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**Finding America: Issues of Acculturation and Assimilation in the  
Works of Anzia Yeziarska**

**(Hledání Ameriky: Problémy akulturace a asimilace v díle Anzii Yeziarské)**

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## Abstract

This BA thesis deals with the acculturation and assimilation of East European Jewish immigrant women in the pre-WWI United States, as represented in the selected works of Anzia Yeziarska (“Wings,” “Hunger,” “The Free Vacation House,” “The Fat of the Land,” “How I Found America,” and *Bread Givers*). The source of the conflict in the texts is the discrepancy between the immigrant ideals of America as the land of their dreams, and the Americanizers’ demand for Anglo-conformity. Operating with definitions of assimilation by Robert Park and Arnold Rose, and Milton Gordon’s concept of intrinsic and extrinsic cultural traits, this interdisciplinary analysis approaches the conflict on two levels. Firstly, as the clash of the Jewish and American traits, identified in the representatives of each culture. Secondly, as the confrontation of the first and second generation immigrants, whose differing visions of America influenced their attitude towards acculturation and assimilation, determining its efficiency.

The thesis debates whether formalized Americanization, as represented in the primary texts, enables complete assimilation on both the intrinsic and extrinsic levels. Since the texts frequently place the Jewish and American traits in polar opposition, the thesis explores whether assimilation, as the replacement of one set of traits with the other, is depicted as desirable. Following is the final question of the Americanized characters’ ability to relate to their Jewishness without compromising the American self.

Initially (Chapter 2), the analysis deals with the differing expectations of America. While the first generation’s vision of material success quickly results in disenchantment and reluctance to acculturate, the second generation’s metaphorical ideal of equality and self-expression opens them up to Americanization. The Jewish traditions of high learning and linguistic hierarchy are explored as a means of subordinating women, and their connection of Yiddish and the Jewish secular culture becomes clear (3). Subsequently (4), a parallel discussion of the Americanizing efforts reveals a restrictive and therefore inefficient approach, promoting acculturation without connecting the intrinsic and extrinsic cultures. Later (5), through the use of Standard English in the educational context, it is shown that English is the carrier of the American culture as well as the liberated language of the metaphorical America; it can mediate between the intrinsic and extrinsic culture, enabling successful acculturation and subsequent assimilation. The discussion progresses to the teaching profession which enables the protagonist of *Bread Givers* to become an Americanizing force and affirm her American self.

The final chapter (6) returns to the generational aspect of the conflict, exploring the second generation's rejection of the parent culture as the result of the notion of WASP superiority. Secondly, the first generation's response is analyzed; to regain self-respect, they revert back to the traditional Jewish stereotypes, which only widens the generational and cultural gap. The final section explores Yeziarska's suggestions of possible reconciliation of the protagonists' Jewishness and Americanness by either by marrying an Americanized Jew, or connecting the two by using English as the new "mother tongue" in place of Yiddish. However, the positive outcome of either remains questionable.

**Key words:** acculturation, assimilation, Americanization, Jewishness, Americanness, Yiddish, English, education, women

## Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá problémy akulturace a asimilace východoevropských židovských imigrantek v předválečných Spojených státech, jak je zachycují vybraná díla Anzii Yeziarské („Wings“, „Hunger“, „The Fat of the Land“, „The Free Vacation House“, „How I Found America“ a *Bread Givers*). Uvedené texty spatřují jádro konfliktu v rozporu mezi idealistickou představou imigrantů očekávajících zemi splněných přání a požadavkem anglo-konformity ze strany zastánců amerikanizace. Tato interdisciplinární práce vychází z definic asimilace podle Roberta E. Parka a Arnolda M. Rose, jakož i modelu vnitřní a vnější kultury Miliona M. Gordona, a nahlíží na danou problematiku ze dvou úhlů. V první řadě se soustředí na protichůdnost židovských a amerických kulturních charakteristik, zosobněných představiteli obou kultur. Zadruhé pak na střet první a druhé generace přistěhovalců, jejichž rozdílné představy o Americe ovlivňují jejich přístup k akulturaci i asimilaci a určují tak i míru účinnosti celého procesu.

Tato práce si klade otázku, zda systematická amerikanizace zobrazená v daných dílech umožňuje úplnou asimilaci na úrovni vnitřní i vnější kultury. Vzhledem k tomu, že primární texty často upozorňují na protichůdnost židovských a amerických kulturních znaků, zabývá se práce také tím, zda je asimilace jakožto nahrazení jedné sady znaků jinou vnímána jako žádoucí. Poslední část rozboru se věnuje úvaze, jestli jsou amerikanizované protagonistky s to udržet si vztah ke své židovské identitě, aniž by tím narušily své americké já.

