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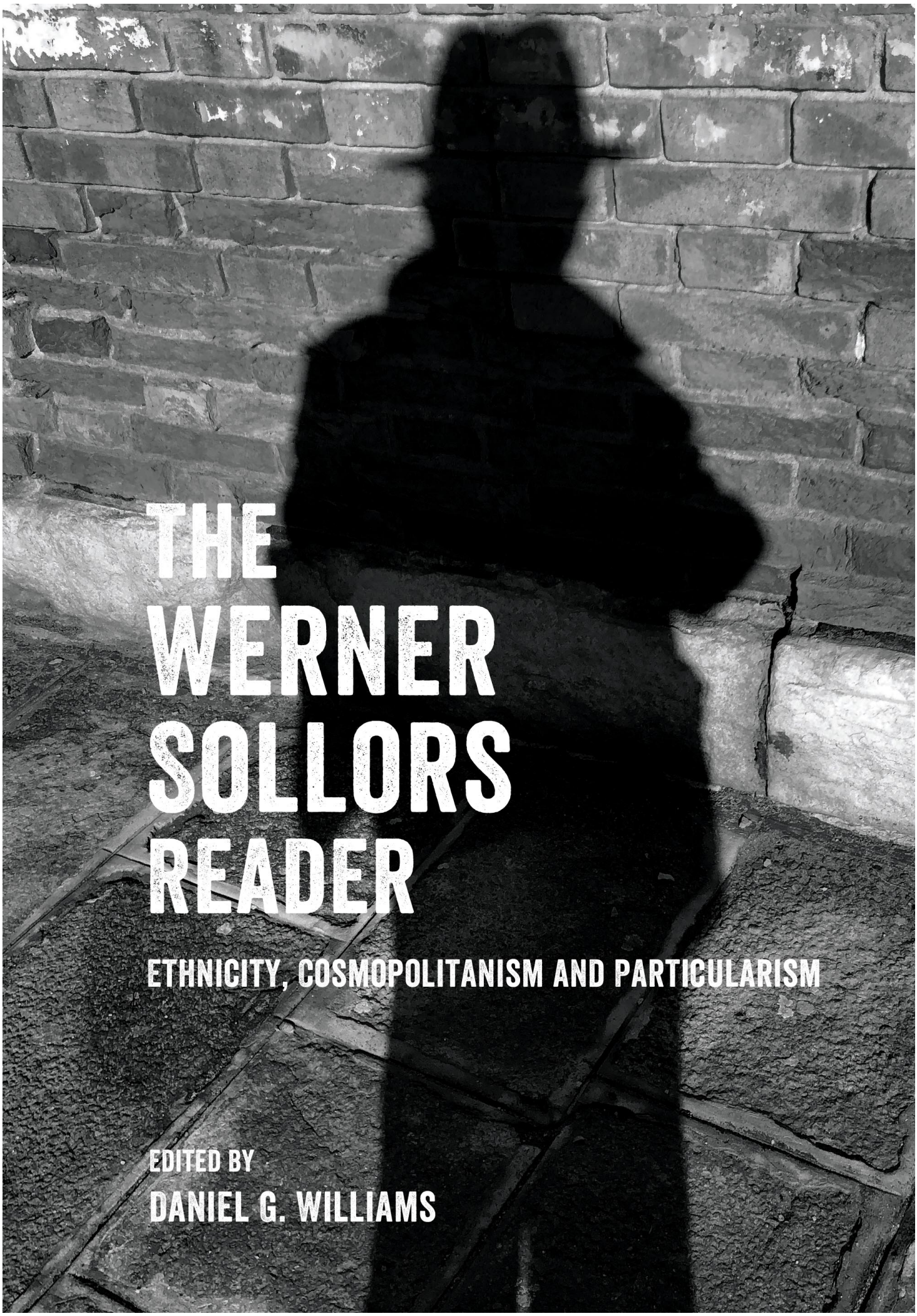
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THE WERNER SOLLORS READER

