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An immigrant novel revisited: Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*

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Abstract: The article explores the genre of immigrant narrative, comparing two early-twentieth-century novels written by the Jewish-American writers Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska with a contemporary novel penned by the Chinese-American author Jean Kwok. Taking adaptation theory (Sanders 2006 and Hutcheon 2006) as a starting point, I examine how Kwok's novel adapts, revises, and reimagines a familiar pattern across time and cultures in order to make it representative of Chinese Americans. The analysis draws attention to experiences of Chinese immigrant women, their class membership and socio-economic status.

Jean Kwok's debut novel *Girl in Translation* (2010)[1] offers an iteration of the familiar genre of the immigrant novel, according to which immigrants come to America, experience economic exploitation and the seamy side of urban life, but their hard work and education finally lead them to success in the form of economic and individual stability. Kwok's novel retells and extends a familiar tale, as an 11-year-old girl, Kimberly Chang, leaves Hong Kong before the transfer to the Chinese and, together with her mother, tries to survive on the paltry wages of a Chinatown sweatshop in Brooklyn. After the initial hardships associated with mastering the English language and American mores, the girl excels at school, earns a scholarship to a prestigious private school, goes to Yale on a full scholarship, and then on to Harvard Medical School. As success comes at a price, her educational and professional accomplishments are not exactly paralleled by happiness in the private sphere, yet the ending implies a promise of such.

The aim of my paper is to analyze Kwok's novel in the light of the immigrant narratives that had preceded it, namely the early-twentieth-century novels written by Jewish-American writers, such as Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925). González notices "a notable historical parallelism between the Jewish and Chinese people, and between the Jewish and Chinese diasporas. In the United

[1] Kwok is an author of *Mambo in Chinatown* (2014) and *Searching for Silvie Lee* (2019), in which she further explores her American immigrant experience.

States, the Chinese are called the 'New Jews' because they seem to be living proof of the American Dream."[2] The history of immigration, which is key to the shaping of the American nation, has made the myth of the American Promised Land one of its mythic templates, and it lends itself well to being rewritten in Kwok's narrative. According to Barthes, "Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication…",[3] but which through adaptation/appropriation can be placed in another cultural or historical context. With adaptation theory (Sanders 2006 and Hutcheon 2006) as a starting point, I will examine how Kwok's novel adapts, revises, and reimagines this familiar pattern across time and cultures. Antin's and Yezierska's immigrant narratives may be viewed as source texts, what Genette calls a "hypotext,"[4] whereas the genre of assimilative immigrant narratives comprises the pool of texts out of which Kwok's novel surfaces, offering its contemporary adaptation. The text is both autonomous and may function in relationship to other texts, as Walter Benjamin claims "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories."[5] A juxtaposition of a contemporary text by a Chinese-American author with the classics of the genre allows for tracing the similarities and differences between the immigrant literary prototypes and their later adaptations, revising the genre of assimilation narratives within the subset of American ethnic writing. However, as adaptation is no longer premised only on fidelity and comparison but is seen as a process of cultural dialogue, the focal point of my study is to examine in what respect Kwok's novel follows the traditions of the immigrant novel in America, in how and where it departs from its early-twentieth-century paradigm, and in what ways it enriches the genre.

Adaptation as creative reinterpretation

In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) Linda Hutcheon subdivides the concept of adaptation into the process, the product generated, and the process of reception. Most suited to my study is "[a] doubled definition of adaptation as a product (as extensive, particular transcoding) and as a process (as creative reinterpretation and palimpsestic intertextuality)."[6] Viewed as a product, adaptation undergoes "transcoding" which is "a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation."[7] As a process of reception, adaptation "is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation."[8] Without posing a threat to the text's distinctiveness and autonomy, the appeal of adaptation "lies in the simple act of almost but not quite repeating, in the revisiting of a theme with variations […]. Like ritual, this kind of repetition

