

Memory, Remnants and Absences: Narrating the Past in Immigrant Jewish-  
American Literature from the 1890s to the 1930s

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## Abstract

This doctoral dissertation examines literature's relationship with the past, specifically the ways in which literature rewrites, and also fails to rewrite, multiple pasts. This project considers the narratives of immigrant Jewish-American authors from Eastern Europe who arrived in America during the third wave, namely between 1880 and 1924. The following four chapters focus upon seven literary works by five of these authors: Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* (1896), Mary Antin's *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899) and *The Promised Land* (1912), Rose Gollup Cohen's *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (1918), Ludwig Lewisohn's *Up Stream* (1922), and Anzia Yezierska's *All I Could Never Be* (1932) and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950). The following pages explore different questions: how do these texts reinterpret the past? What remains of this past, if anything remains at all, in their American present? In order to do this, the methodological framework draws on both canonical and recent scholarly work from memory studies and literary studies. Recent work on memory and mobility, such as Andreas Kitzmann's and Julia Creet's *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies* and Monika Palmberger's and Jelena Tošić's *Memories on the Move: Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past*, form the foundations of this methodology. Other studies on culture, memory and the past, as well as secondary criticism on the selected authors, also inform this theoretical framework on its emphasis upon the intertwinement between memory and literature. Through these specific theories and close textual analysis, this dissertation posits a study of the intricacies that accompany and inform literary narratives of the past. The central thesis of this dissertation is that, in these seven texts, the past constitutes a malleable, rewritten narrative between interrupted temporalities in which routes only lead to other routes.

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**Dedication**

To my father, who deserves far better than this.

To my family, for their stories of emigration to Argentina in search of a better life.



## Introduction

For inquire now about the past generation and apply yourself  
to what their fathers have searched out. For we are of  
yesterday and know nothing, because our days on earth are  
like a shadow.<sup>1</sup>

These well-known words from the Hebrew Bible invite a set of unadorned questions, to ask no more than a few: who is the speaker of these lines, and who is, or perhaps, who are, the listener(s)? When and where does this injunction occur? Do these words actually constitute an order, or are they rather a request? These queries can be answered quite straightforwardly: around 3,500 years ago in the land of Uz, Bildad the Shuhite, a descendant of Abraham and Keturah, utters this request to his friend Job the Prophet. The preceding pages recount that Job, a wealthy biblical prophet renowned for his righteousness and reverence to God, was severely tested by God at Satan's request. Even though Job's trials include the loss of his wealth, health and offspring, he still ignores his wife's suggestions and refuses to curse God, cursing, instead, the day of his birth.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, his friend Bildad, endeavoring to correct his behavior, beseeches him to turn to 'the former generation' as the paragon of devotion to God. As was common in ancient literature, Bildad draws on the centrality of oral tradition to recollect their ancestors' deeds, so that they can guide their steps in the present.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Job 8.8-9, *Tanakh: The Jewish Bible: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 1369. For the original words in Hebrew please see, *Koren Classic Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> See the Book of Job for a full account of these episodes. Likewise, see *Koren Classic Tanakh* for the original account of the same events in Hebrew.

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Niditch, *Oral World and the Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996) for a study of the impact of oral tradition in the Hebrew Bible. For a comprehensive study of the transition from oral tradition to the scriptures see: *Reading the Sacred Scriptures: From Oral Tradition to Written Documents and Their Reception*, ed. by Fiachra Long, and Siobhán Dowling Long (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017). Similarly, Plato discusses writing as a threat to memory, and refers to the man 'who thinks that even the best of writings are but a

Beyond these questions, one might also pose different queries regarding these bygone words: how does temporality work in this passage, or, more precisely, what is the relationship between past and present in these lines from the Hebrew Bible? The speaker establishes a dichotomy between past and present in which the former must serve as a source of knowledge and guidance for the latter. Regardless of this black-and-white division between temporalities, for Bildad words have the ability to bridge this time gap and restore former events for present purposes. In his eyes, words have the capacity to weave a narrative that manifests the history of preceding generations, and his request therefore indicates a correlation between narrative and memory. However, one might also inquire: how can we, those who ‘know nothing’, discern this correspondence between past events and our accounts of them? Similarly, can we ascertain what remains untold, the stories from these missing generations absent from our narratives? The emphasis placed by this biblical character on the primacy of the past and its potential restoration overlooks the inherent malleability of any account of the past. The genealogical relationship between generations is predicated on narratives which are frequently selective, malleable, and unstable, pervaded by silences and omissions. The lineage between fathers and sons does not correspond with a literal account of the past that brings us out of the shadow, and nor, for that matter, does it sustain unbroken links between temporalities.

This dissertation examines literature’s relationship with the past, specifically the ways in which literature rewrites, and also fails to rewrite, multiple pasts. This project is built upon the premise that the relationship between literature and the past is symbiotic: literature reinterprets the past, and is, in turn, simultaneously shaped by its narrated past. In other words, in the complex process of recovering the past, literary

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reminiscence of what we know’. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans., with introduction and notes by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), p. 79.

narratives generate new versions of preceding events that depart from the original occurrences.

This vexed relationship is marked by literature's inability to reproduce the past and by concomitant absences in the selected narratives. This dissertation considers the narratives of immigrant Jewish-American authors from Eastern Europe who arrive in America during the third great wave of immigration, namely between 1880 and 1924. The next four chapters focus upon seven literary works by five Jewish-American authors: Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896); Mary Antin's *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899) and *The Promised Land* (1912); Rose Gollup Cohen's *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (1918); Ludwig Lewisohn's *Up Stream* (1922); and Anzia Yezierska's *All I Could Never Be* (1932) and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950). The following pages explore different questions. How do these texts reinterpret the past? What remains of this past, if anything remains at all, in their American present? In order to conduct this inquiry, the methodological framework draws on both canonical and recent scholarly work in the fields of memory studies, American studies and literary studies.

This dissertation responds to a varied range of theoretical works from scholarly research on memory studies, as well as memory and migration studies, published in recent years. Current work on memory studies has focused, to a large extent, on conceptions of memory as both malleable and mobile, as well as on the intrinsic intertwinement of different memories. Terms adopted in recent years, such as prosthetic memory, postmemory, palimpsestic memory, traveling memory, multidirectional memory, and transcultural memory, reflect this ongoing trend in

memory studies.<sup>4</sup> These concepts might enable new methodologies for the analysis of both cultural products and historical events, and might also provide new understandings of the workings of memory in contemporary culture. Furthermore, since the circulation of knowledge across texts, places, temporalities, and cultures predates capitalism, these terms might also shed light upon memories of former times. However, the aforementioned concepts, although apposite for readings of the past and its mobility in a capitalist, globalized world, often neglect the persistence of discontinuities between temporalities. From oblivion and enforced silence to linguistic and material limitations, literary accounts of the past might be marked by absences, blanks, traces and losses. In a less celebratory spirit than most research in memory studies, this project turns to the darker side that accompanies memories: the disappearance of the past that makes origins irretrievable. The fragility and vulnerability of memory forced by historical injustices and the nature of textuality inform the nature of fragmented memories that never restore the past.

This dissertation draws on scholarship in memory studies and literary studies that considers notions of discontinuity, ruptures and absences in culture and literature. Recent work on memory and mobility, such as Andreas Kitzmann's and Julia Creet's *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies* and Monika Palmberger's and Jelena Tošić's *Memories on the Move: Experiencing*

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<sup>4</sup> On prosthetic memory see: Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), and Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997). On postmemory see: Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). On palimpsestic memory see: Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York City: Berghahn Books, 2013). On multidirectional memory see: Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2009). On traveling memory see: Astrid Erll, 'Travelling Memory', *Parallax*, Volume 17, Issue 4: *Transcultural Memory* (2011), pp. 4-18. Lastly, on transcultural memory see: *Transcultural Memory*, ed. by Rick Crownshaw (Abingdon, Oxfordshire and New York: Routledge, 2016).

*Mobility, Rethinking the Past*, form the foundations of this methodology.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Lois Parkinson Zamora's *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas*, with its analysis of the problematic nature of the past, including literary pasts, in the literature of the Americas, is also at the core of the methodology.<sup>6</sup> Other studies on culture, memory and the past, as well as secondary criticism on the selected authors, also inform the emphasis in this theoretical framework on the intertwinement between memory and literature. Through these specific theories and close textual analysis, this dissertation presents a study of the intricacies that accompany and inform narratives of the past. Addressing the layered nature of the past, the four chapters analyze the personal, literary and historical discontinuities between temporalities that appear in the selected texts. The central thesis of this dissertation is that, in these seven texts, the past constitutes a malleable, rewritten narrative between interrupted temporalities in which routes only lead to other routes.

The theoretical and critical framework of this thesis ranges across disciplines, primarily the aforementioned texts on memory studies and scholarship on the chosen authors. Throughout the four chapters, the close readings of the texts will establish connections between these different yet sometimes overlapping fields. In the first chapter, Creet's notion of memory as inherently mobile across time and space will be related to research focused upon *Out of the Shadow*'s apparent relationship to the past. Similarly, the second chapter interweaves Hubbell's views upon the rewriting of the past as an unfixed process with nuanced readings of Antin's struggle with her own

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<sup>5</sup> *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, ed. by Andreas Kitzmann and Julia Creet (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), and *Memories on the Move: Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past*, ed. by Monika Palmberger and Jelena Tošić (London, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

past. In erecting this framework, this thesis also makes an effort to address a wide range of secondary criticism on the chosen authors that tackles these key concerns. Despite its disparate origins, the framework encompasses research that comes together in recurring concerns with the vexed nature of memory and the past, often in relation to literature, and sometimes connected with other cultural spheres. In further instances, the contrasting views provided by this framework point to possibilities for new readings of the past in the primary sources. In their readings of memory, literature and movement, these theories not only allow readings of the multiple pasts narrated in these texts, but also provide ways of understanding the texts themselves as material products of history.

This introduction addresses theoretical, literary and historical concerns pertaining to these chosen texts written by Cahan, Antin, Yeziarska, Cohen and Lewisohn. Although the introduction is divided into several subsections, these preoccupations are often entangled; for instance, the literary and the historical will be discussed on the same pages. The first subsection, 'Theoretical Framework: Memory, the Past and Literature', clarifies key terminology, such as 'memory' and 'narrative', and examines their entanglements in literature. The second subsection, 'Literature and History: The Limits of Narrating the Past', analyzes in more depth theories of memory in relation to the primary sources, while it also reads the theories of memory studies used in this thesis in relation to materialist readings of history and literature. Thus, this part lays the foundation for an understanding of the past in these texts as a narrative conditioned by its particular material, external reality, which informs every aspect of the texts. The next subsection, 'The Rewriting of the Past in Literary Texts', delves into the representation of the past in literary texts and in the seven texts themselves as a product of the past they rewrite. The subsequent section, 'Rationale

for this Project’, provides a concise reasoning for the existence of this project in view of previous research on these authors. The next section, ‘Historical and Literary Background’, explores the historical context in which the selected texts were composed, alongside the personal background of each author. The final section, ‘Dissertation Structure’, provides a very brief overview of the content of each chapter, focusing on their structure, theoretical underpinnings, and central arguments.

#### Theoretical Framework: Memory, the Past and Literature

As is widely recognized since the nineteenth century, memory does not function as an imaginary box, namely a mere repository in which recollections arrive and are permanently stored in the human brain.<sup>7</sup> In other words, memory does not correspond with a physical or, for that matter, imaginary, location which holds all, or even most, preceding experiences for future use. Rather, its archival nature resembles that of traditional archives as places of selection, rewriting, storage and destruction of former information for social purposes.<sup>8</sup> As the scholar Marita Sturken demonstrates in *Tangled Memories*, ‘memory is a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived’.<sup>9</sup> Although Sturken overlooks the existence of non-narrative, sensorial memories, such as visual, auditory and olfactive memories, ‘narratives are a primary cultural tool for organizing and expressing memories’.<sup>10</sup> As

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<sup>7</sup> For a history of the concept of memory, see *Memory: A History*, ed. by Dmitrii Vladimirovich Nikulin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). To read a critique of the archival mode of memory, see Jens Brockmeier, *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> To read further about the ambiguities of the archive see Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995). For the original edition, see Derrida, *Mal d’archive: une impression freudienne* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2008). For a history of the archive from its emergence in the Late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, see Markus Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1997), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Robyn Fivush, ‘Subjective Perspective and Personal Timeline in the Development of Autobiographical Memory’, in *Understanding Autobiographical Memory: Theories and Approaches* ed. by Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 230 (pp. 226-267).

a present process, remembrance or recollection retells, and, consequently, reinterprets a preceding event whose pastness makes it, by definition, irretrievable. Any narrative about the past is built on the absence of the events it endeavors to capture through its existence, which, in turn, renders the narrative another reading of the past. This dissertation delves into the nature of memory as a story told from the present that delineates a particular version of the past informed by multiple constraints. Whether we refer to Hebraic literature of 3,000 years ago or American literature written in the last two centuries, writing remains bound by multiple former and current limitations.

This dissertation disagrees with academic research that either neglects the importance of the past as a historical reality, or, on the other side of the spectrum, postulates its survival into the present. The selected narratives do not originate in the ‘invention’ or ‘construction’ of the past out of a vacuum that any given language merely manufactures in the present. Consequently, this dissertation dissents from the view that ‘what we call our past is merely a function and production of a continuous present and its discourses’.<sup>11</sup> As elaborated later in this introduction, the past actually emerges as a narrative which is produced by historical circumstances, and which, in turn, reinterprets these circumstances. Furthermore, this project also departs from the standpoint that rewriting ‘inscribes untold narratives within the space of remembrance, re-presenting the untold not as absence or disremembering, but as presence’.<sup>12</sup> The concept of present-pasts, which stresses ‘memory as re-presentation, as making present’, although useful in other contexts, does not map onto the

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<sup>11</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, ‘Negotiating between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom—Dessa Rose’, in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. by Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 147 (pp. 144–63).

<sup>12</sup> Liedeke Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 129.



mechanisms of memory in these texts.<sup>13</sup> These narratives do not restore the past, even in a fragmentary form; hence the seemingly haunting nature of the past in these texts is problematized. Despite their existence, narratives are not composed of former presences that can be written onto the page, and hence restored from the dead, since, in different ways, the seven texts encompass multiple interpretation of absences.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of the relationship between literature, memory and the past, it is also necessary to clarify the meaning of these terms in this dissertation, and to further explore their connections. Since the seven primary sources are examples of narrative prose, in this context literature refers to this particular form of writing. A narrative can be defined as an account of an event, or, in this case, a series of events related to each other, told in a linear sequence from a particular point in the past to a specific instance in either the past or the present.<sup>14</sup> These narratives are constructed by the interweaving of words that tell stories about preceding events guided through patterns of causes and effects that lead to the present. Despite the temporal linearity of these seven texts, they allow for dramatic devices that disrupt this temporal order, particularly through the form of flashbacks. Furthermore, their chronological flow does not impede the presence of temporal gaps, such as temporal jumps of days, or sometimes even years, without any reference to these untold events. PalMBERGER's and TOSIC's *Memories on the Move* argues against reductionist understandings of narratives that disregard inconsistencies: 'we need to question romantic notions of storytelling that erase the often fragmented, incoherent moments

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<sup>13</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> For further research on narrative studies, see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1997); Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Points, 2019); Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1980); Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), and Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*; trans. by Alan Sheridan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982). For Genette's original work in French, see Genette, *Discours du récit* (Paris: Points, 2007), and Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1983).

of the telling'.<sup>15</sup> This dissertation builds upon this premise in its attempt to examine these inconsistencies, which, whether they are intrinsic to the notion of narrative or are merely features of the selected texts, are a recurring feature of these primary sources.

The relationship between 'memory' and 'the past' begs further analysis considering the porous, kindred nature of both concepts that might suggest their synonymy. As aforementioned, memory is not only a personal faculty that enables recollection of former events, but might also refer to the recollection themselves. In this subjective, malleable quality of 'memory' as recollection, one might argue that 'memory' overlaps with notions of 'the past' as narratives that rewrite former occurrences. One definition of memory, however, establishes a distinction between both terms by locating the past as a foreign, irretrievable reality. According to Richard Terdiman, 'memory is the modality of our relation to the past', which fits the mediatory relationship between memory and the past through literature.<sup>16</sup> The understanding of 'memory' and 'the past' in this dissertation cannot escape ambiguity. On the one hand, 'memory', such as the protagonist's recollections, emerges as the current procedure to access the past, and, in turn, determines the current impressions of this past. On the other hand, 'the past', which in the present becomes a mere set of memories, also refers to former events as they actually occurred, however irretrievable their actuality might be. Thus, despite their entangled nature, like memory, 'the past' also denotes the series of actual events that took place, irrespective of whether or not these events later turn into memories or are merely rendered into oblivion.

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<sup>15</sup> Annika Lems, 'Mobile Temporalities: Place, Ruination and the Dialectics of Time' in *Memories on the Move*, ed. by Palmberger and Tošić, p. 151 (pp. 127-157).

<sup>16</sup> Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 7.

Memory constantly fails us, and is always tainted by forgetting, the inability to recollect or capture an event, or the human failure that cannot transcend its limitations. Forgetting remains intertwined with memory, as memory functions as a form of oblivion, and thus, to speak about memory is always to speak about forgetting. Jonathan Boyarin notes that memory often camouflages forgetting: ‘we are so unused to naming it that even those of us who realize its danger usually prefer to speak *for memory*’.<sup>17</sup> To speak of memory implies, perhaps ironically, disregard of the fact that memory constantly demands forgetting. This might seem paradoxical considering that the primary sources are pervaded by memories; they might even be deemed ‘memory narratives’ owing to their chronological focus upon the past. Certainly, there are disparities between the texts: whereas *Yekl* focuses upon a few months in the protagonist’s life, in the introduction to *The Promised Land*, Antin promises the narrative of her ‘long past vividly remembered’.<sup>18</sup> Yet, at the same time, in all these texts lingers the constant oblivion required by memory: the impossibility to account for the totality of the past compels the narrators to delve into certain matters, while disregarding many others. The nature of human memory, with its inherently limited quality, implies that these narratives of former days can only recover a portion of the past.

Related to the notion of narrative, arguably even intrinsic to it, lies the notion of ‘the past’, whether we refer to historical events external to the text, or the representation of these events in the narratives. The primary sources might be read within the immigrant American literature to which they belong, or, for that matter, merely within American literature. Since Yeziarska’s, Cohen’s and Antin’s works also belong to American women’s literature, these narratives are located within

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 3.

multiple literary and historical pasts. At the same time, this dissertation constantly refers to the personal pasts of the protagonists, namely their former experiences that inform their current lives in America. ‘The past’ acquires, therefore, a personal and communal meaning in which private experiences intertwine with the history of the community or the nation. Thus, while in Yeziarska’s *Red Ribbon*, the namesake protagonist is subjected to her father’s contempt for her literary aspirations, she also suffers a personal experience of discrimination which leaves deep scars in her soul. At the same time, this personal ordeal is part of a historical narrative of early-twentieth-century frustrated women unable to fulfill their professional dreams. In fact, one might even argue that Yeziarska’s tribulations in her writing career are the result of this communal history of discrimination against women that relegates her to the private sphere. Although personal experiences might not acquire communal significance, personal and communal pasts constantly intertwine throughout the narratives.

Regarding the sense of the past in this thesis, it is also necessary to clarify that, considering the literary nature of the subject of this dissertation, the past also holds linguistic significance.<sup>19</sup> In other words, this definition of the past encompasses not only the narrated events pertaining to former times, but also the past of the tongues in which these events are retold. As examined in chapter 4, language itself has a history: languages originate in a particular place and time, and are spoken by a particular collectivity. Moreover, languages are in a constant state of change, in fact, they might even disappear, and their origins in preceding tongues might not even be discernable. The English of the narratives comes from particular American dialects, often interspersed with foreign words, and is deeply influenced by the readings of the

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<sup>19</sup> For a study of the understanding of history since Antiquity, see Dmitriï Vladimirovich Nikulin, *The Concept of History* (New York: Bloombury Publishing, 2016).

authors. Thus, the language of the narratives evidences the history of English, as well as the particular idiolects of the writers, but also broader historical events. For instance, Yeziarska's difficulties in the acquisition of English as a second language are the result of the poverty that restricts her to the ghetto and deprives her of an education. Her constant search for 'words, words about words' exemplifies both the subjugation of women and the oppression of the poor as coalescent historical realities.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the English of her texts reveals her personal history of emigration from Poland to America, with its concomitant, ongoing process of English acquisition. Simultaneously, her words demonstrate that the personal and historical oppression of women, which conditions her education, can also be read in her writings.

#### Literature and History: The Limits of Narrating the Past

A study of literature's relationship with the past must emerge from an understanding of the historical context in which the chosen texts were produced.<sup>21</sup> In her analysis of feminism and capitalism in the contemporary world, the Marxist feminist critic Teresa Ebert claims that 'the fact that we understand reality through language does not mean reality is made by language'.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, frivolous notions of reality as a product of discourse that are common in scholarly and political debates often masquerade and perpetuate histories of class oppression. Bearing in mind that the history of men and women cannot escape their own material conditions, literature is always the product

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<sup>20</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *The Bread Givers* (New York: Persea Books, 2003), p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> For an understanding of the relationship between historiography and literature, particularly the Hebrew Bible, see Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). For an analysis of the conceptions of history since ancient Mesopotamia to modern times, see Jacques le Goff, *History and Memory*; trans. by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). For the original text in French, see le Goff, *Histoire et Mémoire* (Paris, Gallimard, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Teresa Ebert, '(Untimely) Critiques for a Red Feminism', in *Post-Ality, Marxism and Postmodernism*, ed. by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, Teresa Ebert and Donald Morton (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1995), p. 120 (pp. 113-149). For an in-depth analysis of this line of thought see this edited volume and also Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

of particular temporal and geographical circumstances. As an example, in their attempts to mirror the external world in which the narratives develop, the existence of history as a material reality shapes the content of the selected texts. The most obvious example of this is the class inequality palpable in their storylines: with the exception of *Up Stream*, the historical context of the selected texts exemplifies the centrality in the narrated events of either recurring or permanent poverty. Similarly, beyond the factory scenes, the five selected texts written by women, and even those composed by men, reflect the innumerable limitations imposed upon women during the Progressive Era. Moreover, in their word choices, syntactical features and other formal aspects, the texts themselves are the products of this very history. Although the economic conditions in which the primary sources were written are not the main focus of this dissertation, the centrality of these historical circumstances in the relationship between literature and the past frequently recurs throughout this thesis.

Within the universal nature of economic forces as the foundation of the cultural sphere lies the particularity of these historical relations in precise historical moments.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned before, Ebert argues for the materiality of history as the foundation of the cultural realm: ‘social relations and practices are, in other words, prior to signification and are objective. The subjugation of women, then, is an objective historical reality’.<sup>24</sup> This reality of the oppression of women and the working-class, which sometimes comes together, as in the cases of Yeziarska and

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<sup>23</sup> For further reading on memory and history from a cultural memory studies perspective, see Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism*, p. 38. For a classic study of the materialist conception of history, see Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. by Maurice Dobb, trans. by S.W. Ryazanskaya (London: Lawrence and Wishart; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970). For a briefer overview of the materialist conception of history, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook’ in Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One*, ed. by C. J. Arthur, trans. by International Publishers Co. (New York: International Publishers, 1970), pp. 39-56.

Cohen, exists outside language while also shaping the cultural sphere. Language, and, hence literature, relate to class dynamics, as well as to structural inequality between men and women, which, as the relevant chapters demonstrate, pervade the primary texts. While texts are written, read and reread within this historical reality, the particularities of history and language must also be taken into account. In other words, although class oppression, however varied it may be, has arguably existed for millennia in different regions of the world, history cannot be reduced to an abstraction of a series of continuous events. Instead, the historical context behind these texts, which, broadly speaking, corresponds to America between the 1890s and 1930s, must be understood as a series of particular events in specific moments. Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon*, for instance, relates a poor American woman's search for a past, where her gender makes her marginal to both Jewish and American histories during the Progressive Era. The nature of her experiences, including her poor educational background, which frustrates her quest for a literary heritage which she can reclaim as her own, is the result of this given time.

This emphasis upon the historical nature of literary works does not deny that the quest for objectivity in the representation of the past merely leads to multiple versions of the same events. Therefore, it is important to notice that this dissertation does not fall within the category of autobiographical criticism that equates autobiographical fiction with the narrative of the author's life. Furthermore, it does not consider the correspondence, or, for that matter, the lack thereof, between the narratives and the lives of their authors. Jonathan Greenberg notes the intrinsic connection between autobiography and fiction when he states that 'fiction always hovers around the edges

of any autobiographical account'.<sup>25</sup> In fact, research conducted on this issue has demonstrated the fictionality of some of the events, the existence of omissions, and the manipulation of the style. This is the case with studies of Yeziarska's oeuvre which argue that, despite her poverty, she fashioned her supposedly poor English, mixed with Yiddish, to mirror the speech of her ghetto characters.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, like other literary genres, although they are not necessarily fabrications, autobiographies and memoirs are fictional accounts to the extent that any version of the past rewrites this past.<sup>27</sup> The possibility to elucidate the accuracy of the represented events, and even the extent of their departure from the truth, are beyond the scope of this dissertation. As a result, it posits that the existence of an objective reality, such as the exploitation of women's labor as described by Yeziarska, does not stand at odds with the impossibility of capturing the objectivity of this exploitative relationship. Rather, the impossibility of an accurate, objective representation of history coalesces with the unstable, changing rewritings of personal events in the primary sources.

The nature of prosthetic memories sheds more light upon the porous, blurred relation between memory and history in these literary works. Without denying the reality of history, it is imperative to acknowledge its constant permutability, which Alison Landsberg connects with the existence of mass media. Hence, Landsberg, who

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Greenberg, 'Travel Writing as Modernist Autobiography: Evelyn Waugh's Labels and the Writing Personality' in *Modernism and Autobiography*, ed. by Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 69 (pp. 69-83).

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed analysis of Yeziarska's English, see Delia Caparoso Konzett, 'Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yeziarska's *Hungry Hearts*', *American Literature*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (Sep., 1997), pp. 595-619. To read more on Yeziarska and her fashioning of language, see Lisa Botshon, 'Anzia Yeziarska and the Marketing of the Jewish Immigrant in 1920s Hollywood', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Cinema & Narrative (Fall, 2000), pp. 287-312. For a contemporary perspective of Yeziarska's language, see Alter Brody, 'Yiddish in American Fiction' (*American Mercury*, 1926), pp. 205-207.

<sup>27</sup> For scholarly work on autobiographies and fiction, see *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France*, ed. by Claire Boyle (London: Legenda/Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2007), and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). To read more on autobiography and women, see *Feminism & Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. by Tess Coslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).



also acknowledges the ability of literature to manufacture prosthetic memories, claims that through this form of remembrance ‘people are invited to take on memories of a past through which they did not live’.<sup>28</sup> A case in point is actually Antin, who, as later analyzed, constantly reclaims Puritan history as her own past throughout *The Promised Land*. To clarify this, it is necessary to consider that Antin’s reality, namely her foreign origins, propels her to rewrite her own past, turning it into an account of immigrant homecoming to the Land of Promise, in order to secure an American self in the present. Thus, although literature does not belong to the mass media referred to by Landsberg in *Prosthetic Memory*, it does, in Antin’s case, play a vital part in her personal reinvention of her past by which she acquires memories of a particular collectivity, in this case Americans, in order to inscribe herself in American letters as one of their own. Irrespective of her actual past, Antin’s memories are always adapted, filtered by her present desire to share an American present and future with her fellow citizens.

Returning more directly to the relationship between the texts and autobiographical approaches, further clarification is required in view of the autobiographical elements of the chosen sources. On the one hand, this thesis clearly departs from now uncommonly held views that consider authorial intention as a principle that can be discerned in a text. As ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ already argued in the 1940s, ‘the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable’.<sup>29</sup> Sharing this skeptical view with much of contemporary scholarship, this project does not delve into these matters of authorial intention, whose certainty, regardless of claims to authenticity, clearly escapes the pages of the chosen texts. On the other hand, this perspective does not imply the denial of the nuanced nature and intrinsic

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<sup>28</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, *The Sewanee Review*, 1946, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1946), p. 468 (pp. 468- 488).

complexities of notions such as intention and truth. As Edward W. Said reminded his readers in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, ‘the designation of a beginning generally involves also the designation of a consequent intention’.<sup>30</sup> For Said, literary beginnings, which include both actions and considerations, carry the intentional production of textual meaning by the writer, whose first words determine to a large extent the remainder of the text. By the same token, the importance of considering aspects such as empathy, for instance, empathic readings of women characters in postcolonial autobiographies, must also be acknowledged in this introduction.<sup>31</sup> As a result, an approach to the chosen texts that departs from biographical considerations does not necessarily disregard the nuanced nature of autobiography and its multiple truths.

The aforementioned reflections regarding Marxist materialism deserve further consideration in view of the previous references to current scholarship on memory studies. Certainly, these different theories neither build upon materialist conceptions of history nor make frequent reference to any Marxist school. However, the selected theoretical approaches to memory and literature do not necessarily contradict these Marxist understandings of the cultural sphere; rather, their existence, as well as the texts with which they engage, can be reinterpreted in the light of this framework. As Karl Marx notes regarding this relationship between the spiritual and the material realms: ‘it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence which determines their consciousness’.<sup>32</sup> The so-called ‘social existence’ of men must be understood within an economic dimension: ‘the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and

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<sup>30</sup> Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Reeds and Anna Rocca, ‘Introduction’, in *Women Taking Risks in Contemporary Autobiographical Narratives*, ed. by Kenneth Reeds and Anna Rocca (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 4 (pp. 1-20).

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 92.

intellectual life'.<sup>33</sup> Scholars have debated for decades the extent of this determination of the economic base upon the cultural sphere, or even whether the original text in German refers to the former merely conditioning the latter.<sup>34</sup> Although the existence of limited autonomy in cultural phenomena from the material conditions of each period is a source of debate, the importance of the mode of production, in this case capitalism, is beyond doubt. While this thesis considers the economic underpinnings of the primary texts tangentially, it does not disregard their relevance in shaping these texts. Therefore, without dwelling upon the potentially limited autonomy of the cultural arena, or its very inexistence, this project frequently returns to the historical conditions of its sources.

According to this view upon social life, the existence of men and, concomitantly, the culture produced by these men is determined by both historical and natural circumstances. Yet it is important to clarify that in this dissertation 'the material conditions' emphasize the importance of 'matter' itself, namely, the production and dynamic actuality of the texts, as well as their surrounding conditions. Likewise, here 'nature' focuses mostly on the limited conditions of men, such as the restricted nature of memory, whose fragility often undermines the protagonists' claims to accuracy. Despite not being a Marxist project per se, this thesis frequently returns to the impact of material existence, in both its natural and social derivations, upon the case studies. Indeed, the aforementioned reference to historical circumstances already implies that social and political events will often be granted more analysis than economic matters. To illustrate this, the analysis of *Red Ribbon* in chapter 1 refers to the underpinning climate of financial depression after the crash of

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 175.

<sup>34</sup> For a nuanced reading of Marxism and economic determinism, see John McMurtry, 'Making Sense of Economic Determinism', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Dec., 1973), pp. 249-261.

1929, mass emigration and the penuries of women writers. Marx's analysis contributes to a rereading of the primary and secondary sources, whether from memory studies and otherwise, which considers the preceding and contemporary circumstances of this American era. Thus, his materialistic thinking aids to avoid ahistorical, decontextualized readings of the text that disregard not only class oppression but also the material nature of memory.

While these texts are never mirrors of their epoch, their particular, shifting contexts play a pivotal role in their ongoing reimagining of former times. The malleability and fragility of memory in *The Promised Land* and *Red Ribbon* are not only the product of the limited, transient nature of memory, nor, for that matter, the mass emigration movements of the twentieth-century. Rather, although not mere reflections of the material world seen through human minds, the texts are conditioned by their differing historical conditions, which limit the work of memory in different ways. Thus, Antin's yearning for a Puritan past is not only grounded in her longing for an American self, but also, equally importantly, it builds upon her yearning for a middle-class existence away from her years in poverty. In other words, as will be showed in the four chapters below, the necessity to either obtain or secure a middle-class status often conditions the multiple discontinuities from the past that can be seen in the narratives. In fact, the production of the texts themselves is shaped by the circumstances of material life which determine the nature of memories as routes, instead of roots, in their pages. Ultimately, these two notions of materiality overlap throughout the narrative, as is best illustrated by the transliteration of Hebrew and Yiddish characters in these texts. This rendition of the Hebrew alphabet into English responds to the writers' need to affirm their Americanness, using the Latin alphabet instead of a script foreign to them, which could potentially alienate their readers.

While fulfilling this purpose, the absence of these ancient letters from the English text would likely have reduced the printing costs for all editions of Antin's autobiography.

Memory, including literary accounts of the past, is a social phenomenon that encompasses overlapping social communities, such as the family, the neighborhood and the nation. The existence of these communities is predicated on a narrative of continuity where the relationship between a particular past and the present is shaped by dominant frameworks: 'the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society'.<sup>35</sup> One remembers within a community, and this community also shapes and dictates an official or sacred memory that takes precedence over other memories. Several social frameworks, such as family, religion, and nation, might sanction certain memories to create a sense of group cohesion through individual memories. There might, of course, be other frameworks beyond this, yet these groups, which are the focus of Halbwachs's *On Collective Memory*, exemplify for him how the individual's memory is conditioned by his society. Thus, belonging to specific groups determines the process of remembrance of its members, and therefore Halbwachs even claims that 'the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances to each other'.<sup>36</sup> Groups do this by creating communal narratives of belonging which connect the individual to the group, and all of its members with previous generations of the same group. Without denying that memory also has an individual dimension, Halbwachs considers that social frameworks always mediate and reshape personal memories.

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<sup>35</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 40. For the original text in French, see Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994). For further canonical reading on collective memory see, Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. by Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York, Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980), and, for the original French, see Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

<sup>36</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 83.

It is necessary to clarify the collective dimension of memory in order to understand how narratives of the past operate in the primary sources within specific familial, religious, communal and American frameworks. A case in point is how the protagonists partake in different, intersecting, frameworks, and sometimes, particularly regarding their religious community, also depart from them. An example of this complexity would be Yezierska's *All I Could Never Be*, in which Fanya Ivanowna, Yezierska's counterpart, shares almost contrasting, Jewish memories. In an early scene, Ivanowna connects the Jewish ghetto of New York, where she came of age, with the origins of both Israelite and American history. In doing this, the ghetto recovers an ancient exilic narrative that turns the Israelites into the ancestors of Jews and Americans, joining both peoples. Later, Ivanowna returns to the same streets during Chanukah celebrations, where she imagines a different communal history in which this Jewish holiday stands at odds with the American surroundings. Thus, ancient events from Israelite history, namely the biblical Exodus and the Maccabean victory over the Syrians, are interpreted differently depending on the communal framework. Furthermore, the predominant thoughts of society, such as patriarchy, are embedded into these narratives in the necessity to conform to a male artistic world. Thus, despite Ivanowna's telling the poverty of women writers, she does not hesitate in joining Scott, her Gentile companion, in her Protestant idealization of America as the Promised Land.

These memory frameworks emerge from the necessity for a common history between members of the same community, such as American citizens sharing a common past of emigration and arrival in the New World. While these frameworks force community members to recall certain events, they also require them to forget innumerable episodes of their own history. Communal narratives demand the

obliteration of many accounts that might threaten the integrity of this collectivity. National memory sanctions certain memories and obliterates others that might be a threat to the integrity of the state; the sacralization of certain narratives comes at the expense of many others left untold. This explains the need for national events to obliterate troublesome memories, such as the treatment of women and cultural minorities, or even humiliations and defeats. Similarly, Svetlana Boym argues that in the making of national memory, ‘the gaps and discontinuities are mended through a coherent and inspiring tale of recovered identity’.<sup>37</sup> Attempts to destroy working-class memory are also caught up in this sense of remembrance and oblivion, as well as personal desires to forget certain tragic events. Likewise, this also explains the subtle satire of factory owners by Cahan in the opening pages of *Yekl* as a socialist attempt at a veiled denouncement of their mistreatment without degrading his adopted nation.<sup>38</sup> A passage from another text, Cristina García’s novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, exemplifies the selective and politicized nature of remembrance, suggesting also another important aspect: the obstacles to changing these master narratives of the past. The women characters grumble about the historians’ highly selective focus upon the privileged at the expense of women, who are erased from historical accounts:

If it were up to me, I’d record other things. Like the time there was a hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. Why don’t I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what’s important?<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> Abraham Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, in *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and other Stories of Yiddish New York* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Cristina Garcia, *Dreaming in Cuban* (Washington: Turtleback Books Publishing, 1992), p. 28.

Institutions, including political, social and religious organizations, often manipulate the past with the intent to determine the events that societies should remember and forget. As a result, memory is neither innocent nor neutral, and it is never immutable, since ‘memory is active, forging its pasts to serve present interests’.<sup>40</sup> Remembrance is, by definition, a series of mental processes that belongs to the present: ‘memory not only stores the past but restructures, mediates, and adapts it to the semantic frames and needs of a given society’.<sup>41</sup> Memories adapt to cultural frames in order to reaffirm particular narratives that support the often financial interests of a selected group, such as cultural elites. In literary narratives, omissions are also commonplace in the necessity to obliterate events deemed unimportant, injurious or irrelevant for political powers. To return to a previous example, Yeziarska’s *Red Ribbon* captures the existence of religious and national memory frameworks whose narratives sanction different versions of communal memory. On the one hand, the religious community of her namesake protagonist privileges a chain of memory in which, since its beginnings to the present, men are the writers and custodians of tradition. On the other hand, national American memory also excludes women from its pages, hence the woman protagonist’s inability to find her place in a lineage of women writers. These different forms of collective memory rewrite history to suit particular present concerns, such as the interests of a dominant elite that render women subservient to men.

If memory can exist only within a particular historical context, the selected narratives are marked by the dynamics of remembrance that obliterate particular

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<sup>40</sup> Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwartz, ‘Introduction: Mapping Memory’, in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 3 (pp. 1- 14).

<sup>41</sup> Nanci Adler and Selma Leydesdorff, ‘Introduction: On the Evidence Value of Personal Testimony’ in *Tapestry of Memory: Evidence and Testimony in Life-Story Narratives*, ed. by Nanci Adler and Selma Leydesdorff (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2017), p. xviii (p. ix-2).



narratives. Hayden White notes that the same search for temporal continuity also dominates literary narratives: ‘narrative strains to produce the effect of having filled in all the gaps, to put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning’.<sup>42</sup> While the applicability of this claim to all narratives is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the primary sources do endeavor to produce a sense of temporal continuity, however fragmented this linearity might be. As mentioned above, if within these attempts to create the impression of continuity other memories are effaced, therein also lies the difficulty, sometimes the impossibility, of rescuing these memories from oblivion. A further, albeit brief, elaboration on the previous example of *Yekl* sheds light upon this: *Yekl*’s historical context of Americanization and capitalism constrains the account of former and current events. Thus, not only is workers’ exploitation in the protagonist’s factory undiscussed, but *Yekl*’s Russian past in his native village is also left largely unexplored. These omissions of non-American matters help adapt the narrative to an assimilation pattern which, despite its ironic tone towards the promises of America, still equates America with the present and the future. *Yekl* also bears another layer of silence: in his attempts to Americanize the narrative, the editor, William Dean Howells, modified the content of the text, including its title.<sup>43</sup> As a result, however faithful to reality his representation might be, Cahan’s novella exemplifies the intersections between historical and literary erasures of the pasts.

In the incompleteness of their accounts, the three women, Yeziarska, Antin and Cohen, rely to various degrees upon silences to indicate discrimination against

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<sup>42</sup> Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’ in *Narrative Theory: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Mieke Bal (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 66 (pp. 56-80).

<sup>43</sup> To read more on the history of *Yekl*’s edition, see Aviva Taubenfeld, “Only an ‘L’”: Linguistic Borders and the Immigrant Author in Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl* and *Yankel der Yankee*” in *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*, ed. by Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 144-165, and Abraham Cahan, *Bletter fun Mein Leben* (New York: Forward Association, 1928).

women. The relationship between women and silence in literature has already been examined in academic research, with a focus upon its formal aspects in twentieth-century literature.<sup>44</sup> Writing on women and history, Gerda Lerner argues that ‘what women have done and experienced has been left unrecorded, neglected, and ignored in interpretation’.<sup>45</sup> These three women writers not only suffered the historical constraints imposed upon them, such as the previously mentioned limited access to sources, but they also endure other restrictions in their writings.<sup>46</sup> As a consequence, their accounts of the lives of their protagonists are often pervaded by silences, such as women’s inability to voice certain former experiences. An example of this is *Out of the Shadow*’s flashing descriptions of the sexual harassment experienced by the protagonist’s aunt at the hands of random men.<sup>47</sup> In her depictions of the mistreatment of her aunt by an unnamed man, Ruth, the narrator, tacitly denounces violence against women, as she mentions the exploitation of women in the American factories. Yet her denouncement is limited to a few paragraphs, which might even disregard the more gruesome details, in an account that highlights and omits events in order to serve present concerns. Neither Antin nor Yeziarska include scenes of this kind, although violence against women is occasionally present, such as Yeziarska’s verbally abusive father in *Red Ribbon*. Indecorous issues that might threaten the American middle-

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<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Patricia Ondaek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, Stanford: University Press, 1991).

<sup>45</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 4. To read more on the struggle for a women’s consciousness, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> For canonical scholarship on women and memory, see *Gender and Memory*, ed. by Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Thompson (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), and for more recent scholarship on women and memory, see *Women on the Move: Body, Memory and Femininity in Present-Day Transnational Diasporic Writing*, ed. by Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Julia Tofantshuk (London: Routledge, 2018). Furthermore, there are several studies on the erasure of women from history, including, Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), *Women’s Memory: The Problem of Sources*, ed. by Türe, Fatma D., and Birsen Talay Keşoğlu (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), and Mary Chamberlain, *Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

<sup>47</sup> Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 54-55 and pp. 58-60.

class sense of moral propriety are therefore left unmentioned, consigning episodes from women's pasts to oblivion.

#### The Rewriting of the Past in Literary Texts

Whether through formal or thematic aspects, these narratives remain consistently marked by the irretrievable nature of the past that informs their endeavors to restore it through their words. L.P. Hartley's well-known observation, 'the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there', best captures this view of the past as an unknown and unknowable territory.<sup>48</sup> Referring to what he perceives as the inability of the stranger to see the foreign nation through native's eyes, Hartley's remark captures the immensity of this abyss between past and present times. Like the foreigner, who, no matter the years he has lived in a new land, contemplates a reality that cannot comprehend, so do the narrators relate a reality remote from their current lives. Fragile by nature, memory can provide only partial glimpses of the past; hence 'our knowledge of the past is only ever that of a knowledge of traces, or even of traces of traces'.<sup>49</sup> In this case, in their constant return to former times, whether the Russian village of Polotzk in *The Promised Land* or an unnamed Polish village in *Red Ribbon*, the traces ultimately constitute memory remnants of irretrievable events. The continuum of these traces, these current memories of early occurrences, whether American or foreign, can never retrieve the origin, the moment in which the events actually took place. Rather, attempts to recollect and write the past return the storyline to reinterpretations of these events, forever removed from the actuality of the past.

The notion of origins, and the traces which they become, are addressed in different ways in the four chapters of this thesis, hence the need to clarify these concepts from the start. As argued above, these narratives of the past must be

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<sup>48</sup> L. P. (Leslie Poles) Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Roger Kennedy, 'Memory and the Unconscious' in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. by Radstone and Schwarz, p. 187 (pp. 179-197).

understood in view of their textual limitations, together with the limitations imposed by the process of remembrance. From oblivion and omission to re-editing and censorship, to name a few, both mnemonic and textual constraints prevent the retrieval the Origin, the event as it actually occurred. From this we can infer the lack of continuity within and between texts themselves, which correlates with Parkinson Zamora's *The Usable Past*, a key text in this dissertation. Indeed, Zamora claims that in the case of some American writers 'their intertextual strategies self-consciously propose that origins are multiple and indeterminate, never fixed or fully decided'.<sup>50</sup> In replacing the origin in literary texts, words become these traces of the past, because since they replace the missing origins, they become the only origins available for readers and writers alike to grasp external reality. Temporal continuity, understood as an unbroken sense of linkage between past and present, must originate in a particular moment which then leads us to current times. As opposed to this vision of continuity, the narratives posit changing versions of origins, meaning that there is no certain correlation between the events and their versions of them.

In view of the centrality of these notions of memory that stress their malleable, changing nature, this dissertation examines the multiplicity of pasts that exist in the primary sources. Besides the previously explained intertwining of personal and collective pasts, the ongoing entanglement of mythical and historical pasts is also a recurring concern in this thesis. As a source of cohesion between temporalities, literature often serves to 'merge "actual" and "mythical" past events with the aim of inscribing the group in a historical and spatial trajectory'.<sup>51</sup> The reimagining of former places which predate emigration, to which Palmberger and Tosic refer in *Memories*

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<sup>50</sup> Parkinson Zamora, *The Usable Past*, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Burcu Cevik-Compiegne and Josef Ploner, 'Gallipoli Revisited: Transnational and Transgenerational Memory Among Turkish and Sikh Communities in Australia' in *Memory, Migration and Travel*, ed. by Sabine Marschall (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 87 (pp. 85-104).

*on the Move*, entails the merging of fictional and real histories. Relevant for this dissertation is the reimagining of the past of immigrants to America, who, mixing different narratives of the past, reinterpret their arrival in America as their coming to the Promised Land. Whether a literal mythification of America as the Promised Land, or a satire of this vision, or, as is common, a mixture of both, the seven texts echo this myth of immigrants as exiles longing for the land of plenty. Prosthetic pasts, those narratives borrowed from other collectivities, such as the biblical Israelites, serve the overall structure of the narratives, as well as their claims to Americanization. Despite the singularity of the noun, the past must be examined bearing in mind the various, sometimes inconsistent, and even contradictory, narratives that operate within the main storylines.

Lastly, more specific note must be made about the materiality of the primary sources, since it plays a key role in these mnemonic discontinuities between texts, as well as within the texts themselves. Their materiality implies not only the forces of production behind the texts, but also the physicality of the texts themselves, namely their existence as concrete entities. Writing on textuality and erasure, Roger Chartier refers to ‘the essential substance of the work, which is supposed to remain invariable, from the accidental variations of the text’.<sup>52</sup> Chartier places the text within a continuum of potential variations related to its history, which is always influenced by ‘those who copy, compose and correct’ them.<sup>53</sup> In other words, documents are not permanent, stable entities; in their existence lies the constant possibility of change and even destruction. A case in point is the passage of time, which imprints its marks upon the pages of the texts, sometimes even erasing portions of them for future

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<sup>52</sup> Roger Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. ix.

<sup>53</sup> Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century*, p. ix.

generations. In its impact upon their storylines, the changing nature of texts relates to the preceding discussion of memory, the past and the primary sources. Considering that memories exist in these texts only as narratives, the physical nature of the texts, which shapes them, also determines every aspect of their content.

The materiality of the primary sources not only contributes to the fragmented, malleable nature of the memories narrated in them, but also erases the history of these sources while preserving them. The composition of these sources, such as their edition history, translation of foreign terms, word count restrictions owing to publishers and printing costs, leaves their imprint on the printed version. Furthermore, the production of texts entails their materiality, including the connections between the main texts and their paratexts, as part of what Roger Chartier denominates ‘the manifold, shifting, and unstable relations between the text and its materialities, between the work and its inscriptions’.<sup>54</sup> *Yekl*, which serves as a case study for the relationship between memory, narrative and language in chapter 4, exemplifies these unstable relations between its multiple parts. In Cahan’s novella, paratextual elements, mainly the title, subtitles, tables of contents and footnotes, contribute to the structuring of the past into a seemingly coherent, closed account. Yet these elements, like the history behind the publication of *Yekl* itself, reproduce a history of erasure marked by the necessity to adapt the narrative to American standards. Features like the title, which was modified from the Yiddish-sounding *Yankel der Yankee* to *Yekl*, a name which, although foreign, does not exist in Yiddish, capture this textual Americanization. Present demands to conform to an American way of life entail the

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<sup>54</sup> Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century*, p. ix. For the original text in French, see Roger Chartier, *Inscrire et effacer: culture écrite et littérature (XI-XVIII siècle)* (Paris: Gallimard and Le Seuil, 2005). For further reading on materiality and memory, see *The Materiality of Text: Placement, Perception, and Presence of Inscribed Texts in Classical Antiquity*, ed. by Andrej Petrovic, Ivana Petrovic, and Edmund Thomas (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), and Rachel Hurdley, *Home, Materiality, Memory and Belonging, Keeping Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

excision of Yiddish terminology, now consigned to the past, like other narratives also discarded from the final version of *Yekl*, which, in turn, might also undergo further changes in the future.

