Lauren Wachspress
Judaic Studies
JST490- Honors Thesis
Graduation: 5/7/16
Submitted: 4/29/16
In the spring of 2015, I designed my own independent course on contemporary women’s memoirs. I have always been interested in women’s writing and especially the memoir form. After reading memoirs like Susanna Kaysen’s Girl Interrupted, Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Annie Ernaux’s Happening, and Jeannette Walls’ Glass Castle, I started to reflect on how the writing of trauma shapes identity. This independent study inspired me to continue my exploration in women’s memoirs, looking at the presence of traumas in addition to gender constraints, Jewishness, the various forms of ghetto, and the process of writing. Even in diverse cultures and times, the Jewish female experience exhibits commonalities based on a set of identity constraints involving gender and ethnic components. I analyzed Anzia Yezierska’s Red Ribbon on a White Horse, Roya Hakakian’s Journey from the Land of No, Helen Fremont’s After Long Silence, and Rebecca Walker’s Black White and Jewish.

My secondary research helped me conceptualize different influences on these author’s trauma writing. Traumas played out through the form of various ghettos, physical and metaphorical, and these realities of ghetto-type existences influenced all four memoir authors that this study will analyze. I explored everything from the confined, isolated ghettos of Eastern European shtetl life, fiction dealing with modernity and assimilation¹, to American Jewish ghettos.

¹ I drew on scholarship on European Jewish ghetto life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to understand pre-WWII ghettos and Jewishness for young girls in Vienna. For further information see to Alison Rose’s “Childhood and Youth of Jewish Girls” and “Literature and Culture.” The ghetto of Eastern Europe, pre-WWII, represents a traditional Jewish dwelling of working class poverty isolated from the rest of the country’s population. This is the ghetto Yezierska came from and Jewish Viennese immigrants fled. Childhood for young girls in the Viennese Jewish neighborhoods or ghetto speaks to the ongoing history of oppression that the memoirists’ writing unconsciously parallels.
and Nazi ghettos\textsuperscript{2}. Ghetto tales\textsuperscript{3} of how to incorporate modernity without compromising identity became the essence of the ghetto girl. Drawing on Riv-Ellen Prell’s work on the ghetto girl\textsuperscript{4}, who bears resemblance to modern stereotypes of the Jewish woman as in the JAP, I used ghetto girl as a construct to bridge the fears and anxieties of one author to another. Scholarship on American Jewish immigration\textsuperscript{5} exhibited that assimilation called for a new formation of Jewish identity, but fears of rejection from society, led to the stereotypes Prell explores. These ghettos and the process of assimilation isolated and ostracized women.

With the research background of confined shtetl life to fiction dealing with modernity and assimilation and American Jewish ghettos to the very different Nazi ghettos, I was able to expand my definition to metaphorical confinements of ghetto. This was especially helpful in thinking of Fremont and Hakakian who broke through ghetto mindsets or the silence of trauma victims. Another focal point was the negotiation of dual identities as Jewish women. My exploration of dual identities centered around the assimilation process in different cultures and how rejection from society affected these women. Jewish identity presents itself as a challenge, coupled with gender constraints. Walker stands out from other authors with rejection of Jewishness, which presents a challenge to other components of her identity. Though for all the authors, the form of memoir was crucial to understanding their complex selves and these histories. Navigating the world as Jewish female, minority and oppressed person led all the authors to write about their rejection from society shaping their Jewishness and larger identity.

\textsuperscript{2} See Tec for more on Nazi ghettos and gender roles.
\textsuperscript{3} For information on “ghettogeschichte” or ghetto tales and the conflicts they tackled such as assimilation and intermarriage, see Wallach, Rose, Hess, and Brenner.
\textsuperscript{4} See Prell for further information on Jewish American ghetto girl stereotype of overconsumption and materialism, which influences the modern Jewish American Princess or Jap stereotype. The fear of the ghetto girl stereotype stemmed from anxieties about women’s independence and failure to assimilate.
\textsuperscript{5} See Hyman’s “Paradoxes of Assimilation” and “Immigrant Jewish Experience”; See also Batker for more on Jewish Immigration in America and on female immigrant authors, see Inglehart, Karafillis, Sheffer, Ebest and Konzett.
I saw how each author writes her own trauma. Whether the disruptive nature of immigration and assimilation proved traumatic, such as for Yezierska, or one dealt with secondhand trauma like Fremont, all four authors wrote memoirs on their suffering. The scholarly approaches to the genre of memoir informs how writing about these traumas served its own purpose of self-discovery and collective memorization as the ultimate impetus for writing. As noted in Sven Birkerts’ work on the memoir, the emotional work of memoirs expresses the truth of the past without relying on facts for authenticity. This mode helps us understand how the memoir authors formulate the truth of not only their traumatic experience, but also their Jewish identity. The history of ghettos and ghetto writing, in addition to the scholarly approaches to memoir will aid me in my discussion of the four memoirs and their constructions of Jewish identity. All four memoirs create their own identities in relation to a form of the ghetto, physical or metaphorical, and as a response to trauma. Yezierska’s *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* relays the painful experience of immigration and the process of assimilation, in which trauma is a useful term in describing the rupture. Yezierska attempts to define her Jewishness in relation to the New York ghetto through art and writing, an escape or form of therapy for her trauma.

My findings were that writing about traumas led to self-discovery and the formation of one’s Jewishness. My work on the memoirs helped answer the following questions: How does the act of memoir writing present itself as therapeutic for trauma and also a formative tool of Jewish identity? How does history of the ghettos, the ghetto girl and metaphorical ghettos influence Jewish identity? I classified each author as their own specific type of ghetto girl,

---

6 See Lehrer’s work for more on collective memory in Poland after the Holocaust. See Margaret K. Willard-Traub and Nancy K. Miller for further on the relationship between memoirists and readers and the performative nature of memoirs. Gender and ethnic components in memoir writing function in particular ways, aiding the process of collective memorialization.

7 When reading trauma writing, interpreting the purpose of the piece reveals the psychological factors affecting the author. Birkerts first conceptualizes trauma as a rupture, “For a trauma is a rupture, a break (literally ‘wound’), whether brought on by a single experience or, more commonly, the infliction of a repeated injury that cannot be integrated; the normal continuum of growth is violated” (145). Growth is violated, often resulting in what psychologists refer to as “repetition compulsion”, and Birkerts ties this to memoir writing, “Psychologists often talk of the ‘repetition compulsion’ - the process whereby an individual keeps symbolically reenacting a distressing situation, hoping to master it, to get it right and be free of it...a purposefully undertaken repetition, the goal being comprehension and exorcism: psychological control” (145-6).
dealing with their own concepts of ghetto, some physical and others metaphorical with very real and historical ghettos often influencing their Jewish identity, sometimes in restrictive ways. Through the examples from close readings, I located incidents of trauma related to Jewish and gender identities to demonstrate how these moments affected memory and needed to be expressed through writing as a sort of therapeutic release.

*Red Ribbon on a White Horse*

Anzia Yezierska, a Jewish immigrant from Poland, wrote her memoir *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* about living in the Jewish slums of New York City during the early 1900s and her rise and fall from poverty. Yezierska depicts her renegotiation of her Jewish identity, as she assimilates into the Hollywood American culture when her collection of stories, * Hungry Hearts*, is made into a movie, and then back into a culture of poverty as an artist. Her return to New York after refusing to make artistic compromises within Hollywood society, eventually leads her to a government funded writers' project and then to the New England countryside to flee the poverty of the Jewish New York ghetto. Yezierska, with poignant memories of the pre WWII Polish ghetto, follows this complex journey from Hester Street of New York to Hollywood, back to New York, and finally to the countryside of New England. Her European past with Jewish poverty in what she refers to as the Polish ghetto, shapes her goals for herself in America. In her memoir, Yezierska constructs herself as a progressive Jew looking for a better life while maintaining loyalty to her people. My analysis will discuss the role of ghettoization in Yezierska's work, her art as an escape from the ghetto, and her internalized inferiority of being a Jewish immigrant woman in America.
Yezierska’s battles with Jewishness center around her desire to escape the confines of the ghetto. The pressures of immigrant status conflict with the Jewish culture of Eastern Europe. She remembers Poland where poverty was not such a disgrace. In America, a world of change, her father is left behind. This ghetto Jewishness though is an essential part of her identity. She realizes he never felt the pressures of poverty in the same ways as she, while she compromised with this New World. Her father chooses not to assimilate to American culture and resents his daughter’s assimilation. He continues his traditions from Poland of devoting his life to Torah. Through Torah, he is fulfilled, but Yezierska cannot ignore how his Old World ways cause conflict, “He had no choice but to live for God. And I, his daughter, who abandoned him for the things of this world, had joined the world against him” (Yezierska 32). She becomes an enemy for searching for more out of life because her father sees this as an obsession with the material things in life. He calls her a daughter of Babylon for becoming too American, claiming money is taking the place of God (33). In America, her father no longer holds esteemed social standing for studying Torah all day. This way of life has no place in the pursuit of the American dream, a dream so grounded in the physical rather than spiritual. Yezierska does not see a use for his way of life in America, “His old God could not save me in a new world, I told myself. Why did we come to America, if not to achieve all that had been denied us for centuries in Europe? Fear and poverty were behind me. I was going into a new world of plenty. I would learn to live in the now…not in the next world” (33). Yezierska sees herself as a progressive Jew looking for a better life, not an enemy of her people. More importantly, she sees her father’s poverty as a threat to her intellectual growth.

Constantly exploring the aspects of herself that isolate or estrange her from others, Yezierska struggles to assimilate as a Jewish woman in America. The New World presents itself as the opposite of the Polish ghetto. The older, more traditional generations ardently protest the
call for assimilation in America. In Hollywood, she receives a letter from a dying old Jewish man who cites a line her father often did about poverty being a red ribbon on a white horse. The man claims America is worse than the ghettos of Poland. Speaking of Poland he says, “Poverty was an ornament on a learned man like a red ribbon on a white horse” (91). She also recalls this life in Poland where poverty was a badge of honor and not a disgrace. In America, this man and her father are left behind without that same honor religious pursuits and the inevitable poverty tied to them once held. She defies his authority for the sake of life in this world (92-93). What appears to her father as a New World hunger for money disgusts him. Yet, in Hollywood money hungry people disgust Yezierska, and she struggles to fit in. Yezierska is not driven by a hunger for money, but rather by art and her love of writing.

Art and writing become her escape from these pressures of assimilation and the subsequent abandonment of traditional Eastern European Judaism. The life of an artist contrasts the traditional Jewish woman’s role her father wishes she fulfilled. There’s an intellectual poverty at stake with her father that threatens to starve her from this fulfilment. When Yezierska returns from Hollywood and falls back into poverty, the beginning of her time with the Works Progress Administration’s, WPA, Writers Project provides this escape through art. “A new life opened to me with my new-found young friends, the jobless writers and painters” (149). Perhaps she begins to replace one ghetto, the Polish one of her past, with this new tight knit community. She flees the repressive form of poverty her father advocates for a more freeing form with bold, creative types. Yezierska feels reborn amongst all of the creative and jobless people in the WPA Writer’s Project, “Their waiting was no longer the hopeless stupor of applicants for mass relief; they were employees of the government. They had risen from the scrap heap of the unemployed, from the loneliness of the unwanted, dreaming of regeneration, together. The new job look lightened the most ravaged faces” (156). She sees such promise in
the others, as well as herself, when she joins their ranks. Yezierska relishes in her work with the WPA, “Each morning I walked to the Project as light-hearted as if I were going to a party. The huge, barracks-like Writers’ Hall roared with the laughter and greetings of hundreds of voices” (165). Just socializing with other creative types and being accepted as an artist lifts her spirits. This art circle provides her with an alternative to the traditional role for Jewish women, without selling herself out to Hollywood by compromising her art. Perhaps this artistic outlet provides its own type of ghetto or confined group of similar people in poverty as a comfort to her. Yezierska indulges in the nontraditional life of an artist with them, something her father cannot appreciate. As Sheffer classifies Antin’s work, Yezierska’s memoir can also be viewed as a trauma narrative that works through immigration, attempting to recover agency with the act of writing.

The process of writing allows Yezierska to find her voice as an artist. She continues the tradition of ghetto tales, but not to describe her past life in the Polish ghetto. Her book, Hungry Hearts, gets adapted as a screenplay based on her life in New York’s Lower East Side. Ghetto life in New York entails sweatshops and constant conflict between her traditional father, and assimilating and modernizing self as an artist. Her father’s daily praying does not bring in any money, but Yezierska’s writing brings in money crucial to the family’s survival in poverty. As Birkerts explains in relation to the effects of trauma, the trauma of immigration and assimilation ruptures Yezierska’s growth. We see the resulting repetition compulsion Birkerts refers to when Yezierska constantly revisits painful memories such as her fights with her father over their different perspectives. She recalls one particular fight with her father during which she justifies the one hundred dollars she gave him by claiming her writing earned her this money: “For all his scorn of my godlessness, I thought he would take a father’s pride in my success...He wouldn’t let me finish. He shook a warning finger in my face. ‘Can you touch pitch without being defiled? Neither can you hold on to all that money without losing your soul’” (33). Writing provides
Yezierska with a way out of the ghetto despite her father’s protests, which continue to haunt her as she attempts to release this compulsion and find some understanding or acceptance. The ghetto and her subsequent ghetto Jewishness prove to be as nonnegotiable as her vocational calling as an artist. Yezierska does not discover this until her time in Hollywood where she learns writing is an escape from traditional Judaism but cannot be an escape from her Jewish ghetto roots.

In Hollywood, she tries to escape that Jewish ghetto poverty through her success. Her memoir writing provides her with a way to discover herself and make sense of her life, as Miller explains with her claim that memoirs provide a narrative to understand one’s past. The adjustment period in Hollywood reminds her of an early experience as a new immigrant. She reflects upon her few days in school as a young immigrant when she was unable to escape her immigrant identity. These school days, before she began working, traumatized her so again we see her compulsion to return and gain understanding of this moment through the writing of it, “The black curse of poverty followed me during my brief, few days in an American school...I felt like the village idiot in my immigrant clothes so different from the clothes of the other children. But more than the difference of appearance was the unfamiliar language...before I could learn, poverty thrust me into the sweatshop” (39). The fear of being marked by lesser clothing and an inherent difference follows her to Hollywood. Yezierska attempts to leave behind this burden of poverty and the ghetto at first, “I would shed the very thought of poverty as I had shed my immigrant’s shawl. I had learned to abase myself; now I would learn to lift up my head and look the world in the face” (39). Her first step calls for disrobing of immigrant clothes. By shedding the shawl, a marker of female immigrant status, she readies herself for a new life in Hollywood. Though she soon sees how her metaphorical shawl or marker of differences may not be shed as easily.
Her differences extend beyond clothing, and she finally confronts this when offered a contract to continue producing hits for Hollywood. Yezierska turns it down because the writing process would suffer in order to produce blockbuster hits. She explains her refusal by identifying herself as a self-discovery writer, “Writing is everything I am...It's my search for meaning. I can’t sign it away” (87). Hollywood fails to offer Yezierska freedom to produce authentically. Writing is her ultimate escape from the ghetto, but only authentic artistic work provides an honest escape and comfort for Yezierska, who seeks to explain her past to herself as Drucker notes. Discovering writing as her calling, as well as time with the WPA, helps her dismantle the ghetto of her past to understand her new Jewish identity as a ghetto girl in America.