[2] González 2001: 229.
[3] Barthes 1972: 110 [italics in original].
[4] Genette 1997: 4.
[5] Benjamin 2006: 367.
[6] Hutcheon 2006: 22.
[7] *Ibid*.: 8.
[8] *Ibid*. [italics in original].

brings comfort, a fuller understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next."[9] This mixture of repetition and difference brings about "the pleasure of accessibility."[10] As Hutcheon furthers her argument, "adaptation appeals to the 'intellectual and aesthetic pleasure'[11] of understanding the interplay between works, of opening up a text's possible meanings to intertextual echoing."[12] In Julie Sanders's words, "It is this inherent sense of play, produced in part by the activation of our informed sense of similarity and difference between the texts being invoked, and the connected interplay of expectation and surprise, that for me lies at the heart of the experience of adaptation and appropriation."[13] The examination of different works of literature in search for parallels, in terms of form or discourse, allows us to reimagine an old story in order to discover its contemporary relevance.

With a degree of proximity to prior representations of the immigrant novel genre, one may recognize a visual and thematic continuity between the early-twentieth--century Jewish-American novels by Antin and Yezierska and Kwok's text. Both Kwok and her Jewish-American predecessors distance themselves from their ethnic roots by choosing to write in English, the language of their adopted home. It is the American voice that tracks the development of the immigrant protagonist's female self, although Kwok's heroine continues to identify herself as a member of the Chinese-American diaspora, manifesting, for example, the cultural practices of the group that promote success: "we set up five altars in the kitchen: to the earth god, the ancestors, the heavens, the kitchen god and Kuan Yin."[14] In this way, the author reclaims her ethnic background while integrating it into her American life. Where Mary Antin provides a glossary with the Yiddish words at the end of her novel, Kwok's text features a few Chinese words whose meaning is explained by context clues. Like in other ethnic narratives, culturally specific information not only provides a verifiable context and gives authenticity to the narrative voice but also familiarizes the general public with the distinctiveness of Chinese-American culture and history. However, in line with the principles of assimilative narratives, this distinct ethnicity is seen as a social stigma that will gradually vanish in the process of the character's assimilation and acculturation.

As textuality is tied to cultural and generic conventions of a given period, both early--twentieth-century Jewish-American assimilative narratives and Kwok's text represent literary realism, and as they favor theme they do not engage in experiments in form. Its linear structure and third-person omniscient narrator produce a traditional nineteenth--century novel in which the narrative forms a clearly comprehensible plot for the reader. Hutcheon sees the appeal of "the familiar linear and realist story-line,"[15] which makes the story easily accessible and thus appealing. The details of a daily routine of immigrant life and attention to what is commonplace and ordinary allow the author to explore social ills through the immigrant lens. By reflecting on their problems and setting them

[9] *Ibid*.: 114–115.
[10] *Ibid*.: 117.
[11] Du Quesnay 1979: 68.
[12] *Ibid*.: 117.
[13] Sanders 2006: 25.
[14] Kwok 2010: 21.
[15] Hutcheon 2006: 25.

against the lives of affluent Americans, these texts offer an insight into power structures in contemporary multi-ethnic societies.

