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# Ghetto Regionalism: Place, Identity, and Assimilation in the Fiction of Abraham Cahan, Sui Sin Far, and Zitkala-Sa

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GHETTO REGIONALISM: PLACE, IDENTITY, AND  
ASSIMILATION IN THE FICTION OF ABRAHAM  
CAHAN, SUI SIN FAR, AND ZITKALA-SA.

By

Tabitha Adams Morgan

B.A. Temple University, 2000

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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Advisory Committee:

Benjamin Friedlander, Assistant Professor of English, Advisor

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Benjamin Friedlander

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented

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My thesis is an exploration of turn-of-the-century immigrant and minority fiction. I deal specifically with the marginalization of minorities who live in ghettos, how and why such a demarcated place and space informs their social identity, and the function and ramifications of the assimilation process on those individuals, as shown in the fiction of Abraham Cahan, Sui Sin Far, and Zitkala-Sa.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this thesis to my sisters, Robin and Laurel, for their intelligence, their spirit, their beauty, and most of all for being the brightest stars in my sky.

In memory of Grampa George, Molly, and Ms. Marilyn.

I want to thank Jonah and Shateiel, Jo, Rebecca, Jer, and Bea, Meredith, Jason, and Killian, Josie, Rande and Kirsten, Sam, Emilie, and Charlie for...everything--it's all too much to say on this silly page--but when do I keep quiet? You folks have been a family to me that my life would have been incomplete without. Thank you for loving me, and making me a better person because of it. I love you.

Mom, Gram, Jenn, Finnegan, Lucille, Barbara, and Jason: I would not have finished my thesis or graduated without your love, support, e-mails and cards of encouragement, late night vodkas, and *long* phone conversations.

Thank you Ben for forcing me to do my best, even when I had given up five minutes earlier, and for all the long talks reminding me that I was capable. Thank you Tony for reminding me to Breathe. Naomi, Pat, Tina, Dr. Jay, and Carolyn Karcher (from a distance) thank you for your support, understanding, attention to detail, and guidance during this long process.

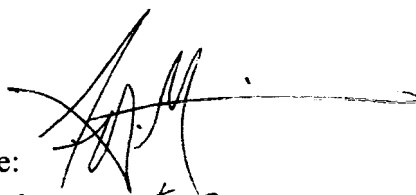
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July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2002

## CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Ghetto regionalism is a term I have chosen to represent minority and immigrant fiction from turn-of-the-century ghettos. Immigrant and minority authors had a singular perspective from which to view and comment on the burgeoning American landscape, and though they had distinct racial differences and prejudices to negotiate, they shared a perspective of a marginalized population. Immigrants and minorities were often relegated to specific geographic spaces which then held their collective and individual social identities. Authors from these spaces wrote from such a viewpoint and illuminated often shadowed perspectives. Authors from the Jewish ghetto of New York, the Chinatown of San Francisco, and the Indian Reservation of South Dakota shared a common thread: each came from a marginalized space where the inhabitants were forced, more often than not, to live an existence defined by geographic locale, a demarcated space, which included the construction of their social identities as built within the boundaries of life in that disenfranchised community.

Marginalized communities including Jewish tenements, Chinatowns, and Native reservations, can be subsumed under the broader heading of ghettos. Ghettos can then be defined as areas of isolated housing for a particular group of people. Though there is certainly a distinction between urban ghettos and rural reservations, they do share similar elements. As John Findlay notes in "An Elusive Institution," "Seeing reserves as places to be defined and planned, experienced and modified, resisted and abandoned, permits us to invoke insights into the significance of the built environment" (13). The "built environment," be it tenement, Chinatown or reservation, has the connotation of the word



ghetto, as a locale of forced, boundaried, and limited survival, and so for my purposes here will be equatable. As David R. Goldfield and James B. Lane have noted, the “formation of ghettos resulted from a combination of coercion by established society and voluntary decision by the ghetto residents” (1). Goldfield and Lane further explain that the ghetto “generates its own unique, complex patterns of behavior, which arise from the shared experiences of its residents in their responses to a potentially injurious environment and a hostile outside society” (11). The process of forming and sustaining ghettos is then contingent upon the dominant group’s ability to control the minority group, and the minority then being limited in that locale. Ghettos were also used as a way for the dominant majority to control an ever-increasing immigrant population, and corralled what was thought to be a vanishing race of Native Americans. Just as mass immigration instituted many open/closed policies, Natives were also subjected to governmental policies which designated the ways in which they could live. One “American commission report in 1895 talked frankly of isolating ‘the undesirable classes...in specific neighborhoods. They can then be more easily looked after’” (Goldfield and Lane 1). This government report is speaking specifically to urban ghettos, yet could be easily applied to reservations. The very conscious control of one group over another creates specific issues for the controlled. The question of how assimilation was to be most thorough, expedient, and fruitful came back to the role of place and whether or not segregation of minority populations furthered or hindered the assimilation process.

The space designated for minorities becomes inextricably linked to their sense of social identity. As Mark Abrahamson notes in *Urban Enclaves*, the “term ‘identity’-- from a social-psychological perspective--refers to people’s definitions of their (social)

selves and tends to be linked to roles and statuses” (5). The role the immigrants were to play was as useful and productive aides to the dominant majority. The problem was that the immigrant’s “role” was based upon their segregation to specific and limited minority areas, ghettos. Minorities and immigrants were boundaried by space in such a way that the ghetto “as a geographic entity and as a space with social meaning, also tends to be an object of residents’ attachments and an important component of their identities” (Abrahamsom 1). Ghetto residents’ acquisition of a “role,”--and consequent social identity--was, like their geographic locale, often not an autonomous choice, so that their social identity was as marginalized as their community.

Immigrant and minority identity was often informed by the dominant culture’s stereotyped version of how immigrants and minorities should act. The debate over whether or not immigrants and minorities *could* assimilate allowed the dominant culture to decide whether or not they *should* assimilate. Oscar Handlin’s classic *Immigration as a Factor in American History* (1959) continues to be an authority on turn of the century immigration policies and practices. Handlin states that “[t]hroughout the nineteenth century the open policy that had admitted any comers to the nation had been justified by the certainty that all could be absorbed and that all could contribute to an emerging national character” (146). Such "absorption" in the case of immigration is parallel to assimilation. The critical decisions and policies revolving around the issue of assimilation inevitably required decisions by the dominant group concerning the minority groups’ relationship to space (i.e. the ghettos). These decisions were informed by debates about the “function” of immigrants in America.

The debates concerning immigrants revolved around three major theories: melting pot, cultural pluralism, and white identity. Israel Zangwill, an English dramatist, wrote in his play *The Melting-Pot* (1909), “There she lies, the great Melting-Pot--listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth--the harbour where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething!... --how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them in his purging flame!” (quoted in Handlin 150). Quite dramatically, Zangwill described how the melting pot would consume the immigrants and disentangle them from their cultures by a “purging” so that they might become part of the larger culture. This theory is conditioned upon an already established American ideal. Though this ideal may not have been written in the laws, there was an underlying assumption in American consciousness that its “ideal” citizen was white, English speaking, and a productive entity, i.e. had money. This was the ideal to which the immigrants were expected to “melt and fuse”--assimilate--themselves in order to become a vital part of the national identity.

In opposition to the Melting-Pot, Percy Stickney Grant, an Anglican pastor, believed that America must change its ideals to conform to the growing numbers of immigrants; that transformation *was* the American ideal. His influential article “American Ideals and Race Mixture” (1912) stirred the immigration and assimilation debate to another level with a theory that would later be termed “cultural pluralism.” Grant argued that “we must reconstruct our idea of democracy--of American democracy. This done, we must construct a new picture of citizenship. If we do these things we shall welcome the rugged strength of the peasant or the subtle thought of the man of the Ghetto in our reconsidered American ideals. After all, what are those American ideals we boast

so much about?" (quoted in Handlin 151). Grant recognized that establishing spatial boundaries, such as ghettos, along racial and cultural boundaries would not lead to the freedom and equality that constitute American ideals. Although the vast majority of cultural pluralism supporters recognized that different races could live in one society peacefully, if not always equally, many others believed in cultural pluralism simply because they also believed that immigrants were not capable of assimilation.

A third voice supported assimilation as a clear answer to the "immigration problem" but also recognized as a problem the reality that immigration inevitably affected white identity. R. Mayo-Smith believed that it was the immigrant's responsibility not to disturb the dominant culture. In *Emigration and Immigration: A Study in Social Science* (1890) he stated that "the addition of foreign elements has been so rapid that it has made the race composition of our population essentially different from what it would have been if we had been left to our own natural growth." (quoted in Handlin 159). Mayo-Smith believed that "fusing" would change white identity, and consequently American identity, because through the process of assimilation, immigrants would "fuse" themselves into the dominant culture, thereby altering the Melting Pot. His solution can be taken as the basic goal of assimilation: "the great ethnic problem we have before us is to fuse these diverse elements into one common nationality, having one language, one political practice, one patriotism and one ideal of social development" (163). If assimilated according to Mayo-Smith, minorities would be fused into the dominant society without affecting the already established white identity. With the diverse arguments concerning the role of immigrants, identity at the turn of the century

was not simply a notion of individual selfhood, but a national issue with which each individual, in each minority group, struggled.

While none of the authors I will discuss overtly advocate assimilation, all three do address the issues and their effects on the individual. Each investigates place, assimilation, and culture, which provides multiple layers for understanding immigrant identity. As Kate A. Berry and Martha L. Henderson note in “Envisioning the Nexus between Geography and Ethnic and Racial Identity,” “[g]eography is relevant to the social construction of race and ethnicity because identities are created not only by the labels that are borne but through the spaces and places in which they exist” (6). Thus, race and social identity converge around the nexus of geography. The texts I have chosen are representative of fiction which explores the issues of place, identity, ethnicity, and assimilation; in each text, place takes on specific symbolism which informs the welfare and identity of the protagonists. Though each author has a particular perspective about the position of ethnicity and identity, all three texts share a consciousness for the marginalized nature of their symbolic places. Ghetto regionalism focuses on the role of place as connected to identity, as the space that immigrants and minorities occupied had a direct influence on the shape of their identity and the process of their assimilation.

Abraham Cahan’s ’s *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), was the first immigrant novel authored by an immigrant and exclusively dealing with issues of assimilation and Americanization (Chametzky 57). The novel revolves around Yekl, a Jewish immigrant, who leaves his wife and son in Russia and comes to America to find his fortune. Yekl renames himself Jake and this begins his journey from “greenhorn” to Americanized. Jake struggles between the life he has left behind and the life he is trying

to create. These conflicting ideals of traditionalism and Americanization ultimately end up warring for his identity when his Old World wife and son come to the New World. Yekl/Jake is a character trapped in the liminality of creating his selfhood, where the ghetto takes on a pivotal role as representing the boundaries that keep him non-assimilated. The Jewish tenement holds traditionalist elements as well as the promise of the American experience; this tension, which the ghetto embodies, parallels Yekl/Jake's personal assimilation process. Cahan focuses on Yekl/Jake's struggle within this assimilation decision and process. His ambiguous ending leaves unanswered the question of whether or not Americanization is a positive process.

Sui Sin Far's "The Wisdom of the New" (1912) takes on a similar theme of the immigrant's struggle within the assimilation process, yet unlike Cahan ends with an anti-assimilationist stance. In the story, Wou Sankwei was seven years in America before he sent for his wife Pau Lin and son Yen. He had made friends with Americans Mrs. Dean and her niece Adah. These two American characters represent two of the perspectives that white America had toward immigrants. Mrs. Dean views the Chinese as a people who must be taught certain attributes in order to acculturate and be accepted into American society, whereas Adah sees the Chinese as individuals with personal struggles that transcend culture, race or gender. What ensues is a short and searing indictment of the effect of assimilation on the immigrant's identity, when that identity was securely founded in a traditional culture, and the possibly horrific ramifications of Americanization.

Sui Sin Far's short story, "Its Wavering Image" (1910?) also focuses on the struggle of an immigrant who is half white and half Chinese, although it is not so extreme

in its indictment of Americanization. Instead, the story details the personal response of one young woman, Pan, to the external pressures of assimilation. Through her questionings of internal and external struggles, Pan ends up affirming a traditional identity that revolts against the popular debates of assimilation, and this story chronicles her individual, personal, and emotional struggle within the larger debates about the role of immigrants in American society. Sui Sin Far advocates cultural pluralism to the extent that the characters embody it through their biracialism, but by the end of the story Pan's choice of one identity over the other indicates that cultural pluralism isn't always realistic. Pan's mixed race status, like that of Sui Sin Far herself, furthers the symbolic, as well as realistic, tensions of racial identity that war *inside* an individual. The ghetto again provides boundaries for traditionalism and Americanization; as when a white reporter exposes Chinatown, Pan is forced to choose her loyalties to one culture over another. The ghetto becomes a part of the tensions that assimilation pushes and pulls within the individual.