ETHNICITY, COSMOPOLITANISM AND PARTICULARISM

EDITED BY

DANIEL G. WILLIAMS

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The Werner Sollors Reader

Ethnicity, Cosmopolitanism, and Particularism

Edited by Daniel G. Williams

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Non-English American Short Stories*

What are non-English-language American stories and why should they be included in this book?—some readers may ask. For though earlier literary histories of the United States routinely covered works in American Indian, colonial, and immigrant tongues, "American literature" has now become synonymous with English-language literature written in the United States. This is a great loss, for American literature in Yiddish, Polish, Swedish, Welsh, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, or German—the list goes on and on—offers fascinating insights into American ethnic diversity in works some of which are formally accomplished and thematically provocative. This is particularly true for the area of twentieth-century short fiction: one only has to think of Vladimir Nabokov's Russian stories or of Isaac Bashevis Singer's Yiddish tales and imagine what readers would be missing if such works had never been made accessible in English versions or were not considered part of American literature (but were also outside the purview of other national literatures). This is the limbo in which non-English short fiction finds itself, even though its very linguistic difference might constitute a particular invitation to readers interested in other areas of ethnic, gender, and cultural difference in multicultural America. How many Nabokovs and Singers are still waiting to be discovered? To be translated into English? Or to be presented to readers in bilingual editions?

No one quite knows how many short stories were written or published in the United States in the twentieth century in languages other than English, but it is probably safe to assert that there must be a very great number, at least hundreds, and probably thousands of them. Electronic library catalogues have made it much easier than it used to be to do bibliographic research that can provide access to little-studied areas of knowledge. In Harvard University's Library system alone, a data-base search produced a list of more than 120,000 imprints published in the United States in scores of languages other than English. These include works in many American Indian languages, as well as in virtually every tongue spoken in the United States, but they cover titles in all genres and periods, and I know of no method to limit findings to non-English short fiction of the twentieth century. The list of only those multilingual American newspapers that

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* From Blanche H. Gelfant, ed., *The Columbia Companion to Twentieth-Century American Short Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 72–80.

were under the surveillance of the U.S. Postmaster in 1917 includes over two thousand titles of periodicals in languages ranging from Ruthenian to Syrian, Bohemian to Ladino, and Tagalog-Visayan to Rumanian, as well as many bi- and tri-column formats such as Polish-Latin, Danish-Norwegian-Swedish, or German-Hungarian; many of these periodicals probably published numerous short stories (or such related genres as tales, novellas, feuilleton stories, sketches, or vignettes). However, until a research team goes through the vaults of the U.S. Archives, it is impossible to know just how many pieces of short fiction are buried there. Given this state of affair, the following pages resemble more the tentative forays of a blindfolded man than the expert coverage that can be given to many other areas of modern American short fiction. This essay is indebted to the specialists in different language groups who recommended the best published short stories of the century. It is hoped that this necessarily unrepresentative survey will convince readers that more investigations and translations of non-English literature of the United States are desirable.

Shortly before the turn of the century, Abraham Cahan (1860–1951)—working with the encouragement of Lincoln Steffens and William Dean Howells—began to develop a particular form of short fiction in which such themes as Jewishness, immigration, cosmopolitanism, assimilation, and labor were successfully fictionalized. His formal choices—representing the immigrants' English as dialect writing full of malapropisms and Yiddishisms, their Yiddish as somewhat more idiomatic English (however, also with some language interference)—and his love-and-marriage (and divorce) plots have remained popular, not only with later ethnic writers like James T. Farrell who read him, but also with general audiences who were also given movie versions many decades after Cahan published his most famous tales, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and "The Imported Bridegroom" (1898). *Yekl* was particularly influential as a novella that contrasts the protagonist Yekl / Jake, an Americanized Russian Jewish immigrant, with his wife Gitl who arrives in America two years after Jake and embarrasses him by her old country ways—which however yield to a healthier mode of transplantation, combining tradition with New World impulses.[1]

