

of the *Cambridge History* hints strongly at this idea. As she calls our attention to the difference between “geography” and “ideology” in her introductory discussion of Lazarus’s celebration of the “virgin world” of the United States in her poem “1492” (1), Hana Wirth-Nesher reminds us that the land we inhabit will never be as Jewishly numinous as the meanings we have sometimes been tempted to foist upon it.

MICHAEL HOBERMAN teaches American literature and folklore at Fitchburg State University. He is the author of *New England/New Israel: Jews and Puritans in Early America* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011). His book *A Hundred Acres of America: The Geography of Jewish American Literary History* is forthcoming from Rutgers University Press.

NOTES

1. See also Isaac Mayer Wise, “The Fourth of July, 1858,” in *The Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Jules Chametzky et al (New York: Norton, 2001), 85.
2. Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), xiii.
3. Jonathan Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Manuel Noah* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 70.

THE FORGETTING OF CORA WILBURN: HISTORICAL AMNESIA AND THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

JONATHAN D. SARNA BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, the Reverend Madison Clinton Peters (1859–1918), in his widely circulated apologetic survey entitled *Justice to the Jew: The Story of What He Has Done for the World* (1899), listed among America’s “numerous writers of verse” nine different Jews: Emma Lazarus, Penina Moise, Miriam del Banco, Nina Morais Cohen, Cora Wilburn, Solomon Solis-Cohen, Mary Cohen, Rebekah Hyneman, and Morris Rosenfeld.¹ Four of these poets—Lazarus, Moise, Hyneman, and Rosenfeld—likewise find mention in *the Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*. Five of the seven women (but not del Banco or Wilburn) appear in *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* and on the website of the Jewish Women’s Archive. But what of the rest?

Here, I recount the story of one of these forgotten poets, Cora Wilburn (1824–1906). Not just poetry, but also essays and novels flowed from her prolific pen—including the first ever novel by a Jew dealing (in part) with Jews in America,

published serially in 1860. Hers, overall, is the largest oeuvre of any nineteenth-century American Jewish woman writer, and her death made news across the United States.² Nevertheless, her name has now completely vanished from the historical record. Why? Difficult as it is to account for historical amnesia of any kind³—particularly in the case of women, so many of whom have been forgotten—hints of an explanation emerge from Cora Wilburn's unusual biography⁴ as well as her writings.

Cora Wilburn was born on December 1, 1824;⁵ her original first name was Henrietta and her family name was probably Pulfermacher ("Powdermaker"). She listed her birthplace, at different times, as either Germany or France; most likely she was born in Alsace.⁶ Fluent in German, with some knowledge of French, Spanish, and Yiddish, she nevertheless wrote the surviving volume of her diary (1844-1848) in English; that, presumably, was her mother tongue.⁷ If, based on the evidence in the diary, we read her novel as thinly veiled autobiography, her birth mother lived and was buried in England.

Cora Wilburn's father, whom she despised and whose name she subsequently discarded, was an unscrupulous gem merchant and con man, as well as an abusive father and husband. He remarried following the untimely death of his first wife, but he never became the kind of person whom the Jewish community would want to remember. In 1837, the *London Gazette* listed him as an insolvent debtor and prisoner named "Moss Pulfermacher," a self-described "agent for foreign houses in the West Indies, and for Spaniards on the Spanish Main."⁸ Six years later, the *Maulmain Chronicle* (Burma), in a cautionary article reprinted in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, portrayed the same man as "Moritz Pulfermacher." Under the headline "Tricks of a Traveller," it described how, opulently attired and in the company of his wife and daughter, he claimed to be both a captain in the Prussian Cavalry and a naturalized Englishman. He held himself forth as a "rich diamond merchant," and swindled a sea captain and others by taking loans that he did not repay and by supplying them, in pledge, "false stones," "counterfeit gold," and "German"—faux—silver. Next, according to the exposé, he proceeded under various guises to Muscat (Oman) and to Bushire (Iran), where again he affected "affluent circumstances." This time, he paraded as "an American Jew named Moritz Jackson"—the same last name that Cora subsequently used when she immigrated to America. He also allegedly impersonated Sir Moses Montefiore! Even in an age when "self-fashioning" was something of a social norm, and Jews, in particular, changed their ways and their names in quest of social and economic mobility, the case of "Moritz Jackson" seemed extreme. The *Maulmain Chronicle* warned readers to beware, and revealed that the con man was en route to "Khorasau" (Curaçao?) to ensnare new victims.⁹

Ultimately, "Moritz" settled some two hundred miles away from Curaçao, in the Venezuelan port of La Guaira, near Caracas, where the "Jackson" family

took up residence in 1844. By then, he had dragged his long-suffering wife and teenaged daughter, in her words, “nearly over the world”¹⁰—before the advent of oceangoing steamboats—forever seeking to escape his creditors and victims. Cora Wilburn’s writings would eventually include elaborate descriptions of many of these places, not just England and Germany, but also such exotic locations as Singapore, Burma, India, Australia, Hawaii, and Venezuela.¹¹

The only surviving volume of Cora Wilburn’s diary—written while she was still Henrietta—commenced upon her arrival in La Guaira. It began on February 28, 1844, and painted a grim picture of her Jewish family, far different from the idealized Jewish family that so many nineteenth-century Jewish writers and artists celebrated.

