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## The New Woman Narrating the Histor(ies) of the Feminist Movement

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# AMERICAN LITERATURE IN TRANSITION, 1910–1920

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MARK W. VAN WIENEN is Professor of English at Northern Illinois University. He has published extensively on American literature and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including essays appearing in *American Literature*, *American Quarterly*, *American Literary History*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*. His previous books are *Partisans and Poets: The Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War* (1997), *Rendezvous with Death: American Poems of the Great War* (editor, 2002), and *American Socialist Triptych: The Literary-Political Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Upton Sinclair, and W. E. B. Du Bois* (2012).

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AMERICAN LITERATURE  
IN TRANSITION,  
1910–1920

EDITED BY  
MARK W. VAN WIENEN  
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## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page viii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Chronology</i>	xiv

Introduction: Revolution, Progress, and Reaction in the First Decade of American Modernism	I
<i>Mark W. Van Wienen</i>	

### PART I THEMES

1 The City: Modern Poetics and Metropolitan Life	17
<i>John Timberman Newcomb</i>	
2 The Country: Myth and Reality, Affirmation and Reform	31
<i>Janet Galligani Casey</i>	
3 Indian Country: Between Native Claims and Modernist Desires	45
<i>Beth H. Piatote</i>	
4 Labor: The Lawrence Strike in Poetry and Public Opinion	59
<i>John Marsh</i>	
5 The Color Line: Racial Inequality in the Literary Field	74
<i>Michael Nowlin</i>	
6 The New Woman: Narrating the Histor(ies) of the Feminist Movement	89
<i>Francesca Sawaya</i>	
7 Eugenics: Bad Blood and Better Babies	103
<i>Beth Widmaier Capo</i>	

8	Bohemians: Greenwich Village and <i>The Masses</i> <i>Joanna Levin</i>	117
9	Americanism: Assimilation and the "Immigrant Question" <i>Cathy J. Schlund-Vials</i>	131
10	Masculinity: Regenerative Primitivism as Cultural Compensation <i>Jonathan Vincent</i>	146
11	Revolution: Imagining a Counternarrative <i>Laura Hapke</i>	160
PART II FORMATS		
12	Modernist Poetry: Or, The Growing Taste for the Lower Kinds of Poetry <i>Robin G. Schulze</i>	177
13	Modernist Fiction: Women's Writing and Cultural Emergence <i>Guy Reynolds</i>	191
14	Realist Drama: From the Little Theatre to Broadway <i>Brenda Murphy</i>	204
15	Realist Fiction: A Resilient Mode <i>Robin Peel</i>	216
16	Roots and Popular Music: Literary Encounters with Jazz and Blues <i>Tim A. Ryan</i>	229
17	Popular Verse: Poetry in Motion <i>Mike Chasar</i>	244
18	Sports Writing: A Foundational Decade <i>Scott D. Emmert</i>	266
19	Manifestos: Anti-Foundationalism in Avant-Garde, Feminist, and African American Modernisms <i>Laura Winkiel</i>	278
PART III INSTITUTIONS		
20	Little Magazines: Aesthetics and Dissent <i>Jayne E. Marek</i>	295

*Contents*

vii

21	The Movies: The Transitional Era <i>Charlie Keil</i>	312
22	The Academy: Potential and Constraint <i>Cary Nelson</i>	327
23	The Presidency: Woodrow Wilson and the Reinvention of Executive Power <i>Sean McCann</i>	341
24	The War: Event and Institution <i>Mark W. Van Wienen</i>	354
	<i>Works Cited</i>	365
	<i>Index</i>	405

