

Spring 2019

# Confirmation and Contradiction: A Continuous Recreation of Gender and Ethnicity in the Works of Josephus

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CONFIRMATION AND CONTRADICTION:  
A CONTINUOUS RECREATION OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN THE WORKS OF  
JOSEPHUS

Taylor Ashby  
May 14, 2019

Do you honestly believe that Hillary would be tougher on Putin than me?

- Donald Trump

Family stories are not the same as tribal citizenship.

- Elizabeth Warren

Psychologists and sociologists are facing a new resurgence of interest in how humans perceive themselves and how these personal perceptions impact interpersonal relationships. C. H. Cooley's, "looking-glass self" concept demonstrates one such approach. Cooley argues that individuals learn their own concept of self by understanding how others perceive them.<sup>1</sup> But this relationship doesn't just work in one direction; we use our reflection to make the adjustments required for advancing socially. This theory, and others like it, can be applied retroactively to historical figures, giving researchers new insight in the lives of key individuals. While many studies have used the works of ancient historians like Josephus and Philo to understand how Jewish communities interacted with their Roman counterparts, fewer studies have focused on how the individual Jew, such as Josephus or Philo, saw himself as a part of greater society. Many of the works from this period were written in the first person, making them easier texts for applying these sociological and gender studies concepts. Understanding how male authors viewed their own masculinity is important for having a balanced understanding of a text and its context. In acknowledgement of this, Josephus's *The Life* can be used as a resource for understanding Jewish masculinity in a Roman context. After introducing a few terms helpful for framing Josephus's masculinity and explaining his context, the importance of at least the appearance of domination in both Roman and Jewish masculine ideals is examined with evidence drawn from *The Life* to explain how Josephus understood his own masculinity as

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<sup>1</sup> Leigh S. Shaffer, "From Mirror Self-Recognition to the Looking-Glass Self: Exploring the Justification Hypothesis," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 1 (January 2005): 54.  
<http://fulla.augustana.edu:2056/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=15344888&site=ehost-live>.

compared to the ideal Roman hegemonic masculinity and how this process redefined Jewish masculinity from marginalized to complicit.

The study of masculinity seeks to understand how different people or groups of people try to enact the social requirements for being an ‘ideal man.’ The ideal man is a subjective status whose defining characteristics fluctuate over time and across cultures. Importantly, one’s masculinity is not a given characteristic and is always at risk of changing to a lower status. One way of discussing a specific enacted masculinity is to explain it relationally with others by labeling them as either hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, or subordinate.<sup>2</sup> Hegemonic masculinity is the first of these and represents the ideal form of masculinity characterized by the successful domination over all others in a society.<sup>3</sup> Often times, this masculinity is not enacted by a majority of the males in a society, but rather is expected *de facto* of the most powerful few and is sought by almost all others. Regardless of the number of men who fall into this category, hegemonic masculinity reflects the expectations a society has of all men. Complicit, marginalized, and subordinate masculinities reflect the varying degrees and circumstances to which one might fail to achieve hegemonic masculinity. Complicit masculinity is characterized by a failure to fully enact hegemonic masculinity, but nonetheless allows its individuals to benefit from the expectations and privileges of the hegemonic ideal through an intentionally aggressive imitation of hegemonic practices and values.<sup>4</sup> The standards of complicit masculinity are often similar to those hegemonic masculinity, the only difference being the required subservience by other males to hegemonic males in all contexts. Marginalized masculinities are

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<sup>2</sup> For definitions on subordinate masculinities, see R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2d ed, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. Connell, *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 2. “Masculinities, Relations among.” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004, 508.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 509.

characterized by the disequal treatment of a disadvantaged outgroup of people.<sup>5</sup> People in this group cannot join the hegemonic group because of another factor, perhaps their ethnic identity or physical ability, and their masculinity is characterized by an otherness that prevents them from ever achieving a hegemonic status. Complicit masculinity can be seen as a bridge between marginalized and hegemonic masculinities and is essential for understanding how Jewish masculinity might fit into a dominant Roman masculinity at the start of the common era.

