

Autobiography and the Making of Modernist Multiculturalism

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August 2011

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Acknowledgements

It is my great pleasure to thank all of the people who have helped to make this dissertation possible. First, I want to express my gratitude to my adviser, Paula Rabinowitz. As a model of an inventive, engaged, ambitious scholar, Paula has continually inspired me. She has challenged me in ways that have taught me a great deal about my own habits of thinking, and her advice, support, and belief in my project have fueled me from its inception to its completion. I am also incredibly grateful to the rest of my committee for their advice and encouragement. Maria Damon's enthusiasm, generosity, and kindness have sustained my work in many ways, and I am especially thankful for having had the opportunity to work with Maria on an independent study, which was crucial to the development of my second chapter. Jigna Desai's wonderful seminar on Asian-American cultural theory inspired me to think more critically about race and identity in relation to cultural production; her insight and perceptive feedback, as well as her warm support, were crucial to me in preparing for my preliminary exams and laying the groundwork for this project. And for his willingness to continue to be involved in my project despite having moved on from the University of Minnesota, I am incredibly grateful to Tom Augst, whose approach to teaching and scholarship has been inspirational to me on many levels.

I have benefited enormously from my work with other faculty members at the University of Minnesota, in studying modernism with Lois Cucullu, American literature with Edward Griffin, cultural theory with Qadri Ismail, British literature with Andrew Elfenbein, feminist theory with Jacqueline Zita, American history with Sara Evans, and nonfiction writing with Patricia Hampl. I thank each of them for not only what they taught me about their subject matter, but for what they taught me through their varied approaches to teaching and academic life. I have also benefited enormously from the students who had the pleasure of teaching at the University of Minnesota, who have challenged and inspired me in ways that were fundamental to this project.

My work on this dissertation was aided by a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship from the University of Minnesota, for which I am incredibly grateful. I would also like to thank the English department for two travel grants, which supported conference presentations on key portions of my dissertation, and for nominating me for several other fellowships and awards. Furthermore, chapters two and three would not have come to fruition were it not for the help of the wonderful librarians and archivists at the Wisconsin Historical Society—especially their regional center at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls—where I was lucky enough to be able to work with the Samuel Ornitz papers and the American Labor Education Services papers. Likewise, my first chapter benefited from the research librarians at the University of Minnesota's Wilson Library, who were instrumental in helping me navigate their rich collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century periodicals.

Katie Levin has been an invaluable support, both as my supervisor at the University of Minnesota Center for Writing, and as an astute, untiring, and good-humored reader of many drafts of portions of this dissertation. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my dearest friends at the University of Minnesota: Lauren Curtright, Molly

Kelly Gage, Chris Kamerbeek, and Madhurima Chakraborty. They have been the most supportive and inspiring comrades—intellectually and personally—that I could imagine. As readers and as friends, they have seen me through this project from start to finish. I also want to thank my family—my sisters and sister-in-law, brothers-in-law, mother-in-law, and especially, my parents, Susan and Dallas Knight, for their unconditional support and enthusiasm. Finally, my eternal gratitude goes to my husband, Steve Healey, whose love, confidence, and utterly unflagging support was at times the only thing that kept this project moving forward; and to my son, Nico, whose birth was roughly coincidental with the beginnings of this project, and who has made my dissertation-writing years more joyful than he can ever know.

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Preface

I am part of what was maybe the first generation of American students trained to fully embrace multiculturalism. I was an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh in the mid-nineteen nineties when a more multicultural canon had finally come to greater prominence (however uneasily) in the curriculum. At first, to me as a student—as to most students, I would imagine—this change seemed inevitable and transparent, simply the inclusion of texts that had previously been excluded from courses and anthologies. But my perspective started to change particularly after I came to the University of Minnesota and began teaching. As I developed my own syllabi and looked at anthologies and other people’s syllabi (which I did somewhat obsessively as a new teacher), I kept returning to one central question: why is the new diverse canon so saturated with autobiographical writing? How do life stories, personal accounts, and memoirs function differently in the new canon than fiction and poetry did in the traditional canon?

I found that the question of authenticity presented unique intellectual and pedagogical challenges, particularly in the context of multiculturalism. Students tended to read literary texts as somehow directly representative of heretofore excluded social groups, and to expect these texts to make visible certain truths about such groups. I began to speculate about autobiography’s new value in the expanded canon and the multicultural classroom, given its capacity to enhance this sense of an unmediated relationship between the text and the social identity of the author. Moreover, I found that the rich history of autobiographical publication in the United States could provide a

meaningful context for the issues I was encountering. I did not want to take up autobiography as a discreet “genre,” or to affirm the primacy of difference in considerations of culture; rather I want to explore how both autobiography and cultural difference, as conceptual categories, interact to through the institutional frameworks that legitimate them. To me this meant conceiving of authorship not just as a space of theoretical possibility, but also as a public role with a history embedded in institutions— institutions that mediate both access to literary authority as well as readers’ processes of meaning-making; it also meant taking seriously the circulation and reception of autobiographical texts, and thinking about texts as material artifacts whose history offers insight into the development of literary culture (and culture in general).

Initially, it was the texts themselves that drew me to the early twentieth century—the magazines, fake autobiographies, and workers’ stories that I write about in this dissertation were to my mind both fascinating narratives in themselves and artifacts that spoke to the profound changes occurring within wider U.S. culture—not the least of which was a shift in the concept of culture itself. I landed on the term “modernist multiculturalism” as a way to describe the attitudes and expectations to which many of the texts were responding, and that I saw embodied in their reception and circulation. That concept also offered me a way to think about the connections between the early twentieth century and some of the tendencies that seem to characterize multiculturalism as it has come to be institutionalized at the end of the century.

My focus was thus not only on the primary texts, but on attempting to reconstruct how they were embedded in a larger field of cultural production and social reproduction.

Each of my first three chapters thus takes up a different venue for the circulation or dissemination of autobiographical texts—though one of the ways I would expand the project would be to also offer a broader portrait of the autobiography publishing landscape, to give a more clear picture of how and where these individual instances fit in. In the epilogue, I connect the history of autobiography and modernist multiculturalism to the issues in contemporary literary studies that initially set me thinking about this topic; part of why this history matters is that it demonstrates habits of thought about genre and identity that still haunt us, and that still inform the ways we (broadly speaking) think about literature and culture. In many ways, this was the section of the dissertation that was the most challenging to write, in part, because I became less invested in it the more involved I became in the historical texts. But the project would clearly benefit from its expansion and clarification. As I noted in the introduction, my aim was not to question the methods or motives of individual teachers of multicultural literature, but rather to point out how both students and teachers are set up institutionally to make sense of or incorporate multiculturalism in unproductive, epistemically dangerous ways. I ultimately rely heavily here, in both obvious and perhaps less obvious ways, on my own experience—having been a student of literature for the last twelve years and a teacher for the last seven. One thing I need to do is to reckon more thoroughly with the pitfalls (and perhaps the potential benefits) of drawing on my own autobiography in this way.

Introduction

Autobiography is a genre uniquely suited to the American cultural landscape¹; indeed, the *collective* American autobiography—the story we popularly tell ourselves—entails that each member of our democracy has the right to tell his own story, and that each life story has its own inherent value. This promise seemed to ring particularly true in the early decades of the twentieth century. While life stories written by clergymen, literary figures, and prominent citizens—all connected to earlier traditions of autobiography—continued to be commonly published, so, increasingly, did writing by society’s more marginal characters. The immigrant autobiography, the slave narrative, the criminal’s memoir, just to name a few sub-genres that could be included in this category, all emerged, by the end of the nineteenth century, as popular and profitable. In this dissertation, I examine this popularity and profitability in terms of a burgeoning middle-class multiculturalism—what I call “modernist multiculturalism”—that, while not identical to the multiculturalism that would come to define the “culture wars” one hundred years later, nonetheless shares many of its flaws and problematic implications.

¹ In making this argument, Sacvan Berkovitch, for example, has coined the term “auto-American-biography” to describe the uniquely crucial role of autobiography within American literary history (*Puritan*); see also John Paul Eakin (*American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1991); Robert Lee (*First Person Singular: Studies in American Autobiography*. New York: St. Martin, 1988); Herbert Liebowitz (*Fabricating Lives: Explorations in American Autobiography*. New York: Knopf, 1989); and Diane Bjorklund (*Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.)

“Modernist multiculturalism”—a term that I will continue to unpack within the body of this dissertation—describes a set of attitudes and expectations about culture and identity that emerged in the early twentieth century United States in response to changes wrought by the increasingly rapid circulation of people, things, and ideas. In fact, Brad Evans has suggested that in the modernist era, a larger failure of older conceptual categories to correlate with the experiences of modern life (legal and social changes brought about by the Civil War and Reconstruction, massive demographic shifts resulting from migration and immigration, American imperial expansion, etc.), and the limits of categorical knowledge that were suggested by this failure, engendered a renewed fascination with these newly elusive conceptual categories (7-8). As W.E.B. DuBois described in his own autobiography, the turn of the twentieth century thus inaugurated a “significantly and fatally new” attention to “the differences between men; differences in their appearance, in their physique, in their thoughts and customs...Culture among human beings came to be and had to be built upon knowledge and recognition of these differences” (4). Matthew Frye Jacobson suggests that contested but potent new understandings of difference and affiliation “rested on formal regimes of ‘knowledge’ developed within the academic disciplines” (101), which undermined previously stable conceptual frameworks as they worked strenuously to consolidate their authority by establishing new ones. Like Evans, Jacobson sees the newly emergent discourse of ethnography as an especially powerful and prolific one that straddled various arenas of the culture and knowledge industries in the United States, and engendered scholarly and popular accounts of “others” that were taken as “neutral ethnological truths” (101-2).

Readers' encounters with these textual representations in turn shaped their encounters with difference in other cultural, political, and social arenas.

The popularity of folklore, travel writing, local color, and other forms that traded on the "exotic" and the "authentic" speaks to the early twentieth-century hunger for such accounts. Edith Eaton, one of the first Asian Americans to be published in the U.S. (and whose sister Winnifred's writings I take up in this dissertation), noted the resultant pressure she felt to "use" her ethnicity:

People advise me to "trade" upon my nationality. They tell me that if I wish to succeed in literature in America I should dress in a Chinese costume, carry a fan in my hand, wear a pair of scarlet beaded slippers, live in New York, and come of high birth. Instead of making myself familiar with the Chinese Americans around me, I should discourse on my spirit acquaintance with Chinese ancestors and quote in between the "Good mornings" and "Howd'ye dos" of editors. (230)

The commodification of difference was enabled and energized on an unprecedented scale by a booming turn-of-the-century culture industry. This growth of mass culture "collapsed the distinction between what would come to be known as 'cultures' [in the anthropological sense] and humanistic 'culture' into products of the culture industry" (Evans 7). Indeed, the value ascribed to cultural difference within this economy can be seen in part as a response to the fear of the perceived leveling effects of mass culture itself—a fear that Randolph Bourne expressed in his oft-cited 1916 "Trans-national America":

What we emphatically do not want is that [immigrants'] distinctive qualities should be washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity. Already we have far too much of this insipidity, masses of people who are cultural half-breeds...letting slip from them whatever native culture they had, they have substituted for it only the most rudimentary American—the American culture of the chap newspaper, the 'movies,' the popular song, the ubiquitous automobile. (98)

This dissertation argues that amidst the complex exchanges among texts and readers within emergent structures of affiliation and difference, autobiography played a unique role in relation to middle-class consumers of culture, because it offered what appeared to be a transparent window into authentic otherness—a way to perceive, and therefore understand and contain, differences that had become unmoored from their nineteenth-century foundations. This assumption clearly mediated the value of autobiography within the literary market. Priscilla Wald points out that the cultural practices through which personhood is defined shape the ways that personal narratives can be made legible (or “transcoded,” à la Fredric Jameson). As Wald implies (and as Eaton described experiencing), for writers who are excluded from full personhood, these issues of legibility take on particular significance—the legal and socioeconomic marginalization of African Americans and immigrants at the turn of the century limited their access to literacy and the literary marketplace, and mediated the nature of the narratives that could be told, for instance (4). More specifically, as Elaine Kim has shown, American publishers and a largely white readership were “traditionally more

receptive to expressions of self-contempt and self-negation on the part of members of racial minorities than to criticisms of problems in American society” (qtd. in Kang 62). Thus the vogue for literary otherness was linked to the need for that otherness to mirror the superiority of dominant cultural values. Through the first decades of the twentieth century, those dominant cultural values were based in the “common sense” of white superiority, rigidly defined gender roles, and upwardly-mobile, middle-class mores (Ohmann 258).

It was precisely this tension—the fascination with cultural difference, and the need for cultural difference to be contained and subordinate—that characterized the ethos of modernist multiculturalism in which the texts that I examine were produced and first circulated. As the history of these texts demonstrates, because readers associated a whole host of conventions with autobiography, the texts tapped into readerly expectations in very particular ways—confirming some, challenging others, but undoubtedly raising questions (both explicit and implicit) about identity and the politics of authorship. When readers expect autobiography to offer the “authentic” voice of a given social group, the autobiographer becomes the de facto representative of that group; and while this representative function can serve a politically useful purpose—containing an implicit argument for the significance and legitimacy of the self described—it also raises profound questions about the ability of any individual to stand in for an entire social group. The representative self is always potentially culpable for perceived *misrepresentation*, and skepticism and censure are ubiquitous in the history of autobiography’s readership. My dissertation examines this history as it manifested

through the production, circulation, and reception of a wide range of texts in the early twentieth century, demonstrating the complexities of representation that are masked when an individual is perceived as transparently representative of a social group.

Even within contemporary autobiography studies, where theorizing more nuanced understandings of autobiography has been a focus for many decades, we often fall into some of the same tendencies of thought that marked modernist multiculturalism. Undoubtedly, recent scholars have problematized the particular referential grounding of autobiography that its early scholars such as George Gusdorf took as a given, and that lies at the root of readers' expectations for autobiographers' representativeness; and they have challenged the related historical description of autobiography as a "Western" mode tied to Enlightenment subjectivity, which is entailed in the modernist multicultural perspective. As Leigh Gilmore notes, "This version has been displaced from within and without autobiography itself as critics argue that the tradition was never as coherent as it could be made to appear, its canonical texts formally unstable and decidedly multivoiced, and its variety as much a critique, parody, or mimicry of the Western self as evidence of it" (*Limits 2*).² And while these kinds of investigations have worked to unfix autobiography from an exclusionary conception of literary tradition, they have been

² For such rereadings of the history of autobiography, see Karen Caplan, "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects" (*Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988. 208-16); Francoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989); Julia Watson, "Toward an Anti-Metaphysics of Autobiography" (*The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*. Ed. Robert Folkenflick. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993); Cynthia Sau-ling Wong, "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach" (*Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988. 299-319)

frequently coupled with suggestions that autobiography serves as the means for emergence *into* that tradition. Sidonie Smith notes, for example, that “for the marginalized woman, autobiography may serve as the coinage that purchases entry” (“Resisting” 85). And Robert Folkenflick says “the weak canonical status of autobiography is an advantage, and its importance especially in recent years as a vehicle for members of minorities and inhabitants of third world countries is obvious” (12). Similarly, G. Thomas Couser positions the function of autobiography as a portal through which individuals can move from “minority cultures” into the “dominant culture” (as quoted in Kang 38).

But clearly, more than anything about the nature of the genre, or about authors’ creative intent, characterizations like Smith’s, Folkenflick’s, and Couser’s are indicative of the way autobiographical texts are positioned within systems of reading practices. In her critique of this kind of rhetoric as it surrounds Asian-American women, Laura Kang asks, what exactly is autobiography the “vehicle” or “portal” to? “To emerge and become articulated as ‘the marginalized woman’?” (45) What Kang describes here is a “broader clash between disciplinarity and social identity” in which autobiography, figured as a literary genre, has become a primary mode through which to confirm the inclusionary capacities of literary studies (and, metonymically, the inclusionary capacities of American society).

Finally, then, I use this history of autobiographical publication and readership to recast debates within the *contemporary* era of multiculturalism, where, I argue, these anxieties are recapitulated within literary pedagogy. I examine how, with the

multiculturalization of the literary canon and curriculum, the autobiographical has taken on a significance both more central and more unrecognized than ever before, as authors increasingly (and problematically) come to stand in as representatives of given social groups. I argue that within contemporary literary studies, the tendencies of modernist multiculturalism persist: problematic modes of reading autobiography have resulted from the desire to fix or contain identity, and thereby understand or control it, despite the fact that autobiographical writing often performs *the instability of* (or the ability to “pass” between) ethnic, racial, class, and gender categories.

Autobiographical writing clearly offers readers more than just insight into individual lives; I argue that through its circulation and teaching, it is profoundly entwined with representations of national identity and belonging. Each of my chapters thus takes up a different venue through which to examine the publication, circulation, and reception of autobiographical writing in order to trace its cultural import, particularly in relation to the ethos of modernist multiculturalism. In so doing, I take up many different autobiographical forms: short sketches, memoirs, traditional full-length autobiographies, and others. And while it is not my intention to conflate these varied forms, as they have distinct (if deeply interlocked) histories, I find it useful to examine the *force* that the autobiographical is taken to have across a range of forms. After all, genre, like identity, is nothing if not an unstable system of classification. Autobiography, as even its earliest theorists recognized, cannot comfortably stand on its own as a self-evident genre; particularly since the appropriation of the first person “I” as a novelistic convention, there may be nothing inherent to a text that signals its status as autobiography. As Elizabeth

Bruss says, “Outside of the social and literary conventions that create and maintain it, autobiography has no feature—has in fact no being at all” (6). Rather than an independent object to be investigated, autobiography can be seen as one that has been dependent for meaning on the contexts through which it is produced—that is, through which it is invoked to particular effects, and through which it is put in the service of particular kinds of cultural work. As Fredric Jameson suggests, genres are “essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function it is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” (106). In examining autobiography under this light, I take up Jameson’s suggestion to explore how such categories are “implicated in the literary history and the formal production they were traditionally supposed to classify and neutrally to describe” (107).

Despite its slipperiness, the study of autobiography has been saturated by a methodological focus on narrative analysis—that is, an examination of how a person or life is constructed through a text’s structure and other narrative elements. This dissertation draws on theoretical developments linking autobiography to subjectivity and citizenship by scholars such as Gilmore and Smith, but it goes further than just using this framework as a basis for narrative analysis. Rather, my approach combines close readings of the text themselves with an analysis of the material-historical context of their production and circulation—details of their publication histories, author interviews, reviews, correspondence. My aim is not to reconstruct a complete history of any one text, but rather to use these contexts to consider how autobiography is positioned within

systems of reading practices that correspond to a larger field of cultural production and social reproduction.

Chapter one, “Mass Magazines, Autobiography, and the New Currency of Difference,” focuses on autobiographical sketches from popular magazines, taking as a case study the widely-circulated and politically-moderate magazine *The Independent*. Popular magazines at the turn of the century were arguably the first truly mass-cultural form,³ and provided a particularly dynamic and far-reaching venue for the dissemination of national culture. For readers from an emerging middle class attempting to fix their bearings in the dizzying social space of the fin de siècle, magazines demonstrated the means to modern self-definition through new styles of consumption, attitudes toward other cultural forms, and information about people, places, and technologies: magazines offered readers a lens through which to view themselves and a way to imagine a community of like-minded citizens. And while literary studies have attended to the place of fiction within mass magazines, there has been no similar examination of autobiography. Drawing on the work of magazine historians such as Richard Ohmann and Matthew Schneirov, I examine the place of autobiographical writing in *The Independent* to argue that the ideological work performed by autobiography informed and was informed by larger concepts of cultural difference, selfhood, and an emerging ethos of consumerism.

³ Richard Ohmann makes a convincing argument for considering popular magazines as the paradigm case of an emerging mass culture in his *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*.

The memoirs, reminiscences, and life stories (serialized and in short form) that magazines frequently published were authored not only by well-known politicians or literary figures, but also by immigrants, workers, and others whose lives were foreign to the magazines' middle-class readership. Magazines thus offered many culturally-marginalized writers a venue for publication as autobiographers, and as such, were documents of a burgeoning modernist multiculturalism. If with one hand, modernist multiculturalism makes a gesture of inclusivity by inviting such an unruly chorus of voices onto its pages, with the other hand it stifles or contains those voices: in the context of the magazine's typical content and tone, the narratives become both "educational" curiosities that facilitated readers' fluency in the chicly exotic, and ideological markers that gave readers the means to achieve self-definition through the negation or trivialization of other perspectives. I read the narratives themselves as well as their interactions with the advertisements, travel articles, reviews, and other elements that magazines put into new proximity. As a medium for autobiography, magazines engendered a complicated relationship between their readers and the genre: as life stories became commodities for mass consumption, cultural difference took on a new currency for middle-class readers attempting to define their own identities.

Chapter two, "Passing as Autobiography/Autobiographies of Passing," takes up best-selling novels that challenged the ethos of modernist multiculturalism by performing what I call "autobiographical passing"—using the generic conventions of traditional autobiography to explore and manipulate the narrative construction of identity. I examine early twentieth-century texts by Samuel Ornitz, James Weldon Johnson, and

Edith Eaton—all of whom wrote fictional texts that purport to be autobiographies and whose subjects pass between racial and ethnic (as well as gender and class) categories. I combine close readings of these popular texts with a historical analysis of their histories of publication, circulation, and reception to argue that the histories of these works reveal readers' expectations for how both genre and identity function: for contemporary readers of these anonymous works, race became the signifier that took the place of the missing proper name to fulfill what Philip Lejeune has called "the autobiographical pact"(13)—that is, it is that which allows the text to be legible *as* autobiography. Where these texts failed to live up to readerly expectations regarding the representation of race, within a the paradigm of modernist multiculturalism, they failed as autobiographies

I briefly explore the concept of passing as it has been variously theorized in order to demonstrate its specific resonance for the politics of autobiographical authorship before examining the implications for these specific texts' investment (both generic and thematic) in passing. I first take up James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which was initially published anonymously in 1912 to unsympathetic reviews and scant sales. Republished as a work of fiction under Johnson's name in 1927, it was widely popular and heralded as one of the most important works of the Harlem Renaissance. Comparing the two moments of publication—the failure of the first, which I connect to the reading public's ambivalent relationship to African-American authorship in the nineteenth century, and the success of the later, embedded in the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance—I argue that the text's new life was indicative of both changes in the cultural climate and an altered perception of its generic status. Given that

autobiography was perhaps *the* most significant vehicle for marginalized writers to reach a mainstream reading audience, it is ironic that Johnson's text found success only when published as a work of fiction; but I argue that it was in fact his troubling of racialized identity and his rewriting of earlier narrative scripts of racial passing that made the "autobiography" an uncomfortable challenge, for both white and black audiences. I next turn to Samuel Ornitz's *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl*, which was first published in 1923 as an anonymous autobiography. An immediate best seller, it was serialized in the Communist press and staged in the radical Yiddish theater, even as the text itself, as it contains definitions of Yiddish terms, explanations of Jewish customs, and anti-Semitic sentiments, appears to be aimed at a Gentile audience. The text's manipulation of the (by then well-established) conventions of immigrant autobiography, and the varied responses it elicited from different sectors of the reading public, make it a particularly interesting case for considering the relationship between conventions of genre and ethnic identity. I argue that readers' radically different responses can be linked to their cultural locations through the parodic elements of the text. Lastly, I examine Edith Eaton's autobiographical novel *Me: A Book of Remembrance*, which was initially published anonymously in 1915, complete with an introduction by Jean Webster (a popular novelist and friend of Eaton's) testifying to its authenticity. While the text makes only muted and ambiguous (however interesting) references to the protagonist's race, readers and reviewers fixated on those references as a way to determine the text's authorship. Eaton, who published many popular novels and stories under the pen name Onoto Watanna, identified publicly as Japanese despite her Chinese-Canadian heritage. I argue that

Eaton's self-conscious manipulation of her identity in her autobiographical novel, and her reading public's response, reveal how the politics of representation are masked when autobiography is treated as a transparent window into social identity. Her text lacks the self-conscious irony and formal sophistication of the other two works; but perhaps more clearly, its surface narration and use of the autobiographical and romance forms embody, as a sort of Jamesonian "political unconscious," the social and economic realities that shaped it.

Chapter three, "Factory Meets Faculty: Autobiography in Workers' Schools," examines the role of autobiography in early twentieth-century workers' schools. In these pedagogically innovative spaces, the students' life experience was taken as central to their education, and the writing and reading of autobiography was a central component of the curriculum. Taking as a case study the Bryn Mawr School for Working Women, which was widely considered the flagship humanistic program for women workers, and which became the model for many subsequent programs, I combine close readings of the students' autobiographies (both published and unpublished) with an analysis of the pedagogical context of their production and circulation. The autobiographies that the students routinely wrote for their English classes were read by their classmates; were published in the schools' literary magazines (like Bryn Mawr's *Shop and School*), to be distributed to the student body and beyond; and were collected and published by the umbrella organization The Affiliated Schools for Workers and distributed to workers' organizations nationwide. These texts provide a unique counterpoint to those published for mass consumption, and the narrative comparisons they invite illuminate the

imbrication of autobiographical practices and questions of audience and circulation.

If, for middle-class readers of magazines and best sellers, autobiography served as a tool through which to understand and contain cultural differences that seemed to threaten a newly consolidating middle-class identity, for working-class readers at Bryn Mawr, it became a lens through which to analyze and develop class consciousness in a way that did not confuse or conflate it with racial or ethnic difference. I argue that the Bryn Mawr approach to autobiography thus demonstrates an alternative understanding of structures of affiliation and difference that avoided many of the pitfalls of modernist multiculturalism. I first examine the particular pedagogical space of the workers' school, where the approach to teaching English was focused on an examination of literature's relationship to the material conditions of its production. I show how, as a pedagogical tool, within the interdisciplinary framework of English and economics, autobiography was used to examine the relationship between individual experience and the social and historical context in which it is embedded, and, moreover, as the basis for social action. Further, I argue that such an approach toward literature and the need to read literature for what it can tell us about the material conditions of our own and others' lives and the power relations that structure those conditions gives us a rich context through which to consider the women's autobiographies themselves.

Having examined autobiography through a range of historical contexts, I conclude this dissertation by linking these findings to contemporary debates surrounding multiculturalism and literary pedagogy, given that the literature classroom has become a new locus for the creation of middle-class reading practices. In "Graphic

Multiculturalism: Rethinking the Place of Autobiography in Literary Pedagogy,” I argue that the relationship between individual lives and group identities takes on a particular urgency in the contemporary era of multiculturalism, as educational institutions across the country respond to mandates to diversify their curricula. In literary studies in recent decades, the expansion of the canon to include women and writers of color has reinvigorated the field; however, I join a group of scholars such as John Guillory and David Palumbo-Liu who argue that the debates surrounding this mode of curricular reform ignore the broader context in which literary studies, if it is to retain its critical capacity in the contemporary university, must ground its critique of unequal social relations. Specifically, I argue that in the age of multicultural literary studies, the autobiographical has taken on a significance both more central and more unrecognized than ever before. Rather than being simply a means to a more inclusive and diverse literary curriculum, multiculturalism becomes a sort of literary affirmative action, whereby authors are supposed to stand in for heretofore unrepresented social groups. Such a mode of curricular reform not only constrains the ways that students can understand authors and texts, but also oversimplifies the processes of identity formation and representation.

My dissertation thus adds to a dynamic conversation among scholars exploring literary pedagogy for the twenty-first century, but it does so through a new angle: I connect contemporary multicultural education to the apparatuses of early twentieth-century publication, arguing that to understand and critically reengage the problematics of contemporary multiculturalism, we must understand its roots in modernist

multiculturalism—especially the role played by the autobiographical and the development of the genre’s social currency. Institutional and pedagogical theorists have largely ignored the importance of historicizing curricular matters in a wider social context; but I argue that such an approach is imperative, as schools have increasingly taken over the ideological functions that a century ago were determined by the publishing industry. I examine the growing and problematically uncritical currency of autobiography in literary curricula, and I explore how it operates to foster particular understandings of selfhood, citizenship, and cultural difference, concealing the problems of representation it entails. My aim is not to question the methods or motives of individual teachers of multicultural literature, but rather to make evident the necessary (and problematic) impact of the structural roots of multiculturalism within literary studies. I thus show how across the span of the twentieth century, the autobiographical has served as a crucial marker of value because of its capacity to enhance the sense of an unmediated relationship between the text and the social identity of the author, arguing ultimately that the anxieties and desires that marked modernist multiculturalism are recapitulated within contemporary literary pedagogy. I conclude with a reading of Miné Okubo’s graphic memoir *Citizen 13660* in the context of the multicultural literature classroom, using it to demonstrate that by treating autobiographical texts not simply as reflections of a given social group, but as embedded in more complex dynamics of cultural production, we offer students a way to understand the relationships among texts, authors, and readers as dynamic and demonstrative of the power relations that structure our experience.

Chapter One

Mass Magazines, Autobiography, and the New Currency of Difference

Upon opening the October 1905 issue of *The Independent*, readers would have first paged past the table of contents—perhaps admiring its modern, ornately-wrought, art-nouveau design—scanning the titles of its diverse offerings, which included several original poems, an essay on “The Good and Evil of College Fraternities,” a musing on “The American Victory at Waterloo,” and much more. They would then flip through eighteen pages of advertisements (another thirteen such pages appeared at the end of the magazine), maybe pausing at a particularly eye-catching illustration or compelling slogan—“Standard Porcelain and Enameled Baths: Assure a Modern, Beautiful, and Sanitary Bathroom”; “Have You Considered the Advantage of Having a Telephone in the Home?”; “The Globe-Wernicke Co. Catalogue will show you how to design a library that reflects good taste and refinement.” After these advertisements, readers would encounter the magazine’s regular feature “Survey of the World,” which cast an imperialist eye over the global news, offering stories in small, socially useful, dinner-party conversational bits.

On the next page, readers would have arrived at an article titled “Views of an Igorrote Chief,” by Fomoaley Ponci. According to the editor’s headnote, Ponci was one of several native Filipinos to travel to the U.S. and appear at Coney Island as part of a sort of “living diorama” of Filipino life. Much of the first-person narrative is spent

describing his own life; but Ponci also holds a mirror up to the spectators at Coney Island (and, by extension, the readers of *The Independent*), commenting on their attitudes toward their bodies, their ideas about work, and their obsession with technology. “Views of an Igorrote Chief” offered readers a very different worldview from their own, and one that questioned their own in very specific ways.

Ponci’s narrative challenges the American perspective he faces in the gaze of the Coney Island visitors and the readers of *The Independent*. And though autobiographical narratives like Ponci’s appeared in the magazine frequently, it nonetheless seems surprising to encounter such a critical piece in a publication that projected, through both its editorial content and its advertisements, an incredible confidence in the American way of life: readers from an emergent middle class at the turn of the century, such as those of *The Independent*, found in popular magazines a positive reflection of their social identity. And in turn, popular magazines helped shape this emergent middle class in ways that allowed them to feel at home amidst the sweeping social and cultural shifts that were concomitant to the ascendance of corporate capitalism.⁴ Magazines positioned their

⁴ The story of these changes is one that has become generally familiar and agreed-upon, and I will review it only briefly. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, industrial America was born: the expansion of the railroads, the widespread use of the telegraph and telephone, the introduction of electric power, and other technological and infrastructural developments enabled a boom in manufacturing that brought people in vast numbers from farms into factories and shops, from rural areas into towns and cities. Furthermore, wealth and income became increasingly concentrated in the hands of industrial capitalists, and this growth in inequality led to great instability, with depressions and labor conflicts occurring regularly throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century.

At the same time that class difference was becoming increasingly polarized, however, the changing economy gradually gave birth to a new class of workers, often referred to as the professional-managerial class (PMC). These men, the finance workers;

readers as modern, savvy, and informed consumers of cultural goods, both observers of and participants in the inevitable march of American progress: familiar with the culture of the day, confident in America's growing political and economic power, and fluent in the latest fashions and technological innovations. Magazines offered readers a lens through which to view themselves and a way to imagine a community of like-minded citizens.

the writers, editors, and others who performed primarily creative mental labor; mid-level corporate managers; and their counterparts in government and other institutions; made up a small but increasing percentage of the workforce, and, by most measures, would come to be the core of a recognizable middle class by the early decades of the twentieth century.

Attendant with these demographic changes were major alterations to people's experience of everyday life: with the shift away from home production of clothing, food, and household goods, and the development of national corporate brands, the modern consumer was born. Furthermore, the ever-growing production capacities of manufacturers meant that there was as well an ever-growing need for new markets: industrialists quickly discovered the need to have an active role in the orchestration of not just production, but also consumption. "Marketing" became an increasingly significant element of the corporate model, and the members of the PMC were in many ways the ideal target audience as potential consumers—upwardly mobile and interested in associating with the modern, the emergent middle class was well positioned to define itself in terms of new products and styles of consumption.

But this emergent middle class was not completely consumed by materialism; rather, a spirit of reform and civic-mindedness was also central to its developing ethos. Many of the issues that became central to Progressive Era reforms were eagerly taken up by the middle class: interest in immigrant settlement and education, child labor and welfare, urban tenement housing conditions, and other such issues became widespread in the early decades of the twentieth century, although this altruism was more often than not coupled with a certain moralizing condescension, even voyeurism, on the part of the would-be reformers. Many scholars have characterized the Progressive Era zeitgeist as an ideological response to the anxieties created by the inequality and instability of corporate capitalism; and while much of the reform spirit was directed at ills generated by the system, the reforms themselves were certainly not incompatible with a capitalist ethos, aimed as they were at achieving stability and quieting cries for more popular risings rather than generating any fundamental change. In this chapter, I will address these cultural shifts as they informed and were informed by a developing ethos of modernist multiculturalism, as reflected in popular magazines.

