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Aaron J. Rovan
West Virginia University, ajrovan@mix.wvu.edu

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Sacramental Ethnicity: Women's Culture and Vernacular Religion in Twentieth-Century America

Aaron J. Rovan

Dissertation submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in
English

Rosemary Hathaway, Ph.D., Chair
Michael Germana, Ph.D.
Cari Carpenter, Ph.D.
Debra Lattanzi Shutika, Ph.D.
Susan Kalčik, M.A.

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

Sacramental Ethnicity: Women's Culture and Vernacular Religion in Twentieth-Century America

Aaron J. Rovan

This project examines the reciprocal and evolving relationship between American women's culture, vernacular religion, and the social development of American ethnicity. This project focuses on the roles of white ethnic women, both literary and real, in the construction, maintenance, and transmission of ethnic identity. The project highlights the connections between the folkloric performances of vernacular religion and the discursive articulation of ethnicity by focusing on two women writers and two groups of Slovak American women. The fiction of Kate Chopin and Anzia Yezierska illustrates how literary authors bring their contemporary concepts of folklore into their writing. The writings of these two women reveal the development from group-based difference to ethnicity in the early twentieth century. These literary depictions are paired with the life experience narratives collected from two small groups of Slovak American women: a subset of American Catholic sisters from the Vincentian Sisters of Charity and a group of women who belong to the Slovak Heritage Association of the Laurel Highlands. Together, these oral history-based chapters illustrate the ways in which women's culture is fundamental to the development of American ethnicity. The stories of these women challenge the boundaries of what are considered stable boundaries of racial and ethnic groups. Through this research, I provide an overview of the techniques through which women's engagement in informal religious traditions fuels the social dynamism of ethnicity.

Dedication

To Marcie, Matilda, and Lucy

Acknowledgments

As with most projects of this scope, there are so many people whose support and assistance shaped this work.

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Introduction

There's a moment in the opening of Kate Chopin's short story "At the 'Cadian Ball" that mingles the sacred with the profane. On the steps of the local church after Sunday Mass, the Creole woman Fronie accuses the Cuban immigrant Calixta of sexual impropriety. In response, Calixta "swore roundly in fine 'Cadian French and with true Spanish spirit, and slapped Fronie's face. Fronie had slapped her back; 'Tiens, bocotte, va!' [Hey slut, go away.] 'Espèce de lionèse; prends ça, et ça.' [You lionesse, take that and that]" (219-20). The profanity of this scene overshadows the central role of the Catholic church in this Creole community. The fact that this altercation is set directly outside the local church is more than happenstance. As if to illustrate the fundamental importance of the religious institution, the two women stop fighting only when "the curé himself was obliged to hasten and make peace between them" (220). As the arbiter of this fraught relationship, the pastor—the human representative of the divine—leaves the confines of the church building to maintain the integrity of the Creole community in all its worldly foibles. Chopin's narrative choice to fuse a salacious fight to a sacred space focuses readers' attention on the fundamental role of religious traditions to both the spiritual and the earthly lives of the town's residents.

This scene from Chopin, first published in 1892, resonates with a conversation I had with my grandma's cousin Margie Sutor in 2019. As part of my extended family, Margie agreed to speak with me about the role religion had played in her life. Although not prurient like Chopin's scene, Margie's memories still highlight the contradictory ways religious traditions and sacred spaces are used by secular communities to build and reinforce ethnic relationships. We shared a conversation across her immaculate dining room table, with various personal and religious artifacts strewn between us. As a late summer breeze drifted through her open window, she

remembered attending St. Stephen's, the local Catholic church, on weekdays with her mother when she was a young child during the Depression. "Churches were always open," she remembered. "And the parish community would pray their rosary in Slovak. Sometimes my mother would take me. Then they'd stand outside the church and talk and talk and talk." Although she didn't remember any specific accusations of promiscuity like those detailed by Chopin, she did remember her own mother's hypocrisy.

Margie's mom constantly admonished that a person should go straight home after church to, as Margie phrased it, "take your blessings on your family first before you go out." In other words, one should go straight home after church to spread good will there before visiting friends or extended family. But Margie's mom rarely practiced this herself since she would always stop to see relatives before going home. "And I asked her one time about it," Margie remembered. "She said, 'Well, maybe they need [the blessing] better than you and I today.' That's the only time she'd get to talk to Uncle Val and Aunt Kate, because they didn't visit us. So she said maybe they need the blessing more." In *not* practicing what she preached, Margie's mom used religious traditions to reinforce worldly relationships. Although less dramatic than Chopin's scene of confrontation, Margie's story nevertheless details the ways in which personal interpretations of religious traditions unite the sacred and the profane.

I choose to begin with these examples because they are concise articulations of the main theme of this project: that networks of informal connections centered around religious traditions—networks that are often maintained by women—define, articulate, and reinforce ethnic group identity. Chopin's literary description and Margie's recollections hint at the ways in which women have been responsible for reinforcing the power of religious ritual in their communities and subsequently extending these traditions beyond the physical confines of a

worship space through a dynamic process of individual interpretation and modification. Each example also embeds a reference to the women's ethnic identity, highlighting the fundamental role of informal religious practices in establishing and reinforcing a shared ethnic identity and vice versa. Although these scenes are far apart geographically (Louisiana vs. Pennsylvania), temporally (1892 vs. 1930s retold in 2019), and methodologically (literary vs. lived experience), they both illustrate the evolving and reciprocal relationship between American women's culture, vernacular religion, and the malleability of American race and ethnicity in the twentieth century.

Women's Practice of Vernacular Religion

In American society, women describe themselves as being more observant of religious rituals than men. In a 2002 meta-analysis of surveys that have evaluated the role of gender in American religious traditions, George H. Gallup, Jr. asserts that "women are more religious than men, hold their beliefs more firmly, practice their faith more consistently, and work more vigorously for the congregation." Similarly, in a 2018 survey of American Catholic women conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and *America* Magazine, women respondents indicated they were more consistently observant of Catholic rituals than men who had responded to similar surveys. According to the CARA/*America* survey, women responded more favorably to all questions that indicated a stronger adherence to religious traditions. For example, 78% of women responded that they believe in God "without doubt," compared to 73% of men (Gray 43). 24% of the surveyed women reported attending Mass weekly or more often, compared to 19% of men (43). Perhaps most telling, though, were the responses to a question asking about religious rituals observed outside the worship space. 51% of women reported engaging in daily prayer, compared to 33% of men (43). This study of gender

and religion appears to reinforce a simple binary division that women are more religiously observant than men and that women are more likely to maintain religious rituals in daily life.

This gendered association also reinforces a worldview that equates women's religious activities with women's culture and domesticity. "It is nearly impossible," writes Virginia Sapiro, "to separate women's specifically *religious* activities and duties from their other activities. Women's family roles often have been understood as expressions of their religious values and the primary means for enforcing women's piety" (197). This convergence of piety—or an attitude of respect toward formal religious tenants—and domesticity is explained more plainly in Barbara Welter's foundational essay "The Cult of True Womanhood." She lays out four "cardinal virtues" that nineteenth-century women aspired to: "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). She explicitly aligns piety with the domestic, explaining that "one reason religion was valued was that it did not take a woman away from her 'proper sphere,' her home." (153). The through-line from the nineteenth century, as explained by Welter, to contemporary times, as exemplified by the religious surveys, is that women are viewed as more religious and thus more domestic.

The lived experiences of Alice Voytko, another woman I spoke to about the role of religion in her life, contradicts this belief that religion reinforces domesticity. Her life stories highlight how informal social ties that are linked to a religious tradition can facilitate women's active public roles. Alice told me that she served in Vietnam as a member of the American Red Cross in the late 1960s. "On the second tour," she explained, "I went back in the social services aspect of it where I got to break bad news to some baby-faced kids." During the Vietnam conflict, she told me, families would contact the Red Cross with news that needed to reach soldiers. Women in Alice's position would receive the message and deliver them personally to

the solider. Although these messages ranged in severity, she recalled that most of them were "brutal."

Over time, Alice accrued the power to dispatch men back to the United States if she felt that the news warranted that action, even without pre-clearing her decision with the formal military chain of command. As she explained,

> I used to have a system where I'd call up the first lieutenant or the first sergeant and say, "Hi, it's Alice." And I'd say, "Okay, here we go, Sergeant. This is what I want you to do. I want you to put Joe Dokes in a jeep. Do not let him drive up here. Meanwhile, cut his orders, pack his bag. He's going home." And the sergeant would say, "What happened?" I said, "It's not for me to tell you. Just trust me on this." One or two times doing that and the first shirt or the first lieutenant or whoever was in charge would say, "Got it." That's all they did. They cut the orders. They sent somebody with them. Boom, sent him off to the airport.

Alice's experiences are emblematic of the public gains that women made throughout the 1960s, slowly accruing power within formal hierarchies.

Notably, throughout her time abroad, Alice also identified as devoutly Catholic. When I asked if she let her religious observance slip while overseas, she said she maintained weekly attendance as much as possible: "By and large, that beat just kept going. I mean, there was no deliberate deviation." Significantly, she acknowledged that an informal friendship with a priest is what helped her process the trauma during her time overseas. "I had become good friends with a priest who was assigned there," she said. "He was a very good sounding board. It was an almost instant-trust situation because we were both in the same place at the same time under the same circumstance. So that was a big help to me." Alice viewed her conversations with the priest as

informal chats, not as part of any formal religious process: “We had some casual conversations about what was going on. And he would sit there and listen to me and say, ‘Have you considered this?’ Which is what you need in a situation like that.” She valued the young man’s personal demeanor foremost, a trait that was secondary to his position as a priest. With resonances to Chopin’s curé who works to ameliorate community conflict, Alice trusted the young priest to help “carry the burden.” Alice aligned her success in accruing power within established male hierarchies to her friendship with the priest, an association that bends the tidy narrative of religious duties reinforcing women’s domesticity.

The examples of Alice’s experiences in Vietnam, Margie’s early memories of her mother, and Chopin’s literary descriptions of a church fight locate the power of religious ritual outside the physical space of a worship site. The examples highlight “vernacular religion,” which is, as Leonard Norman Primiano defines it, “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (“Vernacular” 44). Beyond the formal devotions that happen in a worship space or in service to an institution, vernacular religion encompasses the everyday symbols and rituals that extend into the home and community. Originally theorized as “folk religion,” this kind of lived experience includes, as Don Yoder writes, “the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion” (14). Often, these traditions are passed down orally or learned informally as a routine part of life.

One example of this vernacular religion that exists alongside liturgical forms is the way that my Roman Catholic family prepares for Easter dinner, especially their baking of *Paska*, or Easter Bread. It’s a tradition that exists outside the formal worship space but is nonetheless, a “process of religious belief” and one example of “the verbal, behavioral, and material

expressions of religious belief" that usually falls within the purview of women's culture (Primiano "Vernacular" 44). A few days before Easter, family bakers gather in one woman's kitchen and bake a sweet bread for Easter dinner. After forming the bread dough into a round loaf, a baker rolls out several long thin ropes of dough, braids them together, and forms them into a cross on the top of the bread. While the family's written recipe details the ingredients and steps, it omits one vital part of the tradition. As the baker slides the bread into the oven, she recites a whispered prayer and makes the sign of the cross over the loaf. This crucial step is a tradition that is learned only from the family's tradition-bearer (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Taken on the day before Easter in 1994, this photo shows finished Paska bread that will be served on Easter Sunday.

This *Paska* tradition encapsulates the way that vernacular religion merges the secular with the religious. This is a bread that is made only during Holy Week and only served after Mass on

Easter Sunday. While the *Paska* mirrors the formal Catholic symbolism of the consecrated Eucharist, the preparation is not officially prescribed or overseen by a religious institution. The tradition demonstrates, how, as Robert Orsi phrases it, "something called 'religion' cannot be neatly separated from the other practices of everyday life" (6).

Contrary to the attempts to quantify religious piety, like the Gallup poll or the CARA/*America* survey, vernacular religious theory acknowledges that "religion inherently involves interpretation" ("Vernacular" 44). Considering how religious observance can extend beyond the physical, formal worship space, the concept of vernacular religion reveals how quantification can elide the everyday actions that reinforce religious beliefs and communicate identity through expressive forms. Although you can count how many times you attend a religious service, it's more difficult to quantify the number of times you cook a meal that is linked to your religious background or seek informal conversations with a religious cleric. Alice's story, for example, underscores the ways in which her conversations and friendship with the young priest were part of both her religious life and her secular life. The two are so intertwined that they are inseparable. If, as Primiano writes, "It is impossible for the religion of an individual *not* to be vernacular" ("Vernacular" 44 emphasis added), religious tradition and symbolism can extend into the way that food is prepared, the interior decorations of a house, and even the narrative structures of an elder's stories.

Vernacular Religion and the Vitality of White Ethnicity

While the theory of vernacular religion illuminates how formal religious precepts are melded to a person's secular life, the actual practice of vernacular religion reveals the ways in which individuals orient themselves to their ethnic identity. Sapiro explains that "religion is one

of the most powerful institutions involved in shaping people's beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors" (182). Some vernacular religious practices—like creating shrines in the home, reciting daily prayers, or celebrating holiday traditions—can be potent signifiers of ethnic belonging since these rituals can express aspects of identity that may not be fully available in "official" religious observances. Larry Danielson explains that "religious affiliation often involves ethnic identity. Church members may categorize themselves as Italian-Catholics, Swedish-Lutherans, or Scotch-Presbyterians," but these ethnic-religious affiliations are often identified on the level of the local parish or within an individual's own definition of identity (56). Sometimes these ethnic-religious identities exist in opposition to the directives of the religious hierarchy, as in the case of the American Roman Catholic church, which professes to be a universal church. In this context, the vernacular rituals themselves can "become an ethnic-religious experience" (56), existing as one marker in a web of qualities that demarcate an individual's ethnicity.

These overlapping markers of identity—vernacular religion and ethnicity—are rooted in simultaneous social movements and theories of the early to mid-twentieth century. "The concept of 'folk religion' in tension with 'official religion,'" Don Yoder writes, "grew out of the concern of anthropologists to show the interrelatedness of types of culture in a complex society" (5), a question that anthropologists and folklorists of the early twentieth century grappled with. Yoder identifies the text *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (1939) by Joshua Trachtenberg as the first work to have used the term "folk religion" in its title. In Trachtenberg's view, "folk religion" refers to the "ideas and practices that never met with the whole-hearted approval of the religious leaders, but which enjoyed such wide popularity that they could not be altogether excluded from the field of religion" (xxvii). Trachtenberg's theory foregrounds the

work of other contemporary anthropologists and folklorists who were beginning to postulate the ways in which traditions performed in small groups were subject to personal interpretation.

Trachtenberg's work, which laid the foundation for later theories of vernacular religion, appeared at the same time as social scientists were articulating the concept of American ethnicity. The expansion in immigration from Central and Eastern European countries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to a number of social consequences.[1] As these immigrants were not considered fully white, there was a related spike in anti-immigrant rhetoric that centered around religious difference. Catholics, for instance, were targeted not only for their ethnic foreignness but also for their diverse religious rituals. Denis Lacorne points out that for many social leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "Religion . . . involved ethnic issues, leading Protestant elites to treat the insufficiently assimilated immigrants who did not belong to the dominant 'race' as unrepentant sinners" (90) Justin Nordstrom identifies a specific iteration of this convergence in anti-Catholic journalism, which "espoused the same restrictive and exclusive visions of citizenship found among their eugenicist contemporaries" (29). As Catholic rituals became more visible in the early twentieth century with public processionals and celebrations, Nordstrom observes, "American popular Catholicism began to exert a powerful public presence that coincided with a simultaneous movement by nativists to buffer and limit vernacular displays of affiliation" (33-34). As Catholics became more numerous in the U.S., the informal symbols of their religiosity—like public festivals and parades—were derided and challenged by civic authorities. Jewish immigrants, too, were targets of this dual critique, As Lacorne points out, "The Jews, apparently forgetful of their traditions, eager to

[1] Dinnerstein and Reimers's *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration* is an excellent, nuanced overview of the Age of Mass Migration and the social movements that sprang up during the era.

Anglicize their names the better to blend in with the Christians, like blacks with light skin passing for white, were no more Christian than blacks were white" (97). By repressing public displays of religious belief and challenging the performances of immigrant assimilation, nativists attempted to suppress the identities, both ethnic and religious, that threatened Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony.

These debates over the suitability of non-Protestants to the health of the nation reinforced the simultaneous movement that demeaned these new immigrants based on the fear that, as Arelia J. Gross suggests, "America would become a 'mongrel' nation" (225). In response to this, the anthropologist Franz Boas developed a theory that "called on Americans to see human difference in terms of history, culture, and environment rather than immutable biology" (226). Although Boas' theories were still based on the language of blood and race, they laid the groundwork for the shift to ethnicity, which would be fully articulated in the 1930s and 1940s.

By its definition, the ethnicity concept theorizes how cultural attributes, particularly religious practices, contribute to a group's sense of identity. "Religious practice," James Bau Graves explains, "is often among the central components of ethnicity" (31). While the theories of both vernacular religion and ethnicity are rooted in the time period of the Age of Mass Migration, they also share etymological roots that highlight their co-dependence. The linguistic roots of "ethnic" as a religious concept reinforces the centrality of religious ritual to the development of a group's identity. "An ethnic, etymologically speaking, is a goy," writes Werner Sollors (*Beyond* 25); "the Greek word ethnikos, from which the English 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' are derived, meant 'gentile,' 'heathen.' . . . In English usage the meaning shifted from 'non-Israelite' . . . to 'non-Christian'" (25). In contemporary usage, Sollors contends, "the English language has retained the pagan memory of 'ethnic,' often secularized in the sense of ethnic as

other, as nonstandard, or, in America, as not fully American" (25). If the concept of ethnicity is rooted in the language of religious difference, then the path of many Central, Southern, and Eastern European immigrants who were not "white" on arrival relied on religious traditions to eventually be seen as "white ethnic."

The linguistic associations between ethnicity and religion foreground the malleable nature of race and ethnicity. Immigrants from Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe forced revisions to the concept of American "whiteness" throughout the twentieth century. As the racial identity of these immigrants shifted during the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, it showed that the notions of "white" and "black" are culturally embedded and thus shifting over time.[2] The experiences of these European immigrant groups bear out that theory, and their social history demonstrates how, as Stephen Stern points out, "ethnicity is a dynamic and evolving force in American life rather than a conservative grouping of old and outmoded ways" (xi). If, as Matthew Frye Jacobson asserts, "race is not just a conception; it is also a perception" (*Whiteness* 9), then the performance of traditional practices like vernacular religion structures the way that race is perceived in America. By the turn into the twenty-first century, these groups with European ancestry were classified together as part of the "Caucasian race," itself a term that, as Jacobson observes, appeared in vernacular usage only in the late twentieth century as a way to consolidate the various European immigrant groups into a monolithic whiteness (*Whiteness* 7-8). As these immigrant groups performed their identity in ways that hewed to codes of American civic conduct, they became known as "white ethnics," a term that deflates the linguistic resonances of "non-standard" and "not fully American." These white ethnics are American in the sense that they align themselves to the white American codes of civic behavior, but they also

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[2] Books like Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* and Karen Brodkin's *How the Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* explore this concept in detail.

retain their separation through their diverse national heritages and traditions. In sum, the cultural expression of religion reinforces the vitality of ethnicity.

Women as Tradition Bearers of Sacramental Ethnicity

In studying the evolution of these white ethnics, immigration scholars like Jacobson, David Roediger, and John Bodnar focus primarily on the political movements that led to the formation and maintenance of white ethnic identity and on the codes of civic behavior that have defined ethnicity. In doing so, these scholarly works elide the experiences of women in the formation of white ethnic identity. Though not all prior scholarship has completely ignored women's roles in defining and maintaining white ethnicity, their stories and experiences are usually subsumed under the more political, more easily accessible, and more documentable experiences of men. As Hasia Diner notes, most studies about ethnicity "have relied almost exclusively on census data of male heads of households . . . , usually ignoring the data on the women who composed more than half of the group" (xiii). Even Roediger registers the clumsy gender associations that have been applied to ethnic identity: "Such pursuit of white identity, consistently tied to competition for wage labor and to political citizenship, was coded largely as male, and it tended to apply awkwardly to the immigrant mothers" who were nevertheless "recognized as key figures in identity formation" (129-30). By focusing mainly on men's experiences and only offering glancing views of women's limited public roles, these works ignore the crucial cultural development that took place in more private, more ephemeral contexts.

The gap that Roediger identifies in the scholarship on women's roles in ethnic-identity formation is exactly what this project addresses by showing that informal, vernacular religious

practices, often the responsibility of women, were and still are fundamental to inventing, reinforcing, and safeguarding what it means to be white ethnic in America. Vernacular religious rituals afford women the opportunity to express private beliefs that influence their public perceptions. Those informal religious traditions allow women to perform transformative aspects of their heritage in a socially sanctioned context. As Stern writes, "By emphasizing some traditions while downplaying others, and by combining various traditions, styles, and interpretations of ethnicity, ethnic men and women take greater control of their lives. They come to play active roles in determining what cultural features are relevant to their understanding of ethnicity" (Stern xiv). If, as Roger Abrahams and Susan Kalčik postulate, non-immigrant white ethnics have the privilege of choosing to emphasize or de-emphasize "the things about themselves that are different from Anglo or mainstream American culture" (233), then religious traditions constitute one of the most fertile areas of life that women use to express a specific ethnic identity.

Alice's experiences after retiring from her career in social services concretely illustrate how the expression of ethnic identity can be influenced by vernacular religion. Alice acknowledged that her ethnic identity shifted importance during her life, and she credited that shift specifically to her choice in a home parish. She didn't identify her ethnic identity as particularly important to her religious observances in Vietnam. Instead, she told me, "I don't think I got truly involved in the ethnic tradition religion thing until I retired and came back home and walked into St. Stephen's. . . when I walked through that door and I saw the archways that they took down. And the lector that day walked in and as the congregation was assembled, and he said '*Pochvaleny bud' Pan Jezis Kristus* [Praise be to the Lord Jesus Christ].' And I said, 'I'm home. This is my church.'" Her experiences reinforce Stern's contention that religious symbols

of ethnic identity “are not fixed points of tradition, but rather frames of references within which ethnics respond to social, political, religious, or economic pressures” (xiii). When she returned to her hometown in her retirement, her ethnic religion connected her formal religious observance to traditions that she aligned with her family’s heritage.

The fact that Alice based her decision of parish membership on the architecture of the church and an ethnic greeting reinforces the social dynamism created between religion and ethnicity that reinforces group-based identity. Recognizing that “our everyday word *group*” encapsulates the relationship between “the empirical network of interactions in which culture is created and moves, and the community of the social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance,” Dorothy Noyes posits that collectives like ethnic groups are essentially a bundle of networked relationships that encompass both interpersonal interactions and performances of identity (11). In short, “acting in common makes community” (29). By continuing to recite a traditional Slovak greeting in an American Catholic church, the members of St. Stephen’s created and sustained a Slovak American community.

Alice’s choice to attend St. Stephen’s because of the signifiers of Slovak heritage further illuminates a model by which to understand the negotiation between personal acts of vernacular religion and the ways in which those expressions shape a shared ethnic group identity. Noyes writes that “If individual acts of identification create the reality of social categories, the reality of a community with which to identify comes from collective acts” (29). Alice grounds this theory in practical terms. When someone like Alice engages in a mundane, daily activity like silently reciting a traditional Slovak prayer or cooking a meal of Slovak food, those discreet expressions of individual identity will “create the reality of social categories” (29). In Alice’s case, those daily actions produce the social category of “Slovak American.” Moreover, her decision to

engage in private activities that align with her heritage then have significance beyond her own self; they contribute to the larger category of Slovak American women. As those social categories reify into distinct collective identities, individuals like Alice who share in those "collective acts" eventually establish "the reality of a community with which to identify" (29).

In many ways, religious traditions lend women public visibility and power. For instance, women perform many religious duties in the public space of the physical church: attending services, fundraising, and directing social functions, to name just a few. Focusing specifically on the function of religion in European immigrant communities, James K. Kenneally claims that participation in ethnic churches provide immigrant women "acceptable tasks outside the home, an undertaking that [increases] one's self-worth" (121). Along with more public visibility, women also deploy religious traditions to strengthen their power in their communities and, relatedly, in a patriarchal society. Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff note that many "forms of women's symbolic expression," including religious traditions, are often "hidden from, or considered unimportant to, the majority culture" (89). Elevating traditions that are glossed over serves to "enlarge our understanding of the way in which women create or use symbolic modes within the dominant culture of the patriarchy" (89). Women's observance of religious traditions can unwittingly shatter the notion of the "separate spheres" that much prior scholarship on women and religion (and women and ethnicity) tends to reinforce.

To address this gap in the scholarship, This project extends these observations, arguing that white ethnic women, both literary and real, have made unique and valuable contributions to the way that white ethnicity has been constructed, maintained, and communicated to future generations. The title of this project, "Sacramental Ethnicity," highlights the connections between the folkloric performances of vernacular religion and ethnic identity that is fundamental

to the twenty-first century articulation of American ethnicity. Alluding to the Christian concept of a "sacramental," or ordinary objects like palm branches or water that carry symbolic meaning, this project emphasizes the ways in which common practices and objects affect ethnic identities.

Overview of the Project

In triangulating women's culture, vernacular religion, and ethnic identity, this project takes an interdisciplinary approach by integrating literary criticism with folkloristic study. Both literature and folklore are mediums of communication that, as Frank de Caro and Rosan Jordan explain, share "an aesthetic use of language" as well as an "interactional dynamic" where folklore influences a writer's use of tropes (3, 12). "Insofar as folklore is a part of culture and society," write de Caro and Jordan, "and writers provide a re-creation of culture and society, so folklore will appear in literature simply as part of the life reflected there" (8-9). Some authors, like the ones included in this project, take an active role in integrating folkloric concepts into their writing. Through their narrative choices, these authors explore the effect of folkloric concepts on group identity. Since my focus is the relationship between women's performances of vernacular religious traditions and the development of American white ethnicity, my project examines real women's experiences alongside literary depictions of ethnic women to provide a nuanced approach to the social contexts of the twentieth century. If, as Cristina Bacchilega observes, "The meanings of folklore, in literature as in the world, are read as specific to textual, social, and political contexts" (449), approaching this topic from an interdisciplinary standpoint illuminates parts of both perspectives that might otherwise be left unexamined.

This project is arranged chronologically, with each chapter focusing on a different iteration of the connections between vernacular religion and ethnic identity. Each of the four

examples in this project present the links between women's culture, vernacular religion, and ethnic identity as dependent on local culture. In Chapter One, "'And what stories she told them!': The Third Space in Kate Chopin's Louisiana Fiction," I argue that Kate Chopin's short fiction in *Bayou Folk* and her novel *The Awakening* prefigure a social system that delineates ethnicity from race. Chopin's stories anticipate the concept of ethnicity decades before the modern sense of the term came into use. Her stories achieve this early articulation of ethnicity because of their depictions of local small groups in Louisiana. Because of its unique Creole social systems, for example, the city of New Orleans was one of the first major American cities to move from a three-tiered racial system (white, black, and in-between) to a binary system. This movement to a black/white racial system necessarily led to anxiety over those populations that previously fell "in between" white and black. Chopin depicts Louisiana's Creole and Cajun society as occupying this liminal space, and her characters exemplify the social movement to a system of variegated whiteness.

Her texts chart this cultural movement by illustrating the connections between religious practice and racial difference. Chopin used her interest in the growing folklore movement to explore the role of informal religious traditions on the maintenance of group identity. Characters from *Bayou Folk* explore these connections, and Edna's difference in *The Awakening* has as much to do with her Protestant upbringing as it does with her lack of Creole identity. Through their adherence to vernacular religious traditions, Chopin's characters prefigure the Modernist conception of ethnic identity as based on cultural factors rather than on solely physical markers.

That Modernist movement toward formally defining the concepts of "culture" and "ethnicity" is the focus of chapter two, "'My religion is not for sale': Ethnic Counterfeiting in Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers*." These two texts specifically call attention

to religious difference as a function of ethnic identity as experienced in the tenement life of Lower East Side Jews. Broadly, the American Jewish experience reflects both a religious difference from the mainstream white population and an ethnic difference among members of the same Jewish religion. While Jews consider themselves part of a singular religious diaspora, their local cultures affect many of their specific folk traditions. By the time Jews from Eastern Europe immigrated to America at the turn of the twentieth century, German Jews had already risen to levels of prominence in American society. Yezierska draws on the complicated nature of Jewish American identity to define Jewish ethnicity in the early and mid-twentieth century, and she explores how the invention of American ethnicity is explicitly tied to the Jewish religion.

Specifically, through Yezierska's use of economic language and tropes in these two books, she participates in a broader Modernist experimentation that explores the connections between economic practices and racial/ethnic identity. Her first published book, *Hungry Hearts*, charts a parallel between economic innovations of the Progressive Era and the literary depiction of Jews. Through a number of short stories in this collection, Yezierska explores the ways in which Jewish women are kept in economic servitude simply by their adherence to Jewish rituals. She follows this story collection with *Bread Givers*, a novel in which the main character must invent herself as a woman who can mediate her traditional ethnic-religious practices with the broader secular, white society. Appearing at the same time that anthropologists and other social scientists were beginning to formally articulate the concepts of "culture" and "ethnicity," Yezierska's stories refashion these theories in a literary landscape that depends on the maintenance and modification of local religious and ethnic traditions.

Authors like Kate Chopin and Anzia Yezierska navigate complex racial and ethnic landscapes when writing about characters from a not-quite-white background. By doing so, they

tap into the complicated relationship between ethnic difference and religious difference, and the first two chapters establish a model of the relationship between American ethnicity, religion, and women's culture. Women writers and white ethnic literary characters, however, offer only one mode to explore the construction and communication of ethnic identity. Focusing solely on literary representations of ethnicity risks overlooking the lived experiences that real women have used to define their ethnic identity. Consequently, this project shifts gears after the second chapter to focus on the creation and maintenance of Slovak American ethnicity in Western Pennsylvania. Focusing on two specific communities of women—a small group of nuns in Pittsburgh and several lay Catholic women in the small town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania—this project explores how real women construct and maintain white ethnic identity in ways that resonate with literary depictions of white ethnic women.

While the first half of this project focuses on literary depictions of vernacular religious traditions and the roles that women play in maintaining those traditions in service to their ethnic group, "'We were the hunky sisters': The Lived Experiences of the Vincentian Sisters of Charity," centers on the role of American Catholic sisters in the development of ethnic identity. Sisters demonstrate a unique convergence of religion, ethnicity, and gender. These women take formal religious vows, but they are also given a place of authority in the Catholic Church, where they have some influence over religious practices and teachings. At times, they even spar with the male hierarchy to defend their vocation and the people they serve. This chapter centers on the life experience narratives of six sisters from the Vincentian Sisters of Charity in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania who identify as Slovak American.

Their stories of joining the convent, their descriptions of creating and maintaining both religious and ethnic community while in the order, and their tales of working among non-white

communities in the American South illuminate the ways in which their experiences as Catholic sisters informally expressed their own views about the shifting definition of whiteness in the twentieth century. Their experiences illustrate the situational nature of American ethnicity, or the idea that ethnic identity can morph depending on the social context. Their continued practice of vernacular religious rituals reinforces the centrality of those traditions to their sense of ethnic identity.

The final chapter, "'Everything was a tradition, really': Vernacular Religious Traditions in Johnstown, Pennsylvania's Slovak Community" focuses on the experiences of Slovak American women in a mid-sized Western Pennsylvania town. Their stories of growing up in Slovak American parishes illustrate the dynamism of social change that fueled the evolution of ethnicity itself. These women recounted experiences that explain how their informal religious traditions affected their ethnic identity and how those traditions are intrinsically linked to their ethnic identity. Blending informal and formal religious traditions, these women reaffirm their religious *and* ethnic identities.

The women's stories reveal how their ethnic traditions and their religious traditions were dependent upon the women in their lives. Those women were mostly the ones responsible for the vernacular traditions that linked their ethnic and religious identities. They told stories about how their practice of religious devotions outside the space of the church reinforced the cohesion of their ethnic community. In many ways, their stories reveal that the structure of the formal worship rituals was a way to facilitate their ethnic identity. This was especially true with holiday traditions. The women explained how they, and the other women in their families, used the religious holy days as a way to celebrate their secular, ethnic traditions. By modifying those

traditions to suit their own needs and local contexts, they ensured the transmission of traditions to future generations.

Chapter 1

"And what stories she told them!": The Third Space in Kate Chopin's Louisiana Fiction

On June 7, 1894, Kate Chopin reflected in her personal journal on the one hundred press notices she had received about her recently published short story collection *Bayou Folk*. She wrote that she was "surprised at the very small number which show anything like a worthy critical faculty" and that the worthwhile reviews were so rare that they "might be counted on the fingers of one hand" (Toth, 187). This comment is puzzling, since, as Nancy Walker makes clear, most of the reviews of *Bayou Folk* were positive (80). The review featured in *The Critic*, for example, revels in the book's depictions of the "oddities in life and character" of Louisiana ("Bayou Folk" 299), and the reviewer from *The Literary World* suggests that the book is "full of fascination" due to its regional focus ("Fiction" 121).

Modern scholars have attempted to explain the dissonance between the praise of the reviews and Chopin's attitude toward them by focusing on literary genres. Some, like Alice Hall Petry, imply that Chopin was disappointed in the pattern of "quaint pronouncements routinely used to describe local color writers" (8), suggesting that Chopin would have appreciated reviews that set her work in the more prestigious genre of realism.[3] Other scholars, like Emily Toth, argue that Chopin's contemporaries missed "the radical things she was writing about women" (*Unveiling* 148). These readings suggest that Chopin's disappointment is due to reviewers mis-

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[3] Phillip J. Barrish provides a detailed account of the literary and cultural criticism that encompasses the contested terms "local color" and "realism" in chapter 5 of *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism*. He explains that the local color genre has most often been categorized as a subset of realist writing. For critics in the nineteenth century, "sophisticated" realist texts came from writers like William Dean Howells and Hamlin Garland, while local color writing was produced mainly by women writers in isolated regions of the United States. (See also *Regions of Identity* by Kate McCullough, pages 185-188.) Although recent criticism from Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, Amy Kaplan, Barbara Ewell, Richard Brodhead, and Elizabeth Ammons challenge this reductive approach to the genres, the theories from the nineteenth century is what is most pertinent to this project.

categorizing the story collection as a piece of local color fiction rather than a set of realist stories or a collection of feminist musings.

Yet Chopin's own body of work belies these scholars' interpretations. Later in the same diary entry, Chopin herself undermines the idea that she is rebelling against a local color tradition. She praises Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's novel *Pembroke,* published only a few months before *Bayou Folk,* calling it "the most profound, the most powerful piece of fiction of its kind that has ever come from the American press" (*Kate* 187). Given Chopin's high praise, it's surprising that *Pembroke* was also classified by contemporary reviewers as a piece of local color fiction, especially if Chopin were truly opposed to being associated with the local color genre.[4] In her diary, Chopin defends *Pembroke* against the critics who focus only on the "disagreeable characters" and do not appreciate "the spirit of the work, the subtle genius which created it" (187). By drawing a parallel between *Bayou Folk* and *Pembroke*, Chopin indicates her disenchantment with critics unable to glimpse her own "subtle genius" and subsequently her innovative use of the local color genre. Critics should, in Chopin's view, appreciate the unique way in which she uses local color conventions like dialect, location-based details, and the illusion of authenticity to depict group-based difference, a term that the anthropologist Franz Boas defined in the late nineteenth century as "a configuration of manners, mores, and beliefs peculiar to a people" (Elliott xiii).

I argue in this chapter that Chopin's use of local color conventions showcases her engagement with and contributions to the emerging field of folklore. As a developing discipline

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[4] Reviews from 1894 use language that reflects the belief that *Pembroke* should be classified as a piece of local color literature. Phrases like "typical people," "reality of an insignificant village," and "simplicity of life and character" pepper the reviews from Margaret Sangster in the April 1894 review in *Harper's Bazaar* (335) and unattributed reviews from the July 1894 and November 1894 reviews in *Life* (Droch 38 and "Bookishness" 296).

concerned with, as Martha Sims and Martine Stephens define it, "informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures, and our traditions" (8), folklore afforded Chopin a way to articulate group-based difference in a way that anticipated the social concept of ethnicity, an idea that would not enter linguistic usage in America until the mid-twentieth century. Through her use of folkloric elements, like her characters' adherence to vernacular religious traditions, Chopin devises an approach to identities that fall "in between" white and black. Writing in the post-Reconstruction era when the established three-tiered racial system of Louisiana was consolidating to a binary color line, Chopin's stories focus on Creole and Acadian (migrants from Canada who settled in Louisiana) characters whose ethnic identities slipped in between white and black.

From her early short stories collected in *Bayou Folk* to her final novel *The Awakening*, her Creole and Acadian characters often use their religious identity to reinforce a group sense of belonging and differentiate themselves from outsiders.[5] By charting a connection between ethnic difference and religious difference, her fiction opens a discursive space in which these contested identities of Creole and Acadian can be subsumed into whiteness and be categorized as what later was termed white ethnic.[6] In this way, Chopin's fictionalized Creoles in Louisiana prefigure other liminal groups across the U.S. that fall between the binary color line.

Chopin's Folkloric Approach to Local Color Writing

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[5] For a folkloric analysis of how groups define insiders from outsiders, see William Jansen's "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," pg 207.

