the difficulty in attaining it, as is implied in this fantasy, gives it the possibility of transforming the ordinary laborer into a hero.

This transformation is not an isolated poetic moment. The referent of wealth as hero-maker, and as maker of Americans, echoes several poems of Angel Island which, less metaphorically, also suggest how forms of heroism mark an American difference in their poetic personas and create a new American presence. One poet compares his own experience of arduous travel across the sea with the struggles of historical Chinese heroes. He adds, "In days of old, heroes underwent many ordeals. / I am, in the end, a man whose goal is unfulfilled. / Let this be a expression of the torment which fills my belly. / Leave this as a memento to encourage fellow souls" (#57, 122). Although the ancient heroes experienced similar circumstances, they were able to go home. This speaker implies that he will not even be that successful. Yet in the comparison, he becomes the new form of Chinese hero; he takes the place of the historical characters and re-writes the classics according to the restrictions he experiences in America. In other words, the heroism, a literary construct from China, is redefined and refracted through the encounter with American law. As the speaker writes himself into classical Chinese tales, he simultaneously writes himself into American presence on an American barrack wall. He describes a new type of hero as one who articulates his condition through awareness of his body and thus, leaves a literary form that may help other Chinese detainees. The revised Chinese hero then is a Chinese *American* hero who can combine body and voice to offer a literary expression and literary grounding for those who follow.

If we take the two poems above as models for hero-building and for creating a new Chinese American identity in the process, another *Gold Mountain* poem consolidates the issues of both poems and further represents how the effort of highlighting the concerns set in America shape the poetry and the presence of its speakers. This folksong underscores the newly granted importance of money in a distinctly Chinese American way, one surprisingly beyond the original manifestation of a Chinese immigrant:

A son, or money--which is more precious?  
 On top, of course, is money.  
 Without money, liberty and rights are beyond your means.  
 Parents take care of a son, but money takes care of your skin.  
 Money is everything.  
 What's more convenient than having money on a spending spree?  
 A son wastes his father's money; nothing unusual about that indeed.  
 But a father can only drool in vain over his son's money! (#95)

In the revelry over riches, the poem introduces a comic voice, distinct from the detention verses.<sup>102</sup> With this expression the author mitigates the somber physical and financial instability the laws determined and other poems narrate. Humor, therefore, provides a new voice and a supplemental perspective. Yet the folksong's message remains serious as it addresses questions of cultural transformation and the relationship between the voice-body dyad and money. Standard social and legal perceptions of Chinese in America saw them as desiring only to send money back to China and subsequently return themselves. Here the poet dodges such efforts to define and delimit absolutely. Because of the difficulties the laws created for the Chinese to move back and forth between China and the United States, the poet must alter his perspective. His immediate concerns must be in America because his status (and the presence he must promote) has changed from sojourner to immigrant. He supplements the perception of the immigrant with a character still concerned about money, but he concentrates on money's usefulness to himself as an

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<sup>102</sup>The Cantonese folksongs on which the *Gold Mountain* poets based their works, while usually didactic, often presented such a comic tone. See Hom's introduction.

American resident. Given these poems' engagement with the exclusion laws, subordinating a son to money is telling: the emphasis of money over duty to family, a duty that stressed producing an heir, suggests a simple appropriation of American values and a zeal for countering the regulations that made money so difficult to obtain. Hence, it is a fiercely desired reward. However, this poem also reveals a new voice because many stranded sojourners faced the impossibility of returning to China to father a child, particularly after the exclusion laws were tightened and re-entry certificates voided. The reference to the "son" discloses another fantasy that can only be explored within a literary space. The literary son offers a documentation through proof of important family relations that the laws essentially denied.

This poem's reference to the transformation of sojourner to immigrant status, a common impact of the exclusion laws, subtly echoes what several other poems directly address: the psychological impact of witnessing one's identity in America involuntarily changed. This unwitting transformation created what would constitute the process of Americanization for many Chinese, and the poetry describing it reflects how this unsettling experience is part of the groundlessness that the literary texts portray and try to overturn with a narrative substitute. For example, one poet describes the stranded sojourner harboring "a restless mind" partly because his "lingering emotion spans the two continents." As a result, his mind and body are split apart: he dreams of himself back in China but "my body still remains in the Golden Gate" (#88). Being caught between the two continents--and being placed between sojourner and immigrant status--requires one to rewrite his narrative on America.<sup>103</sup>

The persona of poem #95, in fact, highlights the narrative representation of that change in status. This change becomes part of the new presence that emerges, one that

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<sup>103</sup>See also poems #72, 80, 84, 89, 90, 91 (these group together under Hom's title "Nostalgic Blues") all of which underscore an emotional response of this condition in contrast to the legal rationale that created the condition. They also reference America, the country as a whole, as a place of detention.

must be cognizant of the threats that continued for the sojourners who became permanent residents in the United States. Despite the new voice articulating a new position through the concern of money over filial obligation, the voice is still rooted in the body and must testify to the threats against it that continue to exist. The speaker's desire for money is not simply for personal gain, but also for bodily protection. The Chinese immigrant's legal instability and corresponding danger from anti-Chinese violence remain at the center of the poem: protecting one's "skin" became paramount.<sup>104</sup> The legal reality, therefore, demands reassessment and that, consequently, spawns a new articulation. The importance of this emergent voice is that it locates its needs within the United States rather than China, within both the opportunities and the threats in America, and so "liberty and rights" as commodities supersede more tangible goods of sustenance required by family members in the native village. Since the competing narratives of the Chinese immigrants and American law engage at precisely the site of liberty and rights, the testimony of this poem's persona exploits the gap created by the contestation and challenges sole possession over them by claiming these legal riches for himself.

In addition to rearticulating an economic voice, the *Gold Mountain* poets emerge with a new social presence. Contrasting direct references to the law's silencing mechanism expressed in the immigration/detention poem, "No letter or message can get through to me" (#7), verses on other topics directly intervene the anti-Chinese legislation by positing greater human interaction than their circumscribed lives actually allowed. For example, one poem addresses the general topic of sexual relations and overtly challenges the meager social possibilities the law demarcated for the Chinese in America:

We're guests stranded in North America;  
Must we also give up the fun in life?

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<sup>104</sup>See McClain's *In Search of Equality* for examples of violence against Chinese immigrants, particularly 173-190. For a testimonial of violence directed at Chinese see also Victor G. and Brett de Bary Nee, *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 72.

Girls of the Flowery Flag Nation, all superbly beautiful and charming;<sup>105</sup>  
 By all means, have a taste of the white scent while there's time.  
 If both sides are willing,  
 Why not share a dream in bed?  
 If you betray your youthful vigor and such wonderful delight,  
 Just remember, you may return to the old country as a wealthy man, but  
 you won't have this chance again! (#164)

Bawdiness constitutes an important part of these poems, allowed because of the anonymity of the authors.<sup>106</sup> Yet the legal background to their lives makes the assertion in the poem more than mere sexist fantasy. Foremost, it troubles the strict anti-miscegenation laws by imagining a space that allows interracial attraction and relations. Opening up this space alone revises the sojourner-to-immigrant transformation (suggested in the first line's "guest"/"stranded" juxtaposition) by providing a ground where such "fun" is a possibility. Recognizing that such a chance may occur once in a lifetime, the poet metaphorically reasserts the tenuous position in which the Chinese immigrant found himself, even if stable financially. With the fleeting socio-sexual opportunities in mind, the writer attempts to reach beyond the social instability he acknowledges by also suggesting a poetic space that provides more stable social grounding. The text grants the Chinese male dignity, first, by suggesting that among white women he would be able to find a "willing" partner, and second, by placing him on the level of the white man, who would have such an experience. Within the poetic document, race transcends the superior/inferior rhetorical positioning, upon which most anti-Chinese legislation was predicated.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>"Flowery Flag Nation" was a common name for the United States among the Chinese at this time and it is used often throughout the *Gold Mountain* poems.

<sup>106</sup>Hom includes this poem in a section he calls "Ballads of the Libertines." Other section titles he uses include "Nuptial Rhapsodies," "Songs of Prodigals and Addicts," and "Songs of the Hundred Men's Wife" (that is, songs of prostitutes). As Sau-ling Wong as argued, Hom's groupings don't necessarily replicate the organization schemes of the original collections. However, Hom provides us ample evidence that sexuality was an important issue in the literary representations of Chinese in America these Chinatown authors wanted to construct. It is not surprising given the legally imposed bachelor society. See Wong's essay "The Politics and Poetics of Folksong Reading" in *Entry Denied*, ed. Chan.

<sup>107</sup>To obtain any measure of racial equality (difficult if not impossible given the legal narratives and general political rhetoric that saw the Chinese as unassimilable), the Chinese in America had to address

As the poem imagines the Chinese immigrant's ability to transgress legal boundaries via interracial sexual conquest, it reveals a profoundly *gendered* racial desire. In fact, the exertion toward equality depends as much on defining a masculine personhood as a Chinese American personhood. According to Gary Okihiro, when considering Chinese American life, the role of gender is as important as race and class in determining power and social change. This poem centers its endeavor toward supplementary and border crossing in male sexual desire. The effort rests on one condition: "If both sides are willing." This subjunctive pause suggests that, if achieved, there would be an equal agreement on race relations and power would reside on "both sides" of the racial divide. Because the topic is a consensual, heterosexual act, this poem also pushes the boundaries of the bachelor society: a woman, made absent by both exclusion and anti-miscegenation laws, is present and active. *She* must be willing for the act to happen. Okihiro argues that Chinese women, who were largely absent from American society at this time, still played a central role in the lives of the Chinese men in America. Many were mothers, sisters, and wives left behind in China and dependent on financial support. Therefore, their physical absence did not deter their influence in the new world.<sup>108</sup> Their very present absence influences that poetic space of intervention and creation: since Chinese women were largely absent in America, hypermasculine desires arise. These desires, however, must be voiced and reshaped according to the American setting, and thus, the poem references Caucasian women. In this way, the present absence of Chinese women inspires a poetic documentation that pushes the boundaries toward a differently conceived Chinese Americanism.<sup>109</sup>

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"yellow peril" rhetoric. See Gary Okihiro's discussion of the "yellow peril" in *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

<sup>108</sup>Okihiro, 91-92.

<sup>109</sup>Other poems in Hom's selection also reveal that the masculinity exerted by the Chinese male poets was tempered by the absence of Chinese women and the desire made present by that absence. See, for example, the poems in the section Hom calls "Lamentations of Estranged Wives," in which the male

Even with this new sense of Chinese Americanism, the poem ends by contemplating the return to China, a thought expressed in many other folksongs. This articulated longing at first appears to reverse the generative tension between sojourner and immigrant that helped to define the terms of Americanization as these writers outline them. However, the broadening range of social and economic desires and the more radical establishment of borders and subsequent disruptions of them, make even these statements resonate with the challenge to American law and the "newness" of the represented Chinese presence. The collective voice arising from *Songs of Gold Mountain* and marking a new presence in American society becomes a Chinese American voice. This transformation is not simply in spite of the author's wishes, as Sau-ling Wong contends, but because of the direct engagement with law and the need to rearticulate what American legal culture had silenced.<sup>110</sup>

### The Role of Silence

While the interaction and intervention in hegemonic legal discourse to create an alternative "testimony" is a significant accomplishment for the *Gold Mountain* poets, we must consider the political efficacy of the endeavor since exclusion laws remained in effect until 1943. To a significant degree the issue of language caused this project of

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poets speak for their wives left behind in China, and "Nuptial Rhapsodies," in which the male poets fantasize about wedding night bliss with Chinese wives. Again, this often had to remain a fantasy because of the exclusion restrictions.

<sup>110</sup>I am indebted to Sau-ling Wong's argument that the poets whose work make up *Songs of Gold Mountain* almost unwillingly created a Chinese American voice. This is despite the fact that a large number of poems are set in China, or nostalgically lament the past left behind in the old country, or reveal strong desires to return to China (see her essay "The Politics and Poetics of Folksong Reading: Literary Portrayals of Life Under Exclusion" in *Entry Denied*, ed. Sucheng Chan), 258-259. Wong does not recognize, however, that the creation of this voice, this identity as Chinese American, occurred precisely because of the direct dialogue between the poems and legal narratives. This intersection became the site for the Chinese immigrants to "testify" since all other options were closed, and subsequently provided a space where the authors could exploit the possibility for articulation and create a new personhood, as Chinese American, replacing the original identity erased by American legal culture. Further, I extend her argument by investigating the particular literary aesthetic that emerges as a result of the law and literature nexus.

reinscribing voice and body and exerting a new identity to fall short of its goal: poems written in Chinese and circulated mostly in Chinatown had little political, social, or legal influence on the white, English-speaking sector of America. Yet as Abdul JanMohamed argues, a minority discourse retains its integrity when it resists the language of domination.<sup>111</sup> Samples from *Songs of Gold Mountain* suggest that some poets saw their work as such. For example, one exonerates Westernized Chinese women for speaking "the barbarian tongue" (#137). Another implies that speaking English is not essential for placement in a Western world: "Since I left China, / I have changed my clothes to the Western style. / I seek praise for being neat and fashionable / Though I have yet to speak with an American tongue" (#118). Even if one continues to speak in Chinese, the poet argues, assimilation into American life can occur in other ways, such as through external appearances. Thus, we must question if silence resulting from language barriers necessarily translates into powerlessness. I argue that it does not. For example, in their dialogue with the dominating legal narratives of exclusion, the *Gold Mountain* poems, in effect, elide that dialogue or foreclose the possibility of dialogue simply because of language differences. Often the poems present a "fantasized" American experience, one that is successful precisely because it transcends both legal narratives and literary interpretation. Like the mute defendants in court or in the immigration center, the poetry also becomes a very present absence. These literary works have existed for years despite the fact that few people in social, political, or legal positions of authority could understand them. Because they reside in a representational spaces, the poems themselves exist outside the policing forces of law, language, and nation, and that in itself constitutes a form of power.

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<sup>111</sup>See JanMohamed and Lloyd's introduction, "Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse: What Is To Be Done?" in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, 2. See also David Palumbo-Liu who discusses minority discourse as idiom that is not always understood outside a particular community of speakers, which, he adds, is both a weakness and a strength. In *The Ethnic Canon*, 17.

If we return briefly to the Angel Island poem meditating on the corpse, we can recognize a poetic expression of silence's power. In addressing the dead body, the poet writes, "Who are you depending on to voice your complaints," adding at the end, "Before you would fulfill your ambition, you were buried beneath clay and earth. / I know that even death could not destroy your ambition" (#55, 106). These lines provide two lessons to readers. First, the condition of the corpse is most lamentable not because he is silent, but because he must depend on someone else to speak for him. He is not in a position even to choose whether or not he speaks or remains silent. Silence, especially if chosen when deciding not to answer the irrelevant questions asked by immigration officials, therefore has power when it is a choice. And the immigrants retained that choice, as the defendants in *Sing Tuck* illustrate. Second, the poet claims that one of the greatest sorrows is not being able to fulfill ambition, but he suggests that even unrealized ambition will not completely die with the dead. In some ways the community of writers on Angel Island and in Chinatown participate in the attempt to keep the ambition from final, absolute confinement in "clay and earth." In that collaboration (even if unwitting or unintentional), the multiple attempts at articulation after legal silencing helped to construct a model for a Chinese American voice that transcends silences. It is a position that finds its real power, and real grounding. In other words, the absence that only appears to be silence is, in fact, a resonate presence.

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We can turn to another Chinese immigrant voice, one different in many respects from these male immigrant poets, to understand how this literary grounding, via an aesthetic of absence-made-presence, can be established. In a 1909 series published in the *Westerner* magazine, "The Chinese in America," Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton) argues

for a vitality in Chinese immigrant writing that might otherwise be dismissed as ineffective silence. She serves as the first English voice exploring and revealing the dignity of the Chinese laborer and the power of the laborer's narrative that the Chinese voice so boldly proclaimed on barrack walls and in *Songs of Gold Mountain*. She writes,

Yet these Chinese, Chinese-Americans I call them, are not unworthy of a little notice, particularly as they sustain throughout the period of their residence here, a faithful and constant correspondence with relations and friends in the old country, and what they think and what they write about Americans, will surely influence, to a great extent, the conduct of their countrymen towards the people of the United States.<sup>112</sup>

She does not reference poetry that testifies to social, financial, or sexual conditions in America, yet she draws attention to another immigrant text: letters sent back to China. Her observation identifies a transglobal presence of San Francisco Chinatown writing. According to Marlon Hom, the Cantonese folksongs written within Chinatown's borders were occasionally presented to Chinese officials in the United States and sent back to China. If the poems voiced complaints, at times Chinese government officials acted upon them.<sup>113</sup> While this influence on China's foreign policy was surely limited, it is important to recognize, as Sui Sin Far does, that potential strength lies behind the written expression of the Chinese in America. By drawing attention to this power, Sui Sin Far follows a central goal in her writing: to introduce and attest to the presence and dignity of those she calls Chinese Americans. At the same time and often in the same manner, in her written work she attempts to reveal herself, or more precisely, create herself as Chinese in America. On one level she becomes an English translation for the poetic

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<sup>112</sup>Sui Sin Far, "The Chinese In America," first published in *Westerner* magazine, May 1909, reprinted in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, eds. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 233. I will refer to this edition for all passages taken from Sui Sin Far's fiction, autobiography, and journalism, and I will note the page numbers parenthetically in the text.

<sup>113</sup>See Hom's introduction to *Songs of Gold Mountain*, 33 and 52-53. For instance, Chinese envoys to the United States presented official notices of protest to the United States Government after hearing complaints of treaty violations and the increasing severity of exclusion laws. Even if not an overwhelming influence, their response was occasionally felt in the related court cases.

forms emerging from Angel Island and Chinatown--poems that even she, largely unversed in Chinese, would not have been able to read. Yet on another level, her work is a self-conscious effort to construct a Chinese identification. Hence, her own writing is also informed by an aesthetic of absence-made-presence, particularly because her own national, racial, and gender position was, according to the law, unwelcomed and fundamentally unimaginable according to the laws supporting Chinese exclusion and anti-miscegenation. Her efforts to navigate North American space via this legal narrative, therefore, reveals an even more urgent project to provide oneself grounding within literary space.

If a new method of articulating presence was required by Chinese immigrant writing, Sui Sin Far offers a glimpse of this by way of her own life and literary work.<sup>114</sup> Born to a Chinese mother and English father in England, she immigrated to North America with her entire family, settling for a time in the eastern part of the United States (New York) before moving to a more permanent location in eastern Canada (Montreal). Although her family was poor, she did not face the same destitution that posed a threat to Chinese laborers in the United States whose economic potential was constantly curbed by anti-Chinese ordinances. As half-white and as an immigrant from England settling in Canada, she was not subject to the exclusionary policies that restricted so many from her mother's country of origin. With the ability to pass as white, however, she chose to be identified as Chinese, claiming a connection to China as her mother country as well as a literary self-identification as "Sui Sin Far."

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<sup>114</sup>I will follow the tendency of current scholars such as Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks to use "Sui Sin Far" when discussing the writer. See Ammons's *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and White-Parks's *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). Because much of her personal history has been culled from her autobiographical pieces (or at least writing that appears to be autobiographical), it makes sense to do so.

Like her claim to China and Chinese identity, she understands her association with America and Chinese Americans to be based on narrative space. In an autobiographical piece, "Sui Sin Far, the Half Chinese Writer, Tells of Her Career" (*Boston Globe*, 1912), she locates her genesis as a Chinese writer in San Francisco's Chinatown. She explains that while gathering subscriptions for a newspaper there, a Chinese acquaintance inquired if she still composed her stories about the Chinese. She writes, "Latent ambition aroused itself. I recommenced writing Chinese stories" (293). Having rediscovered a literary voice in this Chinese American space, she wrote the collection of "Chinese stories" in her only published book, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. Appropriately, this book solidified her identity as Sui Sin Far, the "Half Chinese" writer. While her identity as "Sui Sin Far" begins in a Chinese American space, it is further grounded in a literary text. Her cultural, racial, and national identification with the Chinese, while only partially supported by blood, is then consolidated in narrative space.

In what follows I investigate the ways in which Sui Sin Far revises the understanding and meaning of narrative space by examining how residue of Chinese exclusion legislation shapes the contours of her narrative. I first briefly look at two short stories collected in her 1912 volume *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* that display how the legal stipulations to which the Angel Island and Chinatown poets responded also influence Sui Sin Far's work. She concurs that law has the potential to create a profound absence for the Chinese in America, and part of her narrative plan is to illuminate that potential before turning absence into presence. Throughout her work, she claims that the absence becomes an irritant to American space, so to speak, but she concludes that this is possible only through the power of narrative. To test that conclusion, I then turn to her autobiographical piece, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," published in 1909, to investigate how the effort to keep what is absented narratively present is a central theme in her storytelling. Specifically, she focuses on her own set of national,

racial, and gender classifications that create the conditions for absence in American space but, at the same time, enable her to redefine the meaning of the word "Chinese" and provide herself presence in this space. By describing her own experience through these concerns, Sui Sin Far reveals different needs for establishing American identity in literary space, and, because she constructs her own Chinese identity within the narrative, a particular urgency in that project.

### **Residue of Exclusion Laws in the Writing of Sui Sin Far**

Several short stories in the collection *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* disclose Sui Sin Far's awareness of the impact exclusion legislation had on the lives of all Chinese in America, both laborers and merchants. For example, "In the Land of the Free" discusses the problems that can occur if proper documentation procedures are not followed. In this story, a merchant couple must give up their newborn son to immigration officials because they do not have "papers" for the boy. Reflecting detention on Angel Island, the child is held in a missionary orphanage for ten months, enough time to forget his parents. A double absencing occurs as a result. Just as the boy is taken from his parents because he cannot legally exist in America without certification, his Chinese parents cease to exist for him, particularly after the missionary nurses attempt to assimilate him by wiping away vestiges of Chinese culture. A similar absence lurks beneath the plot of "Mrs. Spring Fragrance." This story describes another Chinese merchant couple living a life of assimilation in a Seattle neighborhood alongside white Americans. Despite the idyllic scene and a storyline concerned chiefly with complications in romantic love, a specter of exclusion arises. Almost as a footnote, Sui Sin Far introduces a character who exists outside the narrative frame of romance but is noticeable simply in his incongruence. This character is a relative, in San Francisco but "detained under the roof-tree of this great

Government" (21). Clearly Sui Sin Far refers to wooden barracks of a detention center.<sup>115</sup> While "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" concludes with all romantic plots resolved, the brother remains in detention. Consequently, the reality of his absence in American society becomes an irritant in a story that otherwise ends happily, satisfactorily for all characters. In the hands of Sui Sin Far, the absence becomes a narrative presence requiring attention.

These stories present only two examples of how the historical realities of exclusion serve as an undercurrent in Sui Sin Far's writing. They demonstrate the devastation in the absences as well as her effort to turn absence into presence as a component in her narrative structure. It is precisely this fear of being absented and the need to provide an antidote of presence that propels the narration of Sui Sin Far's autobiographical essay "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian."

As this story of her life begins, the question of national and racial status immediately rises to the forefront when Sui Sin Far remembers the cognitive birth of the word "Chinese." A concern with how that word is defined and understood (or misunderstood) marks her first attempt to define her existence as a Chinese and her narrative status as a Chinese writer. Although the story begins in England, Sui Sin Far uncovers the same attitudes that led to legal distinctions in American law. The persona of Sui Sin Far in this narrative, here at four years old, hears her nurse tell another about her mother's Chinese background. A reaction of surprise prompts Sui Sin Far to begin her meditation on the linguistic signifier "Chinese" and in that word, she finds consequences. She writes,

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<sup>115</sup>Because "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" was originally published in 1910, the same year the Angel Island immigration station opened, she may not be referring to the Angel Island barracks specifically but to the previous detention center, another wooden building, one even less accommodating, on San Francisco's Pacific Mail Steamship Company wharf. The immigrants called it *muk uk* or "wooden house" (see Lai, Lim, and Yung, 13). The poets of 16 *Island* poems also refer to the "wooden building" imprisoning them (the literal translation from the Chinese is "tree building").

Though the word "Chinese" conveys very little meaning to my mind, I feel that they are talking about my father and mother and my heart swells with indignation. When we reach home I rush to my mother and try to tell her what I have heard. I am a young child. I fail to make myself intelligible. My mother does not understand, and when the nurse declares to her, "Little Miss Sui is a story-teller," my mother slaps me. (218)

Sui Sin Far acknowledges that personal expression in face of public disapproval is difficult if not impossible. The male poets lament that they had no voice with which to complain of injustice, and Sui Sin Far offers a similar expression: the unfair disregard that the nurses hold for her parents. Furthermore, her inarticulation underscores the questionable status of her identity: because the "word 'Chinese'" only begins to have meaning for her, she lacks a coherent voice with which to explain it. Once she finds a voice as a "Chinese" she will be able to defend the position. Sui Sin Far must construct the meaning of this word that also partially defines her according to both her double appellation from the nurse ("Little Miss Sui" and "a storyteller") and the physical response from her mother.