### *Flavius Josephus and Jewish Masculinity*

Flavius Josephus, an elite Judean, lived during the first century CE in the Roman Empire, right at the end of the second temple period. He claims in the first few lines of *The Life* to be from an impressive family line descending from Jewish priests and royalty.<sup>6</sup> This claim of lineage establishes himself as an important and credible Jew - a tie he seeks to both elevate and diminish as is perceived to be most helpful for ensuring his own relevance. After being trained as a priest, he was given a military command as the governor of Galilee during the Jewish Revolt against Roman rule - an unsuccessful venture culminating in the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. Following the failure of his own command, Josephus was taken to Rome by Vespasian and his son Titus, where he maintained his elite status through his Roman captor's patronage. His obligations to Vespasian and Titus granted Josephus a privileged status despite his Jewish identity and involvement in a failed revolt and it was from this position that he wrote his major works *Antiquities of the Jews*, *Wars of the Jews*, *Against Apion*, and *The Life*. Both *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War* are histories of the Jewish people, while *Against Apion* is used by

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<sup>5</sup> Cliff Cheng, "Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction" *Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 296.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1963075&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>6</sup> Flavius Josephus, "The Life of Flavius Josephus," in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William A. M. Whison (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1873), §1.

historians to explain Jewish culture at the time of the Second Temple. *The Life* was the last of his works and is an autobiography. Caryn Reeder asserts that these first works show evidence of Josephus's efforts to "(re)construct Jewish masculinity"<sup>7</sup> as something worthy of praise and respect from the Roman perspective. Though Reeder provides the groundwork for understanding Josephus's attempt at changing his own masculine status, further explanation is needed for understanding how this 'new' Jewish masculinity related to the Roman ideal. Other scholars, such as J. H. Neyrey, have used *The Life* as an example of an encomium, a work of self-praise, thus underscoring the efforts Josephus makes to alter the Roman perception of Jews.<sup>8</sup> *The Life* offers insight as to how Josephus wanted himself to be seen by literate Romans as a Jewish man living under the protection of Vespasian and Titus. The work can then be extended as a commentary not just on Josephus's own masculinity, but as redefining Jewish masculinity as a complicit masculinity to the Roman hegemonic ideal and not a masculinity negated to a marginalized status.<sup>9</sup>

Roman hegemonic masculinity can be defined in part by its domination over others. In most cases, the men able to enact the hegemonic masculinity were "rulers, heads of elite households, powerful patrons"<sup>10</sup> and, of course, always Roman citizens. These men had power over others, and were themselves free from other's control.<sup>11</sup> One of the primary ways a man

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<sup>7</sup> Caryn A. Reeder, "Gender, War, and Josephus," *Journal for the Study of Judaism In the Persian Hellenistic & Roman Period* 46, no. 1 (2015): 71. DOI:10.1163/15700631-12340419.

<sup>8</sup> J. H. Neyrey, "Josephus' *Vita* and the Encomium: A Native Model of Personality," *Journal for the Study of Judaism In the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 25, no. 2 (Dec. 1994): 179.

<sup>9</sup> Josephus's redefining of Jewish masculinity sees itself manifest in the later constructions of Rabbinic masculinity. Because of this, some sources will include discussions on Rabbinic masculinity.

<sup>10</sup> Janice Capel Anderson, and Stephen D. Moore, "Matthew and Masculinity," In *New Testament Masculinities*, edited by Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 69.

<sup>11</sup> While this would seem to imply that only the person at the very top was capable of displaying hegemonic masculinity, those in equal positions could also be seen as enacting hegemonic masculinity. For example, powerful senators might not have complete authority over one another, but only the emperor had authority over them as a group, making them ideal candidates for displaying hegemonic masculinity.

could show his own authority over others was by possessing a military command or an official role within the government, such as a senator or someone directly involved in the imperial household. Even outside of these official postings, men could show their own authority in the role of the paterfamilias. Tat-siong Benny Liew explains how the leading male in a family had control over all his material resources and the human members of his household - immediate and extended family members and slaves.<sup>12</sup> How individuals in a household acted was a direct reflection of the leading male's character and so having complete control over every public aspect of one's family's lives was essential for maintaining a high masculine status.

Influenced by Stoic thought, the ideal Roman male in the first few centuries of the common era was in control over his own emotions and demonstrated moderation in his actions. This self-restraint was at least in part justified by associating women with emotional and irrational behaviors. If women were emotional and irrational, men must be self-restrained emotionally and rational, so the logic went. Josephus demonstrates this self-mastery when describing his own ability to refrain from misdeeds despite having authority at a young age. He describes himself as having kept "every woman free from injuries," despised unneeded gifts, and refused tithes; however he does confess to having enjoyed the spoils of of the Syrians he conquered.<sup>13</sup> While the former aspects of this list herald his own self-restraint and therefore excellent masculinity, even the last aspect, framed as a confession, announces his masculine virtue as a successful military leader. Later, Josephus compares his own masculinity to that of Justus, a contemporary Jewish scholar who challenged Josephus's accounts. Josephus claims that

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<sup>12</sup> Tat-siong Benny Liew, "Re-Mark-able Masculinities: Jesus, the Son of Man, and the (Sad) Sum of Manhood" In *New Testament Masculinities*, edited by Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 103.