Adaptation and the genre of immigrant narrative

I recognize *Girl in Translation* as an adapted text, which triggers my expectations about the genre. Since Kwok's novel tells immigrant story, its readers anticipate the plot and characterization based on their prior knowledge about the genre: a story about an arduous journey far from home to establish a new life in a foreign country. According to William Q. Boelhower, the structure of the generic immigrant narrative consists of "[a]n immigrant protagonist, representing an ethnic world-view, [who] comes to America with great expectations, and through a series of trials is led to reconsider them in terms of his financial status."[16] In the context of the twentieth-century Chinese-American community, the novel conflates and revises the genres of the ethnic Bildungsroman and assimilation fiction through a female lens, in which an immigrant experience is rendered retrospectively through the eyes of an adolescent. It is a story of growing up and gaining self-autonomy through diligence and determination: "I say I have not been so much pushed by winds as pulled forward by the force of my decisions,"[17] asserts Kim. The victory of a young person's will to shape her own destiny places Kimberly Chang alongside such heroines as Mary Antin and Sara Smolinsky. By unconsciously adopting Ralph Waldo Emerson's teachings on the value of the solitary individual and Benjamin Franklin's paradigm of success (frugal and pragmatic) as their models, the protagonists confirm the concept of individual achievement as fundamental to the immigrant success story. Financial success legitimizes Kim's place in the adopted society in the eyes of mainstream Americans, proving her worth and merit to her new homeland. Kramer's comment that Antin's narrative "reaffirmed the contested conviction that American selfhood resided not in race and ethnicity, but in the replicable assimilable plot of the American success story"[18] might also be applicable to Kwok's protagonist. Just like Antin's Mary on the path of assimilation, Kimberly frees herself from the burden of her memories and does not dwell on the past, but she complicates the American Dream discourse by partial fulfillment. Hers is the story of immigrant success, yet there is a price the heroine must pay. In the case of Kwok's protagonist, it is a painful compromise between her rational beliefs and emotional desires, between public and private definitions of success, which leave her with a MD degree but unmarried, and her son fatherless.

Kwok exploits the genre of fictional autobiography to demonstrate "a growing awareness of the self and the construction of authorial identity,"[19] which conforms to a culturally sanctioned model.[20] For many ethnic writers the writing process is a way to come to terms with their anxieties, as the genre of semi-autobiographical novel lends

[16] Boelhower 1981: 6.
[17] Kwok 2010: 9.
[18] Kramer 1998: 135.
[19] Gasztold 2011: 77.
[20] In interviews Jean Kwok asserts that *Girl in Translation* is a work of fiction which loosely draws from her own experiences of immigration to the U.S.

itself well to rendering the nuances of the experience of displacement. For ethnic immigrant writers, the genre of life-writing serves the assimilationist ideologies of the dominant culture, allowing immigrant women writers to present themselves as professional intellectuals. A textual reference to the existing canon of American immigrant literature implies authority, putting a debuting novelist on par with other acclaimed writers and her work within a recognized literary culture. Hutcheon explains: "Part of this ongoing dialogue with the past, for that is what adaptation means for audiences, creates the doubled pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced – and knowingly so."[21] Adapting culturally accredited works such as immigrant narratives in a nation built on the concept of immigration is a relatively safe practice for new authors and publishers, and it might also ensure commercial success, especially since the publishing industry tends to regulate the literary market through the maintenance of genre classifications that are clear to potential buyers/readers.

William Q. Boelhower observes that the construction of an immigrant selfhood relies on a model that was "rigidly codified" over a century ago by the "foundational" and largely assimilationist autobiographies of the likes of Edward Bok, Mary Antin, and Marcus E. Ravage (The Making of Ethnic Autobiography in the United States, 125).[22] Kwok communicates her version of the immigrant myth across generations and cultures by appropriating the common literary archetypes which propel the reiteration of the same story: an adolescent female immigrant narrator who is the voice of an ethnic minority, an impoverished urban setting located at the margins of the metropolis, and the contrast between white affluent middle-class America and its blue-collar masses offer another variation on the familiar theme. However, where Antin claims to speak on behalf of the "scores of unwritten lives,"[23] Kwok's narrative voice stresses the individual experience over the collective. Her protagonist is a young woman dreaming of "a satisfying career, with a nice husband, in a clean home, a kid or two."[24] It is only through hard work and persistence that she, just like her literary prototypes, achieves professional and material success. During the process, Asian-American immigrants are "pressured to remain faithful to ancestral heritage, while at the same time admonished to assimilate and become fully American, but ultimately finding that because of their Asian genes, many Americans will never give them full acceptance."[25] Kwok centers the concept of the American Dream not only on individual achievement and success but also on successful assimilation and material gains, recognizing its allure for immigrants. In Cullen's words, "[t]he possibility of a poor girl from a small town becoming transformed into a Hollywood princess on the silver screen seems to embody our notion of an individualistic democracy far more than, say, an equal distribution of economic resources."[26]

The choice of immigrant fiction as the genre favored by first-generation ethnic authors met the expectations of turn-of-the-century readers, but contemporary critics find this

[21] Hutcheon 2006: 116.