What has remained little known is that Cahan wrote and published Yiddish versions that differed from those he presented to English-speaking readers. Even Cahan's most famous tale is a case in point. Originally serialized under the title "Yankel der Yankee" (and under the author's pseudonym "Socius"), the Yiddish Yekl differed not only in the name of its protagonist ("Yekl" was not actually a Jewish name) but also in its strategy of cultural mediation and its form of narration.[2] Cahan's Yiddish-language tales include omniscient socialist narrators instead of English-language happy endings; more social criticism, more profanities in characters' dialogues, and more sexual frankness in general than those "same" tales would contain in English.[3] His double stories are suggestive of the kinds of worlds that non-English short fiction opens to American literature.

Helena Staś's Polish-American story "Marzenie czy rzeczywistość: obrazek polsko-amerykański" (Dream or Reality, 1907) follows Wanda, the rebellious, idealistic, and stubborn heroine, from Poland to America, when her impoverished-gentry parents emigrate to separate her from her Russian lover. "Are you so emancipated that religious and national feelings have died in you?" Wanda's scandalized father asks her. "I don't acknowledge national or religious feelings," Wanda answers. "Not one nation and creed, but all humanity should be our motto." "Renouncing national or religious

feeling is the same as renouncing family feeling," old Kęszycki objects. "Oh, this world is so backwards," insists Wanda. "I want to belong to the universal, to move freely, to be a child of the whole world, and to love everyone equally."[4]

But Wanda's idealism leads to rootlessness. When she abandons her parents aboard ship and returns to her village, she discovers not only that the Russian has betrayed her, but also that without her family she has no place in the community. So she goes to America after all, tries in vain to find her parents, makes two unhappy marriages, contributes to the suicide of her teenage son, and is finally pursued by the police as an anarchist before she stumbles back into the family and the national fold. Staś's remarkable story ends with a visualization of this prodigal daughter's new world view. An embroidered canvas over her bed depicts the Polish eagle held by Prussia, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, the three powers that had partitioned Poland. However, hope comes from overseas as a Polish army is shown in America, ready to fight for the violated Motherland. Staś's family drama of betrayal and reconciliation turns emigration into a solution to the Polish national tragedy of partition.

Carl Wilhelm Andeer, born in Sweden in 1870, emigrated in 1891, and served as a minister in Swedish-American churches in Iowa, Massachusetts, North Dakota, and Minnesota. Among his stories that he published in the Augustana Synod publication *Ungdomsvännen* (Friend of Youth), is the 1904 tale "Svensk-amerikanen" (The Swedish-American), which dramatizes class differences and hypocrisies.[5] Returning to Sweden for a visit, the second-generation Professor Arvid Norén of North America appears like a miracle in a world of hypocrites who believe that all Swedish emigrants are drunken farm hands or bragging servant girls. Norén claims his position as an American to question "Swedish class distinctions and Swedish self-importance" and frankly criticizes the anti-American hypocrites in town in a comedy of manners-style that is characteristic of much of the story. Only at the end comes the revelation that Norén is in love with Anna, the daughter of the baron on whose estate Norén's father had been a poor farmer. Just as Norén exhorts his beloved to accept that this match can never be, the old Baron Sjärnfält who had overheard the sad conversation gives his consent and blessing: "Children—God bless you! I can gladly leave my child in such hands, even if his father was my father's servant." The surprise happy ending reveals that there is change in the old world as well as in the new, and the truly educated emigrant is portrayed as the equal to the old aristocrat, for both are superior to the prejudiced crowd.