Práce se nejprve zabývá rozdílnými představami přistěhovalců o Americe (Kapitola 2). Zatímco první generace očekává blahobyt a zklamání jejich představitelů jde ruku v ruce s odmítnutím akulturace, druhá generace vidí Ameriku jako metaforu pro rovnoprávnost a seberealizaci, což jim otevírá cestu k amerikanizaci. Další kapitola (3) probírá tradiční důraz židovské kultury na

vzdělanost a jazykovou hierarchii v souvislosti s podřízeným postavením žen a objasňuje jejich spojitost s jidiš a světskou sférou židovské kultury. Následuje obdobná diskuze o praktikách organizované amerikanizace (4), které jsou zobrazeny jako omezující, a tudíž kontraproduktivní, jelikož propagují akulturaci bez propojení vnější a vnitřní kultury. Pátá kapitola se zabývá významem spisovné angličtiny, a to zejména v kontextu vzdělávání. Tato část rozboru ukazuje, že angličtina je nejen nositelem americké kultury, ale i osvobozujícím jazykem Ameriky v přeneseném slova smyslu. Jako taková propojuje vnitřní a vnější kulturu a umožňuje úspěšnou akulturaci a posléze i asimilaci. Následuje debata o významu učitelského povolání, díky němuž se hrdinka románu *Bread Givers* aktivně zapojí do amerikanizace, a dále tak upevní své nové americké já.

Poslední kapitola (6) se obrací zpět ke generačnímu rozporu a zabývá se nejprve odmítnutím rodné kultury ze strany druhé generace v důsledku představy o nadřazenosti kultury americké. Následně práce analyzuje reakci představitelů první generace, kteří se ve snaze zachovat si sebeúctu vžívají zpět do stereotypních rolí tradiční židovské kultury, což vede k dalšímu odcizení obou generací a kultur. Poslední část rozboru se věnuje možnostem usmíření rozporů mezi židovskou a americkou identitou hlavních představitelk. Výchozí texty spatřují smírčí potenciál ve sňatku hrdinky s amerikanizovaným židem, případně v propojení židovské a americké identity za pomoci angličtiny jakožto nového „mateřského jazyka“ namísto jidiš. Ani jeden způsob však nezaručuje dosažení žádoucího výsledku.

**Klíčová slova:** akulturace, asimilace, amerikanizace, židovství, americkost, jidiš, angličtina, vzdělávání, ženy

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## 1. Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. The immigrant “between two worlds”

Finding America not in the geographical sense, but in its more metaphorical meaning of self-expression, equality and acceptance, is a theme that runs throughout the works of Anzia Yeziarska. Her Jewish immigrant heroines strive to achieve those goals while navigating between the Jewish and American cultures. They desperately try to connect with both but often discover they cannot fully identify with either. The prominence of the struggle to take advantage of the opportunities that America offers while balancing one’s Jewish and American selves is not coincidental in Yeziarska’s work. Being a first-generation Russian Jewish immigrant herself, she had first-hand experience with the opposing pressures of the orthodox Jewish background and the omnipresent Americanizing forces. Fiercely ambitious, Yeziarska left the impoverished ghetto to earn a college degree and became a well-known author in the 1910’s and 20’s. However, she felt that this mainstream success distanced her from her Jewish origins as the chief source of her inspiration; this ambivalence features prominently in her work. Eventually, the readership interest decreased, and though Anzia Yeziarska continued to write, she only published one book between 1932 and her death in 1970. She died forgotten and in poverty, ironically only a few years before the feminist movement and the reevaluation of early twentieth century ethnic fiction would bring renewed interest in her work.

This thesis explores the conflict not only of the Jewish and American cultures, but also the rift which it created between the first and second generation immigrants. The conflict Yeziarska deals with in her works stems from the confrontation of the immigrants’ visions of America with the practices of the Americanization movement, which sought to inculcate the White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) values at all costs. By analyzing, in several selected texts, the influences on both sides of the Americanizing debate, their principles and effects, this thesis will discuss the effectiveness of organized Americanization, the desirability of complete assimilation, and the impact it has on the protagonists’ relationship to their Jewishness, as depicted in Yeziarska’s works.