[22] In "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach" Sau-ling Cynthia Wong challenges Boelhower's western-based paradigm of immigrant autobiography, claiming that it is not suited to the rhetorical aims of Asian-American life writing.

[23] Antin [1912] 1997: XIII.

[24] Kwok 2010: 173.

[25] de Manuel, Davis 2006: 7.

[26] Cullen 2001: 204.

convention stifling and reductive. Betsy Huang explains the danger of reproducing one narrative model:

> While [it] does an important work of illuminating the trials and tribulations of geographic dislocation, cultural reorientation, and other assimilation concerns of the immigrant experience, it nevertheless produces the paradoxical effect of solidifying the status of Asian Americans as perpetually "immigrant" – that is, always in the state of becoming American and never in the state of being, to borrow Stuart Hall's useful formulation.[27]

By adopting the standpoint of feminism, the author alludes to other culturally validated texts penned by women that promote a female perspective. Kwok's novel, however, does not propose a break with this tradition; rather, it informs and enriches its stream by contributing to the genre of American semi-autobiographical narratives.

Immigrant experience through a female lens

Kwok's literary effort follows in the footsteps of early-twentieth-century American--Jewish immigrant narratives that champion the women who were silenced and marginalized, making their voices heard and their experiences relevant to American culture. Hence, Kwok's adaptation offers a continuation of a particular narrative that is of cultural value to American society. The choice of a female narrator promotes a gendered angle within the coming-of-age narrative. Like Antin's heroine, a Russian Jewess named Maryashe who becomes Mary in America, Kwok's protagonist changes her Chinese name Ah-Kim to the English-sounding Kimberly: "It's very important to have a name that is as American as possible. Otherwise, they might think you were fresh off the boat!"[28] Mastering the English language is a step to inclusion and empowerment, something the immigrant parents rarely have an opportunity to achieve, instead relying on their children to translate for them. With better command of the language comes a better understanding of American mores or lack thereof, often resulting in feelings of shame and humiliation, especially on the part of more assimilated immigrant children: "The worst was when Ma wanted to bargain, the way she had in Hong Kong, and I had to translate for her."[29] The generation gap between the immigrant parents and children, in Jewish and Chinese immigrant families alike, is not only based on differences in linguistic fluency, but it also reveals varying strategies and degrees of assimilation and acculturation. While Kimberly strives to carve her niche in American society, her mother continues to live outside of the mainstream, in an ethnic ghetto – the only familiar place that enables her to find employment and support her family.

Kim's gender and ethnicity appear to be less of an obstacle to professional success than that encountered by Antin's and Yezierska's heroines, as she is admitted to an elite, private high school and later to a prestigious college. Initially associated with American Jews, who were perceived to achieve a higher degree of socio-economic success than

[27] Huang 2010: 6.
[28] Kwok 2010: 16.
[29] *Ibid*.: 112.

the average population, Asian immigrants have been pegged as the model minority[30] in regard to education, income, low criminality, and high family stability.[31] On the one hand, Kim and her mother must show determination in overcoming the obstacles of immigrant daily life, while also being "good, law-abiding minorities who know their place within society and do not challenge their place in it."[32] Even though Kim may be seen as a paragon of fortitude not only by other immigrants but also by Americans, the successes of Asian-American immigrants fail to address their intra-ethnic diversity and divert attention from the racism and immigrant hardships which accompany their struggles. In an opening sentence Kim says: "I was born with a talent" (9); thus, as a representative of Asian immigrants, Kwok's heroine falls victim to stereotyping by reiterating the pervasive cultural image of outstanding academic success, even though her innate ability is matched by her enormous efforts. Moreover, her claim "endorses racist concepts of intelligence and academic achievement as genetic."[33] Kim's characterization supports the monolithic and oversimplifying model minority discourse, which is contested by Hartlep for example, who blames it on the homogenization of Asian-American experience.[34]

