A “Revolution in Ink”: Sui Sin Far and Chinese Reform Discourse

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In November 1909, suffragists began to hawk their new journal, The American Suffragette, near the Brooklyn Bridge. Appropriating language commonly used during the Progressive Era to describe the threats that a modernizing Asia was seen to pose to America and the rest of the world, the New York Tribune comically described the “small and apparently harmless women with yellow bags full of yellow-backed magazines” who descended on innocent bystanders as a “yellow peril,” aligning the “militant sisterhood” engaged in a “feminine uprising” with the Chinese. In many ways, disenfranchised U.S. women had much in common with China, a feminized nation that, because of military defeats, had ceded its autonomy to foreign powers. Some suffragists identified with Chinese women, and saw in Chinese efforts to end foot binding and sex slavery a feminist movement that paralleled America’s. “China may even yet be one of the prime movers in the suffragist campaign,” The American Suffragette predicted. However, for most white suffragists in the nativist Progressive Era, connections with Chinese women were in tension with beliefs in white racial and U.S. national superiority. In consequence, suffrage discourse frequently deployed Orientalist tropes such as bound feet as metaphors for the oppression of women worldwide at the same time that it participated in anti-Asian discourses.

Chinese North American author Sui Sin Far (born Edith Eaton) experienced firsthand the ambivalent relationship between discourses of American suffrage and Chinese modernization during the Progressive Era. Between 1900 and 1910, when she lived in California and Washington, Sui Sin Far published fiction, essays, and articles that focused on Chinese women’s collisions with Western feminists, efforts to preserve their culture amid philanthropic campaigns to “Americanize” them, and painful reactions to the U.S. government’s anti-Asian policies. Her works depict suffragists as anti-domestic, individualist, classist, racist, and dismissive of the needs of the less fortunate, while her journalistic pieces champion the Chinese democratic, modernizing reform movement that had, among other goals, gender equality and women’s enfranchisement.

Although early scholarship on Sui Sin Far read her portraits of women struggling against arranged marriages, sex slavery, and patriarchal Confucianism as uncomplicatedly feminist, more recent scholarship has criticized her work for its problematic politics. The editors of Aiiieeeee! and Lorraine Dong and Marlon K. Hom, for example, fault Sui Sin Far for perpetuating stereotypes by writing through the filters of U.S. cultural prejudice; more recently, Sean McCann has characterized her writing as “deeply conservative” because reformers “come off badly” and suffragists are depicted as “shallow and unhappy” in her fiction. In “Connecting Links: The Anti-Progressivism of Sui Sin Far,” McCann claims that Sui Sin Far “objected to the cultural politics of progressive reformism” and was “indifferent to the major contemporary efforts to modernize and democratize,” and implies that her works are effectively apolitical since “everything that counts in her writing occurs far from the world of statecraft and civic virtue and well within the realm of the ordinary, the mundane, and the domestic.”

Critical assessments such as these misread Sui Sin Far’s politics by missing the cultural work performed by her deployment of stereotype, by not recognizing the “politics” of “ordinary, mundane and domestic” settings, and, as I will argue here, by failing to recognize the broader transnational and transhistorical political contexts in which she wrote. One cannot comprehend Sui Sin Far’s critical portraits of suffragists unless one recognizes the tremendous influence that domestic feminism, promoted both by the Chinese reform movement and by the American sentimental literary tradition, had on her. Inspired both by Jane Tompkins’s claim that sentimental fiction used domestic settings and familiar stereotypes to “redefine the social order” and by recent scholarship encouraging a more transnational American studies, I would like to reevaluate both the content and context of Sui Sin Far’s “politics.” By observing how Chinese diasporic reformers and their sentimental domestic feminism provided Sui Sin Far with an alternative to the racist feminism of the American suffrage campaign, this essay makes specific interventions in how we define and understand U.S. politics and women as participants in them.

Much is at stake, politically and historically, in analyses of the “politics” of any writer’s work, but particularly writers who, in terms of gender, race, nationality, class, and literary formation, are as complex as Sui Sin Far. This essay has three goals: to read her subtle, complex, and deeply political writings more responsibly by connecting them to transnational reform movements.
and recognizing their debts to an earlier generation of reformers’ literary forms; to model a scholarly approach to the politics of the Progressive Era that does not permit either elite white suffrage or mainstream progressivism to stand in for “feminism” or “reform” during this period; and to encourage more responsible readings of all writers whose historical identities inflect their particular engagement with mainstream politics, particularly women writers whose focus on domestic and other forms of labor might be misread as “indifference” to “politics.” Chinese feminism, as Sui Sin Far represents it, demonstrates the complicated and contradictory forms of agency that arise out of women’s participation in nationalist movements.

Reformers’ “contemporary efforts to modernize and democratize” China, and particularly its women, were in tension with twentieth-century U.S. ideas—indeed, Chinese understandings of women’s rights had more in common with nineteenth-century domestic feminism than with Progressive Era ideals of femininity. Whereas the U.S. Progressive Era ideal was the elite white beauty who privileged the “vocal mandate” of American culture through public speaking, the Chinese ideal was quieter, more private, and more domestic.

A frequent lecturer in the United States spoke for mainstream Chinese feminism when she claimed that “the . . . suffrage movement in China is . . . strong, but you don’t hear much about it, because Chinese women are silently working for the cause. The militant method is against the nature of the Chinese women.”

While U.S. feminists organized primarily around the franchise, Chinese reformers opposed many traditional gender practices, from foot binding and sex slavery to educational restrictions and marriages arranged for money rather than love. Although most reformers promoted expanded opportunities for women, they were divided on the political role that women might serve in a reformed China; a minority lobbied to permit women to participate in politics while the majority regarded raising good citizens as women’s primary responsibility.

And while U.S. suffragists celebrated alternative affiliations to the family by parading in formations organized by vocation, alma mater, and voluntary associations, the Chinese idealized a Chinese version of the American Republican Mother, that is, the sentimental self-sacrificing mentor of the nation’s citizens. One of Chinese reformers’ exemplars was Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose 1852 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin was translated in 1901 as A Chronicle of the Black Slaves’ Appeals to Heaven. Diasporic Chinese compared their own trials—prejudicial employers, harsh immigration laws, exile, and separation from family—to the suffering of Stowe’s characters. When Chinese reformers debated how a woman might participate in the nation, they did not suggest she sever the “Three Bonds” that defined her relationship to her ruler, parents, and husband; rather, they reinterpreted the relationship as reciprocal, about responsibilities and roles rather than subordination, in much the same way many mid-nineteenth-century U.S. feminists had interpreted separate spheres ideology. Many Chinese reformers believed women’s primary responsibilities were her family and home but, like U.S. sentimental writers, reinterpreted a woman’s relationships with family as synecdoches of her relationship to the nation.

Inspired by these models, Sui Sin Far styles a more domestic and privately contoured model of political agency for women than the progressive ideal of suffrage. In her stenographer characters and her own sentimental storytelling method, Sui Sin Far asserts the value of textuality and “private” speaking over the “public” speaking with which U.S. suffragists associated women’s political self-expression. Sui Sin Far crafted a personal politics with an awareness of women’s place in global modernity. As in many sentimental novels, her fictional settings make manifest political issues that concern women most acutely: the constructions of gendered racialization, the uneven distribution of social/political/economic power, and the micro- and macro-politics of new social movements.

One documented influence on her literary and political self-styling was the male journalist and leader of the Chinese Reform Party Liang Qi Chao (1873–1929), whom she profiled in The Los Angeles Express in 1903. Like many U.S. writers who believed that popular domestic fiction could “redefine the social order,” Liang viewed print as an effective weapon in a nationalist rebellion and considered fiction capable of “renovat[ing] the people of a nation.” Whereas Chinese reformers such as Sun Yat-sen urged violence, Liang urged a “revolution of ink, not a revolution of blood.” Key to this “revolution” was print culture’s transcription of discourses circulating within the nation: that is, “gather[ing] virtually all the thoughts and expressions of the nation and systematically introduc[ing] them to the citizenry . . . The press, therefore, can contain, reject, produce, as well as destroy, everything.”

Drawing on her stenographic training and on Liang’s notion of media as active “transcribers” of national discourse, Sui Sin Far models women’s “political voices,” not on parading and public speaking, but on listening and stenographically transcribing. In a 1912 essay, Sui Sin Far admits being frustrated by her stenographic habits, which forced her to struggle to “emancipate [her]self from the torture of writing other people’s thoughts and words with a heart full of [her] own.” However, in fiction depicting stenographers, such as
“The Inferior Woman” (sequel to “Mrs. Spring Fragrance”) and “One White Woman Who Married a Chinese” (and its sequel “Her Chinese Husband”), Sui Sin Far represents transcription as a mode of female self-expression compatible with stereotypes of Asian women’s quietness and earlier U.S. models of domestic feminism. By listening to competing Progressive Era discourses and transcribing them in a way that mirrors their limits, Sui Sin Far effects a “revolution in ink.”

“Yellow Perils”

The relationship between nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. suffragists and the Chinese was more complicated than the Tribune’s “yellow peril” trope suggests. Like the “sisterhood” between white women’s rights activists and African American women, it was deeply ambivalent, at once presupposing identification on the basis of gender and competition on the basis of race. From the 1830s, white feminists exploited affinities between Chinese women—domestically confined, sexually exploited, and despotically treated by patriarchs—and the U.S. women restricted by separate spheres ideology. The Chinese woman symbolized female powerlessness under patriarchy. Central to this analogy were the bound feet that indicated women’s constrained physical and social mobility. In 1835, Lydia Maria Child interpreted foot binding as a deliberate deterrent to insurrection, suggesting that the practice was introduced when Chinese women “combined together to overthrow the government; to prevent the recurrence of a similar event, it was ordained that female infants should wear wooden shoes, so small as to cramp their feet and render them useless.” By celebrating women’s “reign” over domestic matters while limiting education and political access, Child implied, American society also stunted women. In 1860, Elizabeth Cady Stanton extended Child’s trope, invoking Chinese women’s “feet compressed in iron boots to the smallest possible dimensions, depending on man to carry her about” as a metaphor for the unnatural dependence of women on men around the world. This symbolic affinity between Chinese and U.S. women culminated in the Progressive Era.

The limitations of this Orientalist rhetoric were apparent in Washington and California, where suffrage referendum campaigns (in 1910 and 1911) coincided with anti-Asian feeling. As non-Anglo-Saxon immigration increased, nativists promoted suffrage as a means of preserving elite power by “canceling out” the “slum” and “ignorant” vote. Support for suffrage in California, where Sui Sin Far lived from 1898 to 1904, came largely from those who made no secret of their condescension toward . . . [ethnic] Chinese [and] all non-Anglo, lower-class citizens.” During the 1896 referendum, California suffragists expressed outrage that native-born college-educated women were disenfranchised while non-English-speaking men of Chinese ancestry had been enfranchised. The referendum’s defeat, leader Anna Howard Shaw claimed, could be explained by the fact that “every Chinese vote was against us.”

At the same time that suffrage discourse found in Orientalist tropes a convenient way of promoting an image of universally oppressed femininity, campaigns like California’s regarded Chinese American women as indifferent to feminism, even as news of Chinese feminist reform began to hit newstands. “Women” continued to mean white women. Suffragists also considered Chinese-born men, who were “ineligible for citizenship” and not enfranchised, as irrelevant to campaigns. While campaigning for referenda in Washington (in 1910) and California (in 1911), suffragists frequently mobilized nativist rhetoric that asserted that native-born white American women were more fit for citizenship than assimilable Chinese men and their “backward” female relatives.

Inspired by imperialist rhetoric viewing the United States as China’s protector, modern suffragists began to use bound feet as a metonym for both China—its international status as a weak nation protected by virile America—and its “unprogressive” women. By the Progressive Era, the image of the subservient, immobilized Chinese woman served less as an allegory of oppressed femininity worldwide and more as a measure of the achievements of U.S. feminism when compared with other national women’s movements. The bound foot as a measure of American women’s international superiority was mobilized most explicitly when, beginning in 1907, suffragists paraded down thoroughfares and hiked hundreds of miles to present petitions to state legislatures. Walking became identified with women’s citizenship. As organizer Rheta Childe Dorr defined it, “the difference between belonging to the human race and being a member of the Ladies’ Aid is merely the difference between walking in ordinary shoes and toddling painfully in Chinese boots.” Parading in groups, U.S. suffragists modeled women’s unleashed potential; by contrast, they viewed Chinese women as hobbled by “three-inch golden lotuses” and confined to maternal, wifely, and daughterly roles.

“Revolutionary Days”: Sui Sin Far and Chinese Stylings of Reform

Given the anti-Asian undercurrents in U.S. suffrage discourse, many Chinese American women had limited sympathy for suffrage but were curious about
the Chinese reform movement’s efforts to expand opportunities for women. At the same time that twentieth-century U.S. suffragists were casting Chinese women as unfit for modernization and the franchise, women in China were actively engaged in the most dramatic feminist revolution in their nation’s history. The Chinese reform movement, initiated in 1898 when Kang You Wei and Liang Qi Chao implemented the Hundred Days of Reform, considered the rehabilitation of womanhood critical to national salvation. Feminist ideas spread rapidly, among students at elite girls’ schools in China and Japan and in popular Chinese journals, such as Zhong guo xin nüjie zazhi (Journal of the New Women of China) and Nüxue bao (The Journal of Women’s Studies). Many Chinese reformers, in addition to opposing foot binding, sex slavery, and arranged marriages, also insisted on gender equality, even female citizenship and suffrage.

In the United States, diasporic Chinese women read about inspirational women reformers in newspapers such as Chung Sai Yat Po and Chinese World/Sui Gai Yat Po; they broke with conventions to attend lectures by visiting reformers, especially Chinese women students whose U.S. education was funded by the Boxer Indemnity Fund; they published pro-revolution poetry in local media and some made “speeches of fire and patriotism” of their own.

During the years in which Sui Sin Far lived in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle, those cities were hotbeds of support for Chinese reform ideas. While she canvassed Chinatown for subscriptions for the San Francisco Bulletin, wrote Chinatown sketches for the Los Angeles Express, and volunteered at Seattle’s Chinatown missions, Sui Sin Far observed the popularity of Chinese reform. Her publications provide evidence that she followed China’s reform movement closely and was sympathetic to its agenda. Los Angeles was a “stronghold” for Liang’s Reform Party (Baohuanghui), which promoted a democratic China through advocating the institution of a constitutional monarchy and parliament. In her Westerner series, she praised the Reform Party for recognizing the necessity of “a new way of living . . . a new way of thinking.” She considered reformers among the “most influential and enterprising,” and stressed their support of industrial and educational reforms, intermarriage, and, for some, religious reformation.

Sui Sin Far may have been one of the hundreds of diasporic Chinese who heard Chinese student Sieh King King lecture about reform, the eradication of the slave girl system and foot binding practices, and women’s rights in 1902 (figure 1). Sieh was “the apostle of freedom to the women of China: to free them of the yoke of bondage and to place them upon a footing equal to the men of the nation.” Sui Sin Far may also have encountered “Mrs. J. Jung” and “Miss B. Loo” who, speaking in San Francisco, called for their countrymen to win the ballot in China by the sword, to overthrow the Manchu dynasty and install a republican form of government in its place. She definitely encountered reformer Liang; she profiles his October 1903 visit to Los Angeles in “Leung Ki Chu and His Wife,” an article for the Los Angeles Express. Liang’s complicated perspective—pro-emperor, anti-(violent) revolution, pro-women’s rights, pro-sentimentality as a conduit for reformist ideas—coincides with Sui Sin Far’s. Just as Liang has been misunderstood—one scholar inaccurately describes him as a “Los Angeles reformer” attempting to “topple the monarchy and replace it with republicanism”—Sui Sin Far’s own politics are elusive and subject to misreading.

Unlike Sun, who did not refer explicitly to women’s equality in his writings, Liang addressed women’s rights repeatedly in his work, insisting that improving women’s conditions would strengthen Chinese families and the nation. In speeches and editorials beginning in 1897, he argued that national salvation lay in capitalizing on women’s talents; eliminating foot binding and improving women’s educational opportunities would permit them to contribute to the nation’s wealth instead of parasitically draining the nation’s resources. The Girondist revolutionary Madame Roland (1754–1793), whose biography Liang wrote, was, he argued, a “mother” of all revolutions and a model of self-sacrifice for Chinese women.

Sui Sin Far’s identification with women reformers is made explicit in “Leung Ki Chu and His Wife.” Although Liang’s wife did not accompany him to the United States, Sui Sin Far’s article describes her character and thoughts. In the first two paragraphs, Sui Sin Far conveys the sacrifices made by Chinese in the name of reform: “Many have lost their lives and . . . liberties, others have had their property confiscated by the Chinese government, their homes made desolate, their families driven into exile and poverty . . . [Liang] himself dares not, at the cost of his life, enter his native land, and his wife and family are obliged to make their home in Japan.” But the final paragraphs shift from Liang to his wife, whose significance to Sui Sin Far is reflected in the equal billing she gives her in the article’s title. For Sui Sin Far, Liang’s wife exemplifies the self-sacrificing Chinese woman reformer:

She has shared her husband’s vicissitudes with a brave and cheery spirit. She has full faith that a brighter day will dawn for China, and . . . she hopes to see her husband reinstated.
with honor. His work is such that it naturally necessitates lengthy periods of separation from his family, but though anxiety for his welfare is ever present with his wife, she has never been heard to repine or reproach. She devotes her life to her children, to whom she daily teaches the lessons of patience and fortitude.

Whereas the article begins by identifying Liang as the “hero of thousands of enlightened Chinese people,” it ends by picturing Liang’s wife as “hero.”

“Those who believe in ideals and hero worship may picture her—when her children are in bed and her husband over the sea—stretching her arms Chi-naward and crying”:

Oh, China! Unhappy country! What would I not sacrifice to see thee uphold thyself among the nations? Far bitterer than death it is to know that thou who wert more glorious than all now liest as low as the lowest, while the feet of those whom thou didst despise rest insolently upon thy limbs. . . . [N]ow, the empire, which is the oldest under the heavens, is falling and other nations stand ready to smite the nation that first smote itself. Truly Mencius said, “the losing of the empires comes through losing the people.” The government, being foolish . . . has lost the hearts of the people. Who shall restore them?

Sui Sin Far’s “transcription” of this imagined lament, with its sentimental arc, self-sacrificing gesture, and attention to the place of “heart” in government, styles female political self-expression as a private gesture originating in a domestic space but “broadcast…over the sea.” This speech’s oscillation between grand oratory and sentimental gesture marks the intersection of public and private gendered discourses. Liang’s domestically bound wife, as Sui Sin Far depicts her, demonstrates, in addition to devotion to family, a keen familiarity with Chinese politics. As Liang’s biographer notes, “there was a general feeling among some reform-minded Chinese intellectuals that China suffered from a political gap between ruler and ruled.” Liang’s wife views this gap as caused by the government’s loss of the people’s “hearts.” She is not “conservative” or “indifferent” to reform; rather she imagines a feminine political voice articulated from a domestic space. If her speech ends with a question—“Who shall restore [the people’s hearts]?”—its answer lies in self-sacrificing reformers like herself; the “patience and fortitude” she teaches her children are relevant virtues for patriots and statesmen to possess. Although her oration seems stereotypically feminine, Sui Sin Far assigns this same speech to a male student who believes he is destined to be a “future leade[r] of China” in a 1912 story, suggesting that it expresses the views of many exiled male and female reformers eager to return to China to aid in national salvation. The similarities between article and story also suggest that for Sui Sin Far, as for Liang, formal distinctions
between journalism and fiction are not significant—both can function to “gather . . . the thoughts and the expressions of the nation.”

This article, Sui Sin Far’s only located reference to a politically affiliated Chinese woman, demonstrates how distinct Chinese women’s rights discourse could be from that of U.S. suffragism. Although U.S. newspapers were drawn to the sensational Chinese equivalents of American militants (i.e., radicals described as “sanguinary Rebel[s]”), most pre-revolutionary Chinese feminists celebrated the mother whose self-sacrifice would contribute to the nation’s strength and the unity of women who would collectively work toward the goal of national salvation rather than the individual self-actualization valorized by American democratic ideology. As one Chinese suffrage motto expressed it, women should be “Helping each other: All of one Mind.” In “Leung Ki Chu and His Wife,” Sui Sin Far chooses to celebrate a mother working on behalf of her family, speaking privately rather than publicly, to an imagined nation rather than an actual audience. While her husband lectures publicly, Liang’s wife delivers an apostrophe to China from her home in exile. Her greatest sacrifice lies in being exiled from her homeland. Sui Sin Far’s focus on the Chinese woman in exile rather than the visiting Chinese statesman, or indeed the lecturing “sanguinary” suffragette, speaks volumes about her belief that women can contribute to the polity morally through their domestic roles.

“A Revolution in Ink”: Sui Sin Far’s Response to the Rhetoric of “Inferiority”

Four of Sui Sin Far’s stories, published after “Leung Ki Chu and His Wife,” mark the limits of American suffrage rhetoric and offer Chinese reform discourse as a more inclusive alternative. Minnie, the narrator of “The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese” and “Her Chinese Husband,” is held in contempt by her first husband, because she values her self-sacrificing domestic labor more than her stenography career. Alice, the heroine of “The Inferior Woman” (the sequel to “Mrs. Spring Fragrance”), resists suffrage discourse because it presumes women need elite philanthropic activists’ protection from male harassment in the workplace, a presumption at odds with her own stenographic experience. These stories oppose the assertion that men and women are the “same” and the implication that some women are superior to others by virtue of class and race, and instead work to emphasize the importance of women’s labor on behalf of both home and homeland.

Like “Leung Ki Chu and His Wife,” these stories are set primarily in domestic spaces linked to national spaces (e.g., immigration detention pens and lecture halls in which progressives lecture about America as the “protector” of China). Rather than “turning away from public rhetorics” and “displacing” politics, as McCann claims, Sui Sin Far readily observes politics within the personal. In these stories, familial relations reflect power dynamics within larger contexts; female characters’ domestic rebellions symbolize civic rebellions, and U.S. reformers’ loveless homes signal a cultural incapacity to care for the needy and to consider the collective above the individual.

Sui Sin Far revises Progressive Era discourse using stenographer characters who “take down” what is said in order to expose its limits. Literary critic Victoria Olwell has observed that stenographers are presumed passive transcribers of voices. Indeed, a stenographer who mediates others’ speech rather than making speeches herself seems the antithesis of the U.S. suffragist. Yet Olwell argues that in much Progressive Era fiction the “typewriter girl” functions as a trope of new womanhood and an alternative to the popular images of the voter. In Sui Sin Far’s stories, Minnie and Alice, as well as Mrs. Spring Fragrance, use transcription to model idiosyncratic original thinking—Minnie by ignoring racist opposition to Chinese men, Alice by insisting men do not harass working women, and Mrs. Spring Fragrance by challenging assumptions about “inferiors” in U.S. society.

In “One White Woman” and “Her Chinese Husband,” published in 1910 in The Independent, a pro-suffrage, pro-Chinese weekly, Sui Sin Far “transcribes” Minnie’s account of her divorce from Carson and marriage to Liu Kanghi. The stories contrast Carson, who is inspired by “socialistic and new thought literature,” takes suffrage as a “hobby,” and is presumed to be an “educated broad-minded man,” with Liu, a businessman interested in Chinese and U.S. politics but presumed to be “just an ordinary Chinaman.” Key to Sui Sin Far’s critique are the husbands’ contrasting valuations of home. Although Minnie serves Carson in a “home of [her] own” and finds it “a pleasure,” Carson’s misogyny prompts Minnie to desert him. His progressivism is blind to the contributions to the civic sphere made not only by his wife but also
by Chinese immigrants such as Minnie’s second husband, whom he derides as an “oily little Chink.”