“I had not been home long yesterday but it began anew,” she reported cryptically on March 1, 1844. A week later, she explained that she and her father “had again a most tremendous row, as usual for nothing. . . . The brandy bottle was applied and so began his cursing and bellowing; it continued till near morning.” Within months, the situation at home deteriorated further; her father, perhaps fearing that discovery was near, turned violent. “Yesterday the looking glass was broken,” she reported to her diary in May. “Today after 15 glasses, butter glasses, were broken . . . he began to take a knife up to my [step-]mother so we both left the house.”

In her autobiographical novel *Cosella Wayne*, published serially in the Spiritualist journal *Banner of Light* in 1860, Wilburn elaborated on the abuse that her central character suffered at the hands of her father. She described the threats, the screams, the assaults, and the beatings that Cosella endured, particularly after her step-mother’s untimely death. (Wilburn’s step-mother died on June 29, 1844). Enraged that his daughter steadfastly refused to assist him in his crimes or to marry the (much older) man whom he had selected as her husband, “Manasseh” (the name of the father in the novel) threatened her with a pistol and drove her from the house.¹²

In 1845, “Moritz Jackson” née Pulfermacher likewise died; rumors abounded that he had been murdered. Fifteen years later, in *Cosella Wayne*, Wilburn, imagining the tortures that he suffered while he lay dying, described the “winged and horrible demons, wild birds of prey with outstretched sable wings” that perched upon Manasseh’s “laboring breast, croaked hoarsely in his ear, and snatched his trembling fingers from his eyes!” This, she thought, was his deserved punishment, retribution for his “manifold and pardonless sins.”¹³ He was no paragon of Jewish fatherhood.

The orphaned Henrietta lost everything upon her father’s death. Whatever of value he may have owned was stolen. Her days as a “gentlewoman,” raised in a home with servants and the visible accoutrements of wealth, ended abruptly. She found herself practically penniless.¹⁴

Adrift in the world, and taken in by sympathetic Catholic neighbors in La Guaira, Henrietta succumbed to pressure from those around her and, on June 24,

1846, converted to Catholicism. This was an unardonable act of betrayal for a nineteenth-century Jew. Even though by the time she reported it to her diary she had already repented, the memory clung to her. Apostasy, like bastardy, was a sin one could never live down.¹⁵

In hopes of improving her situation and returning to her people, and buoyed by the traditional belief that fellow Jews would embrace and uplift one of their own, Henrietta spent forty dollars of her remaining funds and took to sea for a final time, hoping to make a fresh start as a Jew in Philadelphia, about which she had read. She spent three weeks at sea on the *Euphemia*, arrived in New York on September 30, 1848,¹⁶ and reached Philadelphia that same night. Over the ensuing days, she bitterly recalled, her faith in a Jewish moral economy based on mutual assistance was cruelly shattered. “She sought for aid and friendship from those of her mother’s race,” she wrote in a passage from *Cosella Wayne* that must have greatly discomfited Philadelphia’s proud and sensitive Jews. “She had read much of the tie of sympathy existing between those of the same faith, and she dreamt of protection, maternal guidance, fraternal help and sustained friendship. Not one of her dreams was realized.”¹⁷

Cora Wilburn found herself reduced to menial servitude in Philadelphia. In *Cosella Wayne*, she poignantly described her character’s four years of penury:

Through all the various grades of discipline that poverty enforces has Cosella passed; for some weeks “companion to a lady,” that misnomer for ceaseless drudge; then assisting in the care of children; then laboring with the needle for the stores; then watching by the sick, deprived of weeks of rest, of night after night of sleep; then, in despair returning to the hated needle; and sometimes compelled to spend days of utter listlessness, when there was no work to be obtained, and consequently no bread to eat. She would then go and offer her services at places where she had been employed before in order to obtain a meal. Sometimes, with a few pennies saved, she would buy a loaf of bread and a draught of milk, and seek a lodging for the night. At last, she rented the small room in a retired part of the city, and for a while bore up bravely against the ills that beset her. She sold her few remaining books in order to obtain food; she lived for many days without a fire that inclement winter; and her scanty garments bore the marks of time, the shoes upon her feet were worn, the poetry, beauty, and refinement of life was gone.¹⁸