Despite no longer living in the Old World of her father or physical ghetto of Europe, Yezierska’s internal struggles construct an inferior image of herself. She often uses the term ghetto to describe her inadequacy, “The ghetto was with me wherever I went- the nothingness, the fear of my nothingness” (219). Her status as a Jewish immigrant from the ghetto makes her feel inherently inferior and isolated from others. Hyman’s work on the disruptive nature of immigration and assimilation demonstrates Yezierska’s natural responses of fear. Although Yezierska follows some steps of acculturation that Hyman outlines, she never feels able to pass or fully assimilate into American culture. Her own fears cause her to oppress herself. Thus, she creates her own ghetto mindset by shutting herself off from society and calling out differences within herself that she cannot overcome. The ghetto Yezierska cannot escape refers to the American Jewish ghetto of New York and the immigrant identity attached to that Jewish ghetto life. This is the fear she felt in the classroom and then again experiences in Hollywood. The feeling of inferiority because of her ethnicity causes her to attempt to suppress her Jewish identity and run from her ghetto roots. Yezierska ultimately learns she cannot escape her past or her Jewishness. Her questions as a writer and an artist, who feels unquestionably Jewish,
attempt to answer how she can respect but adapt her personal history and the history of her people in the New World.

Her mother’s immigrant shawl that she pawns and her reflections on the shawl reveal Yezierska’s internalized inferiority because of gender and ethnic constraints. The shawl from Old World represents the traditional life for Jewish women centered around the Jewish religion and not higher education or careers. This shawl comes from the ghettos of Eastern European and Yezierska explains her mother’s prayer shawl was a great luxury in Poland. Her mother received this shawl as a wedding present from a rich uncle and wore it only on the Sabbath, “Old and worn- it held memories of my childhood, put space and color in my drab little room. It redeemed the squalor in which I had to live” (26). The shawl only serves nostalgic purposes for Yezierska in America. She decides to pawn it and the pawnbroker calls it an old rag, but she protests that people’s lives are woven into it (27). Yezierska feels her people’s lives are woven into it and that the shawl takes on this larger place by containing the history of her people. She packs for Hollywood, mourning the loss of the shawl, “The next day I packed my belongings without the shawl that had gone with me everywhere I went. The loss of that one beautiful thing which all my money could not reclaim shadowed my prospective trip to Hollywood” (30). She feels she has betrayed herself and her people by leaving this piece of her history and her people’s history behind, but once in Hollywood she feels a sense of relief to start fresh. The shedding of the immigrant shawl in Hollywood promises new beginnings, “I would shed the very thought of poverty as I had shed my immigrant’s shawl. I had learned to abase myself; now I would learn to lift up my head and look the world in the face” (39). Although the shawl held sentimental value, it also represents all the restrictions placed upon Yezierska as a Jewish immigrant woman. As Hyman notes, shedding Jewish markers aided in the assimilation process and ultimate acceptance into Gentile society. She sees that Hollywood can only embrace her
without the burden of the immigrant shawl, both the physical one she discards and the metaphorical one she cannot seem to shed.

Yet, in Hollywood Yezierska still feels the dirtiness of being an immigrant woman. Yezierska feels like a clumsy peasant girl placed into a lavish world. Again, her own insecurities about being an immigrant woman lead to self shaming. In the hotel she feels she will pollute all of the nice things,

I looked down for the imprint of my shoes on the white-tiled floor. How could I desecrate the cleanliness of that tub with my dirty body? I thought of the hours I had to stand in line at the public bathhouse before Passover and the New Year...One faucet for eight families. Here were two faucets. Hot water, cold water, all the water in the world. I turned on both faucets and let them run for the sheer joy of it (37).

She feels her body will pollute the tub, even though the purpose of the tub is to clean dirt. Reminiscing on life in the New York ghetto, when bathing was reserved for special Jewish holidays, she relishes the access to both hot and cold water. These luxuries cause her a mixture of pleasure and guilt. Yezierska laments with guilt for enjoying the comforts of life in Hollywood, “It was too big, too beautiful. Could I ever get used to living in such comfort? Could I enjoy such affluence unless I could forget the poverty back of me?” (38). Yezierska attempts to find some form of Jewish assimilation, as Hyman explains, that retains a shared religious memory and culture. By indulging in Hollywood comforts though, she betrays the New York ghetto she came from and thus her Jewish immigrant identity.

Yezierska’s secretary, Miss Young, represents true womanhood and everything she fails to embrace as a Jewish immigrant. Miss Young makes Yezierska feel inferior and question her own womanhood, “Lipstick, mascara, faultless wave of blond hair, silk stockings, slender, delicate feet in patent leather...Miss Young’s smooth prettiness, her graceful figure made me
aware of the clumsy peasant that I was. Could I ever achieve her elegance if I went to all the
beauty experts of Hollywood?” (43). Physical markers of the female genders push Yezierska to
feel more self-aware and insecure about what she sees as her inferiority. Even the idea of
beauty pampering may not be enough to bring her to Miss Young’s level. Yezierska appears to
view herself as the ghetto girl stereotype Prell described. No amount of American clothing or
makeup can conceal her true ghetto girl nature. Under the immense pressure from comparing
her own appearance to Miss Young’s she asks to go shopping with her.

Yezierska desperately wants to shed her immigrant identity as she shed the shawl. She
hopes a new wardrobe selected by the ideal woman may provide her with this opportunity to
abandon her old identity. She no longer wants her clothes to hold her back, “All at once my old
clothes could no longer contain me...New clothes were part of this new world! I was going to
enjoy all the things I had done without, but enjoy people most of all. I decided to go shopping
with my secretary. She would know her way about when it came to clothes” (64). Before they
can leave, Miss Young reveals she was turned down for a raise and only gets twenty-five dollars
a week. Yezierska reflects on her old immigrant rags and tries to make sense of this outrageous
expectation for poor women in Hollywood, “This dressed-up poverty was as different from the
poverty I had known as Hollywood was different from the ghetto” (65). Miss Young makes
poverty look elegant and polished, which Yezierska claims she never could achieve.

Her internal conflicts related to appearance demonstrate a fear of betraying ghetto roots.
Yezierska’s “straggling hair” and unmanicured nails cause her to consider pampering herself
(66). She then protests changing her appearance in any way because that may reflect trying to
alter her true essence as a ghetto girl, “Even in Hollywood I wanted to be myself- whatever that
was...Do you have to look like a yenteh from Hester Street to be yourself? Immediately the other
side of me protested. What’s wrong with looking like Hester Street. I am Hester Street. Why
should I be afraid to be what I am?” (56). Yezierska appears to be having an identity crisis, torn over her dual identity. Part of her wants to assimilate further into American culture, and the other part of her protests having to change her appearance and ghetto girl essence. This conflict, common to ghetto fiction and in response to immigration, drives her to leave Hollywood and search for artistic fulfillment without compromising her Jewishness. She feels that Hester Street is essential to her Jewish and artistic identity.

Though Yezierska realizes she cannot run from the poverty of her past, even leaving Hollywood fails to reconnect her with her ghetto roots. She leaves Hollywood because “Ten thousand dollars hadn't given me happiness or peace of mind, clarity or self-confidence, or knowledge of how to write” (86). Now living in New York again, but not in the squalor of Hester Street, she holds certain privileges above other Jews and feels scorn from her old ghetto friends, “Bitterly I told myself that I had never found any one among the literati as real as Zalmon, the fish peddler, or Sopkin, the butcher, or Hannah Breineh, haggling at the pushcarts over a penny. But now they no longer came to see me as friends but only as beggars. They envied and despised me...” (120-1). Her success separates her from her past, but she never felt fully accepted among the rich and famous. She looks around her, seeing all her success has brought her and the handicap of it, as well, “I could buy everything I wanted except the driving force I once had to inspire my work” (120). Now her work suffers without the poverty that first inspired her, “Without a country, without a people, I could only live in a world I had created out of my brain. I could not live unless I wrote. And I could not write any more. I had gone too far away from life, and I did not know how to get back” (127). Yezierska’s success isolates her from her friends and Jewish roots. Her writing suffers without inspiration from her true home in the ghetto. Not until she returns to poverty and joins the WPA Writer’s Project amongst other poor artists does she begin to feel at home again. Then when she tries escaping off to New
Hampshire to write, she again confronts the reality that her true Jewishness is ultimately tied to the ghetto.

Yezierska’s reflections on the traumas of her immigration in New Hampshire cause her to have an epiphany, like a psychological breakthrough, about her New World Jewishness. This breakthrough aids Yezierska in overcoming her past. In the countryside of New Hampshire she reacts dramatically when a Thanksgiving play stirs up her own memories of immigration. The play ends with a speech about the Christian values of justice and mercy on which America was founded. This upsets Yezierska, who has not always received such a welcome in America, especially at times when she was banned from applying to jobs because of her Jewish ethnicity. She sees no hardship for the descendants of Pilgrims. Only that first group of Pilgrims display courage, in her opinion, for immigrating to America. After an outburst exclaiming the lack of courage the descendants display, she attempts to apologize to her friend who reaches out to console her, “The river of sorrow that the exiled Jew carries in his heart suddenly threatened to engulf me at her touch, and I blurted, ‘Tonight I was intolerant- I who suffered from intolerance all my life” (209). As a Jew, she always carries a shared history with her, one of an exiled people who constantly face discrimination. Yezierska faces intolerance from the pogroms and anti-Semitism in Poland to discrimination in New York. Yezierska soon has an epiphany after her initial anger and apology, “With a sudden sense of clarity I realized that the battle I thought I was waging against the world had been against myself, against the Jew in me” (212). The Jew her father is, the Jew within that makes her hide her Jewish identity while applying for jobs, and the Jew inside herself that separates her from others are all what she has been running from her whole life. This Jewishness, though, is an essential part of her identity. Yezierska often suppresses or ghettoizes her Jewish identity out of fear of inferiority or rejection from society,
but through memoir writing and its revisiting of painful memories, she comes to an understanding of her acculturation and newly formed American Jewish identity.

Yezierska portrays the ghetto Jewishness as an inescapable facet of her identity, which speaks of the larger Jewish immigrant experience at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her reflections of fights with her father help her realize how he lives in a different time and her Jewishness fits the time and new country. She culminates her memoir with one such interaction between herself and her father and further insights inspired by her journeys. Her father becomes a window into her own New World identity. His views starkly contrast hers, but his voice imprints Jewish values on Yezierska that she adapts to her own needs. In the final moments of the memoir, she recalls a conversation with her father after she published *Bread Givers*. He tells her in the Torah it says, “He who separates himself from people buries himself in death. A woman alone, not a wife and not a mother, has no existence. No joy on earth, no hope of heaven” (217). Yezierska’s father devalues her because of her gender and failure to fulfill the duties of a Jewish woman. Her pursuit of a career in writing serves of no use to traditional Judaism. In this same fight, her father tells her “Poverty becomes a Jew like a red ribbon on a white horse. But you’re no longer a Jew” (217). Yet, she does feel pride in her Jewishness, an identity firmly grounded in poverty, that Hollywood, the American ghetto, and countryside of New Hampshire brought out in her.

Even after fleeing her father and the confines of the ghetto, she never truly escapes her father or his words: “He was the conscience that condemned me” (217). She now sees clearly how their differences can coexist. Her father was affected by poverty during a time in the context of Eastern European Jewish culture. “Having nothing only drew him closer to God. Homelessness, hunger, exile- Jews had survived them for thousands of years...this immunity to the changes around him- this strength was also his limitation. He ignored the world I had to live...
in and compromise with. Centuries yawned between us” (218). Her father’s stubbornness and persistent Torah worship turned from a strength to a weakness in America. Perhaps her father ghettoized himself in America while Yezierska’s strengths lie in her adaptability and absorption into American culture. She works hard and strive towards something other than just domestic work and raising a Jewish family. Embarrassment and self-conscious awareness of status transforms into pride of Jewishness. Yezierska learns her own inferiority complex or ghettoization of her Jewishness isolated her. Thus, she internalizes the ghetto in a more helpful way, tying it to her identity as a female writer.

Yezierska’s conclusion, as in the classic ghetto tales, provides an opinion on assimilation. She finally feels confident in herself and the New World Jewishness she uncovers, “I did not have to go to far places, sweat for glory, strain for the smile from important people. All that I could ever be, the glimpses of truth I reached for everywhere, was in myself” (220). Writing and art provide an opportunity to connect with her authentic self. Her New World Jewishness means she no longer must suppress her identity or ghetto past, but rather embrace the ghetto girl identity while allowing herself to assimilate to American culture. Her obsession with and return to the ghetto come from the passion and life she finds there. She links Hester Street to her artistic identity. Yezierska appreciates those people from her poor Jewish neighborhood and what they represent of her past, which allows her to treat herself with the same acceptance.

Yezierska’s ghetto identity and negotiation of her Jewishness and traumas through writing parallel that of the other three memoir authors. Yezierska’s initial attempt to confine her ghetto identity parallels Walker’s struggles to suppress her Jewishness when she feels rejected by the world of her Jewish father. The return to the ghetto theme relates to the affinity Walker feels with her black feminine side after experiencing the most oppression while identified as black and not Jewish. Fremont attempts to break down her mother’s ghetto mindset to
Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran

Roya Hakakian explores her girlhood as a Jewish Iranian living during revolutionary Iran in her memoir *Journey from the Land of No*. Oppressive gender roles from a religious regime and the label of Jewish, an ethnic minority in a dominantly Muslim society, caused what Birkerts calls a rupture in growth, or trauma. While the ghetto figuratively defined Yezierska, the ghetto was a physical place in the actual restrictions placed on females and Jews in Iran, as well as a frame of mind for Hakakian. Messages from friends and family and school made Hakakian believe she was inferior because of her gender and her Jewishness. Hakakian turns to language, especially her own writing, as a tool to overcome and renegotiate her identity as a Jewish Iranian woman. Through writing the memoir, she takes on the responsibility to share her specific experience as a female minority. Hakakian’s compulsion to write was driven by the suffering she endured as a result of the segregation and isolation felt as Jewish and female in revolutionary Iran.

The ghettoization Hakakian depicts centers around the isolation of being a Jewish female in a Muslim patriarchal society. *Journey from the Land of No* presents itself as a modern ghetto story, or Iranian Jewish *Ghettoposophie*, describing Hakakian’s struggles with isolation and assimilation. Hakakian provides a brief history explaining how Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the king of Iran, who wished to restore Iran to the glory of ancient Persia with aid from his intelligence service, SAVAK, was replaced after the revolution in 1979 with Ayatollah
Khomeini (6). Khomeini quickly rose to the Shiite sacred status of an “imam,” a step away from the prophet, and the 100,000 Jews of Iran, the second largest Jewish community in the Middle East, after Israel, “fell into disarray” with the rampant anti-Semitism that followed (7). The physical ghetto restrictions manifested through social barriers and other loss of opportunities due to Khomeini’s government. Her uncle and father attempted to ignore this physical ghetto, but the barriers ultimately proved unconquerable for Jews in revolutionary Iran. The ghetto mindset Hakakian constructs is based on restrictions in school, similar to the struggles of the young girls in Fin de Siècle Vienna, and the constant message of female inferiority.