## *Figures*

4.1	The 1912 “Bread and Roses” strike. Photograph.	<i>page</i> 67
4.2	Art Young. “Law and Order in Lawrence.” Illustration.	72
17.1	Edgar Guest. “My Friend.” Greeting card.	246
17.2	“Camp Greetings.” Printed handkerchief.	247
17.3	Fox Entertainments. <i>Evangeline</i> . Advertisement.	249
17.4	“Thus departed Hiawatha.” Extract of <i>The Song of Hiawatha</i> by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Lantern slide.	250
17.5	Oliver Wendell Holmes. “A Sun-Day Hymn.” Lantern slide.	252
17.6a	“From many an ancient river.” Extract of “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains” by Reginald Heber. Lantern slide.	253
17.6b	“From many a palmy plain.” Extract of “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains” by Reginald Heber. Lantern slide.	254
17.7	Susan B. Warner. “Jesus Bids Us Shine.” Lantern slide.	255
17.8	“The stockings were hung.” Intertitle of <i>The Night Before Christmas</i> , directed by Edwin S. Porter. Motion picture still.	257
17.9	“Merry Christmas to all.” Scene from <i>The Night Before Christmas</i> , directed by Edwin S. Porter. Motion picture still.	258
17.10a	<i>Funny Jungleland Moving-Pictures</i> . Advertising booklet, inside pages.	262
17.10b	<i>Funny Jungleland Moving-Pictures</i> . Advertising booklet, back cover.	263
17.11	“This comes with the warmest.” Matchbook greeting card.	265
20.1	Marius de Zayas. “Theodore Roosevelt.” Drawing.	298
20.2	Marie Laurencin. Drawing.	299
20.3	Cornelia Barns. “Voters.” Drawing.	300
20.4	Frank Walts. “Sketch of Nora E. Johnson.” Drawing.	301

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Mencken, dated only April 29 (probably 1919 or 1920), suggests Johnson sent it to the *Smart Set*. Mencken described the poem as “an interesting experiment” that avoided “the usual grotesque dialect” and advised him to send it to *Poetry* as well (Mencken to Johnson, April 29).

- 9 See Casanova 181–5.
- 10 As Ronald Wainscott argues, “O’Neill’s correspondence verifies that he assumed that audiences and critics could easily misunderstand his intent with each new play . . . When the plays were well-written and emotionally charged, the mysterious content and staging served to intrigue and engage the audience even while confusing them, thus contributing to the mystique that grew up around this reclusive playwright, who exemplified the serious American drama of his decade” (108).

## CHAPTER 6

### *The New Woman*

#### *Narrating the Histor(ies) of the Feminist Movement*

*Francesca Sawaya*

To dip into the scholarship about the New Woman is to be puzzled by the extensive focus on and the strong disagreement about chronology. Why do some scholars offer such a wide range of years for the New Woman, and others such a narrow range? And why do the dates – whatever they may be – diverge so widely? What becomes clear is that dates matter not because the New Woman can be easily periodized – after all, there are no legislative or political milestones that mark her entrance or exit from the public stage – but because she herself invoked, and thus still provokes, a polemic about temporality. Indeed, temporality defines the New Woman. What is “New” about her depends on who is seen as preceding her – a figure we can call the “old” woman. As such, the New Woman becomes the site for debates about how to narrate the history of feminism – an intellectual, social, and political movement that was just beginning to coalesce under that nomenclature in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (instead of under the earlier terms “the woman question” or “woman’s rights”). Such debates must necessarily be vibrantly contentious since one of the central tenets of feminism is that the category of “woman” is socially constructed and thus defined differentially across class, racial, and ethnic divisions and hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> Which woman, or set of women, is New? Which is “old”? What kind of history is created when novelty is claimed or anachronism identified? How does that history intersect with other divisions and hierarchies within the society?

The classic scholarship about the New Woman typically asserts that she makes her definitive appearance in 1894 when two British writers, Ouida and Sarah Grand, engaged in a no-holds-barred debate about her in *The North American Review*, the elite transatlantic forum on liberal ideas. This scholarship further argues that the New Woman disappears as a social formation around 1915 as World War I intensifies. In this periodization, the New Woman takes advantage of new opportunities in higher education and the professions for women. Her financial independence allows her to defer

or reject marriage and family and create new kinds of emotional affiliations and partnerships. She is therefore also described as a middle- or upper-class white woman, with all the possibilities and limitations that those social identities suggest. More recent scholarship has called those years into question, suggesting that – given the lively debates about the “woman question” as well as the political agitation for “woman’s rights” throughout the mid-nineteenth century – the New Woman emerges in a transatlantic context as early as the 1850s and may not disappear until the 1930s.

Other scholars have challenged both the classic and expanded periodizations by focusing on women who are not middle- or upper-class white women. These women, who also claimed New Woman status, are working class, Native American, African American, and Jewish. These New Women highlight the intersection of feminism with other historical phenomena: slavery and emancipation; industrialization, immigration, and the labor movement; colonialism and imperialism. Their writings reveal as much the divisions between women in the feminist movement, as their solidarity, compelling us to fundamentally rethink temporality in feminist history. The New Woman’s moniker “New,” in other words, provokes us to historicize, and yet it is by necessity difficult to reach agreement about that history. The philosophical and political divisions that are central to the vibrant contentiousness of feminist thought and activism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are registered in the ways in which the history of the New Woman was and is narrated by women in different subject positions.