Part of her task in establishing presence for herself is to clarify what is otherwise unintelligible. The fact that she cannot make herself understood reflects common childhood struggles with difficult words and complex subjects. Yet since Sui Sin Far does not specify what words she used to tell her mother about the incident, we can assume that she would have used the word "Chinese" because that is the term she hears the nurse speak. If that is the case, her mother does not understand the word or at least how Sui Sin Far can explain it at this stage. Hence, Sui Sin Far will have to express "Chinese" as something different, likely a variation of the standard definition. This task, in fact, is crucial because, as her story discloses, expressing her Chinese-ness arises as central to her literary endeavor. In fact, the difficulty in explaining her particular Chinese-ness reveals an urgency in recreating and revising Chinese identity in America through storytelling. Her narrative suggests the danger for absence if she is not able to

make herself intelligible and define the word "Chinese" so that it will include her. Thus, it is appropriate that her nurse calls her a storyteller because Sui Sin Far places particular emphasis on telling a supplemental tale that provides a broader understanding of the term "Chinese." Her story must be one that, unlike the Angel Island and *Gold Mountain* poems, will be acceptable *and* accessible in a public discourse permeated by anti-Chinese legislation.

Storytelling, therefore, becomes a central feature of her efforts to describe her national and racial being. Just as she needs storytelling to define "Chinese" and to construct an identity through narrative, she must carefully document herself as a storyteller. When called a storyteller here, the nurse intends to mark her as a liar. It is significant, then, that in a following vignette, Sui Sin Far explicitly introduces the subject of lying and connects it to the inquiry and confusion over her national and racial identity. This episode tells of her response to a friend who explains that their friendship is secure even though Sui Sin Far's mother is Chinese. Sui Sin Far replies that she does not, however, care to be friends, a statement she cites as her "first conscious lie" (218). Before, she was falsely accused of lying, and here she admits to the charge. Before, she was designated as a "storyteller"; however, here she does not explicitly identify herself as such. Therefore, she simultaneously introduces storytelling and lying and distinguishes the two. Within the structure and language of the narrative, then, Sui Sin Far attempts to support the credibility of her own storytelling. If she does lie as a storyteller, she does so *unconsciously*. Although one is aware and has volition when one lies, storytelling can be another matter.

Sui Sin Far does not necessarily suggest that one has no volition when telling a story. But because of the potential for stories to tell what might be construed as either the truth or a lie, the very nature of storytelling begins to unearth something beneath the conscious level. In her children's story "What About the Cat?" (published in *Mrs.*

*Spring Fragrance*) Sui Sin Far offers one speculation on storytelling, suggesting that, indeed, one gains more from a story than simply the truth. When a princess admonishes her servants for fabricating stories about the location and activity of the cat when, all along she stowed the pet away in her sleeve, one servant wonders, "would a story be a story if it were true? Would you have been as well entertained this morning if, instead of our stories, we, your unworthy servants, had simply told you that the cat was up your sleeve?" (148). The princess admits that indeed she wouldn't have, and Sui Sin Far thereby suggests that storytelling has different functions. She exploits this possibility throughout "Leaves." Storytelling, therefore, has the potential to do more than just tell a story (the truth or a lie); it has the potential to add something new, offer a mode of speculation, and present a supplement to the standard narrative told by public discourse and legal narratives. Storytelling exists somewhere else than just on the surface. In the case of Sui Sin Far, it must exist in representational (imagined, described) spaces.

But because the nurse is the one to name her as the storyteller, Sui Sin Far in fact loses some sense of agency as one who creates narratives. As a result, she is in danger of not directing her own story and thus her own national and racial identification. The remainder of "Leaves" explores the possible ways that one can gain that agency as a storyteller. One of the methods that helps define Sui Sin Far as storyteller and directs the nature of the stories is supplied by the second name the nurse provides her at this juncture. Within the comment "Little Miss Sui is a story-teller" the nurse grants her two identities at once: storyteller and Chinese. Critic Annette White-Parks argues that Sui Sin Far was given this pet name by her family. However, White-Parks makes her claim by reading "Leaves" as, more often than not, purely autobiographical.<sup>116</sup> Such a reading is

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<sup>116</sup>See White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton*, especially chapter 1. Toward the end of her study, White-Parks discuss narrative ploys that Sui Sin Far uses in "Leaves" such as a Dickinsonian "telling truth slant" and tricksterism; however, she takes as unproblematic several moments in "Leaves" that suggest something beneath the surface of pure autobiography.

inherently problematic simply because Sui Sin Far calls herself (or demonstrates that she is called) a storyteller, and she implies here and in other writing that storytelling can be--perhaps must be--more than the "truth." In fact, her entire project of defining herself as Chinese in North America and in arguing for Chinese legitimacy in the United States and Canada must defy the "truth" as it was defined by legal narratives. The nurse's use of "Little Miss Sui" is therefore a curious moment in the text. Even if she were called Sui Sin Far by her family at this age, the story conflates that appellation and her identity as a storyteller within one narrative breath. Hence, Sui Sin Far suggests that her identity will have to consist of both a storyteller and a Chinese: one will not be able to exist without the other.

It is in this dual identity, however, that serious danger lies, for when she acts out that part she is slapped by her mother. Sui Sin Far thus inhabits a troubled position: if she does not define herself as Chinese through stories, her very existence is threatened. If she does, she will feel the impact on her body through physical violence. The impossibility of this situation recalls Justice Gray's decision in *Fong Yue Ting* and displays the contradictions existing within the rhetoric that unsettled the legal existence of the Chinese in America. Adding to the association with legal discourse, Sui Sin Far's example of this impossible position also discloses the cultural ramifications underlying the physical threat. The violence is not from her European source as might be expected, but from the Chinese half. Such a source clarifies for Sui Sin Far that she will have to fight internal battles among her racial and national polarities. Moreover, by referencing violence from a Chinese, Sui Sin Far illustrates further complexities in the Chinese immigrant position. As immigrants refine their self-identification according to a new setting, they must necessarily be different and perhaps no longer acceptable to the old world. In this case, Sui Sin Far indicates that hazards may be involved when having to re-define a term like "Chinese." Such redefinition is inevitable in the process of telling

stories, particularly of the immigrant experience in a new world. We witnessed how the male poets' sojourner voice became sequentially an immigrant and Chinese American voice as their literary work inevitably paid attention to American-influenced concerns. In this process, one loses the moorings of the old world. Sui Sin Far demonstrates even more strongly that one must create a narrative in order to construct an identity apart from both the old and the new worlds. But this endeavor is always fraught with danger, and thus, the literary space in which one positions herself is inherently unstable.

One part of the instability that remains in the narrative identity, and in the contours of the text itself, is the tension between naming and being named, between seeing and being seen. These narrative forms of identification further highlight how storytelling is a crucial function for one attempting to tell a different story than the legal narratives. In the case of Sui Sin Far, her position as storyteller is established after she is named by the nurse. Hence, she understands that it is a position both put upon one and taken, a position that is both empowering and potentially destructive. What is true for naming is also true for seeing. The opening line of "Leaves" initiates this parallel inquiry. Here Sui Sin Far discloses the process of negotiating a narrative space from which she can claim authority in the telling. She begins, "When I look back over the years I see myself, a little child of scarecly [sic] four years of age, walking in front of my nurse, in a green English lane, and listening to her tell another of her kind that my mother is Chinese" (218). In this line, Sui Sin Far immediately distinguishes the observer and the observed as well as the place and distance of observation. The narrator looks from a space in the present to the past and in that, views herself, the persona, from a vantage point outside herself. This distance between narrator and persona is significant because this narrative strategy replicates the standard positions of dominant culture/legal narratives. If the one who observes names what she sees, Sui Sin Far exerts narrative agency over an identity that, in its bi-racial status, was strenuously scrutinized and named by others. By

occupying a space outside as observer, she appropriates the role of the nurse and controls her own story and the development of the persona who becomes Sui Sin Far. The second, contrasting implication in this narrative distance is the need for the narrator and the persona to come together, particularly when we consider that one of Sui Sin Far's goals for this project is to find the space in which she can identify herself as Chinese. If there are two Sui Sin Fars in the narrative, the writer's task is to bring the two together, so that the observer can be identified like the observed and therefore, be in the storyteller's position to ground herself in the narrative with a Chinese identity.

In this opening section of "Leaves," then, the distance remains, but it soon becomes less obvious. As the gap narrows, the story suggests that a new narrative position will emerge: one that is associated with storytelling and Chinese identity (the persona) and with the power to name (the narrator). In the third paragraph Sui Sin Far writes, "I see myself again, a few years older" (218), once more placing herself at a distance from the persona who just begins to uncover the possible meanings of the "word 'Chinese.'" To some degree she positions herself with others who view her from the outside looking in. This is true for the first few vignettes, one at a party in England and the next in Hudson City, New York. As the gap between narrator and narrated remains in these scenes, Sui Sin Far, the narrator, is like the old English man at the party who critically "surveys" Sui Sin Far, the persona: the latter is disrupted from her play "for the purpose of inspection" (218). Subsequently, the narrator is like the New York boy who taunts the persona after he has "seen" her mother. In these examples, the persona is the one looked upon and identified from the outside. Yet complicating this position of the observed, Sui Sin Far (the persona) simultaneously becomes the observer. Just before she and her brother are confronted by the boy, they themselves look at the Chinese as outsiders. She writes, "We pass a Chinese store, the door of which is open. 'Look!' says Charlie. 'Those men in there are Chinese!' Eagerly I gaze into the long low room.

With the exception of my mother, who is English bred with English ways and manners of dress, I have never *seen* a Chinese person" (219, my emphasis). Not only are the persona and her brother, as Chinese, seen by the narrator and others from outside their Eurasian status, they also scrutinize the Chinese. This example of seeing a particular national and racial identity and being seen with the same identity suggests that Sui Sin Far can become the narrator with the perspective from the outside. In fact, the old English man notes that the persona has "her mother's eyes and hair and her father's features." While he is vague on what English characteristics she might have, in his perception she conspicuously possesses eyes that identify her as Chinese and indicate that her perspective is determined by a Chinese sensibility. In other words, she will see through the "eyes" of the Chinese. Therefore, the persona is seen, but here takes on the power to see herself. The narrative thus begins its process of coalescing the narrator and narrated as it undermines the absolute distinctions between seeing and being seen, naming and being named, calling and being called.

Throughout "Leaves" Sui Sin Far is "called" various names, each attempts to fix her identity, often within a racial or national stereotype of the Chinese. It might be "Chinky Chinaman" by the boy in New York or "Chinoise" by the French Canadians. In each case she finds herself at once accepting the identity and feeling challenged by the baggage it carries in North America at this time. Even in naming herself Chinese, she realizes that she takes on the collective mental and physical burdens that characterized the Chinese in this new world. However, her position as bi-racial leads to ambiguity between cultures and consequently additional burdens in dealing with this "calling." By this "calling" she becomes the subject who determines other subjects.<sup>117</sup> While not explicitly giving the Chinese immigrants the name "Chinese Americans" in "Leaves," in

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<sup>117</sup>See Louis Althusser who describes this process in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

other stories she does in fact narratively transform individuals into subjects and provide them a literary space as "Chinese Americans."<sup>118</sup> She never calls herself Chinese American, yet she performs the same function by allowing herself the narrative space of persona and, within that space, constructing her identity as Chinese.

This process, however, is not smooth nor in the end definitive. Having begun seeing for herself, the persona Sui Sin Far begins to resist the coercion always latent in being seen and named. She and her brother hear the boy name them "Chinky, Chinky, Chinaman," and, prompted by this appellation, she declares herself Chinese in a battle cry when she fights the boy. Having so identified herself--and claiming victory in the battle--she afterwards crawls away from the family tea "unobserved" (219). In being unobserved at this point, even when within the family home, the narrative suggests a change in this dynamic of seeing and being seen: Sui Sin Far has claimed at least some power of resisting the pressure of being seen. Her identification with the Chinese (the moment when her "mother's eyes" both *look* Chinese and *see* herself as Chinese) allows this change. Although she, as narrator, does not see herself from the distance that characterized the opening of the story, those from the outside continue to "stare" and "gaze" at her as the story proceeds. This narrative feature underscores the difficulty in finding a definitive position of agency when originating from a racial and national status that defies all standard forms of identification, particularly in the United States and Canada where anti-miscegenation laws were in effect. Yet simply because of that defiance, the efforts to classify can become stronger and more invasive, as we have seen

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<sup>118</sup>Reiterating the term she introduced in "Half-Chinese Children" (*Montreal Daily Star*, 1895), she writes in "Chinese Workmen in America" (*Independent*, 1913), "Yet these Chinese, Chinese-Americans, I call them..." (231). In her introduction to Sui Sin Far's journalism, White-Parks argues that Sui Sin Far was responsible for "Chinese American" first appearing in print (*Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, eds. Ling and White-Parks, 174). If this is true, then it makes sense to link the narrative efforts of Sui Sin Far with the Angel Island and Chinatown poets whose literary work enabled them to establish a Chinese American voice.

from the logic of exclusion law. Even as Sui Sin Far can see herself from the position of the Chinese, she must still contend with being seen.

Part of the effort of seeing oneself through the lens of national and racial status, Sui Sin Far suggests, is proceeding through an arduous course of questioning that status. Hence, by replacing an unstable physical grounding with narrative space still requires a potentially unsettling narrative inquiry. As her story continues, she engages in meditations on who she is, subtly underscoring the non-position the legal narratives seemed to afford her. She writes,

A debt owing by my father fills me with shame. I feel like a criminal when I pass the creditor's door. I am only ten years old. And all the while the question of nationality perplexes my little brain. *Why* are we what we are? I and my brothers and sisters. *Why* did God make us to be hooted and started at? Papa is English, mamma is Chinese. *Why* couldn't we have been either one thing or the other? *Why* is my mother's race despised? I look into the faces of my father and mother. Is she not every bit as dear and good as he? *Why? Why?* She sings us the songs she learned at her English school. She tells us tales of China. Tho a child when she left her native land she remembers it well, and I am never tired of listening to the story of how she was stolen from her home. She tells us over and over again of her meeting with my father in Shanghai and the romance of their marriage. *Why? Why?* (221-221, my emphasis)

In her use of "why," Sui Sin Far establishes a narrative rhythm that builds to a climax of confusion and wonder: Why is she who she is? Why does she have to fight the battles she stumbles across? Why should a nation not accept her as representatively Chinese? and (most importantly) Why should she carry on her crusade to be the connecting link between cultures and, in that position, a voice for the Chinese in America? As the questions build upon each other, the subject eventually drops out: from "Why is my mother's race despised?" to simply "Why?" Consequently, the narrative replicates the legal culture's systematic erasure through the creation of absences. Even the potentially positive features of Sui Sin Far's unique status evaporate under the pressure of the "why" so that the subject of the inquiry disappears leaving only the inquiry itself. This rhetorical marking of absence further underscores the perils of claiming Chinese (and Chinese

American) identity during this period of exclusion: one is certain to give up—or forced to give up—the security that comes from past identity rooted in a particular place. All that remains to re-build upon is the "why."

At the end of the passage she tells of her mother's stories and her parents' romance only to be followed by a repetition of the same double questioning. Asking "why" here is linguistically off-center, irrelevant to what precedes it to some degree. To what do the "why"s refer? This story, or the endeavor to uncover the meaning of this story, then, must take the center. For Sui Sin Far, racial and national status resists standard definitions so that her position as subject is questionable. Yet inquiring "why" she might not be a subject draws attention to the search for her subjectivity. "Why?" continues to animate the question of her identity as well as the meaning and impact of that identity. This, then, is an issue to which one constantly returns, about which one must re-tell and re-explore in stories.

The narrative of "Leaves" as a whole, however, demonstrates that even within the historical details of one's life that may seem subordinate to this essential question, remnants of law infiltrate the content and form of those stories that must be told and re-told. A story within a story, for example, discloses the residue of the laws on the lives of Chinese immigrants, even those whose experience appears radically different from Angel Island detainees. Her meditation on "why," and in particular the reference to her mother as a storyteller both of England (she sings songs learned at English school) and of China is illustrative. Between the stories of England and of China, it is the latter in which she seems most interested. Given her stated goal to identify more clearly with her Chinese half, such emphasis at first appears unremarkable. Yet, the particular story does more than just support this goal; it represents how stories of amalgamation return one to the laws affecting Chinese immigrants and how stories themselves are affected by this connection to the law. Of the Chinese tales, Sui Sin Far singles out one that appears to

have two parts. She grammatically divides the parts with a sentence break: "I am never tired of listening to the story of how she was stolen from her home. She tells us over and over again of her meeting with my father in Shanghai and the romance of their marriage" (222). She further distinguishes the parts of the story with an implied evaluation. The first part of the tale she enjoys hearing repeatedly. The second part is told "over and over" although Sui Sin Far cites no equal enjoyment in it. Sui Sin Far suggests that the latter part of the tale may not be as enjoyable because its repetition increasingly underscores its physical result in Sui Sin Far herself. Of course, she is a product of that romance. Yet, this story has more serious implications for Sui Sin Far. For example, the story of the romance is essentially repeated with each birth of a new sibling, and through these events, the story is physically impressed upon Sui Sin Far's own body and consciousness. Just before her litany of "why"s, Sui Sin Far writes, "My mother's screams of agony when a baby is born almost drives me wild, and long after her pangs have subsided I feel them in my own body. Sometimes it is a week before I can get to sleep after such an experience" (221). In the end, the repetition of this story underscores the urgency behind the question "why?" and the continued struggle with her particular national and racial condition. Part of the pain would come simply from her effort to redefine the personhood that the laws would not recognize because of that condition.

However, if this pain originates in her parents' romance, could difficulty also arise in the other part of the story? Although Sui Sin Far separates the two parts for individual analysis, narratively, the romance appears to be predicated upon the bodily (and national) theft. If so, then the eventual miscegenation between distinct racial and national types arises from a historical tale commonly heard about Chinese immigrant women. As several historians have noted, many Chinese women were stolen from their homeland to serve as prostitutes in the United States. This event, in many respects, directly resulted from exclusion legislation: most Chinese immigrants were men and not

able to bring their wives with them to America for financial reasons and because of female exclusion. With the Chinese laborer community predominately a bachelor society, a lucrative market for Chinese prostitutes existed.<sup>119</sup> With this legal history underwriting the narrative at this point, we can further uncover the complexities layering the "why"s Sui Sin Far asks. The narrative positioning of this "story" with and against Sui Sin Far's parents' romance necessarily folds the legal and historical into the question of her bi-racial status.<sup>120</sup> As Sui Sin Far folds the element of gender into the inquiry into her own national and racial status, she therefore reveals the broader consequences of the exclusion legislation.

Sui Sin Far realizes, for example, that the manner in which the laws may have defined her mother also may have an effect on how she is perceived, particularly as she identifies herself as "Chinese" in America. Bringing the implications of her mother's experience to a more personal level, Sui Sin Far closely follows her intense recitation on "why?" with another vignette suggesting the dangers of being a "stolen" Chinese women.

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<sup>119</sup>See Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 40-42 and Sucheng Chan's "The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943" in *Entry Denied*, ed. Chan. Testimony before the California Senate in 1878 revealed the general belief that many Chinese women in America were stolen and made slaves; also according to this testimony, the many believed that all Chinese women in America were prostitutes. See the California State Senate Report, 17 and 86. For a personal account of a woman being stolen away (in her case sold by her poverty-stricken family in South China) for prostitution, see the testimony of Lilac Chen in Nee and Nee's *Longtime Californ'*, 83-90.

<sup>120</sup>Of course, Sui Sin Far's mother, Lotus Blossom, was not stolen for prostitution, though we do not know exactly if she was "stolen" at all and if so, why. White-Parks offers some suggestions, but admits that this early part of Lotus Blossom's life is a mystery (see her *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton*, especially 9-14). According to the evidence she provides, we cannot even be sure that she was taken away to England as a girl. It seems that "Leaves" is the only document, and as I am arguing, this narrative is much about the constructing of an identity, of a documentation of Chinese American-ness; therefore to take it as a history is problematic. In fact, the very ambiguity about her mother being "stolen" when placed up and against the history suggests that Sui Sin Far is making another point, that being the inherent association of her life narrative with the stories of other Chinese immigrants, stories that were shaped by the legal narratives. On the other hand, if, in the case of Sui Sin Far's parents, "stolen" is connected to the romance, the word could have more positive connotations. I find that Sui Sin Far's narrative requires us to consider the negative features of the word as well. If, in this particular association, her father did not literally steal her mother from China, in the move away from Shanghai, in the later settlements in England, the United States, and Canada, the connection with that cultural heritage which Sui Sin Far so desires as part of her identification (at least her narrative identification) is in fact stolen both from her mother and from herself.

After discussing her siblings' efforts to earn money for the family, Sui Sin Far introduces some of her own labor activities:

I tramp around and sell my father's pictures, also some lace which I make myself. My nationality, if I had only know[n] it at that time, helps to make sales. The ladies who are my customers call me "The Little Chinese Lace Girl." But it is a dangerous life for a very young girl. I come near to "mysteriously disappearing" many a time. The greatest temptation was in the thought of getting far away from where I was known, to where no mocking cries of "Chinese!" "Chinese!" could reach. (222)

Just after discussing her mother as stolen, a condition resonates with the perception of Chinese women prostitutes laboring in the United States, Sui Sin Far directly raises the question of labor in terms of her own experience. In this example, her racial and national identification join her status as woman to describe a condition that is at once beneficial financially and detrimental personally. Relying on the stereotype of the exotic Oriental, she has the potential to attract attention. Yet, she also notes that this life is dangerous. Why exactly, however, she leaves unclear. Moreover, what she means by "mysteriously disappearing," which she curiously places in quotation marks, is similarly not defined. The ambiguity recalls the uncertainty of how and why her mother was stolen from China. The conjunction of her mother's story and hers suggests that danger resides in the position of the Chinese woman in light of national politics and global economics. These discourses position women so that they always are on the verge of some type of disappearance. Indeed, they would disappear if they had no documentation that grounded them to a place or profession. Sui Sin Far reflects this condition here: as she "tramps" around, her mobility becomes both a danger and an asset. Not technically confined, she yet underscores the familiar restless roaming that marks other literary portrayals of Chinese in America: women stolen, Chinese girls disappearing. None of these women had, nor would be able to procure any documentation, particularly if, as history has shown, they were wound in the web of law that allowed only one definition of Chinese women laborers in North America, that of prostitute. Thus, those who taunt

her as "Chinese!" represent the legal, political, and economic forces that pressure her into only one conceptual space of North American existence.

This perception plays a crucial part of the work experience Sui Sin Far narrates as "Leaves" continues. As she explores the impact of her national, racial, and gender status on her definition as a Chinese in America, she must then confront and challenge such narrow perceptions. She realizes, however that if she defines herself as Chinese, she has no choice but to face such designations. She indicates this fact when discussing the several places where she labored either as a journalist or a stenographer. One of these places is "under a tropic sky" on a West Indian island.<sup>121</sup> In this locale, she witnesses the ramifications of these constructed perceptions and must offer contrary testimony to them. For instance, when "it begins to be whispered about the place that I am not all white," she finds that people seek her out. Her body seems to tell one story--"I am small and look much younger than my years"--and so she must impart another story--"When, however, they discover that I am a very serious and sober-minded spinster indeed, they retire quite gracefully, leaving me a few amusing reflections" (226). Her need to supplement the story recalls the poetic efforts in response to the collective rhetoric of the exclusion laws that viewed the Chinese immigrants only as bodies and in terms of labor. Here Sui Sin Far, hints at the additional burden for women: their labor was often equated with sex. Without stating so directly, she implies that she is sought out as an example of Oriental exotica, as that part of the perception of Chinese women at once attracting and repelling and thus, requiring some sort of legal containment.

Sui Sin Far is more explicit, however, in the impact of this perception as she continues and concludes this segment of her personal narrative. Having also heard the "whispers," a naval lieutenant asks to meet her. His response follows the same expectations for the Chinese and, it seems, expectations that accompany those identifying

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<sup>121</sup>We know from White-Parks that this location was Jamaica (*Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton*), 32-36.

with the Chinese. After she rebuffs his advances, Sui Sin Far notes his response as the section closes: "Why--I came just because I had an idea that you might like to know me. I would like to know you. *You look such a nice little body*. Say, wouldn't you like to go for a sail this lovely night? I will tell you all about the sweet little Chinese girls I met when we were at Hong Kong. They're not so shy!" (226, my emphasis). If we understand that seeing all Chinese women in America as prostitutes, then it follows that such a perception reduces them to the level of the body. Sui Sin Far's narrative again resonates with the Angel Island and *Gold Mountain* poems arguing that the body had to become the means of articulation and the method of documentation to redeem what was otherwise an undocumented and, therefore, illegitimate existence in America. However, she also indicates the problem that the Chinese defendants in the Supreme Court decisions on exclusion discovered, the condition that the male poets wrote against: how definitions of legal narratives take away the Chinese person's own control over the interpretation of one's body. As a result, the narrow definitions always threaten to make the Chinese person simply disappear. Sui Sin Far suggests as much in the syntax and grammar of her sentence: "you look such a nice little body" rather than "you look *like* such a nice little body," demonstrates how the emphasis on body overtakes the entire being of the person. Instead of the person serving as a representative, in the absence of the simile it also disappears: the body here is taken even beyond the metaphoric. Furthermore, the missing simile construction puts pressure on the word "look." As simply a body, then, Sui Sin Far is simply reduced to something to be looked at, to be observed.