Autobiographical writing was a common discursive feature not just of *The Independent*, but of many popular magazines, which regularly included memoirs by well-known politicians, popular scientists, captains of industry, clergymen, writers and respected commentators—figures presented to readers as worthy of emulation, as having attained the cultural, social, or economic status befitting a range of middle-class aspirations and values. Indeed, Edward Bok (longtime editor of the highly successful *Ladies' Home Journal*) attributed his magazine's popularity at least in part to the frequent publication of autobiographical writing; in his own autobiography, Bok says (speaking of himself in the third person, as had Henry Adams):

On every hand, the question was being asked: "How is it done? How is such a high circulation obtained?" Bok's invariable answer was that he gave his readers the very best of the class of reading that he believed would interest them, and that he spared neither effort nor expense to obtain it for them....As he knew [his reader] to be fond of the personal type of literature, he gave her in succession Jane Addams's story of "My Fifteen Years at Hull House," and the remarkable narration of Helen Keller's "Story of My Life"; he invited Henry Van Dyke, who had never been in the Holy Land, to go there, camp out in a tent, and then write a series of sketches, "Out of Doors in the Holy Land"; he induced Lyman Abbott to tell the story of "My Fifty Years as a Minister." He asked Gene Stratton Porter to tell of her bird-experiences in the series: "What I Have Done with Birds."...He got Kate Douglass Wiggin to tell a country church experience of hers in "The Old Peabody Pew." (374-5)

Bok was not alone in recognizing that readers had an affinity for the autobiographical voice. Another of the first and most popular mass magazines, *Everybody's*, included anonymous autobiographical essays as a regular feature: these pieces, such as “Autobiography of a Married Man,” “Autobiography of an Elderly Woman,” and “Autobiography of a Business Man,” offered optimism and affirmation to readers who may have seen such titles as descriptions of themselves or their loved ones.⁵ Other successful and widely-circulating magazines similarly published a great deal of first-person material, ranging from humorous or moralistic sketches, to travel narratives, to entire serialized autobiographies—many with a straightforwardly didactic or inspirational tone. Magazine editors recognized the educational power of the autobiographical voice: as *Munsey's* magazine put it in an editorial titled “The Charm of Autobiography,” “I know a teacher who develops the character of his boys very largely by reading the great autobiographies of the world. He says that this form of literature is the most stimulating for the education of youth that has as yet been discovered” (614). As a feature of magazines, autobiographical writing served a similar educative function, helping to consolidate middle-class identity—linked to both fantasies of upward mobility, and anxieties about social fluidity—by offering as models life stories of moral sincerity, of financial success, of imperialist conquest, of achievement in science and technology. Such life stories reflected and helped shape the middle-class values and aspirations of their readers.

⁵ These examples appeared in the February 1905, May 1906, and February 1907 issues, respectively.

But magazines also frequently included first-person narratives from a very different class of people—from workers, immigrants, and others who were clearly positioned socially below their readership.⁶ And not infrequently, such pieces proved popular enough that they were parlayed (by ambitious authors or by shrewd publishers) into book deals; many now well-known autobiographers first published versions of their works in magazines. Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), for instance—considered by many the Urtext of twentieth-century immigration narratives—was originally published as a series of five short pieces in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1911; the journal’s editor, Ellery Sedgwick, brokered a deal for the subsequent and wildly successful book publication by Houghton, Mifflin. Both Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901) and Jacob Riis’s *The Making of an American* (1901) were first published serially the previous year in *Outlook*. Charles Alexander Eastman’s *Indian Boyhood* (1902) and its sequel *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916) began as a series of sketches written for the influential children’s magazine *St. Nicholas* (which also published such literary luminaries as William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, and F. Scott Fitzgerald). And many writers who may not have gone on to publish full-length autobiographies nonetheless had their autobiographical magazine pieces republished in countless

⁶ While such autobiographical pieces take on a particular function, I argue, in the context of the emergent form of the American mass magazine, their publication in periodicals has a long history dating back to the earliest British magazines. Ben Yagoda notes that life stories written by “those hanging on the lower rungs of the social ladder” were not uncommon: “Narratives by criminals, in particular, picked up on a longtime trend on the other side of the Atlantic. As early as the late seventeenth century, miscreants of various kinds were telling their stories in the pages of several different English periodicals,” and apparently garnering their publishers heretofore unseen sales (76).

collections and anthologies. For instance, Sui Sin Far, now considered by many critics to be the foremother of Asian-American literature, frequently wrote autobiographical sketches for magazines—including her widely-anthologized “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” first published in the *Independent* in 1909; and Zitkala Sa’s “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” “An Indian Teacher among Indians,” and others, were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s Monthly* in the early 1900’s, before being published as a part of her collected works in 1921 and later in many literary anthologies.

While some such autobiographers became popular through their magazine writing, others became notorious. Bok’s *Journal* published an anonymous 1916 article called “My Mother and I: The Story of How I Became an American Woman,” which narrated the author’s experience of immigration and life as an American Jew, to such a response that its author, E.G. Sterne, published it in book length (to much acclaim) the following year. Sterne would go on to publish several more memoirs, and would later be embroiled in a scandal around the veracity of her books when it was revealed by her son that she was actually born in Pittsburgh to Welsh and German parents. Similarly, Sylvester Long Lance parlayed a 1919 *Cosmopolitan* article into his wildly popular autobiography about growing up as a Blackfoot Indian, but he was later revealed to be the son of former slaves from North Carolina—a revelation which brought the disavowal of some of his patrons, and Long Lance’s eventual suicide.

In some cases, magazines and their writers were more straightforward about designating fictional work as autobiography. For instance, Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of*

David Levinsky (1917) was first published serially in *McClure's* in 1913, under the title "The Autobiography of an American Jew"; editors included a note indicating that the story was fiction, but emphasizing that its proximity to reality (however skewed by racism that "reality" may have been) was what gave it value: "Levinsky is, in fact, an actual type; his story reproduces actual characters, occurrences, and situations taken from real life. And his intense and complicated struggle shows, as no invention could do, the traits of mind and character by which the Jew has made his sensationally rapid progress in the business world of America" (92-3). What cases such as Sterne's, Long Lance's, and Cahan's all demonstrate about the use of the autobiographical is that, whether a means for writers to get published or for editors to sell magazines, both clearly understood the currency of autobiographical writing and sought to use it to their advantage.⁷

Certainly not all autobiographers published in magazines garnered the recognition (or infamy) of these examples; paging through back issues of any popular magazine, one can find autobiographical pieces by countless writers who, like Fomoaley Ponci, have long been forgotten. Nonetheless, magazines offered many culturally-marginalized writers a venue for publication as autobiographers, reflecting a fascination with cultural difference that was a hallmark of modernist multiculturalism. And yet, despite their frequency, such pieces seem to be ideologically aberrant in the context of general-interest magazines aimed at a middle-class readership: while many of these narratives were

⁷ Chapter two explores "fake" autobiographies at much greater length, demonstrating that we can locate the social conventions and readerly expectations surrounding autobiographical writing in part because we can observe the consequences when those conventions or expectations are violated.

clearly invested in the mythology of democratic possibility and American exceptionalism, many others were critical, at least indirectly, of the very economic and social conditions that enabled the growth and cultural differentiation of the middle class. What purpose, then, did these narratives serve? What cultural work did they perform, and what was the impact of their circulation through this new medium? In this chapter, I consider popular magazines as a unique venue for the wide dissemination of autobiography. Moreover, I argue that its circulation among editorials, advertisements, travel articles, reviews, and other elements that magazines put into new proximity performed very particular ideological work: as life stories became commodities for mass consumption, cultural difference took on a new currency for readers attempting to define their own identities in opposition to those of marginalized groups. As a medium for autobiography, magazines engendered a complicated relationship between their readers and the genre. In order to understand the significance of that relationship, we need to take a brief excursus through magazine history, to explore the relationship that magazines engendered with their readers more generally.

My Magazine, Myself

In the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, magazine circulation increased exponentially, and more people read magazines than had regularly partaken in any other single medium in American history.⁸ What was at the root of this

⁸ Richard Ohmann reports that total circulation of the genteel nineteenth-century monthlies likely never topped four million; by 1890, circulation of new mass magazines reached about eighteen million, and by 1905, it surpassed 64 million (29).

phenomenon? Clearly, magazines offered something for which readers were eager. That 1905 issue of *The Independent* put it well, in some instructive comments that opened a six-page preview of the upcoming theater season (complete with photoengravings of titillating scenes from George Bernard Shaw's latest offering, the most popular new actor and actress of the season, and the spectacular interior of New York's Hippodrome):

Formerly the line could be pretty sharply drawn between playgoers and non-playgoers, those who saw almost everything of any interest, and those who never entered a theater. Neither class needed dramatic criticism. Now, however, a very large and increasing proportion of the population go to see a few plays a year and want to see the best. They do not want to waste their time, to waste their money, nor to waste their minds and emotions on trash. They want...not a censor to restrict their choice, nor a dictator to decide between good and bad, but a friend who will give suggestions as to the merits of plays of all kinds, so that each person can pick out those he would like to see when he has the opportunity. (923-4)

The Independent's description of its own editorial presence—a culturally sophisticated friend, at the ready to make informed suggestions—characterizes that which many turn-of-the-century mass magazines strove to cultivate. Their predecessors in the nineteenth century, publications aimed at an affluent leisure class for whom familiarity with high culture was a birthright, spoke as to insiders, offering little editorializing and presuming a

great amount of shared cultural knowledge.⁹ By the last decades of the century, however, publishers began to recognize a much broader potential audience for general-interest magazines: publications like *The Independent*, *McClure's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Outlook* offered access to this store of cultural goods to an emerging middle class, and did so in a way that helped them to feel as though they were being gently educated rather than patronized. Despite the fact that most of *The Independent's* readers would in fact *not* be able to travel to New York to see “The Walls of Jericho” hot on the tail of its smashing London success, the magazine would give them fluency in such “talk of the theatrical circles” (926).

While magazines did successfully appeal to a broad new audience by linking themselves to the social aspirations of the middle class, there is more to the story of what enabled their popular rise. Richard Ohmann in *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (1996) and Matthew Schneirov in *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America 1893-1914* (1994) both usefully trace this rise through the convergence of economic and social forces that ushered in the new century; and both argue that the popular magazine in this era was arguably the first instance of a truly national mass culture.¹⁰ Beyond their aiming for and helping to define a new kind of audience, turn-of-the-century magazines also had a new ability to *reach*

⁹ On the editorial presence in nineteenth-century American magazines, see Schneirov, chapters one and two and Ohmann, chapter one.

¹⁰ Ohmann makes a particularly specific and compelling case for considering mass magazines as the first form of mass culture, which he defines as “voluntary experiences, produced by a relatively small number of specialists, for millions across the nation to share, in similar or identical form, either simultaneously or nearly so; with dependable frequency; mass culture shapes habitual audiences, around common needs or interests, and it is made for profit” (14).

this audience: technological developments in photoengraving, printing, and distribution, along with the professionalization of advertising (which was developing out of growing corporations' need to find new markets) enabled them to reach a wider swath of American homes than ever before. More specifically, in the mid 1890s magazine publishers found that by broadening the appeal of their content and dropping their subscription rates, they could vastly increase their circulation numbers, thereby offering a new—and highly valuable—commodity to advertisers: a national audience of relatively well-off and eager consumers. And in return, advertisers happily provided enough revenue to subsidize the magazines' production costs.¹¹

Most historians of magazines agree on the narrative up to this point, and this change in the model of magazine publishing is widely considered a “revolution.” Far more contentious is the debate about the effects of this shift that made advertising the major source of revenue for magazines. For Ohmann, magazines inevitably shaped the formation of the middle class along ideological lines that were most conducive to formalizing their roles as consumers:

A central need of people who became readers of [magazines] was to fix their bearings in the fluid social space of that moment, and to do so to their social

¹¹ Nineteenth-century magazines generally carried a scant dozen or so pages of advertising, most of which promoted books from their affiliated publishing houses; the new popular magazines, however, carried as many as seventy to ninety pages of advertisements. From the perspective of magazine history, see Mott, introduction, and Ohmann, chapter two; from the perspective of advertising history, see Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, 1929) and Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance; A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

advantage. Magazines that came into homes helped establish and announce the social level of those homes. They also provided their readers with a range of information and interests that linked them conversationally to other readers in the same circle of acquaintance, and culturally to like-minded readers across the nation. In this they collaborated with the reconfiguration of social space and with the new styles and meanings of consumption. (220)

Magazines played a key role in consolidating the new middle class by positioning their readers as consumers surrounded by cultural wares, in both the editorial content and the advertisements, helping them to feel empowered and at home in the new world of consumer capitalism.

For Schneirov, however, Ohmann's focus on magazines as an instrument of hegemonic values does not allow for the agency of the writers, editors, and publishers of the magazines, who were frequently (explicitly or no) *not* ideologically aligned with corporate interests. He notes, "Magazines became the ideal vehicle for national advertising, but they were also a national forum for an assortment of ideas—some from social reformers, others from journalists, editors, businessmen, and scientists. Of course, . . . not all ideas could be admitted; there were 'invisible hegemonic limits.' But within these limits there was ample room for diversity" (10-11). Indeed, many of the most important thinkers of the Progressive Era were frequent contributors to popular magazines, and some of the most widely-circulating magazines were known particularly for their muckraking—most notably *McClure's*, whose early publication of work by Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens defined it as a pioneer of investigative journalism. McClure

was certainly not the only editor who espoused a specifically progressive political outlook and truly worked to make his magazine a platform for what might generously be considered a new kind of social consciousness and reform.

While Schneirov is right to insist on a concept of hegemony that is perhaps less rigid than Ohmann's (one, he says, that refers to "a process, inherently complex and contested, that is never fully achieved precisely because of the need for mass culture to incorporate new social developments"[10]), he does not fully acknowledge the power of the new formal qualities of the magazines in delivering their diverse messages—flanked as they were by advertisements and presented as cultural products for consumption. I want to suggest a way of understanding turn-of-the-century magazines and magazine readers that draws from both Ohmann and Schneirov, but recognizes the limitations of each: rather than focusing on the idealism of the editorial content at the expense of acknowledging the power of the new discourse of advertising and consumerism that flowed through the magazines, or ignoring the magazines' progressive potential by conceiving of the editorial content as wholly saturated by the corporate agenda of their advertisers, I try to imagine readers' experience of magazines as a dynamic interaction, involving both immersion and critical distancing. In the analysis that follows, I try to take the editors, contributors, and readers of magazines seriously and in good faith, but also recognize that popular magazines, as a cultural form whose birth is inseparable from the economic and social upheaval of the late nineteenth century, embody the all-pervasive changes to social relations rendered by the advent of corporate capitalism.

For example, whatever their editorial content, it is undeniable that turn-of-the-century magazines hailed their readers in a radically new way: *as consumers*. The magazines' content was literally framed, in the dozens of opening and closing pages, by advertisements for products and services (in contrast to nineteenth-century magazines, which contained perhaps a few pages of notices for new books). They offered a riot of images, slogans, and information, evoking a whole way of life as lived through commodities. And as Ohmann has noted, much more than earlier magazines, the heterogeneous editorial content mirrored this sense of the magazine (true to its etymology) as a storehouse, "profusely and quite miscellaneous stocked" with cultural wares presented for consumption (223). Furthermore, the magazines presented *themselves* as desirable commodities, enticing and elegantly produced, at once offering information and entertainment to their readers and proclaiming the status of the homes whose coffee tables they graced.

What is fundamentally at stake here is what the new magazines said *to* and *about* their middle-class readers; in an arguably more far-reaching and dynamic way than any media before, they offered a lens through which this new and increasingly powerful class of people conceived of themselves *as selves*, in relation to others. While the editors, publishers, writers, and advertisers of popular magazines did not explicitly take up these philosophical issues, they were nonetheless, in positioning themselves for an audience, engaged in ongoing negotiations about the meaning of middle-class selfhood. Autobiographical writing, as a particularly potent vehicle for the ideology of selfhood, was perhaps more explicitly implicated in such negotiations than most other forms of

discourse. And the ubiquity of autobiography (in magazines and also in book form) at the turn of the century was indicative of people's grappling with new understandings of selfhood and the relationship between self and society.

Many historians have examined the transformation of selfhood wrought by the advent of corporate capitalism and, as Tom Pendergast points out, have done so in relatively mournful tones: "Positing that the nineteenth-century individual enjoyed natural relations with his or her property, community, and self, such critics contend that the disruption of those relations brought by the rise of consumer culture left the modern individual estranged from 'real' selfhood" (7). And while Pendergast, like Schierov, is right to point out the typically idealistic tone of the magazines themselves (in contrast to scholars' generally rueful take on the effects of the emergence of consumer capitalism), it is an oversimplification to then assume (as both, to some degree, do) that the anxieties and alienation that scholars have read into the ethos of the era are in the main anachronistic. They fail to acknowledge that magazines' idealistic tone was itself often a symptom of greater unease and apprehension related to the place of the middle-class self amidst such slippery social, cultural, and economic terrain.

It is this apprehension that seems to characterize the place of autobiographical writing by people outside of these magazines' readership, as it characterized the modernist multiculturalist spirit that magazines embodied. While the presence of such different voices on the pages of middle-class magazines should in part be seen as an inclusive, democratic gesture, in the context of typical magazine content and tone, they often become something much less so: at best, the narratives are oddities, something akin

to the Coney Island Igorrote diorama that put individuals and groups on display to represent groups as “educational” curiosities; at worst, they serve as ideological markers for middle-class readers to more clearly differentiate “us” from “them,” the means to achieve self-definition through the negation or trivialization of other perspectives. More generally, though, autobiographical writing in magazines by people outside of their white, middle-class readership reflected a shift in the very notion of culture and cultural difference—a shift that was at the heart of a burgeoning modernist multiculturalism, and that would in turn have a profound impact on the meaning and value of autobiographical narratives.

New Magazines for a New Culture

While drama, literature, art, and scholarship had an important place in popular magazines, they were by no means simply degraded versions of their genteel nineteenth-century counterparts; rather, publications like *The Independent*, *McClure's*, and *Outlook* were doing something altogether new. More than just offering access to the hallowed ground of high culture, popular magazines charted the new social terrain that emerged attendant upon the seismic economic and social changes ushering in the new century. They offered their readers an image of themselves in relation to their wider culture. And what the new magazines reflected, at least in part, was that the notion of culture itself was undergoing dramatic change.

Raymond Williams and others have traced the contemporary understanding of the world “culture” to its roots in both the French *civilisation* and the German *Kultur*.

Civilisation has long connoted arrival at the pinnacle of human development as manifest in certain habits, customs, and standards of living. *Civilisation* is something to be attained through generations of striving and refinement, not equally available to all. *Kultur*, by contrast, is identified with the spiritual identity of a nation, with the history and way of life embodied in its peasant *Volk*. While the American use of the term has a long and knotty history, suffice it to say that through the nineteenth century, “culture” was most strongly identified with *civilisation*, with all its evolutionary and hierarchical implications. But in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the German-born and trained anthropologist Franz Boas developed a new sense of the word, one much more akin to *Kultur* as time- and location-bound. The Boasians stressed that “A culture was not a universal history but a configuration of manners, mores, and beliefs peculiar to a people...Each culture, in this sense, possesses integrity, and one more accurately speaks of cultures in the plural rather than of a singular culture that confers different degrees of status upon broad divisions of humanity” (Elliot xiii). While both *civilisation* and *Kulture* continued to inform understandings of group-based difference, the Boasian sense of cultures gained currency in both the scholarly and popular imagination in the decades around the turn of the century.

With the introduction of the anthropological sense of cultures, then, came a renewed interest in culture *as* difference; and yet, the connotations of the French sense of the word were not wholly evacuated. Rather, it was no longer simply fluency in high culture that signaled one as “cultured,” but fluency in *cultures* plural. The decades surrounding the turn of the century, then, saw a shift in what it meant to be cultured that

reflected a nascent incorporation of the Boasian sense of culture—and thus the ascendance of modernist multiculturalism. Mass cultural forms fueled the pace and scope of this shift in that they “collapsed the distinction between what would come to be known as ‘cultures’ and humanistic ‘culture’ into products of the culture industry” (Evans 7). Magazines especially manifested this leveling: alongside more traditional fare, the ubiquity of local color fiction, travel writing, folklore, and the like on their pages—not to mention their Progressive Era interest in the conditions of such groups as immigrants and workers—bespoke an attention to cultural difference on the part of their readers that was altogether absent from nineteenth-century magazines.

In the 1905 issue of *The Independent* that opened this chapter, for instance, readers would have found not only a preview of the theatrical season, a cautious examination of Tolstoy, several original poems, and a review of the latest important literature to be published, but also an exposé of the lives of immigrants in New York City tenements, a study of Japanese rice farmers in Texas, and an examination of the health conditions in the Philippines, not to mention a wealth of advertisements for products promising everything from superior cleaning power to sound investing. And while the experience of encountering such disparate elements side by side is something that we take for granted, as Richard Ohmann points out, at the turn of the century, it was a fairly novel experience: “We have become used to discontinuous forms, from vaudeville to the flow of TV entertainment and news and commercials, so that such juxtapositions seem normal. The nineteenth century had already made them familiar to city

people...Magazines brought them into the home, into the hands, before the eyes” (224).¹² The experience of reading a magazine, then, was about more than the sum of reading its parts. Rather, the juxtaposition of those parts put many different—often competing—modes of discourse into relationships with each other.¹³ So while the attention to cultural difference in magazines signaled a shift toward a more egalitarian and relativistic idea of culture, it must be read in relation to other elements with which it coexisted on the magazines’ pages.

The Independent and its Undistinguished Americans

It is in light of this shifting social terrain on which new ideas about selfhood and otherness were formed and disseminated in the early twentieth century that I want to consider the publication of autobiographical narratives in mass magazines. Such narratives offered middle-class readers what seemed to be transparent, authentic images of other social groups, a way to perceive, and therefore understand and contain, differences that had become unmoored from their nineteenth-century foundations—differences that marked the shifting contours of the very notion of culture. *The Independent*, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century under the editorship

¹² This was true of newspapers as well, but to a much lesser extent, as the variety of their content was more limited, and they were visually less complex.

¹³ Similarly, M.M Bakhtin notes the multiplicity of voices within the newspaper (as an image of the distinctive chronotope of Dostoevsky’s novels); he says, a newspaper is “a living reflection of the contradictions of contemporary society in the cross-section of a single day, where the most diverse and contradictory material is laid out” (30). In Bakhtinian terms, the voices in a magazine, like the newspaper, are already polyphonic and dialogic.

of Hamilton Holt, took a particular interest in this brand of culture, and as such positioned itself as more modern and progressive than many of its competitors. Founded in 1848, the magazine began as a religious anti-slavery journal, but by the 1890s had refashioned itself as a secular general-interest magazine. Like its competitors, *The Independent* sought to broaden its appeal by avoiding highly partisan politics; each issue included articles on current and historical events by respected public figures, regular features on the arts, finance, and technology, poetry and fiction, an increasing number of illustrations and photoengravings, and over thirty pages of advertising. The magazine's publishers embraced the new model of production—cutting subscription costs by relying on advertising for revenues—that had come to be the industry standard during that period; in fact, *The Independent* once boasted more advertisers than any other extant magazine (Mott 375). While it is difficult to find reliable circulation numbers,¹⁴ Werner Sollors places the magazine on par with (and politically in between) two of the most well-know magazines from the era, *McClure's* and *Outlook*: “*The Independent* seems to have functioned as a more liberal alternative to Lyman Abbott's *Outlook*...although it was a more conservative organ than *McClure's Magazine*, which became identified as the central muckraking journal at the beginning of the century” (xiv).

I take *The Independent* as my focus here in part because of this middle-of-the-road status: the magazine clearly positioned itself to appeal to a very broad audience. And while the magazine, like its competitors, was very much embedded in the machinery of corporate capitalism, Holt (like others of his peers, particularly *Cosmopolitan's* Hearst)

¹⁴ *The Independent* absorbed two other magazines in the early decades of the twentieth century, and reported circulation numbers vary widely in these years.

was also fiercely dedicated to the notion of independent journalism. In particular, Holt was enamored with the power and the democratic potential of the autobiographical voice, and the magazine published a large volume of autobiographical narratives, particularly by people outside of its readership—immigrants, factory workers, sharecroppers (as Holt himself put it, people “of the humbler classes in the nation” [i])—a cast of characters that created a truly broad composite portrait. The short sketches, which Holt termed “lifelets,” were so widely popular with his audience that he eventually gathered many of them into a collection which he published in book form, under the title *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans*, which was then itself published in two different editions.¹⁵

¹⁵ The multiple meanings embedded in Holt’s title, *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans*, are indicative of the ambiguities surrounding the meaning and value of the narratives as offered to readers. Firstly, “undistinguished” implies (if slightly pejoratively) that, while the individuals included in the collection have no particular claim to distinction, their stories are still worthy of publication, and thus the collection itself stands as an inclusive and democratic gesture. Indeed, the introduction notes that one of the forces that accounts for the pieces’ popularity is a renewed interest in literary forms that emphasize “the importance of the average man” (3). In another sense, however, “undistinguished” implies that they are indistinct from each other, made to be representative in such a way that their subjectivity is effaced and they stand in as types. The titles of the short pieces exemplify this second sense of the word: each is introduced by ethnicity and vocation (“A Polish Sweatshop Girl,” “An Italian Bootblack,” “A Negro Peon”). In one instance, “The Life Story of A Syrian,” this indistinctiveness is literally at play in the narrative construction; the editor notes, “The following chapter is a composite. Three young Syrians of Washington Street, New York, each lent a part of his life to the making of it, in order that the story might be nearly representative of the average Syrian immigrant” (147). So while the introduction situates these forms squarely in a literary framework (within a genealogy of novelistic writing), it nonetheless presents the literary interest of the short pieces as embedded in their potential ethnographic interest, noting: “This, after all, is the most profitable branch of nature study, the study of Homo sapiens, and of his wife, who, in this country at least, usually also belongs to the species sapiens” (3). Given that a large proportion of the narratives that follow are those of immigrants, the humor here, playing on the suspicion of foreigners as being potentially less than human, also subtly undercuts the democratic promise the introduction intones.

But the democratic impulse that may have been at the root of Holt's interest in publishing the "lifelets" at times inevitably got lost in the current of competing discourses that flows throughout the magazine, as I will discuss; many of the magazine's articles and editorials make evident, for instance, that it was as Frank Mott has noted, "wholly committed to the policy of 'expansion' and 'taking up the white man's burden'" (377). And in the magazine's advertisements, difference becomes merely part of an aestheticized background to the promise of a consumer's paradise.

What effect might the autobiographical narratives' circulation among these other elements of the magazine have had on readers' experience of the narratives themselves? How might the circulation of these narratives through the medium of mass magazines have influenced readers' understanding or valuation of autobiography generally? If the general-interest magazine regularly brought autobiographical narratives to larger audiences than ever before, then it offers a significant venue through which to consider the larger cultural work performed by autobiography; and in order to think through some of these issues, I want to now turn to some of the narrative themselves and examine them in the context of their original magazine publication.¹⁶

¹⁶ A note about sources: despite a thorough search, I was unable to locate an archive of *The Independent's* records; and the Hamilton Holt papers focus almost exclusively on his later career in university administration, rather than on his early career with *The Independent*. I have thus been limited to the published editor's notes for information about how the autobiographical narratives were obtained, and as I will discuss, that process was certainly not transparent; nonetheless, at least one of the narratives that I discuss—that of Rose Schneiderman—is verifiably consistent with other of her own accounts of her life.

Competing Currents

Fomoaley Ponci's narrative, which opened this chapter, is a particularly compelling example of magazine autobiography, both in terms of its content and the way it interacts with other elements of the magazine. Ponci begins by describing his childhood, his marriage, and his village's encounters with Spanish and American colonizers; and throughout his narrative, he is careful to express an awareness of others' views of Igorrote customs (acknowledging, for instance, the American disapproval of their "headhunting" practices and answering it as with an unconcerned shrug: "What can we do? We have always done it" [780]). He criticizes Spanish colonial politics and religious practices by demonstrating their absurdity within an Igorrote worldview:

We did not owe [the Spaniards] anything; why should we pay what they call taxes? We let the Spaniards come because there is plenty of room [on the island] for everybody... [A Spanish priest] told us that God had a son who died for us, and that we ought to leave our God and go to him. But our Chief said: "We did not want him to die for us. We can die for ourselves." No, we will be true to our own God, who has always been good to us. We never give him anything. How could a man give anything to God? (781)

In Ponci's narrative, the Spanish and the Americans are clownish (if dangerous) figures with bizarre ways, prone to inexplicable bouts of anger. His description of a scientist who visited his village reads itself as a set of field observations of the visitor's behaviors: "All he wanted was beetles and bugs and birds and bats and snakes. He put them in boxes and bottles...and spent days watching [them]...When he could get anyone to

interpret for him he was always asking questions. He had a book and a little stick that made a black mark, and when we told him anything he made black marks in the book” (782). Ponci’s description of the abuse of the Igorrotes by the whites (“[The Spaniards] caught a few Igorrotes and were very bad to the, whipping them to make them work. Some they whipped to death” [781]), interspersed with descriptions of their scientific, geographical, and anthropological interest in the island and its inhabitants, lays bare the violence at the root of these imperialist gestures of charting, classification, and control.

His reverse-anthropological gaze becomes even more marked as Ponci narrates his travels to the U.S. He describes the visitors at Coney Island:

Great crowds of people came to see us every day and we show them how we live. They are good people, but they do not look well. They all wear clothes, even the children. It is bad that any one should wear clothes, but much worse for the children. We pity them. They cannot be well...Perhaps they are ashamed because they don’t look well with their clothes off. They are thin and stooping and pale. That is because they work so much. I would tell them about our way of life, *if I could*, because I feel sorry for them. (784, my emphasis)

Ponci, who has readily acknowledged the limits of his understanding of the whites he has encountered, here nods to the limits of the whites’ understanding of Igorrote life. And while he expresses admiration for the technological achievements he encounters in the U.S., he also notes their irrelevance for him: “I have seen many wonders here, but we will not bring any of them home to Bontoc. We do not want them there,” (784) going on to

explain exactly why electric lights and cars and telephones are unnecessary for life in his village.

Ponci's narrative is critical of the American perspective of the visitors at Coney Island and the readers of *The Independent*.¹⁷ But the magazine's treatment of the narrative frames it in very particular ways. In the editor's headnote, the authenticity of the account seems to be assured by the chief's simplicity and lack of decorative language, despite the obvious complications of translation; furthermore, his natural incapacity for objectivity and accuracy assures the editors' and readers' superior judgments: "The genial exponent of the simple life who furnished the following article by talking through an interpreter...was a large, plump Filipino whose age was probably forty-eight. He was clad in two necklaces, two bracelets, some tattoo marks and a loin cloth...In regard to figures he is quite impressionistic, 'a thousand' representing any large number" (779). The focus on Ponci's physical form echoes the Coney Island-esque interest in "the native" as spectacle, as do the photographs that accompany the piece in the magazine: they picture Ponci and his fellow Igorrotes in various "characteristic attitudes" (783) against the backdrop of a village constructed for the Coney Island display (see fig.1).

¹⁷ Given that Coney Island was primarily a working-class leisure zone, the narrative may also have served to confirm readers' negative perceptions of the park's working-class patrons.

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Fig. 1. Photographs accompanying “Views of an Igorrote Chief,” *The Independent* 59.2 (Oct. 1905): 779-785.

The photographs offer what appears to be a literal glimpse of the Igorrote way of life. But they are in fact much more layered and complex: not just representations, but representations of a representation—images of a people posing on a set constructed to portray a village. Ponci’s narrative is similarly layered and complex: a story told orally, then filtered through a translator and a writer—what appears to be a first-hand narrative is in fact three times removed. This sort of acknowledged artificiality was, of course, very common in the age of Barnum, Buffalo Bill, and Madame Tussaud; fin de siècle America was a crucible for both the mass spectacle and the social sciences, and the line between

entertainment and information was a blurry one. Magazines, like other purveyors of modernist multiculturalism, rode this line, and were, as the editor of *Cosmopolitan* described, both “a power and a pleasure” (as quoted in Schneirov 1). “Views of an Igorrote Chief” is positioned both as a curiosity and as an encounter with the real, an amusement and an accurate portrayal of Igorrote life; its constructedness is coupled with a claim to authenticity, made all the more powerful by its deployment of the autobiographical voice. The autobiographical voice offered what appeared to be a transparent window onto another culture. And the power of that autobiographical voice is undeniable—despite these myriad complications of representation, Ponci’s narrative offers an interestingly critical perspective on turn-of-the-century America.

But that perspective is contained, literally and figuratively, through the editorial apparatus of the magazine; its critical edge is severely blunted by the ways in which the editor’s note and the accompanying photographs position both Ponci’s physical body and his narrative as a quaint curiosity. And not just the framing of Ponci’s narrative through the editor’s note and the photographs would have impacted readers’ experience of the narrative itself. The piece was of course just one of many elements of the October 1905 issue of *The Independent*; and that issue was just one out of the many months that its subscribers would read. Readers’ experience of any given piece was thus embedded in their additive, ongoing experience of the magazine as a whole, and Ponci’s narrative was caught up in the many discursive currents that flowed through the magazine.

His was certainly not, for instance, the only piece in the magazine to discuss the Philippines; of course, in 1905, the Philippines were on everyone’s tongue. Americans

had enthusiastically backed this imperial adventure that, however bloody, resulted in American rule of the islands until after World War II. News from the Philippines regularly appeared in the magazine's "Survey of the World," and feature pieces were common. In the month following the publication of Ponci's narrative, for example, *The Independent* published an essay by then Secretary of State William H. Taft, enumerating the reasons that the Filipinos were incapable of self-rule. Taft blames the islands' current woes primarily on the lack of "individual initiative and resourcefulness" (1017) on the part of the Filipinos, noting that "We Americans have grown so accustomed to rapidity of development in our own country, and to the display of great individual initiative and enterprise, that we are prone to expect results too rapidly in the Philippines" (1015).