### Historicizing the New Woman

For the purposes of this chapter, I will analyze three central modes of historical narration: atavism, continuity, and rupture. These modes are often combined together in a variety of ways in New Woman literature to articulate different philosophical positions and historical experiences. Nonetheless, an emphasis on one or the other mode is usually evident in the various conceptions of the New Woman. Three manifestos of the New Woman are used here to demonstrate how atavism, continuity, or rupture are highlighted by the manifesto writers and the quite different theoretical frameworks and politics involved in each.

Atavism is at the heart of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1898). One of the most famous New Woman texts, Gilman’s book was read widely in a transatlantic context, going through nine editions. Gilman borrows in this text from the scientific, evolutionary racism inherent in the political economy of the time in which modern capitalism is seen

as the apex of progressive civilization. Gilman argues that modern capitalist labor depends on "Specialization and organization" (*Women and Economics* 67), but women's domestic labor is stuck in the past and is "of the earliest and most primitive kind" (8). Gilman thus compares women to primitive peoples, imagined as further down the evolutionary chain, and equates the contemporary marriage of (white) men and women with miscegenation:

Marry a civilized man to a primitive savage, and their child will naturally have a dual nature. Marry an Anglo-Saxon to an African or Oriental, and their child will have a dual nature. Marry any man of a highly developed nation, full of the specialized activities of his race and their accompanying moral qualities, to the carefully preserved, rudimentary female creature . . . and you have as a result what we all know so well,—the human soul in its pitiful, well-meaning efforts, its cross-eyed, purblind errors, its baby fits of passion. (332)

Drawing upon the white racial hysteria of the time, Gilman depicts the old (domestic) woman as atavistic, a primitive savage, an "African" or "Oriental," to threaten her readers with devolution and to argue for the (white) New Woman's ability to pursue "civilized" and specialized professional labor in a modern capitalist economy. Gilman asserts dramatically that the old domestic woman "hinders and perverts the economic development of the world" (121) because of her atavistic labor and stage of development.

The Russian Jewish immigrant and anarchist, Emma Goldman, stakes a claim to the New Woman through a completely different history than Gilman's. Implicitly criticizing the evolutionary racism of Gilman's history and its assumptions about progressive capitalist civilization, Goldman focuses on continuity in women's history rather than atavism. In her essay, "The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation," first published in 1906, Goldman argues that the New Woman, whom she calls derisively "the emancipated woman," is a reactionary formation, produced by woman's rights activists in response to the scare tactics used by the popular media, which "misrepresent[ed]" such activists, and depicted them as leading "reckless [lives] . . . of lust and sin; regardless of society, religion, and morality" (*Tragedy* 225). To prove that women would instead have "a purifying effect on all institutions of society," woman's rights activists forced their ideals of freedom into a "narrow, Puritanical vision" that excludes all forms of self-expression and sexuality (225). As a result, Goldman argues there is "a deeper relationship between the old-fashioned mother and hostess, ever on the alert for the happiness of her little ones and the comfort of those she loved, and the *truly new woman*, than between the latter and her

emancipated sister” (229; emphasis added). In contrast to Gilman, then, Goldman emphasizes continuity between the “old-fashioned” woman and the “truly” new one, a continuity disrupted only by the so-called emancipated woman.<sup>2</sup> Goldman insists, the “emancipation of woman, as interpreted and practically applied today, has failed . . . Now, woman is confronted with the necessity of emancipating herself from emancipation, if she really desires to be free” (221). The “truly new woman,” as Goldman calls her, must free herself “internally,” refusing to accept any limits to her emancipation, including limits on her sexuality and desire for maternity (228) that the putative “emancipated woman,” ironically, helped to create.