The reduction of the person classified as Chinese to the body takes on different gender consideration in another vignette placed just before her narrative of Jamaica. In "a little town away off on the north shore of a big lake," another setting in which law corresponds with her labor, Sui Sin Far contextualizes her particular status within

standard perceptions of Chinese male laborers and, consequently, recasts and underscores their groundless with her own as a Chinese woman. Like Jamaica, this locale also consigns the Chinese to a legally prescribed laboring position. Sui Sin Far narrates a dinner with residents of this "Middle West" town when talk turns to the Chinese: "Some one makes a remark about the cars full of Chinamen that past [sic] that morning. A transcontinental railway runs through the town" (224). As Sui Sin Far cites the transcontinental railroad, she relies on another image central to the history of the Chinese in America that signals another example of erasure for these laborers' American existence. When unfair financial burdens were leveled upon the Chinese miners, many took up work for the railroads; when their labor was praised, the Chinese suddenly became a threat to American workers prompting the exclusionary measures. In Sui Sin Far's tale, the reference replicates the same attitude. One speaker questions if the Chinese have souls and adds, "'Their bodies are enough for me'" (224). The Chinese who rush by on the train without a place to land--they do not stop--are therefore laborers without souls, without voices, and thus, perceived to be only bodies. With this example of the inarticulate Chinese, Sui Sin Far's narrative is propelled by the need to speak as well as by an awareness of the danger in speaking. Amidst the anti-Chinese insults she reflects,

A miserable, cowardly feeling keeps me silent...*If I declare* what I am, every person in the place will hear about it the next day. The population is in the main made up of working folks with strong prejudices against my mother's countrymen. The prospect before me is not an enviable one--*if I speak*. I have no longer an ambition to die at the stake for the sake of demonstrating the greatness and nobleness of the Chinese people. (224, my emphasis)

Sui Sin Far strengthens her identification with the Chinese through association with her mother as well as in her awareness of the danger in expression. If she defends the Chinese as her own countrymen, she at least metaphorically opens herself up to the kind

of violence that often devastated the Chinese communities in interior American towns.<sup>122</sup> Notably, the body is in danger. She must consider if she is still willing to "die at the stake" for her defense of the Chinese, a bodily-centered peril to be sure. Furthermore, the her body's insecurity rests on the hesitation over the prospect of speaking: "if I declare"; "if I speak." Both modes of breaking the silence are bound within a subjunctive construction and are therefore merely speculative, the latter particularly so because it is set off from the rest of the sentence with dashes. As a matter of speculation, there is little guarantee what the result will be.

Inevitably, she herself draws attention to her body as a Chinese when she, in the end, volunteers information about her identity. In doing so, she is able to make herself heard, and thus, she displays that, like becoming the seer rather than just the seen, she is able to direct her own identification. More specifically, she indicates that the distinct features of her national, racial, and gender status--elements that had legally classified her--have become tools by which she can classify herself. She clarifies this power as the narrative continues: "With a great effort I raise my eyes from my plate" and she says, "the Chinese people may have no souls, no expression on their faces, be altogether beyond the pale of civilization, but whatever they are, I want you to understand that I am--I am a Chinese" (225). The description of her action in preparation to speak is a cliché of sorts: she raises her eyes in a move that signals both a hesitation and a boldness to again take up the battle for the Chinese in America. Yet given the context of this vignette which identifies the Chinese through their bodies, and recalling the earlier moment in "Leaves" when an elderly gentlemen, upon being told that Sui Sin Far is half Chinese,

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<sup>122</sup>For discussions of anti-Chinese protests and violence against the Chinese in Denver see William Wei, "The Anti-Chinese Movement in Colorado: Interethnic Competition and Conflict on the Eve of Exclusion" in Chinese Historical Society of America, *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 1995, eds. Marlon Hom, Him Mark Lai, Lillian Louie, Laurence Wu McClain, and Ruthanne Lum McCunn (Brisbane, CA: Fong Brothers, 1995); for Rock Springs, Idaho see Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*.

believes he sees "her mother's eyes" in her, the reference to her eyes carries much significance. Beyond the simple stereotyping of the Chinese by the different shape of their eyes, the body allows them to speak, narrate, and provide some form of "documentation" for their legitimate existence in America. Furthermore, the stereotypes rehearsed in the comments about the Chinese in the train are reiterated here in Sui Sin Far's narrative voice, but these characterizations cannot completely hold within the discourse she provides. Or more accurately, the testimony she provides to supplement the standard depiction of the Chinese may begin with her body (eyes) but is carried out in a voice now not inhibited by the subjunctive: "I am—I am a Chinese."

The residual hesitation (a stuttering of sorts) that marks this declaration signifies her ability to embrace her particular status and identify herself. This stuttering recalls the speaker in a *Gold Mountain* poem discussed earlier in this chapter: "I want to complain of injustice, but my tongue stutters. / At a loss for words-- / I wrack my brain for a solution, to no avail" (#14). This poem announces the need for a new means of articulation and suggests that through a form of stuttering (repetition) the poet will be able to speak for the Chinese who have been reduced to bodies without voices. In that repetition (demonstrated in the poem's final line "Don't you think this is cruel? Don't you think this is cruel?"), the literary endeavor opens up a new space in which the Chinese persona can exist, can be recognized as different from and supplemental to what the legal definitions described. When Sui Sin Far stutters, she does something similar. By the doubling of "I am" she underscores the agency in the "I" both in the recognition of personal subjectivity and in the ability to name oneself. Moreover, that ability allows her to bring her own being into existence: the to-be verb "am," as she reiterates it, highlights both a bodily existence as well as an intellectual and spiritual being. Echoes of the

biblical God's declaration "I am who am" are not, I would argue, coincidental.<sup>123</sup> Therefore, once she moves beyond the stutter now as a speaker, she is in a position to narrate something more than the "Chinese" with which she is taunted, or the "Chinese" with which the laborers are stereotyped. Here through a successful collaboration of the body and the voice, Sui Sin Far extends the project we find in the *Island and Gold Mountain* poems, demonstrating that a word of signification ("Chinese") can offer a new and supplemental testimony when one is compelled to speak by the national, racial, gendered body and, as Sui Sin Far especially demonstrates, beyond the confinements of that body. Stuttering in the hands of Sui Sin Far represents the effort to express an identity in America through the means of a confrontation. Her response is enabled not so much by just repetition, but repetition *and* re-articulation of the "I": a re-positioning from a subjunctive uncertainty to an assertive claim of being.

This assertive moment is not the final word on her project in redefining the term "Chinese" for herself. In fact, this vignette marks a continuing vacillation between assertive claim and hesitant acceptance of her own Chinese-ness. Shaping that inherently unstable position is her continued narrative exploration of the Chinese body and voice as they engage the affects of exclusionary legislation. The railroad again serves as a point of meditation for her project, and significantly, this touchstone for Chinese American existence transports her to another, San Francisco's Chinatown.

Following her labor experiences in the Midwest and Jamaica her story travels to the Pacific Coast. Notably, her body initiates the westward excursion--she must migrate for health reasons--and her mode of transportation is the railroad. Her declaration in the

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<sup>123</sup>Sui Sin Far invites that reading when, in the following paragraph--the vignette initiating her story about the Jamaican experience--she directly refers to the Bible in an attempt to decipher her own unique position as the offspring of both Shem and Japheth. We could also consider Louis Althusser who discusses the God of Moses who calls himself into being with "I am that I am." He thus makes himself the "Subject *par excellence*"--a Subject (with a capital "S") who both creates other subjects and makes them subjected to him. See Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation), 179.

midwestern town provides one form of supplement to the rigid perceptions of those who observed the Chinese passing through on the train. Because her assertion ties her to these Chinese, when she boards the train for the West, she becomes another supplement. Her body takes the place of the laborers who "rush about" without rest or settlement as well as their forefathers who toiled to build the transcontinental railroad. She is after all, taken across the continent as they were by their work. The conditions under which she travels determine these connections: "I leave Eastern Canada for the Far West, so reduced by another attack of rheumatic fever that I only weigh eighty-four pounds. I travel on an advertising contract. It is presumed by the railway company that in some way or other I will give them full value for their transportation across the continent" (226). Describing her experience, she focuses on two topics, her body and her status as laborer. Given the context she has established for this episode with her previous glance at Chinese laboring bodies on the railway, an absent transition between the medical and the financial (between her weight and conditions of travel) causes the two to collapse. In short, she becomes another laboring body for the railroad. Though she is reduced to just a Chinese body, she is different for three reasons: she "calls" herself Chinese, she is a female body, and she simultaneously crosses racial and national borders as a "half-Chinese." Each of these supplemental characteristics carries with it dangers and challenges: the instant legal burden of identifying one as Chinese, the suspicion that the Chinese woman laborer incites, the co-existence of assertiveness and mere acceptance of Chinese status that the bi-racial person experiences. However, these new features that she brings to the definition of "Chinese" demand a different reading of that word.

San Francisco's Chinatown demonstrates that even this richer definition that she brings to the word "Chinese" can still be questioned because of additional perceptions of her unique national, racial, and gender status. Hence, her story of Chinese presence in America moves again to the position between assertion and uncertainty. In Chinatown,

her personal supplement to the term Chinese at first appears to be find support. She notes that after being in Chinatown, her "Chinese instincts develop." However, just as she finds a place for her Chinese identity to coalesce, she recognizes the difficult path to that position. Because she is only half-Chinese, she must inevitably retain some amount of distance from that identity: in the specific place of Chinatown, she recognizes the complexity underlying her efforts to identify herself as Chinese. She suggests this phenomenon when discussing her job of obtaining subscriptions for the newspaper from residents in Chinatown. She reports that she performs her duty "with enthusiasm," but she adds,

I find that the Chinese merchants and people generally are inclined to regard me with suspicion. They have been imposed upon so many times by unscrupulous white people. Another drawback--save for a few phrase[s] I am unacquainted with my mother tongue. How, then, can I expect these people to accept me as their own countrywoman? The Americanized Chinamen actually laugh in my face when I tell them that I am of their race. However, they are not all "doubting Thomases." Some little women discover that I have Chinese hair, color of eyes and complexion, also that I love rice and tea. This settles the matter for them--and for their husbands. (227)

Her depiction of the space of Chinatown, therefore, centers on her own relationship with her Chinese identity. This is a troubled relationship because her Caucasian half carries with it reminders of the legal narratives that she has had to confront in order to gain that identity. Yet more detrimental is her inability to make herself recognized as Chinese: she cannot speak the language and to those not willing to investigate, she does not resemble Chinatown residents. Like other locations where she had to overcome strict definitions to identify herself as Chinese, Chinatown, ironically, demands the same of her. Hence even in this American space, Sui Sin Far cannot necessarily ground her existence as a Chinese.

Significantly, it is the "Americanized" Chinese who question her, who refuse to believe that she could share their racial and national status. Her comment suggests that

the standard process of Americanization she witnesses among the Chinese is somehow insufficient because that process hinders the possibility to see a bi-racial person and the form of Chinese-ness she exemplifies. This Americanization, in other words, does not recognize the status of which her body and position in America rewrites definitions and enriches the designation of what constitutes the word "Chinese." If this is the case, then the consequences are many because these Chinese immigrants would be unable to recognize her discourse, or read her story and her position within that story. Like the male poets, the difficulty with Americanization is that the standards by which this process is understood do not exist for the Chinese. Sui Sin Far, through her own unique status, underscores that reality. She recognizes the likelihood that the Chinese themselves can overlook her status, and therein lies the danger. By not recognizing her Chinese identification, they cannot take advantage of the supplemental representation that provides the only solid grounding available for the Chinese during this period of exclusionary politics: "Sui Sin Far" as a representative can only exist in a text. What she presents and what they do not seem to accept is an Americanization that recognizes its own foundation within stories, within representational space.

Sui Sin Far discloses this new form of Americanizing through her interaction with the women of Chinatown. In discovering her Chinese features, these women allow her to tell a different story, a supplemental story. Although these women acknowledge her Chinese-ness in her physical features, Sui Sin Far suggests that their influence moves beyond the exterior. It is after she notes their acceptance of her as Chinese, and importantly reveals their power over their husbands' perceptions of Chinese, that Sui Sin Far's "Chinese instincts" develop. As she becomes more Chinese, the identity begins to move into the interior. Physically connecting herself to the Chinese, therefore, is only an initial step. She becomes more Chinese not by discovering her roots, but by constructing a new, interior narrative. Moreover, by underscoring gender and the power of women to

acknowledge the absences and provide the means for the one who lacks to name herself, Sui Sin Far is able to claim her Chinese status. Sui Sin Far herself, because of her complicated relationship with space and identity, becomes the supplement by which a broader Americanization of Chinese immigrants can be understood. Importantly, it takes women to notice this in the realm of the body. Her body becomes the text onto which Chinese American-ness can be written.

**"So I roam backward and forward across the continent"**

Having secured this new status as Chinese after encountering the women of Chinatown, Sui Sin Far ends her autobiography with a meditation on Chinese identity in America, on expression, and ultimately on her body. After finding temporary physical grounding in Chinatown, leading to a more secure foundation of her Chinese identity, Sui Sin Far again recounts her moving from place to place. With recognition now as Chinese, secured in her written words, she tells of the advice she received to turn completely Chinese, to "'trade' upon [her] nationality" (230). Because she must, as a single woman, continue as a laborer in some form, she is advised to let identity labor for her, to turn it into a commodity. In other words, some suggest that she cash in on the exotic stereotype of the "Oriental"--and in so doing allow herself to be written into the same public discourse she challenges. To become "Oriental" would be at the expense, she claims, of identifying with the Chinese Americans around her. Again, she clarifies the unique status of this group, this self-defined and self-narrated position.

Yet complications remain in this position, even when self-narrated. Although throughout "Leaves" the issue of her "nationality" is in question and is a point that she strives to resolve, the resolution she comes to is that she has no nationality: "individuality is more than nationality," she claims. Certainly power exists in that disavowal. However, danger also lurks underneath because she opens herself up to be, thereby,

"nothing" and vulnerable to definitions from outside her control. This narrative position then leads her back to a familiar place--that of no place. She discusses traveling as part of her "experiences as an Eurasian" that "never cease." From her experiences it appears that, ultimately, she is able to find little grounding. She adds, "So I roam backward and forward across the continent. When I am East, my heart is West. When I am West, my heart is East. Before long I hope to be in China. As my life began in my father's country it may end in my mother's" (230). Her comment re-asserts her unique national, racial, and gender status that becomes the basis for her rewriting and narrative positioning of herself as Chinese American. But what stands out more prominently is her emphasis once again on the restlessness, the lack of grounding that seems to accompany that position. Although she may have secured documentation, particularly in her own writing, she still roams the country. Hence, she ultimately returns to the question of where and how a Chinese in America can ground her identity.

The Angel Island and Chinatown poets both recognized the complex features of roaming and, in some poems, turned that restlessness into a fantasized American existence. Sui Sin Far also embraces that position as one leading to possibility of success, but she discloses more clearly the vulnerability within it. The end of "Leaves" reveals again that the literary space is perhaps the only grounding possible for the Chinese immigrant in America, and she demonstrates precisely the tenuous nature of that grounding. She ends "Leaves" by stating, "I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant 'connecting link.' And that's all" (230). Ultimately, her body, seen and created by the text, by the need for expression, becomes the geographic space in which she can exist. While it serves as an important bridge, it is a link that can also be destroyed. Sui Sin Far reveals for us that the narrative space is, in the end, an unstable space. It is a space that has to be continually re-created because of its possibility to fall

apart. Yet significantly, in that requirement of re-creation lies the power of the Chinese immigrant writer to resist the strict, dominating definitions and to continually rewrite her own documentation.

## CHAPTER THREE

MAPPING LAND/MAPPING IDENTITIES:  
 HOMESTEAD LAWS AND IMMIGRANT CLAIMS IN O. E. RÖLVAAG'S  
*GIANTS IN THE EARTH* AND WILLA CATHER'S *MY ÁNTONIA*

To the people of Europe, where the high price of real estate confers distinction upon its owner, it seems beyond belief that the United States should give away 160 acres of land for nothing. Yet such is the fact; a compliance with the Homestead Law...secure[s] title to a quarter section of government land.

--Henry N. Copp, *The American Settler's Guide* (1882)

Colonies of European people, Slavonic, German, Scandinavian, Latin, spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette. They brought with them something that this neutral new world needed even more than the immigrants needed land.

--Willia Sibert Cather, *The Nation* (1923)

As I look out over American history I see two chapters stand more boldly against the skyline than all the rest: the Westward Movement and Immigration. These two I tried to reflect in *Giants*. Aside from that I wanted to combine both the plus and minus in terms of the human equation, of this thing that we call Empire Building.

--O. E. Rölvaag to Percy Boynton (5 June 1929)

As we have seen, authors of Chinese immigrant literature transform the loss of legal rights and physical grounding into a narrative spatial orientation from which they can express American personhood. In contrast, O. E. Rölvaag and Willa Cather, narrators of Norwegian and Bohemian immigrant experiences, transform a legally sanctioned association with American midwestern landscape into a reimagining of national space. Whereas exclusion laws create absences that require a literary challenge, homestead laws provide opportunities that demand a narrative inquiry. The nature of

these opportunities, especially as they pertain to the construction of American identities and identification of spaces in the nation, is therefore at the center of Rölvaag's and Cather's immigrant fiction. In their work, we find that the immigrant and the nation's land are carefully intertwined, a relationship to which my epigraphs attest and clarify. For example, Henry Copp claims that the possibility of owning land in the United States, often an unrealized dream in Europe, forms a path toward distinction and thus, shapes a certain type of identity for the foreign-born. Cather extends that association and suggests that immigrant presence, in turn, impresses an identifying print on the land, coloring a dull "new world" with ethnic particularities and diversifying the sameness of America's prairie landscape. Further specifying this partnership, Rölvaag argues that immigration stands as one of the major forces determining national destiny and actively directs how we define national expansion. All of these writers, then, imply that ways to read America and Americanism emerge when the immigrant is placed upon the land.

More specifically, Copp, Cather, and Rölvaag perform a narrative mapping of the immigrant and the land, inscribing them into texts and suggesting that the tale they collaboratively tell illuminates distinctive spatial orientations of the nation. While one story describes a broad, seemingly uniform national space defined by "empire," another reveals the specific features of a regional section within that larger whole. A third story--one of homesteading--explains how immigrant presence on the land can identify space in the nation on both levels. The Homestead Act, as Copp proclaims, provides access to the nation as a whole for immigrants, but at the same time, it offers just a piece of the United States--160 acres. The immigrant settlers, all these writers imply, can take advantage of that opportunity to develop their section of America--to particularize that regional space--as they join with other homestead settlers across the midwestern prairie to contribute to national growth. At the same time the homesteading opportunity maps national and regional spaces through the immigrants, it also marks and defines a certain group of

foreign-born people who have U.S. governmental sanction to perform such a task. As Cather suggests, immigrants to whom this promise is directed constitute a specifically categorized group: European, usually white, and considered assimilable. Because of their invitation to own land, participate in national "empire-building," and consequently determine attributes of national and regional spaces, the American identity of these immigrants is based upon a different and seemingly more benign economic, social, and legal context than that of Russian Jewish and Chinese immigrants. However, their relationship to American space has its own challenges that create a particular aesthetic of Americanization when refracted through literary texts. These challenges and their results on immigrant narratives, therefore, require separate scrutiny.

I take up that analysis in this chapter by examining how the homestead laws enable and promote a constitutive relationship between immigrant and midwestern landscape as its stipulations enfolds both within particular spatial orientations. This means of organizing space--which I call the culture of homesteading--serves as a larger narrative that influences how we perceive the identification and function of both landscape and immigrants. To demonstrate that influence, I first examine the legal terms by which homesteading attempts to constitute space in the farmlands of America's middle and western regions. Specifically, I focus on the immigrants' position in regard to these terms of homestead settlement, especially as these people are affected by and contribute to the ruptures within an apparently seamless narrative of land distribution. With this position in mind, I turn to Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1924, translated in 1927) and Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918), two novels clearly situated within the culture of homesteading. Reading these novels, I consider how homesteading, as a national narrative about space, attempts to fix certain meaning for both immigrant and land, but I discover that almost simultaneously such meaning is problematized by the various particularities of each. The results, I argue, are forms of Americanization directed by

immigrant stories describing relationships that deviate from but must exist alongside the narrative authored by homesteading.

### **Mapping the Midwest: Homesteading as National Discourse**

The 1862 Homestead Act, the first in a series of statutes distributing the western public lands, gave meaning to large sections of U.S. territory that previously existed largely outside the national consciousness. By dividing the land into discrete and discernible plots, by placing artificial borders where none existed previously, this law made the land known and understood, at least for majority (white, eastern) social and political realms. Specifically, the nation could comprehend the land because law imparted use value upon it. The homestead legislation, therefore, performed what Robert David Sack has explained as a mapping that transforms undefined "space" into a distinct "place" by physical marks on the land or lines drawn upon paper. Human agency, he notes, enables this transformation. In the case of homesteading, this endeavor turns what is limited in meaning into an understandable (and thus valuable) part of the nation. In other words, "space" becomes "place" when it is socially constructed.<sup>124</sup> This process occurs, for instance, when the U.S. government writes the prairie into a document, directing how it can be perceived and how it can therefore be settled. As Henri Lefebvre explains, land is made into a text when human agency turns space into place. He claims that space is produced when it is marked by various lines on the land: furrows in cultivated soil, patterns in growing crops, wire fences bordering fields, pathways traversing the landscape. These signs of "practical activity" write upon nature a particular representation of space. Lefebvre argues that mapping of space proceeds according to the manner in which it can be used. However he clarifies that the politics of mapping always

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<sup>124</sup>Robert David Sack, *Homo Geographicus: A Framework for Action, Awareness, and Moral Concern*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 16.

include representations, texts such as actual maps, laws, or property deeds that require study and interpretation.<sup>125</sup>

One of the ways the authors of the 1862 Homestead Act interpreted the landscape was with a template of uniformity. As the law reads, the area for settlement must be no more than a quarter section of land—160 acres—and be "located in a body in conformity to the legal subdivisions of the public lands."<sup>126</sup> Hence, the federal regulations create a definition of space, turning it into a place according to standard ("conformed") size and location. Furthermore, the land must be used in certain ways: it must be resided upon and improved and it cannot be "alienated" for more than six months at a time. Hence, the land enters national consciousness as finitely bordered, domesticated, and cultivated in a prescribed way. "Conformity," therefore, is a key concept in the legal and textual construction of the homestead space. The logic behind these original 1862 homesteading provisions treats all land open for settlement the same; that is, it neither acknowledges the possibility that residence or cultivation might be more challenging on one quarter section than another nor recognizes that, consequently, equally productive use might not be within the homesteader's reach. For example, later versions of homestead legislation, which expanded the lands of settlement westward from the midwestern prairies, characterized the land in much the same way with similar expectations for settlement and productivity.<sup>127</sup> This was the case even when dry lands replaced the more fertile midwestern prairies as the setting for raising crops of grain. The culture of

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<sup>125</sup>Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 117-118. I follow Sack's explanation of the general terminology about "space" and "place." He notes that whereas space becomes place after it is differentiated by human agency (and thus is granted meaning), other geographers such as Lefebvre and David Harvey discuss "place" simply as "space" that has been "produced." Therefore, my reference to American space, made so by homesteading, relies on a notion of "place" as the "production of space."

<sup>126</sup>Homestead Act, 20 May 1862, ch. 75, 12 Stat. 392.

<sup>127</sup>The first homestead act in 1862 directed settlement mainly on land stretching from the Great Lakes region west to the Dakota territory. See Allan Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire" in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

homesteading, then, was driven by a desire to write these public lands into the American story in a certain, uniform manner.

We can understand the impulse behind this expression of conformity and explain how it makes the culture of homesteading a participant in the story of national expansion by considering what Lefebvre and David Harvey call homogeneous space. According to Harvey, one of the tendencies toward space is to control it, particularly after it is conceived as usable, malleable, and capable of human domination. Part of that control is in the representation of space through map making and surveys, which permit the definition of property rights. As Lefebvre explains, space is produced once marked on a map and that mapping/representation fixes how the space is identified. It is made absolute in uniformity, Harvey adds, when the space is understood as a commodity: it becomes homogeneous when it is measured only according to money. In other words, differences and peculiarities are eliminated because all is subsumed under the category of use value: distinctions are not in the space, but in the money value attached to that space. This value is most crucial for those who conceived the idea of this space: as long as the space remains uniform through use value, it can continue to be controlled and dominated.<sup>128</sup> Although the homestead provisions did not place money value on the land per se--the land was free after settlers conformed to the law's requirements--the course they outline for land distribution is informed by the concept of homogeneous space. Most fundamentally, the statute suggests that the space of settlement has value but only when used in a certain way. In its attempt to divide the land within a controlling vision, the culture of homesteading promotes a tendency toward sameness and so its language follows a single image of what all property claims should be. Because these sections of middle and western America are public lands to be parceled out, the words of the statute

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<sup>128</sup>See David Harvey, *The Urban Experience*, 176-177, and Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 52, 200, 288, 341.

imply, they necessarily have value for the nation as a whole. Hence, a vision of conformity for the land suggests a desire for controlling and dominating national space. Usability and uniformity, then, become central characters in the narrative of homesteading that tells one version of national expansion.

The control that the federal government desires over this space is clear. While a homesteader must first file all claims to "enter" land and apply for a final, permanent record at the local land office following a required five years of residence, the law demands that the local registration (all deeds, records, proof) ultimately appear before the General Land Office of the United States. Moreover, if the land is abandoned for more than six months at any time, it reverts back to the U.S. government. Such a stipulation, of course, protects the settler from speculators who are not personally tied to property and who can profit by selling land that should otherwise be freely available to settlers. However, this rule also safeguards the government's attempt to control how land is defined and, equally important, how the land is used.<sup>129</sup> Speculation might very well change both the physical and conceptual mapping of the land, removing it from individualistic agricultural purposes and, thus, threaten the law's construction of uniformity of space.