The history of *Yekl*'s manuscript tells a narrative of ongoing erasure inflicted upon its pages: from the title to the name of the protagonist, *Yekl* underwent painful excision in order to be more suited to the American market. Howells decided to modify the title from *Yankel der Yankee* to *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, while changing the name of the protagonist from Yiddish to a foreign-sounding name nonexistent in this tongue. Yet the history of erasure is not only imprinted upon *Yekl*'s pages in this literal, palpable way, which becomes apparent for the reader knowledgeable about its lengthy edition history. As analyzed in chapter 4, language itself reproduces this history through its very existence, namely, its words and silences in the main text and its accompanying paratexts. To write this otherwise, at least in *Yekl*'s case it is possible to claim that 'the materiality of texts could be perceived as equal to speaking of the textuality of texts'.<sup>55</sup> Whereas this thesis does not provide an in-depth reading of this material history, close readings of several excerpts demonstrate the repercussions of external constraints upon the different versions of the text. The text itself sheds light upon different kinds of materiality: on the one hand, the physical nature of the text, that is, its essence as an object, on the other hand, the social history of this document, including the linguistic constraints of the time. While the chosen edition results from particular events, such as Howell's wishes and Cahan's acquiescence, these events in turn shape all its textual features.

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<sup>55</sup> Andrej Petrovic, 'The Materiality of Text: An Introduction', in *The Materiality of Text: Placement, Perception, and Presence of Inscribed Texts in Classical Antiquity*, p. 10 (pp. 1-28).

### Rationale for this Project

This dissertation differs from other scholarship devoted to the representation of the Jewish-American literary past in Jewish literary studies in recent decades. It does not aim to provide a picture of ‘Eastern Europe’, no matter how this term might be understood, or even to analyze the representation of Eastern Europe by American Jewry. Markus Krah’s *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (2017) has already examined the multiple ways in which post-war American Jews have reimagined Eastern Europe in different cultural forms, including literature, theater, journalism, and photography.<sup>56</sup> As Krah illustrates in this monograph, the relationship of immigrant writers to their birthplaces is quite different from the often vague representations by the native born, who tend to homogenize and distort the same spaces. Another monograph, Julian Levinson’s *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (2008), already explores the interactions between American literary tradition and Jewish writers, including Antin, Lewisohn and Yeziarska.<sup>57</sup> This book illustrates that American-Jewish writers shape new understandings of Judaism by merging Jewish tradition with the American visionary tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. In a different light, Donald Weber’s *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to The Goldbergs* (2005) addresses the Jewish American past, focusing chiefly on nostalgia for the Old World and assimilation into American society.<sup>58</sup> *Haunted in the New World* traces the genealogy of affect through close readings of works of American Jewish culture, stressing the centrality of nostalgia in plenty of these texts.

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<sup>56</sup> Markus Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>58</sup> Donald Weber, *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to The Goldbergs* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005).



This dissertation intends to reconsider reductionist views of the past beyond simplistic conceptions of this temporal period as either completely gone or potentially retrievable. Therefore, it does not aim to demonstrate the constructed nature of lost homes in the Old World, or, for that matter, the complexities of these images.<sup>59</sup> Instead, the relationship between literature and the past is examined through the selected narratives in order to analyze the multiple traces of former events in the texts. However, as argued throughout this introduction, in literary texts, these traces of the past do not amount to remnants, broken pieces of a lost whole that contain fragmentary images of the past. Rather, these traces belong to a continuum of previous traces that must be understood in relation with notions of the origin as roots which always lead to further routes. Thus, this thesis explores the layered nature of the past, particularly the ways in which, from differing accounts of the same event to the omissions of problematic matters, the past is constantly rewritten in these texts. In other words, in lieu of continuity between the past and the present, the accounts of the protagonists' former lives only reproduce a constant straying away from the original events. Thus, in contrast with scholarly work on this literary period, this project does not merely focus upon narratives as either the refashioning or the reinvention of lost heritages in a quest for a usable past. The fragmentary nature of the selected texts, including their frequent absences and ruptures, demands a reading cognizant of the entangled vicissitudes of history and literature in which these texts are composed. For these reasons, unlike preceding research, this thesis argues for something perhaps counter-intuitive, namely, the centrality of absences, discontinuities and silences as intrinsic to these narratives of the past.

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<sup>59</sup> For a classic study of Jewish conceptions of the past since ancient to modern times, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1996).

One might wonder why these particular authors and texts were selected to conduct a study of the relationship between literature and the past, particularly considering the existence of innumerable narratives that might suit this purpose. First, the limited number of texts provides the opportunity for close textual analysis, which would be quite difficult if more texts were examined. Moreover, considering the copious scholarship on the selected works, this choice enables a close reading that includes both secondary criticism and current discourses on memory. This combination of scholarship from different fields sheds diverse lights on the issues at hand, mostly concerning the concurrences and discordances between literary texts and their respective pasts. Despite their similarities, the texts are markedly different in their themes, devices, and styles, as well as their lengths, and this facilitates the exploration of diverse responses to the past. Not only do the historical circumstances that inform the texts differ, but the nature of each narrative, namely its format and structure, also contributes to these disparities. Simultaneously, beyond the multiple ways in which the past relates to writing in these texts, there are similarities in how they intertwine traces and absences. The texts are representatives of the traces that constitute the past and are marked by similar patterns of remembrance as the continuous rewriting of these former traces.

Further explanation is necessary as a rationale for the selection of these seven texts, particularly if considering the exclusion of other potential candidates, such as Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* and Emma Goldman's *Autobiography: My Life*. As mentioned earlier, this thesis focuses upon Jewish-American immigrant literature of the third immigrant wave. Thus, the varied textual selection from American-Jewish literature during this time intends to honor the term 'American' in the thesis title. This goal necessitates the inclusion of texts from different American regions, without

equating ‘Jewish-American’ with New York City, despite its large population size and prominence in Jewish-American memory. Despite the preponderance of New York, the central location of the works of Cohen, Cahan, and Yeziarska, the writers represent different geographies: Lewisohn is a Southern author and Antin grew up in Boston. Thus, with regards to *Up Stream*, its seeming dissonance within a thesis largely focused on the East Coast is justified by its presence as a text that reflects the breadth of Jewish-American literature. In similar fashion, *The Promised Land* contributes to the reconsideration of what is often forgotten in Jewish-American scholarship: the regional diversity of the United States itself.

The textual choice also aims to be representative of the contributions of both men and women to Jewish-American literature of the period, and does not equate this body of American literature with what could be called male Jewish-American writing. Furthermore, autobiography has often been a genre cultivated by women, in both Europe and America, which makes it all the more important to include texts written by women in this selection.<sup>60</sup> Lastly, the texts also address the diversity of Jewish-American immigrant literature in different ways: from Yeziarska’s struggle for survival as a poor woman writer to Antin’s account of her Russian Orthodox upbringing, followed by her life amidst the Boston socialites, the texts address a multiplicity of experiences and regions during this historical period. Yeziarska and Cohen shed different lights upon urban places as *lieux de mémoire*, the different meanings of mementoes, and the vagueness of language, including obscure metaphors. Their rejection of their heritages, often tainted with pain, betrays the fragmentation between past and present in which their breaks from tradition turn to mark their lives. Lastly, the particularity of *Yekl*, with its socialist, working-class

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<sup>60</sup> To read more on women and autobiography, see Estelle C. Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) and *American Women’s Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, ed. by Margo Culley (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

milieu pervaded by Yiddish words, also illustrates the constant return and erasure of Jewish memories through foreign tongues.

#### Historical and Literary Background

Mary Antin, Rose Cohen, Anzia Yeziarska, Ludwig Lewisohn and Abraham Cahan share a common background: they are Jewish immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe who arrived in America during the years of mass emigration from these regions to the New World (1881-1924).<sup>61</sup> Moreover, further circumstances tie them together: the five selected authors share personal, cultural and linguistic similarities that leave their imprints on their writings. Except in the case of Lewisohn, who came from an affluent background, the remaining writers' lives were marked by the yoke of poverty back home and, to various degrees, also in America. Their living conditions, which brought them to particular neighborhoods and experiences, informed every aspect of their lives, including educational and working opportunities and the lack thereof. Their cultural backgrounds were defined by linguistic diversity, the influence of their respective local cultures, and, to various degrees, knowledge of Jewish tradition. None of them had English as their mother tongue, and, for this reason, they had to confront the difficulties of foreign language acquisition upon their arrival in America. Despite this, the five authors wrote either most or all of their outputs in English, hence their writings often reveal their multilingual backgrounds and the intricacies of language acquisition. Either explicitly or implicitly, all their narratives refer to the difficulties of acquiring a different tongue.

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<sup>61</sup> The bibliography on the history of American Jewry during this period is immense. For an overview of the history of American Jewry, see *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. by Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and Hasia R. Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). For different perspectives upon the relationships between Judaism, America and Europe, see *American Jewry: Transcending the European Experience?*, ed. by Christian Wiese and Cornelia Wilhelm (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), Gerald Sorin, *Tradition Transformed: The Jewish Experience in America* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), and Hasia R. Diner, *How America Met the Jews* (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown Judaic Studies, 2017).

The works also concern themselves with very similar themes: assimilation into American society, conflicted views about religious tradition, the desire to move from rags to riches, and the quests for love and friendship, among others. Furthermore, with the exception of Lewisohn, a native of Berlin, the protagonists also experienced emigration from rural regions to metropolitan areas. Despite its numerous possibilities, from the unfamiliar places to the intense overcrowding, their new life in urban neighborhoods was the source of dislocation for their characters. Besides the recurring promise of America as a new home, their narratives explore experiences of emigration and homelessness, despite the obstacles in climbing the social ladder. Their writings are realist to the extent that they tackle the American life of their days with verisimilitude, and they frequently turn back, willingly or not, to their former homes. In none of these narratives is there space for fantasy: all narrative events stay within a realist framework that aspires to an accurate and objective representation of reality. Their relationship with the past oscillates from categorical rejection of their heritage to excruciating nostalgia, but almost always includes ambivalence and ambiguous feelings towards what they believe to have left behind. Furthermore, in these works often lies the yearning not to look back to their former days in their now-remote homes, hence the either hurried or interrupted nature of some of their flashbacks. Whether through the promises of prosperity and education, or through the pressing demands of current problems and concerns, the American present imposes itself in all these texts.

Their historical context was shaped by the mass emigration movement to which they belong, together with the rampant disparities between the wealthy and the poor

that they encountered in America.<sup>62</sup> Owing to the economic backgrounds of their protagonists, all of these narratives fall, at least at one point, into the darker side of this pole. From the poverty of the ghetto tenements and Boston slums, to the terrible working conditions in overcrowded, stuffy factories, the texts bear witness to the lives of the American working-class. Such is the case of Ruth, the woman protagonist in *Out of the Shadow*, forced to work too hard in several clothing factories, underpaid and under the threat of instant dismissal. In its exploitative conditions, mistreatment by employers and frequent insecurity, her life mirrors the lives of thousands of workers during the Progressive Era. Similarly, another important factor was assimilation, a process by which immigrants adopted the culture, language, behaviors and values of middle-class America. The acquisition of English and the embrace of American values seem to offer a passage of entrance into the American middle-class for Ruth and her counterparts in the other texts. Their longing to be a piece of the American puzzle manifests in the oeuvre of their authors: English serves as the vehicular language for most of them, which would establish their status as American writers.<sup>63</sup> With the exception of Antin, who belongs to the middle-class by the end of her autobiography, their hopes are dashed and their dream does not come true in the

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<sup>62</sup> Scholarship on this historical period is abundant. For scholarly work related to the Gilded Age see: Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2011), and Charles W. Calhoun, *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995). For historical research on the Progressive Era see: Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s-1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), and Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: A Grassroots History of the Progressive Era* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008). For research specific to the South during the Progressive Era, see Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1983). Furthermore, like Grantham's volume, Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) might also shed light upon the political turmoil behind Lewisohn's *Up Stream*.

<sup>63</sup> Cahan only wrote some of his literary production in Yiddish, including his novella *Yankel der Yankee*, which was renamed *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* in its English translation, and his autobiography *Bletter Fun Mein Leben*. See Abraham Cahan, *Bletter Fun Mein Leben* (New York: Abraham Cahan, 1931), and *Yankel der Yankee* (Arbeiter Tseitung, 1895).

ensuing narrative. Although the narratives, particularly *The Promised Land*, might seem panegyrics to America, uncertainty about its promises does manifest, however frankly or subtly, in their pages.

Despite this, although they are sometimes overlooked owing to our historical perspective, there are also significant differences between the selected works, chiefly in linguistic, cultural, spatial, and sexual spheres. Firstly, as well as the protagonists of the selected narratives, the five authors themselves immigrated to America from quite different places. In fact, what we often label ‘Eastern Europe’ is an imagined region created, to a large extent, by American-born Jewry of later generations that reimagined their ancestors’ home.<sup>64</sup> Whereas Lewisohn and his counterpart in *Up Stream* were born in Berlin, Germany, Yeziarska came from Maly Plock, Poland (back then part of the Russian Empire), and her protagonists emigrated from different villages in Poland. Likewise, Cahan did not come from the Pale, but from Vilnius, Lithuania, although his protagonist, Yekl, was born in Povodye, a town in north-western Russia. Lastly, Antin and her protagonists were from Polotzk, the Pale (currently Belarus), and Rose Cohen’s counterpart, Ruth, in *Out of the Shadow* hailed from an unnamed village, also in the Pale. The protagonists also ended up in different locations in America: whereas Yeziarska, Cahan, and Cohen’s characters first resided in the overcrowded Lower East Side in New York, Lewisohn’s central character first lived in different parts of the South. Meanwhile, *From Plotzk to Boston* closes with the protagonist’s arrival in the latter city, and Antin’s heroine in *The Promised Land* also spent her late childhood and adolescence in Boston.

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<sup>64</sup> For specific scholarly work on how American Jews reimagined Eastern Europe, see Steven J. Zipperstein, ‘American Jews and the European Gaze’, *American Jewish History*, Vol. 91, No. 3/4, The 350th Anniversary of the Jewish People in America (September/December 2003), pp. 379-386, and Steven J. Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999). Likewise, the aforementioned study by Krahn, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, also focuses upon this phenomenon.

Their relocations and perambulations across America differ, sometimes widely, since their journeys cross different geographies that do not always coincide.

Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon* traverses America several times: starting in New York City, the protagonist moves to Hollywood, only to return to New York, and finishes the narrative in New England.<sup>65</sup> Her other narrative, *All I Could Never Be*, also opens in the New York ghetto, and the protagonist also departs to a village in New England, where the narrative closes. Antin's *From Plotzk to Boston*, as its title already indicates, retells her six-week journey from her hometown in Russia to the capital of Massachusetts. However, in *The Promised Land*, Antin moves across several Boston neighborhoods, from Crescent Beach and the West End, to Union Place, Chelsea, and, lastly, Dover Street. Furthermore, in the final chapter she makes a passing reference to her years in Barnard College, a women's liberal arts college in New York.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, in Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*, the protagonist moves around several precarious areas of the Lower East Side without ever finding a way out of the ghetto and into economic prosperity. Her limited geography reflects the desire to move socially, and evokes the difficulties in departing from a lower-class background to a middle-class status that could grant her family financial stability. Conversely, Lewisohn's upper-class protagonist in *Up Stream* leaves the South, stays for a while in New York, and then resides a few years in the Midwest to later return to New York. Meanwhile, none of the characters in *Yekl* abandons the tenements of the Lower East Side in which they first settled after their separate arrivals in Ellis Island.

As in the case of these spatial contrasts, the five authors were not familiar with the same languages, and, in some cases, their acquaintance with particular dialects

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<sup>65</sup> For a literary overview of Jewish-American writers connected with the Lower East Side, see Sanford Sternlicht, *The Tenement Saga: The Lower East Side and Early Jewish American Writers* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 282.



also diverged.<sup>67</sup> Both Lewisohn and his protagonist in *Up Stream* had German as their mother tongue, knew neither Hebrew nor Yiddish, and acquired English after their arrival in America. Ruth, Cohen's protagonist, is fluent in both Russian and Yiddish, has some knowledge of German, and learns English in the ghetto. Whereas Antin's namesake protagonist in *The Promised Land*, whose first language was Yiddish, learns English in Boston schools, the text also reflects her character's knowledge of Russian, and partial knowledge of Hebrew. The main characters of Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon* and *All I Could Never Be* speak both Polish and Yiddish, know no Hebrew, and learn English amidst the poverty of the ghetto. In a different vein, Cahan's Yekl, a native speaker of Lithuanian Yiddish, well-versed in biblical Hebrew, grasps pieces of English in the factory. *Yekl*, which contains far more Yiddish than the other texts, constantly returns to the significant differences between the dialects that compose this language. Unlike these other works, *Yekl* reflects the linguistic diversity of the ghetto and provides an overview of the different phonetics and syntax of Yiddish dialects. Yekl's wife, Gitl, typifies this linguistic diversity in her accented English, influenced by her native Lithuanian Yiddish, which would sharply contrast with the Polish variety of this tongue spoken by Yeziarska.

The historical context pertaining to these seven texts deserves further consideration, particularly considering the time span between *Yekl* (1896) and *Red Ribbon* (1950). It must also be mentioned that, despite the late publication date, Yeziarska wrote this novel during the 1930s, and then spent years struggling to find a publisher, as had already happened to her in the publication of her collection of short

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<sup>67</sup> For an exhaustive analysis of the multilingual heritage of American Jewish writers, including Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, Russian and Polish, as well as their imprints on English, see Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009). Focused on the historical period between the 1880s to the 1990s, Wirth-Nesher's monograph also provides deep insight into the important generational differences that lie behind this linguistic heritage.

stories *Hungry Hearts*.<sup>68</sup> Like the other narratives, her semi-autobiographical accounts delves into the key issues of her time, such as the Great Depression and its devastating consequences, particularly for women writers, for whom chances of finding employment were far more limited than in the case of male authors. More subtly, the aftermath of the Reconstruction contributed to the industrial expansion in the North, with the unprecedented growth of manufacturing. While *Yekl* is the story of the imagined lives of some of these factory workers, *Up Stream* recalls these changes in a very different way. Like thousands of Southerners, the protagonist departs from the South in search of prosperity across different places, later settling in New York. Despite this, his departure bears little resemblance to the plight of African-Americans from Southern states who made a similar journey away from poverty and segregation. *Up Stream*'s treatment of these events, or, more precisely, their omission from the narrative, locates the text within a tradition of Southern nostalgia common of its time. Although this text clearly belongs to a tradition of American realism, its modernist treatment of myth frequently reproduces an idealized, atemporal South away from the conflicts of the era.

While both the literary and the wider historical context informing the texts partake of the temporal differences between them, some issues, such as emigration and its aftermath still persist in all these narratives. With the exception of *Up Stream*, all the texts refer to mass emigration, and, more centrally, the ghetto filled with immigrants it brought to the metropolises of the East Coast. While some of these texts predate the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, in which 123 women and 23 men lost their lives, it could be said that the depiction of the exploitative conditions of

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<sup>68</sup> Delia Caparoso Konzett briefly refers to *Hungry Hearts*' successive rejections and belated publication in 1915. See Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms: Anzia Yezierska, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Dislocation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 31. For more information regarding *Red Ribbon*'s publication history, see Louise Levitas Henriksen, 'Afterword' in Yezierska, *Red Ribbon*, pp. 221-228.

most workers almost anticipates this tragedy. Likewise, the overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions of the tenements, in which families dwelt in poorly lit apartments with limited ventilation, serve as a background for Yeziarska's, Cahan's and Cohen's chronicles. Depending upon the chronology of their composition, the seven accounts illuminate different events, from the Gilded Age to the initial years of the Great Depression. Sometimes overlapping in their temporality, even when they touch upon similar topics, they write about different pasts. Antin's optimistic view about the benefits of the tenement house reform, as opposed to Cohen's vacillating perspective about this same venture, exemplifies this point. In drawing attention to these particular events at the expense of other matters, such as labor and women's struggles, the primary sources inevitably recreate the evoked events.

Particular mention must be made of the influence of this American historical context upon women writers, whose experiences differ, to a large extent, from those of their male counterparts. Upon their arrival in America, Antin, Yeziarska and Cohen encountered similarities and differences with their former lives as religious women in Eastern Europe. During the Progressive Era emerges the image of the New Woman, an ideal of femininity that values women's independence and education over ties to their household chores. Mostly from middle and upper-class backgrounds, these women often partook in the public arena, fighting for political changes, including women's suffrage. Although in terms of economic status, Antin is the only one of these three women who meets the criteria to be considered a New Woman, all three writers benefited from the solidarity of upper-class Anglo-American women. Their different lives mirror the changing experiences of American women, always accompanied by the persistent discrimination that thwarted their aspirations. Although Antin's literary career predated Yeziarska's writing years, the former's middle-class

status allowed her the privilege of an education and a hectic public life as a woman of letters. Like other women of her generation, Antin was fortunate to profit from ‘women’s institutions—social and literary clubs, reform and suffrage groups—that demonstrated new possibilities for women outside the home’.<sup>69</sup> Yet the price for her literary success was also silence: *The Promised Land* mutes these social issues, making no reference to political struggles for women’s freedom. As a woman of her time, Antin opted for a cautious stance on her writing, away from controversies that could erode the image of America as a land of promise for immigrant men and women alike.

Although Antin, Yeziarska and Cohen neither belong to comfortable milieus nor openly support women’s political struggles in the chosen writings, their protagonists experience the influence of this changing landscape for women. In their works lingers the quest of these characters to escape an oppressive past that would destine them to a domestic life as wives and mothers, away from their much-hoped literary aspirations. Uninterested in marriage and children, the women of these narratives strive to succeed on their own in a cultural sphere dominated by men which frequently smothers their aspirations. Moreover, in Yeziarska and Cohen’s texts, women must endure the limitations imposed by their religious fathers, including educational deprivation and confinement to the domestic sphere. Therefore, the close readings of these texts take into account the freedom offered by America to these women, but without disregarding the shackles, which, whether traditional or secular, continue to hold them back. Yeziarska’s professional life exemplifies the double-edged sword of this historical context. As a typist, she joins a profession that since the 1880s increasingly welcomes women, but this entrance into the men’s sphere does not

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<sup>69</sup> Ellen Wiley Todd, *The "new Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Oxford, England: University of California Press, 1993), p. 2.

entail an escape from poverty.<sup>70</sup> Echoing Yeziarska's clerical work, Cohen's life and work reflect the growing numbers of American women working in the industry since the later half of the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> Their words are both a constant reminder of their protagonists' penury and a testimony to the limitations that social circumstances impose upon literary texts. Despite their disparate paths, the recurring characteristics of Yeziarska's protagonists, who frequently embody the image of the necessitous immigrant woman of the ghetto, also mirror the real women who walked the same streets during these years. In the same vein, *Out of the Shadow* closes with a scene about the protagonist's brother's acceptance at university, thus testifying through silence to the lack of the same opportunity for her sister.

Generic similarities between the narratives are also manifest: in their linearity, verisimilitude and depth of detail, the seven texts belong to a tradition of American realism. Despite temporal jumps and gaps, linearity imprints the structure of the texts, which always move from an instance in the sometimes remote, sometimes immediate past to their respective presents. Yet the generic categorization of the narratives is far from straightforward, particularly when considering the varied nature of realism, and its overlaps with other movements, such as Modernism. Furthermore, while *Yekl* clearly builds upon a tradition of local color, especially urban local color writers, *The Promised Land*'s serious, respectful tone distances the text from this particular heritage.<sup>72</sup> In reflecting the failure of his characters to master English, Cahan's

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<sup>70</sup> *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working-Class History*, ed. by Eric Arnesen (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 262.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew Beaumont, 'The New Woman in Nowhere: Feminism and Utopianism at the Fin de Siècle', in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, ed. by A. Richardson and C. Willis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 215 (pp. 212-224).

<sup>72</sup> To read more on Yekl and local color, see Sharon B. Oster, *No Place in Time: The Hebraic Myth in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018), Michael Hoberman, 'Colonial Revival in the Immigrant City: The Invention of Jewish American Urban History, 1870-1910', in Hoberman's *A Hundred Acres of America: The Geography of Jewish American Literary History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019) and Jules Chametzky, *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977).

realism provides a depiction of immigrant American Jewry pervaded by poignant satire. Furthermore, unlike the other texts, *Yekl* captures geographical differences in the speech of its characters, rendering these disparities palpable in transliterated Yiddish and Yiddish-inflected English. *Yekl*, *Red Ribbon* and *All I Could Never Be* share the criticism of capitalist exploitation, best represented by the poverty of the masses made up of the workers and the unemployed. The three texts connect with late-nineteenth-century realism in their language, style, themes and structure, emphasizing the importance of the local milieu and recurring themes, such as love, poverty, freedom and confinement.

The primary sources also prove the existence of blurred lines between sometimes opposed literary genres, namely realism and modernism. As stated before, the texts relate to realism to varying degrees, but this does not imply that they fit neatly into this category, or even that they belong exclusively to it. The influence of Gertrude Stein's modernism can be felt in the temporal breaks in the pages of Yeziarska's oeuvre, which abruptly undermine temporal linearity, as well as in the intense exploration of subjectivity in her language.<sup>73</sup> While Antin's narrator occasionally descends to the Boston slums, her prosaic, yet sometimes lyrical style, places her texts within a realist tradition reminiscent of the nineteenth century. More tenuously, *Out of the Shadow*'s passionate, private language also echoes Modernist stream-of-consciousness in its disruptive, unfinished introspections. In this respect, the narratives provide a deep contrast with *The Promised Land* and *From Plotzk to Boston*, both texts defined by a more serious tone and factual, yet often metaphorical, language. While Antin and Cahan also wrote after Stein and Roth had published their

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<sup>73</sup> To read more on Yeziarska's relationship to Modernism see Brooks E. Hefner, "Slipping back into the vernacular": Anzia Yeziarska's Vernacular Modernism' (*MELUS*, Vol. 36, No. 3, White and Not-Quite-White (Fall, 2011), pp. 187-211, and Nihad M. Farooq, 'Of Science and Excess: Jacob Riis, Anzia Yeziarska, and the Modernist Turn in Immigrant Fiction' (*American Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (2014), pp. 73-94.

work, both of them under clear modernist influences, modernism left its mark upon Yeziarska's and Cohen's narratives. In contrast, in its linearity and minutiae *The Promised Land* opposes Stein's and Roth's fragmented temporality and fragmented language in works such as *Three Lives* and *Call It Sleep*.

#### Dissertation Structure

Chapter 1, 'Traces of the Past: Mementoes, Past and Present in Three Women's Narratives', begins with an analysis of the notion of origins in literature as the constant rewriting of a fading past. This chapter argues that present memories do not look back to a point of origin, but that memories of the past are the product of memories upon memories that do not lead back to a starting point. Among other works, this chapter draws on *Memories on the Move* and *Memory and Migration* in order to illustrate the traveling nature of personal and communal memory in the chosen texts. This chapter is divided into two sections: 'Tales of Multiple Pasts: Yeziarska's *All I Could Never Be* and Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*' and 'A Shawl, Books, and the New York Ghetto in Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*'.

Chapter 2, 'Memory, Narration and Correspondence: Women's Postcards from Former Times', continues this discussion to demonstrate that immigrant accounts provide an unstable and fragile view of the past, always under construction rather than being fixed in stone. This chapter states that, in lieu of a unique narrative of progress and Americanization, these women's accounts present ongoing narratives of their respective pasts that are under constant change. Among other works, this chapter draws on *Memory and Migration*, alongside Amy L. Hubbell's *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile* in order to delve into the intertwinement between rewriting and absences in the chosen texts. This chapter is divided into two sections: 'The Troubles of Memory, Epistles, and Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*' and

‘Antin’s *From Plotzk to Boston* as a Postcard from the Past in Antin’s *The Promised Land*’.

Chapter 3, ‘Literary Traditions, Usable Pasts and Historical Ruptures: Literature as an Interrupted Legacy in Lewisohn’s and Yezierska’s Memoirs’, pursues the importance of absences, rather than presences, to analyze the legacies of biblical, English and Southern literary traditions in American writing. The central contention of this chapter is that in the selected texts literary tradition functions not merely as a set of ideals that survive in the current narratives, but, more accurately, they turn into absences, traces and discontinuities. This chapter draws particularly on *Memories on the Move*, Madeleine Fagan’s edited volume *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, and Parkinson Zamora’s *The Usable Past* in order to examine the recurrence and intertwinement of literary legacies in these narratives. It is divided into two sections: ‘English and American Literary Legacies in a Southern Narrative: Crossing Traditions in Lewisohn’s *Up Stream*’ and “‘Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity’: Biblical Tradition in Yezierska’s *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and *All I Could Never Be*’.

Chapter 4, ‘Mother Tongues and Impossible Legacies: English as a Language between the Past and the Present in the Writings of Lewisohn, Antin and Cahan’, revisits the notions of origin and memory, although this time in relation to mother tongues and English. The main argument of this chapter is that lexical and syntactical vestiges of mother tongues coalesce not as remnants of home, but as traces of stories of exile that both evoke and withdraw the past. This chapter draws particularly on *Call It English*, Paolo Bartoloni’s *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing* and Maria Lauret’s *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* in order to scrutinize the relationships between tongues and the past in these texts,



including the histories of the text themselves. The two sections comprising this chapter are ‘Traces of German in Lewisohn’s *Up Stream* and Foreign Accent in Antin’s *The Promised Land*’ and ‘English Echoing the Past in Cahan’s *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*’.

## Chapter 1: Traces of the Past: Mementoes, Past and Present in Three Women's Narratives

### 1.1. Overview

The theoretical framework for this chapter combines theories of memory from Kitzmann's and Creet's edited volume *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies* with discussions in Palmberger's and Tošić's edited volume *Memories on the Move: Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past*. This first chapter focuses upon memory and narrative in three texts, Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and *All I Could Never Be*, and Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*. More specifically, these three case studies aim to use recent theories of memory studies to examine the multiple, sometimes even contradictory ways in which the past is narrated in these three literary texts. The chapter builds upon *Memory and Migration's* reading of memory as inherently mobile, as the ongoing product of multiple journeys across times and places that refuse to come to an end. *Memories on the Move's* interpretation of memory also emphasizes the dynamic imaginaries that underscore remembrance, always marked by its contingent nature. The following pages contribute to the development of these readings of memory by revisiting the origins of these three texts in view of the fact that literature turns their foundations into beginnings. The chapter turns to these and other secondary sources in order to explore the traveling nature of textual memories, demonstrating the ways in which the origins of these texts constantly evade the reader.

The past is subject to the ever-changing circumstances of the present, which, whether unpredicted or not, take their toll upon any form of remembrance. The constraints of the present, best represented by the fragility of human memory, frame

the past through an often-distorted and always-malleable lens. Quite appositely, in *Memory and Migration*, Zofia Rosinska claims that ‘a recollected memory is never the same but rather changes its meaning depending on the horizon of other experiences that surround it’.<sup>74</sup> In a literary context, memories might change in different instances: when they are rewritten or reread, or, perhaps less obviously, when they are reproduced on paper for the first time. In these three texts, memories are, by definition, written accounts of preceding events that endure the shifting nature of their respective historical contexts. Thus, in order to explore more specific features at work in the selected texts, such as the discontinuities and absences examined in the other chapters, it seems imperative to first look more closely at memory and narrative. Therefore, in its analysis of memory as a narrative that reimagines and rewrites origins that it purports to retrieve, this chapter aims to set the foundations for the remaining three chapters.

*Memory and Migration* poses apposite questions for a re-understanding of memory and narrative that demands attention to the problematics of memory. Regarding the vexed nature of this term, in the introduction to *Memory and Migration*, Julia Creet poses the following question: ‘should we not, given our mobility, begin to ask different questions of memory, ones that do not attend only to the content of memory, but to the travels that have invoked it?’.<sup>75</sup> In Creet’s query, memory might be read as the faculty by which the mind stores and recalls specific facts, or, as is the focus of this dissertation, memory might be understood as the narrated recollection of former events. The contents and travels of memory go hand in hand, not only because they are entangled processes, but also owing to the intrinsic

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<sup>74</sup> Zofia Rosinska, ‘Emigratory Experience: The Melancholy of No Return’, in *Memory and Migration*, ed. by Creet and Kitzmann, pp. 38-39 (pp. 29-43).

<sup>75</sup> Creet, ‘Introduction: The Migration of Memory and Memories of Migration’ in *Memory and Migration*, p. 6.

traveling nature of recollections. Thus, endeavors to ascertain the historical accuracy of the events narrated in Yeziarska's and Cohen's text prove irrelevant for this project. Instead, if, as is the case in literature, memories are constantly reinterpreted and rewritten, a reading of memory in literary texts must pay attention to its multiple journeys. Rather than distinguishing between truthful and distorted memories, this chapter examines the retelling of the past as informed by the travels of history and its own travels. Furthermore, following Creet's point, one must also consider which particular travels invoke the selected memories. Concerning this issue, the sections below consider the spatiotemporal mobility that underpins the three narratives, best captured by the biography of each woman protagonist.

Like *Memory and Migration*, other scholarly work on the travelings of memory underscores the prism through which this chapter reads these texts closely. In *Memories on the Move*, Tošić and Palmberger state that 'already, when setting off for another place, in the process of moving, hopes and imaginaries become reminiscences of lives lived before or in between'.<sup>76</sup> In the same edited volume, Annika Lems argues that 'we need to question romantic notions of storytelling that erase the often fragmented, incoherent moments of the telling'.<sup>77</sup> Regardless of the seeming disconnection between both statements, they come together in Cohen's and Yeziarska's narratives through the ongoing rewriting of the past. In the same way as the imagination already tricks the emigrant prior to his departure from home, the mind of the author already recasts the events he is about to narrate. In very different ways, *Red Ribbon*, *All I Could Never Be*, and *Out of the Shadow* constantly reminisce the lives left behind by their protagonists, whether in Europe or in America. The place of

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<sup>76</sup> Tošić and Palmberger, 'Introduction: Memories on the Move—Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past', in *Memories on the Move*, ed. by Palmberger and Tošić, p. 7 (pp. 1-16).

<sup>77</sup> Lems, 'Mobile Temporalities: Place, Ruination and the Dialectics of Time', in *Memories on the Move*, p. 151.

origin, whether Poland, Russia or the ghetto, changes in the words of these writers as time takes its toll upon their memories of decades-old episodes. The telling of their stories contrasts with idealized, fixed understandings of the past that, while privileging its stability, omit the malleable nature of any retelling.

Scholarly work on Yeziarska and Cohen often dwells upon their relationship with the past, with a particular emphasis upon whether they embraced or rejected their non-American heritages while they assimilated into American culture and values. For example, Leslie Fishbein emphasizes that neither Yeziarska nor Cohen managed to escape their respective pasts: ‘Cohen entitled her autobiography *Out of the Shadow*, but neither she nor Yeziarska could emerge from the shadow of their ghetto past’.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Sally Ann Drucker notes the weight of the past in the ghetto for its women writers: ‘no longer living in the ghetto at the time that they write, the ghetto nevertheless remains part of these immigrant Jewish women writers’.<sup>79</sup> Arguing the opposite, Joyce Antler deems that both women did depart from their misogynous heritages: ‘like Yeziarska, Rose Cohen must leave her family and her tradition entirely in order to secure her freedom’.<sup>80</sup> The research of these critics dwells upon the ambiguities of these texts, the characters’ conflicts with their fathers and Jewish tradition, and, sometimes, the haunting nature of their religious heritages. While these investigations survey the complex relationship of these women writers with their pasts, this chapter, despite acknowledging these complexities, departs from these concerns. Instead, the following pages analyze the back-and-forth nature of memories

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<sup>78</sup> Leslie Fishbein, ‘Anzia Yeziarska: The Sweatshop Cinderella and the Invented Life’, *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), 1998, Vol. 17, *The Resonance of Twoness: Ambivalent Faith in an Ambiguous World* (1998), p. 140 (pp. 137-141).

<sup>79</sup> Sally Ann Drucker, ‘“It Doesn't Say So in Mother's Prayerbook": Autobiographies in English by Immigrant Jewish Women’, *American Jewish History*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Autumn, 1989), p. 70 (pp. 55-71).

<sup>80</sup> Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century* (New York: The Free Press), p. 36.

in these texts, that is, the ways in which the past from which they wanted to escape emerges as malleable and unstable. Since the ever-changing nature of these haunting memories remains unexplored, this chapter endeavors to shed light upon the ways in which writing reimagines their missing origins.

Since this study refers to key terms such as memory, narrative, and the past in the aforementioned texts, the relevance of the New York ghetto in these narratives deserves prior explanation.<sup>81</sup> The ghetto in which the three protagonists reside, which became known in the 1930s as the Lower East Side, emerges as a *lieu de mémoire* for their former lives in the Old World.<sup>82</sup> Although multiple ethnic groups cohabit in these streets, the three narratives reimagine a neighborhood dominated by Jewish people, whether immigrant or native-born. In fact, despite the large numbers of Irish and Italian immigrants living in the area, with the exception of *Yekl*, there is no mention of their existence in any of the selected narratives.<sup>83</sup> As a key place for Jewish emigration, the Lower East Side came to embody the essence of Judaism for American Jewry, particularly for the post-war generation descendant from Eastern European immigrants. As the first stop in America, this enclave came to resonate with Yiddish voices, synagogues, immigrant poverty and overcrowded houses from all corners of the Old World. Even though these narratives predate these reinvention by the postwar generation of Jewish Americans, the financial improvement of the

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<sup>81</sup> For scholarship on the Lower East Side and its centrality for American-Jewish memory, see *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side: Narratives Out of Time*, ed. by Catherine Rottenberg (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), Hasia R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth S. Wenger (eds.), *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), and Beth S. Wenger, 'Memory and Identity: The Invention of the Lower East Side', *American Jewish History*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (1997), pp. 3-27.

<sup>82</sup> For a study of the history and origin of the Lower East Side, see Moses Rischin, 'Towards the Onomastics of the New York Ghetto: How the Lower East Side Got His Name', in Diner, Shandler, and Wenger (eds.), *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections* (pp. 9-23).

<sup>83</sup> In *Yekl*, the narrator makes a passing reference to the Italians of Mulberry Street. See Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 57.

protagonists shifts them away from the often precarious life of the ghetto into a distant view of these streets.

Although in these narratives, the characters are the children of the ghetto, rather than the postwar generation of American Jewry, this site synthesizes their pre-American heritages in their immigrant eyes. This is particularly explicit in *Red Ribbon*, where the protagonist even commences the narrative in the ghetto, unlike *All I Could Never Be* and *Out of the Shadow*, which begin in Poland and Russia, respectively. Differences also exist as to the specifics of the ghetto itself: the protagonists live in different, sometimes distant streets, and only *Red Ribbon* refers repeatedly to a distinct area, Hester Street. Yet, regardless of these disparities, these streets from Manhattan crowded with poor immigrants recover for them former, traditional ways of life from the Old World. The mythical status of the Lower East Side does not necessarily correspond with its history; rather, as Hasia R. Diner notes, ‘its sanctity grew out of the power, however invented, of its memory’.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the representation of the ghetto as a site of Jewish-American roots belongs to ‘a certain memorialization and reconstruction of a neighborhood that no longer exists in present reality’.<sup>85</sup> Yeziarska’s and Cohen’s texts partake of this reimagining of the ghetto, albeit with strong personal overtones: the ghetto is for them a place of childhood and immediate memories. In being so, their memories belong to an ongoing process of rewriting and forgetting this place which echoes Boyarin’s claim, ‘more has been forgotten in and about the Jewish Lower East Side than virtually any other place or time in America’.<sup>86</sup> While Boyarin refers to other kinds of forgetting, such as the

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<sup>84</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 181.

<sup>85</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, ‘Introduction: Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side’, in *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side: Narratives Out of Time*, ed. by Catherine Rottenberg (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. 7 (pp. 1-16).

<sup>86</sup> Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise*, p. 2.

erasure of foci of Jewish culture and the reconstruction of the neighborhood, this chapter considers the particularities of the erasure of this past.

In the three narratives, memories of the ghetto are not a constant from beginning to end; their recollections of home differ as time passes and the protagonists distance themselves from these streets.<sup>87</sup> Sometimes, as in *Red Ribbon*, the distance acquires literal connotations: in her escape from poverty, Yeziarska, the namesake protagonist, makes her way from the ghetto to Hollywood. Whereas when she travels back home to the ghetto a few months later, she cannot encounter home amidst its poverty and despair, so in the penultimate chapter she moves to Fair Oaks, New England. By contrast, in *All I Could Never Be*, the Polish protagonist, Fanya Ivanowna, improves her economic situation thanks to various jobs, but only leaves the ghetto towards the end of the narrative. In *Out of the Shadow*, Ruth, the Russian protagonist who also ends in the Lower East Side, only departs from the city to sojourn in the countryside with upper-class Gentiles for a few months. Consequently, their departures bear both literal and figurative meanings: while the three women leave the ghetto for some time, their parting is also entwined with financial improvement which might precede their physical departure. Their financial changes, coupled with their distance from home, explain their ambivalent portrayal of the ghetto, which oscillates between misogyny and nostalgia: ‘hard and often desperate life there had been, still those streets and tenements, sweatshops and pushcarts had meant a close-knit neighborhood’.<sup>88</sup> Thus, these narratives of home related to the Lower East Side which recall, and sometimes even replace, the memories of their hometowns in Eastern Europe, evolve throughout

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<sup>87</sup> For a historical study of Jewish families living in the Lower East Side during the Great Depression, see Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999). For a historical overview of the Americanization of the ghetto as it was taken place in the 1920s and 30s, see Ethal S. Beer, ‘The Americanization of Manhattan’s Lower East Side’ *Social Forces*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Mar., 1937), pp. 411-416.

<sup>88</sup> Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures on New York’s Lower East Side* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 199.



the narratives. Like Drucker, other critics, such as Brooks E. Hefner, have scrutinized the centrality of the ghetto as a site of roots, but without surveying these multiple, entangled narratives, with their lost homes.<sup>89</sup> Bearing in mind the centrality of the ghetto as a personal *lieu de mémoire* for these characters, this chapter aims to examine these relationships between narratives of these women's past.

Like their adopted neighborhoods, the relevance of objects in the three narratives also merits some prior clarification.<sup>90</sup> Whether a photograph, a garment, or a piece of jewelry, belongings might bear personal significance for their owners, sometimes in connection with their pasts. Items might recall a particular instance in time, such as a moment of joy, wonder or grief, and might even be reminders of a shared life, such as a married ring or an old family picture. Moreover, as souvenirs, some objects might also conjure up memories of particular places, for example, in the eyes of an emigrant, items from former homes might be reminders of his former life. This is particularly the case in *Red Ribbon*, where the protagonist resorts to objects to solidify her relationship with the past, whether her Polish home or the American ghetto. The protagonist of *All I Could Never Be*, Ivanowna, also holds onto souvenirs,

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<sup>89</sup> In *The Word on the Streets* Hefner claims that Yeziarska's 'characters, always striving to become American, find themselves drawn back to their Lower-East-Side, Jewish roots, even in the syntactical construction of their language'. See Brooks E. Hefner, *The Word on the Streets: The American Language of Vernacular Modernism* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017), p. 114.

<sup>90</sup> For a broader perspective on emigration and objects see: Svetlana Boym, 'On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's Installations and Immigrant Homes' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Intimacy (Winter, 1998), pp. 498-524, Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), David J. Parkin, 'Mementoes as Transitional Objects in Human Displacement', *Journal of Material Culture* (1999), Vol. 4, pp. 303-320, Paul Basu and Samuel Coleman, 'Introduction: Migrant Worlds, Material Cultures' (2008), *Mobilities*, Vol. 3, Issue 3: Migrant Worlds, Material Cultures (2008), pp. 313-330, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, 'Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 27, Issue 2 (Summer, 2006), pp. 353-383, David Lepoutre and Isabelle Canoodt, *Souvenirs de familles immigrées* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005), Jean-Sébastien Marcoux, 'The Refurbishment of Memory' in *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, ed. by Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 69-86, *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects. Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*, ed. by Maruška Svašek (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), and Ilaria Vanni, 'Oggetti Spaesati, Unhomely Belongings: Objects, Migrations and Cultural Apocalypses', *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2: Emotional Geographies (2013), pp. 150-174. For an overview on objects and the self, see Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (London: Routledge, 1998), and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Objects of Memory: Material Culture as Life Review', *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (May-Aug., 1989), pp. 123-149.

the last one of which, a newspaper, will be part of the close reading of chapter 3. In *Out of the Shadow*, letters also serve as a reminder of the protagonist's past, as well as its distance; however, owing to word restrictions this subject will be analyzed in the next chapter. In other words, in these texts, 'mementos mark the place where life used to be', namely, these belongings denote the absence of persons and experiences, often in connection with their pre-immigrant lives.<sup>91</sup>

In the same way as the ghetto does not restore the protagonists' ways of life in Eastern Europe, the mementoes from these three narratives do not simply recall former times. In their presence, the origins supposedly captured by these objects turn into routes which reveal that 'roots do not necessarily precede routes; origins and stasis are made and remade by movement, transition, and change'.<sup>92</sup> The routes invoked by these mementoes return, or, more accurately, depart from different geographies in journeys that also traverse varied locations. The unstable nature of these objects must be read within a historical context marked by the precarious status of women within their Jewish and American communities. Despite their endeavors to cling onto personal belongings to cleave to the past, these women cannot acquiesce to the burdens of history that thwart their purposes. The three women protagonists share not only their yearning to escape their poverty, and their inability to do so, but also the experience of being denied access to their own tradition. The inferior status of women in religious tradition was connected with their inability to read sacred sources: 'women's inability to read sacred texts in the original and their relegation to an

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<sup>91</sup> Esther Leslie, 'Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin: Memory from Weimar to Hitler', in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, p. 131 (pp. 123-135).

<sup>92</sup> Susan V. Donaldson, 'Southern Roots and Routes: Mobility, Migration, and the Literary Imagination', *Mississippi Quarterly*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Vol. 65, Number 1 (Winter, 2012), p. 8 (pp. 5-15).

“inferior” language rankled as emblems of their subordinate status’.<sup>93</sup> None of these three women protagonists were able to read biblical languages, hence their limited knowledge about tradition and even more fragile relationship with their memories. Their accounts of the past, however distant or resentful towards tradition, are malleable and unstable owing both to the passage of time and to their detachment from their biblical legacies. Although this issue will be examined in depth in chapter 3, the precarious heritage of women writers must be mentioned as a cornerstone for their continuous search for a narrative of their pasts, as reflected in this first chapter.

Whether they come back to the ghetto, or never actually never leave, their writings struggle to recreate former memories, places, neighbors and family. Drucker emphasizes that writing enables these women writers the possibility to return to the ghetto: ‘although they need to leave the ghetto, with its limited roles and opportunities for women, their writing gives each of them a vehicle with which to return’.<sup>94</sup> However, writing does not even enable these women writers an imagined return to their pasts: their different presents prevail over their differing recreations of their lives. *Red Ribbon* retells a few years in the life of its protagonist that encompass her departure from the ghetto, her months in Hollywood, her return to New York before the crash of 29, and her sojourn in New England. Meanwhile, in *All I Could Never Be*, Ivanowna’s account, narrated by a third-person narrator, also spans a few years, in which she only dwells in her native Poland in the first chapter, after which she lives alone in her ghetto apartment until the epilogue in which she also leaves for New England. In *Out of the Shadow*, Ruth, whose birth name was Rahel, recounts her life from her early years with her family in an unnamed Russian village to her early

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<sup>93</sup> Barbara Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 197.