Like Goldman, African American activist and educator Fannie Barrier Williams traces a history of the New Woman’s emergence that contests Gilman’s racist, evolutionary schema, and its notion of capitalism as the apex of progressive civilization. Relying on social history, rather than ideology critique as Goldman does, Williams argues in her 1904 essay, “The Woman’s Part in a Man’s Business,” not for continuity but for radical rupture between the past and the New Woman. She writes, “The Negro woman is *really* the new woman of the times” (61; emphasis added). She explains that

I do not think it too much to say that the American Negro woman is the most interesting woman in this country. I do not say this in any boastful spirit, but I simply mean that she is the only woman whose career lies wholly in front of her. She has no history, no traditions, no race ideals, no inherited resources and no established race character. She is the only woman in America who is almost unknown; the only woman for whom nothing is done; the only woman without sufficient defenders when assailed; the only woman who is still outside of that world of chivalry that in all the ages has apotheosized woman kind. (59)

Williams focuses on the exclusions African American women have experienced – excluded as an object of interest and knowledge, excluded from any form of privilege, excluded even from the protections of chivalric patriarchy against which the white New Woman actively rebelled. African American women’s exclusions are nothing to “boast” about, Williams writes, and while she expresses a degree of optimism in the assertion that the African American woman is “the only woman whose career lies wholly in front of her,” she explicitly refuses to appeal to notions of inevitable capitalist progress as Gilman did. Instead Williams simply claims that since nothing

has ever been thought about, given to, or done for the African American woman, she alone can count as really new.

Given the New Woman's different modes of narrating her own history, we do not need to conceive of her so much as appearing and then disappearing at a certain historical moment. Instead we can think of her as a social, political, and cultural formation of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century who appears in a transatlantic context and who represents a broader question: how to narrate the history of a coalescing but also vibrantly contentious modern feminist movement. Like many other "new" phenomena, the New Woman appeared at the end of one century and the beginning of another – when hope and anxiety about the "modern" are at a highpoint. She is a lived and self-identified figure even as she is textually – and intertextually – produced in both visual and written culture. Always, however, historical narrations – typically through notions of atavism, continuity, and rupture – are implicitly or explicitly part of her definition and thus debates about her.

In the 1910s, all three modes are evident in New Woman narratives. It would be foolhardy to fixate on one mode over the other – given the wide range of representations of her in this period. Nonetheless, general trends can be charted. A growing skepticism, *both* conservative and radical, in the early twentieth century about the association of capitalist modernity with progress and civilization, combined with the increasing popularity of pluralist and culturally relativist ideas among American intellectuals, meant that atavism with its links to scientific evolutionary racism was increasingly satirized or marginalized as a mode of narration in New Woman writing. Skepticism about progressive narratives also led to deeper explorations of continuity between the old and the new woman – explorations that work both to undermine notions of triumphal evolutionary progress and to create alternative accounts of progress. Nonetheless, rupture, central to the definition of the "new," is also, and paradoxically, interwoven into these notions of continuity and into texts that seek to link the past and the present of women's ideals and aspirations.

### **Atavism in the 1910s**

Atavism as a discourse for the New Woman, as I have said, depends on evolutionary racism to celebrate the triumph of capitalist modernity. One must note that such racism is not incidental to the New Woman movement but entangled with it from the 1880s through the first decades of the

twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> However, in the 1910s, a few white women writers began both to borrow from and satirize the New Woman's atavistic narrative. In Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* and Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia*, both published in 1913, capitalist civilization indeed produces the New Woman, but such civilization and such a woman undermine the notion that evolution leads to progress. While the racial politics of these texts remain complicated at best, their satires of capitalist modernity and its relation to women's freedom and equality are pointed and powerful.

Undine Spragg is both Wharton's New Woman and the embodiment of capitalist modernity. She is named after a commodity (a hair product her father has marketed and successfully sold), and her ambitions are those of a new competitive and emulative commodity culture. "I want what the others want" (*Custom* 688), she says early on in the novel, explaining her extraordinary drive for upward mobility and her equally extraordinary absence of selfhood or interiority. Undine is, in the novel's account, shockingly anti-domestic and unsentimental and ruthlessly utilitarian in gaining greater capital and leverage – financial, social, or cultural – through the marriage market. As opposed to the old woman who stayed in the home, caring only for her family, and who was the locus of morality, Undine's goal is to "go around." Likewise, her body, her parents, her friends, her lovers and husbands, and most scandalously in the novel, her own child, are all simply tools she uses to obtain for herself "what the others want."