Liu, although a stranger when he intercepts Minnie’s suicide attempt, provides her and her baby a home; later, he is a loving husband and father. Rather than encourage Minnie to work outside the home, he gives her piecework she can do while caring for her child. His devotion to family extends to a broader network of kin—he supports a relative unable to work, for instance—to include affiliations such as the “Chinese Reform Club, a Chinese social club, and the Chinese Board of Trade.” Unlike the brutish, self-absorbed Carson, Liu is a kind, collectively oriented man who fulfills many Chinese reformer ideals.

Although Minnie’s domesticity displeases Carson, it fulfills Chinese reformers’ ideal femininity. Minnie observes a reciprocal rather than hierarchical understanding of the “Three Bonds.” She substitutes for her lack of interest in the abstract ideas of “politics, labor questions, woman suffrage, and world reformation” a desire “to help a wee bit the poor and sick around me,” a quality Carson dismisses as “narrow-mindedness.” Minnie’s language is sometimes hard to tally with Western feminism: for example, she appreciates that Liu permits her the “privilege of being but a woman” and insists that Liu is her “superior”: “I would not love you if you were not.” However, Minnie’s adoration of her “great husband” is matched by his adoration of her.

Minnie and Liu’s selflessness toward others resembles the filial piety and brotherly love (jén) that reformers encouraged Chinese to extend to the state. Their love for the unlucky—which a progressive state should encourage—contrasts sharply with the stinginess of Carson and his suffragist assistant, who “never loved nor understood children.” When Minnie’s child is sick, Carson’s assistant insists, “We have no disease that we do not deserve.”

The abused Minnie finds the confidence to challenge Carson, paradoxically, by using her stenographic training to transcribe critiques expressed by people she respects. Although she perceives stenography as in conflict with her domestic responsibilities—“While I took dictation . . . I thought only of [my daughter]”—Minnie transcribes the authoritative perspectives of others to buttress her critique. When Minnie relates her husband’s interest in reform to a friend, the friend responds: “What sort of social reformer is he that he would allow his wife to work when he is well able to support her?”

Mrs. Rogers looked very serious as she told me that . . . the majority of men had no wish to drag their wives into all their business perplexities, and found more comfort in a woman who was unlike rather than like themselves.
lobby for an eight-hour day, Washington clubwomen continued to demand longer days from their own servants.59

Sui Sin Far sets the story of the “inferior” woman within this context. For Mrs. Carman, class and education distinguish the “Superior Woman” from her “Inferior.” Ethel is a college-educated New Woman encouraged by her mother to lecture on suffrage. By contrast, the self-educated Alice has worked many years to become “private secretary to the most influential man in Washington.” However, according to Carman, Alice is “inferior,” “uneducated in the ordinary sense”; “her environment . . . has been the sordid and demoralizing one of extreme poverty and ignorance.”60 Carman’s epithets reference the Confucian categories of “Superior” and “Inferior Man” outlined in the Analects of Confucius, which Sui Sin Far encountered in a 1900 translation of Chinese Literature from which she frequently quotes. According to Confucius, the “Superior Man” is distinguished from the “Inferior Man” not by class but by qualities: social virtue, social good feeling, and gratitude to one’s fellow man.61 By contrast, class and formal education are at the heart of these Progressive Era American iterations of Confucian categories.

“The Inferior Woman” exposes suffragists’ assumption that even though they supposedly work for the welfare of all women, opportunities to work with and to marry talented men “by rights belong only to . . . well educated wom[e]n of good famil[ies].”62 When Ethel invites Alice to lecture her club about the “oppression of women by men,” she assumes Alice will say that “men prevent women from rising to their level.” Alice, however, declines the invitation:

The men for whom I have worked . . . , whether they have been business or professional men, students or great lawyers and politicians, all alike have upheld me, inspired me, advised me, taught me, given me a broad outlook . . . [I have been] borne aloft and morally supported by the goodness of my brother men.63

Significantly, Alice refuses to repeat Ethel’s “script”; indeed she substitutes for suffrage “sisterhood” a “brotherhood” that has supported her while her “sisters” regard her as inferior. To her credit, Ethel recognizes that Alice has learned on the job and has graduated from the “university of life with honor,” making Ethel a “schoolgirl in comparison.”64 Sui Sin Far also disrupts the assumption that the college-educated lecturer makes a more original contribution than the stenographer Alice. Although Ethel has a good reputation as a speaker, she confesses, “I have studied one hundred books . . . and attended fifty lectures. All that was necessary was to repeat in an original manner what was not by any means original.”65 Alice’s job, by contrast, involves passive transcription of others’ words and yet she expresses a unique perspective on her male colleagues that departs significantly from suffrage dogma while voicing support for suffrage. She apologizes that “[she] cannot carry out [Ethel’s] design, and help [her] work, as otherwise [she] would like to do.”66 Sui Sin Far’s defense of utterances that do not appear “original” may explain her own strategic use of popular forms. These forms—sentimental fiction and ethnographic Chinatown tales—serve as the unoriginal containers for the new ideas contained within. Like Alice, Sui Sin Far is more “original” than she initially appears.

Paralleling suffragists’ misguided efforts to protect working women in “The Inferior Woman” are the United States’ efforts to “protect” China while enacting racist, anti-Asian policies. Liang, in the journal he kept during his U.S. tour, mentions Roosevelt’s speech urging Americans to dominate the Pacific and “exert more influence over . . . weaker nations in that area.”67 In “The Inferior Woman” and “Mrs. Spring Fragrance,” Sui Sin Far suggests that the rhetoric of inferiority and protection that informs U.S. understandings of class and gender also informs ideas of ethnicity and race. Alice’s perceived inferiority links her with China and the Chinese; the letter she writes declining Ethel’s invitation parallels the letter Mrs. Spring Fragrance writes to her husband about a lecture on “America, the Protector of China,” which she attends with progressive “American friends”:

The effect of so much expression of benevolence leads me to beg of you to forget to remember that the barber charges you one dollar for a shave while he humbly submits to the American man a bill of fifteen cents. And murmur no more that your honored elder brother, on a visit to this country, is detained under the roof-tree of this great Government instead of under your own humble roof. Console him . . . he is protected under the wing of the emblem of Liberty.68

Here, the relationship between domestic and national spaces that prompts the profile of the exiled Chinese woman reformer and the critique of U.S. reform discourse resurfaces in the image of the detention pen as the “home” America offers the immigrant. The literal and political homelessness of Mr. Spring Fragrance’s brother parallels the social homelessness Alice experiences as a self-supporting woman renting a modest cottage. Significantly, when Mrs. Carman appreciates Alice’s superiority, she goes to her “distant” cottage and invites Alice to “return home with [her],” a move Mrs. Spring Fragrance describes as bringing a “bird” back to the “nest.”69
Just as she deconstructs the hierarchy that places Alice beneath Ethel, Sui Sin Far also deconstructs the hierarchy that positions Chinese below their U.S. protectors. Like Alice, the Spring Fragrances lack “the divine right of learning.” Sui Sin Far’s narrative, however, showcases their wit and awareness. Mr. Spring Fragrance quotes classical Chinese poetry from memory and interprets it for his college-educated neighbor. Although he is a philanthropist, Mr. Spring Fragrance is considered a mere merchant, not a member of China’s scholar-gentry class. A newspaper account of his banquet for Chinese students devotes “several columns to laudation of the students . . . but no comment whatever . . . on the givers of the feast,” which makes Mr. Spring Fragrance feel “unappreciated.” When Mrs. Spring Fragrance regrets that she lacks “the divine right of learning,” her husband scoffs: “The divine right of learning! . . . Humph.”

Through their clever quotation and ironic reinterpretation, the Spring Fragrances challenge the assumption that the best reformers are formally educated. The Spring Fragrances represent many diasporic Chinese reformers who contributed funds and shelter to exiles, and promoted reform among their countrymen. Mr. Spring Fragrance reads the reformist newspaper Chinese World and invests in Chinese modernization. He is up-to-date on political affairs despite his lack of education; as Mrs. Spring Fragrance notes: “If you were a scholar you would have no time to read American poetry and . . . newspapers.” Similarly, Mrs. Spring Fragrance is a Chinese “new woman,” a political agent working from a domestic, familial location: she has married for love, wears Western clothes, speaks English, walks frequently (suggesting that her feet are not bound), travels often (indeed, her trip down the West Coast traces the route Chinese reformers and revolutionaries took), attends lectures, and is writing a book analyzing U.S. culture for her Chinese peers.

Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s most political act involves “taking down” a conversation she overhears: “The conversation I heard through the window was so interesting to me that I thought I would take some of it down for [the book I am writing] before I intruded myself. . . . My book I shall take from the words of others . . . I listen to what is said, I apprehend, I write it down.” Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s faithful transcription of the conversation exposes Mrs. Evebrook’s exclusive, elitist perspective, functioning, like Liang’s journalism, as a critical mirror.

In “The Inferior Woman,” the stenographer offers a quieter, textual alternative to the public-speaking suffragist while representing a model of authorship that reworks others’ words in order to effect political reform. Through stenography, Mrs. Spring Fragrance turns “the words of others” into “an original idea!” Her stenographic success implies that Alice, too, has a more political “voice” than the stenographer imagined as simply passive. Working in a lawyer’s office, Alice is more politically aware than her lawyer lover. “I hear . . . that your . . . case comes on tomorrow . . . You are going to have a hard fight . . . You may lose on a technicality,” she predicts. If “the typist constitutes—or literally inscribes—alternatives to those conceptions of identity and citizenship that dominated debates about women’s enfranchisement,” as Olwell suggests, then Sui Sin Far offers several of her characters as privately styled stenographic alternatives to the public-speaking American New Woman.

Minnie, Alice, and Sui Sin Far’s proxy, Mrs. Spring Fragrance, work diplomatically to challenge hierarchies. Their stories insist on the ways in which American progressive discourses err. If Sui Sin Far’s fiction mocks suffragists who cannot appreciate the self-made woman and criticizes progressives who pay lip service to suffrage while treating their wives with contempt, we should not, however, assume that she opposes women’s enfranchisement, just as Alice’s refusal to denounce male colleagues does not entail participation in a racist and classist suffragist movement and instead advocated “true” suffrage, which she defined, however naively, as more nearly associated with the Chinese nationalist form of feminism.

Sui Sin Far’s stories thus demonstrate the tension between Chinese reform discourses and U.S. Progressive Era reform discourses. Despite the author’s positioning of the Spring Fragrances and Liu Kanghi as Chinese reformers suspicious of U.S. reform, critics lacking context have missed the political inflection of Sui Sin Far’s work. Rather than dismiss her work as inhabiting a realm “far from the world of statecraft,” I would argue that, like many sentimental reform fictions, her stories unveil the covert operation of statecraft in domestic sites. Mrs. Spring Fragrance’s disruption of Will’s engagement to the “superior” woman forces suffragists to reconsider their class prejudices; similarly Minnie’s marriage to Liu challenges the State’s attitude toward interracial marriages and the “yellow peril” racism embedded in its rhetoric of protecting China.

While Sui Sin Far’s stories of diasporic Chinese women pressured to “Americanize” and of self-supporting stenographers denied their own homes have
sometimes been read as “displac[ing] political concerns with personal fables” and “turning away from public rhetorics,” they should rather be understood as promoting an understanding of an interdependency between these two modalities, just as sentimental domestic fiction written fifty years earlier promoted a recognition of the domestic valences of political issues. Sui Sin Far’s works suggest that classism, racism, nationalism, and imperialism are experienced personally as homelessness: political exile keeps radicals from returning to China; poverty prompts emigration; Exclusion Acts separate Chinese men from their families; and classism keeps a stenographer living alone in a distant cottage. Read in this way, Sui Sin Far’s depictions of women’s challenges to and rebellions against arranged marriages and authoritative husbands intersect with broader concerns about the relationship between diasporic Chinese and the state; the homelessness, for example, of a suicidal mother parallels the homelessness of Mr. Spring Fragrance’s brother when he is detained rather than permitted to immigrate. Suffrage becomes, in her stories, short form for a feminism that discounts domesticity and values individualism over personal self-sacrifice on behalf of parents, children, and the less fortunate. Ultimately Sui Sin Far’s work is less a rejection of political roles for women than an effort to locate an alternative to U.S. feminism more suitable to the modernity embraced by her Chinese and Chinese American peers.

“Catching Up” to Sui Sin Far

Just as Mrs. Spring Fragrance hit bookstands in March 1912, U.S. newspapers announced, somewhat inaccurately, that China had enfranchised women. This news challenged dearly held beliefs in the United States’ global superiority by questioning the narrative of suffrage’s export to China by its U.S. “protectors.” In the months following, U.S. suffragists shamelessly mined the “even-in-China” story for its rhetorical power, attempting to embarrass U.S. men into enfranchising women so as not to position them as inferior to their Chinese sisters. Suffrage leaders claimed the enfranchisement of Chinese women “was a discredit to the men of this country.” Implicit in this rhetoric is a sense that white U.S. women deserved suffrage more and that the birthplace of modern democracy should control suffrage’s spread to “backward” nations. That spring, suffragists paraded down Fifth Avenue, carrying a banner urging the United States to “Catch Up with China” (figure 2). In August 1912, The Woman’s Journal reprinted a cartoon (figure 3) that telescoped suffragists’ mixed feeling about China’s progress. It depicts white U.S. women, wearing impractical
hats, hobble skirts, and tiny incapacitating shoes, observing a Chinese woman taking large steps in oversized boots that poke out from under her gown on which “EQUAL SUFFRAGE GRANTED” is printed.

Like the image of China itself, which, in the wake of the success of the Chinese Revolution had to be revised from old-fashioned to youthful, the U.S. suffrage campaign’s Orientalist tropes needed updating as more and more reports came out of China signaling women’s progress. Rather than describing Chinese women as “fast-bound in sleep of centuries” and as guardians of an ancient culture, U.S. suffragists began to imagine Chinese women as the very essence of the modern and at the forefront of international suffrage developments.

Sui Sin Far’s works seem to anticipate the very language that suffragists began to deploy to describe Chinese women as “modern.” In “The Chinese Woman in America” (1897), for example, Sui Sin Far claims Chinese women invented “the divided skirt” that many U.S. suffragists wore to mark their liberation from antiquated fashion ideals; she also claims “New Woman” is a Chinese term used to designate a recently married woman; and in a 1900 letter to publisher Charles Lummis, she challenges the view that “the Chinese women are kept down” by referring to the Empress Dowager’s power. “Isn’t it strange that the greatest person in China—the one who has the most influence—should be a woman? And the white people howl over that and don’t like it at all.”

Whereas prior to the Chinese Revolution, U.S. suffragists had ignored Chinese immigrants as potential suffragists, after 1912, they took up young Chinese and Chinese American women as images of progress and modernization. In the months following news of Chinese women’s enfranchisement, newspapers ran stories profiling Chinese members of U.S. suffrage organizations. When California’s referendum for woman suffrage succeeded in November 1911, suffragists circulated a photograph of Tye Leung, a second-generation Chinese woman, calling her the first Californian woman to vote (figure 4).

The most impressive evidence of the shift in U.S. suffrage discourse may be provided by the example of suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt, who began her suffrage crusade as a nativist concerned about “the slum vote” and “foreign menace” but became China’s most enthusiastic promoter in the months following the Revolution. In “America for Americans,” written in 1890, Catt remarked that the fact that “all orders of foreigners also rank politically above the most intelligent, highly educated women, native-born Americans—is indeed the most bitter drop in the cup of our grief.” But when Catt visited China in 1912 to promote her International Suffrage Alliance, her understanding of the relationship between Chinese women and suffrage changed. Her journalistic and diary accounts of her trip are marked by a newly inclusive, noncompetitive rhetoric referring to Chinese feminist achievements. She notices, for example, that the boatwomen of Macao are “full of vigor, strength and self-reliance,” “don’t care a flip what anyone thinks of them,” and are more “emancipated” than either elite U.S. women or women of the higher classes in China. Compared with the Chinese woman, who has “the freedom of the trousered leg,” a newspaper profile of Catt asserts that “the American woman is as helpless as a baby almost.” In an article Catt published in Jus Suffragii, she counters the reigning assumption that China learns from the liberated West: “There are other millions [in Asia] who have always enjoyed more personal freedom than was accorded to most European women a century ago, and more than is now permitted to thousands of women under our boasted Western civilization. . . . When . . . European influence
... has done its perfect work, will these women be losers, or gainers?" And Catt remarked to the Chinese press: "In spite of the force of the unfavorable circumstances under which Chinese women live and move they have not lost their strength of character and intellectual susceptibilities. With the removal of the artificial barriers and the possibilities of equal educational rights, they become equal to any other women."

Rather than reading Sui Sin Far as a “backward” woman opposed to U.S. progressivism, Catt’s shift, like the political awakenings of the fictional Mrs. Carman and Mrs. Evebrook, invites us to think of Sui Sin Far and the Chinese feminists who inspired her as in the vanguard of a transnational reform movement in this era. U.S. progressives were actually behind Chinese reformers, who understood that women around the world locate their oppression and liberation in different things and therefore need to create productive alliances that permit cooperation while tolerating difference. Perhaps it is fitting that Sui Sin Far’s death in Quebec coincided with the grant of the vote to women (for local elections) in that province. Her April 1914 obituary in the Montreal Daily Star notes that Sui Sin Far died “just when the road, which would have led to rewards commensurate with her hard work and continuous effort, had been thrown wide open to her.” What the author did not recognize was that North American suffragists were simply “catching up” to her!

Notes
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2. See Hao Chang, Liang Chi-Chao and Intellectual Transition in China, 1890–1907 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); and Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, eds., Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in late Qing China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Asia Center, 2002).
7. Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xi. Ning Yu notes Sui Sin Far’s debt to Fanny Fern (Ning Yu, “Fanny Ment in this era. U.S. progressives were actually behind Chinese reformers, who understood that women around the world locate their oppression and liberation in different things and therefore need to create productive alliances that permit cooperation while tolerating difference. Perhaps it is fitting that Sui Sin Far’s death in Quebec coincided with the grant of the vote to women (for local elections) in that province. Her April 1914 obituary in the Montreal Daily Star notes that Sui Sin Far died “just when the road, which would have led to rewards commensurate with her hard work and continuous effort, had been thrown wide open to her.” What the author did not recognize was that North American suffragists were simply “catching up” to her! Women and Language[1996]: 44–47); Linda Tintin Moser links her with Stowe in “Chinese Prostitutes, Japanese Geishas, and Working Women: Images of Race, Class, and Gender in the Work of Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far and Winnifred Eaton/Oneota Watanana” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Davis, 1997), 146; see also Min Song, “Sentimentalism and Sui Sin Far,” Legacy 20.1-2 (2003): 134–52.
8. Although feminism and nationalism are not always in tension, much recent feminist scholarship has drawn attention to how women are often awkwardly positioned in relation to the nation since modern nations have been founded primarily on gendered principles of citizenship even as they often deploy maternal imagery to represent the nation. Frequently male nationalists defer implementation of feminist goals in order to secure the coherence of an emerging nation, as was the case in post-revolutionary China, as I discuss in detail in note 78. In the months following the Revolution, a Han patriarchy quickly assumed control of the new Chinese nation and ignored the feminist agenda of women who had contributed so much to the nationalist revolutionary effort, revoking the modest provincial woman suffrage attained in Guangdong and rejecting woman suffrage from their list of priorities. See Louise Edwards, Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women’s Suffrage in China (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008). For broader discussions of the ways in which feminist agency is often compromised within nationalist movements, particularly in the Third World, see Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoo Moallem, eds., Between Women and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminisms, and the State (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); and Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
13. Yue argues that, in addition to sentimental literature in translation, Chinese literature from 1904 on frequently takes up the themes of family loss, suffering (including melancholy, and grief, themes that were popular in American sentimental fiction, but with a different historical impetus: the harsh exclusion laws that were separating Chinese families. See Yue, Shanghai and the Edges of Empire, 125.
24. Ibid.
25. Chinese-born men were disqualified from voting by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; however, U.S.-born men of Chinese background were enfranchised in 1896.
31. Ibid.
32. Charles Moses, *China’s Joan of Arc*, *San Francisco Chronicle* magazine, March 1, 1903, 2.
36. Pang, “Education for a New Age,” 65. Pang describes Liang as “the most articulate champion and prolific publicist of transforming Chinese people” (33). In addition to editing influential journals such as *The Chinese Progress* and *The Pure Discussion Journal*, he published essays in the *New People Miscellany* (1902) and a “General Discussion on Reform.” Liang’s journals were unbelievably popular: *The New Citizen*, which he launched from Japan in 1902, sold 14,000 copies per issue and had an estimated readership of 200,000, including many Chinese who relied on smuggled copies passed hand to hand.
38. Ibid., 207.
39. Ibid., 206.
Alliance organization, and shut down their journals; by September 1912, the election protocols for all the provincial assemblies had been standardized and Guangdong’s provincial policy of woman suffrage was revoked. See chapter 3 of Edwards, Gender, Politics, and Democracy.

81. Solomons, How We Won the Vote, 71.
83. For contemporary newspaper coverage of Chinese American support of suffrage after the revolution, see “Chinese Women to Parade for Woman Suffrage,” New York Times, April 14, 1912, X5.

Understandings of gender perform important ideological work in a given society. Individuals find it useful to promote, adhere to, or challenge the ideas about gender prevalent in their surrounding environments—ideas which themselves are contested and constantly reconstructed—at different points in their lives. In turn, these ideologies serve to organize, justify, and normalize social interactions, legal and economic relationships, and community institutions. In this context, even as gender ideologies appear cohesive and impermeable, their apparent hegemony masks their underlying instability and contestation. When a certain set of gender ideals retains its prominence, despite changes in the circumstances that gave rise to these understandings, it is worth asking what purpose perpetuating and defending these ideals serves for the individuals who work so diligently to uphold them. These questions are particularly useful in shedding light on the ways in which the process of negotiating and adapting to life in a new cultural environment is inherently gendered. By examining the gendered dynamics of migration and acculturation, we can better understand not only the ways in which men and women experience these processes differently, but also the ways in which understandings of gender inform the interplay between migrants’ decisions to adopt certain gendered behaviors that they perceive as (in this case) “American,” versus rejecting “American” ways in favor of their premigration cultural patterns.

When French Canadians migrated from Quebec to New England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of them moved from rural agricultural economies into industrialized urban settings for the first time. Although many Americans during this era were wholeheartedly in favor—as were many of the Quebecois migrants—of the notion of a sole male breadwinner single-handedly supporting his family, this was not the reality the migrants encountered in northeastern U.S. cities. Instead, many of them entered local economies dominated by textiles, shoes, and other industries whose
heavy reliance upon the underpaid labor of women and children made it difficult for men to find employment at wages high enough to support their families. As a result, many Quebecois mistakenly assumed that women and children working long hours in factories was the “American” way, and that many Americans actually preferred such arrangements. When the migrants saw the wives and children of their working-class neighbors—including many of their fellow Quebecois migrants—going off to the mills each day, they associated this behavior not with their own relocation from a rural agrarian world to an industrialized wage-based economy, but rather with their relocation from Catholic French Canada to Protestant New England.