<sup>94</sup> Drucker, ‘“It Doesn’t Say So in Mother’s Prayerbook”: Autobiographies in English by Immigrant Jewish Women’, p. 70.

twenties in the ghetto, waiting upon her impending marriage. Despite their disparities, the three texts come together in the linearity of the accounts through which the impact of time upon their memories manifests. The moments of the telling to which Lems refers in *Memories on the Move* experience continuous alterations inflicted by this ongoing passage of time.<sup>95</sup> Writing returns the protagonists to a different place in lieu of their former homes, since return is ultimately a misnomer that occludes that what is left behind exists no more.

The two sections comprising this chapter are ‘Tales of Multiple Pasts: Yeziarska’s *All I Could Never Be* and Cohen’s *Out of the Shadow*’ and ‘A Shawl, Books, and the New York Ghetto in Yeziarska’s *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*’. The first section presents close readings of passages from *All I Could Never Be* and *Out of the Shadow* in order to examine the multiple, entwined narratives of the past present in both texts. The section considers the various narratives of the past, namely biblical, Puritan, Polish, and Russian, particularly the ways in which they relate to each other and the texts as a whole. The history behind both literary works, including the culture of assimilation in the America of the 1920s and the marginalization of women from cultural and financial spheres, is also taken into account. Like *Red Ribbon*, in different manners, these two texts problematize readings of *lieux de mémoire*, whether textual or archaeological, as manifestations of personal and communal pasts. The second section, centered on *Red Ribbon*, presents close readings of multiple passages from the first chapter to the final section of the text, including both recent events and Yeziarska’s recollections. This comprehensive reading endeavors to provide an in-depth analysis of the representation of the protagonist’s past in view of her ever-changing circumstances in America. This section also examines the rewriting of

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<sup>95</sup> Lems, ‘Mobile Temporalities: Place, Ruination and the Dialectics of Time’, p. 151.

former memories, such as the dynamics between Poland and the ghetto, by which new versions of the past erase former histories.

## 1.2. Tales of Multiple Pasts: Yeziarska's *All I Could Never Be* and Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*

This section delves into the intricacies of personal and collective narratives of the past in Yeziarska's *All I Could Never Be* and Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*. Palmberger and Tošić contend that memory cannot be reduced to 'a simple temporal framing of 'before' and 'after', because instead it entails "a complex 'everydayness' of shifting temporalities".<sup>96</sup> This section demonstrates that these texts are predicated upon similar temporal frameworks in which stable notions of past and present become undone as the present periodically shifts into the past. The ongoing passage of time modifies former impressions of the same event at the most literal level in the texts, such as recollections from the protagonists' former homes in Europe and their current homes in the ghetto. Furthermore, at a more abstract level, ever-shifting temporalities also leave their imprint upon the structure of the narratives. Such is the case of *Out of the Shadow*, in which Ruth's entanglement of her Russian village and the New York ghetto contributes to a pattern of seeming circularity that ultimately reaffirms temporal linearity. Whether fragmentary or detailed, images of the past return throughout Ruth's account in order to be modified by later renditions of the same lost places in Russia. The texts reproduce this superimposition of accounts of the past in which new narratives replace former narratives without ever retrieving the original circumstances of their pasts.

This section first examines the ways in which biblical, Puritan and Polish pasts in the epilogue of *All I Could Never Be* intertwine under the eyes of the protagonist, Fanya Ivanowna. Firstly, this section surveys how she conceives the ghetto, her

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<sup>96</sup> Tošić and Palmberger, 'Introduction: Memories on the Move', in *Memories on the Move*, ed. by Palmberger and Tošić, p. 7 (pp. 1-16).

American home after her emigration from Poland, as a purely American space originating from Puritan times. Later the focus turns to a different scene: personal circumstances force Ivanowna to reimagine her neighborhood as the realization of her Polish-Jewish roots. As Cohen's Ruth struggles to 'navigate the cultural distance from the Russian countryside to the tenements of the Lower East Side', a similar pattern of different visions of the past cohabiting in the same text occurs in *Out of the Shadow*.<sup>97</sup> In her desire to assimilate into American society, Ruth sheds her former name, Rahel, yet this narrative of integration also carries the belated re-readings of both names. Likewise, Ruth's return to the ghetto after a few months away also underscores the ongoing reimagining of both the ghetto and her Russian hometown. In both Yeziarska's and Cohen's literary works lies the entanglement of the distant and immediate pasts of their women protagonists, along with mythicized communal pasts. Similarly, in recreating their former years, this reimagining, which only leads to further routes away from their origins, in both cases even predates their departure from their homes in the ghetto.

An early scene in *All I Could Never Be* provides an apparent impression of the fusion between a mythical, Orientalized Jewish past and the America of the 1920s. Despite their mutual spatiotemporal remoteness, ancient Eastern mythology and twentieth-century American history interact with each other in a ghetto episode. On a summer evening, Scott visits Ivanowna in her dismal apartment, and, after having dinner together in a restaurant, he entreats her to take him to the ghetto, longing to contemplate it through her eyes. Ivanowna accepts his request, and, while they walk, she laments the secluded life of women in the tenements, peering at the outside world through their windows, to which Scott lively replies: 'that's not wasting time. They're

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<sup>97</sup> Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives*, p. 198.

watching life go by. There's an oriental richness in their passivity'.<sup>98</sup> In their stroll, they pass by crowds of men and women in the streets, in addition to pushcarts, peddlers and hucksters, and subsequently enjoy the sounds of a music band amidst the squalor of the ghetto. After the performance, Scott ascribes to this place and its inhabitants an enchanting, mythical, and anachronistic aura, whereas Ivanowna contemplates a different view on her personal and communal origins:

He looked through her into the far history of her people.  
 "There's an imprisoned splendor about your ghetto.—  
 This imprisoned splendor released—is what made the  
 poets and artists of your race."

She fell into a silence, regarding him with a gaze wide  
 as light. The night, the stars, the men and women who  
 passed them by seemed to deepen the meaning of his  
 words.

She had taken him to see the East Side with a sneaking  
 sense of apology for her people, and he had made her  
 feel proud to be one of them. He had made her see  
 through the dirt and the poverty into their hearts, until  
 the ghetto rose before her, a city set on a high hill whose  
 light could not be hid.<sup>99</sup>

The competing images of the past, Oriental and Puritan, endeavor to establish roots out of divergent routes that resonate with different mythologies of Jewish and American origins. Scott echoes a late-eighteenth-century Western discourse that reimagines the East as an often-petrified, fixed image. In the words of Edward W.

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<sup>98</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *All I Could Never Be* (New York: Brewen, Warren & Putnam, 1932) p. 52.

<sup>99</sup> Yeziarska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 55.



Said, ‘the male conception of the world, in its effect upon the practicing Orientalist, tends to be static, frozen, fixed eternally’.<sup>100</sup> Scott projects the imagined ‘stability and unchanging eternality’ of the Orient into a purported present-past in the East Side in which its foreign origins remain palpable and traceable.<sup>101</sup> The discourse of Orientalism establishes a static view of the ghetto and its inhabitants as outdated, as the manifestation of an originary difference unchanged by time. In his struggle to establish a version of Ivanowna’s past rooted in a binary between them and us, Scott renders the presumed foreign ghetto both knowable and different from his own America. As an upper-class Anglo-Saxon man, Scott addresses the need to distance himself from her, and, by virtue of the power emanating from his condition, he has the power to do so. Certainly, his idealization of a world of poverty also results from his own secure financial status, which leave him oblivious to the experiences of the community he contemplates. Scott distorts both the present and the past, fabricating a narrative of a present-past that manifests as a petrified coalescence between roots and routes beyond particular narratives and experiences.

While Ivanowna prides herself in Scott’s romantization of the ghetto, as opposed to him, she fashions a different image of the quarter. In her case, the immediacy of the streets resonate with the stories of a different past which, although also mythical, does not transfer her to the ancient Middle East. In the Polish eyes of the protagonist, the ghetto, filtered through the lens of American history, relates to a Puritan narrative of American origins that leads to a different past. In another attempt to render origins in a shared American narrative, and deeply echoing American Protestantism, Ivanowna reproduces the same pattern that reduces the past to an abstraction of distant events. Her reference to ‘a city set on a high hill’ alludes to the

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<sup>100</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1978), p. 208.

<sup>101</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 240.

existence of intricate narratives between Christianity and other traditions, particularly Judaism, regarding the origins of America.<sup>102</sup> Drawing upon the mythology of the Israelites as Oriental and America as a light unto the nations, Ivanowna rewrites the ghetto as the place in which both fictions coalesce. First repulsed by the ghetto, she now feels close to it owing to her ability to reclaim a usable past that grants her a chosen status reminiscent of Gentile America. Her version of the Promised Land glosses over the late arrival of Polish Jews in America, as well as the intrinsically Protestant nature of this myth from the New Testament. Her imagined present-past merges an ancient narrative, rewritten by American Protestants, which leads to New England, and later, culminates in her ghetto. Ivanowna turns Puritan routes into the roots of the ghetto and establishes common origins of sacredness and belonging through biblical texts shared between traditions.

The endeavors of both Ivanowna and her friend Scott to account for the present through the prism of the past reveal the belated nature of any narrative of origins. Their different visions suggest divergent pathways away from the ghetto through the rewriting and mythification of the same American past. Their prosthetic memories entail different reasons for this departure, yet both views evince the necessity to assert distance from the un-American, poor ghetto. Scott contemplates the ghetto from an American-by-birth stance, where this place unfolds foreign stories unrelated to the Anglo-Saxon America to which he belongs. In other words, immigrant Jewry remains un-American, a materialization of Eastern Otherness that deeply contrasts with his all-

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<sup>102</sup> In *Red Ribbon*, the ‘city set on a hill’, which refers to Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, conflates America with the imagery of the land of Israel from the Tanakh. See, for instance, Deuteronomy 11:10-12: ‘For the Land which you come to possess is not like the Land of Egypt that you left, where you sowed your seed and which you watered by foot, like a vegetable garden. But the land, to which you pass to possess, is a land of mountains and valleys and absorbs water from the rains of heaven, a land the Lord, your God, looks after; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it from the beginning of the year to the year’s end’ in *Tanakh: The Jewish Bible*, pp. 1119. For a history of this notion of American chosenness, see Abram C. Van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020).

American Protestant origins. Since the purported Easternness of the ghetto renders it both different and knowable, this place can be mapped and defined through momentary observation. Landsberg notes that ‘the workings of typology also prove capable of editing out differences’, which fits quite appositely with this insertion of this American enclave within an Eastern narrative.<sup>103</sup> In the same vein, Scott omits the connection between the Puritans and the Israelites, which could pose a potential threat to his version of American history in which the coexistence of different nations does not lead to a cultural hodgepodge. The circumvention of this obstacle diverges the space into a knowable reality, embedded in a vague, atemporal present-past despite the Eastern European origins of most of its inhabitants, and the Anglo citizens of the nation, who remain native regardless of their manifest foreign ancestry.

Whereas Scott fixes the ghetto by reducing it to a facile, ancient image detached from his own native background, Ivanowna reclaims the biblical myth as a prosthetic memory predicated upon her distance from the ghetto. In these lines, her usable past, untied by geographical and national boundaries, shares traits of the pasts of imagined communities ‘that do not presume any kind of affinity among community members’, such as the Israelities and the Puritans themselves.<sup>104</sup> Ivanowna’s vision is not, as it was the case of immigrant descendants, the consequence of the nostalgia for lost roots stemming from an escape from poverty to prosperity.<sup>105</sup> However, while she still dwells in the ghetto, she shares the vision of America as a land of future prosperity and opportunities for herself. If the city upon the hill is understood as the promise of economic prosperity, which became a reality for numerous ghetto residents, her financial instability, although away from penury, still does not allow her entrance into

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<sup>103</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, p. 66.

<sup>104</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, p. 8.

<sup>105</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, ‘Introduction: Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side’, in *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side*, p. 8.

the middle class. However, away from early deprivation, now as an assistant to a professor, Ivanowna deems her current home in the tenements a place belonging to the American promise. Furthermore, her rewriting of this particular past also relates to her yearning to find commonality with Scott, thus, erasing the cultural barriers that divide the native Anglo-Saxon and the foreign Jew. Ivanowna reimagines ancient tales of distant places, reframed through a Puritan lens, as the unavoidable cause of their shared destiny in the Promised Land. Ultimately, the characters' different versions of roots turn into routes that reveal the significance of the present over their endeavors to map the past onto current places.

After Ivanowna's estrangement from Scott, she rewrites the ghetto, this time as a place that returns her, through its biblical traditions, to her lost home in Poland. Despite the oppressive nature of her ancestors' tradition towards women writers, Ivanowna, detached from this subjugation, renders another version of the past tainted by homesickness. Towards the end of the narrative, Ivanowna pays a final visit to the ghetto, and, by contrast with her previous summer stroll, this time she roams alone on a freezing winter night during the holidays. In her perambulation, she cannot escape the desolation of the deserted streets, and other disheartening surroundings in which 'trees stood gnarled and stiff like skeletons, weighted down with sleet and ice. Even the tenements, surrounding the park, stared at her lonely and forlorn'.<sup>106</sup> However, persevering in her nocturnal wanderings, Ivanowna overhears familiar biblical chants in honor of the holidays, and contemplates lighted candlesticks inside the homes. Deeply moved by this scene, she overlaps this moment with her memories of her Polish village, evincing the multiple and competing versions of the same past:

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<sup>106</sup>Yeziarska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 215.

The little village in Poland where she was born suddenly flashed into life. Her father, holding forth, surrounded by neighbors. How their narrow kitchen walls stretched out into far-off lands when he related the miracles and wonders of long ago.

That night, bathed in the poetry of ancestral memories, it seemed to her there was only one way to go on—to go back to her roots—back to the ghetto.<sup>107</sup>

Like the above leisure scene of the couple's walk in the ghetto, this rendition of Ivanowna's neighborhood reimagines this site as the intersection of multiple narratives. The ghetto departs from its Puritan origins in order to abandon the Americanness granted by this narrative, following, instead, another narrative also tainted by mythology. Scott's aforementioned words regarding the 'far history of her people' vanish in Ivanowna's new portrayal of an altogether different history of origins.<sup>108</sup> Her ever-changing process of recollection, haunted by the absent, inescapable nature of her origins confirms the nature of memory as 'a continuous process of 're-remembering', of putting together moment by moment, of provisional and partial reconstruction'.<sup>109</sup> Ivanowna's words intimate the coalescence of biblical, Polish and ghetto history in a continuum of entwined narratives that she also reimagines as a present-past. By contrast with her walk with Scott, after her estrangement from him, she now needs to distance herself from a Puritan narrative that implies their shared origins. Her interpretation of this holiday scene gives her access to a different past which, as the solidification of a foreign, non-Protestant

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<sup>107</sup> Yeziarska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 216.

<sup>108</sup> Yeziarska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 55.

<sup>109</sup> Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 175.

heritage, stands for the antithesis of Americanness. A few months after their stroll, the same streets tell a different story in which the differences between the mythical past of the Orientalized ghetto and the now-European vision of it come to the fore.

If Ivanowna's words refuse holistic narratives of the past, the same sentences confirm the passage of time by which roots become ever-changing, malleable routes. Unable to return her to her lost origins in Poland, her purported journey back in time turns a face-to-face encounter with a present that disregards these multiple routes. The preceding passage notes this decay by which 'trees stood gnarled and stiff like skeletons' and 'the tenements, surrounding the park, stared at her lonely and forlorn'. Despite the cyclical character of the prayers overheard by Ivanowna, the material surrounding her proves itself to be transient and mutable in its nature. Beyond their seeming stasis, the naked trees symbolize the death of her former years, whether in Poland or in America, along with the erasable nature of her history in the ghetto. In the same vein, the tenements mirror this vanishing of the past through the ongoing decay inflicted upon their bricks, redolent of the aging of their occupants. Both nature and architecture demonstrate that her wanderings only mark the rewritings of her past not only concerning her personal history in Poland, but also her own memories of the ghetto. In the same streets in which she came of age, there now lies the escaping nature of roots for which the ghetto does not correspond to the place of her childhood. The ancestral memories that endow the narrative with a mirage of eternity do not develop beyond routes that are reinterpreted, first in Poland, and later in the ghetto.

The confusion between Poland and the ghetto evidences Ivanowna's former proximity to the ghetto and her current distance from her neighborhood, which now becomes a *lieu de mémoire* of the Old World. Despite the particularities of her native village, the entangled memories which relate these streets to Poland embrace a

homogenized image of Poland. Considering that ‘the premise of memory’s entangledness presents itself as a hermeneutic corrective, resistant to both reifying essentializations and the quest for new holisms’, the entwinement of these different narratives problematizes the ascertainment of their origins.<sup>110</sup> The rhythm of Yeziarska’s language mirrors this movement forward, directed towards the future rather than the past, manifested in the cadence that echoes the holy words recited during the holiday. The parallelism of the final lines reinforces the imagined nature of this petrified past, this movement of yearning to go back through literature, whether the narrative itself or the recited poetry that Ivanowna overhears. The dissonance between her roots and the ghetto undermines this illusion of the retrieval of her footsteps in which her new American home does not match her Polish origins. The tension between Poland and the ghetto evidences the distance between both places in which the ghetto is an American place, immediate in its poverty and restrictions. Her journey back home after her American disappointment turns into another departure, where discordance reveals that the permanence of roots is but an illusion.

Like *All I Could Never Be*, *Out of the Shadow* opens with the real, although always reimagined, distant past of an unnamed village in the Old World. Like Yeziarska’s fictional account, *Out of the Shadow* also shifts from personal pasts to mythical narratives of communal origins that entwine with Cohen’s protagonist’s previous narrative. Both fictional accounts bear out Creet’s and Kintzmann’s view upon the changing nature of recollection: ‘a recollected memory is never the same but rather changes its meaning depending on the horizon of other experiences that

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<sup>110</sup> Gregor Feindt, Felix Krawatzek, Daniela Mehler, Friedemann Pestel and Rieke Trimçev, ‘Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (February 2014), p. 44 (pp. 24-44).

surround it'.<sup>111</sup> Ruth's memories exemplify this contention in her constant necessity to adapt to her ever-changing conditions, particularly her imperative to conform to American middle class values. Simultaneously, her inability to escape poverty thwarts her initial perception of the ghetto as an American place; instead, poverty brings her back to the penury of the Russian Pale. Not even her prospective marriage with an unnamed Jewish man, better established financially than her, can enable her to cast off her financial instability by the end of the narrative. Although Ruth's haunting poverty never leaves her, the images of her past change once she realizes the uncertain nature of the American promise of financial prosperity. Despite the narrative of American origins rooted in the Bible that enabled her to join the heritage of God's own country, she later conceives of the ghetto, although an American site, a derivative of her czarist home.

In the American chapters, the diction of *Out of the Shadow* problematizes the permanence of traces of the past through the writing of new narratives upon former ones. Whereas Rahel's renaming as Ruth reaffirms her precarious American status and moves away from her foreign origins, the renaming also reflects retrospectively on the interactions between temporalities and writing. In a factory, which, as a token of capitalism and industrialization, symbolizes rupture from her native village in Russia, a brief scene captures the dynamics between old and new beginnings. Soon after her arrival in America, Ruth starts helping her father in the shop, where she learns to baste flaps along with other factory workers in a dark tenement room. On the first day one of the workers questions her father: 'when she had worked a few minutes she asked father in very imperfect Yiddish: "Well, Mr. --, have you given your

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<sup>111</sup> Rosinska, 'Emigratory Experience: The Melancholy of No Return', in *Memory and Migration*, pp. 38-39.



daughter an American name?"<sup>112</sup> When Ruth's father answers in the negative, 'the presser called out from the back of the room: "What is there to think about? Rahel is Rachel"'.<sup>113</sup> However, the woman who raised this issue considers the potential dangers of this name, including possible mockery from idlers, and promptly settles the matter: 'and on Cherry Street where you live there are many saloons and many loafers. How would you like Ruth for a name?' I said I should like to be called Ruth'.<sup>114</sup> The new first name puts the past behind to secure an American self; although both names echo biblical origins, Ruth sounds more Anglo-Protestant than 'Rahel'. The new beginnings erase the former narrative through a linearity that reaffirms origins evoked in order to leave them behind in exchange for an American future.

The name of Ruth coincides with that of the biblical Moabite woman who, in the biblical book of Ruth, married Boaz, an Israelite man, and joined his tribe three millennia ago. While in Moab, Naomi, her mother-in-law, decides to return to Bethlehem, and entreats Ruth to stay in her native land; however, she refuses and follows Naomi to Beth-lechem.<sup>115</sup> The biblical Ruth would later be regarded as a matriarch of the Israelites, an example of the foreignness that often lies at the origin of communal narratives.<sup>116</sup> Like Abraham, who was not born in the land of Israel, Ruth evokes origins that lead to other lands and peoples in a continuum beyond the particularities

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<sup>112</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 82.

<sup>113</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 82.

<sup>114</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 82.

<sup>115</sup> Ruth 1:16. 'Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried'. See *Tanakh: The Jewish Bible*, p. 1423.

<sup>116</sup> To read more on Ruth's status, see Julia Kristeva's 'The Chosen People and the Choice of Foreignness' in Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 65-76, and Bonnie Honig's 'The Foreigner as Immigrant', in Honig's *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 41-72.

of a given place and nation.<sup>117</sup> Considering that the origin of the Israelites can be traced to a foreign nation, Ruth's ancient story also points to routes as the origin of the biblical narrative. Their beginnings in the land of Israel return them to a different collectivity, which, in turn, could also lead back to another history of communal origins. Recollecting this action of joining a collectivity triggers awareness of the impossibility of ascertaining a single narrative of the past. The point of origin, like Rahel as her first name, comes into question as the starting point of a narrative that can simply be inscribed from its inception to the present.

The protagonist's name change, which belongs to a pattern of Americanization that is built on different origins, also questions the fixed nature of these origins. The biblical origins of her new name acquire a different, Protestant-sounding meaning in America, suggesting a history different from the Jewish narrative that underlies the same name. Like the biblical Ruth, Cohen's protagonist aspires to belong to a foreign nation, for which she needs to share a common history of which her new name would be proof. Ruth seldom returns to her former name, with rare exceptions, such as a later scene in the ghetto where a former friend from the village addresses her regarding her imminent marriage. Her friend laments her own unremitting poverty in contrast with Ruth's future prosperity: "you are very fortunate, Rahel," she said. "I am tired of the shop, I want something more than a folding cot for my home".<sup>118</sup> However, the momentary return to her former name, 'Rahel', does not erase the years that have passed between her name change and her engagement. Despite the shared poverty of both characters, during these years the protagonist has broken away from the religious traditions of her Russian childhood in her search for American roots. The

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<sup>117</sup> In fact, Abraham, the father of the Israelites, was not born in the land Israel; he came from the land of Uz, on the border of Edom. Likewise Moses, although a Hebrew prophet, was born in Egypt.

<sup>118</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 214.

names Ruth and Rahel invoke different narratives, Protestant and Jewish, foreign and American, depending upon the shifting historical reality of the protagonist.

*Out of the Shadow* conflates the history of the ghetto with the Russian past of some of its inhabitants, which enables Ruth to obliterate the regional differences that pervade her native country. In the homogeneous rendition of these dissimilar histories, the narrative captures the entwinement between ‘the content of memory’ and ‘the travels that have invoked it’.<sup>119</sup> Once Ruth departs from her tenement home, the ghetto turns into a center of farewells, which, without the presence of nostalgia, looks back to her lost village. The disparity between the protagonist’s hometown as seen on the opening page and a later scene in the ghetto sheds light upon the influences of roots and the rewriting of routes. As in her hometown, Ruth continues to endure poverty in the ghetto, and the exploitation of her labor in several factory jobs takes its toll upon her by leaving her bedridden. Distraught by her inability to work and her unforeseen home seclusion, she follows the advice of her doctor and Miss Wald and enters a Presbyterian hospital. Following a three-month stay, the protagonist returns to the ghetto after glorying in the support and affection of Gentiles, and having recovered from her poor health condition. The contrast between the opening paragraph of *Out of the Shadow* and the later scene in which the protagonist experiences this homecoming as a return to her first home captures the haunting and rewriting of her past:

I was born in a small Russian village. Our home was a log house, covered with a straw roof. The front part of the house overlooked a large clear lake, and the back, open fields (*OotS* 246).

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<sup>119</sup> Creet, ‘Introduction: The Migration of Memory and Memories of Migration’, in *Memory and Migration*, p. 6.

Although almost five years had passed since I had started for America it was only now that I caught a glimpse of it. For though I was in America I had lived in practically the same environment which we brought from home. Of course there was a difference in our joys, in our sorrows, in our hardships, for after all this was a different country; but on the whole we were still in our village in Russia.<sup>120</sup>

The first extract from the opening page illustrates the difference between beginnings and origins, or, rather, how the former do not always turn into the latter. Echoing Said's distinction between beginning and origin, 'beginning as opposed to origin, the latter divine, mythical and privileged, the former secular, humanly produced, and ceaselessly re-examined', in *Out of the Shadow* the latter both echoes and departs from the former.<sup>121</sup> In the first passage, in its unsophisticated, straightforward style, the language of the protagonist mirrors her description of a modest, simple life in her hometown. The realistic style, reinforced by the three simple sentences, contributes to the convergence of her home as beginning and origin of her autobiography and her life. The stasis of her initial words aims to conceal the disparities between roots and routes by establishing her home as a central place of personal and familial history. In fact, the starting point of the narrative consists of elements selected from many possible beginnings, from family history to communal narratives of origins. In other words, the narrative establishes a place of origin, which merges the home and the nation, and, in doing so, these literary beginnings pose as her origins. Despite their historicity, her Russian roots are part of a narrative of routes which includes the

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<sup>120</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 246.

<sup>121</sup> Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intentions and Method* (New York: Columbia Press, 1985), pp. xii-xiii.

selection of particular events and their concomitant interpretation from the American present.

The second extract blurs the boundaries between Ruth's village and the ghetto, destabilizing, rather than reinforcing, the purported originality and stability of both locations. As in the previous case, the syntax contributes to this tension between fixing the past and revealing its multiple routes; this time through the complexity of her sentences. Through the conjunctions 'although', 'though' and 'but', the three sentences intend to undermine the conspicuous dissimilarities between Russia and America. Without denying these disparities, after her return from her idyllic retreat, the protagonist conflates both places owing to their shared poverty and oppression. However, the same grammar undermines this coalescence: her convoluted style reveals the difficulties in disregarding physical and temporal differences. In her constant need to reassert his break from the past, the ending of every sentence emphasizes the futile nature of her endeavors, together with the multiple narratives of her past, whether Russian or American. In doing so, the same words also foreground the changing vision of this past, in which the ghetto, a former cornerstone of her Americanization, now turns into a reminder of her foreign past. In the veiled linearity of its syntax, the second passage reveals that Ruth's current impression of her former home does not match with the existence of this distinction. Ultimately, language betrays the protagonist in its rendition of a binary that demonstrates the abyss that separates her lost home not only from the ghetto but also from her current image of Russia.

The darkness from which Ruth endeavors to escape in *Out of the Shadow* remains ever-changing, located at the intersection of history and its multiple routes. Ruth's dubious escape from her past transcends the uncertainty noted by Thomas

Dublin in the final pages of her narrative: ‘she has come "Out of the Shadow, " but it is clear that she has not fully entered into the light’.<sup>122</sup> To a certain extent, the protagonist does depart from the darkness in which she was born: although limited, she acquires an education that enables her to read and write. Similarly, despite her uncertain financial future, by the end of the narrative, she escapes the penury of her hometown and the exploitation of her later years in the factories of the ghetto. Yet, as the preceding passages illustrate, the account of Ruth’s journey is also a product of the rewriting of these experiences through her changing personal conditions. The title of Cohen’s autobiography bears a misleading connotation: Ruth does not sever her ties to the past once and for all; rather, she is constantly moving away from it throughout her account. As the passage of time continuously renders the present as the past, new images of this past emerge alongside older events as part of an ongoing narrative of changing roots. Always irretraceable in *Out of the Shadow*, Ruth’s roots appear only as routes that turn the shadow of her past into multiple, fluctuating images of both Russia and America. Therefore, the shadow from the title transmutes into different versions of her past, which, regardless of their celebratory or depressing undertones, reveal her ever-increasing distance from the opening page.

To conclude, in their journeys across America, its promises and downsides, *All I Could Never Be* and *Out of the Shadow* share the reimagining of different pasts. This reimagining ranges from the protagonists’ memories of the Old World, which are sometimes decades-old, to their memories of their recent past in the streets of the ghetto. As Radstone and Schwarz note, ‘memory’s activities in the present belie the apparently simple, reified, and knowable past evoked by the call to remember’.<sup>123</sup> In these cases, present needs condition remembrance through their imperative to draw an

<sup>122</sup> Thomas Dublin, ‘Introduction’, in Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. xviii (pp. ix-xxii).

<sup>123</sup> Radstone and Schwartz, ‘Introduction: Mapping Memory’, in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, p. 3 (pp. 1-14).

imaginary line between former and past selves that can secure an American future for both women. Simultaneously, since expectations do not always match reality, poverty and rejection take their toll upon the protagonists, shifting their impressions of their respective pasts. Sometimes, as in Ivanowna's case, an American place can shift from a bedrock of a Protestant myth of American origins to a facsimile of late-nineteenth-century Poland. In similar fashion, in *Out of the Shadow*, the same American location can alter from a mainstay of Americanness to a reminder of the foreign country from which plenty of its dwellers came. The material, that in both cases encompasses the ghetto, along with names in Cohen's case, turns into a mobile *lieu de mémoire* which projects different, sometimes conflicting, versions of the past. Not only do material remains contribute to the ongoing reimagining of the protagonists' former lives, but, like the texts themselves, they also underscore the continuous rewriting of any physical trace of the past.

### 1.3. A Shawl, Books, and the New York Ghetto in Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*

This section's main concern is the centrality of materiality in establishing multiple narratives of the past in *Red Ribbon*. The section begins with close readings of a few passages from the first chapter, entitled 'Hester Street', in which this area, Yeziarska's neighborhood of her childhood and adolescence, figures as a central concern. This description then leads to close readings of extracts related to objects, mainly Yeziarska's shawl, which belonged to her late mother, and religious books, which were the property of one of her correspondents. These portable and fixed *lieux de mémoire* conflate memories from the same and different events, which, despite their disparate origins, return the protagonist to the ghetto of her former years. Palmberger's and Tošić's claim about the mobility of memory is quite apposite: 'already, when setting off for another place, in the process of moving, hopes and imaginaries become reminiscences of lives lived before or in between'.<sup>124</sup> This section delves into these processes of reimagining the past through the material, including, as these critics note, the reimagining that predates departure. In fact, Yeziarska's departure from the ghetto does not merely coincide with her departure to Hollywood: her isolation in the tenements problematizes straightforward readings of her emigration to California. The intricate nature of *Red Ribbon*, with its many returns that turn into further departures from an ever-changing home, play with the impossibility of stabilizing memories.

Yeziarska's narrative entangles different pasts which not only move from biblical to current times but also struggle with her present circumstances. Schoen

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<sup>124</sup> Tošić and Palmberger, 'Introduction: Memories on the Move—Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past', p. 1.



notes that, by the end of the narrative, Yeziarska ‘has not, as some critics have suggested, returned to the Judaism of her childhood, but to the self that is the sum of all her diverse experiences’.<sup>125</sup> If Yeziarska’s quest for a home only leads her to the future, the narrative amalgamates her experiences in a complex dialogue between temporalities. Such is the case of Hester Street as a site of nostalgia and origins reminiscent of later representations of the Lower East in the Jewish-American imagination. However, as showed from Chapter 1, Hester Street is a *lieu de mémoire* embedded with personal memories that distance Yeziarska from later generations of middle-class American Jewry. Whereas Yeziarska conflates the ghetto with a site of origins that returns to biblical times, she does not disregard her painful memories as a former poor woman of the ghetto. Despite the fixed nature of this opening chapter, Hester Street proves to be an ever-changing memory according to the suffering that she endured there and Yeziarska’s evolving present away from home. In its analysis of this intersection between personal and mythical pasts, this section demonstrates the impossibility of disentangling these multiple pasts.

As an anchorage linked to former times, Hester Street becomes an imagined, steady place of mental refuge amidst the novelty, uncertainty and hostility of Hollywood. Owing to its symbolic significance in *Red Ribbon*, Hester Street echoes the imagery of the Lower East Side as ‘the Plymouth Rock of American Jewish history’ examined by historians.<sup>126</sup> For Yeziarska, her lost home in the ghetto concretizes her uncomplicated origins, unchanged regardless of the days that distance her from the moment she departed to California. Already in Hollywood, Mr. Letz, chief of Goldwyn Pictures’ publicity department, welcomes her into his office and

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<sup>125</sup> Carol Schoen, ‘Anzia Yeziarska: New Light on the "Sweatshop Cinderella"' (*MELUS*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Ethnic Women Writers I (Autumn, 1980), p. 9 (pp. 3-11).

<sup>126</sup> Diner, Shandler, and Wenger, ‘Introduction’ in *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*, p. 6 (pp. 3-16).

initiates her into her new work environment. In the heart of the American film industry, struggling to find her balance amidst the unfamiliarity of the extravagant environs, Yeziarska reminisces about her lost home as a personal *lieu de mémoire*:

The gloves in my hands kept twisting around my fingers.

The desk, the chair, Mr. Lenz, everything in the room  
swayed as I tried to find my balance.

In Hester Street I knew my way. Black was black; white  
was white. Right was right; wrong was wrong. Now black,  
white, right, wrong—nothing was real any more.<sup>127</sup>

In the first chapters of *Red Ribbon*, Hester Street conflates origins with beginnings through its absent nature as a former home that functions as a chronotope.<sup>128</sup>

Yeziarska's passionate reliance upon her lost home contrasts with her former status in the patriarchal world of Hester Street as a 'daughter of Babylon' and 'an object of pity and laughter' owing to her career as a woman writer.<sup>129</sup> The stability attributed to Hester Street by her words omits the pervasive nature of religious devotion that relegated her, and other women, to the domestic sphere. Her uncertain present in Hollywood leads her to twist the 'fear and poverty' from which she escaped to fulfill her dreams of a writing career into the antithesis of this oppressive environment.<sup>130</sup>

Later, when she returns to the ghetto to visit Mayer, she sheds off her delusion to see in these streets 'all the poor in the earth crying for a place in the sun'<sup>131</sup> In her rewriting of Hester Street, this *lieu de mémoire* secretes memories that oscillate between stability and kinship and the former painful reality of scorn and penury.

<sup>127</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (New York: Persea Books, 1981), p. 41.

<sup>128</sup> For the notion of chronotope, see Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel', in Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84–258.

<sup>129</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 33 and p. 30, respectively.

<sup>130</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 33.

<sup>131</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 97.

Therefore, the syntactical parallelism of the previous lines, although seemingly facile, indicates the multiple layers that comprise the representation of her immediate past. The concreteness of this street fixes origins defined by their dissimilar, sometimes conflicting, attributes to a place now ensconced in a particular moment in time. Hester Street resonates throughout *Red Ribbon* as a lost site of a former life and a place of origin that drifts from misery and anguish into an ambivalent site of nostalgia.

The departure from Hester Street, which reshapes this site in Yeziarska's imagination, also reveals the entwined relationship between her Polish village and her first American residence. In the opening lines of *Red Ribbon*, a few days prior to her departure to Hollywood, Yeziarska returns to her rented home in Hester Street: 'I paused in front of my rooming house on Hester Street. This was 1920, when Hester Street was the pushcart center of the East Side'.<sup>132</sup> Without particularly referring to Hester Street, Joyce Carol Oates notes the limited presence of Poland in Yeziarska's writings: 'Yeziarska is rarely sentimental about the past, and she certainly does not look back over her shoulder at Europe'.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, although the first chapter briefly refers to Poland, the starting point in the ghetto replaces the former as a point of origin that grounds Yeziarska's existence and her narrative. Like her early Polish home, Hester Street symbolizes a close-knit community of familiar faces, very similar ways of life, where tradition provides an overarching framework for their lives. Likewise, as a mirror of Poland, this overcrowded neighborhood also shares its disproportionate poverty, restrictions upon women, and limitations upon secular education. Despite such similarities, these places retain a distinctive character owing to the American context that defines the ghetto, which is best represented in the

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<sup>132</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 25.

<sup>133</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, 'Imaginary Cities: America' in *Literature & the American Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, ed. by Michael C. Jaye, and Ann Chalmers Watts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p. 18 (pp. 11-34).

pressures to assimilate into a different culture. The ghetto where Yeziarska's American journey starts, with its echoes of a foreign past, forms a setting that is ambivalently situated between the retrieval and loss of its foreign inhabitants' former homes.

The centrality of the ghetto is ultimately the centrality of the rewritten version of this place, which, in turn, implies the protagonist's distance from it and also from the Pale. Hester Street never functions as a fixed point in time in the protagonist's past, since, as Anne-Marie Fortier notes, 'home' is not a unitary, coherent origin fixed in the distant past, a place that was simply left behind'.<sup>134</sup> The centrality of the ghetto is the centrality of its absence; Yeziarska recalls a memory of a memory, since she departs in the first pages, and barely returns. Whereas the opening page echoes the centrality of this distant site of loss, 'the pushcart center of the East Side', Yeziarska's words do not homogenize both locations.<sup>135</sup> In other words, her reference to these peddlers, whose presence was commonplace both in the Old World shtetls and the Lower East Side, evinces a more complex relationship with her past. Beyond these vague similarities, there lies not only the American context with its pressure to assimilate, but also the religious diversity of the ghetto. The ambivalence between nostalgia and resentment towards her past does not erase the historical abyss that separates the tenements from her house in Poland. The unpreventable passage of time, which relegates both sites to memory, also causes the disparities between both pasts, distant and immediate. Although in *Red Ribbon* a 'home' means a place that was left behind, the plurality of homes in the narrative does not support images of a fixed past.

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<sup>134</sup> Anne-Marie Fortier, 'Making Home: Queer Migrations and Motions of Attachment', in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. by Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2003), p. 123 (pp. 115-136).

<sup>135</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 26.

Personal mementoes shed light upon the centrality of Yeziarska's departure from the tenements, and the concomitant rewriting of the narratives about the past. Yeziarska's shawl, one of her most precious possessions, exemplifies this rewriting of the past in relation to both Hester Street and her former home in Poland. Both places belong to a narrative of the past that comprises different objects, interpretations of which are influenced by losses of the objects and by losses they evince. After receiving a telegram requesting her to 'telephone immediately for an appointment to discuss motion picture rights of "Hungry Hearts"', Yeziarska scrambles to obtain 'a nickel for telephoning' and 'ten cents for carfare'.<sup>136</sup> While examining her room for an object to pawn for fifteen cents, she stumbles upon an old shawl, one of her most precious possessions that belonged to her late mother in Poland:

I needed a nickel for telephoning, ten cents for carfare—  
fifteen cents! What could I pawn to get fifteen cents?  
I looked about my room. The rickety cot didn't belong to me.  
The rusty gas plate on the window sill? My typewriter? The  
trunk that was my table? Then I saw the shawl, my mother's  
shawl that served as a blanket and a cover for my cot.<sup>137</sup>

The shawl survives the journey across both worlds, and, thus, becomes a memento of the past that bears a familial history of the deceased in Poland and the ghetto. Beyond its utilitarian nature, if the shawl survives, the past is still not dead; its usefulness and physical protection signal its immediacy in daily life as a reminder of former times. However, a closer scrutiny of this initial scene undermines readings that equate the shawl with remnants of Yeziarska's former life that testify to the accuracy of her memories. Whereas the shawl comes from a particular spatio-temporal context, her

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<sup>136</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 26.

<sup>137</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 26.

native village in the 1890s, its seeming immediacy conceals a circuitous journey to the tenements. Before hurrying to the pawnshop to deposit the shawl, Yeziarska elaborates on the circuitous story behind the relic and its personal value in her then-deprived present:

Nobody in our village in Poland had had a shawl like it. It had been Mother's wedding present from her rich uncle in Warsaw. It had been her Sabbath, her holiday. . . . When she put it on she outshone all the other women on the way to the synagogue.

Old and worn—it held memories of my childhood, put space and color in my drab little room. It redeemed the squalor in which I had to live. But this might be the last time I'd have to pawn it. I seized the shawl and rushed with it to the pawnshop.<sup>138</sup>

If objects sometimes create a sense of continuity between past and present, they also problematize the sense of permanence provided by remnants from former times in the present. As an object from a lost home, the shawl bears a strong connection with its prior location: 'even if the objects have moved in relation to the place, they represent stability and connectedness to the "original" place through their mnemonic function'.<sup>139</sup> The shawl relates to multiple stories about Yeziarska's past: personal and familial, sometimes traversing continents and temporalities in an intricate history. As a souvenir from Poland, the shawl tells us that not everything from this world is lost, and it serves as a reminder of her mother's experiences in both countries.

Furthermore, this tattered fabric intimates a woman's tradition of embroidery and

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<sup>138</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>139</sup> Sandra Üllen, 'Ambivalent Sites of Memories: The Meaning of Family Homes for Transnational Families', in *Memories on the Move*, p. 89 (pp. 75-98).

homemaking that returns to preceding generations of women laboring in their homes. Thus, the shawl shapes a narrative of women's continuity across generations, such as the potential, and perhaps casual, passing down of everyday objects from other women. Moreover, its precarious, threadbare reality stands for the vulnerability of women's legacies through its potential loss and seemingly trivial existence. The status of Yeziarska's shawl stands at odds with the centrality of the tallit, and, in turn, conveys the instability of a woman's past in a patriarchal world that silences her voice.

In the multiple stories of the shawl that overlap different places, times, and events, this scene also evinces the ever-fading nature of roots in *Red Ribbon*. The same item that attests to her mother's memory and her former life in her village, also attests to her abandonment of her birth country, and her ensuing departure from the ghetto. In a way, Yeziarska had abandoned the ghetto a long time ago despite still dwelling in it at the onset of the narrative, since she has broken away from her family and community. The shawl relates to Yeziarska's most immediate history, particularly her arrival in America and her subsequent experiences there, including her mother's death in Hester Street. In fact, although she remained in the ghetto, Yeziarska abandoned her father's house years prior to these events in order to achieve a writing career. As a consequence, the shawl's immaterial value of this place emanates from her lonely life in the tenements as a single, poor woman with nothing to holding onto beyond her memories. Accordingly, not only does the existence of the shawl relate to her childhood memories, but its current existence also results from her distance from these fond events. Therefore, the shawl could be read otherwise, namely as a symbol of the immediacy of actual and metaphorical deaths now intertwined with its threads.

The shawl is an old, worn object that does not ‘age’, but continues to change and acquire new memories and meanings in the ghetto as time continues to take its toll. In constantly erasing and rewriting the past from which it supposedly emerges, the garment problematizes uncomplicated readings of long-lived objects as ‘mementoes and reminders of the past’.<sup>140</sup> After signing the movie contract, Yeziarska receives a nine-thousand-dollar check for movie rights, a railroad reservation for Hollywood, and a hundred-dollar check for expenses on the train. Blurting to her agent that she ‘could be ready as soon as [she] got something out of a pawnshop’, Yeziarska hurries to Zaretsky’s shop to redeem the shawl, only to discover that her expectations are utterly crushed:<sup>141</sup>

“I sold it the day you brought it here for five dollars,” he  
groaned, his face distorted by frustrated greed.

The next day I packed my belongings without the shawl that  
had gone with me everywhere I went. The loss of that one  
beautiful thing which all my money could not reclaim  
shadowed my prospective trip to Hollywood.<sup>142</sup>

In addition to Yeziarska’s abandonment of her hometown, through its loss the shawl retells a story of her subsequent abandonment of the ghetto for Hollywood. Sometimes, as in this case, the reimagining of the past already predates the instance of departure, reminiscent Tošić and Palmberger’s remarks that, before leaving, ‘hopes and imaginaries become reminiscences of lives lived before or in between’.<sup>143</sup> In fact, the packing of her scarce belongings, along with the impossibility of gathering them all, conflates different losses that foreshadow her subsequent odyssey to California.

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<sup>140</sup> Daniel Miller, ‘Behind Closed Doors’ in *Home Possessions*, p. 14 (pp. 1-22).

<sup>141</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 31.

<sup>142</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 31.

<sup>143</sup> Tošić and Palmberger, ‘Introduction: Memories on the Move—Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past’, p. 1.



Like Hester Street itself, the shawl becomes a lost object that marks her departure from her new home by transforming into a cornerstone of lost stability, and ultimately, the loss of this anchorage itself. The shawl is the price to pay for success; its loss through being sold rather than being pawned for a few hours is indicative of the precarious nature of her memories. The loss of this object preceding her train journey to Hollywood entwines it with the ghetto and, more importantly, her definitive departure from home. Thus, the evocations of Poland with which this garment is strongly associated in the opening pages turn, towards the end of this first chapter, into associations with the most immediate past of her American street. Besides the instant of departure, the packing of her belongings triggers the dynamics of memory that rewrites this object as a symbol of multiple, changing losses. Both Hester Street and its tokens enter into an ongoing dynamic by which Yeziarska's past is rewritten as current events occur, constantly repositioning recent events as part of her past.

Besides the ghetto and the shawl, letters also become other material permutations of the past that rewrite, rather than reflect Yeziarska's past in *Red Ribbon*. Although she does not bring this correspondence with her to California, some of the letters from her admirers from different American regions, which were sent to her address in Hollywood, reminds her of former days. In Hollywood, Yeziarska receives piles of letters requesting her advice on writing, financial favors, brief autobiographies, and autographs, as well as pleas for her to commit to finding publishers for unrecognized writers. Although the letters 'overflowed into another, most of them still unread', she confesses that 'I was still too close to Hester Street to be able to let my secretary dispose of those letters'.<sup>144</sup> One day she stumbles upon a

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<sup>144</sup>Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 90.

pile of correspondence on the floor, and, among them, discovers a letter preceded by the formal salutation ‘to the honorable and most respectable Anzia Yeziarska’.<sup>145</sup> In this missive, Boruch Shlomo Mayer, an elderly man disenchanted with American materialism, begs her for a ship ticket to Poland in order to return to his little village, die and be buried there.<sup>146</sup> Upon reading Mayer’s evocative letter, Yeziarska momentarily recalls her native village in Poland through this man’s ‘voice out of time’: ‘he called me back from years of forgetfulness, from the layers of another life, back to the village in Poland where I was born’.<sup>147</sup> Through these old man’s words, Yeziarska returns to a shared heritage of religious tradition that, this time, does not form a common thread between Poland and America.

Like Mayer’s letter, his books, which Yeziarska encounters in his apartment after she travels back to New York to meet him, also imprint the narrative with the weaving of former and new memories. Like his missive, the books trigger a mnemonic journey by which these mementoes from someone else resonate with her personal memories of their shared geographies. The malleable nature of these accounts of the past encapsulates ‘the work of re-membering as the reworking of always-messy origin stories told to and by ever-changing selves’.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, the texts left by Mayer lead to a reworking of personal and communal pasts, including, for instance, Yeziarska’s relationship with the oppressive traditions of the ghetto. When Yeziarska arrives in Mayer’s apartment in the East Side, she encounters a scene of poverty, squalidness and decrepitude that echoes her early years in the neighborhood. Yeziarska’s trip is almost in vain: Mayer had passed away weeks before her arrival, and all that is left of him are his sparse possessions. Among Mayer’s scarce

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<sup>145</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 91.

<sup>146</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>147</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 92.