However, if Undine embodies capitalist modernity, the novel also provides another and not unsympathetic account of her position as a woman in consumer capitalism. Thorstein Veblen had suggested in his influential and comparably satirical *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) that atavism lay at the heart of a "barbaric" consumer capitalism, in which women were simply "chattel," whose role was to consume conspicuously to prove the economic power of their husbands. Wharton borrows from and revises Veblen's argument by suggesting through her character Charles Bowen that women simply represent what Bowen calls one of the "dogmas" that "people give their lives for . . . [but] have ceased to believe in" (*Custom* 758), or "the custom of the country" (*Custom* 757). In this outmoded way of thinking and acting, men seem to be working only to provide for their women (*Custom* 758). But in actuality, Bowen argues, modern men's main goal is to make money, which is the "real business of life" (757). Their secondary goal, therefore, is to keep women occupied and out of the way. To do so, men offer women conspicuous consumption, or as Bowen puts it, "the big bribe" of "money and motors and clothes" (759). Bowen argues that

women nonetheless find ways to “avenge themselves” (758), as Undine so clearly does with each new husband.

As the novel proceeds, the reader comes to see that Undine’s revenge lies, ironically enough, in being at one with modern capitalism as a New Woman. Undine is consistently (if shockingly) capitalist, applying the purely utilitarian business morality of the time to emotional and domestic life. By contrast, the novel’s men – even the canny and clear-eyed financier Elmer Moffatt, who helps sponsor Undine’s rise – inconsistently revert sentimentally to notions of the separate spheres of public and private. The men imagine or believe that the world of feelings and of family can transcend the utilitarianism of the modern market. Early on in the novel, Undine’s first husband imagines the relation of old money to the nouveau riche in American society as that of the “Aborigines . . . those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race” (*Custom* 669). By the end of the text, however, Wharton comically but also wistfully relies on such romantic racism to imply that it is men and their sentimental belief in realms of existence outside capitalism who are the “vanishing” “Aborigines” and the barbaric New Woman who dooms their feelings and the family itself – indeed any notion of morality outside of capitalism – to “extinction.” The New Woman’s revenge is complete.

From a different angle, Ellen Glasgow’s underrated *Virginia* (1913) likewise uses atavism for satirical purposes. By contrast with Wharton’s New Woman heroine, Glasgow focuses her eponymous narrative on the old woman. Virginia is not only representative of the domestic and sentimental woman of the past (or the “lady,” as Glasgow repeatedly calls her), but also of the old South itself; and both stand for atavism: for “all that was static . . . obsolete and outgrown” (10). The “new woman” (96) and the “new industrialism” (55) both inevitably doom to extinction the Southern lady and the South’s “old feudal order” (55). For Glasgow, the problem of the lady and of Southern feudalism is specifically that of an “evasive idealism” (*Certain Measure* 50) that can be understood through the history of slavery. In an early set piece, the novel depicts the lady looking at what Glasgow calls “the Problem of the South” – freed former slaves segregated in the impoverished black section of town – in a characteristically evasive way: “as the Southern women had looked down on . . . [the Problem] for generations, and would continue to look down on it for generations still to come – without seeing it was a problem” (35). The obsolete lady and the white South itself, whose “evasive idealism” Glasgow depicts satirizes with

exuberance, is being forced to face historical and contemporary reality or to become extinct.

At the same time, Glasgow's narrative is skeptical about progress. It is not just that progress occurs unevenly in Glasgow, so that the ladies of "generations *still* to come" will not see the "the Problem of the South" (35), but also that the new industrialism is just as evasive as the obsolete lady. The capitalist titan of the book, for example, can no more see the "Problem of the South" than the lady can. Cyrus Treadwell refuses even to know the name of his half-black son, and in a Judas/Christ invocation literally throws money at his former black mistress so that he can ignore his own son's lynching. In terms of women's issues, Glasgow describes Treadwell as standing "equally for industrial advancement and for domestic immobility" (273). Glasgow suggests that capitalist modernity is focused on "possessions" (56) and so deeply materialist that it is comparable in its blindness to the Southern lady: "[J]ust as . . . [the lady's] vision eliminated the sight of suffering because her heart was too tender to bear it, so [the capitalist] . . . overlooked all facts except those which were a part of the dominant motive of his life" (61). The novel's central New Woman figure, accordingly, is described ambivalently. She is "a woman of power" and "the free woman," but at the same time, Glasgow depicts her critically as "one with evolution," as a person whose "freedom, like that of man, had been built upon the strewn bodies of the weaker" (364). In addition, the novel's New Woman is an actress; her career is based on marketing sentimental "trash" (294) that has nothing to do with reality. By the end of the novel, Virginia, the old woman clothed in "the inviolable sanctities of the spirit," is the civilized character, while the New Woman by contrast is described as "almost coarse" (365). Glasgow's New Woman, like Wharton's, highlights the atavism at the heart of supposed civilization, calling into question the notion of progressive capitalist modernity and its relation to women's putatively "new" forms of freedom.