This paternalistic tone is common to nearly all the magazine's discussions of the Philippines, and is representative of the discourse of imperialism in its pages. Attendant upon the discourse of imperialism was a veneration for technological progress; the same issue in which Ponci offered his critique of Americans' dependence on technology also featured, for instance, "The Advance of the Trolley," which offered diagrams and photographs of the latest in trolley design and luxury (846-854), as well as "The Impressions of an Aeronaut," in which the popular French scientist Wilfrid de Fonvielle discusses the contributions to meteorology, geography, and health made by advances in ballooning (866-9). Technology and anthropology were also comfortable bedfellows on the magazine's pages: the next month's "The Eclipse of the Sun in Egypt" (1028-35) was part astronomy, part travel essay, and part ethnography, and, like Taft's piece, was accompanied by photographs of Americans formally posed against a backdrop of exotic

natives. It is impossible to ignore the impact that all of this would have had on readers' experience of Ponci's autobiographical narrative, which appears to be, in these discursive contexts, simply evidence of the Filipino's childlike naiveté.

Ponci's autobiographical narrative was one of a great many authored by people from social groups outside of the magazine's middle-class readership to appear on its pages in the early decades of the twentieth century. The narratives created an unruly chorus, often powerfully critical of the social and economic forces that enabled a middle-class way of life. But like Ponci's, all of these narratives were adrift in the flow of discursive currents through which readers created meaning out of magazine contents; undeniably, the strongest of those currents combined to offer readers a positive reflection of their social identity, and served more often than not to tame, contain, or reframe any criticism that the narratives made.

For example, *The Independent* published dozens of autobiographical pieces by immigrants, and the magazine's discursive currents included varied, and often competing, views on the issue of immigration—an issue that, like imperialism, was fraught with anxieties about race and class. The immigrant life story was becoming a very popular form, and autobiographies such as Mary Antin's and Edward Steiner's topped best-seller lists and garnered great critical attention. Like Antin's and Steiner's, some of the narratives published in *The Independent* confirmed the power of American culture and the mythology of the "American Dream"—an agreeable message to an emerging middle class eager to distance itself culturally from the urban slums while maintaining its democratic ideals. The Polish immigrant Sadie Frowne's "The Story of a Sweatshop

Girl” (September 1902), the Italian immigrant Rocco Corresca’s “The Biography of a Bootblack” (December 1902) and Antanas Kaztauskis’ “From Lithuania to the Chicago Stockyards—An Autobiography” (August 1904) all frame their stories in terms of education and methodical hard work—and, like Antin, they measured their success in terms of their assimilation. Frowne’s story, for instance, dedicates a great deal of space to the painstaking listing of earnings and expenses, focusing on her careful frugality rather than the precariousness of life as a shopworker. While she mentions that she is a member of a union and appreciates what the union has done, she quickly qualifies her appreciation with a disavowal of socialism and anarchism. Despite the piece’s title, relatively little time is spent discussing the challenges of her work itself; and all of the story’s emotion is sublimated into descriptions of her all-American courtship by another worker, as it moves toward marriage. Frowne’s narrative thus presents a completely uncritical portrait of the life of an immigrant factory worker—one that challenges neither the bounds of class nor gender, nor the pressures of assimilation.

Such a perspective was well suited to the mood of the country in the early decades of the twentieth century, which saw a shift away from a single-minded focus on immigration restriction to an exultation of America’s capacity to transform the immigrant.¹⁸ Although debate (public and legislative) around immigration continued to rage, the relatively open immigration policies of the pre-World War I 1900s allowed for

¹⁸ For a concise discussion analysis of the public discourse around immigration in this era, see chapter seven of John Higham’s *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (2nd ed. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1988).

an unprecedented surge of immigration, primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe.¹⁹ The magazine ostensibly reflects a liberal stance toward immigration, as an editorial published in December 1905 declared, “The admission of decent laboring men, whether Chinese, Japanese, Irish, Italians or Hotentots, ought to be welcomed from the side whether of political economy or humanity, and we regret the popular obsession on this subject” (1414). And many of the immigrant narratives published in the magazine were critical of the economic and social forces that worked against immigrants in the U.S.—although these criticisms, as I will discuss, tended to appear as small eddies in the magazine’s larger tidal forces of American confidence and self-satisfaction.

Despite its proclaimed editorial stance on the issue of immigration, *The Independent* seems to have done little to quell the “popular obsession,” and staunchly anti-immigrant voices had a significant presence on its pages, as they did in other popular media. Two months after their editorial, for example, in February 1906, the magazine published an article by James Davenport Whelpley, whose just-published book *The Problem of the Immigrant* (1905) was receiving great attention. The editor’s headnote hails Whelpley as “one of our best newspaper and magazine writers, especially on industrial economics and political subjects” (261). In a tenor common not only to *The Independent*, but also to the anti-immigrant discourse of the day generally, Whelpley’s article employs the language of invasion and warfare to describe the arrival of immigrants:

¹⁹ Early exceptions include the continuation of Chinese exclusion, along with the exclusion of anarchists (after 1903).

The country now attempting to control immigration is always on the defensive. However well entrenched [sic] upon its own territory, it must await attack and be content with repulsing the enemy. No victory, however great, can be followed up. One repulse merely invites further effort. In brief, no defeat of the besiegers is final and the attempt of the United States Government [sic] to discriminate in the admission of aliens is a wearisome and unending struggle against the combined forces of the alien army of the world. (261)

He describes the anti-immigrant cause as “fighting in a spirit of self-preservation for ideals which [sic] would soon become hopeless of [sic] achievement if the country was overrun by an indiscriminate horde often recruited from the scarcely human social understrata of the Old World” (261-2). He calls the notion of “maintaining an asylum for the oppressed of all the world”

buncombe and of the political variety. No nation comprising many millions of people can justly maintain an open door for diseased, criminal, pauper or deficient aliens, and all nations should be compelled by international sentiment to carry their own burdens of this description. To dump these people on a foreign shore is insanitary [sic] for the receiver of these objectionable goods, and certainly a criminal evasion of responsibility on the part of the shipper. (261)

Ultimately, Whelpley calls for other countries to create strict emigration policies—to keep the “objectionable goods” from ever leaving the factory, so to speak.²⁰ Such bullish commentaries, by authors who are lauded by the editors as “experts,” certainly muted the

²⁰ Whelpley’s metaphor makes explicit the relationship between consumerism and cultural difference.

political force of the critical immigrant autobiographies, from which the editors generally either withheld commentary, or framed through their introductory notes as quaint curiosities or decorative tales (as in the case of Fomoaley Ponci's narrative)—more like the magazine's works of fiction or other cultural fare than serious commentary. After all, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, mass magazines prided themselves as being purveyors of such fare; original fiction, poetry, reviews, and the like, took up a significant number of pages in each issue, and "local color" was fast becoming high literary fashion.

Nonetheless, the autobiographical sketches do offer a counterpoint to views like Whelpley's. In the very same issue as his essay, for instance, the "objectionable goods" speak for themselves: at the end of the magazine, an autobiographical piece called "The Life Story of a Pushcart Peddler" appears. The peddler's story, while ultimately in praise of the opportunity offered in America, also offers some harsh criticism. He begins his narrative with a charming portrait of his life in Greece before emigrating; enticed by an adventurous brother who has traveled to America, he arrives in New York with almost nothing—not because of his own laziness or misdeeds, but because he has come from an agrarian society where, as he characterizes, families and communities were virtually self-sufficient, growing and making everything that they needed themselves: "We had very little money, and so little use for money that the currency might almost as well have been the iron sort of our remote forefathers" (274). Interestingly, here money becomes a sign of antiquity, not of progress. And while he is not uncritical of life in Greece, he describes, "Narrow as our lives might be considered by Americans, there was plenty to interest us...and considering matters from the standpoint of our wants and needs, we were

certainly prosperous and happy” (275). His life upon arriving in the United States is anything but, however. He describes his confusion upon undertaking work as a pushcart peddler in trying to understand the system of graft through which the police extorted money from immigrant merchants. His ignorance first leads to his being physically brutalized by the police; soon, however, he learns that peddlers must pay to work the “good places” in the city:

Push cart peddlers who pay the police make \$500 to \$1,000 a year clear of board and all expenses, and actually save that amount in the bank; those who don't pay the police make from \$200 to \$300 a year. All the men in the good places pay the police... .A policeman collects regularly, and we don't know what he does with the money, but, of course, we suspect. The captain passes by and he must know; the sergeant comes along and he must know. (277)

The portrait he paints of the immigrants themselves stands in direct opposition to Whelpley's; he says “The Greeks are almost all doing well; there are no beggars and no drunkards among them, and the worst vice they have is gambling” (278); moreover, he portrays the pushcart peddler's work as imbued with a sense of social consciousness, and offering something vital: “When the push cart men finish selling dear to the people with plenty of money they go and sell cheap to the poor in the evenings. Plenty of fruit is a fine thing for [their] health” (278).

The peddler's success, and his contribution to society, happens *despite* the American “way of life”: graft, as embodied by the corrupt police. The author—about whom we learn nothing from the editor but that he gave his story through an interpreter—

offers a portrait of his motivations, desires, and capacities that is in stark contrast to Whelpley's diatribe. And certainly, this juxtaposition was not an accident on the part of the editors. But if the pushcart peddler's story was intended to be a defense in response to Whelpley, that defense is undercut by the piece's burial deep within the magazine, by the anonymity of the author, and by the lack of any editorial commentary.

Nonetheless, like the Greek peddler's, many others among the narratives do offer powerfully critical perspectives on life in America. Some of the most damning portraits come from the narratives of those whose work brought them in contact with the upper classes: Agnes M. in "The True Life Story of a German Nurse Girl (September 1903), Amelia des Moulins in "The French Dressmaker's Life Story" (April 1904), and the anonymous author of "The Confessions of a Japanese Servant" (September 1905), all criticize the concentration of wealth in America and the behavior of the upper-class "aristocracy" in a supposedly democratic nation. As with Ponci's narrative, however, the magazine's editorial apparatus often frames these stories in a racist manner that tames their criticism by presenting them as quaint curiosities. For instance, the story of "A Japanese Servant" is introduced thusly:

Those who have wondered what was behind the uniform politeness and unreadable face of a Japanese servant will be interested in this very frank confession of one...No alterations whatever have been made in the manuscript for his occasional use of Japanese idioms and of bookish English makes his narrative all the more personal and naïve. (159)

The piece thus stands in as a transparent window onto what is otherwise masked by the naturally “unreadable” Japanese face; and, as in Ponci’s narrative, his imperfect English offers assurance of both the narrative’s authenticity and the readers’ superiority. Nonetheless, the narrator offers some harsh criticisms of class stratification in America and the treatment of the underclasses by the wealthy. He describes the racism that keeps him from being able to find any work other than domestic servitude—the demands of which make it all but impossible for him to attend school, which he says had been his primary goal in immigrating. He narrates a series of miserable employment situations, from his first position as a cook’s assistant for a woman who in essence held him hostage by withholding his wages, to his position as a butler for a haughty, wealthy New York family whose obsession with their family lineage and stature deeply disappoints him: “Before I came to this country I have told my uncle the boast of ancestor is a remnant notion of Feudalism...I thought I rather worship Franklin and Emerson. Now I must say that human nature is everywhere just same” (664). The narrator, quite literally trapped in a script not entirely of his own making, laments the hollowness of the promise of the American “self-made man.”

Perhaps surprisingly, some of the criticisms that narratives such as the Japanese servant’s make actually sit comfortably with the magazine’s general stance on issues of class—particularly, its ambivalence toward the very wealthy. Certainly, the attainment of wealth is presented as a laudable aim and part of the American dream, and readers’ fantasies of upward mobility are clearly mirrored throughout the magazine: for one, no one could ignore the magazine’s advertisements, which promised readers access to a life

more luxurious, more refined, more modern, more stylish, more cultured through the purchase of material goods (see Fig. 2).

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Fig. 2. A sample of advertisements from the December 1906 issue of *The Independent* that appeal to readers' desire for luxury, elegance, exclusivity, leisure, and culture.

And the reviews and commentaries focusing on theatrical and musical productions of the world's cultural centers, while discussing events that the vast majority of the magazine's readers would never have the opportunity to attend, nonetheless gave them access to the cultural conversations of the leisure class. Furthermore, the magazine regularly printed photographs, biographies, and commentaries on the era's notable tycoons, like Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Morgan, and a great deal of coverage was given to their philanthropic gifts. Particular praise was given to those captains of industry who could be held up for their fair dealings or honesty in accumulating their wealth (something that was harder and harder to do in the era of Ida Tarbell and antitrust suits)—like Marshall Field, who, according to a July 1906 *Independent* editorial published upon his death, “beginning with nothing but his brains and his integrity, had accumulated a fortune in a clean and honest way” (228). But criticisms of the *misdeeds* of the wealthy were not uncommon, particularly of those whose wealth was inherited; as an editorial called “Parasites of Society”—published just five months prior to the celebration of Marshall Field's financial success—noted of this group:

Out of such come the vulgar parades and the moral scandals of Society. They are the Smart Set, the rich fools, who have no business but to waste time and money with shows and dissipation. They are themselves not real society, but its parasites, of no service to true society, but a shame and disgrace to it, a venomous

and corrupting sore to the company to which they are attached. They are in the public prints, their fads and fancies, their Lucullus dinners and their lavish expenditures, and their amours and liaisons are in the gossip of the street or the ballroom. (288)

And even though the magazine frequently published admiring glimpses into the lives of the wealthy, like the July 1903 article “Summer Life in Luxurious Adirondack Camps,” which featured a photo spread of the sumptuous summer “cottage” of the Vanderbilt family, or the December 1905 article “Ward McAllister on Golden Weddings,” which featured party-planning advice from “the greatest genius America has produced for planning social functions” of the wealthy, the moneyed life was also frequently presented as morally dubious. A January 1903 essay summed this up: “Greater wealth and greater luxury are now the special danger to the high ideals of life” (35). So the kinds of criticisms made in “Confessions of a Japanese Servant” and other such narratives ultimately served to bolster a middle-class image of its moral superiority to the wealthy, despite the fact that much of what magazines offered to middle-class readers mirrored their fantasies of upward mobility.

The magazine reflects a similar ambivalence toward the working class: cautiously liberal on labor issues, *The Independent* gave a fair amount of coverage to strikes and other union activities, and was generally sympathetic to the cause of workers’ rights. And some of the magazine’s autobiographical narratives reflect such a stance; for instance, “The Life of a Hungarian Peon” (September 1907) describes the coercion and exploitation of new immigrants by the lumber industry, and, with a much more critical

tone than that of Sadie Frowne's narrative published three years earlier, Rose Schneiderman's "A Cap Maker's Story" (April 1905) offers a portrait of the terrible working conditions of urban sweatshops. Given her rising stature within the labor movement, the inclusion of Schneiderman's narrative, which briefly discusses her family and childhood but focuses primarily on her early union involvement and organizing activities, is particularly indicative of the attitude toward the cause of labor. Nonetheless, there were limits to this sympathy, and those limits were generally reached in any discussion of socialism: as one editorial framed the advocates of socialism, "Hatred of the rich, including all who profit by the existing social order, is stronger than love of the oppressed. We do not like to say it...but the fact can hardly be denied or concealed, that to many of its most fanatical disciples socialism is a religion of hate" (398). Another editorial remarking on the worldwide "drift toward socialism" and the "growing political interest of organized labor" in the U.S. notes, "Naturally, to cautious minds these developments are disquieting, while to the capitalistic class they seem menacing" (289). Clearly addressing the *Independent's* middle-class readers as those "cautious minds"—sensible, with a belief democratic ideals, but ultimately politically conservative—the essay goes on to criticize the attitudes of the "capitalistic class" for the possibility that the U.S. could "drift blindly on into a *régime* of purely proletarian socialism" (290).

This skepticism of socialism and latent fear of revolution was coupled with criticism of the character of the urban poor—a criticism that undercut the power of narratives like Schneiderman's and others that portrayed life in the slums, by suggesting that such poverty was a natural condition. This criticism was often couched in a

Progressive-era discourse of reform which, like the discourse of imperialism, was clearly linked to a belief in progress and a fundamental faith in the soundness of the American system and way of life. *The Independent*, like many other popular magazines in the early decades of the twentieth century, embraced the muckraking mode of journalism; and following the model of Jacob Riis, the inner-city tenement was a common target for investigation. The October 1905 issue, for example, featured journalist Julius Wilcox's "The Greatest Problem of Great Cities," exposing in words and in photographs "the under-world of the tenements." Like Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, the reform spirit of *The Independent* article is at times undercut by its derogatory generalizations that belie a certain level of ambivalence about the inherent worth of the tenement inhabitants and fear of the unruly potential of the underclasses: Wilcox blames some of the conditions on "the wandering character of the tenement class," noting, "They are in part ignorance [sic] of any alternative; in part the disposition of the immigrant to squat where he lands and to move up against his own kind where he finds them; in part a gregariousness which seems conquerable with great difficulty...[their] spots have been nests of ignorance, of disease, of socialism and anarchy; they have been hopelessly impenetrable by democracy. Nothing could be done for them but to break them up" (906).

A piece similar in tone appeared just two months later, titled "The Tenement House Family," by Elsa G. Herzfeld who, according to the editors "has just completed an exhaustive investigation of tenement house families....We were so struck by the monograph, that we asked her to give this composite photograph" (1520). Herzfeld opens her essay, "A study of the tenement house family will at once suggest a close

resemblance between primitive and tenement house man...in the inefficiency, lack of initiative, naïve animistic habits of thought, and a sense of preternatural interference at a time of good or evil fortune” (1520). The four-page description characterizes the social lives, religious habits, and homes of the “average” tenement family, with little attention given to cultural specificity (here, for example, is one of the more culturally sensitive passages of the essay, discussing tenement-dwellers’ religious beliefs): “Great emphasis is laid upon an early christening in the Catholic home, as an unbaptized child will die much more easily. In case of sudden death any one may rescue the child from the Evil One. The warnings of approaching death are many. The belief in the Banshee is widespread among the Irish residents. Ghosts are likely to deceive persons by deceptive allurements. Dreams speak true” [1521]). Herzfeld’s descriptions of the rudeness of the tenement homes themselves, as reflections of their inhabitants, are particularly pointed; an editorial on American progress in the same issue points to the middle-class home, by contrast, as the pinnacle of civilization (ironically made possible by the cheap goods produced by working-class labor): “Today there is no one thing so perfect as the common man’s house. Its spring-bed has more comfort than the state couches of Louis le Grande. Baseburners and furnaces keep him warm. A dozen books cost the price of a quarter of lamb or a roast of beef. Ten square yards of news, printed in clear type, come to his door each morning for two cents” (1547).

The Progressive-era zeitgeist that fueled such exposés rendered the tenement inhabitants nameless statistics; and, like so many of the magazine’s discursive currents, was thus in interesting tension with the many autobiographical narratives that the

magazine published by people outside of the magazine's middle-class readership. At its root, this tension was a result of the fact that the magazine was attempting to navigate the nuances of a developing middle-class identity: one that valued wealth at least ostensibly as the product of hard work and individual initiative, while not questioning its basis in an economic system grounded on inequality; one that held to the democratic ideals of freedom and equality while working strenuously to distance itself culturally from immigrants and the urban poor; and one that projected confidence in the soundness of the American way of life and the inevitability of American progress. As a particularly potent vehicle for the ideology of selfhood, autobiography played a significant role in these negotiations, as they played out on the magazine's pages.

To be sure, the inclusion of the kinds of autobiographical narratives discussed signals a burgeoning modernist multiculturalism that, while very different from the multiculturalism of the turn of the twenty-first century, nonetheless shares its impulse to "celebrate" (and contain) difference through representative figures. The narratives offered readers what appeared to be unobstructed glimpses into the lives of given social groups; and this apparent function of autobiography may have been at the root of what magazine editors correctly perceived as readers' real interest in autobiographical writing. But readers' experience of the narratives was inevitably shaped by the nature of the venue in which they were published: magazines, as a powerful new medium, appealed to readers by offering them a positive image of themselves—in part, by using the autobiographical narratives to differentiate their readers from the narratives' poor, foreign, or non-white authors. The narratives were overwritten by the larger cultural

scripts that the magazine offered, to such a degree that for many readers, their criticisms must have been unintelligible. As Rebecca Harding Davis said in a review that appeared in *The Independent* after the autobiographical narratives were published as a collection: “There is in not a single one of these histories of life, a word of acknowledgment or gratitude to the country which gave them the chance and the success. Why is this? Was there anything lacking in the gift?” (964)

The magazine’s content demonstrated a shift in what it meant to be “cultured.” Twentieth-century magazines offered access to a storehouse of culture, not only in the Arnoldian sense of traditional “high culture,” but also in the Boasian sense of cultures as multiple and discreet. Further, as advertisements came to be increasingly central to magazines’ production model (and therefore more central on their pages) and readers were increasingly hailed as consumers, there was a leveling effect on the contents of magazines that rendered everything on its pages cultural products for consumption. Thus, through the autobiographical narratives they published, life stories themselves became commodities for consumption, and the problematic function of autobiography as offering access to cultural difference against which readers could define themselves was enhanced. In the next chapter, I examine another venue for the circulation of autobiography in the early twentieth century: best-selling books. Specifically, I explore what is demonstrated about the cultural function of autobiography through an examination of the scandals that surrounded three “fake” autobiographies.

Chapter 2

Passing as Autobiography/Autobiographies of Passing

In early 2008, a division of Penguin Books published Margaret B. Jones' *Love and Consequences: A Memoir of Hope and Survival*, about her childhood in South Central Los Angeles. Jones, half Native American, half white, was placed in the foster care system after being sexually abused at home, grew up among gang members and eventually joined their ranks, running drugs and guns for the Bloods. Her insider's view of the streets during the height of the crack epidemic received resounding praise: the *New York Times* ran a glowing review (Kakutani) as well as a feature piece in the "Home and Garden" section (Read); a national NPR call-in show ran an hour-long interview and discussion with Jones ("Love and Consequences' in South Central LA"), along with several other shows that ran shorter features; and myriad other publications and media outlets echoed their acclaim. Jones' story, told in "colorful, streetwise argot" with "an anthropologist's eye for social rituals and routines" (Kakutani), clearly held great fascination for critics and for the reading public.

The acclaim was short-lived, however. Just days later, Jones' story was exposed (by her sister) as a fake. Jones was in fact not Native American; she was never abused and was not raised in foster care; and the closest she came to gangland was working with several ex-gang members in a community outreach program. Margaret B. Jones was

actually Margaret Seltzer, a white woman raised by her biological parents in affluent Sherman Oaks, California. (Rich) The publisher immediately pulled all copies of the book, and the same media outlets who just days earlier wrote with glowing praise for her fascinating, poignant, authentic story leapt to express their outrage.

Seltzer is not, of course, the only memoirist in recent times to be so exposed—such scandals have routinely provoked outrage in the reading public, perhaps of most note recently James Frey, J.T. LeRoy and Greg Mortenson.²¹ Public discussion of these fakes has centered primarily on the foibles of the contemporary publishing industry. The criticisms to which these situations most often give rise—of unscrupulous publishers’ failure to fact-check, of their uncritical embrace of anything that can be marketed as memoir—are usually yoked to portraits of an industry in decline, desperate to maintain its foothold in a new-media-saturated world.

But regardless of the current sustainability of the book publishing industry, fake memoirs are not simply a byproduct of contemporary conditions. Rather, they have a long and interesting history. And while every era has seen its own fakes, borne of a unique cultural moment with its own aesthetic, social, and economic pressures, when

²¹ Frey’s 2003 memoir *A Million Little Pieces* created perhaps the most talked-about scandal, as it had been chosen for the Oprah book club, and Oprah subsequently gave Frey and his publisher a very public thrashing on her show for his exaggerations and misrepresentations regarding his drug addiction and criminal history; LeRoy was an identity created by the writer Laura Albert, who wrote several books supposedly based on LeRoy’s childhood history of prostitution, drug addiction, and homelessness, and who was eventually exposed in 2005 because of inconsistencies in statements made by her friend who “played” LeRoy for interviews and book signings; and most recently, incidents from Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea* (2006), his mega-hit about building schools in Afghanistan, have been questioned—including his story of being kidnapped by the Taliban for eight days—particularly in light of his use of the book as a promotional tool for his non-profit organization, the Central Asia Institute.

viewed over time they constitute a phenomenon that reveals a great deal about the social functions of autobiographical writing. That is, we can locate the social conventions and readerly expectations surrounding autobiographical writing in part because we can observe the consequences when those conventions or expectations are violated. Such “scandals” create a space to explore larger questions: what desires or anxieties does memoir generate or quell for readers? How are the reading practices surrounding memoir mediated by the relative identities of reader and author? And how do writers, clearly aware of these relationships, use them—whether consciously or not?

I trace here a particular genealogy within the history of “fakes,” of which Seltzer’s text can be seen as a cousin: novels that perform what I call “autobiographical passing”—using the generic conventions of traditional autobiography as a device to explore and manipulate the narrative construction of identity. I examine early twentieth-century works by James Weldon Johnson, Samuel Orntiz, and Edith Eaton—all of whom wrote fictional texts that purported to be autobiographies and whose subjects pass between racial, gender and class categories. I argue that the publication and reception histories of these mock autobiographies reveal readers’ expectations about both genre and identity: writers from outside of the cultural mainstream who traded on the popular currency of autobiography frequently encountered the limits of what readers are willing to accept as a rendition of a “real” life.²²

²² Ironically, Seltzer’s example demonstrates the inverse proposition: readers were all too willing to accept the ‘truth’ of her story, which (as some critics have noted in retrospect) traffics heavily in stereotypical, pop-cultural images of urban life.

My slippage between terms here—from “fake” to “mock”—is not accidental. Rather, I want to highlight the historical contingency of literary value. A text that may be condemned as a fake in one era, fraudulently attempting to pass itself off as an autobiography, may come to be valued much differently in another era. As different facts about its publication history or the author’s designs fade into or out of historical memory, or as critical fashion directs attention toward certain kinds of texts or certain features of texts, the moralizing edge inherent in the moniker “fake” is blunted. James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, for example—published in 1927 as a work of fiction—has, for most of its life since, been lauded as one of the most important works of the Harlem Renaissance. Critics have until recently paid little attention to the fact that the text was, by design, a “fake”: when he published it originally in 1912, Johnson intended for readers to take it as an actual autobiography.²³

Moreover, I introduce the term “mock” autobiography because it contains useful nuances that are lost with the term “fake.”²⁴ In one sense, the word “mock” simply means a copy, “something which deceptively resembles something else; an imitation, counterfeit, sham” (*OED*). This definition—the most akin to “fake”—suggests that such a text is modeled after autobiography, and presents itself as autobiography, but without disparagement. In another sense, however, “mock” connotes a value judgment, implying

²³ Obviously, the political stakes are much different for Johnson’s text than for Seltzer’s, and I do not intend to equate them; what I do intend is to demonstrate that those stakes are never transparent, and further, that regardless of those stakes, both examples can tell us something about readerly expectations regarding genre and authorial identity.

²⁴ Timothy Dow Adams similarly glosses the definition of “mock” in his article “The Contemporary American Mock-Autobiography” (*Clio* 8 [1979]: 417-28).

“a derisive or contemptuous act or utterance,” holding something up to scorn or ridicule. We might, then, think of the mock autobiography as mocking the conventions of the autobiographical genre—or, perhaps more broadly, mocking the genre’s conventionality (whether the reading public is in on the joke or no). These definitions are both closely linked to a third sense in which we can read “mock”: as a literary prefix. As in the mock-heroic or mock epic, which parody epic literature by replacing grandiose subject matter and heroic characters with the trivial and pathetic, the mock autobiography can be seen as a caricature of the classical definition of autobiography as the narrative of a worthy man looking back over his historically significant life.

Under this classical definition, perhaps best encapsulated by the early autobiography critic Georges Gusdorf, autobiography “expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures” (29); it allows man to “take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time” (35). But as Sidonie Smith argues, the “self” so often invoked in such self-expressive theories of autobiography

is not a noun, a thing-in-itself, waiting to be materialized through the text. There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. Nor is the autobiographical self expressive in the sense that it is the manifestation of an interiority that is somehow ontologically whole, seamless, and “true.” For the self is not a documentary repository of all experiential history running uninterruptedly from infancy to the contemporary moment, capacious,

current, and accessible. The very sense of self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss to consciousness of fragments of experiential history. (“Resisting” 108)

The seamless self which appears to be the *origin* of autobiographical narration under Gusdorf’s definition is ultimately an *effect* of that narration. In an extreme sense, mock autobiographies by their nature reveal this to be so—the self making the claim of authorship is pure narrative effect. If classical autobiography bolsters the romance of the bourgeois individual, then, mock autobiographies can be seen as undermining the same.

The fictional narrators of these three mock autobiographies inhabit positions very different (socio-culturally and metaphysically) from Gusdorf’s privileged “I.” The texts were produced and circulated an early-twentieth-century milieu where their narrators’ experiences of self did not square neatly with existing structures of understanding—all three challenged the idea that identity categories are stable and hierarchical and therefore presented an uncomfortably disorienting social vision to mainstream reading audiences. But if these authors were mocking classical autobiography from *outside of* the tradition, their texts were also positioned squarely *within* other traditions of autobiographical writing. By the early twentieth century, autobiography had become a well-established vehicle for the voices of marginalized peoples in the United States. Slave narratives and immigrant life stories, for instance, were highly popular and had proved to be commercially viable for publishers aiming at mass-market audiences. Such works also often served as significant political tools for reform, the former for abolitionists and rights activists arguing for the common humanity of African Americans, and the latter for

anti-nativist activists working against restrictive immigration laws and for social support for new immigrants. Both the political and financial capital of such works traded on their perceived authenticity—readers were titillated by literary encounters with “real” lives of people from groups with whom they had little actual contact.

Aside from their explicit political utility, as I argued in chapter one, autobiography played a unique role for middle-class readers amidst the epistemological instability of the early twentieth century, by offering access to apparently authentic cultural difference through and against which readers could define themselves. This created unique conditions for the reception of autobiographical texts: clearly, changing conceptions of racialized and gendered identity and national belonging impact which voices are authorized to speak and to whom they can be made intelligible. But writers (and publishers) were keenly aware of the peculiar cultural currency of autobiography in the modernist-multicultural moment, and they utilized the form to intriguing ends. The three mock autobiographies I examine, whose subjects “pass” between identity categories, use the conventions of the form to manipulate conventional understandings of race, class, and gender. The theme of passing that each text takes up suggests another way to think about the mock autobiography: as a text that “passes.” These texts provide a unique perspective on the relationship between genre and identity, and the challenges they presented to their audiences’ expectations is reflected in the reception histories of all of the works.

Of the many texts that could be considered to perform “autobiographical passing,”²⁵ I focus on Eaton’s, Johnson’s, and Ornitz’s mock autobiographies for several reasons. First, their narrators come from a broad spectrum of socio-cultural locations, and their voices vary widely in style and tone; and while I am obviously not attempting a comprehensive survey, taken together they demonstrate how autobiography could serve as both a tool and a trap for a range of writers. Second, all three were originally published anonymously, making them unique examples of the already vexed politics of passing and of autobiographical authorship, as I will discuss. The publication histories of each of these works serve to highlight how identity—both generic and authorial—is implicated in questions of value, in the authors’ own time and in ours.

Passing as Autobiography

The past two decades have seen the growth of a fascinating discussion of literary representations of passing, and before I examine the implications for these specific texts’ investment in passing (both generically and thematically), I want to explore more generally the politics of passing as it has been variously theorized. My cursory gloss over this perhaps familiar territory is in service of demonstrating, as I will discuss, its specific resonance with the politics of autobiographical authorship. Elaine Ginsberg notes:

The genealogy of the term *passing* in American history associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent

²⁵ Laura Browder’s *Slippery Characters* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000) provides a fairly extensive compilation of such titles, in the context of the history of “ethnic impersonation.”

“white” identity by an individual culturally or legally defined as “Negro” or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry. As the term implies, such an individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary—indeed, *trespassed*—to assume a new identity. (2-3)

The term has since been applied to the disguise of other elements of identity that are presumed to be “essential,” such as ethnicity and gender. As Giulia Fabi points out, “The passer embodies the reality of cultural difference by containing dichotomies: although his or her liminality is contingent on the existence of recognizably distinct groups, it also turns what was conceived of as a *natural* opposition into a *societal* one” (5, my emphasis).

On the most basic level, then, passing subverts the intimate relationship between visibility and knowledge that runs so deep in Western culture: if visibility is a trap, as Michel Foucault says, that fixes subjects through the logic of hierarchical categorization,²⁶ then passing subverts those very logics. It disrupts the identity categories on which systems of social recognition and cultural intelligibility are constructed and maintained, both blurring the carefully marked lines of race, gender, ethnicity, and class, and demonstrating how they are mutually constitutive (Butler 168). If the passer can elide categorization by sliding from one identity to another, then ultimately she calls into question the notion of any “authentic” identity, and instead evidences the performative and contingent aspects of identity. Furthermore, despite its potential danger, passing also has the potential to be intensely pleasurable and

²⁶ See Part 3, Chapter 3 of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (2nd ed. New York: Vintage, 1995).

empowering for the passer: inherently playful, it opens up the space for creative self-determination and agency and allows for experimentation with many kinds of identities (Ginsberg 16).

Of course, successful passing requires that its disruptions and subversions remain hidden; but even if we are unwilling to grant that passing is actively subversive, it can no doubt be seen as a form of passive resistance. The passer can cross social or economic boundaries that exclude or oppress, and access the rights and privileges accorded to certain identities. Thus it serves as resistance against the social invisibility that is so often (and ironically) the experience of the visibly marked or “minoritized,” or against other very real physical or emotional dangers. Ultimately, then, passing can be seen as an attempt to control the process of signification, the means through which others “read,” and therefore respond to, one’s identity: passing provides a means of self-protection from hostile or indifferent readings.