<sup>148</sup> Irene Gedalof, ‘Taking (a) Place: Female Embodiment and the Re-grounding of Community’, in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, p. 106 (pp. 91-112).

possessions, Yeziarska repeatedly emphasizes the abundance of books: ‘a book, face down, was on top of the pile of books on the table. More books were on the window sill. A row of boxes filled with books lined the other wall’.<sup>149</sup> Upon contemplating Mayer’s literary legacy, Yeziarska feels a sense of personal resonance with the heritage of exile and dispossession that transcends the ghetto apartment, connecting it with the biblical past:

The sacred books, the worn bindings, the moth-eaten velvet  
bag with the praying shawl on the cobwebbed wall charmed  
away the squalor of the place. This was the heritage of the  
uprooted, the mute hymn of the homeless in a strange land.<sup>150</sup>

Yeziarska reimagines this literate tradition belonging to a man she never met as her own in another attempt to recover the ghetto of her lost youth. In this description, which combines biblical imagery with the actual place, the belongings and the room itself remain unchanged in the aftermath of their owner’s death. Like before, a site and objects evoke memories of former times that entwine different pasts, from biblical and Poland to the ghetto in which these three pasts coalesce. Yeziarska therefore disregards Mayer’s view of the ghetto as an American place of rupture from religious tradition, which, for him, only survived in his native Poland. Places and times coalesce in Yeziarska’s yearning to return to a familiar, personal past imbued with a sense of eternity that transcends the passage of time upon her lost home and herself. Once again, the protagonist privileges her necessity to adapt the ghetto, albeit certainly different from the neighborhood she left behind, into a petrified mosaic of different memories. Unlike the shawl, the books do not bear a deeply personal history for her, and yet they are souvenirs of a shared, broken history across continents and

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<sup>149</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 96.

<sup>150</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 96.

temporalities. The books also signal the necessity to hold onto remnants of these roots, something that testifies to the existence of the past, something to remember amidst so much oblivion.

Rather than being symbols of continuity between past and present, the sacred books actually connect memories of different deaths, both metaphorical and literal, across *Red Ribbon*. If ‘memory is where we have arrived rather than where we have left’, Mayer’s volumes now turn back to events interspersed across the text that lead to the narrator’s present.<sup>151</sup> Firstly, the sacred books are a constant reminder of the demise of their owner, Mayer, who leaves only these items behind as mementoes of his uprooted life. Lying in a room that resembles a mausoleum without a body, despite their sacred status, they stand as signs of the immediacy of his presence and death. They do so through their sense of permanence, granted by their bygone status, which contributes to the impression of frozen time in the room. Furthermore, the same items also stand for the remnants of a missing tradition: Reb Mayer is ultimately a substitute for Yeziarska’s father, and his death echoes the previous death of the latter. The religious books are reminders of her father’s own books in the tenements, hence, despite the unfamiliarity of Mayer’s possessions for her, they epitomize the demise of her former way of life. In other words, the scene merges different pasts, immediate and distant, in a narrative in which memories rewrite other memories and also live side by side with losses of memory.

Like the shawl, the sacred books produce new narratives in the present that bear witness to the both ever-dying and rewritten nature of Yeziarska’s past through their existence. Ultimately, the multiple pasts of *Red Ribbon* reveal the intertwinement of route and roots through writing: ‘roots do not necessarily precede routes; origins and

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<sup>151</sup> Creet, ‘Introduction: The Migration of Memory and Memories of Migration’, in *Memory and Migration*, p. 6.

stasis are made and remade by movement, transition, and change'.<sup>152</sup> An example that concerns the material reality of these roots, namely Yeziarska's poverty, sheds light upon the constant malleability of the aforementioned memories. Yeziarska's life is the product of multiple roots, including, importantly, her origins in the poverty of Poland, and, subsequently, her similar roots in the poverty of the ghetto. The former scene, in which she shares Mayer's uprootedness, also hints at this shared heritage of poverty which informs her life and memories, including the relevance of objects from her past. However, Yeziarska's legacy of poverty differs from Mayer's deprivation: her identification with this man glosses over her distance from religious tradition as a woman. Unlike Mayer, Yeziarska experiences two types of deprivation, material and spiritual, hence the fragile nature of her narrative rooted in her reimagining of a different past. In her endeavors to erase this distance from the rabbi, she foregrounds her current detachment from the ghetto as a prosperous visitor to what has become a foreign world for her. Yeziarska's roots are the product of the dialectics between the present and the past that constantly require her to adapt her narrative to new events that either modify or erase former accounts.

From Hester Street to its derivatives, including Hester Street itself as another derivative of her former neighborhood, *Red Ribbon* is a narrative of multiple meanderings. Yeziarska's autobiography does not exactly match the category of 'a narrative of linearity—from ghetto to middle class, with some nostalgic loss and sadness on the way'.<sup>153</sup> Unfortunately for her, Yeziarska's sudden affluent status only culminates in her bankruptcy, but her rewriting of her lost ghetto is indeed filtered through the lens of time. Her narrative is, in the first instance, a journey away from Hester Street, or, more accurately, a journey away from her oppressive past,

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<sup>152</sup> Donaldson, 'Southern Roots and Routes: Mobility, Migration, and the Literary Imagination', p. 8.

<sup>153</sup> Rottenberg, 'Introduction: Black Harlem and Jewish Lower East Side', in *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side*, p. 8.

encompassing both Poland and America. Regardless of the mnemonic value invested in objects, her constant attempts to hold onto the past through the material only cause her and her narrative to drift further away from home. In the same way as the passage of time takes its toll upon her body, temporality renders her literary endeavors to restore Hester Street onto the page futile. Although, unlike the shawl, other *lieux de mémoire* still stand by the end of the narrative, regardless of their firmness her past in the ghetto has vanished into thin air. Despite her Polish origins, the imaginaries of the past turn the tenements into her irretrievable lost home: whether by foot or by pen any journey back to her roots produces further routes marked by her present. Life and literature come together in Yeziarska's narrative, by which her lost home in the tenements becomes another route of her also reimagined hometown in Poland.

## Chapter 2: Memory, Narration and Correspondence: Women's Postcards from Former Times

### 2.1. Overview

Through close readings of three literary texts, Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*, and Antin's *The Promised Land* and *From Plotzk to Boston*, this chapter focuses upon an understudied theme in literature from the third immigrant wave: immigrant correspondence. In order to properly address the complexity of this topic, the introduction to this chapter starts by clarifying the theoretical framework that underpins this second chapter. This framework is largely indebted to the readings of memory and narration developed in Creet's and Kitzmann's *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies* (2011), and Amy L. Hubbell's *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile* (2015). Firstly, this chapter returns to Creet's notion of the perambulations of memory, particularly its restless nature as captured in cultural artifacts. This chapter re-reads this notion of memory in relation to Hubbell's work on memory to shed further light upon an issue unexplored in *Memory and Migration*, namely, the absences entailed by memory's travels. Hubbell's sustained readings of the rewritings of the past in the aftermath of emigration provide a convenient starting point for close readings of the primary sources. Specifically, like *Remembering French Algeria*, this chapter delves into the voids of the past that writing can never cover, and whose very existence it exposes as intrinsic to these writings themselves.

This chapter examines the fragility intrinsic to literary reconstructions of the past by bearing in mind the particular historical circumstances of the primary sources. The texts demonstrate the varied ways in which writing can ultimately only amount to

rewriting, and the ways in which this rewriting cannot completely erase absences from their pages. As in the previous chapter, the introduction moves to a brief discussion about secondary criticism on the oeuvre from the selected authors in relation to the issues at hand. Finally, it closes with an overview of personal correspondence between the 1890s and the 1930s, focusing on its relevance as a bond between temporalities. Importantly, these pages also aim to establish relationships between diverse studies, namely recent scholarship on memory and writing, literary criticism on the two writers, and research on memory and correspondence. Their connections justify the references to these varied sources, since, however tangentially, these researchers from different fields underscore the centrality of writing, as well as the absence it entails, in narrating the past. Lastly, the introduction also aims to provide an overview of the storyline of the three selected texts to facilitate the reading of the two following sections.

Returning to the first chapter, we saw that Creet invites an understanding of memory that does not devote exclusive attention to the content of memory, but also to the journeys that shape memories. In the introduction to *Memory and Migration*, Creet poses this already cited question: ‘should we not, given our mobility, begin to ask different questions of memory, ones that do not attend only to the content of memory, but to the travels that have invoked it?’<sup>154</sup> The preceding chapter showed the entangled nature of the contents of literary memories and the travels that invoked their existence, including historical factors and the traveling nature of memory itself. This second chapter continues this line of thought in its analysis of the various narratives of the past in *Out of the Shadow*, *The Promised Land* and *From Plotzk to Boston*. In fact, close readings of passages from these three texts require paying

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<sup>154</sup> Creet, ‘Introduction: The Migration of Memory and Memories of Migration’, in *Memory and Migration*, p. 6.



attention to the malleable nature of narrative memories owing to historical and textual factors. Furthermore, these two sections survey the absences that lie beneath these narratives, namely the gaps, omissions, and silences whose existence lingers in these three texts. While these absences are mostly thematic in nature, such as unmentioned episodes and temporal gaps between chapters, they inevitably have a textual dimension. The intertextual nature of the letters in *Out of the Shadow*, along with the citation of passages from *From Plotzk to Boston*, a lengthy letter itself, in *The Promised Land*, elucidate this point. They do so in the very travels of the narrated memories of the protagonist's pasts, which, as it could not be otherwise, are determined by the traveling nature of literary texts.

Sharing *Memory and Migration's* emphasis upon the shifting, fragile nature of memory, *Remembering French Algeria* relates theories of memory with literature more thoroughly. Looking at postcolonial literature in French, Hubbell examines the written and visual reimaginings of Algeria by the *pieds-noirs* after the colonial rule in Algeria came to an end in 1962. In her monograph, Hubbell also examines the literary attempts of these former French citizens of Algeria to rewrite, reimagine, and ultimately hold onto their broken past in this Arab country after their arrival in France. Deeply complicit in the colonization of Algeria, these *Français d'Algérie* were marked by an often-idealized image of the colonial past removed from the recollections of the French nation. In their compositions produced between 1962 and the present, these authors often endeavor to sustain a connection between the past and the present without completely escaping the absences haunting their accounts. Despite geographical and temporal disparities between Hubbell's literary selection and the texts analyzed in this dissertation, Hubbell's sustained analysis of these broken versions of the past is relevant to this thesis's discussion of memory and literature.

Hubbell articulates these writers' relationship between past and present as an attempt to reconstruct the past: 'to fix or stabilize the past, the author continually rewrites a new version, a paper homeland that attempts to fill the void felt in the present'.<sup>155</sup> Sometimes influenced by nostalgia, sometimes guided by their protagonists' rejection of the past, *Out of the Shadow*, *From Plotzk to Boston* and *The Promised Land* constitute attempts to fix particular versions of the past. In these endeavors to render a unified account of events from particular instances in the past to their respective present, the voids left by the past emerge in the texts.

If, as ascertained in chapter 1, the past constitutes a malleable, shifting narrative, or, as is often the case, narratives, influenced by historical forces, the absences within these narratives are intrinsic to their existence. Hubbell elaborates upon the ways in which the *pieds-noirs*' writings on the Algerian past 'fail to permanently satisfy the longing for roots and instead compel the author to continually take up the pen to rewrite the homeland'.<sup>156</sup> Similarly, these continuous rewritings of the past are showed clearly in *From Plotzk to Boston*, *The Promised Land* and *Out of the Shadow* in different ways. In other words, these three narratives reveal the uncertainty, instability and fragility of the memories that they supposedly fix onto their pages. In the two first texts, Antin engages in a process of rewriting by which she renders different, sometimes contradictory accounts of the same events from her personal past. More subtly, as years go by in America, *Out of the Shadow* reimagines former places, such as Ruth's native village, as ambivalent spaces instead of mere sites of oppression.<sup>157</sup> Irrespective of the strategies at hand, the necessity to account for the past inevitably presupposes its very absence: events must have already

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<sup>155</sup> Amy L. Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), p. 75.

<sup>156</sup> Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria*, p. 75.

<sup>157</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 45.

occurred to be rendered into words. The missing nature of the original events, now irretrievable, constitutes the most obvious absence at work in these texts, which are, therefore, already predicated upon this loss.

Scholarship on Cohen's and Antin's oeuvres, particularly the selected texts, serves to develop the study of their rewriting of the past in the three narratives in view of the centrality of these absences. Academic articles, book chapters, book reviews, and doctoral dissertations have been written about Antin's *The Promised Land* in such copious numbers as to make it impossible to refer to them all here. On the other hand, scholarship on *From Plotzk to Boston* and *Out of the Shadow* is far more limited, mostly restricted to academic articles and book chapters. Although plenty of these studies deal with identity, assimilation, and Jewishness, in recent decades some critics have centered on the existence of underplayed and silenced themes in *The Promised Land* and *Out of the Shadow*. For instance, Jolie A. Sheffer perceives in *The Promised Land* a counternarrative that questions the trouble-free nature of Antin's assimilation: 'The Promised Land's paradigmatic assimilation narrative that is, contains within it a counternarrative revealing the terrors of immigration and the difficulties of adjusting to American life'.<sup>158</sup> While Antin, an immigrant woman who receives education in American schools, repeatedly celebrates her new life in her Promised Land, a subtle critique of progress lingers in her pages.<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, although present in the text, this counternarrative, in which Antin insinuates her doubts and anxieties about assimilation into Gentile America, also gestures towards events left untold. Besides

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<sup>158</sup> Jolie A. Sheffer, 'Recollecting, Repeating, and Walking Through: Immigration, Trauma, and Space in Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*', *MELUS*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Transgressing the Borders of "America" (Spring, 2010), p. 142 (pp. 141-166).

<sup>159</sup> For a reading of Antin's language narratives that calls into question her idealization of literacy, see Amy E. Dayton-Wood, 'The Limits of Language: Literacy, Morality, and Transformation in Mary Antin's "The Promised Land"', *MELUS*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 2009), pp. 81-98. For a reading of sentimentalism and realism in Antin's narrative, as well as her critique of social reform, see Sarah Sillin, 'Heroine, Reformer, Citizen: Novelistic Conventions in Antin's "The Promised Land"', *MELUS*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Fall, 2013), pp. 25-43.

her occasional misgivings after her arrival, such as rejecting her strong foreign accent, Antin disregards many details, such as her family's financial instability.<sup>160</sup>

*The Promised Land* is an ambivalent narrative that oscillates between Antin's unceasing hope in the American dream and the sometimes-illusory nature of this vision. In this regard, this chapter departs from readings of *The Promised Land* as an unambiguous, optimistic encomium to America.<sup>161</sup> Rather, the second section of this chapter demonstrates that the purported accuracy of her account, namely its faith to the events and its detailed nature, ultimately does not hold. Sheffer, or, for that matter, Magdalena J. Zaborowska already highlighted that Antin's subtext reveals silences, such as Antin's repression of her own sexual desire.<sup>162</sup> Already in *From Plotzk to Boston*, a seemingly unadorned translation of a private missive to her uncle, Antin's past must be rewritten for specific readerships: 'she is willing to change that narrative to fit her intended readership's expectations'.<sup>163</sup> This second section looks instead at chapter XV of *The Promised Land*, in which Antin turns to extracts from *From Plotzk to Boston* to narrate her six-week journey from Russia to America. This mid-chapter in *The Promised Land* serves therefore as the hinge between two worlds, and its storyline coincides with the content of her previous letter, which opens, as its title suggests, in Plotzk, in order to close with her arrival in Boston. The insertion of this extract, along with other textual features of the passage, exemplifies the recurring nature of thematic and formal absences in *The Promised Land*. Antin's rewriting of

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<sup>160</sup> Whereas Antin refers to the poverty of her early years in America, there are no explanations of her financial situation in her present. For passing references to her family's poverty, see, for instance, pp. 155, 160, 217, and 277, in Antin, *The Promised Land*.

<sup>161</sup> For different readings of *The Promised Land* as a paean to America, see Sarah Blacker Cohen, 'Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*: A Breach of a Promise', *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1975-1979), Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter, 1977-78), pp. 28-35, and Steven Kellman, 'Lost in the Promised Land: Eva Hoffman Revises Mary Antin', *Prooftexts*, Vol. 18, No. 2, *Jewish-American Autobiography*, Part 1 (May, 1998), pp. 149-159.

<sup>162</sup> Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *How We Found America: Reading Gender Through East-European Immigrant Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 69.

<sup>163</sup> Sunny Yudkoff, 'The Adolescent Self-Fashioning of Mary Antin', *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), Vol. 32, No. 1 (2013), p. 17 (pp. 4-35).

her preceding version of her journey also reveals the existence of multiple versions of the same events underscored by silences and omissions.

As in the case of Antin, although far more scarce, recent research on Cohen's *Out of the Shadow* has also noticed the fragmented nature of her autobiography. In a sentence that summarizes the overall storyline of *Out of the Shadow*, Thomas Dublin considers Ruth's account as 'the moving story of a young immigrant's efforts to navigate the cultural distance from the Russian countryside to the tenements of the Lower East Side'.<sup>164</sup> As seen in the previous chapter, Ruth struggles to negotiate this distance between Russia and America in her endeavors to Americanize, acquire English, and socialize with Gentiles while in the tenements. Examining Ruth's difficulty in reconciling the American present and the foreign past in *Out of the Shadow*, Lisa Muir notes the fragmentary style of her autobiography: '[the riddles of her life] are the fragments that make up her modern existence and the disparate parts are the ragged whole'.<sup>165</sup> In *Out of the Shadow*, Muir notes the existence of missing explanations of events, incomplete conclusions and disconnected chapters.<sup>166</sup> Indeed, in its brief chapters, 'filled with somewhat unrelated memories, sometimes erratically delivered', the narrator frequently reduces full episodes to a few pages.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, as showed by the frequent letters mentioned by Ruth, the multiple narratives present in the text intertwine in a pattern that often erases former narratives. In other words, these letters, mostly written by her family members in either Russia or America, exemplify these textual absences entailed in her rewriting of her past.

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<sup>164</sup> Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives*, p. 198.

<sup>165</sup> Lisa Muir, 'Rose Cohen and Bella Spewack: The Ethnic Child Speaks to You Who Never Were There', *College Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter, 2002), p. 139 (pp. 123-142).

<sup>166</sup> Muir, 'Rose Cohen and Bella Spewack', p. 139.

<sup>167</sup> Muir, 'Rose Cohen and Bella Spewack', p. 139.

The chapter is divided into two sections, ‘The Troubles of Memory, Epistles, and Cohen’s *Out of the Shadow*’ and ‘Antin’s *From Plotzk to Boston* as a Postcard from the Past in Antin’s *The Promised Land*’. The first section analyzes several references to personal correspondence across and within different geographies, Russia and America, and temporalities, namely before and after the protagonist’s emigration to America in *Out of the Shadow*. By means of close readings of its several passages, this section argues against common readings of letters as containers of memory that preserve the past for the sake of the present. Rather, the missives of the text often erase more events than they actually retell; moreover, their narrated events are frequently haunted by further omissions. The second section contains close readings of passages from chapter XV of *The Promised Land*, which, in its depiction of Antin’s voyage, bridges her life from ‘the Middle Ages’ to ‘the twentieth century’.<sup>168</sup> Like *Out of the Shadow*, Antin’s autobiography uses correspondence as a testimony of former times that should reaffirm the stable, cohesive nature of her current memories. Concomitantly, the section also focuses upon the extracts from Antin’s lengthy letter, *From Plotzk to Boston*, whose presence breaks the fifteenth chapter into multiple narratives. Through the perusal of these passages, this section demonstrates that this lengthy letter, alongside its new historical and textual context, illustrates the erasure of former narratives upon which Antin’s new narrative is built.

#### Immigrant Correspondence: A Brief Outline

Between 1880 and the 1930s, when the events in these texts unfold, correspondence was for most the only method of communication across physical distance. Other means of communication, most notably telephones, were still inexistent among the

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<sup>168</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 3.

general public, and visit trips were almost always unimaginable for poor immigrants like Antin and Cohen. Besides these expensive travel costs, there were social restrictions on women travelling alone, so that letters were the most important vehicle for spreading news between these women and their loved ones both prior and after their arrival in America.<sup>169</sup> Elliott and Gerber summarize the role of immigrant correspondence as follows: ‘apart from supplying both public and private information, they served to maintain material and emotional links between separated brethren, and helped to shape future migration’.<sup>170</sup> Besides the exchange of news, letters also helped in coping with new places, disorientation, loss, and confusion; or merely provided a place in which their writers could voice their anguish. In doing this, letters addressed to those who were back home touched on innumerable subjects: their lost homes, the journey, the new land, those left behind and those they met after departure, to name but a few. Some of them delve into occupational expectations and disappointments, nostalgia for hometowns, or, on the contrary, the joys of parting.<sup>171</sup> In the concern for

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<sup>169</sup> There are numerous collections of letters of immigrants to America written across the nineteenth and early-twentieth century: *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home*, ed. by Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Johannes Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer, trans. by Susan Carter Vogel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), *Letters from the Promised Land: Swedes in America, 1840-1914*, ed. by H. Arnold Barton (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press for the Swedish Pioneer Historical Society, 1975), *Dutch American Voices: Letters from the United States, 1850-1930*, ed. by Herbert J. Brinks (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), *The Welsh in America: Letters from the Immigrants*, ed. by Alan Conway (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1961), Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), *Danes in North America*, ed. by Frederick Hale (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), Antonio Gibelli and Fabio Caffarena, ‘Le letter degli emigranti’, in *Storia dell’emigrazione italiana*, Vol. 1, ed. by Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, Emilio Franzina (Roma: Donzelli, 2001), pp. 563-574, Ilaria Serra, ‘The Immigrants Write: The Letters’ in Serra, *Imagined Immigrant: Images of Italian Emigration to the United States between 1890 and 1924* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), pp. 133-157, and Theodore Christian Blegen, *Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1955).

<sup>170</sup> David Fitzpatrick, ‘Irish Emigration and the Art of Letter-Writing’, in *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, ed. by Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 97 (pp. 97-106)

<sup>171</sup> There are a few anthologies of Jewish immigrant correspondence of the third immigrant wave: Gur Alroey, *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear: Letters from Jewish Migrants in the Early Twentieth Century* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), and Robert Rockaway, *Words of the Uprooted: Jewish Immigrants in Early Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

family members left in their villages, coupled with the expectations placed upon the American dream of prosperity and freedom, the three texts partake of this diversity of topics.

Extracts from immigrant correspondence between America and their home countries shed light upon their authors' imperious need to respond to the demands of the American present, including the opportunities available for them in this country. In some missives, immigrant addressers do not hesitate to vouch for America: 'I am so comfortable and have prospered so well here that I would like to have some of my people here with me and will try to do the best I can for them'.<sup>172</sup> They also stimulate immigration, encouraging others to follow suit; in fact envelopes sometimes contain not only gifts, but also money and passage tickets for ships to America. An English immigrant concludes the following of his journey from Kent to Ohio: 'I again repeat that I consider my Emigration as the most fortunate step of my whole life, and I assure you no act of mine ever gave such complete satisfaction'.<sup>173</sup> Letters also mix descriptions of new places with personal narratives of their writers' journeys: 'New York is a very beautiful town and after this I took a ship to come to Albany'.<sup>174</sup> Missives such as these convey the hope for the future amidst immigrants, which often provides a vivid contrast with their living conditions in their countries of birth. In these experiences and exhortations, the letters account for new beginnings and recreate snapshots of America, symbolizing their distance from former places.

The bright side of American adventures is accompanied by the shadows of this same journey, which sometimes even echo the nightmares of the Old World. A case

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For a study of immigrant correspondence across multiple geographies and collectivities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see: *Letters across Borders*, ed. by Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke.

<sup>172</sup> Mr. Simon Sachs, 'Letters to and from Simon Sachs', in *Words of the Uprooted*, p. 202.

<sup>173</sup> Robert Bowles to brothers, Harrison, Ohio, April 20, 1823, Ohio Historical Society.

<sup>174</sup> 'This is the best place under the sun'. From David Shone Harry (David Jones) Joiner, Late of Llwyngwrl, in Albany, New York, to his wife, October 14, 1817, in *The Welsh in America: Letters from the Immigrants*, ed. by Alan Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 57.



in point, working conditions in the New World could also turn exploitative, as immigrants also demonstrate: ‘during the season I worked six months, much more harder as in New York in the shops, from 8 in the morning till 10 at night, and Saturday till 11 at night, having only one hour for dinner’.<sup>175</sup> As countless letters sent by Jewish immigrants to the Industrial Removal Office in New York make manifest, the possibilities to prosper were often limited.<sup>176</sup> Despair even leads a Jewish immigrant to proclaim that he desires ‘only what the patriarch Jacob prayed for: “bread to eat and clothes to wear”’.<sup>177</sup> Language barriers could also pose a problem for newcomers; for instance, a Jewish woman who inquires about her missing husband makes linguistic difficulties explicit: ‘and if you answer me, please answer in Yiddish because we cannot read English. It was not easy for us to find someone who could read your response in English’.<sup>178</sup> From cultural obstacles, already conveyed in their struggling diction, accompanied by relentless poverty, to elaborate dreams of a better life, the letters showcase the lights and shadows of America.

If letters reveal the complexities of the American present, they also hold an ambivalent relationship with the past that oscillates between recollection and oblivion. Letters promise the continuity, and, sometimes, even the restoration of former bonds, holding together worlds miles apart through their words. Often treasured as souvenirs by immigrants, as well as by those who stayed behind, they functioned as reminders of others and a world that is no more, or that, perhaps, never was. As a result, letters have frequently been interpreted as mementoes that ‘shape memory and help to give content to memories, as they connect us with the past as well as with the present and

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<sup>175</sup> Max Fruchtman, ‘Letters to and from Max Fruchtman’, in *Words of the Uprooted*, p. 202.

<sup>176</sup> For more information on correspondence to the Industrial Removal Office during the early-twentieth century see Alroey, *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear*.

<sup>177</sup> Letter to Israel Zangwill, November 18, 1908, Central Zionist Archives, A36/97.

<sup>178</sup> Miriam Leskes, ‘Dear Sir’ in Alroey’s *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear*, p. 104.

the future'.<sup>179</sup> Letters enable addressers and addressees to stay in touch, while they might also contain recollections of personal and communal episodes rewritten and stored by their words. Despite this, research has demonstrated the historicity that hinders these temporal bonds; for example, not all letters survive into the present: 'each letter collection is, therefore, a part of a universe of documents, the size and nature of which can never really be known'.<sup>180</sup> These quotations from different letters prove this point: it is impossible to ascertain the original scope of these collections of letters, and, indeed, how they came to be collections in the first place.

Correspondence fragments into pieces of different stories whose journey into the present has inevitably led to remnants different from the original letters decades ago.

The partial, thwarted nature of correspondence deserves further consideration in view of the multifarious nature of this loss that haunts the letters in Antin's and Cohen's texts. Amidst the surviving correspondence there are disparities between men and women: letters written by women are underrepresented in immigrant anthologies.<sup>181</sup> Since these anthologies often focus upon the writings of immigrant men, the voices and lives of women remain unheard while the male experience is universalized. The potential fate of these letters, whether penned by immigrants or correspondents outside America, might also entail their loss, misplacement, discarding or even destruction. Moreover, in plenty of cases, like *Out of the Shadow*, existing documents would be the product of translations into English from original languages, in this case Yiddish. Furthermore, surviving correspondence did not

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<sup>179</sup> Natalia Alonso Rey, 'Memory in Motion: Photographs in Suitcases', in *Memories on the Move*, p. 101 (pp. 101-126).

<sup>180</sup> David A. Gerber, 'Epistolary Masquerades: Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters', in *Letters across Borders*, p. 142 (pp. 141-157).

<sup>181</sup> Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, Suzanne M. Sinke, 'Introduction' in *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, p. 10. For further reading on women and correspondence, see Suzanne M. Sinke, *Dutch Immigrant Women in the United States, 1880-1920* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), and Christa Hämmerle, and Edith Saurer, *Briefkulturen und ihr Geschlecht. Zur Geschichte der privaten Korrespondenz vom 16. Jahrhundert bis heute* (Wien, Köln, and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2003).

always escape previous or current censorship, voluntary omissions by their authors, or historical inaccuracies.<sup>182</sup> Another example from *Out of the Shadow*, namely a letter telling about Ruth's grandmother's death, addresses the importance of omission, in this case in the form of sparing the gruesome details of her final days.<sup>183</sup> As a result, these conditions surrounding real correspondence also imprint not only *From Plotzk to Boston*, a missive itself, but also the fictional correspondence present in these literary texts.

To briefly clarify this point, like the souvenirs of the first chapter, in this second chapter letters are not treated as extant remnants of the past that survived into the present. Although 'letters often explicitly contain memory of the shared past in one form or another', they might actually have the opposite effect by obliterating the past they presumably recall.<sup>184</sup> The aforementioned examples from different writers could further elucidate this point: letters face textual and historical restrictions upon what can and cannot be written. Therefore, the English skills of the woman worried about her husband's fate, for instance, could probably limit the information that she could convey about her past and present circumstances. Similarly, the workman laboring fourteen hours per day could even have left out from his testimony the most painful circumstances of his new life so as not to worry those at home. Likewise, letters did not always hold families together: correspondence did not always manage to bridge the temporal and physical distances that separated families. This explains why Antin and Cohen's correspondence with those left at home becomes more infrequent,

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<sup>182</sup> For further reading upon the omission of information in personal letters, see Gerber, 'Epistolary Masquerades', in *Letters across Borders*, pp. 141-157.

<sup>183</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 278.

<sup>184</sup> David A. Gerber, 'Moving backward and moving on: nostalgia, significant others, and social reintegration in nineteenth-century British immigrant personal correspondence', in *Migrant Letters: Emotional Language, Mobile Identities, and Writing Practices in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Marcelo J. Borges and Sonia Cancian (Abington, Oxon. and New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), p. 18 (pp. 11-34).

particularly for the latter, as their stay in America carries on.<sup>185</sup> As a consequence, these women's correspondence cannot be understood within a binary of destruction and survival of memory by which letters salvage pieces of the past.

In their close textual analysis of the three texts that regard Antin's and Cohen's letters as narratives of the past, the following two sections delve into memory, writing and absence. This reading of correspondence acknowledges that this understanding of writing differs from the narrators' own interpretation of letters as souvenirs of their foreign lives. In a citation from *From Plotzk to Boston*, *The Promised Land* refers to the ability of correspondence to store the past: 'I noticed all this and remembered it, as if there were nothing else in the world for me to think of'<sup>186</sup> In *Out of the Shadow*, similar documents found in 'a translation from the Russian into Yiddish, partly letters, partly diary', also recall former times for Ruth, then already residing in the tenements.<sup>187</sup> Their expectations do not correspond with the reality of the narratives in which souvenirs, as Oona Frawley states, step into the gap between memory experiences and realities.<sup>188</sup> Rather, in this case letters step into these gaps between the women protagonists' past and present without covering the absences left by their distance from their past. In other words, like the text themselves, the letters examined in this chapter are accounts of the past defined by their ongoing rewriting and erasure of former memories.

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<sup>185</sup> Although Antin writes letters profusely, in the last chapters she corresponds mostly with her upper-class American friends. See Antin, *The Promised Land*, pp. 249, 267 and 274. Until news of her grandmother's death arrive, Ruth spends months in America without referring to letters from home. See Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 192.

<sup>186</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 136, and Antin, *From Plotzk to Boston*, p. 20.

<sup>187</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 220.

<sup>188</sup> Oona Frawley, *Memory Ireland: Volume 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), p. 8.

## 2.2. The Troubles of Memory, Epistles, and Cohen's *Out of the Shadow*

Not only are letters crucial as forms of narration that connect individuals and consolidate versions of preceding events, but they can also problematize accounts of the past. Writing on three Cuban-American novels, Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe* (2001), and Ana Menéndez's *Loving Che* (2003), Iraida H. López notices the presence of 'orphaned, diasporic characters who often rely on diaries, letters, and photographs to fill the gaps or, conversely, to serve as a springboard to their accounts'.<sup>189</sup> Despite significant historical differences between these three novels and Cohen's autobiography, in *Out of the Shadow* letters fulfill a similar function of building the present and the future. Some of the letters in *Out of the Shadow* enable the narrator to establish connections with Gentile Americans and to demonstrate her English proficiency and Americanization. This section focuses upon four letters, which, written in either Russia or America, illustrate the erasures of personal and textual memory inflicted by Ruth's narrative of her past. Although these four missives do not directly display the English skills of the protagonist, they partake of her ongoing distance from her Russian early years.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, correspondence, whether penned in Russia or in America, fragments reductionist visions of the past by suggesting multiple, often competing narratives of preceding events. In *Out of the Shadow*, letters refute notions of memory as permanent and unchangeable, rendering Ruth's past as a broken narrative that can never provide a single, fixed image of the past. Letters relate to one another, as well as to the text, through thematic and structural patterns of absences which intertwist and erode other narratives in the text.

<sup>189</sup> Iraida H. López, *Impossible Returns: Narratives of the Cuban Diaspora* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), p. 192.

<sup>190</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 26, and Antin, *The Promised Land*, pp. 263-280.

This section illustrates that in *Out of the Shadow* the multiple letters interspersed throughout the narrative provide transient, inconstant versions of the past marked by physical and mnemonic absences. The following pages do not delve into the intentions behind Cohen's writing, but focus rather on the narration of the immigrant past through several letters recalled in the text, as well as on their echoes and implications. In order to do this, this section considers the vulnerable nature of objects, which entails 'the inability to ever know precisely what it is that we lost together with the lost object' shared by the memories attached to them.<sup>191</sup> Such is the case already in the first chapters, in which after his arrival in America, Ruth's father omits his painful condition in his letter: 'father did not tell us much about his life out there'.<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, objects are in constant change, they are scratched, scarred, and shattered beyond our control, and this flow maps onto the shifts and disruptions produced by letters in the narrative. The perambulations of written documents denote the changing, evolving nature of the writings, that is, the inability to apprehend, capture and establish the narrated events. In *Out of the Shadow*, uncertainty, blanks and mobility replace any notion of stability that writing, with its seemingly permanent, anchored nature, might evince. Focusing upon four personal letters scattered across the text, the following pages return to the tensions between the necessity to narrate the past and the impossibility of doing so.

Several literary scholars have already emphasized the underlying subtexts and varied absences that lie behind the main storyline of Cohen's account. For instance, Laura Hapke, in examining class structures in relation to settlement houses and the precariousness of women workers, notes critical undertones towards the settlement movement in *The Promised Land* and *Out of the Shadow*. According to Hapke,

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<sup>191</sup> Rosinska, 'Emigratory Experience: The Melancholy of No Return', in *Memory and Migration*, p. 37.

<sup>192</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 26.

although Antin and Cohen were ‘thankful for the scholarship and the settlement house, respectively’, these texts ‘contained subtexts of resentment that subverted the official version of their stories’.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, Lisa Muir notes the fractured nature of Cohen’s writing: ‘but Cohen never synthesizes the images to answer the riddles of her life. They are the fragments that make up her modern existence and the disparate parts are the ragged whole’.<sup>194</sup> Another scholar, Barbara Sicherman, remarks that ‘Cohen’s is a nonlinear story, full of stops and starts, of her journey from marginal literacy in her native language, Yiddish, to the linguistic accomplishment needed to write in English, a language she came to only in her late teens’.<sup>195</sup> Meanwhile, Thomas Dublin muses on the absence of clear resolution for the narrative: ‘in the end, Cohen’s legacy is the autobiography she has written: a story of the struggle of her own life, whose outcome was still in doubt as she wrote’.<sup>196</sup> Whether a product of her status as an impoverished woman, or an outcome of her urge to master English, multiple ellipses and fragmentary accounts punctuate the text from beginning to end. Although the limited space of this dissertation does not allow examination of all these particulars, the following pages frequently return to the fragmented, excised structure of the narrative.

Despite their detailed readings of the nuances of *Out of the Shadow*, none of these scholars mention the connections between the use of correspondence and narratives of the past in the text. Building both on research in memory studies and secondary criticism on Cohen’s narrative, this section demonstrates the relevance of correspondence in the dynamics of memory at work in the text. More precisely, letters underscore that memory functions as a narrative which repeatedly indicates the

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<sup>193</sup> Laura Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 148.

<sup>194</sup> Muir, ‘Rose Cohen and Bella Spewack’, p. 139.

<sup>195</sup> Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives*, p. 198.

<sup>196</sup> Dublin, ‘Introduction’, in Rose Cohen’s *Out of the Shadow*, p. xviii.

centrality of multiple absences that lie behind Ruth's words. Liedeke Plate connects the recovery of absences with women's writing, and claims that the latter might function as 'a counter-memorial discursive practice that inscribes untold narratives within the space of remembrance, re-presenting the untold not as absence or disremembering, but as presence'.<sup>197</sup> *Out of the Shadow* does not materialize absences, such as omitted events and suppressed stories, whose development and outcome remain unknown in the text, in order to bring them onto the page. Rather, the four missives, with their variegated content, different dates, places of origin, addressers and addressees, as well as their diverse scriptorial styles, embody varied experiences of the past that echo these absences. Likewise, regardless of the nostalgic tone of some letters, the future-looking tendency of the narrative contributes to the ambiguity of gaps in the text as neither silences nor presences. Through its historical nature, namely its material quality as a handwritten document, and the ongoing limitations of the memory of the protagonist, correspondence reasserts the temporal linearity of the narrative. Although they might momentarily transport the characters to a previous moment, letters ultimately reaffirm the passage of time and their distance from the past.

Whether Cohen writes to 'exorcize the past', 'remain linked with the past', or both, as Drucker claims immigrant Jewish women writers often did, bears little relevance in this case.<sup>198</sup> Instead, what matters here is that *Out of the Shadow* problematizes the role of letters as conveyors of memories, and, thus, the capability of the narrative to rescue fragments of the past, or, for that matter, even provide glimpses of it. A few months before his family makes the same perilous journey, Ruth's father departs for America on his own, embarking on a lengthy odyssey from Ruth's

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<sup>197</sup> Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting*, p. 129.

<sup>198</sup> Drucker, "'It Doesn't Say So in Mother's Prayerbook'", p. 70.



hometown in the Russian Pale to New York City. A few days after his departure, the family receives a letter, which, through its Prussian stamp, reveals that her father has managed to escape Russia. This document not only brings incommensurable elation to his relatives, but also suggests the importance of missives in narrating the past in *Out of the Shadow*:

Soon a letter and money came from father. This was the first letter from America. Father did not tell us much about his life out there. He just said that he was boarding with a nice Russian Jewish family and that he was already working and earning ten dollars a week. The rest of the letter was just good cheer and loving messages to each one of us.

Grandmother kept the letter under her pillow and soon the writing was defaced by her tears.

One day I managed to get hold of it. I put it into my pocket, slipped out of the house, then I took it out and looked at it.

It seemed to me so wonderful that a letter posted in America found its way into our little village.

"And this is American paper and here is an American stamp!

And no doubt father touched this very stamp!"<sup>199</sup>

Driving the protagonist—and the narrative—to an American future, the letter shatters conceptions of the Pale as an impervious space, immune to external influences.

Indeed, letters frequently enabled their exchangers to ‘form a new present and future, to build upon rather than simply brood about the loss of the past’.<sup>200</sup> In a way, her father’s missive is a souvenir from an impending future: it foreshadows Ruth’s

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<sup>199</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 26.

<sup>200</sup> Gerber, ‘Moving backward and moving on’, p. 29.

departure to America in order to be reunited with him. The hopeful tidings about his current life in New York promise a fresh start for his family once they manage to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Ruth's final thoughts balance what is familiar and unfamiliar: the proximity with her father that the letter materializes becomes the closeness of America. Concomitantly, the existence of this piece of paper proves that the villages of the Pale were not isolated entities removed from external influences and unchanged since medieval times. The circulation of knowledge and peoples imply that visions of the Pale as a medieval, stable entity of religious purity and unacquaintance with the outside world borders on atavism.<sup>201</sup> Letters do not necessarily 'brood upon the past', or, for that matter, rescue the past from potential oblivion, but rather point to its instability and shatter our preconceptions. Correspondence traverses physical and mental borders, and hence demolishes illusions of purity and isolation, including petrified, unalloyed versions of 'Eastern Europe'. American reality is not positively antipodal to the Pale, but is deeply intertwined with it: the letter serves as witness and agent of the malleable and evolving nature of the past through the disintegration of any stable image of Ruth's hometown.

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<sup>201</sup> Nostalgic views of the shtetl are encapsulated in Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), and Steven J. Zipperstein, *Imaginary Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1999). Recent scholarship contesting this view of Jewish life in the Pale includes: *Everyday Jewish Life in Imperial Russia: Select Documents, 1772-1914*, ed. by Chaeran Y. Freeze and Jay M. Harris (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2013), and Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002). For specific views on Jewish politics in the Russian Pale during the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century, see: Inna Shtakser, *The Making of Jewish Revolutionaries in the Pale of Settlement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Zvi Gitelman (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), Erich Haberer, *Jews and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Golda Akhiezer, 'Jewish Identity and the Russian Revolution: A Case Study of Radical Activism in the Russian Empire', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 25 (3), pp. 561–75. For further research on Jewish women in the Pale during Cohen's time, see: Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*, trans. by Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, and Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004).

In establishing the past by determining what survives in the present, the material history of this particular letter captures the selective and shifting nature of narration. Considering that the decision to store the document as memorabilia is undermined by its erasure, the aforementioned history of the document draws attention to the fragility of memory. The disfigured paper throws doubt on a unique, comprehensive account of these events and privileges a convergence of partial pasts, highlighting ‘the accidental variations of the text, which are viewed as unimportant for its meaning’.<sup>202</sup> While insisting on the diverse material realities from which immigrant items emerge, in *Out of the Shadow* these particular histories are simultaneously shaped and erased by these belongings. Textual variations, such as its damage by her grandmother’s tears, inform the nature of the document, along with its fragility, namely the impossibility of actually storing, salvaging something as it once was for the future. The letter, which cannot be condensed into reductionist readings of either storage or disposal of her father’s experiences, becomes part of a process of defacing and re-inscribing new narratives. Her grandmother’s tears ultimately constitute a ‘wordless re-writing’ of her son’s handwriting, and, accordingly, they tell of the layering of this narrative, and the inscription of histories onto the page. Although they do so through silence, the teardrops suggest other histories, they tell other narratives as a response to the former ones, and hence the document becomes these new accounts. These various trails are undergoing constant change even when documents are not defaced, destroyed, or slightly damaged; in lieu of a single temporal break between their composition and the addressee’s reading, there lies an ever-shifting document.

Pasts must not only be simultaneously traced and erased, or, for that matter, lost forever; *Out of the Shadow* draws attention to what could have been, that is, potential

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<sup>202</sup> Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure*, p. ix.

rather than actual pasts. For example, the non-event of an unwritten letter entangles with the events of the narrative that engrave Ruth's later memory of this missing piece onto the text. In other words, in the narrative, letters do not always materialize, since they are not always written, but are occasionally only envisioned by the protagonist. Before leaving for America, Ruth makes a promise to her frightened grandmother, who will remain alone in the village after the subsequent departure of Ruth's mother and her siblings. Cognizant that she will never see them again, the elderly woman recalls the day on which she lost her sight, and muses on her actual life:

"But I must not sin. For if God has taken my sight, He has given me dear little grandchildren who have been everything I wanted. Ah, if I had only been worthy enough to keep them with me!" Here she turned to me suddenly and taking my face between her cold soft hands she said entreatingly, "Rahel, promise me that you won't cry when you are starting. You hear? It is bad luck to cry when one is starting on a journey. And—I want you to write me whether there are any synagogues in America." "I promise!".<sup>203</sup>

As part and parcel of *Out the Shadow*, silence, both in the form of the requested missive, and the immediate change of subject, suggests the intertwining of memory and oblivion in the narrative. The grandmother's message is far deeper than her enjoinder: she asks Ruth to look back to her past, entreating her not to forget where she came from, and, thus, who she is. Besides the maintenance of their close relationship, the act of writing seems a mere excuse, a pretext so that her

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<sup>203</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 44.

granddaughter does not abandon her faith once she settles in America. Her apprehension probably stems from the frequent rumors in the villages of the Pale regarding the assimilationist tendencies of immigrant Jews in American metropolises.<sup>204</sup> Indeed, her foreboding might well have been justified, since Ruth does not compose this letter, or, at least, she never mentions replying, and nor does she ever attend a synagogue in America. Regardless, the narrative gets lost in preparations for the journey, warnings, advices, and anecdotes: ‘what happened after this I do not remember until the very minute of starting on the second of June. And even then, as I look back I can see nothing at first, but a thick grey mist’.<sup>205</sup> The scene rushes and moves on to the departure procedures that commence a few days later, and this broken promise becomes another reminiscence, limited to a few words.

‘Stories of incompleteness’, as they are named by Eliasova, might entail omissions, gaps, and other forms of silence, or might even be, as in this case, stories left untold, vanished from the narrative, barely mentioned.<sup>206</sup> Rather than privileging presence over absence, memory entangles retelling and silence: ‘the true significance of memory lies not just in what is visible and communicable but also, and perhaps more importantly, in its halo, in the traces of the missing now engaged in dialectic with what which can be told’.<sup>207</sup> Memory and its supposed opposites, whether oblivion or omission, construct a narrative in which multiple absences not only punctuate Ruth’s words, but also become intrinsic to the narrative. Beyond the silence itself, the passage suggests the unknown nature of Ruth’s decision, and the

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<sup>204</sup> The same fears are present among Antin’s neighbors in *From Plotzk to Boston*, p. 15. For Russian-Jewish views of America during the third immigrant wave see the aforementioned book edited by Alroey, *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear*.

<sup>205</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>206</sup> Vera Eliasova, ‘Constructing Continuities: Narratives of Migration by Iva Pekarkova and Dubravka Ugresic’, in *Between History and Personal Narrative East European Women's Stories of Migration in the New Millennium*, ed. by Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru, Madalina Nicolaescu, and Helen Smith (Zurich and Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014), p. 229 (pp. 229-248).

<sup>207</sup> Paolo Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation, and Writing* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008), p. 53.

consequences of this scene, including the rapid change of topic, are a further result of her inaction. The necessity to forget the past, as required by present need to assimilate, as well as economic precariousness, which also limits the amount of time devoted to writing, pave the way to this silence. The precarious position of the text informs the centrality of these absences in relation to memory; or, in other words, their resonance resides in their inability to materialize as a narrative. In lieu of deciphering or reconciling the silences, a reading of *Out of the Shadow* can only interrogate them, relate them to each other and the text, and analyze their imbrications with the recollection of the past. If letters signal contradictions, inconsistencies, oblivions and gaps, this suggests that the significance of memory in *Out of the Shadow* lies in its frequent erasures and silences.

Whereas *Out of the Shadow* continues to gaze at the American future, momentary glimpses of the past continue to flash after Ruth's arrival in the New York ghetto. Like Mary Antin, Ruth is in a steadfast quest for her particular Promised Land, chiefly embodied in an escape from poverty, together with the acquisition of literary and English proficiency. More ambivalent than Antin towards the offerings of America, and more uncertain as to whether these promises will actually materialize, Ruth nonetheless sporadically sings the virtues of her adopted homeland. Thanks to the benevolence of Miss Farly, her benefactress, Ruth manages to revel in the benefits of American life by sojourning on a farm in the New England countryside in the company of Gentiles. During this bucolic vacation, a letter from the ghetto arrives to remind her both of her non-Christian origins and the unstable, selective nature of her narrative about the past:

And indoors in the evening there were the open fires, the harmonica music, the dances, the songs. And when the

children were gone to bed the pleasant chat with Miss Farly in the pleasant warmth of the room scented with the odour of sweet fern drying on the hearth.

Then a chilly day came. The last batch of the children were with us. Miss Farly began to pack away little bundles for the winter and from home a letter came asking me whether I knew that the Day of Atonement was approaching. Yes, I knew.<sup>208</sup>

In its painful endeavor to draw Ruth to look back to a shared past, her family's plea draws attention to the continuous, broken process of rewriting and reimagining their past. Personal correspondence might be imbued with memories of a collective heritage, since 'letters often explicitly contain memory of the shared past in one form or another'.<sup>209</sup> Yom Kippur promises a new beginning: it takes place during the *Yamim Noraim*, the ten days of Awe, a holiday of repentance, introspection and atonement, which coincides with the start of the Jewish New Year. At the end of this day, God closes and seals the Book of Life (*Sefer HaChaim*), in which he inscribes the names of those who will live in the upcoming year. The holiday encapsulates a cyclical, highly ritualistic view of time that merges past, present, and future by demanding, at least, an annual return to the religious community. Yet its future-looking orientation, its promise of a fresh start after casting our sins away, being forgiven, and absolving others of their wrongdoings, are overshadowed in Cohen's narrative by the circumstances in which the scene takes place. Homecoming, in Ruth's case, will not be a return; as she laments, home was stranger than ever: 'it was

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<sup>208</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 268.