A strong Jewish element permeated this tale of woe. Cora Wilburn’s sketches, supposedly “from life,” revealed aspects of the Philadelphia Jewish community that its elite surely would rather have seen suppressed. She told one story, for example, about “Mrs. Na—[Nathan?], a wealthy lady, one of the daughters of Israel,” in whose Philadelphia home Cosella sewed for three weeks. Repeatedly, Wilburn

writes, she was “admonished to sew faster, and told that ‘girls who made their living must not talk of exercise and such things—they had only to attend to their duties.’” Tormented by the family’s rude, spoiled children, she looked forward with anticipation to concluding her job, only to discover that the wealthy “Mrs. Na—” had shortchanged her, paying her twenty-five cents less per week than originally agreed upon. When she gently pointed this out, she was ordered from the house. Her response, while powerful, prophetic, and reflective of the lofty egalitarian values that Cora Wilburn herself consistently espoused, hardly reflected the lady-like demeanor that readers at the time might have preferred. “You may wrong the orphan and the stranger, but you will be none the richer, none the happier! . . . Your religion is a sham, your lives hypocrisy! I scorn, I shrink from association with such as you!”¹⁹

In 1852, Henrietta Jackson broke free of her hated needle. Aided by Christian friends, she became a professional writer and began a new life. Henceforward, she would be known only by her *nom de plume*, Cora Wilburn, which soon became her legal name, listed in official censuses and also on her death certificate. To keep “the demon of want from the door,” she still found herself needing to work “from early dawn to midnight.”²⁰ Henceforward, however, she labored in a “respectable” profession. Writing was one of the few occupations that a woman of her day could take up with pride.

As a writer, Cora Wilburn aligned herself for some seventeen years (1852–1869) with the fast-growing but controversial Spiritualist movement, which treated women on par with men and attracted numerous women into its ranks. She did not become a Spiritualist medium or “trance lecturer,” as the movement’s best known women did. Spiritualists like Cora L. V. Hatch (Scott) and Victoria Woodhull became wealthy through their lectures, books, séances, and well-publicized theatrics. Grieving relatives, especially during the Civil War, paid handsomely to communicate with lost loved ones through a medium. Audiences, meanwhile, thronged to performances where a skillful practitioner interacted with the spirit world; it was the equivalent of a modern-day circus or magic show.²¹ Wilburn, though, mostly reached people through her writings (“I do not feel myself adapted for public speaking.”²²) She published regularly in Spiritualist magazines such as *Banner of Light* and *The Agitator*. Only rarely, most notably in *Cosella Wayne*, did she allude during her Spiritualist years to her Jewish roots. Later, when she abandoned Spiritualism and became known as a Jewish poet, her voluminous Spiritualist writings would be forgotten.

Wilburn was one of a comparatively small number of Jews who identified with Spiritualism.²³ In her case, she never denied her Jewish heritage, but much like Jews who would later participate in such movements as Unitarianism, Ethical Culture, Christian Science, and Buddhism, she insisted that her liberal Spiritualist faith required her only “to be true and pure,” and “to live the life that

is approved of God and angels.”²⁴ In a series boldly entitled “My Religion,” she went so far as to portray the “human soul” as a more reliable guide for human beings than the Bible. “I have never reaped any benefit from the teachings of the Old Testament,” she declared, and “in later years, when I turned from the materialism of the Jewish faith, to the search for light in Christianity, the New Testament failed to inspire me.” She placed her faith, instead, in “Nature’s God,” insisting—no doubt to the horror of her Jewish compatriots—that “we need no Bible and no Creed.”²⁵

Cora Wilburn’s faith led her to become a staunch advocate for social justice—a forgotten foremother of twentieth-century Jewish liberalism. She spoke out boldly against African-American slavery before and during the Civil War, and as early as 1860 other forms of social injustice (“all forms of slavery”) likewise drew from her sharp protest:

I protest . . . against the sale of my black brother and sister, and their subjection to unholy bondage; against the education and sale of maidens for the marriage altar; against the tyranny of unjust laws; and against the slavery of labor, as it is enjoined in our northern cities, in our factories, in our households; against the monstrous systems of extortion practiced by the aristocratic drones of our land toward the defenseless poor; the hard-heartedness of landlords, the tasking of the wretched seamstress, the burdening of orphans and widows with the double weight of humiliation and toil, the contemptuous treatment of dependents, the starvation wages that force young women into the paths of degradation; against all of these outrages perpetrated in this christian land, under legal sanction and authority, my soul protests!²⁶

Wilburn’s “outspoken speech and writings” outraged some Spiritualists. They did not share her politics or her high-minded views on the evils of worldliness and the importance of altruism. Her insistence that “True Spiritualists deny the outer distinction of clothing, fine surroundings and caste,” and that they “spend hours of their most valuable time ministering to the poor, the ignorant, the sick”²⁷ distanced her from more materialistic-minded Spiritualists and did nothing to promote her long-term reputation. As she herself later recalled, some Spiritualists “vowed an implacable animosity toward me, because with unsparing tongue and pen I revealed their worthlessness.” She was labeled a “half-believer” a “skeptic,” an “exclusive.” “Because I opposed immoral doctrines, and yet labored for a righteous freedom,” she explained, “those of the very household of faith reviled me.”²⁸ Some of the literature on Spiritualism would later efface her name completely.

