Narcissa Owen’s *Memoirs* commence not with the Dedication or Introduction, but with a 1906 photograph of Owen on her seventy-fifth birthday. An inhabitant of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Owen wears a tastefully embroidered black dress suggesting an affluent woman of fashion, while her pleasantly direct expression, coupled with eyeglasses held gracefully but not casually in her right hand, proclaims a person of seriousness and intellect, capable of commanding both the drawing room and the classroom. Mother, housekeeper and impresario for her political son Robert, and unofficial spokesperson for educated, acculturated Cherokees, Owen projects a version of Cherokee, Southern, and American, history in her own embodiment. This essay explores Owen’s negotiations of this embodiment across private and public spheres, and it will argue that her representations, both in images and words, undercut, unpack, and complicate gendered norms not only for Native American women, but for American women more generally.

Born in 1831 in Arkansas Indian Territory to a Scots-Irish mother and mixed-blood Cherokee father who died when she was only three years old, Owen encountered the Cherokee nation *in extremis* during the forced migration of the Trail of Tears in 1838-1839. In her *Memoirs*, privately published in 1907, Owen suggests that her first sustained engagement with Cherokee culture occurred in 1880 when, following her son Robert Jr’s government appointment, she moved to Oklahoma Indian Territory to teach music in the Cherokee Female Seminary. In her earlier years she was occupied by attaining the education appropriate for the daughter of an affluent, slaveholding

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family, marriage to railroad executive Robert Latham Owen, raising her two sons, heading volunteer work in Lynchburg, Virginia, during the Civil War, and then widowhood, financial trouble, and work as a private music teacher to send her sons to college. When Robert Jr’s career advanced (he eventually became a US Senator) she returned with him to Washington, DC and resumed her role as a socialite and artist. As this sketch only intimates, Owen’s public roles and occupations were numerous and many-faceted.

For Owen, public and private spheres are always interconnected, in as much as her narrative depicts her guiltless freedom to circulate in various spaces. Whether this freedom derived from her Cherokee background, her fluid but fundamentally elite class status, her age, her education, or some combination of these and other factors is unclear; but no adequate conceptual framework exists to describe the variety of her experiences and of her performances of womanliness (or Cherokeeess, for that matter). Alison Piepmeier’s charge resonates here: “What needs to be more fully articulated and explored [in studies of nineteenth-century womanhood] are the modalities of embodiment that make use of both public and private, that are neither fully victim nor agent, that – rather than being appropriate or deviant – are multiple, transitional, strategic, playful, contested.” In some sense, Owen provides a paradigmatic argument for readers’ self-examination, since what has characteristically been perceived as contradictory behavior – that is, crossing boundaries between public and private – in Owen’s case generates apparently little or no dissonance. We must ask, then, why do we see dissonance?

Although she often represents herself as a conventional Victorian American wife and mother, Owen repeatedly and deliberately juxtaposes and confuses “white” and “Indian”, “savage” and “civilized”, in the process necessarily challenging corporeal conventions. To be “out in public”, according to Piepmeier, “suggests a body taking up space and moving through the world of commerce, government, or celebrity”. In a nineteenth-century context, however,

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2 Deborah Cameron, in her essay “Theorizing the Female Voice in Public Contexts”, in Speaking Out: The Female Voice in Public Contexts, ed. Judith Baxter, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, proposes a significant difference between a “public setting” and “the public sphere” (7), but for Owen even this distinction blurs.