<sup>209</sup> Gerber, 'Moving Backward and Moving on', p. 43.

hard to get used to the old life again when I came home'.<sup>210</sup> Indeed, she opts for a different, American-like Arcadian cycle of visits: 'and when I went home I knew that the next summer I would come again'.<sup>211</sup> Regardless of the vexing interruption of her pastoral idyll, she undermines the relevance of traditional continuity between different temporalities and geographies. Her commitment to the American present relegates her parents' aide-memoire to a former era, or, rather, an unusable past for the American protagonist.

If letters do not amount to the destruction or obliteration of the past, neither, for that matter, do they salvage it from cultural, temporal and geographical gulfs. Owing to their seeming endurance and inability to retrieve the past, they resemble cinders, which Kenneth Rufo defines as follows: 'they are fragile remnants of something that was, but they are not, by any means, re-presentations of what was lost in the fire'.<sup>212</sup> As Rufo continues: 'if they signify anything, it is the existence of the fire itself, of consumption. And yet they are a fragile record, easily lost, scattered or interned'.<sup>213</sup> Yet, one might well wonder, how do letters function as a record in *Out of the Shadow*? Or, perhaps more accurately, what do we actually mean by a record in this case? By definition, letters tell stories of absences, including lost places, missing persons, and former times, as in Ruth's case, where they suggest personal separation, and the occasional illusion of bridging this distance. The letters form a fragile compendium of memories, easily mislaid and destroyed, emerging as scattered remnants from the past; they are records in themselves and, as a result, the narrative constitutes records of records. They account for the imperious necessity to narrate the

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<sup>210</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 273.

<sup>211</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 270.

<sup>212</sup> Kenneth Rufo, 'Shades of Derrida: Materiality as the Mediation of Difference', in *Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics*, ed. by John Louis Lucaites and Barbara A. Biesecker (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 243 (pp. 229-252).

<sup>213</sup> Rufo, 'Shades of Derrida: Materiality as the Mediation of Difference', p. 243.



past, and, concomitantly, the fact that records are always built on losses, or, rather, the impressions of these losses. Ultimately, the arrival of Yom Kippur, as well as their recollection in the writing of the text, can only manifest the malleable absences of former events in the American present. These narratives of intimate destitution, from a distant father to a lost grandmother, suggest both the singularity of every letter, and the echoes of these broken pieces in these fragile trails.

These three letters, including the unwritten missive, come together as records of Ruth's life story, which are fraught with distance and the promise of imagined re-encounters. Alongside the fourth letter, composed in the Pale, they are the pieces of a narrative that connect through divergent absences, both material and intangible. After roughly a couple of years in the New York ghetto, a tragic episode simultaneously forces Ruth's family to confront memories from the Russian Pale and severs one of her main bonds to their past. One day, after her mother's recovery from her illness, Ruth comes home to a dreadful scene: her whole family is devastated after discovering grandmother's unexpected demise in the Pale. As usual, the narrative hastens to turn letters into memories, leaving the past behind; thereby indicating that the occurrences of the Old World bear little significance in their American lives. However, no other section of *Out of the Shadow* devotes more ink to a letter than the passage that recounts the arrival of the missive that notifies the family of her grandmother's death:

ONE night about this time when I came into the house I was shocked at what I saw. Father was sitting on a low box in the middle of the room. He was in his stocking feet, his elbows resting on his knees, his head bent between his hands. Sister stood near the lamp in the bracket, reading a letter and crying

bitterly. My thought was of grandmother at once. I went over to sister and looked over her shoulder. After a lengthy and ceremonious greeting, it read:

"Your mother is dead. But you should not grieve. You should be glad. For she suffered much in these two years." It was an old woman that wrote the letter and what she told of grandmother's suffering is too horrible to repeat. The letter closed with: "I only hope and pray that he who breaks every home, he to whom no bond is sacred, the Czar of Russia, may know at least for one year in his life the sorrow and loneliness she has known."<sup>214</sup>

This tragic message returns to the broken pledge of the protagonist: stories are still left untold, but rather than being muted, they echo in other narratives and other silences.<sup>215</sup> The written words of this unidentified woman function as an informal obituary, namely the only material record of her grandmother's final years and death. Like letters, obituaries are always connected with processes of remembrance, since 'the obituary offers the rare accolade of public recognition, the first step towards posthumous memory'.<sup>216</sup> As Bridget Fowler continues, 'the death of those we know crystallizes the individual memory-images of their presence, structured by a group

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<sup>214</sup> Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, p. 192.

<sup>215</sup> For scholarship specific to obituaries and memory: Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (London, England: Routledge, 2007), Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), Peter M. Nardi, 'AIDS and Obituaries: The Perpetuation of Stigma in the Press', in *Culture and AIDS*, ed. by Douglas A. Feldman (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2000), Kenneth M. Hamilton, 'Chapter 2: A Symbol of America: Obituaries and Other Published Memorials', in Hamilton, *Booker T. Washington in American Memory* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017) (pp. 38-68), and Sonja E. Klocke, 'The Triumph of the Obituary: Constructing Christa Wolf for the Berlin Republic', *German Studies Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (May, 2014), pp. 317-336.

<sup>216</sup> Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory*, p. 8.

framework'.<sup>217</sup> Customarily, obituaries serve to establish memories: they give an account, however brief, of a person's life, sometimes name their progenitors, and, if known, state their cause of death. In other words, obituaries seem to merely account for the past, reinstating an authentic, official and permanent record, which often praises the deceased and expands on their merits. Moreover, and, perhaps more obviously, they aim to establish a particular version of the past that will be permanently engraved for future generations. Likewise, the letter regarding Ruth's grandmother's death confirms the pastness of the past, its distance, even its remoteness from their current life in the American tenements. The words of this previous neighbor bear witness to her grandmother's former existence as a material testimony of her life, however briefly evoked, and death. Therefore, despite the absent eulogy, the acting necrology emerges as the only memento of the elderly lady that straddles the interval between evoking and concluding her life.

Ultimately, the letters and the text itself illustrate not only the centrality of remembrance as the impossibility to materialize the past, but also the inability of writing to account for an unknown past. Similarly, the death of the protagonist's grandmother also takes a more metaphorical turn: her disappearance symbolizes the dissolution of a major nexus of the village. In other words, her passing shatters potentially static views of the family's former homes, and intertwines their personal memories of the deceased with the narrative of the penwoman. Beyond this reading of this tragic scene, this last missive, like the preceding ones, does not stand alone as containing separate tidings, and functions, instead, as a story subordinated to the main narrative. Ruth interrupts the scene and forces them to reread the letter aloud, and, in consequence, the same document tells different stories of its subject's life and death.

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<sup>217</sup> Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory*, p. 28.

The personal document never crystalizes the grandmother's former life, or even who she might have been, owing to how this particular context is dominated by oblivion and momentary memories. In being reread and written as an intrinsic part of the text, the acting obituary continues to be rewritten and reinterpreted, becoming a different version from the original missive. Therefore, the letter marks the culmination of the preceding correspondence as fraught remnants of the past, symbolizing the certainty of death and the impossibility of fixing this death through words.

Through the rendition of former events, and, sometimes, their omission, Cohen's fictional account exemplifies the significance of correspondence in Ruth's narrative of the past. As previously explained, while Plate argues for the ability of women's writing to materialize the absences, the silences that pervade women's lives, one of the objectives of this section was to question this possibility.<sup>218</sup> Absences multiply throughout the text, including Ruth's recurrent sojourns away from her home, her family's departure from the Russian Pale, and her lack of response to her family's missive.<sup>219</sup> The schematic language of the letters, and the summaries of them provided by the narrator, resonate with the interrupted chapters, the periodic jumps in time and the scant recollections of her village in her American years. The four letters, including the unwritten letter from Ruth to her grandmother, never become flashbacks, instances of the frozen past that survive into the present. Their disclosed absences, such as that of the dead grandmother only become stories, accounts of the past, to the extent that they relate to missing and recurring absences in *Out of the Shadow*. These stories within stories scattered throughout Cohen's autobiography connect with each other in their abruptness that merges with the fragmented structure of the text. *Out of the Shadow* echoes the absences that cannot be, their unknown

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<sup>218</sup> Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting*, p. 129.

<sup>219</sup> For Ruth's visits to White Birch Farm, see Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, pp. 261-270 and p. 305.

location, and, like these letters, assembles multiple pasts that continue to change, bound by historical circumstances.

Like the rest of this chapter, this section has shed light upon the vicissitudes of memory, particularly the process of remembering of the personal past, along with writing as the translation of this past into words and gaps. The necessity to respond and reinterpret these temporal gaps continues throughout the narrative, including in the abrupt ending of *Out of the Shadow* mentioned in the introduction. According to Hapke, the intense focus upon Ruth's brother, who, unlike her, has obtained an education, and the concomitant effacement of herself in the final pages of *Out of the Shadow* signal 'an erasure of her own longings that implicitly registers suppressed rebellion at her disappearance from her autobiography'.<sup>220</sup> The narrative is always informed by this context that privileges economic prosperity over dwelling on the past, as well as the difficulties for a woman narrator of coming to terms with the misogyny of her former culture. Furthermore, the nature of the letters, exemplified in her grandmother's tears, and even in the diverse acts of penning them, already intimates the constraints imposed by its intrinsic materiality. In lieu of merely glancing back at her past in the village, Ruth's rewriting of these events in her autobiography reinstates the linearity of the narrative, the inexorable passage of time and the unknown nature of what was left behind. Nuanced readings of the selected text, as undertaken in this section, suggest these layered narratives of the past, and themselves become part of these ongoing rewritings and failures to rewrite the past.

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<sup>220</sup> Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction*, p. 148.

### 2.3. Antin's *From Plotzk to Boston* as a Postcard from the Past in Antin's *The Promised Land*

This section examines the correspondence present in chapter XV of Antin's *The Promised Land*, which, as mentioned above, comprises ten extracts from her early booklet, *From Plotzk to Boston*.<sup>221</sup> In her account of her troublesome emigration from Polotzk to the Boston slums, the citations from Antin's lengthy letter serves to illustrate the multiple versions of the past extant in *The Promised Land*. Furthermore, the chapter as a whole serves to demonstrate the existence of thematic and formal erasures that inform her later account of the same events. This section starts by relating correspondence to the Exodus framework: letters aid in reinforcing the transformation of Antin from rags to riches, and, thus, her journey from the Egyptian Pale to her Promised Land. Moreover, the blueprint from this biblical narrative contributes to the overall structure of the text by providing a sense of cohesion between different times and places. Besides questioning the successes of her assimilation, the myth of the Exodus also undermines this stability of the text by partaking in its process of continuous rewriting. The text, particularly by means of its intertextual elements, encompasses multiple narratives that result from the continuous erasure of preceding narratives. The reproduction of these ten brief passages from her early booklet in *The Promised Land* illuminates the origins, perambulations and shifts of accounts that retell the same events in different ways.

This section draws on Hubbell's analysis of rewriting and memory in postcolonial French literature to delve into the intricacies of rewriting, erasure and

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<sup>221</sup> For Antin's explanation regarding the misspelling of her hometown in *From Plotzk to Boston* (instead of Polotzk) please see Antin, 'History of this Manuscript', in Sunny Yudkoff, 'Translation of Mary Antin's Yiddish Letter (Precursor to *From Plotzk to Boston*)', *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, Penn State University Press, Vol. 32, Number 1 (2013), pp. 33-66.

temporality. According to Hubbell, rewriting validates a particular version of the past: ‘to fix or stabilize the past, the author continually rewrites a new version, a paper homeland that attempts to fill the void felt in the present’.<sup>222</sup> In fact, letters are not only partial accounts of the past, but also part of a fragmented body: ‘each letter collection is, therefore, a part of a universe of documents, the size and nature of which can never really be known’.<sup>223</sup> In *The Promised Land*’s endeavors to further stabilize this past through Antin’s former correspondence, the narrative reproduces the erasures left by the ever-changing present.<sup>224</sup> After the overview of the Exodus template, this section moves on to close readings of passages from the main text, together with several extracts from her early letter in view of this theoretical framework. In order to achieve this, the following pages analyze scenes from different moments, from the instant in which Antin penned the manuscript to her present in the America of the 1910s. From thematic aspects, such as her meticulous descriptions of the journey, to formal concerns, for instance, intertextual patterns, the rewriting of the past intertwine with its absences. The diverse occasions exemplify the multiple ways in which temporality, including its historical and material constraints, impose the rewriting of the past.

The renditions of Antin’s birth land, the transatlantic passage and her destination conflate Jewish mythology with a Christianized version of the Exodus narrative rewritten in Puritan literature. Antin establishes a binary between the

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<sup>222</sup> Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria*, p. 75.

<sup>223</sup> Gerber, ‘Epistolary Masquerades’, in *Letters across Borders*, p. 142.

<sup>224</sup> Academic work on Antin’s adaptation of her texts to her readership includes: Keren McGinity, ‘The Real Mary Antin: Woman on a Mission in the Promised Land’, *American Jewish History*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (September, 1998), pp. 285-307, Maria Lauret, ‘Chapter 3: *The Promised Land, Lost in Translation: Mary Antin’s Eva Hoffman’s Wanderwords*’ (pp. 67-95), in Lauret, *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), Hana Wirth-Nesher, ‘Chapter 3: “I learned at least to think in English without an accent”: Linguistic Passing: Mary Antin’, in Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English* (pp 52-76), Mary V. Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *How We Found America: Reading Gender Through East-European Immigrant Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

Russian Pale and America, equating them with Egypt and the Promised Land, respectively, and equating herself with an Israelite, and, according to some, ‘an heir of Moses’, or even Moses himself.<sup>225</sup> Her account invokes a modern odyssey from financial and cultural deprivation to socioeconomic security, from misogyny to freedom, and from dictatorship to democracy.<sup>226</sup> Antin constantly equates Russia with Egypt in both texts, even proclaiming that ‘Russia was another Egypt’ when she describes her neighbors’ hostility in Polotzk.<sup>227</sup> Chapter XIX of *The Promised Land* reiterates this view of the Pale as an oppressive site in deep contrast with the discovered land of promise:

That I who was born in the prison of the Pale should roam at will in the land of freedom was a marvel that it did me good to realize. That I who was brought up to my teens almost without a book should be set down in the midst of all the books that ever were written was a miracle as great as any on record. That an outcast should become a privileged citizen, that a beggar should dwell in a palace—this was a romance more thrilling than poet ever sung. Surely I was rocked in an enchanted cradle.<sup>228</sup>

*The Promised Land* presents an ambiguous, less negative view of the past that overshadows this straightforward transition between places and the supposedly monolithic, static nature of her former home. In fact, *The Promised Land* offers

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<sup>225</sup> Sheffer, ‘Recollecting, Repeating, and Walking Through’, p. 153, and Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, p. 63, respectively.

<sup>226</sup> The Exodus template shaping *The Promised Land* also relates to the Acheinu prayer that asks for redemption for the Israelites, ‘from mourning to celebration, from darkness to great light, and from subjection to redemption’. See Joseph Tabory, *JPS Commentary of the Haggadah: Historical Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), p. 101.

<sup>227</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 9.

<sup>228</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 267.



occasional glimpses of hope regarding Antin's childhood in the Pale: 'the year, in our pious house, was an endless song in many cantos of joy, lamentation, aspiration, and rhapsody'.<sup>229</sup> The pages preceding the extracts echo these views in her neighbors poignant messages upon her departure, "'Happy journey!' 'God help you!' 'Good-bye! Good-bye!'", supporting this view of the past as not altogether negative.<sup>230</sup> Some critics have already challenged this purportedly altogether disheartening rendition of the past, and have provided more nuanced readings of Antin's formative years in her hometown. For instance, noting Antin's fond depiction of her former home, Jana Pohl argues that 'the country of origin emerges as more complex than a mere antithesis to America'.<sup>231</sup> Similarly, Steven J. Rubin comments that 'the past is not seen as deficient—or at least not entirely so—but as an object of both love and scorn, of nostalgia as well as irony'.<sup>232</sup> However, Antin's sporadic nostalgia in these hopeful scenes, which undermine scholarship that reduces the representation of her past to a succession of ordeals, does not evince a counter-narrative of these times as her glory days. *The Promised Land* privileges the varied cultural benefits of her American life and glosses over financial difficulties that reaffirm a more multifaceted vision of the past. The flashing memories of momentary bliss do not shatter the adaptation of this biblical model by which Antin flees from Russian oppression into her personal promised land. Rather, within this modernized biblical template there are glimpses of a more nuanced versions of the past that are rarely followed throughout *The Promised Land*.

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<sup>229</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 61.

<sup>230</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 134. For a similarly emotional farewell from her neighbors in Polotzk in *From Plotzk to Boston*, see Antin, *From Plotzk to Boston* (Boston: W.B. Clarke, 1899), p. 3.

<sup>231</sup> Jana Pohl, *Looking Forward, Looking Back: Images of Eastern European Jewish Migration to America in Contemporary American Children's Literature* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), p. 198.

<sup>232</sup> Steven J. Rubin, 'Style and Meaning in Mary Antin's "The Promised Land": A Reevaluation' (*Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) No. 5, *The Varieties of Jewish Experience* (1986), p. 41 (pp. 35-43)).

While the narrative upholds the Puritan ideal of America as the Promised Land, rewriting and erasures mark its structure, as reflected in the attempts to fix the immediate past through a biblical past. In their rewriting of the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage and their expedition to Canaan, Puritan narratives render their own version of their past: ‘Puritan rhetoric rehearsed this biblical story of the journey from slavery to freedom in the Old Testament as the prefiguring of their journey from the Old World to the New’.<sup>233</sup> The critic Michael P. Kramer has examined the parallelisms between these Puritan narratives and *The Promised Land*: ‘by using the conversion narrative as a model for immigrant autobiography, by conflating her coming to America with spiritual regeneration, Antin joins an American literary tradition that began with the Puritans’.<sup>234</sup> Beyond, or, rather, within, this Puritan blueprint that structures Antin’s narrative, there lies the amalgam of textual materials that compose her current text. In renovating this biblical tale in the early-twentieth century, Antin departs from this late-sixteenth century model by drawing on her current material resources. Whereas *The Promised Land* joins this Puritan tradition, the insertion of her former letter into her autobiography questions the fixity presupposed by these readings. As a consequence, her conversion narrative, exemplified in the preceding citations, begs further analysis beyond the ambiguities in the representations of both Old and New Worlds.

The reproduction of ten brief passages from the letter in *The Promised Land* illuminates the origins, perambulations and shifts of accounts that retell the same events in different ways. Thus, Hubbell’s words on memory and narrative resonate with Antin’s writings: ‘the repeated and layered images become solidified over time, and this fixed or religious version of the past becomes more concerned with

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<sup>233</sup> Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, p. 63.

<sup>234</sup> Michael P. Kramer, ‘Assimilation in *The Promised Land*: Mary Antin and the Jewish Origins of the American Self’, *Prooftexts*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (May, 1998), p. 137 (pp. 121-48).

permanence than accuracy'.<sup>235</sup> Antin turns to the Exodus paradigm to frame and solidify a particular version of the past in which she claims to speak for natives and immigrants alike in early twentieth-century America.<sup>236</sup> She can quote from her early booklet for the sake of accuracy: memory is fragile, but script seems permanent; hence, the process of inserting brief extracts—of one, two or three paragraphs—of *From Plotzk to Boston* in chapter XV of *The Promised Land* starts with the following preface:

Memory may take a rest while I copy from a contemporaneous document the story of the great voyage. In accordance with my promise to my uncle, I wrote, during my first months in America, a detailed account of our adventures between Polotzk and Boston. Ink was cheap, and the epistle, in Yiddish, occupied me for many hot summer hours.<sup>237</sup>

Whereas Antin's words imply the permanence and accuracy of written documents, they do so through the trivialization of the circuitous, multiple peregrinations of these excisions. Irrespective of her endeavor to reproduce the past through these quotations, citation does not amount to the transference of a precursory text into a new surface. Writing on Walter Benjamin's Kraus essay, Giorgio Agamben claims that citation 'appears as an eminently destructive procedure whose task is "not to shelter, but to purify, to rip out of context, to destroy"'.<sup>238</sup> In other words, citation is, by definition, an act of erasure which presupposes, at least in this case, the intertwined rewriting of the

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<sup>235</sup> Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria*, p. 75.

<sup>236</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 2.

<sup>237</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 134.

<sup>238</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*; ed. and trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 152. Agamben refers to Walter Benjamin's theory of citation in which Benjamin claims, regarding Karl Kraus, that 'only when despairing did he discover in citation the power not to preserve but to purify, to tear from context, to destroy'. For the reference to Benjamin, see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931-1934, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 455.

past and the disposal of former memories as a result of a new historical context. This definition of citation already points to a process of selecting the past, choosing what to remember, and, concomitantly, what to erase in the current narrative to construct a different account of Antin's voyage to America. Rather than the displacement of textual fragments onto a present document, these ten quotations are part of an elaborate process of rewriting both the preceding and the contemporary texts. Determined by its new present, the copy underscores the passage of time and the malleability of memory across different materials to suit an American readership. Furthermore, beyond the excision and translation of a former text, this extract foregrounds a more entangled textual metamorphosis within this layered process of rewriting. Although Antin manages to make a copy of her letter, as the passage continues to recount, the original document was accidentally burned by kerosene. Before quoting from the letter to chart her journey from her village to America, Antin describes this tragic incident, as well as the history of the translation of the missive:

It was a great disaster, therefore, to have a lamp upset on my writing-table, when I was near the end, soaking the thick pile of letter sheets in kerosene. I was obliged to make a fair copy for my uncle, and my father kept the oily, smelly original. After a couple of years' teasing, he induced me to translate the letter into English, for the benefit of a friend who did not know Yiddish; for the benefit of the present narrative, which was not thought of thirteen years ago. I can hardly refrain from moralizing as I turn to the leaves of my childish

manuscript, grateful at last for the calamity of the overturned lamp.<sup>239</sup>

In lieu of a dichotomy between *From Plotzk to Boston* and *The Promised Land*, the history of the document posits a layering of narratives about Antin's former years. To recapitulate the narrative of her passage across the Atlantic, first, soon after her arrival in Boston, Antin writes a letter in Yiddish to her uncle; the letter is disfigured by kerosene, but a duplicate survives. She later translates the letter into English; however, *The Promised Land* does not specify whether the source text is the original or the copy, and whether any modifications occurred during this undertaking.<sup>240</sup> Therefore, the narrator omits several details elucidated by academic research: the citations from her letter present in chapter XV in fact differ from the original text. Furthermore, *From Plotzk to Boston* is not only a literal translation of this meticulous copy from the damaged original, since Antin also previously edited this document before publication.<sup>241</sup> Finally, roughly a decade after the publication of *From Plotzk to Boston*, she borrows ten extracts from this initial memoir in *The Promised Land*.<sup>242</sup> The history behind the translated letter foreshadows the material perambulations of the extracts, including literal destructions that become intrinsic to this process of rewriting. In lieu of the retrieval of the former document, its material history of destruction, edition and translation informs the later printed texts with its lacunae.

<sup>239</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 61.

<sup>240</sup> In 'History of this Manuscript' Antin clarifies that the English translation was based on the stained original Yiddish document. See Antin, 'History of this Manuscript', in Yudkoff, 'Translation of Mary Antin's Yiddish Letter', p. 68.

<sup>241</sup> For a detailed history of this edition process of *From Plotzk to Boston*, see Sunny Yudkoff, 'The Adolescent Self-Fashioning of Mary Antin', pp. 4-35. For a transcription of the original Yiddish letter, see Yudkoff, 'Transcription of Mary Antin's Yiddish Letter' (Precursor to *From Plotzk to Boston*) (*Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), Vol. 32, No. 1 (2013), pp. 67-98. For the original Yiddish letter, see Yudkoff, 'Translation of Mary Antin's Yiddish Letter (Precursor to *From Plotzk to Boston*)' (*Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), Vol. 32, No. 1 (2013), pp. 36-66.

<sup>242</sup> There are significant differences regarding punctuation between all the citations in *The Promised Land* (pp. 135-142) and the original passages in *From Plotzk to Boston*. Page 136 of *The Promised Land* also rewrites 'Keebart' (*FPtB*, p. 10) as 'Kibart', and page 139 of *The Promised Land* replaces the original 'germs' (*FPtB*, p. 24) with 'sickness'.

Literal and figurative disruptions, such as the damaged manuscript and its subsequent history, contrast with the seeming immediacy of the lost original in Antin's narration in *The Promised Land*. These material limitations, which echo the limitations of memory that she struggles to avoid in the present, cause the distance between the original document and the quotations in chapter XV.

From damaged documents to forgotten memories, thematic and formal aspects coalesce in their continuous endeavors to account for the past and the concomitant persistence of multiple absences in the narrative. According to Liedeke Plate, the intertwinement of several opposites informs rewriting: 'rewriting is marked by a dynamics of storing and retrieving, inscribing and obliterating, remembering and forgetting'.<sup>243</sup> Owing to the history of *The Promised Land*, where keeping the letter results in a fragmented connection with the past, Antin's first manuscript undermines binaries between storage and destruction. If, as her claim regarding the accuracy of the letter illustrates, memory requires the aid of written accounts, these documents might also fail us, become distorted or disappear anytime. In her case, the preservation in the original becomes an impossible act predicated upon successive incidents that distance the extracts from the first document. In fact, despite Antin's constant emphasis upon its accuracy, the ruination of the letter to her uncle might already suggest the potential destruction of the latter texts by proxy. In other words, Antin's account emerges from these multiple, crossing dynamics between texts which blur the binaries between antithetical processes. As the following pages demonstrate, when it comes to literature, notions such as storing, inscribing and remembering contain in themselves their very opposites. Since writing maps their intertwinements

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<sup>243</sup> Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting*, p. 3.

onto the page, the absences implied in this narration of the personal past suggest a dynamic process that limits memory.

In *The Promised Land*, the content of Antin's letter illustrates the dynamics of memory and writing through her former narrative, as well as its absences. Specific aspects of the content of these quotations in *The Promised Land*, such as the prolific descriptions of peoples, objects and places, might shed light upon this point more clearly. In a scene following her peregrination to Boston, Antin informs her uncle of the luggage she encounters in a baggage room in Hamburg. As before, prior to her description of the events, Antin reiterates the importance of memory: 'the letter to my uncle faithfully describes every stage of our bustling process. Here is a sample scene of many that I recorded'.<sup>244</sup>

There was a terrible confusion in the baggage-room where we were directed to go. Boxes, baskets, bags, valises, and great, shapeless things belonging to no particular class, were thrown about by the porters and other men, who sorted them and put tickets on all but those containing provisions, while others were opened and examined in haste. At last our turn came, and our things, along with those of all other American-bound travellers, were taken away to be steamed and smoked and other such processes gone through. We were told to wait till notice should be given us of something else to be done.<sup>245</sup>

In *The Promised Land*, luggage problematizes its seeming role of memory capsule that bridges the abyss between past and present, the Russian Pale and America.

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<sup>244</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 136.

<sup>245</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, pp. 136-137.

Objects from lost homes recurrently bear an important relationship to memory: ‘the souvenir, as the etymology of the word suggests, constitutes a trace—a memory or a reminder (*mémoire*)—of an authentic experience that must be left behind’.<sup>246</sup> At first glance, this contention seems appropriate to Antin’s context, considering that these articles are the only belongings they carried, while the others were left behind or sold in their one-way journey to America. Luggage frequently functions as a mobile *lieu de mémoire*, as it is often the only means for transferring items across places, and thus collecting memories, in this case salvaged not out of desire, but out of necessity. In the fashion of correspondence, these items promise to retrieve vestiges of the past from the devastation of the journey and to enable their survival into the present and the future. Nonetheless, the aforementioned passage questions this common reading of souvenirs as remnants of the past able to retrace particular experiences related to their histories. The erasure of the status of the characters and the abusive practices of the gendarmes that Jolie A. Sheffer notes in this passing episode also echo in this process of accounting for the past through their luggage and its peripatetic deviations.<sup>247</sup> Svetlana Boym casts light upon the entangled relationship between exilic belongings and the intricate narratives that their presences might elicit:

There are many nostalgic objects on the immigrant bookshelves, yet the narrative they tell on the whole is not the predictable tale of nostalgia. Diasporic souvenirs do not reconstruct the narrative of one’s roots but rather tell the story of exile.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 61.

<sup>247</sup> Sheffer, ‘Recollecting, Repeating, and Walking Through’, p. 151.

<sup>248</sup> Boym, ‘On Diasporic Intimacy’, p. 523.



The plethora of precarious possessions disrupts the endeavors of the narrator to bridge her childhood in the Russian Pale and her departure from her village to America. The souvenirs tell a story of destitution and loss, in which the past continues to alter, and the suitcases do not function as repositories of memories, transporting them into the present. Instead, as noted by the narrator, the suitcases undergo changes several times throughout the journey, particularly their sorting, labeling, displacement, steaming and smoking. Considering the potential misplacement of her family's possessions owing to the carelessness of the gendarmes, in Antin's fearful words also lingers the possibility of their permanent loss amidst other families' possessions. Furthermore, the likelihood of the stories attached to these belongings falling into oblivion, alongside those which occurred in this instance of the journey, also hovers over the fleeting passage. Therefore, the meaning attached to these belongings continues to change, so that the stories merge and confuse in this amalgam of packets, valises and other effects, which homogenizes the narratives, and loses their particularity. The organizing labors of the German officers culminate in a single narrative of rupture with the past that obliterates the multiple, variegated stories that lie behind these fragile valuables. Acting as a testimony to this loss, Antin's family's belongings manifest the continuously evolving nature of her rendition of her pre-American past that already predates her arrival in Boston. The chaotic scene shatters the illusion of permanence: the past is no longer retrievable, and becomes dated through the very items that should furnish a sense of continuity that could compensate for the vulnerability of personal memory.

The process of writing, with its concomitant selection of the precarious conditions of Antin's journey, contributes to this fragmentary view of her past. Enumeration, such as Antin's reference to the diverse items of luggage, frequently

forces its writer to recall the listed objects: catalogues demand memory, and, after their completion, they serve as reminders of the inventoried items. Besides its role as a keeper of past remnants, listings might also aid in controlling reality, and assist individuals to stay in touch with present events.<sup>249</sup> In addition, a record of objects might intimate beyond itself, by reason of its ability to conjure up unmentioned elements by association, such as disappeared, discarded, and destroyed objects, and even missing persons. Antin's passing reference to the 'boxes, baskets, bags, valises, and great, shapeless things belonging to no particular class' evinces the existence of preceding and subsequent disruptions that lead to the existence of these possessions. The selection of the luggage already predates the subsequent disturbances and the difficulties of remembering through materials that remain constantly malleable and erasable. In telling stories about these absences, the missing pieces of her journey and her narrative remember the narrative of exilic losses to which Boym refers. As a result of the materiality of the text, namely its inherently physical nature, this scene of the profusion of 'souvenirs' actually demonstrates the limitations of Antin's written records. In lieu of inscribing or retrieving the past from the passage of time and physical distance, writing, through recounting the transportation of valuables required for their lives, testifies to the material loss of the past.

The narrative of Antin's Exodus, while signifying her family's escape from their particular Egypt, reveals the problematic nature of establishing a fixed image of the past, however partial it may be. The Exodus functions as a broken blueprint for *The Promised Land*; broken owing to the stories left untold, the gaps in the narrative that pervade her account of exile. Through both formal and thematic aspects, the extracts from the letter evince the ongoing rewritings of the past as a result of material

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<sup>249</sup> Monica B. Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 40.

and temporal circumstances. A different scene, in which Antin voices her despair owing to the uncertainty about her departure to America, sheds light upon the centrality of these conditions underpinning the text. Prior to the aforementioned scene in the Hamburg office, another passage captures the dereliction that Antin experiences when she finds herself with her family still in Versbolovo, the final station in Russia. After examinations by medics and gendarmes, the passengers are informed that they must upgrade their third-class steamer tickets to second-class passages, which would require two hundred roubles beyond their available financial resources. The narrator of *The Promised Land* concludes her current account of these events with a note of despair: ‘our passport was taken from us, and we were to be turned back on our journey’.<sup>250</sup> Accordingly, the subsequent extract from her former correspondence on this incident chronicles the ongoing erasure of memory at multiple levels:

My letter describes the situation:—

We were homeless, houseless, and friendless in a strange place. We had hardly money enough to last us through the voyage for which we had hoped and waited for three long years. We had suffered much that the reunion we longed for might come about; we had prepared ourselves to suffer more in order to bring it about, and had parted with those we loved, with places that were dear to us in spite of what we passed through in them, never again to see them, as we were convinced—all for the same dear end. With strong hopes

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<sup>250</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 135.

and high spirits that hid the sad parting, we had started  
on our long journey.<sup>251</sup>

The passage not only struggles to capture the immeasurability of Antin's suffering and sorrow, but also reveals the absences and rewritings that lie beneath this contemporary version of this biblical myth. Upon examination of the frequent inconsistencies of Antin's recollections, Sheffer states that 'the presiding metaphor that structures Antin's autobiographical project is that of fragile (re)construction'.<sup>252</sup> Whereas the lexical and syntactic parallelisms work to create and stress the sense of textual coherence and historical particularity, the profusion of the account contradicts these devices. The repetition and emphasis upon detail reveal the fragile nature of this concealment through which her six-week voyage turns into a fragmented narrative of Antin's early letter. This seeming profusion stands at odds with the partial, fragmentary nature of the account marked by the rhythm of the journey and her constant yearning to capture everything that fleets before her eyes. The swiftness of the circumstances during her journey, together with the belated rewritings, both the letter and her autobiography, thwart her attempts to record 'every stage of our bustling process'.<sup>253</sup> The endeavor to capture the details, minutiae and anecdotes of the journey results in multiple, fleeting images that denote the passage of time in a few words. Therefore, this profusion of disparate concerns, from poverty to loneliness, coexists with the time constraints that contribute to the multiple layers of rewriting. Writing not only forces Antin's narrative to render particular versions of the past, but also occasions its ongoing dissolution owing to this tension between

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<sup>251</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 135.

<sup>252</sup> Sheffer, 'Recollecting, Repeating, and Walking Through', p. 144. The dahlias scene, in which Antin misremembers the poppies of her grandfather's garden as dahlias, sheds further light upon this point. Aware of her deception, Antin insists that they are, in fact, dahlias, in order to sustain her current image of the past. See Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 66.

<sup>253</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 136.

temporality and writing. The Exodus holds together a narrative as a blueprint that requires parallelisms that, besides structuring the narrative, suggest the persistent failure to convey the past.

From her present, Antin's former status as 'homeless, houseless, and friendless' suggests a foreign world of shifting and absent rewritings of her foreign shackles. The efforts to capture the past lay bare the intrinsic futility of this enterprise, or, in other words, 'the conscious and deliberate attempt to preserve the past means that we are irretrievably distanced from it'.<sup>254</sup> As Greene continues, 'for the "distance" from the past that prompts the dutiful creation of mnemonic "sites" also suggests the futility of our attempts to truly remember, to seize and capture the past'.<sup>255</sup> The aforementioned profusion proves an illusion and temporal distance, along with her remoteness from her hometown, underscores different pasts in this textual site of memory and oblivion. The intrinsic nature of the extract, namely the fact that it is an excerpt from a former text, exemplifies, perhaps tangentially, the nature of this distance in *The Promised Land*. Because citations are acts of excision, the ten extracts from Antin's letter always relate to the remaining pages from this document unquoted in her autobiography. The texts that predate and follow these citations mirror the other silences, namely the events left untold in both accounts that cannot be transferred onto their pages. In her account of her Exodus to America, Antin detaches herself from her preceding text not only through her mastery of literary English, but also through the further excisions upon her former account inflicted by *The Promised Land*. The constant cuttings of these passages from her letter to her uncle in Russia embed in the narrative mnemonic sites that gesture towards oblivion.

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<sup>254</sup> Naomi Greene, *Landscapes of Loss: The National Past in Postwar French Cinema* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 154.

<sup>255</sup> Greene, *Landscapes of Loss*, p. 154.

The intertextual relationship between *From Plotzk to Boston* and *The Promised Land* sheds light upon the tensions of writing the past in the ever-changing present. In the novel *Amour bilingue (Bilingual Love)*, the Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi connects memory and narrative in a manner quite relevant to *The Promised Land*. Away from home, a North African man finds that his image of his hometown survives only through a French woman's description of it. As a result of the centrality of her words in his image, this man 'came to the conclusion that, once abandoned by words, the city would fall into ruins'.<sup>256</sup> To phrase it differently, now that the city has become a memory for him, the man realizes that only words can sustain the existence of this location in his mind. Despite geographical differences, the conclusion of this character broadly illustrates the underpinnings of this section, even of this dissertation: the necessity of words to salvage the past. Yet, as a concomitant, this section demonstrates that writing the past renders the purported stability of memory an edifice of lies. Instead, whether a North African city, as in *Amour bilingue*, or a series of places across Europe, as in *The Promised Land*, writing constantly reimagines the ruins of the past without reassembling the missing pieces. Thus, the necessity to tell the story of her generation does not prevent the past, as well as her memories, from 'falling into ruins' through material and immaterial limitations. In the endeavors of her narrative to capture the magnitude of the journey from Russia to America, Antin shows that this narrative amounts to a reinterpretation that changes as time passes by.

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<sup>256</sup> Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages*, trans. by Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 10. For the original novel in French, see Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Amour bilingue* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1983).

**Chapter 3: Literary Traditions, Usable Pasts and Historical Ruptures:  
Literature as an Interrupted Legacy in Lewisohn's and Yeziarska's Memoirs**

**3.1. Overview**

The third chapter of this dissertation addresses the centrality of tradition in Lewisohn's *Up Stream* and Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and *All I Could Never Be*. Specifically, this chapter centers on the influence of literary traditions in these three fictional texts, including thematic and formal features, such as motifs, imagery and textual structure. This focus upon tradition relates to preceding chapters, since heritage was an issue already examined, for instance in the cases of Yeziarska's shawl in chapter 1 and Antin's luggage at the station in chapter 2. As in preceding chapters, this thesis returns to Palmberger's and Tošić's *Memories on the Move*, this time in order to relate their notion of shifting pasts to the temporal ruptures that manifest across the primary sources. Parkinson Zamora's *The Usable Past* is particularly useful for its emphasis upon the persistence of the past in American literature, although here this persistence is understood in a different sense. Whereas *The Usable Past* tends to focus upon the quest of writers of the Americas for a singular heritage, the readings of this chapter highlight the disconnections from the past of the chosen authors, irrespective of their potential quest for a literary heritage. Lastly, Fagan's edited volume *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy* provides a valuable study about the impossibility of heritage that haunts its very existence.

Close textual analysis informed by this theoretical framework contributes to a nuanced understanding of the centrality of absences and ruptures in the seemingly stable literary lineage of the primary sources. This chapter also furthers the ways in which literary legacies can be understood as ruptures themselves, that is, as a broken

chain whose existence amounts to a series of disruptions. This third chapter follows this focus upon legacies as mnemonic entities that both connect and disconnect their inheritors from their past. Unlike before, the upcoming two sections consider the constant breaks that mark the relationship between past and present in literary narratives. With a strong focus upon the text themselves, this chapter examines how textual and historical concerns create a broken chain of tradition that connects these narratives with former texts and traditions. Thus, in Lewisohn's and Yeziarska's pages continuity with the literary past manifests as a form of ongoing discontinuity by which the distance between past and present comes to the fore in their texts. As previously, the introduction briefly explains the theoretical framework, places the textual analysis in relation to secondary criticism about the selected texts, and clarifies certain aspects of these three primary sources to help the reader.

The theoretical basis for this chapter is informed by Fagan's edited volume *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, Palmberger's and Tošić's *Memories on the Move* and Parkinson Zamora's *The Usable Past*. Parkinson Zamora notes that writers of the Americas, as opposed to other literatures, do not necessarily yearn to break from tradition to establish new traditions. In literatures of the Americas, the search for a usable past is ultimately the 'search for precursors (in the name of community) rather than escape from them (in the name of individuation), and to connect to traditions and histories (in the name of a usable past) rather than dissociate from them (in the name of originality)'.<sup>257</sup> Unlike modern European writers, who, according to Parkinson Zamora, resist their past in order to achieve singular creativity, American authors consistently search to establish their past in their writings. While these American authors construct an American canon, they turn to the past as a recurring subject for

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<sup>257</sup> Parkinson Zamora, *The Usable Past*, p. 5.



their work, often to fill what they regard as historical voids in the New World. Although discussion of the accuracy of this claim about European and American literatures is well beyond the scope of this dissertation, this search for a personal past, including a literary heritage, manifests in the chosen texts for this project. More than upon the actual search for a past conducted by the authors, or even their protagonists, as stated before, this chapter focuses upon the literary bonds between these texts and their predecessors. It does this by studying not only references and allusions to specific authors, but also the ways in which language and form often echo recurrent tropes in American history and mythology.

Before delving into more depth on the precursors, traditions and histories that underpin the primary texts of this thesis, the terms ‘tradition’, ‘heritage’, and ‘legacy’, already used several times in this introduction, must be clarified. As in *Negotiating the Legacy*, heritage and legacy are used indistinctly, yet in this case their use is always intertwined with ‘tradition’. Here the latter term refers to the ‘the transmission of statements, customs and ways from generation to generation’, as reflected in the case studies with regards to their predecessors. Considering that this thesis focuses upon Jewish-American literature, tradition bears inevitably textual connotations: the primary texts are influenced by traditional sources, namely the Torah and the Talmud. Furthermore, the imprint of other literary traditions, mostly classical and English literatures, must also be considered as part of the heritage shaping these texts. The understanding of ‘legacy’ adopted in this thesis resonates with legacies understood as material remnants that connect individuals with former times.<sup>258</sup> As already seen in the analysis of Yeziarska’s shawl in *Red Ribbon*, it is difficult to overstate the

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<sup>258</sup> See, for instance, *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 414.

importance of objects in these texts; hence this chapter delves into the material and immaterial implications of these legacies.

The legacies behind these texts, always framed by the texts' reinterpretation of these legacies, generate a problematic, unaccomplished sense of continuity with their forebears. While the primary texts themselves become legacies of a particular history and its stories, they are also testimonies to this fragmentation between narratives and memories. The introduction to *Negotiating the Legacy* sees in this view of heritage 'a onedimensional vision of what inheriting can consist of as well as an infidelity to the loss that initiated this search'.<sup>259</sup> In these texts, legacies, or heritages, are not metaphorical and physical chains that remind their inheritors of bygone friends, relatives, moments, places and occurrences. The loss that lies behind every legacy, namely, the reason for this legacy to exist in the first place, does not live through these remnants, surviving into the present and the future. This clarifies the 'infidelity' the term by which this volume refers to the ambivalent nature of inheritance that cannot be reduced to a correspondence between the absence and its remains.

Whereas legacies acquire intangible, emotional value for their owners, and even for others, this chapter understands legacies in their material form, without disregarding their immaterial outcomes. As mentioned, the existence of legacies is closely associated with absences, whether the death of a loved one or a material loss, from which they came to be valued as legacies. The present is, therefore, connected to the absence of the past that manifests as a legacy: 'what organises our reaction, what informs our attention to the event is an act of disappearance, a noticeable absence'.<sup>260</sup> At the same time, when discussing literary texts, these absences must be read within a

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<sup>259</sup> Ludovic Glorieux and Indira Hasimbegovic, 'Introduction: Inheriting Deconstruction, Surviving Derrida', in *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, ed. by Madeleine Fagan, Ludovic Glorieux, Indira Hasimbegovic, and Marie Suetsugu (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 3 (pp. 1-22).

<sup>260</sup> Glorieux and Hasimbegovic, 'Introduction: Inheriting Deconstruction, Surviving Derrida', p. 3.

material context, namely the source text, in which the impressions of these absences manifest. Andrej Petrovic notes the materiality of literature when he claims that ‘in all literate societies textuality is predicated upon materiality’ and ‘textuality is necessarily defined by the physical characteristics of the media it relies upon’.<sup>261</sup> This materiality, which always recalls the text into the present, into its own existence, which by definition departs from the past, here refers literally to the physical nature of the documents at hand. Likewise, beyond Petrovic’s sense, this chapter interprets the literary legacies within the material circumstances determining the texts, that is, the historical forces behind them. To put this otherwise, the discontinuities between temporalities and texts examined in this chapter must be read within the context of the material conditions that shape, and ultimately constitute, histories and texts.

As material entities, literary legacies exist in a spatiotemporal context by which the present constantly shifts into the past, changing, in turn, their seemingly permanent nature. As Palmberger and Tosic already note in *Memories on the Move*, temporality cannot be simplified into ‘a simple temporal framing of ‘before’ and ‘after’; they argued instead for ‘a complex ‘everydayness’ of shifting temporalities in the course of negotiating pasts, presents and futures between and across generations’.<sup>262</sup> Material artifacts, such as *Up Stream*, *Red Ribbon* and *All I Could Never Be*, partake of the ever-changing nature of temporality, yet they do so otherwise: the traditions to which they belong are always re-readings of preceding texts. To rephrase this, regardless of the search for precursors conducted by their authors, the texts, framed within their respective historical contexts, can only reinterpret the traditions to which they pertain. In this continuum between former literary works, mostly narrative and poetry, and the chosen texts, discontinuity comes

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<sup>261</sup> Andrej Petrovic, ‘The Materiality of Text: An Introduction’, p. 4.

<sup>262</sup> Palmberger and Tošic, ‘Introduction: Memories on the Move’, p. 7.

to the fore, both as a result of history and the nature of text themselves. Thus, when the narrator places *Up Stream* in the tradition of English literature, he locates his account, simultaneously, within later deviations from this tradition, namely American and Southern literatures. However, this textual continuum, which, for him, stretches from English Renaissance literature to the 1920s, fractures into ongoing misreadings of preceding narratives. In other words, when *Up Stream* reclaims Shakespeare's poetry, it does so through a Southern lens that reveals, in turn, the narrative's distance from both Southern and English heritages.

The perambulations of the protagonists in *Up Stream*, *Red Ribbon* and *All I Could Never Be* explain the dominance of certain literary legacies in each narrative. As already examined, *Up Stream* tells the story of an unnamed man who moves from Berlin to the American South, where he spends his late childhood and adolescence, first in St. Mark's, and later in Queenshaven, South Carolina. Lewisohn later stays a few months in New York, works several years in a college in the Midwest, and returns to New York, where the narrative closes. Meanwhile, Yeziarska's stories recount the lives of women who come from different small towns in Poland to the New York ghetto, where their journey diverge, leading them to different places. In *Red Ribbon*, Yeziarska moves to Hollywood, only to return to poverty in New York, and she later sojourns in Fair Oaks, New England, where the narrative closes with her in a train going somewhere else. In *All I Could Never Be*, poor Ivanowna stays in the ghetto, where she moderately improves her financial situation, and she only leaves the ghetto towards the end to dwell in Oakdale, New England. In the same way as the perambulations of the characters drive them from different origins across disparate regions, their literary heritages also vary. *Up Stream* mostly turns to English and American literatures, together with Southern literature, particularly in its recurring

mythology. *Red Ribbon* struggles with biblical sources, which, despite the inability of its woman protagonist to access them, still leave their imprint on the protagonist and her text. *All I Could Never Be* also bears the influence of biblical sources, yet it does so through the lens of Puritanism owing to the protagonist's fascination with this Protestant rewriting of the biblical text.

Owing to his broad education in classical, German, French and English literatures, the protagonist of *Up Stream* frequently makes references to canonical texts in these traditions. However, owing to his fervent desire to assimilate into Anglo-Protestant America, English literature holds overwhelming importance in the narrative. The narrator hopes that deep knowledge of this tradition, which is, in turn, the basis for American literature, will grant him an American status despite his foreign origins. At the same time, in the first part of the narrative, he also expects that this cultural capital will enable him to claim the values of a Southern gentleman for himself. In his fantasy, the protagonist partakes of the Lost Cause narrative, which praises a culture of honor and chivalry while minimizing the presence of slavery in the nation. Like many Jewish writers at the turn of the nineteenth century, the narrator begins a search for a usable past, in which he aims to establish a literary genealogy for his own text.<sup>263</sup> Whether French novels or English Renaissance poetry, his readings reveal his passion for literature and longing for a heritage as a writer, while they also underpin the structure of his autobiography. Therefore, *Up Stream* interweaves English, American and Southern literatures in a pattern in which English literature serves as the foundation for the others, as well as the text. In fact, as the section on *Up Stream* demonstrates, other traditions, such as Greek poetry, are ultimately filtered and rewritten through the prism of English literature.