[6] Bonnie James Shaker undertakes a similar argument in *Coloring Locals.* Shaker's main focus is on Chopin's periodical fiction from *Youth's Companion* rather than a broader view of Chopin's short story collections and novels.

Chopin's fiction is illustrative of the late nineteenth-century convergence of local color writing and the study of folklore. Chopin's writing, published mainly in the 1890s, appeared concurrently with the formalizing of folklore as a discipline. The broader literary movement of local color writing reached its peak of popularity at exactly the time that the discipline of American folklore was beginning to take shape in the 1870s and 1880s. Phillip J. Barrish makes clear that the "popularity of local-color fiction in the United States coincided with a more general interest in 'folk' cultures and languages" (78). The articles that were published in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* in the 1890s, according to Michael Elliott, "parallel the reach of works being published during the same years under the rubrics of 'dialect literature,' 'local color writing,' and 'regionalism'" (128).

Beyond sharing a similar timeline, local color writing and folkloric study had similar aims: to textualize the various forms of American difference. Both folkloric and local color writing were aimed at exhibiting unfamiliar social groups from seemingly exotic locations to elite Northern readers. This burgeoning interest in folklore and folk cultures at the turn of the century, as Brad Evans explains, "was of a kind with the period's popular fascination with and aestheticization of strange and exotic peoples" (56). Similar to folklore, which was epistemologically positioned as an attempt to capture a vanishing way of life in America's remote regions (Zumwalt 15), local color writing attempted to document pockets of rural America that were quickly disappearing. As Kenneth Pimple sums up, folklorists themselves often consider "local-color literature as a depository of folklore" (388). Recording and depicting "those phenomena—language, dress, rituals—that gave groups a distinguishing identity" (Elliott xiv), folklorists and local color writers shared in attempts to textually preserve the folkways of the United States' diverse groups. Evans points out that local color books "were slotted into the

same epistemological framework as folklore" in the late nineteenth century (Evans 83). Further, the discipline of folklore emerged, Elliott writes, as "an interdisciplinary enterprise poised between [the] two approaches" of anthropology and literary realism (127).

In trying to textually represent group-based differences, Chopin mediates the dual viewpoints of anthropology and literary study through her use of folkloric elements. Whereas folklorists endeavored to professionalize this kind of study as a science, local color authors sought mainly to entertain readers with this material. Both the anthropological and the literary approaches, though, developed "similar strategies of publication that responded to problems related to the textual representation of group-based identity" (Elliott xiv). As a mediating discipline between anthropology and literature, folklore exemplifies how both genres "shared an interest in the documentation of difference" and developed similar "conventions by which that difference would be textualized" (xviii, xxvi). If, as Stephanie Foote argues, local color writing is fundamentally "*about* the representation of difference" (4 original emphasis), Chopin's works mediate the scientific and literary approaches.

Rather than being viewed simply as depictions of exotic peoples or places, both local color texts and folkloric essays were expected to be authentic representations of the people and places they described. Folklore and local color writing were not, as Evans makes clear, "taken to simply be *about* local places and peoples, but [were] reimagined as being fundamentally *representative* of them" (83 emphasis mine). Predisposed to read local color literature as authentic representations of the people and places described, nineteenth-century readers valued these texts for their supposed ability to impart some kind of truth about unfamiliar groups.

This context not only helps to explain the positive reviews of *Bayou Folk* but it also illuminates Chopin's method for much of her fiction. As a book that, even through its title,

signals to be representative of those living in the exotic bayou country of Louisiana, *Bayou Folk* garnered praise for its representation of the "subtle, alien quality which holds the Creole apart from the Anglo-Saxon" ("Fiction" 121). Moreover, the book was valued, at least to *The Critic*'s reviewer, because Chopin was "evidently familiar at first hand with the illiterate Creoles, the old broken-down plantations, the queer *patois* people, the bayou landscapes to which she leads us in these simple tales, whose very simplicity increases their verisimilitude" ("Bayou Folk" 299). Because the short story collection *Bayou Folk* appeared to accurately document the folkways of Louisiana's exotic peoples through Chopin's participant-observation, reviewers respected the book for its true-to-life representations that she wove into fictional stories. These reviews of *Bayou Folk* further illustrate how local color "came to value the first-hand observation of group-based difference" (Elliott xxvi). In other words, *Bayou Folk* appears to do exactly what the title advertises; it purports to textually document the odd folkways of strange Southern people through Chopin's insider perspective.

While Chopin herself was careful to publicly characterize her writings as *not* participating in a local color/folkloric pastiche, her anecdotal connections to folklore and the related discipline of anthropology suggest that she was at least aware of the folkloric qualities of her texts. In 1899—albeit toward the end of her writing career—Chopin wrote a newspaper column in which she declared that she had been taken "to spots supposed to be alive with local color" by Louisiana guides and that she was given "frank permission to use them as I liked" (qtd in Rankin 183). But she insisted that "never, in any single instance, has such material been of the slightest service" (183).

Chopin's words suggest she held a vested interest in distancing herself from the local color genre, but details from her biography contradict this persona. Although biographies of

Chopin do not explicitly specify the ways in which Chopin engaged with folkloric study, certain details about her life and friendships suggest that she was engaged directly in the discourse of folklore. For example, Per Seyersted's biography of Chopin points out that she demonstrated an interest in the sciences of biology and anthropology (49). When she lived in New Orleans during the 1870s, she also enjoyed exploring the city and observing its diverse racial makeup. According to Seyersted, "She loved to ride on streetcars and observe people, and she seems to have covered the routes of all the carlines at her disposal" (41). Seyersted concludes that Chopin "must have gathered a wealth of impressions as her intense curiosity about life spurred her to roam" (41). She took special note of its ethnic and racial diversity: "Creoles and Cajuns, Negroes and mulattoes, Germans, Italians, Irish, and Americans" (41).

Aside from her documented interest in anthropology and racial difference, Chopin was also tangentially acquainted with the emerging discipline of folklore. Chopin certainly knew about the existence of folklore societies since a minor character from *The Awakening* attends a meeting (Chopin, *The Complete* 958). To be clear, no records appear to exist that indicate Chopin was a member of any formal folklore association, either at the local or national levels. Both New Orleans and St. Louis, the two cities where Chopin lived, each had local folklore associations, but Chopin was not geographically close to either during their years of operation. The Louisiana Folk-Lore Association was founded in 1892 (Jordan and de Caro 33), but by then Chopin had already moved back to her childhood home in St. Louis. While she did make occasional trips back to Louisiana—including to Natchitoches and New Orleans, according to both Daniel Rankin and Seyersted—there is no extant record of her attending a meeting of the Louisiana Folk-Lore Association. In St. Louis, the Missouri Folk-Lore Association began meeting in 1906, two years after Chopin's death. She also does not appear to have been a

member of the national American Folk-Lore Society, according to the membership rolls published in the society's journal.

While there are no existing records indicating that Chopin was a formal member of any regional folklore associations, she was acquainted with other women who were involved in folklore societies. Chopin knew Mollie Moore Davis, a writer who lived in New Orleans, and she attended Davis's Friday afternoon salons beginning in 1885 (Brady 155). Davis was a well-known writer in New Orleans, and in 1892, Alcée Fortier—the founder of the Louisiana Folk-Lore Association—recruited Davis to participate in the Louisiana branch's monthly meetings between 1892 and 1896 (Jordan and De Caro 34). Although Davis's Friday afternoon salons were held before her involvement in the Louisiana Folk-Lore Association and her attendance in the folklore society post-dates Chopin's first writings, it's certainly plausible that Davis's friendship with Chopin acquainted her with folkloric ideas and a general interest in the field. Considering also Chopin's documented interest in the field of anthropology, it is a small leap to assume her interest in folklore, especially since, as Rosemary Zumwalt makes clear, the American Folk-Lore Society and its corresponding journal were dominated by anthropologists in the late nineteenth century (29).

More than this circumstantial evidence, though, Chopin consciously used folklore as a structure for some of her early texts. One of the first pieces of fiction that she wrote, "The Maid of St. Phillippe," illustrates her direct use of folklore in writing. In December 1890 (the same year that her first novel *At Fault* was published), she responded to a writing contest in the *Youth's Companion* periodical that asked for "the best American Folklore stories" ("Prizes" 676). The contest was to "awaken the interest of local story-tellers, and to collect the clever, curious, and instructive traditional stories of American homes and neighborhoods" (676). In

response to this call, Chopin wrote "The Maid of St. Phillippe," a story that, as Bonnie Stepenoff explains, was modeled after the life of Chopin's great-great-grandmother (68). Stepenoff remarks that "through her contacts with three generations of older women, Chopin maintained a connection with the past that wove its way into her fiction" (75). Although the story did not win the *Youth's Companion* contest, she managed to eventually publish "The Maid of St. Phillippe" in *Short Stories: A Magazine of Fact and Fiction* in 1892 (Toth, *Unveiling* 169). Although the piece is counted as among Chopin's *least* successful stories by later critics, her experiences with writing a story that clearly fits her contemporary definition of folklore reveals her early, underlying interest in the discipline.

Later stories, too, illustrate Chopin's more direct engagement with folkloric methodology. Her short story "At the 'Cadian Ball," first published in 1892, focuses on the interactions between Creoles and Acadians in Louisiana's Natchitoches Parish. The story was in fact modeled on Fortier's scholarly essay "The Acadians of Louisiana and their Dialect," published in 1891 in *PMLA*. Aside from being further evidence that Chopin was familiar with the scholarly publications of her day, this story illustrates Chopin's direct connections to published folklore. Geraldine Seay astutely compares passages from Fortier's essay to Chopin's story, finding almost word-for-word transcriptions between the two pieces. Seay concludes that Fortier's "nonfiction piece served as the folkloric source for Chopin's short story" ("Kate" 40).

Chopin also wove French and Creole folklore into her fiction.[7] Her brief sketch "Croque-Mitaine" draws on a French legend that was used to enforce certain desirable behaviors among the community's youth. Written in 1892, "Croque-Mitaine" takes its title from a traditional French legend of the same name. In French tradition, a Croque-Mitaine is the "equivalent of a

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[7] For a detailed analysis of Creole folklore, see Nathan J. Rabalais' *Folklore Figures of French and Creole Louisiana*.

bogeyman," as Heather Kirk Thomas explains ("The White" 104). As a mythical creature whose purpose is to frighten children into correct behavior, the Croque-Mitaine of Chopin's story is described as "a hideous ogre, said to inhabit the strip of wood just beyond the children's playground" (Chopin, *The Complete* 200). P'tit-Paul, the boy at the center of the sketch, is told constantly about Croque-Mitaine by his "nursery-governess from Paris" (200). One night, when the governess attends a neighboring ball, she reminds P'tit-Paul and the other children that "they must lie very still and go to sleep, or Croque-Mitaine would stalk from the wood and come to devour them where they lay" (200). While Chopin's "Croque-Mitaine" has been interpreted as a metaphor for the white supremacist society of New Orleans (Thomas, "The White" 104-06), the story is, at its core, a folkloric retelling of a French legend. Like the Croque-Mitaine of French legend that metaphorically polices the border of acceptable behavior, Chopin's text similarly delineates the folkloric borders of identity based on French Creole beliefs and practices.

By transforming a French legend into a French American setting, "Croque-Mitaine" further illustrates Chopin's interest in the same kinds of material that was being shared at formal folklore meetings. Early editions of the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* reveal that regional folklore meetings often focused on re-telling and recording family and local lore. For example, the stated objective of the Louisiana Folk-Lore Association was, according to the April-June 1892 edition of the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, "the accumulation and collection of ancient folk-lore stories which have never been published, but handed down from generation to generation through old people and nurses" ("Local" 160). Examples of these, listed in the same edition of the journal, included a "quaint and childish story, entitled 'Fatty and the Kneading Trough,'" "some peculiar Nova Scotia proverbs," and "some quaint Virginia superstitions current in the old slave days among the negroes" (160). Within this context, Chopin's retelling of

"Croque-Mitaine" demonstrates her familiarity with contemporary folkloric elements and her ability to integrate them into her fiction.

Chopin's use of local color conventions is not, therefore, coincidental but rather a strategic choice. Given that Chopin, as Kate McCullough argues, "was clearly aware of the hierarchy of genres operating in American literature" and knew "both the benefits and costs" of relying on local color conventions, her strategy of employing folkloric techniques in her fiction was a deliberate choice (191). Although McCullough insists that Chopin worked throughout her later life to disassociate herself from the label of local color, her texts themselves contradict this supposed effort. Even *The Awakening*, which is often viewed as a pinnacle example of realist writing, relies on an underlying logic structured by folkloric, local color principles. Perhaps Chopin felt constrained by expectations accorded to nineteenth-century female authors to write in a local color genre, as Richard Brodhead argues about many women writers of the era. But it seems more likely, when contextualized among the emerging field of folklore, that Chopin's choice of genre allowed her to strategically use the conventions associated with local color—conventions that had already been established as a way to textualize social difference—in order to participate in the ongoing development of the study of folklore. "Chopin," as Marcia Gaudet explains, "was certainly interested in the folklore of the people and she was certainly aware of its importance to native Louisiana" (45). Her choice of genre allowed her to draw from the study of folklore to explore group-based differences in Louisiana in innovative and engaging ways.

Louisiana's Racial Milieu as a Staging Ground for Ethnicity

Given her blending of folklore and local color, Chopin finds fertile ground in the racial and ethnic diversity of Louisiana to explore the ways in which group-based traditions affect

ethnic categories that straddle the binary color line. Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby" particularly demonstrates her concern with identities that cannot be easily categorized. The story also highlights her ability to reflect some of the general concerns of the local color movement onto Louisiana's racial and ethnic milieu. With its setting on a Louisiana plantation and its incorporation of French and French American characters, "Désirée's Baby" draws on established local color conventions of depicting exotic locations and strange characters. By drawing on the ambiguities of racial identity—and the inability of race to satisfactorily sort identities—the story participates in the textualization of difference that was central to both local color and folklore, and it anticipates the later social construction of ethnicity. Originally published in 1893, "Désirée's Baby" is ostensibly set during the antebellum years, and the central tension of the story revolves around Désirée's contested racial identity. Although she appears white, her baby resembles the other mixed-race children on the plantation where she lives with her husband, Armand Aubigny. Considering Désirée's uncertain origins, as she was an orphan, all assume that Désirée is black, an assumption that follows Désirée as she disappears into the bayou.

Chopin uses the guise of historical fiction to confront the contemporary concerns about individuals who are caught in between the binary color line. Although set before the Civil War when Louisiana society followed a three-tiered racial system, "Désirée's Baby" foregrounds the binary racial system of the post-Reconstruction years. This textual anachronism hides the fact that Louisiana's race relations, as Anna Shannon Elfenbein makes clear, "developed distinctly" from the rest of the country (14). Extending back as far as 1724, Carl Brasseaux notes, "Louisiana's legal system fostered the creation and maintenance of a three-tier social system, with a white elite and a black servile population at the polar extremes and, between them, a free black class that enjoyed most of the legal rights and privileges, but not the social status of

whites" (40). While this three-tiered racial system was not wholly unique, it was most well defined in antebellum Louisiana.

This particular racial system developed partly in response to the state's unusual political history. In contrast to New England, where Anglo Americans constructed themselves as socially superior, Louisiana's social system was inspired by French structures. Despite changing national affiliations from France to Spain to France (again) and then to the U.S. during the eighteenth century (Nagel 5-6), Louisiana remained a "French city" throughout its period as a colony, as Jerah Johnson remarks, and its outlook remained French even after the U.S. took over (45). This French attitude toward government and social organization led to a unique position toward race relations. The practice of interracial marriage, for example, was more readily accepted in Louisiana during the colonial years than in other parts of the United States (Johnson 23).

The state's racial diversity was a driving a factor in its literary construction as an exotic and strange land. Because of this unique political and racial history, Louisiana was understood by those both inside the Louisiana community and outside it as definitely *not* Anglo American.[8] Prior to the American purchase of Louisiana in 1803, the area—and especially its main center of New Orleans—consisted of French settlers, African slaves, American Indians, and German immigrants. In the early nineteenth century, the territory's population rapidly grew because of the Haitian Revolution. Refugees migrated to Louisiana, bringing free white French colonists,

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[8] My understanding of the racial composition of early Louisiana comes from Jerah Johnson's "Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth-Century French Ethos," Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's "The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture," and Paul F. Lachance's "The Foreign French," all of which are essays from *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*. Taken together, these three essays create a picture of colonial New Orleans in which Africans, French, Spanish, and American Indians commingled to create a distinct cultural milieu in the Louisiana territory. The territory's French identity and social values dictated its formal stance toward the diverse groups living within it. While far from equitable, the treatment of non-whites by whites was different than the British American colonies and states.

free persons of color, and ex-slaves who were quickly returned to bondage after arriving on the US mainland (Fussell 848). Later in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Fussell explains, "waves of German, Irish, Italian, and other migrants" arrived in Louisiana (847). By the time of the Civil War, Louisiana was thoroughly diverse, a quality reflected in the solidification of a tripartite racial order.

The distinguishing feature of Louisiana's three-tiered racial system was the status "free person of color." Free persons of color were typically children of slave women and free white men who had been granted freedom by the male owner. After the slaves were granted manumission, Virginia Dominguez writes, "they were free and therefore legally different from African slaves. But in the French colonial context, they did not emerge legally or socially as white. They were *gens de couleur libre*, free people of color" (23). As they were liberated, free persons of color attempted to separate themselves from black slaves, but, as Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cosse Bell make clear, the white ruling class thwarted these attempts. Consequently, according to Logsdon and Bell, Louisiana's "racial order remained fluid during most of the antebellum period" (208).

The emancipation of slaves in the 1860s, though, forced Louisiana to adopt the binary racial system in which "free" was coded white and former slaves were marked as "black." Former free persons of color, as Clifton Carmon writes, "had to confront the definition of their role and place in the community and in society" during Reconstruction (x). Reconstruction-era governments eliminated this in-between category and enforced a legally strict binary racial system. With the new black/white racial system, free persons could no longer take advantage of their liminal position between the two races. Joseph Tregle, Jr. claims that as early as the 1870s, Louisiana society moved to consolidate the color line to white and black (172), and Dominguez

asserts that the binary color line was fully in place in Louisiana by about 1910 (34), making it the earliest American city to fully enforce a binary racial system (Fussell 850). Louisiana's binary system left the formerly free persons of color in a complex situation. No longer able to define themselves in contrast to enslaved blacks, free persons of color slid into the racial category of black. This complicated racial system is the foundation of Chopin's ability to anticipate the national shift to white ethnicity. "Désirée's Baby," in particular, illustrates Chopin's technique in bringing the discipline of folklore to bear on Louisiana's distinct racial history.

The anachronistic quality of the story is important since the timing of the events would have a fundamental impact on Désirée's future after being accused of having mixed-race ancestry. In fact, Amy Branam Armiento mentions that the story is more about interracial relationships in the 1890s rather than a historical look at a bygone era (57). In pre-Civil War times (the supposed timeframe of the story), Désirée would have been able to live at least peacefully, if not prestigiously, as a free woman of color. Even though Désirée would not be guaranteed inheritance or any kind of financial security after her parents' death (Armiento 54), her situation would not be completely hopeless. By the 1890s, though, Désirée's status as a free person of color would have changed drastically. Having been accused of descending from African American ancestry, she would have been firmly categorized as black, since the liminal free person of color status would have been eliminated. She would be subject to Louisiana's harsh anti-miscegenation laws passed after Reconstruction (Armiento 51-52).

That anachronism highlights the slipperiness of determining racial identity and further reveals Chopin's reinforcement of one of local color's central aims: to undertake "the cultural work of defining the boundaries between American self and American Other," as Susan Donaldson phrases it (50). Indeed, the story's recurring theme is the inability to read a person's

racial identity correctly, and those identities can only be defined when contrasted with other identities. Désirée discovers her child's racial heritage only when he is juxtaposed against another boy of mixed-race ancestry. As Désirée's baby, "half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy" (242), he is fanned by a "little quadroon [boy]—half naked too" (242). The text thus creates a dichotomy between the luxurious royalty of the Aubigny/Valmondé family and that of the slave child. The dichotomy collapses, though, when Désirée "looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. 'Ah!' It was a cry that she could not help" (242). In viewing both her child and the slave child together, Désirée notices a physical resemblance between the two and realizes that her child physically resembles the slave child. If the local color genre, as Donaldson points out, "helped tell white middle-class Americans who and what they were by presenting them with spectacles of what they were not" (50), then the slave child in "Désirée's Baby" acts in a similar way by revealing the mixed racial heritage of Armand and Désirée's progeny.

By echoing one of the main aims of local color writing in the structure of the narrative and by situating her story specifically within the Louisiana bayou, Chopin reflects the shifting perceptions of racial identity in the late nineteenth century. In the context of local color traditions that purport to draw a straightforward line between self and other, Chopin resists these easy classifications. The startling conclusion of the story, revealing that Armand, not Désirée, is the character descended from an African American mother, hinges on the characters' and readers' inability to read race onto a person's physical features. As Susan Castillo remarks, "Perhaps the story's most intriguing facet, however, is how readily most readers are duped into jumping to the conclusion that it is Désirée who is of African descent, rather than Armand, the 'whitened'

Creole landowner" (71). The implication is that Louisiana's plantation elites are not all lily white, thereby further deconstructing the false dichotomy of a binary color line. As pictured in "Désirée's Baby," then, Louisiana's merging of the color line literally squeezes the liminal identity from a free person of color. As the legal status of free person of color disappeared in the late nineteenth century, so too do Désirée and her baby disappear into the bayou, leaving readers to question where there is room in the social system for Désirée and her innocent child.

"At the 'Cadian Ball" and the Changing Definition of Whiteness

The conclusion of "Désirée's Baby" points to the need for a new paradigm of difference, which is a theme that extends throughout the stories collected in *Bayou Folk*. Chopin embeds clear connections in the story collection between the discipline of folklore, local color fiction, and the liminal categories of Creole and Acadian. While "Désirée's Baby" is centered on the position of the free person of color, the majority of Chopin's work focuses on Louisiana's Creole and Acadian populations. Creoles were often depicted as "proud, graceful, and aristocratic" in Chopin's fiction (Seyersted 75), while the Acadians are often depicted as a having a "lower class status" and living a "rural lifestyle" (Birnbaum 311). Chopin drew on the class and ethnic differences between these two groups to explore identities that fall between white and black.

By choosing to write about Louisiana's Creole and Acadian populations, Chopin situates her stories as part of a broader social and literary discourse involving the place of the two ethnic groups on the American color line. In Chopin's time, Creole was a contested category.[9] Creole

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[9] My discussion of Creole identity draws especially from the following texts: Andrew J. Jolivette's *Louisiana Creoles: Cultural Recovery and Mixed-Race Native American Identity*, Carl Brasseaux's, Keith P. Fontenot's, and Claude F. Oubre's *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country*, Virginia Dominguez's *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*, Shirley Elizabeth Thompson's *Exiles at Home*, Sybil Kein's *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, and Sister Frances Jerome Woods's *Marginality and Identity:*

identity originally developed as a direct response to the influx of Northern Anglos to Louisiana during the nineteenth century. Before the Anglo migration, the Creole designation could apply to a person of any race who was born on the land. In the late colonial period, as New Englanders arrived in Louisiana, they threatened to displace the Creoles as political and social leaders. "Origin in the soil," Tregle notes, "became the very essence of the concept *creole*, precisely because it gave the older residents the most profound warrant of the right not to be dispossessed in their own land" (138). They called themselves Creole precisely because they were *not* Anglo.

In this sense, Creole identity applies to people of all races in order to differentiate "old" Louisianans from "new" Anglo settlers. Although Creole identity, as Tregle explains, developed out of a sense of the "humiliating loss of Gallic identity to a devouring Anglo-Saxon homogenization," the Reconstruction period forced Creoles to revise that identity (173). At the same time as free persons of color were being subsumed into the black race, Creoles also faced a similar existential crisis. After Reconstruction, Creoles faced "the infinitely more horrible possibility of being consigned to debased status in the 'inferior' race, identified as half-brother to the black, a sort of mixed breed stripped of blood pride as well as of any claim to social or political preferment" (173). To maintain their privilege, the Creole name became synonymous with whiteness, and the formerly free persons of color, many of whom were Creoles in the original application of the term, were forced to identify as black.

Chopin's contemporaries like George Washington Cable, Grace King, and Lafcadio Hearn had already set precedent in publishing books, stories, and essays that engaged directly with this question of Louisiana Creole identity. Chopin's writing draws on the fraught relationships between these writers' outlooks and their definitions of Creole identity. Cable's

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A Colored Creole Family Through Ten Generations, and the essays collected in *Creole New Orleans*, edited by Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon.

writings were perhaps the most controversial to Creoles themselves, since his novels like *Old Creole Days* and *The Grandissimes* directly questioned the Creole claim to whiteness. Although Cable was spurned by the Louisiana Creole community, his fiction was so popular outside of Louisiana, according to Rosan Jordan and Frank De Caro, that "various sites depicted in [Cable's works] had become tourist attractions" (33). Grace King, on the other hand, insisted on the Creole claim to whiteness and their pure racial heritage. Lafcadio Hearn, an outsider to Louisiana, was more interested in providing an "objective" portrait of Creole culture and therefore refrained from passing any racial judgment on the Creoles. Chopin's writing relies on the local color depictions that these writers popularized. But her descriptions break the binary color line that other writers tended to reinforce. In this way, Chopin uses her fiction to gesture towards what Matthew Frye Jacobson calls "variegated whiteness" (*Whiteness* 41-42) by depicting how those identities that straddle the binary color line—like Creoles and Acadians—can be fully subsumed as part of the white race.

Chopin's fiction speaks directly to these contestations of white identity by *creating* a space within whiteness for Creole and Acadian characters. Significantly, the modern concepts of "ethnicity" and "culture" were not yet in linguistic circulation in the late nineteenth century when Chopin wrote her Louisiana fiction. The OED records the earliest usage of "ethnicity," in the sense of "having a common national or cultural origin," in 1920, nearly two decades after Chopin's death ("Ethnicity"). Although her contemporary readers would presumably have been familiar with the concept of an "ethnic group"—defined simply as "relating to a group that has common descent" ("Ethnic)—the idea of a common *cultural* origin was not yet in circulation. Considering that, as Evans explains, "the anthropological concept of culture became useful when race no longer described type but denoted biology" (6), Chopin's observations of life in

Louisiana is an early example of a movement away from understanding difference as rooted in national heritage. The characters in her fiction become discursive sites for Chopin to work through this shift from racial difference to cultural difference. Her use of "linguistic, religious (Catholicism) and other cultural markers" of Creole and Acadian identity (McCullough 196) do not simply reflect a pre-established paradigm of ethnicity. Rather, her depiction of these folkloric principles fractures the binary racial system for in-between identities and anticipates the emergence of the concept of ethnicity.

The discipline of folklore was uniquely poised to intervene in these ongoing debates about Creole and Acadian identities because of its focus on group-based practices rather than physical differences. Within the context of the 1890s, folklorists responded to Louisiana's unique racial milieu by focusing on the ways that each discrete group practiced their own traditions. Fortier's work in particular demonstrates the larger folkloric movement that sought to show "that race was separate from culture and that cultures should be studied as discrete wholes" (Elliott 13). His 1891 *PMLA* article "The Acadians of Louisiana and Their Dialect" is an example of the blending of linguistic and cultural study. Fortier's later book *Louisiana Studies: Literature, Customs and Dialects, History and Education* continues this kind of hybrid study, serving as another example of the kinds of work folklorists were doing at this time. As mediators between anthropology and literature, folklorists synthesized components of both to address the complexities of identity.

Chopin's short story "At the 'Cadian Ball," first published in 1892 and reappearing in 1894 in *Bayou Folk*, demonstrates Chopin's vision for how group-based practices like religious traditions should structure perceptions of liminal ethnic groups like Creoles and Acadians. While Fortier's scholarly essay serves as a written source for this story, Chopin weaves depictions of

informal religious practices into her fictional narrative, thereby refiguring folkloric scholarship as fictional local color. Although the physical features and class statuses of Creoles and Acadians differ, both identify themselves as part of the white race. By drawing on the contested history of the terms Creole and Acadian, Chopin imagines a theory of group-based difference that separates the liminal categories of Creole and Acadian from Anglo American yet still within the purview of whiteness.

To ensure their acceptance into whiteness, the characters in "At the 'Cadian Ball" ensure their racial similarity through their performances of cultural traditions. The traditions are clearly gendered: the men adhere to masculine codes of labor while the women ensure the group's religious continuity. The farmer Alcée hails from a wealthy Creole family, but his financial resources do not preclude his feeling anxious over maintaining his racial privilege. Alcée's whiteness is determined by his ability to work hard. As Chopin writes, "It was an every-day affair for him to come in from the field well-nigh exhausted, and wet to the waist" (220). If, as Shaker claims, whiteness is often dictated by "the personal dedication, ambition, and responsibility of the Protestant work ethic" (31), Alcée models this kind of Anglo behavior. On the other hand, Bobinôt, an Acadian farmer, is depicted as more racially ambiguous and closer to losing his privilege of whiteness. Although he is depicted working on a farm similar to Alcée, Chopin records a clear physical difference: Bobinôt is "big" and "brown" (219). Bobinôt's physical description blurs his racial background, causing confusion even for modern scholars. Although Chopin clearly identifies Bobinôt as a "young Acadian" (226), a descriptor that consistently marks Chopin's other Acadian characters as white, scholars like Geraldine Seay argue that "Bobinôt is defined as black" due to his darker skin color (*The Literature* 190).

This ambiguity over racial classification extends even to the women of the story, but primarily to Calixta, who is a love interest of both Bobinôt and Alcée. Calixta's ambiguous identity constitutes the crux of Bobinôt's ambivalence toward escorting her to an upcoming ball. He knows that Calixta—the "little Spanish vixen" of the community (219)—will also be attending, whether or not he asks her to go along. Bobinôt is ambivalent because of Calixta's heritage and its subsequent racial implications. Even though Calixta's "slender foot had never touched Cuban soil, . . . the Spanish was in her blood all the same" (219). Because the community views her as having a Cuban-Spanish heritage, they mark her as an outsider, as evidenced in their leniency toward her behavior: "The prairie people forgave her much that they would not have overlooked in their own daughters or sisters" (219). Even when there is "breath of scandal" about her in the community, the neighbors dismiss it because, as they mutter, "C'est Espagnol, ca" ("She's Spanish"). Her behavior is excusable, therefore, because of her racial difference.

Her racial classification vexes not only Bobinôt and the rest of the community, but also scholars of Chopin's writing in ways that echo Bobinôt's uncertain racial description. Elfenbein refers to her as black, and Seay argues that Calixta is of mixed-race ancestry because, for example, she is described with kinked hair (*The Literature* 192-93). Shaker, on the other hand, insists that Calixta is *not* black or mixed race but that she is in fact white (132, note 24). To further complicate matters, Chopin's later story "The Storm"—which revisits the characters of Calixta, Bobinôt, Alcée, and Clarisse—constantly describes Calixta's body with physical signifiers of whiteness.

If racial identity in this story were only dictated by appearance, one would expect both Bobinôt and Calixta to be categorized as black. But Chopin bridges the physical gaps between

the Creoles, Acadian, and Cuban by emphasizing their shared religious traditions. Clarisse is characterized by her adherence to Catholic vernacular traditions. For one, her very living situation is structured by her religious relationship to Alcée's family. Madame Laballière, Alcée's mother, is Clarisse's godmother. Moreover, Clarisse practices vernacular religious traditions in her daily life. When a cyclone hits the family's rice fields "without a moment's warning in which to light a holy candle or set of piece of blessed palm burning," Clarisse and Madame Laballière "wept openly and said her beads" (221). The kinds of vernacular religious practices that this passage alludes to show that Clarisse is being groomed to take the role of religious tradition-bearer in the Laballière family.

Calixta shares Clarisse's religious background; she attends Catholic Mass like the Acadians and Creoles. But she is simultaneously constructed as an outsider to this culture. The old Acadian men of the community say about Calixta, "Bon chien tient de race," which, as Seay suggests, appears to be a "colloquial pejorative expression" that translates roughly to "a disgrace to the race" (*The Literature* 194). While the men shrug their shoulder and attribute Calixta's transgressions to her blood, the women whisper to each other that if an Acadian "were to conduct herself in a like manner, she should immediately be taken out of the mule-cart and driven home" (224). The narrator sums up succinctly that "the women did not always approve of Calixta" (224). Despite these physical differences, Calixta is still integrated as part of the local community owing primarily to her religious traditions that align with Creoles and Acadians.

Because Calixta offers a parallax viewpoint in the story, her character foregrounds the ways that folklore anticipates the idea of white ethnicity. Because Calixta is both an insider (marked through her Catholicism) and an outsider (marked by her Spanish Cuban ancestry), she breaks down the pre-conceived racial barriers. Calixta's character constitutes what Marjorie

Garber calls a "category crisis," a term for "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (16). As a representation of Garber's "third term," Calixta casts doubt on "identities previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded, and 'known'" (13). Calixta's exoticism allows both Alcée and Bobinôt to define their own identities more concretely during their interactions with her. Like Chopin's folkloric Croque-Mitaine, Calixta's presence pushes other characters to regulate their behaviors. Her double status as both religious insider and ethnic outsider highlights the role of vernacular religion within the emerging concept of ethnicity.

Religious Continuity and Racial Fragmentation in The Santien Trilogy

If Calixta symbolizes a category crisis in "At the 'Cadian Ball" because she delineates the boundaries of racial Otherness, other women in *Bayou Folk* similarly act as foils to define the whiteness of Creoles and Acadians. In the three stories that appear at the beginning of the story collection—a series that has been termed the "Santien Trilogy"—the women characters further illustrate the relationship between women's religious traditions and the emerging concept of ethnicity. While each story within the trilogy ostensibly focuses on male characters, the stories present a portrait of a community held together by a common religious background. Those religious traditions are carried on by the women. Observance of religious traditions not only structures the Louisiana Creole and Acadian communities in these stories, but it also distinguishes cultural insiders from outsiders. Euphrasie in "A No-Account Creole," Suzanne in "In and Out of Natchitoches" and 'Tite Reine in "In Sabine" navigate the binary color line and articulate an early definition of ethnicity through their association with religious imagery. Their

adherence to Catholic traditions is both a marker of group-based difference and a binding force for group identity.

Although the three stories that open *Bayou Folk* are not explicitly linked by a narrative guide, they do focus on three of the Santien brothers that Chopin had introduced in her first novel *At Fault*. Rather than focusing on the connections between these three brothers, the trilogy highlights the fragmentation of the Creole family. The three brothers—Placide, Hector, and Grégoire—occupy three different Louisiana locations: the bayou of Natchitoches, the city of New Orleans, and the prairie of Western Louisiana. Juxtaposing the continuity of the familial relationships with the divergent geographic settings, the trilogy reflects Donaldson's assertion that a short story sequence like the Santien trilogy contains "threads of continuity linking separate stories and . . . discontinuities created by the breaks between stories" (48). While Donaldson suggests that this tension between continuity and fragmentation is a balance between "nostalgia for community" and "a resigned recognition of communal decline and fragmentation" (48), it can also be seen as a reflection of the shifting boundary between race and emergent ethnicity.

The Santien trilogy reflects the racial anxieties of Creoles and Acadians who had lost their privileged status during Reconstruction. Sandra Gunning remarks that Chopin "uses the fictional Santien family as a means of creating a sustained portrait of Creole aristocracy in crisis" (67). Part of their crisis is the collapsing of the color line which threatens to squeeze some Creoles out of the protections and privileges of whiteness. Although the Santiens were once aristocratic, the family name now represents, according to Nagel, "the impoverished up-country population that persists in speaking French and in clinging to a pride that is no longer supported

by reality" (122). Reading these three stories as "truly a story cycle" (120) highlights the dynamics of group-based difference in a changing racial system.

While the men in these stories are depicted as struggling with the fragmentation of their community and their subsequent loss of identity, the women signify social continuity through their adherence to religious traditions. In the first story, "A No-Account Creole," Euphrasie is the mediator between the Creole Placide Santien and the "Yankee" Wallace Offdean. Euphrasie symbolically provides the link between the Creole in crisis and the privilege associated with Anglo whiteness. The main narrative tension focuses on the fact that Placide and Euphrasie are at odds over how to deal with the Santiens' abandoned plantation. Placide shows no interest in keeping up the old homestead, opting instead to put all of his effort into beautifying a small house in the nearby village of Orville. When Offdean—a member of the finance company who now owns the Santien estate—arrives in Natchitoches to investigate the possibility of renovating it, Placide staunchly refuses to participate in the upkeep, exhibiting "an indifference and ignorance concerning the condition of affairs" (88). Placide's lack of interest in keeping up his family's homestead confounds Euphrasie, who thinks that Placide should be more invested in the rehabilitation of the plantation.