The third author I will be exploring is Zitkala-Sa, a Sioux from the Yankton Reservation. Her book *American Indian Stories* (1921) is a compilation of autobiographical and fictional stories that revolve around the Native American struggle to reconcile marginalization with survival. Her fiction speaks of place and identity in a way that diverges from Cahan and Far. Zitkala-Sa, and Native writers in general, have a singular relationship to geography where a relationship to the land is a basis for identity, yet that land is, by government interference, a mobile, transitional, and transitory locale. This connection between space and identity was a tenuous one for Natives, and often detrimental to their survival and way of life, yet Zitkala-Sa does address the reservation

in ways parallel to Cahan's treatment of the Jewish tenement and to Sui Sin Far's treatment of Chinatown. Zitkala-Sa establishes the reservation of "Blue Star-Woman" as the boundary between assimilated and non-assimilated. The interpolation of assimilated Natives provides the impetus for Blue- Star Woman to choose the elements on which she will base her identity. For though reservations and Chinatowns have distinct differences, and different histories, the issue of assimilation is common to all marginalized populations, all ghettoized people.

Ghettos are moveable and transitional spaces as they become part of the process of assimilation and part of the consciousness and identity of immigrants and minorities; physically, the New York ghettos expand to Boston and Philadelphia; likewise the Georgia reservations are forced to migrate to Oklahoma, while the New York Chinatowns emigrate to San Francisco for economic expansion. Consciously, the geographic locale that a ghetto occupies represents a spatiality that is imbued with specific connotations and is then carried in the minds and imaginations of the residents. All residents of ghettos thereby have a consciousness held in common by the consciousness that all marginalized communities share. This ghetto consciousness invests its symbolism in an individual's sense of selfhood and social identity.

That an individual could take his/her ghetto consciousness, and the social identity that results, and move to another ghetto connects geographic mobility, for the individual and the his/her cultural group, to a national sense of geographic stability. Land, then, does move, as the people of that land move. As Sam Bass Warner, Jr. and Colin B. Burke note in "Cultural Change and the Ghetto," the turn of the century afforded "extreme geographical mobility, the response partly to the opening up of new land in the



west, and partly to the fluid state of the economy which encouraged men to move from shop to shop and from town to town seeking work, [which] wore down traditional local loyalties and identifications” (53). In this way, the notion that geography was static and stable began to alter with movement throughout the nation. It is at this juncture where the literary genre of regionalism is seen as a component of and springboard for ghetto regionalism. Literature is a cultural product, and is guided by cultural shifts in a population’s consciousness, so that the more geographically static genre of regionalism began to shift and expand in response to the movements of urbanization, emigration, and immigration. Not simply a record of timeless landscapes, regionalism began to explore the ways in which America’s geographical diversity helped to shape a national identity.

David Jordan in *Regionalism Reconsidered* states that regionalism was an answer to America’s growing industrialization and the desire for a great national art that would distinguish an American identity from our European competitors. “Regionalism seemed to be the answer: detailed depictions of unique American environments and the communities that inhabited them were thought to be the means of forging a distinctly American art” (ix). What exactly was depicted in regional fictions was unique to each author’s geography of choice, but also limited to that locale’s perspective, as regionalism/local color was dependent upon a locale’s particular aspects. An individual’s experience of those specific locales creates a consciousness and identity centered in place. John Gordon Burke in *Regional Perspectives: An Examination of America’s Literary Heritage* also notes the importance of place in an individual’s consciousness, as depicted in American literature. “There is a logic of literary ‘place,’ and ...its essence may be found in geography. What makes this proposition so difficult, however, is that a

regional tradition can be so fleeting and ephemeral....There is further, a regionalism of the mind” (vii). The “regionalism of the mind” is this connection between land, consciousness, space and identity. They converge in the individual (character) and are communicated through literature, specifically regionalism and ghetto regionalism.

In opposition to the championing of place, Robert M. Dainotto argues that contemporary theory has already embraced regional ‘place literature’ and asks, “[w]hat have we *lost* by our ‘getting back to place’?” His primary answer is that by embracing regional literature we have lost an historical perspective because “place...is fundamentally a negation of history” (2). While this may be true for more traditionally regionalist literatures, place is not, in ghetto regionalism, a negation of history, because that place which ghetto literature represents is not a static negation of moving culture and history. Instead, ghetto literature uses place to embody history rather than negate it. Ghetto regionalism explores issues, such as assimilation, that were central to the welfare and lives of turn of the century peoples. This is evident in the fiction I am discussing by the ways in which each protagonist fights for or against the boundaries of the ghettos as a part of his/her fight for or against the process of assimilation. These issues--place, identity, and assimilation--not only affected the immigrants directly, but also impacted the dominant majority’s way of life, political beliefs, and sense of national and personal selfhood. The world was changing rapidly and the “new” theory of cultural pluralism was becoming a living issue with which everyone had to grapple.

Many contemporary critics have become aware of the historical and cultural importance of regionalism, while also noting its lack of an urban perspective. Carrie Tirado Bramen, in *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National*

*Distinctiveness*, has expanded the understanding of regionalism to include the vast urbanization of turn-of-the-century America in a theory she has termed “urban picturesque.” Urbanization is unarguably important; its literature, the literature of the ghettos, therefore should be equally recognized as a vital part of American history. Towards this end, Bramen’s main focus is to “equate ethnic variety and urbanism with modern Americanism” through the use of exploring turn of the century urban picturesque whose main task was “to capture immigrant peculiarities as a way to demonstrate to middle-class readers that ‘richness and variety’ were part of the metropolitan experience” (159). Such cultural pluralism relies on the perspective of white middle class authors’ explorations of the immigrant situation, rather than relying on the immigrants’ first-hand accounts of how urbanization and ghettoization affected the people who were living it daily.

Bramen notes that “[s]imilar to cultural pluralism’s response to concerns that America was becoming either too homogeneous or too heterogeneous, regionalism took a middle path between the two, insisting on a model of unity-in-distinctiveness” (118). She cites Rudolph Bourne’s 1916 interpretation of William James’s “pluralistic universe,” calling for what Bourne terms a “Trans-National America.” Bramen explores both sides of the turn-of-the-century debate about assimilation and notes that “in contrast to the melting-pot, the predominant trope of American assimilation by which cultures were to blend in order to form a new synthesis, Bourne’s model of national incorporation was based on unity-in-discreteness. According to his model, immigrants must retain their ‘foreign savor,’ which would distinguish modern America from the supposedly homogeneous nationalities of Europe” (159). Similar to Grant’s theory of cultural

pluralism, Bourne recognized that in order to keep America's distinctness and freedom of individuality, immigrants must be allowed full expression of their cultural identities.

Slowly the dominant society began to recognize that what was central to the "urban experience" and to multicultural America at the turn-of-the-century was the impact of the immigrants and minorities who made up almost a third of the national population. In this way, the rural regionalism of Sarah Orne Jewett's quaint New England became an urban regionalism that also included Stephen Crane's "New York City Sketches" (1890's) and Theodore Dreiser's *The Color of a Great City* (1923). Bramen looks closely into the role of white authors' interpretations of the urban expansion and influx of immigration. She explains that Crane and Dreiser's role, as authors and journalists, underlines her theory of the urban picturesque because both their writing and her critical approach are ways "to naturalize both swarthy immigrants and poverty as elements of modernity" (182). Yet now with hindsight we can realize that the objectifying and exoticizing tone in which Crane and Dreiser unconsciously wrote was representative of the racial prejudices of their time, which is why it becomes vital to emphasize the previously sidelined literatures written by and speaking for minorities.

American literature has been boundaried by race, class, and culture so that it becomes imperative to explore Americanism not simply from the distanced perspective of the dominant group but from the perspective of those people who lived in a hidden yet emerging multicultural America. It is to the texts of ghetto regionalism that we must turn to hear the voices of those exiled from the American ideal. Specifically, Abraham Cahan's novel centers around Yekl/Jake's identity as it is defined by exterior circumstances, most significantly, by the ghetto that borders him. *Yekl* is a story of

boundaries: how they are created, where they come from, and why we keep them. Sui Sin Far's two short stories revolve more around the inward boundaries of what one individual considers the identifying characteristics of her identity, why and how this is achieved, and the consequences of the establishment of those boundaries--not only as an individual choice, but as a national requirement for its newcomers. Zitkala-Sa explores the role of already assimilated Natives, and the boundaries that they cross culturally and geographically with their assimilation, and the impact that their return has on the reservation residents.

Regionalism, as a literary genre, reflects the consciousness of particular geographic locales; yet, because immigrant consciousness was not represented in this genre, except from the perspective of "outsiders," traditional/rural regionalism lost its ability to conceptualize and encompass America's growing diversity. Bramen's explanation of the urban picturesque began to capture the growing concern white America had about immigration, yet the urban picturesque is focused on descriptions of immigrants not their consciousness; these authors were still "outsiders" to the ghetto, ghetto consciousness, and ghetto fiction. Ghetto regionalism is, instead, the voices of people from marginalized communities expressing why and how their environment created or affected their social identities.

My thesis will explore the perspectives of immigrant and minority authors and their attention to identity in a turbulent time and with unclear rules, and unchangeable boundaries to guide them. The specific factors that inform most marginalized community literature are the role of land, the conditions of assimilation, and the consequences of an assimilated identity. The texts I have chosen represent a multi-perspectival view of

immigrant and minority social identity and show how the interconnected elements of land and identity become key factors that inform minority survival.

## CHAPTER TWO: ABRAHAM CAHAN

*“Can it be true...that we are attracted in literature by characters and scenes that we would shrink from in the flesh?...Do they serve any purpose, even to amuse? Do they do any good?...above all, are they literature?”*

Nancy Banks *“The New York Ghetto”* 1896<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish ghetto epitomizes the inter-connectedness of geographic spaces and social identity. The *Shtetl* and the ghettos of Eastern Europe began what has become a long history of ghettos in America. Yet as Louis Wirth explains in *The Ghetto* (1928), “There is one important difference between the ghettos of the Old World and the those of the New. The former are on the whole homogeneous bodies concentrated in a single section of the city, with a common city-wide, if not regional, cultural life. The American ghetto, on the other hand, is, as a rule, split up into various sections, containing various national groups of Jews and reflecting the influences of heterogeneous waves of immigration, as well as of successive generations of the same group” (204). That the American ghettos are “split” rather than “homogeneous” establishes a precedent or foundation for a fractured sense of cultural and societal identity.

The American ghetto, specifically of the 1890s in New York, certainly did not have one homogeneous, city-wide, cultural life. The vastly multicultural life of New York ghettos was not always welcoming of its many diverse ethnicities, as evidenced by the racially-factioned environment of ghettos. This factioning created a splintered atmosphere between racial groups that even affected the author’s fiction and its possible

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<sup>1</sup> quoted in Haenni

publication. Sanford E. Marovitz notes that “[p]ublishers did not believe that most of their readers would be interested in fiction dealing only with East Side Jews, the sordid ghetto environment, and unhappy endings.” Abraham Cahan was even told by one publisher that *Yekl* was “only about Jews, and nothing beautiful was in it” (1996: 70). Such cultural displacement is representative of minority and immigrant struggles, and, such sentiments may be what prodded Cahan to defend the style and subject matter of his fiction. He stated in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1898,

Would that the public could gain a deeper insight into these [sweatshop] struggles than is afforded by [scornful] newspaper reports! Hidden under an uncouth surface would be found a great deal of what constitutes the true poetry of modern life,—tragedy more heart-rending, examples of a heroism more touching, more noble, and more thrilling, than anything that the richest imagination of the romanticist can invent. While to the outside observer the struggles may appear a fruitless repetition of meaningless conflicts, they are, like the great labor movement of which they are a part, ever marching onward, ever advancing.<sup>2</sup>

Immigrants wanted to express their selves but the ghettos disenfranchised them from the larger consciousness of the city as a whole, just as the dominant culture’s reluctance to hear their voices displaced them from the national identity.

Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) was the first immigrant novel authored by an immigrant and exclusively dealing with immigrant issues of assimilation and Americanization (Chametzky 57). Cahan explores the tensions of an immigrant, Yekl, who wants to Americanize but is tested in the “rightness” of his choice. The novel ends on an ambiguous note as the reader does not know whether he fully assimilates or not. Cahan does not seem able to actuate the vision of cultural pluralism that Sui Sin Far will do in her 1912 short story collection. Perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> First quoted in Marshall “The Life of A. Cahan, Novelist.” *Boston Sunday Post* 27 (1896). Reprinted as an appendix in Kirk and Kirk.



chronological coincidence, but more likely Cahan was embroiled in the Melting Pot debates while Sui Sin Far was privy to the cultural pluralism of Grant's 1912 essay. Cahan is captured by the historical realities that he was faced with, and in response provides his characters with an emotionality that deepens the assimilation debates to an individual level. An 1896 review states that *Yekl* has "set the critics of two continents to scribbling and to drawing comparisons between his work and that of Stephen Crane, I. Zangwill, and others"<sup>4</sup> (quoted in Haenni). This connects Cahan's fiction to the urban regionalism of Crane's "New York City Sketches" and to the current political debates evidenced in Zangwill's *Melting-Pot* and other writings.