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<sup>263</sup> David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 1-10. The introduction provides a concise overview of several 'usable pasts' in modern history.

Secondary criticism on Lewisohn's oeuvre provides no in-depth examination of his literary influences, nor, for that matter, does it explore his relationship with the South. An example of this could be Helge Normann Nilsen, who connects *Up Stream* with the Midwest, instead of the South: 'what Lewis had done for the Midwest in Main Street, Lewisohn did for his Midwest in his autobiography, Central City being his name for Columbus, Ohio, where he lived and taught during the First World War'.<sup>264</sup> The South, however, is a central place in *Up Stream*: it is the place where most of the first chapters take place, and its presence lingers in the narrator's imagination after his departure. Besides being a geographical site, the South is also an imagined place, imbued with recurring imagery of plantations, churches, violence, moonlight and magnolias, also present in the text. Another critic, Dan Shiffman, devotes a few pages of his book *College Bound* to Lewisohn's relationship to English literature, including *Up Stream* as part of his study. In his book, this critic notes the criticism of the narrator of *Up Stream* directed towards what he perceives as 'the pallid quality of too much of the English literary canon'.<sup>265</sup> Lewisohn's autobiography does present an evolving view about English literature: the narrative moves from absolute devotion to its canon to an ambivalent perspective about its virtues and flaws.<sup>266</sup> However, this first section does not delve into the evolution of the protagonist's evolution on his literary impressions; instead, the aim is to examine the discontinuities caused by the protagonist's attempt to insert his text within this tradition.

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<sup>264</sup> Helge Normann Nilsen, 'The Road to Judaism: Spiritual Development in Ludwig Lewisohn's Autobiography', *MELUS*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Ethnic Autobiography (Spring, 1987), p. 60 (pp. 59-71).

<sup>265</sup> Dan Shiffman, *College Bound: The Pursuit of Education in Jewish American Literature, 1896-1944* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017), p. 100.

<sup>266</sup> Compare, for instance, the narrator's views on English literature in Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, pp. 47, 52, and 92, with p. 113.

More ink has been devoted to secondary criticism on Yeziarska's oeuvre than to Lewisohn's literary works, including her problematic relationship with Jewish tradition. Yeziarska's religious path has little in common with Lewisohn's life: Lewisohn was a German man unfamiliar with Jewish tradition who converted to Methodism in his years in the South. Although Lewisohn later returned to Judaism and became a Zionist, *Up Stream*'s protagonist merely becomes critical of the American Protestantism to which he converted in his youth towards the middle of the narrative.<sup>267</sup> In contrast, Yeziarska grew up in a traditional Jewish household, as did her namesake protagonist and Ivanowna, both women accustomed to daily prayers and communal life in Poland. At the same time, these women were unable to read biblical languages, so their knowledge of tradition often came from overhearing their fathers and other men recite the prayers. Thus, the life of Yeziarska's women protagonists must be read within a context in which women, frequently unable to access literary sources, acutely faced the discontinuities of history. Gerda Lerner constantly returns to 'the lack of continuity and the absence of collective memory on the part of women thinkers' over the centuries in her analysis of women's literature.<sup>268</sup> Yeziarska's protagonists exemplify this burden: whereas Jewish tradition, particularly biblical stories, is central in their writing, this does not erase their detachment from their heritage. Despite their attempts to escape the ghetto's restrictions on women, their struggle with the past, which never stops haunting their memories, runs throughout the narratives.

American scholars have reflected upon the importance of tradition, as well as its absence, in Yeziarska's novels and short stories, often highlighting her characters' longing to escape their oppressive pasts. Shelly Regenbaum remarks upon

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<sup>267</sup> Lewisohn's later novel, *The Island Within*, chronicles Arthur Levy's return to Judaism. See Ludwig Lewisohn, *The Island Within* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

<sup>268</sup> Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, p. 139.

Yeziarska's poor status within her own religious tradition: 'there was no place in the tradition for an unmarried woman, for the kind of "career woman" that Yeziarska finally became'.<sup>269</sup> Natalie Friedman comments that Yeziarska escapes the shackles of her heritage, although not through family and love, but 'through work and education'.<sup>270</sup> Barbara Sicherman adds that women's ties to tradition were more fragile than men's: 'deprived of a specifically Jewish education, women evidently found it easier to break their ties to a religious tradition that consigned them to second class status'.<sup>271</sup> Furthermore, Yeziarska and Ivanowna's marginal status within their own tradition couples with their discrimination within American letters, where both poor women experience the rejection of a world dominated by upper-class men. As a matter of fact, Yeziarska's rediscovery by critics in the late 1970s and 1980s 'came on the heels of an increasing interest in narratives of working women by feminist scholars'.<sup>272</sup> Therefore, her precarious status within American literature resembles the frustrated attempts of literary success of her characters, who conclude the narratives far removed from the American literary establishment. In *All I Could Never Be*, the longing to belong to America, and its literature, is even more pressing for Ivanowna, who frequently resorts to the narrative of Puritan origins in her endeavor to embrace America through its literature. Thus, literary heritages in both texts are fraught with the absence of a continuous lineage to which both writer-protagonists can turn in their works and lives.

The two sections which comprise this chapter are 'Classical and English Literary Legacies in a Southern Narrative: Crossing Traditions in Lewisohn's *Up*

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<sup>269</sup> Shelly Regenbaum, 'Art, Gender, and the Jewish Tradition in Yeziarska's "Red Ribbon on a White Horse" and Potok's "My Name Is Asher Lev"' (*Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) (Spring, 1988), Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 57 (pp. 55-66).

<sup>270</sup> Natalie Friedman, 'Marriage and the Immigrant Narrative: Anzia Yeziarska's Salome of the Tenements', *Legacy*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2005), p. 177 (pp. 176-186).

<sup>271</sup> Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives*, p. 196.

<sup>272</sup> Hefner, *The Word on the Streets*, p. 109.



*Stream*', and "“Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity”": Biblical Tradition in Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and *All I Could Never Be*'.<sup>273</sup> The first section looks into the literary traditions behind *Up Stream*, including English and non-English literatures, paying close attention to their interactions. From references to ancient Greek poetry to allusions to the book of Genesis, *Up Stream* rephrases older heritages through the prism of English literature. Thus, this section considers the narrator's endeavors to fashion the narrative as an American text, hence also part of the English tradition, by close readings of several of its passages. The second section devotes attention to two narratives with similar origins, but in which the protagonists take different pathways. On one hand, *Red Ribbon*, as its very title, a Talmudic reference, already suggests, frequently makes reference to religious tradition without finding a place in this heritage. On the other hand, in *All I Could Never Be*, as its title also implies, Ivanowna yearns for all she could not possess, including a writing career and an American heritage. This section focuses upon the often-entangled religious and American heritages in both texts, which take a particularly Protestant tone in the latter because of the frequent Puritan motifs.

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<sup>273</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. and trans. by Michael L. Rodkinson (New York: The Talmud Society, 1918), Sotah, 21b:1, p. 360. *The Jerusalem Talmud* also states, 'Let the words of Torah be burned up, but let them not be delivered to women'. Sotah 19a. See *The Jerusalem Talmud: Tractates Sotah and Nedarim*, ed. and trans. by Heinrich W. Guggenheimer (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), p. 289.

### 3.2. English and American Literary Legacies in a Southern Narrative: Crossing Traditions in Lewisohn's *Up Stream*

This section focuses upon a few scenes from Lewisohn's *Up Stream* in order to analyze its response to preceding literary traditions, specifically Southern and English literatures. At the most superficial level, the narrator searches for a personal past that can grant him a sense of belonging first to the South and the nation, and, only later, almost exclusively to America. Lewisohn's autobiography is a personal quest for a home in which literature, despite being a private homeland for the protagonist, does not grant him a usable past. The same literary texts that contribute to his gradual integration in the American South do not blend into an interlinked pattern of predecessors and their descendants. Steven J. Rubin captures this restless search for a home throughout the text: 'the title suggests the movement of salmon, which, having matured, swim upstream—against the current—to find their breeding ground'.<sup>274</sup> Literature proves itself an invaluable instrument to turn the narrator's routes into roots: both canonical English literature and Southern literature serve as foundations for the narrative. If *Up Stream* can be placed within a particular Anglo-Saxon tradition, its author can be granted the status of both a contributor to and an inheritor of this century-long legacy. In close reading this intertextuality, from passing remarks to lengthy analyses of other texts, this section navigates through *Up Stream* by taking into account this multifaceted relationship to preceding texts. Likewise, the centrality of Southern literature, particularly its recurrent motifs, such as the moonlight and magnolias, is closely examined in view of the problematics of this legacy.

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<sup>274</sup> *Writing Our Lives: Autobiographies of American Jews, 1890-1990*, ed. by Steven J. Rubin (Philadelphia, New York, and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 20.

This section draws on the understandings of legacy developed by Parkinson Zamora, and to the volume edited by Glorieux and Hasimbegovic already examined in the introduction to this chapter. Glorieux and Hasimbegovic emphasize the interrelation of life and death when it comes to legacies: ‘the two realms bind our life: one of outliving others – which is structured by the living memory of the dead (in us) – and the forthcoming death of others’.<sup>275</sup> The imperatives of death also apply to literature, albeit in different ways: the search for a past in *Up Stream* only leads to successive discontinuities between Lewisohn’s text and former literary works. If “continuity” involves the simultaneous operations of multiple traditions and heterogeneous expressive forms’, the same dialogue between different literary sources can be a source of discontinuity.<sup>276</sup> Along with the storyline of *Up Stream*, this section also delves into formal features in the narrative at both the restricted level of syntax and the broader level of its structural features. To be more precise, the section first focuses upon scenes from the protagonist’s years in the village of St. Mark’s, South Carolina, and then moves onto his readings while he is in Queenshaven, also South Carolina. In their references, either direct or oblique, to English texts, the quoted passages point to *Up Stream*’s departure from this English legacy for both historical and material reasons. The final pages refer to episodes in St. Mark’s, once again, in order to analyze the deep imprint of the English literary canon upon Southern literature in *Up Stream*.

*The Odyssey* exemplifies the ways in which classical literary traditions, rendered in English in *Up Stream*, are a template for the structure of the narrative. *Up Stream* mirrors the structure of this epic poem by Homer in the constant search for a home of its protagonist and the concomitant assumption of the existence of a fixed

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<sup>275</sup> Glorieux and Hasimbegovic, ‘Introduction: Inheriting Deconstruction, Surviving Derrida’, in *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, p. 3.

<sup>276</sup> Zamora, *The Usable Past*, p. 200.

place called home. *The Odyssey* narrates the adventures of Odysseus, its Achaean protagonist, during his decade of wandering after his victorious struggle against the city of Troy.<sup>277</sup> Following the Greek army's victory, Odysseus and his men set out on their journey home to Ithaca, yet from Calypso and Circe to the Sirens, they endure numerous obstacles along the way that delay their homecoming. Upon his arrival in Ithaca after his various adventures, he murders the suitors who had troubled his wife Penelope during his absence, and ultimately ends his ordeal by securing his throne. The protagonist of *Up Stream* remarks on the impact of his reading of the Homeric text on his imagination, as well as the deep connection between the poem and his memory of the Southern world of St Mark's:

I do not read Greek; I cannot read Homer in the original. Yet I am sure that I know what Homer is. In a plain room behind the store in which apples and cloth and furniture and ploughshares and rice and tinned fish were sold to chattering Negroes, I sat with my book and clearly heard

“The surge and thunder of the *Odyssey*”

and saw Nausikaa and her maidens, white limbed and fair, on the shore of the wine-dark sea, and dwelt with Odysseus on the island of Calypso and returned home with him to Ithaca—not without tears—and listened to the twanging bow-string that sped the avenging arrows.<sup>278</sup>

A closer inspection of *The Odyssey* reveals the inconsistencies in this formulaic reading of homecoming, and proposes, instead, an ancient narrative of ongoing discontinuities between the consecutive events. In her emphasis upon the labyrinthine

<sup>277</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Emily Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

<sup>278</sup> Ludwig Lewisohn, *Up Stream: An American Chronicle* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1992), p. 40.

nature of this Greek composition, Svetlana Boym undermines its apparent linearity: ‘hence even the most classical Western tale of homecoming is far from circular; it is riddled with contradictions and zigzags, false homecomings, misrecognitions’.<sup>279</sup> As Boym continues, returning home is not uncomplicated, since ‘after all, Odysseus's homecoming is about nonrecognition. Ithaca is plunged into mist and the royal wanderer arrives in disguise. The hero recognizes neither his homeland nor his divine protectress’.<sup>280</sup> Regardless of his physical homecoming, there is no way back home for Odysseus: the passage of time has transformed him and his seamen, along with the inhabitants of Ithaca, and, ultimately, this place itself. After these two decades, like all humans and demigods in the narrative, the protagonist carries the imprints of aging upon his body, since time has taken its toll on men and women alike. In fact, he is not even recognized by his own wife and former friends, and only his maid discovers his true identity once she recognizes his age-old scar while washing his feet, a tradition meant to welcome strangers. All these circumstances show that, beyond the overall temporal linearity of the poem, breaks are an intrinsic part of the multiple twists and turns in *The Odyssey*. Odysseus's expedition encapsulates the ruptures of homecoming in his ‘return’ to a different place that signals the unerasable rupture inflicted by the passage of time.

In its narrator's paraphrase of this English translation of *The Odyssey*, *Up Stream* renders an Anglicized version of the myth in which the protagonist searches for continuity through a Southern narrative of roots. In fact, even the reference to *The Odyssey* itself could be read as a quest for a past that not only looks back to classical literature, but also gazes at the English canon. The protagonist, who must face his emigration from Germany, also struggles with his successive sojourns across America

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<sup>279</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001, p. 8.

<sup>280</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001, p. 8.

after his departure from the South. All these disruptions, paramount in the narrative, relate to his deep identification with Odysseus, whose quest for roots in an ancient literary text epitomizes for the protagonist the success for which he longs in his own quest. At the same time, and perhaps more subtly, his identification with the Greek hero relates to the important footprint left by Greek literature in Southern and American literatures. To rephrase this, the narrative turns to canonical literature that resonates with American texts in sustaining a tradition of references to a shared ancient culture. Classical literature underpins Southern and American literatures through their imagery, themes, characters, and poetic language that resonate through their texts across centuries.<sup>281</sup> The prominence of this legacy also comes to the fore in motifs, such as the mentioned quest for a home in *Up Stream*, as well as the grandeur of war, and the value of honor that are commonplace in both literatures. Likewise, characters such as Oedipus, Ariadne, and Calypso, or places like Atlantis, whose prosperous nature even echoes, at times, in the protagonist's lost Southern home of long ago, have also left their imprint in these Anglo traditions. Out of this varied heritage of innumerable myths and legends, the protagonist selects recurring motifs, particularly home, honor and courage, and the more conspicuous Odysseus, the protagonist's counterpart.

The brief citation from English literature in the middle of the passage both contributes to and problematizes the insertion of the narrative within an English-language tradition. The quotation, borrowed from the final lines of a poem inspired by Homer's second epic, also entitled 'The Odyssey', was written by the Scottish poet

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<sup>281</sup> For further reading regarding the influence of Greek literature upon American literature, see Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), and Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood, *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a study specific to the influence of classical literature upon English literature, see Jeanette Boswell, *Past Ruined Iliad...: Bibliography of English and American Literature Based on Graeco-Roman Mythology* (Metuchen and London: Scarecrow, 1982).

Andrew Lang in the eighteenth century: ‘and through the music of the languid hours / They hear like Ocean on a western beach / The surge and thunder of the Odyssey’.<sup>282</sup>

Besides carrying the promise of home for Odysseus’s men into English letters, these English lines look back to classical tradition through a different tongue that departs from these Mediterranean origins. In this ongoing dynamic of continuity and rupture in processes of remembrance, ‘individuals produce continuities and ruptures between different life periods and historical periods as well as between different localities’.<sup>283</sup>

The presence of English, instead of the original Greek, signals the primacy of the former over the latter in the missing nature of the original words, which is absent in both Lang’s and Lewisohn’s texts. Considering that it partakes on the tradition of reusing a former heritage for the sake of the present through English, *Up Stream* approaches English literature in its distance from Homer. Whereas the passage implies the update of Odysseus’s tale of Greek homecoming in the narrator’s arrival in the Southern village of St. Mark’s, this illusion breaks in these seven words from Lang which distant different words, Greek and Anglo-Saxon. Like Homer’s narrative, Lang’s words only echo in the dreamlike, unfeasible nature of any journey back home which ultimately exists in the three texts. Lang’s words divide fact from fiction through different worlds, ancient and modern, which do not come together owing to the dissonance between these heritages.

In subsequent chapters, the language of the narrative continues to interweave an English literary legacy with the American South in order to bridge the historical gaps between both legacies. The scholar Stanley F. Chyet remarks on Lewisohn’s strong emphasis upon the English heritage of the post-Reconstruction South that ‘Lewisohn

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<sup>282</sup> Andrew Lang, ‘The Odyssey’, in *The Odyssey Of Homer Rendered Into English Prose*, ed. by S.H. Butcher and Andrew Lang (London: Medici Society, 1930), p. iii (pp. i-iv).

<sup>283</sup> Karen Fog Olwig, ‘Moving Memories and Memories of Moves: Some Afterthoughts’ in *Memories on the Move*, p. 281 (pp. 271-286).

made a great deal of South Carolina's association with England and English culture'.<sup>284</sup> As before, the narrative turns to an English literary legacy that the narrator endeavors to weave into the text in a pattern of personal and literary continuity between temporalities. His musings on his copious English readings, which include many canonical writers, reiterate the emphasis upon the continuity of English culture in the South. The protagonist explicates his varied readings, from Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater to William Hazlitt and Robert Louis Stevenson, among numerous others from his list of English writers.<sup>285</sup> The pages on his literary immersions contrast his early inklings, such as his early admiration of Stevenson, with his currently nuanced, dispassionate approach to Stevenson's writings. While he muses on his former manuscripts with the critical glance afforded by the passage of time, he also acknowledges his inability to surpass, or even emulate, canonical English writers:

I have recently looked at some thousands of manuscript verses of that period. The poems are full of a rhythmic ardor, yet never without restraint. There are good lines and happy turns of expression and there is no lack of imagination. [...]

Without the learned Renaissance tradition of English poetry from Surrey to Swinburne the verses were unthinkable. With that tradition and its results extant they were superfluous. But they illustrate how I lived and moved and had my being in the cultural tradition of the Anglo-Saxon aristocrat. I was of those who "speak the tongue that Shakespeare spoke, the faith and morals hold that Milton held" ...<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Stanley F. Chyet, 'Ludwig Lewisohn in Charleston (1892-1903)' (*American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (March, 1965), p. 315 (pp. 296-297).

<sup>285</sup> The narrator of *Up Stream* does not specify that Robert Louis Stevenson was in fact Scottish.

<sup>286</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, pp. 95-96.



This textual genealogy in which these authors' oeuvres act as predecessors of *Up Stream* does not consolidate into a literary lineage that culminates in the current text. The references endeavor to insert his manuscripts, and, more subtly, the narrative, within a literary tradition in the New World in which 'reading comes to symbolize the writer's imperative to adapt previous works of literature to local use, to integrate them into a usable tradition'.<sup>287</sup> The passage endeavors to establish a genealogy through which the manuscripts refer back to each other chronologically as an inheritance that survives through reading and writing. By virtue of how his readings and his writings merge, his compositions are the result of readings that grant him a status inferior to that of an English poet but also a place in the chain of tradition. However, this relation of causality does not imply continuity: historical and textual differences suggest otherwise, pointing to the breaks with English tradition in *Up Stream*. Daniel Boyarin shares this view of the literary text at the intersection of former texts that the present writing system alter and crack into multiple pieces that are extant in the new text. In his monograph *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, the text is shown to be a site of social and literary conflicts in which previous texts and events disrupt current narratives:

As the text is the transformation of a signifying system and of a signifying practice, it embodies the more or less untransformed detritus of the previous system. These fragments of the previous system and the fissures they create on the surface of the text reveal conflictual dynamics which led to the present textual system.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Zamora, *The Usable Past*, p. 132.

<sup>288</sup> Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 94.

The ‘tradition of English poetry from Surrey to Swinburne’ that predates Southern literature constitutes a selective heritage built upon historical ruptures, particularly class inequality. Since class remained pivotal after the Civil War, impoverished, high-born Southerners struggle to pretend that they retained their privileged financial status: ‘in this post-Reconstruction era, old families, money-poor but status-rich, clung desperately to their one source of authority—the very image of their aristocratic pose’.<sup>289</sup> This image, ‘the cultural tradition of the Anglo-Saxon aristocrat’, which the protagonist of *Up Stream* exemplifies, is an upper-class fantasy through which the elites are the product of a privileged tradition. First, access to this tradition requires both literacy, which in the 1900s was still restricted, particularly for women and the poor, and access to material sources, which also excluded many potential readers.<sup>290</sup> Furthermore, leisure time is another prerequisite to engage with a canon that requires commitment only available to those without exploitative working hours. Thus, regardless of this aristocratic legacy that grants a heritage to the very few, the narrative partakes in a tradition rooted in the exclusion of most Southern readers. The English canon, to which *Up Stream* should belong, is tainted by class conflicts that create the fragments and fissures to which Boyarin refers in this passage. Owing to these material constraints that entail ruptures within generations, cultural and financial capital marks the narrative through the inherently fragmentary nature of passing down tradition.

Like historical circumstances, the textual dynamics behind these references and citations also result in ruptures between *Up Stream* and preceding literary works.

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<sup>289</sup> Ralph Melnick, ‘Oedipus in Charleston: Ludwig Lewisohn’s Search for the Muse’, *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), No. 3, Jewish Women Writers and Women in Jewish Literature (1983), p. 68 (pp. 68-84).

<sup>290</sup> For further reading upon educational inequality in the South, including illiteracy, during this time, see Robert A. Magro, *Race and Schooling in the South, 1880-1950: An Economic History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and Wayne A. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives: A People’s History of the American Public Library* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Such is the case of the lines regarding those ‘who speak the tongue that Shakespeare spoke, the faith and morals hold that Milton held’, borrowed from William Wordsworth’s poem ‘It is not to be Thought of that the Flood’, which extol an upper-class narrative of British blood.<sup>291</sup> Besides the few literary references in the above passage, the narrative mentions many of his readings, naming hundreds of authors, for example ‘Swift and Dryden, Pope and Addison, Johnson and Goldsmith’.<sup>292</sup> The ‘fragments of the previous system’, namely these names that should embody their respective bodies of work, ultimately turn into empty references that do not refer to an existing tradition. The genealogy turns into a fiction through which the narrator endeavors to name authors endowed with Englishness without a clear sense of influence in his writing. In other words, there is no apparent evidence of the influence of these authors in either the formal or the thematic aspects of the text. Such is the case of the style of the text, whose prosaic, factual nature departs from the adorned, metaphoric sophistication of both Shakespeare and Milton. Indeed, the paucity of figurative language, which increases towards the end of the narrative, when the narrator reflects on contemporary politics, distances the text from most of these authors. Like the historical exclusion of many English men and women from this legacy, this matter-of-fact style detaches the present from former literary texts by pointing towards overarching breaks in the text. Like the fissures left by the unfairness of history, the text itself works against the narrator’s endeavors to position his Southern narrative within English tradition.

As well as both drawing upon and distancing itself from English literary tradition, *Up Stream* also engages more closely with Southern imagery through its allusions to Southern myths. Similarly to the English imprint upon the pages of *Up*

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<sup>291</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘It Is Not to be Thought of that the Flood’ in *Wordsworth's Poems of 1807*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 276.

<sup>292</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 76.

*Stream*, the Southern past encompasses a literary legacy that intertwines historical and textual discontinuities. This re-usage of Southern mythology not only overlaps with the aforementioned discontinuities from English literature, but also sheds light upon the presence of this related literacy legacy in the text. The South, filtered in the narrative through the personal experience of the protagonist, is also influenced by the literary myths attached to this place that resonate in how it is described.<sup>293</sup> The narrative constantly evokes conventional images of this American region, including the pervasive poverty, the rural nature of the region, and the prominence of Christian denominations. The South becomes a place of legends and a legend itself in the post-Civil War period in which ‘the Old South thereby became a place out of time, its inhabitants as immortal as the Olympians’.<sup>294</sup> *Up Stream* provides multiple images that glorify the past through echoes of the antebellum tropes such as the nostalgia for the good old days of ‘moonlight and magnolias’. Unlike preceding and even contemporary texts in Southern literature, this imagery neither advocates for the virtues of slavery in pre-civil war South nor contains vindications of the Lost Cause. Rather, the Edenic past recalled by the protagonist is the place of childhood memories: his descriptions turn into a metaphorical refuge from the burdens of the present. *Up Stream*’s Deep South corresponds with his personal rendition of lost times and places, which is in turn filtered through depictions of the region in American literature.

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<sup>293</sup> Examples of Southern literature dealing with mythical, recurring imagery of the Old South include Thomas Nelson Page, *Ole Virginia or Marse Chan and Other Stories*, *The Burial of the Guns* (London and New York, NY: Ward, Lock and Co., 1889), George Washington Cable, *The Cavalier* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1901), George Washington Cable, *Strong Hearts* (New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1899), Joel Chandler Harris, *Balaam and His Master and Other Sketches and Stories* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891), Joel Chandler Harris, *On the Plantation: A Story of a Georgia Boy’s Adventures During the War* (New York: Appleton, 1892), William Faulkner, *Sartoris* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), William Faulkner, *Sanctuary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), and William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962).

<sup>294</sup> *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. by Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2014), p. 141.

The imaginary returns of the narrator to his former home render a layered view of this place that merges the familiarity of these episodes with its preceding literary recreations. The imagery oscillates between the comfort of churches and cotton fields to the romanticization of underprivileged tobacco-chewing men as symbols of the static, old-time South. Two different scenes elucidate this contrast: the first scene describes the countryside of idealized Queenshaven, and the somber, second scene, equally imbued with myths, narrates a day in Queenshaven's bay:

I see the iridescent plaster of the old walls at sunset, the  
crescent moon, so clear and silvery, over the light-house,  
the white magnolias in their olive foliage; I feel the full, rich  
sweetness of that incomparable air.<sup>295</sup>

In the afternoon our friends took us to our train, shoved us  
into a day-coach and hurried off. I recall vividly the long,  
shabby, crowded car and its peculiar reek of peanuts, stale  
whiskey and chewing-tobacco.<sup>296</sup>

Similarly to the preceding lines about the narrator's manuscripts, in which class inequality undermines generational continuity between texts, historical upheavals also shape the presence of this imagery in *Up Stream*. The narrator's words disclose the ever-changing, unstable nature of notions of the South: 'the consciousness of change has been present so long as to become in itself one of the abiding facts of Southern life'.<sup>297</sup> The first scene evokes the unchanging nature of a natural cycle set against the backdrop of urban America in attempts to uphold a binary between stasis and instability. The tobacco and the whiskey establish an almost religious view of poverty

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<sup>295</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 56.

<sup>296</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 36.

<sup>297</sup> George B. Tindall, 'Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History' in *Myth and Southern History: The Old South*, Vol. 1, ed. by Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 12 (pp. 1-16).

and communion between neighbors that echoes preceding Southern generations in their shared deprivation. Rather, these static, timeless images are in fact a fragile product of both reality and the imagination meant to vanish through the turmoil caused by capitalism in rural areas. His evocative descriptions omit, for instance, the changes upon the landscape inflicted by the growing national market, and the ever-increasing rates of urbanization. Regardless of the potential historical accuracy of his memories, alongside their survival into the narrator's present, the life that they evince is fated to vanish amidst the expansion of the industry in the South. The rural life that he describes, which was already fading in the 1890s, would not hold as such owing to the impact of economic changes upon the traditional ways of communal life evoked by these items. The different images echo the preceding scenes in remembering an English tradition marked by historical changes that would affect nature, community, and emigration.

From the white magnolias to the stale whiskey, the story turns continuity into breaks from the past as these motifs, seemingly frozen in time, ultimately do not last. In *Up Stream*, Southern history is framed through 'Southern myths [which] have frequently been analyzed as discrete entities, but together their stories tell the story of the South'.<sup>298</sup> Further historical analysis of the context beneath these tropes sheds light upon the contextual discontinuities of *Up Stream*, including its necessity to establish the past through these myths. The different scenes, which resonate with other descriptions of the St. Mark's of the 'streets that trailed of into cotton fields', echo the same failed attempts to camouflage the fractures of the South.<sup>299</sup> As before this particular imagery of cotton fields, which also relates to the constant changes in the South and in other parts of America, does not escape the manufacturing that

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<sup>298</sup> *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. by Wilson, p. 127.

<sup>299</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 37.

transforms its production process. These quintessential imagery of the rural South, although corresponding to the reality of the narrative, such as the accuracy of the landscape, produce myths that share their fragility. In fact, the idealized landscape of these scenes, which echoes the protagonist's lost days of adolescence, provides a sharp contrast with the present of the narrative two decades after these events. If myths sometimes reify history, imbuing it with a sense of cohesion and covering potential lacks, this necessity to cover historical breaks manifests in these tropes. As the products of particular histories, these lasting images of the Southern scene demonstrate the existence of historical changes resulting in their instability.

In order to explore these discontinuities between the text and these preceding narratives, this Southern imagery should be examined more closely in relation to the protagonist's devotion to an all-English literary canon. The renditions of the South in *Up Stream* frequently return to the tensions between continuity and discontinuity from both English literary tradition and the malleable image of the South.<sup>300</sup> A few months after his arrival in the South, the protagonist, invited by Mrs. C., a devoted member of the church, begins to attend her Sunday School class in St. Mark's. Soon he enters into the Christian faith, falls in love with 'lesson-quarterlies, golden texts and the familiar hymn tunes', and aspires to a Protestant life.<sup>301</sup> Narrating 'those distant years in St. Mark's', the protagonist provides a succinct, idyllic depiction of the lady's church as the cornerstone of this Southern village:<sup>302</sup>

The small, white church with its wooden belfry was like a thousand others. It stood in a sun-flooded street, behind it were scattered graves and then cotton fields running to olive or brownish pine-forests. The calm of the village Sundays was

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<sup>300</sup> Zamora, *The Usable Past*, p. 128.

<sup>301</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 50.

<sup>302</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 50.

truly sabbatical, and the clear, solitary ringing of the church-bell had a shrill and primitive sweetness to my ears.<sup>303</sup>

These references to emblems of Southern history, such as this white church, which are interspersed throughout *Up Stream*, exemplify the intertwined discontinuities between literatures and histories. As a symbol of Christian tradition, the church implies unity between the Old and the New World through a shared heritage brought to America by centuries of emigration. As an all-encompassing cornerstone of Anglo-American unity, Protestantism is an undercurrent in *Up Stream* that also underpins English and Southern literatures. Thus, the cyclical nature of religious ritual transcends this single image in order to imprint the text with a sense of cohesion that looks back, once again, to English tradition. However, the church scene stands for the absence of a stable sense of tradition that can be passed down beyond the fixed nature of this remarkable building in the village. In the protagonist's imagination, this symbol of communion among the villagers disregards the existence of tensions between religious denominations that refashion this English legacy.<sup>304</sup> After spending the preceding pages criticizing its economic order and political corruption, the final paragraph concludes, obscurely, that 'the end is as fit as the beginning; the darkness is as beautiful as the dawn'.<sup>305</sup> Like his final words, circularity proves a fantasy in the ever-changing nature of these images which evince not only the protagonist's distance from St. Mark's, but also the South's remoteness from England. The attempts to 'connect to traditions and histories (in the name of a usable past)', noted in the

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<sup>303</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>304</sup> For further reading upon relationships between different Christian denominations, including Protestant-Catholic relations, see C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985), Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill, N.C. and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), and Andrew Henry Stern, *Southern Crucifix, Southern Cross: Catholic-Protestant Relations in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012).

<sup>305</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 246.



introduction to this chapter, once again lead to disassociation from these traditions.<sup>306</sup> This disassociation, in this case the break between England and the American South, echoes in these different Southern memories that project a broken chain between multiple temporalities.

The parallelism of the final paragraph is reminiscent of the tensions between England, the South and the narrative through which literature breaks from the past once again. Moving forward towards the final chapters of the narrative clarifies this claim: the church scene seems ancient history once the narrator arrives in the East Coast. The two final chapters, 'Myth and Blood' and 'The World in Chaos', cut ties with this past by moving onto discussions of the Great War and American politics. Thus, the narrative finally accepts the particularities of its own American context away from the early endeavors to fashion a Southern heritage imbued with the glories of the English past. As shown by Leonard Tennenhouse, the desire of American writers to emulate their English counterparts only led to the contrary, because 'it was in their respective attempts to do the same thing as the English—namely, stabilize English usage—that an American difference emerged'.<sup>307</sup> The search for an Anglo-American past culminates in the tacit acknowledgment of the impossibility of returns: if the end is as fit as the beginning, this is owing to the intrinsic between these instances. The final words do not only allude to the aging of the protagonist, the closeness of death and the communal dereliction because of the war, but also acknowledge the death of another former life. The death of this former life explicitly refers to the creation of a literary work built upon broken motifs, quotations, references and allusions, which also breaks away from this heritage. In other words,

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<sup>306</sup> Parkinson Zamora, *The Usable Past*, p. 5.

<sup>307</sup> Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750-1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 19.

the narrative not only departs from tradition through its references, but the narrative itself, through its development, breaks away from its literary pasts.

The multiple legacies existent in *Up Stream* demonstrate the centrality of literature in the protagonist's account of his life and his search for an American past. Furthermore, these legacies not only influence his personal and educational development, but also bear relevance for the overall foundations of the narrative. From the words of the Bard of Avon to the stories of Thomas Nelson Page, literary traditions mark *Up Stream* with their traces that manifest the fractures of history. Boyarin notes that 'intertextuality is, in a sense, the way that history, understood as cultural and ideological change and conflict, records itself within textuality'.<sup>308</sup> The final pages, which conclude in a different world from the South that governs this section, epitomize this conflict between worlds, North and South, and times, past and present. The impact of history, best exemplified in capitalism and its ramifications, including the war, transforms the South even if its impact remains mostly untold. The historical underpinnings behind *Up Stream* inform the ruptures between the narrative and its English-speaking literary lineage in the very existence of these textual breaks. In the same vein, the quest for a literary past that grounds the narrative within an English and Southern tradition of aristocratic, gentlemanly values implies the departure from preceding texts in the attempts to preserve this past. The protagonist's search for precursors, which here signals the breaks between the text and its inheritors, bespeaks the centrality of tradition in *Up Stream* as a broken chain whose fragments run through the text.

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<sup>308</sup> Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, p. 94.

**3.3. “Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity”:  
Biblical Tradition in Yeziarska’s *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and *All I Could  
Never Be***

This section, focused upon Yeziarska’s *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and *All I Could Never Be*, addresses the influence of literary tradition in both narratives. They both feature a woman protagonist, ‘guilt-laden and burdened by a sense of duty to her father and Jewish patriarchy, swaying between defiance and submission’.<sup>309</sup> Formal and thematic aspects in both selected works evince that for women writers ‘traditions are unevenly available and whole histories may be tragically truncated’.<sup>310</sup> The first part of this section focuses upon discontinuous legacies through an exploration of the legacy of a secondary character, the writer Jeremiah Kintzler, in *Red Ribbon*. Kintzler constantly boasts about his writings, which include a history of Talmudic literature, a biography of the Bal Shem Tov, and his incomplete *Life of Spinoza*. However, after his death, Yeziarska discovers the fragmented nature of his papers, which raises related queries regarding the nature of this legacy, and, more broadly, women’s legacies and the lack thereof. Kintzler’s literary remnants resonate and discord with Yeziarska’s past in multiple discontinuities in which life, death and literature come together. The cultural limitations imposed on women, particularly the lack of predecessors and access to literary materials, inform Yeziarska’s reading of Kintzler’s absence. The unavailability of literary traditions to the narrator, as opposed to Kintzler’s rich heritage, does not prevent her from hearing the echoes of former words, from the biblical prophet Jeremiah to her modern namesake.

<sup>309</sup> Regenbaum, ‘Art, Gender, and the Jewish Tradition in Yeziarska’s “Red Ribbon on a White Horse” and Potok’s “My Name Is Asher Lev”’, p. 62.

<sup>310</sup> Parkinson Zamora, *The Usable Past*, p. 177.

The following close readings of *All I Could Never Be* illustrate that, in the chosen texts, legacies are a compendium of narratives, very often fragmentary, handed down from preceding generations in which the impossibility of continuity becomes a form of legacy. *Memories on the Move*'s claim that 'individuals produce continuities and ruptures between different life periods and historical periods as well as between different localities' is quite apposite to these broken heritages.<sup>311</sup> As shown before, instead of being antipodes, continuities and ruptures are frequently closely associated in the relationships between these texts and their predecessors. The second part of this section focuses upon the legacy of another secondary character, Jane, a woman who was cast out of from her pre-revolutionary community in *All I Could Never Be*. Expelled from Oakdale, her family's village for generations, owing to her father's bankruptcy, Jane endures the ruptures resulting from her current isolation. This woman, whose surname is never revealed, finds an anchorage against her uprooting in the rootedness of her farm, as well as the comfort of her belongings. Beyond the personal sphere, but always entangled with it, the history of her ancestors, in whose pages a woman's place is denied, is deeply present in her life. More precisely, the second part of this section examines how Jane's personal history is, to an extent, the result of the discontinuity of women's history in Oakdale since the Puritans' arrival in New England centuries before.

The impossibility of continuity both between temporalities and between texts, particularly in the case of women writers, such as Yeziarska, underpins the pervasive nature of biblical tradition in *Red Ribbon*. From her inability to read biblical texts to her precarious position as a woman writer, the ongoing struggle for a literary tradition marks the life and work of the protagonist. This notion of legacy, the passing down of

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<sup>311</sup> Fog Olwig, 'Moving Memories and Memories of Moves' in *Memories on the Move*, p. 281.

something from generation to generation, demands the examination of what was left behind, and, even, the questioning of whether there is something left behind at all. In a monograph that revisits Derrida's writings on legacy, as well as his own legacy, the authors of the introduction provide an apposite reflection on this intricate term:

In a systematic fashion then, one is looking for something that is passed over, a gift passed on to the circle of mourners. Animated by one question, we wonder relentlessly what is the heritage with which we are left? Some paper, some thing that will testify, to the satisfaction of all, what has been left—behind, before, between. In this frantic analysis of the remains of the dead, of his belongings and possessions, in the hope of finding a homogenous given, we are halted. Resistance to this inquiry is fusing from all sides; we are caught in our own game—in its tight and unimaginative rules of inheritance—unable to find what we came looking for, forgetting that it is for what and who is lost in the first place that we engaged in this search.<sup>312</sup>

The present recovery of the remains of the dead demands the mourners the re-examination, and hence, the reinterpretation, of these physical traces from the past. The search itself assumes the existence of a missing object retrievable in the present that traces an unbroken route between particular pasts and the instance of retrieval. Thus, mourners often expect legacies to defeat the passage of time by the creation of a present-past in which the latter survives in the former in order to grapple with death. However, the potential outcomes of the remnants are manifold: they might remain

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<sup>312</sup> Glorieux and Hasimbegovic, 'Introduction: Inheriting Deconstruction, Surviving Derrida', in *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy: Negotiating the Legacy*, p. 3.

partially, they might be lost along the way, or they might even never have been there in the first place. In other words, in lieu of a homogeneous legacy, heritages exist as fragmented, incomplete pictures of the deceased that testify to the impossibility of a return to the past. In indicating the absences that lie at their origins, material heritages, such as literary legacies, demonstrate the impossibility of retrieval of what was actually left behind. Therefore, the search for a legacy only leads us to a presence that can never be grasped as before, owing to temporality that continues to change both mourners and missing objects. Yeziarska's discovery of an inconsistent history belonging to previous writers in her friend Jeremiah's papers captures this broken lineage between generations. The heritages testify to missing individuals and their stories in a dynamic relationship between temporalities which ultimately undermines continuity between past and present. Written records, such as Yeziarska's oeuvre, constitute the reshaping of the past through the prism of the present that ultimately unveils the multiple interruptions that pertain to these legacies.

As a precursor of Yeziarska's Jeremiah Kintzler, the biblical Jeremiah also partakes in the ongoing intertwinement between written legacies and their destruction. In the Book of Jeremiah, this prophet constantly writes records of events, albeit sometimes prophecies, which testify to the existence of the Israelites' communal past.<sup>313</sup> In this book, God commands the namesake prophet to document what He will recount to him about Israel and Judah: 'the Lord spoke to Jeremiah. The Lord God of Israel says, "Write everything that I am about to tell you in a scroll"'.<sup>314</sup> After Jehoiakim, King of Judah, burns this scroll, Jeremiah records God's prophecies regarding the impending capture by Babylon of Israel and Judah, as well as the

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<sup>313</sup> See the the book of Jeremiah for a more detailed account of the prophet's life in *Tanakh: The Jewish Bible: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), pp. 763-982.

<sup>314</sup> Jeremiah, 30:2 in *Tanakh: The Jewish Bible*, p. 870.

destruction of Jerusalem: ‘so Jeremiah wrote in a book all the evil that should come upon Babylon, even all these words that are written against Babylon’.<sup>315</sup> Echoing these episodes, this time following God’s command, Seraiah, a military man, is instructed to destroy this new scroll by tossing it into the river Euphrates. This way, in this course of events in which episodes are retold in different documents, the nature of this biblical book encompasses complex dynamics of writing and its destruction. Coupled with the survival of these records through the rewriting of these collective narratives is the inherent notion of discontinuity from preceding accounts. In their survival, Jeremiah’s scrolls become lost legacies which, in preserving the past, transmit the missing pieces evidenced in the process of rewriting of the past. Since the story also relates that the one inherits the book is left with the task of its destruction, the biblical tale echoes the tension between the modern Jeremiah and Yeziarska as his heir.

For Yeziarska, the writings of her late friend Jeremiah Kintzler capture discontinuities with her personal and communal past in similar fashion to the cycle of writing and destruction prevalent in this prophet’s biblical legacy. If ‘in order to respect the absence [of the past], there always needs to be some place for it’, in Yeziarska’s case, legacies entwine with, and even become, instances of multiple discontinuities with preceding writers.<sup>316</sup> As the author of the history of Talmudic literature, and a study of the Baal Shem Tov, Kintzler looks to diverse sources of biblical and secular continuity in his writing. Meanwhile, Yeziarska, a woman, is faced with the obstacles of coping with his death through legacies in which women are absent in a broken chain between pasts. During a heated dispute with other workers over his refusal to do his assignments, which he considers demeaning for a

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<sup>315</sup> Jeremiah, 51:60 in *Tanakh: The Jewish Bible*, p. 421.

<sup>316</sup> Glorieux and Hasimbegovic, ‘Introduction: Inheriting Deconstruction, Surviving Derrida’, in *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy: Negotiating the Legacy*, p. 4.

man of his genius, Jeremiah Kintzler collapses and dies in the director's office. After an ambulance removes his corpse, Yeziarska collects his briefcase, containing his manuscript, from the floor, and rushes through the streets to her home:

No one noticed me as I carried Jeremiah's brief case out of the hall. I hurried through the streets, tense with excitement. I felt that Jeremiah had entrusted me with the fruit of his life—a manuscript that no eye but his had yet seen.

In my room I threw off hat and coat, impatient to open the brief case. But where was the manuscript he had talked about and for which he had fought and died? I hunted, and only papers of all sizes, clippings, scribbled envelopes, and bunches of notes, fell out. At the bottom was a mess of stuff, as if the trash from the wastebasket had been dumped there.<sup>317</sup>

Yeziarska's expectations are broken into pieces in an encounter in which fragments of written works imply the literal and figurative destruction of her heritage. Unlike the biblical Jeremiah, Kintzler does not leave behind a written document beyond broken fragments that are silent witnesses to a finished, unrecorded life. After the removal of his corpse from the building, the presumed manuscript becomes his only remnants, the testimony that Kintzler once existed, and the past actually occurred. Yet these 'papers of all sizes' constitute a tradition of discontinuity which shatters her expectations of a reliable legacy to which *Red Ribbon* could belong. Acting as the uncertain obituary of a missing friend, the crumpled papers best represent the passage of time, including Yeziarska's own aging. Despite her lifelong struggle for a literary career, Kintzler's papers force her to confront the impossibility for women writers of

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<sup>317</sup>Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 191.



reconstructing a heritage. If the pieces of his former life cannot be put together into a coherent narrative, neither can his legacy serve as a personal record of a shared past between pariah writers. The past belonged to Kintzler, whose dialogue with preceding sources breaks into different routes for her, accentuating her inability to put together pieces already broken. In her pursuit for a past, beyond the futility of her friend's endeavors, Yeziarska stumbles upon the impossibility to render her own lifetime onto words. In this encounter which materializes the absence of Kintzler and the absence of a past, the traces also reaffirm the differences between men's and women's literary histories.

As literary remnants, Kintzler's belongings establish a series of traces which mark several instances in which Yeziarska's literary heritage breaks from her present. If, as mentioned previously, 'what organises our reaction, what informs our attention to the event is an act of disappearance, a noticeable absence', in *Red Ribbon* this absence multiplies into different traces.<sup>318</sup> Yeziarska's double burden as a woman writer in search for her predecessors coalesces in this broken chain between writers which ultimately looks back beyond her friend's jottings. To be more precise, Kintzler's death evidences the absence of a literary legacy for Yeziarska, since, unlike him, she has no access to a religious tradition that she could imitate. As opposed to her friend, owing to her limited instruction, the protagonist cannot fathom to write in view of a religious past which, from the Bal Shem Tov to Spinoza, could ground her writing. Besides her own artistic difficulties, Yeziarska's encounter with Kintzler's writings forces her to acknowledge her equally important vexed relationship to literary tradition. Yeziarska ponders on the inability of writers to transfer their passions into words, and their concomitant penury, both of which connect the two

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<sup>318</sup> Glorieux and Hasimbegovic, 'Introduction: Inheriting Deconstruction, Surviving Derrida', in *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, p. 3.

frustrated authors. Therefore, in her despair, she decides to take a drastic route, by which not only Jeremiah's documents, but also her own writings, will share the fate of destruction:

Suddenly, roused from the nightmare of waste and loss, I  
picked up the brief case, carried it downstairs and emptied it  
into the ash can.

Like a sleepwalker, I returned to my room, gathered all my  
notes, my boxes of manuscripts, and carried them down to  
mingle my wasted years with Jeremiah's.<sup>319</sup>

This instant gestures towards a series of fragmented, unrecorded narratives in Yeziarska's words that echo the writing and erasing in the scrolls of the biblical Jeremiah. The destruction of both Yeziarska's and Kintzler's work reaffirms her preceding realization of a past marked by absences that fail to produce an unbroken chain. Through this brusque resolution, reminiscent of the prophet's toss of the scrolls, as a woman, Yeziarska actually departs from the destruction of these parchments. 'My wasted years' are her wasted pages in which she joins other women in her loneliness, her writing, her inability to write and her fractured relationship with the past. Despite her financial success, here Yeziarska refers to her spiritual scarcity caused not only by the constraints enforced upon women during her time, but also by her lack of references in both secular and traditional sources. In her despair amidst Kintzler's remnants, Yeziarska confronts her loneliness, which culminates in her inability to put together these scattered pieces from former texts. The excision of women from traditional sources relates to this secular burden in a search for a past that turns these absences into broken presences in the text. The book of Jeremiah,

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<sup>319</sup> Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, p. 191.

with its complex, lengthy accounts of the Israelites and the prophet himself, does not exist in *Red Ribbon* beyond brief, sporadic quotations.<sup>320</sup> Neither religion nor a secular tradition are granted to her, since, like Jewish tradition, the American literary establishment was too dominated by men to allow a woman's voice at the time. In fact, Yeziarska's marginality from both heritages constantly recurs in her inability to find a place in the American letters throughout the narrative. Unlike in the works of both Jeremiahs, in the words of the protagonist, despite its relevance, the past entwines both biblical and American heritages in its disconnection from her present.