But this control is gained at a price: the successful passer relies on his ability to manipulate stereotypes, to trade in the very essentialist identities from whose trap he seeks to escape. Furthermore, passing risks making invisible and further devaluing those identities out of which subjects pass. Ultimately, then, passing can be seen to hold social hierarchies in place. What may be liberatory for an individual may, in a larger context, prove to be a deeply conservative force.²⁷

²⁷ Gayle Wald offers a useful overview of the literary-critical debates that have developed around narratives of passing, showing how critics have generally followed one of these two strands of thought: the passing figure is read as either an instrument of ideological critique or as a reiteration of normative scripts of identity (30-35). Like Wald, I argue that the deployment of passing as a narrative trope should not be ascribed with an

These two faces of passing turn on the issue of secrecy: passing's destabilizing nature is only recognizable if the passer is revealed. Ironically, passing becomes politically suggestive only through its failure. Similarly, successful passing, the complete disruption of social boundaries or identity categories, requires that on the surface, those very boundaries and categories are never challenged. It would seem, then, that the necessity of keeping the secret means that the havoc the passer wreaks on oppressive or exclusionary ways of maintaining identity-based hierarchies can be understood only by him. Of course, secrecy is not necessarily an all-or-nothing proposition, and the authors I examine here, for example, complicate this already vexed politics of epistemology by revealing their supposed passing, but doing so anonymously.

Whether known only to the passer or to the world around him, passing is ultimately about the ability to construct a readable narrative of self. As Gayle Wald notes, "passing entails...not transcendence, but rather struggles for control over representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied appearances" (6). So while what is at stake in the ability to construct a convincing narrative of self is dependent on the socio-cultural location of the narrator, passing reveals identity itself to be a form of storytelling. Passing thus has a very suggestive connection to autobiography, as a construction of self through text. And in many ways, autobiography shares passing's two-faced nature, both its destabilizing and conservative elements: it opens up space for experimentation with the process of self-definition, while at the same time relying for its generic legitimacy on some standard of documentary truth—a

inherent political value, but can more productively be seen as an invitation to interrogate the politics of identity and authorship.

standard against which, as I note, the author or text is always potentially guilty of trespass in the eyes of a reading public with entrenched ways of understanding what defines a legitimate identity.

So what, then, does it mean for texts to pass as autobiography, given autobiography's "radical unreliability" as a genre? What readerly expectations do such passings trade on, and on what do their successful performance rely? What meanings get lost when a text passes that are revealed when it is exposed? What risks and benefits come with that exposure? Such questions had very real implications for authors and for texts that used autobiography as a means to explore the construction of identities through narrative—identities that may not always have rung "true" with the reading public. I use the works I examine here as case studies to examine the history of this readership, to explore the significance of the autobiographical to the modernist multiculturalism of the early twentieth century.

The Ex-Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

"I wrote the book to be taken as a true story....In it all, the absolute secrecy of the authorship must be maintained. As soon as it is known that the author is a colored man who could not be the character in the book, interest in it will fall. There must always be in the reader's mind the thought that, at least, it may be true" (qtd in Goldsby 257).

James Weldon Johnson's expectations for his *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, here expressed in a letter to his wife Grace after the book's initial publication in 1912, were clear. He recognized that the interest of the book lay in its approximation to real life—

the reading public had a hunger for authentic otherness, and his story promised a provocative portrait of the African-American cultural landscape. But something went awry in Johnson's calculations; despite his success in maintaining the book's autobiographical ruse, it garnered very little attention and went quickly out of print.

Given its heralded place in the canon of African-American *fiction*, this publication history has largely been ignored; but to read *Ex-Colored Man* through the lens of its initial 1912 publication, placing it within a history of mock autobiographies, troubles any simplistic understanding of its authorship and reception. Johnson's determination to publish the novel as an autobiography and maintain its identity as such speaks to his understanding of the racial politics of the literary world into which he was writing; the autobiography's utter failure speaks to the ways Johnson's text challenged his audience—both their expectations for autobiography and their understandings of racialized identity. *Ex-Colored Man*, which tells the story of a light-skinned African-American musician who decides to give up his musical career to permanently pass as white, challenged common earlier depictions of mulattos as somehow intrinsically corrupt or essentially degenerate²⁸; however flawed a character, his narrator is clearly a victim of a system of rigidly-defined racial categories, and one whose choices challenge the ideology on which those categories are based.

Johnson was clearly sensitive to the dynamics among authors, texts, and readers, and this played a major role in the decisions he made regarding *Ex-Colored Man*. Jacqueline Goldsby has documented the lengths to which Johnson went to maintain his

²⁸ For a discussion of nineteenth-century representations of mulattoes, see Fabi's introduction to *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*.

anonymity for the 1912 publication; specifically, she argues that it was the major factor in Johnson's choice of the small firm Sherman, French, and Company as publisher. As a poet, musician, and writer of several Broadway hits, Johnson had already gained a fair amount of fame within African-American cultural circles, and while he thus had access to the top black-owned firms, he worried that such a relationship would make the secret of his authorship a difficult one to keep. But the only African-American writers who had been published by mainstream firms were Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt (with Houghton Mifflin and Dodd Mead, respectively). Among the large, white-owned firms, then, the publication of black writers was virtually unprecedented, and the voice of Johnson's ambivalent, alienated narrator most certainly did not fit the mold of the black folk vernacular that gave Dunbar and Chesnutt's work its "local color" appeal. Given his limited choices, Johnson chose what he came to characterize, after much frustration with their lackadaisical handling of the book, as a "job printer for authors" (qtd in Goldsby 252); Sherman, French was willing to publish Johnson (giving him access to a white audience) and to respect his confidentiality, but was less willing to invest in any active marketing. By all accounts, the book went nowhere.

While Goldsby's investigation of the circumstances surrounding the 1912 publication provides invaluable insight into the publishing conditions facing African-American authors in the pre-Harlem Renaissance era, she leaves open the question of *why* anonymity was so important to Johnson. Why was keeping up the ruse of the text's autobiographical veracity significant enough to Johnson that it merited his choice of a smaller, less enthusiastic publisher? First, Johnson was well aware of the challenges he

would face in even reaching an audience with a work of fiction at that time. Looking back over the era in a 1928 essay titled “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” Johnson notes: “The line of American Negro authors runs back for a hundred and fifty years....But in all these generations down to within the past six years only seven or eight of the hundreds have ever been heard of by the general American public or even by the specialists in American literature” (378). By claiming the status of autobiography for his book, Johnson gave it a much more auspicious lineage than that of African-American fiction.

While African-American fiction at the time of *Ex-Colored Man*’s publication remained virtually invisible to the mainstream reading public, African-American autobiography, in the form of the slave narrative, had a popular readership dating back to the eighteenth century.²⁹ By the early 1900’s, hundreds of slave narratives had been published in the United States, many in multiple editions. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, for example, went through 36 editions in as many years;³⁰ the

²⁹ For the history of slave narratives in the U.S., see (among others) Marion Starling (*The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*, 2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1988); Frances Smith Foster (*Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*, 2nd ed. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994); Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates (*The Slave’s Narrative*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985); Stephen Butterfield (*Black Autobiography*, Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1974); and Sidonie Smith (*Where I’m Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1974.)

³⁰ Scholars and readers have recently questioned the authenticity of Equiano’s now canonized narrative. Vincent Carretta’s *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (2007), which challenges the story of Equiano’s birth and childhood in Africa, has inspired an energized debate about the stakes and definition of autobiographical truth—not just among scholars (see, for instance, his exchange with Paul Lovejoy in the journal

Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery had already gone through ten editions by 1856; Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative went through seven editions in four years; William Wells Brown's, four in just its first year.³¹ Slave narratives were popular in part because of their didactic elements; their frequent portrayal of religious conversions as well as scenes from Southern life gave slave narratives a spiritual and ethnographic interest for many readers. Furthermore, as Frances Foster argues, the guise of educational value couched the narratives' sensational elements: they were the "pious pornography of their day, replete with horrific tales of whippings, sexual assaults, and explicit brutality" (20). Like other ethnic autobiographies, they offered a white reading public an apparent glimpse into the lives of its "exotic" and mysterious "others."

While autobiography proved to be a useful tool for the abolitionist movement—slave narratives were sometimes published, and often circulated and publicized, by abolitionist and rights groups—as implicit (and sometimes explicit) arguments for the humanity of African Americans,³² it also became in many publishers and readers' minds the only legible model for authentic black authorship. The autobiographical was, for Johnson, a way to gain access to a vastly broader tradition of publication and readership than that of African-American fiction. And indeed, as many critics have noted, *Ex-Colored Man* gestures frequently toward the conventions, images, and language common

Slavery and Abolition), but also among non-scholarly readers (as evidenced, for instance, by the discussion among reviewers of Carretta's book on Amazon.com).

³¹ Publication statistics come from Foster (22-3) and Starling (107-22).

³² See Foster (17-20)

to slave narratives: Robert Stepto, Lucinda MacKethan, Valerie Smith, and Robert Goellnicht have all pointed to the (often ironic) relationships Johnson creates in his text to this rhetorical tradition.

While Johnson's text traded on the currency of African-American autobiography, his ambiguous, ambivalent take on racialized identity undercut the potential of that appeal. Rather than one that confirmed prevailing understandings of black identity and culture, the reality that Johnson portrayed rendered the color line meaningless, and demonstrated the possibility (indeed, probability) that passing was a common phenomenon and that blacks lived undetected amid white society. His depiction was a challenge to the very notion of authenticity, and to prevailing understandings of racial identity as fixed and immutable. And many reviews of the book, from both mainstream and African-American publications, reflect discomfort with this challenge. While white reviewers noted an ethnographic interest in observing "the inner life of the Negro," as the book's preface put it—scenes of gambling, cakewalking, jazz and ragtime performances, and racial violence were enjoyably titillating—many thought that the work manipulated readers into "ignoring the dangers of race amalgamation"; and Southern reviewers particularly were less willing to believe in the truth of the narrator's successful passing (Goldsby 257). Furthermore, many black reviewers decried the book's ambivalent stance toward racial uplift and portrayal of "low-class" and "criminal" elements, in several cases comparing it unfavorably with the "constructive optimism" and focus on self-improvement of Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*.³³

³³ From the *New York Age* and the *Springfield Republican*, as quoted in Goldsby, p. 258.

While he never mentions the response to *Ex-Colored Man* specifically, Johnson describes his frustration with these kinds of critiques in “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” where he characterizes the “double audience” of blacks and whites as a “two-horned dilemma” on which the African-American writer is impaled. Both groups, he claims, have “some firm opinions as to what the Negro is, and consequently some pretty well fixed ideas as to what should be written about him, and how” (379). Anything other than a portrayal of blacks as either simple and docile, or vengeful and savage, would be “straining the credulity of white America beyond the breaking point” (379); and given their precarious social position, black readers rail against the portrayal of “anything but their best points,” and are likely to accuse those who do of “being the prostitute [sic] of his talent and a betrayer of his race” (381). Written in the months following the novel’s second (and ultimately vastly more successful) publication, Johnson seems to be reliving the sting of *Ex-Colored Man*’s original failure.

Troubling Reading in *Ex-Colored Man*

How to account for the book’s failure in 1912, when African-American autobiography had already proven so immensely popular, and the reading public was hungry for authentic cultural difference? Why did *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* make for such troubling reading? I propose that it is precisely because of the way in which the text presents reading as a troubling act. The narrator’s glaring unreliability lies in sharp contrast to the earnest tone conventional in many earlier African-American autobiographies, and defies the logic that gave ethnic autobiographies their appeal as

transparent windows onto otherness—the narrator’s account cannot be taken simply at face value. The text requires a more nuanced approach to reading black cultural products, and also race more generally. The narrator’s passing blurs the lines of racial demarcation and challenges the stability of “whiteness,” and furthermore, his estrangement from and exploitation of black culture undermine the notion of an authentic and inherent “blackness.”

In a convention standard to slave narratives, Johnson’s text opens with a preface testifying to the text’s authenticity, authoritatively signed “THE PUBLISHERS”—although in fact, as Donald Goellnicht has shown, it was dictated to them almost verbatim in a letter from Johnson (19). The preface encapsulates the ironic stance toward racialized identity that Johnson cultivates throughout the text. Written in a quasi-ethnographic register, it promises a “vivid and startlingly new picture of conditions,” drawn in a “dispassionate, though sympathetic manner” (vii). Clearly aimed at a white audience, it claims that the book will offer “a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire [negro] race” (vii). The voyeuristic tone of the language becomes increasingly insistent, promising a “bird’s-eye view,” and a “glimpse behind the scenes of this race-drama,” at its height, echoing Du Bois’ “Forethought” to *The Souls of Black Folk*, published nine years earlier: “In these pages it is as though a veil had been drawn aside: the reader is given a view of the inner life of the Negro in America, is initiated into the ‘freemasonry,’ as it were, of the race” (vii). Ironically, though, as Goellnicht points out, neither “THE PUBLISHERS” nor, as we come to learn, the narrator himself, can claim any true “insider” status (19).

The irony of the preface becomes pointed when, after offering the promise to fully reveal and make knowable “the Negro,” “THE PUBLISHERS” add, “These pages also reveal the unsuspected fact that prejudice against the Negro is exerting a pressure, which, in New York and other large cities where the opportunity is open, is actually and constantly forcing an unascertainable number of fair-complexioned colored people over into the white race” (vii). This statement serves to reframe the entire preface by undercutting any claims to knowledge that it has made: if blacks are living undetected among whites, then ultimately, it implies, racial difference may be *unreadable* and *unknowable*. What the book offers a “bird’s-eye view” of, then, is not simply authentic blackness, but rather a reality where absolute racial difference is itself exposed as inauthentic.

A similarly ironic contradiction becomes apparent in the first paragraph of the book proper. Using the discourse and tropes of confession—a rhetorical mode to which autobiography is closely linked, as both promise to reveal the inner truth of their subjects—the narrator opens suggestively:

I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions; and it is a curious study to me to analyze the motives which prompt me to do it. I feel that I am led by the same impulse which forces the unfound-out criminal to take somebody into his confidence, although he knows the act is liable, even almost certain, to lead to his undoing; I know that I am playing with fire, and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating

pastime; and, back of it all, I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society. (1)

Of course, the narrator's anonymity renders his confession moot—*his* secrecy is maintained; what is revealed is the phenomenon of passing. Johnson's challenge to his readers' generic expectations is intertwined with his challenge to their expectations regarding racialized identity: the autobiography ultimately makes a full "reading" of its subject impossible by withholding his name, just as it fails to reveal a portrait of authentic blackness by demonstrating the instability of racial classification. We might think, then, of the narrator's "practical joke on society" as being both his genre- and race-passing. He demonstrates that identity is not, in fact, as readily readable as early twentieth-century modernist multiculturalism would have.

Tropes of reading and misreading become central to the ex-colored man's narrative, and Johnson uses them to keep readers off guard: an adept musician and quick learner of languages, he possesses an uncanny ability to interpret and translate in a literal manner, and at times the narrator seems keenly self-aware, an astute observer of his surroundings; but at other times, he is clearly and tragically blinded by his own prejudices and ignorance. Within the first few pages, he offers early memories that involve reading; in discussing his early music lessons, he notes,

My music teacher had no small difficulty at first in pinning me down to the notes. If she played my lesson over for me I invariably attempted to reproduce the required sounds without the slightest recourse to the written characters. Her

daughter, my other teacher, also had her worries. She found that, in reading, whenever I came to words that were difficult or unfamiliar I was prone to bring my imagination to the rescue and read from the picture. She has laughingly told me, since then, that I would sometimes substitute whole sentences and even paragraphs from what meaning I thought the illustrations conveyed. (4)

Here, his (intentional) misreadings afford him a certain creative power. These literal refusals to follow scripts are echoed figuratively in his eventual refusals of each of the various identities that he takes on over the course of the story, as he conscientiously crafts them to fit his changing ambitions and desires.

Many misreadings become evident in the narrators' formative memories—perhaps most significantly, in regards to his own identity. Raised by his light-skinned mulatto mother in a liberal northern town, his white father visits him only occasionally; but as a young child, the narrator does not realize he is any different from his white classmates, even joining them in their abuse of their “nigger” classmates—a trespass for which his mother scolds him, but does not correct his understanding of his own social position.

When he does discover that he is “colored,” after a teacher tells him to sit with the other colored children, he is utterly shocked, and he runs home to contemplate his image in the mirror:

I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty; but, now, for the first time, I became conscious of it, and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how

the long black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. (8)

His new recognition of his exotic features corresponds with his new understanding of his place in the world: “And so I have often lived through that hour, that day, that week in which was wrought the miracle of my transition from one world into another; for I did indeed pass into another world” (9). This change he characterizes as “more subjective than objective”; he says, “I, myself, would not have so clearly understood [my] difference had it not been for the presence of the other colored children at school; I had learned what their status was, and now I learned that theirs was mine” (10). Becoming black, for the narrator, means learning to read his place in the world differently. But his understanding of his absentee white father, of whom his mother says only, “Your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you,” remains hazy (8). After one of his father’s rare visits, the narrator notes: “In my mind I ran over the whole list of fathers I had become acquainted with in my reading, but I could not classify him. The thought did not cross my mind that he was different from me” (16).

While literature has not furnished him with the tools to read his own complicated familial situation, it has, he notes later, furnished the country with less complicated, and for white readers, perhaps more palatable, understandings of racialized identity: “Log cabins and plantations and dialect-speaking darkies are perhaps better known in American literature than any other single picture of our national life. Indeed, they form

an ideal and exclusive literary concept of the American Negro to such an extent that it is almost impossible to get the reading public to recognize him in any other setting” (78). Such stereotypes clearly influence his own impressions of blacks in the South, however, where he heads in a failed attempt to attend college after his mother dies (he ironically notes that it was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that “opened my eyes as to who and what I was...in fact, it gave me my bearing” [19]). He is “repulsed” by “the unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people” (25); nonetheless, it is through his southern travels and particularly the connections that he makes as a music teacher that he feels he makes his “entrance into the race”: he says of his southern sojourn, “I had formulated a theory of what it was to be colored, now I was getting the practice” (34). Race, then, is not an authentic and fundamental element of identity, but rather a learned practice. The narrator learns his racial identity by reading others, just as he learns to read Spanish while working in a Cuban-operated cigar factory in Florida, and he becomes an adept practitioner of both.³⁴

After losing his job, the narrator decides to seek his fate in New York City, where he is introduced to ragtime music. He quickly masters the form and gains fame as a performer for his interpretation of classical pieces—his adeptness with two musical languages, and his ability to translate between them, is what makes him an especial novelty for audiences. But after his tangential involvement in a murder, he flees to Europe with his wealthy white benefactor, where he discovers that he can live a very

³⁴ In fact, he becomes so skilled in the Spanish language that he is promoted to the position of “reader” in the cigar factory, whereby he sits in the center of the factory workroom, reading the news or installments of novels aloud to the workmen, adjudicating arguments, and moderating debates and discussions. (34)

enjoyable life passing for white. After several comfortable years of adventure, however, and despite the entreaties of his practical benefactor, he is inspired to return to the United States and embrace black culture after hearing a German musician acquaintance interpret one of his ragtime pieces into classical form:

I sat amazed. I had been turning classic music into ragtime, a comparatively easy task; and this man had taken ragtime and made it classic. The thought came across me like a flash.—It can be done, why can't I do it? ...I made up my mind to go back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in my inspiration first-hand. I gloated over the immense amount of material I had to work with, not only modern ragtime, but also the old slave songs,—material which no one had yet touched. (66)

His desire to reconnect with black culture intensifies, but is borne only out of personal ambition, rather than, as he imagined as a boy, “wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race” (21). While he returns to the American South and submerges himself in black life, he describes it always at an uncomfortable remove, reading it as an ethnographer would.

Ultimately, he witnesses a horrific act of racial violence that compels him to flee—both the South, and his newly re-adopted black identity: “A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with...Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals. So once again, I found myself gazing at the towers of New

York, and wondering what that city held in store for me” (90). His interpretation of the event—as one that compels in him only shame that is directed inward rather than any rage toward those responsible—is an emblematic example of Johnson’s destabilizing method of critique: while the narrator is not portrayed simply as unreliable, his “proclaimed loyalty to his ‘mother’s people’ is continuously undercut by his admiration for and identification with mainstream white America” (Fabi 93), just as his facility at manipulating his own identity is continuously undercut by his inability to be self-reflexive at key moments.

The narrator finds great success as a white businessman in New York; and while he admits to feeling regret for abandoning the musical ambitions that he equates with his blackness, his marriage and children cement his commitment to maintaining his white identity:

My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am, and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage. (100)

Despite all the outward trappings of great success—financial prosperity, social standing, familial comfort—his unread manuscripts, like his undetected black identity, are tragic signs of the social and economic implications of racism. And clearly, writing his autobiography, for the ex-colored man, does not signal a move into complete self-

possession and true self-understanding (just as his anonymity does not allow readers a complete portrait of the man). Johnson offers his readers enough of an ironic distance from his narrator to recognize this fact, and to recognize that there is clearly nothing inherently “black” about him. Race, for the Ex-Colored Man, like ragtime music, or Spanish, French, or German, is just one of many systems of notation that he learns to read and strategically use over the course of his narrative.

This vision of race, as refracted through a portrait of the alienating effects of racism, was clearly a challenge to prevailing understandings of blackness—for both black and white audiences. So while publishing his book as an autobiography may have given Johnson a way to connect immediately with his audience, a way to place his text within a tradition far more established and accepted than that of black fiction, his story spilled over the bounds of what his audience was comfortable with understanding as a real life. But beautifully reprinted as a “classic” by a major publisher (Knopf) in 1927, Johnson’s text was received as “prophetic and consistent with the cultural nationalist agenda of the Harlem Renaissance,” a fact that Giulia Fabi reads as ironic given the Ex-Colored Man’s ambivalent relationship with and often condescending attitude toward African-American cultural practices (193). This new celebration of *The Autobiography* thus reflected changes in attitudes toward race and racial difference—a new kind of appreciation for African-American cultural products that was nonetheless fraught, in ways that are still evident in the celebratory atmosphere of contemporary multiculturalism, as I will discuss.

“The Making of a Professional Jew”

“How I thrill to it—what people think. I am convinced this is the big thing in life, there is nothing else; you are what people think you are....” So pontificates Meyer Hirsch, the narrator of Samuel Ornit’s 1923 *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl: An Anonymous Autobiography*. A decade after Johnson’s initial publication of *Ex-Colored Man*, Ornit’s audience may have been somewhat differently attuned to the irony with which he engaged another outsider tradition of autobiography—that of the immigrant life story. And unlike Hirsch, Ornit himself was somewhat less concerned with the public’s opinion per se—while the novel clearly demonstrates his political commitments, his impetus for writing it was in large part financial (Ornit devoted much of his time to social causes, and several failed business attempts left his young family in dire financial straits; as his biographer reports, “In a desperate bid to supplement [his] meager income, he worked eighteen hours a day for three months to turn out his first novel” [Miller 209]). The novel, the story of a Jewish gangster’s corrupt rise from the streets to a prestigious judgeship and a home on “Allrightnik’s Row,” would create a “literary furor” (Miller 209), and it was turned down by numerous publishers who feared being branded anti-Semitic.³⁵

³⁵ In a letter to Stephen Wise, a well-known Reform rabbi who had condemned *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl* while acting as an “advisor” to the publisher Simon and Schuster, Ornit detailed one of these rejections: “Schuster congratulated me on having written one of the finest books he had read in years. His staff of readers were exceptionally enthusiastic. But he knew the touchiness of your kind better than I did...He said it was bad business for his house to become known as the publishers of what might be called an anti-Jewish book. Do not waste praise upon him; he did not forgo profits. He was afraid of losing them” (Letter).

In fact, it appears that the book's publication as an anonymous autobiography, rather than a novel, was a calculated move on the part of its eventual publisher, Boni and Liveright, who stipulated in their contract with Ornitz that they could publish it as such if they chose.³⁶ Likely anticipating the possibility of controversy, their decision to publish the book as autobiography, crediting Ornitz with having prepared the manuscript (its subject having supposedly died five years earlier), was an attempt to cut off any protestors: after all, how could readers criticize the presumedly truthful telling of a man's life story? Even over a year after its initial publication, Boni and Liveright felt the need to publish a notice reiterating the book's generic status:

This work has roused so much comment and so many important men have been pointed at as possible important figures in this book that it is time for us to reiterate HAUNCH, PAUNCH AND JOWL is the history of a man who, as we have already stated has been dead for five years. The material of HAUNCH, PAUNCH AND JOWL is essentially autobiographical. It was organized and written by Mr. Samuel Ornitz some years ago. The essential fact is that it remains an autobiography. (Liveright)

However, altering its perceived generic status did nothing to quell controversy—in fact, I would argue that it likely increased the scale of the controversy, which, however unintentionally, led to the book's great popularity. As an autobiography, the text received far greater and wider notice than it would have as a novel. Like Johnson in

³⁶ The signed contract reads, "It is understood and agreed by you that if we so desire we are to publish this book as an anonymous autobiography" (Contract).

1912, When Ornitz penned *Haunch* in 1922, he had few literary ancestors—Jewish novelists had gained minimal access to the mainstream press, and less attention from mainstream audiences. Abraham Cahan’s 1896 *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* was a commercial flop, despite praise from the influential William Dean Howells (Guttmann 31); twenty-one years later, he received a small measure more attention for *The Rise of David Levinsky*, now considered to be a foundational Jewish-American work. Other novels published around that time, like Nathan Kussey’s *The Abyss* (1916) and Elias Tobenkin’s *Witte Arrives* (1916) also yielded minimal attention (Miller xi). But Jewish-American autobiographies *had* garnered great attention. Perhaps the most significant example, Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*, had been published in 1912 by Houghton Mifflin, and was an immediate runaway success and topped best-seller lists for years.

Antin’s book was praised in reviews for its literary merit, but (like other ethnic autobiographies) more especially for its sociological interest. As one reviewer described, “[*The Promised Land* is] the record of the experience of a typical immigrant and her family, and as such it is the more important. The woman who can write a book like ‘The Promised Land’ is by no means an ordinary personality; but her experiences and those of her family were very ordinary indeed, and it is in their ordinariness that the narrative finds its greatest value” (“The Immigrant”). Another noted, “This vivid story is the most interesting contribution of the year to the immigrant problem. A rare document of self-revelation which stirs and persuades” (*New York Evening Sun*).

As was evident in the tone and content of *The Independent*, with “the immigrant problem” looming larger and larger in the public imagination, readers’ ethnographic

interests took on a new urgency. In 1914, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* reported on a sea-change in library circulation; “Minneapolis Readers Grow High Browed” noted that the subjects in greatest demand were “conditions of the laboring classes, welfare work, social unrest, syndicalism, sex hygiene, sanitation, socialism and immigration,” noting specifically that “a long list is continually waiting” for Antin’s book. Autobiographies like Antin’s, Edward Steiner’s, and other first- and second-generation Jewish Americans (along with immigrants of other ethnicities, like Edward Bok and Jacob Riis) were popular in part because they confirmed the power of American culture and the mythology of the American Dream. A twentieth-century Benjamin Franklin, Antin demonstrated that pluck and hard work, along with a dogged loyalty and admiration for American culture, could overcome all obstacles—a message for which Allen Guttman deems Antin the foremost representative of the “cult of gratitude”—and an agreeable message to an emerging middle class eager to distance itself culturally from the urban slums while maintaining its democratic ideals. Antin measured her success in terms of her assimilation, which fit the mood of the country in the early decades of the twentieth century. As John Higham notes, those years saw a shift away from a single-minded focus on immigration restriction to an exultation of America’s capacity to transform the immigrant, with a new focus on welfare and reform (107)—a fascination reflected in the report on Minneapolis libraries.

But as the numbers of immigrants increased exponentially in the decade leading up to World War I, especially the new Italian and Jewish immigrants from Mediterranean and Eastern European ports, this fascination was coupled with an increasing xenophobia,

deeply tied to the history of black-white race relations: as Jim Crow took a firm hold and white supremacy was again legally and socially enshrined, one strain of popular discourse warned that the new immigration added a new threat to the stability of the racial hierarchy (Higham 166-7). Furthermore, many historians have noted the middle class's discomfort with the increasing sense of class conflict that resulted from both the political activism of immigrants as well as the emergence of new political power bases of lower-class whites like the Farmer's Alliance and the Populist Party. The renewed interest in immigrants' lives was deeply tied to the history of race and class relations and the ideological struggles of white middle- and upper-class Americans to maintain their dominance.

So while the interest in immigrants often had a genuine and deeply felt humanitarian impulse at its root, the fear with which it was coupled was consistent, if varied in its expression. The impulse toward Americanization, spurred on by an intensified nationalism during World War I and the anti-radical sentiments of the postwar years, by the early 1920s took on a more distinctly racial bias; as John Higham describes the prevailing attitude of the period, "The racial danger was in the blood. Why try to change people who are biologically unchangeable?" (262) The early 1920s were the flowering time of the pseudo-scientific racism that had been popularized by Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, first published in 1916, and printed in new, well-selling editions in 1921 and 1923; scientists from across the disciplines espoused various versions of such racial philosophies, and "with such authority to sustain them, it is little

wonder that not only many eugenicists but also a broad segment of literate opinion in America accepted the tenets of racial nativism as proved truths of science” (Higham 276).

Into this highly charged atmosphere, Samuel Ornitz published *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* in 1923. Foreshadowing the tough-guy novels of the 1930s, Ornitz’s book chronicles the rough-and-dirty life of a young Jewish man, born during his parents’ Atlantic crossing to America and raised on the gang-ruled streets of New York’s Lower East Side. Smart and resourceful, Meyer Hirsch learns early how to “play the game,” and he works himself up through the ranks of the corrupt political boss system to become a federal judge. He is, in many ways, the anti-Antin, and his portrait of the rags-to-riches immigrant success story is an utterly ironic one. The many varied responses to this irony demonstrate the ways that readers invested the autobiographical with significance.

Within Jewish cultural circles, the controversy that the text created was virtually unparalleled, and reached such a fever pitch that even the mainstream non-Jewish media remarked on the row, focusing on the very strenuous, very public denunciations of the book by several well-known rabbis (with headlines such as “Rabbi Assails ‘Haunch, Paunch and Jowl’ as ‘Stinking’ Book” and “Rabbis Denounce Book on Jew”). At the root of the rabbis’ criticisms was the notion of representation: if taken as a representative Jewish life, Meyer Hirsch’s created a somewhat less than flattering portrait. As one reviewer wrote in *The Jewish Daily News*:

What was the Bowery a quarter of a century ago and what is it today? It is the story of Jewish immigrant endeavor. Who drove out the boodle politicians from the East Side if not the East Side? Who fought the grafting judges if not the East

Side? Who rebelled against the shyster lawyers if not the East Side? Will Boni and Liveright or any other publisher give to the world the true story of the East Side? We doubt it. It is not in harmony with the new literature which wallows in filth. (Bril)

And in a vigorous front-page denunciation in *The Jewish Tribune*, Rabbi Samuel Schulman wrote, “I hold that this book is a treacherous piece of work. It presents to the Gentile world a picture of Jewish life in which the figures are gunmen, harlots, grafters, hypocritical politicians and professional Jews, and in which whatever of the better stirs expresses itself in contempt for the religion of the fathers.”

Of course, not everyone in the Jewish press agreed with these sentiments. As one reviewer noted, “What a relief, after the hordes of Longing Louies and Yearning Yettas, with their sniffing outbursts in autobiography, to read a forthright, unsentimental story of life in New York’s ghetto by a writer who sees things as they are and finds them sufficiently interesting to present them just that way” (Spitzer). Others read it not as a condemnation of Jews, but of the American treatment of immigrants:

It is these smug, self-satisfied citizens who ought to flush red from ear to ear with shame and disgrace when they read ‘Haunch, Paunch and Jowl’—yes, with shame and disgrace, because instead of assisting the old, fine traditions of the immigrant to blossom forth in perfect bloom in this Land of Promise—they allow them, with astonishing indifference, to sink in the dirt and turmoil of the struggle for existence. (Aidline-Trommer)

Still others read it as a “vindication of Jewish ideals”: “A vindication because it is proof of the unutterable depths of moral rottenness which awaits one who tampers with those ideals, to further his own selfish ends” (Weinstein). Furthermore, the book was serialized in several Yiddish newspapers, including the influential Communist *Morgen Freiheit*, and it was staged by the radical Yiddish theater the Artef.

Unsurprisingly, many reviewers from the mainstream press did read the book specifically as a window into “the Jew”: as a writer for *The Portland Oregonian* said, “The Jew has long been an enigma for his combination of worldliness and spirituality—two qualities that do not ordinarily go hand in hand...Explicable heretofore only to thinkers of profundity, this anonymous author has given the world a picture and an explanation of value” (“Haunch”). And predictably, some did read it as an indictment of Jews—a reviewer for *Time* calling it “an arraignment of Jewry, heaving its stinking bulk out of a diseased ghetto” (“From the Ghetto”), another from the *New York Tribune* blaming Hirsch’s behaviors on his “Oriental” upbringing and education (Markun). But others praised it for its titillating portrait of urban life more generally: *The New York Times* praised it as “an extraordinary book, vigorous and vivid and racy”; and the *Chicago Sentinel* reported, “As the colorful and spicy tale unrolls before us, we are taken behind the scenes in ‘chedorim,’ gang fights, cabarets, bawdy houses, courtrooms, strikes, political campaigns and any number of institutions and prostitutions that go to make the gaiety and sadness of the life of New York.” Reviews in the mainstream press reflect the (often arrogant) fascination with cultural difference that was a hallmark of modernist multiculturalism.

“Lives in My Life”

Whether praising or haranguing Ornitz’s work, reviewers’ responses hinged on the notion of representativeness: the autobiography was taken as a portrait—whether truthful or distorted—of “the Jew,” and its proximity to or distance from the authentic original, as imagined by each reviewer, is taken as its measure of success. But the nature of the controversy belies the textual subtleties that are masked when autobiography is viewed as transparently representative. In fact, Ornitz’s text plays on the very notions of identity and representativeness. Meyer Hirsch, while he gains the reputation for being “the Shield of Israel in America,” makes it clear that his decisions in life have nothing to do with any shared sense of identity or struggle; rather, any sense of community has been replaced by a ruthless capitalist drive for success.