In the minds of many Quebecois migrants, then, the phenomenon of women working for wages was an “American” evil; in contrast, the ideal of women staying home and tending to their families and households was, to them, a distinctly canadien way of life. While some French Canadian men and women responded to these challenges by consciously and deliberately adopting lifestyles that they perceived to be more “American” than their previous ways of life, many worked hard to maintain, at least on the most basic level, their premigration understandings of men’s and women’s proper places in family and society: man’s authority in the family came through his responsibility of providing for his wife and children, while woman’s place was in the home as wife and mother. This article explores the various functions that perpetuating these premigration understandings of gender served for many Quebecois migrants and their offspring.

My argument is twofold: on one hand, for male leaders in these migrant communities, perpetuating traditional ideas about men’s and women’s contributions to family and society was part of an effort to retain, on a communal level, their distinct identity as a Catholic people of French Canadian ancestry. In contrast, for female migrants, the decision to support traditional gender norms was a more complicated one; many migrant women and their American-born daughters advocated perpetuation of traditional Quebecois understandings of gender not only as a means of defining their place in American society, as Catholic women of French Canadian ancestry, but also to obtain and maintain the benefits and status within the home that these ideals afforded them in the United States. Thus, while members of both sexes understood their efforts to preserve these gender ideals as a means of maintaining a distinct identity as French Canadians within American society at large, some women also utilized the concept of female economic dependence upon a male breadwinner to redefine the position of canadienne wife and mother, both in the family and in Franco-American society as a whole. In the greatest irony of all, some of them could only maintain this chain of economic dependence by acting independently of their husbands, with some going so far as to initiate proceedings against their husbands through the American legal system.

This essay focuses primarily on the Franco-American ethnic enclaves of Lewiston, Maine, and Worcester, Massachusetts, two New England cities with fundamentally different economies. Lewiston was primarily a textile-manufacturing center, though its residents also worked in the shoe factories of neighboring Auburn, while Worcester’s economic base was much more industrially diverse. Though smaller and less famous than Lowell (Massachusetts), Woonsocket (Rhode Island), and other extensively studied textile giants, Lewiston was otherwise a typical example of the New England textile centers that lured French Canadians south in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While many histories associate French Canadians in New England with textile manufacturing, Worcester, in contrast, attracted a sizable French Canadian population despite having a much more diversified economy; as a result, it was the leading example of New England cities whose attraction to the French Canadian migrant did not revolve around the production of cloth and related industries.

These economic differences had important ramifications for French Canadian migrants. Industries such as textile and shoe manufacturing succeeded in part through hiring women and children at lower wages over adult male workers whenever possible; this reality decreased employment options for men across the board, deflated wages for jobs that did go to men, and increased the likelihood that women and children would perform wage work, since families could not count on the wages of a sole male breadwinner for survival. In contrast, cities such as Worcester depended less on the underpaid labor of women and children; a combination of more skilled and semiskilled job openings, smaller businesses in economic areas less conducive to the labor of women and children, and few jobs available for women and children in unskilled factory positions made Worcester a job market more favorable to male heads of household than to their dependants. As a result, more male heads of household could secure jobs that might pay enough to support their families. However, this does not mean that women and children, French Canadian or otherwise, were nonexistent among the ranks of Worcester’s wage earners. Worcester’s few small textile mills and shoe factories, as well as its nationally known manufacturers of such clothing articles as corsets and gloves, counted their share of canadiennes among their predominantly female workforces; other women of French Canadian ancestry worked as domestic servants, seamstresses, or office workers and salesclerks.

The understandings of gender that the Quebecois migrants held so dear were hardly unique to Catholic French Canadians in the late nineteenth and
early twentieth centuries; indeed, many Protestant New Englanders also believed that men should be sole breadwinners, while women's workplace was the home. What is important is not the extent to which these ideas were unique to the French Canadian migrants, but rather the extent to which the migrants perceived these moeurs, or moral values, to be distinctly Quebecois. Especially in the late 1800s, at a time when outside capital from English-speaking Canada was financing much of the slow push to industrialize Quebec society, while language rights for Quebec's growing English-speaking minority infringed upon the concept of Quebec as the home and refuge of French Canadians, the Quebecois were accustomed to defining themselves as a separate people surrounded by a larger and alien culture. New England factory owners, eager to exploit female and child labor for low wages, were thus on some levels no different to the Quebecois than Anglo-Canadians had been; likewise, educated American professional women seemed as unnatural as Protestant and English-speaking Canadian feminists had. Thus, for many Quebecois migrants of both sexes, promoting and preserving this gendered division of household labor was a means of perpetuating their separate identity as French-Canadian-ancestry Catholics in what they perceived as a predominantly Protestant society.

However, it is important to note that women of French Canadian ancestry in New England perpetuated domestic definitions of adult womanhood, and the corollary rhetoric of economic dependence on a male breadwinner, in ways that had been impossible for them in Canada. Being an economically dependent wife and mother in the United States offered many of these women the potential for a degree of material comfort and economic security that had not been possible for them in Quebec, where continued reliance upon extensive home production went hand-in-hand with being a maternal housewife. Ironically, leaving their homeland and relocating in New England served, for many of these women, as a step along the path to more fully living out the economically dependent wife-mother ideal that they associated with their Quebecois heritage. In the process of attempting to maintain and live up to the premigration ideals of male breadwinner and maternal homemaker, these women created a new definition of the economically dependent canadienne wife and mother. This Franco-American version of female economic dependence, much closer to the middle-class version of the ideal then prevalent in the United States, included a degree of conspicuous consumption, participation in a modern consumer economy, and independence from traditional domestic chores that had been less accessible to these women either in rural Quebec, where good housewives were still expected to produce the bulk of their family's clothing and food from scratch, or in Quebec's cities, where wages were generally lower than in les états. Thus, women of French Canadian ancestry who sought to promote this lifestyle in the United States, whether from the working classes or the middle-class elite of their migrant communities, did so not only as a conscious act designed to establish their (to them) unique identity within American society—as Catholic women of French Canadian ancestry—but also to benefit from the distinct advantages that domesticity afforded them in the wage-based economy of American cities during this era.

Since Oscar Handlin first published his analysis of America's large immigrant population as The Uprooted in 1951, generations of migration scholars have responded by demonstrating the ways in which Handlin's images of discontinuity and severe breaks with a pre-immigrant past are inaccurate for many migrants. Scholars of migrant women have been no exception, with many arguing that despite the massive changes wrought by relocation, continuity—not rupture—was the dominant theme in their subjects' lives. Migration effected too many changes in the lives of many French Canadian migrants to allow such a blanket statement about Quebecois women in New England. In contrast to their lives on rural Quebec farms, or even in Quebec's relatively modest urban centers, migration to New England brought many Quebecois women into contact not only with new forms of wage work, but also with new neighbors whose non-French languages or non-Catholic religious practices were unfamiliar. Most important, life in New England's urban centers shifted the focus of many Quebecois women's domestic activities from rural forms of home production to reliance upon an industrialized consumer culture.

Although raising future generations of French Canadians was women's most important responsibility in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Quebec, according to French Canadian domestic ideologies, provincial lay and clerical leaders' aversion to modern industrial society meant that the rural Quebec housewife's work often remained tedious, time consuming, and unrewarding. While forms of female production that might add to the family's income (such as the manufacture of surplus dairy products for commercial sale) were eliminated during this period, male clerical and lay leaders alike denounced women who saved time by substituting commercial goods for home production of items for the family; for example, women who bought ready-made clothing or commercially produced fabric faced condemnation for placing their own selfish desires to save time and effort over their families' well-being and best interests, by substituting inferior-quality manufactured goods for those made at home with maternal love and devotion. As a result, it was not uncommon for Quebec housewives to make their own soap, fabric, and other household commodities as late as the early twentieth century. Needless
to say, trading such home production for access to modern consumer goods was a welcome benefit of life in New England cities for many housewives.\textsuperscript{14}

In sharp contrast to these and other material changes the migrants faced, a certain degree of continuity in the ideas of many migrants about what Quebecois women's lives should be like is apparent when surveying the migrant press. Quebecois community leaders in particular, from French Canadian priests to male editors of French-language newspapers in New England, promoted the maternal, domestic ideal for women as a means of maintaining ties to the French Canadian identity and traditions they had brought with them from Quebec. That migrants to the United States often posited the women in their communities as torchbearers of tradition has been documented;\textsuperscript{15} Quebecois migrants were no different in this regard.\textsuperscript{16} Obligations to preserve community members’ premigration linguistic and cultural heritage, as well as their kinship ties to the homeland, were particularly female responsibilities because of women’s capacity to influence the next generation’s development through childrearing. Thus, it is not surprising that above all else—as newspaper articles reiterated from the 1870s to the 1930s—being a good woman of Quebecois ancestry meant being a good wife and mother, and vice versa. In the words of one editorialist, only a “loving mother” and “loyal wife” was truly worthy of the title “woman,” as far as the migrants (or at least, the newspaper writers that purported to speak on their behalf) were concerned.\textsuperscript{17} As one male editor made clear, marrying and raising large families “to be Christians” (specifically, French Canadian and Catholic ones) were duties that lay at the heart of French Canadian women’s “virtue, good morals, and influence.”\textsuperscript{18}

Indeed, though these social and biological facts were hardly unique to women of French Canadian ancestry, Quebecois writers on both sides of the border placed them at the core of French Canadian womanhood; in contrast, as the editorialist mentioned above noted, \textit{américaines} simply did not understand the importance of marriage and motherhood, either in the abstract sense or in the lives of French Canadian women in particular. Again, the important issue is not whether Americans would have agreed with French Canadians that a woman’s place was in the home, and the responsibility of supporting the family belonged to the male head of household; many of their American-born contemporaries would have fully supported such notions.\textsuperscript{19} Rather, what is important is that many French Canadian migrants did not perceive the changes they encountered as part of moving from an agricultural to an industrialized society; rather, they understood these differences as the result of moving from their French Catholic homeland of Quebec—an oasis, albeit one under siege, from Anglo-Protestant Canadian society—to an alien Protestant American culture. The phenomenon of young girls (including migrant daughters) working long hours in factories; the difficulties unskilled adult men found in earning enough to support their families in economies geared around underpaid female and child labor; the temptations young wage-earning women faced, whether such temptations revolved around spending part of their hard-earned wages in conspicuous consumption of American fashions, or postponing marriage and a life of housework to prolong the relative freedom they felt as “working girls”—all these circumstances characterized the rural-to-urban transition for hundreds of thousands of international immigrants to the northeastern United States during this era.\textsuperscript{20} But just as Catholic clerics in Quebec insisted that maintaining the traditional French Canadian family (in the face of threats posed by the march to a modern industrialized economy)\textsuperscript{21} was the only way for Canadians of French ancestry to perpetuate their distinct identity as a unique race or nationalité, so too did migrants attribute the challenges their gender ideals faced upon migration not to the realities of life in an industrialized economy but rather to the negative influences of the larger Protestant American society in which they now lived.\textsuperscript{22}

This is why, from 1870–1930, New England’s French-language press printed numerous articles, editorials, speeches, poems, and letters beatifying the \textit{canadienne} wife and mother.\textsuperscript{23} As wives and mothers, women were at the ideological center of the battle for \textit{survivance}—the perpetuation of the migrants’ French Canadian and Catholic identity (or, more specifically, of their French language, Catholic faith, and traditional Quebecois morality) following their relocation to the United States. As one article explained, “The \textit{Canadienne} does honor to our name; she is the inviolable guardian of the hearth and home, the inviolable hope of our race, and one of the brightest lights of its face.”\textsuperscript{24} In contrast, attitudes and lifestyles that appeared to challenge Quebecois customs (including the centrality of marriage and motherhood in adult women’s lives) were inherently bad—and, in addition, often labeled “American,” to distinguish them from traditional French Canadian \textit{mœurs}, or moral values. As another editorial highlighted, man’s place in the family, in theory if not always in practice, remained as head and provider; woman was to fulfill her obligations to the family and society as a wife and mother, not as a wage earner. Whether the working woman was a factory employee or a member of the emergent class of educated professional women made no difference; both were equally degenerate, and equally “American,” in the collective mind of New England’s French Canadian enclaves. As one French Canadian newspaper editor in Lewiston, Maine, wrote in condemning an 1882 meeting of career women in a nearby city, “We respect the wife, we revere the mother, but we confess we have but little esteem for [professional women].”\textsuperscript{25}
Not surprisingly, given available work options for women in the local textile-based economy, Lewiston’s French-language newspapers reiterated this point frequently. Yet even newspapers in cities with fewer canadiennes performing wage work, such as Worcester, Massachusetts, felt the need to condemn women’s paid employment, while reinforcing her God-given role as wife and mother, on occasion. It is worth noting that the Franco-American press saw a surge in such articles in the fall of 1920, after the Nineteenth Amendment went into effect, guaranteeing women in the United States the right to vote. As devout Catholics, many Quebecois migrants and their Franco-American offspring feared that female suffrage would disrupt the familial gender hierarchy they believed God had ordained. As they read it, the Book of Genesis clearly outlined that men were heads of their families, with the responsibility to provide for them, and women were to be wives and mothers. Since good wives and mothers were to defer to their husbands in all matters, there was no need for women to vote, since men represented their families in the public arena of political participation; in a civic sense as well as an economic sense, then, women were to be dependents of their husbands, rather than independent agents able to act on their own. In the words of one article, female suffrage would bring about “the death of the family.” (Only in 1940, long after the Canadian government had granted women federal suffrage and all other provinces had granted the provincial vote to women, did Quebec allow women the right to vote in provincial elections.)

While female wage earning found little favor among these Quebecois migrants because of its potential to interfere with maternity and childrearing, even more denigrated was le matérialisme américain—that is, “American” tastes for “luxury,” conspicuous consumption, and other indications of excessive participation in the U.S. consumer economy. As noted previously, although maternal responsibilities were at the heart of Quebec’s version of the domestic ideal, the Quebecois wife and mother ultimately remained a productive housewife, inasmuch as the household goods her family consumed were concerned. Though life in American cities made the switch to consumption of commercially produced goods not only possible, but essential, New England’s French-language press repeatedly expressed concern over the decades that migrant daughters were developing a taste for “American materialism” while succumbing to other related temptations of life in the United States. “Society girls,” who were particularly guilty of such sins and had their priorities backwards, always made poor wives and mothers:

The society girl is distinguished by her love of fashion [as well as] her pronounced taste for parties, strolls, visits, public outings, theaters, balls. . . . She doesn’t go to church, or if she does, it’s only to see and be seen. She knows how to dance [better than she knows] how to pray to God and keep house. . . . If she marries before mending her ways, ten to one she’ll be an even worse wife than she was a bad girl. . . . Boys who’d like to have a wife who is quarrelsome, fussy, wasteful, and inattentive to a mother’s duties can confidently choose a girl who dresses like a model, nearly like the sort described above.

Though the dire predictions about the likelihood that “society girls” would fail as wives and mothers were no doubt hyperbolic, the frequency and consistency with which the migrant press warned against this female participation in consumer culture confirms what individual recollections of migrants and their offspring highlight: a number of young canadienne migrants apparently derived a great deal of enjoyment and satisfaction from the wide array of commercial products (clothing especially), and other goods and services, that were available for consumption in urban New England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the ability to buy ready-to-wear clothing, commercially produced soap, and other consumer products had long been the assumed corollary of the male breadwinner, maternal homemaker, and family wage ideals in the United States, actually doing so was often portrayed in Quebec during the late 1800s and early 1900s as the antithesis of the “traditional” rural lifestyle that provincial lay leaders and clergymen were working so hard to reinforce in French Canada, in response to industrialization and Anglo-Canadian cultural encroachment. The editorialists above and others like them suggest that New England’s Quebecois journalists agreed with their brethren in the homeland in this regard, even as the messages transmitted by the fashion columns, store promotions, and other advertisements that kept their newspapers afloat fostered a very different set of values—one that many migrants perceived as inherently “American.”

Though Quebec agricultural magazines and other sources urged rural French Canadian women to shun ready-made clothes in favor of home production well into the early twentieth century, Quebecois migrant women enjoyed the opportunities New England textile centers and the region’s industrialized urban economies afforded them to purchase inexpensive clothing off the rack. French Canadian migrant women and their Franco-American daughters were so particularly fond of dressing well that even contemporary observers commented on “the fine clothes they wear,” in the words of an 1891 account, especially when they made return visits to Canada. Twentieth-century migrants also took advantage of return visits to show off their material prosperity to relatives back home. As her great-niece recalled, one woman
Among other things, this role encompassed upholding French Canadian customs and values, such as the use of unadulterated French, in their homes and among their family members. Since the Quebecois battle during this era for *survivance* centered, in New England as in Quebec, on maintaining their Catholic faith, French language, and Quebecois customs and values (*foi, langue, et mœurs*), Lamarche’s audience could not have missed the significance of the major role he assigned to women, on the front lines of this battle for the survival of their identity as French Canadians in the United States—a role that was best fulfilled through their maternal and domestic obligations.

From the late nineteenth century through the 1920s, many working-class men also agreed that their wives belonged at home raising children and caring for the house, albeit for different reasons. These men were less concerned about preserving Quebecois identity and more concerned about preserving their own authority and sense of manhood; many men felt threatened, emasculated, and inadequate when their wives worked outside the home. Like the Manchester, New Hampshire, man who asked his wife’s boss to fire her in 1896, explaining, “I want her to stay at home,” 

men found wives’ waged labor outside the home disturbing not so much because their wives were working per se, but because wives’ paid employment publicly implied men’s ultimate failure to support their families economically. In his history of manhood in the United States, Michael Kimmel has argued, “Throughout American history men have defined their masculinity not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other.”

Even when not yet defining themselves as the “American” men to whom Kimmel refers, many groups of Quebecois male migrants were certainly driven by their desire to compete with, prove themselves superior to, and otherwise measure up in the eyes of other men.

Although not all French-Canadian-ancestry men shared this view, many working-class male migrants saw their ability to provide for their families’ needs as a key yardstick by which they and others measured their success as men. The disapproval many working-class men felt when their wives worked for wages was so strong that, decades after the fact, family members vividly recalled the discomfort their fathers and other Quebecois men experienced when wives worked outside the home. Raymond Dubois spent his earliest childhood years in the textile center of Lowell, Massachusetts, before moving to Manchester, New Hampshire, around age ten in the mid-1920s. As he explained in an interview during the 1970s, “My mother was one of the few that didn’t work in the mills after she was married. She was an exception to the rule. This was the reason why my father worked so hard. I think that most men pre-
Alice Olivier was even more explicit in her recollections of the family politics surrounding whether her mother, Maria Poitras Lacasse, worked. Lacasse moved to Manchester at age sixteen, where she worked in local textile mills for several years before her 1910 marriage, which produced twelve children. As Olivier recalled,

After my parents got married, my mother just worked [in the mills] periodically, for two or three months at a time, when things would get too hard and my father didn’t have any money. My father didn’t really want her to work. That was a big issue because she always wanted to go in and earn a little money. But the minute she said she wanted to work, there would be a big fight. He’d say, “No, you’re not going to work. You’re going to stay home.” And that’s why she did other things. She’d make clothes for him, take in boarders, rent rooms. . . . Sometimes she’d also work little stretches at night. . . . When there were big orders, the mills were always looking for people to work. But my father didn’t want to keep the children. That was women’s work; his work was outside.44

Olivier’s mother clearly valued being able to help the family financially and even managed to defy her husband’s wishes in various ways on several occasions. The fact that shejumped at the opportunity to go to the mills whenever she could, instead of just bringing in extra cash through boarders and sewing, suggests that she even enjoyed working in the textile factories, or at least preferred factory work to extra work at home. Yet her husband’s self-image as a provider kept her out of the mills and in the home as much as the family could afford. For these working-class migrant men, and others like them, even if their sense of manhood was not overtly connected to being of French Canadian ancestry, it was still innately linked to the so-called [French] Canadian moeurs, espoused by community leaders, which dictated that God had created women to bear families and men to support them financially.45

Thus, although the motivating sentiments were different, a wide spectrum of French Canadian migrant men continued to believe that marriage, motherhood, and full-time devotion to childrearing and housekeeping defined adult women’s position within the Quebecois community, whether in Canada or in the United States. Women who fulfilled these obligations to their families and the French Canadian patrie (homeland) were celebrated and lauded in public discourses; those who did not were denounced and shouldered the blame for any perceived diminution in French Canadian identity, or for moral decline in society more broadly.46 This is particularly evident in articles discussing and editorials speaking out against the evils of divorce—a growing (albeit still socially undesirable) phenomenon in the United States at large, but especially frowned upon in French Canadian communities because of the Catholic Church’s teachings against divorce. As Manchester’s Franco-American bishop Georges Guertin proclaimed in a 1908 sermon, laws permitting divorce “[are] contrary to the sacrament [of marriage] instituted by God.”47 Noting that divorce results in “the destruction of the home” and “the degradation of women,” Guertin proclaimed that “divorce can lead only to sin”48—views echoed by Quebec’s Monseigneur Langlois in a 1924 speech that received prominent coverage in New England’s Franco-American press.49

Until the secularization of Quebec society in the “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s, divorce was a rare phenomenon in Quebec, due in large part to the Catholic Church’s condemnation of the practice. As a result, French Canadians in Quebec more commonly resorted to legal separation in their efforts to remedy unsatisfactory marital relationships. According to one study of this phenomenon, which examined the 233 petitions for separation recorded in Montreal from 1795 to 1879 (four-fifths of which succeeded), 95 percent of the requests for separation came from the wife, who most often complained of spousal “brutality,” alcoholism, or both; when husbands presented a request for separation, they most often cited adultery as the motivating factor. Despite the social pressures that kept divorce rates low before the Quiet Revolution, separation requests increased in the last few decades of the 1800s and into the twentieth century.50

Thus it is not surprising that, as was the case with conspicuous consumption, articles, editorials, and other writings condemning divorce frequently linked the phenomenon to the United States and its customs. For example, in a fictional 1873 dialogue, part of an ongoing newspaper series that aimed to reinforce French Canadian moral values among the migrants, a young man asked the priest who starred in this discourse to remind him of the laws governing marriage. When another young man later remarked that laws in the United States permitted the termination of marriages by divorce, the priest in this fictitious dialogue was unequivocal in his response:

That, my friends, is the indication that the population isn’t Catholic. And while even laws may allow divorce, Divine law prohibits it, and all good Catholics must submit to [Divine law]. How unfortunate are those Canadiens who, listening only to their own evil passions, invoke American laws to get rid of their spouse!51

Immediately after his speech on the unfortunate effects of divorce, the priest returned to the original question posed by his young listener about laws concerning marriage. In particular, he reminded his audience that, among other things, “a wife needs her husband’s authorization for the various acts of life” (em-
phasis in original), such as entering into legal contracts, and acquiring or selling property.52

The priest's juxtaposition of women's dependent status under marriage, and the evils of divorce in America, suggest that the dialogue's author mentally linked female submission to male authority with the perpetuation of French Canadian values and beliefs, and likewise associated any self-assertion or failure to submit by women with degenerate "American" ways that could very well lead to divorce. The responses that ensued from the priest's fictitious male disciples reinforce this interpretation, while offering further evidence that canadien male migrants indeed perceived a possible threat to their manhood in any attempts by their womenfolk to adopt such "American" mannerisms as failure to submit to male authority. One of the young men vowed to tell his girlfriend—"she who claims that once married, women ought to wear the pants!"53—about what the priest had said; in response, another proclaimed, "If Catherine [his wife] ever wants to take off her petticoat [and put on] pants, I'll repeat [Fr.] Tuquetaine's fine words to her."54

Sometimes the connection between the dissolution of the French Canadian family and women's adoption of so-called American habits was less explicit. Some writings, such as an 1884 article on marriage, specifically blamed "young women's lack of desire to fulfill their duties as good mothers and good housekeepers" as well as women's "luxury in dress" for both a rise in divorce rates and a decline in marriage rates.55 Others, particularly in later decades when exogamous marriages had become less rare, were quick to blame religious and cultural differences that arose when canadiens and their Franco-American offspring chose spouses who were not Catholics of French-Canadian ancestry. Among the unfortunate consequences of such unhappy marriages, as noted by one article that originally appeared in a Lewiston newspaper but was reprinted in Worcester, was a loss of love among future generations for la patrie, their ancestral homeland. "If the parents regret being [French] Canadian [as indicated by their choosing a spouse of a different background],," the article asked, "then how can their children love the old mother country?"56—a particularly pointed question in Worcester's French Canadian community, where intermarriage rates had long been higher among Franco-Americans than was true in Lewiston.57

Yet men were not the only ones who spoke out in the Franco-American press in favor of maintaining women's exalted status within the home. Canadiennes and franco-américaines also lent their voices to the chorus of praise for economically dependent French Canadian and Franco-American wives and mothers. However, in the process of upholding woman's place in the home, these women subtly redefined what being a canadienne wife and mother meant. By honing in on women's maternal obligations, these women shifted the focus of ideologies of adult womanhood from the productive housewife to the maternal consumer. With an abundance of commercially made household goods readily available for purchase throughout New England, migrant women found themselves free to devote more of their time and energy to raising their children—as long as the family's total income was sufficient to meet the household's expenses.