Amidst these different genealogies for men and women, discontinuity becomes the only form of continuity for Yeziarska, merging life and death, literature and silence on these pages. Although defined as 'a break from time, the fracture between eras, the gaping void separating fathers from sons', in this case, tradition echoes multiple fractures in the disrupted continuity that separates fathers and daughters.<sup>321</sup> While in the book of Jeremiah prevail the requests for the destruction of former narratives, through the narratives of these accounts, the tossed scrolls later turn into intrinsic parts of the prophet's story. Like Yeziarska's account of Kintzler's documents, the new versions of these accounts rendered in this biblical book are the reinterpretations of the former accounts. The 'wasted years' echo both temporalities, and the personal failure through which time escapes from her in the writing of the narrative that rewrites these missing links. Writing about destruction, including, importantly, her own frustrations as a writer, is the only way of writing, hence writing carries for her stories left untold. The salvage of Kintzler's manuscript, and its subsequent relinquishment, are as an intrinsic part of *Red Ribbon* as Yeziarska's struggle with her haunting, yet broken, past. Yeziarska's account mirrors the prophet

<sup>320</sup> For biblical quotations present in the text, see Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, pp. 32-33, 92-93 and p. 217.

<sup>321</sup> Stephane Moses, 'The Theological-Political Model of History in the Thought of Walter Benjamin', 1989, *History and Memory*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall-Winter, 1989), p. 15 (pp. 5-33).

in its rewriting from preceding versions, now unknown, through which writing is predicated on the break from preceding texts that asserts the importance of her present. However, the relationship between both figures is far away from this simplicity: the disposal of the documents only joins the biblical Jeremiah and Yeziarska in the destruction of a literary heritage. Rather, considering her detachment from traditional sources, Yeziarska, unlike Kintzler, only partakes of a religious literary tradition through the formal gaps of her account.

In another quest for a past, in *All I Could Never Be*, regardless of her non-Puritan origins, Fanya Ivanowna struggles to share a Puritan past with her new neighbors in Oakdale. Whereas Puritanism invites American writers to ‘find typology similarly resonant with their own experiences, interests and hopes—or phrase their divergent interests and aspirations’, the Puritan framework that structures *All I Could Never Be* fragments into different narratives.<sup>322</sup> Ivanowna covets and admires the Puritan past of rootedness and belonging in the same land through generations entwined with the origins and source of American history. Her hankering to belong in Oakdale leads her to her search for knowledge about the Puritan origins of the village, which culminates in her contrasting views of this communal past. The prosthetic past that she endeavors to borrow changes from her persistent awe at the wealth and kindness of the villagers in her early days in Oakdale to her subsequent rapport with the marginal Jane.<sup>323</sup> The Puritan tradition, with its promise of continuity acquirable through literature and rootedness in the land, bifurcates into narratives of success and failure. If ‘the events of [Jane’s] life were a worn-out story among her neighbors’, this ‘worn-out story’ showcases the multiple breaks existing in Oakdale’s Puritan

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<sup>322</sup> Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 56.

<sup>323</sup> See Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, for an in-depth analysis of the notion of prosthetic pasts itself, and its presence in American culture.

history.<sup>324</sup> Both women, Ivanowna, and her friend Jane, are victims of this intricate tradition of discontinuity that banishes women from the mainstream history of the village.

In *All I Could Never Be*, the fractures of Jane's life story, narrated in the epilogue set in Oakland, inform the myth of Puritanism as the origin of America. Werner Sollors touches on the ability of Puritan tradition to transcend the ruptures of emigration and cultural difference: 'Puritanism had created cultural mechanisms to transmit even discontinuity'.<sup>325</sup> Puritan narratives enable diverse collectivities and literary genres across different temporalities to embody an updated and modified account of American origins. The flexible nature of this Protestant legacy, which builds bridges across ruptures and conflicts, might serve disparate narratives from women's literature to twentieth-century literature. Sollors's words bear relevance regarding the discontinuity between this Protestant tradition that laid the foundation of America and *All I Could Never Be*. His assertion echoes in the interplay between the village and Jane's detachment from it caused by class dynamics that use deprivation as a reason for her exclusion. Jane's home, a derelict farm on the outskirts of Oakland, distanced from all other houses, encapsulates this sense of discontinuity from and within the Puritan narrative. Since her family's bankruptcy decades before, Jane remains a pariah who does not interact with the other villagers, experiencing a concomitant cultural break from her past. When Ivanowna decides to visit her, regardless of her neighbors' persistent efforts to dissuade her, she encounters the other side of the narrative of Puritan prosperity:

Fanya ventured out to Jane's farm, in spite of the neighbors' warnings. Her house was a moldering wooden structure,

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<sup>324</sup> Yeziarska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 225.

<sup>325</sup> Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 56.

overgrown with weeds and tall grass. The front door and all the front windows were shut. The ragged curtains, seen through the windows, were black with dust. Decay and desolation spread like a fungus growth over the place.<sup>326</sup>

Through this image of her friend's dereliction, Ivanowna's search for her personal past amidst the villagers evinces the lacunae in the Puritan narrative. Both Jane and her dwelling connote the seemingly lost glories of an ancient era of Puritan prosperity and stability, marred by the upheavals of industrialization and social change in the metropolis. Ruins testify to the passage of time, its ability to erode and destroy any man-made construction, and, concomitantly, the loss of the narratives associated with these material remnants. The decaying farm that denotes the collapse of Jane's prosperous family and the vanity of prosperity that is evidenced by how little remains of this history conveys more than Jane's financial decline. The presence of ruins symbolizes fractures within places and between times: 'ruins testify to the impermanence rather than fixity of place, the discontinuities rather than linearity of time'.<sup>327</sup> Besides Jane's personal history of expulsion from the village, the property hints towards the discontinuities of her social heritage as a woman in a Puritan community. The decayed farm reveals the gaps in the Puritan narrative of the upper-class villagers, which erase impoverished women who must vanish from the village. Yet, despite its survival, the farm questions the narrative told by the villagers without positing a counternarrative that could threaten Oakdale's establishment. The house and its owner exist as marginal remnants of a different past, a past marked by poverty and neglect that stands at odds with the Oakdale's prosperity. Although present in

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<sup>326</sup> Yeziarska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 226.

<sup>327</sup> Max Silverman, 'Memory Traces: Patrick Chamoiseau and Rodolphe Hammadi's "Guyane: Traces-mémoires du baigne"', *Yale French Studies*, No. 118/119, *Noeuds de mémoire: Multidirectional Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture* (2010), p. 226 (pp. 225-238).

Ivanowna's narrative, she is relegated to marginality in the imagined account of Oakdale's origins and evolution told by its inhabitants.

In its dereliction, the farm, despite its apparently monolithic nature, falls into metaphorical pieces suggestive of the absences of other Puritan women besides Jane. The grass and plants overgrow, the window dust accumulates, the wood slowly languishes, and the curtains, already rags, continue to tear into pieces, as the narrative suggests multiple breaks. In lieu of a unique origin, namely Oakdale's narrative of progress from oppression in England to the Promised Land, Jane's farm exposes the gaps of this account. The most obvious examples are perhaps the erasure of Jane's departure from the community and her family's financial loss from the official narrative of the village's history. The fate of women like Jane moves them away from history, to a retired place whose ruinous nature erodes the permanence of the ancient, august residences in Oakdale. This description of the fragile structure leaves untold stories about Jane's arrival in the area and her life during these decades, which points to the existence of further breaks in the epilogue. The multiple cracks inflicted by time upon her home reproduce the personal and communal breaks upon these different narratives about the life of Puritan women. The cracks in Jane's house materialize the cracks of history through which women have fallen through the ages, away from the written words of Puritan history. From the invasive grass to the ragged curtains, the different damages in the building hint at stories left untold, both in Ivanowna's epilogue and in the account of Jane's former neighbors.

In a different scene between the protagonist and her silent friend, continuity and rupture between temporalities persist in marking Ivanowna's New England account with a broken pattern. If Jane's story is 'a counter-narrative in which testimony becomes guided by voids rather than points of presence', these voids, both thematic

and formal, leave their imprint in the scaffolding of the epilogue.<sup>328</sup> Harmless to other villagers owing to her powerlessness, Jane's existence carries the burden of the unwritten, the silences of haunting personal and communal narratives. Some time following the visit to Jane's farm, Ivanowna once again encounters her friend, who shows her a newspaper story about independent plane trips: "Look!" she smiled, and there was something like excitement in her usually hollow voice. "Here's someone from your New York"<sup>329</sup>. Jane reveals that she reads the newspaper every day, and remains interested in the outside world, after which the final scene of the epilogue closes with their silent farewell:

Jane shambled off to her cart, and Fanya saw how the villagers moved carefully aside as she passed them, unaware of their hygienic shudders.

Fanya looked after her until she disappeared. When she was gone, Fanya stood motionless at the door, holding the newspaper Jane had brought her, so strangely happy she was filled with smiling compassion for those who condemned her.<sup>330</sup>

Jane's history is a matter of gestures and silences, that is, gaps that barely make known any details about her life, and also question what, if anything, will remain of her. Similarly, in the Puritan imaginary, America becomes 'a land of new beginnings, where the burdens of the past would be shrugged off and the road to salvation opened wide'.<sup>331</sup> The newspaper allows for a kindred reading, a memento of a different kind as its content undermines its connection with the past through its constant return to

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<sup>328</sup> Dylan Trigg, 'The Place of Trauma: Memory, Hauntings, and the Temporality of Ruins', *Memory Studies*, Vol. 2(1) (2009), p. 89 (pp. 87-101).

<sup>329</sup> Yezierska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 225.

<sup>330</sup> Yezierska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 232.

<sup>331</sup> Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street*, p. 1.



the present. Newspapers are symbols of ephemera, of the present; unlike books, they are not meant to last: they are meant to be discarded and bear little value beyond the transitory. Unlike her Puritan ancestors, and, even, unlike Ivanowna, Jane has no written account of her life, however partial, that can testify to her existence after her death. Thus, her newspaper denotes continuous new beginnings by gesturing towards what is missing in Ivanowna's biography of her friend: records of women's lives that would grant her a history beyond her loneliness. In lieu of these records, the epilogue of Yezierska's final work reiterates the pervasive nature of these absences in a continuum that joins past and present. The material, in this case, persists as a transient symbol of the present, the minutiae of everyday life that characterizes the absence of permanent records that could aid Ivanowna in her search. The newspaper, which involves a rite of continuity through the ongoing oblivion of current events, relates to the absence of documents that records women's past for the sake of posterity.

This scene, which is also the final encounter between the two women, constitutes an abrupt ending through which formal aspects recall these thematic ruptures. The constant search for the 'the city upon a hill' that guides Ivanowna to Oakdale provides a narrative guided by the shared voids of history and literature. The departure has already taken place in a different way, since the narrative was already broken in the discontinuities of Jane's story and the communal story through her house. The farewell echoes preceding, abrupt exchanges, from their first encounter to their last, sometimes wordless, and always pervaded by mutual silences.<sup>332</sup> From her house to her belongings, passing through her behavior, Jane's existence constitutes a broken chain of a fragile tradition in which traces are suggestive of this broken narrative. The continuities and ruptures produced by individuals, which, according to

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<sup>332</sup> See their previous encounters in Yezierska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 225 and pp. 226-229.

Fog Olwig, criss-cross personal and historical periods, here intersect in Jane's history and her communal past.<sup>333</sup> Jane's silences and omissions ultimately become the only story left of her life, leaving Ivanowna a legacy of absences that, closely read, refuses to provide a coherent version of the past. The lack of detail in the scene, for instance, Jane's allusion to Ivanowna's foreign origins in the metropolis, mirrors the silence of marginal women from former times. Ivanowna's inability to account for her past in *All I Could Never Be* culminates in this abrupt denouement through which Jane's fragmented story emerges as the only possible legacy for working-class women.

Similarly to *Red Ribbon*, in *All I Could Never Be*, the constraints of history hinder the possibilities of early-twentieth century women to possess a usable past. In its exploration of the tie between literature and tradition, this section built upon the claim that 'what organises our reaction, what informs our attention to the event is an act of disappearance, a noticeable absence'.<sup>334</sup> Yeziarska occupies many pages of *Red Ribbon* with her recurrent quest for a literary heritage that can validate, and, potentially, give weight to her writings. Eventually, Kintzler's writings force the reckoning of this absence of a past to which she can belong, like her dead friend did, intimating the absences exposed by his death. As opposed to Yeziarska in *Red Ribbon*, Jane does not search for a heritage; she merely finds herself a piece in a broken narrative of deracination from her previous lack of roots. Ivanowna's and Yeziarska's struggle for material prosperity amidst their poverty, particularly after their fall from grace, solidifies into different responses to their personal and communal pasts. Indeed, from analyzing the absences that manifest in *Red Ribbon* owing to Kintzler's death, to Jane's ever-dying heritage in *All I Could Never Be*, we can see that this instant of disappearance takes different forms in both texts. Both

<sup>333</sup> Fog Olwig, 'Moving Memories and Memories of Moves', in *Memories on the Move*, p. 281.

<sup>334</sup> Glorieux and Hasimbegovic, 'Introduction: Inheriting Deconstruction, Surviving Derrida', in *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, p. 3.

narratives demonstrate, in different ways, the centrality of the written word in the retrieval of traditions, and the accompanying broken, truncated nature of these legacies.

## **Chapter 4: Mother Tongues and Impossible Legacies: English as a Language between the Past and the Present in the Writings of Lewisohn, Antin and Cahan**

### **4.1. Overview**

The final chapter of this dissertation turns to language, memory and narrative in order to focus upon tongues as routes, instead of roots, towards the past, as well as routes in themselves. Tongues, such as the English of these narratives, convey the disruptions of personal and communal history, including their own history, through their lexicon, syntax and other features. This last chapter develops ideas from the preceding three chapters, while it also returns to the first chapter in its emphasis upon the past as a narrative of related events arranged in their temporal sequence, retold and rewritten from the present. Previous notions of narration as rewriting and erasure, alongside considerations of the textual and historical discontinuities that shape these texts, discussed in chapters 1 and 2, coalesce in the following two sections. An examination of the linguistic features in these texts evidences that, in its rewriting of the past, language itself contains histories of erasure and discontinuity. With this in mind, three texts, Cahan's *Yekl*, Lewisohn's *Up Stream*, and Antin's *The Promised Land* will be the focal point of this chapter. This introduction first elaborates these ideas, referring to the theories behind them, and later relates its premises to literary scholarship on the texts. Moreover, for the sake of clarity, brief explanations of the linguistic background of the authors is provided, in addition to an overview of *Yekl*, the only text unexamined until now.

The theoretical framework for this chapter draws on Bartoloni's *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing*, Lauret's *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* and Wirth-Nesher's *Call It English. On the*

*Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing* supplies elaborate readings about narration and memory while considering the centrality of absence in this relation. Despite its occasional ahistoricism, this monograph sheds light upon the nature of language, including its narrative form, as haunted by the omissions entailed by its very existence. *Wanderwords* is particularly useful for its detailed reading of languages in American literature, away from abstract, atemporal notions of language common in contemporary discourse. Specifically, this chapter further pursues Lauret's reading of different tongues as part of a narrative of historical routes instead of the embodiment of their own roots. The relevance of *Call It English* for this thesis lies in its reading of languages, particularly Jewish languages, as reminders of the foreign personal history of their speakers. Even so, as will be seen below, this chapter inverts this reading of languages as mementoes of other homes now lost in order to demonstrate that the persistence of native tongues can also echo oblivion. This chapter's core contribution encompasses historicized readings of language in the primary sources that shed light upon the intricate relations between tongues. In relation to this, oblivion emerges as an intrinsic part of remembrance, here understood as the erasure of the memories of foreign pasts from the texts.

*Call It English* identifies the linguistic heritage of American Jewry, although sometimes fragmentary in its iterations, as a treasure of multiple European geographies. Wirth-Nesher examines the presence of foreign tongues in Jewish-American literature from the nineteenth-century to the present, including the cultural aspects of this multilingual heritage.<sup>335</sup> Dealing with issues such as monolingualism, multilingualism, diction and translation, Wirth-Nesher demonstrates the persistence of linguistic diversity in Jewish-American literature. In chapter 3, she notes, for instance,

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<sup>335</sup> See Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature*.

the mnemonic essence of Antin's foreign speech: 'the immigrant Mary Antin could not pass over in speech, because her acculturated body resisted the ambitions of her mind'.<sup>336</sup> For this scholar, Antin's inflections, marked by her native Yiddish acquired in her years in Polotzk, bear the unerasable traces of her foreign past prior to her arrival in America. Despite its acknowledgment of Antin's difficulties in passing as an American owing to her un-American accent, this chapter does not merely consider linguistic traces, whether lexical, syntactical or phonetic patterns, pieces of the past. Rather, this chapter, particularly the section devoted to *The Promised Land*, examines the multiple ways in which tongues rewrite and erase the pasts they supposedly evoke. Although her body 'constituted the obstacle to her complete transformation', Antin's passage from Russia to America deserves further attention in view of the complexities of these traces and the texts they retell.<sup>337</sup>

In a manner similar to its rereading of language and the past in *Call It English*, this chapter draws on Lauret's *Wanderwords*, a seminal text on the study of American literature and multilingualism. In this monograph, Lauret looks at the interactions between languages in immigrant American literature, with a particular focus upon the presence of foreign words in otherwise English texts. Lauret argues against simplistic connections between foreign words and the origins they seem to embody: 'words, phrases and passages of non-English in the American English text are markers of migrant writers' and migrant writing's wandering and meandering: they betoken routes more than roots'.<sup>338</sup> In her introduction, Lauret defines 'wanderwords' as 'words and phrases in other languages that disrupt, enchant, occlude or highlight the taken-for-granted English of American literature'.<sup>339</sup> Consequently, her coinage refers

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<sup>336</sup> Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, p. 56.

<sup>337</sup> Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, p. 56.

<sup>338</sup> Lauret, *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature*, p. 2.

<sup>339</sup> Lauret, *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature*, p. 2.

to foreign, non-English words that frequently appear in American writings, emphasizing the multilingual nature of American literature. As she notes, wanderwords do not merely evoke the past, proving, for instance, the existence of a Russian heritage behind Antin's sporadic Russian terms in *The Promised Land*. Rather, these wanderwords 'disrupt, enchant, occlude or highlight' not only the English of American literature, but also the versions of the past they attempt to recreate. Since they indicate routes more than roots, the words of these three texts demonstrate the wanderings of language, and also, this chapter contends, the wanderings of history.

This thesis takes a different turn from Lauret's emphasis upon foreign words, shifting the focus to the English words and grammar of the chosen narratives. Yiddish, Antin's and Cahan's mother tongue, as well as that of their protagonists, has been regarded as 'the language of death', embedded with the memories of the Old World.<sup>340</sup> The Shoah, which devastated most Yiddish-speaking communities in Eastern Europe, only contributed to this perception of Yiddish as the language of the past for Ashkenazi Jewry. Without denying the linguistic evolution in which American Jewry often shed off Yiddish and other tongues, replacing them with English, this thesis delves into the relationship between English and the past. On the one hand, English is certainly a necessary means to an end: a passport to Americanness that can help immigrants climb the financial ladder from poverty to a middle class life. As a corollary, English proficiency often has an ambivalent relationship with this multilingual past: for instance, unlike immigrants, their descendants are likely to have English as their mother tongue. On the other hand, in the chosen primary texts, English words betoken perambulations across different

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<sup>340</sup> Alyssa Quint, 'The Botched Kiss and the Beginnings of the Yiddish Stage', in *Culture Front: Representing Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Benjamin Nathans and Gabriella Safran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 93 (pp. 79-102).

geographies that do not necessarily return to their origins in England. Like Lauret's foreign wanderwords, the English of these texts conveys the routes of former lives and memories, and also, perhaps less obviously, the routes of the texts themselves.

In Antin's, Cahan's and Lewisohn's works, English accounts for particular histories, while, at the same time, it fails to account for other histories, or, to evince the absences in those already retold. Certainly, English, despite its numerable dialects and variants across the Anglophone world, bears a particular history that traces its origins back to England. However, this history is beyond the scope of this dissertation; moreover, this linguistic history bears little relevance in the issues at hand. Rather, this chapter considers the idiolects of each selected text, their word choices, syntactical patterns, and, in Antin's case, phonetic features, taking as its focus the particularities of language in this text. Beyond the linguistic journey of their protagonists, mainly defined by English acquisition, an exploration of these texts underscores the nuances of their personal histories. For instance, in its polished English, *Up Stream* conveys a history of assimilation into Southern values and the haunting nature of the German past of the protagonist. In the same vein, here language not only retells history, but often contributes to its omission: 'what we see, what we narrate as memory, represents itself, but it also gestures to what is missing'.<sup>341</sup> To follow this example, while the diction of *Up Stream* denotes its foreign past, its words also preclude the recovery of this foreign past, often even obfuscating the German years of the protagonist.

*Yekl* focuses upon a few months in the life of a poor immigrant man named Yekl, who Americanizes his name to Jake after his arrival in America from the Russian Pale. Once the narrative begins, Yekl has already lived in the New York

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<sup>341</sup> Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing*, p. 51.



ghetto for three years, after departing alone from Povodye, a Russian village, in search of a better life. Although his finances improve, he labors as a factory worker with other immigrant men and women, while, as a native Yiddish speaker, he strives to improve his poor English. In the fourth chapter, ‘The Meeting’, his wife, Gitl, and his son, arrive from the Pale to be reunited with him. The arrival causes major disruptions in his life: in her attire, mannerisms, religious customs, and her inability to speak English, Gitl reminds Yekl of his own foreignness. Unlike his wife, who holds on to her traditions, Yekl abandoned religious observance long ago; an ironic tension considering that his American name, Jake, echoes the Israelite Jacob.<sup>342</sup> After several disputes, their marriage dissolves, after which their lives go separate ways: Yekl is now engaged to Mamie, an Americanized lady, and Gitl hopes to marry Bernstein, an observant man. Although Yekl and Gitl hail from foreign, traditional backgrounds, always present in their impediments to master English, their paths lead them on separate ways in their American journeys.

In contrast with Yekl, who manages to communicate in rudimentary English, Gitl, who endeavors to acquire English, constantly falls behind in her learning. To her husband’s despair, the woman cannot relinquish her accent, an imprint of her native Lithuanian Yiddish, or her multiple lexical and syntactical errors, another imprint of her foreignness. Although Yekl shares her native dialect, the novella draws attention to the various dialects, tongues and cultures that coexisted in the immigrant ghetto. The multilingualism and multiculturalism of *Yekl* have been issues of interest for

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<sup>342</sup> See Genesis 32:28 and Genesis 35:9 in *Tanakh: The Jewish Bible*, p. 58 and p. 62, respectively. For the original words in Hebrew please see, *Koren Classic Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 1961).

literary scholars, such as Aviva Taubenfeld, who compares *Yekl* with its Yiddish version *Yankel der Yankee*:<sup>343</sup>

*Yankel* comes from the town of Povodye, the author from elsewhere in Lithuania, the audience from all over Eastern Europe, but by calling the thousands of places they left behind “home” and invoking their shared experiences, the narrator helps to turn the “hodgepodge” of the Lower East Side into siblings of a new family to establish a unified ethnic community in America. He creates his characters, audience, and himself into a people with a common history and home even before their arrival in the United States.<sup>344</sup>

As opposed to the extensive research devoted to the assimilation and hybridity of the protagonist and the Lower East Side, his wife has received much less scholarly attention, with the exception of a few articles and book chapters in recent decades. In this research, Gitl has frequently been regarded as the emblem of Old World values, women’s religious rites, and a rural, almost medieval way of life. For instance, Sabine Haenni defines Gitl as the ‘the Old-World wife’, and Linda S. Raphael explicitly refers to this character as ‘a symbol of the Old World’.<sup>345</sup> Another critic, Cathy J. Schlunds Vials affirms that, ‘Gitl is representative of a bucolic Russia that fits

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<sup>343</sup> See, for instance, Sanford E. Marovitz, “YEKL:” The Ghetto Realism of Abraham Cahan’, *American Literary Realism*, 1870-1910, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Fall, 1969), pp. 271-273, and Sonya Michel, “Yekl” and “Hester Street”: Was Assimilation Really Good for the Jews?, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring, 1977), pp. 142-146.

<sup>344</sup> Taubenfeld, “Only an ‘L’”, pp. 159-160.

<sup>345</sup> Sabine Haenni, ‘Visual and Theatrical Culture, Tenement Fiction, and the Immigrant Subject in Abraham Cahan’s “Yekl”’, *American Literature*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (Sep., 1999), p. 517 (pp. 493-527), and Linda S. Raphael, ‘There’s No Space Like Home: The Representation of Jewish American Life’ in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. by Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 438 (pp. 433-458), respectively.

uneasily within New York urbanity and capitalist-driven modernity'.<sup>346</sup> Thus, although Gitl comes from 'a people with a common history and home', like other immigrant Jews, her status as a woman precludes her Americanization. Restricted to the domestic sphere, she remains marginal to American and Jewish traditions, a premise that this chapter intends to develop in relation to her linguistic journey. In other words, this chapter considers Gitl's English not only as a sign of her arduous assimilation, but also as a tongue marked by the stories of her foreign life. Therefore, it is important to notice that this thesis departs from the views of Gitl as a static figure; rather, she is a woman on her way to Americanization, but still haunted by the routes of her past. The section on *Yekl* responds to this sparse attention to Gitl's presence in the text, while considering the centrality of her English as a reminder of her distance from her past.

Unlike *Yekl*, where the diction often contains words from foreign tongues, a polished, formal register of English, with no foreign words whatsoever, defines *Up Stream*. Whereas the common spelling mistakes in *Yekl* underscore different dialects, particularly Polish and Lithuanian Yiddish, in *Up Stream* none of these appreciations are even mentioned. Despite these differences, German does not merely vanish from Lewisohn's autobiography: the protagonist frequently refers to his mother tongue in the opening chapters and later becomes a German instructor for a brief time. German emerges in the text as an object of loss, related to his childhood years, although the narrator clearly privileges English literature and American matters over his 'far childhood'.<sup>347</sup> With this context in view, this chapter provides a nuanced reading of the presence of German in the text, focusing upon its persistent traces behind the English words of its protagonist. As in the case of *Yekl*, the English of the narrative

<sup>346</sup> Cathy J. Schlunds Vials, *Modeling Citizenship: Jewish and Asian American Writing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), p. 47.

<sup>347</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 11.

does not retrieve the past, but rather distances the present from the past while revealing the persistence of its absence. Thus, considering that ‘much of *Up Stream* is full of longing, of nostalgia and poetic renderings of former times and places’, this chapter scrutinizes the medium through which these feelings manifest.<sup>348</sup> In doing so, the entanglements between the absences and the rewritings of history and language in these ‘renderings of former times and places’ come to the fore.

In its relationship to foreign tongues, *The Promised Land* falls in-between the often Yiddishized English of *Yekl*’s characters and the refined, archaic English of *Up Stream*. Born in the Russian Pale, Antin spoke Russian and Yiddish, knew basic Hebrew, and only acquired English in American schools after her arrival in Boston. Despite her rhetorical skills, which made her an outstanding schoolgirl, Antin could shed her foreign accent, a perpetual reminder for her of her non-American origins. Thus, regardless of her literary achievements, exemplified in the completion of *The Promised Land*, Antin regards English, like her early linguistic heritage, as tainted by her different past. Writing on Antin’s endeavors to expel her foreign past in *The Promised Land*, Kellman comments that ‘yet a stubborn anterior world lurks behind every one of Antin’s English words’.<sup>349</sup> According to him, Antin’s English does not mean amnesia regarding her foreign past: ‘Antin’s zestful English prose betrays its origins and re-insinuates the past’.<sup>350</sup> Building upon Kellman’s conclusions, this chapter examines Antin’s English, together with its relationship with her previous tongues, in order to explore the changing, evasive nature of this lurking world. Therefore, like in the preceding texts, English comes to the fore, in this case as the medium that conveys both Antin’s journey across languages and her biographical wanderings.

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<sup>348</sup> Nilsen, ‘The Road to Judaism’, p. 59.

<sup>349</sup> Kellman, ‘Lost in the Promised Land’, p. 153.

<sup>350</sup> Kellman, ‘Lost in the Promised Land’, p. 153.

The two sections comprising this chapter are ‘Traces of German in Lewisohn’s *Up Stream* and Foreign Accent in Antin’s *The Promised Land*’ and ‘English Echoing the Past in Cahan’s *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*’. The first section provides an in-depth reading of Antin’s linguistic evolution in *The Promised Land*, paying close attention to her speech inflections and remaining linguistic remnants of the Old World. Like the following pages on *Up Stream*, the section places *The Promised Land* within a context dominated by Americanization that exhorts the protagonist to master America’s language. Regarding *Up Stream*, the first section provides close readings of a few scenes that enable us to discern the connections between the German past and its manifestations through language. The second section, centered exclusively on *Yekl*, analyzes the linguistic features of the text in relation to Gitl, Yekl’s wife, considering this woman as a dynamic, marginal character. This section also refers to the historical context shaping the narrative, particularly Gitl’s precarious position as a poor woman in America, as well as her relationship with her husband and her marginality in religious tradition. In view of this, like Lauret’s wanderwords, *Yekl*’s English suggests, while it also precludes, the persistence of Gitl’s experiences, memories, and customs.

#### 4.2. Traces of German in Lewisohn's *Up Stream* and Foreign Accent in Antin's *The Promised Land*

This section, focused upon Antin's *The Promised Land* and Lewisohn's *Up Stream*, examines the multiple ways in which English reaffirms the present through traces of the past. In these cases, memories, filtered through language, relate to multiple absences, mostly those embedded in the linguistic and historical journeys of the narrators in these texts. In *The Promised Land*, the ambiguity of Antin's foreign accent and the purity of her English, including its highly elevated tone, define her relationship with the past. Specifically, this section engages with Wirth-Nesher's reading of Antin's accent as both 'an emblem of the inescapability of personal history' and 'the writing onto the body of collective history'.<sup>351</sup> Antin's linguistic journey, embedded in her larger 'personal history', is, broadly speaking, a linear development from her multilingual background to English without the oblivion of the former. However, traces of her foreignness do not simply vanish, but instead permeate her English, suggesting the missing pieces left behind in this language acquisition. Her linguistic biography reproduces the memories that haunt her since her early years while these same traces also expose the absences behind these memories. Thus, building upon Wirth-Nesher's reading, the following pages demonstrate that, as emblems of the inescapability of her past, both accent and language connect the absences of Antin's personal history. The English of both autobiographies illustrates that both linguistic and historical features relate to multiple absences that intertwine throughout both narratives.

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<sup>351</sup> Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, p. 75.

Lewisohn and Antin share a commitment to Americanization that underpins their writings, where their polished English is a means to this end. Written in impeccable English, with no traces of foreign words or inflections, *Up Stream* creates a division between German and English as different worlds. Upon his arrival in the South, the narrator's relationship with German undergoes upheavals correlated with his devotion towards English literature as a cornerstone of the South. Close readings of early passages make clear the problematics behind readings which opposed German as a foreign tongue of his early years to English as the foundations of his new life. Specifically, this second part of this section focuses upon two scenes from the first two chapters of *Up Stream* to illustrate that its English cannot shed the traces of his German tongue. Therefore, this close reading focuses upon how the pure English of the text contains in itself 'the traces of the missing now engaged in dialectic with that which can be told'.<sup>352</sup> In other words, the English of the narrative suggests a foreign history, both personal and communal, without ever retracing this history beyond fragmented impressions. Although the relationship to language differs widely in both texts, they share the presence of fragmented, intertwined stories of languages, their histories, and other narratives.

On account of memories that refuse to vanish in the present, accent remains a mark of the personal history that accompanies Antin in her wanderings across America. Thus, Wirth-Nesher connects Antin's accent with memory, namely the remnants of her mother tongue in the American present regardless of fervent attempts to erase these marks: 'her body, the physical continuity that she asserted was no disadvantage in her conversion story, nevertheless constituted the obstacle to her complete transformation. For accent is the body remembering. The language into

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<sup>352</sup> Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing*, p. 53.

which she was born would inevitably leave its imprint'.<sup>353</sup> In its traces of Antin's journey across geographies, which encompasses, of course, her migration across times, the indelible speech places her in an ambiguous position that undermines her Americanness. Her scars tell a personal story of emigration from the Pale to America that betrays her foreign status in a journey from her home town that guides us to her present self in early-1910's Boston. However, this language, and the history it elicits, need to be interrogated beyond this conception of a unified linguistic code, whose remnants purportedly survive in the Boston slums. Although Antin's unmentioned adventures might appear in 'any volume of American feminine statistics', her accent undercuts both her Americanization and the survival of remnants from her past.<sup>354</sup> Towards the end of her narrative, the persistence of her accent contrasts with her linguistic and cultural distance from her former self embodied in her literary achievements:

But lest I be reproached for a sudden affectation of reserve, after having trained my reader to expect the fullest particulars, I am willing to add a few details. I went to college, as I proposed, though not to Radcliffe. Receiving an invitation to live in New York that I did not like to refuse, I went to Barnard College instead. There I took all the honors that I deserved; and if I did not learn to write poetry, as I once supposed I should, I learned at least to think in English without an accent.<sup>355</sup>

Regardless of her overwhelming success in writing, Antin's foreign accent remains a persistent burden of otherness that suggests an ambiguous sense of difference from

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<sup>353</sup> Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, p. 56.

<sup>354</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 281.

<sup>355</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, pp. 281-282.



native-born Americans. Her accent marks her non-native American status by contrasting with the speech of native speakers, most of whom would utter English sounds without major difficulties. However, accent cannot retrieve, or even reconstruct, a particular story of her past that leads to her present by means of phonetic sounds that evince narratives from her first home. As Derrida notes, traces do not lead back to their missing origins, since the trace ‘means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin’.<sup>356</sup> In lieu of fixed origins, or the reification of a present-past, Antin’s marked speech patterns exist as a manifestation of the present that reinterprets former events. Whereas Antin’s speech might denote her status as a non-native speaker of English, *The Promised Land* contests the existence of a linguistic heritage that can be read as a cogent narrative of her past. A different scene, in which Antin reminisces about her childhood days in primary school, and the centrality of language acquisition in her Boston years, sheds light upon the conflation of accent and routes. As part of her laudation of the American education system, Antin recalls her classroom struggles to pronounce English words, alongside other beginners in English, as well as the earnest help of her teacher, Miss Nixon:

But we stuck—stuck fast—at the definite article; and sometimes the lesson resolved itself into a species of lingual gymnastics, in which we all looked as if we meant to bite our tongues off. [...] I did take great pleasure in [Miss Nixon’s] smile of approval, whenever I pronounced well; and her patience and perseverance in struggling with us over that

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<sup>356</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 61. For the original version, see Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1967), p. 90.

thick little word are becoming to her even now, after fifteen years. It is not her fault if any of us today give a buzzing sound to the dreadful English *th*.<sup>357</sup>

The scene holds onto the necessity to erase this trace almost through pain, to banish it from the page, to name it in order to distance itself from it once again. Regardless of her speech impediments, Antin's school memories return her to an American scene, the dedication of her former teacher and the necessity to alter her phonetic inflections. While decades have passed since the described events, even more time elapses between her early childhood in Polotzk and her current self in this otherwise distant memory.<sup>358</sup> Beyond the seeming stability of the written page, which struggles to freeze a moment in time, phonetics undergoes constant change that reveals the permanent mutability of language. Beyond the persistence of accent, the scene also connotes the changing nature of what persists and the inability to retrieve this accent, and, for that matter, her mother tongue, as they once were. What seems a mere mark of memory actually unveils an intricate relationship between temporalities in which the overwhelming burden of the past turns into a series of absences. Through the word 'archaic', among other terms, Jane Gallop analyzes the contextual nature of language, namely both its existence in a particular spatio-temporal instance, and the words' containment of the history of their previous meanings:

Prolonging the passage of translation, I often found reason to  
linger among what the dictionary calls "archaic". [...] To

<sup>357</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 164.

<sup>358</sup> Linguistic research has been devoted to study diachronic linguistic change upon individuals. For instance, William Labov, 'The Study of Change in Progress: Observations in Real Time' in Labov, *Principles of Linguistic Change Volume 1: Internal Factors* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 73-112, Henrietta J. Cedergren, 'The Spread of Language Change: Verifying Inferences of Linguistic Diffusion', in *Language Spread and Language Policy: Issues, Implications, and Case Studies* ed. by Peter H. Lozvenberg (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1988), pp. 45-60, Gillian Sankoff, 'Language Change Across the Lifespan', *Annual Review of Linguistics*, Vol. 4 (2018), pp. 297-316, and Gillian Sankoff and Hélène Blondeau, 'Language Change across the Lifespan: /r/ in Montreal French', *Language*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Sep., 2007), pp. 560-588.

lean thus upon the archaic is to recognize that language exists in time, that it carries a history in it, and that in it we can read traces not just of its history but of history.<sup>359</sup>

Antin's speech would follow a particular pattern that moves away from Russia that partially traces back both the history of her multilingual heritage and her own personal history. Like the term 'archaic', whose meaning varies, and whose histories are untraceable, her speech patterns indicate the complexities of cultural history, as well as the impossibility to ascertain them. Like any distinctive way of pronouncing a particular tongue, her speech would oscillate depending on factors such as places of residency, speech communities, and level of education. A casual remark on her friend's maid discloses the influence of Antin's affluent environs on her speech: 'the maid who brought my hostess her slippers spoke in softer accents than the finest people on Dover Street'.<sup>360</sup> Similar to her elevated written style, her speech patterns, although untraceable in her autobiography, would experience continuous fluctuations produced by her changing environments. In Boston, Antin remains distant from the linguistic community that speaks her native Yiddish, reads English books, socializes mostly with Gentiles, and attends American schools. Her distance from Yiddish speakers would gradually influence her current speaking patterns, and so would her long-lasting relationships with the upper-middle classes. Furthermore, considering that linguistic disparities between men and women remain commonplace across cultures, as a woman, her speech patterns would differ from men's speech features. Likewise, considering that the scene requires constant repetition, both in her real life, and in her memories, phonological changes could occur, perhaps unconsciously, in

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<sup>359</sup> Jane Gallop, "'Women' in Spurs and Nineties Feminism', in *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman*, ed. by Ellen Feder, Mary C. Rawlinson, and Emily Zakin (New York and Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1997), p. 16 (pp. 7-20).

<sup>360</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 282.

both spheres. For example, throughout the years, the ‘buzzing sound to the dreadful English *th*’, would undergo changes, such as the realization of dental fricatives as dental stops, or modification of her vowel pronunciation before this *th* sound. Both features, common to Boston English, remind us of the diversity of American English, which, like her foreign native tongue, differs between locations beyond constructs of homogeneity.

Without denying Wirth-Nesher’s reading of Antin’s accent as ‘an emblem of the inescapability of personal history’, *The Promised Land* can never restore this history, or for that matter, the history of her linguistic development.<sup>361</sup> The previous scenes indicate that the seemingly holistic, stable inflections emerge from different historical moments that cannot be mapped onto the words of her writing self. As argued, it is difficult to ascertain the nature of Antin’s accent beyond the certainty of the existence of diachronic changes in her speech patterns that would entail differences with her early inflections. Always inescapable, history in *The Promised Land* is the product both of presences, the events rendered as part of the narrative, and absences, the silences of the narrative. Whether material or intangible, the linguistic traces of the narrative intertwine language and history in pointing towards a narrative in which absences haunt the narrated events. Antin later returns to her emphasis upon rupture from the past, and she does so, once again, by means of evoking languages and their different bearing on her past. In Chapter IX, ‘The Promised Land’, set in the West End of Boston, Crescent Beach and Chelsea, Antin continues to sing to America, still intertwining her narrative with the emphasis upon her detachment from her former years in the village. Although she mentions the pervasiveness of poverty in the slums, her deprivation contrasts with new possibilities for women, including free

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<sup>361</sup> Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, p. 75.

education and the acquisition of the English language. Besides the distance between her Russian years and her Boston past, Antin's language also conveys the lapse between her Boston years and the present of her writing self:

In after years, when I passed as an American among Americans, if I was suddenly made aware of the past that lay forgotten,—if a letter from Russia, or a paragraph in the newspaper, or a conversation overheard in the street-car, suddenly reminded me of what I might have been,—I thought it miracle enough that I, Mashke, the granddaughter of Raphael the Russian, born to a humble destiny, should be at home in an American metropolis, be free to fashion my own life, and should dream my dreams in English phrases.<sup>362</sup>

Besides being a passport to Americanization, English continues to echo Antin's past by emphasizing the disjunctions between past and present in *The Promised Land*. Language evinces the illusory nature of Antin's burdensome past, or, in other words, 'the persistence of the past as burdensome memory only underscores the profundity of the transformation. One is haunted by the past only when the past is remembered as radical difference'.<sup>363</sup> The sentence opens and closes with the centrality of Americanness: while the three reminders of her former years are relegated to a dash sentence, her status as 'an American among the Americans' returns to her 'dreams in English phrases'. The narrative moves away from the foreign words interspersed in the first chapters to the English that dominates the final pages as an assertion of her assimilation. By contrast, like her accent, letters, newspapers and conversations demonstrate the simultaneous persistence and limitations of these traces from her

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<sup>362</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 156.

<sup>363</sup> Kramer, 'Assimilation in The Promised Land', p. 129.

past. The three elements, probably in either Yiddish or Russian, coalesce in their flashing, momentary nature that can only fade amidst the overwhelming presence of English in the text. Like foreign inflections, foreign words must be read through the prism of the present that reframes these documents and dialogues as partial echoes of former times. The sentence returns to the coalescence between Americanness and English language as an outcome of her present that glosses over the stories that lie behind these linguistic fragments.

Material or incorporeal, linguistic traces from foreign tongues, embedded in the English of the narrative, turn English into a language that carries changing images of the past. Returning to 'the past as burdensome memory' might shed more light upon these recurring remnants, which, even in English, bring the protagonist back to her early days in Russia. Not only do languages convey memories, or even evoke other memories beyond the narratives they tell, but owing to this radical difference between times, they also constitute memories in themselves. Ultimately, Antin's 'accented' English carries an accent beyond her distinct speech patterns; her writing's accented nature includes transformed linguistic and non-linguistic memories. As argued in the first chapter, material remnants undergo continuous processes of change which undermine a direct correlation between the past and its current interpretations. As a tool of memory, language reproduces the changes dictated by its particular history, in this case marked by a narrative of cultural assimilation into a foreign tongue. The immediacy of language, which, towards the end of the narrative, renders new items, such as friends' letters, as mementoes of her past, conveys the increasing distance between Antin's past and her present. Rather, like Antin's speech, which fluctuates with the passage of time and other factors, English mediates a relationship with preceding times marked by present events, including its role as Antin's first language.

Since here linguistic traces are memories, like the histories they evoke, they suggest the intertwinement of language and memory through the ongoing distance from her Russian past.

If Antin's linguistic perambulations reveal the absences that haunt her linguistic biography, besides other aspects of her personal history, a similar situation occurs with Lewisohn in *Up Stream*. In the latter, despite the fact that he arrived in America at the age of eight, there are neither foreign words nor references to the protagonist's German accent. This absence of foreign traces, although a sharp contrast with *The Promised Land*, does not obliterate the traces of German in the syntax and scaffolding of *Up Stream*. These non-English traces in an Anglophone text demonstrate that in *Up Stream* memory presupposes 'what is visible and communicable' and 'the trace of the missing now engaged in dialectic with what which can be told'.<sup>364</sup> Although literally absent from the text, emerging from its familiar and cultural bearing for the protagonist, the seeming presence of German frequently lingers over its pages. The early chapters of *Up Stream*, set in Germany and the South, present this recurrent impression of German remnants in its otherwise Polish English. A scene about German readings serves as a starting point to explore the dynamics between 'the traces of the missing', German literature, and the text. In chapter II, 'The American Scene', the protagonist records the conveyance of some German books to St Mark's soon after his arrival in South Carolina:

My books had been saved and, one day, my father discovered that he had forgotten a small balance in the Deutsche Bank. For this money he ordered books from Germany, and I came into possession of a set of very red

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<sup>364</sup> Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing*, p. 53.

volumes: the marvelous chap-books of the Reformation  
 age— Griseldis, Genoveva, Robert the Devil, Dr. Faustus—  
 naive and knightly or magical and grim.<sup>365</sup>

In these pages, German is not a medium that conveys the memories of the narrator's former life, and becomes, instead, another recollection from his foreign past. The German volumes neither overcome the physical abyss between continents, nor bridge the no less important chasm between the times before and after his departure. Instead, the books, as pieces of a life and a library left behind in Berlin, belong to an interrupted literary journey resulting from the break in time inflicted by emigration. By virtue of their German origins, they relate to the broken pages of lives fractured by emigration and by echoing memories of a fading Germany frozen in the 1880s. In fact, out of the impressive library in his former home, only a few texts are salvaged, and the few titles mentioned in this passage are the product of an international acquisition. Furthermore, his Southern ideals of Anglo-Saxon superiority force the narrator to discard this treasure in order to privilege English language and its literary canon over foreign, un-American ideals.<sup>366</sup> Although the protagonist does not cease reading in his mother tongue, his passion for his early readings wanes as days in his Southern home pass by. His financial position, which bestows the possession of these mementoes, does not erase the multiple breaks, both linguistic and historical, embodied in these volumes. The books are remnants of the precariousness of the journey, the economic privilege that bestowed them the power to rescue them, and potential losses that have already occurred.

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<sup>365</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 40.

<sup>366</sup> For studies on German-American relationships during the First World War, see Chad R. Fulwider, *German Propaganda and U.S. Neutrality in World War I* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2016), and Jörg Nagler, *Nationale Minoritäten im Krieg. »Feindliche Ausländer« und die amerikanische Heimatfront während des Ersten Weltkriegs* (1. Aufl. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2000).



As in the case of these German books, *Up Stream*'s relationship with the German past is framed by the ongoing influence and absence of the German language throughout the text. Sandra Alferts, who examines the survival of the past in writings beyond a binary of life and death, postulates that 'the text may be viewed to constitute a polyvalent site of memory resonating with voices neither dead nor alive'.<sup>367</sup> *Up Stream* is not a site of memory, in which memory coalesces and secretes itself, salvaging the remnants of preceding events and texts through the retelling of the past.<sup>368</sup> In their persistence, the pre-American memories of the narrator resonate with dead voices from former times, but these resonances presuppose the veiled changes of histories and languages. In the second chapter, 'The American Scene', the narrator mentions his first readings in English literature, his initial writings, and his gradual acquisition of English in the village of St. Mark's. On a summer day in his Southern home, the narrator builds a 'rude, shaky little desk' from abandoned boxes, and suddenly starts his long-lasting commitment to writing.<sup>369</sup> While his writings strive for continuity with his numerous English readings, in their themes and form these tales from his childhood remain marked by his mother tongue:

So I stood and wrote—for the first time—verse and prose:  
 tales of disaster at sea, of ultimate islands, of peaceless  
 wandering. The prose and verse were mixed  
 indiscriminately, assonance sufficed in place of rhyme, all I  
 felt was an intense inner glow. It was all instinctively done in  
 German. And I emphasize this fact in the development of an  
 American since that childish outburst marked the first and

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<sup>367</sup> Sandra Alferts, 'Voices from a Haunting Past: Ghosts, Memory, and Poetry in Ruth Klüger's "weiter leben"', *Monatshefte*, Winter, 2008, Vol. 100, No. 4 (Winter, 2008), p. 520 (pp. 519-533).

<sup>368</sup> Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', pp. 7-24.