Hirsch’s intense resistance to any impositions of an identity onto him are first registered as an adolescent resistance to his family’s “old world” Jewishness, even as he recognizes in it a certain power. He rails against the “love name” his mother uses for him—*Ziegelle*, or “little goat”—eventually ordering her to never use it again, despite its deep emotional and metaphorical resonance (his mother reveals that a goat nursed him after he was born during their crossing to America, thereby keeping him alive when she was unable to produce milk). And he says of his Uncle Philip, of whom he is both embarrassed and in awe:

He intimidates: not he, but his way of speaking Yiddish. It is not just Yiddish—gutteral, jargonish, haphazard; but an arresting, rhythmical, logical

language....Yiddish, the lingo of greenhorns, was held in contempt by the Ludlow Streeters [Hirsch's childhood gang] who felt mightily their Americanism. Yet even the gang fought shy of making fun of the green Uncle Philip. (14)

Hirsch's uncle Philip, the most significant figure in his formative years, embodies most clearly the brutal American focus on individual success: his is Antin's immigrant drive stripped of its lofty idealism and spiritual sheen. Philip is presented early on as a driven intellectual who rejects the ideas of his Leftist companions and embarks on what he sees as the only path to success in America: exploitation. He vows to beat the German-Jewish garment bosses by taking advantage of non-unionized immigrant workers, and his success (coupled with his greed and spiritual emptiness) lay bare the ruthless capitalist ethos behind the quest for the American Dream that structures so many immigrant autobiographies.

But Hirsch's story offers a somewhat more complex version of this critique: while he achieves the same level of success as Philip, he does so not by *abandoning* any sense of community or shared identity, but rather by *exaggerating* and *exploiting* it, becoming, as he quips early on, a "Professional Jew." Like Johnson's narrator who celebrates his ties to African-American culture for personal gain, Hirsch uses his Jewishness as a political tool, playing on the sympathies and desperation of new Jewish immigrants to get clients as a young lawyer, and later to get votes and donations as a politician. The identity-based alliances that Hirsch forms are explicitly linked to the violent exploitation of capitalism—he uses a populist message, which serves as a form of class passing, to mask his own greed and gain at the expense of "his people."

Hirsch begins his career, however, in entertainment, first performing with and managing a group in whose “racial comedy” (as Esther Romeyn terms this mode of performance, common to early twentieth-century America) he sees great promise for success, then managing the hugely successful club, Lavelle’s, in which they become the primary act. The song-and-dance act that makes Hirsch’s group famous, titled “Paddy Reilly Does the Jewish Wedding Dance,” involves a dancer in costume as an orthodox Jew telling jokes and performing a fast, impressive combination of an Irish jig and a Russian-Jewish wedding dance as the band oscillates between the two types of music. (The two lead musicians eventually become successful publishers of popular songs, which they created [in a method reminiscent of Johnson’s narrator’s] by “picking out the tuneful bits from the works of the masters [which they] wove into ragtime hits” [150-151].) Hirsch describes how ethnic impersonation becomes the club’s mainstay: “We found that Lavelle’s receipts swelled as we attracted the respectable citizens, who spent as lavishly as they were proportionately shocked. They wanted to see the life and excitement that they imagined was a continuous phantasmagoria of depravity, license, and murder” (151). Hirsch begins using actors in the audience playing caricatures of racial types—namely Italians and Chinese—to perform fights, hold-ups, and murders. As Romeyn demonstrates, such performances fed the bourgeoisie’s hunger for the “authenticity” of which urban life (embodied in racial types) became a *loci*, even as their theatricality revealed them to be, instead, “authenticity effects” (xxii). Hirsch’s career is thus launched by his facility with, and recognition of the currency of, the manipulation of supposedly fixed identities.

While Hirsch seems to feel no genuine connection to the community of Jewish immigrants in his native Lower East Side, he does express ambivalence (if not disdain) for the one Jewish character who appears to be passing as a Gentile. Hirsch meets Lionel Crane, a psychologist and associate of one of his childhood friends, and his response is pointed:

Where did he get the bang-up snobbish name—doesn't go with his face....On the spot I disliked him, this Lionel Crane, *ne* (Harvard matriculation) plain, vulgar, Lazarus Cohen. Like velvet rubbed the wrong way, sickeningly soft, creepily irritating, was his meticulous, modulated speech with its heavy Harvard accent. It cloyed. Inconsonant in *him*, not his by right, therefore an affectation, I felt, as were his distinguished manners." (191)

Hirsch's distaste for Crane is tied, as he readily admits, to Crane's being the object of affection of a woman with whom Hirsch is enamored, but it nonetheless seems to be paradoxical given his own manipulations. However, his distaste is also clearly tied to Crane's views on the "Jewish Question," on which he pontificates at great length (over four pages of text). In his sermon—the only moment in the book in which the issue of Jewish identity is taken up as such—Crane advocates for intermarriage to "bring in the saving tonic of new blood":

The Jews will create a Jewish Question in America as long as they cling to their bizarre Jewishness.... What calls immediate, curious attention to the Jews...his outlandish ways and attire—his beards and ear-locks...He is always the repellent

foreigner, his slovenly, baggy clothes, or his overdressed, bejeweled, flashy appearance; his blatancy and vulgarity...” (198)

And while Crane unwittingly criticizes Hirsch personally by haranguing the “Professional Jews” who are responsible for “usury, faginism, receiving stolen goods, corrupting officials, procuring, brothel-keeping, labor-sweating” (a virtual reading of Hirsch’s resume), Hirsch seems more annoyed by the racism that is at the root of Crane’s assimilationist ideals (despite the fact that Hirsch’s early career as a performer traded on these same kinds of racist stereotypes). Ultimately, Hirsch’s discomfort with and dislike of Crane seems to be connected with what he sees as Crane’s *moral* passing, and Crane indeed lives up to his cynical expectations:

I had a sneaking feeling that giving Crane a good job and a chance to mix with the higher-ups, he would play the game, and forget his crusade against the Professional Jew and his theory of intermarriage as a saving tonic for the Jewish race. And I wasn’t far from right, for Crane sought eagerly the job of establishing a social settlement under the patronage of the exclusive Fifth Avenue Temple.
(260)

If Hirsch represents a cynical vision of identity-based alliances, given that he uses his Jewishness strategically for exploitative aims and individual gain, *Haunch* does demonstrate other structures of affiliation that appear to avoid the charges ultimately leveled by the narrative’s implicit critique: namely, a sort of trans-ethnic social activism, as embodied by the character of Esther, and socialism, as embodied by the character of Avrum. Avrum, one of Hirsch’s childhood friends, becomes a devoted socialist and union

activist, and despite their differences, he remains one of the few characters who escapes Hirsch's criticism, and his earnest sermons on workers solidarity across ethnic lines manage to avoid Hirsch's cynical reinterpretations. But he can apparently function only as an abstraction, as he disappears midway through the narrative to travel the country setting up workers' education programs. Esther is a beautiful, selfless neighborhood girl, whom everyone (including Hirsch) worships. She regularly surfaces to puncture Hirsch's self-focus, however, she, too, all but disappears as a character by the middle of the narrative. When Hirsch learns of her marriage to an Irish millionaire devoted to social causes, he begins to question in earnest his life choices; he becomes depressed, gets drunk, and spends the night at a whorehouse. The narrative ends with Hirsch (who has become very fat, hence the nickname from which the book draws its title) being called from a fantasy about his new mistress by his wife Gretel to come to dinner:

“Come, Meyer, come and eat. I got something you like. *Gedampfte brust und patate lahtkes.*” (Potted breast and potato pancakes)...I heave my great bulk and waddle towards the dining room...Again, Gretel sings...”Tell me, life, tell me, what's it all about; tell me, life, what's it all about?”...

What—

It smells good.

Gedampfte brust und patate lahtkes— (300)

Hirsch's focus on his earthly appetites is ultimately impenetrable by self-reflection.

If, for Mary Antin, success means “Americanization” and shedding her Jewish identity, for Meyer Hirsch, success means strategically playing on that identity. Hirsch's

ruthless focus on material wealth, and its attendant spiritual emptiness, offer a critique of the capitalist impulse at the root of the American Dream that clearly appealed to the political Left (like the *Freiheit* and *Artef*). But middle-class readers, like the middle-class clientele who flocked to Hirsch's club to see staged authenticity, seemed to focus on the narrative as an authentic portrait of "The Jew" and of the seedy underbelly of urban life, and to ignore the ways that the text parodies such a reading. Many Jewish reviewers, similar to black reviewers of *Ex-Colored Man*, and reflecting the precarious position of Jews (as of blacks) in early twentieth-century America, condemned the work for its focus on corruption, greed, and violence, and thus its unsuitability as a representative Jewish text. Ornitz's agreeing to publish the work as an autobiography may have bought its commercial success; but his frustration with these kinds of reviews led him to reveal himself as the book's author in order to respond to them.³⁷ Ornitz's original subtitle for the text, "Lives in My Life," indicates his more nuanced approach to identity as multiply-constructed, and that approach is intimately linked to the text's political critique. But the subtitle with which his publishers replaced it, "An Anonymous Autobiography," rendered

³⁷ See Henry S. Rodman, "The Truth About 'Haunch, Paunch and Jowl'" (*Jewish Tribune* 22 Feb 1924, 3). Ornitz went on to write two more novels and a play, none of which were achieved commercial success, and much of his later career was spent as a (reluctant) Hollywood screenwriter. He remained committed to social causes, however, and devoted a great deal of time to them: he worked to improve prison conditions and he was an advocate for children's rights; he worked to free the Scottsboro Boys; he worked with Theodore Drieser and John Dos Passos to investigate the labor conditions of coal miners in Kentucky; and he was a vocal opponent of fascism and anti-Semitism. He became one of the group later known as the Hollywood Ten, which challenged the House Un-American Activities Committee, and he was imprisoned for a year after refusing to say whether he was a member of the Communist party when called to testify before HUAC.

that political critique unintelligible for many readers, who happily (or unhappily) then took the book simply as a window onto authentic Jewish life.

The Trouble with *Me*

Now considered an “autobiographical novel,” Winnifred Eaton’s *Me: A Book of Remembrance* was published anonymously in 1915 to an immediate flurry of speculation about its authorship. Clearly anticipating public skepticism about the text’s authenticity, the publishers included an introduction by Eaton’s friend, the popular novelist Jean Webster. In the same convention made familiar by slave narratives that Johnson drew on, Webster confirms that while names of people and places have been changed, the text that follows “is pure reporting; the author has not branched out into any byways of style, but has merely told in the simplest language possible what she actually remembered” (1). Clearly engaged with the dynamics between readers, texts, and authors, Eaton had published over a dozen novels under the Japanese-sounding pen name Onoto Watanna, one of which was adapted for Broadway and film, along with many short stories and essays in such magazines as *The Century* and *Harper’s Monthly*.³⁸

Eaton’s choice to pass as Japanese in her authorial identity should be read in the context of the brutal anti-Chinese sentiment that was widespread in the United States

³⁸ The Winnifred Eaton digital archive at the University of Virginia reports, “According to the testimony of surviving family members and Winnifred Eaton herself, the number of her periodical publications may have neared or surpassed a hundred works. However, scholars until now have only located twenty short stories and about a dozen non-fiction pieces.” Many of those, along with biographical information, are housed in their archive at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/eaton/>.

during her lifetime. While public support for restrictive immigration laws in general waxed and waned in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, anti-Chinese sentiment was consistently high, as codified, for example, by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was renewed in 1892 and again in 1902 (Gabaccia 37). Matthew Frye Jacobson describes anti-Chinese agitation, inaugurated through fears about labor on the West Coast in the mid-nineteenth century, as “unique in the history of American nativism for the consistency of its violence, for its success in capturing the major workers’ organizations as well as both political parties, and ultimately, for its success in winning legislation that singled out one group for total exclusion” (81). The Japanese, on the other hand, were seen as less of an economic and cultural threat because of their relatively small numbers in the U.S.; and in the era of American empire, they were admired for what was seen as their “noble” military prowess (Ling 46).³⁹ Through her novels and stories, which dealt primarily with Japanese and Japanese-American characters, Eaton was able to capitalize on the reading public’s fascination with the exotic while escaping the particular vitriol aimed at Chinese Americans.

Eaton was the first writer of Asian descent to publish a novel in the U.S., and the first to reach a mainstream audience with her writing. But unlike the work she published as fiction, *Me* makes only muted references to the protagonist Nora’s ethnicity. Unlike Johnson and Ornitz’s “autobiographies,” Eaton’s most definitely does *not* engage with any tradition of self-consciously “ethnic” writing, but rather organizes itself around the

³⁹ Eaton’s decision to adopt a Japanese identity has, in this context, been invested with varied moral significance. See Nguyen, *Race and Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), for a thorough discussion of Eaton’s life as variously figured within Asian-American studies.

narrative form of the romance—given her previous publication success, she did not need to use the autobiographical form to access a mainstream reading public, as they did; instead, she used it to attempt to escape the narrow scripts that her success as a “Japanese” writer gave her, presenting a narrator whose mixed-race heritage is constituted in much more subtle ways. Despite these facts, her narrator’s (supposedly obvious) ethnicity became central to the reading public’s response to the text.

Given the text’s anonymous publication, and its author’s literary celebrity via her pseudonymous identity, it is no simple question to ask who “Me” is, as readers immediately did. But *The New York Times*, for example, which responded to calls for an “investigation” into the text’s authorship, confidently speculated that Eaton was the author of *Me* several months after its publication. The linchpin of their investigation, emblematic of many other reviews of the work, consists apparently in the ethnic identification of Nora, the protagonist, with the suspected author: the article proclaims, “[the author’s] secret is loudly revealed in almost every chapter, for she cannot conceal the glow of pride she feels in being half Japanese” (74). As proof, the article cites a scene where Nora kisses the sleeve of her would-be lover, a behavior which is assumed to be “the custom of her country” (74). Furthermore, in what appears to be a blatant misreading, they note, “the ways of the Nippon come to the surface when she tells how strange she looked in even fashionable garments, for the charm of the women of the land of the wisteria is much obscured even by the best of the Occidental modes” (74). (Nora says, despite the fact that she was “odd looking” and “not pretty,” “when I began to wear

fine clothes I must have appeared quite well, for I had all sorts of compliments paid to me” [184].)

When Nora alludes to her novel being adapted for Broadway, *The Times* surmises:

That no writer who was half Japanese would have neglected Japan for local color is self-evident. This brings on the almost irresistible conclusion that the creator of ‘Me’ is none other than the author of ‘A Japanese Nightingale,’ a novel which in 1903 was dramatized and produced as a play both here and in London...The book must have been written by Mrs. Winnifred Eaton Babcock, whose pen name is Onoto Watanna (74).

After finally revealing Eaton/Watanna as the author, in case further confirmation is needed—not of her authorship, but of the identity of which that authorship is clearly an expression, the article concludes, “She is distinctively Japanese in appearance, and in Japanese rather than in American costume the charm of her personality is more fully revealed” (75).

For *The Times*, Eaton/Watanna’s ethnicity, as transparently communicated through Nora, functions as the guarantor of her authorial authenticity—and, not incidentally, of her interest as an author. The textual clues that are read as hints to the author’s ethnic identity are the key to uncovering and confirming Eaton/Watanna’s authorship—*The Times*’ reading, serving itself to properly clothe her in Japanese costume, “more fully reveals” the author’s essential “personality.” Ethnicity, then, is the signifier that takes the place of her missing proper name to fulfill what Philip Lejeune has

called “the autobiographical pact”(13)—that is, it is that which allows the text to be legible *as* autobiography. (For Ornitz and Johnson, of course, the self-conscious ways they challenged the conventions of ethnicity were precisely what made their “autobiographies” *illegible* as such to the reading public.)

Significantly, *The Times* article says less about Eaton’s text than it does about the ethnographic publishing conditions in which that text was produced and first circulated; it serves as a confirmation of the readerly capacity to reveal the truth of the author’s identity through the apprehension and fixation of her otherness. But Eaton’s treatment of identity should be seen as far more complex than *The Times*’ reading would suggest. She demonstrates—in the self-conscious performativity of her own pseudonymity and anonymity, and more specifically through her narrator in *Me*—the relationship between how we construct narratives of self and how we understand others’ readings of us. While her text lacks the self-conscious social critique of Johnson’s and Ornitz’s, its subtle, perhaps unconscious disruptions of the ideological investments entailed in the autobiographical and romance forms merit examination. The anxiety in the text surrounding ethnic (and gendered) identity, made illegible by *The Times*’ interpretation, embodies the tensions of modernist multiculturalism.

Rereading *Me*/ Retracing the (Il)legible

In claiming in her introduction that Eaton had not “branched out into the byways of style,” Webster attributed to her text the impossible. Eaton’s text clearly relies on established literary conventions in order to construct its narrative—a technique that many

critics have noted has a long history in autobiography.⁴⁰ Most recognizably, Nora's story follows the trajectory of a traditional romance plot: after experiencing a series of unwanted advances from various men, she is rescued from a particularly lecherous employer by the wealthy, sophisticated, older Roger Hamilton, with whom she promptly falls in love. Their potential romance stumbles over many obstacles, most obviously Hamilton's secrecy about his life. But while Nora's emotional struggle is not eventually redeemed through marriage to Hamilton, neither is she condemned to death; rather, the story closes, as it opened, with her striking out independently in search of new opportunity.

Into this narrative, Nora's ethnic difference figures very ambiguously, in interesting ways—despite *The Times*' claim that it is “loudly revealed”; and when she does allude to it, it does not stem from “pride,” as the article suggests: Nora proclaims, “I would have given anything to look less foreign. My darkness marred and crushed me” (166). She attributes her foreignness to her mother, who “was a native of a far-distant land” (3); and she clearly sympathizes with her mother's hardships, noting that the romance of her youthful life as a performer had been “squeezed out” by the socioeconomic hardships she encounters in North America, where “she never got over the feeling of being a stranger” (3). But Nora chooses to emphasize her ties to her father,

⁴⁰ Sacvan Bercovitch, for instance, has examined the adaptation of the jeremiad by writers of autobiography through the nineteenth century (*The American Jeremiad*); and Joanne Braxton has studied how black women autobiographers' manipulation of conventional forms offers the opportunity for critique (*Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*).

an artist and an imperialist “adventurer” in his youth; as a girl of seventeen contemplating her impending move to the West Indies for a job with a local newspaper, she remarks:

Was I not the daughter of a man who had been back and forth to China no fewer than eighteen times, and that during the perilous period of the Tai-ping rebellion? Had not my father made journeys from the Orient in the old-fashioned sailing-vessels, being at sea a hundred-odd days at a time? What could not his daughter do? (5)

Nora’s self-identification with her imperialist father is confirmed by her “genuine thrill of excitement” upon landing in Jamaica. Her first impressions of the island resonate on an ethnographic register:

Everywhere I looked were negroes—men and women and children, some half naked, some with bright handkerchiefs knotted about their heads, some gaudily attired....Women with heavy loads on their hands on their shaking hips, and chattering in a high singsong dialect (I didn’t recognize it for English at first!), passed me. Some of them looked at me curiously, and one, a terrifying, pock-marked crone, said something to me that I could not understand. (20-1)

Her excitement is soon tempered; if she finds unsettling the women who return her gaze, she is terrified by actual interaction: “I started screaming when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looking up in the steadily deepening twilight, I saw a smiling face approach my own, and the face was black!” (21) As if terrorized by the black face as a mirror of her own otherness, the incident sends her running to the captain of the ship on which she sailed, and she quickly finds herself within the protective (if always threatened) fold of

white femininity. However, that identification is anything but stable. When she first meets her roommate, she notices “the yellowness of her skin” and wonders “if it could be possible that she, too, were ‘colored’” (28); but the roommate quickly welcomes her with a warning: “You’d better look out...There’s only a handful of [us] white women here, you know. We don’t count the tourists” (31).

Nora’s new employer informs her, by way of guiding her professional actions, that while many of the blacks on the island are wealthy and hold positions of power, there is “a fine line drawn between them and the native white people” (32). Her exposure to the island’s oppressive racial polarization impels her further identification with white femininity, and the trauma she seemed to experience through her initial experience in the face of a threatening blackness is intensified when she meets Mr. Burbank, a wealthy and powerful member of parliament about whom she is supposed to report. Shocked to find he is black, she is “filled with a sudden panic of almost instinctive fear” (40)—a fear which completely “robs” her of “all physical and mental powers” when, weeks later, a smitten Burbank proposes and attempts to kiss her (54-5). Burbank’s seemingly mild entreaty—but one that stands as the ultimate transgression of her (already threatened, because not-quite-white) femininity—is rendered in the emotional register of a rape, and the incident ultimately sends Nora fleeing back to the U.S., where, after several other romantic snafus, her entanglement with Hamilton begins.

While Nora strenuously posits her neutrality on issues regarding race, claiming that she is “as far from feeling [race prejudice] as any person in the world” (41), and occasionally commenting on her own status as “colored,” her terror of blackness is

matched by her unequivocal admiration for “white” beauty: she remarks, “The blond type I adored” (41). While this is clearly the root of her attraction to Hamilton, a worldly Southern gentleman, she recognizes that he sees her as a “curiosity” (241); indeed, he often describes her as his “find,” his “discovery,” as the object of his “interest” and “fascination” (240), and while she concedes to his demands in order to maintain his attention, she continually bristles at his desire to control her dress and daily life without offering her love or physical affection. If her foreignness seems to be at the root of his attraction, Nora also recognizes it is being at the root of the ultimate impossibility of their romance; her hopes are finally crushed when she finds a picture of his lover:

She was all the things that I was not, a statuesque beauty, with a form like Juno and a face like that of a great sleepy ox. Beside her, what was I? Women like her were the kind men loved. I knew that. Women like me merely teased their fancy and curiosity. We were the small tin toys with which they paused to play. (349)

Like Harriet Jacobs, whose rewriting of the scripts of sentimental fiction allows a critique of their reliance on “the platitudes of a morality that erases the specificities of a slave woman’s experience” (Smith “Performativity” 101), Eaton’s subversion of the romance plot highlights its construction on an unacknowledged foundation of white femininity.

Outside of the romance narrative, Nora finds another fate; woven into the romance narrative is the story of Nora’s struggles as a writer; and it is the thought of her writing that allows her to reframe her image of Hamilton’s lover:

No, no, she was not better than I. Strip her of her glittering clothes, put her in rags over a wash-tub, and she would have been transformed into a common thing.

But I? If you put *me* over a wash-tub, I tell you *I* would have woven a romance, aye, from the very suds. God had planted in me the fairy germs; that *I* knew.

(350, italics original)

And in the midst of Nora's mourning her failed romance, her friend Lolly urges her, "You can *write*...You have a letter in your pocket addressed to posterity. Deliver it, Nora! Deliver it!" (355, italics original)

But rather than signaling an unambiguous movement into self-possession and autonomy, writing, for Nora as for the Ex-Colored Man, remains a space of contested affiliations and identifications. She says of her writer sister, "a girl with more real talent than I...She is dead now, that dear big sister of mine, and a monument marks her grave in commemoration of the work she did for my mother's country" (194). In comparing herself to her sister, she equivocates about the means to her own success, at one point noting, "My success was founded upon a cheap and popular device...Oh, I had sold my birthright for a mess of pottage!" (153-4). Although she doesn't specify what that "cheap and popular device" is, her citation of the closing lines of Johnson's *Autobiography*, published three years earlier, connects it at least obliquely to racial passing. Exactly what her "birthright" is, in this case, is strenuously maintained as ambiguous—but she clearly laments the narrow scripts through which she has been able to find success.

Although *The Times* uses the (il)legible traces of Eaton/Watanna's ethnic heritage to construct, through Nora, a portrait of the author as an authentic representative of "the land of wisteria," we might read *Me* as a testament to the very impossibility of such a modernist-multicultural reading. When Nora first introduces herself by way of

describing her parents, she notes, “I mention these few facts merely in the possibility of their proving of some psychological interest later” (4). Nora’s emphasis on the psychological highlights the contingency of her self-identification. Rather than a given identity that can be apprehended and fixed within specific structures of cultural meaning, the text offers traces of a self-identification that slides between whiteness and otherness, femininity and masculinity, as she negotiates her relationship to the world and responds to the varied ways others read her. *Me* stands not as the crowning achievement of an individual who has achieved lived success and thorough self-reflection, but rather one ironically marred by its narrator’s blind spots and prejudices, a document of the fact that identity is not a fixed given, as modernist multiculturalism would have it, but an ongoing negotiation and struggle.

The tendencies of modernist multiculturalism persist; Linda Trinh Moser, author of the afterword to the 1997 edition of *Me*, says that Eaton’s “textual silence” regarding her Chinese ancestry makes it “difficult to read *Me* as an autobiography” (358). That Moser shares this impulse to attribute Eaton’s autobiographical authority to an avowal of her ethnic identity is striking, given her awareness (unlike *The Times*) of Eaton’s highly self-conscious manipulation of her ethnic identification. Moser’s perspective is emblematic (in a more muted contemporary way) of how, as the histories of Johnson, Ornitz, and Eaton’s texts show, writers who troubled common perceptions of identity often ran aground against the hard reality of the era’s modernist-multicultural logic. The production and circulation of autobiographical texts was embedded in a network of ideological assumptions and anxieties regarding genre and identity—many of which are

recapitulated today in the seemingly vastly different atmosphere of contemporary multiculturalism, as I will discuss in chapter four. But first, I will examine the cultural work of autobiography in a very different, early twentieth-century pedagogical setting: workers schools.

Chapter 3

Factory Meets Faculty: Autobiography and Worker's Education at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers

A group of girl students are sprawled at ease in a semi-circle on the green lawn close to the Science Building. The teacher, who is a jovial young man, apparently well versed in literature and who inspires everyone with his emotional gaiety, reads to the group. Twilight stealthily extinguishes the crimson sunset on the horizon. Snowy cloudlets are drifting by in the distance. Only the teacher's voice pierces the hushed atmosphere... The group comprising various nationalities is given an insight into the history of their adopted land. Now and then, the instructor injects some commentary or defines a baffling word, until the dim light calls a halt to his activity. The girls stretch their limbs carelessly, as if coming out of a daze. They were evidently in a trance and are now once more coming back into contact with the physical world. A miner's daughter, somewhere in the centre, barks out choppy sentences about returning to a sweat shop at the end of the course. The words fall heavily on all the girls, and, one by one, they stroll along sadly to their temporary quarters.

Pauline Salant, Bryn Mawr Summer School class of 1929

Many of us feel that the Negro problem is a tremendous one, and we feel so helpless in regard to it that we take the easiest way out and shut our eyes to much of the real suffering... [But on my first day at Bryn Mawr] the girl in Room 13 reminded me of the fact that nearly 90% of the Negro population were workers, and the workers are the masses. Therefore we need only to unite our forces and we will bring about a betterment of conditions for all. I am glad my sister student called me into her room that day. She set me thinking in an entirely different direction... I have then to thank Bryn Mawr for putting me on the right track. I have Bryn Mawr to thank for making me race and class conscious.

Marion Jackson, Bryn Mawr Summer School class of 1926

In the early twentieth century, progressive-era ideals—and particularly the energy around women's social activism and feminist groups' interests in ameliorating the

injustices related to industrialization—led to the flowering of the American labor education movement. One of the earliest and most successful programs was the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, which was inaugurated in 1921, and which joined later with the School for Workers in Industry at the University of Wisconsin and the Vineyard Shore Workers School on the Hudson in upstate New York to form the Affiliated Schools for Workers. Each summer for fifteen years, eighty to one hundred young working women from around the country left the factories and shops that defined their daily existence for the idyllic suburban campus of the elite Bryn Mawr College. These women were part of an educational experiment that deeply affected their lives and the lives of the educators with whom they worked. Unlike other workers' education programs, which focused primarily on vocational training or training for labor organizers and activists, the Affiliated Schools offered non-vocational liberal arts study—particularly Bryn Mawr, which was widely considered the flagship humanistic program for women workers, and which became the model for many subsequent programs. As the opening epigraphs of this chapter demonstrate, the women's experience at Bryn Mawr was both an idyllic, almost dreamlike suspension of their often grueling workaday lives, but one that for many of the women had a very real psychic and material impact.

Founded by M. Carey Thomas, then president of Bryn Mawr College, the Bryn Mawr Summer School was inspired, in large part, by the thriving British Workers Education Association (WEA), in which members of Thomas's intellectual and activist English family were involved. Bryn Mawr's program emulated the WEA and other British models in its use of established (capitalist) institutions and networks for financial

and organizational support—a fact which may have ultimately led to the school’s closing in the 1930s, when faculty and worker-students became more radicalized and clashed with the College’s administration, which was mounting an endowment campaign that would rely on wealthy investors (Heller 27-8).⁴¹

The school’s curriculum changed continually over the years; influenced by developments in progressive, labor, and adult educational theory, the administrators and faculty were animated by a belief in education as a vehicle for social change. Within their pioneering curriculum, faculty experimented broadly with course content and pedagogical methods, but English and economics remained the interdisciplinary core. In fact, for much of the school’s life, the program’s core courses were taught by teams of two instructors, comprised of an English professor and an economist (Heller 206). While English and economics were thus put crucially into relationship with each other, both

⁴¹ Early on, students and labor groups expressed deep skepticism toward the school, both about the utility of its liberal-humanist approach for addressing labor issues, and about its larger aims and sympathies, given Bryn Mawr’s status as an elite (and elitist) institution, and given that the faculty was drawn exclusively from the academic establishment and not from the labor movement. In a narrative report on the school, its director Hilda Smith claimed that despite this hesitancy, the school’s record quickly spoke for itself, and labor groups were happy to ally with the school once the activism and achievement of its graduates became evident (*Women Workers* 25-7). But the school’s records also demonstrate that its faculty and administrators gradually voiced more open, direct sympathies with the labor movement, revising the mission statement numerous times to address the school’s utility regarding the aims of the movement; devoting half the seats on its main policy-making committee to worker representation; and later meeting student demands to hire Marxist scholars for the faculty (Heller 19-20, 206-7, 244-45). Nonetheless, some students continued to note an ideological disconnection between ideals and actions: as student Celia Friedman put it in an essay reflecting on her summer at Bryn Mawr, “What I do miss in Bryn Mawr is a real proletarian atmosphere, which I expected to find at Bryn Mawr, the institution for industrial girls where a workers’ ideology is so essential. I find instead the prevailing bourgeois traditions and customs, which are contrary to all the teaching in the classes.”

because of the structure of the team-taught core course, and, as I will discuss, because of the contextualized approach that English instructors took generally, the study of English did not simply serve to demonstrate economic ideas; as Hilda Smith, the school's long-serving director, put it, "The members of the English Department, which included work in composition, literature, and public speaking, were unanimous in their statement that English should be taught for itself primarily, and not merely as a tool in an economics course" (71). The students clearly valued the instruction that they received in English, both for giving them access to the pleasurable experience of reading and for sharpening their skills of observation and analysis; but also for giving them broader insight into the problems of class and power relations, beyond the personal and local circumstances that circumscribed their daily existence as workers.⁴²

The school's faculty was committed to education that took as central the workers' own experience—an idea that continued to gain currency within adult education, and which remains one of its most widely-accepted tenets. This commitment led to egalitarian relationships among students and faculty, to a high level of student representation within the school's administration, and to experiments with democratic teaching methods in the classroom. Another crucial way that workers' experience was

⁴² The significance of literature for radical pedagogy was also increasingly being recognized among progressive children's educators in the 1920s and 1930s. Changing ideas about the nature of childhood and the possibilities for social transformation (as opposed to social reproduction) through education led to a widespread reconsideration of the nature and function of children's literature. For analysis of how these changes fed (and were fed by) trends in the children's book publishing industry and shifts in the country's broader political contours, see Julia L. Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006).

made central to their education was through the widespread use of autobiography as a teaching tool. Writing and reading each other's autobiographies gave students coming from diverse circumstances a way to locate commonalities and differences among their experiences, and to see their own experiences in the context of other working women's lives. Student autobiographies thus gave instructors an invaluable tool through which to contextualize the work that students did in the classroom; historian Rita Heller notes:

Instructors...had to compensate for students' inadequate educational background, and their long absences from classrooms. In addition, they faced a dizzying mix of occupational, national, geographical and social backgrounds. Cultural and ethnic heterogeneity prevailed even within intellectually homogenous groups. The one common denominator came to be the workers' life experience. Job-connected issues and autobiographies were basic to the Economics and English classes.

(210)

At least as much as their writing, it was the *reading* of the autobiographies that served a crucial educational function. Students became critical readers of their own and each others' autobiographies—as Andrea Hourwich, a Bryn Mawr teacher who edited a collection of the students' autobiographies called *I Am a Woman Worker* (1936), put it, “Such a process points up valuable happenings, and out of a collection of those a basis for group action may be formulated.” Similarly, as I will discuss, autobiography was fundamental to the way that students were encouraged to read literature more generally: “Both students and subject matter [were] studied and situated in terms of a local, national and/or international context, given political dimensions, and related to an economic base

associated with discursive power struggles” (Hollis 5). As a pedagogical tool, then, and within the interdisciplinary framework of English and economics, autobiography was used to examine the relationship between individual experience and the social and historical context in which it is embedded, and as the basis for social action.

In this chapter I examine the model behind English studies in the Bryn Mawr school, particularly its pioneering interdisciplinarity and its focus on the material conditions from which literature emerges and that it reflects. The role of autobiography specifically was crucial—students were encouraged to produce autobiographies and to read their own and each other’s autobiographies, as well as published autobiographies by a range of authors, in ways that were grounded in an analysis of these material conditions. In my previous two chapters, I looked at how, for middle-class readers of magazines and best sellers, autobiography served as a tool through which to understand and contain cultural differences that seemed to threaten a newly consolidating middle-class identity. For working-class readers at Bryn Mawr, however, it became a lens through which to analyze and develop class consciousness in a way that did not confuse or conflate it with racial or ethnic difference.

The students and faculty did not ignore cultural differences—to do so would have been impossible given the range of backgrounds that the students brought with them, as well as the range of literature that they read (which, as I will discuss, would be considered multicultural even by today’s standards). In fact, it was due to demands on the part of some students that the summer school began admitting African Americans in

1926.⁴³ In their English courses, they were encouraged to be self-reflexive about their own identities and their prejudices toward others; for example, a common English assignment, versions of which were used by instructors Ellen Kennan, Grace Hawk, and Elinor Goldmark Black, among others, prompts students with these questions:

“What instances of prejudice have you met in your life? Would you object to a Chinese girl as a working partner? Would your objections reach to any other race? Are you as sympathetic with the forelady’s troubles as with those of your working partner? Can you listen with equal patience to a Republican, a Democrat, a Socialist, a Communist? A Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew, a Mohammedan, an athiest? Are you conscious of having acted on prejudice yourself? Have you conquered any of your prejudices? Are you trying to conquer any now? Have you any that you do not wish to conquer?”