In 1868, Wilburn gathered funds enough to publish a small book of her poems entitled *The Spiritual Significance of Gems*. She had learned about gems in her father’s house, but where he used the precious stones to profit and deceive, she

looked upon them as spiritual preceptors, each imbuing its wearer with a moral lesson (“Sapphire—Trust in Heaven”; “Diamond—Spiritual Purity”; “Chrysolite—Holiness”; and so forth). *The Spiritual Significance of Gems*, like most published volumes of poetry, brought its author neither fame nor fortune. But the volume was noticed by the *American Israelite*, the Reform Jewish newspaper founded by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, and it identified Wilburn as a Jew. “The poems . . . teem with kind and affectionate expressions and noble aspirations for the happiness of man,” it reported, even as it grieved at Wilburn’s belief in “in the dread superstitions of spiritualism.” “We are sorry,” it wrote, “to see so gifted a daughter of Zion being deluded by the heathen demonology of prostrating imposters.”²⁹

Notwithstanding the Spiritualist teachings reflected in her poems, Cora Wilburn, by the time her book appeared, had grown disenchanted with the Spiritualist movement. Investigators had shown that the mysterious “rapping” sounds that once held believers like Wilburn in thrall were nothing more than noise produced by the vigorous cracking of toe joints. Other spiritualist “demonstrations” likewise turned out to be reproducible tricks, rather than manifestations of a “spirit world” beyond ordinary perception. Internal controversies too weakened the movement, particularly well-publicized battles concerning the issue of “free love.” To Wilburn, an advocate of sexual purity and herself an “old maid,” free love meant no more than equality and freedom for women: “Let woman be free; and she will be what God ordained and Nature desired, a beautiful loving being, full of holy sympathies and boundless aspirations.”³⁰ For others, though, and particularly for the outspoken Spiritualist radical, Victoria Woodhull, free love meant exactly that: “sexual freedom for all people—freedom for the monogamist to practice monogamy, for the varietist [polyamorist] to be a varietist still, for the promiscuous to remain promiscuous.”³¹

With Spiritualism on the wane, Wilburn drifted into the new Free Religious Association that aimed to emancipate religion from dogmatic traditions and to “promote the interests of pure religion.” A wide variety of religious liberals joined this new association, including notable Reform rabbis like Isaac Mayer Wise.³² Thanks to them, Wilburn became aware of a form of Judaism that embraced the liberal and progressive causes that she held dear. That discovery distanced Wilburn from her Spiritualist past and brought her back to her people.

“Urged by the strongest convictions of right and duty, I have returned to the faith I was born and educated in, namely the Jewish religion,” she announced to readers of the Spiritualist *Banner of Light* on November 13, 1869. She explained that she now identified with its “progressive ranks,” not its “so-called Orthodox standard,” and that Reform Judaism accepted “all enlightenment, and welcomes every truth tending to exalt the material and the spiritual life of our aspiring humanity.” She promised to continue to labor for the “pure, the true, the beautiful” to the best of her “humble capacities,” but would henceforward do so as an identifying Jew.³³

Wilburn was almost forty-five years old when she made this announcement. Middle age was catching up with her, and her health and productivity had greatly declined. Finding herself with few friends and, significantly, “without one kindred tie in this world,” she looked to live her remaining days in a small cottage in Maine.³⁴ New York’s Temple Emanu-El, the leading Reform Jewish congregation in the United States, provided her with half the sum needed to purchase the cottage, and generous supporters from the Free Religious Association proffered additional assistance. Maine became her home for several years.

By 1877, though, she was living in Lynn, Massachusetts, and writing more and more for Jewish publications such as the *Philadelphia Jewish Record* and B’nai B’rith’s *Menorah*. She no longer produced much in the way of fiction or critical essays; instead, the bulk of her writing consisted of poetry. Visitors found her increasingly bitter and reclusive. “Were I not bound by woman’s fate, that keeps / Me here inactive, while man grandly reaps, / I would, in Israel’s sweet and holy name, / Help to enkindle the world’s freedom-flame,” one of her poems exclaimed.³⁵ Her age, her sex, her ill-health, her poverty—all precluded her from doing more to advance the great social causes that she cherished. Instead, she spent most of her time caring for beloved animals, reading widely, and writing poetry.

Jewish themes suffused her work during these final decades of her life. She published poems entitled “After Yom Kippur,” “Israel’s Power,” and “The Mission of Israel,” as well as ones honoring or memorializing Jewish worthies, such as Emma Lazarus, Amy Levy, Henrietta Szold, Sabato Morais, Alfred T. Jones, Baron Maurice de Hirsch, and Benjamin F. Peixotto. Her most celebrated Jewish poem was “Israel to the World in Greeting,” written for the Jewish Women’s Congress in Chicago in 1893, forerunner of the National Council of Jewish Women. “Greeting to Israel still in captive chains!” she sang out. “Greeting to all in Freedom’s wide domains! / Not Toleration, but Fraternal Love, / Be the New Era’s olive-bearing dove!”³⁶ While not poetry of the caliber that Emma Lazarus produced, the fact that this poem was commissioned and that it subsequently appeared in the pages of the Congress’s published proceedings suggests that contemporaries admired it and looked up to Wilburn as a Jewish poet.