The opening scene of *Yekl* is in a "sweltering" and "oppressed" sweatshop where Jake is arguing with his co-workers by taunting them about who is more Americanized. Jake considers himself the most Americanized because he has a working knowledge of American sports and speaks fairly good "Yiddish-English." He yells at one man, "you bedraggled *greenhorn*, afraid to budge out of Heshter Shtreet" (6). The issues of place, ethnicity, and identity are immediately foregrounded. Whether one is Americanized or not is connected in Jake's mind to whether one can leave the ghetto boundary of Hester Street. The other street that creates a ghetto boundary is Suffolk Street. The narrator comments, "Suffolk Street is in the very thick of the public battle for breath. For it lies in the heart of that part of the East Side which has within the last two or three decades become the Ghetto of the American metropolis, and, indeed, the metropolis of the Ghetto of the world" (13). Characterizing the Jewish ghetto as lying "in the heart" of the East Side creates a sense that the city streets and the ghetto itself are imbued with a character.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Haenni. For more comparison between Cahan and Stephen Crane see David M. Fine.

The characters' geographical surrounding then has a life-force of its own, compounding the already oppressive cultural and ethnic tensions of the nineteenth century.

Peter I. Rose in "The Ghetto and Beyond" writes that the "American ghetto was from its inception a combined product of communal assistance and societal denial. Realities quickly intruded upon the optimistic visions of the "open society" and Jews found that, while they could join society, the price of membership was high," as Yekl/Jake would find out for himself. Rose continues to explain why and how such exclusion was caused by the dominant group and precipitated by the immigrants themselves: "[m]ounting fear over the 'wretched refuse' of Europe had led to a growing anti-foreign sentiment throughout the country. And none decried the influx more quickly than those who had so recently been immigrants themselves" (5). This becomes evident in Jake's antagonistic tone with his fellow immigrants. The ghetto becomes a battleground for "greenhorn" immigrants versus Americanized immigrants (versus America in general) as the ghetto traps them in a world bordered by anti-Semitism and holding immigrants captive who are struggling for individual identity within the national American identity.

The ghetto is described by Cahan as possessing both Old World and New World characteristics, and trapped in a liminality that impedes the progress of individuals. Cahan sets up the ghetto with the same dual struggles as the immigrants it houses; the ghetto's identity is as split by Old and New as are those of the ghetto dwellers. Jake "had to pick and nudge his way through dense swarms of bedraggled half-naked humanity...the pent-in sultry atmosphere was laden with nausea and pierced with a discordant and, as it were, plaintive buzz" (13). Emerson's 'buzz and din' of civilization becomes centralized

in the specific Yiddish ghetto of Suffolk and Hester streets, as Cahan goes on to list all the various countries, languages, religions, and dialects that make up this ghetto of the expelled, runaway, and refugee population (14).

The people themselves become more than statistics or faceless immigrants, and, as Sanford E. Marovitz writes, "*Yekl* could simply be categorized as an urban local-color novel, but it is, in fact, considerably more than that by virtue of individualized if not fully developed characters as well as expansive themes" (1996: 76). Cahan goes beyond the mere superficialities of people's outward differences (as embodied by Bramen's urban picturesque) to say that they were

good people morally degraded in the struggle for success amid an unwonted environment; moral outcasts lifted from the mire, purified, and imbued with self-respect; educated men and women with their intellectual polish tarnished in the inclement weather of adversity; ignorant sons of toil grown enlightened--in fine, people with all sorts of antecedents, tastes, habits, inclinations, and speaking all sorts of subdialects of the same jargon, thrown pellmell into one social cauldron--a human hodgepodge with its component parts changed but not yet fused into one homogeneous whole.  
(14)

Cahan describes ghetto residents as marginalized, "morally degraded" people whose only role is that of "outcasts." To distinguish between the dominant majority's conception of immigrants as wholly marginalized and Cahan's assertion that individuality is present even within their classification as "immigrant" or "American." Each character is, then, afforded the opportunity to choose a personal social identity. By acknowledging the subtle individual differences within the tenement (that is a "human hodgepodge"), Cahan enters the national melting pot debates. Though he initially situates himself against Israel Zangwill by noting that the immigrants were not "fused into one homogeneous whole," he does add "yet" to suggest that assimilation is to some degree inevitable. Cahan does

not stereotype all immigrants as striving towards Americanization but rather shows that they have individual selves with “all sorts of antecedents, tastes, habits, [and] inclinations.” By personalizing the immigrant character, Cahan shows that the “homogeneous whole” is a made from individual identities; that the culture does not simply create a ‘type’ but that individuals create the culture.

As the novel begins, Yekl is in the process of assimilating; the narrator announces that Yekl has been in America for three years and has already changed his name to Jake. Priscilla Wald in *Constituting Americans* explains that “[n]aturalization legislation enacted in 1906 symbolized the state’s prerogative to enable and even encourage the immigrants to revise their personal narratives of identity by making a name change, at the court’s discretion, a lawful part of the naturalization process” (248). A name change for immigrants became a natural component of the assimilation process. White America also often found immigrant names disconcerting and difficult to pronounce; Yekl is an overtly foreign name which may hinder his Americanization process. Jake says defensively: “Once I live in America...I want to know that I live in America. *Dot’ sh a’ kin’ a man I am!* One must not be a *greenhorn*” (Cahan 5, his emphasis).<sup>5</sup> Crossing the threshold of

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<sup>5</sup>Cahan’s uses dialect to further explore individual expression within a community and society. Dialect for the urban Jewish community is a part of the natural assimilation process of acquiring a new language, but also often recreates the fractured and fragmented prose that is symptomatic of the splintered immigrant assimilation process as well (Ruland and Bradbury 334). Dialect can bring verisimilitude to regionalism, and is often considered one of its trademarks, but it can also be stereotyping and debasing. Cahan’s use of dialect has been seen as vulgar and comic, especially when compared to the high-toned verbosity of the narrator; yet, Cahan’s narrator says that the immigrants were “speaking all sorts of subdialects of the same jargon” (Cahan 14) and Cahan reiterates this point by using different dialects for different immigrants, which shows a conscious desire on his part to assert the individuality of each immigrant within the assimilation process as an often collective endeavor. As well, Yekl’s recurrent phrase “Dot’ sh a kin’ a man I am!” reinforces the theme of self-assertion—even *through* dialect--because it presents, to the readers, a picture of the dual languages and dual identities that immigrants must struggle with. Through their use, and misuse, of the English language characters show outward manifestations of their inner struggles created by acculturation and its resultant fragmenting and decentering.

Castle Garden or Ellis Island often meant, even required, a new name and a new identity in order to receive the "stamp of approval."

Such changing of names symbolizes Jake's displacement of identity when he attempts acculturation. Cahan immediately addresses this issue at the close of chapter one when the narrator says: "[t]hree years had intervened since [Yekl/Jake] had first set foot on American soil, and the thought of ever having been a Yekl would bring to Jake's lips a smile of patronizing commiseration for his former self" (12). Yekl has disassociated from his former self and created such a split that he now considers his two different names to be two different people. With such a splintered conception of selfhood, Yekl is not simply a former name but becomes "*a* Yekl" which signifies a type, a symbology that Jake refuses to acknowledge as part of himself. In Yekl/Jake's case, the changing of names signifies not a claiming of one's inner self (as with freed slaves who change from their master's name to a name of their own), but rather an outward acknowledgment of capitulation to the American push for assimilation. Yekl/Jake's name change signifies the consummation of American culture and his renunciation of traditional values and customs.

Jewish identity was often based on the individual's acceptance of traditional ways, or the lack thereof. Daniel Bell in "Reflections on Jewish identity" notes that identity "is not a question of assimilation, for that is a matter of choice, the choice of severing all ties, and one which is made consciously. Attrition is not chosen--it is a wasting away. There is a word, Jew, but no feeling. And this becomes the most tragic consequence of identification solely through memory" (472). Jake is in a similar position; his Jewishness rests solely on the memory of his family in Russia. In America

he is not a practicing Jew in any meaningful way--he has given up praying, going to synagogue, etc.--and he lives in his Americanization process with no connection to his Jewish identity except for the thought of getting rid of it. Yet whether this is conscious or not is questionable. Milton M. Gordon in "Marginality and the Jewish Intellect" speaks to the identity crisis that often results from an assimilation process that entails leaving one's traditional identity behind. Anti-immigrant discrimination creates a marginality in society just as assimilation creates a marginality of traditional and progressive identities in the individual. Gordon writes, "[w]hile psychological correlates of marginality have been hypothesized as insecurity feelings, nervousness, and hypersensitivity" (477). Jake is both a "dandy" and a sheep, both insecure and terrified. This tension is one of many that underlie the assimilation process in the struggle for control over the protagonist's identity. It is only when his family comes from Russia that Jake is thrown into the chaos of his two warring selves.

That Jake has left his wife and son in Povodye, Russia is considered "a piece of burlesque as old as the ghetto" (25) and he is characterized instead by his flirtations and romances with the dancing beauties at the Suffolk Street dancing academy. Jake is a high-flying single man awash in his Americanization process, while his former Yekl self is almost forgotten. The narrator comments: his "Russian past appeared to him a dream and his wife and child, together with his former self, fellow characters in a charming tale, which he was neither willing to banish from his memory nor able to reconcile with the actualities of his American present" (26). Up until this point, Jake had no need for 'reconciliation' of his traditional self versus his Americanized self.

Because he cannot read or write Yiddish, Jake goes to his local scribe in order to have the monthly letter from home read to him. He is told that his father has died, and, momentarily, his world collapses. Jake is suddenly thrown, unwittingly, into remembrances of his traditional life. His father's death conjures a sense of his own traditionalism dying, of the Old World, and his old self, receding, and Jake (or would he consider himself Yekl at this moment?) is thrown awry in his search for a cultural identity. Writes Cahan, "he was overcome with a heart-wringing consciousness of being an orphan, and his soul was filled with a keen sense of desolation and self-pity. And thereupon every thing around him--the rows of tenement houses, the hum and buzz of the scurrying pedestrians, the jingling horse cars--all suddenly grew alien and incomprehensible to Jake" (31). Only when Jake is forced into consciousness of his old world, does he question or feel uncomfortable in his new world surroundings.

Jake is then thrown into a reality, one that does not compete for the most Americanized person, but that values family and loyalty. He vows to himself that he will begin a new life, and starts by attempting to say his nightly prayers. He can no longer remember them and is subsequently haunted by a man in white burial clothes who tries to choke him. Jake quickly borrows a prayer book from a neighbor, says his prayers, and the next morning sends for his wife and child to come join him in America. Being haunted by his dead father (which will, as the novel goes on, only get worse) seems the metaphysical signpost that pushes him to incorporate his traditional life into his Americanized life. When Jake finally sends for his wife Gitl and son Yossele it signifies a change in his consciousness. His willingness to incorporate his traditional life into his

Americanized identity is represented by Gitl and Yossele's physical move into the Jewish ghetto.

When, a few weeks later, Jake goes to get Gitl and Yossele from the Ellis Island immigrant detention area, he is dressed to the nines, hoping to impress his country wife with the splendors and riches he has found in American life. Yet Gitl has been in steerage for weeks, sunburned and unbathed, and the couple barely recognize each other. Gitl and Yossele find their Yekl a cold and distant "American" and he finds them uncouth and grotesque (34). The narrator comments on Jake's mind-set: "here he was, Jake the Yankee, with this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side!" (36).<sup>6</sup> A few weeks before, Jake had left the dance club with an American beauty on each arm, but now he has his wife and son anchoring him down into tradition and away from the Americanization for which he has struggled. He is left "gnashing his teeth with disgust and shame or hissing some Bowery oath" (37).

Gitl attempts to become Americanized for her husband's sake, and Jake aides her process by changing her name to Gertie (41) and his son's name to Joey (45) (though the narrator continues to call both by their traditional names). Gitl slowly becomes used to America while also "getting used to her husband, in whom her own Yekl and Jake the stranger were by degrees merging themselves into one undivided being" (41). Yet, as Gitl thinks to try an Old World love potion, Jake thinks to try poison. "He thought himself a martyr, an innocent exile from a world to which he belonged by right...But can it be that he is doomed for this life? No! no! he would revolt, conscious at the same time that there was really no escape. 'Ah may she be killed, the horrid greenhorn!'" (44). Once a Russian refugee exiled from his traditional home, now Jake sees himself as exiled

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<sup>6</sup> For further criticism on gender and the role of clothing in *Yekl* see Schreier. For gender see Velikova.



from America--the world where he really belonged, by "right." How is it that Jake made the transition from being a greenhorn himself three years ago to being an American by "right"? The assimilation process--new name, new clothes, new language--must then involve a new identity where one's social consciousness is founded in the new country to such an extent that any deviation from that country's required norms becomes unacceptable, even to the formation of a social identity for the newcomer.