<sup>369</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 48.

last time on which I used my original mother-tongue in writing as a matter of course and without a sense of deliberately limiting such powers of expression as I may have. . . . That first impulse lasted, with daily but decreasing passion, for some weeks. Then it died out.<sup>370</sup>

The English of the narrative evinces the persistence of the hovering presence of German as a haunting reminder of a foreign past that cannot articulate this past. Enacting a repetition of the first time in which he decided to acquiesce his mother tongue, the narrator struggles to put the ghosts of German to rest in the narrative once again. The syntax fluctuates by starting with three concise sentences that lead to a convoluted three-lined sentence, which, in turn, leads to a closing simple sentence. This fluctuation in the length of the sentences in this passage reproduces the speaker's reaffirmation of his definitive departure from German through his earlier writings. Thus, like the emphatic content, the grammatical patterns of these lines mirror the death of German as his scholarly language. In its belatedness, the scene returns to this passage from German into English, and, thus, reaffirms this rupture in a mental visit that turns into another departure from his German past. His language reaffirms a return that turns into another break from the past that cannot be deciphered beyond the vagueness of the tales and his vanished mother tongue. As mentioned above, in lieu of carrying a history, the English of the narrative disrupts the sense of continuity between languages by reifying a binary between past and present.<sup>371</sup> In this passage, the traces of his German writings in St. Mark's emerge as their own erasure; the narrative moves further away from them owing to the prominence of his new historical context. Thus, the passage suggests a present history, the immediacy of

<sup>370</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>371</sup> Gallop, "Women" in *Spurs and Nineties Feminism*, p. 16.

America set against the vagueness of a past filtered through literature and now read through a different tongue.

The narrator's English words suggest the opposite of a retrievable past: the narrative cannot trace back a history of former languages and experiences beyond the struggle to master a foreign tongue. Alferts's metaphor of the text as a *lieu de mémoire* turns into the impossibility to retrieve the muted German words written decades ago in a narrative that echoes the past without capturing it. The German of his writings in the South would inevitably differ from his tongue spoken in Berlin, since time and English must have taken its toll on his former linguistic skills. The German of the protagonist would register the influence of the acquisition of English and the new readings that would depart from the German spoken in Berlin. His new social environment serves as the catalyst for the reading of English classics whose imprints, like those of any reading on a writer's oeuvre, should be manifest. Since the influence of an acquired tongue can be felt on a mother tongue, including word choices and syntactical patterns, this points to the influence of English in his German writings.<sup>372</sup> In other words, his mother tongue, a mere absence in his American present, has become an object of memory that cannot be restored onto the page as it was before. Like the books, German marks a missing origin, namely a point of departure reframed through the writing of the narrative that can never be pinned down as a reliable remnant of the past.

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<sup>372</sup> The disparity between the amount of research upon the influence of mother tongues upon acquired language versus the opposite relation is overwhelming; whereas plenty of scholarship has been devoted to study the influence of first languages upon acquired tongues, scholarship that explores the impact of acquired languages upon mother tongues is far more limited. For studies upon mother language attrition related to language acquisition, see *First Language Attrition*, ed. by Herbert W. Seliger, and Robert M. Vago (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and *First Language Attrition*, ed. by Monika S. Schmid, and Barbara Köpke (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013).

Although particularly present in the first two chapters, the German past of the protagonist follows the way of his native tongue in pointing to the untold narratives of these years. Memory narratives encompass both the words inscribed on the pages and the absences between these words: ‘what we see, what we narrate as memory, represents itself, but it also gestures to what is missing’.<sup>373</sup> In *Up Stream*, this gesturing towards ‘what is missing’, the erasures of the protagonist’s past, comprises the constant dialogue between words and absences from the onset of the narrative. By dint of personal memories entwined with the political changes of late-nineteenth century Germany, his English words continue to bespeak these missing pieces. Chapter I, ‘A Far Childhood’, opens in the Berlin of his earliest memories, a chronotope that echoes a picture frozen in time defined by its literal and figurative foreignness. The language of the passage suggests further remoteness from his current life in America, as the German capital becomes a dead site and foreshadows a space of death after the Great War. The linguistic and historical gaps coalesce in the irretrievable nature of this site that becomes both a memento of this German era and an epitaph for former times in personal and communal history:

The city that I remember, the Berlin of the eighties, was rugged and grey. But it had nothing forbidding in its aspect, rather an air of homely and familiar comfort. There were few private houses, but people lived in their apartments in large, airy rooms with tall French windows and neat, white tile ovens. The streets were monotonous in appearance but admirably clean.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation and Writing*, p. 51.

<sup>374</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 11.

German becomes a missing referent, an omission replaced by a physical place whose existence is built upon the obliteration of the protagonist's vernacular tongue from the text. Berlin figures as a chronotope that embodies a nation's historical juncture, its upheaval after the death of Wilhelm I, and also a more personal era, the protagonist's childhood in Germany. The portrayal of the city resembles a photograph, a memory of a dead place, dead, firstly, for the protagonist and also for his former neighbors owing to the passage of decades. Moreover, political changes, such as Wilhelm I's death, and, in 1914, the outbreak of the Great War, would transform the nation's state of affairs. The twists of history, by which the personal past does not escape this political frame, come together with their seeming opposite, the ever-missing German language in which these events occurred. Walter Benjamin, writing about his early years in Berlin, notes that memories always erase other memories: 'what my first books were to me—to remember this I should first have to forget all other knowledge of books'.<sup>375</sup> Besides this history, and within it, lies translation: the protagonist renders into English experiences that occurred in a different tongue, which inevitably implies changes in his account. German goes missing as if it were merely another memory which predates the recollections of Berlin that open *Up Stream*, instead of the medium in which they took place. Berlin anchors the narrative as an extant space that camouflages this linguistic absence, and functions as another absence that needs to be erased in order to arrive in America. Language partakes in a continuum of absences which go beyond the opening page in pointing towards further memories that undermine this closed version of history.

If in this passage presences entail both linguistic and historical absences, these absences demonstrate the commonalities between the traces of language and history

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<sup>375</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1927-1934*, Vol. 2, p. 631.

throughout the text. A few lines later, the narrator briefly recalls the burial of the German emperor as ‘that icy day in 1888 on which the old emperor’s body lay in state in the cathedral’.<sup>376</sup> The absence of German coalesces with this burial: although recounted in the opening pages, history constitutes a cursory overview opaque for the reader beyond the narrated facts. English, with its style mixing the poetic and the factual, does not allow for a reading of linguistic change in his mother tongue from these events to the present. His words balance the retrieval of these memorable events with the partial, undetailed nature of these descriptions that create the impression of a foggy past. Regardless of their account of former times, in their fragmented presence, these historical episodes do not differ, to a large extent, from the missing narrative of the protagonist’s linguistic evolution. Although it is an English autobiography written in America, *Up Stream* recalls the books from Germany acquired by his father in the second chapter. All these volumes stand for the omissions that surround the text, including the absence of his native tongue, upon whose inexistence the narrative is predicated. The partial view of his former life projects a mosaic of fragments that turns language into a memory, which is, by definition, a sign of the existence of the past and its perpetual absence. Absent from the text, German does not register the changes across time, remaining, like the books, a narrative that marks departure and a broken chain for a legacy.

From the frequent traces of foreign tongues in the English of *The Promised Land* to the complete lack of German vestiges in *Up Stream*, language proves crucial in the persistence of the past in these literary works. In both texts, foreign traces evoke particular instances from the past, whether childhood memories of a Boston classroom or a winter morning in late-nineteenth-century Berlin. Nevertheless, this

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<sup>376</sup> Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, p. 11.

persistence turns into the impossibility of recovering the missing histories that lie beneath the varied remnants of foreign tongues. Although ‘an emblem of the inescapability of personal history’ and ‘the writing onto the body of collective history’, language is not an open door to either personal or communal histories.<sup>377</sup> Antin’s and Lewisohn’s English writings contain these traces that disrupt their claims to Americanness while turning these linguistic routes into further routes. The memories from their lost homes that linger in the texts hinge upon the entwinement between their native tongues and their acquired language. Whether phonetic, lexical or syntactical, imprints of their mother tongues travel into their written English as reminders of the ever-changing nature of pasts and texts. As the medium for their life narratives, English itself becomes an intrinsic part of these stories, including the stories experienced in foreign tongues that predate their arrival in America.

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<sup>377</sup> Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, p. 75.

### 4.3. English Echoing the Past in Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*

This second section focuses exclusively upon Cahan's novella, *Yekl*, with the purpose of investigating the relationship between English and the past in the narrative. As already explained in the introduction to this chapter, Maria Lauret's concept of 'wanderwords' serves as a starting point to map the shifts in this relation. To recall, Lauret defines wanderwords as 'words, phrases and passages of non-English in the American English text' that denote 'writing's wandering and meandering'.<sup>378</sup> Here, instead of considering the foreign Yiddish and Hebrew terms interspersed across the text, English emerges as central in the meanderings of its characters and *Yekl* overall. This happens because English drives Yekl and his wife Gitl away from their former lives imbued with religious tradition: English enables them to merge with a different, Christian world. Consequently, whereas Yekl drifts away from his wife by flirting with Americanized ladies, Gitl, although more of a novice than him, begins to become acquainted with American culture through her limited English. While Yekl finds himself 'in the grip of his past' upon his wife's arrival in the ghetto, this section demonstrates that the English that retells his foreign past can only capture its haunting routes.<sup>379</sup> Not only do former heritages undergo changes following their arrival in America, but the narrator's English account of them also denotes the centrality of their absences.

This final section builds upon Paolo Bartoloni's exploration of the relationship between memory and language, particularly his emphasis upon the centrality of the untold when narrating the past.<sup>380</sup> The following pages present close readings of scenes from several chapters that come together in their simultaneous evocation and

<sup>378</sup> Lauret, *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature*, p. 2.

<sup>379</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 30.

<sup>380</sup> Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation, and Writing*, p. 51.



erasure of memories. Beginning with Gitl's first encounter with the tenements on the day of her arrival in America, the section closes with the final scene in which Yekl travels to the mayor's office to request a civil divorce. Furthermore, paratextual devices serve to further elucidate the relationship between the words printed on the page and the absent histories they evince. This is the case of the footnotes, which tangentially relate to the tension between Gitl's vexed existence in the ghetto and her lost life in the Pale. Most of the absent histories considered in this section relate to Gitl, particularly the loss of her life in the village which creates a disruption in her personal and communal spheres. In her departure to America Gitl must leave behind her own family and community; after her arrival she must abandon rituals such as head coverings after marriage. Both the narrator and her own voice tell the narrative of her past from the other side, the American present by which they never manage to account for her former experiences.

Gitl's relation to English is framed by the tension between two poles: the assimilation implied by her acquisition of English and the foregone stories haunting this linguistic journey. The silences in the narrator's account accompany the fragmented impressions of her Lithuanian Yiddish, such as her accented 'Goot-night!' to Yekl's friend, Mamie.<sup>381</sup> Beyond her native tongue, her attempts to master English in this farewell, thwarted by her illiteracy, bear witness to the existence of a narrative different from Yekl's male heritage. Karen E.H. Skinazi notes the marginality of women's voices in Jewish-American literature: 'in contrast to the male-coded Jewish Horatio Alger macronarrative, Jewish women's pursuits of business success appear in literary history, for the most part, as marginalia'.<sup>382</sup> This grand version of history is

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<sup>381</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 50.

<sup>382</sup> Karen E. H. Skinazi, *Women of Valor: Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters, Crime Writers, and Rock Stars in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), p. 153.

undermined by the gaps that women represent, their marginalization from history and literature upon which this linear narrative is built.<sup>383</sup> Although Gitl's voice might be limited, often even forced into silence by her husband, her presence, or, rather, her presence-absence, bears significance for the overall narrative. She changes the course of the narrative with her arrival in Ellis Island, so that her subjugated status to Yekl is not at odds with the recurring traces of her past throughout the novella. Her accented English tells the biography of a Lithuanian-Jewish woman between worlds whose existence while these very same inflections obscure the undercurrent of the pre-American past.

Whereas the English of the narrator involves the breaks with the past of the immigrant characters, this disruption does not merely banish the past from the text. A domestic scene in the tenements echoes the irreconcilable tension mentioned by Sarah Clift between the 'survival of what has been left behind' and the nature of this survival as 'an enduring discontinuity within language itself'.<sup>384</sup> In *Yekl*, language carries the fragments of diverse, foreign linguistic heritages that are unerasable from both the speech of the characters and the diction of the text. In a lengthy paragraph, Gitl, troubled by her abusive husband, ponders on his rough treatment of her, compares herself to other women in her village, and considers her duties as a wife. In these lines, the narrative provides a detailed description of her feelings a few days after her arrival from her village, whilst she experiences lonesomeness in the tenements. Subtly, English emerges as a dominant concern in this domestic scene in

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<sup>383</sup> For recent scholarship upon Gitl, see Or Rogovin, 'The Rise of Gitl Podkovnik: Rereading Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* through the Lens of Its Heroine', *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981), Vol. 39, No. 2 (2020), pp. 196-216. For scholarship upon Jewish women and reading, see Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*, trans. by Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2004), and Devra Kay, *Seyder Tkhines: The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2004).

<sup>384</sup> Sarah Clift, *Committing the Future to Memory: History, Experience, Trauma* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 185.

which language both undermines and reaffirms the break between her Russian past and her American present:

Her heart was wrung with the most excruciating pangs of homesickness. And as she thus sat brooding and listlessly surveying her new surroundings—the iron stove, the stationary washtubs, the window opening vertically, the fire escape, the yellowish broom with its painted handle—things which she had never dreamed of at her birthplace—these objects seemed to stare at her haughtily and inspired her with fright. Even the burnished cup of the electric bell knob looked contemptuously and seemed to call her "Greenhorn! greenhorn!" "Lord of the world! Where am I?" she whispered with tears in her voice.<sup>385</sup>

Besides the oppressive nature of the space and the temporal disjunction between her village and the tenements, Gitl's suffering also relates to the rupture inflicted by her acquaintance to English. Echoing Gitl's exilic plight, in his essay 'Reflections on Exile', Edward W. Said argues that 'exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past'.<sup>386</sup> Gitl remains in a domestic sphere, which, as a woman, should palliate its strangeness, but the tenement room is pervaded by multiple discontinuities from her hometown. Severed from her family and estranged from her husband, she has literally lost her home and connections to her past in an abrupt break after which she finds nothing to hold onto. As a language of the past and a mechanism to regain control of the situation, Yiddish both voices her despair, and figures as a potential bridge with

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<sup>385</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 42.

<sup>386</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 177.

her now distant past. English seems a foreign, hostile tongue, producing a binary division between mother and acquired tongues that generates animosity and dislocation, a symbol of violence. However, whereas English confirms the immediacy of the American present through its relevance and inescapability for Gitl, this tongue is simultaneously imbued with her conspicuous rupture from the past. In thoughts related to the narrator's aforementioned remarks on language and memory, Bartoloni argues that, albeit as a form of language, memory ultimately emerges from the unnarrated:

Memory is narration—it is language—and as such it also owes its existence to its negativity, which is ultimately nothing other than memory as the untold, the nonnarratable (the potential existence of which lingers in the very potential to narrate memory).<sup>387</sup>

In their prevalence amidst her new surroundings and the absences that they evoke for Gitl, the presence of the objects mirrors the presence of English in the text. From the iron stove to the fire escape, the objects that she describes denote their foreign nature: they speak of an American existence unknown to her Russian eyes. As signs of her new life in the tenements, away from the penury of her lost home, the profusion of objects embodies their Americanness and material value. There are no objects left behind that belonged to her: no prayer books, no letters, no linen, no furniture, no cooking utensils; unlike other immigrants she carries no souvenirs. Their absences convey Gitl's imperative to leave everything behind; she carries no mementoes with her in her journey to America, hence her new environs remind her of her loss. Her poverty forces her to reconcile herself to the pervasive nature of this absence and its

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<sup>387</sup> Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation, and Writing*, p. 51.

immediacy amidst what might seem at first sight a place of amnesia from her past. More subtly even, the English that dominates this passage, in which there are no foreign words, also entails an ambivalent relationship with her past beyond a dichotomy of presence and absence. Bartoloni continues to analyze physical places as sites of conflicting temporalities, which also applies to textual spaces in which different traces coalesce in the present:

But even more problematical and fascinating is the feeling that these spaces of the past are not crystallized in any given time. [...] If memory in language exposes the dark gaps of the past, it also exposes space as a cluster of ruins, half-finished sites, rubble-strewn lots, whose existence testifies to their missing parts and dark gaps.<sup>388</sup>

The English of the narrator must be read bearing in mind the traces of Gitl's foreign tongue, whose imprint testifies to her distance from her former life in the Pale. Like the rest of this tenement scene, although in Yiddish, her whispered response to the imagined imprecations from the bell knob is rendered in English. Despite the absence of Yiddish, considering the recentness of her arrival and her scarce knowledge of English, her lament, "Lord of the world! Where am I?", would have been voiced in her mother tongue. As a confirmation of her foreignness, her words serve as a method to regain control over her tormented thoughts in counteracting the unfamiliarity of her new home. Whereas Yiddish fails to materialize in Gitl's words, their echoes still disrupt her American milieu through the translation of these two phrases. The religious undertones beneath 'Lord of the world!', for instance, counterbalance her distress concerning the perceived irreligiousness of the ghetto. Unable to conquer her

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<sup>388</sup> Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation, and Writing*, p. 53.

new home through the transference of material remnants, the woman can only indicate the haunting nature of her traditions mangled by her Americanized husband. The traces behind these English translations bear witness to the ‘missing parts and dark gaps’ of Gitl’s past, namely her material heritage left behind in the Old World. Likewise, in the textual necessity to somehow render her lament into English, her exclamation proclaims the limitations of voicing her foreign words.

Considering that the sense of departure echoes throughout Gitl’s journey in America, English continues to convey these absent pasts throughout the narrative. Already a broken chain in the Pale, Gitl’s religious heritage continues to be marked by rupture in America, evidenced by the lexical and structural features of the text. Unlike her, Yekl periodically corresponds with her family back in the Pale in the ancient tongue, since ‘both he and his old father read fluently the punctuated Hebrew of the Old Testament or the Prayer-book’.<sup>389</sup> As an illiterate woman, Gitl pays the price of her poor knowledge of traditional sources, which suggests a narrative of women’s discontinuity across languages and histories. After Yekl ridicules Gitl’s appearance, a heated argument between him and Mrs Kavarsky ensues, in which he declares his willingness to divorce Gitl regardless of the cost. As a woman, Gitl occupies a disadvantageous position, unable to understand either of these languages: ‘Gitl scarcely understood the meaning of the formula, though each Hebrew word was followed by its Yiddish translation’.<sup>390</sup> Like these foreign tongues, English problematizes Gitl’s connection with the past by highlighting the non-existence of a narrative that connects her with either a mythical or a historical past. Chapter IX, entitled ‘The Parting’, opens with the divorce scene, followed by Jake and Mamie buying a midnight train ticket to Philadelphia, and their decision to marry:

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<sup>389</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 29.

<sup>390</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 78.

It was on a bright frosty morning in the following January, in the kitchen of Rabbi Aaronovitz, on the third floor of a rickety old tenement house, that Jake and Gitl, for the first time since his flight, came face to face. It was also to be their last meeting as husband and wife.<sup>391</sup>

Through the retrieval of this tenement world, the centrality of English as a medium that reaffirms discontinuity from the Russian past comes to the fore. By means of the dominance of monosyllables over more complex words, the passage focalizes the spatial and temporal specificities of this episode. In other words, lexical elements contribute to a sense of particularity and simplicity that distance the divorce scene from other episodes marked by foreign terms and turns of phrases. The description of the cold atmosphere of January contains precise information focused upon this instant, with no references to preceding or following events. Likewise, the cold atmosphere accompanies Gitl's emotional odyssey in what constitutes for her another drastic turn of events after her arrival in America. Lastly, this opening paragraph summarizes the whole chapter by dint of the confirmation that the encounter between husband and wife is ultimately a farewell. Although the divorce takes place according to Jewish law, this ritual implies a break from tradition for both characters, particularly for Gitl, still less Americanized than her husband. Besides the absences in Gitl's past, such as her inexperience in biblical tongues, which recalls Bartoloni's views on memory cited above, language also conveys the impending break from her husband. Therefore, English, whose presence salutes new beginnings for both characters, ties in with this divorce by recreating a traditional world whose existence does not escape rupture from the past.

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<sup>391</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 80.

The divorce scene looks back to preceding departures, which, although more surreptitious in nature, also disrupt temporal continuity through language. The most conspicuous example is the previously examined occasion in which Gitl finds herself alone in the tenements for the first time. As in this early scene, this set of circumstances force her acknowledgment of her break from her former way of life guided by daily rituals and communal tradition in the village. Going further back in time, her arrival in America also confirms the beginning of a new life, which, despite her attempts to cling to her heritage, promises different mores along the way.<sup>392</sup> In these three scenes, set in Ellis Island and the tenements, the narrator either articulates Gitl's experiences of disorientation or recounts her impending divergence from the customs of a Jewish woman. Therefore, the fact that English conveys the existence of missing pieces of her past confirms 'the dark gaps of the past' exposed by these events, and the text as 'a cluster of ruins'.<sup>393</sup> In these related scenes, English articulates the ambivalence between her successive breaks from her heritage and her inability to gain a foothold in America. Yet, as analysis of further facets of Yekl in this section will clarify, these absences do not remain stable throughout the text: as time passes by, the ruins of Gitl's past continue to change. The multiple departures, always within an Anglo-American framework, move away from the day of her arrival while, in breaking away from it, recall its persistence. English conveys the existence of breaks from her personal history, such as her divorce, preventing them from fading into oblivion, but without ever reducing them to the final break.

The fifteen footnotes provide a more elucidating sense of the reproduction of linguistic and historical discontinuities throughout the structure of the text. Besides their allusions to Yekl's linguistic blunders in the first pages, the footnotes return to

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<sup>392</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 30.

<sup>393</sup> Bartoloni, *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation, and Writing*, p. 51.



Gitl's persistent struggles to acquire English, exemplified in her aforementioned problems with naming random objects in this language. In the tenements, Gitl struggles to assimilate into the unfamiliar place, dons her new corset, and begins outlining the room in English: "What is it they call this?" Gitl presently asked herself, gazing at the bare boards of the floor'.<sup>394</sup> After recalling the answer, she proceeds: "And that?" she further examined herself, as she fixed her glance on the ceiling. This time the answer was slow in coming, and her heart grew faint'.<sup>395</sup> However, upon uttering the word 'veenda' ('window'), she remembers her reply to Yekl the previous night, when, after she had forgotten the same word, she suffered his persistent jibes: "*Es is of'n veenda mein ich*,"[11] she hastened to set herself right", which the footnotes render as "It is on the window, I meant to say".<sup>396</sup> English coexists with Yiddish throughout *Yekl*, yet, when it comes to the footnotes, English, instead of Yiddish, is the door onto the characters' past. Thus, whereas Gitl closes this tense exchange with her husband with foreign words that restore her overseas status in contrast with the Americanized Yekl, the footnotes complicate this straightforward reading.

The footnotes shed light upon the erasures of history inflicted by English upon the text, as well as the concomitant traces of these erasures. These marginalia establish a binary through which English relegates history to the peripheries of the main text while this language also propels the main text towards the future.<sup>397</sup> At first glance, the footnotes seem to reproduce the past in a similar manner to how Sollors claims the glossary in *The Promised Land* functions, as 'a minimal vocabulary that

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<sup>394</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 40.

<sup>395</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 40.

<sup>396</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 40.

<sup>397</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 37 and p. 40, respectively.

replicates at least a small part of the semantic environment of her past'.<sup>398</sup> However, in *Yekl* the footnotes depart from the potential recovery of the past that the immediacy of these foreign words might imply at first glance. Sarah Clift provides an apposite rereading of Benjamin's views on language and history, and the obfuscation of the latter by the former, which also holds validity for the intersections of language and memory:

By drawing attention to the role played by language in determining what counts and becomes visible as history, his disastrous counterimage powerfully undermines the conception of language according to which words signify the "real"; this kind of language is turned into the very force of blindness itself.<sup>399</sup>

Instead of turning into 'the very force of blindness itself', in Cahan's novella language hinders the recovery of the characters' personal history without completely obliterating its traces. The footnotes seem to retain an impression of the past which includes experiences, sayings, professions and traditions that cannot simply be rendered into English. On the one hand, the footnotes relegate Gitl to the foreign past; on the other hand, the past embodied by Gitl does not provide a coherent, stable view of her former life. The first six footnotes refer to Yekl's foreign expressions, including words such as 'crucifix' and 'shoemaker', hence undermining his claims to English proficiency.<sup>400</sup> Upon Gitl's arrival in America, from 'nobleman' to 'noblewoman', most subsequent footnotes are related to her lack of proficiency in English.<sup>401</sup> As in the case of her husband, these Yiddish words come from a religious

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<sup>398</sup> Werner Sollors, 'Introduction', in Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. xxi (pp. ix-liv).

<sup>399</sup> Clift, *Committing the Future to Memory*, p. 11.

<sup>400</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 21 and p. 28, respectively.

<sup>401</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 37 and p. 40, respectively.

world built upon the mixture of diverse regional traditions foreign to the American reader. Similarly, as in Yekl's case before her appearance, the footnotes undermine her aspirations to an American status by accentuating her inability to master even basic English. Besides revealing their similar struggles for cultural assimilation, the footnotes only provide brief explanations, or more often, English translations of the corresponding foreign term. For this reason, although they do not eclipse the histories predating their coming to America, the footnotes only present glimpses of the characters' linguistic journey across languages. Likewise, the histories behind these words only serve as a generic glance into of their heritages, particularly in the case of Gitl, since most notes pertain to men's milieus.

The relevance of the footnotes to the discontinuities between temporalities across *Yekl* begs further analysis. The words and explanations from the footnotes, perhaps paradoxically, evoke a foreign world through English so that an American audience is able to follow the text. English, instead of Yiddish or Polish, is used to channel images of Hebrew letters, 'noblemen' and 'matrimonial agents' that reveal different narratives for men and women.<sup>402</sup> Whereas both characters come closer to America thanks to their divorce, they continue to relate differently to their personal pasts. Despite her illiteracy, Gitl relates to 'the discontinuity in the story of women's intellectual effort' in a narrative in which she abandons the Old World, and the narrative moves along with her.<sup>403</sup> There are scarce references to her past across the narrative, as opposed to Yekl's biography in the first chapter, and further explanations of his former life in later chapters. Just as little is known about Gitl's circumstances in Russia, the footnotes barely counterbalance this legacy by merely locating her as a Lithuanian woman imbued with religion. Likewise, the English words that she fails to

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<sup>402</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 37 and p. 45, respectively.

<sup>403</sup> Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, p. 275.

remember in the aforementioned dispute are signs of how little is left for her in America: Gitl preserves her rich linguistic heritage, but most of her history does not survive. Considering that most details provided of Gitl's life are relevant in relation to Yekl, the footnotes relate to the consistency of this partial history through the narrative.

While they relegate fragments from the past to the bottom of the page, *Yekl's* footnotes join this pattern of foreign histories sustained and fragmented through English. To be more precise, the footnotes subtly disappear towards the middle of the narrative: the last note is towards the end of chapter V, prior to Gitl's decision to cover her hair.<sup>404</sup> Thus, an analysis of this paratext must not only consider 'the manifold, shifting, and unstable relations between the text and its materialities, between the work and its inscriptions', but must also examine the loss of these relations.<sup>405</sup> Their disappearance acquires symbolic overtones that gesture towards the vanishing nature of the past: they are no longer necessary owing to Gitl's headways in assimilation. Furthermore, if the footnotes disappear well before the end of the novella, the impression of Gitl as the personification of Yekl's foreign past does not stand. Intertextual devices are no longer necessary to underscore her disparity with her husband; her English acquisition follows the path of her material mementoes in the histories they leave behind. Although Gitl never casts off her heritage, she falls victim to the necessity to discard a former way of life that used to strictly inform her daily life in the Pale. As traces of her past begin to vanish from her speech, her former observance, as well as her personal bonds with the Pale, also begin to suffer the erosion of time. Ultimately, the past faces a constant process of disposal as time takes

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<sup>404</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 50.

<sup>405</sup> Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure*, p. ix.

its toll upon the characters and America imposes its pressing demands upon their lives.

The final scene, which returns to the tension between departure and looking back towards the pre-American past, sheds further light upon the dynamics between language and memory throughout the text. After their divorce, amidst the uncertainty of their separate futures in America, temporary nostalgia for their lost conjugal life haunts Yekl and Gitl in a scene with no foreign words. In the final chapter, 'A Defeated Victor', beginning a new life away from his former wife, Yekl travels to court to marry Mamie, whilst enduring the misgivings of this definitive severance. Whereas she feels unburdened after the divorce, Yekl does not relish his expected jubilation with his future wife, hence he ponders dashing into Gitl's apartment and restoring his authority as 'lord of the house'.<sup>406</sup> Thus, as the immediate past starts to be rewritten, Yekl's material victory over his former wife proves an ambiguous break from the life left behind in their divorce. The car, symbol of American modernity and antonym of his father's cart in the village, conveys the gap between rural and urban lives, and so does the English of the final lines:<sup>407</sup>

But the distance between him and the mayor's office was  
dwindling fast. Each time the car came to a halt he wished  
the pause could be prolonged indefinitely; and when it  
resumed its progress, the violent lurch it gave was  
accompanied by a corresponding sensation in his heart.<sup>408</sup>

The final scene captures the prominence of the present and its coalescence with the persistence of haunting impressions that cannot be reproduced on the page. Shadowed by his threatened patriarchal status owing to his Americanized future wife, Yekl

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<sup>406</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 91.

<sup>407</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 9.

<sup>408</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 92.

concludes the narrative by looking back to his lost marriage while being pulled towards his future.<sup>409</sup> The same scene also toys with the nostalgic view of the past as a fantasy of loss that disregards the reality of his marriage disputes and his former rejection of his wife.<sup>410</sup> Meanwhile, Gitl obtains potential financial stability through her future marriage to Bernstein, along with the possibility of balancing tradition and Americanization in the ghetto. The English that dominates this concluding paragraph, along with the final page, expresses the tension between the lurch in Yekl's heart and the communal history he leaves behind. The final scene is the culmination of the previous absences in which the personal and the communal, always intertwined, must be abandoned in order to obtain the passage to a better life. As before, the mixture of reality and fiction rewrites a past which, thanks to the importance of English, is kept at a safe distance and goes through a process of selection. In the 'corresponding sensation in his heart', Yekl misreads a former history that, once he perceives it as completely severed from the present, becomes otherwise.

The vanishing of Gitl, who disappears in the final scene, twists the relationship between English and her foreign past by making her an image of the American future. Like her husband, the lady who 'sat swaying and wringing her hands' after her divorce falls prey to a narrative of loss that in her case even disregards domestic abuse.<sup>411</sup> Yet similarities only go so far: the past has different resonances for both of them as they move away through a language that reaffirms distinct pasts, presents and futures, owing to their material differences and power imbalance. Sabine Haenni notes that absences haunt the representation of this character when she claims that

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<sup>409</sup> For an in-depth approach to nostalgia, see Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

<sup>410</sup> For more information on irony and *Yekl*, including language, culture, the protagonist and Gitl, see Chapter 2, 'Crossing Delancey: Jewish Diaspora Locality and U.S. Literature' in Dalia Kandiyoti, *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diaspora Literatures* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press: 2009), pp. 49-80.

<sup>411</sup> Cahan, *Yekl*, p. 91.

‘Gitl is the ultimately successful ethnic immigrant, but the temporal process of her assimilation is not portrayed’.<sup>412</sup> If unlike Yekl, Gitl does not sacrifice her heritage, the final scene underscores the absences that characterize her past, now also embedded in nostalgia. Although perhaps more precious to her, Gitl’s Jewish heritage is far more fragile than Yekl’s knowledge of tradition, and certainly more marked by her inferior status. Absent in the end, Gitl endures once more the absence of a woman’s voice, which, in turn, reflects the aforementioned silences across the narrative. English bifurcates into different narratives that convey that, beyond the torments haunting both characters, there lie different histories for men and women. The passage of time, like the car driving to the town hall, carves separate futures for Yekl and Gitl which do not overcome the silences that fragment her narrative.

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<sup>412</sup> Haenni, ‘Visual and Theatrical Culture, Tenement Fiction, and the Immigrant Subject in Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl*’, p. 517.

## 5. Conclusions

The conclusion to this doctoral dissertation has two functions: firstly, to reinforce the main points made throughout the four chapters, and secondly, to delineate the limitations of this project and indicate areas where further research is needed. To begin with the first point, this dissertation examined the writings of several American authors whose works seem to offer factual, unidealized renditions of the world. As shown throughout this project, textual analysis questions these impressions and problematizes the ways in which external factors, such as the history of these documents, influence their existence in the present. As argued in the introduction, materiality here acquires a Marxist meaning, relating to ‘the dependence of every aspect of the historical process upon the manner in which man reproduces his existence [...] through economic production’.<sup>413</sup> Thus, although the narratives fictionalize and reimagine the past, they do not contradict the existence of material circumstances; rather, they emerge as a result of them. Economic circumstances become visible within the processes through which the text is produced and within its changes after publication, as well as impacting upon its formal and thematic features. For instance, these connections can be seen in *All I Could Never Be*. Here, Ivanowna leads a frustrated life and is a woman haunted not only by her failed love with Scott, but also by her heritage of poverty. At the same time, material circumstances also condition the history of the text itself, which despite the literary resonances of its title, constitutes a piece in a broken chain of biblical and American predecessors.<sup>414</sup> As a

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<sup>413</sup> Paul Tillich, ‘Christianity and Marxism’, in *Political Expectation*, ed. by James Luther Adams (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 94.

<sup>414</sup> The title is a reference to a line in Robert Browning’s poem ‘Rabbi Ben Ezra’. Yeziarska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 3. For the full poem, see Robert Browning, ‘Rabbi Ben Ezra’ in Robert Browning, *Robert Browning: Selected Writings*, ed. by Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 401-407.



result of this dependence upon history, ‘the material form of the book’, from the typography and paratexts to the footnotes and design, is the product of these circumstances.<sup>415</sup> Therefore, without denying the fictionality of these American memoirs, this thesis considers the relation between their recurring themes and ideas and their historical and material nature.

The texts reimagine their external conditions without ever transcending them or becoming autonomous entities, the products of an abstract notion of language removed from history. In order to address this reality, this thesis departs from what Ben Agger calls ‘literary and cultural theory oblivious to the material nature of textuality’.<sup>416</sup> As the material nature of textuality emerges throughout the chapters, discussion of the historical period underpinning these texts draws attention to the particularities of each text and the similar histories behind them. The introduction to *The Promised Land* captures a tension between the necessity to discard the past and the difficulties of achieving this goal, a sentiment also expressed by Yeziarska and Cohen in their texts. In these opening pages to her autobiography, Antin proclaims that ‘a long past vividly remembered is like a heavy garment that clings to your limbs when you would run’.<sup>417</sup> A few lines later, she concludes on a hopeful tone, referring to the purgatory nature of her text: ‘I take the hint from the Ancient Mariner, who told his tale in order to be rid of it’.<sup>418</sup> The three women long to escape their foreign pasts, and, concomitantly, their unknown religious heritages, in writings in which the historical oppression of women is palpable in the singularity of their voices.

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<sup>415</sup> Graham Allen, Carrie Griffin and Mary O’Connell, ‘Introduction’, in *Readings on Audience and Textual Materiality*, ed. by Graham Allen, Carrie Griffin and Mary O’Connell (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 1 (pp. 1-8).

<sup>416</sup> Ben Agger, *The Decline of Discourse: Reading, Writing, and Resistance in Postmodern Capitalism* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1990), p. 203.

<sup>417</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 3.

<sup>418</sup> Antin, *The Promised Land*, p. 3.

The importance of the past, understood as both personal and communal, and as ‘history’ that encompasses socioeconomic events, must be reiterated in view of its problematic nature. The introduction above builds on Ebert’s defense of the existence of an objective historical reality in order to avoid ahistorical, idealistic readings of the literary past.<sup>419</sup> Literary texts are the products of a specific historical context, which is, in turn, determined by the given material conditions of production of this society. Although these texts might serve as an accurate mirror to the reality of their times, from gruesome factory scenes to domestic violence, they do so with caveats. None of them, not even Cahan’s and Yeziarska’s local color realism, can escape the writing and rewriting of history that is inevitable part of literature. Thus, history permeates these texts in the minutiae of their details: the class injustices of their times, the pains of love and marriage, or the struggle for survival. History’s presence can also be felt in the absences, the impossibility to refer to present concerns that could question, or even undermine, the American myth of freedom. Ultimately, history informs the formal aspects of the texts in the dominance of realism and regionalism, sometimes tinged with modernism in the cases of Lewisohn and Yeziarska. Likewise, material conditions impose specific restrictions, such as printing costs that limit Antin’s ability to reproduce foreign characters, and even condition the length of the texts.

Further final remarks must be made about the relationship between literature and the past in this dissertation. Arguably, this thesis has not departed from the readings of history and its relationship to literature posited in the introduction. The four chapters return, in different ways, to the centrality of communal frameworks, mostly familial and American, which shape the individual recollections of the protagonists. To reiterate a premise from the first pages of this dissertation:

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<sup>419</sup> Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After*, p. 38.

‘remembering is also governed by unmistakably social norms of remembrance that tell us what we should remember and what we should essentially forget’.<sup>420</sup> These communities dictate particular memory narratives of communal history in order to ensure the identity, cohesion and continuity of the community. The individual essence of memory, namely its biological nature as a cognitive process, can only operate through social and linguistic frameworks dominated by ruling classes. In this process, other stories, such as women’s narratives, are left untold, and, while they often emerge in these pages, they do so partially, as broken, muted voices that hint towards the past more than they actually relate it. Although what we should forget according to familial, religious, national and other social frameworks might not always be erased from documents and minds, the remnants of the past do not overcome their own repressive history.

Throughout these pages, the intricacies of literary representations of the past, particularly the personal past, come to the fore in multiple ways. Firstly, this complexity comprises the multiple narratives that retell the same events, such as Antin’s different versions of her voyage from Russia to America in *From Plotzk to Boston* and *The Promised Land*. On a more abstract level, beyond the literal variety of renditions of the past, lie the infinite ways in which these pasts can be interpreted by writers and readers alike. This dissertation partakes of this process of interpretation in its close readings of certain events, which, in turn, provide particular re-readings of the author’s accounts. With its particular emphasis upon certain passages from these texts, this dissertation throws light upon the malleable, selective nature of the writing of the past. Furthermore, the seven primary sources comprise mythical, historical, personal and communal pasts, all of them categories which continuously relate to

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<sup>420</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 5.

each other. Thus, *The Promised Land* entwines Antin's personal past with a communal narrative of the Exodus from Russia to the Promised Land, shared by her family and other immigrants. This narrative, centered on the notion of America as the Promised Land, 'the mother of exiles', echoes Puritan and other American ideals, which, in turn, return to the biblical book of Exodus.<sup>421</sup> From this it follows that the past is always in a relationship with preceding pasts, and, as time continues to elapse, this recent past will in turn become one of these preceding pasts.

The endeavor to provide a nuanced, in-depth reading of the representation of the past in these seven American narratives, along with the no less important reading of the histories informing the texts themselves, guided the four chapters. Different from memories, which are narratives of former events, often sequential and linked by causality, told or written from the present, the past constitutes the events as they actually occurred. In other words, any attempt to retrieve the past would always render it a memory, a version of the events which, despite their former reality, are no longer retrievable in the present. Without denying this, this dissertation referred to 'the past' as 'memory', not out of carelessness or disregard for the importance of terminology, but because of the conflation of presence and absence entailed by both terms. Going back to the beginning of this thesis, *Memory and Migration* refers to the traveling nature of memory: 'the content [of memory] is not sacred, but manifest, not measured by distance from point of origin, but by the passage itself'.<sup>422</sup> In this passage, always inflected by time, and, occasionally, by physical distance, memories turn into the past that acquires, for the protagonists, the value of the former. Thus, without dismissing the actuality of the events, and the disparities between life and fiction, this thesis demonstrates the necessity to acknowledge the impossibility to

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<sup>421</sup> Emma Lazarus, 'The New Colossus', in *Emma Lazarus: Selected Poems and Other Writings*, ed. by Gregory Eiselein (Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), p. 233.

<sup>422</sup> Creet, 'Introduction: The Migration of Memory and Memories of Migration', p. 6.

capture the past, even in its most fragmentary forms. Rather, even when authors manage to escape editorial constraints, such as those endured by Cahan in his attempts to publish *Yekl*, texts can only recollect impressions of former impressions which never lead back to the events themselves.

The limited scope of this project, restricted in terms of nationality, culture, and temporality, might lead to questions as to the extrapolation of its main arguments. Thus, an important point must be made regarding textual selection and the potential generalizations of the analysis and conclusions of this project regarding literature, memory and the past beyond third-wave immigrant Jewish-American literature. From anthropology and history to geography and literary studies, for a variety of reasons memory has been a recurring concern in multiple scholarly fields since the 1960s.<sup>423</sup> Literature and the past have also been the subject of work in literary studies, yet the nature of these concepts is not always clarified or examined. At the same time, among scholars of ‘world literature’, there is a current search for universals, such as the need to address global problems, the aspiration to a shared heritage, and universality, often understood as mutual comprehension between peoples. William Franke even posits that for some literary scholars ‘this vocation of literature or literary thinking to a universal dimension in the conversation between cultures lies near to the heart of the urgent motivation for world literature’.<sup>424</sup> Even so, most current scholarship takes a skeptical approach to this notion, diverging from universalizations that group different literatures by appealing to a given commonality. Since this thesis’s main focus is

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<sup>423</sup> To read about the memory boom and the age of Modernity, see Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 2012). To read about the memory boom, history, the Shoah and Jewish consciousness, see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, ‘Flawed Prophecy? Zakhor j the Memory Boom, and the Holocaust’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Fall, 2007, Vol. 97, No. 4 (Fall, 2007), pp. 508-520.

<sup>424</sup> William Franke, World Literature and the Encounter with the Other: A Means or a Menace?, in *Tensions in World Literature: Between the Local and the Universal*, ed. by Weigui Fang (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 131 (pp. 113-146).

Jewish-American literature between the 1890s and the 1930s, it did not seem befitting to extrapolate its claims to unexamined literatures, even when referring to other subgenres within American literature.

This thesis engaged with memory and the past in Jewish-American literature by circumscribing the reading of these terms to a given theoretical framework and a set of key readings. Amy K. Kaminsky's musings upon the term exile are quite appropriate to consider the dangers of universalization of at least seemingly universal terms. Kaminsky reflects upon the word 'exile' in the literature of Uruguayan exiles: 'the colors, shape, and weight of the word 'exile' were being eroded by the carelessness of those who picked it up and made use of it in their desire to name something else'.<sup>425</sup> Like the word 'exile', terms such as 'literature', 'memory' and 'the past' exist in different cultures and across different periods; indeed, one might even go as far as to claim that there is no existence without memory. However, while fragility might be an intrinsic quality of memory, the nature of this fragility diverges scrutiny depending upon issues such as one's condition, predisposition, and resources. Likewise, omission might be intrinsic to literature, and even to communication itself, but the nature of omission is inevitably bound with context, customs and languages. Following this line of argument, this thesis has examined certain forms of discontinuity that emerge between the chosen writings and preceding Jewish and Western texts. Similarly, albeit it might be claimed that memory is always a form of reimagining, the rewritings of the narrated pasts of the protagonists have emanated from their own linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds. In limiting its claims to Jewish-American literature during these four decades, this thesis acknowledges the innumerable understandings and forms these terms might take in different realities.

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<sup>425</sup> Amy K. Kaminsky, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. xi.

Undoubtedly, this thesis has left a few loose threads that could provide a starting point for further research on memory and American literature, or even other literatures. Also in this thesis there are several paths related to literature and history that have only been partly trodden, which could also lead to research on these matters. An apposite example of a topic in need of further study is the relationship between a literary text and its sources, which was examined in chapter 3 through close readings of *Up Stream*, *Red Ribbon*, and *All I Could Never Be*. Undeniably, plenty of publications have been devoted to intertextuality, influence, citation, allusion and other forms of intertextual references in literature. Some of this research, such as Julia Kristeva's 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', where she coins the term intertextuality, has even become canonical in literary studies.<sup>426</sup> Certainly, one might consider that, since literary texts are in constant dialogue with each other, an exploration of any given text inevitably requires a study of its relationship with other texts. However, one might develop the notion of literary tradition as a heritage in which the linkage between texts functions as a broken, inconsistent chain that joins and disjoins its pieces. This conception of tradition that pays attention to its discontinuities could provide a humble approach that acknowledges the discontinuities of history in literature. This notion of tradition could be particularly valuable in the case of collectivities that, owing to the vicissitudes of history, have not always had access to a tradition of their own, such as women.

Another example of an issue that deserves much deeper exploration than the analysis in chapter 4 above is the imbricate relationship between languages and literature. This thesis has made an effort to depart from much previous research in

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<sup>426</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 34-61. For the original French article, see 'Le mot, le dialogue et le roman' in Kristeva, *Semotiké*, trans. by A. Jardine, T. Gora and L.S. Roudiez (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969), pp. 143-73.

recent decades which unfortunately tends to deal with language in an abstract, ahistorical manner. Rather, this project has argued for an understanding of language as a concrete code of communication employed by a particular community which varies according to time, place and other factors. Needless to say, what constitutes a language and a dialect is a matter of contention, and so it is also a matter of contention whether certain linguistic codes, such as Yiddish, could be classified as languages or not.<sup>427</sup> However, by equating language with what we commonly refer as ‘tongue’, this thesis underscores that while language is often used to convey history, it always has its own history. Certainly, the nature of these linguistic histories, namely the events that constitute them, as well as their gaps, or even the ramifications of a particular event, could be further examined with regards to other languages. A starting point would be the multiple ways in which the oeuvre of authors writing in foreign tongues relates to their mother tongue and the literary genres to which the texts belong. This line of research, with its emphasis upon personal writings, idiolects and other linguistic features, could lead to further research in disparate fields, from linguistics to literary studies.

A final note as to the possibilities of this thesis to serve as a starting point for further research on memory, literature and the past must be made pertaining to the main aims of this project. As explained in the introduction, this dissertation’s purpose was to examine literature’s relationship with the past, including textual, linguistic and historical pasts, focusing upon American literature between 1890 and the 1930s. The narrow nature of this focus, restricted in both time and space for the sake of accuracy and structure, immediately begs questions as to the extrapolations and limitations of this claim. The aim of this project was not universalize its premise about memory and

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<sup>427</sup> For further reading on Yiddish as corrupted German, see Jerold C. Frakes, *The Politics of Interpretation: Alterity and Ideology in Old Yiddish Studies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).



literature in the chosen context to literatures from other regions and historical periods. On the contrary, limiting the scope leaves the door open for other scholars to explore the literature's relationship to the past in other cultures and communities, including oral literatures. For example, to what extent is it the case in other literatures that memory operates as a broken narrative of former events rewritten for the sake of present needs and concerns? Do other forms of formal and thematic discontinuities manifest in other literatures, and, if that is the case, in which ways they do so and why? How does memory manifest in other literatures, namely, do other communities privilege different narratives of the past, for instance, drawing mostly from mythology, or, by contrast, recycling recent communal history? These and other questions inevitably require us to reconsider our notions of memory and the past, as well as literature itself, including their changing, unstable natures.

If literary traditions place the pasts of the texts within a broken continuum, the texts themselves partake of these interrupted linkages from former texts, despite their different legacies. This dissertation's focus upon the primary sources has left no space to analyze the discontinuities between these predecessors, for instance, the biblical legacy And Puritan writing, or Homer's legacy And Shakespeare, to name but two. Traditions are always ongoing, unstable, marked by particular breaks determined by historical differences, by disparities between men and women, and so on. Without denying the importance of presences, in this case, the words on the page, this thesis turned elsewhere to shed light upon the importance of absences, missing pieces behind these narratives. Ultimately, this thesis remarks in *Memories on the Move* about 'the inability to ever know precisely what it is that we lost together with the lost object'.<sup>428</sup> This thesis partakes of the inability to recollect or write most former

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<sup>428</sup> Rosinska, 'Emigratory Experience: The Melancholy of No Return', p. 37.

events, while also demonstrating the persistence of these absences in their many forms. These seven writings, in which the thematic and the formal entwine, testify to the existence of erasures and excisions between and within literary texts. Furthermore, the memories evoked in these texts underscore the entwinement between the rewriting of the past and these narratives' continuous departure from their literary ancestors. Like the texts they constitute, these missing pieces of the past are also ever-changing, malleable in new circumstances that demand new interpretations of episodes forever lost.

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