Later versions of the homestead law, including the 1891 "Timber Culture Act," even more explicitly clarify the government's investment in mapping the land according to a concept of conformity. The expanded legislation displays the national efforts to define an even wider scope of land through settlement possibilities for the western, "arid"

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<sup>129</sup>According to Alvar Jacob Beck, Congress passed the homestead law of 1862 after years of often acrimonious debate (particularly between eastern and western lawmakers) in increasing attempts to protect the settler against land speculation. This same problem persisted, however, and as other problems arose when the profile of the land shifted as homesteading moved farther west, the issue remained in the forefront of political discussions and resulted in new homestead laws following the first. See Beck's *Homestead Legislation, 1862-1891* (M.A. Thesis, University of Washington, 1929). For discussion of problems created by the various amendments of the homestead law, see Stanford Layton's *To No Privileged Class: The Rationalization of Homesteading and Rural Life in the Early Twentieth-Century American West* (Provo, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1988).

territories. The 1891 settlement stipulations require homesteaders in this region, upon filing a claim, to provide a map describing the land and a plan for using it. The law thereby writes use into the land's identity. Ensuring that the land replicates the productivity of earlier areas of homestead settlement, the Timber Culture Act also increases the demands for testifying to the land's "improvement." For instance, it requires that the homesteader provide annual written affidavits and verbal testimony from witnesses proving that specific projects dictated by the law (such as irrigation systems) made the land conform within expectations of homogeneity. The law asks for a replication of activity and production that had already been established in the humid, midwestern climate: according to the act, the settler must demonstrate how he will "reclaim said land, and prepare it to raise *ordinary* agricultural crops."<sup>130</sup> Ideas of what constitutes successful cultivation (on lands "chiefly valuable for agriculture," as designated by the federal government), conspicuously mark the logic of this statute. Thus, the culture of homesteading solidifies the position of productive homogeneous space not just in the midwest but in territories beyond, suggesting that in its clear participation in national expansion, homesteading begins to tell its own national narrative.

If the story of an expanding American nation describes an effort to map land into sections according to a conception of usability and uniformity, then it will logically attach a homogenizing schema onto the settlers of the land. The constitutive relationship between land and people, which Copp, Cather, and Rølvaag notice, is also part of the homesteading story. And thus, the law provides a unifying template for the person qualified to enter the 160 acres. The 1862 act reads:

That any person who is the head of a family, or who has arrived at the age of twenty-one years, and is a citizen of the United States, or who shall have filed his declaration of intention to become such, as required by the naturalization laws of the United States, and who has never borne arms against the United States Government or given aid and comfort to its

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<sup>130</sup>Timber Culture Homestead Act of March 3, 1891, ch. 561, 26 Stat. 1095 (1096, my emphasis).

enemies, shall...be entitled to enter one quarter section or less quantity of unappropriated public lands.<sup>131</sup>

The law designates the prospective settler to be an American or one who must become American to participate successfully in homesteading. It also suggests that the non-American can change her status *by* such participation. In either case, the legal description of that person centers first on imperatives of maturity and national loyalty. The logic behind these requirements is reasonable. Preventive measures against potential threats to the nation make sense for national security and control over the conformity of space. Furthermore, an immigrant refusing to be a citizen undermines an otherwise stable citizenry and, on a political and civic level, is not productive to this newly settled section of the United States, especially when homesteading is concerned with strengthening and expanding the nation. This logic does, however, underscore the position of immigrants who are situated outside the "American" model. To become the same type of "American" as the native-born, immigrants face more responsibilities and pressures. Part of their contract is an oath that will be necessarily life changing especially for the many fearing a loss of old world culture.<sup>132</sup> The requirement implies that immigrants will become more useful to this form of national expansion by pledging their loyalty to the United States. Furthermore, the law stresses all settlers' use value on individual homesteads in a way similar to how it envisioned equally productive parcels of land. It requires that the settlers prove their productivity by residing on their claims for five years and engaging in cultivation in order to "improve" them. For immigrants, improving the land and naturalizing themselves allow them to become useful to America materially and politically. If they complete the required five-year tenure and achieve their own legally recognized transformation from immigrant to U.S. citizen, they will have been passed

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<sup>131</sup> 1862 Homestead Act, 392.

<sup>132</sup> For personal expressions of this fear, see the letters collected in Theodore Blegen's *Land of their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1955), especially letters from Ole Raeder, Sept.-Oct. 1897.

through a homogenizing, Americanizing process that ties them physically, economically, and conceptually to the equally homogenized homestead claim. In other words, the law which strives against any land being "alienated" from its ideal of conformity also functions to erase "alien" features from the settlers on the land.

Although homesteading as a national narrative about conformity can incorporate both people and place into an single concept of American space, when western realities clash with eastern lawmakers' ideals, the goal of perfect homogeneity is necessarily compromised. Harvey and Lefebvre have recognized this possibility, claiming that contradictions inevitably lie within homogeneous space. If, for example, homogeneity of space is achieved through division into separate and equal parcels of private property based on money value, then at the same time, the productive potential of different sections of divided space will be compared and evaluated by people variously interpreting its value. Because of the interpretations, that status of homogenous space fragments into various readings of that space. Inevitably, these multiple readings will not fit into a single vision of uniformity. The perpetual tension that arises between the "appropriation" of space (for individual and social purposes) and the "domination" of space (for state and class power) leads to fragmentation and the undermining goals of uniform space. Put differently, while homogeneous space is conceived by those who hope to control it, this space is directly experienced by "inhabitants" and "users" who often find that their specialized and localized manner of living deviate from the controllers expectations for the space. Hence, the differences that fragment off neat conceptions of sameness will always be in play to re-orient notions of spatial uniformity.<sup>133</sup>

The tendency of uniform space to fragment inheres in the culture of homesteading when people and place will not completely conform to the federal government's expectations. The fragmentation, indicating a deviation that inevitably arises, often

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<sup>133</sup>See Harvey, 177 and Lefebvre, 310-311 and 355-356.

occurs as a result of laws not corresponding to the conditions on which settlers staked their claims. An 1881 statute on homesteading illustrates how this possibility of fragmentation is in some cases written into the law. This act clearly admits that the plots cannot always be perfectly mapped when it discusses the process of staking borders for quarter sections. This act notes that, although 160 acres is the standard claim, because of "unavoidable inaccuracies of surveys in adjusting meridians, etc., it often exceeds or falls below that amount. It is still, however the technical legal quarter section defined by law and ascertained by official survey."<sup>134</sup> In this case, the language of the law recognizes that absolute uniformity in the claim cannot always be achieved because of cartographic mistakes; that is, it indicates that a slight difference between legal definitions and actual conditions can exist. In general, however, the homesteading statutes do not acknowledge such discrepancies. While the law offers no real provisions for land that might defy the homogenizing vision for use value, specific terrains that might not adhere to ideas of productive cultivation (hills and ravines, for instance) are also included within the borders of the 160-acre plots to be resided upon and improved. Moreover, the productivity within this prescribed space is not always possible on the arid desert lands, even with expectations of irrigation written into the law.

Examples of homestead legislation subsequent to the 1862 and 1881 statutes, as well as general beliefs by lawmakers who passed such laws, clarify how a single vision to which land and people conform is inadequate. These later acts often allowed larger sections of land to be entered by a single homesteader because the 160 acres plot was far too small to yield a sufficient livelihood in such places as the cattle-grazing lands of Utah and Wyoming, lands often good only for pasture and not crops of grain. Yet, as environmentalist John Wesley Powell observed early in the twentieth century, even

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<sup>134</sup>Qtd. in Henry N. Copp, *The American Settler's Guide: A Popular Exposition of the Public Land System of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., 1882), 53-54.

promises of 320 or 640 acres lacked the vision of what direct experience on this particular land entailed. He argued that such allotments were insufficient to support a herd of cattle big enough for a single family to retain economic solvency.<sup>135</sup> Clearly, Powell implied, lawmakers were blind to the topological and climatic realities of the western United States. As Marc Reisner has noted, to those writing the homestead laws 160 acres became less an actual parcel of land than a mythical symbol of national possibility. Theodore Roosevelt, for example, encouraged a continued settlement pattern modeled on the individual homesteads that populated the middle west. His introductory marks to a report by the Commission on Country Life, an agency he formed in 1908, responded favorably to its recommendations that America's rural base be expanded and strengthened. He wrote, "We were founded as a nation of farmers, and in spite of the great growth of industrial life it still remains true that our whole system rests upon the farm, that the welfare of the whole community depends upon the welfare of the farmer. The strengthening of country life is the strengthening of the whole nation."<sup>136</sup> While Roosevelt responded to the many success stories that homesteading authored, he represents a trend of overlooking the harsh conditions and difficult life farming entailed. In the Jeffersonian idealism his rhetoric evokes, he promotes individualism but a model that is unrealistically founded upon uniformity in space and type of farm stretching across the diverse, western landscapes. Reisner adds, this symbolic approach to land and land

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<sup>135</sup>See Kinkaid Act of April 28, 1904 (ch. 1801, 33 Stat. 547), Dry Farm Homestead Act of Feb. 19, 1909 (ch. 160, 35 Stat. 639), and Stock Raising Homestead Act of Dec. 29, 1916 (ch. 9, 39 Stat. 862). For discussion of Powell's criticisms of this legislation see Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 47-53, and William Cronon, "Landscapes of Abundance and Scarcity" in *The Oxford History of the American West*, Eds. Clyde A. Milner II, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 606-607.

<sup>136</sup>*Report of the Commission on Country Life* (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1911), 10. For discussion on Roosevelt's understanding of farm settlement and the significance of country life see also Layton, 5-10. For a general discussion of the West as a region that would replicate and even improve on the American promise of freedom and prosperity, see Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 32.

use, and how it was translated into law, signaled a "dreadful mistake" in the story of America's west. Whether mid- or far-west, I contend, the law carried with it the seeds of its own unraveling. Thus, in addition to the physical fragmentation of homogeneous space, the ideal of homesteading itself has the potential to disintegrate conceptually.

The homestead as a space to be interpreted (as it was by Roosevelt) is the subtext in Henry Copp's 1882 discussion on settlement. In fact, his guide joins a collection of informational pamphlets explaining how to identify plots and register land.<sup>137</sup> Copp's long and comprehensive discourse on a broad range of experiences—including the economic, social, and psychological problems that a homesteader might face—suggests that homesteading, in general, could be variously understood (and misunderstood). This is true for all settlers, but especially so, he implies, for immigrants unarmed with knowledge of American life. As a result, Copp unwittingly displays how the conformity stressed by the culture of homesteading can be easily troubled through means of conflicting interpretations. He does this as he outlines the procedure by which law maps the land, noting how the land becomes textualized with imaginary lines drawn on the terrain to subdivide it. These lines, apparently absolute in the logic of the law, signal the need to "read" the land as text. Copp acknowledges that such a mapping must be "read" because, he notes, the public lands are available *and* recognizable only after legal survey. He explains how the entire mass of the land to be settled upon could be imagined as a series of parallelograms "formed" by and extending from a base line. These lines "constitute the frame-work of the rectangular system of surveys."<sup>138</sup> "Formed" and

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<sup>137</sup>In addition to Henry Copp's circular explaining the laws and possibilities of homesteading, there were several others written at approximately the same time including *The Law of Homestead and Exemptions* by John Smyth (1875); *A Treatise on Homestead and Exemptions Laws* by Seymour Thompson (1886); *A Treatise on Homestead and Exemption* by Rufus Waples (1892); *Herick's Manual of the United States Homestead and other Public Land Laws* by Samuel Herick (1909), and several circulars from the General Land Office (1892, 1898, 1899, 1904—discussing extensions to the original homestead act). Like Copp's, many were directed in part toward immigrant settlers, joining the homestead law in writing the (European) immigrant into American consciousness regarding western expansion and land claims.

<sup>138</sup>Copp, 15.

"constitute" imply moments of creation as the lines are drawn, as imaginary traces on the land become discernible features on an actual map. Employing this geography, which legally marks the land, Copp moves through the subdivisions of townships, to the 36 sections within the townships (each containing "as near as practicable" 640 acres), and to the half and quarter section within these full sections. This is an "imaginative" geography, to be sure, because as he describes it here, no particularizing features of land would interfere in the uniformity of the arbitrary squares. Yet since such features do exist, the homogeneity Copp grants the individual divisions of land is subject to fragmentation.<sup>139</sup>

It is in Copp's more careful analysis of the subdivisions that he reveals the possibility for deviations, this through his recognition that marking the land is ultimately an exercise of arbitrary inscription. He observes a certain artifice that underlies the process:

Their minor subdivisions are *defined by law*, and the surveyors-general, in protracting township plats from the field-notes of sections, *designate them in red ink*, the lines being *imaginary*, connecting opposite quarter-section corners, thereby dividing the section into four quarter-sections of 160 acres, and these, in their turn, into quarter-sections of 40 acres each, by *imaginary* lines starting from points equidistant between the section and quarter-section corners, and running to opposite corresponding points. The *imaginary* lines may at any time be actually surveyed by the county surveyor at the expense of the settler.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup>The 1906 homestead act goes beyond demanding a physical map, but gives more explicit instructions of how to "map out" the land itself. According to the law, within five years of the date of beginning a settlement, the prospective owner must "file with the required proof of residence and cultivation, a plat and field notes of the lands entered, made by or under the direction of the United States surveyor-general, showing accurately the boundaries of such lands, which shall be distinctly marked by monuments on the ground, and by posting a copy of such plat together with a notice of the time and place of offering proof, in a conspicuous place on the land embraced in such plat during the period prescribed by law for the publication of his notice and intention to offer proof and that copy of such plat and filed notes shall also be posted." The law clearly underscores the process of physically mapping an imaginary space, outlining how "monuments on the ground" must indicate borders. It also demands a textual transcription of these physical markings in "plat and field notes" with the United States surveyor-general at the land office (Forest Reserve Homestead Act, 11 June 1906, ch. 3074, 34 Stat. 233).

<sup>140</sup>Ibid, my emphasis

The homogeneity of space that the clear boundaries of the 160 acres plots ostensibly provide dissolves in the end into imaginary lines that can only truly divide when noted in a plat book. The land is subdivided and the farm boundaries solidified only when literally written into a text. But because texts are interpreted, Copp introduces the uncertainty underlying this American landscape's foundation as understood by law. The textual nature of the land, defined according to the legal and informational texts, makes it even more substantially a rhetorical construct and, despite the apparent solidity of its promise, unstable as homogeneous space.

The instability within the arbitrary marking of the land reflects a corresponding difficulty in the efforts to homogenize the people living within the borders. For instance, if immigrants--whom Copp, Cather, and Rölvaag tie so intimately to the land--attempt to secure their position in America by their claim, their Americanization could be in jeopardy when their 160 acres fail to conform to homesteading's expectations. In other words, if for some reason the immigrants are unable to "reside on" and "improve" the land for the required time and in the required way, they risk losing the very grounding that, according to Copp, secures them distinction and (he implies) American identity. Blizzards, insect infestations, and alkaline soils resisting cultivation are only a few of the difficulties that put all settlers' claims at risk.<sup>141</sup> The immigrant, therefore, is in a unique position to reveal the potential fissures in the effort to homogenize settlers on the land. Copp discusses one of these fragments in the federal government's expectations when he turns his attention to the problem of claimants deemed "insane" and reveals how they are written into law as deviations. He references the Act of June 8, 1880 which acknowledges the existence of the "insane" and allows for others to testify on the

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<sup>141</sup>Copp discusses these difficulties and ways to overcome them; *The American Settler's Guide*, 48. See also Stanford Layton who also discusses hardships and reports that of the almost 60 million acres settled through the Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916, less than half of the original entries were carried to the final patent at the end of five years. In *To No Privileged Class*, 1-9 and 82-83.

person's behalf. Because of this provision, he can receive a permanent deed to the homestead. However, the law also makes clear that this homesteader, while able to stay on the land, is considered legally outside the productive persona that homesteading requires. Moreover, Copp notes that no one considered insane at the time of filing will be offered a claim. The law, therefore, implies that if an "insane" settler resides on the land, she must have become so during the settlement experience. Although legal document does not suggest why this might be the case, it is not unlikely that insanity can result from the harsh living conditions that contradict the promise of success.<sup>142</sup> Like the land that seems to deviate from the ideal of productivity, this type of settler also displays difference in her failure to fit within the arbitrary lines defining the individual's role on the homestead.

In their exploration of immigrant life on the Dakota and Nebraska prairies, Rølvaag and Cather take up this arbitrariness inscribed into both people and place by the culture of homesteading. While Copp begins to reveal the representative and interpretable nature of the lines drawn on the land and the identities given to homesteaders, these two authors extend that inquiry. They test the logic of homesteading by exploring the historical realities that emerged from it, and in doing so, they translate into literary form the presence and impact of the fragmentation of homogenous space as it occurs within homesteading. In other words, they center their analysis on how the immigrant characters highlight the inevitable breakdown of the general conformity that the homestead laws promoted. With the immigrant as representative of difference--the fragment in this spatial orientation--they consider the type of identities that emerge on this landscape under these conditions. In the end, Rølvaag and Cather recognize the fragment not as a liability, but as an important and necessary element in defining Americanization.

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<sup>142</sup>A form of insanity as a result of harsh prairie life is one of the topics Rølvaag explores in *Giants in the Earth*.

The aesthetic that develops from their investigation highlights a fragmentation that both dissolves and reconstitutes homogenous space and, in that process, serves as the basis for re-thinking American identity and the American nation.

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In his 1912 semi-autobiographical *Amerika Breve* (Letters from America), Rølvaag first addresses the immigrants' place in relation to the narrative of homesteading, and begins his career of pondering the Norwegian American position within a larger national history. In the case of his protagonist, Per Smevik, an immigrant working on a Dakota territory homestead, the American guarantee of success quickly becomes illusory. Per states, "America may be the promised land, but it will be some time before I'll admit it. And if it continues to be as hard on me as it has been up to now, I'll never live long enough to admit it either.... No, this is another world, a dead world I was on the point of saying."<sup>143</sup> While Per Smevik eventually goes on to be, like Rølvaag, successfully educated in America, his experience as an immigrant farm laborer reveals to him the contradictions in America's promise. Instead of being alive with earthly riches, the land is a corpse; instead of finding new life for himself in the new world, he is confronted by life-threatening harshness: he wonders if will he "live long enough" to see any productive end to his American experience. His response, of course, employs hyperbole, but he enables Rølvaag to highlight the artifice behind homesteading's guarantee of success, a very different reality often lurking within the promise of 160 acres.

In this early work, therefore, Rølvaag outlines the various disappointments his immigrant character encounters on America's midwestern prairie. Yet beyond merely

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<sup>143</sup>O. E. Rølvaag, *Amerika-Breve* (Letters from America), translated as *The Third Life of Per Smevik* by Ella Valborg Tweet and Solveig Zempel, (Minneapolis: Dillon Press, Inc., 1971), 52-53.

presenting the material and psychological gains and losses as a composite of Norwegian American history, as many scholars observe in Rølvaag's work, Rølvaag carefully attends to the historically situated national narrative of homesteading and the manner in which its spatial organization grounds the Norwegian immigrant story.<sup>144</sup> I argue that Rølvaag consciously directs his narrative endeavor toward the intersection of national space, landscape, and immigrant experience and, therefore, does more than merely historicize. Rather he questions how an American space, predicated upon uniformity, determines a particular Americanization when the immigrant presence discloses its inherent contradictions. Turning to *Giants in the Earth*, I explore Rølvaag's inquiry in three parts. First, I examine how Rølvaag simultaneously writes the culture of homesteading into his presentation of both the landscape and the immigrant characters that populate the prairie. I then analyze how Rølvaag represents the fragmentation of homogeneous space through a single character. In this case, Rølvaag underscores the central position of the "fragment" as he describes how landscape and identity contain the potential to unravel homesteading's promise of uniform national production. Finally, I consider what Rølvaag does with the "fragment" once he exposes it as part of the immigrant experience on the prairie. Though standing as an undesirable element from the standpoint of the national narrative, the fragment in Rølvaag's story is not a failure; instead it is necessary (and productive) for a re-negotiated Americanization that resists the homogenizing force of the nation.

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<sup>144</sup>See, for instance, Dorothy Burton Skardal's *The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience Through Literary Sources* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), Christer Lennart Mossberg's *The Immigrant Voice as American Literature: Scandinavian Immigrant Fiction of the American West* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1979), and Martha Sledge's "Truth and Fact: The Rhetoric of Fiction and History of Immigrant Literature," *South Dakota Review* 29:2 (Summer 1991): 159-169.

### Structuring *Giants in the Earth*: Landscape and National Space

The authors of the homestead legislation were compelled to contain the vastness of America's interior into recognizable, manageable, homogenous parcels of land. Rølvaag acknowledges and reflects that compulsion as he begins *Giants in the Earth*. In fact, he structures his presentation of the landscape and immigrant settlers by first transforming uncontained into controlled space through homesteading's strategy of spatial organization. He then undertakes a more critical analysis of this model's efficacy in defining immigrant experience on the prairie. For instance, Rølvaag opens his novel with a boundless landscape, space that is "endless" and "beginningless"; it is "a plain so wide that the rim of the heavens cut down on it around the entire horizon."<sup>145</sup> This is space without borders, beyond cognitive grasp. Yet propelling Rølvaag's narrative forward is the presence of Norwegian immigrants who turn this "space" into a "place" and grant the previously unknown prairie comprehensibility. By introducing the immigrant travelers—"a small caravan...pushing its way through the tall grass"—Rølvaag incorporates the space into the national narrative of homesteading. That is, this caravan, transporting Per Hansa and his family toward a Dakota homestead, signals an entrance into the story of westward movement that Rølvaag cites as the basis for "empire-building." As a result, it becomes the first element in the novel performing a conceptual and legal mapping of the midwestern prairie. These settlers display how land, when particularized by homesteading, can be understood for its potential to support west-moving migrants within a prescribed manner of settlement. Per Hansa and his family, by their very progression, mark the defining features of the land as they view them, whether subtle elevations disturbing the boundless monotony or small woods dotting the

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<sup>145</sup> O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), 3. All subsequent passages from the novel will be cited parenthetically in the text.

otherwise seamless horizon. They become the impetus to locate the landscape within the ideal of productivity laid out by the national narrative.

At the same time that people tame the land's boundlessness, the landscape transforms them from a generic caravan into a specific family. We learn that Per Hansa is a certain height only because the prairie grass in which he walks measures him, making him seem "shorter than he really was." Just like the wagon track that disappears in the resilient grass behind it, the land attempts to diminish the force of particularization. However, Rölvaag demonstrates that the landscape will have to collaborate in this joint characterizing and homogenizing of both space and people.<sup>146</sup> Thus, the national narrative that perceived the dual means of identification initiates his story. In fact, as this opening sequence continues, Rölvaag simultaneously names both character and place:

This was the caravan of Per Hansa, who with his family and all his earthly possessions was moving west from Fillmore County, Minnesota, to Dakota Territory. There he intended to take up land and build himself a home; he was going to do something remarkable out there, which should become known far and wide. No lack of opportunity in that country, he had been told! (5)

Here again, Rölvaag's narrative continues to move from boundless space to a particular place that is situated within the parameters of promise and productivity. Although Per Hansa is already in the process of transferring material goods to a new land, in this new "country" lies the potential for gaining greater possessions, such as a farm and a home. This "opportunity" also includes distinction. As a result, personal productivity and useful possessions are joined by reputation as homogenizing agents on a uniform national space. Following Copp's exhortation, Per Hansa believes that taking land and granting it

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<sup>146</sup>Here Rölvaag addresses the landscape's apparent indifference to the presence and difficulties of the settler on the prairie, a topic many novels contemporary to *Giants in the Earth* take up. See for example Hamlin Garland's autobiography *Son of the Middle Border* (1918) and Margaret Wilson's novel *The Able McLaughlins* (1923). Both highlight the difficulties that arise when settlers (native and foreign-born) arrive on the prairies of Wisconsin, Iowa, and the Dakotas. In contrast to the genre that Garland and Wilson represent, Rölvaag is much more aware of the mutual mapping into meaning that the people and the landscape present to each other.

identity as a homestead will positively and profoundly mark his character and his American identity. Certainly "remarkable" is an apt term here. Just as the novel quickly traces a course from boundless space to specified land--and in the process attaches value to what is understood--it underscores the importance of an individual being known "far and wide" in this American setting. Hence this land, now named as Dakota, is inscribed within the rhetoric of personal success and national "empire-building" that homesteading promotes.