Even when sons, daughters, and wives themselves had to supplement the earnings of the male head of household, many women still considered it their husband's God-ordained responsibility to provide for the family's economic needs; in the words of one woman from the textile center of Lewiston, Maine, where ample opportunities existed for women to support themselves, "I said to myself, 'When I am married, my husband will make a living for me.'"58 In fact, evidence from divorce proceedings, legal separation cases, episodes of abandonment, and other instances of marital discord suggests that many migrant women and their daughters most actively promoted the ideal of the maternal homemaker (and her counterpart, the sole male breadwinner) at times when these ideals coincided with their own goals and immediate needs. Particularly in cities where Quebecois women had fewer viable opportunities for self-sufficiency, such as Worcester, Massachusetts,59 women who opted for marriage and motherhood often deliberately embraced the ideal of economic dependence, and the access to modern American consumer society that this ideal seemed to promise them; thus, they especially called upon their dependent status when the reality of married life failed to meet their expectations.60

Female columnists in the Franco-American press made little attempt to hide their opinions on issues involving women. Although some female columnists, such as Liane of Lewiston's Le Messager, used their position of influence to speak out in favor of everything from women's paid employment to female suffrage,61 other women used the Franco-American press as a platform for more "traditional" perspectives. For example, Marguerite, female columnist in Worcester's L'Opinion Publique in the late 1890s, had plenty to say on the subject of feminism in one column—none of it flattering:

For quite a little while now, the feminist movement has become the hobby-horse of a good number of our American sisters. What pathetic speeches haven't they peddled, in special congresses, on women's emancipation, the right to vote, and the whole long stream of so-called woman questions! Cartoonists have certainly drawn a profit from this movement, and their caricatures, while sometimes cruel, aren't lacking a basis in reality—except, of course, in the eyes of the Misses of a more-than-ripe age.
[i.e., old maids], and their married counterparts who are at odds with their spouses and domestic life]—those [two groups of women] who form the primary body of the great army of the New Woman.\footnote{Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 173}  

In Marguerite's mind, feminism was a distinctly American phenomenon, one that (oddly enough, considering feminism's French roots) was entirely foreign to her as a woman of French Canadian ancestry, and of which she therefore wanted no part whatsoever.\footnote{Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 173}

Moreover, like many of her male contemporaries (both French Canadian and American), Marguerite could imagine none but disastrous consequences from any efforts to "emancipate" women from their dependent status, fearing that these moves would upset the gender ideologies on which she and others based their understanding of how society worked, and more specifically, their understanding of what made French Canadians unique on the American landscape. She continued her diatribe against feminism by describing a political cartoon she had seen the day after President McKinley's recent inauguration; her description made clear her thoughts on what she perceived as feminism's inevitable outcomes. The illustration was one artist's rendering of what a presidential inauguration of the following century might look like:

Except the happy President-elect was a woman, wearing a derby hat, eye-glasses, and pants, and the assembled audience was composed almost entirely of hypermasculine women, all wearing the same elegant costume. I say "almost"; for here and there appeared several effeminate persons, beings deprived of their rights, loaded down with kids—the last survivors, I'm guessing, of the detestable race of fathers, brothers, and husbands!

People have said to me that the illustration completely defies common sense; that was my reaction at first, but after thinking about it, I've wondered if the cartoonist didn't have the vision of a prophet. Already, four western states, if I'm not mistaken, have indulgently allowed women the right to take part in their legislative assemblies. No one can ignore the tireless efforts of the "woman suffragists" in many other states. Given the way things are going in this, the country par excellence of the New Woman, who knows what fate the future reserves for us, the old[-fashioned] women, who believe that family life brings us enough happiness and, let's face it, enough preoccupations. (emphasis in original)\footnote{Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 174}

The emphasis on women's maternal responsibilities in this description is noteworthy. Whereas the "hypermasculine" [American] "New Women" abdicated their sacred responsibilities by leaving childrearing in the hands of men, more traditional [French Canadian] "old [-fashioned] women" defined themselves through their maternal obligations.

Having made clear that she herself was on the side of tradition, not of women's rights, Marguerite did her best to persuade any readers who still needed convincing to join her camp:

There are, perhaps, among my readers several [feminists who want] to see the day dawn when women can all descend into the political arena. I want to believe that the number of these poor misled women is quite small among us Canadiennes; but I don't think there should be a single one left [within this group] after the [following] story, as comical as it is true.\footnote{Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 174}

She then relayed the story of a recent convention of Populist men and women in Denver, which had ended in a "general mêlée" after one of the female attendees criticized the male delegates.\footnote{Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 174} In Marguerite's mind, this story was ample proof that women could never succeed in civilizing politics; instead, politics were bound to remove any last vestiges of womanhood and feminine delicacy from the female population. As a proud Canadienne, Marguerite wanted no part of any such unfeminine activity. Moreover, she was confident that her readers would agree with her once they better understood the true consequences of "women's emancipation"—including the loss of their sacred maternal obligations—and would then, like her, prefer instead to remain as dependent wives and mothers within the home, leaving such responsibilities as heading the family and voting for society's leaders to men, as God had intended from Genesis onward.\footnote{Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 174} Marguerite placed her traditional, "old-fashioned [French] Canadian" values in direct opposition to new-fangled "American" ways. Her belief that a woman's place was in the home tending children, not participating in the public realms of politics and paid employment, was, in her mind, one of the things that set her and her sisters apart as women of French Canadian ancestry living in American society.

As this account and others make clear, Marguerite considered herself a Canadienne mother first and foremost, her weekly column in L'Opinion Publique notwithstanding. As she wrote in a later column, "We Canadiennes have never had a 'Mother's Congress,' like the American mothers have; we don't have the time to leave our homes for the pleasure of listening to each other talk about such things!"\footnote{Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 174} While Marguerite's emphasis on mothering (not household production) necessitated a certain amount of participation in American consumer society, she certainly did not condone overindulgence in this regard. Similarly, the Franco-American press periodically published writings by other women that decried any moves by the migrants or their offspring to embrace the excesses, material or otherwise, of life in the United States. From Margot's condemnation of [high] "Society" in Lewiston's Le Messager in 1909, to the denouncement of "Worldly Extravagances" by Angéline Leduc
that appeared in Worcester’s *L’Opinion Publique* in 1915, a number of female writers decried the corrupting examples they saw around them in American society, in an effort to hold Franco-Americans (and Franco-American women in particular) to the higher moral standard that they believed set their people apart in the United States. The three women’s writings just mentioned reflect several trends also apparent in the writings of male editors and columnists from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth. Even as *canadiennes* and *franco-américaines* embraced the consumer culture that freed them from housewifery and allowed them more time to devote to their children, these women—like their male counterparts—increasingly articulated their negative assessment of “American” ways and habits as concern over what they saw as an excessively materialistic and consumer-oriented American lifestyle, and some Franco-Americans’ growing predilection for the American consumer economy.

Given the degree of concern over excessive materialism that these authors expressed, and the apparent preoccupation a number of migrant women had with their own husbands’ failure to support them and their children (as discussed below), their fears may have contained more than a grain of truth. Elaine Tyler May has noted that in the United States during the early 1900s, rising divorce rates went hand-in-hand with a corresponding rise in women’s expectations that wives should not have to work after marriage and husbands’ salaries should be high enough to allow wives free access to America’s growing consumer culture. Although women and newspaper editors alike thought they were promoting traditional definitions of French Canadian womanhood when they expressed an understanding that husbands would support their wives, it is entirely likely—given the taste many of these women had developed for fine clothing, as just one example—that some of their expectations that husbands “provide” for them financially were influenced as much by the dizzying temptations of American consumer culture as by the definition of male providership they had learned in the Catholic church, if not more.

Though its emphasis on wives’ economic dependence meshed well with the migrants’ Catholic beliefs and Quebecois customs, the more consumer-oriented version of the maternal homemaker that life in the United States facilitated for Quebecois women was also very middle-class in many respects, whereas many of the migrants were not. But regardless of whether they were seeking merely to ensure survival or instead hoping to move into a higher socioeconomic category, just as some women used the Franco-American press to broadcast their own personal views on women’s place in the family and the world, other women used the French-language newspaper network in New England to call to task husbands who were not fulfilling their provider obligations. In the early 1880s, when divorce remained so unacceptable (and hence so rare) that New England’s French newspapers rarely reported divorces among Quebecois couples, the wife of a Quebecois doctor begged the French-language press to help her find her husband, who had abandoned her to raise their children alone, forcing her to work to support them. An uncharacteristically long news item reads,

Frank Gratton, better known as Dr. Gratton, left Cohoes [New York] last August or thereabouts and has not returned, abandoning his wife and three small children like a coward. Since then, one of his children has died, and his wife has been forced to work in a cotton factory, earning scarcely enough to support her little family. Mrs. Gratton now wishes to know where her husband is, and will gratefully receive any and all information on this matter. The French Canadian press in the United States, and particularly *Le Messager* of Lewiston, Maine, is asked to please reprint.

No doubt in collaboration with newspaper editors, Mrs. Gratton worded her appeal to highlight the fact that she was unable to support their family financially, try as she might—a circumstance that, because of the maternal neglect that necessarily followed Mrs. Gratton’s taking outside paid employment, may have contributed to the death of one of her children.

Although the article does not indicate precisely why Mrs. Gratton chose this particular point in time to search for her missing husband, either the loss of a child (due to her inability to properly fulfill her maternal duties), or her reaching a breaking point regarding the factory job her husband’s absence “forced” her to take, was likely responsible. If she had enjoyed her work and found the pay sufficient to support herself and her children, she no doubt would have been less inclined to seek him out, or to authorize the pitiful account of her family’s circumstances that appeared in French Canadian newspapers throughout the northeastern United States; yet clearly she was eager to return to the job of full-time mothering. Moreover, the article clearly indicates that the blame for their child’s death lay not with her, for any deliberate or willful failure on her part as a mother, but rather with her husband, Dr. Gratton—presumably a middle-class professional (and by extension, pillar of the community), who should have been setting an example for others instead of abandoning his breadwinner responsibilities. The following issue of *Le Messager* reported the outcome of Mrs. Gratton’s appeal with the terseness more characteristic of the French Canadian press at the time: “We have been informed that Dr. Gratton, about whom information was requested, is living in Biddeford, Maine.”
Four decades later, some women continued to call husbands to task in public by arranging for newspaper accounts of their plight, in an effort to bring husbands who had abandoned spousal obligations and paternal responsibilities alike back into line. That they used the public forum of the French-language press throughout the northeastern United States as their weapon of choice suggests a degree of confidence in the sympathy, moral support, and assistance of their fellow migrants. Had their pleas not been based upon common understandings of the primacy of a man’s obligation to support his family financially, these women’s appeals would have resulted in little but personal public humiliation. In contrast, the prompt responses that such tales as Mrs. Gratton’s elicited, and the way in which the authors of these accounts carefully crafted them to highlight wives’ victimization at the hands of non-providing husbands, indicates a level of support both from the migrant press and from the migrant population at large. For example, like the piece requesting information on Dr. Gratton’s whereabouts, the pathetic 1920 story of little Henriette Lescard’s illness appeared with the full blessing and full complicity of her mother, Mrs. Pierre Lescard. As Worcester’s L’Opinion Publique reported,

Her father’s absence renders her ill. A little girl by the name of Henriette Lescard is seriously ill at the residence of her mother, Mrs. Pierre Lescard of 66 Salem Street. The child’s illness is caused by the grief she has suffered, ever since her father has left the family.

“Where is Papa?” she asks constantly. During the course of last winter, the little one suffered a bout of the flu that left her heart quite weak. Father LaRue, who was called [at the time], says that only the return of her father can cure her. The family hopes that through the voice of the press, Pierre Lescard will come to know the state of his child and return home.24

Mrs. Lescard, identified in the article only by her husband’s name (a detail that served to reinforce her dependence on him while maintaining the article’s focus on her husband), brazenly used her daughter as a pawn in her efforts to shame her errant mate publicly for abandoning his family, in the hope of humiliating him into returning to them and resuming his economic obligations toward them. In her endeavor, Lescard had the full support not only of her priest but also of the local press (as the condemnatory headline alone makes clear)—both of whom clearly agreed with her efforts to force her husband to uphold the financial obligations canadien men owed to their families.

While these women sought to win over the court of public opinion, other women chose instead to insist upon men’s responsibility to support wives and children in the courts of the American legal system. In doing so, though these women most often drew upon the American legal system in the very un-canadien pursuit of ending their marriages, the way in which the Franco-American press reported upon their actions suggests that these desperate moves are best understood in the context of survivance. As this essay has already demonstrated, a man’s obligation to provide for his family was a critical component of French Canadian moral values, both in Quebec and in New England, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; moreover, New England’s French-language newspapers were among the leading champions of upholding traditional understandings of gender and other premigration values. When husbands failed to uphold their end of the marital bargain, some Quebecois migrant women and their American-born daughters felt perfectly justified in attempting to force, through American courts, recalcitrant providers to sustain their families. That the Franco-American press wholeheartedly supported these women’s efforts, repeatedly portraying them as victims and their husbands as villains (instead of condemning the women for succumbing to the evil American temptation of divorce), suggests that not only the women themselves but also New England’s Franco-American communities at large understood the women’s actions in this context. Just as newspaper editors called to task young canadiennes tempted by American ways, so too the Franco-American press, despite ongoing paeans to marriage and condemnations of divorce, backed the efforts of these women—who took negligent husbands to court only as a final attempt to bring their irresponsible spouses to task for failing to provide in an effort to reinforce these men’s familial and societal responsibilities as canadiens.

As noted previously, most Americans during this era would have agreed that men were responsible for meeting their families’ financial needs; throughout the United States, state legislatures passed laws between 1890 and World War I that criminalized men’s failure to provide for, or desertion of, their families.75 Quebecois and Franco-American women in New England did not hesitate to take advantage of these laws to deal with nonproviding husbands. Although women’s suits for legal separation in Quebec at this time revolved primarily around husbands’ abuse of their wives or excessive drinking, the most frequent causes of Franco-American women’s pursuing legal action against their husbands—whether in textile centers like Lewiston, diversified urban economies like Worcester’s, or smaller towns throughout the region—stemmed from their husbands’ obligation to provide for them and their children, an obligation that was both legally binding in the United States and Quebec and morally upheld within Quebecois migrant communities. Moreover, in their reports of women’s efforts to force husbands to live up to this responsibility, New England’s French-language press further reinforced these values by pub-
licly shaming those men who failed to adhere to breadwinner norms. Within smaller communities, such humiliation may have done more to bring men into line than legal mandates handed down by the American judicial system ever could. For example, when Florence LeSage sued her husband for legal separation in July of 1915, the account of her legal action that appeared in Worcester’s French-language newspaper was typically concise:

**A Request for Separation.** Mrs. Florence LeSage, wife of Louis LeSage, of Winchendon, Mass., has addressed to the Court a request for legal separation of goods against her husband, claiming that he left her on April 15, 1913 without just cause, and that he has refused all [financial] support to her and her child.76

Although Mrs. LeSage apparently won her legal case against her husband, the judge’s decision did not change her husband’s actions; as a result, several months later she was back in court. In contrast to the announcement of her first court appearance, the newspaper account of her second legal action against her husband was unusually lengthy and detailed, and included a more damning headline:

**Refusal to provide.** Florence Lesage, of Winchendon, wife of Louis E. Lesage, also of Winchendon, presented a request in court Tuesday demanding that her husband be forced to provide for her support and that of her child. Some time ago, the court had ordered Lesage to pay $10 per month for the support of his family. As he has been refusing to do so, he will be required to appear before the judge and give the reasons for which he refuses to obey the court’s mandate.77

While Florence LeSage was either tenacious enough or desperate enough not to give up the fight against her husband, the support of the Franco-American press—who clearly sided with her in their coverage of her legal proceedings, agreeing that her husband had failed in his familial obligations (as the condemnatory headline of the second account suggests)—may well have been more effective in gaining his compliance than was the proclamation of the American judge, whose efforts had failed once before.

What is unique and noteworthy about these women’s behavior is not the fact that they believed their husbands were obligated to provide for their financial needs, nor that they used the resources available to them to ensure that their husbands did so. Had they faced these circumstances in Quebec, many of them might well have used similar strategies to bring their husbands into line with their own and their communities’ expectations regarding adult males’ responsibilities. Article 191 of the 1866 Civil Code of Quebec added “the husband’s refusal to receive his wife and to furnish her with the things necessary for life, according to his ability” to the list of grounds for legal separation; furthermore, nineteenth-century separation cases in Montreal not infrequently depicted female plaintiffs as women who fulfilled their domestic and maternal responsibilities to perfection.78

Yet it is important to note that when women pursued such actions in the United States, as members of a minority society engaged in a constant battle to preserve its identity and culture, their actions took on added symbolic importance: when these women accused their husbands of abandonment and failure to provide, they did so as *canadiennes*. The emphasis in Franco-American newspaper accounts on their own innocence and their husbands’ willful negligence and deliberate breaching of the sacred responsibilities of the male breadwinner took on new meaning in light of the ongoing fight within the migrant communities for *survivance*, including the preservation of the male breadwinner and economically dependent wife-mother roles that the migrants associated with their French Canadian and Catholic heritage. Even if *canadiennes* south of the border were more likely to use nonprovidership as the legal basis for their claims than were their sisters in Quebec, the depiction of the *canadienne* wife and mother as innocent victim who had upheld her half of the marriage contract, while her mate had not, remained constant. Their actions were thus part of the larger battle against the encroachment of non-*canadien* behaviors among migrant men, just as the above-mentioned editorials served the same purpose in dissuading *canadiennes* from adopting “American” ways.

In fact, strategic reliance by women of French Canadian ancestry on the concept of the wife as an economically dependent homemaker and childrearer is most notably apparent when looking at divorce proceedings and petitions for legal separation. This no doubt helps to explain why, rather than condemning these women when they attempted to divorce or separate from their husbands, newspaper editors instead joined the women in condemning their husbands’ failure to live up to the expectation that a *canadien* head of household provide for his family. In her study of what caused divorce rates to rise in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Elaine Tyler May has argued that the various explanations offered at the time—including the liberalization of divorce laws, the “emancipation of women,” and the growing urbanization of the country—were insufficient to account for this phenomenon. Instead, she attributes the increasing popularity of divorce to the growing expectations that young individuals placed upon the marriage relationship and on the inability of their married lives to live up to the hopes and dreams with which they had entered marriage.79 As noted above, divorce was a practice the Catholic Church condemned and one for which women often shoudered the blame.

Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 179

FRONTIERS/2005/VOL. 26, NO. 2 180
Nonetheless, some female members of Quebecois migrant communities chose either divorce, or the less scandalous option of legal separation, as a means of escaping marriages—or more specifically, spouses—who had failed to live up to their expectations for married life.

New England’s French-language press frequently included summaries of local police activity and court proceedings, as well as more extensive coverage of those arrests and legal cases involving or otherwise concerning the newspapers’ Franco-American audience; divorce proceedings and suits for legal separation were generally no exception. In reports of divorce proceedings and other legal actions that Franco-American women pursued against their husbands, it is often clear that many of the women had certain understandings regarding their husband’s financial obligations toward them and their children. Most notably, they, like many of the women in May’s study, expected to fulfill the male breadwinner obligations that were well established not only in the American legal code at the time, but also in Quebecois custom, culture, and law.

It is entirely possible that these women’s understanding of what “breadwinning” entailed was in part influenced by their own rising expectations of material standards, a change in expectations facilitated by the move from rural Quebec society to urban American culture. Nonetheless, for those women whose complaints against their husband included failure to provide or desertion, it appears that they—and more importantly, the migrant communities in which they lived—saw this violation of traditional Quebecois gender norms on the part of their husbands as an unpardonable act, one tantamount to a canadienne’s eschewing marriage and motherhood in favor of paid work. No headlines proclaimed the errant husbands’ transgression of standards for manhood as a subversion of French Canadian heritage and identity per se; no such statements were necessary, because the point was obvious to readers. For example, the newspapers could have chosen to criticize the women requesting divorces for succumbing to American influences, just as they had elsewhere condemned divorce as an “American” phenomenon. Yet in failing to chastise these women for seeking divorce or separation in the first place, the newspapers’ editors instead indicated their tacit approval of the women’s efforts to uphold Quebecois values and customs regarding the obligations of men and women toward their spouses and society, according to French Canadian and Franco-American understandings of the marriage contract.

This is not to say that women divorced without stigma or shame. Even in Lewiston, although newspaper accounts suggest that women sought divorce (not legal separation) more frequently than in Worcester, divorce was not something women contemplated lightly, for it could bring considerable damage to a woman’s reputation—as suggested by a disclaimer published in Lewiston’s Le Messager in 1923: “Mrs. Elizabeth Pelletier, born Elizabeth Marchand, wishes to announce that she has not asked for the divorce from her husband, Mr. William Pelletier.” In fact, as late as 1915, one Lewiston woman chose to contact the police in Washington, DC (where her husband had allegedly fled a year before) rather than seek a divorce on grounds of desertion, perhaps because she feared a loss of reputation and social standing. In reporting that the Washington police had recently issued an arrest warrant for the woman’s husband, both of Lewiston’s French-language newspapers at the time mentioned only that he was a “young lawyer.” Because of the husband’s professional standing, it seems unlikely that the entire Franco-American population of Lewiston was oblivious to his abandonment of his wife. However, in contrast to the shameless tactics employed by Mrs. Lescard five years later, the local press omitted all names from their accounts of this woman’s plight—most likely because the woman herself wished to keep the affair as private as possible, as suggested by the means in which she chose to resolve it.