Euphrasie is mystified because she believes that Placide, as a landowning Creole, should want to keep the plantation as a fundamental part of his Creole identity. The plantation has been in the Santien family for at least three generations and carries with it the symbolic resonances of the Creole identity itself. Euphrasie, too, was born on the plantation to the former manager, Pierre Manton. But while Euphrasie transfers her own excitement at the prospect of repairing the plantation onto Placide, Placide himself constructs his identity as based on adherence to Creole cultural values as well as his difference from Anglos, rather than on nostalgia for the antebellum

days. Upon first meeting Offdean, Placide demonstrates his contempt for Anglo outsiders as well as his adherence to the Creole sense of decorum. When introduced to Offdean, Placide accepts him coldly, remarking that he "looks like a Yankee" (88). Although Euphrasie insists that "he's a Southerner, like you,—a New Orleans man" (88), Placide insists that Offdean doesn't belong in the Natchitoches community because Offdean is acting in the same role as Anglo interlopers who, in the late nineteenth century, were pulling political and social power away from Louisiana's Creoles. Nagel remarks that "Intruders" like Offdean "came from the North, in Placide's mind, and he despises them: they brought about the collapse of his family" (123). But this initial reaction of dislike is quickly replaced by Placide's "instinctive sense of the courtesy due to a stranger" (Chopin 88). Thus, despite the danger that Offdean represents, Placide's Creole sense of decorum reveals that the Creole value of hospitality trumps his racial anxieties. Placide's performance of the Creole code of conduct marks him as an insider to the Creole group, despite his inexplicable willingness to give up his land.

Although Placide wants to draw a distinction between himself and Offdean, Euphrasie wants to break down that barrier. In fact, she engages enthusiastically with Offdean to fix up the plantation house and land. As she attempts to be the mediator between Placide and Offdean, Euphrasie leverages her own upbringing. While she was raised on the plantation, she lost her mother when she was young and was sent to live with Madame Duplan, who was "the Lady Bountiful of the parish" (85). Under Duplan's care, Euphrasie attended the local Catholic school: "Euphrasie went to the convent soon, and was taught all gentle things, the pretty arts of manner and speech that the ladies of the 'Sacred Heart' can teach so well" (85). The narrative attributes her social class as a direct product of this parochial education. Because she attended a Catholic school, she increased her standing in the community. Despite her religious similarity, Euphrasie

feels anxiety about her own class position. Unlike Placide, she is not as secure in her performance of identity, since that identity was taught from a religious perspective, rather than as long-standing family tradition. She feels she has to support the Northern, Anglo investor to ensure her sense of privilege.

Whereas Euphrasie mediates Creole and Anglo values, Suzanne in the second story, "In and Out of Natchitoches," is more concerned with maintaining the color line. As a teacher at the local Acadian school, Suzanne's adherence to the binary color line is perhaps best exemplified in her interactions with Alphonse Laballière and her defense of the racial purity of her classroom. Laballière, a Creole from outside Natchitoches who had recently purchased local land, is the subject of gossip circulating in the community. The narrator notes that "People said he was entirely too much at home with the free mulattoes" (256). These rumors center on the fact that Laballière is living in the same house as the Giestens, a family of Creoles of color who work for Laballière. The Giestens are part of the "ethnic complexity of Cane River life" (Nagel 126). Although they share the Roman Catholic heritage of the other characters, they are of mixed-race ancestry and thus consigned the identity of African American in Louisiana's binary racial system. By associating Laballière with free Creoles of color, the narrator paints him as an outsider who is unable or unwilling to correctly interpret appropriate behavior in Natchitoches.

When Laballière brings Andre Giestin, the youngest of the Giesten children, to Suzanne's schoolhouse, Suzanne maintains the binary color line that marks herself and her Acadian pupils as white and the Creoles of color as black. She explains to Laballière: "Permit me to remine you that you have made a se'ious mistake. This is not a school conducted fo' the education of the colored population" (258). Although Laballière leaves the young Giestin boy at the schoolhouse, the child "took only the time to give a quick, wary glance round the room, and the next instant he

bounded through the open door" (258). Andre, though, is not blamed for this racial transgression. Instead, as Suzanne tells her class, Andre "has shown mo' taste and judgment than those above him, f'om whom we might espected good breeding, at least" (258). In Suzanne's eyes, "good breeding" equates to upholding the separation of races, with Creoles of color still being identified as black.

Suzanne's anxiety over allowing a Creole of color in her classroom illustrates a larger anxiety over the association of Acadians like Suzanne with those of African American descent. Since Acadians were already considered a lower social category than the more aristocratic Creoles, they were closer to losing their white status than aristocratic Creoles. McCullough notes that "Both in the Louisiana of Chopin's day and in her work, these long-complicated categories were deeply intertwined with categories of . . . class and were often contingent upon an urban/rural dichotomy that identified New Orleans' 'founding families' as Creole while locating Cajuns as specifically rural, sometimes accompanied by Creoles of Color" (197). As such, Suzanne's defense of the color line is indicative of her protection of her student's (as well as her own) social status. She seeks to ensure the whiteness of Acadians and Creoles by defining their whiteness in contrast to the status of Creole of color.

While Suzanne's religious traditions surface only briefly in the narrative, they serve to reinforce Suzanne's belief in upholding segregation since they appear at a moment in the narrative that highlights the fragmentation of Suzanne's community and her attempt to maintain the old order. Religious sacramentals surface at exactly the moment when Suzanne must recount her defense of the color line in the schoolhouse to her friends in New Orleans. After Suzanne has given up her teaching job, she moves to New Orleans to live with Maman Chavan and to visit with her cousin, Hector Santien. One particular Sunday morning, Suzanne and Maman Chavan

attend Mass and Hector comes to visit after they return from services. After Suzanne "hummed the Kyrie Eleison that she had heard so beautifully rendered an hour ago at the Cathedral" (262), Hector relates the latest gossip from Natchitoches, including a mention of Laballière. Upon hearing Laballière's name, Suzanne recounts her confrontation with him in the schoolhouse. Both Maman Chavan and Hector express their agreement with Suzanne's position. Maman Chavan remarks, "And to think an affront like that going unpunished" (262). Suzanne's mother, however, seems more amenable to Laballière than Suzanne. Suzanne's mother reminds her that "it is the duty of a Christian to forgive" (263). In this scene, Suzanne's mother is depicted as the most liberal of the group, and she specifically calls upon her Christian values to forgive Laballière his transgression. Because the narrative undergirds Suzanne's defense of the color line with her practice of religious traditions, Chopin foregrounds the relationship between group-based religious practices and the state of racial flux in Louisiana.

"In Sabine," the final story of the Santien trilogy, is geographically displaced from both Natchitoches and New Orleans, which are the areas that are typically associated with Louisiana's Creoles and Acadians. By displacing the characters from a recognizable community, the story explores the role of community in developing and maintaining a sense of identity. While the story tackles the "verboten" topic of "domestic abuse" (Petry 8), it also provides insight into the interactions between different ethnic groups, represented by each character. Grégoire Santien is the token Creole. 'Tite Reine is, as Nagel writes, an "Acadian from Cane River" (129), and Bud Aiken is "a disreputable so-called 'Texan,'" according to the narrative, "who a year ago had run away with and married . . . 'Tite Reine" (Chopin, *The Complete* 326). Finally, there is Uncle Mortimer, Aiken's African American servant. With these characters serving as representatives of their ethnic groups, the story, as Gunning claims, "functions as a commentary on ethnic division

among whites themselves, specifically Americans and Creoles in the context of an increased anxiety over racial purity after emancipation" (73). Further, within the context of the previous two stories, "In Sabine" illustrates the pivotal role of community traditions in maintaining identity.

The lack of community is what leads 'Tite Reine into the predicament she finds herself in. With no one to enforce community standards of decency onto Aiken, 'Tite Reine finds herself the victim of his abuse. 'Tite Reine confides in Grégoire that "He beats me; my back an' arms—you ought to see—it's all blue. He would 'a' choke' me to death one day w'en he was drunk, if Unc' Mort'mer had n' make 'im lef go—with his axe ov' his head" (329-30). With the lack of other whites around to defend 'Tite Reine's safety, the only African American character in the narrative is tasked with protecting the Acadian from the abuses of the Anglo Aiken.

'Tite Reine is abused both physically and psychologically by Aiken. Among the litany of abuses that she describes to Grégoire, she describes that Aiken uses her religious background to torment her. She explains, "Then sometime' he plague me mos' crazy; he tell me 't ent no preacher, it 's a Texas drummer w'at marry him an' me; an' w'en I don' know w'at way to turn no mo', he say no, it 's a Meth'di' archbishop, an' keep on laughin' 'bout me, an' I don' know w'at the truth" (330). By gaslighting 'Tite Reine with the truth of her marriage, he does not allow her the security of knowing that she is morally wed to him. The story thus draws a parallel between the physical abuse that Reine suffers and the psychological abuse, which is rooted in her religious upbringing.

The text then draws a parallel between this discrimination of her religious beliefs with her racial denigration. Because she lacks a community to reinforce her identity, 'Tite Reine is also threated with the loss of her white Acadian status. Aiken in fact justifies his abuse as a proper

delineation of races. Aiken views himself as white, but he slots Uncle Mortimer and 'Tite Reine into the same racial category; he does not distinguish between African American and Acadian. For one, Aiken forces 'Tite Reine to work in the field with Uncle Mortimer (or even instead of Uncle Mortimer) during the day. Grégoire's first interaction with anyone on Aiken's property is when Uncle Mortimer explains that Aiken "don't hires me to chop 'ood. Ef I don't chop dis heah, his wife got it to do" (323). Later, 'Tite Reine cooks breakfast for the men before "Bud sent her into the field to pick cotton with old Uncle Mortimer" (330). By engaging her in the labor typically associated with slavery, Aiken treats his wife the same as he treats his African American servant. Moreover, Aiken explains Reine's behavior in clearly racial terms: "That's the way with them Cajuns . . . ; ain't got sense enough to know a white man when they see one" (327). By suggesting that an Acadian cannot recognize a white person, represented by the Creole Grégoire Santien, Aiken clearly defines 'Tite Reine as not white.

Yet, according to Grégoire's memory, 'Tite Reine's status in Natchitoches was white, a detail that underlines the idea that identity is contingent upon local mores. Indeed, Grégoire fondly remembers 'Tite Reine back in Natchitoches with "her piquant face with its saucy black coquettish eyes; her little exacting, imperious ways that had obtained for her the nickname of 'Tite Reine, little queen" (326). Aside from her physical description, Grégoire more importantly remembers that he "had known her at the 'Cadian balls that he sometimes had the hardihood to attend" (326). Since in Chopin's fiction, only whites attend Acadian balls, 'Tite Reine is clearly viewed as white in her home of Natchitoches. Taken away from the context of Natchitoches society, though, she no longer has power over her racial designation. Thus, Aiken's assertion that 'Tite Reine is black reflects the pervasive fear among Louisiana's Creoles and Acadians that with a loss of economic stability and with Anglo invaders from the North, they'll also lose their

privileged white status. Aside from Aiken's actions evoking "the familiar nineteenth-century feminist alignment of helpless white femininity with disenfranchised blackness," as Gunning claims (73), the story also demonstrates the ways in which the color line is dependent upon the context of the community.

In the end, Grégoire's rescue of 'Tite Reine indicates not only his willingness to "protect traditional Cajun and Creole ethnic categories" (Gunning 74) but to ensure a space in the white race for Acadians like 'Tite Reine. Whereas Uncle Mortimer doesn't even get the privilege of having his race disputed, 'Tite Reine relies on that dispute for her physical and emotional safety. By delineating a societal line between Aiken and 'Tite Reine, Grégoire ensures a space within whiteness for identities such as hers and reinforces his own whiteness. As Gunning makes clear, "The urgency to rescue the Cajun 'Tite Reine is also the urgency to open up a space for the articulation of new white American ethnicities chafing under restrictive definitions of Anglo-Saxonism, without altering the racial designation of blackness as undesirable" (75). Chopin writes this space into being, articulating a nascent notion of ethnicity in which shared traditions, particularly vernacular religious traditions, are the foundation of shared identity.

Chopin's early fiction, especially the pieces collected in *Bayou Folk*, signal that Chopin knew Louisiana folklore and could adeptly integrate folkloric concepts into her fictional narratives. As McCullough writes, in depicting marginal social groups like Creoles and Acadians, Chopin "[reappropriates] Local Color for her own ends, contesting the image of the South . . . as exotic, quaint primitives" (200). McCullough claims that Chopin's works are "at the center" of the late nineteenth century "cultural discourse on national identity" and that she "consciously entered these debates" (186). By adhering to genre codes for local color fiction in this early work, Chopin discursively opens a space for whiteness to include liminal identities.

The Woman's Perspectives in "Athénaïse" and *The Awakening*

Whereas Chopin generally depicts the women in *Bayou Folk* as using their vernacular religious traditions to maintain social continuity, she shifts focus in her later stories to show women chafing under restrictive traditions. Her stories "Athénaïse" (1896) and *The Awakening* (1899) center on women whose actions fracture their communities by their conflicted stances toward religious group-based traditions. The stories reveal the reciprocal relationship between a community's observance of religious traditions and an individual's construction of personal identity. Violating this foundational relationship and its subsequent enforcement of the community's group-based traditions highlights the contingent nature of ethnic identity. "Athénaïse" and *The Awakening* appear to be very different stories at first, but Chopin's underlying interest in how vernacular religious traditions structure a community's view of itself unites the stories. "Athénaïse" focuses on a woman born in Louisiana, while *The Awakening*'s protagonist is of Anglo descent from Kentucky. Athénaïse eventually finds support and fulfillment in her role as wife and mother, while Edna from *The Awakening* decides she must escape her constricting social roles in the Creole community. Their contrasting views of similar situations highlight the role that literary folkloristics plays in Chopin's stories.

The short story "Athénaïse" focuses on a woman's search for her own authentic identity, and it centers on the expectations of a Catholic woman in Louisiana's bayou country. The main conflict of the story is the title character's struggle to accept her marriage to Cazeau, a man she married two months before the narrative opens. Athénaïse's contrary attitude toward the marriage reveals how her role as a woman in Louisiana society is circumscribed by the expectations for her gender. Her choices are to either marry or to enter the convent, both

expressions of female piety. Yet neither option fully satisfies Athénaïse. Although Cazeau is "portrayed as being the epitome of a loving husband," according to Julie Goodspeed (60), Athénaïse remains unsettled. As she explains to her brother Montéclin, "It's jus' being married that I detes' an' despise. I hate being Mrs. Cazeau, an' would want to be Athénaïse Miché again. I can't stan' to live with a man; to have him always there; his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet—washing them in my tub, befo' my very eyes" (Chopin, *The Complete* 431). By ruminating on the physical aspects that deter her from marriage, Athénaïse reveals that her quarrel isn't with Cazeau specifically but rather with the general expectation that she must be married.

While she feels conflicted about her marriage, she is also conflicted about the possibility of a religious vocation. In the past, Athénaïse reveals, she had entered a convent. She left shortly after, with the help of her brother Montéclin, "against her parents' wishes, because she had expressed a desire to remain there no longer" (437). After separating from Cazeau, though, Athénaïse ruminates that "Sister Marie Angelique knew w'at she was saying; she knew me better than myse'f w'en she said God had sent me a vocation an' I was turning deaf ears" (431). Her renewed longing for a religious life can be considered to be, as Goodspeed suggests, "a means of solidifying her Catholic identity" (57). But more than simply reifying her Catholicism, the prospect of a religious vocation indicates her desire to still adhere to the expectations set by her group identity.

Only when Athénaïse renounces her vocations as both a wife and a nun does she begin to construct her own identity. Athénaïse sojourns to New Orleans during her separation from Cazeau. This escape, Goodspeed argues, "completely removes her from Cazeau and her enforced identity as Mrs. Cazeau" (58). Likewise, her time in New Orleans frees her from the expectations

accorded to wives of Creole landowners. In short, her choice to leave her family frees her from the expectation of upholding the religious traditions associated with her ethnic group.

Her choice of residence—and her subsequent choice of mentor while in the city—focuses the narrative on the racial divide and the subtle ways to manipulate a restrictive identity. Athénaïse lives "in the house of Sylvie," the narrator explains, "on Dauphine Street, in New Orleans" (440). Sylvie is "a portly quadroon of fifty or there-about, clad in an ample *volante* of the old-fashioned purple calico so much affected by her class. She had broad, coarse features, with a nose that's turned up, exposing the wide nostrils, and that seemed to emphasize the loftiness and command of her bearing" (440). Chopin dwells on Sylvie's physical characteristics to reinforce that she is, as Thomas notes, "an unmarried, African-American businesswoman," who, significantly, "enjoys emotional, economic, and (presumably) sexual emancipation in New Orleans" ("The House" 208). Chopin uses the ambiguous figure of Sylvie to critique the social expectations set upon Athénaïse. Sylvie calculates how to leverage her own restrictive racial identity for better economic power. Chopin notes that Sylvie carried "a dignity that in the presence of white people assumed a character of respectfulness, but never of obsequiousness. Sylvie believed firmly in maintaining the color line, and would not suffer a white person, even a child, to call her 'Madame Sylvie,'—a title which she exacted religiously, however, from those of her own race" (440-41). Her *choice* of maintaining the color line is not only a savvy business decision, but also, paradoxically, a signifier of her racial difference. Sylvie chooses to highlight her Othered identity, a decision that positions her as "a more reliable guide and surrogate mother than either Madame Miché . . . or Sister Marie Angelique" (Thomas, "The House" 215).

Chopin contrasts the uncertainty Athénaïse feels about the benefits of her ethnic identity to Sylvie's embrace of her racialized Otherness in order to critique the group-based traditions

that restrict Athénaïse. As opposed to Sylvie's clear racial identity, Chopin constructs Athénaïse's background as muddled. Chopin never explicitly states whether Athénaïse is Acadian or Creole, and Athénaïse is another character whose ethnic background leads to scholarly disagreement. While Julie Goodspeed confidently assigns Athénaïse a Creole identity (57), Thomas declares that Athénaïse "grew up amidst Cajun laughter and dancing," presumably marking her as Acadian ("The House" 211). But by lodging with a mentor who teaches her not only social decorum but also how to create her own persona and identity, Athénaïse becomes comfortable as a woman in either ethnic group. Chopin implicitly suggests at the end of the story when Athénaïse returns to Cazeau after discovering that she is pregnant with his child that it is Athénaïse's own choice to uphold her group-based traditions of motherhood. Throughout the story, Athénaïse's liminal ethnic identity, undergirded by her religious traditions, is always in view.

The character of Athénaïse serves as a "herald" for Edna of *The Awakening* because, in Thomas Morgan's words, the story "engages the same themes [as *The Awakening*], albeit in the form of a regional short story framed by local color characters as opposed to that of a realist novel" (163). The fact that *The Awakening* is recognized as a realist novel, rather than as a local color sketch, conditions readers—both Chopin's contemporaries as well as modern critics—to appreciate Edna's provocative sexual liberation rather than Chopin's deployment of the same kinds of folkloric motifs that characterize her short fiction. Although "Athénaïse" contains "both local color characters/subject matter and an examination of a women's [sic] right to choose," as Morgan explains, "its packaging as a regional short story influences its reception—both then and now—more than the content it contains" (163). The same can be said for *The Awakening*. It's packaging as a novel that explores the interiority of the main character and concludes with a

tragic, ambiguous ending slots it into the genre of realism, despite the centrality of group-based difference to the narrative. Chopin's leap from "quaint" local color fiction to the more prestigious genre of realism thus renders her novel's continued engagement with themes of group-based difference nearly invisible. Yet these themes structure not only Edna's experiences within the New Orleans Creole society but also her eventual awakening.

To be sure, *The Awakening* breaks with many of Chopin's previous works in some important ways. Rather than obscuring her engagement with folklore, these disruptions point to the centrality of folkloric themes in Edna's journey of self-exploration. For one, *The Awakening* focuses on an outsider's view of Creole New Orleans. Whereas many of Chopin's earlier stories focus on the viewpoints of Creole or Acadian insiders—usually men—in their home environment of Louisiana, *The Awakening* centers the perspective of an Anglo woman. Because Chopin deploys an Anglo outsider's view of Creole society, *The Awakening* complements the viewpoint of her earlier fiction in which Anglo outsiders were anathema to the cohesion of the local Creole community. In *The Awakening*, she is readily accepted by the Creole community.

Through her depiction of Edna's perspective of the New Orleans' Creole community, Chopin emphasizes the centrality of group-based traditions to the structure of the *The Awakening*'s narrative tension. Unlike Athénaïse, Edna lacks the lived experience of vernacular Catholicism that structures the Louisiana Creole and Acadian communities. Without the sense of community offered by the practice of vernacular Catholicism, Edna is unmoored from the values of her adopted community. These values appear most readily in the archetype of the Creole mother-woman, who is defined by, as Mary Bendel-Simso explains it, her "unquestionable fidelity and lofty chastity" as well as her unwavering devotion to her family (38). For Edna, though, motherhood is "merely a role" (38). While Bendel-Simso finds that Edna's view of

motherhood is “the source of her conflict” in the novel (38), her incompatibility with the Creole community extends beyond just her adherence to the code of Creole womanhood to her inability to participate in the full range of their folkloric practices.

Edna’s position as outsider is rooted in her geographic and religious Otherness in New Orleans Creole society. For one, her origin in the Kentucky bluegrass marks Edna as a liminal character. With the novel set only a generation after the Civil War,[10] Chopin’s contemporary readers would mostly likely have recognized the significance of Kentucky as a border state during the Civil War. During the war, Kentucky’s allegiance wavered between the Union and Confederate causes. Though the state remained neutral at the beginning of the war, by the early 1860s, two governments formed within the state: one that backed the Union and another that supported the Confederacy. (The Confederate government existed only briefly on paper, and it disbanded in 1863.) Chopin is clear in the text, though, that Edna’s father was well respected in the Confederate army. The fact that Edna traces her roots to a Confederate-supporting family would have signified a dual allegiance to many of Chopin’s contemporary readers.

But it is not Edna’s geographic origin that primarily marks her difference in the novel. Rather, her religious difference is what renders her unable to conform to the expectations of behavior in New Orleans. Connie Douglas links Edna’s confusion about her expected behavior within the Creole community to her religious upbringing: “She has been raised partly as Presbyterian but trained at a Catholic school; the religious codes, at this impressionable time for Edna, presented confusion about female sexuality” (103). When Léonce proposes marriage to Edna, her father demonstrates “violent opposition” to the marriage not because Léonce is Creole but because Edna’s marriage is “with a Catholic” (Chopin, *The Complete* 898). Because she is

[10] Barbara Ewell and Pamela Glenn Menke point out *The Awakening* is set in 1892 (pgs. 6-7).

caught between her White Anglo-Saxon Protestant upbringing and her new Catholic Creole environment, Edna is constructed as an outsider whose inability to read the Creole traditions has more to do with her religious otherness than with her Anglo upbringing.

By elucidating the conflict between Edna's childhood Kentucky home and her adult Louisiana home, Chopin roots difference in the novel in group-based traditions. Edna is out of place in this Creole New Orleans environment because, as Thomas observes, she "habitually [misreads] conduct, character, or race in context, as opposed to canny insiders who register an intuitive regional authority" ("The White" 97). The relationship that Edna nurtures with Robert Lebrun demonstrates the anxiety of misreading social context. Adele Ratignolle, a character who acts as the "hegemonic police" of Creole culture (Bendel-Simso 39), notices Robert engaging in playful advances toward Edna. While Adele, Robert, and Léonce all understand these advances to be "parts of Creole society that don't conflict with the unquestionable fidelity and lofty chastity of the Creole mother-woman" (Bendel-Simso 39), Adele fears that Edna will misunderstand Robert's behavior. Adele asks Robert to "let Mrs. Pontellier alone" (Chopin, *The Complete* 900). She explains that Edna "is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (900). Adele acknowledges that Edna does not follow the accepted codes of behavior for Creole men and women. This foundational misreading of Creole tradition dooms Edna to always being the outsider. Edna does not grasp the Creole code of conduct, nor does she adhere to the related practice of the Catholic religion.

Despite Edna's separation from the group-based traditions of her adoptive Creole community, the Creoles in the novel try to emphasize their similarity to the Anglo Edna by inviting her into their social rituals, despite her inability to correctly interpret them. In particular, the scenes that are set away from New Orleans, on Grand Isle and the *Chênière Caminada*,

indicate Edna's growing awareness of her self by illustrating what she is *not*. The setting of Grand Isle, in particular, signifies a safe space of contact for people from various backgrounds. As Bettina Matthias remarks, resorts like Grand Isle offer characters "a chance for liberation from socially and culturally prescribed restrictions" (7). In this way, Chopin makes use of the hotel setting to explore the interactions of different identities. Drawing on the hotel trope, Chopin contrasts Edna with a number of other personalities, and Edna defines her self in contrast to these others. She is not infatuated with her husband, like the two young lovers she notices in Grand Isle, nor does she command an understanding of sailing like Monsieur Farival.

If the narrative of Edna's awakening hinges on the practice of vernacular religion, then the character of the lady in black particularly resonates with Edna's experiences. In this racially diverse but religiously monolithic environment, the "lady in black" demonstrates that Edna lacks the Catholic devotions that characterize Creole traditions. Though she remains nameless throughout the narrative, the lady in black is characterized by her intense religious devotion. Each time she appears, she is associated with some sort of religious sacramental: a rosary when she is "telling her beads" (882) or a prayer book when she is "reading her morning devotions" (895). The lady in black underscores that, in the context of Grand Isle, religious similarity trumps social class. As Douglas remarks, "Whereas in Kentucky, Edna's Presbyterian heritage would have included mostly members of her social class, at Grand Isle, all the inhabitants, across all class lines, are Catholic" (107). While Adele is the exemplar of the Creole mother-woman, the lady in black is the model for Catholic piety.

The lady in black conspicuously accompanies Edna and Robert on a Sunday-morning sojourn to the neighboring island *Chênière Caminada*, a narrative sequence that layers the theme of ethnic Otherness with religious difference. The scenes in *Chênière Caminada* demonstrate the

link between Edna's lack of religious identity and Chopin's imagining of emergent ethnicity. As Edna and Robert ride in the boat over to the *Chênière Caminada*, Chopin introduces the character of Mariequita, who acts as a foil for Edna. Mariequita, like Calixta in "At the 'Cadian Ball," is of Cuban origin,[11] representing an identity that falls between white and black. And like Calixta, Mariequita's "dark presence at crucial junctures in the story," as Elfenbein observes, "underscores her unacknowledged importance in Edna's world" (149). Mariequita represents a combination of qualities that Edna could never possess in this society. Although she is dark skinned, which should be a mark of Otherness, she is instead an insider to the group-based traditions of the Creoles. As the boat ferries them to the *Chênière Caminada*, Robert and Mariequita engage in conversation that excludes Edna. The conversation is spoken in Spanish, though rendered by Chopin in English. While this scene illustrates the Creole ability to code switch, it also demonstrates the world that Edna could never penetrate. The scene depicts for readers the world Edna could never be part of, while readers are invited in. Readers become knowing insiders to the Creole community who can interpret signs that Edna cannot.

Significantly, Robert and Mariequita's conversation is broken by a paragraph of description that shifts focus back to Edna. Chopin writes that "Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening—had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails" (915). It's no coincidence that as Edna imagines a sense of freedom, Chopin contrasts two characters who are freer to travel the globe; Robert will soon depart for Mexico and Mariequita is expatriated in the U.S. from Cuba. Amy Doherty Mohr observes that Mariequita is "a triangulating presence to the white Protestant and French Creole

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[11] Although Chopin identifies Mariequita as "Spanish," she most likely would have been read as Cuban (Menke 76).

which Edna and Robert respectively represent, someone who plays the role of the servant but is well aware of her mobility and level of access in the social dynamic" (9). While Robert and Mariequita are transnational subjects, Edna only imagines herself to be unfettered. As Mohr sums up, "Mariequita suggests the alternative way of life Edna seeks but fails to find" (9).

When the boat eventually arrives on the island of *Chênière Caminada*, Edna is shown to be an outsider to the local traditions, both in terms of ethnic group as well as in religious observances. Robert and Edna first attend Catholic Mass at the "the quaint little Gothic church of Our Lady of Lourdes" (916). During the Mass, Edna feels faint because of the "stifling atmosphere of the church" (916). Instead of participating in this religious ritual, she and Robert retire to the home of Madame Antoine, who allows Edna to rest in a side bedroom. Chopin juxtaposes Madame Antoine's exoticism with Edna's whiteness. Madame Antoine is an Acadian who "could speak no English" while Edna, after undressing, reclines "in the very center of a high, white bed" (917). As Michele Birnbaum insists, "Edna's dozing in Mme. Antoine's house on *Chênière Caminada* reflects, paradoxically, her desire to be one of the 'folk' and yet to remain stretched out 'in the very center of the high, white bed'" (311). In other words, Edna wants to retain her position of privileged whiteness while also passing as an insider.

Notably, Madame Antoine is one of the characters who fall between the binary color line, and as such, she is a character that "resist[s] easy racial identification," and one who "disturb[s] the text and Edna's position in it" (Mohr 7). Madame Antoine is "intrinsic to the regional identity of New Orleans, but potentially upsetting to the racial hierarchy of the nation, and by extension, the most conservative views within it, represented by Edna and her Confederate heritage" (7). Unlike other characters like Robert, who later travels to Mexico, Madame Antoine represents a transnationalism that is rooted in group-based difference. Not only does Madame

Antoine speak no English, she also adheres to religious devotions. While Edna sleeps, she had "gone to Vespers, and to visit some friends" (Chopin, *The Complete* 919). More symbolically, though, Madame Antoine is a raconteur who awakens Edna's sense of adventure through her retelling of local tales. As Chopin writes, "And what stories she told them! But twice in her life had she left the *Chênière Caminada*, and then for the briefest span. All her years she had squatted and waddled there upon the island, gathering legends of the Baratraians and the sea" (920). As a repository of local traditions, Madame Antoine embodies the canny insider knowledge that Edna can only achieve in her imaginings. In this way, Madame Antoine represents the convergence of folklore and ethnic Otherness that Edna could never successfully achieve.

The Awakening demonstrates Chopin's articulation of group-based difference in the bayou country of Louisiana and the centrality of folklore to the coherence of the group. Chopin shows that there are multiple ways for Edna to participate fully in the Creole and Acadian communities, but she cannot successfully read the folkloric signs and symbols of her adoptive community. Stern writes that "Symbols of ethnicity are not merely static products of ethnic culture but are solutions to problematic situations that characterize, project, and parody everyday life" (xiii). These symbols "are not fixed points of tradition but rather frames of reference and meaning" for individuals to respond to outside pressures (xiii). In this sense, Edna does not adhere to the dynamics of symbolic ethnicity to overcome her outsiderness. She refuses to act as the Creole mother-woman, and she cannot enact the importance of religious traditions. Unlike her earlier stories in which her Creole and Acadian characters struggle for acceptance into the white race, *The Awakening* implicitly accepts the whiteness of Creole characters from the

beginning. Rather than physical differences, the Creoles define their difference from Edna through their shared social behaviors and sense of community values.

Chopin's stories that focus on the relationship between Creole, Acadian, and Anglo characters reveal the discursive openings for a new articulation of identity, one that is based not solely on physical difference but on group-based traditions. If, as Mohr writes, New Orleans "occupies a 'third space' beyond the nation, a combination of the transnational and the local, with the national laws of segregation existing uneasily alongside the fluid ethnic and cultural identity of Creoles of Color" (13), Chopin's stories feature women characters who fill a similar "third space," those who cannot be easily classified. In an era when Northern Anglos were feeling more alienated in growing industrial centers, Chopin's stories worked to ameliorate the concerns about all the new "races" that were coming to America's shores. Chopin's stories instead envision early formulations of cultural difference and ethnicity that would eventually coalesce as important theories in the twentieth century. Approaching Chopin's fiction from a folkloric perspective reveals the ways in which the novel allows for the expansion of whiteness to include these Louisiana characters who, as one contemporary reviewer phrased it, are an "exotic, not-quite-American species" (qtd in Birnbaum 302). Affirming the importance of the role of group-based practices throughout Chopin's fiction reveals the subsequent centrality of white ethnicity to the narratives. In this way, Chopin anticipates the later movement in the early twentieth century that would shift to a more Modernist conception of identity, one that included a move toward variegated whiteness.

Chapter 2

"My religion is not for sale": Ethnic Counterfeiting in Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers*

Anzia Yezierska's 1932 novel *All I Could Never Be* opens at a community lecture featuring the fictional sociologist Henry Scott. Held in a settlement house auditorium, the lecture focuses on the discriminatory acts perpetuated against the Jewish immigrant population. Scott begins by invoking a familiar mantra that signals his Jewish audience's separation from other groups: "Stick to your Hester Street. Chelsea section belongs to the Irish" (29). Explaining that prejudice toward the stranger reaches all the way back to ancient Greece, where the "code of morality was to be kind and hospitable and generous to those they knew and ruthless to everyone else" (29), Scott posits that the technological innovations of the Modernist era are rendering group-based discrimination obsolete:

> The globe grows smaller and smaller. The radio, the airship, the wireless, mass production necessitating foreign markets, are breaking down the barrier between nations and races, making the whole universe one community. People today know more of what is happening in China than they used to know of what was happening in the next village. We have been forced out of our national boundaries into racial units. And now we are slowly beginning to struggle out of our racial antipathies to realize that there's no more reason to hate another race than there was for savage man to hate members of another tribe. (30-31)

His optimistic vision of improved race relations is followed by an even more optimistic call to action: "Every time you accept with dignity and philosophy some discrimination that is part of the old black past lingering into the present, you are chipping off another flake from the great

rock of misunderstanding that bars the way for all. . . . For there is a growing realization of the solidarity of the human race—that what hurts and diminishes one hurts and diminishes all in the end" (32). His audience leaves uplifted, feeling that they were "part of an historic process of emancipation of mankind from prejudice and ignorance" (33).

This opening vignette of Yezierska's penultimate novel is a touchstone for themes that she explores throughout her fiction. Although Scott characterizes the Jewish immigrant experience as tinged with racial discrimination, an "old black past" lingering into the present, his speech stages a simplistic view of the future in which the oppressed should simply ignore prejudicial acts. Simply ignoring them, Scott suggests, will make them less potent. Rather than confirming this premise, though, Yezierska's writings illustrate how Modernist innovations actually *enable* and *support* the intersecting religious and economic discrimination of American Jews. Her writings explore the multi-layered negotiations among Anglo and immigrant groups that are dependent upon technological, economic, and literary innovations of the Modernist era.

Like Kate Chopin, Yezierska employs a folkloric approach in depicting the informal community relationships that work against institutionalized discrimination. But in contrast to Chopin, who never formally studied folklore or ethnography, Yezierska undertook formal ethnographic study with John Dewey at Columbia University. She attended one of Dewey's seminars in 1917 (Dearborn 122), and she subsequently participated in an ethnographic study—led by Dewey—of Philadelphia's Polish immigrant community. Yezierska, who immigrated as a teenager to America in 1893 from Ploch (a part of Polish Russia), was invited by Dewey "both to translate and . . . to study 'conditions affecting family life and women'" (Dearborn 123).

In her fiction, Yezierska refashions the ethnographic practices that she encountered during her fieldwork, thereby adding a new dimension of experimentation to the literary

Modernist movement. The American Modernist era, according to Werner Sollors, was constituted by a web of connected cultural movements: "The ascent of aesthetic modernism, the expansion and dominance of commercialism and mass culture, the growing international importance of the United States in a very violent period of world history, and the changing ethnic and developing multicultural definition of 'America' mark a dramatic transformation, and American literature participated in these developments" (*Ethnic* 15). Based off this definition of Modernism, scholars have pivoted from viewing Yezierska's texts as examples of historical realism or ethnic autobiography to explicating her engagement with ethnic Modernism, vernacular Modernist language, and complex representations of Modern identity. But pigeonholing Yezierska's works into merely one or two of these perspectives, as many scholars tend to do, misses how her use of folkloric methods bridges the divergent focuses of literary Modernism. Placing Yezierska's fiction into Sollors' cultural paradigm—which includes not only the Modernist use of language and description but also an engagement with questions of race, economics, and folklore—exemplifies the ways that her stories bridge the divergent arms of Modernist experimentation.

In her short story collection *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and her novel *Bread Givers* (1925), Yezierska articulates the connections between Jewish religious traditions, perceptions of race and ethnicity, and American economics. Her works engage directly with contemporary debates about the "Jewish Question," which Ron Ebest defines as an "ugly, frequently nativist, many voiced" debate of the value of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to America (106). Simultaneous to these debates, there were also discussions about the expanding American marketplace and the rapid growth of the American economy. Yezierska's fiction bridges the gaps between immigration, economics, religious traditions, and literary depictions. Specifically, her fiction

maps the correlation between the stereotype of the "Jewish look" and the acceptance of Jews into white American culture by depicting characters who attempt to cover over, or counterfeit, their Jewishness by dressing and acting like wealthier white Americans. Through their use of some of the technological innovations of the Modernist era, these characters contradict the premise that Yezierska's fictional Henry Scott parrots: that Modernism will banish racism.

Rather, Yezierska's stories show how her characters who attempt to "pass" as white are filled with the anxieties of counterfeiting. Yezierska's brand of cultural counterfeiting is a cognate of monetary counterfeiting. In Yezierska's day, paper money had a direct and tangible relationship to monetary value. Before the gold standard was abolished in 1976, a bank note or piece of paper money signified a certain amount of precious metal that had "intrinsic" worth. Because, as Stephen Mihm writes, "the value of paper money ultimately depended on the confidence that participants in the market economy accorded it" (29), there was a direct correlation between the tangible signifier of the monetary note and the abstract signified quality of value. But a counterfeit monetary note disrupts the relationship between signifier and signified. The counterfeit note does not correlate to any amount of external precious metal. Rather, counterfeit money only works because the person receiving it either has been duped or has confidence that he or she will be able to spend it again. Since "confidence was the engine of economic growth," as Mihm argues (10), counterfeit money counter-intuitively led to a growth of confidence in the American economy.