### Continuity and Rupture in the 1910s

If atavism was a discourse both borrowed from and used satirically in the teens to narrate the history of the New Woman, continuity was important among writers seeking to depict her in positive terms. The past in these narratives is seen either as the context out of which the New Woman emerges or, more surprisingly, as a resource for her. A quite different form of narration than atavism, continuity tended to eschew the latter's dependence on evolutionary schemas that were both racist and celebratory of

capitalist modernity. As such, it enabled more flexible accounts of the relation between past to present. Continuity seemed to have had particular significance for ethnic, Native American, and African American New Women writers because it enabled both the critique of the equation of capitalist modernity with progress and the revaluation of cultures that had been deemed primitive or savage. This is not to say, however, that continuity did not also entail certain dangers for feminist thinkers of all races, and so narratives of rupture paradoxically are always also entangled with the exploration of continuity for the New Woman of the 1910s.

The tendency in the 1910s to emphasize continuity in New Woman narratives is perhaps best demonstrated by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel *Herland* (1915). While a text that remains deeply indebted to scientific racism and particularly "eugenic feminism" (Richardson), Gilman nonetheless doubles back on the kinds of arguments she made in *Women and Economics* as well as in her most famous story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) about women's atavistic domestic past. In *Herland*, domesticity and motherhood are at the heart of her utopian civilization, whereas American capitalism is described as wasteful and predatory. Gilman's utopia is a country of all "Aryan" (*Utopian* 193) women, who have developed outside the influence of Euro-American capitalism and whose highest religion is motherhood, not financial profit. The residents of Herland are so much like the old domestic woman of the past that Gilman has the most sympathetic male character from the outside world call them "New Ladies" (197). In other words, a full flowering of the possibilities and values of the old woman is emphasized in Gilman's utopia rather than rupture.

From a different angle, continuity is key to Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915). New Woman Thea Kronborg's career success as an opera singer is financially enabled by a number of men, but her artistry and gifts are the result of the women who came before her. To begin with, while Kronborg's mother leads a purely domestic life, her intellectual generosity and cosmopolitanism are seen as crucial to Kronborg's development and to her personality. At the same time, Kronborg's personal and artistic breakthrough occurs in Panther Canyon in the presence of the long dead "Ancient People." Kronborg begins to feel "a continuity of life that reached back into the old time" (286) and particularly has "intuitions about the women" (284) who lived in the canyon and their artistry. Cather has already suggested that Kronborg's inherited cosmopolitanism – her willingness to learn from Mexican, German, Swedish, and Jewish immigrants – is central to her status as both a New Woman and an artist. But it is Native

American women's art – their ancient, beautiful, now broken pottery – that becomes the true inspiration for Kronborg's own art. Kronborg must eventually leave behind the canyon and move beyond what Cather – relying here on atavism and primitivism – describes as “the dead races . . . [and] a world without change or ideas” (307). Nonetheless, generations of Native women's artistic work provide the epiphany that enables Kronborg's New Woman life and artistic career.

Contemporary New Woman writers of color relied on the thematics of continuity even more than Anglo-American writers without the recurrence to moments of racialized atavism evident in Cather's work. Zitkala-Ša's (Yankton Sioux) three-story sequence – “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” and “An Indian Teacher Among Teachers,” first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900 and republished in a larger collection of her work *American Indian Stories* (1921) – may seem at first an odd choice to focus on in terms of New Woman continuity narratives. At the end of the third story, the narrator is planning a new career in an “Eastern city” (112), and there is no hint that she will marry or that she will go home to her mother and her people. In short, the story could be seen as a New Woman narrative of rupture, of a break with tradition and family. But the combined stories call into question the value of rupture itself and undermine the notion that the “new” or the “modern” is always best. Indeed, the solution to alienation in modern capitalist culture is provided by tools from the past.