That the students grappled with these questions continually is evident; as Ada Franssens, student editor of the school literary magazine *Shop and School*, put it in her editor’s note to the 1931 issue of the magazine, “From our study of English...we have learned to analyze a man [sic] for his true values and not what he seems to be. The ignorance and

⁴³ See Heller 70-73; this was a highly contentious issue among students, school administrators, and the larger Philadelphia-area community. Heller’s analysis evidences the many dialogues that surrounded this decision: “Here were black factory women who were recruited for and admitted to residential study on a Main Line College campus during the socially inert Coolidge era. The surrounding community, the site of the legendary play and film ‘The Philadelphia Story,’ was an enclave of vast wealth and conservatism. The black women’s presence on campus affected local mores. The local movie theater bowed to the Summer School’s pressure to desegregate its seating. Bryn Mawr College matriculated its first black undergraduates after the labor school did so. Laboring women in the twenties rarely worked alongside blacks. Only 3% of female factory workers were black and they labored in largely segregated workplaces” (70).

prejudice which was embedded in the hearts of some of us has entirely disappeared and in its place we find understanding.” While Franssens’ statement may be somewhat idealistically overreaching, ultimately, as many of the student autobiographies I discuss demonstrate, the students did attempt to put issues of cultural difference, and specifically gender-, and race-based oppression, into relation with the power dynamics of capitalism.

Autobiography and the Bryn Mawr Curriculum

The widespread pedagogical interest in autobiography at Bryn Mawr reflected the school’s student-centered orientation, which was at the heart of much of its innovation. As mentioned above, the school’s curriculum was informed by the progressive education movement, and particularly by John Dewey, who believed that “a teacher’s raw materials are not his discipline but rather his students’ attitudes and motives.”⁴⁴ By the 1920s, such ideas were gaining wide currency in adult education; and the British labor education movement had long focused on the links between education and the “real world,” putting students’ experience (particularly their work experience) at the center of the curriculum (Heller 204). While teachers at the Bryn Mawr school were clearly inspired by these

⁴⁴ Dewey says, “When engaged in the direct act of teaching, the instructor needs to have subject matter at his fingers’ ends; his attention should be upon the attitude and response of the pupil. To understand the latter in its interplay with subject matter is his task, while the pupil’s mind, naturally, should not be on itself but on the topic in hand...the teacher should be occupied not with the subject matter it itself but in its interaction with the pupil’s present needs and capacities. Hence simple scholarship is not enough. In fact, there are certain features of scholarship or mastered subject matter—taken by itself—which get in the way of effective teaching *unless* the instructor’s habitual attitude is one of concern with its interplay in the pupil’s own experience” (212).

movements, they largely invented, experimented with, and revised their own very unique pedagogy and curriculum. From informal, discussion-based classes, where students sat around long tables rather than at fixed desks, to the focus on qualitative rather than quantitative evaluation of the students, to equal students representation on all school committees, the Bryn Mawr faculty's then-radical approach to pedagogy and governance anticipated many educational reforms that would come to be widely accepted, in both adult and post-secondary education, later in the century.⁴⁵

Given the significance accorded by the faculty to the students' own experience, it is perhaps not surprising that an autobiography came to be standard as the first English assignment, and was used by many English teachers throughout the semester. As long-time teacher Amy Hewes described, "If they did not know it already, [the Summer School] teachers soon found that the most fruitful beginning was the student's own experience. Classes in English often started with the writing of autobiographies" (216); another teacher, Alice Hansen Cook, noted that the faculty agreed on the importance of such an assignment, emphasizing that it was "something that we all did" (qtd. in Hollis 62). While the assignment varied from instructor to instructor and over time, the school's curriculum files show that the version originated by the popular teacher Ellen Kennan was widely used by other instructors, over many years. Kennan's assignment asks students to respond to a series of questions, noting, "Don't take any of these questions as commands. Answer what you please." The assignment is divided into five sections: "Family and Background," "Education," "Work," and "What do you do for fun?" And,

⁴⁵ See Heller, Chapter 5, for a discussion of the innovative classroom techniques at Bryn Mawr.

as Karen Hollis notes, while such categories represent a relatively bourgeois pattern of development, the questions they contain encourage the writers to take a critical stance toward such an emplotment. For instance, the “Childhood” section asks, “What is the first thing that you can remember? What do you remember that you wish you could forget?” And the “Education” section asks, “What schools did you go to? What did you fail to get [from school]? What did you get that you later found untrue?”

How did these essays fit into the broader study of English at Bryn Mawr? The curriculum was altered and refined a great deal over the school’s lifetime, and curriculum committee reports spanning the life of the school show evidence of ongoing engagement with issues of interdisciplinarity, approaches to balancing subjects, and a focus on student self-analysis. For example, instructors debated about the best ways to integrate and relate material from different courses, methods for encouraging deeper and broader analyses of texts, and the degree to which Marxism should be studied as such in the context of other classes.⁴⁶ Despite changes, the interdisciplinary “unit” of English and economics was the program’s mainstay. All students were required to take that core course, and could elect to take additional literature courses. English was among the most popular subjects throughout the history of the school; Hilda Smith reported in 1929, “No student ever gets enough, and the reiterated demand for ‘more English’ has become familiar at every faculty meeting or curriculum committee” (137). The school’s directors and faculty were

⁴⁶ The latter issue was one around which there was particularly spirited discussion, as evidenced by curriculum committee reports over many years from the mid-1920s to 1930s. While there was apparent student demand for the study of Marxism, some instructors worried that students would get too bogged down by its philosophical nuances, and Marx does not appear on reading lists. However, students and instructors did form a popular extracurricular Marxism study group. And despite contentious debate, in 1933 the faculty voted to hire a Marxist scholar in response to a growing number of leftist students’ more insistent demands.

also firmly convinced of the value of literature in the worker's curriculum; as Smith said, echoing a statement made by the curriculum committee after the school's inaugural summer, "literature should not be regarded only as a means of relaxation, and therefore, a luxury. It is a necessity for the intelligent understanding of life, and for that reason is fundamental in carrying out the purpose of a workers' school (73). Furthermore, in Smith's mind, as among the faculty, the study of literature and the literary production of the students themselves were intimately connected: "From the joy and illumination the industrial worker finds in literature, one may foreshadow what her creative expression might be, once released from the monotony and fatigue of the long day in the factory" (119). Indeed, after the school's first year, composition and literature were combined (with the later addition of public speaking); further, the composition assignments frequently included creative elements. So the students' reading of their own and each other's autobiographies was firmly rooted in the context of their wider study of literature.

The Social Function of Literature: Contextualizing the Bryn Mawr Approach

The Bryn Mawr faculty's approach to literature departed in significant ways from that of their contemporaries within and outside of the academy. A document produced by the curriculum committee in the school's first year, and reiterated in many later curriculum reports, explains the significance that was accorded the study of literature at greater length:

A. To give some conception of the different types of literature...With guidelines and some careful observation, the student should be able to establish for herself some sort of standard according to which she may measure the literature she reads through the rest of her life.

B. To show literature not only as a stimulus to imagination, and appeal to the emotions, a thing of beauty, but as the vehicle for the ideas and ideals which men live by—in short, when the thinking it codifies is sound and fine, as a guide to life.

C. To show literature as a reflection of the steady march of man, the medium which bears witness to improvement in social conditions, a yearning for reform, and an increasing recognition of the rights of the working man. With this point of view, literature becomes, instead of something dead and buried in books, a living sentient thing, keenly sensitive to changing opinions, itself the voice of men who have struggled themselves, or barring that, have a sympathetic eye to the struggle.

This description is noteworthy for several reasons. First, the literature classroom is presented as the site for the inculcation of literary taste, and literature's value is presented in terms of beauty and moral soundness—ideas that reflected the prevailing (conservative) sentiment of academic English departments. This is perhaps not surprising, given that all of the faculty members were drawn from the academic establishment.

But these ideas take on a new cast when viewed along side the actual reading lists from the summer school's literature courses, which bore little resemblance to those

common in traditional college literature classrooms, where the study of literature was quite narrow; as disciplinary historian David Shumway describes, the standard reading list that emerged in the academy as American Literature became codified as an object of study, for example, was quite homogenous, confined to a narrow list of authors, “all of them white men, most of them from New England and almost all of them of English ancestry. [This reflected the fact that] American literature had long been understood as the expression of a homogenous American culture defined against the alien cultures of immigrants, blacks, and Native Americans” (124). And nowhere was Bryn Mawr’s departure from the traditionally narrow view of literature more marked than in courses that focused on American literature, such as those of the popular teacher Jean Carter, whose ever-developing syllabus and attendant materials were used as models by new Bryn Mawr teachers and were published by the Affiliated Schools under the title *This America: A Study of Literature Interpreting the Development of American Civilization*. The publication was distributed widely to workers’ education groups, and while it is impossible to know if or in what way it was used, to be sure it communicated a version of American literature to an audience of working-class readers and educators that was very different from the one generally sanctioned by the academy. The syllabus—prescient for its attention to “folk” literature and its implicitly inclusive definition of the “literary” text—would be considered “multicultural” even by today’s standards. Along side texts from what the academic establishment was coming to consider the American canon (by Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance), the syllabus included collections of Native American stories and poetry, works by Joel Chandler Harris, Mary Antin, James Weldon Johnson,

Anzia Yezierska, and Abraham Cahan, as well as works by contemporary literary radicals such as Waldo Frank. Other Bryn Mawr teachers' syllabi reflect a similar attention to diversity; For instance, Ellen Kennan, another long-time teacher, who taught courses that focused primarily on American literature but also included European works, offers a section just on autobiography, where Ben Franklin's *Autobiography* sits next to Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* and Peter Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*.

But what is perhaps more significant than the surprising diversity of the summer school reading lists is their innovative approach to teaching the literature. In the academy, as Shumway notes, teaching methods in English in the first decades of the twentieth century typically consisted of two approaches: "lectures on historical backgrounds, and the reading aloud of literary works, accompanied by brief celebratory interjections" (192). But at Bryn Mawr, the democratic teaching methods inspired by the progressive education movement and the labor education movement (class periods that were almost exclusively discussion-based, less formal relations between professors and students, and a focus on the students' experience) were combined with an approach to literature that viewed it, as the curriculum committee's document describes it, as "a living sentient thing, keenly sensitive to changing opinions," bearing witness to changing material conditions and offering a useable site for the analysis of contemporary social relations.

As one English teacher, Rachel Dunaway Cox, describes on her syllabus, the goal of the course is to understand how "artistic expression—and especially literary expression—has its roots deep in the economic structure out of which it has come...the ideas set forth in books are and must be identified with the way people earn their living,

and those ideas represent the way in which that work affects the thought and action of the people engaged in it.” In the school’s official literature, in curriculum committee reports, and on individual course syllabi, the links between literature and the material conditions of its production and consumption—and the value in examining those links—are emphasized. And from the evidence available, students appear to have made and appreciated those links. In a 1925 postmortem report, instructor Helen Lockwood sums up the experience in her classroom: “I am sure that [the students] have been made to feel that English and economics do not occupy fields carefully fenced off from each other.” And in a 1926 issue of the student magazine *Shop and School* devoted to the value of reading, one student, Rose Kruger, notes, “Our studies have now brought us to the point where we realize that great literature is inseparable from the political and social changes of the period in which it was produced” (4). Other student essays demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the politics of literary production; in her essay “Proletarian Literature,” for instance, student Gay McNamara argues for the need for such literature, noting:

This sort of literature has been criticized from the standpoint that it is ‘propaganda.’ Admitting that, I would say that the most of literature, directly or indirectly, is also propaganda. A novel will present the solution of some problem; it will teach some moral; at least it will picture a certain way of living or thinking. All of this definitely influences the minds of readers. (19)

McNamara demonstrates an engagement with the debates of the day among left intellectuals, and goes on to critique Upton Sinclair for the “crudeness” of his novels, tracing a trajectory for the literary development of proletarian art. She concludes, “This

literature will live and thrive as long as existing conditions continue....Crush it and it will spring up again, for it is the expression of our present day, the literature of the workers of our time” (19).

The idea of the inseparability of a work of art from the material conditions of its creation—that a work’s meaning is crucially grounded in the economic and social milieu in which it is produced—may be more commonplace, if not universally accepted, today. But this was certainly not true in the wider literary establishment of the 1920s, particularly within the academy, which was increasingly taking over the critical function of earlier men of letters as American Literature was becoming established as a discipline. Even as American Literature came to be an established object of study, into the 1920s, the focus of the academic establishment was still on traditional literary history; the methods promoted were, as Gerald Graff puts it, primarily suited to “such tasks as preparing editions, establishing a critical bibliography, investigating and interpreting sources, and solving problems of authentication and attribution” (137). And even as criticism made inroads in the academy, it bore no resemblance to the proto-cultural criticism that was being promoted at the summer school; rather, it was a reaction against earlier biographical and historical scholarship, and as such, it was actively disinterested in authors, readers, and cultural or historical context—a relative of what would become New Criticism, with its focus on the formal and aesthetic qualities of a literary work. By the time the first anthologies of American Literature were published (largely for use in colleges and universities) in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the focus of research in the academy was beginning to shift, as Shumway puts it, from “biography and background to

oeuvre and text,” with an increasing tendency to focus on “major” authors, and virtually no attention given to contemporary authors (195). Given that the professors at the summer school all came from the academic establishment, the collective and emphatic focus on literary works’ material context on the part of Bryn Mawr faculty is remarkable.

Furthermore, while the summer school faculty may have taken inspiration from contemporary literary radicals working outside of the academy (many of whom, such as Frank, Upton Sinclair, and Randolph Bourne frequently appeared on their syllabi), the radicals offered little by way of a unified approach to literature that could be employed in the classroom. As literary historian Daniel Aaron notes, “They agreed on many of their antipathies and honored in common a certain number of spiritual ancestors if they differed in their aesthetic standards and in their political and social goals” (42). Some, such as Max Eastman (perhaps the most widely-recognized of the era’s literary radicals), developed radical political critiques, but remained surprisingly conservative in their literary tastes and conflicted about the relationship of art to politics; while others, such as those most closely associated with little magazines, “had [less] interest in political or economic questions and [were] revolutionist only in literary matters” (Aaron 44). United by their increasingly critical stance toward the academy’s growing influence, these disparate intellectuals “all held some genuinely radical political views...but for the most part they lacked a political program. And since their politics developed out of their experience of literature and not the reverse, the literary radicals did not have the means to offer a political analysis of literature” (Shumway 54).

So Bryn Mawr and its affiliates were truly a crucible for the approach to literature that they promoted in their curriculum and classrooms. Such an attitude toward literature and the need to read literature for what it can tell us about the material conditions of our own and others' lives and the power relations that structure those conditions gives us a rich context through which to understand the women's autobiographies themselves. The Bryn Mawr faculty's interdisciplinary approach combined reading, writing and economic critique into one enterprise in an innovative way that presented the study of literature as a worthy pursuit in and of itself, but broadened both the definition of literature and the ways of describing the utility of the "appreciation" of literature. The women's autobiographies, which challenge traditional definitions of the literary both in their subject and form, lend themselves to just the kind of reading that was promoted at the summer school.

Literary Work(s)

In her essay "Working/Women/Writing," Lillian Robinson makes a case for reading texts like the women's autobiographies as literature, despite the relative absence of craft or skill—their apparent lack of sophistication, reliance on clichés and sentimentality, problems with logic, sentence structure, and diction. And while I disagree with Robinson's prescriptive premise that the "best feminist literature" is that which "narrates mass experience," and that the best role for feminist criticism is to celebrate "that which is basic [over] that which is marginal, what is common [over] what is

exceptional,” I nonetheless agree with her conclusions (229). In order to read texts like the women’s autobiographies, says Robinson, we do not “have to ‘relax our standards.’ Instead, writing like this can force a reevaluation and a reordering of those standards and turn them on their heads. And this sort of process, this sort of reading, tells us something we urgently need to know” (252-3). Robinson’s approach echoes that of the summer school, where literature (whether the “official” literature listed in course syllabi or the literature produced by the students themselves) offers a venue for urgent and self-reflexive cultural criticism that does not discount the cultural significance of writing based on aesthetics, subject matter, or authorial identity.

The women’s narratives are moving and often sharply self-reflexive, offering rich insight into their own social and material contexts; and taken together, they offer a compelling exploration of class, identity, and cultural production. As noted earlier, the editor of the published collection *I Am a Woman Worker* described a similar utility in the narratives, linking the kind of analytical reading to which the narratives lend themselves with the possibility for social action. Further, it is not simply their utility for which the editors praise the narratives, but also for their uniqueness as (particularly modern) literary products: “In the ideas of old fashioned English teachers, some of the accounts are perhaps not English—at least as it is taught in old fashioned schools—though to a prejudiced view the English in these stories is infinitely preferable” (1).

Paula Rabinowitz describes how the editors’ arrangement of the narratives under five separate headings (“Getting a Job,” “Life in the Factory,” “Open Shops and Company Unions,” “Trade Unions and Organized Shops,” and “On Strike!”) provides a

“narrative structure for the developing class consciousness of the women” (24). But, as Rabinowitz notes, this story of developing class consciousness does not overwrite the particularly gendered experience of the women workers; rather,

I Am a Woman Worker focuses on the special concerns of women workers—segregated labor pools, sexual harassment, sexist unions, the double day—as well as on their differing senses of commitment to work, family, and each other; by doing so, the book discloses the unspoken content of a sector of the working class whose voices were not articulated by official Party or union organizations (or by literary history and criticism). (24)

Similarly, I would argue that the narratives also offer insight into the ways in which such experiences are particularly racially or ethnically marked, whether by direct discrimination on the part of bosses or fellow workers, the enflaming of workers’ prejudices on the part of bosses to discourage workers’ solidarity, or the linking of labor and anti-racist activism.

While the autobiographies that were collected in *I Am a Woman Worker* are all explicitly job-related narratives, the women also wrote autobiographical pieces dealing with more wide-ranging topics, from childhood recollections and family history, to education and their social lives. The breadth of the material that the women drew on demonstrates that neither class nor gender were exclusive keys to any essential, general identity of the women workers, and that they drew on many sources of self-awareness

and creation.⁴⁷ The volume of autobiographical writing by students is striking— both unpublished, in the course files of the School’s archives, and published, if not in *I Am A Woman Worker*, then in the school’s literary magazine *Shop and School*, which was given to each student and also distributed to other workers’ groups.

That these brief sketches offer just fragments of the women’s lives speaks, in part, to the material conditions of their creation. Like Harriet Jacobs, who even after gaining her freedom from slavery was only able to write her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) in fits and starts when she could steal away from her servant’s duties (she apologized to a friend to whom she sent an early draft of her manuscript for her “unconnected scrawl,” noting, “I have been interrupted and called away so often—that I hardly know what I have written” [as quoted in Yellin 135]), the women eked out time to write from their busy work lives. Even in the relative luxury of their weeks at Bryn Mawr (as compared to their daily lives as factory workers), virtually every moment of their waking lives was accounted for, the School’s schedules show, with classes, study groups, domestic chores, and organized extracurricular activities such as lectures or conferences. Unlike the autobiographer of George Gusdorf’s classical definition, these

⁴⁷ Some of the narratives speak to the difficulty of reconciling this multiplicity; for instance, in her 1927 narrative “My Heritage,” student Emma Fickardt describes her college-educated Russian-Jewish mother, who was forced to work in a factory after immigrating to the U.S., and her German father who deserted from the navy at the outbreak of World War I and who, despite his many artistic and intellectual talents, worked only marginally happily as a machine repairman. This mix of ethnic, national, religious, educational, and class identities through which she has been constituted leave her puzzled as how to self-identify, and she closes, without offering any clear reconciliation: “I would like to speak of these parts as a whole, but I find it impossible, and I have to choose between them for what I consider my heritage” (2).

autobiographers lacked the leisure time necessary to “interpret a life in its totality,” to “reconstitute [themselves] in the focus of [their] special unity across time” (35-8).

The short narratives gain force through their compilation in the School’s publications. Their compilation highlights the autobiographers’ tendency to narrate their experiences and self-revelations in relation to others and to their social circumstances. As Valerie Smith has described Jacob’s *Incidents*, it is “not the classic story of the triumph of the individual will; rather it is more a story of a triumphant ‘self-in-relation’” (216-17). Particularly when taken together, we see how the women’s narrators, like Jacob’s narrator Linda Brent, exhibit interdependence with other characters and must balance their radical or transcendental impulses with the reality of their social roles, often inscribed by race and gender—what can be read as an expression of a uniquely heterogeneous class consciousness. The power of the compilation of these textual fragments lies in their demonstration of the breadth of individual experience and perspectives, even as they utilize highly conventional narrative modes, as I will discuss. Furthermore, particularly in *I Am a Woman Worker*, where the narratives are organized along thematic lines, the commonalities among the women’s experiences of punishing workplace conditions, brutal responses to strikes, and despotic bosses highlights the impact of these material conditions across geographic, racial, and ethnic lines.

In publishing their narratives in the School’s literary magazine, along side poetry, short stories, and book reviews, the women (and the magazine’s student-editors) clearly claimed for them the status of literature. As Sylvia Cook describes in an analysis of American working women’s literary production, earlier models of working women’s

literary magazines, from the *Lowell Offering* (1840-45) to Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* (1906-18) were consistently accused of either failing to be adequately literary, because of the quality of the writing and their content, or of failing to be adequate vehicles for the expression of class consciousness, because of an association of "literariness" with bourgeois class values. But this perennial debate that positioned writing women as in tension "between bourgeois literary selfhood and female proletarian activism" (229) was perhaps less keenly felt by the Bryn Mawr autobiographers, who understood their primary audience as their fellow students, and the teachers for whose classes they may have produced the narratives—classes where the literary and the political were presented as dynamically interrelated rather than as in opposition.

Reading Bryn Mawr Autobiographers

The women's autobiographies are at their most compelling when they succeed in offering readers an understanding of their personal experience within a larger social context. Most of the narratives (published and unpublished) consist of just a page or two of writing, some focusing on a single incident or event, others offering a summary of the narrator's life (or one aspect of her life). This piece, "Autobiography," written by Loretta Starr and published in *Shop and School* in 1925, uses a childhood memory as a jumping-off point for a broader social analysis:

When I was eight years old, I first began to see that I would have no opportunities to become rich and famous. I happened to be playing out in the yard

one hot summer day. Around me were many children who were just as hot and dirty as I. Some of the children got into a fight over some trifle and before anyone realized what had happened the mothers of these children came out of hot and dirty kitchen to straighten out the free for all.

Instead of smoothing matters out, the mothers succeeded in getting themselves involved. Sharp talk developed, names were flung left and right. During their squabble these women looked their worst. They were ugly. I was not involved in the fight but stood on the sidelines. It suddenly came over me, what an awful thing it would be for me to grow up and be like that! Then I began to think, “Why, what chance would I have to grow up, I would also have to go into a dirty factory, get married to some poor man, raise many kids as these women and I can’t do much to stop this from becoming so.”

The portrait of the working-class families in the first two paragraphs echoes Frank Norris’s (somewhat more harsh) portrait of the Ryers and the McTeagues from his 1897 story “Fantaisie Printanière”; Mrs. Ryer and Mrs. McTeague, despite the abject struggles they both encounter to sustain their families’ daily existence, are unable to recognize their common experience of class- and gender-based oppression, and instead end up locked in a violent feud about whose husband is more skilled at inflicting abuse. While Starr’s piece offers little by way of artful narration—the narrator primarily *tells* us what happened rather than descriptively *showing* us—the incident is nonetheless made compelling because the reader senses the force of the narrator’s realization at the end of the passage.

Unlike Norris' story, the narrator here recognizes the links between public and private, between domestic and social problems, and especially between family and the reproduction of class. Eli Zaretsky describes how the development of industrial capitalism led to the devaluation of the work of "housewives" and mothers, since it was no longer seen as integral to the production of commodities; at the same time, however, the family acquired a new significance as "the realm of personal life"—as the primary institution through which the search for fulfillment and personal happiness takes place. As Zaretsky says, "Reflecting the family's separation from commodity production, this search was understood as a personal matter, having little relation to the capitalist organization of society," and the reproduction of the working class relied on the maintenance of this split (49). The narrator's discontentment with her family life, and her recognition of its connection to the larger class structure of society, demonstrates the illusory nature of the split.

We see the narrator as a child struggling to understand her conditions and their effect on her family:

This [incident] had quite an effect on my life...I made a number of attempts, during my childhood, to change the atmosphere at home. Being poor my parents always worried about how to feed eight mouths. Of course being deprived of certain necessities of life brought about very much unrest and discontent. I wondered often how we could be happy...I thought for a while that if I carried out the "Golden Rule" as was taught to me by nuns and teachers that the others in

the family would do the same. My family thought I was crazy and I soon stopped trying since it had no good effect on the others.

The narrator reveals the inadequacy of the moral framework that she is given at school to make sense of the effect of material deprivation on her daily existence; but despite what this moral framework would have her believe, she continues to doubt that it was “because we were ‘bad’ that we had so much disagreement among the different members of the family,” and she tries to understand her life instead by reading nearly everything in the small local library. As she begins to work outside of the home, we see snapshots of her developing class consciousness:

Soon after I went to work, I joined the Industrial group of the YWCA. My conditions in the factory began to affect me very much, more mentally than physically. I could see that the bad relations existing in my family and in the other working class families were a result of the present system of society. Their ill temper was a sort of release from their oppression in the factory. I knew that I couldn't change the whole system by myself and I couldn't see any organization or group of people who were trying to change things. I think that this is what made me feel my bad conditions more. During this period of mental unrest I did very much reading... When I was nearly eighteen, the factory that I was working in began to cut down on production and reduce wages. At that time I felt we workers could do something to improve our conditions so I began agitation in the factory for organization. I spent day and night in this work. I really began to feel I

had something to live for, that it wasn't necessary to take things lying down, that the thing to do was FIGHT!

While we don't know the outcome of the initial organizing efforts in which she became involved, it is clear that the "FIGHT!" with which the narrative ends is a much more hopeful one than that with which it begins.

Other pieces make use of more sophisticated literary devices. Estella Geller's "The Right to Eat," published in *Shop and School* in 1924, uses the third person voice rather than the first person (although the original handwritten piece is included in the school's archive of student autobiographies, confirming that it was in fact written as an autobiography):

Three girls entered a popular cafeteria. It was lunch time and they met together to enjoy the preciousness of friendships during the short space of time which was theirs. They were young and gay, and very much like any other group of girls save that two were dark skinned and the third white. All three of them had so much to contribute to the enthusiastic planning of a week-end trip to a camp which they were to enjoy in the near future.

What fun they had in choosing food that seemed most palatable and nourishing, and oddly one could notice that their tastes in food didn't utterly differ. They received their checks and were making their way to a table when two bell-boys appeared and offered to help them with their trays. They were led to a table in the far corner of the room, yet there were many empty tables nearer the

center. One of the boys glared at the white girl as the three of them sat down to enjoy their lunch and talk over their plans.

Very shortly after, the boy returned with a folding screen and, to their confusion, partitioned them from the rest of the dining room. The girls objected to this and one of them asked, “Why must we be screened in order to eat? I insist that you remove the screen or let me see the manager.” To which the waiter merely replied, “I am sorry, but our patrons would disapprove, and the management is not in a position to lose their patronage.” They arose from the table and demanded to see the manager. One of the girls spoke to him saying, “We refuse to eat in a partitioned nook. Perhaps two of us are black, but we pay the same price for this food as your white patrons; and we also need to eat.

They left the cafeteria and were not gay now, but humiliated and discriminated against. And yet we have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Geller’s use of third person narration has a remarkable effect: we cannot know if the author was the white woman or one of the black women.⁴⁸ Presumably all working “girls,” given “the short space of time which was theirs” for leisure, their portrait as offered in the first two paragraphs focuses on the ways in which they are *unremarkable*, no different from other working girls or from each other, as they innocently take great pleasure in choosing their food and discussing their plans. Rather than the characters’ individual race, the focus of the discrimination—and thus the reader’s attention—is the

⁴⁸ Geller’s application to Bryn Mawr shows that she was, in fact, white.

cross-racial relationship between them. Indeed, it is the white woman who is the object of the only overt show of hostility, when she receives a glare from one of the bus boys. And the waiter highlights the connections between the restaurant's discriminatory practices and their profits, noting, "Our patrons would disapprove, and the management is not in a position to lose their patronage." Their protests against the partition are registered in the collective: "We refuse to eat in a partitioned nook. Perhaps two of us are black...but we also need to eat." And in the last sentence, the narrator's voice makes a powerful shift to this collective first person: "And yet we have the 'right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'" The heavy-handed irony of the sketch's close nonetheless emphasizes the productive ambiguity of the author's use of the collective "we"; this intentional ambiguity around the racial identity of narrator and the characters foreshadows similar (if more complex) uses of ambiguity in such works as Toni Morrison's "Recitatif."

Another narrative, "Ambushed" (published in *Shop and School* in 1925), by Emily Williams, similarly reflects on racism while presenting cross-racial relationships as a given within workers' groups. The piece opens with a stream of consciousness from the narrator: "Saturday night I put the dishpan away with a sigh of relief. My brown dress was pressed, my new shoes (I wonder if they'll hurt), hose, everything laid out. I dressed quickly. It was already late; a final glance at the mirror, an extra dab of rouge (Ed will be there) and I flew down stairs. I hope Frieda doesn't get tired of waiting." The narrator's quotidian thoughts and observations (about her clothes, friends and romance, her surroundings) continue as she describes arriving at a party for the opening of a new workers' center. But the tone quickly changes after a brick is thrown through the

window; the reader is left without an explanation of the event just as the partygoers are. The narrator and the other partygoers struggle to regain their former ease and lightheartedness, just as they “struggle furiously to keep time to the staccato rattle” of the band. But there is no hiding the “stiffness in everyone’s manner” after three “tough looking” men enter, demanding permits and ordering the band to quiet.

The first mention of race comes after the discomfort at the part increases when “a half drunken pool room bum [attempted] to start a fight with one of the Negro comrades.” Then, as the party breaks up, a man spits at one woman in the narrator’s group, and yells, “Dancing with niggers! And you call yourself a decent girl!” The group begins to walk on, but as the narrator describes, “We hadn’t taken very many steps before it became apparent that we were hopelessly out numbered and would soon be surrounded by a jeering ugly gang whose mood was becoming more threatening every moment.” They duck into an apartment and call the police as the angry gang continues to grow outside, but even after several more phone calls, the police fail to arrive; the friends are forced to simply hide until the gang tires of waiting, and then fearfully make their way home. The piece ends, “The next morning Mrs. Sparks made some rather scathing remarks about the hour at which I got in. I didn’t say anything.”

The piece reads almost like juridical testimony: the narrator offers no analysis of these events—we don’t know, for instance, who the “officials” were, and if their harassment was based in anti-labor sentiment, or in racism, or both; similarly, she offers no speculation about who threw the brick through the window, or why the police never come to disperse the angry mob. But she communicates the intensity of the incident and

the fear of those involved compellingly. In fact, her reserve in terms of judging the various harassers and attackers highlights her and her friends' innocence in the situation and compels the reader to see the irony in the judgments about "decency" made (explicitly or implicitly) by the officials, the mob, the police, and even Mrs. Sparks (presumably her landlord). Unlike many of the other autobiographies, Williams offers no clear ideological conclusion; nonetheless, the immediacy with which she demonstrates the links between class- and race-based hostilities is profound.

Many of the autobiographies that focus on work-related incidents share a similar emotional immediacy. Mary Anne Cassiani's "My First Job," published in *Shop and School* in 1924 and in *I Am a Woman Worker*, walks us through the narrator's introduction to factory life—a sketch that, like many others that detail the search for work or the first day in the factory, resonate with the experience of Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie.⁴⁹ Cassani describes:

With my heart pounding against my ribs as if it would suffocate me, I approached the girl at the desk. In vain did I strive to find my voice. It was as if some power held it back. With one motion I extended the newspaper and pointed to the advertisement which read: "Girl Wanted."

"Up one flight, the door on the right." High and sharp came her voice as she tried to talk above the metallic click of the typewriters.

Slowly I climbed the stairs; on the door the sign read Cutting Department.

As I entered it seemed to me the noise was absolutely deafening. On one side of

⁴⁹ As I will discuss, Dreiser was popular reading among the students, and his works also appeared on course reading lists.

the room were huge machines of iron. These machines swing up and down, looking as if they would devour the men that stood before them swinging their slightly bent bodies back and forth, back and forth, while they pressed the pedals that controlled the giant machines.

The floor was littered with little half moons of leather. White leather, brown leather, black leather. Girls too were there sitting at long benches, hopelessness in every move of their hands, dejection in every move of their bodies. It was then as I beheld them that a feeling of dismay gripped me. Would I become one of these?

Cassiani's focus on the *humanness* of her feelings—her anxiety, and the physical sensations in which her fear manifests—is made poignant by the implicit comparison she creates through her description of the factory's monstrous machines, and the machine-like qualities of the workers (like the “clattering automatons” of Carrie's shoe factory [27]). The receptionist's “high and sharp” voice blends with the “metallic click” of the typewriters; inside the shop, the massive machines appear to control the workers who operate their pedals: “These machines swing up and down looking as if they would devour the men that stood before them swinging their slightly bent bodies back and forth, back and forth”; the women, too, appear completely worn down by their repetitive work, “hopelessness in every move of their hands, dejection in every move of their bodies.” Cassiani's fear takes on a new cast in the narrative's closing lines, where she leaves her readers at the precipice of an open question—no longer the anxiety of asking for work or speaking with superiors, she now expresses fear for the survival of her own humanity.