Once on the plot where he will stake his claim, Per Hansa further particularizes the landscape as part of the nation by highlighting its use value for agricultural purposes. As he looks over the land that his fellow settlers Hans Olsa and Tönseten have chosen for him, he asks himself "Was he really to own it? Was it really to become his possession, this big stretch of fine land that spread here before him" (34). If possession proceeds according to use, Per Hansa's response appropriately follows Hans Olsa's description of the property: "It's as good a piece of land as you could find anywhere around--every square foot of it plowland, except the hill over there" (33). Although the hill rises as a significant exception, the remainder of the land comes to be known as uniform in its potential for productivity. Accordingly, Per Hansa claims this land as his "empire" (35) and "kingdom" (36), and by signing the deed at the federal land office in Sioux Falls, he writes himself and his family into an Americanized "fairy tale." This fantasy will differ from similar tales in Norway because, Per Hansa believes, what he dreams is suddenly attainable. For Per Hansa as king and his wife, Beret, as "princess" (or so he names her), their land and their identities are transformed and standardized as characters within this national narrative of empire-building authored by homesteading.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup>Rölvaag's use of "fairly tale" is not accidental of course. Throughout *Giants in the Earth* he relies on Norwegian myth and saga traditions to tell his Norwegian American tale. For instance, he transplants trolls into the midwestern soil. However, it is also important to note that given the pressures of American legal and social life, these myths change. While they can be seen as universal touchstones to a Norwegian character, like the generalities of American law, they do not retain their ability to provide all-

Yet the reminder of the hill casts a shadow on the Americanized fairy tale. This feature of the landscape cannot be cultivated and thereby defies homesteading's emphasis on conformity. The hill's presence amid otherwise uniform land demonstrates that Rölvaag is aware of the potential for troubling differences to arise. Notably, he structures his novel upon that further particularization, relying on the immigrant experience to reveal the movement between homogeneity and fragmentation. The immigrant presence, he suggests, enables us to scrutinize the specificities of Americanizing land and people beyond the national narrative. For example, Rölvaag employs the legal language of the temporary deed to the homestead claim as an early indication of fragmentation within homesteading's homogenizing vision. This document, which homogenizes space and Americanizes immigrant settlers, at the same time highlights the instability behind the classifications. Rölvaag describes Per Hansa's signing of the "temporary deed" as follows: "[It] was made out in the name of *Peder Benjamin Hansen*; it contained a description of the land, the conditions which he agreed to fulfil in order to become the owner, and the date, *June 6, 1873*" (36, italics in the original).<sup>148</sup> The most obvious threat to the guarantee of success through ownership is the very fact that the deed is temporary. Per Hansa's "fairy tale," we must remember, is predicated upon possession. Simply by qualifying the deed as such, Rölvaag makes the identity that it allows Per Hansa to write into American existence contingent upon land, as well as upon climatic, social, and economic conditions. Although not specifically listed in the law or at this moment in the novel, Rölvaag eventually illuminates the conditions

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encompassing explanations for individual, particularized existence on the prairie. See April Schultz, "'To Lose the Unspeakable': Folklore and Landscape in O. E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* in *Mapping American Culture*, Eds. Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992).

<sup>148</sup>See the Rölvaag's letter to his wife Jennie on September 5, 1923 in which he requests that she get information about the details of land-claiming for a Dakota homestead. This information, which he calls crucial to his plot, here finds its way directly into the novel. Qtd. in Paul Reigstad, *Rölvaag: His Life and Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 101.

challenging the pledge to "reside on" and "improve" the land. Harsh weather, insecurity over crops and livestock, and, in the end, "insanity" are destructive forces these immigrant homesteaders face throughout Rölvaag's story. All of these challenges underscore the possibility that the homogenous space, to which Per Hansa signs his name, will fragment because of threats to productivity and security within this space. Furthermore, Rölvaag's emphasis on Per Hansa's name, as it appears on the deed, extends the possibility of fragmentation to his character. The italics draw attention to the formal name that will henceforth legally designate Per Hansa in America. Because this name marks his claim to land, "Per Hansa" is separated from this association that literally grounds the immigrant in America. Thus, a conceptual split occurs between him whom we witness upon the land (his "fairy kingdom") and he whose name allows Per Hansa to be on the land. Both the dialect-influenced "Per Hansa" and the formal "Peder Hansen" have here coalesced within the promise of homesteading. However, the slight distinction between the two introduces the potential for the immigrant settler, like the hill on Per Hansa's claim, to fragment the homogeneity underwriting the national narrative of homesteading.

### **Fragmented Space/Fragmented People: The Case of Beret**

While we can classify Per Hansa as Rölvaag's clearest representative of homesteading's homogenizing vision, as we have seen, even his identity and his land are complicated with the seeds of fragmentation. Rölvaag, however, turns his attention more directly to Per Hansa's wife, Beret, in order to demonstrate the various features of fragmentation as it is transposed onto the immigrant persona. Throughout the novel, Beret voices skepticism over the homesteading guarantees and, as a result, remains largely outside of what the laws envisioned as a successful, productive settler. Beret, therefore, represents how the vision can fail, how the conformity that is imposed on land

and people breaks down when the person is unwilling and unable to conceptualize herself within the story that homesteading tells. Although Beret is physically productive and reproductive on this land--she bears the first child in their immigrant settlement--she cannot fully participate in the homesteading/Americanizing process because mentally and emotionally she does not fit into its schema. With her extreme fear of the new world she remains too closely tied to the old, and consequently, she is eventually considered insane by the other settlers who embrace the rhetoric of homesteading promise. Hence, Beret discloses a damaging pressure within homesteading's Americanizing template and illustrates the need for a reassessment of assimilation possibilities within this prairie landscape.

We can locate the first signs of Beret's representative fragmentation within her first response to the plot of land that will become her home. After their small caravan meets up with the other Norwegian homesteaders who have traveled ahead to choose land and establish claims, Beret is profoundly disturbed by the barrenness of the scene. She responds from a position outside the general enthusiasm the others express over owning this land and becoming productive Americans upon it. Instead of opportunity, Beret discerns only vulnerability within the conditions of homesteading: "...Was this the place?" she thought, "*Here!*...Could it be possible?...She stole a glance at the others, at the half-completed hut, then turned to look more closely at the group standing around her; and suddenly it struck her that *here something was about to go wrong....*" Shortly thereafter she further ponders, "Why, there isn't even a thing that one can *hide behind!*" (28-29). Of all the settlers, Beret is the only one perceptive to the physical fragments marking the scene: the sweep of her observation immediately includes the "half-completed hut." Moreover, she alone recognizes the possibility for a conceptual fragmentation of homesteading's promise of agricultural success. How could this place, she wonders, support the type of life her husband and the federal government guaranteed

her? Beret's question ("could it be possible?"), therefore, troubles the certainty that Per Hansa, Hans Olsa, and Tönseten exude. As she understands it, the potential in this particular location (an italicized "here") is not for success but for failure. Furthermore, the chance that their plans could go completely awry becomes apparent to her because of the exposure she feels on the prairie. With nothing to hide behind, there is no buffer against the potential for evil in the land, nor is there a way to mask one's own inability to perform the expected role homesteading demands of settlers. We discover later that Beret's vulnerability comes, in part, from a sense of sin that she feels leaves her open to punishment. She cannot hide from the wrath of God in this location. And that sin, she believes, is what eventually brought her family to the prairie. Hers is a sin of leaving family and culture behind in quest for profit and productivity in America. The fear that her sins will be exposed makes the potential of this place foreboding. Her observation of the homestead, therefore, indicates that the "here" is ground for unsettling the ideal of uniform space and people.

Although Beret sees herself standing outside the group, Rölvaag also characterizes her as inside: she looks at the others "standing around her." Thus, her deviance from their enthusiasm over homesteading's potential becomes an indirect center of their experience. That is, although she becomes the fragment in the homogenizing scheme, her fragmentation (and observation of the fragmentation in the landscape as it is written into law) has a general impact on how they all must read their experience on the prairie. This is the case because Beret, who is most resistant to the landscape, is the character Rölvaag paradoxically binds most closely to the land. We see this in a following scene that narrates the action on the homestead occurring at the time Per Hansa signs the deed in the federal land office. When the narrative shifts from Sioux Falls to Per Hansa's land claim, it reveals Beret and the children finishing their work and wandering up the hill on their 160 acres. Significantly, they move "with a common

impulse" toward the feature of the landscape already marked as non-compliant with homesteading's homogenizing vision. In addition to defying cultivation, the hill fragments the plan for the prairie because it is the site of an Indian grave. The Indian buried in this plot is a reminder of the experience many Native Americans had with legal requirements modeled on homesteading. The 1887 Dawes Act stipulated that certain groups of Native Americans were to abandon tribal life and take up 160-acre plots of land. The act was presented as a piece of progressive legislation designed to save Indians from land-grabbers and to provide them (what was seen as) an opportunity to gain American individualism and citizenship through land cultivation. In addition to its "civilizing" function, white reformers believed this legislation also offered the Indians the chance to assimilate to a white standard. According to one, "With white settlers on every alternative section of Indian lands, there will be a schoolhouse built, with Indian children and white children together; there will be churches at which there will be an attendance of Indian and white people alike. They will readily learn the tongue of the white race. They will...readily learn the ways of civilization."<sup>149</sup> Hence, a vision of homogeneity inspired the supporters of the law. Despite its good intentions, the Dawes Act eventually decimated the tribal ways of many Indians as well as caused a great loss of property when white settlers entered tribal land made available by the government: land that federal officials believed the Indians were not "using."<sup>150</sup> The deceased Indian buried on Per Hansa's and Beret's homestead recalls both the difference the Indians represented and the devastation this law unleashed.<sup>151</sup> While the hill is unproductive for tilled crops, it also harbors a memory of what had to be eliminated for homesteading's homogenization to

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<sup>149</sup>Qtd. in Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, 235.

<sup>150</sup>"Using" was the word used by Indian affairs commissioner Thomas Morgan. Qtd. in Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, 236.

<sup>151</sup>See the Dawes Act (General Allotment Act), February 8, 1887, ch. 119, 24 Stat. 388. For an explanation of the results of this act upon the lives of Native Americans, see Monroe E. Price and Robert N. Clinton, *Law and the American Indian: Readings, Notes, and Cases* (Charlottesville, VA: Michie Co., 1983), 147-152.

work. Appropriately, when Beret realizes that an Indian is buried in the land to which she is just then being bound, she is not frightened any further by the landscape. Rather, she is only more aware of "how unspeakably lonesome this place was"; she is only more cognizant of the pressures of homesteading's promise and the realities that upset its efforts to unify.

Her awareness of the land and herself as fragments troubling that endeavor coincides with her memory of her family's immigrant journey, a memory that comes about through her direct association with the land of the Indian hill. For Rølvaag, Beret not only represents the threat to conformity, but she signifies the immigrant experience more so than any other character. In fact, her position demonstrates that the immigrant, although exposed on the landscape, in turn discloses the presence and impact of fragmentary space. Beret reveals this as she lies on the turf of the hill at the same time Per Hansa signs the temporary deed and inscribes his family into American land and American consciousness. Her simultaneous physical and legal link to the land engenders another link: the novel's most direct connection to the settlers' immigrant past. As her mind reviews each step in her family's gradual but persistent westward movement from the old country to the new, this land evokes recollection of the restlessness that forced her family onward toward this place, usually against her will. As such an inspiration, the land highlights the immigrant experience that transported many like her to the prairie and sets a background by which she can be seen and the tale can be told. Rølvaag writes, "The unusual blending of the gentle and forceful in her features seemed to be thrown into relief by the scene in which she sat and the twilight hovering about her, as a beautiful picture is enhanced by a well-chosen frame" (41). The land literally frames her story and thus becomes an integral part of the portrait Rølvaag draws of her. In fact, it promotes richer understanding of her character because it prompts memory and thereby allows a new cultural space (in the story) to temporarily replace her incomprehensible

surroundings.<sup>152</sup> Yet since this land--the Indian hill--fragments the vision of uniform space, as it places Beret in "relief" against the scene, it further highlights her representative position outside the narrative that it resists.

Rölvaag expresses this fragmentation as it emerges from the intersection of immigrant and land by literally, stylistically breaking up his narrative line. Appropriately, the story of the immigrant journey that the land inspires, a tale of the restlessness that forced Beret's family toward Dakota territory, prominently displays Rölvaag's use of ellipses and offers a narrative means to underscore the fragmentation Beret calls attention to in the text. For instance, as Beret recalls the foreignness of the America she finds, this stylistic feature disrupts the flow of her story:

...But they had kept on, just the same--had pushed steadily westward over plains, through deserts, into towns, and out of them again.... One fine day they had stood in Detroit, Michigan. This wasn't the place, either, it seemed.... Move on!... Once more she had felt the spirit of revolt rising to shout aloud: I will go no farther!... (40)

In this passage, Beret recalls not just the places she encountered, but the variations in American landscape she witnessed: different topographical forms, different places of settlement. Rölvaag represents the disjunction she feels within the narrative line: the ellipses signify her personal anxiety over the continued exposure to new and increasingly foreign places. The fact that her family never stops long enough to familiarize themselves with the localized characteristics of each place simply augments the already imposing strangeness Beret feels. Appropriately, the disruptions in the narrative line illustrate her inability to weave any American place into a fabric of wholeness and comprehensibility. Reflecting Rölvaag's narration here, her understanding of these locales as American spaces simply fragments into disjointed pieces. Moreover, this stylistic feature also clarifies her own stance outside the general impulse to push westward. Again, the

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<sup>152</sup>See William Boelhower's analysis of the immigrant journey tale as an important trope in immigrant literature: "The Brave New World of Immigrant Autobiography," *MELUS* 9.2 (Summer 1982): 5-23.

potentiality for her is not in accepting the national promise, but in desiring to revolt against its claims that she believes are false.

Yet in a passage closely following, Beret's memory becomes less fragmented once she can link together past and present experiences.

Farther and farther onward...always west.... For a brief while there had been a chance to relax once more; they had travelled on water again, and she could hear the familiar splash of waves against the ship's side. This language she knew of old and did not fear; it had lessened the torture of that section of the journey for her. (40)

Notably, the disjunction momentarily ends once Beret hears a familiar "language" as her family crosses a body of water (Lake Michigan). Rölvaag uses these thoughts of Beret to disclose an important feature of immigrant settlement under the conditions of homesteading and westward migration. She considers the contrasting languages that either assist or prohibit understanding of the new world. Because the splash of the water reminds her of the Norwegian fishing village from which she emigrated, Beret briefly can make sense of an American setting. Her memory is suddenly less disjointed. Yet after she and the children return from the Indian hill, Beret again hears a different language, one of the prairie. She hears "...nothing except the night wind, which now had begun to stir....It stirred with so many unknown things!..." (42). Again, the ellipses appear to indicate that the words of the prairie, despite the voice of promise, are in a language she cannot understand, and therefore she remains cognitively outside the national narrative of homesteading that interprets the prairie. Although the homestead laws attempted to inscribe the landscape within an idiom that all would be able to understand--a language of use and productivity--for Beret, the prairie remains incomprehensible.

It is important to note that this section of the novel is not the only one in which the narrative line is disrupted by ellipses. Nor does Rölvaag reserve this feature of the novel only for Beret's perspective. In fact, ellipses appear throughout the story signifying

moments of anxiety and despair as well as moments of excitement and hope.<sup>153</sup>

However, the ellipses signify a fragmenting that govern the entirety of Rølvaag's novel. Beret's example simply invites us to understand more clearly the purpose and function of a continually disrupted narrative line. Just as Rølvaag's narrative structure demonstrates a progression from boundless space to a homogeneous particularization to a further particularization and fragmentation of space, the stylistic feature of ellipses underscores the continued possibility that the homogeneity underwriting one story of Americanization always has the potential to unravel. Hence, to tell the particular tale of the immigrants on the prairie, another story is necessary.

An indication that an alternative tale is required also stems from Beret's attempt and failure to understand the language of the prairie. In fact, her memory--her unwillingness to forget the past--shows that she cannot make the landscape comprehensible, and thus, her productivity within homesteading must remain limited. The Dakota landscape, refracted through her consciousness, will not always appear as a controlled, homogeneous whole. For instance, Beret notes that "the broad expanse stretching away endlessly in every direction, seemed almost like the ocean--especially now, when darkness was falling. It reminded her strongly of the sea, and yet it was very different....This formless prairie had no heart that beat, no waves that sang, no soul that could be touched...or cared...." (37-38). Unlike her husband, she does not perceive the landscape as a neatly defined gridwork of homesteads; she cannot see the potential for individual kingdoms of productive farms. Through the example of Beret, Rølvaag suggests that gender also contributes to an alternative tale. Beret represents how an immigrant woman's life is often more circumscribed than a man's because of her place in the domestic sphere of the home. While her husband will leave (to sign the temporary

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<sup>153</sup>Consider, for example, Sorine's concern over Per Hansa's lost caravan as well as Beret's advancing pregnancy (25) and Per Hansa's musings about the glorious future for his kingdom and empire (46).

deed, to gather supplies from the distant town), she remains immobile on the farm. In particular, her prairie existence increases the potential of isolation because of the distance between homes on individual farms, as well as the sparse, bleak conditions of life in a sod hut. Furthermore, her role as domesticator of this home-space is in opposition to the seeming impossibility of domesticating the landscape, and therefore, she must react differently to what she sees. Rather than looking forward to the future of a successful farm, as does her husband, she must glance back to the past. Her role as a woman on the prairie thus introduces a different way of seeing the space and interpreting its potential within the homesteading vision.<sup>154</sup>

Hence, for Beret the landscape is not contained and controlled as it is mapped by homesteading. Instead, it reverts back to the boundlessness to a "formless prairie" that, without a heart or soul, remains alien to her sensibility. In short, the landscape cannot hold such particularized meaning for her. The textual template, which legally inscribes the land, therefore loses its uniformity and comprehensibility when seen from her perspective. Rather than actually reflecting the ocean, the prairie is to Beret's mind "almost like the ocean." If the boundless prairie must be contained within a narrative of homogenous space for it to have sense and to be productive, the language of this passage attempts to replicate that strategy. The words try to capture the landscape within a different, understandable narrative as a means to secure it within an understandable whole. In Beret's case, however, instead of clarifying the image of the prairie through metaphor, the reference fails in the end: the prairie isn't "like" but "almost" like the ocean; in fact, it is "very different." Here the attempt to contain the endless, beginningless

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<sup>154</sup>For analysis of gender issues in Rølvaag, see Harold Simonson, *Prairies Within: The Tragic Trilogy of Ole Rølvaag* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 7-8; Ingrid Semmingsen, "Women in Norwegian Emigration" in *Scandinavians in America: Literary Life*, ed. J.R. Christianson (Decorah, IA: Amundsen Publishing Company, 1985), 82-83; Mariolina Salvatori, "Women's Work in Novels of Immigrant Life," *MELUS* 9.4 (Winter 1982): 39-58; and Ann Moseley, "The Land as Metaphor in Two Scandinavian Immigrant Novels," *MELUS* 5.2 (1978): 33-38.

prairie within the expansive image of the sea should ground the scene for Beret, given her old world association with a Norwegian fishing village. If the metaphor would work, it would cause the scene to conform with remembered images and be marked with a cognitively graspable familiarity. Yet, the metaphor fails to do this, and thus, the landscape dissolves into uninterpretable parts that, for Beret, characterize a landscape she cannot read. As a result, she must remain unproductive for the homogenizing goals of homesteading just as the goals are not useful for her. Because the metaphor fails to explain the prairie for her, she cannot fully enter into this particular national narrative.

This failed metaphor represents such a fragmentation in Beret's mind because it defies a forgetfulness required for homogeneity to succeed. Regarding the construction of "truth," Nietzsche has argued that we can only arrive at any meaning through figuration and in fact metaphor provides access to what otherwise cannot be understood.<sup>155</sup> He claims that "every concept originates through equating what is unequal. No leaf ever wholly equals another, and the concept 'leaf' is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences through forgetting the distinctions."<sup>156</sup> Although all elements of human relations are enhanced and transposed poetically and rhetorically through language and text, eventually the sense of figuration is lost and the meaning gained from metaphor comes to seem "firm, canonical, and obligatory."<sup>157</sup> In short, "truths" are simply illusions that have lost their sense of illusion. In the case of the homesteading narrative, it is only through an imagination of the 160-acre farm that the lawmakers could continue to provide a narrative that granted

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<sup>155</sup>Responding to Nietzsche's argument about truth and metaphorical language, Lefebvre replies, "A society is a space and an architecture of concepts, forms and laws whose abstract truth is imposed on the reality of the senses, of bodies, of wishes and desires" (139). The imposition of imagination (masked as abstract truth) is imposed on reality and that imposition, Lefebvre argues, is by language that attempts to re-orient or re-visualize. Through the example of Beret, Rølvaag demonstrates how this attempt is actually repelled by the individual, the local, the regional.

<sup>156</sup>Frederick Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873) in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 46.

<sup>157</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

meaning to lands of western expansion. They would have to forget the distinctions in terrain for the land to have reality, to gain "truth." Hence, forgetting becomes necessary to establish a uniform national space, particularly when it gains meaning through mapping and figurative inscription in language and text.

Beret attempts to do just that through the arbitrary abstraction of metaphor. She tries to understand the prairie as the sea, but cannot forget the distinction between what she left behind in Norway and what she sees before her in America. The failed metaphor signals her inability to forget the distinctions between the past and the present, between two very different spaces. Despite the manner in which immigrants are written into American identity when they sign a homestead deed, they necessarily bring cultural elements to the landscape that alter its homogenized structure. Yet the pressure of the landscape--exacerbated by the "conditions" one must undertake to gain permanent possession of the land--undermines the efficacy of even familiar old world stories to explain this new American setting. If "truth" comes from a metaphor divested of its sense of figuration, then the truth of the land, as understood in the national texts of homesteading, will not corroborate with her immigrant experience. It is reduced to meaninglessness. Hence, Beret provides an example of what happens when one cannot forget distinctions. In the boundlessness of the prairie she cannot explain, she intuits the harsh conditions that arise as fragments in the homesteading vision. These were conditions not considered in Europe before emigration; these were conditions ignored by lawmakers who wrote the laws that attempted to give uniform meaning to land and settlers. Beret, therefore, reveals how the immigrant creates the fissures within the national narrative about space. Arbitrary abstraction must fail for Beret because, as she expresses the immigrant experience, she is not able to forget the differences between the

two worlds.<sup>158</sup> Understanding the immigrant's place on the landscape, then, becomes an exercise in recognizing the presence of fragments.

But what are the specific results when this fragmentation of the national narrative occurs, particularly on the people inhabiting this landscape? Beret's example is again informative. In strategic locations throughout the story, Rølvaag grammatically alters her identification, dropping "Beret" momentarily for a more generic name: "the mother." Like his use of stylistics and forms of figuration, this conspicuous grammatical structure also highlights Beret's role as exemplar of the fragment of uniform space. However, with this additional tool, Rølvaag does more. We have already seen how Beret reveals the presence of the fragmentary nature of homogenous space. With this third narrative device, Rølvaag suggests that Beret is not just the means toward recognizing the fragment; rather, she *is* the fragment that deviates from the homesteading norm. Reminiscent of the split in character when Per Hansa signs the temporary land deed, Rølvaag more deliberately employs this division in a single character. "Beret" and "the mother" share scenes that also importantly mark crucial events in the homesteading endeavor, and in particular, crises that set her "in relief" as a failure in the process. Marking a pattern of material, ethical, and mental anxiety, these examples signal a personal struggle against the national story that does not mesh with the immigrant's experience.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>For a discussion of ethnic memory as a resistance to American progressivist values of conformity, see April Schultz's *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American Through Celebration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 94.

<sup>159</sup>While this feature of the narrative is most closely linked with Beret, we must note that on several occasions Per Hansa is transformed into "the husband" and "the father." We can see, thus, that Rølvaag does not divide the immigrant response to national space along gender lines, though Beret becomes his clearest example of the fragmentations that inevitably unsettle homesteading's homogeneity: the split in Per Hansa's character occurs only alongside Beret's. This grammatical feature therefore offers another way to narratively visualize fragmentation as it starts with Beret but also includes the other immigrant settlers.

In fact, Rølvaag uses this narrative device to demonstrate how these anxieties develop to fragment Beret from herself. For instance, during Rølvaag's most sustained use of "the mother" to define this character, Beret's identity splits when she directly confronts what she has long suspected: the possibility that this setting will eventually undermine her family's humanity. At a time when Per Hansa is absent, having left to gather winter supplies, Beret accepts what she believes is bear meat from Tönseten, food not uncommon to her Norwegian palate. In this situation two events transpire to reveal how "the mother" represents a descent into savagery before inconceivable to "Beret." In the first case, "the mother" uses physical violence on her children. After Beret, as "the mother," orders her boys in to study, and as "the mother" prepares the meat for cooking, she beats them to stop their bickering. Rølvaag writes, "Not until the mother struck amiss, breaking the switch against the edge of the table, did she stop.... Suddenly she seemed to come to her senses; she left [her daughter] screaming in the middle of the floor, went out of the house, and was gone a long time" (184). This passage denotes Beret's own awareness of a split in her identity: the woman who hits her children is someone whom Beret believes is not part of herself. In this condition, she is apparently "out of her senses" as her character fragments to indicate a loss of responsible action toward her children.

Yet even after she returns to her "senses," her role as "the mother" remains part of her, despite her dismay at the presence so seemingly foreign to her regular identity. As she and her children eat, she again loses her "sense" which she interprets as ethical irresponsibility. As "the mother" she serves the stew, begins to eat, and explains to her children that such meat is good for them. However, it is at this point when her sons proclaim that the meat cannot be bear but must be badger--considered foul among Norwegians--and Beret again comes to her senses, realizing that she might be serving her children food unfit for humans. Believing that she had momentarily lost grasp of the

civility her individuality grants her (as "the mother" preparing the food), she as "Beret," who is "trembling in every limb," disposes of the meat far from the house in the darkness. Thus, the narrative reveals a distinction between the general "mother" who can slip into the inhumanity this setting promotes, and the particular "Beret" who wants to resist this tendency. It is Beret, therefore, not "the mother" who articulates the individual horror in face of the life the national texts have (she believes) transposed onto her family. This change from "Beret" to "the mother" back to "Beret" again exposes the disjunction between the person she expects she is and the person the environment makes her.