Thanks to a long letter that she sent to her friend, Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal of Chicago, we know that Wilburn was supported by the Jewish community during her declining years. The banker Jacob H. Schiff sent her a monthly check of ten dollars (“and he knows me only by reputation”) and the Hebrew Benevolent Society of Boston, headed by Jacob Hecht, granted her eight dollars a month, which she took, though she found it “dreadful” to be on the receiving end of “public charity.” She also received occasional commissions for poems.³⁷

Overall, though, hers was a reclusive and bitter retirement, for, as she put it, “I am homeless, almost friendless, sick, uncared for as I deserve to be.” She feared being “looked down upon,” but was too poor to live among “our

people,” the Jewish community of Boston. Nevertheless, she assured Rabbi Felsenthal that she remained true to her faith: “I observe the Shabbes conscientiously; the Pessach and the holy days. I keep Yom Kippur as would the most rigidly orthodox.”³⁸

Cora Wilburn died at home in Duxbury, Massachusetts, on December 4, 1906.³⁹ She had just turned eighty-two. In deference to her wishes (and in violation of Jewish law), she was cremated; reputedly she was “the first person of Jewish faith” ever cremated in Boston.⁴⁰

Following her death, *The Standard Book of Jewish Verse* (1917), the largest and most comprehensive volume of Jewish poetry published to that time in the United States, anthologized three of Cora Wilburn’s poems, and some were also included in liturgies and other works. But only one critical treatment of her writing is known to have appeared: a study of her life and work by Rabbi Menachem M. Eichler of Temple Ohabei Shalom in Boston, delivered before the American Jewish Historical Society in 1912 and thereafter published in Boston’s *Jewish Advocate*. “Cora Wilburn was not a great poet,” he pronounced. “Many of her verses are ‘prosy,’ others are obscure and almost unintelligible on account of loose construction and poor grammar. She betrays a want of early training in composition. Her technique is poor. But here and there is a divine flash and a truly poetical thought beautifully expressed. Eloquently she sings the praise of the God of Israel. There is so much religious fervor, spiritual intensity and humanitarianism in her poems that they deserve [to] be rescued from oblivion. A little obscure niche,” he concluded, “should be assigned in the Temple of American Jewish Literature to this humble singer whose life was an unending tragedy.”⁴¹

Eichler’s evaluation offers a partial explanation for the historical amnesia surrounding Cora Wilburn. The quality of much of her poetry, he argued, did not warrant her being remembered. But Eichler himself had managed to overlook most of her prose, including the autobiographical novel, *Cosella Wayne*, as well as other novels, short stories, and essays, most of them published in Spiritualist publications during the most creative period of her life, 1855-1870. Why was that also forgotten?

A different way of approaching historical amnesia, drawing upon the insights of Ali Behdad, relates cultural forgetfulness to ideological consolidation. According to this view, forgetfulness is “convenient.” It “improves” history by obliterating knowledge of the past that conflicts with messages that a country or group seeks to project about itself in the present.⁴² Cora Wilburn, we have seen, transgressed in numerous ways that would have troubled Jews. They would, one suspects, have been glad to forget her dysfunctional and abusive Jewish family, her conversion to Catholicism, her affinity for Spiritualism, her criticism of the Bible, her revelations concerning Philadelphia’s less-than-charitable Jewish elite, even much of her strident social activism. The fact that she remained single did

not help either, though a long list of well-known Jews of her day likewise failed to marry (Rebecca Gratz, Penina Moise, Emma Lazarus, Louisa B. Hart, Mary Cohen, Isaac Leeser, Moses Dropsie, Mayer Sulzberger, and many more).⁴³ Nor would they have wanted to perpetuate her criticism of large families and marital norms (“Give us fewer children, and let them be noble specimens of manhood—pure and loving ideals of womanhood. Let us have soul unions, not marriages of convenience or passion”⁴⁴), or her lack of active involvement in any synagogue or other Jewish institution.

Wilburn, in short, failed to live up either to the ideals of Judaism or to the ideals of “true womanhood” common in her day. Even modesty, which Shira Wolosky has shown to have been so central to women’s poetic voices during that time, only characterized Cora Wilburn writings and demeanor in part.⁴⁵ While, akin to many women poets, she took no personal credit for her poetic abilities, maintaining that she wrote “almost without any mental effort on my part,” and that poems came to her and all she did was transcribe them “with ease and rapidity,”⁴⁶ she also celebrated strongly assertive and immodest women. Her character Cosella Wayne, for example, spoke aggressively to her father and to her godmother, talked back to her employers, and displayed extraordinary independence. Jasmine, another character based on the author’s life, was even more assertive. Wilburn herself explained at one point that “Jasmine talks plainly . . . and strongly, even as I feel. Let no false shame deter any honest, true-hearted woman, in this age, from using speech and pen in behalf of the oppressed.”⁴⁷ Speaking through Jasmine’s voice, she likewise explained that she “became known, but never popular; for, always preferring truth to expediency, I shocked the prejudices of many by my outspoken speech and writings.”⁴⁸ No wonder that contemporaries failed to perpetuate her memory!