<sup>13</sup> Josephus, "The Life," §15.

while he showed self-restraint in sparing the other man's life and men, Justus "slew one hundred and eighty-five of your [Justus's] citizens... on account of your own wickedness."<sup>14</sup> Again, Josephus is announcing his own superiority in self-restraint in accordance to the Roman hegemonic masculinity.

*Josephus: The Marginalized Jewish Male*

Given the importance of dominance over others, it is unsurprising that a majority of *The Life* focuses on a brief period of time in which Josephus was a military commander. But here, Josephus's status as a client of two prominent Romans, Vespasian and Titus, play an important role in mediating his own commentary.<sup>15</sup> Josephus's military command was in a failed revolt *against* Roman authority. Not only was his command one that was antagonistic to that of the leading Romans, but it ultimately failed. Josephus strategically navigates around these problems by insisting that it was not under his own leadership that the revolt failed (thus dismissing any personal ownership to the failure), but that of Justus, his political enemy. While claiming some authority for the initial revolt, Josephus claims "I was in the power of the Romans before Jerusalem was besieged," therefore he cannot be held accountable for the revolt's failure by either Jews or Romans.<sup>16</sup> However, the problem still remains that the conflict was against the Romans, a failure almost irreparable to any male trying to perform hegemonic masculinity. But Josephus is able to justify in part his own actions in the revolt as a response to a dream he had. In the dream, Josephus is told to let go of fear, that he will eventually be successful, and finally to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., §65. This claim against Justus serves not only to establish Josephus's own self-control as compared to Justus's, but also raises his own status as a patron that can be trusted to take care of his clients. For a discussion on patronage in the Roman Empire, see Elizabeth Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Caryn A. Reeder, "Gender, War, and Josephus," *Journal for the Study of Judaism In the Persian, Hellenistic & Roman Period* 46, no. 1 (2015): 76. DOI:10.1163/15700631-12340419.

<sup>16</sup> Josephus, "The Life," §65.

“remember that thou art to fight with the Romans.”<sup>17</sup> In a way, his participation in the revolt was at the command of some higher power which promised eventual success. While this doesn't entirely erase his role in the conflict with the Romans, it demonstrates clearly how Josephus was able to enact a complicit masculinity toward the hegemonic Roman ideal. He doesn't directly challenge the idea of military success being important but instead relies on the general populations perceptions of warring men as being masculine to his benefit.<sup>18</sup> This raises his own masculine status by associating his actions with the ideal man's. His own restraint in writing anything slanderous against the Romans displays his unwillingness to challenge his patrons, and perhaps the idea that this was the success guaranteed in the dream.

Essential to understanding the domination of others is the understanding of a man's role in the household. As explained by Liew, men were expected to act as the paterfamilias and maintain control over every aspect of their dependents' - wives, children, slaves, and possibly clients - lives.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Josephus doesn't mention his wives until near the end of *The Life*. The first two of his wives are mentioned only briefly, are not given names, and are each dismissed within a few lines. Josephus writes, “at his [Vespasian's] command, I married a virgin, who was from among the captives of that country.”<sup>20</sup> This first explanation, despite its brevity, hints at the relationship Josephus had with his own masculinity. First, he was commanded by Vespasian to marry a captive. This demonstrates his own lack of control in that the marriage was not something he went into willingly. Secondly, the marriage of a Jew to a foreign woman was traditionally problematic - especially for someone trained as a priest. This bigger Jewish problem

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., §42.

<sup>18</sup> As discussed later, Josephus will actually profess some amount of military success against the Syrians, a somewhat dangerous move considering his patron Vespasian's own connection to the Syrians.

<sup>19</sup> Liew, “Re-Mark-able Masculinities,” 103.

<sup>20</sup> Josephus, “The Life,” §75.

might explain why he admits to having followed Vespasian's command and why he later dismisses the woman from himself. In this way, he is able to save face in front of the other Jews for having married a foreigner. He goes on to marry another woman, only to divorce her, claiming to be "not pleased with her behavior."<sup>21</sup> Here Josephus is enacting the ideal Roman male in his ability to divorce and remarry at will, thus reclaiming his previously lost masculinity when commanded by Vespasian. Finally, he marries "a Jewess by birth: a woman she was of eminent parents, and such as were the most illustrious in all the country, and whose character was beyond that of most other women."<sup>22</sup> This is the longest description of any of his wives, and indicates his own status in society that he was able to marry such affluence. The commentary on her character, as mentioned earlier, should be read back on himself from the Roman perspective. These details in *The Life* offer valuable insight into understanding how Josephus saw his actions as complicit with Roman standards when it came to dominating those in his household.