In a similar way, Yezierska's Jewish immigrants alter their appearance to look more American and thus co-opt the confidence placed in Americans who look and act white. This cultural counterfeiting takes a number of forms: buying American clothing, attaining an education, renouncing their traditional tenets of the Jewish religion, or simply looking "clean."

All of these actions are an attempt to increase an immigrant's signified value by changing their outer appearances. Not coincidentally, her characters experience crises of identity at sites of economic exchange. When an immigrant's economic power is challenged by an inability to purchase items, to attain a meaningful job, or to pay their rent, they view their value to American society—as well as their own self-worth—as diminished.

Yezierska's use of cultural counterfeiting mirrors passing narratives in an effort to focus on the racialized Jewish experience in America. The difference between the two, in Yezierska's view, is that Jews have been and can still be accepted as part of white society. Noting that both African Americans and Jews are "perpetual outsiders in a land which professes equality for all," Melanie Levinson contends that both seek ways to penetrate "the white, middle- to upper-middle class Christian sphere" (5). But the passing archetype is not a perfect fit to narratives of Eastern European Jews. Some Eastern European Jews, both real and imagined, had already become valuable members of American society with their Jewish identity in tact. Rather than "passing," the term "counterfeiting" seems to better describe Yezierska's strategy. Her works focus overwhelmingly on the economic anxiety of Jewish characters, and these stories examine ways in which Jewish immigrants appropriate white American commodities and actions to alleviate their racialized anxiety. Yezierska depicts these immigrant characters as living in a country where their value as individuals is based not only on their bodily appearance but also on their adherence to group-based traditions, especially religion. Her characters thus negotiate the Jewish immigrant entry into whiteness through engagement in the American marketplace and their practice of Jewish religious traditions.

Progressive-era Economics and the Russian Jewish Immigrant

Publishing mostly during the 1920s, Yezierska produced texts that engaged with the principles of ethnographic study while also critiquing the economic ideology of the concluding years of the American Progressive movement. Drawing off the contemporaneous debates of Jewish identity, social value, and economics, Yezierska's fiction disrupts the semiotic relationship between appearance and value that is at the heart of the racist perception of Jews. In general, the Progressives sought to exert control over the ever-expanding American nation. As Maureen Flanagan writes in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*, Progressivism "sought to reorder the nation's institutions to produce more order, efficiency, stability, and a sense of social responsibility." At the turn of the century, these reforms were often focused on improving the conditions of individuals, with the theory that "structural inequality could be ameliorated through voluntary action and enlightened governmental social policy" (Stromquist 4). By the end of WWI, though, the Progressive movement moved away from alleviating social inequality and instead focused on preserving more conservative American social values. Responding to the surge of Eastern and Southern European immigrants who entered America between 1880 and 1920, the Progressives of the 1920s believed that, as Flanagan observes, "only the right populace could guarantee a good democracy," a theory that ultimately led to restrictive policies of eugenics and immigrant exclusion. These newcomers, according to Matthew Frye Jacobson, "aroused doubts" about their fitness for American citizenship (*Whiteness* 14), a fear which further fed the Progressives' anxiety and morphed into physical emblems of their perceived inferiority.

The Jewish immigrants of the early twentieth century came mostly from the Polish-Russian region of Eastern Europe, and they were particularly associated with dirt, an association that carried with it certain racial connotations. Periodical depictions as well as scientific

descriptions of the Progressive era represent recent Jewish immigrants as black because of their physical characteristics. Ebest claims that periodical publications during the early twentieth century "asserted that the Eastern Jews were 'a type of Jew very different' from the Spanish and Germans who had constituted previous Jewish immigration waves" (109). These immigrants were viewed as "degraded culturally, racially, and intellectually by squalid living conditions of Russian peasant life and by intermingling with Slavic types" and "had developed 'a deep lying racial trait' which promoted clannishness and prevented them from evincing patriotic feelings toward any nation in which they lived" (109). Because Eastern European immigrant Jews lived in the perceived filth of the Lower East Side ghetto, that dirt metaphorically became emblematic of Jews' bodies themselves, even in scholarship. Sander Gilman claims that "the general consensus of the ethnological literature of the late nineteenth century was that the Jews were 'black' or, at least, 'swarthy'" (171). In their attempts to integrate into white society, Jews were perceived as having "crossed racial boundaries" (174). In this formulation, the Jewish appearance was read by Anglo and naturalized Americans as being unfit for American citizenship.

This semiotic relationship between outward physical features and perceived social value is a tangible example of late Progressive-era ideology that was cloaked in the mantle of respectable science. Concrete signifiers like hair color, skin type, and facial features correlate to the perceived value of the individual because those features mark them as a part of a broader Jewish group. Jacobson explains that Jewishness in the early twentieth century "represented a complex process of social value *become* perception: social and political meanings attached to Jewishness generate a kind of physiognomical surveillance that renders Jewishness itself discernible as a particular pattern of physical traits" (*Whiteness* 174). These visible attributes,

Jacobson continues, "may then be interpreted as outer signs of an essential, immutable, inner moral-intellectual character; and that character, in its turn—attested to by 'physical difference'—is summoned up to explain the social value attached to Jewishness in the first place" (174). The cycle is as circuitous as it is "ineluctable" (174). The signifier of the Jewish physical appearance, in other words, communicates social and civic unfitness because those qualities are signified by a Jewish appearance.

The anxiety expressed over Jewish immigrants' fitness for American democracy also affected anxiety about the American economy. As Progressive-era reformers were animated by a desire to exert more centralized control over the nation, that desire extended into the economic realm. Thomas C. Leonard remarks that Progressive economists believed "that laissez-faire was bankrupt" (217). If more control was needed to ensure the enduring prosperity of the American state, economists tried to exert that control over the kinds of laborers in the market. In order to achieve these goals, a number of prevalent Progressive economists advocated for eugenics. Since Progressive economists were invested in determining who were the worthiest laborers to be employed, they undertook "a crude eugenic sorting of groups into deserving and undeserving classes" (207). This sorting "crucially informed the labor and immigration reform that is the hallmark of the Progressive Era" (207). Economists feared that Anglo-Saxon laborers would be "overwhelmed by racially inferior 'defectives, delinquents, and dependents'" (209). As a result, Progressive-era economists "were among the first to provide scientific respectability for immigration restriction on racial grounds" (209). Within this economic matrix, Eastern European Jews symbolized a threat to Anglo-Saxon hegemony and thus became targets of those who advocated for economic eugenics.

Yezierska drew off her experiences as an ethnographer to counter the cold, scientific approach of many Progressive-era scientists and economists. Yezierska reformulated her prior experiences with ethnographic study into a literary form that provides a personal, subjective portrait of Jewish immigrant life. Unlike Dewey and his proteges whose practices centered on the "empirical study of individuals," as Lori Jirousek explains, Yezierska "calculated that creating a more personal investment in the studied community, privileging informant voices and perspectives, and making the ethnographic process transparent would result in more accurate representation" ("Ethnics" 20, 21). Yezierska's early fiction, such as *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers*, demonstrates her own belief that ethnographic study should detail the "religious, familial, and economic structures of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant" (29), thus emphasizing the informal, folkloric practices that constitute group-based identity over the more scientific approach of anthropological ethnography.

Yezierska's view that depicting informal, personal relationships creates a more authentic portrait of immigrant life than ethnographic reports is illustrated in her first published short story, "The Free Vacation House" (1915), which appears in her short story collection *Hungry Hearts*. The story's opening line, for example, frames the narrative as an intimate narrative of lived experience shared by the narrator. The story begins, "How came it that I went to the free vacation house was like this:" (62). Yezierska begins this story as a narrative of personal experience, inviting readers to identify with the narrator on an intimate, personal level. This opening, as Brooks Hefner notes, "commands the reader's attention in a line that implies a particular intimacy," and it is "a radical move in a genre of literature where conventions generally demanded an aesthetic distance between the reader and the working-class characters" (117). The intimacy inherent in this act of storytelling is reflected particularly in the

representation of immigrant speech throughout the story. The narrator integrates Yiddish words and phrases ("Gott im Himmel!") into a linguistic construction that mimics immigrant speech ("When she is gone I think to myself, I'd better knock out from my head this idea about the country" [64]). This kind of linguistic rendering is done, according to Delia Caparoso Konzett, to "foreground the active appropriation of American culture by immigrants before it fell under the control of national and social regulation" (606). By breaking down the barrier between storyteller and reader, Yezierska begins to collapse the boundary that holds Jews as Others.

By depicting her immigrant characters *as immigrants* through their dress and speech rather than as Americanized citizens, Yezierska also subverts the ethnological and scientific bases upon which the Jews' discrimination is based. The story critiques wealthy American Jewish women who run the vacation house for their need to affirm their superiority over the poor Russian Jewish immigrants. Written as a first-person narrative, the story focuses on the disconnect between the promise of rest that the vacation house offers to immigrant mothers and the motives of the charity workers who only want to use the immigrants as showpieces for their wealthy patrons. The narrator explains, after being given a seemingly endless list of rules to follow while at the vacation house, that she is "always feeling cheap like dirt, and mad that I had to be there" (70). She and the other mothers are made to sit "on long wooden benches, like prisoners" (70) at the back of the house while the wealthy patrons come to view the house. Initially confused about the appeal of this vacation house, the narrator finally realizes that "they need the worn out mothers as part of the show" (71) to attract wealthy donors. In this critique of organized philanthropy, the narrator also undermines the practice of Progressive-era ethnographers who were invested in reinforcing turn-of-the-century race theory that categorized Eastern European immigrants as "inherently unsuited for American citizenship" (Jirousek,

"Spectacle" 26). Blending this narrative with a Modernist rendering of immigrant language, "The Free Vacation House" rejects a cold, objective approach to immigrant life for a more personal, seemingly more authentic representation of the immigrant community.

More than its representation of immigrant speech patterns and its critique of the Progressive-era approach to ethnography, the story also engages directly in Yezierska's own family folklore. The narrative of "The Free Vacation House" originated with Yezierska's sister Annie, who recounted it to Yezierska (Konzett 606). By appropriating both the content and language of her sister's tale, Yezierska melds the folkloric principle of lived experience storytelling to a piece that rejects the objective approach to representing immigrants. If, as Konzett insists, "Yezierska's work must be seen from within the modern context of an emerging ethnic avant-garde exploring the question of cultural identity in a new and provocative manner" (598), this story demonstrates Yezierska's unorthodox use of folkloric principles in a Modernist critique. At a time when High Modernist language—exemplified by writers like Gertrude Stein—was challenging Realist depictions of immigrant life, authors from minority groups—like Yezierska—"worked to stress a *sameness* through the realist language of bourgeois gentility" (Hefner 107).[12] Yezierska therefore takes advantage of her proximity to Modernist innovations—both literary and social—to sympathetically depict Jewish immigrant difference in a way that counters the late Progressive-era tendency toward discrimination.

The Jewish Immigrant as Circulating Commodity in "Wings"

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[12] One notable exception to this generality is, in fact, Gertrude Stein. Stein was of German Jewish descent, but her work is rarely read for its reflection of "ethnic" or "immigrant" qualities. Sollors postulates that her linguistic innovations overshadowed the "social categories that otherwise may have defined her existence" (*Ethnic* 34).

In the short story collection *Hungry Hearts*, Yezierska articulates the stereotypes of Jews that underpin their economic discrimination, a relationship that is fundamental to her later novel *Bread Givers*, which more explicitly addresses the role of group-based religious traditions. The connection between foreign, dirty, and unvalued is the very relationship that Yezierska disrupts throughout *Hungry Hearts* by focusing on the immigrants' attempts to counterfeit their identity. "Wings," the first story of the collection, metaphorically writes the logic of American capitalism onto the main character's experiences as a Russian Jewish immigrant woman. Shenah Pessah, the protagonist, expresses her belief in an American credit economy and thus draws a parallel between the efforts to be accepted in American society and the economic logic that underwrites the immigrant experience. Although Pessah attributes her misery throughout the story to the lack of a romantic partner, the narrative's structure charts Pessah's predicament as a fundamental result of economic oppression. The story accomplishes this by figuratively creating Pessah as a circulating commodity in two parallel but competing economies: the Russian Jewish immigrant marriage market and the American romance market. Through Pessah's quest to find an ideal life partner and her attempts to counterfeit her identity, the story depicts Pessah in terms that resemble descriptions of circulating monetary currency. Moreover, her value to either economy is based only on her outer appearances as an Eastern European immigrant. Yezierska thus relies on the language and logic of a monetary economic system to explore the place of a Russian Jewish immigrant woman in early twentieth century American society.

The rhetoric that surrounds both of these relationships characterizes Pessah as a commodity circulating within both the immigrant social economy, represented by her uncle, and the American romantic economy, represented by John Barnes, an American professor who becomes her neighbor. Her motivation throughout the story is to find love in an American

context. When she sees the "shopgirls standing on the stoop with their beaux" and "the young mothers with their husbands and babies," Pessah asks, "Why must I only *look on* how they are happy?" (original emphasis 5). Pessah expresses her desire to be viewed as a valuable asset in the American marriage economy. Both her uncle and Barnes, however, disregard Pessah's own ambitions in favor of the value Pessah adds to their livelihoods.

Although she wants the authority to choose her own marriage partner, her status as a Russian Jewish immigrant woman does not accord her the implicit value to successfully circulate in her community's marriage market. Pessah is described as nothing more than a commodity to be assigned a specific value and then used as an object for trade. She acknowledges how her immigrant community devalues her; she realizes "that she was the 'greenhorn' janitress, that she was twenty-two and dowryless, and, according to the traditions of her people, condemned to be shelved aside as an unmated thing—a creature of pity and ridicule" (6). Because her community judges her only on the superficial signifiers of age and wealth, she holds little value in her community.

This perception is reinforced when Mrs. Melker, the neighborhood matchmaker, visits Pessah's uncle to arrange a marriage for Pessah. Eavesdropping from an adjacent room, Pessah hears Melker's proposition to her uncle: "Motkeh, the fish-peddler, is looking for a wife to cook him his eating and take care on his children. . . . So I thought to myself this is a golden chance for Shenah Pessah to grab. You know a girl in her years and without money, a single man wouldn't give a look on her" (11). Melker's proposition defines Pessah's value within the community: because she has no dowry and is in her twenties, her only value is as a widower's second wife. Pessah's double strike of age and penury excludes her from the typical marriage

market where “men don’t want to marry themselves even to *young* girls,” according to Melker, “except if they can get themselves into a family with money” (11).

Despite the matchmaker’s insistence that “It is Shenah Pessah’s luck” that Motkeh is so generous to marry Pessah “without a cent” (11-12), Pessah’s uncle accords her more value as his laborer than as a liability to marry off. Angrily undermining Melker’s entreaties, Pessah’s uncle counters, “And who’ll cook for me my eating, if I’ll let her go? . . . And who’ll do me my work?” (12). In her uncle’s estimation, Pessah is more valuable to him at home, since she makes it possible for him to earn more money. He suggests as much when he says, “I’d have to give up the janitor’s work to let her go, and then where would I be?” (12). To her uncle, Pessah represents the investment of an extra laborer who increases his ability to earn money, and she is worth more in this capacity to him than as a marriageable asset. Besides this, he insists that he has already invested money into Pessah as a worker by paying her passage to America: “Didn’t I spend out fifty dollars to send for her the ticket to America? Oughtn’t I have a little use from her for so many dollars I laid out on her?” (12). Because he invested in Pessah’s migration to America, he feels that he should continue to benefit from that investment. While her uncle’s true motivations in haggling are unclear, Pessah herself is absent during this bargaining, a fact that further reinforces her position as a voiceless commodity involved in an objective transaction.

While Melker and Pessah’s uncle argue over her worth based on her outer signifiers of age and wealth, Yezierksa makes clear that Pessah’s inner motivations are not aligned with these outward signifiers. In overhearing this conversation, Pessah bristles at the “branding torture of their low talk” (11). While this phrase echoes language of “branded” currency that narratively constructs Pessah as a commodity, Yezierska shows Pessah’s personal reaction to being objectified as a commodity. When she is fed up with hearing this conversation, she bursts in on

the two and voices her own desires. “Don’t worry yourself for me,” she insists (13). By signaling her belief that her value exceeds her position in the immigrant marriage market, she insists that their new American context provides her opportunities beyond just those as her uncle’s helper or as Motkeh’s workhorse: “In America,” she shouts, “if a girl earns her living, she can be fifty years old and without a man, and nobody pities her” (13). She believes that the American social system will accord her increased worth.

To transfer her value into the American economy, Pessah realizes that she must change her appearance to be accepted as an American. Upon her decision to transfer her value out of the Jewish immigrant community, “she was all a-tremble with breathless excitement to imitate the fluffy style of the much-courted landlady’s daughter” (14). Pessah equates economic power to sartorial change, which in turn equates to more social value. She needs to wear clothes that align with American expectations of style and class, not ones that signify her immigrant enclave. A change in outer appearance, she believes, will allow her to increase her worth enough to circulate in the American romantic economy.

To engage in this kind of cultural counterfeiting, she must purchase a new outfit, but she does not have enough money for the transaction: “But from where can I get the money for new clothes? Oi weh! How bitter it is not to have the dollar” (14). The strategy she employs to obtain the money to purchase new clothing is significant because it vividly depicts an act of immigrant counterfeiting. In order to purchase the new hat and dress that she believes will “voice the desire of her innermost self” (16), she creates a plan to pawn her mother’s old feather bed. Pessah realizes that the bed is “the only one thing left from [her] dead mother” (14), but she rationalizes her decision by convincing herself that had her mother lived, she would “cut herself in pieces” to see her daughter married to an American (14). Pessah thus convinces herself that the only way to

gain value in the American marriage economy is to pawn the only symbolic link of her Russian Jewish peasant life.

Taking the bundled feather bed to Zaretsky, the Jewish pawnbroker, Pessah remains mute throughout much of the transaction, hearkening back to her silence during her uncle's and Mrs. Melker's haggling. When Zaretsky offers her only five dollars for the bed, she only gasps and gazes around the shop. Pessah's muteness engenders Zaretsky's momentary sympathy, and he doubles his offer to ten dollars, which Pessah accepts. In Pessah's pawning of the feather bed, her "last memory from Russia" (16), she renounces the last of her concrete Old World ties in order to espouse a more abstract conception of value. The money goes to purchase an outfit that symbolizes "the green fields and orchards of her native Russia" (16). Her old feather bed, a concrete signifier of utility and practicality, has been turned into an abstract representation of Russian lore, modeled in an American style. With this purchase, Pessah attempts to mold her Russian experience into an American context. Through this series of economic transactions, her counterfeiting attempt becomes complete.

Pessah's experiences in the American romance economy, however, are nearly as dehumanizing as those in her immigrant community. Her interactions with John Barnes, a university sociologist who takes up residence in Pessah's tenement,[13] exemplify Pessah's circulation within an American economy where she is valued only for her status as a Russian Jewish immigrant. Pessah meets Barnes when he is first looking for an apartment and immediately becomes infatuated with him: "It was as if the god of her innermost longings had suddenly taken shape in human form and lifted her in mid-air" (6). While Pessah fantasizes about

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[13] John Barnes is one of the many incarnations of John Dewey in Yezierska's works. Many scholars, such as Dearborn and Carol Schoen, have noted the similarities between Dewey and the Anglo men of Yezierska's stories.

an uplifting relationship with Barnes, he sees the situation differently. For Barnes, Pessah's value is not as a romantic partner but as an object for his sociological study. Unknown to Pessah, Barnes is "the youngest instructor of sociology in his university" and is "preparing a thesis on the 'Educational Problems of the Russian Jews'" (7). When he learns Pessah immigrated from Russia, Barnes is excited to realize that "he was in their midst, the people he had come to study. The girl with the hungry eyes and intense eagerness now held a new interest for him" (7). That interest is not as a romantic partner but as a scientific object. While she dreams of them as lovers, Barnes's interest is "the enthusiasm of the scientist for the specimen of his experimentation" (9).

Barnes in fact reads Pessah's personality and attitude as a stereotype of her Jewishness rather than as a sign of her individuality: "'So even in the midst of these sordid surroundings were "wings" and "high thoughts,"' he mused. Again the gleam of the visionary—the eternal desire to reach out and up, which was the predominant racial trait of the Russian immigrant" (8). By devaluing Pessah's desire for American acceptance and prosperity as simply a "racial trait," Barnes objectifies Pessah not only as an object in his academic study but also as an object of a different race, thus eliding any of her own individual inner value. In this way, the American Barnes mimics Pessah's immigrant uncle in objectifying Pessah for his own gain. Like her uncle, who wants to reap the benefits of his investment, Barnes sees value in Pessah as an ethnographic object whose primary value is as a data point in his study.

Pessah's and Barnes's first outing together reveals the fruitlessness of her counterfeiting scheme. Significantly, they visit the library, where Barnes hopes to find Pessah a book to determine the kind of work she is best suited for. In a story where the immigrant woman is being metaphorically depicted as a commodity circulating in immigrant and American economies, the library is akin to a bank. Both are institutions whose main function is to circulate written texts.

Pessah's proximity to an American library exposes her apprehension at counterfeiting her identity. Despite being dressed in her new finery—what she calls "her first American dress-up" (19)—Pessah feels decidedly out of place at the library. When the librarian helps Pessah apply for a library card, she senses the illusion of her counterfeiting scheme.

> In the few brief words that passed between Mr. Barnes and the librarian, Shenah Pessah sensed that these two were of the same world and that she was different. Her first contact with him in a well-lighted room made her aware that "there were things to a person besides the dress-up." She had noticed their well-kept hands on the desk and she became aware that her own were calloused and rough. That is why she felt her dirty finger-nails curl in awkwardly to hide themselves as she held the pen to sign her name. (20)

Pessah doubts whether "her dearly bought apparel" will continue to hide her immigrant identity (20). This climactic scene illuminates Pessah's misgivings about her plans to act American. Finally, when she must authenticate her identity by physically signing her library card, she notices all the small, tell-tale signs that belie her attempts to cover over her Jewish immigrant identity.

Pessah realizes that she has not yet transferred her value into an American context; although she has changed her appearance, she still remains an immigrant. Interestingly, she attributes her anxiety to the "electric lights" of the library—a Modernist innovation that makes Pessah feel "like so many eyes [are] looking you over" (20). In contrast to this kind of Modernist panopticon, Pessah expresses her preference for the obscurity of the streets: "In the street it is easier for me. The dark covers you up so good" (20). Her preference for the darkness, where she

can more easily cover over her immigrant identity, contradicts her attempt to make herself into an American.

Pessah represents a complicated relationship between the signifier of outer appearance and the signified of inner identity. While Pessah *feels* American and believes that she belongs in an American context, her attempt to change her appearance in order to increase her value in the American social system does not succeed. Pessah certainly demonstrates her belief in a credit economy; she believes that value is increased based upon confidence. She takes economic risks, like leaving her uncle, in order to invest in her own future as an American. She realizes that if she wishes to eventually be recognized as valuable to American society, she must invest in her own worth. In this way, "Wings" demonstrates a correlation between the American economic system and the value of the Russian Jewish immigrant, and it explores the ways in which social value translates between immigrant and American contexts.

Cleanliness, Whiteness, and the Economy in *Hungry Hearts*

If Yezierska sets up the immigrant character in "Wings" as a circulating commodity, two other stories provide a more direct critique of the discriminatory effects of the American economy to Jewish immigrants. "Soap and Water" and "The Lost Beautifulness" make explicit the connections between economic value and ethnic identity, particularly through their use of the language of whiteness. Yezierska infuses these stories with "white" imagery that challenges the semiotic relationship between the Jew's "dirty" appearance and the perception that they are unfit for America. In these stories, "white" does not always equal an ideal to strive towards.

"Soap and Water" focuses on an unnamed, young female narrator who reveals the insidious stereotype linking Jews to dirt. The narrator begins by explaining that her college

diploma had been withheld because her teacher, significantly named Miss Whiteside, felt the narrator's physical appearance marked her as un-American. The narrator recounts that Miss Whiteside "told me that my skin looked oily, my hair unkempt, and my finger-nails neglected. She told me that I was utterly unmindful of the little niceties of the well-groomed lady" (101). Miss Whiteside voices the correlation between the immigrant's outer appearance with her ability to act American, basing the immigrant's social value on her outward representation. The narrator defines this perspective as a "cruelty of [Miss Whiteside's] cleanliness" (102), suggesting that Miss Whiteside's judgment is clouded by her preconceived notions of what an ideal American college graduate should look like. This inability to look clean is the heart of the tension. For example, Hefner goes so far as to claim that "the narrator's inability to appear clean according to bourgeois standards (her lack of 'soap and water') erases her education" (122). Miss Whiteside cannot justify setting the narrator as an exemplar of the college's teaching program since doing so risks deconstructing the white cultural hegemony that is typified by Miss Whiteside's cleanliness.

Yezierska suggests that Miss Whiteside's attitude is part of a larger pattern of discrimination directed toward Eastern European immigrants. While the beginning of the story characterizes the personal manifestation of this prejudice, the bulk of the narrative catalogs other, similar injustices directed toward the narrator that act as a structure for Miss Whiteside's attitude. For example, the narrator explains that her college days were divided between working eight hours each day and studying for ten hours. Her schedule thus prevented her from attaining the cleanliness that would mark her as an acceptable member of American society. By the end of her work night, she "was so bathed in the sweat of exhaustion that I could not think of a bath of soap and water. I had only the strength to drag myself home, and fall down on the bed and sleep"

(103). Miss Whiteside's attitude is just one example of a society structured by racial and ethnic inequality. The narrator's economic need to pay for food and rent preclude her from the advantages of appearing to be part of "clean" white society.

The narrator forcefully acknowledges the economic circuit that ensures she is kept in her oppressed position. She notes,

> Often as I stood at my board at the laundry, I thought of Miss Whiteside, and her clean world, clothed in the snowy shirt-waists I had ironed. I was thinking—I, soaking in the foul vapors of the steaming laundry, I, with my dirty, tired hands, I am ironing the clean, immaculate shirt-waists of clean, immaculate society. I, the unclean one, am actually fashioning the pedestal of their cleanliness, from which they reach down, hoping to lift me to the height that I have created for them. (103)

Her labor is valued only because it reifies the social order that maintains Miss Whiteside as her social superior and as, in Silvia Xavier's words, one of the "gate-keepers to culture" (29). The narrator realizes, "It was to the advantage of those who used me that my appearance should damn me, so as to get me to work for the low wages I was forced to accept" (105-06). Because the narrator is kept dirty, she is unable to attain higher wages, and because she can't earn higher wages, she can't afford to appear clean, a circuit that reinforces the belief that the Russian Jew is racially unfit for American democracy.

Miss Whiteside's personal reaction to the narrator's appearance is thus indicative of a larger social structure, which is undergirded by economic logic. The narrator's low-paying employment, which relegates her to dirtiness, is actually an essential part of the economy that perpetuates her oppression. The narrator's experiences hearken back to Progressive-era economic theories that espoused the belief that grooming a desirable labor force was the only

way to ensure American democracy. Leonard sums up that for many Progressive-era economists, "race determined the standard of living, and the standard of living determined the wage" (215). These economists viewed the American marketplace as a way to ensure that non-WASP groups were blocked from earning a living wage. The belief is underwritten by the relationship between appearances and value: because some races appeared to need a lower standard of living, those races were given a lower wage. Thus, the signifier of her dirty appearance is the sign of her Otherness, eliding her education and keeping her in an oppressed position.

The narrator's enthusiasm with attending college is quickly deflated as she realizes that her shabby appearance results in "people looking at me at arm's length, as if I were crooked or crippled, as if I had come to a place where I did n't belong, and would never be taken in" (104). She eventually realizes that "clothes form the basis of class distinctions, that after graduation the opportunities for the best positions are passed out to those who are best-dressed, and the students too poor to put up a front are pigeon-holed and marked unfit" (106). In the narrator's experiences, the whiteness of the ruling class is not something to strive toward. Rather, the narrator realizes that she felt she had come up "against the solid wall of the well-fed, well-dressed world—the frigid whitewashed wall of cleanliness" (104). By focusing on this economic anxiety of the narrator and detailing the ways in which she felt rebuked from clean, white society, "Soap and Water" articulates a semiotic relationship between valuable/clean/white and non-valued/dirty/black. The story thus defines the parallels between cleanliness, wealth, race, and social value in a way that foregrounds her other Jewish immigrant characters' view that American commodities are the key to successfully passing in a white, Christian society.

If "Soap and Water" articulates the foundational semiotic relationship between clean/white and dirty/Other, "The Lost 'Beautifulness'" solidifies the relationship between color,

race, value, and American civic duty. Although the story ostensibly focuses on the mundane act of repainting a tenement kitchen, the narrative integrates a number of divergent themes, including the differences between Old World and American understandings of value, the language of color, the trope of counterfeiting, and eugenics. Reading "The Lost 'Beautifulness'" in the context of the other stories contained within *Hungry Hearts*, however, reveals that these tangentially-related themes form the crux of Yezierska's project in folklorically depicting the Russian Jewish immigrant experience. The main focus of the narrative is Hanneh Hayyeh's tenement kitchen, which becomes the staging ground for these debates, and it represents the nexus of the concerns about the fitness of the Jewish immigrant for American citizenship.

The kitchen, for one, is a focus for a debate on the differing views of value. Hanneh, fed up with her ugly tenement kitchen walls, whitewashes them. Her white kitchen is now "a dream come true" because as she explains, her son Aby "will not have to shame himself to come back to his old home" (43). In painting her kitchen, Hanneh expresses an American ideal of value. She explains that "When I see myself around the house how I fixed it up with my own hands, I forget I'm a nobody. It makes me feel I'm also a person" (45). Hanneh expresses a connection between her act of painting the kitchen and her self-worth as an American immigrant. Because she has invested in the aesthetic properties of her rented tenement, she believes she is more worthy to partake in the benefits of American society. In this way, Hanneh seems to fit into an American economy where, as Mihm argues, value is "derived from extrinsic forces" such as confidence (29), rather than intrinsic value. The wall's external signifier (the color) has changed, which implies that what it signifies (the perceived aesthetic value of the apartment) should also change.

Although Hanneh easily recognizes the aesthetic value of the kitchen for her personal enjoyment, she later realizes the implied economic value that her act of whitewashing imparts to

her tenement. When Hanneh visits the neighborhood butcher shop the day after she paints the kitchen, the members of the Jewish immigrant community articulate the conflation between the new color of the kitchen and its subsequent increased economic value. Yezierska draws on the folkloric qualities of gossip to structure the narrative's linking of color, race, and value. When the neighbors enter her apartment, their remarks signal a connection between whiteness and value. One neighbor exclaims, "Gold is shining from every corner!" (47), and another neighbor remarks, "Grand ain't the word for it! What a whiteness! And what a cleanliness!" (48). In an American culture that correlates dirt, Jewishness, and Otherness, these sentences mark the relationship between the white appearance, the perception of cleanliness, and the increase in economic value. More than just articulating a vague sense of its increased worth, the neighbor argues that for a tenant like Hanneh, "the landlord ought to give out a medal or let down the rent for free" (48). In the eyes of the immigrant community, then, Hanneh should be financially rewarded since she cares so much about her apartment to use her own money to improve it. In this context, the neighborhood gossip—which begins in a site of economic exchange—ultimately leads Hanneh to connect her act of painting her kitchen to its increased value. Only when the community imposes their own articulation of color and value does Hanneh's act of civic engagement also include economic improvement.

The text overlays this logic of value, color and race onto a story that is essentially about the meaning of democracy in the life of the immigrant. Hanneh admits that the idea to whitewash her kitchen originated with her friendship to Mrs. Preston, her wealthy friend and employer. Aside from being Hanneh's source of income, Mrs. Preston is also the source of Hanneh's ideas about American democracy. As Hanneh explains, "But Mrs. Preston makes me feel that I'm alike with her. . . . She's been telling me about a new word—democracy. It got me on fire.

Democracy means that everybody in America is going to be with everybody alike" (45). Hanneh's understanding of whitewashing the kitchen resonates with her belief in equality. If Hanneh can imitate her wealthy friend's aesthetic, then she will inch closer to achieving that ideal of American equality. Lori Merish identifies Mrs. Preston as a "kind of home missionary, imparting a desire for beauty and 'whiteness' as class and racial 'uplift'" (208). In fact, Hanneh's main ambition since meeting Mrs. Preston is "to have a white-painted kitchen" just like her employer (Yezierska, *Hungry* 43). In this way, the story also charts a connection between whiteness and American civic duty.

This connection is further reinforced by Hanneh's motivation for painting the kitchen, which is to beautify it for the benefit of her son, Aby, who is a Private in the American Army.[14] Hanneh explains that since her kitchen is now painted, Aby can "lift up his head in this world. I want him to be able to invite even the President from America to his home and shame himself" (44). Hanneh believes that by painting her kitchen white, she is visibly demonstrating her commitment to an American aesthetic that values cleanliness and whiteness. In turn, this aesthetic will create a more welcoming environment for her soldier son. Hanneh's simple act of painting is therefore her own act of civic engagement in an American economy.

Hanneh thus attempts to counterfeit her tenement's aesthetic to ultimately impart more value to it and by extension to herself. The conclusion of the story, however, undermines Hanneh's belief that an American credit economy will benefit her as an immigrant. Like Shenah

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[14] Aby's occupation itself references the Russian Jew's position in American democracy. Aby's status as an Army Private would have had important connotations at the time that *Hungry Hearts* was published. At the time, Jews were viewed as unfit for military service. As Levinson makes clear, "Jews were stereotypically constructed as physically unable to fight in the army, unable to defend their country, and therefore not citizens" (4-5). The story seems to directly confront this stereotype by constructing Aby as a war hero and by depicting Hanneh's strong adherence to American democracy and capitalism.

Pessah who discovers that she has little control over the extrinsic forces that assign her value, Hanneh Hayyeh is betrayed by her misunderstanding of American capitalism. Soon after Hanneh paints the kitchen, the landlord informs her: "'Because the flat is painted new . . . I can get more money for it'" (53). Instead of lowering the rent on the apartment, the landlord raises the rent to an amount that Hanneh cannot afford. Although the whitewashed wall improves the apartment's value, it does not then impart that increase to Hanneh. Hanneh does not become a more valuable tenant because she has whitewashed the wall. Rather, she has only increased the apparent value of the apartment.

Hanneh's reaction to the increased rent is significant, since the language she uses reveals her belief that the wall's value is correlated to her own self worth. Understandably upset at being made to pay an increased rent, she remarks, "Some one who got nothing but only money will come in here and get the pleasure from all this beautifulness that cost me the blood from my heart. Is this already America? What was my Aby fighting for?" (59). In this statement, Hanneh draws a clear connection between her inner essence (her "blood"), the value of the wall, and her own economic value, figuratively connecting the signifier of the kitchen wall and its signified economic value while displacing Hanneh's own personal value. In retaliation to the landlord, Hanneh takes an axe to her kitchen and destroys the apartment, after which "she felt her soul ache there—inside her—like a thing killed that could not die" (60). In disrupting the economic system that accords more value to improved property than to the immigrant, Hanneh commits an act of self-hurt: "What had she gained by her rage for vengeance? She had thought to spite the landlord, but it was her own soul she had killed. These walls that stared at her in their ruin were not just walls. They were animate—they throbbed with the pulse of her own flesh" (60). As the

wall crumbles, so too does her self-image. Because she had attached meaning to the American economic system and that system betrayed her, she has damaged herself.

Hanneh's act of painting thus becomes an act of counterfeiting. She believes that by covering her wall over with white paint—by counterfeiting her wall's appearance—she will increase the value of the object itself. Hanneh is successful in improving the value of her tenement, but that increase in value does not translate to her as an American immigrant. In this way, Hanneh's experiences reinforce the semiotic relationship between signifier and signified, although to her own detriment. Hanneh's whitewashing has a correlation in her son Aby's appearance. Aby's Army uniform is a signifier for his own fitness for American democracy. The text describes the uniform: "On Private Safrinsky's left shoulder was the insignia of the Statue of Liberty. The three gold service stripes on his left arm and the two wound stripes on his right were supplemented by the Distinguished Service Medal on his left breast bestowed by the United States Government" (61). All these insignia symbolize Aby's integral role in the American campaigns of World War I as well as the civic duty Aby has completed. Hanneh's attempt at aesthetic improvement falls flat when compared to the Aby's medals. In this way, the text of "The Lost 'Beautifulness'" resonates with the other stories in *Hungry Hearts* to explore issues of color, race, value, and civic engagement. These stories rely on a trope of counterfeiting—of exploring the relationship between signifier and signified—to examine the role of the Russian Jewish immigrant in American society.

***Bread Givers* and the Immigrant Marketplace: Race, Religion, and the Economy**

Whereas the *Hungry Hearts* collection traces the intersection of cleanliness, economic value, and the civic duty of American immigrants, Yezierska's 1925 novel *Bread Givers*

overlays these same concerns with depictions of Jewish religious traditions. In the novel, the Smolinskys, a Russian Jewish immigrant family living in New York City's Lower East Side, exemplify a generationally-divided attitude toward religious traditions. Reb Smolinsky, the father of the family, spends his days studying the Torah while his wife Shenah and his daughters Bessie, Mashah, Fania, and Sara labor to provide the economic security that keeps the family fed and sheltered in their tenement. The novel focuses on Sara's struggle to free herself of the confines of her father's patriarchal rule and to make herself over into an American.