Jake and Gitl are miserable, and outside help seems necessary. Mrs. Kavarsky, a childless, middle-aged neighbor, takes Gitl shopping for American clothes and advises her that "[i]n America one must take care not to displease a husband. Here one is today in New York and tomorrow in Chicago" (57). Mrs. Kavarsky is very conscious of the easy mobility between ghettos, taking the time to teach Gitl the foundational rules of ghetto life; Gitl attempts Americanization with zeal hoping to keep her family intact. Mr. Bernstein, an educated scholar in Russia but a sweatshop worker with Jake in America, consoles Gitl about her husband's erratic behavior. When Gitl learns of Jake's infidelity with Mamie, a girl he met at the dancing academy, Gitl exclaims, "Woe is me, what America has brought me to!" (65). Yet Gitl embraces her Americanization zealously and "hail[s] the transformation with joy" even though "the change [in her hair and clothes] pleased her as much as it startled her" (67). Jake, though, is less impressed and "the sight of her revolted him" (68) so much that--as Mrs. Kavarsky warned--Jake thinks of fleeing to Chicago (72). Jake's desire for freedom from the traditionalism that Gitl embodies parallels Gitl's own sense of freedom in her burgeoning Americanized identity.

Assimilation becomes part of Jake's and Gitl's consciousness, though in different ways; in Jake's case, his consciousness finds borders and boundaries in the limits of the ghetto. Because the assimilation process is more of a consciousness than a fixed entity, the issues and themes that Jake struggles with move with him. Gitl and Mamie are fixed entities because they represent the polar distinctions of traditionalism and Americanization, two opposite ends of Jake's own internal split, and the ghetto is a borderland that is the witness. Jake and Gitl have a fight, their first and last, and Jake is not certain whether to choose his traditional life and self, represented by Gitl, or choose Americanization, represented by Mamie. This struggle solidifies Jake's process of splitting, and further tears him in opposing directions. The directional pull manifests itself outwardly as a personal diaspora.

Jake decides he must wander the streets until he thinks of some solution to the rending apart of his two selves. This pattern and process parallel the loss of self that immigrants feel in their vast diasporas, where a home and a center must be created in their consciousnesses because they have no distinct and autonomous home of their own design. Jake wanders, thinking of all possible solutions to reconciling his old world with his new, when "[h]aving passed as far as the limits of the Ghetto he took a homeward course by a parallel street" (73). The ghetto "limits" come to represent not simply the geographic locale of urban reality, but becomes symbolic of the immigrant consciousness and its struggles with the boundaries of an "American" identity.

Dalia Kandiyoti in "Comparative Diasporas: The Local and Mobile in Abraham Cahan and Alberto Gerchunoff" writes of the "discourse of place as a generative source of culture, and, significantly, the role of place in the experience of *displacement* and

immigrant identity” (77). Place, as a “generative source,” helps create and shape the immigrant's social identity. Jake, though, is not conscious enough of his relationship with place to have a productive or “generative” give and take, instead he only experiences the visceral and emotional “*displacement*” of being an outcast in two worlds, Old and New.

When Jake begins to question whether or not to divorce Gitl and marry his Americanized beauty, Mamie, he goes through an identity crisis of which the ghetto is the primary witness. Ironically titled “A Housetop Idyl,” this chapter can be seen as a critique of the usual picturesque-pastoral love sketch, and confronts the ways in which the ghetto represents the inner immigrant consciousness. The scene, which should show the sentimental union of a young assimilated couple transcending their squalid surroundings, is instead a “lurid, exceedingly uncanny sort of idyl” (75) beset with death imagery, ghosts, and personifications of Jake’s unresolved fears of leaving his traditional past behind. This scene is the culmination of previous tensions and ambiguities. Mamie, Jake's assimilated girlfriend, taunts Jake into agreeing to divorce Gitl and marry her, yet such pressure from Mamie elicits hallucinations of the dead from Jake.

Jake’s identity crisis occurs on the rooftop of his girlfriend’s tenement house. Jake tries to deny his intuition but his deeper consciousness creates projections of his worst fears. The tenement rooftop is pivotal because it represents the ghetto from a heightened perspective. This position would signify an “elevated” perspective and consciousness, yet Jake chooses to be as unconscious of his cultural tensions as to his surroundings. The rooftop is layered with rows of the lodgers’ laundry; it blows in the autumn breeze and creates a scene that haunts Jake’s consciousness. For Jake, the scene

was “extremely weird and gruesome in those stretches of wavering, fitfully silvered white, to Jake’s overtaxed mind vaguely suggesting the burial clothes of the inmates of a Jewish graveyard” (75). Jake’s compulsive fear of death, and its related imagery, suggests his (unconscious) understanding that the death of his traditional self must be sacrificed in order for his full assimilation to take place. That Jake is haunted by these images instead of spurred to action by them, is his ambiguity about making a final decision to assimilate. Jake is constantly on the verge of tears as his fears manifest themselves in odd hallucinatory images. The immigrant clothes become personifications of the traditional past Jake is thinking of forsaking, and as they “speak” to him, he is silenced or thinks of silencing himself/his self.

What Cahan explores in *Yekl*, by the title alone, is Yekl’s transitional process to becoming Jake and what effect it has on his selfhood; yet because it is titled “Yekl” those other characters, situations, and locales that help create the identity of Yekl are all key elements, and after his own symbolic death of Yekl, the most predominant and pivotal factor is Gitl. In the final chapter titled “A Defeated Victor” Gitl is returning from the divorce proceedings and says to her son Yossele upon entering her home, ““Ai, you have no papa anymore, Joeyele! Yosele, little crown, you will never see him again! He is dead, *tate* is!”” (87). This “death,” parallel to Jake’s own conception of the “death” of his traditional self, shows not only that Gitl has become Americanized to the point where she understands a “death” of one self must occur in order for the other, new self to thrive, but also that she *agrees* with this process enough to participate in it. By the same token Yekl’s “death” to allow for Jake creates a resurrection for Gitl that Jake was not able to obtain with the death of his father. This bodes well for Yossele because--and maybe it is

one of the messages of the novel--he will thrive as a second generation immigrant where his parents barely survived as new immigrants. Gitl decides to marry the scholar Mr. Bernstein and have a more traditional life rooted in the Jewish faith. They plan to open up a grocery store with, ironically, the money that Mamie gave Jake for the divorce.

For Jake, the novella ends on an unpromising note; Jake and Mamie are riding in a cable car towards City Hall to get married. Kandiyoti points out that "The story ends in this vehicle, in a space between the Jewish ghetto and the civic space of the nation in the marriage bureau. Suspended between two places, the protagonists of Jewish immigrant fiction dramatize the discontent of assimilation, the [as Edward Said has said] 'struggle over geography,' and the production of the local as an ever-unfinished process" (94-5). Coming full circle, Cahan draws attention to Jake leaving the ghetto, as he had once drawn attention to the lack of mobility in the non-assimilated sweat-shop workers. In chapter one, Jake had taunted his co-workers about never crossing Hester Street, never venturing outside the boundaried walls of the ghetto. Yet here for the first time, Jake is crossing the boundaries of the ghetto--not for individual freedom, but in order to complete his assimilation process by wedding Americanized Mamie. The border he could not cross before he divorced Gitl, he is crossing now.

While this marriage could portend a new American life, as both Jake and Mamie want, the narrator's comments suggest otherwise. While Jake's proximity to Mamie is comforting, "in his innermost heart he was the reverse of eager to reach City Hall. He was painfully reluctant to part with his long-coveted freedom so soon after it had at last been retained, and before he had time to relish it...instead of a conqueror, he had emerged from the rabbi's house [for the divorce] the victim of an ignominious defeat" (89). If

then Jake is in “The Defeated Victor,” the victim of “defeat,” what is he a “victor” over? If being completely Americanized is the victory, then is individuality and the lack of any cultural retention the defeat that will make him miserable? Cahan does call the novel “Yekl” not “Jake” so that there is a hint that Yekl/Jake will find some resolution with the alienated Self he has forsaken, while also finding community in the New World that will not assimilate away his sense of selfhood.

Cahan has explored the process of Americanization in such a way that his fiction calls into question what the American identity is and who qualifies to be a part of it. By personalizing immigrant struggles with assimilation, Cahan has illuminated how one can have and hold onto a minority identity, and at what price the dominant group will sanction/allow holding onto that minority identity. Rather than providing a definitive solution to the struggles of immigrant identity, Cahan's ghetto regionalism explores and questions the function of assimilation, the process of obtaining a secure conception of selfhood, and the role that place has in the formation of a social identity.

### CHAPTER THREE: SUI SIN FAR

*"Meanwhile, in full trust and confidence, she led him about Chinatown, initiating him into the simple mystery and history of many things"*

*Sui Sin Far "Its Wavering Image"*

What differentiates Sui Sin Far's fiction most strongly from Cahan's is that the Chinese in America were under strict laws that forbade them from becoming U.S. citizens or from establishing roots of any kind. More similar to Native Americans, the Chinese were relegated by "'restrictive covenants' in real estate" that created Chinatowns much the same way reservations were created: through demarcation to restricted areas (White-Parks, *A Literary Biography*, 106; and Tonkovich 238). As well, immigrants of Asian descent underwent a terrorism that was rivaled only by the treatment of Blacks. As Annette White-Parks, a Sui Sin Far scholar, has chronicled, one extreme example of racism "occurred in Los Angeles in 1871, when twenty-one Chinese were shot, hanged, or burned to death by non-Chinese males" (*A Literary Biography* 106). Such racial terrorism created an atmosphere where Chinatowns took on a more self-protective aspect than other ghettos of the time.

Most ghettos were rationalized as the inevitable effect of mass urbanization, yet Chinatowns were attacked on a singularly racial basis that was unprecedented. Chinese immigrants were initially brought to America to aid construction of the transcontinental railroad. Because Chinese workers were considered temporary employees, they were characterized as a mobile and transitory population in America.<sup>2</sup> When they completed

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<sup>2</sup> See Takaki.

the railroad and began to settle in urban areas to secure economic survival in their new country, they were “exploited by capital, victimized by labor, and prevented from assimilating” (Loo 39) by overtly racist and discriminatory acts from other Americans and the national government. This becomes most apparent in the Chinese Exclusion Acts between 1870-1920. Chalsa M. Loo, in *Chinatown: Most Time, Most Hard*, explains that the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 “suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers into the United States and prohibited the naturalization of Chinese” (41). Loo explains further that Chinatowns, particularly of San Francisco, began to function as “ghetto prisons,” because the immigrants feared the continuation of extreme racial violence, and so chose to seclude themselves in Chinatowns. Chinatowns eventually gained the reputation as “decidedly unsavory, as disease and immorality were attributed to place and race” (43). There is a personalization of this space by the outside population: the ghetto is immoral. This is the way in which outsiders classify the geographic locale of immigrants, which in turn affects the consciousness of those who live there, those who cannot help but to internalize others’ outward projections that define the immigrant’s space.

Loo quotes a passage from W.B. Farwell’s *The Chinese at Home and Abroad* (1885) which summarizes the majority’s view of Chinatown:

All great cities have their slums and localities where filth, disease, crime, and misery abound; but in the very best aspect which Chinatown can be made to present, it must stand apart, conspicuous and beyond them all in the extreme degree of all these horrible attributes, the rankest outgrowth of human degradation that can be found on this continent....the Chinese brought with them and have successfully maintained...the grossest habit of bestiality practiced by the human race. (43-44)

This perspective makes it clear that race and place are inextricable when categorizing and stereotyping minority races is concerned.



Sui Sin Far's fiction challenges these stereotypes and categorizations on many levels. First, as White-Parks has argued, Sui Sin Far presents a portrait of English-Asian characters that is "not in the mode of the 'yellow peril' literature popular in her era but with an empathy that has caused critics from her time to the present to recognize her as the first to write from an insider viewpoint on Chinese in North America" (*A Literary Biography* 1). This perspective, similar to Cahan's, goes deeper than the urban picturesque of white authors' portrayals of immigrants. Sui Sin Far's ghetto regionalism uses minorities' own perspectives and thereby challenges commonly held assumptions and stereotypes. Her perspective is certainly unique for turn-of-the-century authors, but more importantly, the themes she discusses and the *way* she discusses them were positively scandalous for her time and are still under-recognized in our own. Rather than simply focus on the political debates over assimilation, Far delves into the individual psyche, but, as she herself acknowledged in "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (1909): "Individuality is more than nationality" (quoted in Tonkovich 132). From this statement alone it is clear that Sui Sin Far consciously explores the pressures of national ideals of assimilation that affect an immigrant's identity, and that that identity can be a national choice.