In an effort to enrich the Welsh language with stories that delve into life's mysteries, Dafydd Rhys Williams published a collection of stories, *Llyfr y Dyn Pren ac Eraill* (The Book of the Wooden Man and Others), in Utica, New York in 1909. Williams's book is a collection of morality tales—temperance stories, a story against smoking, and the story of a gossip—that are distinguished by their fantastic plots. In one case, Williams was inspired by the popular German writer Rudolph Baumbach's story "Nicotiana," yet he insisted that his own treatment was fresh, colored by Welsh and American characteristics. Thus, Young Hugh is spooked out of a bad habit by the appearance of a demon "seated on a great roll of tobacco. His face resembled the one that appears on bundles of Franklin Tobacco, with his hair like American 'fine cut,' his teeth like Scranton stove coal, and his veins like the fine tobacco of the Old Country." Though it does not thematize biculturalism as a marriage plot, the story's demon points in the direction of assimilation, while the influences Williams acknowledged are of a

bicontinental cast: the Welsh folk tale (Twm Shon Cati), the European short story, the heroic narrative (Homer and Ovid), and the literary productions of Americans such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Cullen Bryant.

Leon Kobrin (1872–1946) came to America from Russia in 1892, and, after some early writing in Russian, he was so prolific that by 1910 his collected American short stories in Yiddish added up to more than 900 pages. His sketch-like stories, often told in the first-person singular, portray greenhorns and old-world radicals in their new environments, or focus on chance encounters of strangers. In "Di shprakh fun elnt" (The language of misery, translated under the title "A Common Language"), the greenhorn narrator has found a job as a night watchman but is worried about the dangers of his work: "With an old-country thief I would have flown out there like a bomb. With an American, however—who knows what kind of cutthroat was out there in the dark?" Yet he rises to the occasion soon and beats burglars to a retreat—even though he is bruised. A week later his heroic mood changes when he finds that burglars he beats up turn out to be an Italian immigrant in his forties and his five or six-year-old daughter. A bond of empathy soon links the watchman and the burglars, even though they have no language in common: "We talked in sign language, with our hands, with gestures. But we understood each other." The narrator lets the burglars go and gives them kindling wood—an act of kindness for which he is fired. Later he sees the "Italian friend" who offers him a banana. The story ends with the sentences: "I told him about my calamity in my language, and he told me again about his troubles in his language, and again we both understood each other. We understood each other very well indeed." The solidarity that connects the poor and separates them from the world of hypocritical employers (embodied here by the boss's wife) bridges national and linguistic boundaries in Kobrin's tale.[6]

Ole Amundsen Buslett's Norwegian-language tale "Veien til Golden Gate" (The Road to the Golden Gate, 1915) is an allegorical expression of the cultural program of pluralism; the story thematized and offered support for the continued use of languages other than English in the feverish climate of World War I.[7] A kind of pilgrim's progress in immigrant America, the story depicts Haakon's road to the Golden Gate, beginning with the landing at Castle Garden, even though his mother Kristiane's path begins in Norway. Buslett's warnings against going too far, too fast on that road had been traditional in American conservative thought from colonial times on, and his negative portrait of the restless Aasmund Skaaning, always on the move further west with his ax on his shoulder, is a version of Ishmael Bush in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*. A long dialogue between Kristiane and Skaaning's daughter Rosalita reviews the issues of ethnic identity and assimilation. Buslett allegorizes assimilation as the mad rush into a "Yankee Slough" in which all would become alike (and ultimately go under), whereas the Norwegians who do not sell their birthright also retain their know-how and are able to build safe roads across that slough of Americanization. Despite its opposition to assimilation, "The Road to the Golden Gate" represents American pluralism rather than Norwegian nationalism; it is telling that the road back to the old country is explicitly dismissed as "the road of nostalgia." The story ends as Rosalita declares her love for Haakon, leaving the reader with the prospect of a couple that has just the right degree of ethnic loyalty, sharing neither Rosalita's father's shallow Americanism nor Haakon's mother's old-world orientation.