Similar to *Hungry Hearts*, Yezierska embeds the racial logic of Jewish Otherness into the tenement life of the Smolinskys. Much like the convergence of cleanliness and whiteness in "Soap and Water," *Bread Givers* equates dirt with racialized Otherness. Tyrone Simpson, II finds that, for example, "a racial unconscious appears in the novel's diegetic margins" (99). Although the novel doesn't feature any African American characters, Yezierska's language describing the dirt of the Jewish ghetto resonates with contemporaneous depictions of African Americans. Simpson claims that the novel features "obsessive phobic invocations of the dirt and grime of ghettoized existence—a spatial phenomenon that has characterized much of black life in the twentieth century" (99). By connecting the Smolinskys' immigrant experience to that of African Americans, Yezierska implies that economically oppressed Jewish immigrants are victims of the same white supremacist ideology that enforced racial segregation throughout the Progressive Era. Rather than focusing on direct conflicts between Anglo Americans and the Jewish immigrants, however, *Bread Givers* examines the economic structures of white supremacy that are embedded even into the Jewish immigrant community. This institutionalized discrimination undergirds the racialized experiences of the Smolinskys.

The novel not only foregrounds the racial logic that structures the Russian Jewish immigrant experience, but it also explicates the intersections between Jewish religious traditions and the immigrant's economic viability. If, as Kevin Piper finds, Jewish religious practices are "central to the novel" (114), so too are the economic concerns that pervade the text. Both religious traditions and economics reveal the ways in which, as Simpson demonstrates, the family tries "to purchase themselves out of probationary whiteness" (102). While Simpson astutely observes the intersections between race, ethnicity, and commodities in the text, he glosses over the narrative's overwhelming focus on the role of religious traditions in immigrant life. In fact, the tensions over money *and* religious traditions are the two main driving forces in the text. Through its focus on the precarious economic position of the Smolinsky family, the novel explores the role of traditional Torah study in an American economy.

The novel presents a situation in which Jewish religious traditions not only "[mediate] the generational strife between father and daughter," as Piper argues (114), but they also conflict with American economic structures. Reb Smolinky's adherence to a religious tradition that values men's study of the Torah over their physical labor contradicts the American social systems in which men's labor is valued above any other contributions. Especially in the context of the American Progressive movement where Jewish immigrants were accorded little prestige in the American labor market, Reb is an anomaly. Rather than laboring, he insists that "all America will come to my feet to learn" (9). His comment, when considered in the context of the family's extreme poverty, comes across as at least naive, if not laughable. In a country where men are expected to perform public labor, Reb's demand to remain in the home studying the Torah is markedly incongruous. Moreover, Reb is out of place in his own immigrant enclave. He is the only Jewish man in the novel who is unemployed, and the only character whose sole ambition in

life is to study the Torah. Characterizing Reb as an anomaly both to the Jewish immigrant community and to the larger American culture, Yezierska depicts Jewish religious traditions as at least incongruous to, if not completely incompatible with, the American economic system where even other Russian Jewish immigrant men conform to patterns of American capitalism.

Yezierska mediates the relationship between Jewish religious traditions and the American economy through a literary folkloric approach. Yezierska delineates the tension between religion and economics early in the novel, focusing on Reb's position both within his family and within the immigrant community. While his daughters are responsible for laboring to provide food and shelter, Reb's role is to provide moral support for the family. This support takes the form of retelling ancient fables, stories that Reb believes will "cure all your worldly cares" (11). When the family expresses frustrations over not having enough food to satiate their hunger, Reb announces he will recite a fable. In response, "All faces turned to Father. Eyes widened, necks stretched, ears strained not to miss a word. The meal was forgotten as he began" (11). The family's reaction to the mere announcement of Reb's story reveals the importance of this kind of storytelling tradition to the Smolinsky family. The content of the fable, too, is significant, since the moral is to "be happy and thankful to live in poverty, as long as I know that our reward will be complete in heaven" (12). The legend's purpose is therefore twofold: to provide words of hope and to maintain a shared sense of religious identity among the family. Not coincidentally, Reb recites the legend as the family sits down to share a meal—albeit a meal of a "hard, stale [bread] loaf that nobody would buy for cash" (10). The scene reflects the belief that stories "feed" people, no matter their economic position. By juxtaposing the family's economic struggle with group-based religious traditions, Yezierska depicts Reb acting on his belief that "hope is the only reality here on earth" (126).

Yet, the family's reaction to Reb's story undercuts his traditional beliefs and signals the unsustainability of Reb's Old World religious traditions in a Modern American context. Economic concerns immediately infringe upon Reb's ephemeral words of hope. "But, *Moisheh*," Shenah insists, "God gave us children. They have a life to live yet, here, on earth. Girls have to get married. People point their fingers on me—a daughter, twenty-five years already, and not married yet. And no dowry to help her get married" (12-13). Shenah imposes economic realities onto Reb's religious idealism, thereby encapsulating the tension of the novel: men's study of the Torah, a vestige of the traditional Old World, does not bring money to pay the rent or provide the necessary economic security to survive as an immigrant. Although Reb insists that he's given his daughters "brains enough to marry when their time comes, without the worry of a dowry" (13), his adherence to Old World religious traditions belie this belief. Reb's adherence to those traditions do not comport with the family's economic hardships.

In fact, the economic situation of the family pushes Reb to modify his study habits, demonstrating that physical survival in an American economy overshadows religious adherence. Shenah suggests that Reb move his books out of the spare bedroom so that she can bring in boarders to cover their rent. Although Reb initially protests, Shenah counters by remarking that "Only millionaires can be alone in America" (13). Shenah articulates the incongruity of Reb's scholarly pursuits in a society where monetary wealth is more highly valued. She suggests simply that he can move his books into their bedroom and that he can study in the kitchen, the site not only of family meals but also of Shenah's domestic production. By bringing Reb's study of biblical patriarchy into the space of women's work, the novel draws a parallel between religious study and sustenance while also emphasizing the anachronism of the Jewish man who does not labor.

Despite the anomalous nature of Reb's Torah study, he still retains a privileged position among his Jewish immigrant community. His role as preserver of traditional values is underscored by the folkloric circulation of gossip in the immigrant marketplace, marking another site of conflation between group-based religious traditions and economics. In an episode detailing an altercation between Reb and the landlord's collector, the community's reaction reinforces Reb's privileged position within their community.

At a time when the entire family is out of work, the landlord's collector visits the Smolinskys to collect the rent. Reb insists that they don't have the money because the women are out of work, but the collector continuously berates him. Throughout most of this interaction, Reb maintains his composure, keeping his voice "kind and gentle, as hers was rough and loud" (17). However, one insult in particular makes "little red threads" burn out of Reb's eyes (18). The collector exclaims: "Hear him only! The dirty do-nothing! Go to work yourself! Stop singing prayers. Then you'll have money for rent!" (18). At this, Reb "slapped the landlady on one cheek, then on the other, till the blood rushed from her nose" (18). Reb's extreme reaction is telling. Simpson argues that this scene "demonstrates yet again the Smolinksys' seeming anxieties about their racial status" (98-99). This incident exemplifies the racial subtext of the novel: the Jewish woman with money but no religious respect is characterized as white while Reb, the Jewish man without money but with a fierce devotion to Judaism, is belittled as a "dirty do-nothing," a phrase that recalls the linking of ghetto filth to Blackness. But the landlady's exclamation encapsulates more than a racial anxiety; it more specifically melds Reb's racial status to his vocation as a Torah scholar. By conflating his racialized Otherness with his practice of religious traditions, the collector marks him and his family as outside the possibility of American prosperity.

Reb's uncharacteristic act of violence reveals the ways in which the Jewish immigrant marketplace becomes a site for the community's circulation of stories and a support for Reb's Torah studies. After Reb is sent to jail, the tenement neighborhood circulates stories of Reb that install him as a legendary figure. Sara, the narrator, recounts, "By the butcher, by the baker, by the fish market, everybody was telling everybody over and over again, as you tell fairy tales, how Father hit the landlady when she stepped on the Holy Torah" (25). In her description, Sara demonstrates how the economic circulation of goods simultaneously enables the circulation of community gossip. In the community's view, Reb embodies the hope that he continuously preaches about: "Everybody was scared to death when the landlord came around. And Father hitting the landlord's collector lady was like David killing Goliath, the giant" (26). The neighbors' gossip describes "how Father was the speaking mouth of the block. Not only did he work for the next world, but he was even fighting for the people their fight in this world" (26). The altercation with the collector not only reifies the racial distinction between Jews with money and Jews without money, it also reveals the American marketplace as a site for the circulation of folkloric stories.

The episode, more importantly, undercuts the separation of group-based religious traditions from the American economy. Reb's interaction with the landlady shows how religious traditions and the economy are not mutually exclusive; indeed, each is contingent upon the other. In fact, the only reason Reb is let out of jail is because the proprietors of their local shops bail him out. Although Reb's adherence to religious traditions may appear incompatible to an American economy, the community values his adherence to Old World ways and supports his maintenance of Jewish religious traditions.

Counterfeiting and Identity in the American Marketplace

The function of the marketplace as a site to circulate community folklore underscores the importance of the American economy to the novel. Not only does the marketplace serve as a location to reinforce the community's traditional beliefs and values—as exemplified by the way the community handles Reb's landlord incident—it also acts as a force to mediate the immigrant's experiences with American racial systems. The Smolinsky family's experiences with economic exchanges teach them about the systems governing their identity within American society and their ultimate goal of acceptance into American whiteness.

In *Bread Givers*, Yezierska re-visits the trope of counterfeiting to illustrate how attempts to escape economic oppression can simultaneously be read as attempts to escape an association with Blackness. Simpson observes that the Smolinsky family's possession of commodities "such as fashion and cosmetics" can "deceive the observer (the individual may not be who/what he or she appears)" (94). The act of disguising one's "appearance of ethnic foreignness," Simpson finds, "could facilitate immigrants' acceptance by the modern American mainstream" (94). Specifically, Simpson suggests that "through this complicated relationship to the commodity—one that casts the Smolinskys both as deceivers and deceived—they come to understand racial identity not as an immutable biological status determined by one's skin and blood, but as a potential possession, another commodity they can claim through rational and strategic acquisition" (94). In this way, Simpson's argument foregrounds the notion of counterfeiting one's identity: by acting white—changing one's signifying appearance—the perception of the identity signified also changes. It becomes a system of difference that is based not on inner essence but on outer appearances.

The family's experience with the market and American economic systems acts as a staging ground for their performance of whiteness, which is ultimately dependent on their practice or renunciation of Jewish religious traditions. Certainly, the anxieties that the family associate with the marketplace are connected to the anxieties they feel with their racial position, as Simpson suggests. But more than that, these anxieties of economics and race are expressed through the outward practice of religion. Yezierska reworks the counterfeiting trope established in *Hungry Hearts* to more fully explore the ways in which religious practices facilitate or hinder an immigrant's acceptance into white American culture. The generational divide between Sara and Reb takes center stage in this effort. Sara negotiates the intricacies of the American market, successfully earning the family money when everyone else is out of work. More importantly, Sara learns how to modify her own identity through her attempts to earn money. Reb's adherence to traditional religious performance, on the other hand, is connected to his Old World notions of economics. When he attempts to penetrate the American economic system, his Old World traditions prevent him from fully succeeding. Reb continuously misreads the signifiers presented to him, and he pays economically for these misperceptions.

Sara's first experience in the Hester Street immigrant market illustrates her understanding of the American capitalist system in which the value of a commodity is contingent upon external factors. The scene also reinforces her reliance on a Modernist American context, opposed to Reb's adherence to traditional folkways. When Reb has been sent to jail for hitting the landlord's collector, Sara takes action to provide for the family. In order to avoid the humiliation of "picking through people's ashes" (8), Sara decides to "peddle with something" in the Jewish marketplace (20). Sara takes a quarter from her family and sets out to purchase something to "sell quick to earn money" (20). For Sara, there is a clear link between her success in peddling in

the Jewish marketplace and her perception of being American. When Muhmenkeh, a neighbor and fellow merchant, offers to give Sara a few scraps of herring from the bottom of her barrel for free, Sara counters, "No-no! I'm no beggar! . . . I want to go into business like a person. I must buy what I got to sell" (21). Extrapolating from Levinson's observation that Yezierska's recurring image of "the hunger to be a person" is equivalent to passing as American (5), Sara here conflates her success at making money in the marketplace to her being accepted as American.

As Sara advertises the lackluster herring, she demonstrates the American notion of changing commodity value: by verbally describing the attractiveness of her herring, she increases the value of the commodity to her purchasers. In fact, the spectacle of Sara's own "little skinny bones" is part of what initially draws customers: "So loud was my yelling, for my little size, that people stopped to look at me. And more came to see what the others were looking at" (21). Although some patrons deride her physical appearance, she eventually succeeds in selling every piece of herring, doubling her investment. In contrast to the rest of her family's ineffectiveness at earning money, Sara manipulates the herring's value to keep her family fed and sheltered.

Sara's success at peddling illustrates her comfort in an American Modernist context. She explains that "the pushcart peddlers yelling their goods, the noisy playing of children in the gutter, the women pushing and shoving each other with their market baskets—all that was only hollering noise before melted over me like a new beautiful song" (22). Sara links her financial success to a strikingly Modernist depiction of the community. Her suggestion that she enjoys the chaos of the market hints at her own comfort in the American economic system, as opposed to her family who generally avoids these kinds of chaotic scenes. Together, her success in

manipulating the value of her herring and her comfort in the Modernist chaos signal Sara's adherence to American notions of identity.

In contrast to Sara's savvy business practices, which result in her economic success, Reb refuses to monetize his only asset, his religious learning. Shenah suggests he work as a rabbi since, as she sees it, "Religion is your business" (111). Reb rebukes her saying, "What! Sell my religion for money? Become a false prophet to the Americanized Jews! No. My religion is not for sale. I only want to go into business so as to keep sacred my religion" (111). Reb's words set up a paradigm in which religious traditions and capitalism are opposing forces, and he explains that he cannot commodify his religious beliefs. Rather, money can only *enable* his religious vocation. Through his opposition to sharing his wealth of knowledge, he demonstrates a sense of value that bucks a capitalist paradigm in which he hoards his education for himself, despite the fact that he constantly professes to his family that he is the light of the world and that all America will come to his feet to learn.

Despite Reb's insistence that his religious study be kept separate from moneymaking, Yezierska implicitly reveals the ways in which the two are intertwined. When Bessie, the family's oldest daughter, begins to date Berel Bernstein, a laborer in a garment factory who has aspirations of opening his own shop, Reb objects to their proposed marriage on the grounds that he'd lose the income from Bessie's labor. In trying to convince Bessie to leave without her father's blessing, Berel suggests that "Even in the Torah it says, leave your father and mother, and follow the man" (50). Bessie counters that the family will starve without her wages. Berel responds, "Starve? He won't starve. He'll have to go to work. It's you who are to blame for his laziness and his rags. So long as he gets from you enough to eat, he'll hang on your neck, and bluff away his days with his learning and prayers" (50). In this way, Berel articulates the ways in

which Bessie's adherence to the American capitalist system enables Reb's Old World religious study.

The Semiotics of Counterfeiting

Reb's Old World outlook also manifests itself in the way that he misunderstands the signifiers of Modern identity. Reb demonstrates his inability to read outward signifiers when he begins to arrange the marriages of his daughters. Although Reb intrudes on three of his daughters' plans for marriage, the marriage between Mashah and Moe Mirsky is especially important. After he vetoes Mashah's first attempt at marriage because the man she wants to marry is a poor poet, Reb decides to help out by finding a man that he thinks is suitable. He brings home Moe Mirsky who appears adorned with "the glitter of his shining wealth" (73), an outward signifier of his ostensible status. Reb advertises him as a diamond dealer, an occupation which he believes will provide financial security for him and his family. Indeed, when Moe brings a pair of diamond earrings for Mashah, Reb gloats, "Am I a judge of people? Didn't I tell you from the first that I *know* how to pick out a man? With this diamond-dealer in the family, all our troubles are over" (77).

Reb's reading of Moe is only superficial, since it is based on Moe's visual appearance and his verbal assurance of wealth. Once Mashah and Moe are married, however, Mashah reveals the truth: "He was only a salesman in a jewellry store. . . . He lost his job—lost it—because he let me wear the diamonds he was sent to sell" (83). Reb's attempt to impose the traditional Jewish arrangement, in which a matchmaker or parent procures a spouse, fails. Although he does successfully marry his daughter off to Moe, he does not succeed in arranging a happy or financially beneficial marriage. His inability to see past Moe's outward signifiers—

both visual and verbal—signals his lack of understanding of the American social system in which he is living. The marriage between Mashah and Moe further links the instability of American economic value with the instability of language. In a situation in which the possession of commodities like diamonds are "read" as symbols of wealth and in which verbal assurances of financial security are taken at face value, both are shown to be unstable. In the context of the Modernist movement that uncoupled the connection between language and referent, Yezierska's novel calls attention at the instability of both language and race. As the category of race destabilizes, new forms of cultural expression—subsumed under the rubric of "ethnicity"—are brought in to rename that difference.

This instability of language and race resonates in a later episode when Reb attempts to become an American businessman. When Reb wants to invest the money he obtained from Bessie's marriage, he sets out to find a get-rich-quick scheme. He finds a newspaper blurb advertising "A BARGAIN FOR CASH": a grocery store that is "worth four thousand" being sold "for four hundred" (112). Convinced that this deal is worth pursuing, Reb visits the store before the rest of the family and completes the transaction before anyone else can approve. When Shenah and Sara visit the store, they see "the full-packed shelves of cereals, canned goods, soap, and washing powder. The place seemed overflowing with goods" (114). They also witness a rush of patrons. But upon closer inspection, they find that the store was an elaborate fraud. They discover that "the shelves had goods only in the front row. The whole space behind was empty" (119). Boxes and bins that appeared full of food are instead filled with sawdust. Even the apparent busyness of the store is due only to the food being marked at half the typical cost. Simpson explains that this grocery store episode is "particularly striking because . . . the surface

appearance of a product seldom matches its interior substance," sounding a common refrain of the novel (98).

But more than echoing the break in the relationship between appearance and value, the counterfeit store acts as a metaphor for the American economy: the value of the purchase is based on the appearance rather than the substance. In this episode, Reb is the one who, surprisingly, sums up the role of confidence in the American market: "I trust people. The whole world is built on trust. The bank, the mines, the Government could never exist unless people trusted each other" (124). If one does not put confidence in the commodities that he is purchasing, Reb suggests, the system would fail. But Shenah challenges Reb's naive trust, signaling that as Jewish immigrants, they have to live by a different code: "Oh-h-h-h! Of all the troubles on earth, is there anything so terrible as to have to live with a fool?" (124). Shenah perceives that skepticism in the market economy is needed to ensure their survival.

The purchase of the grocery story is directly connected to the ways in which racial and ethnic identity is perceived. Reb remarks that the person who sold him the store appeared to be "such a born gentleman" because "so smart he talked" (121). For Reb, this perception of the man's personality is connected to his ethnic background. Reb explains that although there was another man ahead of him, Reb was chosen for the purchase because "the other man was an Italian, and the owner sold me the bargain only because I was a Jew" (116). Reb makes it clear that his perception of the seller's ethno-religious background dictated his trustworthiness. That naive trust is shattered when the "Italian" man returns to the store and explains that he was part of the scheme, since he "offered to buy it and displayed this roll [of money] six times yesterday, before you came. But you were the man we had been waiting for all day" (122). Reb's misreading of the store foregrounds his misreading of the seller's background. In this

"confidence scam in which commodities play a decisive role" (97), as Simpson says, so too does the perception of ethnic identity (97).

Throughout this episode, Reb's refusal to take responsibility for his fiscal mistake links his traditional religious practice to this counterfeiting scheme. "Have you forgotten the undying words of our race," he reminds Shenah and Sara. "'The Lord is my shepherd, no want shall I know.' . . . When all other human help is gone, then God Himself steps out of His High Heaven, to help us. This man who robbed me only pushed me closer into the arms of God" (125). Through his quoting and interpretation of the Torah, Reb attempts to counter the commodity culture that he is a victim to. But his deployment of religious proverbs prove to be futile against the economic realities: "What's the loss of money, anyway? You know the old saying, 'Money lost, nothing lost. Hope lost, all is lost.' The less money I have, the more I live on hope" (126). His choice to recite this aphorism reveals the incongruity of his group-based religious practice with his economic situation as a Jewish immigrant. While he may be able to feed his spirit with hope, his body would falter without the economic resources to purchase food and shelter. In this context, spiritual hope is dependent upon the money to feed the corporeal body.

Sara stays with her family and works in the store until she has an argument with her father. She accuses him of being "away praying most of the time" and leaving the daily operation of the store to her and Shenah (134). Sara responds to this by leaving her family and setting out on her own. Again, Reb's reaction to this is framed in religious terms. When Sara exclaims, "I'm not from the old country. I'm American!" Reb responds with religious language: "You blasphemer! . . . Denier of God! I'll teach you respect for the law" (138). As Sara escapes what she views as the tyranny of her father's religion, her attempts to be both a faithful daughter and an American woman are fraught. When her mother dies, Sara is singled out as someone who

"doesn't belong" to the Jewish community because she refuses to adhere to the tradition of tearing clothes. All the other family members partake in the tradition of tearing their clothes to physically show their sorrow. But Sara abstains from this tradition, despite her ambivalence:

> "I don't believe this. It's my only suit, and I need it for work. Tearing it wouldn't bring Mother back to life again."
>
> A hundred eyes burned on me their condemnation.
>
> "Look at her, the *Americanerin!"*
>
> "Heart of stone."
>
> "A lot she cares for her mother's death."
>
> "Not a tear did she shed. Her face is washed. Her hair is combed. Did we care how we looked when our mothers died?" (255-256)

This episode not only demonstrates how outer appearances do not match inner feelings, which shows a break in that semiotic relationship, but it also illustrates the contrast between Jewish religion and American practicality. Sara's counterfeiting scheme has become so ingrained in her personality that even when she is participating in a tradition that is integral to her Jewish community, she does not change her outward dress to align with the community's expectations. She retains her American appearance. Significantly, this scene comes right after Sara has established herself as a teacher and purchased a new dress. The scene sets up a paradox in which Sara's performance of identity must either embrace her new American way of life or adhere to her family's group-based religious traditions. Because Sara is unwilling to destroy the outward signifier of her economic mobility for practical reasons (they were expensive!), she is cast as a cold-hearted American woman, not a true Jewish woman.

While Yezierska uses the relationship between Reb and Sara to interrogate the fraught connections between ethnicity, religion, and economics, the end of the novel illustrates a path toward reconciliation. Yezierska shifts the focus, as Piper observes, "from Reb Smolinsky's patriarchal reading [of the Torah] to a message about the necessity of human contact and interdependence" (115). This message of interconnectedness takes shape when Sara meets Hugo Seelig, and it underscores the need to mediate religious traditions with the expectations of the American economy. When Sara is taking classes at a local college, she starts a relationship with Hugo, one of the teachers. Through this relationship, Yezierska provides a counterpoint to Reb's fiercely patriarchal persona. Unlike Reb, who refuses to modify his religious practices to conform to American capitalism, Hugo mediates the two, providing a version of ethnic identity for Sara to aspire to.

Remarkably, the language of physical Jewish characteristics extends even to Hugo. But unlike the earlier physical linking of Jewishness to dirt, Hugo's physical attributes mark him as more Americanized—more white—than Reb. Hugo has "a Jewish face," Sara remarks, "and yet none of the greedy eagerness of Hester Street any more. It was the face of a dreamer, set free in the new air of America. Not like Father with his eyes on the past, but a dreamer who had found his work among us of the East Side" (273). Sara points out that even though Hugo retains some of the stereotypical physical traits that signify his Jewishness, those physical attributes are disconnected from his worth to American society. Even though Hugo continually exhorts Sara that they are all "of one blood," he demonstrates that this kind of racialized language loses its potency as one ascends the American economic scale (278). As he becomes more economically secure—or as his abilities are perceived as more valuable to the American economy—his physical description conforms more to Anglo Americans.

After fully rejecting her father's extremely patriarchal practice of Judaism, Sara eventually comes to an uneasy peace with the religious traditions he represents. After being separated from her father for some time, she stumbles upon Reb when she is traveling the bustling streets of the city. After he was kicked out of his home by his second wife, Sara sees him as "helpless as a child" and "like a poor orphan with a stepmother" (285, 286). With language that echoes Hugo's admonishment that they are "of one blood," Sara ruminates on the connection she shares with her father, acknowledging that their shared humanity calls for reconciliation: "How could I have hated him and tried to blot him out of my life? Can I hate my arm, my hand that is part of me? Can a tree hate the roots from which it sprang? Deeper than love, deeper than pity, is that oneness of the flesh that's in him and in me" (286). With echoes of Biblical language, Sara realizes that her father's religious and ethnic background is still part of her identity, no matter how much she tries to cover it with American commodities.

Sara cares for her father, and she knows that her father is recovering when he begins to once again recite Biblical legends. "Day by day," Sara explains, "I won his confidence and a sort of dependent affection. His old talkativeness returned. He told me legends of the Bible and explained the wisdom of the Torah" (289-290). Sara realizes that Reb's identity is, at the core, a religiously observant Jew. Although she cannot fully embrace his religious practices since it would threaten her nascent American identity, she sees Hugo as the mediator between Jewish traditions and American culture. Reb remains stubbornly apart from American expectations of behavior. Sara observes, "In a world where all is changed, he alone remained unchanged—as tragically isolate as the rocks. All that he had left of life was his fanatical adherence to his traditions" (296). Hugo, on the other hand defines himself as a follower of the Jewish religion who looks for ways to synthesize his religious views with the American economy. Hugo values

not only the Modern American context, but also the Old World traditions. When Sara insists that "If he lives with us we'll lose our home," Hugo replies that Reb will only make their home "richer" with his presence (296). Hugo's economic metaphor to describe Reb's contributions to the family point to how religious traditions can be incorporated only *after* securing a place in American whiteness. Only when outer appearances telegraph American whiteness can religious traditions be celebrated as an integral part of their identity. Sara's conclusion reveals that there will *always* be a disconnect for an immigrant who tries to counterfeit her identity. But to be successful in America, to be accepted as a white person who can make economic decisions, it's a necessary step.

Sara Smolinsky cannot escape her Jewish immigrant past. *Bread Givers* significantly describes that journey from a woman's perspective, and therefore sets out a narrative of immigrant assimilation. Considering these feminist implications, *Bread Givers* is a literary site that stages a conflict between Old World religious beliefs and New World economic realities through a perspective that values the folkloric notion of community development and coherence. Yezierska demonstrates the convergence between the professional study of anthropological folklore and literary narratives. As Modernist authors, including Yezierska, were experimenting with language and theme in the early twentieth century, folklorists and anthropologists were also adding new techniques to their discipline. Bronislaw Malinowski, for example, pioneered the use of participant observation and theorized the centrality of performance as an indicator of identity just a few years before Yezierska began publishing. Her Jewish characters who attempt to counterfeit their cultural identity then becomes the story of other immigrant groups in the early twentieth century who only embraced ethnic and religious traditions behind closed door.

Yezierska's incorporation of these folkloric elements into her fiction reveals the malleability of the concept of race in the twentieth century.

Interlude

Florida's Menorcans and the Resonances between Literary Narratives and Life Experience Narratives

The examples from Kate Chopin's and Anzia Yezierska's fiction illustrate the ways in which literary authors reshape their interest in and experiences of folklore to fit a literary context. The two authors focus on specific, place-based religious contexts and group-based identities to explore how small groups communicate ideas about ethnic identity. For Chopin, this takes the form of emergent ethnicity as she reshapes and creatively re-contextualizes the vernacular religious traditions and practices of Creoles and Acadians as both similar to and distinct from white Americans. In a related way, Yezierska foregrounds the shifting roles of Jewish traditions in establishing a shared connection between immigrant and acculturated Jews. These literary examples reflect the recent theorization that connects forms of folklore to literary texts. As Michael Dylan Foster urges, for example, "It is imperative to look carefully at the diverse, complex, and creative ways that authors . . . and other artists infuse their works with specific elements from diverse traditions, and also to explore the reasons for and effects of this borrowing" (15). Most of this recent literary folkloristic criticism centers on the resonances between folk narratives—like fairy tales in the case of Cristina Bacchilega's analyses—and literature.

But there is similar power in using folkloric literary principles to illuminate life experience narratives, a subset of folkloric study. Ceallaigh S. MacCath-Moran defines life experience narratives as "Personal narratives about communal and familial life." These stories "not only form the basis of shared identities and values but also display these to outside listeners, who might then form opinions about what they've heard and share them in other contexts." The

resonances between literary representation and the folkloric retelling of life experience narratives illuminate the shared cultural connections between the two. Looking at both as a kind of linguistic performance reveals the fundamental connections between the two. As Bacchilega asserts, "The study of language, and of narrative texts as signs, is the backbone of semiotic perspectives whereby the communicative and social functions of folk narratives are distinctive, but not separate, from those of literature" (453). Considering these two narrative forms together reveals that "meanings emerge in the process of how something is told and valued, where, to whom, and in relation to which other utterances" (453). In the case of this project, these connections reveal the fundamental importance of women's deployment of vernacular religious traditions in creating and sustaining ethnic identity across the contexts of literature and lived experience.

The example of the Menorcan ethnic group on Florida's Atlantic coast is an example of the power of these resonances between literary representations and contemporary life experience narratives, particularly in forming and maintaining a sense of shared ethnicity. Carol Lopez-Bradshaw, the former president of the Menorcan Cultural Society based in St. Augustine, explained to me through email that the Catholic religion was fundamental to the Menorcan identity. She told me, "The majority were Catholic and their religion played a great part of their survival. Today many of those 30,000 descendants here are still Catholic." Carol explained that, although many group-based traditions have fallen away, a few still remain, and these traditions highlight the incorporation of women's culture, religious traditions, and ethnic identity. She wrote, "There are some traditions that remain within the families. The story of the fromajadas. The fromajadas are a cheese pastry. They were only made on Holy Saturday." These small pies are filled with grated cheese, egg, and flour. Then, she explained, bakers "baste them with butter

and cut a cross in the center. As the pastry cooks, the cheese rises through the cross. This signifies the rising of Christ. In the early days, the men gathered just before dark and walked through homes in the Menorcan Quarters singing the Fromajadas Song. The song translated is a religious song about St. Gabriel. This tradition faded away but many of the families still make and serve fromajadas on Easter Sunday." Carol's explanation reveals the importance of these everyday traditions that infuse the Menorcan American community with a sense of their ethnic identity.

But more than the relationship between religion and ethnicity, these traditions show that, as Carol explained, Menorcan identity in St. Augustine has been elided by the city's power structure. She explained, "No matter how hard I work, the City will never recognize the importance the Menorcans have played in the history of this City. As hard as I worked, I found that to be true."

Constance Fenimore Woolson's 1877 story "Sister St. Luke" story speaks directly to Carol's frustration over the erasure of Menorcan identity. Woolson's nineteenth-century fictional account of a Menorcan nun resonates with the experiences of contemporary Menorcan Americans in the way that it positions religious traditions as central to the development of ethnic identity. The story features Menorcan characters, and the narrative highlights the ambiguous, shifting nature of racial and ethnic identities in the context of Florida's Atlantic coast. In the climactic scene, Andrew Keith and George Carrington, two men from the North who are sojourning in Florida, find themselves trapped on a reef as a tornado approaches. The remnants of their boat lay shattered nearby, leaving the men stranded on a tiny jut of land. Miraculously, a "black-robed little figure"—the eponymous Sister St. Luke—arrives seemingly out of nowhere captaining a small boat to rescue the men (71). As if driven by supernatural aid, the nun grips the

sail rope until the rescue of Keith and Carrington is complete. This heroic act contradicts everyone's expectations since the nun is a "frail little creature" and "so timid a fly could frighten her" (42, 73). These descriptors not only mark her personality, but they also hint at her ethnic Otherness. Although Woolson never specifies Sister St. Luke's heritage, readers are led to believe that she could be Menorcan, a group who are, as the text describes, "too indolent to do anything more than smoke, lie in the sun, and eat salads heavily dressed in oil" (45). Although Sister St. Luke is not lazy, other characters bristle at her languid personality and justify her surge of bravery by acknowledging the nun's unwavering Catholic piety: "the good Lord helped her do it," one character remarks (45, 73). The tension between her physical timidity and her near comical adherence to the Catholic religion finally reaches its peak in this baffling behavioral change and points to Woolson's central concern in the story: how to embody difference in a rapidly changing American south.

By foregrounding the folkloric practices of the characters in "Sister St. Luke," Woolson tests the boundaries of difference in the post-Reconstruction south. Sister St. Luke's ambiguous ancestry upsets the traditional ways of defining identity through racial or ethnic backgrounds. In fact, no one, either in the text or in scholarship, can come to terms with the nun's actual ancestry. Even though Sister St. Luke's heritage is unknown since she was abandoned as a baby on the steps of a convent and raised by nuns, other characters perceive her as Spanish, frequently addressing her as señora. Scholars, too, are unsettled about the nun's heritage. John Lowe claims that the nun is a metaphorical "descendant of the old Spanish sailor," which, as he makes clear, differentiates her from Menorcans (40). Alternately, Anne Boyd Rioux leaves her ancestry unsettled, pointing out that she "speaks Spanish but could be Minorcan [sic] or even Creole"

(62). In a story in which all the other characters' ancestry is clearly articulated, Sister St. Luke poses a problem since she is not easily slotted into an ethnic category.

Rather than identifying the nun as an ethnic Other, Woolson establishes that the nun's Catholic faith, rather than her race, is the fundamental signifier of her identity. This difference comes to the fore as Melvyna, an unabashed Calvinist from Vermont, describes the nun: "Is she a good Catholic, do you say? Heavens and earth, yes! She's that religious. . . . She believes every word of all that rubbish those old nuns have told her" (47). Later, Melvyna explains that the nun "loves the [convent] and feels lost and strange anywhere else" (48). For Melvyna, the nun is not a stranger because of her physical difference but rather because she follows a strict Catholic tradition.

Sister St. Luke's religious difference is further reinforced when the other characters struggle with what to call her. In the story, the nun's full name is, simply, St. Luke. In the Catholic tradition, novitiates to women's religious communities typically renounce their given names and adopt a religious name, an action that, as Nancy Sweet makes clear, sets the Catholic sister "apart from Protestant strictures" to become "an agent in her own right, constructing a new identity through the very proclamation of her vows" (16). Through the choice of her religious name, Sister St. Luke has renounced any racial or ethnic signifiers associated with her secular name and crafted a new, religious identity. Yet her name becomes a site of contested identity for the other characters who struggle over how to address her. Melvyna, for example, refuses to call the nun by her chosen name. Ever the intractable Calvinist, Melvyna makes clear, "Sister St. Luke is her name; and a heathenish name it is for a woman, in my opinion. I call her Miss Luke" (48). Acknowledging that she should call the nun by her full name, "Sister St. Luke," or simply "Sister," Melvyna refuses to do so because it would infringe upon her own Calvinist beliefs.

Keith and Carrington also trip over the nun's name, betraying their own preconceived notions of race. When first addressing the nun, Carrington falters, "Miss, Miss—Miss Luke—I should say, Miss St. Luke. I am sure I do not know why I should stumble over it when St. John is a common enough name" (49). Carrington links the nun's religious name to a common French surname, inscribing an ethnic dimension to her identity. This false equivalence not only illustrates the humorous awkwardness of the situation but more importantly points to the shifting perceptions of identity from ethnically-based to culturally-based.

Woolson's story thus posits how religious customs complicate traditional definitions of difference. If, as Matthew Frye Jacobson writes, "religion was sometimes seen as a function of race" in the late 19th century, Sister St. Luke certainly embodies this theory. Indeed, Keith and Carrington's need to identify a person according to their national heritage contributes to their difficulty in categorizing Sister St. Luke. Even though they "treated her, partly as a child, partly as a gentle being of an inferior race" (49), their quasi-infantilization of Sister St. Luke combines the nun's appearance with her odd behaviors to draw a clear racial line. By using this story to explore a stark religious contrast, Woolson invites readers to consider difference as something other than—or in addition to—physical traits.

Woolson's characterization of Sister St. Luke as a reclusive Catholic is therefore not a value-neutral choice. In fact, "Sister St. Luke" represents a radical intervention in the entrenched literary tradition of anti-Catholic sentiment that had circulated in Northern publications throughout the nineteenth century. In making the title character unquestionably Catholic, Woolson refutes the established anti-Catholic tropes that characterized Catholics as subversive to democracy, untrustworthy, and—particularly in the case of nuns—victims of abuse. As Maura Jane Farrelly observes, "One characteristic of the [Catholic] threat remained constant:

Catholicism was at all times seen as antithetical to freedom. Freedom, in turn, was seen as the foundation of 'American' identity" (xii). Considering the larger context of anti-Catholic writings, Woolson's linking of religious difference to ethnic difference is not necessarily new, but Woolson's depiction of the nun pushes back against the more virulent depictions of Catholics as malevolent actors in civil society.

Considering the story of Sister St. Luke within the context of earlier anti-Catholic writers makes the nun's rescue of Keith and Carrington—and the eventual changes brought to all these characters—even more significant. The only person who conquers the island's perils in that moment is the "strange" nun. In the end, Sister St. Luke's surprising rescue of Keith and Carrington overturns their earlier perception of her as from an "inferior race." Rather, her heroic deed constructs her not as inferior but as simply different. As the characters leave the isolation of Pelican Island, they reenter the wider American society having been changed in some way by their experiences there. In an act of uncharacteristic charity, Carrington sends an ornate crucifix to the nun's convent. Keith "bares his head silently in reverence to all womanhood, and curbs his cynicism as best he can, for the sake of the little Sister" (74). In this way, Keith comes to appreciate the nun *because* of her difference. In "Sister St. Luke," the divergent identities inhabiting the island all come to a point of harmony by the conclusion.