The two first stories of the sequence primarily juxtapose the educational practices of the Yankton Sioux (embodied in the narrator's mother) and that of “the civilizing machine” (96) of whites. The narrator's mother, for example, requires that the child learn to be “original” and to “feel strongly responsible and dependent upon my own judgement” (74). The child is furthermore “treated . . . as a dignified little individual” (74). By contrast, when the narrator is sent to a white boarding school for Indians, she finds that white education involves “cruel neglect,” “iron routine” (96), “extreme indignities” (91), and “chains” that “bound my individuality like a mummy for burial” (97). The “civilizing machine” (110) of white education makes the narrator unable to live again with her mother and her people, yet the narrator also continually describes the destructiveness of the machine to her physical and mental well-being *through* her mother's eyes: “my pride kept me from returning to my mother. Had she known of my worn condition, she would have said the white man's papers were not worth the freedom and health I had lost by them” (104). When the narrator takes a brief vacation from her teaching career to return home, she sees herself even more

clearly through her mother's perspective – as “the petrified Indian woman of whom my mother used to tell me” (112). And it is through her mother's explicit critique of the “paleface” and his “hypocrit[ical]” culture that the narrator apparently comes to her epiphany that she can no longer teach in the “civilizing machine.” She decides immediately after a visit to her mother that “long-lasting death lies beneath this semblance of civilization” (113). Thus through the early education in “originality” and “individuality” that her mother provided, and through the subsequent critical vision her mother likewise implicitly and explicitly provides, the narrator comes to “a new way of solving the problem of *my inner self*” (112; emphasis added). While the narrator interestingly refuses to tell us more than that this “new way” involves a “long course of study” “in an Eastern city,” she suggests that the solution she comes to is grounded in the “inner self” that her mother's culture helped form (112). She is a New Woman paradoxically because her mother and her cultural traditions enable her to be one.

Likewise, the *oeuvre* of the Jewish immigrant writer, Anzia Yeziarska, may seem at first to highlight rupture, but her writing also depends on describing the ways that the immigrant New Woman is sustained by her own cultural past and traditions. “Wings” and “Hunger,” a paired set of stories, written between 1916 and 1920 and published in Yeziarska's breakout collection *Hungry Hearts* (1920), focus inextricably on debates over Jewish cultural assimilation to America and on the New Woman. Shenah Pessah could at first be seen as ascribing to the New Woman ideal of rupture. In “Wings,” she rejects “the traditions of her people” that deem “an unmated thing . . . a creature of pity and ridicule” (6), refusing a loveless arranged marriage with an older Jewish man; in “Hunger,” she again turns down marriage, this time based on love, with a younger Jewish man. At the same time, the paired stories ask if the New Woman ideal is actually allied quite closely to the assimilationist ethos of a larger anti-Semitic American culture and insist finally on a different New Woman ideal, one that is based on cultural continuity. In “Wings,” Pessah falls in love with a young American sociologist named John Barnes who has come to the ghetto to study “the Educational Problems of the Russian Jews” (7). Yeziarska relentlessly satirizes this social scientist, who can only see Pessah, first, as a set of stereotypes, as “the Russian Jew,” whose “nebulous emotionalism” runs the “whole gamut . . . swinging from abject servility to bold aggressiveness” (10); and second, as an experiment, “an opportunity for a psychological test-case” (9). Yeziarska repeatedly juxtaposes Barnes's view of Pessah with Pessah's highly idealistic conception of Barnes, whom she sees as no less than “The god of her dreams” (10). The discrepancy in their views of each

other is highlighted by their different thoughts about her intellectual life: Pessah tells Barnes early on about her “good luck” in having obtained a copy of South African New Woman writer Olive Schreiner’s feminist allegories, *Dreams* (1890), a book she tells Barnes that “lifts me up on wings with high thoughts,” the first allusion to the title of the story. Barnes is “appalled” equally by the fact that Pessah has read Schreiner’s feminist text and that she lacks proper “Americanizing agencies” in her life. He immediately offers to take her to the library to guide her reading and thinking into more proper channels (9). In the end of the story, however, Barnes flees from Pessah in a semi-hysterical panic that is described as inextricably sexual and cultural.