Finally, one suspects that Cora Wilburn was forgotten because unlike so many other nineteenth-century American Jewish writers who, as Julian Levinson observes in the *Cambridge History*, “present[ed] their adopted nation as a glorious land brimming with promise,”⁴⁹ she dissented. Slavery, the mistreatment of Native Americans, the inequality of women, the gap between rich and poor—these and other national ills caused her to criticize her adopted countrymen, even as she cherished “this dear land of conquering peace and plenty.”⁵⁰ With the outbreak of the Civil War, she boldly attacked not only the South but also her fellow northerners: “our free soil has been polluted by the footprints of the slave-catcher; our heartstones, as well as our legislative halls, have been desecrated by the apologists of ‘that sum of all villainies—Slavery.’”⁵¹ Later, in 1893, she interrupted her long celebratory poem delivered at the Jewish Women’s Congress to remind her middle and upper class Jewish audience that even in America social problems abounded:

Though safe beneath the Starry Flag *we* dwell
Dare we assert that with us all is well?

While homeless brothers may not seek their bread,
 On native soil; but cringe mid phantoms dread
 Of famine, Murder, Pillage, women slain!
 Are *we* so deadened to another's pain,
 In arms of luxury lulled, that willingly,
 We shackle *here* the soul of Liberty?⁵²

To be sure, Wilburn was not alone among Jews in criticizing the United States. Levinson exaggerates the cult of patriotism among nineteenth-century American Jews, and ignores the many subversives, like Samuel B.H. Judah and Ernestine Rose, who spoke in a different vein.⁵³

What is true, however, is that American Jewish history has generally been unkind to individuals who failed to live up to the community's (shifting) ideals. Subversives, the independent-minded, the transgressors—women in particular—have been banished from cultural memory. That, more than anything else, may account for the forgetting of Cora Wilburn. It likewise helps to explain who won inclusion into *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, and who did not.

JONATHAN D. SARNA is University Professor and the Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, where he chairs its Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program. He also is the past president of the Association for Jewish Studies and Chief Historian of the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. Author or editor of more than thirty books on American Jewish history and life, his *American Judaism: A History* won six awards including the 2004 “Everett Jewish Book of the Year Award” from the Jewish Book Council. Sarna is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the American Academy of Jewish Research. His most recent books are *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* and *Lincoln & the Jews: A History* (with Benjamin Shapell).

NOTES

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1. Madison C. Peters, *Justice to the Jew: The Story of What He Has Done for the World* (London: F. Tennyson Neely, 1899), 123.
2. *Boston Daily Globe*, December 5, 1906; *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 5, 1906, and numerous other newspapers carried the news, which was distributed nationwide by the Associated Press.

3. Arthur Kiron, in "Dust and Ashes: The Funeral and Forgetting of Sabato Morais," *American Jewish History* 84 (September 1996), 155–88, poses a related question concerning the esteemed and later oft-forgotten minister of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia during Wilburn's day. He points to Morais's modesty and values ("cultural feminization") as key determinants. A more masculine and robustly Zionist rabbinite, he argues, held to different ideals than the ones that Morais espoused, and led to historical amnesia concerning his achievements. Morais, of course, was much better remembered than Wilburn, who disappeared from twentieth-century reference works and surveys altogether. The Morais Papers at the University of Pennsylvania contain several letters and poems from Wilburn to Morais, which Dr. Kiron kindly made available to me.
4. I draw in part, for the biographical material below, on material previously published in Jonathan D. Sarna, "Cora Wilburn," *Segula* 37 (April 2017): 52–63; Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jewish Women Without Money: The Case of Cora Wilburn," *Nashim* (forthcoming).
5. While some obituaries for Wilburn listed 1830 or 1831 as the year of her birth, the death certificate (available on Ancestry.com and in the American Jewish Archives) properly lists her as 82 in 1906; see also for her correct dates, M. M. Eichler, "Cora Wilburn," *Jewish Advocate*, February 23, 1912, 6. Wilburn's handwritten diary (see n7) suggests that she may have herself been uncertain about her age, or sought even in her twenties to make herself younger.
6. The 1870 Manuscript Census from Lincolnville in Waldo County, Maine (14), and the 1880 Manuscript Census from Lynn in Essex County, Massachusetts (25) both list her birthplace as France. The 1900 Manuscript Census, from Duxbury in Plymouth County, lists her birthplace as France but her parents' birthplaces as Germany. All of this census information is available on Ancestry.com.
7. Cora Wilburn Diary, SC-12996, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH. I am grateful to Chief Archivist Kevin Proffitt for help in locating this diary and for scanning it for me. For the Yiddish entry, see August 22, 1848; and for one of Wilburn's many translations from German, *Banner of Light* 3 (August 28, 1858), 1.
8. *The London Gazette* (London: 1837), Part 1, 801.
9. "Tricks of a Traveller," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 30, 1843, 4; Cora Wilburn portrayed her father as a swindler of wealthy gentiles in *Banner of Light* 7 (May 19, 1860), 1.
10. Cora Wilburn to Henrietta Szold (January 5, 1891) reprinted in Alexandra Lee Levin, *The Szolds of Lombard Street* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960), 259–60.
11. For Singapore, see Cora Wilburn Diary, March 22, 1844; for Burma, her memoir of how her dog saved her life there in 1839 in *Our Dumb Animals* (November 1878), 46; for Hawaii, see Cora Wilburn, "Dreams of the Hawaiian Islands in Northern Wintertime," *Jewish Messenger*, April 9, 1897, 1; and for Venezuela, see Cora Wilburn Diary, which recounts her time in La Guayra (today La Guaira), 1844—1848.
12. I am preparing *Cosella Wayne* for publication; the original appeared serially in *Banner of Light*, March 30–July 7, 1860. Note that "Cosella Wayne" and Cora Wilburn shared identical initials.