Education was one of the few avenues of assimilation available to young Jewish immigrant women at the turn of the century, and its attraction persists. Likewise, Kim's "Ma believed in the absolute sanctity of education,"[35] through which they hope to reduce the effects of racial discrimination and facilitate Kim's entrance into mainstream American society. Kim's success at school is the best doorway to a first-rate college education and a future filled with opportunities and social mobility. An advanced degree "would mean that the individual can bring honour to the family and also contribute to society… [paralleling] these Asian American markers of success."[36] What is more, the school environment is crucial to Kim's assimilation and acculturation, and the school is depicted as an institution which successfully supports her Americanization: "when I felt the most alone and overwhelmed, I had the fantasy of going to Mrs. Avery for help. Even just the possibility of it gave me real comfort."[37] The school is the only place where she makes friends with white Americans, unlike Antin's and Yezierska's heroines, who struggle for the acceptance of native-born Americans.

In the novels of both Yezierska and Kwok, a romantic undercurrent is an important element of the plot, but it is not given prominence, nor is it presented through sexually explicit imagery. Like her female Jewish-American predecessors, Kimberly suppresses her sexuality to promote her intelligence and rational thinking, a strategy that will afford her a higher position on the social ladder and economic stability. The young woman's restraint in exploiting her sexual desires is supported by her native cultural

[30] The term used by William Petersen in an article "Success Story: Japanese American Style", *The New York Times Magazine* 1966, January 6, to describe Japanese American upward mobility in the 1960s.

[31] For the critique of the model minority concept see Rob Ho's "Do All Asians Look Alike? Asian Canadians as Model Minorities."

[32] Ho 1999: 82.

[33] Choi, Lim 2014: 68.

[34] Hartlep 2013: V.

[35] Kwok 2010: 32.

[36] Shih-Wen, Sin Wen 2021: 295.

[37] Kwok 2010: 55.

norms, in a story represented by her mother: "Ma had been known as something of a beauty herself in Hong Kong, she never commented on how I looked. She'd always taught me that other qualities were more important."[38] The desirable qualities, such as hard work and diligence, are recognized by both Jewish and Chinese immigrant parents as the prerequisite of social inclusion. Likewise, they are depicted as sought after in immigrants and endorsed by the mainstream American society. Unlike Sara Smolinsky, who chooses a fellow Jew for her companion because their shared ethnicity and immigrant experience facilitates their mutual understanding, Kim chooses herself and single motherhood over Matt, her Chinese-American boyfriend. In an act of selflessness, she decides not to break up Matt's family, choosing to raise their son Jason herself in a country presented as a place where there is no public disapproval or social isolation of single mothers. In other words, she prioritizes her own desires, which could not be fulfilled with Matt by her side: "What kind of wife would I be for him? Poor, stressed, frustrated, with all my potential unfulfilled."[39] Her decision is also motivated by her desire for her son to not grow up in an immigrant community: she wants to open up the world of wider choices that go beyond the traditional constraints of the Chinese in America. Thus, through her rejection of her fellow Chinese, she demonstrates a diasporic liminality. What Kwok's novel promotes is the idea that a marriage to an American or an Americanized Chinese is not the only viable way to ensure the immigrant woman's place in society.

Changing family roles in an immigrant family

The relationships in an immigrant family offer a particularly resonant context that reflects the dynamics of a cultural change: "Back in Hong Kong, I would never have dared to talk to Ma like this, to openly argue with her about such grown-up topics, but I had never had the responsibilities there that I now do,"[40] says Kim. She has to renegotiate her Chinese identity in order to wend her way into the power structure of American society. Immigration assigns new roles to family members, adding new responsibilities and changing the inner dynamics; while Kim's mother still holds authority within the family, the daughter represents them to the outside world. The death of Kim's father and the subsequent deterioration of the family finances is what prompted their immigration from Hong Kong. The father's absence is, however, what allows Kim and her mother to escape the confines of the traditional patriarchal roles designated for Chinese women. Unlike Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, who criticizes her patriarchal family and the personal status of Chinese women, Kwok's heroines are free from such patriarchal constraints. The father's absence means that, unlike Sara Smolinsky, Kim does not suffer the distress of an intergenerational father--daughter conflict that resonates of patriarchy within the home on one hand and her social marginalization on the other, especially since Chinese-American parents "have been