Unlike Yezierska’s father who resisted assimilation in favor of ghetto life, Hakakian’s father and uncle actively assimilate and play with ideas of passing. As Hyman discusses in her work on assimilation, assimilation provided greater acceptance in larger society and this was true in particular for Iranian Jews leading up to the revolution. Her uncle and father, due to their abilities to pass as Muslim Iranians, were able to travel between the Jewish ghetto and Muslim world for a period of time. In the pre-revolution days, her father, dressed in his suit and tie, often got mistaken for a Muslim as Iranians greeted him as *Haji*, a Muslim who has been to Mecca. His flexible identity attributed to his warmth and likeability, “Father invoked the Koranic equivalent to express his appreciation for living at a time and in a city where a Jew could mingle with others so freely that he was mistaken for a Muslim. And among Jews, he received an even warmer reception” (28). Her father went back and forth, accepted by both worlds, but her uncle chose to just pass as Muslim. Uncle Ardi’s power lay in his name, appearance, and manner that allowed him to pass for Muslim. This provided his metaphorical escape from the Jewish ghetto. Speaking of Uncle Ardi, Hakakian explains his acculturation, “He was the Jew who had shed the ‘ghetto’ speech, Persian peppered with Hebrew. Even Jews mistook him for a Muslim and behaved as they did in the company of one” (50). As noted by Hyman, the shedding of Jewish
markers provided one with the opportunity to assimilate into Gentile society, in this case the Muslim Gentile world.

Hakakian shows that beyond speech and appearance, her uncle did not have a ghetto mindset, thus propelling him to assimilate successfully. Uncle Ardi appears unrestricted and free, “He did not think ghetto thoughts. He made a safe passage to the other side, even shed the ghetto jobs: he wasn’t a butcher or a salesman, a teacher or gold trader, but an insurance man. He was so assimilated, so certain of his prospects in Iran, that he even insured Muslims” (51). To think ghetto thoughts meant one believed the anti-Semitic messages in the culture and felt inferior. Hakakian’s portrayal of ghetto thoughts seems to be a mindset Yezierska buys into in her memoir. Unlike Yezierska, Uncle Ardi embraced his identity as a non-Jew to assimilate properly. Hakakian pays close attention to what this really means, since she found herself unable to ignore ghetto thoughts once the revolution took hold. Referring to her Uncle Ardi specifically in 1977, she explains his belonging as a passing Muslim in Iran, “What Uncle Ardi had really shed was fear, the fear of claiming his share of the good life like any other middle-class citizen. But he did not call it fear. Instead he said, ‘I know how to live.’ And the place where he knew best to live, where he belonged, was Iran” (51). Hakakian and her parents could not shed the fear as her uncle did, thus Hakakian felt the painful restrictions of a ghettoized life in Iran.

Hakakian’s Jewish ghetto encompasses the impermeable social barriers amongst Muslims, even though figures like her father and Ardi appeared to dismantle those barriers. The state of the Jewish community’s isolation or otherness could never be completely forgotten, even before the revolution. In 1977 the only remaining physical ghetto of Hakakian’s city, Tehran, was in the far south where she claims the poor of every race lived (52). Thus, talk of leaving, specifically to live in Israel, seemed absurd. Despite the insistence on Iran being the
only imaginable home, the Muslim Iranians constantly challenged the Jews and accused many of Zionist leanings. Thus, Jews were often isolated because of anti-Semitic prejudice. Referring to the Jews of Iran she says, “they saw no other homeland for themselves but Iran” (154). Though Israel seemed unimaginable, especially for Uncle Ardi, he fled to Israel after accidentally running over a Muslim with his car. This even the great magician of passing could not fix, “A Jew had run over a Muslim, in a small northern town. The incident was likely to transcend the bounds of a traffic case and become a matter of honor for the people of that town. Even as popular and as loved as Uncle Ardi was, he feared standing trial in so remote a place” (65). Uncle Ardi could not escape the anti-Semitism despite his abilities to pass. Hakakian describes this prejudice towards Jews when discussing the holiday Passover that includes a ritualistic cleaning of the home from crumbs. She says during Passover, the neighbors can witness their diligence in cleaning, “…even by 1977, some Muslims still called Jews najes: dirty. This was the season to prove our cleanliness to our neighbors, though as I would soon learn, the war against impurity was without end, and uncleanness a most indefatigable enemy” (45-6). Hakakian implies these racist myths influenced how Muslims treated Iranian Jews.

Hakakian explored the complicated process of assimilation amongst Muslims and persistent feelings of difference. She described the inescapable feeling of uneasiness when Jews socialized with Muslims. This unsettling feeling carried Jews “from languor to alertness” (56). She continued detailing the feeling by comparing keeping company with Jews and Muslims to wearing certain clothing. Being with Jews for her was as effortless as pajamas, but being among Muslims was like being in a party dress, “I was careful not to stain or wrinkle it. The fabric itched. The zipper pinched. I had to adjust myself to fitting into something less familiar. But it also gave me the chance to see myself anew. It took effort being in it, but I liked the way it changed me. I like how I looked in it” (56). This acculturation to fit in with Muslims
clearly included adjusting her natural self, but at this early point in her girlhood, Hakakian found it exciting. The act of dressing up made Hakakian feel fake when socializing with Muslims, like she had to hide her authentic self and thus her Jewishness.

Hakakian only notices distinctions of being Jewish when her uncle’s affair with the daughter of their Muslim friends is protested, but soon anti-Semitic acts became impossible to ignore. Hakakian first viewed being Jewish as a “surprise from the ordinary” (62). This surprise included an extra day off from school, endless holidays, and dancing in the Purim play. The exciting parts of Jewishness wane once she faces harsher realities, “But seeing the family react to Uncle Ardi’s affair with Neela, I felt the blitheness waning” (63). The blitheness of Judaism began waning once Hakakian noticed how her family vehemently protested the affair. After this, Hakakian saw how even their simple game of charades with the Muslim family friends might actually represent something larger, “Was that the real game of charades, or was it the whole of our afternoon, the attempt at shedding our differences to become one? Oh, how we had scrubbed, boiled, combed, brushed, and bleached. We were no less clean, see? Or were we trying to say that we were cleaner?” (63). Hakakian sees the dilemma of hiding Jewishness and passing. The scrubbing and shedding of their differences was the shedding of religious and ethnic labels. She ponders whether these attempts to acculturate or fit in with Muslims truly meant a shedding or abandonment of Jewishness.

Once the Shah is ousted and the revolution takes hold, the label Jew turns into more of a threatening accusation and not something easily hidden among friends or during games of charades. One day, across from Hakakian’s home she discovered graffiti with a swastika that said, “Johouds Get Lost!” (134). Before this incident, Hakakian explains that Johoud or Jew came from stories of her father’s past. In his past, another world far from the one she has known, he faced torment in school for being Jewish. She cites the Persian dictionary to explain
_Johoud_ could mean several things including Jews or an assiduous person, but in her family lexicon, “_Johoud_ had only one meaning: a world, a word that Father buried before he left the village. There _Johoud_ meant ‘dirty’...Forty years later, there was _Johoud_ again on the wall across from our door. It was punctuated by a strange sign” (134-5). Hakakian reflects on her first confrontation with a swastika paired with the word she knew to mean dirty and refer to her people, “Not one I had ever seen: a plus sign gone awry, a dark reptile with four hungry claws” (135). Her father said the sign is from the Nazi days and nothing she needed to know. Hakakian and her father ignored or moved past this act of hatred. Despite her father’s respected status as a well-educated poet and their family’s middle class existence, Hakakian shows how the family could not escape the Jewish persecution during Khomeini’s reign. Acculturation and proving one’s assimilation was no longer an option.

Hakakian engages in the ghetto thoughts her uncle avoided because of the restrictions on Jews she faced in school, in addition to the societal messages of female oppression and confinement. All three of her brothers get sent to America, while Hakakian, the youngest of her siblings, continued attending school in Iran. Her schooling reinforced a ghetto mindset. At her Hebrew day school, the new Muslim principal, Mrs. Moghodam, implemented several changes during the revolution. She summoned Hakakian into her office and one of her requests was for Hakakian to gather her class every afternoon for lessons on Islam that would replace English lessons (161). Hakakian believed this grudge against the language brings them together until Mrs. Moghodam made her anti-Semitism obvious. She asked Hakakian, “Since you’re so bright and know so much about the Jewish tradition, tell me, why do Jewish fathers take it upon themselves to deflower their daughters?” (162). Her treatment as a Jew only becomes worse from this point, and much of the oppression manifests through Mrs. Moghodam who carried out the anti-Semitic policies. The principal became the embodiment of Jewish segregation. The
teachers saw her that way, "To them, Mrs. Moghadam embodied a return to the old days of segregation for Jews in Iran. To us, she was a tyrant" (162). To Hakakian and the other kids, she was simply a tyrant to rebel against.

Jewish segregation became even more overt when she began attending a new, larger school that coincided with the implementation of national anti-Semitic policies. She describes the almost immediate welcome for the Jewish students,

But a few days into the new school year, non-Muslim students were ordered to leave the class for the Koran and religious studies hours. When we all returned, a certain strangeness had set in. Immediately after those periods a bit of warmth had dissipated from our midst. The easiness of our conversations, our playful tugs at one another's scarves, our indiscriminate horseplay, had diminished. Our Muslim classmates hesitated to share in our lunches. And I began to feel that something the class was being taught in our absence was poisoning our friendships (204).

Similarly to the isolation felt by girls in Fin de Siècle Vienna due to separate religious classes, the separation for religious lessons divided the gentile and Jewish students. Hakakian reflects on her discomfort by trying to put into words the change in comradery. Something during the religious lessons poisoned their friendships and she explains her realization that, perhaps, a hatred or fear of the Jew was being taught. Soon the principal reluctantly announced that according to a new policy non-Muslim students could only use certain bathrooms and water fountains (204). Other policies and consequences swept across the city that segregated and called negative attention to Jews. Non-Muslims had to display signs in their businesses, wounded soldiers refused to be touched by “unclean” Jewish nurses and doctors (205). That month her mother's request to renew her passport was denied, Hakakian's was held for consideration, and her father's passport was confiscated. Hakakian shows the ways
ghettoization emerged through the segregation of Jews in revolutionary Iran and rampant racism.

As a female, this segregation was felt in combination with a pressure to fit into society’s constraining gender roles, and this influences her understanding of self-worth. Again, unlike her uncle, she constructs a ghetto mindset, feeling inferior to men, boys, non-Jews but also other girls. Her cousin Farah explained to Hakakian that “a woman’s destiny was to suffer and sacrifice” (68). She cannot measure up to her older cousin. Hakakian lacks confidence and feels unfit to be a girl because of the way female identity and duty is grounded in the physical. Around Farah she noticed her inadequacies, “I was not the one with the tiny upturned nose. Mine was huge with a bump on the bridge. I was not plump. According to my parents, I was ‘alarmingly thin’...Even my hair, fine and straight, bristled with static at the touch of Farah’s brushes. How could she and I both be girls?” (74). Farah married a suitor her parents arranged, and Hakakian sees her cousin’s future as her own, “Farah was well on the road, and I was trailing...Grandmother, Aunt Zarrin, and Mother. And where were they now? At motherhood, a place of suffering to the north, suffering to the south, suffering to the east, and suffering to the west. Motherhood was the only mark of their femaleness” (74). She describes these female figures serving meals and cleaning up while men nap, “Motherhood was a melancholy affair. Mothers were martyrs...Men suffered and sacrificed themselves only in poetry for the sake of love. In real life, women were the ones to perform those legendary acts” (75). Hakakian observes this, yet remembers the disappointment from her family when Farrah had a baby girl. Hakakian’s mother responded immediately to the news with the blessing, “May you make her a bride” (135). Although mothers were heroes, they did not receive recognition, suffered the most, and boys were favored in families.
Hakakian recalls constant messages of inferiority and the effect they had on her. When dreaming of possibilities for herself she referenced her favorite children's story about an optimistic little black fish and says of her past aspirations, “there had to be a bigger universe, a sea perhaps like the one the little black fish had fancied, with possibilities greater than the ones I could see, where women lived differently from those close to me....Maybe I was meant to be not just a girl, but something more, like an interpreter” (89). She contemplated becoming an interpreter who can figure out the things that puzzle others. Interpretation seems to be the project of her memoir, interpreting her experience, as Birkerts explains of memoir writing, to provide understanding of past trauma. Within Iran, Hakakian realized she could not escape inequality. These aspirations for something greater than what a girl meant in Iran contradict the teachings and examples of others, such as her friend’s sister Z who shows both Muslim and Jewish girls how to “be demure and demand nothing” (98). Hakakian’s gender prevents her from leading prayers in synagogue, a role she practiced for for months that the head of the youth program explained cannot be given to her due to reasons of cleanliness (126). Hakakian is further segregated from society and opportunities even within Judaism because of her gender.

Principal Moghadam’s lecture to the girls about their hair enforced these sexist thoughts. Hakakian revisits this religious rant on hair, “So seemingly dead and blameless. But, my dear girls, blameless it is not. It is constantly scheming to reveal itself, peeking out of the scarf, even from under the veil. It peeks not to reveal itself to me or you, or your peers in this room, but to a man” (165). Girls must be aware of the power they hold, Moghadam warned. The concern of male predators became the responsibility of even young girls, “One glance at your hair, even at a strand of your hair, is enough to turn any man into an irredeemable wanton, into a unicorn beast, with a unique intention, each of his heinous tissues in unanimity, its projectile moving in a unified direction: that of sin” (165). Since hair was evil, women and girls appear inherently sinful.
The act of rape, even of a young girl, would be blamed on the girl, “For this sin there is no penance, no atonement...Once the beast unleashes itself upon your innocence, you’re not a child of Allah anymore. You’re a child of Satan, and appropriate to your kinship, you deserve to receive a hail of stones and nothing less” (165). These harsh words stay with Hakakian who rehashes the religious ramblings and found her strength as a girl in role models and peers to rebel against these sexist messages.

Role models like Mrs. Ebrahimi and Mrs. Armani, along with Hakakian’s involvement in the Jewish Iranian Students Organization, help her break free of a ghetto mindset of limitations. At the Jewish Iranian Students Organization she saw, as the girls took off their headscarves, that being a female was not “such a bleak prospect” (182). Her teacher at Hebrew day school, Mrs. Ebrahimi, tried to inspire confidence in the girls during the short time she had with them, “She wanted to lead us, not into a revolution, but into a show of boldness. A conservative Jewish woman in her late thirties, she wanted us to know that it was possible to earn a degree, wear starched shirts, knee-length skirts, and bright red lipstick, and make one’s own money” (144). Hakakian looked to role models like Mrs. Ebrahimi to dismantle her own ghetto mindset and fears.