Like Sister St. Luke, whose ambiguous background threatens her own erasure, the contemporary Menorcans of Florida work hard to safeguard their ethnic traditions by individually observing some traditions and by hosting an annual Menorcan Heritage Celebration. Woolson's story helps to vividly connect the social concerns of the 1870s (with all its anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic overtones) with these contemporary actions. The literary depiction highlights the ambiguous nature of Catholic Menorcan heritage that must be constantly and

consciously performed in order to continue in America. At the same time, Carol Lopez-Bradshaw's memories and explanations of group-based traditions highlight the ephemeral nature of ethnic identity. The religious traditions that Woolson highlights shed light on the dynamism of social change that ushered Menorcans into the twentieth century as a white ethnic group.

The second half of this project pivots from literary analysis to the life experience narratives recorded from two small groups of women. The trajectory of Menorcans from religious and racial "other" to a white ethnic group parallels that of the women religious who are the subject of the fieldwork I did for the second half of this project. There I will trace the evolution of vernacular religious traditions during the twentieth century that fueled the concomitant development of white ethnicity. The next two chapters further demonstrate that the resonances between literature and the folkloric study of life experience narratives are both essential to understanding the role of women's vernacular religious traditions in the formation of ethnic identity.

Chapter 3

"We were the hunky sisters": The Lived Experiences of the Vincentian Sisters of Charity

I begin this chapter with a confession. Even before I had developed a thesis for this project, I had decided to include a chapter focusing on Catholic women's religious groups and their role in the evolution of white ethnicity. I had nicknamed the chapter "Nuns and Ethnicity,"[15] and when I mentioned my plans to mentors and peers, I was always met with enthusiasm, mingled with a bit of skeptical curiosity. Although in hindsight that decision seems like "putting the cart before the horse," the connections between Catholic sisters and the development of American ethnicity encapsulate the larger themes of this project. As I explain in this chapter, sisters are mediators in the Catholic church between public and private worship, and in that role, they have a direct impact on the perception of American ethnic groups. Within the hierarchy of the Catholic church, sisters occupy a liminal position between the institutional Church, represented by male bishops and priests, and the vernacular practices of the laity. Amy Koehlinger explains that "In their professional roles as teachers and nurses, sisters represented the public face of the church's teachings to the lay Catholics they served. Yet their work also required them to understand and respond sympathetically to the perspectives and practical needs of lay Catholics" (257). By stepping into this middle space—or what Don Yoder might call the "understanding gap between pulpit and pew" (3)—sisters engage with questions of identity and belonging in ways that foreground their liminal roles.

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[15] Women religious in the Catholic Church are divided into communities or orders, each with its unique foundation story and charism or guiding purpose. The orders themselves fall into one of two groups: nuns who withdraw from the world and devote themselves to prayer and sisters who live and work in the world and serve as teachers or nurses. The Vincentian Sisters discussed in the following fall into the latter category. For a nuanced discussion of the difference between nuns and sisters, see the introduction of Margaret M. McGuinness's *Called to Serve*.

American Catholic sisters were also central figures in the shifting perceptions of American whiteness. During the early twentieth century when European groups were in the process of consolidating to a monolithic whiteness, sisters propelled this cultural movement by engaging in three categories of public service: teaching, nursing, and operating social services like orphanages and settlement houses. By serving in a public capacity under the auspices of an organized religion, sisters demonstrated the potential for women to, as Koehlinger explains, “go places and do things that nonreligious white women could not” (257). Engaging with diverse groups, many of whom were socially marginalized and ethnically or racially Othered, sisters often expressed their own views about the shifting definitions of whiteness through their private correspondences or embodied it in their own lived experiences. In particular, their involvement with Catholic parochial education enshrined the transmission of vernacular, secular ethnic traditions within the context of formal Catholic theology.

The dual position of Catholic sisters reflects my own interests for including a chapter about Catholic sisters and ethnic identity. Growing up in a family that identified as both Roman Catholic and Slovak American, I had observed the close relationship between religious vocations and ethnic identity. My paternal grandma’s sibling, Sister Cecilia Ann, joined the Vincentian Sisters of Charity (VSC) order located outside of Pittsburgh, PA, in 1956 (See Figures 2 and 3). At the same time, she remained an active member of the family. Her role as a religious sister connects the family’s Slovak American identity to its commitment to the Catholic religion. As a sign of this hybrid role, Sister Cecilia Ann is called simply “Sister” by the family, even by her siblings. (I was embarrassingly old when I realized that “Sister” was not actually her first name, and even older when I realized that “Cecilia Ann” was her chosen religious name, not her birth name.) The family also relies on her to perform informal religious traditions at family gatherings.

Figure 2: The photo captures the ceremony during which lay Catholic women take their vows for religious life. Dressed in white, as brides, they exchange their secular clothing for a Catholic religion habit.

Figure 3: Sister Cecilia Ann pictured with her sisters after she took her religious vows.

At weddings, funerals, and holidays, for example, there is an unspoken rule that Sister Cecilia Ann will be asked to lead the blessing before the meal, a small act that reinforces her role as the family's most concrete connection to religious ritual.

As part of my research for this chapter, Sister Cecilia Ann offered me the opportunity to meet with several of her fellow sisters at their motherhouse on Pittsburgh's McKnight Road. Founded in 1902, the VSC was the first Slovak convent in the United States and was founded as a direct response to the large numbers of Slovak immigrants in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Father Adalbert Kazinczy, the pastor of St. Michael's parish in Braddock, Pennsylvania, recruited five sisters from the Hungary/Slovakia region of the Austro-Hungarian empire to work in his parish's parochial school. Most of those students were Slovak immigrants. Although the community of sisters soon relocated from their original motherhouse south of Pittsburgh to a plot of land north of Pittsburgh in what is now Ross Township, their main mission remained the same: to support the large numbers of Slovak immigrants who were arriving to work in the steel mills. Throughout the twentieth century, the VSC expanded their mission to diverse geographical areas, including Kentucky, Alabama, Maryland, and Arizona, and cultural groups, including indigenous people and African Americans.[16]

In conversations with six of the sisters, all of whom identified as Slovak Americans, I discovered that their experiences in the VSC[17] order resonate with the historical roles of

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[16] This history of the Vincentian Sisters of Charity is pieced together from M. Mark Stolarik's *The Slovak Americans* and the website for the Vincentian Sisters of Charity (VSC). See also Anne Kremenik's *History of the Congregation of the Vincentian Sisters of Charity of the Diocese of Pittsburgh*.

[17] It's important to note that the Vincentian Sisters of Charity no longer formally exists as an order. Due to decreasing membership, the VSC merged with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth (SCN), based in Kentucky, in November 2008. Although the remaining VSC members officially transferred their religious vows to the SCN, they have retained their Pittsburgh motherhouse. Because many of the sisters I spoke with referred to themselves as VSC and spoke of their experiences as part of the VSC order before the merger, I have chosen to refer to them as VSC.

American Catholic sisters. Their life experience narratives illustrate the confluence of gendered, ethnic, and religious identities that had a profound impact on the American view of whiteness. Most of the women I spoke to attended Catholic school at a young age, and they identified these early memories as one of the major influences that brought them to join the VSC. Despite growing up in diverse geographical areas of Pennsylvania and Ohio, the sisters shared a common ethnic identity, which served to create a sense of community within their order. Throughout their diverse work ministering to communities of African Americans, Latino Americans, American Indians, and white Americans, they also retained their Slovak traditions within their VSC community. Through this mediation, they represent one way that ethnic religious traditions affected perceptions of American whiteness.

This links their experiences to a larger context in which American Catholic sisters had a direct impact on the way that American racial groups were viewed. As Suellen Hoy explains, "Religion offered a way to mediate the tensions of race" (80). The work of Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini and Mother Katharine Drexel—two of America's first Catholic saints—provide important context to understand the significance of the work of the VSC sisters. The experiences of both Cabrini and Drexel illustrate the ways in which sisters have affected the perception of American ethnicity. While the Italian Mother Cabrini worked with her own immigrant group to actively foster a sense of Italian American identity, Mother Drexel—a white American—ministered to marginalized groups of African Americans and American Indians to shape the public narrative about these groups. In both historical examples, the sisters mediated the institutional Church and their lay practices through education. Although the particular approaches that Mother Cabrini and Mother Drexel took to address social inequality differed greatly, each exemplify the ways in which American sisters use their religious cover to negotiate

between marginalized groups and American institutions. In this way, these Catholic sisters demonstrate Leonard Norman Primiano's theory that "vernacular religiosity has the potential to manifest dimensions of both confirmation and contestation, of legitimization of the hegemonic as well as resistance to such societal and cultural manifestations of power" ("Manifestations" 387). Their actions resonate in important ways with the experiences that the sisters of the VSC shared with me. Their stories hew to the broader historical narrative of American Catholic sisters while simultaneously establishing their group's own specific identity as Slovak Americans.

The focus of this chapter is the life stories and personal narratives of the six sisters I spoke with and the ways in which those stories reinforce their group's identity as Slovak American Catholic women. As an example of a translocal community—or a group that illustrates how "enduring, open, and non-linear processes . . . produce close interrelations between different people and places" (Peth)—these women participated in a decades-long process of creating a shared sense of identity from disparate geographic backgrounds. The mechanisms by which the sisters established this sense of community varied by individuals: some recounted stories of feeling ostracized as a Slovak sister while others explained that their Slovak identity was only reinforced after joining the convent. Within these shifting perspectives, the role of their life stories is fundamental. The stories that they tell about how they came to join the convent, the obstacles they faced while in the order, and the work they've done in their surrounding communities have helped them establish a concrete Slovak American identity. If, as Robert Orsi posits, "Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life" (7), these sisters illustrate how to mediate Catholic faith with vernacular identity. As this chapter shows, their personal experience narratives are a discursive space that links vernacular religion, women's cultures, and ethnic identity.

Catholic Sisters, Parochial Education, and Joining the Order

In advance of visiting the sisters, I met with Sister Cecilia Ann, who insisted on making the on-site preparations for me. Prior to my arrival, we had agreed that I'd spend one afternoon at their campus outside of Pittsburgh. As my main point of contact, Sister Cecilia Ann chose the women that I would talk to. Throughout the afternoon, she introduced me to five other sisters: Sister Dorothy Dolak, Sister Tonya Severin, Sister Barbara Ann Lengvarsky, Sister Charlotte Gambol, and Sister Mary Clement Pavlik.[18] Each had joined the order as a teenager and was a life-long member of the order. They also all identified themselves as Slovak American. With the exception of Sister Mary Clement (who was born in 1916 and was 104 years old when we spoke), all of these sisters were born between 1930 and 1944, making them between 75 and 90 years old at the time of my visit in 2019.

Considering their age and their identification with a specific white ethnic group, these women bear out the idea that the growth of Catholic sisters is a function of European immigration. As European immigration grew in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, more women joined women's religious groups. Although nuns have lived on the American continent since at least 1639, the number of Catholic sisters and their congregations grew rapidly from the end of the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century (Ewens 21). According to George C. Stewart, Jr., there were an estimated 11,424 sisters in 1870 (564). By 1965, the apex of American Catholic sisterhood, there were approximately 209,000 (565). Interestingly, these numbers reflect European immigration patterns. As more European Catholics immigrated, more

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[18] From this point on, I have chosen to refer to the sisters by their first name. Although some sisters made it a point to share their family name with me, some identified themselves only by their first name—either their birth name or chosen religious name. For the sake of consistency, I will refer to each sister by her first name only.

women became sisters. Figures 4 and 5 visually depict the similarities between European immigration and the number of women in Catholic religious congregations. As the graphs show, the growth of Catholic sisters mirrors European immigration numbers, delayed by about a generation and a half. Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith write about this growth, pointing out

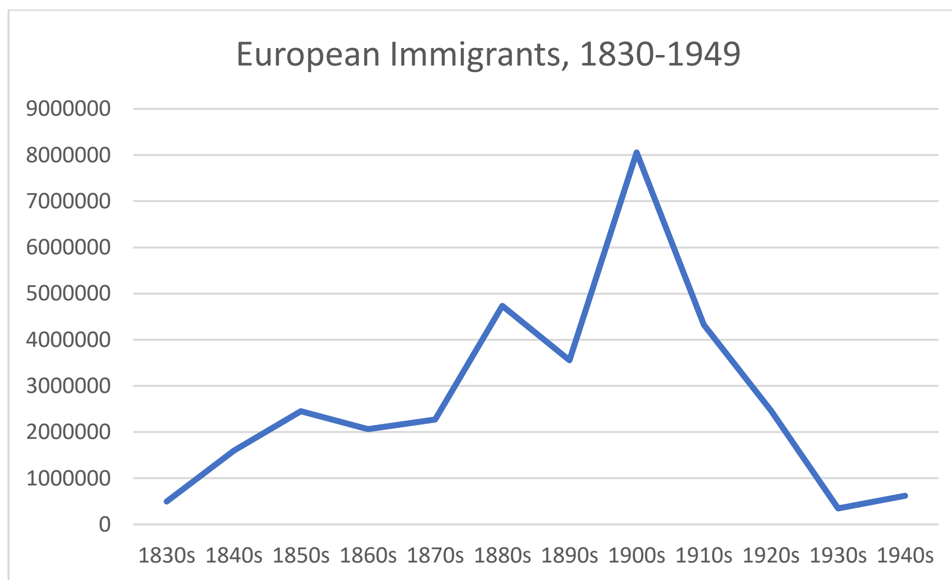

Figure 4: Source: Dinnerstein and Reimers, 218-22.

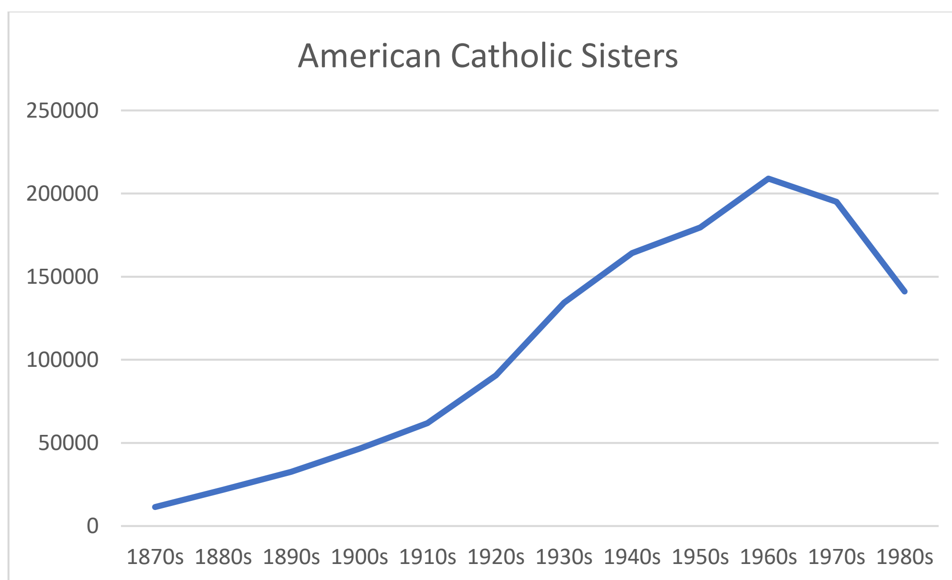

Figure 5: Source: Stewart, 564-65.

that most orders "began with a small band of women—European-, Canadian-, or American-born—who began living and working together in spiritual, emotional, physical and economic

support networks that eventually spanned every region of the country" (2). Considered in light of European immigration patterns, these ideas suggest a correlation between European immigration and the numbers of Catholic women religious. They also reinforce the notion that Catholic sisters reinforced a specific kind of Catholicism, one rooted in white European values.

As the number of sisters increased throughout the twentieth century, they took on a more public role in America than their European counterparts, establishing a women-led power base within the patriarchal structure of the American Catholic church. Throughout the nineteenth century, the lack of priests was a critical problem for the Catholic hierarchy; there were simply not enough priests to meet the needs of the immigrants and their descendants who required ministry. By the end of the nineteenth century, as James J. Kenneally observes, nuns "outnumbered male church workers in every diocese" and "were four times as numerous as priests" (58). As a result, sisters were encouraged to leave their convent and minister publicly. As American sisters interacted with the public throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were directly responsible for the "network of support and services that insured the transmission of Catholic values, culture, and education from generation to generation" (Coburn 2). This network that bridged the institutional church with the daily lives of the laity resulted in American sisters becoming "some of the best educated and most publicly active women of their time" (3). Whereas priests and bishops distributed sacraments, sisters took over the more vernacular, more material—and perhaps more vital—needs of the Catholic laity.

The history of the VSC fits this broad model of American Catholic sisterhood. From its founding, the VSC focused on the educational and health needs of the Slovak immigrants in Western Pennsylvania. In fact, most of the sisters I spoke with joined because they had wanted to become teachers and they recognized that becoming a sister was the most direct way to achieve

that goal. This also follows a larger pattern among American Catholic sisters. Other ethnographic studies of women religious highlight the impact of the women's early educational experiences on their decision to join a religious order. Carole Garibaldi Rogers writes in her sprawling oral history of American nuns that many of the sisters she spoke with pointed to their grade school teachers as role models. Rogers notes that their choice was driven by the image of a "cadre of happy women who were fulfilled in their work, enjoying each other's company, and working together toward a higher goal" (xii). Rogers' rosy portrait of these foundational educational experiences contrasts to Kathleen Sprows Cummings' more sober observations. Cummings concludes that the success of American Catholicism in the early twentieth century rested on a robust parochial education system that was, in effect, self serving. The parochial education system was a continuing effort "to attract a sufficient number of young Catholic women to religious life" in order to have enough teachers for a growing population base (112).

As I spoke with these women about why they joined the VSC, their stories highlighted their experiences with Catholic education as driving forces in their choice to join the convent. In contrast to Cummings' description of the structural forces that grew the ranks of women religious throughout the twentieth century, many of the sisters I spoke with recalled an internal call to vocations that was inspired by their experiences with Catholic education. In short, they recalled joining the VSC because they had been taught by Catholic sisters. If, as Patrick Mullen writes, personal experience narratives "communicate a great deal about [the story tellers] and their cultures" and "reveal the meaning of their lives from the perspective of old age" (3, 4), these sisters constructed their individual and collective identity around personal religious devotions.

Although the kind of education varied—from grade school to high school to their parish's religious education programs, sometimes called CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine)—most identified informal, vernacular elements as the factors that drew them to join the order, such as pedagogical techniques unique to Catholic education. Sister Barbara Ann, a soft spoken but intense woman, recalled that her call to become a sister was always present in her life. Born in 1940 in the small community of Smock, Pennsylvania, Sister Barbara Ann joined the VSC at the age of 16, attending her final two years of high school at the convent. But one moment during her early education stuck out in her memory. "When I was small," she explained,

> probably about five, I watched the sisters teach—the Josephites taught our CCD classes on weekends. So I just thought they were just something awesome. . . . We had these big charts—big, big charts with Bible stories on them. And the sisters used to turn a page every week and tell us the story. And I would say, oh, when I grow up, I want to be like that. I want to tell people about Jesus.

This young desire to "tell people about Jesus" matured into a call to evangelize. By the time she was in high school, her close family recognized that she would become a sister, even before she had made up her mind. "My sister was a year younger than I was," she explained, "and she knew that I was going to sign up. And my cousin knew that I was going to sign up." In her telling, Sister Barbara Ann's path to the sisterhood was one of destiny, inspired by a teaching aid used by teaching sisters.

Sister Barbara Ann further isolated a specific incident that led her to formally join the VSC. Although she knew she wanted to publicly minister through teaching, she didn't personally know any sisters to guide her. Since her town was too small for a Catholic school, she found inspiration in her parish's Sodality, a social group for Catholic youth. The Sodality was a

national organization whose mission was, according to William D. Dinges, to "promote the spiritual life and apostolic works of its members" (36). Sister Barbara Ann explained her experiences concisely: "I belonged to the Sodality. I was 16 then. I was the secretary, and Sister Frances Louise from [the VSC] came for a vocation talk, and I signed up." Sister Barbara Ann's brief mention of the Sodality points to a larger structure that encouraged traditional religious vocations while also confronting the patriarchal nature of the Catholic Church. Although the Sodality movement was a nationwide effort that was directed by the Catholic hierarchy, local parish groups were most often led by teaching sisters. When the national conferences were held, sisters far outnumbered priests. As Stephen Werner indicates, although priests directed the Sodality's Summer School of Catholic Action (SSCA) meetings, "Catholic sisters played a large and critical role in the SSCA. Group photos of SSCAs show priests in the front as a minority in a sea of sisters and lay people. These conferences provided unique opportunities for sisters, priests, and lay people to interact as equals and as partners" (35). That sense of empowerment extended to the local parishes, too, where Sodalities would push Catholic youth "beyond parish-based piety and devotionalism into the realm of social activism" (35). Considering that the Sodality movement subtly challenged the church's strict gender roles and mediated personal forms of religious devotion with community-based action, it's significant that Sister Barbara Ann linked her involvement with the Sodality and her choice to join the VSC. Although her inspiration to become a sister was rooted in her early childhood, her ultimate choice of where to join depended on a social group of similar-minded youth.

This notion that the call to vocations came through educational experiences resonated with several other sisters at the VSC. Sister Dorothy, who entered the Vincentian community in 1961 at the age of 17, also attributed her decision to her exposure to Catholic education as well

as her involvement with her parish's Sodality. A gregarious woman, Sister Dorothy grew up on the outskirts of the Pittsburgh metropolitan area, south of the city. Born and raised in the small community of Donora along Pennsylvania's Monongahela River, she attended a Catholic high school, which she credited for drawing her to the VSC. "In those days," she explained, "all the Catholic schools had sisters teaching in them." But her high school experience was unique at the time. She was part of the first graduating class of Monongahela Valley Catholic High School, a school that was founded by 14 local parishes, and five orders of sisters taught there, including the VSC. Like Sister Barbara Ann, she was drawn to religious life because of the religious symbols that her teachers used in the classroom. "My motives for joining the convent weren't spiritual," she said as she laughed:

> It was October and it was the month of the Holy Rosary. And I was sitting in high school and there was this— one of the sisters had a bulletin board up. She had this beautiful picture of the Blessed Mother with roses around it and a rosary, and I thought, when I become a teacher, I'm going to put a bulletin board up like that. And then I'm sitting there thinking, well I can't do that if I teach in Allen school, the public school in Donora. I guess I'll have to be a nun.

The sudden finality of that decision prefigured Sister Dorothy Ann's story of joining a convent. Although she didn't yet know which order she should join, she knew that she wanted to teach and that she wanted to teach using the religious symbols that she had associated with her family and community.

Like Sister Barbara Ann, Sister Dorothy further credited her involvement with the Sodality for solidifying her decision. She suggested that her involvement with the social group was the last step to becoming a sister: "I had a lot of girlfriends in high school. And we had a

Sodality. I was president of the Sodality. And there were other girls in the high school that were thinking of religious vocations." The Sodality encouraged her vocation, even engaging in secular rituals to bridge the transition to a religious life: "When I graduated, all the girls in the high school, they had a big—, like, a shower for us, and they bought us black stockings because in those days we still wore the old habit." Sister Dorothy's description of her transition from a lay young woman to a committed sister reinforces the interstitial role of American sisters. To celebrate her new vocation, her friends hosted a party that is typically aligned with a woman's marriage. In this way, the Sodality bridged the traditions of secular American society with the institutional religion of the convent.

Sister Cecilia Ann described a similar experience. Although she attended the public school in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in the 1940s, the religious education classes at her parish were taught by VSC sisters. She explained that her inspiration for joining a religious order was her religious education classes on Sundays: "I can still remember being at St. Francis' old church. I looked up at Sister Casimir and I said, I'd like to be a sister like her and teach kids. . . . Just one Sunday and I'm thinking, I'd like to be a sister like her and teach kids. I didn't know nothing about the Vincentian Sisters." Like Sister Barbara Ann and Sister Dorthy, Sister Cecilia Ann linked her call to religious life to a specific moment in her education, and that moment prominently featured a teaching sister.

What is perhaps most interesting about Sister Cecilia Ann's story of joining is that she doesn't actually describe *making* the decision. She explained that two sisters from the VSC order visited her home to discuss joining. Sister Frances was the vocation director at the time, she remembered, "And when she heard that I was interested, she came to visit me at my house with Sister Beatrice. . . . And so they came. I had an interview with them. Then before I knew it, I was

packing up and coming to Pittsburgh." Her story thus elides the decision-making process, constructing her narrative in a way that suggests being a sister was her destiny. In fact, most of the sisters I spoke with talked as if they had been destined to be vowed religious, an aspect of their life stories that reflects Mullen's assertion that personal narrative stories don't necessarily portray objective "truth" as much as the teller's self image, culturally constructed (6-7). In this sense, by removing most of the conversations with family and friends that led to the decision to join religious life, these sisters constructed their self-image as *always* a sister.

However, not every sister I spoke with was as certain about their religious vocation. Sister Tonya, the youngest sister I spoke with, explained that she didn't make up her mind to join a religious order until late in high school. She was born in 1944 in Natrona, a northeast suburb of Pittsburgh. Even though she "had Vincentian sisters through the first eight grades of school," she was still conflicted about the role of Catholicism in her life. She confessed, "When I was a sophomore in high school, I didn't even know if I believed in God, let alone to become a sister. You know how sophomores are. . . . It's just a challenging time in your life." Part of her confusion stemmed from the kind of formal theological education she encountered in high school. Unlike other sisters, Sister Tonya didn't identify a nostalgic memory of a teaching sister breeding a love for education. Instead, she recalled that the priest teaching high school religion class *did not* appeal to her understanding of religious observance. She explained, "We had a priest that was teaching us, and he was using St. Thomas Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God. And I said, that doesn't tell me that there's a God, whatever they're saying." Sister Tonya found this esoteric (and patriarchal) explanation of faith unsatisfactory.

Instead, Sister Tonya found direction in a youth group, the Sacred Heart club, during her junior year. She explained that this group was specifically "for girls who were thinking about

religious life." But her initial interest in the group was more worldly: "So my friends were all joining the Sacred Heart club. That was because there was this good looking priest and everyone wanted to be there. (Laughter.) God works in whatever way God can. (Laughter.) So we would all sit there and listen to him talking. And somehow in the back of your mind, you're hearing God's call somehow." In her life story, Sister Tonya draws a boundary between the theological debates she encountered in formal Catholic education and the less structured discussions in social groups.

Ironically, her call to vocation became clear only when discussing her life's options with her boyfriend:

> I was dating. I had a pretty steady boyfriend. But I'm still thinking maybe I should become a sister. And I told him that I was thinking about it. And he said, Aw, he said, I was thinking of becoming a priest, too. He never became a priest. He became a lawyer. (Laughter.) I just felt like I had to try coming [to the convent] to see if this is where I should be. I was going to—I passed the national league nursing test, I was going to be a nurse and had my uniforms ordered and everything. And then I decided to become a sister. So I became a biology teacher.

Sister Tonya's story triangulates the power of women religious in a patriarchal system. The story is framed between the influence of three men: the negative influence of the priest who taught her theology class, the positive, even worldly influence of the attractive young priest, and the peer influence of her boyfriend. Bounded by these three men, she nevertheless made the decision independently with her own career goals in mind. Unlike Sister Barbara Ann or Sister Dorothy, Sister Tonya didn't express a concrete call through her education. Rather, she joined because she felt like she needed to explore this one option (out of many).

As they recounted stories of their call to religious life, these sisters highlighted the ways in which their personal experiences led them to join the VSC. Interestingly, the stories that I heard from these sisters during my visit closely resemble interviews that appear on the website for the Vincentian Sisters of Charity. As I read through their biographical interviews, I realized that the stories I had heard were well-told tales. Many of the details that the sisters had told me about their lives appeared in this online archive, sometimes with word-for-word similarities (Vincentian). Apparently, the stories I heard had been rehearsed through many iterations. If, as Mullen explains, “the best personal stories are told repeatedly” (5), these sisters’ stories reveal what they deemed important to their group’s culture: their experiences with Catholic education, their involvement with informal social groups, and their desire to evangelize through teaching.

Translocal Religious Community and Slovak Heritage

More than just establishing a linear narrative of their individual lives, the life stories of these sisters also reveal how cultural influences, not just a personal call to religious life, led them to join the VSC. Collectively, their stories suggest that ethnic heritage played a large role in determining which order they joined. For many of these sisters, the VSC convent, north of Pittsburgh, was not the closest convent to their homes (See Figure 6). In fact, the geographical reach of the VSC recruitment is impressive: the sisters I spoke with came from as far away as Johnstown, Pennsylvania (about 70 miles east of the VSC motherhouse) and Cleveland, Ohio (about 130 miles northwest of the VSC motherhouse). Although it’s difficult to generalize the geographic reach of women’s religious communities,[19] their choice to join the VSC reflects the work that

[19] To put this in perspective, some orders reach across continents, while others remain mostly local. Even though, as Gertrud Hüwelmeier notes, many congregations “had been engaging in

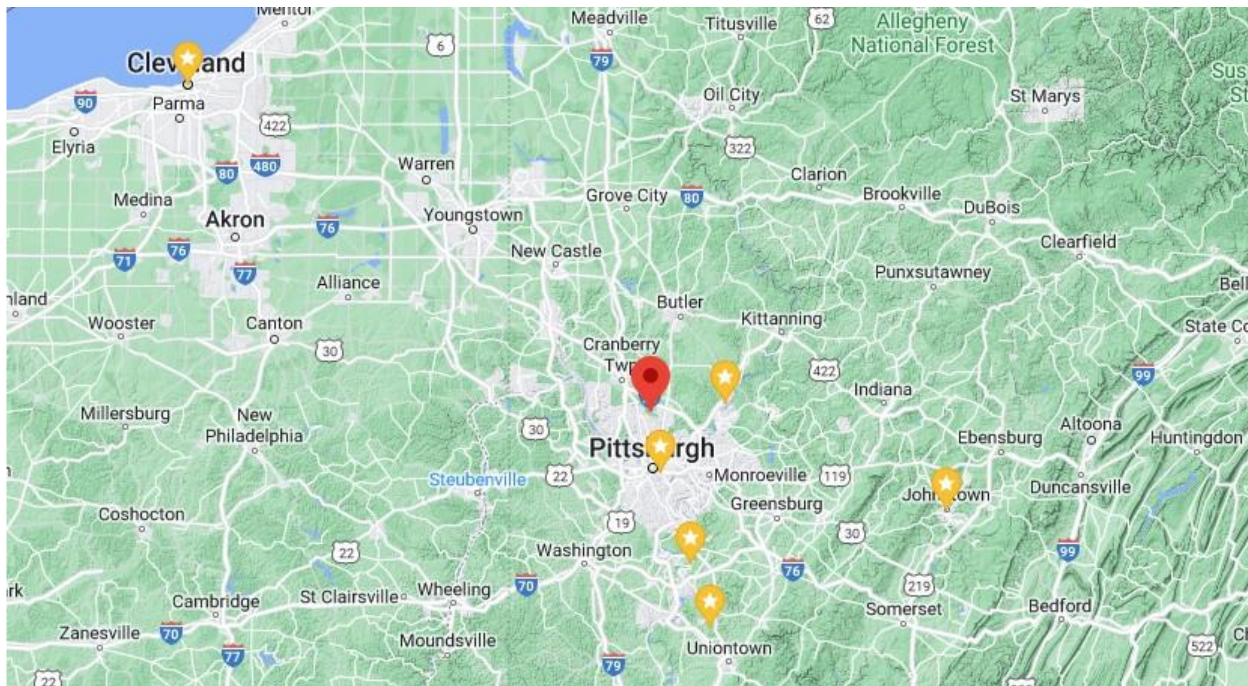

Figure 6: This map shows the homes of the six women I spoke with. The red marker is the VSC motherhouse. The gold and white stars are the sisters' hometowns.

these women put into developing and maintaining religious and ethnic bonds within their community. Because the VSC was a nominally Slovak order, their choices echo the notion of a translocal community, or what Robert Zecker defines as "a community centered not in shared turf but in churches and fraternal clubs to which a widely diffuse membership belonged. A translocal community could expand to contain people miles, even states apart" (425). The VSC motherhouse constituted a translocal community that depended as much on religious affiliation as it did on ethnic heritage.

Underlaying their stories of why they joined lies a concern for choosing the "right" order, a decision which for many of them related to their identification as Slovak Americans. Many of these sisters told me that they chose the VSC precisely because the ethnic heritage of the order

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cross-border activities since the late nineteenth century," the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) expanded the abilities of sisters to develop relationships beyond their local communities (187). While some congregations in America and Europe drew new members from Africa and Asia, other congregations relied mostly on local women to sustain their communities.

matched their own ethnic background. Two of the oldest sisters I spoke with, who joined the VSC in the 1930s and 1940s, made it sound like there was little choice in where to join: they were Slovak American women and so they joined a Slovak order. Sister Mary Clement, the only sister to wear her black wimple when we spoke, told me that she joined in 1930. She called herself "the silly nun," and our conversation bore out that characterization. When I asked where she was born, she laughed, "In a house." As I learned throughout our conversation, that house was located in Pittsburgh's South Side neighborhood.

Growing up on the South Side, an ethnic enclave for Slovak immigrants, her ties to Europe were strong. Her parents immigrated from the Slovak region of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and her older brother joined the priesthood. She explained that she "wasn't even 15 yet" when she decided to join the order: "I was just graduated from eighth grade. And from eighth grade I went right to the coop!" She laughed at her own unique humor. "And I'm not sorry," she said. Like other sisters I spoke with, she explained that her involvement in her local parish partly inspired her decision to join an order. "I used to work with the sisters a lot" at her parish, she said. "In the summertime, I took care of the sacristy for Father." While Sister Mary Clement held very personal reasons for becoming a sister, she also hinted that the VSC was the right order for her because it matched her ethnic background. Since she was a Slovak American, and attended a Slovak American church, she was destined to join a Slovak American order.

Unlike Sister Mary Clement, Sister Charlotte was not a Pittsburgh native. Yet her path to the VSC led through Sister Mary Clement's South Side neighborhood. Sister Charlotte was born and raised in Cleveland, but she had a difficult upbringing. "I didn't have a family," she told me. "My mother died when I was 5, and my dad died when I was 17." When she was a child, her dad was paralyzed after the family's restaurant was robbed and he was assaulted. Her grandparents

cared for her, although, as she recalled, "I was raised on the streets mostly." Despite her dad's physical limitations, he still exerted influence over the direction of his daughter's life choices. She said, "My father decided that my grandparents spoiled me. I needed some discipline. So they sent me to boarding school," a school run by the VSC at their motherhouse in Pittsburgh. She explained that her extended family led her to this particular school: "My Aunt Ann was the Pittsburgh girl, so she knew the Vincentian sisters. They taught at her school on Carson Street South Side. So she says, well, send her there because I know the sisters. So I came here." After spending three years in the academy as a student, she formally entered the order in 1947. Interestingly, she chose the VSC not because of any particular recruitment strategy by the sisters but because her Slovak family chose to send her to this particular Slovak Catholic boarding school. She came because of the social capital built between a member of her extended family and the Vincentian sisters.

The experiences of Sister Mary Clement and Sister Charlotte illustrate the connections between location, ethnic heritage, and institution. Both women, for example, found themselves at the VSC because of their connection to Slovak Catholic parishes. Their experiences foreground the role of religious institutions like convents in establishing a shared Slovak American community that stretched beyond single neighborhoods. Because Slovak immigrants were often dispersed throughout regions, they developed religious and social institutions, like convents, to create a shared ethnic identity. Zecker writes, "As members of a small ethnic group, often laboring in isolated yet multi-ethnic settings such as coal patch towns or small steel cities, Slovaks often had no other option but to find community among co-ethnics in creative ways, using the institutions they built themselves, not the accident of who lived in the tenement or shack next door" (425). Part of this creation of Slovak community included the Slovak American

sisters who served as educators to the children and grandchildren of Slovak immigrants. As Zecker explains, some Pittsburgh parishes listed members from up to 70 miles away, drawing parishioners based on ethnic identity, rather than proximity to their home. Mirroring the draw of the VSC, Zecker's notion of translocal community explains why the VSC order drew both Sister Mary Clement—a Pittsburgh native—and Sister Charlotte—a Cleveland native—into the same order. By drawing on diverse geographical locations to attract new members, the VSC relied on the strength of the religious institutions to reinforce a shared sense of ethnic identity.

Although the consolidation of Slovak American identity through the work of women religious is perhaps an unintended consequence of the VSC's mission, this synthesis mirrors a larger movement in the Catholic church that relied on ethnic national identity to further the institutional goals of the Church. Although from a different ethnic group than the VSC, Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini is an example of a Catholic woman who navigated between the institutional church and vernacular ethnic traditions. Born in 1850 in the Lombard region of Italy, Cabrini founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Italy in 1880. Looking to expand her order's mission, she arrived in America in 1889 with the intention of ministering to the fragmented Italian American community.