Dorthea Dahl's "Kopper-kjelen" (The Copper Kettle) was published in the Chicago Norwegian-language literary journal *Norden* (1930).[8] Born in Norway, Dahl came to South Dakota with her parents at the age of two, and lived in Moscow, Idaho, for most of her life. The story presents a Norwegian immigrant couple, Trond Jevnaker (the center of consciousness in this third-person narrative) and his wife Gjertrud, who had come to America before Trond, is better assimilated and more fluent in English than her husband, and even asks him to Americanize her name as "Gørti"—which he refuses indignantly. (Dahl's story thus inverts the gender pattern of Cahan's story, in which Gitl emigrates after her husband Yekl, so that for Cahan the woman seems less hasty in assimilation than the man.) Dahl's Gjertrud is the type described by Lawrence Rosenwald as the "language traitor" who rushes into (incomplete) Anglicization and is embarrassed by her husband's old-country ways. The pivot of the story is an old kettle that had belonged to Trond's grandfather in Norway and that Gjertrud was planning to discard—when an American lady, Margery Green, who comes to the Jevnakers for a cure in country air, sees the kettle and expresses her wish to buy it as an antique—if only she were not so poor now for marrying a mere engineer against her father's wishes. Though neither Trond nor Gjertrud knows what she means by "æntik" their reactions differ: Gjertrud wants to sell the kettle now, but Trond talks back to her for once: "You've had contempt for the copper kettle all these years, just as you've had contempt for me and all that's been mine. I won't sell it. It will be my wedding gift to Miss Green. For once I'll decide what is to be done around here." Strangely, this changes Gjertrud's relationship to Trond, and she not only asks him for copper polish but offers him coffee and cookies and even promises to abandon one of her American improvement schemes, the "skrinportsen" (screen porch) for a while. The eyes of the American native had seen the value of the Norwegian heirloom that the too speedily assimilated immigrant woman had regarded only as a source of embarrassment.

The Portuguese-language short story "Gente da Terceira Classe" (Steerage, 1938) is representative of José Rodrigues Miguéis's œuvre.[9] Born in Lisbon in 1901, Miguéis died in Manhattan in 1980, after having spent the last forty-three years of his life in New York City where he had gone into political exile. University-trained and a translator of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Erskine Caldwell, and Carson McCullers into Portuguese, he wrote numerous American short stories in his native language. The story "Steerage," formally cast in the manner of a log, is set in the melting-pot world of an ocean liner returning from South America to Portugal via Madeira and Southampton. Among the third-class passengers of the title are returning emigrants whose hopes have been dashed and new emigrants setting out for the New World. These different "currents" meet, and the narrator's dining table is a world in miniature: "At meals, at my table, eat Poles, Portuguese, some lower-class Englishmen (Irish surely), an incommunicative German couple, a large Syrian clan returning from the north of Brazil with jaundiced children, and others of the same breed." Ethnic types described include an Irish emigrant, a Madeiran woman, a Polish woman returning from Argentina and her Jewish companion, both trying to pass for French, a poor Turk (or maybe a Lebanese) woman, and assimilated Luso-Americans. The somewhat snobbish and misanthropic narrator uses descriptions as if they were weapons against "Arianist" waiters and loud crowds; he swallows bad coffee (and is surprised since the ship started from Brazil) and tea, and mulls over the signs of class and ethnic discrimination, for Spanish and Portuguese people only. "Looking at these people, I sometimes wonder, in anguish, if

the people exist, if they actually exist."[10] Assimilation had brought out the worst in them, as the narrator finds them idolizing material things and abandoning spiritual values. Still, he wonders at the end whether the voyage has created a bond of sympathy among these heterogeneous and largely unsympathetically drawn passengers.

Occasionally, non-English stories were published in bilingual format. Sabine R. Ulibarrí's *Mi abuela fumaba puros / My Grandma Smoked Cigars / y otros cuentos de Tierra Amarilla / and Other Stories of Tierra Amarilla* (1977) is an example of a genuinely bilingual short story collection published with a Spanish and an English title; and the ten-story collection matches a Spanish text on the left with an English version on the right page, though neither language is defined as "original" or "translation" in this New Mexican work. The collection also alternates from a folk voice (in "El Negro Aguilar," a near mythic tale of a black cowboy-hero) to a focus on education (in "Elacio era Elacio / Elacio Was Elacio"), and a meditative tone (in "Se fue por clavos / He Went for Nails," the tale of a man who goes to fetch nails and returns four years later).[11]