Hakakian’s membership within the youth organization showed her fight for autonomy and optimistic spirit. Similarly to Tec’s description of familial power dynamics in the Nazi ghetto, the anti-Semitic policies cause Hakakian’s parents finally to decide to move because their power, as providers and protectors, is stunted in Iran. Hakakian followed the trend of rebellious and motivated youth that Nec observed in her research. Hakakian’s involvement with the Jewish Iranian Students Organization in Iran, like Fremont’s mother and aunt’s relentless efforts as teens during WWII, surpassed efforts made by their parents. Hakakian’s father ignored much of the anti-Semitism and kept them in Iran until 1984. The Jewish Iranian Students Organization
Hakakian found in the hopes of integrating Jews and combating anti-Semitism (179). Hakakian's involvement with the student organization follows naturally from her rebellious spirit. Back in 1979 at the Hebrew day school, Hakakian and the other girls rebel when Mrs. Moghadam announces instead of the usual eight days off for Passover, the girls will only be off Thursday to Saturday, but must return to school Sunday. The girls march with branches in the courtyard and then loot the classrooms, writing on the blackboards and shattering windows, “We were rebelling because rebelling was all we could do to quell the rage in our teenage veins. Together as girls we found the courage we had been told was not in us” (169). After what Hakakian refers to as a “mini” rebellion at school with her classmates, trashing classrooms and shouting in the streets, this Jewish Students Organization provided a more academic and less violent approach to rebellion.

Hakakian found encouragement from Mrs. Arman to break free from the ghetto mindset inflicted upon girls. In 1984 as a senior in high school, she began attending a larger school since most Christian and Jewish schools had been shut down. Her Persian literature and composition teacher, Mrs. Arman, sheds light on the policies enforced by the religious leadership. “We were girls, living in a female ghetto. Instead of yellow armbands, we wore the sign of our inferiority on our heads...And Mrs. Arman wanted us not to suffer our circumstances alone. In our misery, we had one another. And we had literature” (212). She awarded Hakakian an almost perfect score, which she had not given out in thirteen years, on an essay about the destruction of war. Then she hid the essay to save Hakakian from being questioned and possibly killed (213-4). Through Mrs. Arman’s guidance and encouragement, Hakakian explains how she began to understand the treatment of females, especially Jewish girls, as ghettoization.

Hakakian explores the nature of writing and literature as tools to save her while also recognizing their inherent danger within Iranian society. Just as Yezierska returned to her ghetto
experience to gain insights about herself through her writing, Hakakian revisits her past ghetto experience once in America to understand herself and the past. Her family moved to America in 1984, but she stayed silent about her past until 1999. Someone from *The New York Times* contacted her in 1999 for a response to student riots in Iran. After this reporter reached out, she forced herself to revisit memories and write her truth. She began her tale with that obligation to speak out, yet using English as protection or barrier when someone from *The New York Times* contacts her with questions about Iran, “When you have been a refugee, abandoned all your loves and belongings, your memories become your belongings. Images of the past, snippets of old conversations, furnish the world within your mind. When you have nothing left to guard, you guard your memories. You guard them with silence” (14). Hakakian fears writing about her girlhood in Persian, “Instead of reexamining the memories, I feared that in Persian, I might begin to relive them” (15). English provides her with an escape, “English sheltered the adult survivor, safely inside a lighthouse. I did not know how to use the language of the censors to speak against them; to use the very language by which I had been denied so much as a Jew, a woman, a secular citizen, and a young poet” (15). This is how Hakakian takes on the project of memoir writing and delves into the trauma of her past.

Part of her connection to language and writing came from her compulsion to speak out as a witness, which Birkerts recognizes as a commonality of memoirs. She recognized her role after her three brothers were sent to America and she suffered during the revolution and years following it. She employed her name Roya, meaning dream, to demonstrate her purpose, “Finally the youngest Hakakian had a leg up. Albert was the genius; Javid, the popular one; Bez, the most congenial. But I, the dream, with eyes wide open, had seen what none of my siblings had. I had become the family’s witness” (145). She received encouragement from Mrs. Arman who insisted that Hakakian was a writer, giving her a fountain pen from her father, who was a
great writer (214). Her duty as witness to record was crucial because things were constantly changing, as the Iranian regime censored truth of the past to serve their needs. She remarks on this urgency by noting the maps she bought had changed street names and omitted her neighborhood and schools, “And I had to record, commit every detail to memory, so I could do in words what the cartographers had not done in their maps: attest to the existence of a time, an alley, and its children whose traces were on the verge of vanishing” (201). The compulsion to record began during her girlhood, but then for years, she stayed silent about these memories. While her truth may be shaped by the literary conventions of memoir, it speaks of her sentiments and uncensored experience, which Birkerts notes as the importance of memoir. Language and writing become the answer for coping with turmoil in Iran, and they also provide comfort as an adult to write these memories of suffering as a way of understanding her trauma.

Throughout the memoir, Hakakian reflects on her complex relationship to writing and language. There are moments, like when she contemplated suicide, when language saved her life, yet language and censorship also lead to the emigration and deaths of many people. She remembers always loving reading, “Reading made everything better, no matter what I lacked, no matter how strange or lopsided I seemed to myself” (89). The intense climate in Iran allows censorship to distort history. Hakakian sees the danger banned literature poses. While hiking with the Jewish Iranian Student Organization, Hakakian and the other members get detained by officers. One of the boys distracted the driver while the other boys passed the banned literature to Hakakian and her friend, Nazila, “It was unlikely that a female paramilitary member would be present at the headquarters to body-search us. And the male guards would not touch us. The pile was handed to Nazila and me...We took the pages and shoved them in our clothes” (188). Banned literature could implicate them in anti-revolutionary plots, which would get them arrested and killed. Upon their arrival at the headquarters they spot a veiled woman. This meant a full
body search, so Hakakian and Nazila asked to use the bathroom. Nazila advised not to flush, since the papers might get stuck. Hakakian and Nazila ate the banned literature to save themselves. Language and writing though a danger, also provided Hakakian with refuge in her most difficult times.

Hakakian finds refuge in writing at the height of crisis when suicide seemed to be the only viable option. Her parents were fighting because her mother had warned her father to put the house up for sale long ago, and then they fear they won’t be able to sell the house because no one would buy from a Jew. Hakakian sought escape and refuge on her rooftop, thinking, “Why live? What the alley wanted was not a great mind but a great daring of anyone willing to die. An occasion to which even I could rise. The revolution’s design for the future was not so clear. But its demand for sacrifice was certain...I too, would leave my own mark of blood -- become a hero” (138). Through this intense moment Hakakian saved herself by writing, “The words flooded the page, a detailed report of everything I had seen. I wrote fast and gripped the pen hard, so hard that the left side of my middle finger paled and began to buzz...I fell asleep. When I awoke, I read what I had written. Then I read it aloud. The bitter allure of the words was intoxicating” (139). She calls her writing a melody and explains how that night and on she kept on writing. Reading and writing had always been her favorite hobby, and her tumultuous relationship with language culminates in Iran with the horror of her father burning her treasured books once he finally decides the family must move to America (225-7).

Hakakian’s memoir serves as its own presentation of the ghetto girl stereotype and complexities of assimilation that accompany this stereotype. She writes her truth to express the pain of Jewish girlhood in Iran where full assimilation was impossible for her. Recalling the moment she could not say Allah Akbar since it felt like a betrayal to the Jews, she says, “But I could not. I had never had to say words in Arabic, to chant in a language other than my native
Persian. I had never been expected to sound like a Muslim. Must I choose?...I feared something unknown” (112). She works through these memories to negotiate her identity and the complexities of assimilation, which Hyman’s work explores. Hakakian dismantles the ghetto, which Hess’ research ascribes to typical ghetto fiction. The need to speak the truth in the name of progress prompts this dismantling of her past ghetto in Iran. She is an Iranian ghetto girl, fitting Prell’s descriptions of the classic ghetto girl negotiating her identity between Jewish and non-Jewish culture, afraid of rejection. The ghetto girl’s efforts alienate her, Prell notes, which rings true of Hakakian’s rebellious reactions to calls for assimilation and acculturation.

Hakakian presents the trauma of girlhood in the Iranian revolution as her own version of the ghetto girl story. Her writing returns to the physical ghetto of her past to dismantle it and also break free from the ghetto mindset forced upon her as a young girl. The form of memoir allows her to understand her suffering as a Jew and female in an oppressive society. Hakakian’s traumas include her struggles to assimilate and fight back against the national messages of female and Jewish inferiority. As Hakakian used language and writing to record dangerously, a pain during a time of intense censorship in Iran, Fremont also dangerously constructs her memoir to reveal a painful truth but one that was purposefully buried by her mother who resists revealing her Jewish past.

After Long Silence

In After Long Silence, Helen Fremont tells the story of discovering she was Jewish. Fremont grew up to immigrant European parents in Michigan during the 1960s. In the 1990s she researched her heritage with her sister unbeknownst to their parents. Her memoir unpacks this family history and confronts her parents’ personal war stories she extrapolated from them. Fremont attempts to understand her parents’ past, how this affects her identity, and why they
kept their Jewishness a secret for so long. Her mother hid her identity during WWII to pass as a
Polish Catholic girl and escape the roundup of Jews during the Holocaust. Fremont’s mother
finally escaped Poland by posing as an Italian soldier to reach Italy, where she joined her sister
and brother-in-law. Fremont’s father, meanwhile, spent six years in a Soviet gulag. Once her
mother and father reunited, they married, moved to the United States, and decided to keep their
Jewish identities a secret. Their hidden identities used to survive the war became permanent. In
their worlds, with traumatic memories of the Holocaust, Jewish meant extermination. Thus, they
raised Fremont and her sister as Roman Catholics, allowing them to believe the false identities
they had adopted or perhaps imposing the false identities upon them while suppressing the real
identities.

I will explore how Fremont views the act of being a memoirist, the constraints of the
physical and metaphorical ghetto, and the notion of sisterhood and gender. Fremont's research
and exploration of passing and identity illustrates the many challenges of a Jewish identity. Her
memoir presents itself not only as detective work, but as dangerous as Fremont tried to make
sense of her parents’ erased histories. With her sister, she discovered why sisterhood
demonstrates such uncontested power in their family and how strong Jewish women have
saved lives. To extrapolate all of this family history, Fremont must break through the ghetto
mindset of her parents, in particular her mother, to return to the physical ghetto of Europe
through writing. The image of the ghetto emerges as the physical place her family lived in once
as well as the restricted area within her parents’ minds that contains their secret past. Here the
metaphorical ghetto is an outgrowth of the Holocaust and physical WWII ghettos.

Fremont’s detective work frames the entire memoir and lays the foundation for her
journey with her sister to reinterpret their childhood memories. Fremont takes on this project of
discovering their Jewish roots with her sister, Lara. They kept it secret from their parents until
they were well into their research. Helen’s curiosity about gaps in her parents’ lives inspired her project. Knowledge about her Jewish heritage and her family’s tortured past, and the writing of that past became a journey of self discovery. She reevaluates confusing moments in her own childhood through this process, for example, hearing her mother telling about a time her new ski boots were taken from her home. Fremont says she must have been six or seven when first listening to this story, and she uses this example to make a remark upon her mother’s story telling nature. Only later does she find out the story was about a pogrom in Lvov, Ukraine called Petlura Day on June 21, 1941. Her mother first began only by saying she used to ski. “And then her voice drifted off and her eyes grew vague, and we knew she had left us and disappeared back to a time before we were born. We were silent” (Fremont 144). Fremont and her sister stayed silent, knowing how their mother transported between times.

Fremont writes someone else’s trauma, thus her detective work was dangerous because it involved breaking the silence of her mother, a trauma victim. The vectors of danger include a threat to Fremont’s relationship with her mother, more damage to her mother psychologically and also psychological damage to Fremont, admittedly on a different level than her mother though. Her memoir explores varying degrees of trauma, including her own second hand trauma. Fremont explains, through a memory of the ski boot retelling, the nature of her mother’s closed off past that presents itself as dangerous, “The past was always like this, an empty space in our lives, a gap in our conversations, into which our mother tumbled from time to time, quietly, without warning” (145). Her mother then said her ski boots were square toed, but did not respond to Fremont’s giggles and questions about the square toed boots. Her mother instead spaced out, “My mother went quiet again. A warning. There was something about those ski boots, I knew, that was dangerous. I held my breath. Lara knew too. We stayed quiet...The longer the silence, the greater the danger. I wanted to fill the space with words, but I was
curious to know about those ski boots, so I stayed quiet” (145). Their mother then asked if the girls wanted dinner and only when they asked what happened to the boots, does she admit they were stolen and that she never got another pair. Their mother smiled and avoided any further questions, “The smile meant we were moving away from the danger, we were missing the point” (145). The girls again questioned her, asking who did it, not understanding how bandits could just rob houses freely at a mysterious time when there was no law or order, but their mother ends the conversation. Fremont reads her mother's signals, “That was the end of the story. We could tell by the tone in her voice that she was finished. We knew there was more to it, because we still didn’t understand it, and we knew we were not meant to understand it” (146). This act of memoir writing becomes the solution for understanding her past through her parents’ history. Fremont attempts to fill these gaps her mother created. The gaps become filled with the stories from her mother and father about their experiences as European Jews during WWII.

In Fremont’s case, the memoir form allows her to explore her connection to Jewish heritage and make sense of the confusion during her childhood. Fremont participates in the type of historical collective memory depicted in Lehrer’s work on *Jewish Poland Revisited*. Once she discovers that she is, in fact, Jewish, Fremont’s identity aligns with a static Western Jewish identity connected to genealogy and family history of WWII Europe when she visits Ukraine with her sister on a tour for Holocaust survivors. She officially uncovered her Jewish identity and confirmed her suspicions once her sister received word back from Yad Vashem about some of their relatives. Her sister, Lara, wrote to them at some point after Christmas and continued to gather testimonies, records, and to contact distant relatives for months. Finally in April, Fremont and her sister confront their parents’ friends, the Janiczeks, who are Holocaust survivors to share the news and ask about whether they knew of the Fremonts’ Jewish identity. Shortly after this, the sisters confront their parents but their mother denies everything. Months pass, they
start to plan their trip to Europe, and in July their mother finally reveals the truth and agrees to go over the maps of her hometown. Fremont’s trip to the site of her parents’ past and place where they abandoned their Jewishness allows collective memory to formulate her newly uncovered Jewish identity. Fremont and her sister decided to take the trip to Ukraine just after her mother secretly confessed her Jewish past to them in a shopping mall. Her mother protests them going, but finally both parents agreed to go over prewar Polish maps of their hometowns with Fremont and her sister (51). On the trip, the general history of European Jews during WWII shaped Fremont’s newly discovered Jewish identity, but as she continued her research, her mother finally broke her silence. Her extensive research, including contacting survivors, the Yad Vashem museum, and possible relatives, gave her and her sister the strength to confront their mother and extrapolate their stories. These personal stories from her mother and father became part of Fremont’s collective Jewish memory.

Fremont’s trip provided a foundation for her detective work, but mainly by supplying this general history of Jews in Europe during the war. Fremont and her sister were adopted by their group, since their parents refused to go with them, “Our group consisted of eight families - three generations of survivors, ranging in age from fifteen to ninety-four. Lara and I were the only members of the group unaccompanied by our parents, which inspired the survivors to claim us as their own, tell us their stories, and lecture us on the ignorance of young people” (53-4). At their father’s home town of Buczacz, Fremont attempted to forge this collective memory with the little information they had on their own family history. They met the last surviving Jew, but this survivor did not remember their father. So they listened about Jews being lined up and shot on a hill they stood on, “Lara and I were getting used to this story, a never-ending refrain throughout all of Ukraine. Every little hamlet, every little town, has its own desecrated cemetery, its site of mass killings, its huge mass graves. Lara and I climbed the steep hill...” (55). The general story
of European Jews during the war washes over the personal, allowing Fremont to partake in a collective Jewish trauma narrative. The spot the girls chose to lay flowers at cannot possibly be the correct site of their individual family’s genocide history. Yet, Fremont shows how lack of specificity cannot negate the sentiment, “We cleared a spot and laid three gladiolus at the point where the Jews were killed...nor where our grandmother Helen Rosenbaum was killed. Nevertheless, we allowed our grief to mix and let history be general and geography generous. This was, after all, the site of death of our family, and we commemorated it with our flowers and stinging flesh” (55). While the trip proved important in Fremont’s journey of self-discovery, the real revelations came once they return and show their parents photos from the trip.