Perhaps French Canadian and Franco-American women in Lewiston were more likely to seek divorce than legal separation of goods (or other legal actions against their husbands, the above example notwithstanding) simply because there were more possibilities for women to support themselves, and thus more examples of female-headed households, in Lewiston than in Worcester. In her study of work and family patterns in two Canadian towns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Joy Parr observed that in the textile-dominated economic landscape of Paris, Ontario, women were “at the center of the local economy; community social relations were organized around wage-earning women, and they were not an anomaly.” Thus, it is equally possible that in the minds of Franco-American women in the textile-dominated economic landscape of Lewiston, whose residents had grown well accustomed to women’s paid employment and even independent living (regardless of whether or not every individual approved of these social realities), an adult woman living on her own and outside the bonds of matrimony, for whatever reason, would have been less of a social aberration. On a practical note, maintaining marriage bonds for the sake of the legally binding financial obligations of married men was also less essential in an economic environment that offered plenty of employment opportunities for women and children. While divorce certainly was not condensed, the idea of a woman living without a husband at least may have been tolerated more in Lewiston than in Worcester, especially as time wore on; available job opportunities certainly made it more practically feasible, in the event that former husbands failed to
follow through with court-mandated alimony and child support payments, as had been the case with Louis LeSage.

Coverage of divorce proceedings in Lewiston’s leading French-language newspaper, *Le Messager*, offers evidence to support these hypotheses. Divorces of Quebecois couples in nearby Auburn (Maine) District Court, whose jurisdiction included Lewiston, apparently remained rare before 1900, as seems to have been the case elsewhere in Maine (and in Massachusetts). By the early 1900s, Franco-American couples were appearing more frequently to request divorces in Auburn District Court. During the January 1909 session, six of the forty-one couples appearing before the divorce judge (about one in seven) were of French Canadian descent. Furthermore, as the newspaper editorialized, “To judge by appearances, it is women who are tiring more quickly of the burdens of married life; in fact, all six requests for divorce [among French Canadian couples] are being made by the wife.” These trends continued into the 1920s. For instance, between September 1924 and April 1925, Lewiston’s *Le Messager* contained reports of eighty-six divorce and separation petitions, made during five separate court sessions. Of these petitions, nineteen (22 percent) involved Franco-American couples; only two of the nineteen were filed by the husband.

Why did these women petition for divorce (or in one case, legal separation)? Of the seventeen petitions that French-Canadian-ancestry wives presented during the seven-month period outlined above, over half involved desertion, failure to provide, or both; other common causes included drunkenness and cruel treatment, the most popular bases for legal separation cases in Marie-Aimée Cliche’s study of nineteenth-century Montreal separations. Often, wives specified more than one ground in their request. Of the ten female divorce petitioners whose marriages appear in the parish registers of Lewiston’s French-Catholic churches, six of the couples had been married for less than ten years; three had been married for ten to twenty years, and only one had been married for more than twenty years at the time of her request. Thus, the majority of female petitioners were still relatively early in their marriages when they requested divorces. It is also worth noting that while the woman who had been married nearly a quarter of a century explicitly requested monetary support (as well as custody of the couple’s children), so did half of those who had been married fewer than ten years—including one who was scarcely married two years and appears to have had no children. For women with children under the age of fourteen, a husband’s financial support was essential for family survival; once children were into their teens, a mother would have more freedom to pursue paid employment herself, and the possibility for greater financial support from her children’s labor. However, the fact that so many petitions in this small sample appear to have come from young wives, and that even one without children to support requested that her husband continue to support her financially, suggests that these women may have been disillusioned by the reality of married life.

Like their sisters who elected to postpone or forgo marriage to keep working, women who married had also made a choice: a choice to trade or pass up the so-called independent lifestyle of the single working girl for the financial security of a marriage relationship in which their husband would provide for their economic needs as well as their emotional ones. One would expect that working-class Quebecois families in both Worcester and Lewiston would have a harder time surviving on the salary of a sole male breadwinner than would be the case for the population as a whole, which would include native-born members of the middle and upper classes. Yet the solution for these migrants and their offspring generally did not involve sending wives into the workforce; in both cities, wives in French Canadian migrant families were less likely to work outside the home for wages than were wives of other backgrounds. On the federal census for 1880, only 14.2 percent of French-Canadian-ancestry women reported a paying occupation, compared to 19.3 percent of Lewiston’s non-French-Canadian-ancestry wives; in Worcester, where employment prospects were better for men than for women, only 2.3 percent of married women of French Canadian ancestry, versus 3.8 percent of non-Quebecois wives, listed paid work on census returns. Even when considering the fact that census enumerators during this era often underreported rates of female wage earning, and despite the fact that the financial need among the migrants would have been greatest in these Quebecois enclaves during the 1880s (when the proportion of first-generation residents was highest), it remains clear that French Canadian women were more likely to adhere to the ideal of the stay-at-home wife and mother during this era than was the case for their New England neighbors.

Thus it is perhaps not surprising that when some of them concluded the reality failed to live up to their idealized image of life as someone’s economically dependent wife, these young wives were among the most explicit in spelling out how their marriages had failed them, and what they wanted the courts to do to compensate them for their shattered dreams, by attempting to force their delinquent husbands to fulfill the economic obligations of a male breadwinner. For example, compare the January 1925 divorce request of Auburn’s Zalma E. Boucher, married for twelve years, with that of neighboring Lewiston’s Eve Riopel, married just over two. According to the newspaper’s report of these two pending cases, Boucher based her petition on the grounds of extreme cruelty and abandonment, and requested custody of her three children. Con
trast this to the more elaborate request of Riopel, based on the grounds of cruelty, adultery, and abandonment; despite the comparably brief duration of the marriage, “she also demands,” as the newspaper spelled out, “monetary compensation in the form of regular installments or a lump sum.”

Two of the listings under the report for the October 1924 court session are also unusually detailed. The coverage of four of the cases cited notes only the grounds for divorce; but the information provided on the cases of Bella Nault, married scarcely six years, and Rose-Alma Beaulieu, married for eight, was considerably more detailed. Nault’s request, as reported by Le Messager, stated cryptically, “Accusation: Serious offense,” adding, “The mother requests the care and guardianship of her children, as well as money for their support.” According to Le Messager’s coverage of Beaulieu’s petition, the grounds were “cruelty, refusal to provide, and desertion. The mother requests custody of her child, a pension, money to provide for the child, and compensation for the costs of the divorce proceedings.” Apparently Beaulieu, like Florence LeSage, thought the courts would have better luck at getting her husband to support her financially than she herself had had during the course of their marriage; hence, she resorted to the legal system in an effort to enforce what she firmly believed were his financial obligations to her and her child. In characterizing these women not as “wife” but as “mother” when listing what each sought from her anticipated divorce settlement, the newspaper’s record of these petitions highlights the fact that each woman had upheld and would continue to uphold her responsibilities to family and society: regardless of her marital status, each would still fulfill her maternal obligations to raise her children, presumably to be good Franco-Americans (her own divorce notwithstanding). However, to do so, each woman needed to ensure that the court would compel her husband to fulfill his economic responsibilities toward his family, even if she had to end her marriage to accomplish this goal.

While the above examples illustrate that Lewiston’s Quebecois and Quebecois-ancestry women were not above petitioning for divorce when married reality fell short of their expectations, evidence from newspaper accounts of court proceedings suggests that their sisters in Worcester were more likely to have their husbands arrested for failure to provide, take husbands to court on the same offense, or at most seek a legal separation, rather than initiate divorce proceedings. Although it is difficult to interpret the motives behind these actions, one possibility is that their surrounding environment made divorce and life as a single woman more difficult for Worcester’s unhappily married canadiennes to envision. Unlike Lewiston, where examples of women successfully living on their own were more common (as were the jobs and wage levels that made self-support possible in practice), Worcester’s French Cana-

As noted above, divorce reports among Quebeois migrants were rare in either city prior to the early twentieth century. But in sharp contrast to Lewiston, where divorces occupy an increasingly prominent place in coverage of court proceedings in the early twentieth century, divorce cases figure less prominently in Worcester’s local French-language press in the early 1900s than do requests for legal separation and other less formal uses of the legal system to remind men of their financial obligations. If a comparison of the two cities’ police reports are any indication, Worcester’s canadiennes and franco-américaines were quite adept at using the legal system simply to have local law enforcement officers track down, arrest, and jail husbands who did not provide for their families or were otherwise less than ideal mates. Whereas such stories did not appear in any of the Lewiston newspaper issues sampled for this research, they appeared with as much regularity in the Worcester press as divorces appeared in Lewiston newspapers.

Women of French Canadian ancestry were not afraid to turn to the police in their efforts to deal with husbands’ reluctance or inability to support their families. In describing the husbands’ subsequent arrests and court appearances, Worcester’s French-language press was clearly sympathetic to the women’s plight, and to the desperation that would drive them to such extremes, as indicated in their often detailed and longer-than-usual accounts of the circumstances leading up to these actions:

This morning Judge Utley released Arthur Beauchamp, accused by his wife of failure to provide. His wife accused him of having sold the contents of their house and of not having procured the necessary means of subsistence, which the defendant denies. [1904]

It’s a bad year. Fred E. Burdette was arrested last night at midnight, under the accusation of neglecting to give his wife and family the money necessary for survival. He is 48 years old and in good health. Mrs. Burdette stated that her husband does not give her a single cent and that often she has had to go hungry because of his negligence. Burdette will have a chance to mend his ways this morning [i.e., in court]. [1905]

Refusal to provide. Henry Ouimette, age 51, was arrested and led to [Police] Station No. 1 Tuesday night, for refusing to provide for the needs of his family. He was arrested at the request of his wife, Mrs. Marguerite Ouimette. [1915]

Waldron: The Battle over Female (In)Dependence 185
It is unclear whether the headline “It’s a bad year” in the second example refers to the high incidence of such arrests at that time, or to a possible justification that the accused in this case had offered in his own defense at the time of his arrest. But what is unmistakably clear in all three of these accounts, and others like them, is that those in charge of compiling and publishing these reports fully agreed—with the women involved, their brethren in Quebec, and no doubt many of their compatriotes in Worcester—that a man was responsible for providing for his family. Failure to do so was not only a crime, but also a flagrant violation of the community gender norms—as spelled out regularly in the Franco-American press (and reinforced in the sympathetic portrayals these same newspapers offered of the plight of disenchanted wives)—that formed part of the fabric of survivance.

Other Quebecois migrant women in Worcester and their Franco-American daughters, though apparently wary of initiating divorce proceedings, were far less reluctant to sue their husbands for financial support without formally ending their marriages. The newspaper coverage of one woman’s petition for legal separation is particularly poignant in its sympathetic portrayal of the wrongs she and her children had suffered as dependents of her nonsupporting husband:

Mrs. C.S. Soucy of Worcester, who has requested a separation of goods from her husband Joseph Soucy, will recount the story of her unfortunate life on Tuesday [in court]. The Soucys have seven children, and the plaintiff has claimed that her husband does not bring any financial support to his family, since leaving the family some time ago.99

The following week’s newspaper, in addition to reiterating the charges of desertion and failure to provide, added additional details on the case from Carrie Soucy’s formal testimony against her husband. Among other things, Carrie told the court that she and Joseph had been married for eighteen years but separated for the past two, that he refused to provide for his family, and that once he had even thrown her and two of their children out of the house. She added that her husband was drunk most of the time, and that for the past two years she had been forced to live with her parents, earning six or seven dollars a week. (In contrast, as other testimony revealed, her husband was earning nineteen dollars a week at the time.) Although L’Opinion Publique did not report the outcome of the proceedings, it is highly unlikely that the judge would have denied Soucy’s request, given her husband’s legal obligation to provide. Furthermore, the paper’s favorable portrayal of her plight no doubt secured her a moral victory, and her husband condemnation, within the local Franco-American community; while his nonsupport was bad enough, her husband’s failure to protect and shelter his family, coupled with his intemperance and eventual abandonment, would have sealed his fate.

Still other women felt no need or desire for any official rupture of their status as legally married women, whether through divorce or separation of goods; they simply sued their husbands for financial support, without seeking to alter their marital status the slightest bit. Although the exact circumstances are not clear from the newspaper account, one woman sued her husband for $1,500 in “damages.”100 Yet another sued her husband for a monthly allowance:

She asks that he allocate her a pension. Under pretext that her husband, Richard Brousseau of Gardner, deserted her last August 31st without leaving her any means of subsistence, Mrs. Rose Brousseau has begun legal proceedings against him in trial court. The couple has three children: Clifford, Hervé, and Irène Brousseau. She [Mrs. Brousseau] is requesting through the court that her husband grant her a pension for her and her children.101

Likewise, the following month Emery E. Lamarche appeared in court to respond to his wife’s accusations; Ana Lamarche had accused him of having treated her cruelly. As the report noted, “She has requested through her lawyer that her husband provide for her support and that of her child.”102 It is difficult to tell how many of the Worcester women cited above were truly destitute and saw legal proceedings as a last resort, and how many had simply tired of their marriages or their husbands’ inability to keep up with their spending habits, as fully dependent housewives in a consumption-based economic environment and a city in which their husbands theoretically should have had no problem earning enough to support their families.103 However, the case of Ana Lamarche against her husband is particularly telling for several reasons. First, she was suing him under the pretext of cruelty (rather than desertion or failure to provide). Second, though she was suing specifically for financial support, she was doing so with the assistance of a lawyer, which suggests that she may have had more resources, financial or otherwise, to begin with than those women who simply had their husbands arrested for failure to provide.

Given the limited information presented in the newspaper account, it is impossible to tell exactly what behavior Ana Lamarche would have considered “cruel” enough to warrant demanding a formal legal separation from her husband. The fact that she had a lawyer to represent her could indicate physical or sexual abuse; Elaine May found in her study of divorces during this era that many California divorces involving complaints with aspects of a couple’s physical relationship were filed under the legal ground of “cruelty.” However, May
also noted a dramatic rise in American women’s tendency by the early twentieth century to expect not only that their husbands provide for their most basic needs but also that they provide for a certain level of material comfort beyond what was absolutely necessary for survival. It is certainly possible that Franco-American women, surrounded by the temptations of American consumer culture, may have come to similar conclusions regarding what constituted providership. Husbands who provided the barest necessities of life, but not much more, could certainly, as editorials that cautioned against marrying “society girls” warned, be deemed cruel by spendthrift wives who expected to be treated royally. As the only other details provided in the newspaper account of Lamarche’s petition are financial in nature—that is, the fact that she requested financial payments to support both her and her child—we cannot rule out the possibility that financial concerns played a role in her request, as they did in so many other petitions presented by Franco-American women to the American court system.

While those women who lived outside of the ideal of the happily married, economically dependent wife and mother were the exception rather than the rule, it is clear that this ideal still influenced their behavior. By the early twentieth century, the financial security that many Franco-American women (both those who were happily married and those whose marriages were less than perfect) envisioned, in Lewiston and especially in Worcester, was not mere survival, but a comfortable living in a flourishing urban consumer-oriented society—a world very different from that envisioned by the Quebecois religious and civil leaders who had first expounded upon men’s breadwinner responsibilities in the nineteenth century as part of their overall plan for the French Canadian nation. But while these women’s definition of the maternal homemaker had shifted slightly, to focus more heavily upon the consumer-oriented culmination of this complement to the sole male breadwinner—and despite the fact that some women found their best hope for living out this dream in a courtroom rather than at home—we should not lose sight of the underlying significance many of these women tied to being a wife and mother, or the fact that most of these women lived out the dream of domestic and maternal fulfillment at some point during their adult lives.

This reality may also explain in part why such imagery continued to appeal to so many members of French Canadian migrant communities well into the twentieth century. For many women, the ideal of the economically dependent wife and mother may indeed have provided not only a sense of security, but also a sense of identity as women of French Canadian ancestry within American society: a sense of identity that connected them to their Quebecois heritage, an identity that they not only embraced for themselves, but deliberately passed on to their daughters. As one woman wrote in a letter to the editor of Le Messager in 1908:

My mother raised me from the crib by telling me the tales—masterpieces of simplicity and imagination—once recounted by the mothers of France, in response to the babbling of their sweet little ones. Tradition has its requirements and its joys, and I repeat these childish stories to my own daughters, so that they in turn will know how to speak the beautiful words of our homeland to those whom Providence entrusts to their care.

In passing on traditional French Canadian childhood stories to her daughters—stories that she traced back (as was often the case with Quebecois customs) to an even more ancient heritage in France—this woman was doing more than providing bedtime entertainment. She was deliberately and consciously passing on a cultural legacy, just as her mother had passed it on to her, with the expectation that someday her daughters would do likewise for their children. The telling of such stories, an act that took place in French, was—for this mother and for many others like her—a direct means of transmitting the precepts of survivance to the next generation. Through these stories, this woman taught her children the French language of their forebears, the Catholic faith so central to the canadiens’ outlook on life, and above all, many of the mœurs at the heart of what it meant to be of French-Canadian ancestry—not least of which was the expectation that some day, daughters would grow up to be wives and mothers so that they, too, could pass on these stories in their turn.

NOTES

For their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this essay, I am indebted to Sara Evans, Anne Huebel, the University of Minnesota Comparative Women’s History Workshop, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of Frontiers.

A note on translations: Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own; in instances when I translated direct quotations from French into English, I have preserved the original text in the notes. In addition to translating the meaning behind the written and spoken French of Quebec and New England as accurately as possible, I have endeavored to preserve the style and tone of the original sources as closely as I could. To do this while rendering a mechanically smooth English translation, I often found it necessary to add emphasis to the translation by underlining certain words or phrases; in many cases, this emphasis replaces emphatic words or phrases used in the French that would be redundant in English if translated literally. In these instances, I...
have noted these stylistic adaptations by indicating “Emphasis inferred” at the begin-
ning of the note, before the French of the original passage.

1. Mary Poovey’s discussion of the “ideological work” that gender understandings
perform in a given society is especially useful; see Uneven Developments: The Ideologi-
cal Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1988).

2. See Sydney Stahl Weinberg, “The Treatment of Women in Immigration History:
other things, Weinberg argued for a critical evaluation of the significance of women’s
roles in the New World for immigrant women as well as the communities to which they
belonged, and for more scholarly examination of immigrant women not just as family
members or workers but also as community members or agents of cultural reproduc-
tion. Despite notable progress, much work remains to be done, especially in studies of
French Canadian migrants, who remain largely ignored by scholars of migration to the
northeastern United States during this era.

3. See Florence Mae Waldron, “I Never Dreamed It Was Necessary To Marry!:
Women and Work in New England French Canadian Communities, 1870–1930,” Jour-

4. On the economic environment of Worcester compared with that of textile-based
urban economies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Paul R.

5. Ibid., 88.

6. Ibid., 84; furthermore, as Charles W. Estus and Kenneth J. Moynihan point out,
French Canadian men’s employment was evenly distributed across Worcester’s eco-
nomic landscape, rather than concentrating predominantly in a single industry or
business. See “Beyond Textiles: Industrial Diversity and the Franco-American Experi-
ence in Worcester, Massachusetts,” in Steeples and Smokestacks: A Collection of Essays

7. On the types of jobs French Canadian women held in Worcester, see Dauphinais,
“Structure and Strategy,” 141, 143; Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours for What We Will:
Workers & Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University

8. See A. I. Silver, The French Canadian Idea of Confederation, 1864–1900 (Toronto:
University of Toronto Press, 1982), for more on French Canadians’ hopes for—and
frustrations with—their relationship with English-speaking Canadians in the late
nineteenth century.

9. Despite feminism’s French origins, “féminisme” was, in the view of French
Canadians in Quebec at the turn of the century, a foreign concept whose popularity
among Anglo-Canadian women was proof enough that it had no place in French Ca-
nadian society. Few Quebecois women embraced the term, and even those whom sub-
sequent generations of scholars have dubbed “feminist” were extremely conservative
compared to their English-speaking counterparts in Canada or the United States; most
of their efforts were maternalist in nature, inspired by their understanding of French
Catholic women’s God-ordained responsibilities as wife and mother. Thus it is not sur-
prising that the migrants saw self-proclaimed feminists, “American” (that is, not French
Catholic) ideas, and anyone or anything else that explicitly challenged the primacy
of woman’s place in the home as inextricably linked. See Susan Mann Trofimenkoff,
“Feminism, Nationalism, and the Clerical Defensive,” in The Dream of Nation: A Social
and Intellectual History of Quebec (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 184–200; Trofimenkoff,
“Henri Bourassa and ‘The Woman Question,’” in Journal of Canadian Studies 10, no. 4
(November 1975): 3–11; Karine Hébert, “Une organization maternaliste au Québec: La
Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste et la bataille pour la vote des femmes,” Revue
d’histoire de l’Amérique française 52, no. 3 (Winter 1999): 315–344.

10. Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made
the American People (Boston: Little, Brown, 1931).

11. Among notable examples of this tendency, see Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, Fam-
ily & Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880–1930 (Ithaca: Cornell University
Press, 1971); Hasia Diner, Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the
Nineteenth Century (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Elizabeth
Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side,
1890–1920 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985); and, in a book based largely on re-
search involving French Canadians, Tamara K. Hareven, Family Time and Industrial
Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Com-
munity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

12. I found virtually no indications that women continued any of the more labor-
intensive forms of home production once they arrived in the United States. While
some women continued to sew clothing for their children—often, in textile towns, out
of cloth they had helped to manufacture in the mills—I found no evidence that mi-
grant women in the United States continued to make their own fabric, soap, butter, or
cheese—to name a few of the more laborious domestic chores of the rural Quebec
farm wife during this era. If the content of women’s pages in the newspaper is any in-
dication, most Quebecois women continued to cook for their families and appreciated
helpful household hints on removing stubborn stains. However, patterns and instruc-
tions for making clothes at home, directions and tips on home dairying, and similar
materials were noticeably absent; in their place were articles on the latest ready-to-wear
fashions for the family and ads for commercially produced cleaning products, the lat-
est stoves and sewing machines, and other modern conveniences.

14. Though women’s nonreproductive responsibilities lessened during the nineteenth century, being a farmer’s wife was hardly a picnic. The labor required to clothe, feed, and otherwise care for large rural households was hard work that many women loathed. Moreover, those tasks that remained were often the most menial, onerous ones, leaving many women feeling as if they had lost a sense of accomplishment—a sense that was, on some levels, inextricably linked to their former direct contributions to the family economy, through production of goods for outside consumption. For migrants’ recollections of housewives’ tasks in Quebec in the late 1800s and early 1900s, see interview with Elmire Boucher, in Jacques Rouillard, Ah les États! Les travailleurs canadiens-français dans l’industrie textile de la Nouvelle-Angleterre d’après le témoignage des derniers migrants (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1985), 98; interview with Antonia Bergeron, in Amoskong: Life and Work in an American Factory-City, ed. Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 59–60; interview with Marie Gagnon, in Marcelle Chenard, “A Case Study of How Four Sisters of One French-Canadian Family Enhanced Their Life Chances in the Second Decade of the 20th Century by Coming to the United States,” in La Femme Franco-Américaine: The Franco-American Woman, ed. Claire Quintal (Worcester: Institut français, Assumption College, 1994), 172; interview with Philomène Gagnon, in “A Case Study of Four Sisters,” 172–173; Mary Elizabeth Aubé, “Mes entretiens avec Memère” (PhD diss., Brown University, 1985), 201–202, 301.


17. In original: “… une femme vraiment femme, une mère aimante, une épouse fidèle… “ “La femme,” Le Messager (Lewiston, Maine), 17 February 1909, 8.