But while Yeziarska emphasizes the American sociologist’s condescending, dismissive, and finally panicked response to Jewish New Womanhood and to the cosmopolitan intellectual world of a working-class immigrant, Yeziarska nonetheless also asks to what extent the models of isolated and pathbreaking womanhood that Schreiner explores in *Dreams* are implicitly allied to an assimilationist and individualist ethos. In “Hunger,” the second story, Pessah finds work for herself in a factory filled with fellow Jewish immigrants. Here, she is lifted up on “wings” again, but in a different way, through community rather than isolation: “It’s just as if I got out from the choking prison into the open air of my own people . . . Just the sight of people lifts me on wings in the air” (35). When a fellow immigrant, Sam Arkin, falls in love with Pessah and proposes marriage, her rejection of him occurs in invidiously racialized language that compares Arkin to Barnes. Her new suitor, Pessah thinks to herself, has “the frank conceit of the self-made man with his neglected teeth, thick, red lips” as opposed to Barnes, “the Other One – made ever more beautiful with longings and dreams” (39). The use of the term “dreams” inescapably links Schreiner’s text to assimilationist desires that are implicitly anti-Semitic. The ending of the story, however, refuses the link between the Jewish New Woman and assimilation. Here Pessah tries to explain her “longings and dreams” to Arkin yet again. Her “hunger to make from herself a person” (42) really has little to do with Barnes and instead is tied inextricably to the history of the Jewish people, and especially to her mother: “All that my mother and father and my mother’s mother and father ever wanted to be is in him [Barnes]. This fire in me, it’s not just the hunger of a woman for a man – it’s the hunger of my people back of me, from all ages, for light, for the life higher!” (41). Early on in the story, Barnes had classified Pessah’s “desire to reach out and up,” as “the predominant racial trait of the Russian immigrant” (8).

By the end of the two-story sequence, Yeziarska ironically confirms Pes-sah's New Womanhood as continuous with an aspirational Jewish culture, but particularly the Jewish "mother's" suppressed aspirations while at the same time, distinguishing these aspirations from an assimilationist ethos. In later novels, like *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and *The Breadgivers* (1925), Yeziarska continues to imagine and describe what she sees as important and complicated links, as well as the tensions, between traditional Jewish culture and the Jewish New Woman.

### Conclusion

The debates over the New Woman's temporality described in this chapter are comparable to ones today about both history and definition of feminism. In the contemporary United States, for example, we have relied on a "wave" metaphor to chart the highs and lows in the history of feminism, a metaphor that interestingly enough may have first been used in the British New Woman novel by Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). In that (in)famous novel, Grand uses the metaphor of the wave to describe both the generations behind the New Woman that carry her forward and the way she herself will carry all other women and men forward to the shore. Whether or not the wave metaphor was borrowed from Grand, however, standard histories of US feminism have described the first wave of feminism as beginning with the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848 and ending with women's suffrage in 1920, while the second wave occurs in the renewed women's rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and the third wave follows in the 1990s to the present. Wave history has been useful in highlighting moments when women's issues have taken center stage in national debates, in charting the effect of legal changes in the status of women, and in describing broad philosophical and political disputes across different generations of feminists.

However, as numerous feminist scholars have pointed out, wave history has resulted in narratives that focus on tracking only hegemonic forms of feminism which come to widespread public attention. Such history also tends to ignore the continuing as well as changing debates *within* the feminist movement that occur even when a wider public has turned its attention elsewhere. This chapter has sought to show how central historical narration has been in the literature of the New Woman and three of the dominant forms of narration. It has also sought to highlight the ways that history is a site on which the productive philosophical and political debates and divides

within the feminist movement inevitably register themselves, so that any simple set of dates or definitions about a unitary feminist movement should necessarily be challenged.

## NOTES

- 1 These divisions and hierarchies are evident in women's political organizations, including, but not limited to, the infamous 1869 split in the women's suffrage movement over support for the Fifteenth Amendment; the way the central wing of the white suffrage movement increasingly used racism as the nineteenth century proceeded to gain adherents; the active resistance by black women to such racism in the crusading journalism of activists like Ida B. Wells Barnett and in the creation of black women's separate political organizations like the National Association of Colored Women (1896); the sometimes successful, sometimes failed, alliances attempted between middle-class women reformers and working-class women, especially Jewish immigrant women, leading to organizations like the Women's Trade Union League (1903); and likewise the complex debates between Native American women and men and white reformers over citizenship and suffrage as expressed through organizations like the controversial Society of American Indians (1911) and the National Council of American Indians (1926). Such profound divisions in women's political organizations – evident in exclusive and inclusive organizations, failed and successful coalitions – are embodied by and expressed in the different temporalities used to narrate the history of the New Woman.
- 2 This argument, Goldman says, has led “The disciples of emancipation pure and simple [to] declare . . . me a heathen, fit only for the stake” (*Tragedy* 229), suggesting just how contentious histories of the New Woman could be.
- 3 See especially Richardson 9.