Upon their return, Fremont’s presentation of photos turned into a confrontation with her mother. Fremont’s desperation to understand her Jewish identity and childhood forced her mother to relive her painful past. Fremont and her sister showed slides of pictures from the trip to their parents and maternal aunt, but at the sight of a Jewish grave their Aunt Zosia goes up to bed. Fremont’s mother had insisted that they girls not let her sister, their Aunt Zosia, know they have discovered their Jewish identity. Aunt Zosia still believed the girls thought they were Polish Catholic. Fremont insisted that her aunt must realize they know after taking a trip to Europe on a tour of Holocaust survivors. Fremont then asked if her aunt suspected anything. At this, her mother interrupted her and rolled up her sleeve,

She smiled and nodded, then rolled up the sleeve on her wrist with her other hand. ‘See this?’ she said. ‘I have no number I wasn’t in the camps. I was never in Auschwitz.’ Her pale forearm was still raised, like a white banner...she grew more desperate, her voice quivering. Tears came to her eyes. ‘I’m not a survivor!’ she cried, shaking her arm, pointing to her smooth, unblemished wrist. ‘You see? I have no numbers! I’m not a survivor!’ (58).
Although her mother began to reluctantly cooperate by this point, the traumas of her mother’s past still prove to be a barrier for Fremont. Her mother resists identifying not only with Judaism but with the idea of surviving something. By affirming no concentration camp numbers mark her, she disavows her associations with the Holocaust and WWII European Jewish identity.

Fremont writes her memoir to make sense of the confusion from her childhood while combating her mother’s ongoing resistance to her Jewishness and her WWII past. Fremont’s mother retold the Petlura Day story in 1975 when Fremont had to write a college paper on psychological reactions to trauma. Her mother told her that Aunt Zosia does not remember one thing from that day, while she remembers every detail. Her mother said this shows how people react differently to stress. Then her mother revealed that the day of the pogrom she stopped menstruating. Fremont waits quietly, as years of listening to her mother’s stories taught her, “I waited for her to say more, but she remained silent” (148). Finally Fremont asked how long she lost her period for, and her mother responded nine months. This leaves Fremont silent but curious, “I didn’t dare ask my mother any more questions, but I wondered about those nine months. Had my mother been raped? Did I have a brother or sister somewhere? My mother’s stories always left holes that I couldn’t fill” (148). Each memory of Fremont’s interactions with her mother about the past brings forth more questions. Writing a memoir about the secrets of the past gave Fremont an outlet to revisit these moments of confusion.

Even in family therapy, Fremont recalls a mysterious silence around something driving all the tension. In 1965 her father enrolled them in family therapy. Fremont was eight at the time, but felt the tension, “We all knew there was something very wrong, but none of us knew exactly what it was” (157). Fremont remembers being distracted by the therapist while her family fought, “In the meantime, my parents and sister fought and cried, raved and sobbed, launching a spectacle for the doctor each week. But no one breathed a word about the past, preferring to
soak in the poison of the present. Our family always respected the power of secrets” (159).

Although she was only eight, Fremont observed this avoidance, experiencing her own second hand trauma. The confusion extended itself beyond just gaps in her mother’s stories, and the memoir provides a solution to these past feelings of frustration and avoidance from her childhood.

Fremont constructs her own Ghettogeschichte or ghetto tale by revisiting the Nazi ghettos of her parents’ past through her writing and presenting her mother as a ghetto girl who abandoned Jewishness to assimilate into Gentile culture. The multifaceted term ghetto represents not only the restricted living area of Fremont’s parents but their suppression of Jewish identity. The parents spent over half of their lives pretending or passing as non-Jews, usually around Jews. Fremont’s parents immigrated already passing as non-Jews to America. Fremont explores the disruptive nature of assimilation, as discussed in Paula E. Hyman’s chapter “Paradoxes of Assimilation” by reinventing narratives of her mother and aunt’s escape to Italy during the war. Her mother adopted a new non-Jewish identity and instead of negotiating parts of herself as Hyman explains in the acculturation process, abandons her former identity completely. Fremont’s parents both immigrated to the United States disguised as non-Jews. Passing for her parents turns into a permanent adopted identity to escape imminent death during the Holocaust, whereas passing for most Jewish immigrants to America meant trying to achieve acceptance from the majority culture. Fremont’s parents allow their new identities to cloud out their former existence as Jews even once they leave Europe. Their traumatic past during the war keeps them from ever returning to their Jewishness.

Fremont manifests this idea of ghetto as a mindset while also retelling family history within a physical ghetto. By hiding their Jewish heritage, Fremont's parents have set up a ghetto frame of mind. Her mother shifted between multiple identities while living in Poland in order to
work and feed her family. Even though she claimed her family was not religious and “completely assimilated” (50), Fremont’s father later revealed that her mother’s family was actually Orthodox (51). When Fremont’s mother, Batya, was left to provide for her parents she had to find a way out of the ghetto. She took off her armband signifying her Jewishness to become Maria, the Pole, sister of an Italian countess. This took place once her sister, Aunt Zosia, was living safely in Italy, giving Maria more credibility to her cover story if caught leaving the Polish ghetto. Fremont’s mother traveled in and out of the ghetto, taking off her armband to pass as Maria and work to support her parents before escaping to Italy to join Zosia.

Fremont paints her mother’s role as Maria as wearing armor that shields her from the pain of the Jews. Fremont identifies the beginning of the war in September 1939 during a bombing as the beginning of her mother’s suppression of her Jewish identity and building of armor, “Her parents and Zosia, on the other hand, dusted themselves off and donned their discarded faces from the previous war...My mother had not yet found a shell of her own, but the first night of bombings she began to grow one, stitch by stitch, a thick skin that would be hard to shed. A wall is built, brick by brick” (108). This armor had its consequences, which her mother never forgave herself for, “Even after the war she would continue to lift it upon her shoulders when it no longer served any purpose. She believed she could not live without it; whatever was inside had long ago died. Only the armor remained, and she would clank with it down the streets of America fifty years later” (180). She adds that this armor helps her forget the young woman she was, Batya, who did not survive (181). Her mother had imprisoned her old self deep within the confines of her mind. Thus, she created her own ghetto mindset to suppress her past as a Jew. It is this barrier that Fremont must break through to uncover the real family history.

Fremont’s discovery of her own Jewish identity includes reviving her mother’s buried Jewishness and understanding the erasure her mother underwent, beyond the typical
acculturation. As Sheffer's research notes in reference to Antin's work, writing of the trauma of immigration is a process of fragile reconstruction. Fremont's memoir works through her mother's trauma of immigration and acculturation as its own form of a ghetto tale. Fremont does not restrict the memoir to stories of the Nazi ghettos in Europe, but she expands this ghetto story into one of how the ghetto and the oppressive forces of the war transformed her mother's Jewish identity and views on passing. In the typical ghetto tales, one either rejected traditional Judaism or favored a nostalgic Judaism. Fremont's mother rejects all Jewishness, even though she claims she was already an assimilated Jew before the war. After adopting the identity of Maria, a Polish Catholic, Batya must even pass as the opposite gender to actually cross the borders and reach her sister in Italy. She passes as an Italian soldier on the train with the aid of an Italian whom she worked for at the embassy in Poland. Batya became Maria then temporarily Giuseppe Rossi to escape death as a Jew. Once Batya escapes Poland as Rossi and then finally, despite other obstacles like being detained in Italy, makes it to her sister Zosia, there is no going back to Batya. Maria becomes the safest self to embrace and way to hide from her Jewish ghetto past. Traditional ghetto tales were testimonies of the changing world and destruction of the ghetto isolation in the name of progress. Fremont's ghetto tale also dismantles the ghetto, but this dismantled ghetto is the confined Jewishness and history of her family. Fremont dismantles her mother's ghetto mindset in order to make progress in a much more personal way within the family and in relation to her own identity.

Fremont constructs her mother as a ghetto girl who painfully chose acculturation with the adoption of her new identity as Maria, the Polish Catholic. Fremont recalls her mother teaching her the signs of the cross as a young girl. Part of passing as a non-Jew meant knowing the sign of the cross. Fremont learned this trick at passing from her mother as a young girl, "She would teach me the sign of the cross in six languages: Polish, Russian, German, Italian, French and
English...And of course, I loved our conspiracy- my mother’s and mine. It was our time alone, our time together, and she was sending me into a night of sleep, protected by a God who could respond to me in any language, under any sky” (11). At the time, it seemed like a fun secret between mother and daughter. Only later Fremont realized this information meant survival, “What I didn’t understand was that my mother was equipping me with the means of survival: proof of my Catholicism to anyone in a dozen countries” (11-2). The simple line, *In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen* could prove her mother was an authentic Catholic. Batya became Maria and adopted signs of the Gentile culture, such as the recitation of this religious line, while leaving her ghetto Jewish girlhood behind.

Fremont breaks her mother’s silence with her detective work, and although her book is memoir, it includes a reimagination of others’ memories by Fremont. As Sheffer refers to Antin’s autobiography as a refusal to be silent, Fremont’s compulsion to uncover the truth combats her mother’s desire to stay silent. Fremont includes a special author’s note about her intentions in taking creative license since she retells her parent’s lives, “This is a work of nonfiction. I have changed the names, locations, and identifying characteristics of a number of individuals in order to protect their privacy. In some instances, I have imagined details in an effort to convey the emotional truths of my family’s experiences.” This declaration does not negate the authenticity of her memoir. As Birkerts explains, distortion in memoir is not only inevitable but permissible because the emotional truth supersedes the invented details. Fremont’s audience accepts that she must reimagine her parent’s ghetto history to give their stories life.

Fremont traces two pairs of sisters: one pair bound together by their secret past during the war and the other pair bound together by the unraveling of this past. Her work bonds her to her sister while separating her from her mother. This focus on her mother and their complex relationship aligns with Birkerts’ chapter “Mothers and Daughters”, which explores the memoir’s
emotional project of struggling for separation from the mother. Fremont’s research and memoir project pit her and her sister against her mother and aunt. Yet, Fremont is intricately connected to her mother through the breaking of the mother’s silence about her Jewish identity. She emphasizes the Jewish female experience through exploring the parallel relationships of her mother and Aunt Zosia, who exemplify the closest and most important relationship in life, and her relationship with her sister. Sisterhood appears larger than life because of her mother’s war history and survival story. The circumstances of the war elevate sisterhood above all other relationships.

Fremont’s mother and aunt’s relentless efforts during the war surpassed any efforts made by their parents. Aunt Zosia saved her sister from Poland and inevitable extermination with a fake identity as a Roman Catholic, secures her release from an Italian concentration camp and provides her with a safe haven in Italy. With their parents and family gone, Zosia and Helen’s mother, originally Batya before going by Maria, only have each other to truly understand their painful past. Tec’s work on gender roles in European ghetto life explain the trend of women taking on new duties. The women appeared more flexible while the Nazis often emasculate men and the men were disabled. For Fremont’s mother, her sister Zosia filled the role of provider, which her parents failed to fill. The men in their lives, Fremont’s father and uncle, have gone through similar struggles, but not the same exact experience as the girls, nor did they grow up in the same household. Only Zosia truly knew Batya and therefore, fully understands Maria. This bond deepens once Maria comes to America and both sisters have children and decide not to reveal their Jewish identities to them. The sisters are privy to knowledge about a past they attempt to bury for eternity. Not even the relationship of children to parents can trump this bond of sisterhood. Sisterhood became the key to their survival, thus nothing surpasses it.
Fremont depicts the love of sisters as greater than love between significant others or children and parents. Fremont and her sister emulate this relationship as they worked together to uncover the truth about how Zosia and her mother formed their indestructible bond. Fremont reflects on a hiking trip she took with Lara. She told her sister Lara as they sat together by a lake that this is what their mother and Aunt have. Lara told Helen what Zosia said to her the day before, “‘Someday,’ she told me, ‘you’ll come to appreciate what it means to have a sister. Remember, there is nothing so important in the world as the love of two sisters’” (169). Fremont responded with the hope they will be as close as their mother and Aunt someday. Fremont only hopes to have that everlasting bond with her sister, which could withstand war, death, and all of life’s obstacles. Fremont’s retelling of the history when Zosia saved her mother’s life during the War emphasizes the continuous strength of these two role models in her and her sister’s lives. Helen and Lara’s project becomes weighted against this larger than life bond. Their relationship intensified because of their detective work piecing together a secret family identity and Jewish ethnicity through the lens of that indestructible sisterhood.

Fremont even feels confident enough to reveal her own secret identity as a lesbian to her family in light of her memoir project. Birkerts’ work on memoir as trauma notes the writing process as an achievement of understanding or acceptance. Through the uncovering of her parents’ traumas and acceptance of that truth, Fremont navigates her own acceptance of self, “But now that we’d pressured Mom and Dad to tell us about themselves, it seemed dishonest of me to hide my own identity from them” (175-6). She then confesses to her mother, Aunt Zosia and cousins that she is a lesbian. Fremont reasons that her family’s history of keeping secrets caused her to keep this part of her hidden. She explained this to her sister, “I wonder whether the reason I haven’t come out to Mom and Dad in all these years is because of the model of secrecy they’ve set..” (177). Her mother brushed off her confession once Fremont admitted she
was gay in 1992, assuring Fremont that she may not know her sexuality for sure, yet and Fremont found little use in arguing with her, “But I was beginning to understand why it had always been so hard for me to figure out who I was, since I could never completely resist my mother’s telling me. I knew she only wanted for me what she thought was best. The extraordinary will she developed to survive she couldn’t help using in love” (257). Although the denial of her daughter’s true self may appear somewhat disheartening or cruel, Fremont sees love as the motivation behind her mother’s actions. Perhaps living as a homosexual appeared just as dangerous to Fremont’s mother, as living as a Jew. Thus, her rejection of Fremont’s confession comes from a place of concern. Fremont’s memoir finally allows her to seek her own voice and not let her mother reinvent a false identity or silence her, despite good intentions. Through writing this memoir, the journey of self discovery extends beyond just conceptualizing Jewish identity and historical past into the acceptance of sexuality.