13. *Banner of Light*, June 2, 1860, 1.
14. Cora Wilburn Diary, June 16, 1845; January 4, 1846; February 1847; see also the reference to the death of her parents in *Our Dumb Animals* (February 1879), 79. She describes herself as “born and bred a gentlewoman” in her letter to Rabbi Bernard Felsenthal (June 2, 1885), Bernhard Felsenthal papers; P-21; Box 1; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, New York, and Boston, Massachusetts.
15. Cora Wilburn Diary, 82 (written between June 24 and October 1846).
16. Cora Wilburn Diary, September 9–30, 1848. The U.S. Government Passenger and Immigration lists available on Ancestry.com, claim that the *Euphemia* arrived in New York on September 3, 1848, with a passenger named “Henretty Jackson” on board, but this seems to be an error for September 30; Ancestry.com. New York, Passenger and Immigration Lists 1820–1850. *Registers of Vessels Arriving at the Port of New York from Foreign Ports, 1789–1919. Microfilm Publication M237 rolls 1–95 National Archives, Washington, DC.*
17. *Banner of Light*, June 16, 1860, 1; see Cora Wilburn Diary, October 5, 1848, for similar sentiments upon which her novel is based.
18. *Banner of Light*, June 23, 1860, 1.
19. *Ibid.*, 2. June 16, 1860, 2.
20. *Ibid.*, 1. December 2, 1865, 2.
21. David Walker, “The Humbug in American Religion: Ritual Theories of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism,” *Religion and American Culture* 23 (Winter 2013): 30–74. On women and Spiritualism, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (rev. ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
22. *Banner of Light*, January 2, 1864, 4.
23. Mark A. Lause, *Free Spirits: Spiritualism, Republicanism and Radicalism in the Civil War Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 23–43. Ernestine Rose and a German Jew named Maximilien Leopold Langenschwarz were other Jews who appeared at Spiritualist gatherings.
24. *The Agitator*, April 1, 1860, 98.
25. Cora Wilburn, “My Religion,” *The Agitator*, April 1, 1860. See her earlier articles in this series in the issues of December 15, January 1, February 1, and March 1, 1860.
26. *The Agitator* 3 (March 1, 1860)
27. *The Agitator* 3 (February 1, 1860), 70–71.
28. *Banner of Light* (December 5, 1863), 1.
29. Cora Wilburn, *The Spiritual Significance of Gems* (Hopedale, MA: The Author, 1868); *American Israelite*, February 21, 1868, 4. The *Israelite* mistakenly called her “Clara” instead of “Cora.”
30. Cora Wilburn, “Free Love,” *The Age of Progress* 2, no.10 (December 15, 1855).
31. Madeline S. Stern (ed.), *The Victoria Woodhull Reader* (Weston, MA: M&S Press, 1974), 120. See Wilburn’s letter to Frances E. Abbott in *The Index* 10 (January 2, 1879), 9, where she attacks Woodhull and proclaims that “The abominations of ‘free love’ have driven many earnest souls out of the ranks of Spiritualism.” Wilburn strongly opposed forcing women into marriages with those they did not love, and