19. As Michael Willrich has observed, every state in the union had criminalized women’s work, dairy industries in Canada during this era, see Marjorie Cohen, Men’s Failure to Provide for their Families by the Mid-1910s. See “Home Slackers: Men, the State, and Welfare in Modern America,” Journal of American History 87 (September 2000): 460. I will return to this point below.

20. To some extent, they also characterized the experiences of those Quebecois—a relatively small number, compared to the exodus to les états—who migrated from the rural Quebecois countryside to the handful of modern urban centers that were evolving in the province during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, the combined influence of clerics and French Canadian lay leaders in enforcing traditional mœurs meant that, despite the growing number of working women in cities like Montreal in the late 1800s and early 1900s, women made up barely 27 percent of the Montreal workforce as late as 1941, and few married women existed within their ranks. Marie Lavigne and Jennifer Stoddard cite this statistic in “Ouvrières et travailleuses montréalaises, 1900–1940,” in Travailleuses et féministes: Les femmes dans la société québécoise, ed. Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard (Montreal: Les Éditions du Boréal Express, 1983), 100; see also Bettina Bradbury, Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993).


22. The Quebecois, like other European and North American groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, used the term “race” to designate distinct groups of people that today would more likely be called separate “ethnic groups” than “races”—that is, a group of individuals who share a common cultural heritage, whether through ancestry, language, religion, customs, or a combination thereof. French Canadians defined themselves as a race or nationalité (nationality) distinct from Canadians of non-French heritage. Thus, the migrants often used the term race interchangeably with nationalité for example, “... toutes les insulites, toutes les injustices n’empêcheront pas notre race de pousser des rameaux vigoureux au milieu des rochers où les autres ont peine à nourrir leur tronc desséché et mourant ... [in contrast to] l’arbre touffu et exubérant de sève de la nationalité canadienne-française....” (“All the insults and injustices will not stop our race from spreading strong branches in the middle of the rocks where others can scarcely nourish their dried and dying trunks [in contrast to] the leafy tree, full of sap, of the French Canadian nationality.”) Le Messager, 26 March 1885, 2.

23. For examples of pieces that glorified the “Canadienne” by name in their title, see “La Canadienne” (poem), L’Etendard National (Worcester, Massachusetts), 16 January
1873, 27; F. X. Burque, Ptre, “Vive la Canadienne” [poem], Le Jean-Baptiste (Worcester, Massachusetts), 14 May 1892, 4; “Vive la Canadienne!” [article], L’Opinion Publique (Worcester, Massachusetts), 22 June 1910, 4; “Vive la Canadienne!” [editorial warning of the dangers of marrying women who are not of French Canadian and Catholic background], Le Messager, 25 September 1933, 3. Countless others lauded the Canadienne by name in the body of the text, if not in the headline.


27. For example, “La femme et le travail,” L’Opinion Publique, 29 September 1920, 4; Alfred Langlois, “Un nouveau livre sur la femme,” L’Opinion Publique, 1 October 1920, 7.

28. See, for example, Marguerite, “Chronique,” L’Opinion Publique, 23 March 1897, 2; “La folie du féminisme,” Le Messager, 12 February 1909, 6; Alfred Langlois, “Le Suffrage,” Le Messager, 24 January 1910, 3; “Arguments contre le vote féminin,” L’Opinion Publique, 8 March 1915, 5; “Contre le vote féminin,” L’Opinion Publique, 26 October 1915, 4. The final article was a reprint of an October 22, 1915 article by the same name, which had first appeared in L’Action Catholique, a popular Quebec periodical published by the Archbishop of Quebec.


31. Excessive materialism was perhaps the most frequently condemned of women’s sins in the French-language newspapers of Worcester and Lewiston, as the articles cited below indicate.

32. In original: “La fille mondaine se distingue par son amour de la toilette . . . son goût prononcé pour les parties de plaisir, les tours de promenade, les visites, les soirées publiques, les théâtres, les bals. . . . Elle ne fréquente pas l’église, ou si elle y va, c’est pour voir et être vue. Elle sait mieux danser . . . que prier Dieu et faire le ménage. . . . Si elle se marie avant de s’être repenit et corrigée, il y a dix risques contre une chance qu’elle sera encore pire femme qu’elle n’était méchante fille. . . . Les garçons qui aimeraien à avoir une femme querelleuse, chipotière, gaspilleuse, insouciante des dévoirs [sic] de mère, peuvent choisir avec confiance une fille taillée sur un modèle à peu près comme celui décrit ci-dessus.” “La Fille mondaine,” Le Foyer Canadien, 25 March 1873, 2–3.


37. In this regard, French Canadian migrant women were hardly alone. Numerous scholars of immigrant women have noted the ways in which participation in American consumer economy helped women both to acculturate to American society, and in many cases to maintain at the same time their traditional functions within their migrant communities. See, for example, Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars; Ewa T. Morawska, For Bread with Butter: The Life-Worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 1890–1940 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Andrew R. Heinze, Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Nan Enstad, Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); see also Lizabeth A. Cohen, “Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885–1915,” in Labor Migration in the Atlantic Economies: The European and North American Working Classes During the Period of Industrialization, ed. Dirk Hoerder (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 321–352. In the context of French Canadian women, I am particularly indebted to Anne Huebel for our conversations on this subject, which have helped me to develop this point.

38. In original: “Toutes les lignes gracieuses et harmonieuses du magnifiques corps
des femmes ont été ordonnées par le Créateur pour une seule chose: la maternité. . . .
39. In original: “. . . du rôle qui vous attend dans la société franco-américaine.”
40. Among other examples of New England’s French-language press serving as a platform for religious leaders’ reinforcement of French Canadian and Catholic values and condemnation of “American” ways, see the writings of Rev Lalande (1905), Mgr. Stang (1909), and the piece entitled “Mode et morale” (1928), all cited above; see also L’abbé Lionel Groulx, “Chez nos ancêtres,” Le Messager, 17 February 1922, 12. The 1928 piece, an exchange of letters between a Quebecois woman and a priest, is especially noteworthy in that it was reprinted from a Quebec-based religious publication; this practice was not uncommon and underscores the important role of the Franco-American press in selectively passing on to its readership current viewpoints and attitudes from la patrie, including the perspectives of the Quebec-based church hierarchy.
41. As quoted in Hareven, Family Time and Industrial Time, 53.
43. Interview with Raymond Dubois, in Amoskeag, ed. Hareven and Langenbach, 161.
44. Interview with Alice Olivier, in Amoskeag, ed. Hareven and Langenbach, 255.
45. As one of many articles which traced these understandings of gender back to God’s statements to Adam and Eve after their fall from innocence, see, for example, “Le Suffrage,” Le Messager, 24 January 1910, 3.
47. In original: “Cette loi du divorce est contraire au sacrement institué par Dieu.”
“Mgr Guertin et le divorce: Un sermon de l’évêque de Manchester qui demande le retour aux enseignements de Jésus-Christ,” L’Opinion Publique, 1 December 1908, 1.
48. In original: “C’est la ruine du foyer, la dégradation de la femme. . . . Le divorce ne peut conduire qu’au péché. . . .” Ibid.
49. “Mgr Langlois Proteste contre la loi du divorce,” L’Opinion Publique, 13 De-
cembre 1924, p. 5. As the article reported, in his protest of Canada’s federal divorce laws Langlois characterized divorce as “the agent of the destruction of Christian families and of social death.” (In original: “d’agent [sic] de destruction des familles chrétiennes et d’agent [sic] de mort sociale.”)
51. In original: “C’est là, mes amis, le signe que la population n’est pas catholique.
52. In original: “. . . la femme a besoin de l’autorisation du mari pour les divers actes de la vie, pour contracter des obligations.” Ibid.
53. In original: “. . . si jamais Catherine voulait ôter son cotillon pour prendre les pantalons, je lui répéterais les belles paroles de Mr. [sic] Tuquetaine.” Ibid.
54. In original: “Elle qui prétend que les femmes une fois mariées, doivent porter les culottes.” Ibid.
55. In original: “la mauvaise volonté des jeunes filles pour remplir leurs devoirs de bonnes mères de familles et faire de bonnes ménageries, le luxe dans les toilettes. . . .” “Le Mariage,” Le Travailleur, 8 January 1884, 2.
57. In Lewiston, where intermarriage rates were generally higher for men than for women, exogamous marriage rates increased slowly from 1880 to 1900 and from 1900 to 1920; yet even by 1920, scarcely more than 5 percent of French-Canadian-ancestry Lewistonians of either sex had married outside the ethnic group. In contrast, in Worcester, in which nearly 5 percent of French Canadian women and nearly 11 percent of French Canadian men had spouses of a different ethnic background in 1880, rates had approached a greater equilibrium by 1900, when 8.6 percent of men and 7.4 per-
cent of women of French Canadian ancestry had married persons of other back-
grounds; yet such rates were still more than twice the comparable rates for Lewiston’s French Canadian population in 1900. While the greater parity in Worcester in 1900 re-
fects in part a more balanced sex ratio within the city’s French Canadian population that year, the higher numbers in Worcester overall are in part a symptom of French Ca-
adians’ lower relative numbers in Worcester, where they made up a much smaller fraction of the city’s overall population, and in part a reflection of the more highly dis-
persed nature of French Canadian migrants and their descendants across the city, rather than the much more highly concentrated and ethnically distinct residential pat-
tterns characteristic of French Canadians in Lewiston and many other textile centers.
60. This is the basic argument behind the rise in U.S. divorces from 1880 to 1920 that Elaine Tyler May outlines in *Great Expectations: Marriage & Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). I will return to this subject below.

61. Liane, otherwise known as Camille Lessard-Bissonnette, became the first female Franco-American journalist when she joined the editorial board of *Le Messager* in 1909. For biographical information on Lessard, who used the pen name “Liane” throughout much of her writing career (a practice then common among other *canadienne* journalists and some of their male counterparts), see “LIANE Mlle Camille Lessard,” *Le Messager*, 7 February 1910, 5; see also Janet L. Shideler, *Camille Lessard-Bissonnette: The Quiet Evolution of French-Canadian Immigrants in New England* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

62. Emphasis inferred, except as noted below. In original: “Il y a déjà belle heurette que le mouvement féministe est devenu le dada d’un bon nombre de nos sœurs américaines. Que de pathétiques plaidoiries n’a-t-on pas débitées, dans les congrès spéculatifs, sur l’émancipation de la femme, le droit de suffrage et toute la longue kyrielle de questions soi-disant féministes!”

Les feuilles humoristiques en ont tiré leur profit, de ce mouvement; et leurs caricatures, pour être quelquefois cruelles, ne sont pas sans actualité, sauf, bien entendu, aux yeux des *misses* d’un âge plus que mûr, et des *mistresses* en rupture de conjungo, qui forment le corps principal de la grand armée de la femme nouvelle” (Marguerite, “Chronique,” *L’Opinion Publique*, 23 March 1897, 2).

71. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila make a similar point with reference to working-class Latinas’ beliefs regarding domesticity and motherhood in the late twentieth-century United States—beliefs that, although very middle-class and white on many levels, also resonate deeply with the teachings of the Catholic faith that is an integral part of their culture. See Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila, “I’m Here, But I’m There: The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood,” *Gender and Society* 11 (1997): 551.

72. In original: “Frank Gratton plus connu sous le nom de Dr. Gratton est parti de Cohoes le ou vers le mois d’Août dernier et n’est pas devenu, abandonnant lâchement sa femme et trois petits enfants. Depuis, un de ses enfants est mort et son épouse travaille dans une fabrique de coton, gagnant, à peine assez pour subvenir aux besoins de sa petite famille. Mde. Gratton désirerait savoir maintenant où est son mari et recevra toute information à ce sujet avec gratitude. La presse canadienne aux États-Unis est priée de reproduire et spécialement LE MESSAGER de Lewiston, Me.” *Le Messager*, 19 May 1881, 2.

73. In original: “On nous informe que le Dr. Gratton, sur lequel on demandait des informations demeure à Biddeford, Me.” *Le Messager*, 26 May 1881, 2.

74. In original: “L’absence de son père la rend malade. Une fillette du nom de Henriette Lescard, est gravement malade au domicile de sa mère, Mme Pierre Lescard du No. 66 rue Salem. La maladie de l’enfant est causée par le chagrin qu’elle éprouve, que son papa ait quitté le toit conjugal.”


76. In original: “On nous informe que le Dr. Gratton, sur lequel on demandait des informations demeure à Biddeford, Me.” *Le Messager*, 26 May 1881, 2.


79. See May, *Great Expectations*.

80. In commenting specifically on the immigrant working class of Manchester, New Hampshire (many of whom had migrated from Quebec), Tamara Hareven has observed that the immigrants’ overall goal was a middle-class [American] lifestyle, which included home-ownership and a stay-at-home wife—a lifestyle which she attributed to the dominant American society, but one which meshed well with the gender ideals Quebec-born migrants had brought with them; Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time*, 361.


84. Church officials in particular continued to condemn the practice throughout the early twentieth century; for example, “Mgr Guertin et le divorce” (1908); “Mgr Langlois proteste contre la loi du divorce” (1924). However, they were hardly alone; for example, “Les raisons du divorce”, “Le divorce aux États-Unis,” *Le Messager*, 5 January 1920, 4.

85. Throughout the 1890s, for example, of an average of twenty-five cases to appear before the Auburn court each term, only one (if any) of the petitioners appeared to have French surnames. In general, approximately four-fifths of the petitioners, and most of the French Canadian petitioners, were women, as was the case in other states during this period. See, for example, *Le Messager*, 23 September 1892, 2; 21 October 1892, 2; 18 September 1896, 2; and (on other states) 26 October 1882, 2.

86. In original: “A en juger par les apparences, ce sont les femmes qui se fatiguent le plus tôt du fardeau de la vie conjugale. En effet, les six demandes de divorce précé-dentes, sont toutes faites par l’épouse.” *L’Opinion Publique*, 20 January 1909, 2.

87. See *Le Messager*, 6 October 1924, 8; 8 October 1924, 8; 21 January 1925, 8; 27 March 1925, 8; 8 April 1925, 8.

88. On Montreal, see Cliche, “Les procès en séparation de corps.” At present, I do not have sufficient comparative data from non-Quebecois divorce petitions in either Lewiston or Worcester for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to make even the most general observations about how the stated grounds for divorce of French-Canadian-ancestry petitioners compared to the official reasons given by their non-French Canadian peers. However, if the divorce habits of Lewistonians and Worcesterites as a whole paralleled those of the New Jersey and Los Angeles couples...
whose 1920 divorce petitions have been analyzed by Elaine Tyler May, individuals of French Canadian ancestry differed from their peers in several respects. Despite radically different divorce laws in New Jersey and California, May found a number of similarities when comparing divorces from her Los Angeles sample to those in her sample from the state of New Jersey. First, while men represented scarcely 10 percent of the Franco-American divorce petitions reported in _Le Messager_ during my seven-month sample period in the mid-1920s, they represented nearly 30 percent of the petitioners in May’s sample from 1920 Los Angeles (she does not provide a breakdown by sex for her 1920 New Jersey sample). Second, while the possible legal grounds for divorce in Los Angeles were similar to those in Massachusetts or Maine during this era, adultery was twice as common in Los Angeles petitions as intemperance (which was a factor in fewer than 4 percent of the cases May studied), whereas only one of the nineteen Franco-American cases discussed in this section mentioned adultery. May, _Great Expectations_, 172, 175, 181.

89. NAPP/MPC “1880 U.S. Census Complete Count.” I do not have ready access to the data needed to make similar comparisons for later years.


93. In original: “Cruauté, refus de pourvoir et désertion; la mère demande le soin de son enfant, une pension et de l’argent pour pourvoir à l’enfant ainsi qu’une compensation pour frais de la cause.” Ibid.

94. See Parr, _The Gender of Breadwinners_, esp. 23, 85. In her study of the textile town of Paris, Ontario, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Parr also notes (95) that women in such environments were better equipped to live without husbands and support themselves should the need arise, because the higher incidence of female wage earning had long accustomed women to creative strategies and adaptations with family members and nonkin in order to fulfill their domestic obligations, from laundry to child care. As one indication of even stronger community disapproval for divorce among Worcester’s Franco-Americans (versus those of Lewiston), Worcester’s _Opinion Publique_ became increasingly reluctant over the years to publish news on divorce proceedings. In an effort to compare divorce proceedings in the two cities over a finite span of time, I searched every issue of _L’Opinion Publique_ from September 1924 through April 1925—an eight-month span in which, as noted above, Lewiston’s _Le Messager_ reported eighty-six divorces filed in nearby Auburn Superior Court, nineteen of which involved Franco-American couples. During this same time period, _L’Opinion Publique_ did not mention a single local divorce (or legal separation) proceeding, whether Franco-American or otherwise. As it is unlikely that Worcester’s population abstained from divorce during this period, it would appear that the editors of the Worcester newspaper decided—perhaps because they opposed the practice themselves and did not want to encourage it among their readership—not to report on local divorce proceedings whatsoever.

95. On the other hand, Lewiston’s newspaper coverage of police arrests and court appearances for other common offenses, such as drunkenness and illegal possession or sale of alcohol, correlate with press coverage of such occurrences in Worcester. Likewise, although incidents of women behaving badly are rare in the Lewiston press’s police blotters before 1920, they appear after that as frequently as they do in the Worcester press. Thus, it seems more likely that such omissions of arrests of nonproviding husbands in Lewiston’s police reports actually correspond to lower rates of such arrests in Lewiston, versus greater press censorship of these events—as appears to have been the case regarding the nonexistent French-language press coverage of Worcester’s Franco-American divorce proceedings in the 1920s.

96. In original: “Le juge Utley a libéré, ce matin, Arthur Beauchamp, accusé par sa femme de refus de pourvoir. Sa femme l’accusait d’avoir vendu son ménage et de ne pas lui procurer les moyens nécessaires de subsistence [sic], ce que le défendeur a nié.” “Cour de police,” _L’Opinion Publique_, 15 September 1904, 5.

97. In original: “L’ANNEE EST MA UV AISE Fred. E. Burdette a été arrêté hier soir à minuit sous accusation de négliger de donner à sa femme et sa famille l’argent nécessaire. Il est âgé de 48 ans et bien portant. Mme Burdette a dit que son mari ne lui donnait pas le moindre sou et que quelques fois elle avait faim à cause de sa négligence. Burdette aura une chance de s’amender ce matin.” _L’Opinion Publique_, 20 June 1905, 5.

98. In original: “_Refus de pourvoir_. Henry Ouimette, âgé de 51 ans, a été arrêté et conduit à la station No 1, mardi soir, pour refus de pourvoir aux besoins de sa famille. Il a été arrêté sur la plainte de sa femme, Mme Marguerite Ouimette.” _L’Opinion Publique_, 21 September 1915, 5.


101. In original: “Elle demande qu’on lui alloue une pension Sous prétexte que son...
mari, Richard Brousseau, de Gardner, l’aurait désertée le 31 août dernier, sans lui avoir laissé aucun moyen de subsistance, Mme Rose Brousseau a intenté une poursuite contre lui en cour de probation. Le couple a trois enfants: Clifford, Hervé et Irène Brousseau. Elle demande par la cour que son mari lui allègue une pension pour elle et ses enfants.”


103. As noted above, Worcester’s diversified industrialized economy offered more job openings and more opportunities for a livable “family wage” to men than was true in textile-based economies, like that of Lewiston; see Dauphinais, “Structure and Strategy,” 69–70.

104. See May, Great Expectations, 104, 118–120.

105. See, for example, ”La Fille mondaine.”

106. In original: “Ma mère m’a bercée en me courant [?] les contes (des chefs-d’œuvre de simplicité et d’imagination) que courent les mères de France quand elles répondent au gazouillis de leurs tendres mioches. La tradition a ses exigences et ses douceurs, et ces histoires enfantines je les répète à mes filles pour qu’à leur tour elles sachent parler le beau parler du pays à ceux que la Providence leur accordera de nourrir.” Une Lectrice, Le Messager, 10 March 1908, 1.

Between the Orient and the Ghetto

A Modern Immigrant Woman in Anzia Yeierska’s Salome of the Tenements

LJILJANA COKLIN

Anzia Yeierska’s first novel, Salome of the Tenements (1923), is one of the earliest attempts to situate the representation of a female Jewish immigrant within the larger context of American modernity. As such, the text is riddled by contradictions as the author strives to combine a female immigrant rags-to-riches story with a narrative of female empowerment. Yeierska’s introductory portrayal of urban immigrant femininity caters to the established expectations of an American audience: it offers familiar sketches of the hardships of ghetto living and reinforces immigrant desire for social visibility and economic stability. Yet, Yeierska’s ghetto girl is also a driven and aggressive achiever and compulsive consumer, aware of her sexuality and increasingly skeptical of the female American Dream: of matrimony as a vehicle for women’s upward social mobility. I argue here that Yeierska’s characterization of Sonya Vrunsky in Salome of the Tenements redefines the ghetto girl as bold, ambitious, and goal oriented and as such participates in the larger efforts of American feminists to redefine the New American Woman as independent, active, strong willed, and sexually assertive. Yeierska establishes a link between an empowered immigrant woman and a liberated New American Woman through her employment of rich yet contradictory Oriental imagery, and in particular through her use of the Salome myth.

Yeierska’s use of the images of Salome and the Orient serves several purposes in Salome of the Tenements. The numerous references to the biblical story of Salome establish the Semitic background of Yeierska’s main character and the polarized world of modern America, in this case between a Jewish immigrant woman and an Anglo-Saxon American male. The identification of Yeierska’s Sonya Vrunsky with Salome, the pivotal figure of European modernist art and the fin-de-siècle Decadent movement, aligns Yeierska’s immigrant narrative with modernist literary and artistic output as well as empowers the immigrant heroine, hungry for cultural sophistication, social advancement, economic power, and sexual freedom. Furthermore, Yeierska’s choice of im-
ages of Oriental otherness and of the heroine’s free “dance” of social mobility participates actively in the American social and cultural scene of the time. It reflects the visual fascination of early Hollywood with the Orient, responds to the shocking emergence of modern dance in America, and supports efforts of American feminists to resort to the Oriental topology as a new geography of women’s newly found liberties: economic, political, artistic, and sexual.

Yeierska’s invocation of the Orient in her representation of a Jewish immigrant woman is a strategy to empower her heroine as well as to situate her within the larger context of modernity, American pop culture, and emerging feminism. Yet, the seductiveness of the Oriental imagery complicates Yeierska’s efforts, as the same imagery is used, as Edward Said has argued, to disempower, distanciate, and dismiss the other on the grounds of its excessive and destabilizing, albeit charming and exoticized, difference. It does not surprise, then, that burdened with complex imagery and contradictory meanings, the immigrant heroine in Yeierska’s text becomes a contested site in which biology and artifice, radicalism and conservatism, submissiveness and aggression, images of a noble savage woman and a stylized, decadent seductress, intersect. The Jewish immigrant woman in Salome of the Tenements emerges simultaneously as a pristine, self-sacrificial, exoticized pre-modern ingénue and a scheming, dishonest, and corrupt woman, whose sexuality threatens to destabilize the power structure of gender relations in turn-of-the-century America. The unsettling inconsistency in Yeierska’s character is a powerful comment on the contradictory existence of the Jewish immigrant woman in modern America, on the jarring contrasts between immigrant ghettos and urban America, and on larger social imperatives to identify, contain, and situate the redefined roles of a modern American woman.