Josephus's actions represent more than just an aspiration for the Roman ideal, but also indicate his rejection of a marginalized Jewish masculinity in favor of a complicit one. Historian Daniel Boyarin writes that "traditionally many Jewish men identified themselves as feminized, beginning with the Talmud and through the opposition to 'Roman' ideals of the male, and understood that feminization as a positive aspect of their cultural identity."<sup>23</sup> Identifying oneself with the outgroup here should not be understood as a reluctant acceptance of one's otherness, but as a way of reclaiming this outsider status and the associated privileges, in this instance the chosenness of Jews. By describing themselves as feminized men, Jews take an active role in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., §76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and Jewish Masculinity," In *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, edited by Bjorn Krondorfer (London, UK: SCM, 2009), 89. Excerpts from Boyarin's essay of the same title.

rejecting the Roman hegemonic masculinity as an example of their own commitment to monotheism and are barred from practicing hegemonic masculinities by others. Given the distinctive “othering” of Jewish males, Josephus lived and wrote in a space in between the hegemonic Roman ideal and a marginalized Jewish masculinity. However, this marginalized status shouldn’t be misconstrued as a drastic departure from the hegemonic Roman ideal. Jewish masculinity placed men over women, prized military like dominance, and required self mastery much like the hegemonic Roman ideal.

Though Jewish males enacted a masculinity different from that of their Roman counterparts, Jewish masculinity is still considered by scholars such as Harry Brod as “subordinate within the dominant culture but superordinate within one’s own culture.”<sup>24</sup> Jewish males, despite their lower status compared to Roman standards, benefited from Roman tendencies to consistently place men over women. Josephus had no need to challenge either one’s perceptions of masculinity itself when seeking to describe his own actions in a masculine light, but rather the relationship between the two. His reimagining of Jewish masculinity would have placed himself in a sort of middle ground with the two groups Jewish males would have interacted with the most: Roman males and Jewish women. Josephus’s treatment towards his wives is indicative of his own superior status to Jewish women, from both a Roman and Jewish perspective.

Jews living in the Roman empire were limited in the aspects of public life they could participate in because of the connections between the Roman gods and public jobs and events. This would have isolated Jews from much of daily Roman life, from public baths, doing business

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<sup>24</sup> Harry Brod, *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 1. “Jewish Men” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004, 442.

during the Sabbath, celebrating the pagan festivals and sharing in the food, as well as barring them from the civil offices marked with devotion to the Roman gods.<sup>25</sup> Some scholars, like Steve Mason and Daniel Boyarin, view this marginalization to have extended to a rejection of Roman tendencies toward warfare and violence, but others such as Ishay Rosen-Zvi, a professor of Talmudic studies and Jewish thought, instead argue that the penchant for battle manifested itself in the debates held between Jewish males on the Torah.<sup>26</sup> Rosen-Zvi draws attention to the terminology used to describe the debates and their participants as similar to that used to describe Roman males in battle. Josephus's own description of his role in the Jewish Revolt is as a general who gave orders and manipulated situations, but not as one who had much success physically fighting. He describes an instance in which he tries to capture two of his enemies, Simon and Joazar, by feigning himself a traitor. After having tricked one of them to meet with him, he turns them over to those with him instead of dealing with the man himself.<sup>27</sup> The emphasis on the verbal role of this military encounter serves to acknowledge what Boyarin and Mason view as a distancing from the Roman military, but the power of his language to support Rosen-Zvi's claim that Jewish men instead turned to debate as a means of persuasion. These scholars can be combined to explain the marginalization of traditional Jewish masculinity and the efforts of Josephus to draw on parts of the Jewish tradition that were complicit to a Roman ideal.

Self-restraint is considered by Jewish sources to be essential to Torah study, and therefore required of all Jewish men. In fact, the recognized study of the Torah is the culminating achievement of a Jewish male, and also meant that a Jewish males self-restraint naturally

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<sup>25</sup> Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1992), 55.