Because life on the prairie creates this condition for Beret's identity to fragment, part of her response to the homesteading opportunity appears as a loss of sanity, at least as "sense" is defined by the other settlers striving to erase the arbitrary abstractions between the national promise and their own local experience. In a later scene, Beret once again becomes "the mother" and in this example of grammatical vacillation between the character's designations, Rølvaag clearly denotes the imposition of the national narrative on local, individual conditions. By this point in the novel--near its conclusion--Beret has been classified by her husband and others as mentally ill, a designation that arises from her very apparent fear of the prairie, still incomprehensible to her. From the initial moment of the land claim, she has tried to keep herself from the landscape's apparent nothingness: she hangs clothes over the windows at night; she runs from the face of evil she sees in a storm cloud approaching from the west; she hides in the "immigrant chest" when clouds of locusts descend on them and their crops. However, her sanity is not just from the strange setting; the perception of her illness comes from her inability to fit into the narrative of homesteading that should make it comprehensible to her. Hence, she cannot forget the past, and therein lies the main concern of the other settlers. Specifically, they find her talking to the past--to her mother now dead and buried in Norway--as if it were part of the present. They fear she will sacrifice her newborn child,

Peder Victorious, for her mother as a way to align these temporal and spatial realms. Rølvaag does not indicate whether or not Beret would carry out such a plan; however, he clarifies that because of the arbitrariness she sees in the definitions of prairie life that the others follow, she must turn elsewhere for solace. The requirements of homesteading, it appears, have finally taken away her senses.

Per Hansa believes that his wife began to lose sense during the difficult birth of her son. Moreover, he is certain that his insistence that the child's name be Peder *Victorious* ultimately causes her descent into what all interpret as madness. Here again, however, Beret's insanity is more accurately a personal deviation from homesteading expectations. For instance, Beret's dislike for the name stems from the arrogance she discerns in it. This name, she feels, makes the assertion that her family and neighbors can, in fact, claim a victory over this land, which is to her mind an impossibility. For Peder's name to be legitimate on the prairie, the distinctions between their immigrant experience and the homesteading ideals would have to be erased. Yet as we have seen, metaphors fail, the story is fragmented, identities are split. In other words, the efforts to homogenize through a "truth" from the erasure of arbitrary abstractions are continually challenged. Importantly then, her reaction to the name centers on its relationship to homesteading's vision of land and people. Thus, Beret ultimately becomes the fragment in the homesteading narrative through an even more intimate connection to the land she cannot understand. Because she cannot fit into the national narrative either through understanding and accepting the landscape as the promise of productivity or through the ability to be identified as a cohesive person within that narrative, she believes that declaring "victory" in their personal struggle with the landscape is an irrevocable mistake. Making such a claim can only reveal to her further disjunction between their localized reality and the national promises.

It is within this frame that we hear Beret again transformed briefly into “the mother.” In this case, Per Hansa, rather than the narrator, voices this change and thereby underscores how characters within the story intuit the reality of fragmented identities. In response to Hans Olsa’s suggestion that they separate Beret and Peder because she might harm him, Per Hansa argues that she must have the child with her, despite her mental health. “She is *the mother*,” he says, “and I can see how she clings to him....” (415, my emphasis). The fact that she is “the mother” and not simply “Peder’s mother” demonstrates that to Per Hansa her identity is also becoming more complicated, one that cannot be contained within the homogenizing scheme of which Peder—American by virtue of his birth—is now a fundamental part. While Per Hansa steadfastly asserts that she should keep her son, this change in how he names her suggests, moreover, that even with the hope for an American future, which ultimately must go through Peder Victorious, one cannot ignore the presence of the fragment, of the local response to the national narrative. As the representative “mother,” the example of Beret demonstrates that the fragmentation she clearly exposes throughout the novel is shared among all the immigrant characters and, thus, troubles their efforts to define an American identity based solely on homesteading’s homogenous vision for people and space.

### **Putting the Fragment to Use: Tönseten and Terms of Americanization**

In the example Beret provides, the fragment appears as a deterrent to Americanization. Such is the case because, as far as Per Hansa is concerned, anything falling outside the circle of this narrative threatens an immigrant settler’s American status as written into law by homesteading. However, Tönseten, neighbor to Per Hansa and self-proclaimed leader of their settlement community, provides an alternative view. He takes the failed metaphor (land that cannot be understood according to old world narratives) and the fragmented person (a split resulting from legal identities clashing with

immigrant particularities) and turns what at first seems unproductive into a different type of creation and, consequently, a new model for American identity. That is, he supplants the form of Americanization specified by homesteading for another: rather than constructing land and people for empire, his brand of Americanism produces local institutions to mediate between immigrant community and nation. Whereas for Beret the fragment denotes despair, for Tønseten the fragmentation of the national narrative to regional particularities is foundational for the Norwegian immigrants to claim an American identity. Although he is often read simply as a comic antidote to the more serious business of Per Hansa and Beret, Tønseten represents a key extension to these characters in uncovering Rølvaag's story of a localized Americanization.<sup>160</sup>

In many ways, contradiction marks Tønseten's path toward Americanism. While he extols the virtues of homogenous space as homesteading demands it, he exemplifies a *non* productivity at odds with the national narrative's demands. He and his wife are the first to arrive on their Dakota settlement beside Spring Creek, choosing and mapping the land for the other immigrant homesteaders. His sod hut is the first to rise from the prairie. And he offers constant advice to the others on how to fulfill the promise granted by the U.S. government. As a result, Tønseten attempts to be the leader of this Norwegian immigrant community. However, unlike Per Hansa who produces a child to carry on the homesteading endeavor, Tønseten fails to provide an heir to his kingdom. His inability to reproduce creates much of the comedy surrounding his characterization, particularly through the complaints of his wife, Kjersti. Yet the immigrant particularities that emerge from this humor are, in the end, not fragments that wrench the homesteaders

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<sup>160</sup>For a description of Tønseten simply as a comic figure see, for example, Neil T. Eckstein's "Giants in the Earth as Saga" in *Where the West Begins: Essays on Middle Border and Siouland Writing in Honor of Herbert Krause*. Eds. Arthur R. Huseboe and William Geyer (Sioux Falls, SD: Center for Western Studies, 1978).

apart from any meaningful existence on the prairie. Rather they serve as a foundation on which the community can build and solidify an American identity.

Tönseten and Kjersti introduce this possibility through a Norwegian story they transplant in their American prairie setting. To highlight her husband's supposed infertility, Kjersti tells the other homesteaders a tale about a woman in a Norwegian village who could not conceive with her husband, but could with a "strange" fisherman who lands in the town. Kjersti clearly directs the story toward her own husband who, she repeatedly reminds all, remains "useless" because he has left her childless. Although set in Norway, the story expresses the fragmentation of a homesteading ideal: the juxtaposition of infertility against the possibility of productivity and use the Dakota soil affords. Kjersti's tale suggests that the type of fragment her husband represents will remain inert and cannot be folded into the homogenous vision: Tönseten will indeed remain fatherless and "useless" throughout the novel. But at the same time, the story requires that we read the notion of "uselessness" that Tönseten displays as not simply deviant to the national narrative, but as a revision of it. In the desire to explain her non(re)productive American experience through analogy, Kjersti's story employs the failed metaphorical language that Beret illuminates. The most obvious comparison--the fisherman's fertility vs. her husband's infertility--seems at first to explain the "truth" about Tönseten. However, because he has essentially produced the possibility for a settlement community, the analogy is not quite comprehensive: unresolved differences remain between her two referents, the fisherman and her husband. In fact, the failure of metaphor causes the tale to reveal what Kjersti had not anticipated. The story hints at how a foreign element can enter a setting and create something new. As leader of this immigrant settlement, that is precisely what Tönseten does. While on one level her story defines her husband as a fragment within the national narrative of productivity, on another level it demonstrates how difference, once within a particular space, can create

something that was before not possible. In other words, it highlights the fragment as the means toward a reconceived notion of productivity in this new world setting. Like the "strange" fisherman who arrives in the village and fathers a child, Tönseten enters the midwestern prairie and fathers elements of a new society. Thus, Kjersti's story, directed to narrating her husband's unproductive shortcomings, fails in its endeavor because it also, indirectly, explains a *type* of usefulness to this region. Because this type does not necessarily correspond to the homesteading vision, its distinctions remain inert (the arbitrary abstractions are not wiped away), but within that difference, creation still occurs. The fragment of Tönseten, therefore, is able to contribute to the homesteading endeavor, even when it exists outside the vision of homogeneity.

Tönseten's response to his wife's story illustrates how the distinctions between homesteading's notion of "usefulness" and his own as fragment influences the nature of productivity he directs. This difference informs his effort to define what America and American identity can mean to Norwegian immigrants on the prairie. He replies to Kjersti angrily, "I should think you'd be able to find something American to talk about!... We're through now with all that troll business over in Norway!..." (207). Here Tönseten seems to follow homesteading's implied recommendation that all difference be erased: in his mind, the tropes of Norwegian storytelling--such as "trolls"--have no place in his new American surroundings. He envisions some "American" subject they should instead adopt. As his own story proceeds, however, he increasingly creates an American space by refracting it through a Norwegian immigrant lens. Understanding the "failure" of Kjersti's story to explain him by analogies that diminish difference, Tönseten will make "something American" by using things Norwegian. These elements, which are "strange" to the American landscape, will be transplanted and transformed according to the local conditions. However they will also remain as fragmentary to the homogenizing vision simply because, in Tönseten's view, what is defined as American must first be

understood as Norwegian. As the fragment that Kjersti's tale unwittingly reveals and Tønseten's claim toward things "American" converge, Rølvaag suggests that one *can* tell an American story through Norwegian business.

Accordingly, Tønseten employs the fragment of Norwegian immigrant difference to produce a "place" within the American prairie "space." He establishes essential institutions that ground a Norwegian American community. For example, Tønseten is largely responsible for creating the settlement "school" when he convinces two of their homesteading party (Sam and Henry Solum) not to abandon their claims but to remain as teachers. Hence, the school appears in response to Tønseten's attempt to keep the Norwegian community intact. As Tønseten perceives it, the school becomes an important source of production on the prairie; for him, in fact, it becomes a means of reproduction. When asking that his sod house also be considered a temporary school building, he reminds the others that, despite his lack of children, "he had *fathered* the school itself" (258, my emphasis). If this is the case, then Tønseten (as fragment) becomes parent to an institutions that fits into the larger narrative as a homogenizing agent: the school has been widely regarded as a crucial instrument toward Americanization.<sup>161</sup> Yet what Tønseten nurtures has its own socializing method that relies on the fragmentary status the immigrants retain in this American environment:

Never, perhaps, was a school organized along stranger lines, or based on looser pedagogical principles; but--ah, well! It was in reality a flexible institution, with all sorts of functions. It served as a primary school and grammar school, as language school--in both Norwegian and English--and religious school; in one sense it was a club; in another it was a debating society, where everything between heaven and earth became fit matter for argument; [...] In these ways the school bound subtly and inseparably together the few souls who lived out there in the wilderness.... (258-259).

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<sup>161</sup>On this point see John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

With the intention of following strict rules of education, the immigrant particularities in this setting demand that the school adapt to conditions at hand. Therefore, instead of solid, clear parameters, its organization follows "strange lines"--lines made arbitrary without a school house and textbooks. This arbitrariness, however, is not necessarily a liability. In the hands of these settlers, it becomes an advantage and an integral part of the educational process. The "flexible" borders of the school allow a combination of languages as well as a mixture of disciplines. The singularity that might rule a regular American school is not possible here; both the immigrant presence and the natural surroundings demand that homogeneity within education be broken into fragments of component parts. This fragmentation allow the school to exist and, importantly, binds the community together in a manner beyond the capabilities of a homogenizing narrative.

The particular way the school brings the Norwegian community together comes from the emphasis on the local. The lack of teaching materials in this prairie setting determines that the teachers highlight, as they rely on, what is immediately available. In this case, that is immigrant particularity. Without books or paper, Sam and Henry Solum base their instruction upon Norwegian stories and folksongs, transferring immigrant difference into a means toward Americanization: "Hunting through his memory, [Henry] sought out all the tales that he had heard or read; and these he related in either Norwegian or English, making the children repeat them until they had been memorized" (259). Sam uses the same method through songs, depending on what "came back to him" through memory, whether hymns and national anthems or folk songs and war songs. As assistants, he employs Hans Olsa's wife Sorine and Kjersti, both of whom "possessed in memory a goodly store of ditties...." And in fact, "Everything of that nature was routed out from its hiding place and put into active use" (260). We have learned from Beret's example that without forgetting the past, metaphors will fail and the surroundings will remain incomprehensible and threatening. Tønseten's school demonstrates how the

memory, which represents the fragment, is put to "active use" and has a productive Americanizing end. The tales and songs the children memorize are signs of fragmentation because their difference remains intact when set against the prairie background; however, the fragment becomes a crucial part of the way the settlers come to define themselves as a community in America.

The settlement school is only one example of Tönseten's institution-establishing productivity based on Norwegian concerns. As *Giants in the Earth* continues, a constant flow of homesteaders arrive or pass through the Spring Creek settlement Tönseten founds. Aware that all the land around them will soon be claimed, he again actively directs how their community will be defined. Here too he is productive as father of the future township when he convinces Norwegian settlers to take the land adjacent to the original homesteads. Consequently, he secures the possibility that the community will continue with this ethnic and cultural identification. Furthermore, he fathers organized religion and the church on this settlement when he hosts the Norwegian minister traveling through and convenes a congregation among the Norwegian population he convinced to settle in this region. Finally, he becomes magistrate of the prairie township and is legally sanctioned to uphold American law. While in each case Tönseten establishes the social, spiritual, and civic institutions that underwrite national homogeneity, his own mark on them places all slightly outside that larger narrative. These Spring Creek institutions append that national story because Tönseten's definition of them insists on Norwegian immigrant particularities.<sup>162</sup>

A closer look at Tönseten's relationship to American law illuminates how the Norwegian immigrant concerns place one outside the national narrative yet still allow one

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<sup>162</sup>For a discussion of church, community, farm, and family as institutions developed in particular ways by Norwegian immigrants see Jon Gjerde, 252-260, Arnold Strickon, "The Forms of Ethnicity in a Norwegian-American Farm Community," in *From Scandinavia to America: Proceedings from a Conference Held at Gl. Holtegaard*. ed. Steffen Elmer Jorgensen, et al. (Odense University Press, 1987), 257.

to retain usefulness for the community. By grappling with American legal language, Tönseten legitimizes a different narrative position for the immigrant whose knowledge of English, and therefore knowledge of law, is limited. Like Beret, Tönseten feels great anxiety over what he cannot understand. In particular, his restricted comprehension of the same laws that allow him to be magistrate suggests a form of fragmentation that jeopardizes his role as founder and leader of Spring Creek. Yet even his status as a fragment in this case, does not hinder him from creating the potential for a new reading of American law. For example, after being named magistrate, Tönseten faces paralyzing uncertainty when he must rule according to laws he cannot know except through translation. For him even performing a marriage ceremony worries him profoundly: "If he could only be sure," he tells himself, "that he had done it properly according to law! But he had been unable to find the papers and instructions furnished him for such an occasion; not that they would have helped him much, for they were all in English" (363).<sup>163</sup> Despite his concern, we discover that Tönseten has comically stumbled his way through the legal proceedings. Having done so, he demonstrates that not fully comprehending the legal texts, which ostensibly define one's place in this landscape, does not negate one's position in the law. Rather, his translation of regulations to suit his needs and abilities, in turn, presents an alternative version of the legal story. Tönseten's example reveals how he can use his position as a fragment of the law to contribute productively (and from the outside) toward the narrative that attempts to define immigrant existence on the prairie.

Reconstituted in this way, law becomes a means to exert individual, local concerns onto the terms of Americanization. We can see this clearly as legal

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<sup>163</sup>Gjerde notes a general anxiety immigrants experienced over both not understanding English and the threat of English to their own cultural heritage. He quotes one immigrant who humorously expressed this very real concern for the Norwegian transplants: "I have nothing against the English language, I use it myself everyday. But if we don't teach our children Norwegian, what will they do when they get to heaven?" See Gjerde, 109 and 236.

considerations linked to the homesteading experience raise questions about naming. Again, Tönseten takes a leading role. During the first winter, when the entire settlement teeters on the edge of despair (when "the courage of the men was slowly ebbing away...") and when they more forcibly feel the landscape's pressure to pin them within prescribed space and identity (they were "cooped up" and enveloped by a "gloomy restlessness"), Tönseten provides a measure of relief. At a gathering, he presents a question "that made them forget everything else for a while" (284). He asks Per Hansa and Hans Olsa to consider what names they will adopt after they fulfill their homesteading requirements and gain possession of their land. Changing names after one secures official American status was not unusual among the Norwegians, Rölvaag informs us. He explains in a footnote that immigrants commonly re-named themselves once they became "Norwegian-American," particularly as independent landowners. When receiving the permanent deed to their homestead, he adds, "their slumbering sense of the historical fitness of things awoke, and so many of them adopted the name of the place they had come from in the old country" (285).<sup>164</sup> Rölvaag identifies the trend that generally outlines his novel: the Norwegian immigrants enthusiastically participate in the American narrative that allows them to own land, but at the same time, the difference they present to the American story is held in suspension so that the sameness homesteading desires for land and people is fragmented by a sense of another place. By naming themselves according to a distinct locale in Norway, they transfer elements of the old world onto the new. As David Robert Sack has observed, individuals and place merge when landscape becomes part of one's identity and memory.<sup>165</sup> If this is true then we can better understand why the Norwegian custom of re-naming is significant to the settlement experience Rölvaag represents in his novel, particularly as he explores the

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<sup>164</sup>Reigstad notes that, in keeping with the old world custom, Rölvaag himself took his American name from his Norwegian birthplace. See Reigstad's *Rölvaag: His Life and Art*, 1-2.

<sup>165</sup>Sack, 135.

impact of national space on the immigrant's local experiences. In response to the homesteading narrative that requires forgetting in order for arbitrary abstractions to be effaced--securing homogeneity in the process--the immigrants search for a different sort of grounding that allows them to retain memory. They recognize that their identities must be altered by any Americanizing process they go through. Yet as they are torn from physical and cultural connections, holding onto their old world place through names allows them to mediate the terms of identification. Tönseten tells his colleagues, "Hans Olsen and Peder Hansen--why, either a Greek or a Hebrew might bear *those* names! It would never occur to anyone who heard them that they were carried by Norwegian people!..." (285). Of course he is wrong in his assessment, but he clearly references ethnic particularity and implies that the American experience has the effect of erasing difference. To avoid that possibility, he advocates a revision that discounts the usefulness of family association in the new world (Peder Hansen as Peder, son of Hans).<sup>166</sup> Instead, they must utilize place to mark themselves in America. The mediator, then, is a localized, Norwegian place transposed onto the narrative of American national space.

It is precisely this possibility of writing themselves into law that prompts Tönseten's question. According to his understanding of the legal process, after they fulfill the homesteading requirements and secure land ownership, their American identity is fixed. He explains that "when the deeds [are] taken out, their names would then be written into the law of the land and thereafter would be as unchangeable as the

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<sup>166</sup>See *Amerika-Breve*, particularly 65-66 where Rölvaag also explores this concern with changing names. His protagonist renames himself Per Smevik after his home region (Smeviken) because he fears the Per Andersen could be understood as Swedish, Danish, German, or English and not distinguish him as Norwegian. Thus, immigrant difference is crucial to him, and region over family (place over kinship) is what he believes will secure that difference. For a discussion of factionalism that often occurred among early Scandinavian immigrants as they struggled to define themselves in America, see Peter Munch, "In Search of Identity: Ethnic Awareness and Ethnic Attitudes Among Scandinavian Immigrants, 1840-1860," in *Scandinavians in America: Literary Life*.

Constitution itself!" (284-285). Again, Tönseten is not completely accurate since the potential for change is built into the Constitution. In his mind, however, once the immigrant settlers are linked with the Constitution, the highest form of American law, they will irrevocably become part of the nation. Because their names will be like the Constitution, as they write themselves into American law, they figuratively become part of the Constitution--the legal document undergirding the national narrative. *How* they write themselves into the Constitution is Tönseten's concern. If their names are unchangeable and linked to American law, then they will characterize that association by names that display localized features of their Norwegian immigrant background.

If naming themselves according to immigrant background solidifies their place in American law and, consequently, in the American landscape, then the immigrants have made it possible to determine their own Americanization through the local as a mediating agent. The settlers' reactions to the newborn Peder Victorious reveals that this is the case. As the settlement's first child--a U.S. citizen according to his place of birth--Peder is directly associated with the nation and thereby an important link for all in their need to claim an American identity. Appropriately, they all attempt to "claim" Peder: "They all felt themselves to be shareholders in [Peder], but they couldn't agree over the division" (255). Because he is claimed, considered as something to be shared and divided, Peder further connects the immigrant settlers with the homesteads on which they reside and improve. Moreover, through his middle name, he also represents the fragmentation inherent in their relationship to the land; that is, behind every victory lurks the possibility of a difficult battle and defeat. Peder, therefore, represents both the homesteading opportunity and the realities undermining that promise. Yet as Tönseten's example suggests, they can be "victorious" but not necessarily within the homogenizing terms of the national narrative. Thus, Peder remains as the fragment that defines their American existence.

But as a fragment, Peder means even more to these immigrant settlers. He symbolizes the important role their local experiences play in allowing them to retain control of naming their own American identity in the face of national pressures. We discover Peder's significance when, after "claiming" him, the settlers each try to name his destiny. Following suggestions such as schoolmaster, minister, and doctor--positions that they find already filled in their community and already particularized as Norwegian--Tönseten turns to politics. He says, "The boy will, of course be President! he is born in the country--everything points in that direction" (257). Consistent with what Tönseten has represented, his suggestion calls for a revision of an American institution through Norwegian American agency. To others, however, Peder even more strongly stands for the vital role of the fragment to resist the homogenizing force of the nation. As a modification that focuses more specifically on the importance of the local, Hans Olsa replies, "I think we'll be more in need of a good governor out here, [...]; these prairies will be a state some day" (257). His suggestion demonstrates that just as the local will be necessary in defining identity through names, the local concern on the prairie will be beneficial to them in governing their relationship to the land. While they all realize that Peder is claimed by the nation as "American"--the second-generation born in the U.S.--Hans Olsa claims him as a bridge between their Norwegian-defined immigrant community and the nation. As the governor, Peder would represent local concerns and become another fragment in the national narrative. But in that capacity, he would represent the importance of the fragments that Beret exposes and Tönseten promotes.<sup>167</sup> Hence, the vision of Peder as governor reveals Rölvaag's claim that fragmentation of the national narrative about homogenous space cannot necessarily be resolved, and for the benefit of immigrant Americanization it *should not* be resolved. Through the example of

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<sup>167</sup>The character Peder remains central to the two novels following *Giants in the Earth* that make up Rölvaag's immigrant trilogy: *Peder Victorious* (1929) and *Their Fathers' God* (1931). Interestingly, in the last of these novels, Peder does become politically active--on the regional level.

Peder, Rølvaag insists that the terms of Americanization employ the region as mediator between national ideals and immigrant realities.

### **"A Gratifying Divergence": *The Nation*, Willa Cather and Narrating the Region**

When Rølvaag highlights the fragmentary nature of homogeneous space and translates it into a meditation on the importance of region, he is not alone in considering the ways immigrants (and Americans in general) understood the nation in the early twentieth century. In fact, *Giants in the Earth* appears near the end of a four-year conversation that took up this very issue. From 1922 to 1925 *The Nation* ran a series of articles entitled "These United States," essays describing the unique features of this country's individual states.<sup>168</sup> The series' name itself reveals that it was designed to examine the nation through its component parts: the plural article "these" transforms the proper noun "United States" into a non-specific, regular noun ("states") modified by an adjective ("united"). The grammar suggests that the nation is more than a monolithic entity. And the essays making up the series concur, collectively asking that we more closely examine the individual states because each has its own history, its own story. The editors of *The Nation* voice their hope that these essays will "furnish an enlightening perspective of the America of today in the somewhat arbitrary terms of politico-geographic boundaries, and that it will be a valuable contribution to the new literature of national self-analysis."<sup>169</sup> Consistent with Rølvaag's project, "These United States," argues for the need to recognize the discrepancies between the nation's various parts in order to map out its meaning. If we think of the United States as a homogeneous whole,

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<sup>168</sup>The series appears in volumes 114 through 120.

<sup>169</sup>*The Nation* (114, April 19, 1922), 460.

these united states require us to re-think that status as we acknowledge the fragmentation always present.

Unearthing regional differences is significant, the editors add, because through such an endeavor we find vital and diverse elements of intellectual productivity. The writers participating in the series "differ considerably in political or economic attitude, in profession and mode of life," and as a result, they provide "a gratifying divergence."<sup>170</sup> Thus, the editors value not the attempt to smooth over differences, but the effort to exploit them for a more complex story of the nation. Appropriately, they claim their project enriches the landscape of American literary production. This collection of essays, they believe, will participate in a "new literature of national self-analysis" that reconsiders perceptions of the nation and, more accurately, the way the story of the nation is told. In their fiction, both Rölvaag and Cather contribute to this "national self-analysis" by examining the role of the region through the relationship between the immigrant and the midwestern landscape. Through their literary texts, they disclose that among the many "divergences" of which a state or region can boast, the immigrant culture, in how it interacts with the organization of space, is particularly instructive. In the hands of Rölvaag, therefore, the immigrant story is part of this "new literature" because it clarifies how the fragmentation of homesteading's promises serve as an important identifying device. At the same time it sheds new light on the demands undergirding the national narrative stressing uniformity.