[38] *Ibid*.: 80.
[39] *Ibid*.: 191.
[40] *Ibid*.: 64.

found to regulate the behaviour of their daughters more strictly than that of their sons… [thereby inculcating in them] a stronger sense of Chinese cultural identity […]."[41] The lack of a father figure is an important element of the girl's successful Americanization, as compared to Sara's willful rejection of her father's dominance – the symbol of the Old World – in order to declare her independence. When Sara takes care of her aging father, her "decision wins the approval of American readers who might be dissatisfied reading about the daughter's success while her father spends his last years in misery."[42] In a similar vein, Kim's determination to take care of her mother is a gesture of filial duty, one which can find resonance with Kwok's readers, especially since, in Chinese tradition, children are expected to support their aging parents in later life. In this way Kim is portrayed as *guai* – a good and obedient Chinese daughter who accepts the authority of her elders and conforms to the culturally desirable norms of behavior.[43]

Yezierska's heroine must not only battle class, gender and ethnic biases in American society but also confront the disapproval of her own family. Likewise, in Kwok's novel the bonds between the family members are shown as corruptive. The mother's sister, Aunt Paula serves to demonstrate the typical rivalry between earlier immigrants, who were lucky enough to do well, and the newcomers, who need to learn a lesson in Americanization through their own mistakes. Thus, rejoining the family proves more challenging than welcoming for the Changs, as they are constantly reminded to be grateful: "Never forget, we owe Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob a great debt. Because they got us out of Hong Kong and brought us here to America, the Golden Mountain."[44] When Kim and her mother are offered jobs in Aunt Paula's sweatshop, they do not expect to be so exploited. Aunt Paula's double standards are revealed when she emphasizes the value of familial bonds: "but remember, if there are any problems, we will fix them. Together. Because we are family,"[45] only to warn them that "[she] can't let the other workers think [she's] showing [them] any favoritism, just because [they are] family."[46] Aunt Paula is jealous of Kim's good school reports, especially since her son Nelson is not doing so well: "Every time Aunt Paula gave us one of my score reports, she would come by a day or two later to complain about some aspect of our work."[47] The rivalry between the two sisters is replayed in their representations of old and new immigration, showing the fragility of the newly acquired success and uncertainty as to their social position: Aunt Paula "didn't want us to be any more successful than she was. And I wasn't supposed to do better than Nelson,"[48] explains Kim. Aunt Paula's unscrupulousness and ruthless exploitation of her own relatives undermines the importance of family and collective values, presenting the Chinese diasporic community as not the only source of values for an adolescent girl whose American education exposes her to other ideals. Lee argues that "[b]y showcasing the diversities and tensions within the ethnic label 'Chinese' and by illuminating the complexities of a transnational Chinese world… [the novel]

[41] Yip, Fuligni 2002: 1557–1572.
[42] Gasztold 2011: 123.
[43] Chen *et al.* 2018: 409–430.
[44] Kwok 2010: 15.
[45] *Ibid*.: 12.
[46] *Ibid*.: 28.
[47] *Ibid*.: 169.
[48] *Ibid*.: 85.

push[es] against the model minority stereotype, which homogenises Asian ethnicities into one pan-ethnic group."[49] That is why the heroines of Antin, Yezierska, and Kwok separate themselves from their families, setting their successful assimilation against the failures of other family members, such as Mary's and Sara's siblings, and Aunt Paula's son. The fact that an African-American shopkeeper and a white American classmate become the Changs' only friends, thus standing in lieu of the family and forming what Wendy Ho calls "extra-familial social networks,"[50] testifies to the increased value of local communal ties.