Chinese-language writers in the United States have sometimes looked at Jewish Americans as a model for an ethnic integration that retains a strong sense of special cultural identity despite full Americanization. Zhang Xiguo's short story "Ge Li" (Circumcision, 1971) is a case in point: the protagonist Song Daduan is a Chinese immigrant who chairs a political science department in a large university and has kept a low ethnic profile, but is reethnicized when he is present at a bris—and suddenly begins to think more about his childhood in China and his own Chineseness.[12]

Class differences among Chinese Americans are the themes of stories about the "downtown Chinese," for example "Duo Tai" (Abortion, 1979) by Yi Li (Pan Xiumei), an immigrant from Hong Kong.[13] The understated and sketch-like story focuses on Mrs. Luo who needs an abortion but is afraid that this could become public knowledge, is scared to ask her husband (who opposes abortion) for the money, and instead decides to do earn the money by doing additional piece work. The conversation of the women in the San Francisco sweatshop—euphemistically called "Harmony Garment Shop"—focuses on issues of birth control and work, reveals the women's and mothers' desperate situation, between the "white devil doctor" who cuts the wombs "of folks who don't understand English" and the tough employer Mrs. Zhou who ignores Mrs. Luo's obvious predicament and cruelly gives her a firm deadline for the completion of the additional garment pieces: "'Bring them back at eight tomorrow morning,' Mrs. Zhou's pale face was expressionless. Mrs. Luo thought she looked as if her soul had been stolen by the devil, just as the folktale said. Her eyes had no life, causing Mrs. Luo to think of that of a dead fish." The hell of Chinese immigrant women laborers in San Francisco has its white American and its Chinese American devils.

At first glance, this survey suggests only a shared condition in these short stories: it is their non-Englishness, which also accounts for the fact that these stories are so little-known. Yet there are also some shared features. Thematically, many tales could be classified as love stories and tales of migration, assimilation, transplantation, pluralism, or nationalism; others emphasize class (Andeer, Kobrin or Yi Li) or suggest the possibility of empathy across ethnic and linguistic boundaries (Buslett or Zhang Xiguo). What many of the American short stories in languages other than English have in common formally is that they inscribe an English linguistic presence into the texts or otherwise thematize English in a way that English original stories or English translations (in which English is the medium of communication) cannot adequately replicate. "Yankee"

is a charged term in Cahan's and Buslett's stories, Kobrin inserts English phrases such as "business was booming" and "business was rotten" (in the story "Actors"—in which these phrases furthermore mark whether the theater cashier speaks English or Yiddish); Yi Li startlingly puts the English word "cancer" into the Chinese text. Dahl spices up his Norwegian with "Hadjudusør" (how do you do, sir), "spærrummet" (spare room), "nervøsbreikdaun," and some complete sentences in English—to suggest the different speed of assimilation that separates Trond and Gjertrud. Miguéis's "Gente da Terceira Classe" includes many English words, entire sentences in English and French (suggesting also the importance of "third" languages in such mixed-language locations), and such "Portingles" terms as "cracas" (crackers), "dolas" (dollars), "bossa" (boss), or "racatias" (racketeers)—that are representative of the employment of mixed tongues in works in many other languages in the United States.

Gert Niers is a contemporary German American who writes "prose" (rather than "short stories"), yet his minimalist sketches and expanded aphorisms show not only a modernist experimenter at work but also a writer who, like his precursors, examines bilingual consciousness, now in the context of transnationalism. The following sketch from "Entwirrungsversuche" (Attempts at disentanglement, 1998) is representative, and it is also an appropriate conclusion to this first foray into the non-English short story: "The wonderful privilege of turning crazy in at least two countries. This handsome schizophrenia permits the immigrant to switch from one country—when things get too unbearable—into another, until that also becomes insufferable, and he has released himself as temporarily cured. Hence emerges a to and fro that can be undertaken for years, and even for a lifetime. Professionals at this game even let themselves be reimbursed for damages or sick pay—as cultural mediators, teachers of literature or other carriers of infections."[14] What Niers expresses hyperbolically, sarcastically, and through presumably hostile eyes, points to the great value of literature that crosses linguistic boundaries. Moving back and forth from one code to another is precisely what gives some of the best non-English stories their particular qualities: an ironic sense of freedom from linguistic constraints in any language, a readiness to experiment with the different meanings languages associate with the same sounds, and a willingness to make readers attentive to the many voices of America.