<sup>26</sup> Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "The Rise and Fall of Rabbinic Masculinity," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal*, (2013), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Josephus, "The Life," §63.

excelled.<sup>28</sup> This is similar to the Roman masculinity and meant this assumptions went largely unchallenged. Josephus writes for a Roman audience and interestingly maintains the emphasis on learning toward developing self-restraint, thus preserving the Jewish masculine ideal in his explanation.<sup>29</sup> He does this by writing over and over again about his own “great memory and understanding.”<sup>30</sup> Josephus describes how he was sought out by older men in his community for his understanding of the law and his eventual training as a priest.<sup>31</sup> This demonstrates for Jews his own superior knowledge of the Torah and obvious self-restraint, but also plays into Roman ideas regarding wisdom. His professed highly educated status even as a young man would have spoken well for his own wisdom and his authority over those who ought to have authority over him. More importantly, this sort of wisdom would have to be connected with ideas of self-restraint from both a Roman and Jewish perspective.<sup>32</sup>

*The Life* is the culminating effort of Josephus to reinterpret Jewish culture as compatible and understandable in comparison to the Roman ideal. The ways in which he challenges the perceptions of Jewish males as falling short of hegemonic masculinity are explained in Roman terms for a Roman audience as a complicit effort and not a lesser grouping of people. In seeing himself ‘through the looking-glass,’ Josephus reimagines a complicit Jewish masculinity comparable to Roman standards as the highest attainable masculine status for Jews. It is evident that this eventually came to be the case with Rabbinic masculinities in the following centuries,

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<sup>28</sup> Michael L. Satlow, “‘Try to Be a Man’: The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 1 (1996): 27. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9606142595&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>29</sup> It is unlikely that many Jews would have been overly concerned with Josephus’s writings. Having failed in the revolt and supported the Romans, most scholars see Josephus as having been cast out by the Jews. This would mean that his writings would only have been read by the elite Romans literate enough to read works on history.

<sup>30</sup> Josephus, “The Life,” §2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> There might be a connection between this idea of self-restrained masculinity stemming from the proper study of scriptures and the patristic authors of early Christianity. This doesn’t have a clear place in this paper now, but may serve as an area of further investigation.

and Josephus may have been instrumental in paving the way for this new enacted masculinity. But the relevance of this scholarship isn't limited to historical politicians as evidence for identity shaping can be found hundreds of years later and halfway across the globe.

*Modern Manipulations of Ethnicity and Gender*

Both Elizabeth Warren and Donald Trump have used the same sort of methods employed by Josephus to enact a perceived hegemonic masculinity similar to the old Roman ideal. When asked about his planned relationship with Russia, Trump claims in one sentence that a positive relationship with Vladimir Putin would be an asset and then immediately insists that he might not get along with the Russian President. But most importantly, he defends his own ability to dominate the relationship by claiming “do you honestly believe that Hillary would be tougher on Putin than me?”<sup>33</sup> Here Trump exemplifies the perceived need for domination felt by Josephus and other first century males in a new context. Not only is Trump capable of dominating his enemies, as Josephus would have done had he not had his prophetic dream, but also raises his own self-assured toughness as being greater than opponent Hillary Clinton's. Trump's attempt at painting himself as being capable of the kind of domination required for Roman hegemonic status shows the power of such an ideal and the political influence such claims have even centuries later.

Warren's claims to Native American ancestry find their reflection in Josephus's crafting of both his Jewish and Roman status. After claiming publically and releasing DNA evidence to back up Warren's claims, she later apologized for not making clear her lack of tribal citizenship.

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<sup>33</sup> “Donald Trump's News Conference: Full Transcript and Video,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2017, Accessed March 29, 2019.  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/us/politics/trump-press-conference-transcript.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/us/politics/trump-press-conference-transcript.html?_r=0)

<sup>34</sup> Like Josephus's references to his own lineage, Warren's claims were seemingly made to grant her credibility as someone with authentic ties to a community and have since needed to be altered to maintain her own importance. The claims to Native American ancestry, a claim to perceived otherness, show the same sort of identity politics that may have influenced Josephus's decision to claim his Jewish heritage at the start of his autobiography. Both Warren and Josephus had to mediate their claims to remain relevant in their own political context. What these modern examples show is a human willingness to alter our own identities to get ahead in a world that demands conformity to perceived hegemonic ideas. The same need to alter our own understanding of ourselves to change others' opinions is a powerful force of change having implications in the way we understand not only our past, but our present selves, and the possibilities for our future.

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Naylor, "Elizabeth Warren Apologizes For Latest Revelation of Native American Claims," *NPR*, February 6, 2019, Accessed March 29, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/06/692103008/elizabeth-warren-apologizes-for-latest-revelation-of-native-american-claims>

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