Family values have always held an important place in American literary discourse, yet Kwok's narrative provides an alternative to traditional family, as its structure has shifted to incorporate a mother, a daughter, and a grandson. Thereby, the author forwards "the role of feminist and matrilineal connections assisting Chinese American women in finding a balance between their Chinese heritage and American lifestyle."[51] While Matt, Kim's love interest, expresses a traditional view on family: "I want to take care of you, Kimberly, not the other way around. That's how it should be,"[52] she assumes a breadwinning role against an ideological template of a white, middle-class, heterosexual family. In doing so, she represents a contemporary trend in which the participation of the mother in the labor force increases, as does the absence of the father. Meanwhile, the grandmother becomes the child's primary caregiver, and it seems that the young boy has enough family support to ameliorate the effects of his father's absence. The question of patriarchal family and male authority is presented through exclusively female lenses – the main parts are played by Kim's and Annette's mother-daughter dyads and Aunt Paula. The male characters, reserved for love interests, are sacrificed on the road to self--fulfillment: "*I never want to love someone like that, not even Matt, so much that there would be no room left for myself, so much that I wouldn't be able to survive if he left me*,"[53] confesses Kim.

Despite a "preference for stories of immigrant economic success typical of Asian American men,"[54] Kim's professional success obliterates the assumption of a gender division of labor in the domestic sphere. Their lack of economic resources affects the protagonists' lives from the moment they arrive in America, as does mistimed childbearing. Single motherhood does not bring economic loss, however, as we see them in a comfortable suburban setting, with the "long driveway of our house in Westchester… *In our spacious living room*, Ma was wiping off her piano."[55] Kim's story defies the image of a teenage, unwed mother as under-achiever, and the institution of marriage as a foundation of personal happiness. The novel proposes that the traditional model of parenting must be reformulated to accommodate new family structures, such as the female--headed family in which Kim performs the parental functions of the absent father. In "an act that violates patriarchal sensibilities,"[56] Kim demonstrates that she "has internalised

[49] *Ibid.*: 26.
[50] *Ibid*.: 183.
[51] Bhattacharya 2019: 439.
[52] Kwok 2010: 188.
[53] *Ibid*. [italics in original].
[54] Bhattacharya 2019: 437.
[55] Kwok 2010: 205 [italics in original].
[56] Chen *et al.* 2018: 301.

the American emphasis on individual success."[57] Thus, a matrifocal organization of an immigrant family challenges a patriarchal concept of fatherhood and demonstrates Kim's Americanization, while her decisions related to motherhood signal the complexity of a Chinese American identity, "debunk[ing] single-dimensional understandings of Asian Americans as academic achievers."[58]

The urban setting and the garment industry

Kwok's novel is set in New York City, in "the projects neighborhood,"[59] which is reminiscent of Antin's and Yezierska's tenement houses with their newcomer occupants, such as could be found at the turn of the century in the Lower East Side. Kwok's contemporary rendition of New York City is visually evocative of the vivid descriptions of tenement life, which were exposed by the muckrakers and explored in the literature of social realism: "The buildings became dirtier, with broken windows and English writing spray-painted over the walls… Garbage was strewn everywhere: broken glass by doorways, old newspapers floating down the sidewalk, carried by the wind,"[60] while the local residents "looked exhausted and unkempt, with glazed eyes and unwashed hair."[61] The Changs live on the margins of American society, not in the ghetto but in a building that is unfit for habitation. The bitter cold, a common reality of life on the Lower East Side, similarly affects the Changs' initial years in America, especially considering "the windowpanes missing or cracked" in their apartment.[62] Kwok's depiction of the squalid living conditions draws attention to inadequate government control over housing policy, an issue which was confronted by the Progressives and has not been dealt with in the twenty-first century. In her social criticism, the author exposes the vulnerability of recent immigrants, whose lack of knowledge makes them easy prey for housing rental scams.