Notably, "Italian" in the early 1900s was still not a coherent national identity for many immigrants from the region. As Stephen Michael DiGiovanni explains, "Many Italian immigrants had neither love for their newly united homeland nor a deep dedication to the Church" (59). This division somewhat mirrors the Slovak immigrant experience. Similar to Italy, the modern Slovak republic didn't come into existence until 1918, so Slovak immigrants didn't always cohere around a sense of nationality. Rather they identified along regional lines. As M. Mark Stolarik points out, Slovaks "migrated to the United States in village chains. If enough of

them settled in a neighborhood . . . , then they proceeded to establish a parish. However, if another group of Slovaks also migrated to the same locality in the United States, but they came from a different dialectical region, this group would also . . . establish its own parish" ("Slovak" 1324). Like Italians, a cohesive Slovak identity emerged as institutions, like the Catholic church, coalesced diverse identities into more coherent groups.

Cabrini's work is instructive in illuminating the tendency for vernacular religious customs to affect institutional participation. Like other Catholic women religious, Cabrini mediated ethnic identity and American identity to ensure religious participation. The Italian communities living in America "divided along lines of provincial loyalties, whose religious life was based upon folk religion and popular cults, and which was not always friendly or receptive to the institutional church" (DiGiovanni 75). Cabrini worked to ease the tension between the informal religion of many Italian immigrants and the institutional church's desire to count immigrants as formal members of a parish. The immigrants' adherence to "folk religion" highlights the split between Catholic institutional leaders and the lay Italian immigrants. DiGiovanni explains that "religion" signified to both Mother Cabrini and American bishops "the official doctrines, worship, and practices of the Catholic Church" (76). To Italian immigrants, though, religion was something "more homespun than institutional, and, therefore, unacceptable to the Holy See, to Mother Cabrini, or the Archbishop of New York and his clergy" (76). As Frances M. Malpezzi and William M. Clements make clear, Italian immigrants relied on "emotional identification with [the] saints, and the Virgin Mary—much more approachable than God the Father" (114). Malpezzi and Clements explain that "the Church, which traditionally received much more support from women than from men, figured in their lives only at rites of passage such as baptisms, wedding, and funerals" (114). Cabrini's method was to act as a

mediator between the American church and the Italian folkways by addressing immigrants' material needs as well as the perceived spiritual errors of the Italian immigrant community.

To do this, she leveraged the Italian folkways of immigrants to guide them to a more nationalistic sense of Italian community. Cabrini's letter "To the Commissioner General of Emigration" dated May 13, 1910 ostensibly seeks an increased subsidy from the Italian Commissioner to support Cabrini's American mission. But in the letter, Cabrini also pushes back against the accusation that her schools and orphanages do not impart an Italian sense of heritage to the pupils. She writes that "To educate the heart of the children to love their far-off native land, to instill in their souls the feeling they must show for the country that received them, to train them so that their little hearts can beat with affection for our Italy" are not tasks that can be quantified empirically (qtd in Sullivan 260). Further, Cabrini makes clear, "It is easy to acclaim one's native land at banquets, in parades and with flag waving, but it is difficult to keep alive in a hostile environment a love for Italy in the hearts of youth. It is still more difficult to gain the respect of local authorities and the public in general" (qtd in Sullivan 261). Here, Cabrini gestures toward the balancing act that she must engage in: she has to ensure that her pupils will demonstrate a sufficient "Italian" pride while at the same time earn the respect of their surrounding American communities. Cabrini concludes that her act of Italian patriotism is to "train [children] so they will not be ashamed to be Italians; it means to develop young people who will provide to their country of adoption that Italian migration is not a dangerous element, but a desirable factor in the civilization and progress of a nation on whose shores Italy annually casts thousands of its emigrants" (qtd in Sullivan 261). Here, she lays bare that her work as a religious woman is inextricably linked to her Italian identity; her work as a sister fundamentally affects how Americans perceive her native ethnic group.

Mother Cabrini's work to solidify an Italian American identity within the immigrant communities from various Italian provinces mirrors the experiences of many Slovak immigrants at the turn of the century. Like Italians, who were often at odds with the official structure of the Catholic church, "Slovak laymen often ran afoul of canon law, and ended up quarreling with their own pastors and/or bishops" (Stolarik, "Slovak" 1324). As June Granatir Alexander makes clear, "Slovak religion was a blend of folklore and superstitions" (*The Immigrant* 5). Although Slovaks generally observed the canonical laws of the church, Alexander writes, "In their daily lives, religion was guided less by theological doctrines than by a system of beliefs and practices grounded in peasant mystic traditions and affixed to the Christian calendar" (6). While Cabrini's personal correspondence offers concise insights into her methods of creating an Italian community, the motivations of the Slovak nuns in the Vincentian order aren't as clear cut or easily identified. However, their life stories demonstrate that mediating ethnic and American identities is a key to ensuring religious participation as well as acceptance into American whiteness.

Many of the sisters indicated that their identity as Slovak American was a fundamental piece of their personal identity, even before entering the convent. Sister Barbara Ann, for example, noted that before joining the VSC, she felt "happy to be Slovak." As she explained, "I loved our hymns. In church, we would pray the rosary in Slovak. And the priest would have the sermon in Slovak and then in English. So were a strong Slovak community." That sense of ethnic community followed her to the convent: "When I got here and all the customs and everything was the same, it was like, isn't this amazing!" Many of the vernacular traditions that the VSC sisters engaged in as a community resonated with her experiences as a child of a Slovak family. These customs included "special soups that we had on holidays, and the holiday Slovak hymns

that we sang and processions that we did in our small little church. It was just like, wow, I can't get over this." For Sister Barbara Ann, those specific folk traditions translated to a sense of familiarity and comfort. As she concluded, "It was home."

While other sisters acknowledged feeling pride at their Slovak heritage, not every sister found the transition to a Slovak religious community a smooth one. Sister Dorothy made clear that her Slovak background dictated which convent she had access to. When considering which order she should join, Sister Dorothy had a revealing conversation with her parish priest:

> When I was in high school, we had a guidance counselor. And at one point, as I told you I would go to all these different retreats at different mother houses. And the Sisters of St. Joseph had these wonderful vocation retreats, and they were very outgoing, you know, and I liked their habit. (Laughter) I remember going to this Father Lutz [her pastor], and I was telling him that I was debating between these two communities. And he said to me, he said, "Dorothy," he said, "go to your own kind." And that meant go to the Vincentians because they were Slovak.

Sister Dorothy recalled that some of her friends joined orders outside of their ethnic heritage and experienced exclusion as result. She explained, "One of my good friends, Sister Katherine, she went to— she was German and she went to Seton Hill. And they were real Irish sisters there. And she said they like looked down on her." As functions of individual immigrant communities, sisters were not only aware of the coherence of their ethnic groups but also policed which ethnic groups could belong to their religious communities.

Yet not every sister experienced ethnic prejudice in quite the same way. My conversation with Sister Tonya and Sister Cecilia Ann, for example, illustrated the different experiences and perceptions held by each individual sister. The two sisters remembered different impressions

about how their ethnic identity was perceived when attending college. I asked Sister Tonya if there was a time that she felt her Slovak identity "mattered." She answered, "When we first started going to college, there were some sisters from another community who thought we were not as intelligent. I just got that impression from them. They kind of looked down on us a little bit. But I got my good grades, and I didn't let them make me feel that I was not as good as they were. But there was that feeling." After Sister Tonya's explanation, I noticed a look of unease on Sister Cecilia Ann's face. Twenty years Sister Tonya's senior, Sister Cecilia Ann confessed that she didn't have the same experience. "I guess I just went to school, college, and I guess I didn't—it didn't matter, you know. Because I thought, I'm going there to learn and to do my, you know—. I guess I never felt that way." These contrasting perceptions—from believing that there was some ethnic prejudice directed to them to not noticing any ill feelings—illustrates the shifting logic of white ethnicity through the mid-twentieth century. Although not a linear movement, since Sister Cecilia Ann attended college classes before sister Tonya, their memories show that there was a movement occurring during the middle decades of the century that elided their particular ethnic background and consolidated European immigrants into a larger category of whiteness.

One story about ethnic prejudice points to the way that the VSC have defined themselves as an order. Sister Dorothy explained that within the larger group of VSC sisters, there is a tradition of tales of ethnic discrimination at the hands by more "Americanized" groups. She explained that "Our sisters were always— like not so much in my day already. But they always tell stories that, like, we were the hunky sisters." Referring to a common epithet of "hunky" for Slovak immigrants in the early twentieth century, Sister Dorothy expounded on how these ethnic biases played out within the local Catholic institutions. As Sister Dorothy recalled the story,

when a local parish was expanding their school in the early 1960s, the pastor needed sisters to staff the classrooms. Sister Dorothy explained that even though the parish was "using our chapel for their services, you know, before they built it," the pastor nonetheless "didn't want our sisters because they were hunkies." But as the story goes, the Catholic bishop stepped in: "But then I guess the bishop told him well, you have to take these sisters because they, you know, helped you." Before launching into this story, Sister Dorothy made it clear that this is a story that had been handed down to her from older sisters. Mullen's assertion that "The past is viewed from the perspective of the present: when an old person tells a story about the past, it is not necessarily an absolutely factual account of the way things were; rather, the story is filtered through the imagination of the teller and influenced by what has happened in the intervening years and by the current situation of the storyteller" (3). Sister Dorothy's retelling of this particular story hews to a larger cultural narrative of sisters who overcome hierarchical structures to fulfill their mission in the community. At the same time, it communicates the fundamental importance of the VSC as a Slovak order. At heart, this story is about how a plucky group of women overcame ethnic discrimination to accomplish their order's mandate and serve their community. In short, it reinforces the centrality of the order's ethnic background.

Social Activism and the Situational Nature of Ethnicity

Throughout our conversations, many of the sisters related how their involvement in a Slovak American religious order coincided with their ministry to marginalized groups. The members of the VSC describe themselves as servant sisters, committed to inclusion by ministering to the poor and proclaiming a Catholic social gospel. All of their work as sisters is guided by their order's charism. Institutionally, charisms are defined by the Catechism of the

Catholic Church as "graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men, and to the needs of the world" ("Charisms"). But Sister Tonya explained it to me simply as the order's "gift to the church." The VSC's charism aligns most closely to the third point in the list from the Catechism: ministering to people's worldly needs. Sister Tonya explained that their "charism is that of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac. And ours is, we're called to serve, to serve God's people."

The VSC directly follow the lineage of Vincent's and Louise's original order, the Daughters of Charity, founded in 1633. McGuinness explains in *Called to Serve* that Vincent and Louise re-structured the way that Catholic women could serve the church institutionally. McGuinness writes that Vincent and Louise "were not interested in forming another cloistered community of nuns—they sought women willing to roll up their sleeves and move among those in need of their services" (5). The "simple vows" that Vincent and Louise pioneered allowed women to be either a cloistered nun or a sister "who served those in need through education, hospital work, or direct contact with the poor" (5). McGuinness's scholarly explanation echoes Sister Cecilia Ann's explanation of the VSC mission: "We're like St. Vincent and St. Louise," she said. "They were out among the people. And what does the Pope and the bishops tell the priests today? Don't sit at home in your two by four room. Get out among the people."

While the sisters I spoke with described their decision to join the convent as a personal choice, they framed those choices as a way to work within a community of women focused on collective action. In this way, the re-tellings of their life stories not only project a unified narrative onto their own individual lives but they also contribute to the larger narrative of the VSC order itself. Sister Tonya clarified that while other orders acknowledge different gifts (the Benedictines, for example, "had a greater stress on praying"), the VSC "had a greater stress on

ministering, on being with the people." As a core part of the order's identity, their ministry to marginalized communities was, in the words of Sister Cecilia Ann, "just something we did." This broader ministry also follows the original mandate of the order to minister to Pittsburgh's Slovak immigrant population. As Slovak families transitioned out of penury throughout the twentieth century, the children and grandchildren of those immigrants were able to focus attention on other marginalized communities.

The work of the VSC falls in line with what Ilia Delio identifies as the Catholic Social Gospel. A movement of the late nineteenth-century that coincided with the Protestant Social Gospel, the Catholic Social Gospel resulted in American Catholic sisters ministering in the public arena in a way that had "significant consequences that challenged the social structures of nativism, racism and gender discrimination" (3). The Catholic Social Gospel laid the groundwork for Catholic sisters' ministering to racial minorities in the mid-twentieth century where being "out among the people" necessarily leads to engaging with the political and social concerns of those people, including the construction of racial and ethnic identity. Koehlinger notes how "Caucasian women religious" in the 1960s began to minister to "African American enclaves in Northern urban centers and in the rural South" (255). Even though, as Koehlinger clarifies, "Interracial apostolic work by white religious was the exception rather than the rule," some white Catholic sisters nonetheless responded to the needs of racial minorities.

The VSC were certainly one of the groups that responded to this call to work across the binary racial line, and their work with Black communities illuminates the situational nature of their ethnic identity. While I didn't hear any stories of these sisters staging sit-ins or boycotts, they did describe experiences that resonate with other orders that ministered to "unlikely, non-Catholic places like inner-city slums, secular college campuses, and the poorest corners of the

Jim Crow South," a public ministry that simultaneously mediated the color line and consolidated European ethnicity as white (Koehlinger 255). In particular, two of the sisters told me stories about their work in Alabama as part of the VSC mission to the American South. Sister Barbara Ann told me about the many years she served as director of the City of St. Jude Social Services in Montgomery, Alabama, and Sister Dorothy recalled her brief time working at the school at Mother Mary Mission in Phenix City, Alabama. Both City of St. Jude and Mother Mary Mission were established in the late 1930s and early 1940s to minister specifically to African Americans. Although the VSC did not establish either of the missions, the order answered requests to staff them (Hertel-Baker).

The sisters' experiences in Alabama reflect the order's call to minister to communities in need while also illuminating the ways in which the women's public ministry affected perceptions of their ethnic identity. As Sister Barbara Ann and Sister Dorothy were recounting stories about their work for marginalized communities of color in Alabama, their vocabulary shifted from one of Slovak identity to one of racial difference. For example, when Sister Dorothy was telling me about her teenage decision to join the VSC, she made it clear that her Slovak identity was a driving factor in which order she joined: she joined the VSC precisely because she was Slovak. But during her time in Alabama, her identity as a descendant of Slovak immigrants didn't carry the same weight. In that context, her identity as white, Northern, and Catholic mattered more than her Slovak heritage. This shift in connotation highlights what Elliott Oring explains as "the sense that ethnic identity is *situational*" (original emphasis 28). Oring writes, "Rather than being something constant and immutable, the recognition of a group or the sense of an identity may vary with situation and circumstance" (28). By using the situational context to define their ethnic and racial identities, Sister Barbara Ann and Sister Dorothy point to the ways in which their roles

as sisters ministering to communities of color affected the way their ethnic background was perceived.

The work of the VSC sisters among African American communities in Alabama reveal how the order, as an institution, lived out its charism through individual acts of social uplift. At the same time, their ministry in the deep south reveals how the individual sisters modified their relationship to ethnic identity in contexts outside of their Pittsburgh motherhouse. Sister Barbara Ann explained that she was sent to work at the City of St. Jude in 1984 and stayed for 35 years. The memories she recounted from her time at the City of St. Jude illustrate the confluence of personal vocation and institutional charism. The City of St. Jude was founded in the 1936 to, in Sister Barbara Ann's words, "lift up the Blacks." As part of the contingent of sisters invited to minister there, Sister Barbara Ann explained, "I was sent down to teach. I was in the fifth grade. That's where I stayed for the last 15 years down there."

For Sister Barbara Ann, her work at the City of St. Jude among people of color mirrored her own white ethnic upbringing. She explained, "I liked the people. I could identify with poverty because I grew up in a coal mining town." Although she made it clear that as a child she "never felt poverty . . . because we never were hungry," she explained that the struggles of the poor resonated with her. "I don't know," she said, "I just cared about the homeless and the prostitutes and the drug dealers." She explained, "Anytime they came through the door, I always spoke to them. Always. And I would give them hugs." For Sister Barbara Ann, her mission in Alabama not only carried out the charism of the VSC but also resonated with her upbringing in a poor Slovak immigrant family.

In addition to their work at the City of St. Jude, sisters from the VSC also participated in outreach at Mother Mary Mission in Phenix City. Sister Dorothy recalled how her work as a

principal at the school on Mother Mary Mission's campus highlighted the racial and religious divide between the sisters of the VSC and the students they taught. She explained that at one point in her service she had grown dissatisfied with teaching at the local high school near the VSC motherhouse in Pittsburgh, so she requested a transfer. As she recounted, "The Major Superior called me into the office and said, 'did you ask for a change,' and I said, 'yes.' And she says, 'well, we're sending you to Alabama to be principal at this Mother Mary . . . (shifts to Southern accent) Mother Mary Mission on the Auburn Opelika Road.'" The school was right across the river from Fort Benning so, Sister Dorothy said, "A lot of the military guys—Black military guys sent their children to the Catholic school." At the time Sister Dorothy served as principal, the student body was made up solely of African American students. As she explained, "400 Black students. Maybe 20 of them were Catholic. They were, all the rest, Southern Baptists."

This led to understandable cultural misunderstandings, specifically around the Catholic tradition of addressing people of authority as "Father" or "Sister," experiences that highlight the situational nature of religious tradition. As Sister Dorothy tells it, "The name of the school was Mother Mary Mission, in honor of the Blessed Mother. And her birthday is September 8th. So I told the kids it's Mother Mary's—, or it's Blessed Mother's birthday, and we had a birthday cake. Well the kids were used to like, Brother Dan and Sister Ann. They said, (shifts to Southern accent) 'Mother Mary, how old is she? Is she gonna come to visit us?'" She laughed and then concluded, "They had no concept that this was like the Blessed Mother." Sister Dorothy's story follows a well-documented experience among white sisters ministering to African American communities at the time. In her work, Koehlinger details the experiences of several white sisters serving in predominately Black communities who experienced similar confusion. Koehlinger

quotes one sister's letter: "Just imagine what an enigma I was on campus last September: northerner, white skin, fast speech, and a Catholic. To call me 'Sister' was nearly incredible for these students, since all members of the black community call each other BROTHER or SISTER. By being white, I was the one person in the classroom that should be Miss, Mrs., Dr., or anything but definitely not Sister" (264). These anecdotes highlight the mutability of religious signifiers based on cultural context. Although Sister Dorothy's students shared her Christian background, the fact that their denominations differed led to cultural confusion, a boundary that reflected both their physical difference and their religious difference.

The work of Catholic sisters like the VSC in marginalized communities highlights the situational nature of ethnicity and the permeability of the binary racial line. The example of Mother Katharine Drexel and her work with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS) order helps to clarify the ways in which American sisters have mediated the binary color line, and it sheds light on how the public ministry of the VSC to African American communities contributes to the development of ethnicity. Mother Katharine Drexel is a stark example of a woman who leveraged her role as both a public figure and a Catholic sister to engage with marginalized groups and shape the public narrative about those groups. As the Mother Superior to her order, Drexel drew on her status as a wealthy, American-born woman to proselytize to African American and American Indian communities. Although Drexel's paternal grandfather immigrated from Austria, Katharine was a fully-Americanized citizen. As Hoy explains, Drexel believed "that education informed by religion—in this case, Catholicism—could best uplift humankind, especially the oppressed" (74). Motivated by her father's philanthropic tendencies and her Catholic faith, she founded the SBS in 1891 with the explicit mission to minister to

African Americans and American Indians, particularly expanding the influence of the Catholic church across the American West.

The example of the SBS is an instructive case study in how women's religious communities used the cover of their habits to engage with marginalized communities of color. These sisters drew a distinct line between their own white ethnic heritage and the non-white identity of the groups they ministered to. Notably, Drexel cultivated an all-white order to minister to non-white communities. Hoy points out that most of the original members of the SBS were "working-class Irish. The majority were from eastern cities, while a number came from Ireland" (72). She explicitly turned away African American women who expressed interest in joining, instead sending them to the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, one of only two American orders that were historically Black. In this way, communities made up of European immigrants or descendants of those immigrants ministered to marginalized communities of color and in doing so, placed themselves in a liminal position that eventually reinforced the binary color line.

In Drexel's public ministry, her order faced significant backlash for its call to minister to African Americans and American Indians at the exclusion of poor white populations. In one notable instance in 1894, Walter Elliott, a Paulist priest, rebuked Drexel because she would not fund his mission. Drexel had rejected his request for money because it did not benefit African Americans or American Indians. In response, Elliott told a friend that "no poor white trash need apply. Only black and red are the team they [Drexel and her sisters] will back" (qtd in McGuinness, *Why* 240). Elliott's riff on the "No Irish need apply" slogan underscores the parallel between sisters who minister to communities of color and the groups that they minister to. Drexel's decision to not fund Elliott's parish indicates the consolidation of whiteness to

include immigrant groups—like those of Elliott's Midwestern congregation—that straddled the color line. Drexel's actions, and Elliott's response, denotes who was *excluded* from Drexel's mission and thus who was *included* in the white race.

Elliott's comment points to a broader phenomenon that aligns women's religious groups who minister to marginalized communities with the communities themselves. Sister Dorothy explained how she observed this happening. She noted:

> In Phenix City there was the white school and then there was the black school. And even when Phenix City—it's like in the middle of Alabama, but our diocese was Mobile. And when we went down to Mobile, the sisters that taught in the white schools were given a little bit better treatment than the sisters that taught in the Black schools. Uh-huh. They were acknowledged. They were given better — they were appointed chairmens of committees and everything. And the Black sist— the sisters that taught in the Black schools were always, like, second rate.

Sister Dorothy's slip in calling the sisters who worked in the African American school as "Black sisters" (rather than "sisters that taught in the Black schools") is indicative of a larger racial confusion brought about by white, Northern sisters teaching in communities of color. In fact, the experiences of Drexel's order align closely with this example. Lou Baldwin, in his biography of Katharine Drexel, states that her work to educate African Americans was denigrated "because it would be used by blacks" (154). As the example of Drexel shows, white sisters who participated in outreach to African American communities and broke the color line in the name of religion were met with the same hostility directed to the African American community itself.

Sister Dorothy's and Mother Drexel's experiences as white religious sisters ministering to African American communities highlights the situational nature of ethnicity. Kathy Hertel-

Baker recounts that the VSC at Mother Mary Mission faced some intense backlash to their efforts to minister to the African American community. She writes that "the Ku Klux Klan was planning a cross burning near Mother Mary Mission. When the Sisters looked out their windows that night they saw hundreds of African American men standing around the edge of the property, protecting the convent." As the white sisters—most of whom identified themselves as part of a white ethnic group—worked toward improving the social conditions of the Black community, the community embraced them. Their symbolic embrace of the white sisters and their foiling the KKK cross burning underscores Koehlinger's insistence that "sisters in the racial apostolate often were considered black, or at least were treated as such by local whites" (265). In this way, their religious habits erased their ethnicity in this context. Southern whites didn't "see" their white ethnic identity. Rather, the sisters were considered traitors to the white race. They were no longer conditionally white, or "white ethnic"; their work in marginalized communities finally broke the monolithic whiteness of the earlier century, paradoxically both separating their group from traditional whiteness and cementing their entry into a variegated whiteness.

Within this public work, their identity as part of a Slovak ethnic group, or more generally as white ethnics, speaks to the broader role that American sisters have played in determining the binary racial line. As Hoy claims, "Religion offered a way to mediate the tensions of race" (80). Sisters were able to step into the liminal position between white and black as well as between religious and secular by virtue of their teaching vocation, which positioned them literally as mediators between institutional and vernacular knowledge. Drawn to the Vincentian Sisters of Charity order due to its presence in their Slovak churches, most of the sisters I spoke with were inspired to be educators. They maintained their own Slovak traditions while adapting their public

personas to meet the needs of their students and communities. In these ways, the experiences of the small group of sisters I spoke with resonate with other communities of sisters in American history. Like Kate Chopin's Calixta and Mariequita, who transgress and police the racial boundaries of the Louisiana Bayou, Catholic sisters represent an alternative identity that disturbs categories "previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded, and 'known'" (Garber 13). In this way, they mediated not only the institutional church with the vernacular traditions of the people they worked with, but they also mediated their own ethnic Slovak culture with the wider American culture.

Chapter 4

"Everything was a tradition, really": Vernacular Religious Traditions in Johnstown, Pennsylvania's Slovak Community

During Labor Day weekend of 1990, Johnstown, Pennsylvania hosted the National Folk Festival (NFF), an annual itinerant festival founded and produced by the National Council for the Traditional Arts. Fulfilling its mission to equitably showcase forms of artistic and cultural diversity in various communities around the United States, the 1990 festival brought a range of musical acts and traditional artists to the industrial Western Pennsylvania town. As Andrew Wallace points out in his historical sketch of the NFF, the Johnstown iteration particularly emphasized "the Eastern European cultures that are prominent in the makeup of the industrial heartland," including the Johnstown region (10). The emphasis on these specific immigrant cultures was partly due to the presence of ethnic Catholic churches around the festival site of Cambria City, a ten-block neighborhood about a mile from downtown. At the time of the 1990 festival, eight ethnic churches stood in Cambria City, and, as Wallace remarks, "many of these churches held social events to coincide with the festival" (10).

There were thus parallel celebrations in the same location at the same time: the NFF, which featured artists and musicians from around the world, and the church festivals and reunions, which showcased Johnstown's local culture. The structure of Johnstown's version of the NFF—one that melded the formal, public promotion of cross-cultural understanding with the organic outgrowth of ethnic folkways from the churches—foregrounds the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and folkways. By presenting symbols of their ethnic identity like their foods and religious art to a mass public audience, parishioners of the Cambria City churches illustrated one strategy to, as Stephen Stern might suggest, symbolically "define their place and position in

regard to their ethnic past and present" during the folk festival (xiii). Just as the "official" NFF coexisted alongside the organic parish-based events, churches provide a formal structure for the informal expressions of religious and ethnic identity among the community.

Since, as Lydia Fish writes, "churches have made a significant contribution to the development of ethnic consciousness" in the United States (84), the public representation of the churches' ethnic folkways is one way to view the connections between ethnicity, folklore, and religion. But beyond this public presentation, religion also structures the private lives and worldviews of many individual parishioners. Following from Leonard Norman Primiano's insight that vernacular religion is "religion as it is believed, practiced, and experienced in everyday life" ("Religion" 1079), I argue in this chapter that religious traditions, centered around ethnic churches, are fundamental to the ways in which ethnicity is articulated in this small Pennsylvania town. In particular, the way that Slovak American women perform their families' informal religious traditions structures the definitions of Slovak ethnicity within their families and the wider community.

Because of its legacy as a destination for many European immigrants in the early twentieth century, Johnstown hosts a number of organizations whose names highlight their ethnic origins. The Croatian Hall and the Russian Club, for example, are two saloons that have retained their roots as immigrant organizations, even though they are open to people of any ethnic background. Although most of these organizations are focused on turning a financial profit, one social group is devoted to understanding Slovak heritage as a symbol of personal and collective identity. The Slovak Heritage Association of the Laurel Highlands (SHALH) does not require Slovak heritage as a condition of membership, but its stated mission is to preserve, study, celebrate, share and teach Slovak heritage. Founded in 1996, the group accomplishes its mission

by holding regular membership meetings every two months, affording its members the opportunity to discuss various aspects of Slovak identity in a context that focuses on the Johnstown region. Each SHALH meeting is organized around a common theme, and they often feature guest lecturers who share their expertise in various aspects of Slovak identity: the painting of eggs at Easter, speaking the Slovak language, or performing Slovak folk dance, to name a few. Other meetings focus on stories from the members in attendance who relate their own memories and experiences as Slovak Americans in Western Pennsylvania.

Many SHALH members are also members of ethnic churches like the ones in Cambria City. As a past president of this organization, I had cultivated friendships with many of the organization's members, and I suspected that the Slovak American women in SHALH had insights on the ways in which Slovaks use religious rituals and traditions to maintain their ethnic identity. As part of my research for this project, I spoke with seven of the women who belong to SHALH and who had expressed interest in participating in this project. Two women I spoke to made it a point that they considered themselves Carpatho-Rusyn, as opposed to Slovak. Carpatho-Rusyns are a separate cultural group that lives within Slovakia's geopolitical borders and whose claim to separate identity hinges primarily on religious affiliation. While Slovaks typically identify as Roman Catholic, Carpatho-Rusyns usually belong to the Byzantine Catholic Church or the Orthodox Christian Church. Notably, the two Carpatho-Rusyn women I spoke to are active members of SHALH, and they discussed the fundamental similarities between Slovak and Carpatho-Rusyn traditions.

As I prepared for these interviews, my primary interest was how these women viewed the fault lines between Slovak ethnic identity and religious traditions. As a person who was raised in a Slovak American family, I expected to hear answers that were mostly similar: Slovak families,

I thought, mostly did things the same way, since they came from the same European region. Yet my conversations with these women reveal a remarkable diversity in the way they define "Slovak." I found that there was not really one Slovak way of doing things. Each family bent certain traditions and rules to meet their own needs within their local context. But what was most notable was that the women traced this diversity back to the links between their ethnic and religious backgrounds. Their religion informs their ethnic traditions, and their ethnic traditions affect their religiosity. The two are so closely intertwined that it's nearly impossible to separate them. If the theory of vernacular religion explains how institutional definitions of religious belief are mediated by the individual expression of that belief, then the women of SHALH certainly express their ethnic identity through their religious practices. As Leonard Norman Primiano observes, there are "bidirectional influences of environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing. . . . From this context, the beliefs of individuals themselves radiate and influence the surrounding environments" ("Vernacular" 44). In this chapter, I argue that the life experience narratives of these women illustrate how churches provide the framework for women in the community to carry out a complex network of traditions that express their religious and ethnic identities.

As I held conversations with each of these women, I noticed that their experiences and explanations clustered around a few themes. For one, they spoke about how their ethnic identity *and* religious identity were dependent upon the women in their lives, both their peers and the women of their families. They recounted stories of how their families depended on the women to maintain their religious and ethnic traditions. Their efforts had the effect of creating a shared sense of Slovak identity. In addition, two women noted a permeability to the religious denominations they belonged to. To my surprise, they explained how they moved between

Roman Catholic, Byzantine Catholic, and Orthodox Christian rites within their lifetime, despite the differences between Slovak and Carpatho-Rusyn backgrounds. Both women explained that they were children of mixed marriages; that is, they were each a child of a Slovak Roman Catholic father and a Carpatho-Rusyn Byzantine mother. By modifying their denominational affiliations at various points in their lives, these women illustrate the permeability of institutional rites within ethnic groups. In similar ways, they and other women described how they modified specific holiday traditions that they viewed as connected to both their religious and ethnic identities. Although they all could recite the ostensible "standard" holiday traditions, many of the women recognized there was no one "correct" way to express Slovak identity during holiday celebrations. These conversations highlight the ways in which women's engagement in informal religious traditions fuels the social dynamism of ethnicity. Performing mostly domestic duties rooted in their religious beliefs, these women ensured the transmission of Slovak American heritage, broadly defined, in their communities.

Immigration History and Ethnicity in Johnstown

The story of Johnstown's Slovak and Carpatho-Rusyn populations is entwined with the larger story of Johnstown's other immigrant groups as well as the national Ethnic Revival Movement. This history is central to understanding the ways in which Johnstown's Slovak churches provided a structure for the expression of ethnic identity. Johnstown, whose city center is positioned at the confluence of three rivers, was also at the confluence of the shifting definitions of ethnicity throughout the twentieth century. Before the 1870s, as Richard Burkert explains, the population of Johnstown "was composed mostly of Welsh, German, and Irish nationality groups," each with its own churches (52). As the steel industry boomed, the mills and

mines began recruiting laborers from Central and Eastern Europe. The first Eastern European group to answer the call in significant numbers were the Slovaks, who began arriving in the 1870s. By 1900, according to Ewa Morawska, Central and Eastern Europeans constituted about 14% of the city's population ("Johnstown's" 494). Most of the immigrants represented eight nationality groups: "Slovaks, Magyars, Poles, Croatians, Serbs, Slovenes, Rusyns (the inhabitants of the then Hungarian Transcarpathia, the southern slopes of the Carpathian mountains), and Ukrainians (from Austrian Galicia, on the northern side of the Carpathians" (*For* 106). Between 1890 and 1910, Eastern European immigrants increased Johnstown's population by 150% to about 55,000 people (Morawska, "Johnstown's" 489, 494). Over 79% of Central and Eastern European immigrants lived in just two small neighborhoods in 1900: Cambria City and Minersville (Morawska, *For* 97). These patterns of immigration transformed the city into one whose population was a diverse mix of European identities by the early twentieth century.

With its high percentage of foreign-born families, Johnstown became a touchstone in the twentieth-century shift toward white ethnicity. In the early decades of the century, the city featured prominently in the Dillingham Commission's proposal for immigration restriction based on national background, owing in large part to its high concentration of foreign laborers.[20] By mid-century, Johnstown fostered a favorable environment for the Ethnic Revival Movement. Matthew Frye Jacobson observes that in response to the fear that the modern industrial era had wreaked havoc on communal sensibilities and that "versions of community and authenticity cast in ethnic terms would be the salve to those postindustrial discontents" (*Roots* 25), people who

[20] Katherine Benton-Cohen notes in *Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and Its Legacy* that Johnstown's ethnic diversity served as a case study for politicans seeking immigration restiction standards. See pages 110-23.

traced their ancestors to Eastern and Central Europe formed a movement to emphasize their ethnic heritage. Jacobson posits that because the Civil Rights Movement had "introduced a contagious idiom of group identity and group rights on the American scene," the effect was "electrifying . . . for white ethnics, whose inchoate sense of second-class status as non-WASPs required only the right vocabulary to come alive" (*The White*). The outcome of that movement, Jacobson writes, was for the story of European immigrants to become "the 'standard' template of incorporation and advancement against which all other groups are judged" (*The White*). This national movement articulated the modern notion of white ethnicity, or the idea of gradations of whiteness based on national background and cultural practices.

Johnstown's environment played a decisive role in the Ethnic Revival as well as its social and political outcomes. In his landmark book *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1972), the Slovak American Michael Novak draws heavily on his childhood experiences in Johnstown to inform his political philosophy that animated the Ethnic Revival movement. Novak's personal turn from an advocate for "a class-based, black-white ethnic coalition within the Democratic Party" to his later opposition to multiculturalism as "non-inclusive of European immigrant experience" mirrors the political movement of Johnstown's residents generally (Michney 311). Although once a Democratic bastion, Johnstown's political affinities shifted in the twenty-first century, a move that was due in large part to the city's white ethnic populations. In reporting the outcome of the 2016 election, *Politico*'s Michael Kruse visited Johnstown and interviewed members of the "white working class." As each person that Kruse interviewed assigns a different reason for voting Republican (the opioid crisis, the loss of jobs, general economic decline), their surnames are as diverse as their reasons: Del Signore (Italian), Schilling (German), and Byich (Serbo-

Croatian). Although sensitive to issues of race, Kruse's survey overlooks the city's roots as a community fueled by the social dynamism of white ethnicity.

While the story of the Ethnic Revival movement typically hinges on public-facing actions of politicians and writers, informal and private activities played a large role in fostering a sense of ethnic community. Even in the early twentieth century as immigrants settled mainly in the neighborhoods of Cambria City, Minersville, and Brownstown (collectively known as the West End), each ethnic group established their own religious and social institutions. In immigrant communities likes the West End, as June Granatir Alexander makes clear, churches act as "centers of social life" ("Slovak" 76). The establishment and building of formal worship spaces relied on existing community networks and reinforced the group's sense of shared identity. "As soon as the immigrants began settling in Johnstown in large numbers," Morawksa explains,

> mutual-help societies mushroomed in the foreign colonies. . . . The pattern was similar to that described in most American cities with large immigrant colonies: A group of pioneers got together, formed a committee, organized collection of funds, arranged for a contract, and hired a pastor to come. Then a church was erected. New societies were established. New, bigger churches were projected, funded, and brought into being. (107)

Following this pattern, immigrants from the Slovakia region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire established their own set of worship spaces: St. Stephen's Catholic Church (founded in 1891) and Holy Cross Evangelical Lutheran Church (1914) in Cambria City[21], and St. Francis of Assisi

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[21] Before 2008, Cambria City was home to an extraordinary number of churches within a ten-block neighborhood. At the height of its religious diversity, Cambria City had six Roman Catholic churches, one Byzantine Catholic church, one Hungarian Reformed church, one Lutheran church, and two Orthodox churches. In 2008, the Catholic parishes were consolidated to one building. The orthodox churches are no longer in operation: one has been demolished and the other has been transformed into an art-focused community center.

Catholic Church (1922) in Morrellville. At the same time, the Carpatho-Rusyn community established their own worship sites: St. Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church (1895) in Cambria City and Christ the Saviour Orthodox Cathedral (1937) in Morrellville. (See attached map.) By maintaining their connection to religious institutions, the descendants of these European immigrants also signaled their continued observance of their group's ethnic traditions.

Stable Buildings and Shifting Religious Identities in Johnstown's West End

The physical sites of these church buildings were central to the shared Slovak identity of their parishioners. Situated centrally within the immigrant neighborhoods, these buildings were, as Susan Kalčik explains, "centers to preserve, maintain, and promote Slovak heritage and identity" (68). Part of the reason to form their own ethnic parishes was, in part, to celebrate the formal rites in their vernacular language. Carol Fris notes that Johnstown's Slovak immigrants "desired to worship where the priests and parishioners spoke their language" (2). But more than this, the worship spaces facilitated the maintenance of Slovak traditions.