The second way that Far challenges her audience and her historical era is that she creates boundaries around the ghetto/Chinatown that make the whites the Other. Lisa Lowe in *Immigrant Acts* has noted that Chinatowns became "at once the deviant space ghettoized by the dominant configuration of social space and the resistant locality that signifies the internalization of 'others' within the national space" (122). I would argue that just as the dominant majority "ghettoized" the demarcated space of Chinatowns, Sui

Sin Far used those borders and racial boundaries to her advantage by re-controlling that space to keep whites at such distance that they become the Others outside of a very self-sufficient community. In literature specifically, White-Parks has also noted in “A Reversal of American Concepts of ‘Other-ness’ in the Fiction of Sui Sin Far,” that as “Chinese or Chinese-Americans become the center of narrative vision, White Americans simultaneously shift to positions of ‘Otherness’ or ‘outsiders,’ appearing in this new light as antagonists to Chinese-Americans, and to the Chinatown community/culture” (19). Sui Sin Far is extremely conscious of ghetto boundaries and the ease in which they affect the immigrant consciousness.

The underlying assumption held by America was the desire for immigrant assimilation, yet there was a dual message being sent, to Asians in particular, that whether the immigrants assimilated or not, they were not welcome. Sui Sin Far’s story “The Wisdom of the New” (1912) takes on the theme of immigrant alienation in the acculturation process, and ends on an anti-assimilationist stance.

In “The Wisdom of the New,” Wou Sankwei enters into an arranged marriage to Pau Lin so that when he ventures to America he may leave her behind to take care of his ailing mother. When, seven years later, the mother dies, Wou Sankwei is obligated to send for his wife and six year old son Yen. Much like Cahan's Yekl, Wou Sankwei has become Americanized during the separation from his family. In the interim seven years, Wou Sankwei has made friends with the Americans Mrs. Dean, who “devoted herself earnestly and whole-heartedly to the betterment of the condition and the uplifting of the young working men of the Chinese race who came to America” (52), and Mrs. Dean’s

niece, Adah, who seems attached to Wou Sankwei in a potentially romantic way until she meets his wife, Pau Lin.

Like Gitl, Pau Lin is illiterate; but where Yekl attempted to keep in contact with his family through a local scribe, Wou Sankwei has not written to Pau Lin in the entire seven years they have been separated. When Pau Lin and Wou Sankwei begin their lives together in America, the narrator characterizes Pau Lin as being “more of an accessory than a part of [Wou Sankwei’s] life” (46). Adah tries to convince Wou Sankwei that Pau Lin should be introduced into society, but Wou Sankwei insists that Chinese women do not understand such things (46). And possibly he is right, the narrator suggests, as Pau Lin keeps to traditional ways by “taking her meals after her husband or at a separate table, and observed faithfully the rule laid down for her by her late mother-in-law: to keep a quiet tongue in the presence of her man” (46). While Adah had more progressive intentions for Pau Lin’s life in America, Pau Lin’s position is uncompromising: “From the first Pau Lin had shown no disposition to become Americanized, and Sankwei himself had not urged it” (47).<sup>3</sup> While Sankwei and Pau Lin have chosen their sides of the assimilation debate, the fate of their son Yen is undecided.

The boundaries around Yen are drawn first by Pau Lin, instigated by her observations of Chinatown. Pau Lin receives the advice of a Chinese elder who tells her that her son married a white woman and now her grandchildren pass her on the street and do not even recognize her (48). Pau Lin gazes down at the Chinatown streets below and sees the merchants’ wives yelling in Chinese, a drunken white man falling down the

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<sup>3</sup> Though not central to my purpose here, there is a genderized control element to this story’s exploration of the assimilation debate. Sankwei’s desire to assimilate can be said to represent an economically motivated endeavor, yet he also seems to desire that his wife remain traditional because subservience is more comfortable to his needs.

street, a fortune teller, children burning “punk,” and an Americanized Chinese man dressed in the latest fashions. “Pau Lin raised her head and looked her thoughts at the old woman, Sien Tau. ‘Yes,’ nodded the dame, ‘’tis a mad place in which to bring up a child’” (49). In this scene, Chinatown becomes representative of the assimilation debates, by having both traditional and American elements. Pau Lin's experience of Chinatown creates in her mind very distinct boundaries between what is acceptable assimilation and what is not; Pau Lin adamantly refuses her son's assimilation by not allowing him to speak English or go to an American school.

Pau Lin could be helped in her Americanization process by the sensitive commiseration of Adah, but Pau Lin speaks no English and Adah speaks no Chinese. While Pau Lin is trapped by a cold and Americanized husband in a culture she detests, Adah is the only one who understands; she tries to explain to Mrs. Dean: “‘A woman is a woman with intuitions and perceptions, whether Chinese or American, whether educated or uneducated, and Sankwei’s wife must have noticed, even on the day of her arrival, her husband’s manner towards us, and contrasted it with his manner towards her’” (53). Despite Adah's interest in helping Pau Lin, she cannot bridge the gap between Sankwei's assimilation and Pau Lin's traditionalism.

The tension between Pau Lin and Wou Sankwei, and the sides of the assimilation debate that they represent, becomes more evident as Yen is trapped in the middle, and his parents will decide his fate. After Wou Sankwei has Yen’s “queue” (a long braid of hair) cut off, Pau Lin yells at the boy, “‘I am ashamed of you; I am ashamed!’” Wou Sankwei calmly responds to the boy, ‘Never mind, son...it is all right’” (50). Their divergent responses to Yen's step towards Americanization further splits the family over how, and

to what degree, their son should become assimilated. Mrs. Dean and Adah continue to be more important to Wou Sankwei than his own family. Pau Lin entertains the idea of bigamy; as this was acceptable in China, Pau Lin assumes that her husband will want to take Adah as a second wife. Yet she thinks, "But, oh! the humiliation and shame of bearing children to a man who looked up to another woman--and a woman of another race--as a being above the common uses of women" (51). Pau Lin keenly feels the disparity between what her husband feels for her as a Chinese woman and his admiration of Adah as an American woman. Yet this does not spur her into assimilating. Unlike Gitl, Pau Lin is confronted with her husband's assimilation, the more she solidifies her own traditional identity. Adah continuously refers to Pau Lin as "*the Chinese*" and "the poor little thing." Pau Lin must, though they cannot converse, feel the paternalistic attitude the American woman has towards her as representative of how her husband now conceives of her as below the status of Adah. Though the other characters clearly feel that Pau Lin is lesser evolved because of her unwillingness to assimilate, the narrator continues to uphold her as a woman who is strong enough to choose her traditional social identity and not deviate despite external pressures.

Patricia P. Chu in *Assimilating Asians* explains the complexity of assimilation when one partner is Americanized and the other is not. She writes, "When the men's success depends on their ability to assimilate, while the women are required materially to perpetuate traditional Chinese customs and symbolically to embody these customs, their separated spheres are bound to be diminished and estranged" (111). The estrangement between Pau Lin and Sankwei becomes more pronounced as Adah's presence emphasizes. There is a triangle created "in which white women, as cultural mediators in

the Americanization process, become objects of the immigrant man's desire, while Asian women are rejected as the embodiments of the Asian and inept interpreters of American democratic ideals" (114). Adah, as a "cultural mediator," is embraced by Sankwei as a bridge to his own Americanization, inevitably leading to a rejection of Pau Lin as non-assimilated. Pau Lin recognizes this rejection and when she gives birth to a second son, who dies two weeks later, she solidifies a bond to her as yet non-assimilated son, Yen. She says to Yen, offering the only foreshadowing in the story, "Sooner would I, O heart of my heart, that the light of thine eyes were also quenched, than that thou shouldst be contaminated with the wisdom of the new" (52). In this foreboding scene, Pau Lin irreversibly avows herself to a fate that is inseparable from her son's, and is unwaveringly traditional and unassimilated.

Mrs. Dean believes that Pau Lin's refusal to assimilate is bigoted and narrow-minded (52). Yet Adah, after attending the Chinese Harvest Moon Festival and hearing a moon chant that asks its followers to calm their passionate souls and let the moon cast peace over them (55), feels an intuitive connection to Pau Lin. Here, the opposite of a "white interloper" scene occurs (which we will see in "Its Wavering Image"). Adah is not characterized as a voyeur because she learns something, feels something through her experience with Chinatown that connects her more deeply to Pau Lin. In this rare instance, the ghetto does not boundary off the races, but instead creates a bridge between two cultures where the women may commiserate despite their inability to communicate. The ghetto "speaks" for them as Adah connects to the rituals of Chinatown and intuitively responds to Pau Lin's struggles.

Adah recognizes the damage that the struggle over the questionably necessary act of assimilation is causing in the Chinese household. She pulls Wou Sankwei aside and says to him: “you are becoming too Americanized...it is a mistake to try and make a Chinese man into an American--if he has a wife who is to remain as she always has been” (57). Instead of heeding Adah’s advice, Wou Sankwei thinks instead of his own Americanized life and feels the rebuke of Adah has caused him to be “exiled from paradise” (59). It is only through Pau Lin’s insistence on traditionalism that Adah questions the function of assimilation and speaks to Wou Sankwei about his assimilation as it affects his role as husband. Yet, like Jake, Wou Sankwei believes that his assimilation has granted him a waiver from honoring any traditional beliefs or obligations. Adah serves as the “voice of reason” for Far’s tale as she sees both sides of the struggle to which Far attempts to find a solution. Adah is cognizant of the negative repercussions of Americanization, and has put aside personal, possibly romantic motives in order to secure happiness for the Chinese family.

On the night before Yen was to begin studying at the American school, Pau Lin poisons him while chanting a traditional Chinese nursery rhyme. Once Wou Sankwei finds them, he leaves the room reeling from the loss. The narrator comments, “The thing he loved most in the world--the darling son who had crept into his heart with his joyousness and beauty--had been taken from him--by her who had given” (60). Far provides Pau Lin with some agency and control to the extent that she who has given life is now the one who takes it. In response to Sankwei’s grief and confusion, Pau Lin says: “He is saved...from the Wisdom of the New” (60). Similar to Yekl/Jake’s “death,” the real death of Yen takes on the symbolic importance of a death/rebirth cycle, wherein one

aspect of traditionalism or assimilation must be sacrificed in order to actuate a cultural revivification.

While Pau Lin splits with reality enough to kill her own child, she also, rather than splitting, is *consumed* by her traditional self to the point where she feels a cultural obligation to keep Yen from assimilation even at the price of death. There is little warning that would allow the reader to question Pau Lin's consciousness and selfhood shift. Adah becomes the rational "eyes" for the reader, and as Adah is the only witness to Pau Lin's suffering, readers are supposed to feel, to *know* the consciousness of Pau Lin (through the perception of a white, female character for a predominantly white, female audience) so that Sui Sin Far does not need to explain Pau Lin's actions--which she doesn't--the story quickly ends. Just as Adah is impotent to stop the Americanization process that is injuring Pau Lin, she is also unable to have or provide a connection to Pau Lin's traditional roots in order to help save her threatened sense of selfhood.

Unlike Cahan's story where the struggle for assimilation ends in capitulation to an Americanism that seems overwhelming, Sui Sin Far has layered multiple racial perspectives and varied debates for and against assimilation, calling into question the function and necessity of assimilation altogether. That *Yekl's* characters do not or cannot actuate a sense of selfhood in America makes it questionable how and under what circumstances traditionalism can combat such an overwhelming force as American identity. Sui Sin Far, on the other hand, takes a definitive stance against assimilation; as White-Parks notes, Far's characters "are not valued by how closely they adhere to a 'white' standard, but by their assertion of individual and cultural integrity against the assimilative forces of North America" ("A Reversal of 'Other-ness'" 21). This stance



allowed Far's audience to see the perspective of assimilation from the minority's point of view, a viewpoint that was often neglected or silenced.

Wou Sankwei, who represents the immigrant's pull towards assimilation, is forced into capitulation towards traditionalism: days after Pau Lin poisons their son, they return to China. Far cannot envision a negotiated and compromised, assimilated self for Pau Lin, who refuses to relinquish her traditional self, and so has her return to her homeland where her sense of self will not be negotiated according to American standards. The move from Chinatown to China mirrors a move in consciousness, that is, as we will see in "Its Wavering Image," not always necessary to the protagonist's sense of cultural identity.

"Its Wavering Image" (1912) delves deeply into the assimilationist arguments of the turn of the century by questioning both the Melting Pot and Cultural Pluralism theories. The protagonist of this story, Pan, is a biracial young woman whose cultural ties, as represented by her allegiance to Chinatown, are challenged by a young white man. As Sui Sin Far enters into the debate from the perspective of a half-white, half-Chinese immigrant author, she also is consciously entering a complex national debate. In this quite short story, Sui Sin Far captures many elements that were intrinsic to the larger culture's debate about assimilation, but does so through an intimate portrait of one woman's struggle with her cultural and personal identity. Pan's choices, her thought process, and her final decision about who and what should constitute the boundaries of her identity are the intention and accomplishment of this story.