Rölvaag focuses on the immigrant as a way to trouble ideas of the nation and, by keeping the fragment unresolved, to tell an alternative regional story. Cather, however, sees the immigrant serving a different function in the story of the nation. She considers how the immigrant does not necessarily tell a separate tale but, as a fragment, revises and refines the national narrative that already exists. She makes this argument in her

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<sup>170</sup>Ibid.

installment to "These United States." In "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" (1923), she claims that the immigrant presence enabled Nebraska to develop a unique region within broader, national definitions. To prove her point she focuses on images of movement and settlement, and she demonstrates that these elements with which we usually define the country's growth, also are central to the immigrant experience. Cather begins by locating the genesis of Nebraska's history as a pathway, the state as a road to the West. Nebraska, she argues, was a state even before people resided within its borders.<sup>171</sup> Instead of attracting settlers, it first was "a highway for dreamers and adventurers, men who were in quest of gold or grace, freedom or romance."<sup>172</sup> When it did attract permanent residents, its history was underwritten by the railway and "home-seeking people from overseas" (237). In other words, the road and the immigrant (to whom she exclusively refers here) created the state. Although she acknowledges the "incomers" from New England and the South, the immigrant is central in her Nebraska story: the 1910 census, she notes, reveals that immigrants outnumbered the native-born Americans nine to three.<sup>173</sup> "With such a majority of foreign stock," she argues, "it would be absurd to say that the influence of the European does not cross the boundary of his own acres, and has nothing to do with shaping the social ideals of the

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<sup>171</sup>We must note, of course, that Cather follows the tendency of her time to simply overlook the fact that the region was certainly peopled before homesteading and European-American settlement. In this essay she makes no note of Native Americans, it is almost as if their lack of legal status (and legal definition) made them non-existent in the expanding American nation. The intellectual framework defining states as created by legal boundaries and the identities of people by social and political institutions, would make it impossible to see the Native Americans as part of the landscape. Cather has been criticized for not giving voice to Native Americans of the Southwest in *The Song of the Lark*. See Sharon O'Brien's introduction to that novel, (New York: Signet, 1991, xv-xvi) and O'Brien's biography of Cather, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). In *My Ántonia*, a similar erasure occurs, but Cather does observe an important landmark left by the Indians, one that contributes the histories of the place, even though she makes no comment on the fact that after homesteading none remain on that spot.

<sup>172</sup>Willa Sibert Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation* 117 (Sept. 5, 1923): 236-238.

<sup>173</sup>The figures Cather provides are as follows: 228,648 foreign-born and native-born Germans; 103,503 Scandinavians; 50,680 Czechs. Out of Nebraska's total population of 1,192,214, the foreign population numbered 900,571 (*The Nation*, 237).

commonwealth" (237). If we understand the homesteader to put his or her own personal mark on the land, then such a mapping stretches beyond the individual homestead. The influence of the immigrant, Cather suggests, is widespread.

By acknowledging the immigrant's influence beyond the borders of his or her own acres, Cather claims that, in Nebraska, the foreign-born grants profound meaning to the landscape. Moreover, the land and the immigrant, she implies, exist in an organic relationship. For instance, after noticing graves as landmarks of the immigrant on the land, she quickly turns the trope so that the immigrant becomes the actual landmark. Such is the case when she describes the inscriptions upon gravestones in Nebraska cemeteries:

*"Eric Ericson, born Bergen, Norway...died Nebraska," "Anton Pucelik, born Prague, Bohemia...died Nebraska,"* I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again. Something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in elasticity of mind, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, in certain qualities of feeling and imagination. (237).

Sack argues that place and landscape become part of one's memory because they are replete with markers of the past: graves and cemeteries, monuments, and place names.<sup>174</sup> Whereas in the case of Beret, memory as device granting meaning to land failed through irreconcilable metaphorical disjunctures, Cather here suggests that memory imbedded in the landscape by these landmarks can retain difference and at the same time be an irrevocable part of the land's definition. In this case, Cather observes a continued distinction between old and new worlds in Scandinavian and Bohemian ethnicities, the two most prominent national/ethnic associations that appear in her novels of pioneer life: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918) as well as her first "Nebraska" short story, "The Bohemian Girl" (1912).<sup>175</sup> However, she does more

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<sup>174</sup>Sack, 135.

<sup>175</sup>*The Song of the Lark* differs from the other two novels in setting and focus on rural life. Its heroine, Thea Kronborg, is a generation removed from the immigration experience although she is clearly identified as ethnically Swedish. Furthermore, the setting is in the town of Moonstone, Colorado (clearly

than highlight an ethnicity that lingers to classify the characters as immigrants. She notes that the gravestones identify them as Nebraska rather than just Nebraskans. Eric Ericson, for example was not born *in* Bergen, Norway or died *in* Nebraska; rather he was *born* Bergen and *died* Nebraska. The immigrant has become the state. Specifically, the immigrant (Cather hopes) becomes both the state's literal soil and metaphoric soul. From the body of the immigrant that enters the ground, Cather implies, the land will be enriched physically. But more importantly, once the body is one with the soil, the influence of the immigrant will extend to the spiritual, intellectual, and imaginative sectors of the state's life.

This physical and imaginative fertilization of the soil, Cather implies, will allow narratives to emerge from this landscape. Her claim, therefore, causes us to reconsider the meaning of the fragment and failure of the immigrant in face of the homesteading endeavor and pressure of the landscape. In *Giants of the Earth*, Rölvaag grounds his conception of Americanization in the immigrant that remains apart from the vision of homogenized land and people. Like Cather, who discusses the deceased, Rölvaag also presents the death of a foreign-born settler on the prairie and thereby reveals a form of fragmentation. Yet, in the hands of the two authors, the outcome of that death is different and constitutes contrasting narratives. Underscoring his belief that the immigrant is productively defined as the fragment, Rölvaag concludes the novel paradoxically with Per Hansa dead, but not interred; he remains as he was during the winter, frozen in position *on* the land with his back to a haystack, his eyes "set toward the west" (465). While the fragment is an important element in Rölvaag's aesthetic of Americanization, Per Hansa's final condition demonstrates that the immigrant becomes part of the American story by signifying the gap between the promise of the westward-growing country (he looks

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patterned on Cather's hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska), and though a rural area, the attention to the dynamics of farm culture are much less part of this novel than in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*.

toward, but is, of course, blind to the West, the promises of empire), and the possibility or even desire for the immigrant to participate entirely. Thus, he cannot be re-integrated into the process in order to re-emerge as the fruits of his homesteading (and nation-founding) endeavors. That is part of Rölvaag's overall project: the immigrant cannot be fully incorporated into the nation, but by highlighting the region as a mediating force, the immigrant can become a character in the American story. Although Per Hansa assists in a cycle of regeneration by breaking sod and producing crops, because he is not buried, he is not part of the soil and cannot materially or metaphorically join in this cycle.

Cather, therefore offers an alternative vision of the immigrant-as-fragment in the region and in the westward-looking nation. In her *Nation* essay, she imagines the immigrant not so much as *part* of the American story, but *as* the American story. By burial in the soil, the immigrant becomes a physical part of the region and thereby part of the complete cycle of regeneration that characterizes a growing region as well as the growth of the nation. Per Hansa only looks blindly to the West and its possibilities; Cather's immigrants become the West. Cather argues for this role in the conclusion to her novel *O Pioneers!* She proposes that the land, which comes to mean both the soil and the region's cultural and social environment, will benefit from the death of the novel's heroine, Alexandra Bergson: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!"<sup>176</sup> Cather illustrates a productive reintegration of the immigrant into the soil and spirit of Nebraska. As a result, the immigrant has allowed the land to produce its bounty because she has contributed to homesteading and sod-breaking when alive *and* becomes manifest in the crops after death. Furthermore, the reward "in the shining eyes of youth," comes about in the stories as well as in the prosperity the land henceforth affords; the land now contains

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<sup>176</sup>Willia Cather, *O Pioneers!* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 199.

seeds for a youthful (and potentially fruitful) imagination. It is the story, often the history of the place, imaginatively planted into the Nebraska soil that is the greater crop to harvest.

Because the harvest reaps imagination, the potential for narrative regeneration coincides with the material cycle of renewal. That is, the association between immigrant and landscape produces a rich intellectual and literary tradition in the region. In her *Nation* essay, Cather observes, "Colonies of European people, Slavonic, German, Scandinavian, Latin, spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette. They brought with them something that this neutral new world needed even more than the immigrants needed land" (237). She recognizes the diversity the immigrants brought to the otherwise dull landscape as well as their artistic talent. Among the "cultivated, restless young men from Europe" who made such "incongruous figures among the hard-handed breakers of the soil," Cather finds many storytellers. In fact, she concentrates on the immigrant here as a storyteller, not as a sod-breaker. Equal to the cultivation of the land as a crucial factor in creating Nebraska is the cultivation of the mind through stories. In this way, Cather redefines the relationship between literature and the project of mapping the region: the affinity between land and immigrant storytellers leads her to conclude that from the soil narratives will emerge. These are the narratives that tell the story of Nebraska and Nebraskans. These are the stories that map the state and identify the people within its borders. Moreover, the collection of these stories, of which Cather's own essay in *The Nation* joins, make the history of the state.

Behind the activity of creating this history of a state and region lies the significance of storytelling, especially as the influence of the immigrant reaches beyond the region to the nation. Cather, therefore, allows us to move from the arbitrary lines, which Copp discusses, to a meaningful place constructed through language and stories. She believes that the narratives emerging from Nebraska have special currency for the

national story as a whole. In her essay she writes, "It is in that great cosmopolitan country known as the Middle West that we may hope to see the hard holds of American provincialism broken up; that we may hope to find young talent which will challenge the pale proprieties, the insincere, conventional optimism of our art and thought" (238). In other words, Cather believes that the Nebraska she narrates will influence the entire nation. Provincialism is the problem, and somewhat ironically, the Middle West's regional attributes challenge smug isolationism that characterizes the different parts of the country. What is regionally specific here is not necessarily true elsewhere in the United States. Consequently Nebraska's cosmopolitan immigrant class provides an intellectual diversity that benefits all of America. By conceptually extending beyond Nebraska's borders and thereby providing a broader spatial scope of meaning, Cather's claim of an intellectual tradition through immigrant presence on (and in) the Nebraska landscape imaginatively and narratively coalesces region and nation. The organic process, by which an Eric Ericson or Alexandra Bergson transforms the soil in this state, makes the immigrant the spirit behind the stories of the land and forms the physical and narrative space that describes both Nebraska and the nation.

Ultimately, Cather's immigrant fiction, particularly *My Ántonia*, returns us to Rölvaag's proposal that region allows immigrants to place themselves within a national landscape. But Cather's work takes us further. Her insistence that the immigrant and the land productively converge relies on the culture of homesteading that both allows their correspondence and invariably raises questions regarding their identification as American people and land. Cather also acknowledges the fragment that the immigrant represents (and is), but as she understands it, the isolation of the fragment from the homogenous whole is not the end of the story. Rather she understands the immigrant/fragment as an important element propelling regional story of land and people forward into a narrative cycle of regeneration that, in the end, reconstitutes the way we read the nation.

Specifically, the accretion of stories about the rural "country" as well as the new and old "countries" upon which Cather builds the narrative of *My Ántonia* results in a history that encompasses both an American and an immigrant past and foretells both a regional and a national future.

### ***My Ántonia*: Immigrant as Landmark; Landmark as Muse**

Although written after *My Ántonia*, Cather's essay in *The Nation* helps us to understand the main issues regarding the immigrant that inform the aesthetic of Americanization she develops in the novel. In particular, her suggestion that the immigrant stands materially and metaphorically as a landmark upon the Nebraska landscape reveals a belief that to narrate an immigrant's American identity is to tell (and re-tell) a story of the land. While Rölvaag argues that the immigrant story can function productively outside the national narrative, Cather's introduction to her novel makes a claim for a different reading. The immigrant as a fragment of that narrative becomes a means toward a story of the nation. *Ántonia* plays this role for the novel's narrator and Jim Burden when she becomes the landmark by which they recognize and remember the prairie landscape of their youth. The novel opens with their rushing across the midwestern plains upon the railroad, being transported through what appears as a homogenous landscape once the motion blurs the specificity of the passing scene. However, remnants of the land and its environment fragment this homogeneity with distinct memories of the past. The narrator explains:

The dust and heat, the burning wind, reminded us of many things. We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet-iron. We

agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it.<sup>177</sup>

Because they spent their childhood together in this region, they find that the pressure of nostalgia breaks down the sameness of the "never-ending miles of ripe wheat" they observe from the train. Memory focuses on the land and its unique details ("dusts and heat"; a land "green and billowy") underscoring how distinctions of the region enter the scene even when their view is framed by a symbol of nation: the railroad as representative of "empire-building." More specifically, the regenerative powers of the land and the continuing cycles of seasons within this region shape the recollection. Through personal experience with this cyclical renewal, one can "know" the place and, they imply, narrate it. We see from this passage that Cather is interested in how narratives come from "knowing" a particularized space and understanding its differences from other parts of the nation.

Although growing up in the prairie town provides the experience to know, full knowledge and understanding require more than just experience. Jim and the narrator agree that they only can know the country of their childhood by knowing the immigrant *Ántonia*. To them, *Ántonia* represents the landscape. Therefore, if the land sparks memory, local histories, and ultimately stories, then the immigrant is the muse behind that inspiration. Such is the case with *Ántonia*:

During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had known long ago and whom both of us admired. More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain.... [Jim's] mind was full of her that day. He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her. (5)

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<sup>177</sup>Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3. All subsequent passages from this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Although landscape appears to prompt personal history, *Ántonia* evokes the discussion of the past. We see that *Ántonia* becomes the "figure" to mark the land for the narrator and Jim and enables them to tell their stories that focus on their earlier lives in this region. But as a "figure," the *Ántonia* that the narrator and Jim remember gains metaphorical status. In contrast to Beret's perspective in which metaphors fail to explain the landscape because of the discrepancies between the prairie and immigrant experiences, here the immigrant is the metaphor and, as such, reconciles the distinctions between past and present scenes. As a figuration representing the land, *Ántonia* occupies a complex position in relation to the stories she inspires. She is not the subject, but at the same time she is not completely outside its subject matter. Instead, as the fragment in the national story, she is the force behind the narrator's and Jim's effort to recall this region and to re-create it narratively. Because she "seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure" of their past, she becomes the land, its produce, its particular physical and natural features. As the country, she allows them to know the country.

*Ántonia*, as the "figure," thus demonstrates how the fragment offers meaning and understanding to the landscape. However, she does more than ensure comprehension. She also creates the possibility of telling multiple stories. Her name alone has the power to "call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain." As a landmark, *Ántonia* appropriately prompts a memory that connects people to places, but in addition, she casts that recollection within a specific narrative genre: the "picture" of the past she brings to mind is a "drama." Since a drama can be interpretable, the narrator and Jim have before them a variety of ways to understand and tell their histories of Black Hawk, their prairie hometown. It is not *the* drama of their childhood necessarily, but *a* drama: one of several ways to narrate this particular place. Accordingly, the narrative introduces the potential for a cycle of stories. *Ántonia* allows one to know the people and

the place, yet at the same time a simple invocation of her as representative of the land inspires one to continue to tell stories and further explore Nebraska's past.

The analysis of their Nebraska past, therefore, demands revision of the stories that construct regional and national histories. This process begins when the narrator and Jim agree to write their own individual stories about *Ántonia*. The narrator explains, "I would set down on paper all that I remembered of *Ántonia* if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her" (5). Jim's manuscript, which forms the narrative that appears after this brief introductory piece, displays that the effort to tell the story of her (to speak her name) produces a history of both people and place. Therefore, a conjunction of the physical and the literary--the land and the stories--predicated upon the immigrant "presence" determines both how a story is written and how it is re-written. As the narrator notes, it is crucial that Jim make her see *Ántonia again*. If re-seeing the immigrant character is necessary, then revising one's understanding of the particular landscape that the immigrant represents naturally follows. If by "getting a picture of her" Jim and the narrator create *Ántonia* textually, they re-create the landscape's story textually. The physical and intellectual construct that makes the story possible also enables further re-examination of the past, a history of childhood, a history of Nebraska, and in the end, I argue, a history of the nation and its immigrant people.

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As Jim's narrative opens in book one, "The Shimerdas," he quickly establishes the immigrant as a "central figure" not only on the landscape, but as the force giving the landscape meaning. To Jim, a child migrating to a "new world" of the Nebraska from his previous home in Virginia, the land first appears as a physical and conceptual void. It is a space that initially exists for him only in negation. In his wagon journey from the train

station to his grandparents' homestead where he will be raised, he enters an unknowable space, not unlike the landscape to which Per Hansa's caravan granted meaning. Jim writes, "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land" (11-12). The terms of negation in this passage quickly multiply, blotting out any meaning that the landscape might have. Those markings which, according to Lefebvre, inscribe the land to produce space simply do not exist at this point for Jim. Along with no fences or fields, importantly, even the road does not seem to be there. If Cather understands Nebraska to have come into existence as a pathway, which she would later argue in her *Nation* essay, then without even a road this region is simply nothing. Yet within and around Jim's observations of empty space are his references to the immigrants within the space. In addition to Otto Fuchs, the Austrian immigrant working on Jim's grandparents' farm who meets Jim at the station, *Ántonia's* immigrant family, the Shimerdas, are the only others to disembark from the train in this location. They too are the force to breach the landscape's utter nothingness for Jim. When he prepares to plunge into the unknown and unknowable Nebraska prairie, the Shimerdas lead the way: "The immigrants rumbled off into the empty darkness," he writes, "and we followed them" (11). Significantly, this immigrant family forms the pathway for Jim. Like Per Hansa's caravan to the Dakota prairie, the Shimerdas are the only element that can turn this space into place. Because no fences, creeks, trees, hills, or fields seem to exist, the immigrants become the landmarks by which Jim can begin to make sense out of the Nebraska landscape. Hence, they assist in turning the potentiality of the "material" Jim recognizes into a country.

As his narrative continues, Jim suggests that the immigrants impart meaning to this space and produce a "country" specifically by their interaction with the land and the

stories that this association generates. In particular, these stories often emerge from the point of disjuncture between homesteading's homogeneity and its inherent fragmentation. For instance, Jim recognizes a conflation of the type of people and land that deviated from this homogenizing vision in a circle inscribed into the land on his grandfather's farm. This is a ring, around which he and others assume Indians used to ride. While Native Americans are not immigrants, Cather's reference to the inscription they leave on the earth illustrates how land can be indelibly marked by a people who legally and socially have struggled in their claim to American soil. These people mark the land, in part, by the attempt to tell their particular story against a national narrative that often silenced them. As the Indian circle demonstrates, when the fragment inherent in homogeneous space appears, it creates multiple new stories that complicate ways to read this space. Although usually invisible, when it appears so do various stories:

Jake and Otto were sure that when they galloped round that ring the Indians tortured prisoners, bound to a stake in the centre; but grandfather thought they merely ran races or trained horses there. Whenever one looked at this slope against the setting sun, the circle showed like a pattern in the grass; and this morning, when the first light spray of snow lay over it, it came out with wonderful distinctness, like strokes of Chinese white on canvas. (51)

The circle provides a sense of the history of the place before the homesteaders arrived. However, that history is up for interpretation. Was it a site of violence? or sport? or labor? In this example we see that although the conjunction of people and place enable stories to be told, it rarely provides a single, indisputable tale. The Indian circle proves that this is the case because what is inscribed in the land appears as Chinese script. These additional racial and ethnic markings more emphatically suggest an alternative form of writing, an alternative narrative inspired by a foreign people marked as racially or ethnically different.

The Indian circle represents how the land becomes a repository for memory even when the people who would have that memory are gone. Inscribed into the landscape,

the subsequent stories it inspires have the potential to collectively change the history of the place through multiple interpretations. Another landmark by one who is gone, is the grave of *Ántonia's* father, Mr. Shimerda. This monument on the prairie also creates stories and demonstrates how the immigrant, rather than just being a fragment, serves to re-integrate the physical and narrative landscapes of the nation. Whereas the grave marks a region, for the non-immigrant Jim it also expands perceptions beyond a narrowly particularized experience to his life outside Nebraska. Memories of Mr. Shimerda's influence on him, represented in the grave, permeate Jim's regional and the national stories. Mr. Shimerda's example shows how the promise of a new country, enveloped within the opportunity through land, can lead to mental, emotional, and physical deterioration, similar to what we have seen in *Rölvaag's* Beret. Emigrating from Bohemia at the insistence of his wife, for whom the culture of homesteading seemed to guarantee chances for her children not possible in Europe, Mr. Shimerda suffers and eventually commits suicide. Further underscoring the literal and figurative fragmentation from general productivity and optimism, his grave is located on the southwest corner of the Shimerda homestead. In that location, it inhabits the actual periphery of the physical boundaries established by homesteading. Within the structure of Cather's narrative, the grave exists on the periphery as well; it is rarely a "central figure" in terms of how often Jim focuses his discussion on it. Yet, the grave serves as a crucial landmark muse for him as he narrates the meaning of the immigrant to the region and the nation.

One reason for the grave's significance is the mystery surrounding its location. After his suicide, Mr. Shimerda's family demanded that he be buried under the stake by which the homestead was marked, the cross section of the farm's border lines. This location, Jim's grandfather observes, will likely become a future intersection when the "official" road system is constructed. Encouraged to bury him elsewhere, the family is adamant. Because Mr. Shimerda committed suicide, being buried at such a spot is a

necessity according to Bohemian myth. Thus the land, which is identified as part of the new American West by the narrative of homesteading, tells a richer story, one steeped in immigrant association. More accurately, the American story emerging from this place is rooted in Bohemian custom. The origins of the myth that requires such a place for the burial, however, remains a mystery. Even a fellow Bohemian cannot explain the rationale for such a burial plot though he "seemed to remember hearing there had once been such a custom in Bohemia" (87). The uncertainty of the practice demands that the grave be variously interpreted. Accordingly, it looks back to an old world past and the recent new world past (homesteading in Nebraska) as well as to the future: it marks the probable spot for the series of roads that will eventually follow section lines. Mr. Shimerda's grave, therefore, evokes a particular regional narrative within larger national histories.

The grave, then, endures and inspires stories that renegotiate the meaning of American space. Jim reports that the surveyors did not set their roads over the grave, and so it remains:

The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island;...I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. I loved the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent, that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence—the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along with the home-coming wagons rattled after sunset. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper. (91)

The history embedded in this space has outlasted the force of time that inflicts a cultural amnesia about the immigrant's effort to break and cultivate the land. In other words, this grave as a landmark has resisted the pressure of progress which paved over the initial markings that provided immigrant homesteaders and the land identity as fragments in the national narrative. This gap caused by the mutual bend of the roads, therefore, holds the

possibilities for one to continue reviewing the history of the space. The well-wishers, who may notice the bend and the burial plot without understanding who inhabits the gap, must create their own version of the sleeper's history. Stories inspired by this landmark overcome time and progress to continue a cycle of regeneration, just as the red grass blanketing the plot will "[die] down in winter and come up again in the spring" (236). For Jim, the "dim superstition" and "propitiatory intent" as well as the "error from the surveyed lines" continue to supply questions rather than answers. Hence for Jim, the story of Mr. Shimerda remains very much alive, enriching the soil and the narrative of the prairie. Because of the grave's enduring presence and mystery, Jim suggests that the direction of empire building has been altered. The bend in the road for the immigrant landmark tells a local story at the same time it offers a revision to a larger (national) narrative.

In fact, this road and others that appear prominently throughout *My Ántonia* extends the storytelling possibilities that inhere in the immigrant landmark. Like Mr. Shimerda's grave, the road functions to re-incorporate the fragment into the a vision of homogeneity from which it deviates, and in the process reconstitutes the idea of national space. Appropriately, roads in the novel are most commonly associated with some aspect of immigrant life and experience on the prairie landscape. Cather clearly suggests that the image of the road serves both literal and figurative meanings of region and nation. Through the immigrant, Jim associates it with the localized Nebraska setting, but at the same time, his life experience expands the pathway to the national level. As he and the narrator travel by train through the midwest we discover that Jim is legal counsel for the railroad moving through the western states, a technological force that secures the continuation of "empire building." Yet to explain this association with the larger national story, Jim finds that he continually must return to the regional influence he received from immigrant presence. We have already learned that the immigrants have formed the

pathway for Jim into a Nebraska countryside that was otherwise dark and meaningless. The immigrants do more, however, than offer a meaning of "road" in this setting. They also point toward destiny beyond the Nebraska prairie. Even before Mr. Shimerda becomes a force from within the land through his grave, he hopes for Jim's intellectual growth and indirectly outlines a path that will take the boy from the region and thrust him into a larger, national existence. Jim recalls, "When his deep-seeing eyes rested on me, I felt as if he were looking far ahead into the future for me, down the road I would have to travel" (69). Thus, Mr. Shimerda and his particular relationship to the "road" becomes the site where the regional and national concerns of Jim intersect. The influence from his childhood days, from the immigrant and the landscape, remains part of his pathway to "knowing" both the region from where he came and the nation to which his association with the railroad eventually will take him.

This dual "knowing" of region and nation through road and immigrant comes to the fore at the novel's conclusion. Again the road becomes a site of interpretation and storytelling, particularly the novel's final image, a pathway that exists between the figurative and the literal, between the imaginary and the real. This road, a remnant of the original wagon path leading from the town to his grandparents' farm, remains on the countryside, real but barely visible. It has been consigned to history because of the new road surveyed and constructed by the government according to homestead borders--the same road that bends at Mr. Shimerda's grave. To Jim, this original trail exists more in his childhood past than in the present form he sees when he returns to the countryside years after he left for school and employment outside Nebraska borders. Thus, the road takes shape according to his own imagination. This is not the first time in the novel that a road possesses an imaginative, interpretive quality. As a child, Jim also found stories in the histories of roads. For example, after first moving to Nebraska he found pathways bordered with sunflowers. According to the story Otto tells him, Mormons, on their way

west fleeing persecution, scattered sunflower seeds so that those who followed would have a marked trail. Jim acknowledges that this story could be easily disputed by botanists claiming that sunflowers are native to the Nebraska prairie. Yet he prefers Otto's history to science: "that legend has stuck in my mind, and sunflower-bordered roads always seem to me the roads to freedom" (27). If these particular roads have become landmarks for Jim, it is partly a result of their metonymic relationship to a migratory group.