Fremont’s memoir dismantles her mother’s ghetto mindset by revisiting and reinventing her parents’ history in the Nazi ghettos and during the war. Fremont cautiously navigates writing her parents’ trauma, especially aware of her mother’s sensitivity surrounding the past. Her detective work and uncovering of a Jewish past opens a window to understanding her own Jewishness and sexuality. Fremont’s ghetto tale is one of abandoned Jewish identities in favor of full acculturation. The suppression of Jewishness left Fremont confused and longing for a true sense of identity and family history. Her research and breaking of her mother’s silence finally fills those gaps from her childhood and gives her a true sense of self. Just as Hakakian uses writing of the physical ghetto to dismantle a ghetto mindset, Fremont uses writing to dismantle her mother’s own ghetto mindset. Rebecca Walker also suppresses her Jewishness with her own ghetto mindset, but her internalized anti-Semitism comes from her affinity with identifying as a black female.
Rebecca Walker’s memoir, *Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* begins with the recognition of her interracial conception as something larger than herself. Her mixed race, the product of her black mother and white Jewish father coming together during the civil rights movement, leads her to contemplate her place in society. She pushes against the boundaries of race, ethnicity and gender. The failure of passing as one particular race or ethnicity results in traumas from societal oppression and exclusion. Full assimilation into black or white Jewish worlds may not always be possible for those with mixed backgrounds. Through her work, we see how an America, far from Yezierska’s early twentieth-century one, appears to provide a privileged existence for Jews or those able to pass as white. Jewishness plays out as whiteness in this context. Non-white skin at this time poses challenges and dangers that some white Jews seem to evade. One must consider the complicated intersections between race and Jewishness in relation to identity, instead of dealing with identity as singular. The burdens of minority status as female and black or mixed appear more threatening and consequential than the status as a Jew. This comparison of burdens and oppression can lead to anti-Semitic rhetoric and assumptions, which in the case of Walker is demonstrated by her ghettoizing and disavowing her Jewishness.

Walker’s elevated status as a mixed child of civil rights activists soon becomes her burden once they divorced, leaving her to navigate racially polarized worlds as a misfit. Her mother, black author Alice Walker, and father, white Jewish lawyer Mel Leventhal, conceived her as they came together to fight for civil rights during the 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi. Together they stood for everything liberal and revolutionary about the 60s. Walker sees herself as their interracial product or Movement Child born in 1969. She represented yet another aspect
of their dedication to the cause. The family moved to Brooklyn and shortly after, Walker noticed her parents grew apart. They divorced when Walker was eight years old, fracturing this world of revolution and the civil rights movement. By looking at Walker’s experiences within the two opposing racial spheres, I will show how her association of white privilege with Jewishness causes an internal anti-Semitism. The trauma of her parent’s divorce and her complex identity as black and white and Jewish inflict pain and suffering upon Walker. She often feels like a misfit and endures not only racial prejudice but gender constraints. As she shifts between her mother and father’s worlds, she realizes her preference for the black feminine world over the white Jewish world. She ghettoizes her own Jewishness by suppressing it.

Walker’s inability to separate white privilege and Jewishness cause resentment and further isolate her from half of her identity. While Walker empathizes with Anne Frank specifically, she later claims an equal empathy for all sufferers. She claims her father’s new suburban life is a betrayal of the civil rights movement and the struggles she endures. Thus, she attempts to justify her preference to associate with her black feminine side and disassociate with her Jewish identity. Her failed attempts to negotiate her Jewish ethnicity whenever she lives with her father ultimately lead her to conclude Jewishness is too intricately tied to race. After her parents’ divorce, she moves back and forth between houses. Walker lives with each parent on the opposite coast of the country for two years before moving. Her mother’s world lies on the west coast where Walker participates in a black world, while her father and his new family reside on the east coast where she dabbles in a white-privileged Jewish existence. Despite wearing masks or playing the part of white Jew or Jewish American Princess (JAP) at times, Walker chooses to permanently associate with her black feminine side and thus dissociates with Jewishness by changing her last name from Leventhal to Walker.
Walker is taught how to fit into the role of black female but facets of herself make fitting in difficult. Similar to assimilation issues experienced by Jewish immigrants like Yezierska, small markers constantly remind Walker of her inability to seamlessly fit into any particular race. Life with her mother enforces gender and racial constraints for Walker. Her mother’s family in particular makes Walker acutely aware of her gender and the differences between her race and others’ racial identities. She fits in with her mother’s African American family for the most part but small moments take away Walker’s ability to define her own racial and gender identities. While staying with her mom’s family in Atlanta for the summer, before her parents’ divorce, she comments on these constraints. One way she subtly notes her slight misfit when her aunt fails to cornrow her hair, “After I wash my hair...I sit on the floor between Auntie Link’s legs watching The Young and the Restless as she tries to grab my thin brown hair up in cornrows that won’t stay because, as my auntie Eva says, ‘those little curls you got from your daddy keep poking out’” (Walker 78). The white half, inherited from her Jewish father, peeks out in small ways like her unique hair texture. Her mixed race causes her to stand out from her black family like the curls inherited from her father that assert themselves. Though her aunt comments on this uncooperative and not authentic or fully black hair, Walker still finds a place for herself within her mother’s family where she feels respected and almost fully accepted. Small indicators act as barriers to a full assimilation among African Americans.

The isolation felt by Viennese girls and Hakakian parallels Walker’s own isolation and shame related to her gender. Unlike the Viennese girls or Hakakian, her gender awareness from a young age stems from internal pressures within her mother’s family and not religious restrictions in school. On her mother’s side, Walker fits in best with her uncles and boy cousins, but when they introduce her to the slang word for whites she again feels an uncomfortable distance from her family. Walker explains that uncle Bobby is notorious for his strict ways and
violent discipline of her boy cousins. She knows her mother forbid him from punishing her,
“Uncle Bobby is strict with the boys, but not with me...Even though I know my mama told him not
to hit me, Uncle Bobby says if I am bad he will” (80). Despite the protection that her gender
guarantees her, Walker fears her uncle for a few days after seeing him beat her two boy
cousins. Then she details the two ways her mother’s family handles bad behavior for boys and
girls, “For a few days after that I am afraid of Uncle Bobby, afraid of what his big, rough hands
might do. But I am a girl, a daughter not a son, and I know that if I do something bad it is most
likely Auntie Link who will punish me, who will tell me to bring her a switch from the yard” (80).
These gendered differences go beyond discipline.

Her pushback against conventional gender roles with her mother’s family demonstrates
the interconnectedness of the oppressive parts of her identity. Walker’s relationships with her
girl cousins while with her mother’s family are marked by their defiance of the standard roles of
young girls. As Hakakian notes from a young age, Fremont is unable to ignore the treatment of
young girls as opposed to boys. Like Hakakian as well, these specified roles suppress Walker’s
freedom and desires. Her grandmother protests Walker’s desire to spend all her time with boys
and men. Her grandmother calls her rude for not wanting to stay inside and play with her female
cousin, Karla. Walker affirms her place with males, explaining her distaste for the stereotypical
gender conventions, “I don’t want to stay in the house, I don’t want to watch soap operas or play
with dolls, I want to be out riding, out watching my uncles do business, exchanging words with
all the other men they know in town” (82). She shows an earnest interest in participating in what
she views as a more meaningful relationship with her uncles. While girls must stay in watching
television shows or playing with toys, the men deal with business. Walker craves this
seriousness and this attracts her to her cousin Kietta. At her Uncle Curt and Auntie Eva’s house,
their daughter provides Walker with a more equal playmate than her cousin Karla, “Their
daughter Kietta is my favorite girl cousin because we are almost the same age and we both are quiet, thinking types who aren’t afraid of our uncles because they treat us like we are two of the boys. They treat us like we are mature, like we are grown” (83). Men and adults usually do not treat young girls with respect, but Walker and Kietta find this respect from the men. Walker sets herself against the stereotypical girl or non-thinking types entertained with soap operas and dolls.

Derogatory slang directed at racial identity prove to be another way others attack those of mixed race and create ruptures during crucial periods of growth. Walker’s mixed race creates a divide between herself and mother’s family, beyond just her uncooperative hair, once she learns the word ‘cracker’. She first hears the word at her Uncle Curt’s house from her Uncle Bobby but says she cannot fully comprehend its meaning until years later, “I don’t realize that it is a term black people use for white people, and which signifies the insanity, the cruelty, the maniacal culture of racist white people” (84). Just as Hakakian recalls the first time she saw a swastika and the derogatory word for Jew, Johoud, once only real to her in her father’s stories, Walker’s encounter with the term, cracker scars her. This insanity and cruelty associated with whites burden her despite her innocence. The moment she first gets called cracker comes while sitting with Uncle Bobby and cousins Robbie and Wayne after a full day of shooting objects off cans in the yard and riding motorcycles. Walker explains the atmosphere and how their company intoxicates her, “I am intoxicated by the smell and buff and love of these men I adore so, delirious with the airy dampness of the house, the thrill of the gun I have held in my hands, the way I have flown over snakes and pressed my cheek into my cousin’s sweaty back” (84). The violence and sweat and manly world she engages in thrills her. This intoxication causes her to have a giggling fit, “the heady mix of fear and excitement and safety and joy and heat rushes through me and I am full with a giddiness that feels like it is spinning me around in circles. I
laugh and laugh in my high-pitched giggle, unable to stop, unable to get control of myself, to calm down, to get into bed and go to sleep" (84-5). Walker’s inclusion in their world and the privileges that entails gives her an innocent childlike high.

Suddenly something as universal as a child’s uncontrollable laughter marks her as racially impure. Her uncle blames her behavior on her cracker ways. Her mother’s family makes it known in these subtle ways that the whiteness in Walker corrupts her. Despite familial ties, they speak out as African Americans who have been historically oppressed by whites to insinuate an impurity in those of mixed race. During this particular incident as Walker has her giggling fit, she notes the mood change once her uncle whispers to her cousins. He whispers the racial slur cracker, unbeknownst to Walker, “What, I say, looking up into his beard wide-eyed in the dark, reaching for his strong arms, What did you say? He turns to me with a grin as wide as my own. I said, Rebecca, that some people would call what you have the ‘sillies,’ but we call what you’ve got the ‘crackers.’ And my cousins burst out laughing” (85). Walker’s white half becomes the reason for her intoxication and craziness. No longer can Walker claim her own actions or feel fully accepted with her black family. She notes how this word reappears often and continues to drive her away from her family,

This is a word my uncle Bobby will use again and again to describe me or one of my mannerisms, and my cousins do too, even when I am grown and doing things they think are strange or weird, things they think are not black. Even though they are just kidding and we laugh about it together, a part of me feels pushed away when they say this, like I have something inside of me I know they hate. And so even as we stand there together I am struggling to find my ground, to know where I really belong. How do I reconcile my love for my uncles and cousins with the fact that I remind them of pain? (85)
Walker cannot ignore the uncomfortable reminder of her white heritage while she is with her mom’s family. When they call her cracker for her differences she struggles to find her true belonging. The traumas of slavery and civil rights affected her family but she sees half of her heritage as responsible or guilty by association for this pain. This incident isolates her from the half of herself that she feels the most affinity to, considering most of her life she is not accepted as white. Reflection upon this moment highlights the ruptures felt and constant exclusion she must battle.

Walker experiences her own traumas, intricately tied to her race and her encounters with the cycle of poverty, while living with her mother on the west coast. Part of her trauma and cause for later pain such as involvement with a bad crowd and teen pregnancy stem from the neglect by her mother. As Birkerts observes, female memoirists that focus on mothers often do so in order to make sense of the complex relationship. Walker’s forgiveness for her mother’s absence and neglect starkly contrasts her anger towards her father. Her mother decides to live in San Francisco “where she feels she can write better because she can see the sky” (116). This creative atmosphere as well as her frequent book tours and lectures leave little room for actual parenting. Walker comments on her mother’s neglect without hostility, but instead sorrow, “…maybe I want my mother to find out that where I am may not be very safe and I want her to tell me to come home. I want her to tell me that I can’t go so far away from her while I’m so young, I can’t get on the 44 late at night and ride to the other side of San Francisco to spend the night with people she doesn’t know, with people she’s never seen” (158). Walker craves love and attention from her mother. She recalls doing all of the laundry since fifth grade in addition to other chores, “I clean the house, scrub the tubs and toilets, and vacuum the carpets. I leave her loving goodbye notes when she leaves for the weekend or for the week to write in ‘the country’ where it is more quiet” (231). Walker plays the role of obedient daughter because she knows
what awaits if she disobeys, “If I act up or forget to do what’s required or make too much noise when she’s working, I find a letter waiting for me on the dining-room table. In it I am chided for being selfish, inconsiderate, thoughtless, lazy” (231). Her mother’s chastising continues by emphasizing the pressures of being a single parent, “She reminds me that it is hard being a single parent, that she works hard to keep us going and that my job is to take care of myself as much as I possibly can. To avoid making demands, to avoid having needs she may or may not be able to meet” (231). Her mother puts Walker in a tough position, forcing her to constantly be mature and grateful without room for any childlike behavior. Perhaps her mother’s words enforce an empathy for the struggles of single mothers, and in particular African American women, that overshadow any empathy she could possibly have for her father.

The role Walker’s mother forces her into causes Walker to feel less like a daughter and more like an adult or friend to her mother. Her mother explicitly calls her a sister during interviews, “In interviews my mother talks about how she and I are more like sisters than mother and daughter. I am game, letting her sit in my lap for a photo for the New York Times, playing the grown-up to my mother’s child for the camera” (231). This game Walker plays represents her actual position in relation to her mother. The way her mother constantly leaves Walker to her own devices and fails to fulfill the loving and overprotective role of mother make Walker become more self-sufficient and independent. Walker craves her mother’s love, but actually feels somewhat empowered by this role reversal, “I feel strong when she says those things, like I am much older and wiser than I really am. It’s just that the strength doesn’t allow for weakness. Being my mother’s sister doesn’t allow me to be her daughter” (231). Although being a sister to her mother empowers her, Walker realizes it also disables her. This disability falls second to the other traumas Walker endures. Her writing of the memoir, as Birkerts suggests about female memoirists on their mothers, perhaps provides her with a way to understand more deeply her
mother and maybe empathize with her over her father. However, it is clear that the role of sister eliminates the existence of daughter, which sets the stage for Walker to rely on other peers and personal encounters to educate herself growing up.

The notion of passing and assimilation extend to social actions with peers in California. She attempts to fit in with various groups of friends, as they teach her about performing gender and race. The friends Walker surrounds herself with while living with her mother in California lead her to experiment with drugs, stealing and sex. Her white friend Bethany makes her aware of how a female body must operate in the world. She sees, as a fifth grader, that older boys desire her friend Bethany, “boys behind the wheels covered with tattoos and hair nets. When they pass they don’t look at me, light brown and awkward with no body to speak of, but Bethany, with her skintight Lees and gauzy shirts, gets it every time...they yell out at her: Blanca, blanca, ven aqui. Come here, white girl” (111). Walker learns from a young age that girls must fit into certain types to get attention from boys. Bethany shows her how to put on makeup and dress the part. Shortly after, Walker begins seeing a boy named Michael. He asks her how old she is and she lies under the pressure, “I lie. I say fifteen. I pretend like I know what I am doing, talking to this cute fine sexy boy older than me..I don’t know how to hold my body, when to breathe, if I should look at him when we talk. I don’t know if being myself is enough. I don’t think it is” (122-3). She sleeps with Michael while her mother is away, but fears telling her friend Colleen, “I want to tell Colleen what happened, but I think she might think I’m fast or a slut. I am not sure I can trust her to keep it between us. She is Michael’s friend, after all, she has known him since they were kids. I am just the new girl, everyone is still checking me out” (132). Walker often navigates this complex world as a young girl alone or with little guidance from female peers. Without her mother’s presence, she faces the challenges of her gender and racial identity alone.
The performance of gender and race become pivotal to her declaration of her own identity. At school and with her peers, Walker understands her female body and race as owned by others. Groups of people and the world at large mark her as a black girl. Hyman’s work details the struggles of assimilation for Jews in America and though not a Jewish immigrant, Walker faces similar struggles of passing. Yezierska’s attempt at passing centered around clothes while Fremont’s mother used clothes and basic knowledge of the Christian religion to pass in a more drastic way. Walker’s experiences parallel Hakakian’s father and uncle’s passing, which was based not only their appearance but their performance. Her passing, different than that of Jew as non-Jew, forces her to choose which side of her mixed race to display. Walker sees how others like her friend Colleen act more black than herself, “She has big breasts and round hips and gold rings and necklaces and she wears lipstick and everything about her is Girl. She also has this attitude...Colleen can stick up for herself. She’s a real black girl, and I’m not” (126). Walker, unable to compete with this confidence and full embrace of blackness presents herself as too white, “When someone asks me something like that, or makes a joke about what I have on or the way I talk, I answer straight, directly. I’m too serious, too stiff to hit the ball back, to bounce some words across the pavement. They say I’m more like a white girl” (126). White again proves to be her weakness for fitting in.