Sarah Gordon's "A Typical Day in My Life," published in *Shop and School* in 1929, similarly demonstrates the materiality of her classed (and gendered) experience, highlighting the violence of factory life and the particularly precarious place of women. She says, "I have a habit of saying when I start out in the morning that I am going to war, for war it is for a worker, in an unorganized trade especially. We must always be on the defensive because we never can tell how our day will end; it depends upon the mood of our employer." The opening paragraphs present a thoughtful, observant narrator who gets great pleasure from reflecting on her physical surroundings:

I start the day wondering why the car company was allowed to raise the fare and was not made to add one or two cars so that the early morning passengers should at least have a seat. But I have found that there is an advantage in hanging on a strap shaking to and fro; it gives me an opportunity to observe my fellow passengers.

I love to observe people's faces; it is almost like reading books....I also like to observe what people are reading, for almost everybody is reading on the train....In the morning paper the average girl is reading the novel first, the young man the sports page, the middle-aged business man turns to the stock exchange news, and the elderly, tired-looking man tries to solve the crossword puzzle, probably as a means of relaxation, but very few people read the editorials, or the news of the day unless there is a big headline about a murder, a scandal, or a society wedding.

But I? I read all these people. Out of the train I come up to my shop, full of impressions. I would be glad if I were given work and were allowed to work my day through peacefully. But no!

The narrator's powers of observation become a defensive weapon, as she goes on to describe entering the shop and "reading" the faces of the boss, the foreman, and her fellow workers, noting, "I instantly feel that there is trouble in the air." Her language continues to highlight the potential violence of the workplace, as she waits for the boss's temper to explode and for trouble to erupt among the workers: "I have a feeling as though I were sitting on a slumbering volcano, I can never tell on which side the lava will break out." The tension, as she finds out during her lunch break, has to do with "a split in the organization":

I come back to work usually under the impression of the argument started on the street and am compelled to continue it, because half of the workers of our shop, that is, the men workers, belong to the opposition and are responsible for the break in our organization. These arguments take on very violent and in many cases dangerous forms. It is a very difficult life for us girls in these days; we have to fight our boss on one side, our union that should otherwise protect us on the other, and we are crushed between the two.

The language of physicality that is used to describe the potential for violence in her daily experience in the shop well as the dangerous position of the women workers contrasts sharply with the pleasurable physicality, linked to intellectual fulfillment, that she describes finding after her workday is done:

And then the evening! That much desired evening! I straighten up my shoulders, walk out on the street, sniff some fresh air, and go eat in a place where I can meet friends. We eat and talk about current events, and then we go to a lecture or a meeting or to see some good play, or to the Symphony Concert according to the day. This is the antitoxin which must counteract the poisonous effects of the day in the shop.

Other pieces focus on the inhumane treatment of the bosses. “The Boss,” published in *I Am a Woman Worker*, offers one such fairly developed character sketch:

He enters the factory bringing with him an atmosphere of untiring activity.

His worst victim is the shipping clerk.

“Louie! What are you doing?”

“I’m—eh, I’m—eh—“

“All right—get through with it!”

“The next minute he’s at the blockers. “Who made this hat?”

The forelady approaches. “Is there anything wrong with it?”

“Isn’t there? Does it look perfect?”

Forelady: “It looks all right to me.”

“Is it just like the sample? Get the sample, get the sample.” Impatiently—

“Now listen! If the girl can’t make it right give it to someone else.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with the hat; it looks all right to me.”

Now listen, I'm running this business. Do you want me to stay in business? If the hats will keep coming out this way, I'm going to stop making hats altogether." As usual he has the last word.

"Louie! Get away from the girls. Look how you handle the hats. Watch out, you big dope!"

A spry little man about 5 feet 4 inches tall, always doing something, even too busy to take off his hat and jacket on the warmest days.

"Miss Bee, trim up these brim hats right away." The next minute he's discussing business with his partner.

Now he's near the cutter. "Did you get the material? Is it all right? Order fifty more yards."

Now he's pressing. The chairlady is asking him to settle prices. "Just a minute, just a minute."

"When will you come in?" she insists.

"In a minute. Wait—in a minute. Louie, did you ship Baer's order?"

"I'm packing it now."

"Hurry up. Don't get lost."

"Mr. T...", the chairlady calls impatiently.

"All right—I'm coming. Louie, come here. Press those crowns and don't watch the girls."

In and out, here and there, sometimes the eye is too slow to follow his movement. Sh! The boss is out, disappeared as fast as he appeared, and the hurry and bustle disappears with him. (27-8)

While very little happens in this piece in terms of plot, its fast pace and believable dialogue create a vivid portrait of the boss and his effect on the roomful of workers. His bustling performance offers his employees a pointed demonstration of his dictatorial power, and the arbitrariness with which he wields that power is clearly disarming. While the conditions the narrator describes are not nearly as harsh as those described by other autobiographers, the piece nonetheless demonstrates how power can be deployed through casual abuses and mistreatment, and through the creation of confusion and anxiety. This apparently nonchalant deployment of power clearly has very real effects on the everyday wellbeing of the workers.

Elaine Herst's "From Now On, Girls," published in the 1931 *Shop and School*, similarly uses dialogue to paint a portrait of a typical workday, focusing on the power dynamics between the workers and the forelady in a hat factory. She begins:

In the morning girls come into the workroom slowly, one by one. Being piece workers they are not compelled to come in at a certain time.

Stella, the forelady, at the top of her voice repeats for about the fifth time the every day's renewed order, "From now on, girls, take off your hat and coat before you mark your name on the waiting list."

On her table is a sheet of paper, on which we mark our names in the morning if we have finished our work the day before, and also later when we

finish our work, so that she will know who has finished in order to give them work. But many times she does not notice the name, and if a girl doesn't watch her turn, she may be out of luck and not get any work at all. A few minutes later, the forelady will say, "From now on, girls, no one should write the name herself. When you finish your work, tell me!" But she is never there when the work is finished, so we have to wait until she comes back.

Among the girls waiting to sign up for work, some are waiting for ornaments.

"You must have it!" Stella will say.

"But I didn't get it," answers the girl.

"You must have lost it. Look good around. Maybe somebody took it," and at the top of her voice again, "From now on, girls, if you lose an ornament you will not get another and you will have to pay for it." A little while after, "From now on, girls, every ornament left over bring back to my table, and girls, don't take any ornaments home!" When I give her back an ornament, she repeats, "From now on, girls, don't take any more ornaments than you need!" There is no way of taking any. It is she who put the ornament by mistake into the bundle of work.

The humorous repetition of the forelady's refrain of "from now on, girls" continues throughout the piece, and while Herst quite successfully uses this repetition as a way to mock the forelady, she also uses it to create a vivid picture of the continual dehumanizing pressure for productivity that the workers face, and the unjust (and often nonsensical)

measures used to ensure this productivity. The forelady marches around the factory, “giving orders and constantly contradicting herself”; the narrator compares her dictatorial power to Caesar’s, “able to rule and ruin the girls, whose lives are affected by her favor or dislike.” After narrating a particularly racist, abusive exchange between the forelady and a worker (presumably a recent immigrant) who is struggling with English, and whom she demands go to school at the same time that she refuses to let her finish work on time to attend classes, the piece closes, “During the eight months I worked with her, I often wished she would go to school and learn a new verse. I was tired of ‘From now on, girls.’” Despite the narrator’s humor, her fatigue after dealing with eight months of such abuse is clearly evident.

Other pieces similarly demonstrate the workers’ victimization by the arbitrary wielding of power. “The President Visits the Mill,” published in *I Am a Woman Worker*, first describes tobacco worker’s frenzied half-day preparations for an unexpected visit from the company president. The piece closes:

The next day, when the President came through he had several other men with him, some wearing diamond stick pins and rings which cost thousands of dollars. The President did not look at the cigarettes; he merely looked over the floor. When one of those very important looking men stopped at one of the cigarette machines that was making fourteen hundred cigarettes a minute, he found just one bad cigarette before the girl that was catching could get to it. (It is nothing unusual for a cigarette machine to run a bad cigarette in a short time.)

This man showed the bad cigarette to the President. The President called the foreman and had the girl fired.

This girl had a mother and a little sister to take care of on \$11 a week. The men went on their way to another floor, while the girl trudged home with the news that she had no job. (47)

The abruptness with which the incident occurs and the piece ends emphasizes the despotic hold that the workers' experience the bosses to have over their lives. The scenario that the narrator describes echoes that of the furnace-tender Hugh Wolfe in Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills," whose life is dramatically and instantaneously changed by a tourist visit to the mills by the owner and his wealthy friends. Davis describes Wolfe's fascination with the men, echoed in many of the women's narratives: "He seized eagerly every chance that brought him into contact with this mysterious class that shown down on him perpetually with the glamour of another order of being. What made the difference between them? That was the mystery of his life" (27). When one of the visitors to the mill later reads about Wolfe's sentencing to nineteen years of hard labor for a theft he actually did not commit on the night of the visit, he notes casually, "Scoundrel! Serves him right! After all our kindness that night! Picking Mitchell's pocket at the very time!" (50). Davis's emphasis highlights the cruelty of his nonchalance: "His wife said something about the ingratitude of that kind of people, and then they began to talk of something else. Nineteen years! How easy that was to read! What a simple word for them to utter!" (51-1).

The bosses, similarly mysterious in their power and thoughtless about the impact they have on the workers' lives, breeze in and out of the women's narratives; presented as caricatures, chimerical, or otherwise larger-than-life or unreal, they nonetheless create in an instant profound emotional and material effects on the women's lives. In "My Clothing Shop," the boss's cigar smoke takes on a metaphorical significance for the almost mystical power that the bosses hold over the workers:

Suddenly all is quiet. The smell of cigar smoke is strong upon the air. This smell is a warning that the owner of the shop is near. You can always smell him before you see him....He walks up and down past the girls, who are working swiftly now. No one talks except when spoken to by the boss.

He picks up garments, inspecting each one separately and closely, looking for bad work. Everyone holds her breath for fear that it is her work he is looking at. If he finds work that is poor, his temper explodes...When you can no longer see or smell him, the atmosphere changes. (30-1)

As in "The President Visits the Mill" (and in Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills"), bosses wield a seemingly arbitrary, thoughtless control; they embody the force of a social system in which the characters find themselves powerless to control or alter their circumstances.

While it is relatively unlikely that any of the women had read Davis's story, which was initially published in 1861 in the genteel *Atlantic* and fell into obscurity in the twentieth century until Tillie Olsen brought it back to the attention of literary scholars in

the 1960s,⁵⁰ there was a great likelihood that many of them had encountered such writers as Norris and Dreiser, both of whom appeared regularly on Bryn Mawr syllabi, and who appear to have been popular reading among the women even prior to the summer school. The women's applications to Bryn Mawr, which asked what books and periodicals the women had read recently, indicates that while their reading experience varied widely, Dreiser was one of the most popular writers among those who made claims to "literary" reading (along with Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair)—*Sister Carrie* or *An American Tragedy* appeared on almost one-third of the more than one hundred applications I randomly surveyed; some women also indicated reading left-wing periodicals such as the *New Masses* in which writers such as Dreiser regularly appeared.

It is not surprising that Dreiser's sympathetic portrait of the material and moral struggles would have held great appeal. Ruth Barraclough has shown how Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* served as a similar touchstone for the movement of literature into the lives of working-class women;⁵¹ she says that for many readers, "particularly those of the newer reading public, lower middle-class and working-class females of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was a relief to encounter Tess" (64). Barraclough quotes Edith Hall, who wrote about reading *Tess* in her autobiography of servant life in the 1920s:

⁵⁰ Unlikely, but not impossible: Olsen herself reported, "I first read 'Life in the Iron Mills' in one of three water-stained, coverless volumes of bound *Atlantic Monthlys* bought for ten cents each in an Omaha junkshop. I was fifteen" (157).

⁵¹ Barraclough analyzes South Korean working women's autobiographies, examining how they draw on conventionalized narratives from working-class literature within the specific framework of the sexual politics of 1980s and 1990s South Korea.

This was the first serious novel I had read up to this time in which the heroine had not been of 'gentle birth,' and the labouring classes as brainless automatons. This book made me feel human and even when my employers talked to me as though I wasn't there, I felt that I could take it; I knew that I could be a person in my own right. (64)

Hall's description speaks to the role that literary discourse plays in the social construction of identities. It resonates with what Helen Lockwood, an influential summer school teacher, described that literature could do for workers; through literature, she describes, workers "found their way to a large world beyond their own narrow horizon...They saw their work in relation to the whole of humanity. They learned to speak of its glory or of its contrasts, between their destiny as toilers and that of the people making profits at their expense" (230). Bryn Mawr's worker-autobiographers clearly drew on the narratives that they had read, and through which they found meaningful ways to frame their own experience.

More specifically, the same kinds of melodramatic devices that Hardy and Dreiser drew on, and that are evident in the women's narratives, were common to much working-class literature of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As Peter Brooks describes, melodrama developed in distinctly different ways in France, England, and America; French melodrama was "written for a public that extended from the lower classes, especially artisans and shopkeepers, through all sectors of the middle class, and even embraced members of the aristocracy," whereas in England and America, melodrama "seems to quickly have become exclusively entertainment for the lower

orders” (xii). Brooks notes that it is the latter association that garnered melodrama its pejorative connotations, but argues that the “melodramatic mode”—one of “high emotionalism and stark ethical conflict that is neither comic nor tragic”—is fundamental to modern literary representation across cultural fields. (13)

The melodramatic mode flourished precisely because of its ability to serve the representational needs of vastly different readers and writers, and to accommodate a range of ideological positions. Certainly, those women whose applications indicate that their reading was limited to pulp-romance magazines such as *Love Story* and *Cupid’s Diary* were also exposed to melodramatic narrative devices, if in a less overtly politically charged milieu than those reading Dreiser. But regardless of the differences in the sophistication with which the melodramatic was deployed among these texts, it may have served a similar psychological function for readers. Martha Vicinus has argued for the importance of melodrama as a “psychological touchstone for the powerless” who face circumstances not of their making and beyond their control. (“Helpless” 128).

In the Bryn Mawr women’s narratives, the use of the melodramatic heightens the feelings of powerlessness that surround the characters’ experience, but melodramatic narrative techniques were often coupled with explicitly political messages. In this, they shared much with the tradition of popular English working-class novels that Vicinus describes, which was

built upon stereotyped characterization and plotting. Authors consciously broke away from the character development and unified action found in the bourgeois novel in order to emphasize the political implications of a situation. Readers were

expected to identify with the hero only as a typical honest-hearted working man [sic] who embodied their best characteristics. A great many dramatic events befall the hero in order to document as fully as possible the oppression of the working class. The courage of the hero combined with his many misfortunes focuses the anger of the reader against those in power....Psychological analysis gives way to a political analysis of why good people are trodden down by circumstances. This fiction first quickens the reader's existing anger, and then channels it toward a political outlet. (*Industrial Muse* 114-15)

While the women's autobiographies typically focused on one incident or event, they nevertheless share with Vicinus's characterization a lack of individual character development in favor of a focus on "emotionally-charged action combined with effective analysis," focusing on the relationship between personal oppression and political change (115). The rallying conclusions of many of the women's narratives demonstrate this combination of drama with a political message. Mary Tomassi closes her narrative in the 1924 issue of *Shop and School*, "What a hateful life I lead! No! I cannot be discouraged; I must live, learn, and teach the truth" (12). Thelma Brown's 1926 narrative, in which she describes an experience of coming-to-class-consciousness while walking from an upper-class neighborhood through a slum, closes suggestively and simply, "Then I got mad" (13). And Loretta Starr, whose 1925 narrative began this section, closes, "I really began to feel I had something to live for, that it wasn't necessary to take things lying down, that the thing to do was FIGHT!" (15).

Many of these autobiographers were affected profoundly by their experience at Bryn Mawr. While no comprehensive survey of matriculants has ever been done, the limited information that was gathered about the women's experiences after Bryn Mawr demonstrates that they found what they learned about themselves, each other, and the subject matter they were taught to have been invaluable. The school commissioned two surveys of its former students, in 1929 and 1938⁵²; and historian Rita Heller surveyed surviving students in a 1984 study. In all cases, the students frequently describe, in various ways, experiencing a transformation of self or coming-to-consciousness. As Heller summarizes:

The Bryn Mawr Summer School caused its students to reflect on their collective identity as working women. They came to realize that, although divided by occupation, region, religion, race and union affiliation, they were all vulnerable to the same impersonal and harsh economic forces. The program instilled a sense of class solidarity. The women became conscious, too, of feminist issues: of women's secondary economic, political, and social status. They began to appreciate the fact that foremen dominated them at work, their families controlled them at home and that employers and unions generally abused or excluded them.

⁵² Helen D. Hill, *The Effect of Bryn Mawr Summer School as Measured in the Activities of its Students* (New York: Affiliated Summer Schools for Working Women, 1929); Florence Hemley Schneider, *Patterson of Workers Education: The Story of the Bryn Mawr Summer School* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941).

The students also began to understand the role-modelling process, being conscious of their mentors' work and life styles. (131)

Among the survey respondents, the women reported high levels of activism in labor unions and other social justice organizations, and several of them rose to the executive levels of large unions. Many became involved in starting new workers' classes. The majority of the students found ways to continue their education—not just in technical or vocational courses, but especially in liberal arts courses—some earning bachelors and even graduate degrees. And while the extant information is not comprehensive enough to allow definite causal links to be made, the anecdotal evidence provided by the survey responses is powerful. The women's experience at Bryn Mawr enriched their lives and made them aware of the limitations—and possibilities—of their personal circumstances and their communities, of their own prejudices and blindnesses, and of the structural relationships among gender-, race-, and class-based oppression.

Through its pioneering curriculum, the Bryn Mawr Summer School offered students an approach to literature from which contemporary multiculturalism could benefit. As I will discuss in the next chapter, contemporary multiculturalism—where class disappears as a fundamental lens for analysis, and race and ethnicity become depoliticized categories into which authors and texts are forced—shares its underlying ideology with the modernist multiculturalism that was proffered in magazines and best-sellers, as discussed in the previous chapters. In those venues, autobiography served as a tool for middle-class readers to understand and contain cultural differences that seemed to threaten a newly-consolidating middle-class identity. For student readers at Bryn Mawr,

however, it became a lens through which to analyze and develop class consciousness in a way that did not confuse or conflate it with racial or ethnic difference, but rather put class, race, and gender into relationship with the material conditions through which they are inscribed. Rather than an ossified document providing “evidence” of cultural difference, then, autobiography (and literature in general) was thus presented as far more dynamic, a “living sentient thing” demanding active and critical analysis from its readers.

Chapter Four

Coda:

Graphic Multiculturalism:

Rethinking the Place of Autobiography in Contemporary Literary Pedagogy

Over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the presence of autobiographical writing on the U.S. cultural landscape has grown. Within the world of new media, blogs, personal websites, social networking sites, and other digital venues for the multimedia production of the autobiographical have multiplied. YouTube's slogan commands: "Broadcast Yourself"; Facebook invites us to continually revise and reinvent ourselves for an audience of hundreds or (not uncommonly) thousands of our "friends"; and personal blogs, by some estimates now numbering over 112 million in English alone,⁵³ offer a venue for us to serially publish our autobiographies nearly simultaneously with our lived experience.

The increased interest in the autobiographical is also evident within traditional media: in 2009, the *New York Times* called memoir "the dominant genre of contemporary literature" (Scheussler). The unceasing proliferation of memoir sub-genres in print has become completely commonplace, and that critics and that commentators so routinely mark the growth of new kinds of memoirs is surprising only because there are actually enough memoirs being published to make any of them legitimate categories. Scanning

⁵³ In 2008, Technorati (the largest blog search engine), reported to be tracking over 112.8 million English language blogs, 99 percent of them personal blogs, and the vast majority of them coming from North America.

the “Memoir/Autobiography” section of any large book store, one will likely find sections for dog memoirs (*Rex and the City: A Memoir of a Woman, a Man, and a Dysfunctional Dog*; *A Big Little Life: A Memoir of a Joyful Dog*; *The Dog Diet, A Memoir: What My Dog Taught Me About Shedding Pounds, Licking Stress and Getting a New Leash on Life*), “momoirs” (*Mamarama: A Memoir of Sex, Kids, & Rock 'n' Roll*; *As Good as I Could Be: A Memoir of Raising Wonderful Children in Difficult Times*; *She Looks Just Like You: A Memoir of [Nonbiological Lesbian] Motherhood*), food memoirs (*Baked Off!: Memoirs of a Pillsbury Bake-Off Junky*; *Trail of Crumbs: Hunger, Love and the Search for Home*; *Comfort Food for Breakups: The Memoir of a Hungry Girl*), gang memoirs (*Inside the Crips: Life Inside L.A.'s Most Notorious Gang*; *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member*; *Always Running: La Vida Loca/Gang Days in L.A.*), and stunt memoirs (or, more pejoratively, “schtick lit”) (*Reading the OED: One Man, One Year, 21,730 Pages*; *Bird Watching Watching: One Year, Two Men, Three Rules, Ten Thousand Birds*; *Helping Me Help Myself: One Skeptic, Ten Self-Help Gurus, and a Year on the Brink of the Comfort Zone*), among myriad others.⁵⁴ And traditional autobiographies, penned by politicians, successful entrepreneurs, celebrities, and writers, still routinely top the best-seller lists (The current *New York Times* top-ten list, as I am writing, includes Keith Richard’s recent autobiography, Condoleeza Rice’s new memoir

⁵⁴ By Lee Harrington (2007), Dean Koontz (2009), Patti Lawson (2006), Evelyn McDonnell (2007), Susan Cheever (2001), Aime Klemptner Miller (2010), Steve Gieger (2009), Kim Sunee (2008), Marusya Bociurkiw (2007), Colton Simpson (2006), Sanyika Shakur (2004), Luis J. Rodriguez (2005), Alex Horne (2010), Ammon Shea (2008), and Beth Lisick (2009) respectively. This is just a small sampling of the memoir sub-genres that are recognized by critics and booksellers as such.

about her parents, and *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, just republished in an “unexpurgated” version).

That this flood of autobiographical publications has engendered a nearly equal torrent of criticism is not surprising—at least since Jean-Jacques Rousseau effectively secularized the genre with the 1781 publication of his scandalous *Confessions*, autobiography has routinely been accused of being at best narcissistic and self-serving, and at worst malevolent or fraudulent. And the nature of these criticisms has changed very little in the last two hundred years. As the critic William Gass put it in a scathing indictment of the genre, published in *Harper's* in 1994 (as this most recent tide of autobiographical publications was beginning to swell), “Are there any motives for the enterprise that aren't tainted with conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification? To halo a sinner's head? To puff an ego already inflated past safety?” (45). The writer Daniel Mendelsohn (himself the author of a memoir) put it similarly, if a bit more playfully, in a recent *New Yorker* article: “Like a drunken guest at a wedding, [autobiography] is constantly mortifying its soberer relatives (philosophy, history, literary fiction)—spilling family secrets, embarrassing old friends—motivated, it would seem, by an overpowering need to be the center of attention.” But other critics, such as the writer Fenton Johnson, have offered a less unflattering appraisal of the situation: the memoir boom, says Johnson, “is not a product of the self-obsession of a selfish, me-first generation; it is evidence of literate people's recognition that the written word has replaced the story told by the winter fire as our means of establishing and preserving cultural memory” (19). Whether it is seen as the

natural evolution of human expression, or as evidence of the decline of meaningful self-examination and communication in the society of the spectacle, the ubiquity of autobiography comes up more routinely in public discussions of the contemporary literary landscape than any other topic. We are fascinated by our fascination with our own stories.

Interestingly, nearly all of the commentary about autobiography focuses on its production, rather than readers' seemingly insatiable appetite for it—we might ask, as I have tried to do in previous chapters, what cultural function such trends serve as they reflect and produce certain kinds of readers. And equally as significant as its influence on the blogosphere and bookstore shelves, but not nearly so scrutinized, is the role that autobiography now plays in literary education. Despite what a recent Modern Language Association publication called “The enormous place autobiographical writing has come to occupy in literary studies” (“Approaches”), this new centrality has received virtually no critical attention. But, as I will discuss, autobiography's presence in the canon and curricula is deeply significant, and deserves examination and reconsideration.

Evidence the growth of autobiography studies as an academic subfield: it has only been perhaps three decades since autobiography has been widely accepted as a legitimate object of academic inquiry; since then, autobiography studies—like its object—has boomed. Countless essays and monographs, anthologies, conferences, associations, and its own journal (*A/B: Auto/Biography Studies*) have generated a huge volume of intellectual work within the subfield. Much of this work has been devoted to “recovering” autobiographical texts and developing and interrogating autobiography

theory. To a more limited extent, autobiography studies has taken up the material histories of autobiography, that is, the history of the production and circulation of texts and the commodification of genres within economic and cultural systems of exchange.⁵⁵

As yet unexamined, however, is the cultural currency that autobiography has come to claim within literary studies more broadly—particularly, its privileged position *in the classroom*. This position cannot be explained merely by the growth of academic autobiography studies, nor by the contemporary popularity of the genre. Rather, autobiography's privileged position is much more closely linked to the ascendance of multiculturalism: since literary studies' "multicultural turn" in the 1980s and 1990s, the autobiographical has served as a crucial marker of value because of its capacity to enhance the sense of an unmediated relationship between the text and the social identity of the author.

Autobiographical writing is thus mobilized within literary studies as it was, in other venues, in the early twentieth century: to fix and contain identity as a reflection of a (fixed and contained) culture. In the previous chapters, I have examined this problematic relationship between reading practices around autobiography, and ideas about cultural difference, as each developed in the early twentieth century in the United States. Readers from an emerging middle class, forging a self-definition during an era of social change, were attempting to locate themselves amidst a rapidly altering cultural landscape, as, for example, African Americans continued to migrate to northern cities, new immigrants continued to arrive from far-flung countries, and the working class continued to grow and

⁵⁵ British theorists like Regenia Gagnier, Mary Jean Corbett, and Carolyn Kay Steedman have taken up issues such as these, particularly from a feminist-materialist standpoint.

become more visible. Autobiographical writing, in widely-read books and popular magazines, offered middle-class readers not just successful models to emulate, but also a way to understand, and situate themselves in relation to, these other social groups. I have thus argued that readers looked to autobiographers as representatives of marginalized social groups, and looked to these writers for truths about those groups. And while readers undoubtedly experience and understand texts differently, I have argued that texts' production and circulation within a broader field of cultural production inevitably shaped the reception of those texts. Autobiographers often found themselves competing with other powerful cultural narratives, and they risked being dismissed or accused of inauthenticity if they challenged these narratives. While readers certainly brought their own experience, ideas, and judgment to autobiographical texts, it is impossible to ignore the power of the cultural apparatus through which they were produced and circulated: the impact of reviews, editorial commentary, scandals, and other elements of the cultural landscape in which they appeared framed and circumscribed the ways that readers approached and understood texts; as Michel de Certeau describes it, while readers are active, creative agents in their own right, the producers of culture hold the powerful position through which they "give form" to social practices (166). Readers do not encounter texts in a vacuum, and the same channels that facilitate readers' access to texts also shape their encounters with texts. This is no less true today: for better or worse, James Frey's (highly fictionalized) memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) would never have been the object of such fiery spite on the part of readers (nor sold so many copies) had it not been for Oprah's powerful effect on creating the terms of the scandal in which

it was enmeshed.

Oprah aside, at the turn of the twenty-first century, more than any other single cultural entity, the university has the broadest reach in shaping readers' encounters with literary texts. While in 1950, the U.S. system of higher education consisted of 1,851 colleges conferring bachelor's degrees on just over 400,000 students annually, today there are more than double that number of institutions, attended by over fifteen million students; this means that over half of all American eighteen-year-olds will enter a college English classroom (Bryson 17-18). And attendant to these demographic shifts has been an increase in the university's cultural capital as the arbiter of literary taste and judgment: as David Shumway argues in his genealogy of the field of American Literature, *Creating American Civilization*, over the course of the last century, the university has come to claim the cultural authority that once belonged to publishers, editors, and critics. Like William Dean Howells, many of the most powerful early-twentieth-century critics not only were not affiliated with universities, but had never attended one either; such figures, through their institutional positions with magazines and publishing houses, historically claimed authority over questions of taste and value (Shumway 50). My previous chapters offer examples of how they collectively (though not in any organized sense) served to educate the public in habits of reading. But the university has taken on this function as it has grown in cultural influence: as more and more middle-class Americans began attending college, the university came to be seen as the primary point of access to the cultural capital that literature offered (Shumway 123). The literature classroom has, in turn, become increasingly significant in terms of its capacity to imbue texts with value.

In this sense, the contemporary literature classroom has become the locus for the creation of middle-class reading practices; thus literary education plays a primary role in setting up expectations for how texts should function within a social field. And current-day debates in education in fact recapitulate the anxieties enacted within wider popular culture amidst the emergence of the middle class in the fluid social space of the fin de siècle. The reading practices surrounding autobiography that I have examined in the context of the early twentieth century continue to inform literary pedagogy in deeply problematic ways. Namely, the notion that the autobiographer can—and should—stand in as a representative of a marginalized social group has played a central (if unacknowledged) role since the expansion of the canon and the growth of multicultural literary education. What this indicates is that there is a significant lag between institutional practice and theoretical developments that have given us much richer frameworks for thinking about the relationships not just among texts, authors, and readers, but among literary education, cultural diversity, and democracy. The multiculturalism that has been most readily incorporated into literary studies is still deeply tied to the modernist multiculturalism that I have explored in previous chapters, haunted by outdated notions of identity, difference, and pluralism that ignore the material realities through which they are structured.

The Trouble with Multiculturalism (or, Aren't We All Multicultural Now?)

Multiculturalism is no longer quite the tinderbox it was in the 1980s and 1990s, when firebrand cultural critics from both the left and the right battled it out on the pages

of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Following William Bennett's infamous 1984 National Endowment for the Humanities report entitled "To Reclaim a Legacy," which offered scathing criticism of the humanities' "abandonment" of the "classic works of Western Culture," such polarizing figures as Allan Bloom, Stanley Fish, Lynne Cheney, and even Jesse Jackson helped to shine a very public spotlight particularly on college English departments. Both sides offered doomsday scenarios for the future of the humanities and American society at large, should the other win; and while conservative attacks on multicultural education certainly have not ceased, multiculturalism has been thoroughly institutionalized, in various incarnations, in most colleges and universities across the country—even filtering down to high school curricula. This is certainly true in English departments: by 2007, the *New York Times* could conclude, "Today it's generally agreed that the multiculturalists won the canon wars" (Donadio). Literary curricula have readily been expanded to include women writers and writers of color, as well as works that entail a broader conception of the "literary" text; this expansion is amply evident in anthologies, syllabi, and course offerings. And, as Michael Berubé points out, these changes have been particularly marked in the field of American literature, where the accepted canon was somewhat less stable to begin with (Donadio).

Yet it is this ready incorporation and institutionalization of multiculturalism that is perhaps the biggest threat to the democratic impulse behind multicultural reform, for it signals that multiculturalism has in fact posed very little challenge to modes of teaching; that is, the focus on the *content* of the canon has come at the expense of more engaged examination of how we *present* that content, particularly in terms of how we approach (or

don't approach) relationships among authors, texts, and readers within the larger fields of cultural production and social reproduction in the classroom. As the popular press indicates, the success of multiculturalism has been manifested almost exclusively as expanded reading lists.

In part, this is due to the slipperiness of the term itself. In her expansive 2005 study examining how the abstract concept of multiculturalism has been put into practice and institutionalized in English departments across the country, sociologist Bethany Bryson examined a range of universities—researching department policies, examining curricula and course offerings, and conducting extensive interviews with professors. Bryson found that, across all of the institutions she examined, “despite the ominous power often attributed to multiculturalism [in the public debates], English professors found the concept to be vague and unworkable, so they changed it. They tamed it, and molded it to fit within their everyday routines...English professors used their organizational structure as an interpretive frame to make sense of multiculturalism and fit it into their existing work lives” (22). And the most common version of multiculturalism to emerge defined it as “an attempt to make literary canons represent the cultural breadth that exists within the U.S. population” (38). Thus, Bryson found that in practice, multiculturalism has been incorporated in the discipline of English (both from the perspective of individual professors and from an institutional standpoint) primarily as canon expansion. Fewer than thirty percent of the professors whom she interviewed talked about multiculturalism as impacting their teaching methods or modes, as opposed

to more simply their text selection: “The question of what they taught took precedence over how they taught it” (49).

This may seem altogether unsurprising and unproblematic—for those interested in democratic education, isn’t a more broadly “representative” canon a good thing? The answer, according to some critics, is not necessarily. By assuming that the expansion of the canon indicates that literary studies have arrived at some multicultural ideal, we miss the mark: as Henry Louis Gates has said, we cannot be content with “the multiplication of authorized subjectivities, symbolically rewarded in virtue of being materially deprived” (215). I agree with Gates and others who have called for a reinvigoration of multiculturalism, versions of which have been described as “critical,” “insurgent” or “polyvalent” multiculturalism, by the Chicago Cultural Studies Group, Henry Giroux, and Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, respectively. I aim to add to this conversation by making explicit, and challenging, the role that autobiography has played in multicultural pedagogy. By contenting ourselves with a modernist multiculturalism that presents literary works according to the “representative” social identities of their authors, we do a disservice to our students and to the texts and authors we teach. Further, we miss the opportunity to reconfigure literary studies as increasingly relevant for the twenty-first century.

Autobiography and Canon Expansion

Autobiography has been central to the project of multiculturalism-as-canon-expansion in a way that has generally gone unrecognized. The most common argument

for the study of previously-excluded texts—what I would call a modernist-multiculturalist argument—grounds its critique in the desire to make the canon more representative, which implies that we should teach certain texts because they make visible the African-American experience or Asian-American culture. In this context, the autobiographical has served as a crucial marker of value because of its capacity to enhance the sense of an unmediated relationship between the text and the social identity of the author. The invocation of autobiography appears to allow access to the authentic multicultural experience.