- shared the “chainless marriage” ideas of Spiritualist Hannah Brown, editor of *The Agitator*, but opposed libertinism. See, for background, John Spurock, “The Free Love Network in America, 1850 to 1860,” *Journal of Social History* 21 (Summer 1988): 765–79.
32. Sydney E. Ahlstrom and Robert B. Mullen, *The Scientific Theist: A Life of Francis Ellingwood Abbot* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 72–80; Benny Kraut, “Frances E. Abbott: Perceptions of a Nineteenth-Century Religious Radical on Jews and Judaism,” *Studies in the American Jewish Experience* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives 1981), 90–113; Benny Kraut, “Judaism Triumphant: Isaac Mayer Wise on Unitarianism and Liberal Christianity,” *AJS Review* 7–8 (1982–3): 179–230.
 33. *Banner of Light*, November 13, 1869, 3.
 34. *The Index* 2 (August 26, 1871), 270.
 35. Cora Wilburn, “Possibilities,” *Philadelphia Jewish Record*, July 6, 1877.
 36. “Israel to the World in Greeting,” *Papers of the Jewish Women’s Congress . . .* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1894), 132. Wilburn did not herself travel to Chicago. The poem was read by Lillie Herschfield of the New York branch of the Council of Jewish Women; see *American Hebrew*, September 15, 1893, 626.
 37. Cora Wilburn to Bernhard Felsenthal (June 2, 1885), Bernhard Felsenthal papers; P-21; Box 1 ; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, New York, and Boston, Massachusetts. It was difficult to live on eighteen dollars a month—the equivalent of just under five hundred dollars in 2016 dollars. On the monthly check from Schiff, see also Sadie R. Cohen to Jacob R. Marcus (n.d.) concerning Wilburn, in the American Jewish Archives.
 38. Wilburn to Felsenthal, June 2, 1885.
 39. *Boston Daily Globe*, December 5, 1906; *American Israelite*, December 20, 1906, 3; the death certificate is available online at Ancestry.com and in the American Jewish Archives.
 40. The cremation certificate and Sadie R. Cohen’s undated comment about the cremation (on the back of the document) are repositied in the American Jewish Archives.
 41. M. M. Eichler, “Cora Wilburn,” *Jewish Advocate*, February 23, 1912, 6. Eichler’s biographical account, while informed by her diary, is replete with errors.
 42. Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
 43. On singleness in the late nineteenth-century American Jewish community, see Jonathan D. Sarna, “Louisa B. Hart: An Orthodox Jewish Women’s Voice from the Civil War Era,” in *You Arose A Mother in Israel: A Festschrift in Honor of Blu Greenberg*, ed. Dvora Zlochower (New York: Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, 2016), 96.
 44. Cora Wilburn, “Maternity,” *Banner of Light*, August 22, 1863.
 45. Shira Wolosky, “Modest Claims,” in *The Cambridge History of American Literature Volume 4, Nineteenth-century Poetry 1800-1910*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 155–99.
 46. Wilburn, *Spiritual Significance of Gems*, 5.
 47. Cora Wilburn, “Jasmine: or the Discipline of Life,” *Banner of Light*, November 28, 1863, 2.

48. Cora Wilburn, "Jasmine: or the Discipline of Life" *Banner of Light*, December 5, 1863, 2.
49. Julian Levinson, "Encountering the Idea of America," *The Cambridge History of American Jewish Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 21.
50. Cora Wilburn, "Israel's Power" reprinted in Henry Abarbanel, *English School and Family Reader, for the Use of Israelites . . .* (New York: Roger and Sherwood, 1883), 185.
51. Cora Wilburn, "A Woman's Thoughts Upon the War," *Herald of Progress* 2 (July 27, 1861), 3.
52. Cora Wilburn, "Israel to the World in Greeting," *Papers of the Jewish Women's Congress . . .* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1894), 131.
53. See on this theme, my "Subversive Jews and American Culture: Notes on the Leonard Milberg Collection of Early American Judaica," in *By Dawn's Early Light: Jewish Contributions to American Culture from the Nation's Founding to the Civil War*, ed. Adam Mendelsohn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Library, 2016), 189–204.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS: EXPLORING JEWISH AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THEATRE AND FILM IN *THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE*

HEATHER S. NATHANS TUFTS UNIVERSITY

In the 2005 award-winning musical *Spamalot*, the character of Sir Robin explains to the puzzled King Arthur the criteria for a successful show, warning him, "We won't succeed on Broadway, / If you don't have any Jews."¹ For audiences familiar with the Broadway hits of Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, Arthur Miller, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, David Mamet, Harvey Fierstein, Tony Kushner, Wendy Wasserstein, and others, Sir Robin's tongue-in-cheek declaration may seem axiomatic. Indeed, as Stephen J. Whitfield argues in his essay in the *Cambridge History*, "Jewish American Popular Culture," the influence of Jewish American artists on a broader American vernacular culture is *so* pervasive that mapping its reach presents almost as formidable a challenge as defining the terms "Jewish" and "American" (Whitfield 584). Tracing the genealogies of these terms lies at the center of the expansive new *Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*.

In her introduction to the volume, Hana Wirth-Nesher acknowledges the myriad of questions that arise when scholars debate how to classify material as both "Jewish" and "American." Four chapters of the *Cambridge History* focus particularly on Jewish American contributions to drama and film, but even those that look at other genres, such as novels, poetry, or comic books, circle back almost inevitably to performance-related themes, exploring how concepts of "Jewishness" and "Americanness" have orbited each other, exerting strong gravitational pulls