“Its Wavering Image” begins with all of the statistics that the Western ideology deems necessary to delineate a person’s social identity: name, race, home address, and occupation. Pan is half-white (mother’s side), half-Chinese (father’s side). Her mother is dead and Pan lives in San Francisco’s Chinatown with her father who runs an Oriental Bazaar. Only the last sentence of this resume-like paragraph allows the reader to see how complex this story will become: “[i]t was only after the coming of Mark Carson that the mystery of [Pan’s] nature began to trouble her” (61). The entrance of a white man into the borders of Chinatown create the tensions this story is built around. While the character of Mark Carson is a somewhat clichéd version of the nosy reporter who wants to Americanize the torn biracial girl, he is not the critical role for the message of this story, he is only its catalyst.

The boundaries of the ghetto are delineated by Mark Carson’s infringement into Pan’s world. He is a white reporter, there to find a story, yet when he “stepped across the threshold of a cool, deep room, fragrant with the odor of dried lilies and sandalwood, [he] found Pan” (61). Pan is immediately correlated to the ghetto, the embodiment of all the “mystery” that is boundaried away from white intrusion. The sequestered Chinatown attracts the attention of the white reporter for its outwardly exotic appearance, much as the isolated and exotic young woman, Pan, attracts his attention. Mark Carson’s entrance--his crossing of the threshold into Chinatown--signifies a breaking of boundaries that occurs in almost all ghetto fiction, on both literal and symbolic levels. Literally, he has crossed into a section of town that he is excluded from, that tourists visit but do not engage. His perspective is reminiscent of Bramen’s urban picturesque: that of the white voyeur with no emotional or cultural connection to the environment. Symbolically, he

has crossed a cultural boundary that resonates with national and cultural political issues, but becomes a catalyst for personal transformation as Pan's identity "wavers" with Carson's insistence.

At first, Pan and Carson do not even speak. The reporter asks questions of Pan's father, Mun You, and Pan ignores him as she "always turned from whites" (61). Pan, as Pau Lin, is established as a non-assimilated character. Pan's intuitive response to the presence of whites in her community is registered by her reaction to their gaze of exoticism. "With her father's people she was natural and at home; but in the presence of her mother's she felt strange and constrained, shrinking from their curious scrutiny as she would from the sharp edge of a sword" (61). Such a harsh metaphor speaks to Pan's solidified sense of cultural identity. Because she was raised in that Chinatown, her natural allegiance is to the people that surround her, and doubts about her loyalties do not enter her consciousness. "[I]f she were different in any sense from those around her, she gave little thought to it" (61). Her sense of balancing a half-white, half-Chinese racial identity does not seem to play a part in the conception of her social identity. Instead of entertaining her biracialism as "natural" incentive towards assimilation, Pan has solidified her identity in her geographic surroundings. Because of her establishment in the Chinese community, and the "little thought" she gives to her differences with other residents, exemplifies how unquestioningly she associates her selfhood with her locale.

When Mark Carson takes notice of Pan he thinks to himself, "What was she? Chinese or white?" (61). That he asks 'what' instead of 'who' immediately sets up a dichotomy where Pan conceives of herself in personal terms as a "who", yet it is only in racial terms as a "what" that Carson can perceive her. When Carson questions the

newspaper's city editor about Pan, the editor replies that "[s]he is an unusually bright girl, and could tell more stories about the Chinese than any other person in this city--if she would" (61). Carson perceives Pan as a challenge, not as an interest. His role quickly becomes that of the outsider white male who is anatomizing an "exotic" culture for its entertainment value rather than a humanist approaching another culture, or a man with romantic feelings for a woman.

Pan and Carson's relationship progresses as she shows him around Chinatown. She is the leader and he the follower when they roam the Chinese-city streets, but psychologically he is leading her towards the process of assimilation. "[W]ith delicate tact and subtlety he taught the young girl that, all unconscious until his coming, she had lived her life alone. So well did she learn this lesson that it seemed at times as if her white self must entirely dominate and trample underfoot her Chinese" (62). Pan had not felt lonely before Carson's entrance, so the divide she feels now has been superimposed upon her consciousness by the very divide Carson is creating between her white half and her Chinese half. It is in this space that the narrator announces Carson's acceptance into Chinatown. "For her sake he was received as a brother" (62), and is allowed entrance into the secret world of Chinatown. Pan and Carson spend all their afternoons together traversing the city, yet it is more than a World's Fair glimpse at an Other culture, it is instead Carson's "initiation" into the "mystery and history of many things" (62). Carson's "initiation" into the ghetto is also Pan's initiation into the world of assimilation.

Pan and Carson have now reached the pinnacle of their assimilation struggle. To further highlight this pivotal scene, Far situates them on the rooftop of Pan's father's bazaar. Similar to Jake and Mamie's "rooftop idyl," this elevated perspective allows a

unique glimpse at the streets of Chinatown below. The reporter comments: “‘How beautiful above! How unbeautiful below!’ exclaimed Mark Carson involuntarily” (63). The use of “involuntary” shows Carson’s unconscious bias against the ghetto, and this “Freudian slip” stresses the uneducated assumptions on white America’s part about the role, or function, of marginalized communities. As in Cahan’s story, this interjection about Chinatown allows Far to explore the role of the ghetto, as it has already been equated to Pan, in conjunction with Pan’s sense of cultural selfhood.

Pan answers Carson by saying, “‘Perhaps it isn’t very beautiful,...but it is here that I live. It is my home’” (63). This comment establishes Pan as a loyal resident of Chinatown, but also shows her sense of self as connected to geographical boundaries. The “lantern-lighted, motley-thronged street beneath them” (63) may not offer her guidance or reassurance, but when Carson pushes for assimilation, it is the streets of Chinatown that allow her to continue to seek her own sense of social selfhood without repercussion. As their conversation continues, the Chinatown streets become the boundaries of where Pan does or does not belong.

‘Pan,’ he cried, ‘you do not belong here. You are white--white.’

‘No! no!’ protested Pan.

‘You are,’ he asserted. ‘You have no right to be here.’

‘I was born here,’ she answered, ‘and the Chinese people look upon me as their own.’

‘But they do not understand you,’ he went on. ‘Your real self is alien to them.

What interest have they in the books you read--the thoughts you think?’

‘They have an interest in me,’ answered faithful Pan. ‘Oh, do not speak in that way any more.’

‘But I must,’ the young man persisted. ‘Pan, don’t you see that you have got to decide what you will be--Chinese or white? You cannot be both.’

‘Hush! Hush!’ bade Pan. ‘I do not love you when you talk to me like that.’

Carson delineates the standards of identity by race and culture alone. Pan, on the other hand, seeks an identity of acceptance that is delineated not by intellect or politics but by emotions. It is not that she minds when he speaks *about* assimilation, it is when she is spoken to “like that” that he offends her. Her “real self” is torn not by the lineage which creates her racial binary, but by Carson’s interpretation of it. Carson’s physical intrusion into the ghetto mirrors his intrusion into Pan’s sense of selfhood, both of which are seen as “violating” a space that was claimed--as a Chinatown or as a Chinese woman.

Carson sings her a song about the moon; “The moon and its broken reflection,/ And its shadows shall appear,/ As the symbol of love in heaven,/ And its wavering image here” (64). Pan breaks down and cries because she is “so young and so happy” to which Carson responds, ““Oh, Pan! Pan! Those tears prove that you are white”” (64), as if any emotionality is indicative of a white woman rather than a Chinese woman. Pan experiences her first kiss and Carson begins writing his “story.”

Mark Carson writes an article that exposes all the secrets he had been privy to by Pan’s influence and betrays Chinatown’s every trust. After reading the article Pan thinks, “someone had hurt her. Who was it? There shone: ‘Its Wavering Image.’ It helped her to lucidity. He had done it” (64). The moon provides Pan with clarity when she can find no other logical answer to her emotional confusion.<sup>4</sup> White-Parks notes that Pan expresses a “shocked resistance when a representative of the external white culture tries to force a division” of culture and race upon her because Pan believes such a division is

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<sup>4</sup> Similar to “‘The Wisdom of the New’” the moon becomes a healing element for the female protagonists. Because the moon is considered a female deity in Classical symbolism (Athena, Selene, Artemis, etc.) and in Chinese symbolism (Heng-O the Goddess of the moon who lives in the Palace of Great Cold, for example), Far is drawing upon a long history of, and arguably intuitive, female mythology to further explore the depths of emotionality inherent in female psychology. For more gender based readings of Sui Sin Far’s stories see McCullough or Chu.

“unnatural.” (*A Literary Biography* 227). Pan is shocked, and cannot believe it was Carson who betrayed her; Yet, she has finally felt and grasped the consequences of the assimilation process, and what repercussions there are for *not* choosing that option for her identity.

Once Pan understands how Carson’s betrayal of her injured her Chinatown community as well, she feels that Carson’s exposure of Chinatown’s beauty and secrecy is beyond redemption. Pan would rather “her own naked body and soul had been exposed, than that things, sacred and secret to those who loved her should be cruelly unveiled and ruthlessly spread before the ridiculing and uncomprehending foreigner” (65). It may seem counter-productive that Pan would be so devastated by this exposure because, considering how negatively the general public viewed Chinatowns, a positively glowing account of its beauty may have helped to ease the racial attacks. Yet, as Chu points out, “[i]n a typical reversal of perspective, Eaton momentarily interpellates her readers as fellow Chinese Americans by inviting us to share Pan’s view of Mark Carson’s readers as ‘uncomprehending foreigners’” (109). Pan feels violated by Carson’s intrusion because the Chinatown itself represents more than a cultural center, it represents the individuals who live there, and, as noted in the beginning of the story, Pan has been equated as a parallel entity to the ghetto.

In line with Chu’s interpretation of this scene, Sui Sin Far allows her readers to cross the “threshold” into the ghetto in a way that does not diminish the personalization we have thus far been allowed to engage. Instead, the reader is given the chance, the choice to engage the Chinatown and its residents (as Adah did) on an individual level that supersedes the racial boundaries of any ghettoization. Mark Carson, on the other hand, is

the advocate for and representation of assimilation. He leaves Pan for two months to let the betrayal of his article be forgotten, because, he thinks, “why should a white woman care about such things? Her true self was above it all. Had he not taught her *that* during the weeks they had seen so much of one another? True, his last lesson had been a little harsh...[but] there was a healing balm; a wizard’s oil which none knew so well as he how to apply” (65, Far’s emphasis). The overt sexuality combined with the patriarchal tone causes a tension in the reader’s emotions that Sui Sin Far pushes to its breaking point when she has Pan confront Carson.<sup>5</sup>

Carson explains to Pan that he knew the Chinatown residents would not blame her, and there was no reference to her personally in his article. She is silent. He says: “[i]t is mere superstition anyway. These things have got to be exposed and done away with” (65). There is no clear antecedent for “these things.” Presumably he means the secretive nature of Chinatown residents and the protectiveness with which they treat their space which “has got to be exposed” so that Chinatowns in general “must be done away with.” While this is clearly an assimilationist stance, it also more strongly undercuts any option of cultural pluralism that Far had established in Pan’s acceptance of her biracialism. “These things” also refers to the “mystery and history” that creates the Chinese culture and creates Pan’s identity. Which is why Pan revolts against Carson’s betrayal and his theories of how she should live her life. Pan is still silent. Carson finally notices that Pan is dressed in full “Chinese costume.” Carson questions her appearance, and Pan states definitively: “I am a Chinese woman” (66). Carson adamantly insists

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<sup>5</sup> There are other instances in the story where the sexual overtones of Carson’s relationship to Pan are more explicit, and echo many contemporary theories of colonialization and the sexual politics inherent in such domination. For a closer reading of the sexuality in this story see Chu.



that Pan is a white woman because she cried and because she kissed him. Pan breaks her silence: "'A white woman!' echoed Pan her voice rising high and clear to the stars above them. 'I would not be a white woman for all the world. *You* are a white man. And what is a promise to a white man!'" (66). Similar to what we will see in Zitkala-Sa's fiction, the immigrant and minority authors who question the function of assimilation also question the necessity of the dominant majority's (or government's) interference in their choice of selfhood and social identity in America.

While Sui Sin Far draws specific lines between the races in her protagonists' stances of non-assimilation, she allows the white characters--Adah or the reader--to enter the ghetto in respectful terms. This shows that while Far may have taken an anti-assimilation stance, she allows for the possibility of cultural pluralism in a certain space--physical or emotional--where the races, cultures could peacefully interact.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ZITKALA-SA

*"Intensified hush chills all my proud soul.  
Oh, what am I? Whither bound thus and why?"*

Zitkala-Sa "The Indian's Awakening" (1916)

Zitkala-Sa, like Sui Sin Far, was half white, and extremely conscious of the resulting bi-racial perspective. She was also quite conscious of regionalism as a genre and the way it intersected with her Native heritage. By the turn of the century, Native Americans were considered a vanishing race, and as D.K. Meisenheimer, Jr. has noted in "Regionalist Bodies/Embodied Regions," at first Zitkala-Sa "engaged in a combination of ethnography and elegy, what might be called a kind of cultural 'curation' that readers of the period, for various reasons, had come to expect from the regionalist genre" (109). But Zitkala-Sa expanded regionalist expectations and engaged her audience in the more complex levels of the assimilationist debates: "Zitkala-Sa would gradually abandon her early assimilationist tone and out of her encounter with regionalism (and the audience it satisfied) begin to develop key literary strategies for subverting its expectations" (Meisenheimer 109). One of the most significant ways she brought about this subversion was her use of place and identity as subjects for cultural exploration.