Because the Mormons, sunflowers, and trails suggest to Jim pathways to freedom, roads evoke stories that function socially and politically as well as personally. If nothing else, they allow one to re-consider and re-position a group like the Mormons in the national story. A similar re-positioning of the immigrant occurs in Jim's reflection on the fragment of original road he finds. Although it is nearly imperceptible like the Indian circle or hidden in the prairie like Mr. Shimerda's grave, parts of it appear as "mere shadings in the grass" so that "a stranger would not have noticed them" (272); one with eyes to see the road and experience to know it could retrace its path. In so doing, one can also review his or her history. To see is to understand its story-making potential. In fact, where visible, the road still marks the land metaphorically, "like gashes torn by a grizzly's claws, on the slopes where the farm-wagons used to lurch up out of the hollows" (272). Although this road is nearly invisible, it is central to Jim's imagining of the landscape and the history of it that he creates:

I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Antonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past. (272)

Significantly, *Ántonia* returns to her central role just as this forgotten, peripheral road also again takes center stage. The road prompts nostalgia, a re-working of what has happened in the past as Jim remembers the first experience with this landscape that seemed unmarked and, therefore, meant nothing to him. But it also suggests a future that will allow a re-writing of the history. The "little circle" of man's experience requires that he always double back to where he came from and reconsider the past. While the road stands for possibilities of renewed meetings with *Ántonia* (now married) and her family, it also provides access to what in the past remains "incommunicable": histories that cannot be fully articulated and remain a mystery; stories that have yet to be told. That potential keeps the regenerative cycle of narration active. Therefore, the narratives that immigrants (and the land they mark) inspire must be continually and variously re-told, even by the "American" storyteller, and in that way, they provide the path for integrating fragmentary immigrant histories into the story of the American nation.

### **Reintegrating the Fragment: The Form and Function of Storytelling in *My Ántonia***

How then are the stories able to re-integrate various forms of fragmentation into the national narrative about homogeneity? To answer this question, one central to our understanding of Cather's contribution to an aesthetic of Americanization, we must consider the structure these multiple stories give the novel.<sup>178</sup> Many of those that make up Jim's manuscript seem simply to voice memories of the Nebraska farm. However, through the accretion of various stories we begin to see a narrative form that reflects the immigrant characters' agency in re-interpreting standard divisions between "American"

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<sup>178</sup>Critic Richard H. Millington has recognized that *My Ántonia* is a book about stories. He notes that the series of stories Cather presents repeatedly undermine any "novelist" features of the work: as an anti-novel it resists standard conclusions by deferring the end point of the main characters' maturation process. See Millington's "Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller': Hostility to the Novel in *My Ántonia*," (*American Literature*, 66:4 [December 1994]: 689-717.

and "immigrant." The novel's introduction, specifically the agreement between the narrator and Jim to tell the story of *Ántonia* so that they may develop a "picture of her," is a useful place to investigate Cather's aesthetic. Jim's words of explanation both before and after writing his manuscript reveal a narrative structure contextualized by the immigrant presence. When considering how he would write the story, Jim tells the narrator, "I should have to do it in a direct way, and say a great deal about myself. It's through myself that I knew and felt her, and I've had no practice in any other form of presentation" (5). Later, when Jim presents his manuscript to the narrator, he concedes, "I suppose it hasn't any form" (6), apparently throwing aside even the one literary style he commands, that is, autobiography. While his story is autobiographical, his statement is accurate: it does not follow the standard rules of that genre because the purported subject (*Ántonia*) is not the writer herself. Yet, Jim's narrative has a form, a structure that importantly blends the immigrant and non-immigrant characters as it re-imagines the meaning of American identity.

This form is based on a simultaneous recognition of the separation and conflation of central and peripheral subjects. Jim claims that he can only tell *Ántonia's* story in a "direct way." Given the stated subject of his narrative, *Ántonia*, he appears to tell the story of *Ántonia* *indirectly*. This method is not as disingenuous as it may at first seem, particularly when we consider the larger scheme of Cather's work. She briefly and metaphorically illustrates her narrative approach towards the end of the novel when Jim observes that the activity at the home of *Ántonia* (now *Ántonia Cuzak*) represents an indirect mode of life. He underscores the naturalness of it. "In farm-houses," he observes, "somehow, life comes and goes by the back door" (249). He refers, of course, to the daily activity on the farm that, in its informality, is more conveniently served by the door often closer to where it occurs: often in the barn and outbuildings behind and beside the house. But more importantly, he suggests that indirection is often

the best way to address what is important, to reveal what needs to be noticed. Indirection, therefore, becomes an important factor in the overall structure of *My Ántonia*. The value of indirection for storytelling lies in its ability to blend identities. Telling stories about the "immigrant" through a narrative form essentially focusing on the "American" merges the two. Ultimately, the singular subject of the novel is blurred so that it becomes multiple, both immigrant and American. Another feature of this indirection is that a story about Nebraska becomes more than that. The various ways of defining "country" (the rural countryside or an entire nation) replicate the blending of "immigrant" and "American." A "direct" story of Nebraska often comes to be an "indirect" story of a nation heavily influenced by the impact of immigration.

The direct/indirect method of storytelling functions according to a constitutive relationship. The immigrant and the native-born American are necessary to each other for their respective definitions. This collaboration of identities is central to Cather's vision of Americanization. In the introduction, the narrator finds that Jim is "still able to lose himself in those big Western dreams.... He never seems to me to grow older. His fresh color and sandy hair and quick-changing blue eyes are those of a young man, and his sympathetic, solicitous interest in women is as youthful as it is Western and American" (4-5). As legal counsel for a western railroad, along with his interest in things Western and his general youthfulness, Jim represents a young nation that is ever moving forward, ever growing. Indeed the promise of the railroad as it spread over the prairies of the Middle West allowed such beliefs.<sup>179</sup> Accordingly, the narrator suggests that Jim is not

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<sup>179</sup>Hermione Lee observes that Cather did feel experience some of the claustrophobic anxiety incited by Turner's 1893 frontier thesis. As Lee notes, this discomfort arises in Cather's *Nation* essay when she writes. "In Nebraska, as in so many other states, we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun" (238). It is interesting that Cather emphasizes the "story" that is told. Perhaps she felt that no new story was yet available, but as I argue, the type of story told about the pioneers is worthy of notice, particularly one in that explores the nuances of the intersection of "immigrant" and "American," of local and national "country." See Lee's *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 7-9.

only quintessentially American, but, to some degree, representative of America. However, before she allows one to rest on that observation, she contextualizes Jim, the "American," within the immigrant influence coloring his background of small towns and wheat fields. The discussion immediately following highlights *Ántonia* as the dominant subject in their conversation, the one who means the country to them. The American, then, is set alongside the immigrant, the "central figure" in their conversation and in the narrative that follows. Hence, even when the story of *Ántonia* is filtered through the "American" and appears peripheral, the immigrant presence permeates the text. Yet just as Jim is defined by *Ántonia*, she needs to keep part of Jim with her to remain whole. She explains that, like her father, Jim will always remain "here" with her in the Nebraska countryside. If Jim remains part of the landscape like Mr. Shimerda, he will be part of *Ántonia* who herself, importantly marks the land.

Moreover, the title Jim gives his manuscript illustrates the narrative importance of this constitutive relationship. When presenting his manuscript to the narrator, he titles his story "*Ántonia*." However, he quickly revises it to "My *Ántonia*." The possession he takes of her, grammatically at the least, is not necessarily appropriative because he echoes *Ántonia*'s father, Mr. Shimerda, who speaks likewise about his daughter. Thus, Jim's choice further blurs the distinctions between American and immigrant. More specifically, the possessive pronoun functions in two ways. First, it highlights the partiality of the story. While his manuscript presents his version of *Ántonia*, the "my" suggests the existence of other versions. Therefore *Ántonia*, like the landscape she represents, inspires many stories rather than *the* story. As such, Jim presents another example in the process of replacing the homogeneous with the fragment. Second, Jim's use of "my" clearly places his own presence in the title and in the story. The "American" and the "immigrant" are simultaneously present and, according to Cather's exploration of narrative structure, necessary. That is, the direct story focusing on him and his

possession (= "My") and the indirect story focusing on the immigrant (= "Ántonia") are required for the narrative to exist. Indeed, part of the immigrant story is what happens outside immigrant experience: Jim has become the representative of mobile, national "America." Yet also part of the immigrant story is how Ántonia, the immigrant--that remaining immobile, regional--has a direct impact, and remains within the "mind" of that outer experience. The approach to Ántonia as a character in the narrative is curious because she occasionally drops out of the story completely. However, as the "country" to Jim, her presence sustains the text and propels it forward.

For example, even when Ántonia seems to fade amid the detail of Jim's life, his narrative continually gestures toward her influence. While Mr. Shimerda's grave silently and mysteriously directs ideas and action on the Nebraska prairie and in Jim's life, Ántonia is likewise a force on Jim and his destiny. Put differently, she occupies a position that is simultaneously central and peripheral. When Jim pursues his intellectual growth outside of the rural environs of Black Hawk, on a path Mr. Shimerda encourages, Ántonia indirectly keeps him centered on that road. Her words of advice to both Jim and her friend Lena Lingard, which arise even in her absence, cause them to abandon a potentially distracting romance. As a result, Jim continues his education beyond Nebraska, and this experience thrusts him toward the railroad and participation in the national story. Yet just as Ántonia influences Jim's association to the nation, her central/peripheral position also returns him to the local story. When Jim describes the phenomenon of the "hired girls" in Black Hawk, for example, Ántonia serves the story's linchpin, fastening together important narrative strands and illustrating characteristic features marking life on the Nebraska prairie. He discusses the "curious social situation" in this rural town, that is, the presence of "country girls" (always distracting for town boys) and adds, "The older girls, who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, *like Ántonia,*

been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new" (149, my emphasis). Jim encloses *Ántonia* within a simile, reemphasizing her representative function. She exemplifies all the immigrant girls who were forced by financial constraints to leave their families and "work out" in jobs away from home. Importantly, *Ántonia* signifies a group with broad influence. Beyond simply turning the heads of the boys in town, she inhabits the center of the group that assists Jim in marking and identifying the country town and the life within its borders. Moreover, his description here discloses the intersection of topics vital to the narrative mapping his story undertakes. He focuses initially on education--life lessons--but he immediately intertwines this topic with land, gender, and immigration. These features of their life facilitated the education that the hired girls received. At the same time, these topics, perhaps more than anything else in the history of Nebraska, were crucial in forming the state that Cather perceived and would later discuss in *The Nation*. A story whose subject vacillates between center and periphery, then, allows for constant reinterpretation and for a reconsideration of what forms the history of a people and a place.

Accordingly, Cather presents a re-reading of region and nation through this direct/indirect storytelling. She suggests that both must exist separately, but are not mutually exclusive. Like the blurred distinctions between immigrant and American, the novel opens up the possibility for nation to be understood through a stronger awareness of the region within it. Throughout the novel, Cather continually refers to the "country," usually meaning the rural Nebraska setting. Yet that definition of the word is never completely fixed because, through a semantic slippage, it often can also more broadly connote the nation. As a result, Jim's direct story about the "country" of his childhood that the immigrant *Ántonia* inspires, often represents more.<sup>180</sup> This is the case

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<sup>180</sup>Cather draws attention to the word in *Ántonia*'s speech. As Jim presents her early limited use of English, he highlights irregular use of language, but only one word does he distinguish by phonetically representing a Slavic dialect: he characterizes her pronunciation of "country" as "kawn-tree."

particularly when the immigrants re-take the central position of the narrative and use stories to compare the old and the new "countries." In addition, Jim's own experience as legal counsel for a western railway introduces complexities into the word. According to the narrator, "He loves with a personal passion the great *country* through which his industry runs and branches" (4, my emphasis). This "country" is simply the "West," but because his interests in the region include "development" of mining, timber, and oil industries—each crucial for the success of capitalistic enterprise and national expansion—this "country" takes on significance for the nation. Hence, what often is a direct reference to the rural, also becomes an indirect explanation of the national.

In contrast, what might be understood as a direct reference to the nation, indirectly means the region. For example, after Jim has left *Ántonia* and the rural country behind for college, he discovers a telling phrase from Virgil's *Georgics*: "*Primus ego in patriam mecum...deducam Musas*" or "for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country." At this stage of his life, when his mind is often filled with memories of the people that populated the farm and rural town of his youth, Jim finds particular importance in this phrase. As he explains it, in some contexts "patria" would clearly reference the nation, but this is not necessarily the case here. Rather, Virgil meant "the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born" (197).<sup>181</sup> Importantly, what might be the stories for the nation, are the stories for the rural area of the poet's/storyteller's birth. Or as Jim implies through his explication of Virgil, the region is where the stories begin. According to Cather's method of storytelling that conflates

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Significantly, each time this spelling characterizes *Ántonia's* speech, she outlines the range of her reactions to her rural surroundings and, more broadly, to her understanding of her family's position as immigrants within the American nation. She stresses surprise in the opportunities that remind one of home, danger and struggle on the prairie, exuberance in overcoming adversity, and the anguish that arises from the economic and social pressure the nation places on the immigrant.

<sup>181</sup>James Woodress has also noted Cather's use of Virgil and claims that this phrase represents Cather's own effort to put Nebraska on the literary map. He also provides a useful discussion on the classical influence in Cather's writing. See his *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 298.

region and nation through the dual meaning of "country," the regional has the potential to influence the national. And if the region can be understood by the multiple stories the immigrant generates, then the same must be true for the nation.

Therefore, Cather concludes, the immigrant must remain as the "central figure" in a larger story of America. *Ántonia's* life, for instance, records the particular, regional struggles unacknowledged in the culture of homesteading. But at the same time, it reflects a measure of the success for the nation homesteading affords. As Jim notes on his return visit to the prairie years after he left, *Ántonia's* long experience on the Nebraska prairie has left her severely worn. Shocked by her appearance, he observes that she has become "a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled" (244). Although the Nebraska landscape has dealt with her harshly, still she is happily married with a farm full of children and full ownership of a homestead. While her difficult life signals a form of fragmentation of the general homesteading promise, she has however been reintegrated into its homogenous vision. In particular, she represents how the fragment becomes part of the national narrative and revises it in the process. She serves as such a "figure" because she has survived in the region. Furthermore, her role in directing a form of the national story will continue because as the novel ends, Jim—a representative of the nation—vows to return often to the region and, specifically, to *Ántonia's* family. When he realizes "what a little circle man's experience is" on this visit to Nebraska, he realizes that he remains in a particular cycle that looks back to the past and, more specifically, a past that carries on to the future. His history then is regenerative, requiring continued narration beyond the manuscript "My *Ántonia*." As the "country" and region of Nebraska, *Ántonia* also must be part of his "country" and nation and instrumental in the story he continues to tell. Whether she is directly or indirectly part of the tale, *Ántonia's* American identity, then, is defined by her participation in the national narrative.

I turn to one last scene in *My Ántonia* to demonstrate how the Americanized immigrant, reintegrated into the nation, revises and refines the American story. Near the end of the novel's second book, Jim tells Ántonia and other immigrant women the history he has learned about the Spanish exploration in America's Middle West. He adds his own version of the story to the textbook explanation he received in school. Questioning the common belief that Coronado did not travel as far north as Nebraska, Jim reports that a farmer breaking sod along the river outside of Black Hawk uncovered a metal stirrup and a sword with a Spanish inscription on the blade. These are discoveries, he adds, that suggest a different understanding of the story. The artifacts, Jim believes, came from Spain and could very well have been deposited by Coronado. By retelling a story that had long been fixed, Jim provides an alternative history. Significantly, he is able to revise history through the agency of a plow, the fundamental implement that homesteaders used to break the land and, subsequently, write themselves into homesteading's homogenous vision of national space. More importantly in the context of Cather's novel, this tool marked both the attempt and the greater possibility of fragmentation that the many immigrants on Cather's Nebraska prairie landscape faced in their need to Americanize themselves within homesteading's stipulations.

The image of the plow continues to dominate the scene when, immediately following Jim's explanation, it is set in relief against the setting sun:

Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share--black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. (183)

Critics commonly cite this moment in the novel as Cather's recognition of the pioneer's participation in national progress and empire building.<sup>182</sup> Although this is an accurate reading, it is limited. Jim's preceding story about Coronado and the immigrant's clear association with the plow requires a different type of analysis. As Jim notes, the plow represents the possibility that we can uncover an alternative history of the place. Its magnification demands that we pay attention to the past that this farm implement illuminates and revises; its enlarging reminds us that this tool places the region more centrally in the national imagination in terms of "discovery." In other words, the plow moves Nebraska from the periphery to the center of national history. In addition to repositioning Nebraska within the national story, this magnification re-situates the plow, and what it represents, within the nation. Not coincidentally, the plow appears as "a great black figure," an image recalling *Ántonia*, the novel's "central figure." While the plow signifies immigrant labor, it also stands for the immigrant: like *Ántonia*, who inhabits both the center and the periphery, so too does the plow. For a moment it is the center of the story as a "heroic" form that makes its mark as "picture writing on the sun." This image suggests that the plow is able to tell its own tale while superimposed on top of some larger narrative. At this moment also, the plow reasserts the suggestion that the immigrant can place her own, regional story within the larger national narrative, and like its impression on the "face of the sun," retell that story.

After the sun sinks below the horizon, however, the plow returns to its marginal status as a farm tool. In this position, its importance lies on a local level, in the region of the prairie. Yet its momentary heroics and the history it retells extend its presence beyond regional to national significance. It demonstrates that what is marginal or fragmented apart from the national narrative still importantly influences how that narrative is told. That is, the plow's moment of heroics in a particular space indicates another moment

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<sup>182</sup>See, for example, Jamie Ambrose, *Willa Cather: Writing at the Frontier* (New York: Berg, 1988), 97.

profoundly affecting immigrants and the landscape on which they settle. It points to the instance when the fragment rejoins and reformulates the homogeneity of space and identity and when, consequently, new Americanisms are created. Just as the magnified plow writes upon the sun and the soil, the immigrant reinscribes the region into the nation to revise the stories of people and place. In the process, the immigrant takes elements of both region and nation to define her Americanization as one acceptable to a homogenizing vision--such as the force of homesteading--but at the same time, one complex enough to require continued redefinition of herself and the American nation she comes to represent.

## CODA

I conclude my dissertation where I began, with the words of Horace Kallen that describe an Americanization transpiring, at least in part, according to space. In "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot" Kallen explained, "All the immigrants and their offspring are in the way of becoming 'Americanized,' if they remain in one place in the country long enough."<sup>183</sup> As this observation suggests, Kallen believed that time--the length of stay in any one location--importantly contributes to the transformation of immigrants. Time alone, however, is not sufficient. He also claimed that the location determines the way foreign-born newcomers are perceived as Americans. True to his belief in the United States as a "federation of nations," Kallen argued that ethnic individuality will remain even as the immigrants' generation gives way to their American-born children and grandchildren. Therefore, American identities must inevitably include cultural particularities. Yet it is place that shapes the particularities into something identifiably "American." Kallen adds, "'American' is an adjective of similarity applied to Anglo-Saxons, Irish, Jews, Germans, Italians, and so on, but the similarity is one of place and institution, acquired, not inherited, and hence not transmitted. Each generation has, in fact, to become 'Americanized' afresh."<sup>184</sup> Place and its specific features provide the common link enabling diverse populations to retain their unique cultural forms while participating in the daily life of the nation. Furthermore, since place can be changed--unlike one's grandmother--the terms of Americanization can be changed as well. As different immigrant groups settle in specific American locations, and as the children of

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<sup>183</sup>Horace Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot," 192.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid, 193.

immigrants inevitably move elsewhere in the nation, the process is continually renewed and revised.

Beginning with Kallen's claims, my dissertation has attempted to complicate and build on his understanding of Americanization. I agree that this combination of ethnic specificity and a concept of place transforms immigrants into Americans, yet I have argued that the features of that transformation, and more specifically, the role of the immigrant story in characterizing the components of Americanization, need more attention and contemplation. In my study, I have explained how writers of immigrant experiences reveal that place lends not just a similarity among diverse peoples, but actively contributes to the different ways in which group-specific American identities emerge. As these authors write the features of place into their texts, they have shown that both people and place are inevitably altered by virtue of their interaction. That transformation highlights both individual processes of Americanization and the power of the texts that arise from such explorations of people and place. Realizing the propensity of American social, economic, and political discourses to impose a sense of domination on the physical places immigrant groups reside, the authors describe (and seek only to describe) the discourses and overlay them with representational spaces in which immigrant characters possess new relationships with the sources of domination. In the process, they appropriate and change the dominated space by making symbolic use of it and, subsequently, reimagine American identities that function in and define that space. The authors thus produce immigrant stories that underscore the contribution these individual examples of Americanization give to our understanding of the place where the narratives take form.

It has been my contention, therefore, that immigrant literature provides the opportunity and the model to re-read specific American regions and, by extension, the nation itself. Each author I have examined has performed an individual revision of immigrant identity and American space in which a particular immigrant group is found.

Cahan, Schneiderman, and Malkiel variously consider New York City's Jewish ghetto as a site imaginatively reshaped according to the collaboration of ethnicity and economic activity. The poets of Angel Island and Chinatown, as well as Eurasian immigrant Sui Sin Far, demonstrate how the literary text becomes a conceptual replacement for the physical grounding that is compromised once legal grounding in the United States erodes. Finally, Rølvaag and Cather argue that local conditions (and localized individualities) of America's midwestern landscape require a new way of looking at national space. While each author tells a story of Americanization that can stand alone, collaboratively these authors offer a narrative model to re-tell the story of the nation. Specifically, if literary representations of Americanization necessarily incorporate and revise various national discourses, then as the immigrants are Americanized so too is the nation. Cather, in particular, offers us insight into the process because, in her understanding of the immigrant's impact upon America, the foreign-born have the power to first define the particular place in which they reside, and then, as a conceptual link between local and national "countries," refine a concept of the nation. Thus, the immigrant stories of Americanization read through American space promote new and more complex interpretations of nation-founding and nation-building. Furthermore, these stories require that we reexamine the logic of the social, economic, and political narratives that put a defining imprint on American spaces. Immigrant aesthetics of Americanization, therefore, offer us the insight to see what we might otherwise overlook: the obstacles and opportunities within the rationale undergirding various national practices.

While Cather is exemplary, she is, however, not an immigrant. How can her narrative, then, present the same national re-vision as the stories written directly from Jewish, Chinese, or Norwegian immigrant experience? I conclude my dissertation with Cather and her interpretation of immigrant Americanization precisely because of that

question. Throughout my study I have recognized that direct experiences with American spaces prominently characterize immigrant writing and enable authors to express the shared failures and successes of a particular group. I have also discovered that if we rest on the assumption that immigrant literature *only* reveals the impact of such place-specific features, we risk not progressing past stereotypical appraisal of this writing as merely autobiographical. Certainly, personal accounts reflect important transforming features of immigrant lives. However, in my dissertation I have sought to demonstrate that immigrant writing has the potential to move beyond that assumption. We must instead acknowledge that immigrant literature, as a genre, highlights a particularized experience, but at the same time explains more than that experience because of the narrative methods it employs. In other words, the manner in which immigrant writing translates discourses of the nation into particularized revisions of American space enables it to transcend personal history and introduce new approaches for describing regional and national history. The story, therefore, is no longer just about the immigrant. Hence, immigrant writing has the potential to inform narrative practices other than those focusing exclusively on the arrival and settlement of the foreign-born. Cather provides a first step in revealing this broader possibility. She focuses not on the immigrant experience *per se*, but on the immigrant's relationship to space in order to tell a story that has implications well beyond the localized people or place. In the same way, we may recognize other (non-immigrant) writers exploring ways to read the nation by employing an aesthetic that develops as they describe their characters in (often contentious) relationships to space. As a result, we have the opportunity to re-read American experience and America itself through the narrative form immigrant writers present. The immigrant's literary association with American space, therefore, opens up a new narrative field to ponder the national story. To explore this field we must, then, begin with the process of narrating Americanization.

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English Conversation and ESL Instructor, Kyoto, Japan, 1987-89

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Tutor, for graduate students from South Korea, University of Washington,  
 1996-1998

English Instructor, for junior high and high school students, Bellevue Learning Center  
 (Bellevue, WA), Summer 1997

Writing Center Tutor, University of Washington, 1995-96

Research Assistant to Vivian Pollak, University of Washington, 1993-94

Course Reader, University of Washington, 1993-94

Writing Center Tutor, Marquette University, 1992-93

Research Assistant to Joseph Defalco and Ed Block, Marquette University, 1990-91

Research Assistant to Saul Landau for *The Dangerous Doctrine: National Security and U.S.  
 Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), Institute for Policy Studies,  
 Washington, D.C., 1986

**RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS**

Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century American Literature; Immigrant Literature; American Ethnic Literature; Theories of Ethnicity and Nation; Law and Literature; American Cultural Studies

**REFERENCES**

Priscilla Wald, Associate Professor of English, University of Washington  
Gregg Crane, Assistant Professor of English, University of Washington  
Joan Graham, Director of Interdisciplinary Writing Program, University of Washington  
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