The tradition of "manger singers," or *jasličkari*, at the Christmas Midnight Mass is one notable example of this hybrid culture. Fris notes that "It was a tradition to celebrate Midnight Masses during the 1920's [sic] by having some men of the parish serve as *jasličkari*" (5). Dressed in costumes reminiscent of Slovak villagers, the men "would march down the aisle before Mass, shaking sticks which had jingling tin can lids attached to one end. They beat on the floor with their stick and banged on the pews while shouting to the people in Slovak, 'Wake up. Wake up. The Christ child is coming'" (5). Importantly, the tradition of the *jasličkari* extended outside the worship space and into the community. The performers, as Fris writes, "also went to parishioners' homes to sing. . . . The singers would carry a miniature Bethlehem scene (*jasličky*)

to honor the Christ child" (5). This tradition of the *jasličkari* is one example of how the stable space of the church building facilitated the vernacular traditions associated with specific ethnic identity, and it's one example of how Slovak congregations, as Alexander writes, took on "a life of their own which separated them from other nationalities and heightened Slovak ethnic consciousness" ("Slovak" 76). The conversations that I had with the women of SHALH support Kalčik's and Alexander's observations, and they illustrate how the church buildings facilitated the vernacular traditions that supported the evolution of the ethnic identity of the parishioners.

Margie

One story that I heard from my conversations illustrates the centrality of the buildings to the larger Slovak community and how the central worship space fostered informal devotions that reinforced the Slovak community's shared identity. Margie Sutor, my grandma's cousin, explained that in the 1940s, her mother belonged to the Rosary Society at St. Stephen's. As the name suggests, the group met to pray the rosary together once a month. Margie remembered, "They would pray their rosary in Slovak. Sometimes my mother would take me. Then they'd stand outside the church and talk and talk and talk. And then they'd all walk home." As the members of the Rosary Society returned home, Margie told me they would take holy cards to continue their devotions. "They had cards with Slovak prayer on both sides," she said,

> And then you had to turn this card in when you met the next time. I think it was once a month or every two weeks. That doesn't matter. You had to turn this card in to tell them that you prayed that. Then you got a new card. And my mother was in charge of the cards. So lots of times I'd have to go on Virginia Avenue. There were a couple ladies there that went to St. Stephen's. . . . I'd have to go to their house, give them the card, and they'd give me their card to give my mother. And

> then they'd take these cards to church and they'd pray there. But you had to take that card home and pray on it. It was a Slovak prayer.

As Margie made clear, the Rosary Society was not just an activity that took place in the formal space of the church; it extended those devotions into the home space. While they used the church to meet, their activities encouraged—even required—further prayer in the home. The Rosary Society thereby reinforced the connection between Slovak ethnic identity—as signified by their prayers in the Slovak language—and their religious identity.

Her labor in delivering religious materials to the neighborhood women casts new light on the kinds of relationships that Micaela di Leonardo terms "the work of kinship." As di Leonardo explains, kin work is "the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin" (194). Although the women that Margie visited were not blood kin, they represented an extended family of their Slovak Catholic parish. While Margie's help in coordinating the distribution of the holy cards reinforced the centrality of the community's shared religious devotions, it also reveals how those religious rituals fostered a shared ethnic identity. By extending devotional prayers from the church into the community, they formed a network of personal relationships among parishioners and ethnic kin.

While Margie's story about the Rosary Society illustrates the ways in which the social network of Slovak immigrants was strengthened by the vernacular religious traditions associated with the Rosary Society, it also gestures towards the centrality of those informal religious traditions to the Slovak American community. Importantly, there were significant divisions in the religious denominations of Johnstown's Slovak population, and these differences highlight the nuances in group-based identities. Immigrants from Slovakia were divided into four main

denominations: Catholics, Lutherans, Eastern Rite Christians (Byzantine/Greek Catholics and Orthodox), and Calvinists. While those who identify as Slovak generally belong to Roman Catholic parishes, Carpatho-Rusyns who live within Slovakia's borders are associated with Eastern Rite congregations. In fact, as Richard Custer notes, "Religious affiliation is today one of the primary characteristics of the respective communities" of Slovaks and Carpatho-Rusyns (14). On a first glance, it appears that the groups tend to remain separate, especially since, as Custer notes, "for the most part, their social clubs were established strictly along ethnic lines" (17). Because social clubs often led to establishing churches, it should follow that each ethnic group would follow their own religious traditions.

However, the conversations that I had with the women of SHALH adds nuance to this division in denominational affiliation. While, as Kalčik asserts, Slovaks by and large "never overcame" the divisions between religious denomination (60), the women that I spoke to noted a remarkable fluidity to the formal church rites that they observed. Out of the seven women I spoke with for this project, five are practicing Roman Catholics, one is a Byzantine Catholic, and one attends the Orthodox church. Some women told me that they affiliated with two or even three Christian denominations throughout their lives. Importantly, though, while the theology and formal rites may have differed, their vernacular religious traditions remained constant, a fact that highlights the continuity of their ethnic traditions across denominations as well as across time. The women's stories about blurring the lines of denominations reveal a fundamental tension: that the formal religious differences between Slovaks and Carpatho-Rusyns mask the shared vernacular traditions that unite their religious and ethnic differences.

Annett

Annett Kristofco's memories emphasize the permeability of denominations over time, especially in mixed-ethnic marriages. Annett lives in a bright, two story house in the Brownstown neighborhood. When we spoke, she settled into a plush lounge chair with a glass of clear soda beside her. Born in the late 1950s, Annett had been active in a number of ethnic groups and associations, including the Ukrainian dance group *Kashtan*, based in Cleveland, and the Johnstown Folk Dancers. She had lived in Johnstown for only a brief period as a child before her dad lost his job in the steel mills. The family settled in Cleveland when Annett was six years old, and her parents lived there for the rest of their lives. Annett eventually moved back to Johnstown in 1989 and now lives in her family's homestead. Despite living in Ohio through her formative years, she explained to me that she spent her summers in Johnstown: her grandpa was at her door "the day after school let out and he would drop me back off the day before school started." She joked, "I more or less went to boarding school in Ohio." That experience of a dual childhood—school in Ohio and summers in Pennsylvania—also reflects her divided religious upbringing.

Annett defines herself as a "bi-rite," or, as she explained, the child of one Byzantine Catholic parent and one Roman Catholic parent. In Ohio, Annett attended the Catholic church with her parents, but in Pennsylvania, as she explained, "every time I came home or my grandparents came out, I went to the Byzantine church." This blurring of denominational divisions extended back to her mom's childhood. She recounted that her mom had attended three different denominations, ranging from Catholic to Carpatho-Rusyn to Orthodox:

> My father is Roman Catholic out of St. Stephen's . . . , and my mom is Byzantine out of St. Mary's, but she did spend a period of time at Christ the Saviour [Orthodox Cathedral]. And that's when everybody was arguing between the two

> churches who was and wasn't under the pope. Well, half that church, St. Mary's, went to Christ to Saviour. In about the late 1930s, they decided to try to go back to their own, to the Byzantine. They had been told they would be laughed at if they came back. That was not the case.

Although her mom eventually returned to St. Mary's, some of her family stayed at the Orthodox church. Annett joked, "Actually I have half a family in Christ the Saviour and the other half in St Mary's. And then the third half is at St. Stephen's and St. Francis."

Like her formal religious observances, her education was bifurcated between denominations. She explains, "So I was baptized Roman Catholic through St. Stephen's. But I made my first holy Communion and my confirmation at St. Charles Borromeo [Roman Catholic church] in Parma, Ohio. I went through nine years of Roman Catholic grade school and then four years of Byzantine high school. So I was raised in both rites." Since her dad was Slovak, Annett was formally raised as a Catholic, and her family formally belonged to the Roman Catholic parish. But, as she explained, her parents were ready to join the Byzantine church as soon as they were married. "They didn't have a choice," Annett explained. "Back in those years you went with what the man was, and Dad was Roman Catholic. He was very willing to go to St. Mary's, but St. Mary's threw him out. Father Dolinay [pastor of St. Mary's] said, No, you gotta go over there [to St. Stephen's Catholic church]." Annett's experiences underscore the formal rules associated with religious traditions and the complications created by a marriage between a Slovak and a Carpatho-Rusyn.

As an adult, Annett made a conscious decision to leave the Catholic church and join the Byzantine church, a choice that reflects the permeability of denominational affiliation. By that

time, the formal rules on switching denominations had relaxed, and she was able to easily join the Byzantine church. She explained,

> We were a Roman Catholic house until like 1983, I think it was, when I just got fed up with the Roman rite and I went Byzantine. And I never said anything to my mom and dad, for a reason. I didn't want them to feel that they had to do something because I did. And I accidentally left my church envelopes out, and Mom happened to notice that they weren't the right color. And she looked at the box and she came around the corner and she said, "When did you change churches?" And I was already there six months. I said, "I left six months ago, Mom." . . . I said, "I went to where I was comfortable." So Mom looked at Dad later in the week and said, "Joe, she went to [the Byzantine church]." And Dad said, "Sign us up." So the joke was, they spent the first 25 years in the Roman church, they spent the next 25 years in the Greek church.

In Annett's story, the outward signifier of parish affiliation—the donation envelopes—communicated more than simply a different denomination. They also signified that Annett's decision to switch parishes and denominations were entwined with her and her family's ethnic identity.

Despite the divisions between how her family formally participated in worship, their vernacular religious traditions remained constant. When I asked her what informal traditions she remembers as uniting both the Roman Catholic and Byzantine Catholic phases, she mentioned a number of sacramentals: "Usually there was one cross in the house, usually in the living room. Always [a picture of] The Last Supper in the kitchen. The holy water we always had. A favorite saint. Rosaries on the door. Always have a rosary on the door when a storm comes. It keeps the

storm outside." Annett identified these sacramental traditions as things that bred a sense of ethnic identity in her family. These informal religious practices united the family's time in both denominations, and they highlight the primary importance of personal interpretations of religious practices.

Marie

Like Annett, Marie Katrancha's childhood was also split between Western and Eastern Christian traditions. Marie is a retired school teacher whose amiable nature covers an understated tenacity that is required in that professional role. She grew up in the Morrellville neighborhood and was raised by her mother and her aunt. She was also the child of a mixed-ethnic, mixed-denominational marriage. As she explained, "My mom belonged to what was then St. Mary's Greek Catholic Church, which is now the Byzantine Catholic church. My dad belonged to St. Stephen's. So I was baptized in St. Stephen's. You got baptized in the father's church." As was the custom, her mother converted to Roman Catholicism when they were married, and Marie was raised a Catholic.

When Marie was just a toddler, her father was lost at sea during World War II, a tragedy that also affected the family's religious devotions. As a widow, Marie's mom depended on her family to help raise Marie. She explained, "My mother and my grandfather, her dad, were widowed about the same time, so we moved in with him up on Virginia Avenue, because she kept house and he worked in the steel mill. And we lived there till I was five years old." At that point, she moved again: "My grandfather had bought a double house up in [Morrellville]. And so we moved up there. And we lived with my grandfather on one side, and my Aunt Mary, my mother's sister, and her husband and three daughters lived on the other side." Throughout this time, Marie's mom maintained the Catholic traditions of her late husband, but Marie's extended

family belonged to the Byzantine church. “My Aunt Mary and her two older daughters,” Marie recounted, “went to St. Mary’s school. And so she was very involved down there with everything practically, and so I went with her a lot of times. . . . Aunt Mary was my second mom.” Since Marie’s Aunt Mary was a secondary caretaker, she exposed Marie to the Byzantine church and the social world of the parish. “When they had bazaars,” Marie said, “she’d do all kind of baking and cooking. The kids were involved, my cousins were involved in plays down there. And I went to church there quite often with them when I was younger.”

Not only would Marie go to celebrations at the Byzantine church while identifying herself as Catholic, but she also attended services there. Her aunt would take her during Holy Week liturgies leading up to Easter, and she remembered specifically the Good Friday devotions: “They had the tomb up by the side altar. Whatever pew you were in, you got out in the main aisle and you got on your knees all the way up to the tomb. And I was a little kid and that hurt. I remember going to church there, and it seemed like it took forever for the services to be done. They were long. . . . The church services to me were endless.” Even though she formally belonged to the Roman Catholic parish and participated in many of the activities available to young women at the time, her experiences highlight the permeability of religious denominations, provided that the ethnic affiliations were similar.

The experiences of Annett and Marie reveal that the formal worship structures of Slovak and Carpatho-Rusyn immigrants facilitated the vernacular practice of their religion. Those informal customs were infused with their ethnic identity. The women described the various ways that their families manipulated their formal religious observances to suit their families’ individual needs, sometimes even leading them to shift their denominational affiliations over

time. This adaptability reveals the social dynamism that is at the heart of maintaining these ethnic-religious traditions and transmitting them to future generations.

Holiday Traditions and the Twin Laws of Folklore Process

Whereas the women I spoke with explained that their denominational affiliations shifted over time, their observance of holiday traditions reflect an even more complicated shift in religious-ethnic expressions. Both Marie and Annett explained that although the public liturgical services they attended differed, their holiday traditions remained mostly constant. In fact, all of the women I spoke with explained that holiday celebrations were particularly important to their ethnic identity. Rooted in both formal religious liturgies held in a worship space and informal celebrations held in the home, these celebrations highlight the ways in which women's culture has a clear power in directing ethnic identity.

The holiday traditions that these women told me about are notable because they demonstrate the elastic nature of their ethnic traditions. Because all of these women were active members of SHALH, they knew about the "standard" traditions associated with holidays. But they each made it a point to explain how their traditions *differed* from this structure. In ways that resonate with the ways that the structure of the church buildings facilitates the practice of vernacular traditions in the community, the structure of the standard Slovak holiday traditions provides an opportunity for families to modify the traditions to suit their family's own needs.

In this way, their stories of holiday observances neatly follows the paradigm of Barre Toelken's Twin Laws of folklore. For Toelken, folkloric traditions follow two opposing forces: conservatism and dynamism. Conservatism, Toelklen explains, "refers to all those processes, forces, customs, and the like, and the attempted passing of those materials, essentially intact,

through time and space in all the channels of vernacular expression" (39). On the other hand, dynamism refers to "all those elements that function to alter features, contents, meanings, styles, performance, and usage as a particular traditional event takes place repeatedly through space and time" (40). Performers of tradition "may institute change, either consciously or inadvertently, but they will do so chiefly within the framework of the familiar, acceptable, and culturally logical" (39). In short, tradition bearers can and do bring about changes to the traditions they're responsible for, while also maintaining certain elements that those tradition bearers deem the essence of the tradition. If, as Kalčik contends, holiday traditions are one of the "most common survivals" when Slovak children move away from "old ethnic neighborhoods" (67), they also showcase the variety of ways that ethnicity is inscribed into vernacular religious traditions. In organizing, maintaining, and modifying holiday traditions for their particular families, these women found ways to safeguard their family's Slovak or Carpatho-Rusyn identity in America. Three sets of holiday traditions exemplify this paradigm best: Christmas, St. Nicholas Day, and Easter.

Christmas

The home celebrations during the Christmas holiday of the Slovak women I spoke to often eclipse the church services they attend. Kalčik asserts that "Christmas Eve (Štredy Večer) was the high point of the season's celebration, with a meal which began when children spotted the first star in the sky" (61). The *vilija*, or Christmas Eve supper, is typically the major meal on the Christmas holiday with a number of corresponding traditions. Some families observe traditions to bring good luck, like cutting an apple crosswise to see if the seeds form a star or cracking walnuts and studying their meat to divine intimations of the future. Some families pass around a bowl of water with coins on the bottom; those attending the dinner dip their fingers and

rub the coins to bring about prosperity in the new year. Along with these traditions that celebrate the profane, families also bring in symbols of their Christian faith. Before the meal begins, guests exchange *oplatky*, rectangular unleavened wafers that are reminiscent of communion wafers. Attendees of the *vilija* break off small pieces of their wafer and exchange pieces with other guests, wishing them "Merry Christmas" and good luck.

The central feature of the *vilija*, though, is the food. The "standard" meal requires twelve dishes. Most commonly, those dishes include vegetarian soup (either sauerkraut, mushroom, or potato as the main ingredient), fish, *bobalky* (dough balls mixed with poppy seeds), peas, sauerkraut, mushrooms, *pirohi* (piergoie), *pagach* (a bread filled with potatoes and cheese), honey, stewed fruit, poppy seeds, and walnuts. Other symbols of a standard *vilija* include an empty chair left for a stranger and straw placed under the table to symbolize the manger in Bethlehem.

In the Johnstown area, Slovak Christmas traditions have become codified, in some ways. Community organizations and churches around the region host traditional Christmas Eve suppers, known as *vilija*s, usually held as fundraisers for the sponsoring organization. As I spoke with each woman, I noticed that they all could recite the "proper" way to observe a *vilija*: the meal requires 12 dishes, an empty chair left for a stranger, straw under the table, and a shared plate of apples and honey. Yet, none of the women held to *all* of these traditions. Most of the women cooked meals with fewer than twelve dishes, some didn't put straw under the table, and some skipped the apples and honey. The diversity of their celebrations suggest that even though these Slovak women hold a common vocabulary about the traditions that are marked as "Slovak," they modify those traditions to fit into their own family's needs.

My conversation with Joanne Spisak and Ethel Gaspar highlights the ways that families modify the Christmas Eve suppers to suit their own needs and tastes. I sat down with Joanne and Ethel together during a SHALH meeting. Joanne was born and raised in Johnstown's West End, but Ethel was not from the city proper, although she identifies as Slovak. Their conversation, rendered in transcript form below, illustrates the role of Toelken's concept of dynamism in their Christmas traditions, with each woman identifying certain elements that are essential for their celebration while letting go of other traditions.

> Joanne: We always had the *vilija*. When my mother and dad--it was just the three of us—we always had that sauerkraut soup.
>
> Ethel: Love it.
>
> Joanne: Oh, I hated it. Hated it.
>
> Ethel: I love it.
>
> Joanne: But then my husband's family, they had the mushroom soup.
>
> Ethel: I love that, too.
>
> Joanne: So we have now the mushroom soup at home---.
>
> Ethel: With sauerkraut in it?
>
> Joanne: No, no, no sauerkraut. Get a pot that big [indicates a large pot with her arms], there's nothing left at the end of the night. Whatever is left they take home. We have that. We have the *oplatky*. We have the honey with them. There's a little piece of garlic you're supposed to eat. But at my house, you have 25 people. 80% of them are not Catholic. They're married into the family, but they do it. And they all take a little bit. . . . We have baked fish. Sometimes breaded fish, too. We have *pirohi*. We have *haluški*, which is noodles with eggs with little

bits of potatoes cooked in it. Now, my mother used to do that, and that's part of our tradition. Then we have what they call *bobalky*. I don't know how everybody else does it. But we made the long sticks and then after they got stale, then you cut them up, put the hot water on, take half of them with honey and poppyseed, the other half with honey and brick cheese.

Ethel: What kind?

Joanne: Brick cheese.

Ethel: I put sauerkraut on mine.

Joanne: Oh no no no no.

Ethel: Oh is that good.

Joanne: No, we don't use sauerkraut at all at Christmas Eve. Then I have homemade bread. I make my nut and poppyseed rolls. But my nut and poppyseed rolls are a little bit of dough and that much nuts or poppyseed [indicates *a lot* of filling with her fingers]. And I make the little rolls, too.

Joanne's recounting of her *vilija* traditions highlight the central role that her own tastes, and those of her family, play in her decisions of what kinds of food and traditions to include. In particular, her choice to substitute her husband's mushroom soup rather than her family's sauerkraut soup, as well as her rejection of sauerkraut in general, illustrate the dynamism of the holiday traditions. Her experiences resonate with Toelken's observation that "Matters of taste, context, art, playfulness, change of function or meaning, . . . age or gender of performer (and many more), all encourage continual change in the particular utterance or production or performance of traditional items" (40). For Joanne's family, the continuation of the traditional *vilija* depends on the family's ability to adapt it to their own tastes.

The flexibility of Joanne's traditions also ensured the continuation of that dinner to later generations. At the time we spoke, Joanne's husband had died a few months before and there was some question about whether her *vilija* tradition would continue. The following Christmas would be the first for the family since Joanne's husband died. As she related to me how their traditions had changed over the years, she recounted that her children had become invested in continuing their Christmas traditions:

> Now see, we used--- Paul and I used to do it all ourselves. And a couple years ago, he says, "You know, I'm not gonna be around forever, [the children] are going to have to start pitching in, too." So now one brings the *pirohi*, one brings the *haluški*, one makes the fish, one makes the *bobalki*. So they all make it. And then one will come in and she'll make the mushroom soup. But he would supervise her. It had to be just so. But they're all pitching in.

Because she and her late husband had taught their children how to prepare the meal and consciously made them responsible for certain elements, they ensured the transmission of those ethnic symbols. When I asked if she thought they'd have the *vilija* again, even without her husband, she smiled enigmatically and said, "They already said we're having Christmas Eve this year. I says, 'Okay, if you want it, we'll have it. That seat will be empty, as it always is, and we'll have Christmas Eve.'"

In recounting how her family's traditions have changed to meet their current contexts, she made it clear that not everyone in the family who attended was Slovak, and not everyone was Catholic. "Three of them are not Catholic," she told me. "That means that one family that comes in are not Catholic. But they come because they want to." Joanne's comments illustrate the centrality of the *vilija* tradition to her family's sense of religious identity and ethnic identity.

Joanne's rich and dynamic tradition of *vilija* mirrors the traditions of some of the other women I spoke to, even extending to Eastern rite Christianity and Carpatho-Rusyn ethnicity. Ann Yurcisin, for example, also described the Christmas Eve celebration as the most important family holiday of the year. For Ann, a member of the Carpatho-Rusyn Orthodox church and a retired director of disability services, Christmas Eve looked similar in many ways to the Slovak Catholic celebrations. Ann remembered, "We had hay under the table, symbolized the manger. And 12 dishes. And we had *bobalky*, little dough balls with poppyseed, a lot of fish. We usually had herring. I'm not sure why, but it was okay. I loved herring." She explained that although her family still made the twelve dishes, their celebration was smaller than many since her dad was the proto-presbyter of the Orthodox Cathedral. Even though her family had the full spread of food on Christmas Eve, the meal was primarily just for her and her parents. Her extended family was divided between Pittsburgh and New Jersey, which kept most of them from visiting during Christmas. "Most of our family was away in the Pittsburgh area," she said. "My father had to be here for services. Sometimes they would come to visit us, but that was kind of hard, too, because they were missing family."

Annett's childhood Christmases, too, were small celebrations, since she and her parents lived in Ohio away from their extended family. "We didn't have a lot out in Ohio because it was just Mom and Dad and I," Annett told me:

> There was more that would go on back [in Johnstown]. We did not do the *vilija*. The *vilija* was done in Johnstown because with Mom not feeling well, there was no way she was gonna do *vilija.* I mean, that's a lot of work, twelve dishes like that. So it kind of pared down to macaroni and cheese. And that was always our Christmas Eve dinner, was macaroni and cheese. We didn't do like the Italians do,

> the 12 fishes, and we didn't do any of the other---. It was just the macaroni. And then it used to be, we opened one gift on Christmas Eve, and depending who was working, we'd go to Christmas Eve Midnight Mass. But then eventually that got changed to just going Christmas morning. And then as I got older, we went to the tradition of having our meal on Christmas Eve, then we opened our gifts on Christmas Eve, then Christmas morning we went to church.

Annett's succinct description of how her family's Christmas celebrations evolved over the years points to the choices her family had to make to continue their ethnic traditions apart from family. Even though their circumstances prohibited her family from serving the traditional twelve dishes, her mother modified those traditions to continue their Slovak and Carpatho-Rusyn heritage. While the connection between a traditional *vilija* and macaroni and cheese might be tenuous, the symbolic significance of the meal remained with the family. In this case, the "authenticity" of the food served isn't the main focus. Rather, the ethnic and religious symbolism resides in the act of sharing a meatless meal on Christmas Eve, a performance of family values that links them to a larger ethnic context.

Adding to the dynamism of Annett's traditions, her family would celebrate several Christmases because they were split between Catholics, Byzantines, and Orthodox. She detailed the dynamism of her ethnic traditions:

> What we've done with the kids is, we keep December 25th as Santa Claus Christmas. And then January 7th is Christ Christmas. We kind of split it that way, and it works better. They get the Christmas presents and all of that, and they're not split from where everybody else is. But then, on Christmas, the other Christmas, January 7th, a small gift, but it's church and dinner and that type of

> thing. That's when we do the *vilija*. January 6th. Or if we've got a group together that want to do it on December 24---. And we've pared that down to fish, the *bobalky*, usually a good soup of a mushroom soup. Peas—good Lord, you have to have them peas. You have to eat one. . . . Maybe out of the original twelve dishes, we're down to five, And we end up combining some of the dishes.

Because her immediate family lived away from her extended relatives, they modified that meal to suit their needs. And now that Annett lives closer to her extended family, they have continued to modify the traditions to suit their own needs. Although they recognize the structure of the Christmas tradition, the families change them to meet their needs.

St. Nicholas Day

While the ethnic traditions surrounding Christmas mainly are observed within the home, other holidays consist of informal traditions both within the home and in the larger community. St. Nicholas Day is one of the holidays that illustrates this dual focus on the family within the home and the larger ethnic community. In both Western rite and Eastern rite Christianity, St. Nicholas Day is observed in the month leading up to Christmas. Celebrated in the Catholic church on December 6 and in the Orthodox and Byzantine churches on December 19, the feast day celebrates St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. In both faith traditions, the feast day is observed with a formal liturgy in the church, although there is no obligation to attend the liturgy. As Annett explained, "Nobody ever really talked about going to church" that day. Rather, the feast day is observed mainly in the home and wider parish community. The women that I spoke with all indicated that their home traditions were more important than any formal religious observances. In this way, the St. Nicholas celebrations are exemplary of vernacular religion: a

variety of traditions that happen in the home and community that are loosely connected to each other but are centered around a formal religious feast.

In the home, the observance of St. Nicholas Day is a pared-down version of Christmas, particularly surrounding the tradition of gift-giving. Re-enacting a common legend that Nicholas, who wanted to help a poor family but did not want to be noticed, anonymously left gold in the poor family's stockings hung near a fire, the Slovak American traditions often involve children leaving stockings or shoes out on the night preceding St. Nicholas' feast. In the morning, children wake up to find what small gifts he left. All the women I spoke with remembered receiving the same kind of gift: an orange, some nuts, and a popcorn ball or some other kind of small snack. Though these gifts may seem paltry by contemporary standards, Annett made clear that "In 1930, those were gold."

For some, the placement of the stockings was as much a ritual of the holiday as the act of gift-giving itself. Sometimes the stocking would be hung on a mantle, as is traditionally associated with Christmas. But some families hid their stockings. According to Annett, her mother would hide the stocking "and you'd have to find it. And then if you couldn't find it, you hoped she remembered where she hid it. Because that happened, too. You'd find it, like, in the middle of December somewhere." Annett indicates that the holiday served as more than a vehicle to receive a few nuts and an orange. Rather, for Annett's family, the tradition was a way to connect the women in a common quest and to cement the bonds between them in a celebration that reflected their ethnic heritage. For Annett, while the structure of the holiday traditions resembled other families' observances, her family added new elements to make the holiday more meaningful to them.

The St. Nicholas day festivities extended outside the home, taking the form of a vernacular religious event that is observed by the larger church community. Ann told me that her church continues to celebrate St. Nicholas Day as a community-wide event. As members of the Orthodox church, Ann told me, “We still do usually have a banquet or something. And it’s St Nicholas that comes, not Santa Claus. I think he’s married to one of our parishioners. I don't know if he's Protestant or Methodist or Baptist. . . . But he comes, he’s St. Nicholas. He has a costume and everything.” The parish community of St. Francis also celebrates the feast day with a community party. The parish holds an annual St. Nicholas party for the church community on the weekend closest to the church feast day. Celebrated with a meal and gifts for the attending children, St. Nicholas also makes an appearance at the party. Usually dressed in gold robes with a bishop’s mitre and staff, St. Nicholas is definitively *not* Santa Claus, a fact that highlights the religious aspect to the holiday (See Figure 7). Just like the in-home celebrations of St. Nicholas

Figure 7: This photo captures the typical St. Nicholas costume, which accents the religious aspects of the character through the gold robes and the bishop's mitre.

Day, even the church-sanctioned celebrations highlight the vernacular aspect of the religious tradition. These contemporary observances further highlight the relationship between the church as institution and the vernacular, ethnic interpretations of the feast day.

Easter

As opposed to the St. Nicholas Day celebrations and the *Vilija* observances, the Slovak and Carpatho-Rusyn women that I spoke with explained that Easter traditions tend to, as Annett phrased it, "hold a little tighter" to tradition. "The heavier influx of Old World for us came on Easter," she said. In fact, all of the women described a similar structure to the Easter festivities,

resonating with Toelken's theory that myths, like the Christian Easter story, "provide dramatic experiential models of protected truths and laws which would otherwise be very abstract, are most likely to be closer to the conservative end" of the Twin Laws scale (40). In other words, since the religious theology surrounding Easter is one of the most sacred religious rites, as well as its most abstract, the vernacular traditions tend to change less across space and time. For all these women, the holiday started over Holy Week, the week preceding Easter Sunday. The women described attending church during several days of Holy Week but most commonly on Good Friday, a solemnity that commemorates Jesus' death.

Outside of the church services, though, several vernacular traditions mirrored the mysticism of the formal liturgy and brought concrete signifiers to the abstract myths of the church. One of the central traditions that unites the home life with a communal tradition is the creation of Easter food baskets and the blessing of the baskets on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday. As Annett explained, "When the basket was brought down—and it came down on Holy Thursday—that's what started your days of Easter." Annett and her mom worked to fill the basket with the foods that would be eaten on Easter Sunday. These foods include ham, *Paska* (a sweet bread decorated with braids or crosses), *sirek* (a homemade cheese made of eggs and milk), salt, butter, horseradish, nut and poppyseed rolls, and wine. All of the women I spoke with said that the preparation of the foods, and the arrangement of the basket itself, fell to the women of the family.

The ceremony of the blessing of Easter baskets was one that brought the Slovak community together and served as a bridge between the vernacular Catholicism observed in the home and the formal services provided by the church. The formal ceremony itself is brief. Parishioners who want to have their food baskets blessed gather in the church itself or a church

hall. The priest recites a few prayers and then sprinkles holy water on the baskets, and the ceremony is over. Despite its short length, the ceremony is intensely meaningful, not only for this formal rite but also for the communal gathering.

The cloth used to cover the basket is one of the most dynamic representations of ethnic identity at Easter, and it is specifically tied to the religious celebration. When traveling to the church, the women cover the food to protect it, and the women I spoke to explained the variety of coverings their families used. Margie told me, “You always had to have a white cloth. You had to have a white cloth to cover that.” She explained that her mom kept a special white cloth only for use during Easter: “You didn't use that cloth for anything else. You know, it had to be white. And then naturally that cloth had to be washed and put away.” Annett articulated the fundamental importance of the cloth: “The basket may not have survived, not been passed down, but the covering was.” (See Figure 8)

Figure 8: This is a photo of the embroidered cover that Annett uses for the Blessing of the Baskets.

Interestingly, the decorated basket cover seems to be a product of the American environment—perhaps a way to symbolically articulate their ethnic identity in a multicultural American environment. Annett explained that "Grandma never had one. I asked her once if she had one from her mother, and she said no, they just covered it with a towel." It was only when her mom found a pattern that the family began using an embroidered cloth. Now, Annett remarked, "the pattern got passed around. And when I do the basket on Easter, I'm looking at carbon copies right around the table" at the blessing ceremony.

Coda: Everyday Decisions and the Dynamism of Ethnicity

Throughout all of our conversations, one theme re-emerged: the symbiotic relationship between ethnic identity and religious observations. Alice Voytko, for example, ruminated about

how one defines "ethnicity." I asked her if she could explain how she navigated the intersection of ethnicity and religion in her life. She remarked, "The pathway was always the church. The various things, including ethnicity, were woven into that. So it was more like a bump in the road or a turn in the road than it was any kind of intersection as such." Rather than separate lines that briefly intersect, Alice vividly portrayed how religious traditions and ethnic identity are incorporated into each other.

Alice offered a frank example from her childhood to explain this: "I can remember my grandmother was horrified that I played with kids who weren't Catholic. Now was that ethnicity, or was that—? You know, where do you cross the lines on these things? Grandma was very prejudiced against anything German, so everybody was Lutheran to her, no matter if they were Catholic, Jew, or Lutheran." For Alice's grandma, differing religious traditions equated to differing ethnic backgrounds, and her example further reveals the conflation of the two. Alice explained that even if the person were a German Catholic, her grandma would have still called them Lutheran, or, as Alice pantomimed in her grandma's haughty style, "*Luteranksy*."

I asked the other women, too, if they could separate their religious identity from their religious beliefs. Ann told me that her Carpatho-Rusyn traditions were inseparable from her Orthodox religion. "We practiced the Orthodox religion with Carpatho-Rusyn traditions," she said. "Everything was a tradition, really. You know, having the liturgy in English or in Slavonic, praying before eating meals, celebrating holy days according to the Julian calendar, Easter and Christmas just filled with all kinds of traditions." Annett offered further insight into those connections, explaining, "I think everything that we did had a little bit of Slovak behind it. Everything had a little bit of, ah, a Slovak flair. You would do something, or there would be something that mom would make, that maybe had a little bit of Slovak behind it. Or if you just

changed one thing to it, Dad would say, 'Well, that's more the Slovak way.'" The memories of these women certainly highlight the central importance of vernacular religious traditions to sustaining their ethnic identity, but they also point to the fundamental importance of women's culture to both religious and ethnic identity. While it may seem trivial that some of these women chose to modify the *vilija* traditions so that instead of twelve dishes, they only had five (or even substituted macaroni and cheese for any "traditional" Slovak food), these everyday decisions are exactly what reveal how much choice and power women have over setting the standard for what counts as expressions of their ethnic identity. Annett concluded: "But that's where I really started to see how the religion and the ethnicity was not split. They were both together at the same time. And I think that's where they say you live your religion."

Conclusion

The specific examples explored in this project—Kate Chopin's Louisiana Creoles, Anzia Yezierska's New York Jewish immigrants, the Slovak Catholic sisters of the Vincentian Sisters of Charity, and the Slovak American women in Johnstown—reveal the fundamental importance of vernacular religion to the articulation and maintenance of ethnic identity. As Primiano writes, "The expressive culture of religion from a performance studies perspective . . . does more than simply reflect the worldview of a religious tradition; it actually assists in the creation of culture" ("Manifestations" 386). Although the local examples included in this project leap in time, genre, religious denomination, and ethnic group, they demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between religion and ethnicity, two social concepts that are intrinsically linked.

Religion and ethnicity are also unified by the central role that women occupy in defining white ethnicity in America during the twentieth century. Placing women at the center of the phenomenon of American white ethnicity turns traditional narratives of ethnicity formation on their heads. If the private, traditional practice of vernacular religion is placed at the center of the discourses of ethnicity, rather than the standard narrative of public labor or political activism, then women take on the aura of active agents in the formation and maintenance of American ethnicity. The examples from this project certainly fill part of the "gap" that scholars like David Roediger point to. These studies often point out that women were "key figures" in the formation of ethnic identity but stop short of fully exploring how women's culture actually affected the development of ethnicity. More than just "filling the gap," the examples from this project recenter the development of American ethnicity away from the public spaces of wage labor and politics and into the private environment of the home and community.

Because many European immigrant families adopted an attitude of adaptability in America, their traditions—and their religious traditions particularly—fueled the dynamism of white ethnicity in the twentieth century and aided these groups in becoming provisionally white at the beginning of the century to unquestionably white by the end. The dynamism of these groups' religious traditions reflect and reinforce the dynamism of American ethnicity. To borrow Barre Toelken's phrasing, these vernacular religious traditions were "passed around long enough to have become recurrent in form and content, but changeable in performance" (37). The fact that these traditional performances could change illustrates the malleability of racial and ethnic identity. Vernacular religion sits at the center of this societal shift. In fact, Primiano observes that "nuances of religious belief and related practices, as well as verbal and material expressions of religion" should be viewed as "artistic communication" ("Manifestations" 386). Moreover, Primiano insists that "individual proclivities for change [are] representative of larger societal patterns" (386). In the instances from this project, those expressive forms of vernacular religion coalesce and settle into the creation of ethnic groups and a particularly American sense of ethnicity.

Women's roles as mediators within their groups position them as potent actors in these dynamic shifts. Like the fictional Calixta in Chopin's short story and Sara Smolinsky in Yezierska's novel, the women I spoke to described how they were mediators between genders and cultures, race and ethnicity. Precisely because white ethnic women straddle a "middle" ground, their potential to shift perceptions of ethnicity is not only vital to but, in fact, central to the formation of ethnicity. Perhaps unwittingly—or perhaps very knowingly—these women challenge the boundaries of what are considered stable categories. Regardless of intention, their performance of vernacular religious rituals shift the perceptions of their ethnic groups. If these

performances structure the cultural logic that dictates how certain groups behave and are perceived by others and if vernacular religion becomes a central pillar in the codification of white ethnicity along with labor and politics, then the stories of these women are crucial.

The stories that are included in this project exemplify how the personal and the collective work together to create a sense of group identity. As Ann from Johnstown told me, "I'm proud of my ethnic heritage *and* the church because they just go hand in hand. I'm proud of it. If somebody doesn't understand that, that's fine. I'm not living up to any particular guidelines or anything like that. Sometimes It's unique but it's a part of me. It's who I am." The pride that she feels in her ethnic religion is certainly personal to Ann, but it's also the product of cultural movements that stretch back centuries and that encompass myriad ethnic groups, racial groups, and religions. To center the voices and stories of individual women who maintain regular vernacular religious devotions is to more precisely illuminate the recursive social movements that determine the cultural grounding for the moves that we make.

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