In "Blue-Star Woman" Zitkala-Sa subverts racial categorization by making whites the Other. Much like Sui Sin Far, the boundaries already established by the dominant group to create ghettos, are then used by these authors as boundaries for the minority needs of safety, community, and place; in this way the authors reverse the connotations

and perceptions of the marginalized space and claim it as their own. By such reclamation, whites then become the outsiders, the Other, to the already established cultural community of the minorities. This does not negate the feeling that the tenement, Chinatown, or reservation is a space marginalized from the dominant majority, but it does allow a modicum of control.

One of the main differences between Cahan and Sui Sin Far on the one hand, and Zitkala-Sa, on the other, is that reservations--while I am equating them to tenements and Chinatowns as marginalized communities--were located, generally, in the mid-West and not, as ghettos typically are, in the middle of a major city. Being thus isolated creates a further marginalization that only compounds the feelings of isolation, disconnection, and dislocation.

Though there is not much debate about the horrific trials that Natives endured, or that reservations played a pivotal role in the Americanization process, there is some question about why reservations were created and how their creation was meant to effectively assimilate the Native population. John M. Findlay in "State and Reservation: New Perspectives on Federal Indian Policy" explains that reservations (like ghettos) are physical entities with very specific, though varied, symbolic connotations. "Meanings attached to the reserve reflected the diverse experiences and expectations of those that planned, supported, or criticized the institution. Reserves were variously likened to farms, fortresses, asylums, schools, final refuges, and Spanish missions as those involved sought to identify the novel institution with more familiar models" (14). My point here, though, is that reservations, as tenements and Chinatowns, were deemed "institutions" which carried in connotation the planning, overseeing, and specific demarcation of the

dominant group's intent to "house" a population of people based on cultural affiliation. This demarcation, and subsequent control, carries specific personal ramifications which informs an individual's identity, as that identity is forced to also be demarcated by culture and place.

"The Widespread Enigma of Blue-Star Woman," first published in *American Indian Stories*, deals with issues of boundaries and land, geography and identity, and how these are related to Native American social identity. Ruth L. Heflin writes that this short story is "designed especially to teach Euro-Americans about how easy it was to manipulate Indians out of their land" (111). I will argue, though, that this story is instead not simply for the instruction of whites, but is very complex in its exploration of assimilation as it affects the minority consciousness, not the white consciousness. Further, that this story deals with the cultural and ethnic identity of these characters as it informs their decisions about whether or not to assimilate, and how these issues tie into the larger concepts of marginalized spaces, and the ramifications of such personal decisions.

Faye Lone-Knapp in "Rez Talk" defines ethnic/cultural identity as "a norm of familial and community ties within a network of similar cultural values and societal behaviors" (635). One of the main values that informs Native identity and creates ties between the characters is that of land. The 1887 Dawes Act that legalized Native land allotment and parceled out land to individual, federally recognized Natives instead of honoring a larger tribal land base, was intended to force assimilation by destroying tribal unity and securing individualism. As Fergus M. Bordewich notes in *Killing the White Man's Indian*, "allotment devastated the Indian land base, sapped the vitality of

traditional tribal government, and terminated the last possibility that Indian societies might be able to evolve at their own pace according to their own standards” (124).

Native land ownership became almost null as the government usurped what was left of Native control. The Dawes Act created a ripple effect where land allotment led to a fractured sense of connection to the land, a loss of tribal sovereignty, and a competition between individuals for land ownership in previously unified tribal communities. The issue of land allotment affects Zitkala-Sa’s characters and their personal development towards or away from assimilation, in that land ownership under the Dawes Act promised a continued connection to the land for the price of assimilation.

Assimilation for Natives meant more than simply speaking English and wearing white clothes, it meant a severe change in lifestyle requiring a disconnection from the land, from tribal members, and from the combination of these two, which was their religion. As Robert M. Nelson notes in "Place, Vision, and Identity in Native American Literatures," the life of the Native American "people as a collective body, like the life of any individual who is part of that [cultural] body, is an extension of the life of that land” (274). Land and life are intimately connected in Native consciousness and social identity, so that when that breakdown is a requirement for survival in white America, Native Americans needed a completely new definition of self in order to avoid a total cultural displacement. That Blue-Star Woman needs to define her self by whether or not she is given an individual land allotment speaks to the cultural values of Native Americans where tribal land ownership is a key aspect of identity development.

“Blue-Star Woman” is a very complex exploration of Native identity and the issues surrounding survival at the turn of the century. Because of this complexity, I will

first summarize the short story and then explore the text in detail. Blue-Star Woman's identity is contingent upon her acquisition of land which comes at the price of her ability to assimilate so that she can accept the demands of the government and other assimilated Indians. Because land and identity are so closely linked in the Native culture, there is an emotional and personal connection to be gained when Blue Star-Woman claims land for herself. Also, there is a legal issue that once she can prove her Native identity, she can claim land; claiming land through the government's allotment it thereby enables her to claim an "official" Indian identity and tribal heritage. The issue of identity becomes twofold then; either Blue-Star Woman can remain traditional and be moved unceremoniously throughout the region at the government's discretion, or she can become assimilated enough to be put on government rolls and be given an identity as the dominant majority so designates. While identity is not always a survival issue, the reclamation of land that creates Blue-Star Woman's sense of self *is* an issue for her survival.

Blue-Star Woman is a white-haired elder living alone on the Western plains. She has been asked by the government to give proof of "her membership in the Sioux tribe" (159), yet she is "unable to find even a twig of her family tree" (161). While questioning her identity and the need to prove it, she is approached by two young, assimilated Indian men. They offer her a deal that would enable her to secure tribal land without having to go through the official process of proving her tribal heritage. She hesitatingly agrees. In exchange for their services the young men will take half of her land as payment.

At this point in the narrative, Zitkala-Sa switches perspectives and focuses the story on Chief High Flier, who lives on the Sioux Indian Reservation. The

superintendent of the reservation--a voice for the government--informs the Chief that he must give a portion of his reservation land to a stranger, Blue-Star Woman, who is claiming Sioux heritage. Chief High Flier has his granddaughter write a letter to a "prominent American woman" (173) appealing the land takeover. He travels on horseback 10 miles to the post office, but before he gets there he realizes that no letter will change the expansionism of government domination. He lights a small fire, burns the letter, and heads for home. A few miles homeward the Indian police overtake him, arrest him for being one of the "bad Indians" who just "this morning was seen trying to set fire to the government agency" (177). Found guilty of these charges Chief High Flier is sentenced to time in jail. He is only set free after his son makes a deal with two young, assimilated Indian men who secure his release. In exchange for their services the young men will take half of his land in payment.

"Blue-Star Woman" is a story of alienation, personal and cultural. Zitkala-Sa attempts to warn or advise her audience about the repercussions of acculturation, while also illuminating the difficulties of survival without assimilating. Blue-Star Woman is a liminal character, caught in-between the old world and the new, struggling to reconcile her needs with the needs of the governing society. At the forefront of this story, and one of its central points, is the space she needs to live and cannot have without assimilating. As Robert M. Nelson writes in "Place, Vision, and Identity in Native American Literatures," "many Native American novels can be read as more extended explorations of the process of...recovering...a collective identity with the land" (271). What creates a more distinctly personal connection between geography and identity in regards to Native culture is that it is founded in a strong connection to the land that they occupy.

Dexter Fisher writes in her study of Zitkala-Sa and Mourning Dove that “[t]heirs is a literature of polarities--Indian versus white, tradition versus change, primitive versus civilization, even oral versus written” (210). I would add, in regards to “Blue-Star Woman,” that these and other polarities create a middle ground that is occupied by the character of Blue-Star Woman, who is herself a character of liminality. Zitkala-Sa begins the short story by placing Blue-Star woman in a liminal space, situating her in the borderlands of the life of all Natives. Specific instances of Blue-Star Woman’s liminality are that she is 53 years of age, half way between birth and death (159); that she sits, eats and works outside as she would traditionally, but has given up a teepee for a white man's log hut (162), so that her ways of life are half way between the Native and the white; and that her state of alienation is described as the middle ground of nothingness, “lonely but unmolested” (159).

Blue-Star Woman seems to recognize her own self-consciousness by bursting onto the first page of the story asking: “‘Who am I?’ [which] had become the obsessing riddle of her life” (159). She answers her own riddle by stating: “‘I am a being. I am Blue-Star Woman. A piece of earth is my birthright’” (159). Immediately she establishes the elements of her self-identification. Her “birthright” refers not only to her tribal affiliation that the government stated in the Dawes Act as requisite for land ownership, but more importantly, “birthright” speaks to the Native connection to the space, a piece of the earth, that Blue Star-Woman intuitively knows is her culture, her life, her identity.

Zitkala-Sa outlines the barriers between Blue-Star Woman and her identity/claim to land, “the unfortunate circumstances of her early childhood, together with a lack of



written records of a roving people, placed a formidable barrier between her and her heritage” (160). Yet, it is not just that she is an orphan, nor that her tradition is an oral one; it is the standard by which her identity is being gauged that establishes the barrier between her reclamation of identity and land. At this point in the narrative, identity and land have become synonymous.

One of the other instances where Blue-Star woman wavers between traditional and Americanized worlds is when she visits a neighbor woman. “Friendly spirits, the unseen ones, had guided her aimless footsteps to her Indian neighbor’s house” where she was able to procure some green coffee beans and a pound of lard (161-62). This marks a certain concession towards assimilation: “[t]he coffee habit was one of the signs of her progress in the white man’s civilization” (162). Here again, Blue-Star Woman occupies a space between two extremes, traditional and assimilated.

Zitkala-Sa continues to use many subtle points to draw her narrative into the larger dialectic of cultural revitalization. Her story makes it clear that dislocation, personal as well as physical, is only accomplishable through personal choice of one identity over another. Her juxtaposition of Blue-Star Woman with the two young Indian men that swindle her out of land allows for an exchange between the realities of struggling survival and detrimental assimilation. The tensions are apparent from their first encounter. The men have cut their hair, and are dressed in “civilian clothes,” though their white man’s shoes are “rusty and unpolished” (164); Blue Star Woman thinks they are ““would-be white men”” (165). The young men, though, are no fools and in “one voice and by an assumed relationship the two Indian men addressed her. ‘Aunt, I shake hands with you.’ Again Blue-Star Woman remarked, ‘Oh, indeed! these near white men

“speak my native tongue and shake hands according to our custom” (165). Blue-Star Woman is won over by the sharing of tribal customs, and the alienation she otherwise feels dissipates when confronted with familiar gestures and words.

The young men are described as "ravenous" in their desire to take all they can from Blue-Star Woman, from her food to her land, which connects the young men to the trickster figure of the raven. Zitkala-Sa makes this quite clear when she writes that in Blue-Star Woman's "dire need she had become involved with tricksters" (170). Yet the young men are not simply Native tricksters, they are assimilated, which adds a level to their complexity; they are not simply mythic archetypes come to play out a lesson, they are also realistic portraits of assimilated Natives. Zitkala-Sa follows this complex web by also describing their behavior as "stealing" what little Blue Star-Woman has left: "[f]illing their cups, she placed her empty coffee pot on the dead ashes" (167). That they would consume her coffee--which, as discussed earlier, has been represented as a signifier of "civilization"--solidifies their representation as assimilated and "white" Indians. Yet they are not white, they are Native, so that the scene is not charged with racial tension and accusation, it is founded in the larger cultural argument of assimilation. Zitkala-Sa clearly equates assimilated Natives with whites, in that both consciously disregard any sense of traditionalism in favor of individual capital gain.

Zitkala-Sa comments on this scene by writing: "Did she guess the truth, she would have known they were simply deluded mortals, deceiving others and themselves most of all" (165). By stating that the young Indian men are "simply mortals" Zitkala-Sa implies that she does not blame them, that they are "only human" and cannot be held accountable for their mistakes, if their assimilation is seen as a mistake. Yet because

Zitkala-Sa adds “deceiving others” it shows agency on their part and creates responsibility. “Deceiving themselves” implies that they have lost their “true” nature when they resigned their traditional culture, and that their Americanized selves are only facades or personas, which in turn “deceives others” and become injurious, particularly to Blue-Star Woman.