Providing a sociocultural discourse about ethnicity and otherness, Kwok's text is a criticism of a contemporary America that fails to implement and sustain its ideals of a pluralistic society. The narrative explores the working conditions in one of the most global industries in the world – the garment industry. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New York was the center of the garment industry, mainly because of the waves of European immigrants who came to American shores and supplied a low-wage labor force: "While the garment industry has provided women, particularly women of color and immigrants, access to the manufacturing workforce, job access has been accompanied by a downward spiral of wages and consistent exploitation."[63] The fact that a novel written in the twenty-first century features a protagonist in a working-class environment that is reminiscent of the early-twentieth-century milieu draws the reader's attention to the problems of ethnic working-class women. Kwok's narrative reiterates the

[57] *Ibid*.
[58] *Ibid*.
[59] Kwok 2010: 45.
[60] *Ibid*.: 11, 19.
[61] *Ibid*.: 11.
[62] *Ibid*.: 13.
[63] Ho, Powell, Volpp 2000: 379.

image of predominantly female, low-skilled, and disempowering labor, which continues to characterize the garment industry: "The air was thick and tasted of metal. I was deafened by the roar of a hundred Singer sewing machines. Dark heads were bent over each one. No one looked up; they only fed reams of cloth through the machines, racing from piece to piece without pausing to cut off the connecting thread."[64] Such passages might have come from the turn-of-the-century immigrant novels, just like Kwok's next one, which vividly recalls the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in NYC: "The windows remained hermetically sealed, probably to deter any inspectors who might look in…"[65] The sweatshop workers are repeatedly mistreated through employment arrangements, which place them beyond any legal protection, and are exposed to health and safety hazards. Kwok conjures a contemporary version of the illegally run sweatshops that are ruthlessly managed by Aunt Paula's family, with still the same intent: "Everybody wants more money, everything has to make a profit."[66] Thus, immigrant labor is revealed as being at the mercy of personal relationships and obligations, and it is easily bent to the wishes of exploitive businesspersons. Despite the awareness campaigns of various workers' rights organizations, sweatshop practices continue to maximize business profits at their employees' expense. Having recent immigrants as protagonists allows the author to highlight the issues that still trouble the immigrant labor market, while emphasizing their often-overlooked contribution to the country's economy.

Final remarks

Kwok's narrative obviously can stand alone, as the reader does not need knowledge of early-twentieth-century Jewish-American novels to appreciate this text. Following Riffaterre's concept of retroactive reading, which involves "reviewing and comparing backwards, recognizing repetitions and variations upon the same structure,"[67] I find it useful in the analysis of Kwok's novel because it enriches and broadens the mimetic reading, thereby enhancing the readers' literary awareness, without the danger of cultural synthesis or homogenization. Kwok's novel joins the genre of American immigrant narratives, testifying to its viability and appeal for the contemporary readership, while the author updates and adapts the familiar pattern in order to make it representative of the American Chinese. Kwok's plot structure, similar characterization, common themes and images, proximate speech and description serve as means to identify and critique earlier works in a process which is more augmentive than reductive. I agree with Sanders, who sees literary adaptation and appropriation as "creating new cultural and aesthetic possibilities that stand alongside the texts which have inspired them, enriching rather than 'robbing' them."[68] As long as the structure of Kwok's narrative, the characterization, the setting and the conventions of literary realism offer little insight

[64] Kwok 2010: 27.
[65] *Ibid*.: 86.
[66] *Ibid*.: 16.
[67] Alfaro 1996: 279.
[68] Sanders 2006: 41.

into the production of meaning in terms of novelty, the subject matter draws attention to the experience of Chinese-American women and their marginal position in the American literary mainstream. In contemporary American literary discourse, class membership and socio-economic matters have given prominence to the issues of gender, ethnicity, identity, and the celebration of difference, whereas Kwok's novel refocuses the interest in material well-being of her protagonists as an important element of the immigrant experience. In this way, Kwok offers not a challenge but a reformulation of the genre, consequently enabling its further growth.

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