Notes

This essay was the result of a collaborative undertaking, and I am grateful to the following specialists for providing me with published work that I have followed closely and paraphrased or with new descriptive prose that I have directly incorporated into this account: Dag Blanck (Swedish), Michela Corradini (Portuguese), Melinda Gray (Welsh), Karen Majewski (Polish), Orm Øverland (Norwegian), Lawrence Rosenwald (Leo Kobrin), Matthew Jacobson, Rachel Rubinstein, and Aviva Taubenfeld (Yiddish), and Xiao-huang Yin (Chinese).

1. Jules Chametzky, *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 57–74 and 114.
2. Aviva Taubenfeld, "'Only an "L"': Linguistic Borders and the Immigrant Author in Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* and Yankel der Yankee," in *Multilingual Ametica: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of America*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 144–165.
3. Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 44–48.

4. Helena Staś, "Marzenie czy rzeczywistość: obrazek polsko-amerykański" (Dream or Reality: A Polish-American Picture), *Gazeta Polska w Chicago* (August 19, 1907).
5. Carl Wilhelm Andeer, "Svensk-amerikanen" (The Swedish-American), *Ungdomsvännen* (Friend of Youth), 1904. Reprinted and translated by Jeanne Freiburg, with an introduction by Dag Blanck, in *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Marc Shell and Werner Sollors (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 398–415.
6. Leo Kobrin, "Di shprakh fun elnt" (The language of misery), in *Der farloirener nigun: roman un zeks dertseylungen* (New York: YKUF, 1948), 245–262. Translated as "A Common Language," in *Pushcarts and Dreamers: Stories of Jewish Life in America*, ed. and transl. Max Rosenfeld (South Brunswick, New York, and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1967), 29–46.
7. Ole Amundsen Buslett, *Veien til Golden Gate* (The Road to the Golden Gate). Reprinted and translated by Orm Øverland in *Multilingual Anthology*, ed. Shell and Sollors, 416–459.
8. Dorthea Dahl, "Kopper-kjelen" (The Copper Kettle). Reprinted and translated by Orm Øverland *Multilingual Anthology*, ed. Shell and Sollors, 552–575.
9. José Rodrigues Miguéis, *Gente da terceira classe* (Lisbon: Editorial Estúdios Cor, 1971), translated by George Monteiro and Carolina Matos: *Steerage and Ten Other Stories* (Providence, R.I. : Gavea-Brown, 1983). Michela Corradini, "Portîngles in the United States: The Luso-American of José Rodrigues Miguéis," in *Multilingual America*, ed. Sollors, 272–280.
10. Miguéis, *Gente da terceira classe*, 172.
11. Sabine R. Ulibarrí, *Mi Abuela Fumaba Puros / My Grandma Smoked Cigars / y otros cuentos de Tierra Amarilla / and Other Stories of Tierra Amarilla* (Berkeley, CA: Quinto Sol, 1977).
12. Zhang Xiguo, "Ge Li," in *Haiwei huaren zhuijia xiaoshuxuan* (A Selection of Short Stories by Chinese Immigrant Writers), ed. Li Li (Lili Bao) (Hong Kong: Sanlian Shudian [Joint Publishing Company], 1983).
13. Yi Li (Pan Xiumei), "Duo Tai" (Abortion), reprinted and translated by Xiao-huang Yin and Rebecca Chien in *Multilingual Anthology*, ed. Shell and Sollors, 663–677.
14. Gert Niers, "Entwirrungsversuche," in *In Abwesenheit* (In absentia) (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Pine Hill Press, 2008), 31.