THE CASE OF ANZIA YEIZERSKA

As an immigrant writer with a proto-feminist orientation, Anzia Yeierska and her work are currently experiencing a revival of interest among feminist scholars and audiences. Her unconventional lifestyle—she abandoned her husband and daughter, insisted on a “room of her own,” zealously pursued an independent career as a writer and teacher of home economics—has created a reputation for Yeierska as a “visionary foremother.” The reception of Yeierska’s works has been both celebratory and skeptical. She has been hailed as the “Cinderella of the Tenements,” a rags-to-literary-riches heroine, the only ethnic woman invited to Hollywood to write scripts, and the only literary accomplished immigrant woman whose work was filmed. Turned overnight into an instant celebrity, Yeierska was expected to write “Uncle Tom’s Cabin of the immigrant” and uphold the illusion of an effortless social mobility possible only in America. Hollywood packaged Yeierska’s successful life story into an exemplary achievement of the American Dream by romanticizing her rise from the tenements by pompous titles, like “From Hester Street to Hollywood.” However, Yeierska was uncomfortable with the assigned role of an exotic female writer; she was repelled by Hollywood’s glamour and opulence and dissatisfied with Hollywood versions of her reality. As her stories were rewritten to the point of non-recognition, she returned to the New York ghetto, whose poverty and chaos galvanized her creativity and provided a powerful stimulus for her subsequent literary work.

While Yeierska’s ethnicity, her well-crafted immigrant persona, was raised to the status of sensationalistic fiction, her fiction about the Lower East Side remained firmly grounded in reality. Yeierska found inspiration in her immediate environment: in ghetto stories, in her own life, and in movie culture. Her fiction—in particular the short-story collection Hungry Hearts (1920) and the novels Bread Givers (1925) and Salome of the Tenements—returns to the same topic: a young and rebellious Jewish immigrant woman searches for love, acceptance, and fulfillment in the new land. For the most part, Yeierska’s writing is a transparent reconstruction of well-known ghetto stories or biographical fragments from her life. Salome of the Tenements is a combination of both: it is based on the true Cinderella story of Yeierska’s close friend, Rose Pastor, an immigrant reporter and a denizen of the tenements who in 1905 married the millionaire Graham (J. G. Phelps) Stokes. The novel also has strong personal overtones: its focus on a failed love between a passionate Jewish woman and an overly rational American man resonates with references to Yeierska’s platonic friendship with John Dewey. In fact, critics like Mary V. Dearborn have argued that Yeierska’s literary world is populated by fictional counterparts of John Dewey: the men are attracted to the otherness of immigrant women, yet they find the same exotic otherness excessive and overwhelming. The resulting failure of an exogenous relationship becomes a recognizable and obsessive pattern in Yeierska’s fiction.

The particularity of Yeierska’s fiction lies in its episodic structure, loose, melodramatic narrative, and highly stereotyped and polarized world of cultural and ethical values. As such, Yeierska’s fiction reminds Rose Kamel of the formulaic structure of silent movies Yeierska “must have watched, though she does not mention them.” In stock characters populating Yeierska’s fictional world—the “heartless factory foreman, landlords, ‘charity ladies,’ aspiring poets with eyes burning like flames, vamps, suffering Jewish mothers and sternly orthodox fathers”—Kamel sees recognizable traits typed by actors in a Griffith or Eisenstein film.
It is quite possible that Yezierska frequented nickelodeons and found inspiration on the screen. Miriam Hansen writes in *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* that movie going, although not a prestigious form of entertainment, provided the only unsupervised leisure activity for immigrant daughters. In general, the magic of the movies—the miraculous transformations of people, settings, and situations—had a tremendous appeal on the imagination of the immigrant population, since it projected their fantasies of a better, abundant life possible only through a similar scenario of self-transformation. In the case of ghetto girls, Hansen notes that the cinema became a public space that allowed them to experience themselves as independent customers and create alternative forms of collectivity other than those centered on the family. The magic of the movies compensated for the drab reality of the life of immigrant women: poverty, arranged marriages, pressures of success and assimilation, alienation. It also initiated female spectatorship into the fantastic world in which they could become desired sexual objects implicated in a romantic love that conquers all. Immigrant women were in particular exposed to the Ghetto films targeting Jewish audiences—*The Jew’s Christmas, Romance of a Jewess*—which dealt with intermarriage and addressed the nature of its conflict. The Ghetto films, which most female immigrants, including Yezierska, must have seen, situate romance in the context of assimilation and conflate sexuality with ethnicity and melting-pot immigration policy. Assuming that Yezierska was a movie-goer, she must have been familiar with the conventions of the Ghetto films, particularly with their rudimentary, if not simplistic, linearity and elliptical narrative, which assumed that the audience familiar with Jewish marital customs and the problem of intermarriage could provide the missing links.

Yezierska’s work has been seen as having excessive and disruptive energy, and her characters are consumed with an urge to succeed. The constant yearning of her characters, their unassuaged desire and dynamism, were seen as a part of the electricity of living in immigrant quarters and the collective fervor of urban immigrants, the powerful new force on the American scene, to create better lives for themselves. But, what if such “un-American” excess, restlessness, and consuming intensity were a part of the electricity of living in immigrant quarters and the collective fervor of urban immigrants, the powerful new force on the American scene, to create better lives for themselves. But, what if such “un-American” excess, restlessness, and consuming intensity emanate from the work of a female immigrant author? What if disruptive and aggressive qualities define a Jewish immigrant heroine? It is not surprising that the abruptness of Yezierska’s work has been seen as over-emotional and uncontrollable, and that the tone of her prose has been described as angry, irrational, and hysterical. These qualities were considered signifiers of the author’s cultural and gender foreignness. The negative perceptions of Yezierska’s work indicated the existing fear of a passionate, irrational, and sexually independent woman, who escapes control, crosses the line of the permissible, destabilizes the established gender relations, and disrupts mainstream culture. In a typical review following the release of *Salome of the Tenements*, W. Adolphe Robert describes the text as an “orgy of the emotions”; it is “sentimental, illogical, hysterical, naïve.” Mary Dearborn rightly concludes that such a negative reception of Yezierska’s work was partly due to the discomfort and nervousness that an immigrant woman unwilling to remain in a picturesque ghetto created in male critics. Moreover, in condemning *Salome of the Tenements*—the story of a social ascendancy of a girl capable of “‘cashing in’ on her uniqueness” and winning the heart of a WASP millionaire—critics were also condemning the immigrant persona, the tabloid fiction of Yezierska’s, a successful female immigrant writer that they helped create. *Salome of the Tenements* is a story of Sonya Vrunsky, a young Jewish immigrant, who schemes to seduce a world-weary American philanthropist, John Manning. Through careful planning, dishonesty, reckless spending, and misrepresentation, the immigrant Cinderella achieves her goal: she gets married, leaves the ghetto, and enjoys economic protection. The aspiring immigrant woman fashions herself as a refined tenement ingénue and uses men unapologetically in order to secure a way out of the immigrant ghetto. She teases her landlord into painting her room by promising sexual favors and charms an aspiring Russian Jewish immigrant designer Jaky Solomon, alias Jacques Hollins, into designing an attractive suit for her. She seduces John Manning into marrying her by insisting on her cultural, ethnic, and economic differences she packages as Oriental mystique. However, Sonya’s strategies of empowerment—manipulative flaunting of sexuality, scheming use of male desire, calculated projection of an imagined persona—not only construct her as a fatal seductress and earn her a millionaire husband, but they also indicate her profound misreading of the Salome figure she continually invokes. Yearning to live an American life and enjoy its privileges of economic stability, social recognition, and romantic love, she constructs herself as an uncompromising vamp and unscrupulously invests into her future as a woman married to a cultured, privileged, and affluent American man. Yet, it is exactly the polar opposites, the supposedly complementing differences between a Jewish immigrant woman and an Anglo-Saxon man, that bring about the collapse of the intermarriage. Sonya’s empowering Oriental imagery reveals ultimately patriarchal underpinnings of the institution of intermarriage and of the confining roles of the two lovers: the freshness and excess of the Orient/woman are supposed to revitalize the world-weary and impotent West/man. The sharp reversal at the end of the novel reverses the power structure between Sonya Vrunsky and John Manning. It is Manning who becomes aggressive, as he wants to claim Sonya back. Sonya on the other hand rejects Manning and channels her...
ambitious planning into a promising career as a fashion designer with international prospects, strategizing a business and a possibly romantic partnership with the successful Jaky Solomon.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING SALOME

It is not surprising that Anzia Yezierska chose the myth of Salome to empower her immigrant heroine, Sonya Vrunsky. The centrality of the Salome figure to European painting and literature in the period between the 1860s and the beginning of World War I made the Salome legend one of the most extensive themes of high modernism.21 Synonymous with the Decadent movement, Salome evoked eroticism, female deceptiveness, taboo, and transgression and came to epitomize femininity and gender politics of the turn of the century.22 As a representative stereotype of the construction of femininity of the time, the appeal of Salome is probably best summarized in a quote from Joris Karl Huysmans’ novel Against Nature: Salome is the “symbolic incarnation of undying lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria . . . the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning . . . everything she touches.”23 Linda Saladin sees the persisting construction of the Salome figure as a sexually excessive woman, whose animalistic drives threaten and undermine the cultured and orderly masculine world.24 The frequent invocation of the figure is indicative of the growing anxiety and fear of women capable of destabilizing and disrupting the status quo of gender power structures. The collective gender consciousness and lasting fascination with Salome have turned this biblical figure into a fetishized feminine image, or masquerade, an oblique substitution for the “rebellious female . . . attempting to forestall the change” in the sociocultural setting of the day.25

The Salome figure is a rich composite of interpretations and meanings, many of which have significantly changed the original biblical story. The interpretation of the Salome myth as it pertains to the analysis of Anzia Yezierska’s text includes the unavoidable image of a femme fatale. As a femme fatale, Salome invokes a rare instance of a powerful and independent woman who, aware of her sexual appeal, has complete control over her seductive body, the performance of her femininity, and the lustful male gaze. Dancing at the birthday feast of her mother’s husband Antipas and entertaining dignitaries, including the ascetic and puritanical John the Baptist, Salome’s sexual power goes beyond the control of the visual field. She disrupts the voyeuristic pleasure of her audience and acts on her desire by demanding the head of John the Baptist, the arch-adversary of matriarchal, animistic, and incestuous relations at Antipas’ court.26 Acting on behalf of her stepfather, Antipas establishes Salome as a courageous and strong-willed woman. The blood on Salome’s hands has given rise to a view of her as an insatiable, destructive, and bestial woman, who hungers for revenge and leaves no space for “rational” and civilized compromise. Some critics, like Linda Saladin, have warned that the glorification of femininity embodied in Salome as a femme fatale cannot occur “without leaving a negative sentiment.”27 The uncritical use of numerous interpretive layers of the image of Salome does not necessarily celebrate the disruption of patriarchal gender relations. It can rather demonize the image by suggesting that female empowerment inevitably includes cruelty, inscrutability, deceptiveness, scheming, and aggression.

For Anzia Yezierska, the Salome myth is a rich source of reference that allows her to address the problems of an aspiring Jewish immigrant woman in a New York ghetto. The image of Salome serves to empower the heroine, Sonya Vrunsky, into an immigrant femme fatale and to address the ethnic conflict underlying the romance between an Anglo-Saxon man and a Jewish immigrant woman. Yezierska’s setting the decadent Jewish princess in New York tenements adds a new interpretation to the Salome myth: it evokes a jarring, discrepant reality of the New World and brings an awareness of cultural and artistic displacements that modernity set in motion. Fusing the high and the low, artifice and primitivism, stylization and spontaneity, Yezierska’s Salome operates within the stereotypes of inscrutability, fatality, performative self-fashioning, and eroticized difference. An engineer of her rise, Sonya Vrunsky is a strong woman from the margins, whose determination, cunning, and carefully manufactured “Oriental mystery” can seduce even the rational and puritanical Anglo-Saxon man and bring her to the very top of American society.

Sonya’s American Dream, clearly stated at the outset of the novel, has little to do with her liberation as a woman: she wants to marry a millionaire, and she is willing to endure any sacrifice or hardship to achieve her objective. A marriage to John Manning, “the man of her dreams,”28 a coldhearted millionaire and a philanthropist who, for lack of other interests, runs a settlement program and scientifically “converts” immigrants into Americans,29 represents Sonya’s deliverance from poverty and ethnic marginality. Subjecting gender to the matters of class and ethnicity and refusing to question the nature of marriage as a vehicle for a woman’s social rise, Sonya constructs her married life as a fantasy that solves all her problems: as Mrs. Manning she would no longer “lose [her] precious hours night after night in such sordid trivialities as washing collars, ironing waists, darning patches in her threadbare suit. As Mrs. Manning, maids would do all this sordid work for her.”30 In Sonya’s myopic vision and fervent belief in the possibility of instant social advancement, a marriage to a cultured and affluent man also promises her spiritual rebirth:
once she escapes poverty and transcends the drab reality of the material world to which she is confined, her soul will be ennobled, and it will no longer be wasted on “the sordid struggle for food and clothes.”

Starved for recognition and angry with an exhausting struggle for survival, Sonya is too impatient to consider the ethical aspects of her American Dream and too deprived to ignore the luxuries of life it brings—romance, beauty, leisure, plenitude, and comfort.

Throughout the text, Sonya presents herself in highly exaggerated images of fire, energy, and flames: she is “scorching” with intensity, exuding “resistless magnetism—feminine mystery”; she is a “wild savage” full of electricity, restlessness, and hunger for the “real life.” To add to the “unnaturalness” of her condition, Sonya points out that her passionate nature and “erratic” American ambitions have inevitably exacted a rift with her family. Her “flares of self-assertion” contrast with her overworked, care-crushed mother, and her “untamed wilfulness” is a painful reminder to her religious father of his own sins, which, he believes, came as a penance in the form of an unconventional, non-traditional daughter. While Sonya’s denial of everything conspicuously “immigrant” has made the separation from her orthodox family unavoidable, she explains her unbridled passion, her eccentric sensibility as being deeply rooted in the history of her people. The conflation of the personal and the political, the private and the communal, provides an explanation for the energy erupting in Sonya; her fire is a culmination of the “Weltschmerz of her race,” of repressed passions of several generations of her religious and downtrodden ancestors:

I am a Russian Jewess, a flame—a longing. A soul consumed with hunger for heights beyond reach. I am the ache of unvoiced dreams, the clamor of suppressed desires. I am the unhiled lives of generations stifled in Siberian prisons. I am the urge of ages for the free, the beautiful that never yet was on land or sea.

Carla Cappetti attributes the restlessness and deviousness that characterize young women like Sonya to the shifting norms of modern urban living. For young girls like Sonya, whose rebellion corroded communal cohesiveness, modernity signifies a desire for clothes, movies, and “all those objects that consumerism potentially makes available to everyone.” It is not insignificant that Cappetti indicates pretty and fashionable clothes, an unattainable goal for most poor urban dwellers, as a potential cause for criminality and deviance in young girls. Stylish clothing, as Kathy Peiss indicates, was of great significance for young immigrant women: it was a sign of respectability, social standing, taste, and class aspirations. It showed the Americanization of young immigrant women hungry for participation in leisure activities, romantic love, personal expression, and autonomy from ethnic past. For Sonya Vrunsky, fashionable clothes do not imply sacrifice and transgression only because of their American and deceptively egalitarian appeal; rather she sees them as a strategic tool, a uniform that brings out her sexuality and helps her attract a millionaire. Mary Dearborn sees in Sonya’s careful strategizing and her disciplined efforts to get Manning’s attention a disturbing military undertone. While fashionable clothes are to satisfy the hunger of the ghetto girl for beauty, they provide an armor-like outfit that she wears on her mission to endear herself to John Manning. For all of Sonya’s professed love of beautiful clothes—“the hunger for bread is not half as maddening as the hunger for beautiful clothes”—she shows unflinching pragmatism. Attractive clothes are necessary to transform her into an image of purity, innocence, and refined simplicity that Manning sees in her. They are to help her “mould herself into the form he desired”...
Mrs. Manning, Sonya recognizes her sudden transformation into an individual when she says, “It was a delirious feeling of triumph that she, Sonya, only a year ago a Hester Street nobody, had in one leap made herself the mistress of the Manning house.” Sonya is also willing to believe that her future husband will perceive her actions, supposed extraordinary sacrifices of a woman in love, as an expression of her immense devotion. Unrestrained by the American tradition to which she, after all, does not belong, Sonya feels free to apply the adopted American credos of individualism, self-reliance, and aggressive pursuit of destiny to her fate as a Jewish immigrant woman. Moreover, in a most unusual way, she fuses her perception of the American character with a sense of romance, hoping that her audacious manner would make her desirable and present her in the most American way.

It is, however, questionable to what extent the aggressive sexual behavior of a Jewish immigrant woman can be seen as typically “American.” At best, it indicates an idiosyncratic interpretation of American values that allows Yezierska’s character to couch her dishonest dealings and “immigrant” persistence in the context of the ruthless competitiveness encouraged in America at the beginning of the century. The implication that successful assimilation is measured by the ability of newcomers to reproduce and internalize the values of modern America may not entirely explain and validate Yezierska’s character. The difference of an immigrant heroine who fuses the masculine, “American,” drive with her struggle against the patriarchy of the immigrant ghetto aligns her rather with American feminists of the beginning of the century and with their efforts to redefine American femininity. An unusual blend of the old and the new, the American and the “foreign,” Yezierska’s character bravely challenges gender stereotypes of the time: she actively pursues her love interest, assumes responsibility for her happiness, empowers herself by Oriental images, and turns her eroticized difference into a means of gender strategizing. Such behavior in an immigrant heroine aligns Yezierska’s novel with efforts to redefine American femininity. An unusual blend of the old and the new, the American and the “foreign,” Yezierska’s character bravely challenges gender stereotypes of the time: she actively pursues her love interest, assumes responsibility for her happiness, empowers herself by Oriental images, and turns her eroticized difference into a means of gender strategizing. Such behavior in an immigrant heroine aligns Yezierska’s novel with efforts to redefine American femininity. The difference and unruliness, the disobedience of an excessive and loud immigrant text, actively contributes to the destabilization of old perceptions of American femininity. The difference and unruliness, the disobedience of an excessive and loud immigrant text, actively contributes to the destabilization of old perceptions of American femininity.

What brings together Yezierska’s novel and American feminists of the time is their reliance on the mythology and topography of the East as a strategy for the empowerment and representation of the New American Woman. The departure of the New Woman from her traditional domestic role, exaggerated in
Paganism, unconsciousness, hysteria, and marginality are the notions frequently associated with female dance, and Felicia McCaren explores them in her article about the American dancer, Loie Fuller. While she writes that dance, as a form of nonverbal communication, is liberating in that it allows the meaning embedded in the body to surface, McCaren also indicates that in the West dance has been perceived in very contrasting ways. On the one hand, it is seen as a release of suppressed voices, a transgressive rupture of rational and orderly existence, which is often synonymous with madness,archy, and disorder. On the other hand, the elaborate and constraining rules of many dances become a manifestation of order exercised, either through individual or social control of the body. As McCaren puts it, dance can be seen as a mediation of the physical excess, a choreographed repression of the emotional and irrational, so that it ultimately merges the apparent freedom of movement with tremendous physical discipline.

While the Orientalism of white American women discussed by Studlar and Yoshihara meant primarily the fascination with the Far East, for a Jewish immigrant author like Yezierska, the Oriental mystique meant resorting to the familiar myth of Salome, a transgressive and bold Jewish woman and an aesthetic icon of the Decadent movement. It is in particular the figure of the dancing Salome that provides a useful link between a Jewish immigrant woman and the New American Woman. Its ambiguous image indicates both the celebration of bodily and sexual freedom and the awareness of discipline to which women were to subordinate themselves to achieve emancipation. In a culture influenced by American concert dance, dance halls, vaudevilles, Isadora Duncan, the Ballets Russes, and Hollywood versions of the Orient, dance, a sensual ritualized movement, becomes an important signifier of the change in women. It offers a fantasy of an escape from confining bourgeois domesticity: the woman is situated in the public sphere, in the realm of pleasure, and she is liberated from her role as a nurturer and caregiver. In Studlar’s view, dance functions as an “ideal symbolic merger between middle-class female gentility and contemporary ideals of feminine freedom from bodily and imaginative constraints.” It ultimately allows women to create other, transformative identities “convergent with those qualities of the New Woman that disturbed social conservatives.” Embraced and celebrated by the female community, dance is, according to Studlar, a liberating activity that releases repression and acts out fantasies of female freedom with “pagan abandon.”