She perfects her performance of blackness once she enrolls in her new school. When she begins attending Wilson “one of the toughest high schools in the city” she learns how to effectively perform her race (159). Her performance centers around her strut, “I walk next to Lisa, switching my hips, squaring my shoulders, tilting my head to one side and pretending I don’t see the kids on the wall. It’s the same walk I put on when we go to the projects in the middle of the night...”(159). This strut of hers is crucial to survival. Lisa teaches her how to imply she poses a threat, “From Lisa I learn to move like I know where I’m going, like I could be
dangerous if talked to the wrong way, like I have brothers or uncles who would come out of
nowhere to protect me if something should go down” (159). Her power as a black female
ultimately lies in her connections to powerful men. Walker must pass as black in these ways
even if others have seen her as yellow or cracker in the past. Passing as black provides a
means to survival in dangerous places like school or the projects.

Walker has some white friends while living with her mom but once she enters high
school, not only must she perform blackness, the other kids claim her as black. She grows apart
from her white Jewish friend, Lena, because of this, “Lena and I go to the same school, but I
have been claimed by black girls and meaty football-playing boys while Lena stays true to her
feathered, beer-drinking white friends” (143). The black kids at school assert ownership over
Walker, which in turn isolates her from whites such as Lena. Walker understands this
phenomenon as more than a natural growing apart, “...it is not knowing how to grow together,
not knowing how to bring her into the world that is slowly claiming me, marking me, not knowing
how to teach her how to walk and talk so that she can fit into my world, not knowing how to let
her be her and fit in without doing any goddamn thing” (144). Walker claims the separation is
partially out of her control while acknowledging a lack of effort on her own part. By allowing the
world to mark her as black and participating in what that means, Walker sees no way for a white
girl to partake. Walker chooses not to teach Lena how to perform in her new world or even allow
Lena to stay in her life as a white girl without changing her. While Lena cannot transport
between worlds, Walker constantly navigates between her white and black worlds just as
Hakakian’s uncle and father had to in Iran. Fremont’s mother temporarily endures this
phenomenon too when she maintained both identities as Batya and Maria before discarding
Batya. For Walker though, the world forces her to embrace her blackness and struggle
alongside other minorities while living with her mother, which she later begrudges her father for not understanding or relating to from his safe middle class Jewish life.

Walker’s growing pains from living with her mother exposed to extreme poverty and a black world fuel the later resentment of her father. As Batker claimed Yezierska calls for a return to the ghetto, Walker’s memoir advocates a return to a distinct ghetto, not that of Jewish American culture but the west coast ghetto life as a non-white. She pays an homage to this lifestyle later when comparing her existence as a non-white to her father’s east-coast suburban life. In California, Walker steals, does drugs with her friends and gets an abortion at fourteen. In middle school, her friend Lena introduces her to a world of drugs and wild nights, “One night I take a Quaalude. Fucked up, numb, only vaguely in touch with reality, I watch a pizza box catch fire in the oven while one of the boys dangles a girl over the railing of the balcony. When I wake up the next morning I have bruises all over my body I can’t explain. The next weekend Lena and I score some acid…” (140). A girl dangling over a balcony and unexplained bruises appear routine in this world Walker inhabits.

Her friendship with Lisa introduces her to extreme poverty and the thrills of shoplifting. Lisa, “the darkest” of her family, easily influences Walker. Lisa’s family is destitute, “We don’t talk about Lisa and her mother and sister being poor. We don’t talk about how they all three sleep on one lumpy mattress, how when Lisa’s mother sends us to the store for eggs and milk, she gives us food stamps, how the only heat in the house comes from the oven” (153-4). Lisa shows Walker how to get boys and steal in sixth grade, “We went into the store like we always did, casually, like we had pockets full of money, which we didn’t…when we came out, Lisa had a new shirt, I had the jacket and Susan had a bottle of bright pink Revlon fingernail polish” (156). Walker’s writing of this incident attempts to dissect the cause for their behavior. She shows the rush after stealing, “We ran shrieking and doubled over through the parking lot, toward the bus
stop, giddy and high on our badness” (156-7). All of the fun dissipates after settling on the bus, “But when we finally climbed on the bus and sat down, it got real quiet. Lisa stared out the window, Susan stared at me, I stared at all the other riders. A dead end. No one had stopped us, caught us, nothing. No one cared” (157). Her youth in California is full of this pain, craving attention and acting out and trying to prove herself to different groups. Her escapades reveal the pain of growing up in a binary gendered world as a non-white.

Her life in California teaches her about binary gender roles and how one demonstrates gender in society through first-hand experiences. Whether those encounters include having sex with Michael in middle school or talking about what she refers to as girl stuff with friends like Lisa, little of her knowledge comes from either of her parents. When she goes to live with her father and stepmother in fourth grade, her stepmother explains sex and periods, but assumes Walker’s mother filled in the rest the following two years. She recalls this lecture the next time she is living with them and seeing her friend’s brother, “Back in fourth grade my stepmother told me about how babies were made, what sex is, and what a period is, and I guess she and my father think my mother has filled me in on the rest while I was with her in fifth and sixth grades” (218). Her mother does not fill in these gaps, but rather Walker uses friends and real world encounters to learn about life as a female. Walker writes about the constant moving and the assumptions about the other household, “It suites me fine...moving around, making decisions without the benefit of their opinion, except that I feel so alone and unsure of myself, like I’m winging every decision, every move, every day, faking like I know what I’m doing all the time rather than being sure” (218). The pressures of acting as though she knows everything at such a young age seem unbearable at times. At fourteen she realizes she is pregnant with Michael’s baby. This finally pushes her to confide in an adult, her mother.
The abortion Walker has at fourteen stands out as monumental and a marker of difference in her coming of age from a privileged life with her father or as a white girl. After telling her boyfriend Michael, she approaches her mother, “When I tell her, Mom, I think I am pregnant, she responds without too long a hesitation. Find a doctor to get a test, she says. Once you know for sure, we’ll schedule an abortion” (249). Her mother responds calmly with the practical steps to take next. Her mother has never been one to yell at her, “She doesn’t lecture me, she doesn’t say, How did this happen, aren’t you using birth control, she doesn’t say much of anything except to call her boyfriend a few hours later and tell him” (249). Though when her mother calls her boyfriend, Walker’s description of her mother’s reaction makes Walker feel like an inconvenience, “I hear her telling him...that I’m pregnant, that I’ve just told her this, and that she’s exhausted. I hear her sighing as she speaks, the same sigh I hear when she worries about money, when she’s feeling overwhelmed and retreats to her bedroom for hours, sometimes days” (249). Her mother turns this into yet another stress to deal with, and Walker understands her mistake as a burden to her mother.

Although Walker describes the mundanity of the abortion and that day, the descriptions of her fears and her mother’s parallel history prove the abortion is a source of trauma for her. As she awaits the doctor, she ponders their mannerisms and intent, “And I wonder if the stern, laconic doctor I met with the week before has plans to sterilize me. I wonder if she had thought it all out, how there shouldn’t be any more black babies, and how sterilizing as many black women as she can will be doing her part for the cause” (249). In a moment of paranoia, her single medical procedure becomes part of a larger plan to sterilize black females. Despite being an outrageous claim, the truth of her fear speaks to her life as a black female and lack of body ownership and constant prejudice. She finds solace in knowing her mother endured the same procedure, “I know that my mother had an abortion before they were legal and so I know to be
grateful that I didn’t have to have a baby way before I was old enough to take care of it, but other than all of that stuff, the baby doesn’t cross my mind” (250-1). Walker affirms the baby does not cross her mind, but the abortion seems to indirectly affect her life hereafter.

Immediately after the abortion, Walker asks her mother to change schools from her high school to a private school. She claims she rarely thinks about the abortion or feels emotion from it, “I don’t feel guilt, like my roommate in college says I should years later, and I don’t feel sad the way pamphlets on abortion say I might” (251). Guilt or sadness do not drive her switch to the private school, but rather a fear or concern for her own future. After her abortion she asks her mom about changing schools, “...then I turn to her and out of the blue tell her that I’m not learning anything at Washington, and that if I stay there through twelfth grade I’ll know less than when I started. I tell her that I need to go to a private school” (251). The urgency comes directly from the recent abortion, an agonizing experience Walker still grapples with subconsciously, “I don’t know where this comes from, really.....it’s not like I know anybody my age who is actually in a private school. But I have just had an abortion at fourteen, and we don’t read books in my English class, only endless mimeographed handouts, and Michael’s friends in college work for minimum wage parking cars” (252). Her mother agrees. Walker’s trauma and suffering as a young black girl in California strongly contrast the world she attempts to fit into with her father.

Walker faces the most adversity while living with her mom. She attends a bad school, hangs out with troubled friends, has the abortion at fourteen, and she only escapes this endless cycle by pursuing a career in education. Her decision to attend a private school changes her path, and she learns valuable lessons on how to pass in different contexts. Just as Hakakian’s father and uncle passed in non-Jewish worlds and performed their Jewishness when appropriate, Walker learns when and how to act white or pass as black. Through her new school called Urban, a small “hippie private school”, she attends at fifteen, Walker goes to New
York for a summer work/study program called Project Month. Afterwards she comments on the
skills of passing as white or black, “By now I am well trained in not breaking the code, not saying
something too white around black people, or too black around whites. It’s easier to be quiet,
aloof, removed than it is to slip and be made fun of for liking the wrong thing, talking the wrong
way, being the wrong person, the half-breed oreo freak” (271). Her complicated navigation
between white and non-white worlds teaches her how to associate with whichever half of her
identity will be best accepted.

Before the abortion and drugs, Walker attempts to empathize with Jews and pass as a
Jew herself while living with her father. Her compartmentalization of Jewishness leads to an
internalized anti-Semitism in which she completely rejects affinity with her Jewish identity.
Before she disavows her Jewishness, Walker empathizes with Anne Frank in particular. She
reads Anne Frank’s diary as a young girl in her father’s home after finding the diary on a
bookshelf. Frank’s diary causes her to fear the Gestapo and have recurring nightmares that hint
at this empathy for Jewish suffering. Walker finds Anne Frank’s diary without knowing anything
besides that Frank is a young Jewish girl living during World War II. However, Walker’s
encounter with Frank’s diary marks a transition. Walker, despite being only half Jewish and half
black, seems to identify with Jewishness fully in this particular moment, “While I read Anne
Frank’s diary, I become her. I live in a secret room in a big house, behind a secret door with my
family...When I get to the end of the book and read that Anne Frank was taken by the Gestapo
and killed, I feel something I have never felt before. I feel terror and loss and like nothing can
save me from the same death as Anne’s” (89). She then worries about being discovered and
killed by the Gestapo. Not only has Frank’s diary touched her emotionally, Walker absorbs
Frank’s fears and burdens of loss. Walker cannot shake this certainty of an imminent tortuous
death, “I am so certain of this, so certain that my mind goes numb and dark and my bones start
to hurt, like someone is pulling at them from the inside, stretching them, making them crack and creak” (89). Walker’s nightmares span beyond a normal fear, causing physical pain. She refuses to believe her father’s reassurances of her safety. This intense emotional and physical pain Walker feels demonstrates that extra sensitivity she later claims to possess.

Though she identifies deeply with Frank, Walker makes it clear that her empathy is not particularly Jewish but rather, a more universal identification with suffering at hands of prejudice. The image of Frank awakens in her this empathy for all ethnic and racial identities. Walker boasts of her empathy, but not strictly for Jews or African Americans. She addresses the question of how to identify with her people. The term people encompasses African Americans and Jews, but she refuses to sympathize with only those of her ethnicity or race,

What I do feel is an instant affinity with beings who suffer, whether they are my own, whatever that means, or not. Do I identify with the legacy of slavery and discrimination in this country? Yes. Do I identify with the legacy of anti-Jewish sentiment and exclusion? Yes. Do I identify with the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War Two? Yes...Do I feel I have to choose one of these allegiances in order to know who I am or in order to pay proper respect to my ancestors? No. Do I hope that what my ancestors love in me is my ability to muster compassion for those who suffer, including myself? Yes (306-7).

She draws no distinction between her sensitivity to pain of those with similar ethnic backgrounds to hers and those without that common ground, despite implications the Anne Frank episode could suggest of a specific Jewish empathy and identification. In a way far from Fremont’s adoption of historical Jewish suffering, Walker refuses to claim the history of Jewish suffering as her own or show any special connection to it over other historical genocide and racism. She firmly asserts that her sensitivity to all does not preclude her from respecting
ancestors and the backgrounds they share, yet she flees from respecting her father's Jewish ancestors in other ways like changing her last name.

Her memories of her father’s side cause Walker to construct her own ghetto mindset by dissociating with her concept of Jewishness and attempting to confine and annihilate it. These memories fuel resentment towards her father and Jewish people in general. Besides her mother’s absence at all Leventhall affairs, Walker is haunted by her paternal great grandmother. Her great grandmother Jennie refuses to speak to her, “Great-grandma Jennie came from Russia, from a little town called Kiev, but she won’t admit this to me even though I am her great-granddaughter and writing a report on my oldest living family member for school” (35). Not even a school assignment coaxes Jennie to communicate with Walker. More than silence, Walker notices an angry refusal, “At Grandma’s house she won’t look at me when I ask her this question, but I know she hears me because her face looks tight, like someone is pulling her ears back behind her head. And even though she is sitting still in her chair...her swollen arthritic fingers clutch at the steel tubing of her walker” (35). This is why both her grandmother, Jennie’s daughter, and Walker’s father have trouble justifying Jennie’s actions. Walker cannot forget this hurt and exclusion.