And indeed, autobiographical texts hold a more central place than ever before in literary curricula. In part, we can attribute this to the increased acceptance of autobiography as a legitimate object of literary study, and to the increased significance accorded to autobiographical forms like the slave narrative. But there is an even more significant link between the presence of autobiography in the classroom and curricular changes made in the name of multiculturalism. In the most recent edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (the anthology most widely used in American Literature classrooms), about twenty percent of their authors are included as autobiographers—a figure double that of the anthology’s initial publication in 1979; and this figure doesn’t include other forms of personal writing, like letters and diaries, whose incidence has also increased.⁵⁶ This increase in the incidence of autobiographical writing

⁵⁶ The contents of an anthology—even one as widely used as the Norton—clearly provides only a very limited portrait of what may be taught in literature classrooms. But unfortunately, I have been unable to locate any comprehensive source of more direct (if ephemeral) evidence; despite a broad search of print and online sources, and inquiries with organizations such as the National Council of Teacher of English, publications such

in the *Norton* coincides with its editors' attempts to remake the anthology's image as more multicultural, in large part in response to appearance of the groundbreaking *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which according to editor Paul Lauter was first published in 1989 as "symbol and a tool" for teachers who were interested in "broadening our view of the authors and texts worth thinking about" (Lauter). The *Heath*, in turn, had been in large part inspired by Lauter's earlier collection *Reconstructing American Literature* (1983), in which he published sixty-seven American Literature syllabi. According to Lauter, these syllabi represented a radical departure from the standard teaching of American literature, which was still dominated by white male New England writers (and the New Critical values they were presumably seen as demonstrative of). In his introduction, Lauter specifically noted that the syllabi "regularly make greater use of autobiographical writing, *at least by minority writers and white women*" (xxiii, my emphasis); and the collection's contributors frequently comment on their inclusion of autobiographies, pointing to them, for instance, as "socially and historically representative," or "representative of rich and poor, male and female, black, Indian, and white" (133, 136).

Lauter and other early champions of multiculturalism adopted a model of curricular reform that reflected the modes of organization of 1960s and 1970s New Left coalition-building and activism—modes that, as sociologist C. Wright Mills described in an open letter in 1960 in which he coined the phrase "New Left," moved away from the

as *Radical Teacher*, and individual colleges and universities, I have been unable to find any useable archive of syllabi. (For example, the syllabus archive to which I had the most direct access, at the University of Minnesota, dates back only to the early 2000s, and contains syllabi by only a handful of instructors).

traditional “old left” focus on labor issues and on class as a framework for political analysis. In the U.S., the various groups associated with the New Left promoted participatory democracy, civil rights, and women’s rights, in non-classed ways, by making claims for specific kinds of (heretofore disenfranchised) public identities. As Grant Farred describes it, “Having rejected the Old Left’s narrow conception of politics, the New Left expanded it to include—and provide a precedent and a platform for—modes of oppositionality that would, in the 1980s, be construed as struggles over representation and identity” (630). The identity politics of the 1980s, including multiculturalism’s demand for the representation of previously excluded groups, was heir to the culturally based political opposition of the 1960s and 1970s.

My intention here is not to criticize Lauter; the *Reconstructing American Literature* project and the *Heath* were crucially transformative and brought well-deserved attention to many significant texts that had previously been unstudied (just as the identity politics of the 1980s generally did crucial work in politicizing culture). But it is precisely because of the significance of Lauter’s work that I use it here to demonstrate how autobiography was mobilized, in a way that was only tangentially and uncritically acknowledged, in the project of multicultural reform. This model of multiculturalism-as-canon-expansion requires us as teachers to perform some tricky pedagogical gymnastics: if the aim is to somehow create a truly representative image of American diversity, we will never be able to add enough non-canonical texts to our syllabi (or even whole courses devoted to non-canonical literature) to achieve that goal. Further, such an approach communicates to students that texts and authors can (and should) stand in as

representatives of a given social group—and that there is a *givenness* to the life of a social group; it ignores the problematization of identity categories, despite the fact that so much theoretical work of the last four decades has done just that.

A multicultural pedagogy premised on such a model constrains the ways that students can understand authors and texts, and also oversimplifies the processes of identity formation and representation.⁵⁷ Moreover, it assumes that there is some clear relationship between the representation of marginalized groups on literary syllabi and the greater enfranchisement of such groups.⁵⁸ But as John Guillory asks, what exactly is the nature of this relationship?

⁵⁷ Shelley Fisher Fishkin discusses these tendencies among literary scholarship generally in her essay “Desegregating American Literary Studies,” where she examines texts that have not been given critical attention because of assumptions that “white writers write books focused on white protagonists (where issues of race, if present, remain relatively peripheral); meanwhile black writers write books focused on black protagonists (where issues of race are omnipresent and central)” (121). Fishkin calls for a shift in teaching and critical practice, focusing on “transgressive texts” that disrupt the easy correspondence between author and textual content that would locate and limit the meanings of race within recognizable, established parameters of representation. Fishkin’s compelling exploration of how certain kinds of critical attention are accorded to certain kinds of texts not only highlights the importance of attending to heretofore ignored “transgressive texts,” but also gestures to new ways of reading established texts.

⁵⁸ There is little evidence that this is kind of relationship exists even within the university: an American Council on Education study recently reported that across nearly all minority groups, post-secondary educational attainment have dropped in recent years (Ryu 1). Nonetheless, Cary Nelson makes a compelling argument that the content of an anthology or syllabus matters more than Guillory seems to suggest: “The priority placed on multicultural representation in the classroom helps persuade students about the priority of multicultural representation on the faculty and in the student body. The admissions policy embodied in the anthology makes an implicit comment on the admissions policy appropriate to the institution as a whole. Nor is it much of a leap to make a connection with the nation’s admission policy—its immigration statutes and their mixed and still politically contentious history of openness and racism. The problems of ethnic, racial, and gender representation in an anthology devoted to a nation’s history or its

There is no question that the literary curriculum is the site of a political practice; but one must attempt to understand the politics of this practice according to the specificity of its social location. The specificity of the political here cannot mean simply a replication of the problem of ‘representation’ in the sphere of democratic politics, and therefore it cannot mean simply importing into the school the same strategies of progressive politics which sometimes work at the legislative level.

(8-9)

There is a clearly a lag between the institutionalized practice of multiculturalism and theoretical developments that have given us much richer frameworks for thinking about the relationships among literary education, cultural diversity, and democracy. I have found Guillory’s call to reexamine the nature of the “political” in the context of curricular reform particularly productive for rethinking multicultural pedagogy, because he shifts the terms of the debate from speaking about the canon as representing or failing to represent social groups to speaking about the historical distribution of cultural capital.⁵⁹

literature...speak quite directly to questions about representation in public debate and legislative bodies. Anthologies empower students to make these connections, whether or not teachers choose to make them explicit” (30).

But the anthology (or, say, the survey course syllabus) by their nature appear to offer authoritative, adequate representation, despite its very impossibility; and it is, to my reading, Nelson’s “whether or not” that Guillory takes issue with. It is the making explicit of the connections between cultural production and social reproduction that needs be central to the multicultural literature classroom.

⁵⁹ Guillory’s argument shares a major premise with that of Walter Benn Michaels, which he has elaborated in *The Trouble With Diversity* (2006), among other places: both are critical of the fact that class generally disappears as a lens for analysis within multiculturalism. But as critics of Michaels such as Michael Rothberg have noted, Michaels takes this premise in an unproductive direction when he uses it to turn an analytic distinction between class and, say, race and gender into a normative valuation. His insistence, for instance, that race is merely a distraction from class, ignores, as

What such a shift illuminates is that literary pedagogy can intervene by making visible the processes and institutions through which this history has been enacted—by taking as central an investigation of texts in relation to histories of literacy, broadly defined. Multicultural pedagogy can far more productively approach texts in relation to the access to the means of literary production and social reproduction—not simply the social identity of the author. At best, such an approach requires a level of self-reflexivity on the part of readers—not in an essentialist or individualist manner, but in a way that extends from the particular to larger questions of society and history—that makes it possible literature to alter our orientation to the world, to truly *move* us.

What is clear, then, is that pedagogical reform needs be concerned with not just the content of the syllabus, but with the particular ways that content is accorded significance; with not just making a set of texts more inclusive, but with making our methods for teaching those texts more expansive. Students are not interested in, nor will they find useful, the same kind of cultural capital gleaned from traditional literary studies—that is, knowledge of a stable canon of texts, no matter in what diverse image we remake that canon. Rather, multicultural pedagogy should be focused on teaching the critical and flexible reading skills that allow for analysis of the mechanisms through which culture is created and transmitted, and of the power dynamics with which these mechanisms are inflected.

Rothberg puts it, the “ineluctable intermingling and intersectionality of those categories in practice” (308). Guillory’s focus on access to cultural capital allows for the consideration of how elements of social identity mediate the reproduction of inequality—that is, how culture *is* directly implicated in social inequality.

All of this is not to argue that we should devalue autobiographical texts, or that autobiography is not useful in the literary classroom. On the contrary, given the representational baggage with which the autobiographical has historically been saddled, as I have explored in the previous chapters, autobiographical texts can provide particularly compelling explorations the imbrication of genre and identity in the multicultural classroom. By treating autobiographical texts not simply as reflections of a given social group, but as embedded in the dynamics of cultural production, we offer students a way to understand the relationships among texts, authors, and readers as dynamic and demonstrative of the power relations that structure our experience. In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (1946), as a case study of an autobiographical text that I have found remarkably useful for tackling these issues on the multicultural literature classroom. In so doing, I hope to concretely demonstrate in the pedagogical utility of situating a literary text in relation not just to the social identity of the author, but to larger issues of cultural production and social reproduction.

Graphic Multiculturalism: Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* in the Literature Classroom

I first encountered Miné Okubo's stunning graphic memoir, *Citizen 13660*, while preparing to teach a course in Multicultural American literature. I had seen it on syllabi for similar courses, and when I first encountered it, I was immediately charmed by its wit and sensitivity, and by its pedagogical potential. Okubo's line drawings and spare prose interact in surprising and rich ways, and their seeming simplicity belies an emotional and

intellectual sophistication that troubles boundaries between the personal and the political, between the textual and the historical, and between libratory visibility and oppressive surveillance. *Citizen 13660* was the first published personal account of the Japanese-American internment during World War II, and as I researched the text in preparation to teach it, I found that it has had a fascinating publication and reception history, interestingly reflective of various moments of public negotiation with the history of the Japanese-American internment: portions of the *Citizen 13660* were first published, oddly, amidst scathing anti-Japanese propaganda in a wartime issue of *Fortune* magazine, and while as a book it had only a brief life after the war, renewed interest brought it republication after Okubo testified in 1981 congressional hearings examining the possibility of reparations for former internees. Students found this history as interesting as the text itself, and it broadened our discussion by allowing us to consider the text not just as an isolated aesthetic object, nor a simple historical or ethnographic document, but as enmeshed in fraught economies of cultural production. *Citizen 13660* is a rich source for literary analysis, but also for an analysis of the cultural work that texts perform in relation to readers, writers, and the institutions that mediate access to the tools of literacy. Textually and extratextually, then, *Citizen 13660* raises profound questions about the relationships among political, cultural, and aesthetic representation. It offers a unique opportunity to explore these representational layers in the multicultural literature classroom, which tend to be masked within multicultural pedagogy, where texts and authors are often uncritically burdened with representing *the* experience of a particular social group.

Citizen 13660 in particular, and graphic memoirs in general, provide a deeply engaging entree for students into these questions of representation. As a genre that has only in recent decades begun to receive mainstream recognition and respect, and even more recently begun to receive attention by scholars, the graphic memoir remains a rich and largely untapped pedagogical resource. From classics like Will Eisner's *A Contract With God* (1978) and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), to more recent works like Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2004), and little-known works like Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, many graphic memoirs explicitly address questions around narrativity, self-reflexivity, and the ethics of representing for others. The complexity of readers' engagement with graphic narratives is pedagogically useful for several reasons, particularly in encouraging critical approaches to questions raised by the multicultural paradigm of literary studies.

Clearly, graphic memoirs are not the only examples of such "problem" texts—that is, texts that themselves thematize and illustrate the complexities of literary production and representation. However, I have found them to be a particularly useful way to open up exploration of these issues in the classroom: in this digital age where visual and textual literacies are increasingly interconnected, students are eager and able to engage the image-text interaction in a highly sophisticated manner; and teaching them to do so critically is ever more crucial. They clearly see the comic form as an accessible one—an accessibility which, in fact, causes even those who are fans of comics to view its presence in a literature classroom with some skepticism. In this sense, the genre automatically forces the question of its literariness: students reckon immediately with questions about

“high” and “low” art, cannon formation, and the relationship between institutions and culture. Students themselves initiated discussions about how judgments of literary and cultural value are formed—questions that are, as I have noted, central to multicultural pedagogy, but that are often obscured by the appearance of adequate representation created by institutionalized multiculturalism.

If traditional multiculturalism privileges a tidy image of diversity and positions texts and authors as representatives of discrete, clearly defined cultures, graphic memoirs like Okubo’s potentially provide the space for a challenging ethical encounter with otherness. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud attributes the intensity of readers’ engagement with graphic narratives to several factors. Defining cartoon style as “a form of amplification through simplification” (36), McCloud says that “when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself....The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel into another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it” (36). Describing the cartoon image of himself that he uses to narrate the text, he says, “I’m just a little voice inside your head. A concept. You give me life by reading this book and by ‘filling up’ this very iconic (cartoony) form” (37). McCloud echoes Marshall McLuhan who identified comics as one of the only “cool” forms of popular media—that is, media that commands audience involvement through iconic forms. So the style of the images creates the space for an almost unconscious empathy with the characters in the story, and thus the potential for students to identify intensely with others’ experiences, however different from their own.

Advocates of multicultural education have long championed literature's capacity to engender such empathy, recognizing its significance to democratic dialogue.

Nonetheless, there are dangers in the empathetic response to literature, too:

The uninterrogated identification assumed by the faith in empathy is founded on a binary of self/other that situates the self/reader unproblematically as judge. This self is not required to identify with the oppressor, and not required to identify her complicity in structures of power relations mirrored by the text. Rather...this self feeds on a consumption of the other. (Boler 258)

A focus on empathy risks engendering a kind of cultural tourism in which the ideals of respect and tolerance ultimately foster an atmosphere of dangerously depoliticized *indifference*—the last thing we want as teachers of literature is for a student to think that, because she read and felt deeply about *Citizen 13660*, she gets the experience of the internment and can move on, ultimately unaffected. And as students are ever more explicitly positioned as consumers, the risk of their educational experiences leaving them thus unmoved becomes more significant. The challenge, then, lies in effectively situating a text in relation to a broader history of cultural production, to whatever degree possible given the limits of any given pedagogical situation; and in a related fashion, in fostering ways of reading texts like Okubo's that don't lose the valuable connection created through empathy, but that also require us as readers to be self-reflexive, to analyze our own response to the text (be it discomfort, anger, guilt, or disinterest), and to try to understand how we are all implicated in the social forces that inscribe identities and power relations.

Framing *Citizen 13660* in the Multicultural Literature Classroom

In a one-semester survey course, little can be done to provide any comprehensive background on the internment; however, the goal of putting *Citizen 13660* in the context of larger currents of cultural production and consumption is crucial. Examining significant moments of the text's publication and reception history is one productive and efficient way that I have found to do this. In its original publication, her work entered a visual conversation with the intensely dehumanizing anti-Japanese propaganda common in the U.S. wartime media. The routine portrayals of Japanese as monkeys or insects in publications as mainstream as the *New York Times* and the *Saturday Evening Post* contrast starkly with the everyday, human emotionality of Okubo's characters. Given the opportunity to page through the April 1944 issue of *Fortune* magazine in which her drawings first appeared, entitled "Japan and the Japanese: A Military Power We Must Defeat, A Pacific Problem We Must Solve," many of my students were shocked by its blatant anti-Asian racism.⁶⁰ But it is easy to express outrage or shock; what's more challenging, and what I tried to encourage in discussion, is analysis of how that racism coexists with the magazine's clearly stated democratic ideals, and how and why this kind of contradiction, in different incarnations, continues to be perpetuated in U.S. culture.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Of course, the end of the war did not mean the end of such sentiment: two years later, Okubo collected her internment illustrations in book form, and while her contacts at *Fortune* helped her publish the book through Columbia University Press in 1946, it was largely ignored. In a 1982 interview, Okubo describes, "It was so difficult getting it published. At that time anything Japanese was still rat poison... it was really too soon after the war. Anything Japanese was a touchy subject" (Gesaway 74).

Over and over again, the special issue of *Fortune* portrays the Japanese as naturally and inherently evil and degraded; the magazine's clearly stated wartime politics connect the ability to defeat Japan with the capacity to render Japan and the Japanese legible—to make clearly visible what was once obscured by “hazy” impressions. The Japanese, as evidenced by their military and economic aggression, are not what they seemed through the lens of pre-war American Orientalism; as one article exploring the “paradoxes of behavior that have twisted the Japanese mind for centuries” notes, “Paradoxes...are key to the temper of the Japanese. On one hand, the Japanese keep to extremes of restraint; on the other they explode in extremes of excess” (123). This inscrutability, as the editors frame it, is what makes the Japanese a particularly pernicious enemy, and what necessitates their task as one clearly framed in terms of victory: “It is our task to understand [the Japanese], and this task is not only for specialists. We have a war to win; here the determination of civilians is as important as the plans for generals. We have a peace to organize; here the knowledge of citizens is as important as the ability of experts” (121). This imperative for the everyday citizen to recognize the dangerous character of the Japanese exemplifies the paranoia and racism that was so commonplace in the public discourse of the day.

The trope of making visible (and hence comprehensible), enacted through the issue's maps, population statistics, photographs, timelines, surveys, sociological analyses, and psychological exposes, was one that became all too efficacious in the lives of the West Coast Japanese in America, who found themselves the objects of scrutiny

⁶¹ Initially, some students vociferously defended the U.S. internment, but their

immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and were subjected to a compulsory hyper-visibility through their internment soon after. Here, the production of naturalized racial difference in the realm of the public imagination and in the realm of official government policy were mutually constitutive. But the position of Japanese Americans is one that the magazine struggles to negotiate, and Okubo's illustrations accompany a brief editorial that addresses the American internment. While the brief article ("Issei, Nisei, Kibei") is sympathetic to the mental, emotional, and financial toll suffered by the internees, ultimately (if circuitously) editorializing against internment, it is fractured into eight sections, spread over 110 pages—almost literally lost in a sea of anti-Japanese sentiment. There is a clear contradiction between the racist logic of the magazine's goal to make visible the "twisted Japanese mind" (123), and its stated aim of making visible the injustice of the internment—an injustice based in that same racist logic. And while the editorial against the internment does attempt to suture the gap between the magazine's insistence on naturalized racial difference and its ideal of universal citizenship, what's more compelling is the way that Okubo's accompanying illustrations are utilized to do the same. As the editors alert us to in their note, "All the drawings and paintings in this issue are the work of artists of Japanese extraction" (4). The racialized presence of these artists serves as an attempt to blunt the magazine's blatant anti-Asian racism; the artists stand in as both evidence of the magazine's democratic neutrality and proof that the "twisted" Japanese mind can be "remade" into something knowable and controllable. Indeed, the editors make a point of describing one artist as a political worker

“for the democratic cause,” and specifying that another’s drawings of Japan are “bitter” and “angry” (4), lest readers be confused.

The editors describe Okubo:

American-born, an M.A. in art of the University of California, she has held several exhibitions of her paintings at the San Francisco Museum of Art. In 1942, when all people of Japanese blood were rounded up, Miné Okubo was sent to Topaz (Utah) relocation center. There she became staff artist of the little homespun camp magazine, *Trek*, a copy of which was later seen by *Fortune*’s art editors. Miss Okubo’s drawings of camp life exactly suited our purpose. *Fortune* found her still at Topaz, but free to leave. At our invitation, she came to New York with a portfolio of 235 drawings, from which we took our pick. (4)

In one brief paragraph, the editors deftly manage the potentially threatening presence of a Japanese-American voice. They simultaneously legitimate Okubo by listing her American institutional affiliations and render her domesticated by describing *Trek* as “the little homespun camp magazine.” But perhaps more strikingly, she is denied any political agency through her illustrations, as the editors describe taking their pick from drawings which suited *their* purposes. The visibility of Okubo and the other artists of Japanese-American descent thus serve to mask the magazine’s violently contradictory politics. This vexed notion of visibility as it relates to race and power is one that I’ve found particularly useful as a way to frame our encounter with *Citizen 13660* in the classroom: how, we can usefully ask, does Okubo’s work itself negotiate questions of visibility? How does an understanding of its original context in *Fortune* impact the way we experience her text?

This issue of visibility also provides a link back to those theoretical questions that I hoped to pressure throughout my course: what do we expect an author or a literary work to make visible about history, or about the life of a social group? What is the relationship between literature and social identity? How can we read in order to avoid making problematic assumptions about these relationships? By their nature, graphic novels continually unsettle the tendency to read a text as transparently “making visible” the experience of a social group: through the non-mimetic quality of the images, readers are constantly reminded of the artist’s presence. Okubo takes this further, often actually portraying herself in the act of drawing a scene, making us aware of her subjective hand. In fact, one of the first things that students often notice about *Citizen 13660* is that with just two exceptions, the Okubo character appears in each of the nearly 200 illustrations, even in scenes we might guess she did not actually witness first hand. So, while in the preface to the 1983 edition she presents her work as an act of documentary (she says, “Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps, so I recorded everything in sketches, drawings, and paintings” [ix]), she also explicitly challenges the very notion of documentary objectivity.

But Okubo clearly saw the creation of *Citizen 13660* as an act of “bearing witness,” and her testimony along with the book’s submission to the Congressional Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Citizens in 1981 marks her work’s involvement in another interesting project of making-visible, this time as part of an emerging Asian-American cultural nationalist politics. Okubo’s testimony expresses a new demand for visibility: she told the Commission, “I believe an apology and some

form of reparation is due in order to prevent this from happening to others. Textbooks and history studies on this subject should be taught to children when young in grade and high schools. Many generations do not know that this ever happened in the United States” (*Amerasia* 17). This call for visibility was answered on several fronts: In 1983, the Commission released its report, which recommended redress payments to survivors and found that “the broad historical causes which shaped these decisions were race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership” (*Justice Denied* 5); that same year, the University of Washington Press, a strong early advocate of the growth in Asian-American studies, republished *Citizen 13660*, and the text has since become a part of a range of school curricula, such as my own.

But regardless of whether congressional hearings can actually or symbolically achieve the goal of adequately redressing historical oppression, the literature classroom is an altogether different context in which to encounter a text. We cannot simply take up a text as making visible cultural difference, or oppression based on the perception of that difference, nor can we assume that a text’s presence in our classroom has some political effect analogous to a legislative hearing. Presenting this historical moment of the text’s life in the classroom engendered usefully self-reflexive discussion about these issues: how was the use of Okubo’s text to simply make visible the injustice of the internment politically advantageous in this context? Should we read the text differently? How and why? Such questions acknowledge the historical utility of identity-based politics, while at the same time inviting students to see the text as a location through which to interrogate the processes of identity formation and representation, rather than to see the

text and its author as transparently representative. To read *Citizen 13660* simply as evidence in the classroom limits the scope of the political project of multiculturalism. Further, it obscures the nature of the political within the text itself, limiting the way we read possibilities for resistance to systemic questions of justice and injustice, thus ignoring practices of everyday forms of resistance and valorizing public visibility as a liberatory force. To read *Citizen 13660* as clearly or unproblematically aligned with such a politics is to ignore the text's nuanced exploration of these very issues.

The Politics of Visibility in *Citizen 13660*

While a detailed analysis of the text itself is not the focus of this chapter, I do wish to finish with a discussion of some elements of the text that I found particularly useful in the classroom in unpacking these ideas around visibility and representation. I have already mentioned the ubiquitous presence of the Miné character as one way that Okubo troubles any sense of narrative transparency. Not only does she continually make evident her own role as narrator, but she also makes readers aware of ourselves: like Spiegelman, Sacco, Satrapi, and other graphic memoirists, Okubo observes *for* the reader and is consciously observed *by* the reader. We are constantly directed not only by the frame of the illustration, but by the focus of the Okubo character's gaze. And some of the most powerful moments in the book come when her gaze is aimed directly at the reader (as, for example, when she looks angrily over her shoulder at the reader in an image whose caption describes the epidemics of dysentery that resulted from the camp's polluted drinking water). In class, I opened discussion of the text proper by asking

students which drawings or moments they were particularly drawn to. Inevitably, many pointed to these moments when the Miné character looks directly at them, eliciting at different moments laughter, guilt, or empathy; that unflinching gaze pushes the limits of readers' engagement with the text and requires us to analyze our own emotional and intellectual responses.

The high level of reader engagement is an element not just of the visual style of particular kinds of images; rather, as Scott McCloud argues, it is built into the comic form itself. He examines the role of “the gutter” in comics—that is, the space between panels—describing how “comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments” (67). Built into their form, then, is the requirement that the reader deliberately and voluntarily fill in the blanks; this reader engagement “is comics’ primary means of simulating time and motion” (69)—a means that necessarily highlights the constructed nature of the narrative it recounts. One activity that proved useful during our classroom discussion was to have students choose a series of panels that they find compelling and examine the relationship among them to ask how they each affect our understanding of the others: why did Okubo choose to illustrate and narrate these particular moments, and what effect do they have together? For instance, the text’s opening panels offer a compelling exploration of the connections between power, visibility, and race. The Miné character is at home on the day the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor, and below the image of a cozy domestic scene, she describes hearing the news on the radio over breakfast with her brother: “We were shocked. We wondered what this would mean to us and the other people of Japanese descent in the United

States” (8). The next three drawings bring issues of visibility to the fore, as the gazes of the non-Japanese in the drawings become increasingly suspicious, hostile, and intense, foreshadowing the institutionalized surveillance that follows. And as readers, we’re made keenly aware of our own gaze. First, we see the Miné character on the street, below a newspaper vendor shouting headlines about the recent declaration of war against Japan. She is hunched over the newspaper, the only Japanese on the crowded sidewalk. One man looks suspiciously over his shoulder in her direction. The next image shows the Miné character with the paper spread before her on the table. She looks directly at the reader with a distressed and puzzled gaze, and the bits of text surrounding her (“A JAP IS A JAP,” “SEND THEM BACK TO TOJO” [10]) suggest both her own mental turmoil and the sentiments that were “in the air” after the bombing. The accompanying text describes the spreading paranoia and the policies it began to spawn. Finally, the next image shows us the inside of a crowded train or bus through its window. The Miné character sits in a boldly patterned shirt, uncomfortably gazing off to the side. She is surrounded by white passengers with pursed lips and harsh stares clearly directed at her. She notes, “The people looked at all of us, both citizens and aliens, with suspicion and mistrust” (12), and then goes on to describe the institution of the voluntary evacuation of people of Japanese ancestry. The passage ends, ominous in its matter-of-fact tone: “On March 27, 1942, voluntary evacuation was halted and the army took over, to bring about a forced and orderly evacuation” (13). Interestingly, while the Miné character is the obvious object of scrutiny in the illustration, she is positioned slightly to the side. At the center of the illustration is the passenger with perhaps the most disapproving stare;

compositionally, the reader's gaze is directed to the passenger's expression of scorn, rather than to that scorn's object.

The relationship between text and images is one of the most pedagogically provocative elements of graphic memoir; often it functions as a way to intertwine several different narratives, and students analyzed how specific panels uses this interaction to create meaning. Okubo's written text is generally emotionless, a straightforward, factual account of events, as when she describes her and her brother's initial evacuation from their home in Berkeley: "We tagged our baggage with the family number, 13660, and pinned the personal tags on ourselves; we were ready at last. Our friends came to take us to the Civil Control Station. We took one last look at our happy home" (22-3).

Juxtaposed with this text are the deeply expressive images; the abject looks on the Okubos' faces, and the Miné character's tears, highlight the personal trauma embedded in these historical events. Okubo matter-of-factly describes the process of her and her brother's relocation from their Berkeley home to the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno (a racetrack where the stables were hastily and incompletely transformed into living quarters), during which their name was replaced with the number 13660. The presence of the family number, on their luggage and on tags pinned to their persons, serves as an ever-present visual marker of their dehumanization, and makes evident the irony in the juxtaposition of "citizen" and "13660" in the book's title. My students were quick to note when Okubo uses irony in this way, as in one drawing of the camp's post office, surrounded by fences and prison-like barracks, which is accompanied by the

comment that “Letters from my European friends told me how lucky I was to be free and safe at home” (61).

Visual repetition is one of *Citizen 13660*'s most powerful devices, and I found that asking students to identify different ways that Okubo uses repetition generated discussion about the text's most significant themes. In the illustrations that depict both her time at Tanforan and then her later move to the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah, the ubiquitous presence of armed soldiers, watch towers, and barbed wire fences serve as constant reminders of the internees' status as objects of official surveillance, as do the searches and medical examinations to which they are frequently subjected. Also ubiquitous, and signaling another kind of mandated visibility, is the presence of the other internees; the constant crowds and long lines resulting from the inadequate facilities engender an absolute lack of privacy that Okubo often notes pointedly. One illustration depicts a maze of bunks and personal items, through which the Miné character gazes at a man playing solitaire. The text reads, “Nearly four hundred bachelors were housed in the grandstand ‘dorm.’ They slept and snored, dressed and undressed, in one continuous public performance. Some built ‘walls of Jericho’ of sheets or blankets” (63). In another instance, she describes, “Many of the women could not get used to the community toilets. They sought privacy by pinning up curtains and setting up boards” (74). The illustration depicts the Miné character walking past a row of women in partially-partitioned stalls, the hopelessness of their attempts at creating privacy with scraps of cloth and wood mirrored in the abject expressions on their faces. Students' observations of these kinds of repetition offered a way to connect this sort of formal surveillance with the informal surveillance

depicted in the book's opening panels and ask, what are the different ways that the visual is used to constitute the object of oppression?

Similarly, my students were highly attuned to the different modes of resistance in the text. Beyond the attempts to create privacy (including her own nailing of a quarantine sign to her door [83]), Okubo depicts other every-day strategies of resistance to mandated visibility. She describes that at Tanforan, "Curfew was imposed, and roll call was held every day at 6:45 p.m. Each barrack had a house captain who made the rounds to check on us twice a day" (59). The accompanying illustration shows a shame-faced "house captain" with pen and checklist, while the Miné character, seated at a table with paintbrush in hand, looks at him over her shoulder while sticking out her tongue. Okubo next describes, "Day and night Caucasian camp police walked their beats within the center. ('Caucasian' was the camp term for non-evacuee worker.) They were on the lookout for contraband and suspicious actions" (60). The illustration depicts the Miné character peering around the corner at a guard who is himself peering into a window. In these instances, as in the moments when the Miné character looks directly at the reader, Okubo depicts an inversion of the gaze, where the watchers become the watched and the power relations implied between observer and the observed are challenged.

Within the text, the everyday strategies of resistance-to-visibility are contrasted to strategies of macro-political resistance, toward which the Miné character expresses at least ambivalence and at most disdain. She describes, for example, the difficult set of issues that the internees faced when they were forced to respond to a loyalty oath:

It brought about a dilemma. Aliens (Issei) would be in a difficult position if they renounced Japanese citizenship and thereby made themselves stateless persons. Many of the Nisei also resented the question because of the assumption that their loyalty might be divided... [The form] was long and complicated. The questions were difficult to understand and answer. Center-wide meetings were held, and the anti-administration rabble rousers skillfully fanned the misunderstandings. (175-6)

The accompanying illustration depicts a “rabble rouser” on a stage in front of a sea of people, sobbing and gesturing into the air, and eliciting tears from others in the audience—with the exception of the Miné character, who is standing in the corner holding her nose and rolling her eyes. She continues, “Strongly pro-Japanese leaders in the camp won over the fence-sitters and tried to intimidate the rest. In the end, however, everybody registered. On the basis of the answers... the ‘disloyal’ were finally weeded out for eventual segregation and the ‘loyal’ were later granted ‘leave clearance’—the right to leave camp, find a job, and ‘relocate.’” (177). Here a group of men holding planks of wood like rifles approach another man who appears to be quite fearful; the Miné character walks through the group, sticking her tongue out at those doing the intimidating. While Okubo fully acknowledges the challenge of negotiating these decisions, swearing loyalty is presented here as a strategic move that allows people mobility and the chance to restart their lives; for those who would deny the political efficacy of such personal resistance in favor of a more publicly visible (as well as masculinist and coercive) resistance, Okubo seems to have little regard. The density of

these images and their text made them challenging for students to fully understand upon first reading them, but they also opened up rich discussion; questions around the need for and efficacy of cultural nationalism, the nature of alliance and resistance in the face of complete political and economic disenfranchisement, and the ethical ambiguities these things entail, all came to the fore.⁶²

Citizen 13660 offers no straightforward moral, no tidy closure. After going through the laborious bureaucratic preparations to relocate, Okubo describes leaving the camp:

I was now *free*. I looked at the crowd at the gate. Only the very old or very young were left. Here I was, alone, with no family responsibilities, and yet fear had chained me to the camp. I thought, ‘My God! How do they expect these poor people to leave the one place they can call home?’ I swallowed a lump in my throat as I waved good-by to them...There was only the desert now. My thoughts shifted from the past to the future. (209)

The ambivalence that marks the text is not neatly resolved. There is no clear call here for remembrance or memorialization—the text resists this response, even as its very existence testifies to the importance of standing as a witness to history. *Citizen 13660* confronts (and forces readers to confront) the violent and scarring history of the internment, but refuses to take on the project of suturing the American self-image, as

⁶² Similar opportunities to discuss the nature of the political/resistance in Booker T. Washington, Richard Rodriguez, etc...

Fortune magazine and the commission hearings did. Similarly, multicultural pedagogy cannot simply aim to redress of the unequal distribution of cultural capital through adequate visibility in the classroom of texts by members of marginalized social groups. Like its modernist predecessor, contemporary multiculturalism has been fundamental to American embourgeoisement. The magazines and best-sellers of my first chapters demonstrated the role that autobiography played in the deployment of modernist multiculturalism in relation to the growth of the middle class; today, as college education is now a primary index of middle class belonging and as autobiography has become more significant in literary education, it continues to play a similar role. But the multicultural literature classroom should be focused on investigating the very politics of identity formation and representation.

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