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It is no wonder that Yezierska’s heroine feels comfortable exploring the foreign potential in herself and invoking Oriental images. Sonya Vrunsky turns her difference into a virtue: she Orientalizes and mystifies her sexuality as a powerful tool to gain her “trophy” husband. She clearly sees herself as a fiery antithesis to her husband, and she describes their marriage as a fusion of the races between “the oriental and the Anglo-Saxon,” a brave attempt to “find a common language” in a society that is ethnically, culturally, and economically divided. Sonya’s aggressive sexuality and sexual insatiability break down gender, ethnic, and class binaries and forefront her body as a means of communication across socially constructed barriers. The metaphor of decapitation of John the Baptist she so freely invokes indicates the capturing of her prey, the “catching” of an American millionaire in an immigrant woman’s web of desires and aspirations. The biblical imagery in Yezierska’s text indicates the beheading of an austere, ascetic, rational, and controlling American male tradition and a simultaneous discharge of the female sphere of senses, jouissance, opulence, and excess. It is in these very terms of alterity and abundance that women at the turn of the century chose to represent their new sense of self. Moreover, Yezierska’s representation of an immigrant seductress provides an important textual counterpart to visual images of dangerous women that appeared in the magazine art and early film in the 1910s.
Kitch argues in *The Girl on the Magazine Cover*, it is the images of the vamp and of the “the scheming beauty,” a coldhearted gold-digger, that expressed the threatening potential of the American modern woman, as well as the cultural anxiety about the loss of purity of the white Anglo-Saxon race.69

Sonya’s indisputable difference—her heightened awareness of her body and calculated use of it—is an instance of a provoking foreign sexuality that contrasted with the existing codes of sexual conduct in America. It contributed to the efforts of budding feminist groups to advocate the image of the New Woman and challenge the gender stereotypes of the time. The wage-earning single immigrant women could afford to participate in public forms of recreation, such as dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theatres.26 These “cheap amusements,” as Kathy Peiss has called them, expressed immigrant women’s desire for leisure activities and control of their bodies, as well as indicated their rebellion against the discipline of industrial labor and the rigid order of their patriarchal families.27 In fact, the participation of immigrant women in public entertainment and American social life stirred controversy from both sides. On the one hand, the new forms of “American” entertainment often strained the patriarchal ties within immigrant families as parents perceived linguistic, cultural, social, and economic changes in their daughters as disloyalty to tradition, rapid corruption of the old ways, and speedy Americanization of their children.28 On the other hand, the American public saw immigrant women as pleasure seeking and morally loose, corrupting the pristine American ways. Magdalena J. Zaborowska points out in *How We Found America: Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives* that immigrant women in turn-of-the-century America, who were brought up in a “different morality and alien sexual conduct,” were considered loose and their behavior disgraceful and vulgar.29 The ease with which immigrant women accepted their sexuality was criticized severely even by many puritanical American women who saw immigrant women as irrational, promiscuous, and unable to control their animalistic drives or check their excessive cravings. Zaborowska explains such a cultural misunderstanding by arguing that the closeness of living conditions in poverty and drab immigrant quarters accounts for a different construction of sexuality in immigrant women.30 American stereotypes of Jewish immigrant women, although less prominent than male Jewish stereotypes, centered primarily on Jewish women’s self-sacrifice, or on their overbearing, aggressive, excessive, and confrontational nature, as well as on their unsophisticated manners.31 In the eyes of many Anglo-Saxon men, Jewish women were perceived as “motherly, earthy, exotic, sensual, and uninhibited.”32

Yeizerska’s character embodies the negative perceptions of Jewish immigrant women: she craves nice clothes, she flirts with and manipulates men, she gets into a debt she expects her future husband to pay back, and she turns her courtship into an obsessive battleground. There are instances in which even Sonya herself remarks in her highly exaggerated language that her love for John Manning is merely a “delirium of the senses,” a “driving madness” that transforms her into “a driven thing, lost in space, tossing and whirling in a void of pain.”33 The overlapping of a growing consumerist ethic among immigrant women at the turn of the century and a yearning of the determined, socially ambitious, and desiring women were certainly perceived as a threat to the established order of gender relations in modern America. The new forms of social and sexual interactions among immigrant and working-class youth in modern America foregrounded the dubious liberation of immigrant women.34 The “foreign” notions of excess, insatiable sexual appetite, and unstable “libidinal economy” allow the female immigrant to challenge patriarchal codes of both her ethnic upbringing and American society and become a significant contributor to the unconventionality and unruliness of the modern, New Woman.35

Although Yeizerska’s text, itself a breathless, energetic body in motion, does not deal explicitly with dance imagery, dance is implied as a complex and conflicting metaphor for the social rise of an unruly female immigrant. Dance in *Salome of the Tenements* is, however, not a stereotypical metaphor for feminine grace, but a contradictory notion that presents Sonya both as a prototype of the New American Woman and as a female immigrant deeply inscribed by patriarchy. The dance macabre of Sonya Vrunsky, an ethnic heroine who seduces and symbolically “beheads” an American millionaire by “making” him fall in love with her and trapping him in a marriage, is certainly a racially, socially, and sexually transgressive act, engineered by a powerful and ambitious woman. Dance allows Sonya to imagine herself as a liberated and determined woman, who breezes across social and racial barriers into marital safety. Sonya’s success, her briefly becoming a Mrs. Manning, leaves an impression of an effortless drifting into short romance, a movie-like happiness, tightly closed in eternal love. The image of dance as a carefree movement, however, enables Sonya to camouflage the sad fact that her dance out of the tenements is not the romantic escape she would like it to be, but a carefully planned mission into which she invests all her time, energy, and money. Sonya’s choreographed behavior, her dance of upward mobility, merges the illusion of ease with hard work and discipline as well as brings together the high and the low, the gracefulness of artistic and affluent American circles and the hard work and difficult living in the tenements.

Sonya’s disciplined body, her Salome-like dance, helps place a sophisticated and prestigious modernist art in the marginal immigrant culture and despi-
The biblical figure of Salome, a central image of turn-of-the-century European art, singles out an anonymous newcomer and draws attention to her self-fashioning. Sonya’s battling against social obstacles in order to win the heart of an American millionaire indicates the artifice of her self-created, contrived persona that helps her rise above poverty and social inferiority. The Salome image in Yeizerska’s text is significant in many ways: it empowers the heroine, stresses her Oriental mystique and transgressive power as an ethnic femme fatale, and draws attention to her liberated immigrant body, which she, paradoxically enough, disciplines in order to enter mainstream American society. To a great extent, Yeizerska’s character helps define and exemplify the New American Woman: she breaks social, racial, and sexual barriers, and she feminizes American values of independence, self-reliance, and initiative. Sonya is liberated in a sense that she is free to act on her desires, to marry outside the immigrant social circle, and to escape the patriarchal world of her Old World parents. The Salome figure in Yeizerska’s novel fuses the images of a decadent, sexually voracious Oriental figure and an aspiring ghetto girl, yearning for freedom from patriarchal constraints and immigrant marginality. It is in particular the comedic work of an immigrant Jewish performer, Fanny Brice, that succeeds in blending the decadent Salome legend of European modernism and the uncultivated ghetto girl of the Lower East Side. Yet, in the context of modern America, both were, Susan Glenn writes, “cultural outsiders, one coded as a powerfully mysterious exotic of the mythical past, the other as a relatively powerless ethnic outsider of the present.”

As Sonya Vrunsky makes clear throughout the text, the marital union, which, sadly enough, represents the pinnacle of her aspirations, is based on the jarring contrast between the commonness of “the flaming East Side girl” and the nobility of “her Anglo-Saxon saint.” Sonya’s emotional intensity, her warmth, directness, and spontaneity, gain in importance only as compensatory values for John Manning’s “rigid training,” “anaemic conventions,” and his legacy of “dead ancestors” that have stifled the love of life in him. Sonya is a “primitive woman,” a self-defined “wild savage,” who has a rare potential to change and emotionally ennoble Manning. Her excess, her unique ability to provide a “cataclysmic love,” is the only possible cure for the man “bound in with centuries of inhibitions.”

Sonya’s exuberance provokes even a highly melodramatic and comical confession from Manning, a rare moment of self-realization that he is a “puritan whose fathers were afraid to trust experience . . . [and] bound by our possessions of property, knowledge and tradition.” We learn that the desired change takes place in Manning: “Till now, he had been sterile—impotent. This woman of the people was the divine finger of God toward the realization of dreams of service as vast as humanity and its problems.” As Sonya sees it, her marriage to John Manning advances American assimilationist policy and sends out a strong message of “global” proportions: “Their combined personalities would prove a titanic power that would show the world how the problems of races and classes, the rich and the poor, educated and uneducated, could be solved.”

It is not difficult to see in a love story that unifies the extremes how the immigrant woman functions as an active progenitor of happiness and change in the decadent man exhausted by social conventions and burdened by the weight of tradition. Sonya represents the freshness and exuberance that would change Manning’s life, and her special charm radiates with simplicity, directness, uncultivated and untamed primitivism. She is an idea, or, in Manning’s words, a “personification of what I mean,” a romantic embodiment of poverty at its most pristine, noble, and simple. She is a hope of salvation for the world-weary millionaire, “the stimulation he needed,” a proof of his utopian desires for a world free of corruption and artifice. Manning sees in Sonya a hope for his resurrection, a romanticized version of a pure and pristine woman whose lack of education, manners, and traditional upbringing is forgiven since she is morally and spiritually superior to the ladies of his society. Rather than a complex human being, Sonya exists for Manning merely as a representation, an image of freshness and change. It is her poverty, the fact that she supposedly exists outside of consumer culture, economy, and the circulation of money, that testifies to her uncorrupted spirituality and sexuality. As Manning explains, “You represent poverty—toil, and it is beautiful, because unveiled by any artifice.” Manning’s search for honest and trusting human relations, which, he believes, exist only among “primitive” and uncorrupted people, takes him to the immigrant ghettos of New York, where he runs a settlement project and, paradoxically enough, devotes himself to the eradication of poverty, what he believes to be the very essence of morality and goodness in people.

Sonya, on the other hand, is equally blinded, for she fails to see that it is Manning’s world-weariness rather than genuine interest in the lives of immigrants that makes him a benefactor on the East Side. Impressed by what she believes is his benevolence and good nature, Sonya glorifies his philanthropic work and scoffs at the designer Hollins’ cynical remark that Manning is one of those idle rich men for whom “playing with poverty is more exciting than knocking golf balls.” It is Sonya’s hero-worship and undivided support that energize Manning and endear her to him. Sonya brings all the energy and appeal of a newcomer into her relationship with Manning, and she unsafely offers her rejuvenating power. She not only accommodates herself to Manning’s idea of her as an unspoiled, natural woman, but she also fervently believes that it is her destiny as a woman to nurture and refresh her man and
be a source of inspiration and stimulation for one exhausted by tradition, civilization, and social obligations. Thus, Sonya internalizes Manning’s patriarchal vision of gender roles and eventually becomes complicit in reinforcing her own inferiority.

Sonya’s Oriental imagery is undeniably a means of her empowerment, but it equally serves as an indication of her tremendous, although masterfully disguised, vulnerability and ingrained sense of inferiority. The power structure of a marriage between an Orientalized Jewish immigrant woman and an Anglo-Saxon man mirrors the one between the ideological constructs of the East and the West. As Edward Said claims, the West needed the freshness—the charm and mystery of the Orient—as a catalyst for its rebirth. This masked power constellation is of great importance for Yezierska’s text. It allows John Manning to abject himself from his stifling tradition, expose his own deficiency, and turn his emotional scarcity, his spiritual malady, into a prioritized site of lack that needs to be attended to. It also encourages complacency and re-inscription of patriarchal codes in the ethnic heroine, who slips “naturally” into the familiar female role—she sacrifices her needs and devotes herself to nurturing her man. Manning’s lack validates in turn the compensatory value of Sonya’s difference. It also subordinates Sonya’s bodily and material needs—she wants sexual gratification, marriage, economic security—to Manning’s “psychic complexity.” The mind vs. body hierarchy only confirms that Manning’s problems are much more substantial than Sonya’s earthly ambitions.

The exemplary intermarriage between a Jewish immigrant woman and an affluent American man, as suggested by Yezierska’s novel, is to promote the melting-pot policy of the time and encourage easier assimilation of newcomers. Moved by his love, Manning ecstatically exclaims, “Are we not the mingling of races? The oriental mystery and the Anglo-Saxon clarity that will pioneer a new race of men?” Similarly, Sonya sees herself as a revitalizing energy, and she generously offers reproductive power in order to heal her emotionally exhausted husband. However, instead of the expected bliss and Manning’s conversion into a warmer and happier man and Sonya’s transformation into a privileged lady, Sonya feels increasingly stifled by the world to which she so desperately wanted to belong. She comes to see herself as an “East Side savage forced suddenly into the strait-jacket of American civilization.” She is an unpredictable “dynamite bomb,” and Manning represents “the walls of tradition constantly menaced by threatening explosions.” After living some time with Manning, she realizes that instead of loving her husband, she has been “intoxicating herself with his delusions” of philanthropy and with hopes that she can cure his ennui. His reserve is no longer appealing and their differences no longer complementary, and Sonya concludes that “just as fire and water cannot fuse, neither could her Russian Jewish soul fuse with the stolid, the unimaginative, the invulnerable thickness of this New England puritan.”

The novel consequently ends with Sonya and Manning parting ways, and with Sonya teaming up with Jacques Hollins, the designer whose custom-designed clothes made her beautiful and powerful. At the end of the novel, a Jewish immigrant woman is no longer a wage earner in the American garment industry; rather, she is emasculated as an entrepreneur, a designer, and a creator. It is, as Natalie Friedman writes, labor rather than romance that allows Yezierska’s heroine “to participate in the classic American ritual of capitalist production.” Sonya Vrunsky emulates American and masculine roles by emphasizing her privilege to make more controlled decisions about her emotional life and to participate actively in the creation of American fashion industry and further stylizations and constructions of new images and roles for Jewish women in modern America.

**THE RELEVANCE OF THE IMMIGRANT SALOME**

The significance of Yezierska’s work lies in the way it captures contradictory values in ethnically diverse modern New York and the resulting ambivalence towards the emancipation and social rise of a Jewish immigrant woman. By presenting the character as scheming, morally corrupt, and driven, the novel reflects the cultural anxiety about the appearance of the New Woman, the assimilation of immigrant women, and the consequent racial and cultural corruption of Anglo-Saxon America. The text also sympathizes with the heroine’s struggle to overcome ethnic and gender biases, liberate herself from the patriarchal ethnic past, and transgress the boundaries of the immigrant ghetto. Furthermore, although the novel operates within the all-too-familiar framework of “how to marry a millionaire,” it does challenge the institution of intermarriage as a vehicle for the transformation of a patriarchal Jewish ghetto girl into a sexually and economically liberated American woman. The end of the novel, in which a divorced heroine starts a successful business with an immigrant man and a prospective romantic partner, debunks what Mary Dearborn calls “the Pocahontas myth”—a belief that an ethnic woman’s cultural, spatial, and social mobility is predicated on a marriage to a socially prominent and economically powerful man.

Yezierska’s novel ends with an affirmation of the courage of an immigrant woman capable of rejecting intermarriage as a vehicle of a woman’s social rise. The Jewish heroine is strong enough to reject the world of affluence, romance, and luxurious American living and participate in the redesigning and refash-
ion of existing perceptions of femininity. She also privileges repatriation over hasty assimilation.101 The impact of such an ending on the emerging immigrant and working-class audience of Yeizerska’s work was twofold. The novel allowed the audience on the very margins of society to gain vicarious access to the world of affluent America—its glamorous and expensive lifestyle, gilded interiors, and sophisticated intricacies—and it also sanctioned and affirmed their own social position, since it enabled them to condemn and dismiss the decadent world of American society as morally and ethically inferior.

By situating the topography of the Orient in the Lower East Side tenements and thus providing utopian space for a release of repressed female sexuality, this proto-feminist text dares to redefine traditional beliefs that matrimony and assimilation lie at the core of a Jewish immigrant woman’s empowerment and social mobility. Susan A. Glenn has similarly noticed that Yeizerska has succeeded in finding a mode of representation of a Jewish immigrant woman, by redefining and relocating an ancient myth and re-envisioning a Jewish heroine in modern America: “By making Salome/Sonya into a fierce defender of her people, and turning her deadly will into a source of positive female energy, the writer [Yeizerska] shows her readers a model of what a passionate Jewish feminist might look like.”102 It is the changing notions of American femininity and cultural and geographic displacements of modernity that contributed to the creation of Yeizerska’s volatile and restless immigrant narrative. Yeizerska’s novel indicates that a female immigrant in turn-of-the-century America is a subject in the making, so slippery and unexplored that it easily slides from the myth that empowers it to the one that traps it into patriarchy. While still depending on myth as a way covertly to address and articulate the changing notions of femininity, the efforts to chart out the emerging subjectivity of an immigrant woman bear the stamp of contradictions underlying modernity itself. Turn-of-the-century society—commodity culture, mass migrations, melting-pot immigration policy—gave rise to the phenomena of ethnic ghettos, economic mobility, jarring clashes of cultures and ideologies, and the appearance of immigrant narratives whose characters strive to balance conflicting and paradoxical aspects of their lives. Thus, Salome of the Tenements is an important immigrant narrative, whose intense and ambivalent exploration of alternative ways to a Jewish immigrant woman’s emancipation warrants the attention of feminist scholarship. In fact, the examination of Yeizerska’s text may be a timely reminder of the need to cast a critical look at contemporary cultural practices that still resonate with a similar premise: the world of reality TV and its glamorized fantasies of the close connection between staged matrimony and female economic and social advancement.

**Notes**


6. Ibid., 113.

7. Aside from those mentioned above, Yeizerska’s works include a short story collection, *Children of Loneliness* (1923), and novels *Arrogant Beggars* (1927), *All I Could Never Be* (1932), and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950).


11. Ibid.


13. Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 118. For additional information about immigrant women and film, see Chapter 3, “City Lights: Immigrant Women and the Rise of Movies,” in Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen’s important work on the mass-mediated


16. Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 72–73. Although these films dealt extensively with the reality of intermarriage, the institution seemed to have remained only a fictitious one. As Hansen indicates, in 1912, the percentage of interracial marriages in America did not exceed 1.17%.

17. Ibid., 73.


19. Ibid., 122.

20. Ibid.

21. Anthony Pym, “The Importance of Salomé: Approaches to a Fin de Siècle Theme,” *French Forum* 14, no. 3 (1989): 31. Pym discusses the pervasiveness and importance of the Salome legend in European art. He even includes a chart of “strong” versions of Salome as they appear in various artists, such as Mallarme’s dramatic poem *Hérodiade: Scène* (1869), Henri Regnault’s (1870) and Gustave Moreau’s paintings (1876), Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé* (1894), Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations to Wilde’s play (1894), Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome* (1905), and W.B. Yeats’ dance drama *A Full Moon in March* (1913). See also Pym, “The Importance of Salomé,” 314–15.


23. Ibid., 239–240.


25. Ibid., 21.


29. In his introduction to Yezierska’s newly issued novel (1995), Gay Wilentz describes settlement houses and outlines the politics of reformist movements in the late 1890s and early 1900s. The settlement houses were schools, resembling today’s continuing education centers, which educated immigrants about America and equipped them with the tools to succeed. Run and supported by liberal reformers like Jane Addams and John Dewey, and influenced by Social Darwinism and the belief that immigrants could be “scientifically” trained to adhere to society’s demands for social order, the settlement houses were liberal versions of the centers for assimilation of America’s ethnically diverse population (xiv). For more information about the settlement house movement and the literature inspired by it, see David M. Fine, *The City, the Immigrant and American Fiction, 1880–1920* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1977), especially chapter 2, “Reformers, Americanizers, and Cosmopolitans: The Case for the Immigrant.” Fine indicates that the settlement house movement encouraged immigrants to retain what was best in their backgrounds and adopt what was best in the native tradition (26).


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 19, 35.

33. Ibid., 37.

34. Ibid., 84.

35. Ibid., 83.

36. Ibid., 37 (italics in the original).

37. Ibid.


39. Ibid., 134.


41. Ibid.

42. Custom-made clothes did have an egalitarian appeal, yet the economic disadvantage of young immigrant women often made those clothes unattainable. Peiss indicates that apart from clothes, ethnicity, and religion, there were numerous ways to differentiate among American women at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as “patterns of speech, manners, levels of schooling, attitudes toward self-improvement, and class consciousness” (64).


45. Ibid., 73.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 120.


49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.
51. Gaylyn Studlar, “‘Out-Salomeing Salome’: Dance, the New Woman, and Fan
52. Ibid., 491. Quoted in Studlar.
53. Ibid., 490.
54. Ibid., 491.
55. Ibid., 506
56. Ibid.
57. Mari Yoshihara, Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism
58. Ibid., 8.
59. Ibid., 100.
60. Ibid., 497.
61. Ibid., 491.
62. Ibid.
63. Felicia McCarren, “The ‘Symptomatic Act’ Circa 1900: Hysteria, Hypnosis,
64. Ibid., 748.
65. Ibid., 753.
1995), 82.
67. YeZierska, Salome, 132.
Kitch provides an entire chapter on visual representations of threatening women,
69. In addition to the stereotypes of the vamp and the coldhearted gold-digger,
Kitch also mentions the image of the party girl as the third stereotype of dangerous
women of the time (The Girl on the Magazine Cover, 60).
70. Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 5.
71. Ibid., 45.
72. Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 72. Further discussion of the challenges to parental,
particularly paternal, authority by American ways of living can be found in Elizabeth
Ewen’s Immigrant Women (1985). Ewen in particular discusses the intrusion of
American ways in Jewish and Italian families and parental insistence of preserving
cultural identity of ethnic immigrant groups through food, clothing, and patriarchal
family relations as manifested in their attitudes to education, work, and marriage.
Especially useful is Chapter 11, “New Images, Old Bonds” (185–205).
73. Magdalena J. Zaborowska, How We Found America: Reading Gender through
East European Immigrant Narratives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
1995), 46.
74. Ibid.
75. Glenn, Female Spectacle, 119–120.
76. Paul Spickard, Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-
Century America (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 176. See also Lori
Jirousek, “Spectacle Ethnography and Immigrant Resistance: Sui Sin Far and Anzia
Sin Fir were able to counteract the construction of ethnic stereotypes, based on exclusionary
politics of what she calls “spectacle ethnography.”
77. YeZierska, Salome, 96.
78. Peiss insists on a dual approach to the liberation of working-class immigrant
women. While immigrant women of the beginning of the twentieth century managed
to revise considerably the new categories of style, fashion, romance, and mixed-sex fun and liberate themselves from the traditional constraints of their families and American
Victorian mores, their lack of economic independence trapped them further in new
forms of oppression and patriarchy (Cheap Amusements, 6). The treatment of romance
and matrimony in YeZierska’s Salome of the Tenements is a wonderful example of a
dubious transgression and a conflicting emancipation.
79. Rita Felski, The Gender of Modernity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,
1995), 77.
80. Glenn, Female Spectacle, 120.
81. YeZierska, Salome, 39.
82. Ibid., 35–37.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 36.
85. Ibid., 37.
86. Ibid., 38.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid., 74.
89. Ibid., 75.
90. Ibid., 74; italics mine.
91. Ibid., 30.
94. Ibid., 132.
95. Ibid., 132.
96. Ibid., 138.
97. Ibid., 147.
98. Natalie Friedman, “Marriage and the Immigrant Narrative: Anzia YeZierska’s
99. Peiss emphasizes the link between new clothing styles of immigrant women and
the redefinition of their social images and roles (Cheap Amusements, 62).
Dearborn interprets Pocahontas’ myth also as a powerful metaphor for the artistic output of the ethnic woman, which she sees as a “tradition of mediation” (33). As Dearborn convincingly argues, literary works of immigrant women reach the audience only after the mediation of various male figures—“editors, publishers, friends, authenticators”—who leave their traces in female narratives. The male figures “educated, polished, corrected, structured, changed, proofread and eventually alienated from their source” the ethnic woman writer’s ideas (33). Therefore, Dearborn sees a patronizing attitude and patriarchal structure not only in the content of the stories but in the editorial work to which the texts of inexperienced ethnic writers were subjected. Inspired by Dearborn’s argument, Magdalena Zaborowska reads female immigrant narratives, including Salome of the Tenements, in the “tradition of mediation” and pays special attention to male and editorial interference in the texts of ethnic women.

100. Glenn, Female Spectacle, 125.

101. Ibid.

The Eastmans and the Luhans

Intermarriage between White Women and Native American Men, 1875–1935

MARGARET D. JACOBS

At a lavish wedding and reception in New York City in 1891 Elaine Goodale, daughter of a prominent New England family, married Charles Eastman, a member of the Wahpeton band of the Santee Sioux (Dakotas). Writing in her memoirs Elaine declared, “I gave myself wholly in that hour to the traditional duties of wife and mother, abruptly relinquishing all thought of an independent career for the making of a home. At the same time, I embraced with a new and deeper zeal the conception of life-long service to my husband’s people.” Charles, a medical doctor, described himself a few months before their marriage by writing, “I was soon to realize my long dream—to become a complete man! I thought of little else than the good we two could do together.” Both Charles and Elaine were members of a group of reformers who sought to solve the so-called Indian problem through assimilation, and they portrayed their marriage as a natural means to overcome Indian “backwardness” and poverty. The white woman would further uplift her already civilized Dakota husband, and the couple would work diligently to serve his people.

Fifty years later New York socialite Mabel Dodge moved to Taos, New Mexico, with her Russian émigré husband, the painter Maurice Sterne. Mabel soon became entranced with Tony Luhans, a Taos Pueblo Indian. Describing her feelings, Mabel wrote in her memoirs:

I had a strange sense of dislocation, as though I were swinging like a pendulum over the gulf of the canyon, between the two poles of mankind, between Maurice and Tony; and Maurice seemed old and spent and tragic, while Tony was whole and young in the cells of his body, with his power unbroken and hard like the carved granite rock, yet older than the Germanic Russian whom the modern world had destroyed.

Mabel and Tony eventually divorced their respective spouses and married each other in 1923. In this case Mabel saw herself as a bridge between Tony’s people...