Some critics have taken these and other passages to signal Zitkala-Sa’s vacillation on the process of assimilation. I believe that although she is conscientiously stating both sides of the assimilation debate, she clearly does not believe--at least in this short story--that assimilation is useful when it instills the most negative qualities of the white man’s ways. Certainly, though, she understands that without Blue-Star Woman’s acquiescence to some aspects of “civilization” she would not survive, or thrive, for long. Alienation is a factor for reservation life, and because identity is closely linked to one’s culture, one’s land, Blue-Star Woman’s sense of self is dependent upon the reclamation and ownership of her identity--as *she* defines it, not as the government defines it for her--so that her selfhood, her social identity, is necessarily defined in relationship to those characters who provide her with the opportunity for her reclamation of land and tribal affiliation.

You will remember from the opening of the story that “‘who am I?’ had become the obsessing riddle of her life” (159). Blue-Star Woman is now given the chance to solidify her sense of self and reclaim ownership of her identity by securing a land allotment: “It was a great relief to the old Indian woman to be thus unburdened of her riddle, with a prospect of possessing land” (168). Zitkala-Sa definitively aligns the “riddle” of Blue-Star Woman’s identity as answered by land reclamation. Robert M. Nelson writes that “tradition confirms but does not create identity. Articulation of

identity must be preceded by an act of identity to articulate....as in many other works of American Indian literature both traditional and recent, identity with a physical landscape precedes cultural re-entry” (275). In other words, land ownership *is* her articulation of identity so that Blue-Star Woman is thus enabled to achieve a "cultural re-entry" by her relationship to re-claiming a piece of marginalized space, a part of a reservation. Like Far's characterization of Pan, Blue-Star Woman claims her identity only after the precedent of claiming her land; Pan first identified her loyalties with Chinatown before she could say "I am a Chinese woman." Blue-Star Woman similarly decides that place is the defining characteristic of her social identity, and she needs therefore to claim it before she can claim selfhood.

When the narrative shifts from Blue-Star Woman to Chief High Flier, Zitkala-Sa changes the focus from individual alienation and questioning to an overarching tribal struggle for sovereignty and for survival. When Chief High Flier is being taken away to jail for attempting to set government buildings on fire, Zitkala-Sa calls him “the voiceless man of America” (178). Here he is compared to every "underdog" in American mythos, the Common Man. Both Chief High Flier and Blue-Star Woman are portrayed as honorable people with good intentions, so that when they are pitted against each other, as the government has allotted Blue-Star Woman land that they have already allotted to Chief High Flier's reservation, the dominant majority is using land to war Natives against each other.

For Chief High Flier, an emblem of Americanism enables him to see past the government's attempts at segregation and have a vision of “a vast multitude of women,

with uplifted hands, [who] gazed upon a huge stone image" (179). The stone image becomes the Statue of Liberty.

It was she, who, though representing human liberty, formerly turned her back upon the American aborigine. Her face was aglow with compassion. her eyes swept across the outspread continent of America, the home of the red man. At this moment her torch flamed brighter and whiter till its radiance reached into the obscure and remote places of the land. Her light of liberty penetrated Indian reservations: A loud shout of joy rose up from the Indians of the earth, everywhere! (179-180).

In the vein of reformist literature like that of Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Zitkala-Sa takes on the evangelical voice that creates a dichotomy between the damned and the saved. What distinguishes this passage from similar works is that not only are women the saving principle, but it is an icon of Americanism that represents and stands behind such a revolution of faith. The representation of revolution, in the Statue of Liberty, is the emblem of immigrants and minorities, the down-trodden and forgotten, that becomes the symbol for Native American cultural revitalization and renewal.<sup>6</sup>

"The Widespread Enigma of Blue-Star Woman" ends with a sigh from Chief High Flier; "Words were vain" (182) he thinks as he signs away half of his land to the young, assimilated Indian men. The note that this short story ends on is depressingly defeatist as well as optimistically revolutionizing. That words (fiction, even) are in vain speaks to the necessity of action, the action of minorities, of American women and of the follow-through of America.

The ghetto can be seen as a marginalized place for a marginalized people; reservations for Native Americans are clearly no exception. What David R. Goldfield

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<sup>6</sup> At times, Zitkala-Sa uses literary tropes, such as the Statue of Liberty, that may appear to reduce her political and cultural message to one of sentimentality. Yet, at the turn of the century, Native writers were at once trying to combat the mythic image of Indians and to tell the truth of their situation to enable a revivification and survival of their true culture. See also Fisher and Grinde.

and James B. Lane write about ghettos is easily applicable to reservations: “The pathology of the ghetto has served as a continuing anomaly tarnishing the ideals of American life. Because the ghetto has symbolized poverty in a country of plenty, discrimination in a nation of equals, disease in a country of advanced technology, and crime in a society predicated on law, many Americans have preferred to ignore its existence or blame its ills on its victims” (4-5). This is remarkably reminiscent of the reservation debates.

Blue-Star Woman represents the liminal space between the two choices of assimilation and traditionalism, and she remains in that liminality, half accepting the ways of the whites while recognizing that without some acquiescence towards acculturation she will likely not thrive for long. Michael K. Green in “Cultural Identities: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century” looks at the historical process by which Natives could secure their identity *and* their survival. “Far from being passive recipients of culture, the natives were engaged in [a] process of creative synthesis and reformulation as they reconstituted their traditional identities in ways to strengthen them in the face of the challenges presented by the colonization of the Europeans” (20). And in this sense, the young Indian men who swindled Blue-Star Woman and Chief High Flier provided that necessary impetus for cultural synthesis. Perhaps the only chance for survival, at least in Zitkala-Sa’s mind at the time, was a certain amount of acquiescence to the processes of acculturation. Yet, as Chief High Flier’s vision shows, the Natives do not go to the Statue of Liberty, she comes to them; as her rays of light reached to even the “obsolete corners of reservations,” so the remaining message of the novel is that America cannot continue to abandon its minority populations.

In "The Great Spirit," also titled "Why I am a Pagan," Zitkala-Sa writes: "I feel in keen sympathy with my fellow-creatures, for I seem to see clearly again that all are akin. The racial lines, which once were bitterly real, now serve nothing more than making out a living mosaic of human beings" (104). Her vision of racial harmony without "melting pot" reduction seems clear to her self, and by the light of her rays, her words, may her audience see the same.

## CONCLUSION

Ghetto regionalism, as a genre of American literature, expresses immigrant and minority authors' concerns about place, culture, assimilation, and social identity.

Abraham Cahan, Sui Sin Far, and Zitkala-Sa exemplify ghetto regionalist writing as their fiction explores these issues in ways that communicate vital concepts in American thought at the turn of the twentieth century. Because these authors, and the concerns unique to their statuses and roles in America, were often marginalized, their voices were often silenced.

Cahan, Far, and Zitkala-Sa's fiction highlights the theme of identity as it is connected to the assimilation process that the dominant majority required of them, to the demarcated spaces in which they had to live, and to their standing in peripheral communities. All three authors question the validity and function of the roles they were asked to play in order to join the larger discourse of American thought. Similarly, all three authors question the status of the individual within the larger social sphere. Each author reaches his or her own conclusions, but each asks, through their characters, "Where is my place in America?"

Cahan leaves his novel's ending open enough to allow for continued speculation and debate concerning the positives of assimilation. He allows for the immigrant's completion of selfhood in America through the character of Gitl, who has created a life for herself and for her son that Jake is far from realizing. Jake's insistent push for assimilation--assimilation for assimilation's sake it seems--is a hollow endeavor and one in which he has had no lasting happiness. The message of Cahan's novel, then, is to find



a balance between the Old World and the New World where one's individual happiness comes before obeying the tenets the dominant majority has established on how and where to live.

Sui Sin Far, on the other hand, has quite specific endings that create a subversion of marginalized spaces. Far uses the boundaries of the ghetto that her characters occupy to make the dominant group--whites, in these stories--the Other. By turning the tables on the isolated spaces given them and claiming that territory, it allows the minority group to engage the dominant group on a level of voluntary control. Such control then lends itself to an autonomy that solidifies a sense of selfhood not based on others' expectations, so that there is a positive social identity that seems otherwise ungraspable. When Far's protagonist, Pan, closes "It's Wavering Image" by asserting to the white interloper, "I am a Chinese woman" (66), she solidifies her selfhood by claiming her social identity. This cultural reclamation is something few of the characters in these authors' stories achieve, but what they all strive for.

Zitkala-Sa argues for assimilation while stating only its negative repercussions; she does not see a future where cultural pluralism exists. The message of her short story seems to be that Blue-Star Woman should assimilate because she will not survive without doing so. Yet she will lose her sense of a social identity, as rooted in traditionalism, by being pitted against Chief High Flier in the battle of land ownership. Zitkala-Sa could not envision a world where the Natives' space would not be controlled and segregated by the dominant majority.

Revivification of a marginalized people's or community's sense of social identity is an elaborate task, and, in this group of fictions, often achieved through assimilation,

through a balance of personal needs and societal expectations, and through survival. In Cahan's *Yekl*, the possibility of revivification is represented by Jake's balancing of his traditional wife and his Americanized girlfriend. Yet this balance is not achieved, as it is not achieved in other ways in any of the stories I have discussed here. Is it possible at all, then, to achieve a balance of traditional and assimilated lives, cultures and identities? Did minority authors see a solution to the struggles of minority identity that America was unable to support? Was a cultural pluralism possible then? Are we still dealing with its past failure now?

One of the necessary tenets of cultural pluralism is that multiple cultures can coexist. Whether or not this is possible in one person is a separate issue, but related issue. For example, in all three works each author explores how the tensions of assimilation versus traditionalism effect the protagonists, yet only in Far's short stories do the protagonists question the role of assimilation from a biracial perspective. Specifically, in Far's short story "Its Wavering Image," in the character of Pan, who fully embodies cultural pluralism by the simple virtue of her biracialism. But because she cannot reconcile those separate cultures in her day-to-day life and in her sense of identity, the cultural pluralism of her raciality splinters, resulting in her choice of one social identity over the other. In this instance, it is the social pressure to choose one delineated cultural existence over another that is the issue. Each race, Chinese and white in Pan's situation, are boundaried and walled-off so that cultural fluidity is shown as unacceptable or unlivable.

Yet boundary can be a positive, even necessary, concept. As Roberta Rubenstein remarks in *Boundaries of the Self*, "boundaries constitute a person's sense of self as

distinct from other people" (5). It becomes vital, then, to an individual's identity to delineate "I am this, and you are that." Through the creation of boundaries self definition only becomes detrimental to a healthy cultural pluralism when the individual's sense of autonomy is absent. The freedom to choose both races and/or cultures simultaneously, then, is what separates the boundaries that ghettoize from the boundaries that allow self-expression. The resultant freedom to choose one's own culture--and a space/place in which to realize and live that culture--is also imperative, as "Blue-Star Woman" shows.

Space is relevant for two reasons. First, because it represents the marginalization that occurs when the dominant majority sequesters a group of individuals based upon their race or culture. Second, because space, specifically in terms of ghetto regionalism, has a particular personal and emotional connotation when defined as a sequestering geography. "Space," as an exterior condition that creates an interior response, becomes a general term for the individual's occupation of a time, a moment, a place, and an emotion.

The lack of description of geographic locale, in the fiction of these authors, and the paucity of direct communication concerning that space leads me to believe that there is an emotional, personal space being occupied by the characters, discernable through the author's description of the characters themselves heightened by their interaction with the ghetto that the authors do describe.

The individual character, then, becomes a representative for a number of particularities without being a stereotype. If, then, we take the characters of Cahan, Far, and Zitkala-Sa to represent a "space," in the larger sense cited above, a personal and yet also representative feeling or thought, then we, as their readers, have entered a space

where we can not only grasp and understand the geographic locale where the characters' are situated, but also the interior responses they have to that environment.

Though there may be a lack of consciousness on the characters' parts as to their situations because the turn of the century was a time of transition, of reconciling old ways with new advances, there is little doubt that the authors themselves had some inkling as to the importance and relevance of space to their characters' senses of self. Even if the authors could not actuate their characters' lives to reflect this burgeoning consciousness of "space," they did juxtaposes the characters' to their place in such a way that alerted readers to the importance that place has in the characters' lives.

Ghetto regionalism embodies the transitional thoughts and feelings of marginalized peoples who are struggling to understand their physical demarcation as well as the marginalizing of their culture and identities. The fiction of Abraham Cahan, Sui Sin Far, and Zitkala-Sa recognizes and elucidates the tensions between land and culture, space and self, place and social identity, in such a way that we should all, as readers and hearers of their messages, see that the periphery is what defines the dominant space.

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## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Tabitha Adams Morgan graduated from Temple University in 2000, with a degree in English, and under the guidance of Carolyn Karcher. She is graduating from the University of Maine in 2002, with a degree in English, and under the guidance of Ben Friedlander. She will be moving to Portland, Maine in four days so that she can read books voluntarily, earn enough to pay her bills on time, and hide out for a year until she has recovered enough from this grad school to apply to PhD's. Tabitha, which, as a wise friend once said, means Goddess in Philadelphian, will live for her cats, breathe for the ocean, and turn her head for nothing save the gods' desire. Tabitha is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from The University of Maine in August, 2002.