The excuses made on Jennie’s behalf do little to appease Walker and she continues to feel distant from her Jewish heritage. Her grandmother explains that Jennie, her own mother, came to America at a young age and doesn’t remember the answers to Walker’s questions but Walker feels purposely ignored, “I nod my head but still don’t understand why Great-grandma Jennie is always so angry, why she hardly ever looks at or talks to me. I feel invisible, present but also not, like I am floating” (36). Her father says she is too young to understand Jennie’s fears from Russia of being labeled a Communist or deported or to understand the pogroms Jennie fled thus, “He says that this desire to protect me, and not anything else, is behind her
angry silence. I am not too young to feel shut out” (36). Jennie’s behavior, regardless of the circumstances, isolates Walker further from her heritage. Walker’s own grandmother, Jennie’s daughter, also pushes Walker from her Jewish identity despite her affirmations to Walker that she is Jewish no matter what Walker’s mother may tell her (40). Those reassurances cannot erase the typical conversations at Leventhal dinners Walker distinctly recalls. Walker remembers her grandmother complaining of non-Jewish grandkids, “....listening to my grandmother kvetch about how ungrateful her daughters-in-law are and how tragic it is that she isn’t ever going to have Jewish grandchildren because her sons married shiksas” (46). Her grandmother and great-grandmother’s distaste for shiksas or the non-Jewish relatives turns into an attack on African Americans for Walker. She tries to picture her mother at these Leventhal dinners, “I imagine that if my mother were there she would be unbearably sensitive, masked, edgy. It would be too stressful for her to sit and pretend that she felt comfortable and embraced, welcomed like any other family member. As if race, and hers in particular, was not an issue” (46). While Hakakian, Yezierska, and Fremont’s parents felt prejudice against them because of their Jewish identity, Walker must combat attacks on the African American half of her identity from Jewish relatives. These moments within her own family mark the beginning of her alienation from Judaism.

Jewishness represents an adaptable identity while blackness remains visible even when Walker wants to hide it. Jewishness becomes invisible or mutable for her, but blackness is always tangible and sensible. Fremont’s parents construct their own ghetto mindset to make their Jewishness invisible as well, but Hakakian and Yezierska dismantle ghetto mindsets by writing of their own physical Jewish ghettos. Walker suppresses her Jewishness because of the associations she makes between a privileged suburban life for whites and her father’s Jewishness. Unlike any of the other three memoirs, Walker associates Jewishness with the
majority culture rather than that of the outsider. Jewishness represents a betrayal of her mother and her African American roots. As her parents go through their separation, Walker notes the rise of the national Black Power movement that replaces the radicalism of Dr. King’s civil rights, “Black-on-black love is the new recipe for revolution, mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor...My father, once an ally, is, overnight, recast as an interloper. My mother, having once found refuge in a love that is unfashionable, may no longer have been willing to make the sacrifice” (60). Her father becomes the enemy just for having white skin. His new identity becomes further complicated for Walker after the divorce, once he remarries a Jewish woman and lives in nice East coast suburbs of New York. Walker’s loyalties lie with her mother who understands her struggles of living in America with non-white skin, but she wants to embrace her stepmother at first. She begins calling her stepmother mom, “…I call her Mom and she answers. I feel giddy and excited, like I am doing something new and fun and dangerous; and I feel duplicitous, shameful, and bad, like I am betraying my mother, like I am choosing this shiny white version over her” (92). Warmly embracing her stepmother feels too much like betrayal to Walker’s mother, which ties back to Walker’s internal conflicts over race.

Walker’s father moves from the Bronx with his new wife to Larchmont or the Jewish suburbs and Walker resents this new life. She fails to picture herself, a mixed girl, in this pristine lifestyle. Her internalized anti-Semitism becomes more overt when she directly identifies her father’s Jewish life with the American WASP culture. Walker refers to the move in a condescending way, referring to this as what the Jewish dream prescribes. Her resentment goes beyond this with her next claim, “I think that the house is very Father Knows Best and the move is some kind of plot my stepmother has concocted to kill me, to wipe away all traces of my blackness or to make me so uncomfortable with it that I myself will it away” (206). She mocks his lifestyle with a comparison to the tidy idea of a 1950s American home as portrayed in a
television sitcom, but then imagines her stepmother plotting to rid her of her blackness. This white suburban model threatens to erase her blackness by her stepmother’s hand or even her own. It becomes a battle, “...I think that she and I are going to battle for my father’s soul, me with my brown body pulling him down memory lane to a past more sensual and righteous, she scratching the dirt off pale Jewish roots I didn’t know he had” (206-7). Walker remembers the passion of her parents coming together for southern civil rights and conceiving her, the movement child for the greater good. Now, her father looks as though he is attempting to leave behind the exciting, civil rights’ “sensual and righteous” history that birthed her in order to return to his own roots. Walker separates herself from this embrace of Jewishness her father and his new wife display. Thus, she hopes to erase her Jewishness before her stepmom erases her blackness. Their lifestyle continues to further disgust her, motivating her to change her last name her senior year of high school.

Perhaps Rebecca Walker’s reflections show a change in status of Jewishness in the country, revealing something of a transformation from the ghettoized, poverty of Yezierska to an association with the mainstream white culture in America. Fremont uncovers her hidden Jewishness, embracing her unique ethnicity and also seeing how her childhood stood out from non-Jewish American culture. Hakakian also notes her own cultural Jewish markers that differentiate her childhood and home life from non-Jews or Muslims. Hakakian, Fremont, and Yezierska all identify the ways they, as Jewish females, feel oppressed and persecuted. Walker only details the gender constraints felt but in a mostly non-white context. While the other authors deal with oppression because of their Jewish identities, Walker becomes the one persecuting that part of herself. Walker’s own father fails to accept her in the ways she craves,

When my father tells me I’m exaggerating about my feelings about Larchmont, I want to kill him, but more than that I want to kill my white, holier-than-thou, perfect Jewish
steppmother, because I'm convinced this whole place is her dream and not his, because
I'm convinced if it wasn't for her my father would still be mine and would listen to me and
would tell me to be proud of who I am, that I was born for a reason and that being black
and white is better than being just one thing and screw people who can't deal (218–9).

Walker shifts some of her anger and frustrations onto her stepmother rather than just her father,
but she still feels rejected by her father, in addition to society at large. This clearly pushes her to
associate negativity with Jews and reject her own Jewishness.

Walker separates herself from this embrace of Jewishness her father and his new wife
display. Walker, originally Rebecca Leventhal, changes her name, placing her mother's maiden
name last to disassociate with her father's Jewishness, to which she feels no connection. She
cannot change her non-white skin, the immutable part of her identity, yet she can change her
name and make her Jewishness invisible. She explains her decision using past experiences,
“When I change my name I do so because I do not feel an affinity with whiteness, with what
Jewishness has become, and I do feel an affinity with blackness, with an experience of living in
the world with non-white skin” (313). This observation seems passive enough, but then Walker
continues to explain the struggles of the black experience, elevating them above the Jewish
American experience she disdains. Her black associations remind her of this anger, “While my
black friends are shuttled through mediocre schools into poorly paid jobs in the service industry
and I escape only by the grace of God, my father has seemingly stopped caring about all things
racial and political and has settled into a comfortable routine commuting from Westchester...I do
not see how I fit into his life, or that I want to” (313). She directs anger at her father for what she
sees as ignoring the struggles of blacks. Jewishness becomes intricately tied to blissful
ignorance of minority struggles for Walker. This seems to serve as the basis for her dissociation
and disgust with Jewishness as an ethnicity. Walker's alienation from Judaism raises questions
about the mutability of Judaism in America during the twentieth century versus the more apparent visibility of other minorities. Judaism, unlike in the other memoirs, becomes associated with the majority culture and therefore resented.

Failed attempts to assimilate and adopt the modern ghetto girl stereotype Prell identifies as the JAP, contribute to Walker’s internalized anti-Semitism. Her ghetto girl identity comes from an upbringing in poverty as black or not white. Her ultimate rejection from the Jewish world causes her to disavow her Jewish heritage. Walker’s inability to pass as a JAP, the opposite of the typical Jewish immigrant struggles of passing in American culture, leads her instead to identify with her black feminine side. Like the ghetto tales that advocated an abandonment of Jewishness, Walker’s memoir advocates another life over a Jewish one. Unlike Hess’ ghetto fiction that dismantles the ghetto, Walker constructs her own metaphorical one even though she claims to possess a universalistic empathy. Her memoir aligns more with Vicki Baum who in her ghetto novellas disavowed her Jewish identity. Walker instead chooses another ghetto life, relating to life in poverty stricken areas as a non-white female. Walker fails to fully assimilate at Jewish camp and while living with her dad, gets dumped by a boy because her skin is not white. Walker explains the power of the stereotype Jap at camp, “Jap is this word we throw around at camp, a word that is always in the air, lurking behind the gold chais...We call ourselves Japs, make fun of what a ‘Jap camp’ Fire Lake is. It means something repulsive, gauche, flashy, and yet secretly we are proud to be Japs, to think of ourselves as spoiled by Daddy’s money and Mom’s overprotectiveness” (179). Yet, she never feels “Jewish enough” at camp amongst all the other Japs (184). This rejection is not limited to camp. Walker’s white boyfriend in New York dumps her because of his peers harassing him for dating a black girl, “...the day Luca breaks up with me, abruptly, out of the blue, about a week after Tina told me some of his friends on the hockey team had razzed him for going out with a black girl, or, as they put it, going out with a
nigger” (220). Walker’s blackness remains visible and the marker distancing her from peers despite her attempts to assimilate within Jewish culture or pass as white.

All of her trauma from living as a black female in a society that favors white and racial purity, fuels her internalized anti-Semitism. Her parents’ divorce, her complicated relationship with them, and the constant racism Walker endures does not allow her to distinguish Jewishness from WASP culture. The broken marriage and collapse of their dream leaves scars Walker. She views Jewishness through this lens of trauma. As Birkerts notes, her writing of her trauma allows her to understand her ruptures to comprehend them and be free of them. Walker says of her memories, “This is how memory works. It reminds me that no matter how strong I feel in myself...I am still the little girl who is too dark or too light, too rich or too poor to be trusted. Memory works like this: I am always standing outside the gate, wanting to be let in” (188). She continues, making her pain even more explicit, “This is how memory works. Beneath the mask, behind the cool, unperturbed exterior there is rage. There is pure liquid fire threatening to annihilate. And I am afraid” (189). Her fears of not belonging and memories of rejection enrage her but also make her fear. Her writing allows her to reclaim power and control in the face of these emotions. Finally she wants to speak for herself, “It is jarring to think that most of my life I have been defined by others, primarily reactive, going alone with the prevailing view” (74). From a life of being defined by others, Walker asserts her authority to self-definition with this memoir.

*Black White and Jewish* allows Walker to speak for herself and interpret her life growing up as female with a mixed racial and ethnic identity. Jewishness gets white washed for her, losing its cultural distinctions amongst the majority of white Americans. The other memoir authors dismantle ghettos to gain control over painful pasts of oppression because of their Jewish heritage. Walker’s project becomes a way to disavow her Jewishness, thus oppressing
herself and displaying an internalized anti-Semitism. Writing about a time when Jewish Americans were received with much more acceptance in the country than African Americans, Walker finds it hard to sympathize with Jews who she associates with her father’s comfortable lifestyle over African Americans, like her mother and herself, who endure racism seemingly more frequently and explicitly.

Conclusion

The four memoirs negotiate female Jewish identity in unique cultural contexts. Each work portrays its own versions of a ghetto girl navigating the world. Jewish identity presents itself as a challenge, coupled with gender constraints and in the case of Walker, racism. Each author’s conception of the ghetto, whether she is constructing or dismantling it, reveals the complexities and the multiple facets of identities for Jewish females across time and culture. The constraints from society the authors face cause them to dismantle their ghettos or in Walker’s case, construct one to annihilate her own Jewishness. The act of memoir writing provides an outlet to reclaim the self and work through traumatic experiences.

The memoirs explore the challenges of passing and choosing to identify with particular facets of oneself. This choice often isolates other parts of the self, something with which all four authors struggle. Yezierska concludes that her poverty or American ghetto Jewishness will forever be tied to her artistic self as a writer and progressive immigrant woman. Hakakian also realizes her Persian nationality cannot be separated from her Jewish femininity. The Iranian revolution though, isolated her for being Jewish and female, which limited her capabilities of passing or being accepted as an Iranian. Fremont’s parents shed their former European Jewish pasts but their past traumatizes them and Fremont. Fremont confronts her parents’ decision to pass and the extreme circumstances that led to them abandoning or muting their Jewishness
and how she can express her own newly discovered Jewishness. Walker, like Fremont’s parents, chooses to mute the Jewish part of her identity. Her frustrations with her father’s privileged existence in relation to her struggles as a non-white female in America born in the late 1960s lead her to disavow associating with Jewishness. Each of their traumas greatly influence their idea of Jewishness.

The authors also demonstrate how the pressures of being a female in society affected them in conjunction with anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice. From Hakakian, with an extreme case of female oppression in the context of a religious regime, to Yezierska feeling pressures from Old World Judaism and tightly defined feminine roles in Hollywood, the authors combat much more than just Jewish suffering. Fremont’s gender roles appear more flexible, with the heavy emphasis placed on sisterhood in her family, but she still struggles with her sexuality. Walker’s awareness of her gender links closely with her struggles of passing; she fails to pass as white and Jewish or a JAP and instead finds comfort in her performance of black femininity. All the authors, with the exception of Fremont, feel inferiority because of their gender at particular moments in their lives or girlhoods.

The act of memoir writing allows these four authors to understand mixed identities as flexible and dangerous, while they deconstruct, or in Walker’s case, construct their own ghettos. How they appear to others, intentionally or unintentionally, directly affects their treatment. These female memoirists reclaim their identity and past traumas of suffering and oppression by writing them. Memoirs provide a safe outlet of exploration and understanding of their complex selves with Hakakian as Jewish Persian female, Yezierska as a female Jewish immigrant artist and daughter of religious Polish Jew, Fremont as the daughter of Holocaust survivors raised thinking she was Polish Catholic, as well as a closeted lesbian to her family, and Walker as a black, white and Jewish female. Memoir writing aids them in making sense of the Jewish female
shaped by her own and her family’s history. Writing becomes the therapeutic release to the 
rupture of their traumatic pasts. The way these authors craft their narratives draws attention to 
moments of intense conflict with their identities in order to gain control over their self and 
histories that were silenced, ignored or censored.

The memoir project pushes the four authors to confront ghettos of their past. Yezierska 
escapes the Polish ghetto of Jewish Europe but feels the American Jewish ghetto of New York 
ingrained as part of herself. Hakakian deconstructs the ghetto of her past, as Yezierska 
deconstructs her ghettoized inferiority. Fremont must deconstruct the ghetto of her parents’ past 
to speak out against the injustice. Her re-imagining of their traumas alongside her own identity 
struggles extend herself from a single female to take on the ambitious mission of understanding 
and retelling others’ pain. Walker locates the source of her past pains as her rejection from 
white and Jewish societies, thus constructing her own ghetto to confine her Jewishness. The 
authors’ projects raise issues about assimilation, acculturation, and passing. The memoirs warn 
that passing or assimilation often proves temporary. As rights and social status are stripped 
away, how does one find one’s place in a rejecting society? Failures to assimilate into 
anti-Semitic or racist culture inevitably shape a person and fit into the larger narrative of 
oppressed Jewish females.
Works Cited


Hyman, Paula. *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and


Rose, Alison. “Childhood and Youth of Jewish Girls”; “Literature and Culture”. Jewish Women


Willard-Traub, Margaret K. "Rhetorics of Gender and Ethnicity in Scholarly Memoir: Notes on a Material Genre," in *College English* 65.5 (May 2003), 511-525.