Since the republication of *Bread Givers* (1925) in 1975, Yeziarska’s texts have been studied in the context of Jewish immigrant fiction, to complete the predominantly male canon. Of the more recent publications, Magdalena J. Zaborowska’s *How We Found America: Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives* emphasizes the feminine perspective on the immigrant experience of displacement, reconsideration of the self and of the American Dream. It also touches upon Yeziarska’s fierce resentment of class, ethnic boundaries and the

discrimination her characters face both as representatives of the Jewish immigrants and the working class. Scholars also acknowledge the ironic undertone of her ‘happy endings’<sup>1</sup> in which the protagonists often Americanize, usually at the expense of their Jewishness. This reflects Yeziarska’s own inner conflict; as Alice Kessler-Harris points out, “[s]he never did reconcile the dichotomies in her life.”<sup>2</sup> We will discuss Yeziarska’s depictions of the effects of the Americanizing pressure and gradual assimilation on the sense of Jewishness of the younger immigrants. Additionally, we will focus on the generational differences and the possibility of reconciliation at both the individual and the generational level.

Yeziarska’s writing is notable for its unusual blend of realistic detail, with which she describes the poverty of the ghetto, and the melodramatic hyperbole depicting the emotional life of her characters. Earlier scholars dismissed this, along with her frequent employment of stereotypical characters, as signs of a naïve and immature literary style. Recently, several compelling studies have emerged, grouping Yeziarska with the so-called ethnic modernists. Brooks E. Hefner and Delia C. Konzett defend Yeziarska’s linguistic experimentation, praising her employment of highly subjective focalizers and sophisticated linguistic representation of the ever-changing immigrant consciousness. Highlighting the linguistic dimension of Yeziarska’s portrayal of the acculturating and assimilating process, they show that the native language “lurks beneath her narrators’ standard language, always ready to emerge.”<sup>3</sup> Our analysis will explore how language not only reflects, but directly influences the transformative process of acculturation and assimilation, especially for the Jewish immigrant women.

Connecting the two areas of research and utilizing certain sociological concepts, this interdisciplinary thesis will focus primarily on the close reading of the selected texts. Through character analysis and interpretation, we will explore the effectiveness of formalized Americanization in the process of acculturation and subsequent assimilation and the creation of a viable American self. Language and literacy will be shown as crucial for the female characters’ ‘finding America’, as they reflect and carry the cultural specificities both Jewish and American, metaphorical and literal. Examining the impact of Americanizing pressures and influences on both the first and the second generation and their relationship as a reflection of the characters’ internal conflict, we will debate whether the selected texts present complete assimilation as desirable. Utilizing the generational reflection of the cultural dichotomy, we will address whether

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<sup>1</sup> To distinguish references to primary and secondary sources from our use of quotation marks for emphasis, the former are always in double quotations marks (“”), whereas the latter utilizes single quotes (‘’).

<sup>2</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, “Foreword,” *Bread Givers: A Novel, 1925*, (New York: Persea Books, 1975) xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks E. Hefner, “‘Slipping back into the vernacular’: Anzia Yeziarska’s Vernacular Modernism,” *MELUS* 36.3 (Fall 2011), 204.

and how a character is able to relate to her Jewishness, once she believes to have found her America, without compromising her new American self.

For the purpose of our analysis, we have selected Yeziarska's 1925 novel *Bread Givers* and five short stories – “Wings,” “Hunger,” “The Free Vacation House,” “The Fat of the Land” and “How I Found America” – collected in *Hungry Hearts* (1920). These particular works have been chosen since they represent different experiences with the dominant American, or in Yeziarska's representation specifically upper- and middle-class WASP culture. Depicting both the first and second generation immigrant women, the selected works will enable us to explore both the internal manifestations of the conflict resulting from the opposing pressures, and its impact on either generation.

## 1.2. Methodological framework

### 1.2.1. Defining Americanization

While finding America may have an individualized, metaphorical meaning for Yeziarska's protagonists, the dominant idea of what it means to be American was defined and promoted by the so-called Americanization movement. What contemporary texts referred to as the “raising of the immigrant to the American economic, social, and moral standard of life,”<sup>4</sup> the sociologist Milton Gordon describes as “a consciously articulated movement to strip the immigrant of his native culture and attachments and make him over into an American along Anglo-Saxon lines.”<sup>5</sup> While the former seems quite a noble endeavor, it actually qualifies the immigrant and his native culture as inferior by default. Gordon points out that “[i]f there is anything in American life which serves as a reference point for immigrants and their children, it can best be described [...] as the middle-class cultural patterns of, largely, white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins.”<sup>6</sup> Drawing extensively on her own memories, Yeziarska has her characters encounter the Americanization movement around the turn of the century, when its notion of WASP superiority required Anglo-conformity on the part of the immigrants.<sup>7</sup> This ideal of the WASP culture as dominant and inherently superior, which underscored the entire Americanization movement, constitutes one side of the cultural conflict in the selected texts.

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<sup>4</sup> Grover G. Huebner, “The Americanization of the Immigrant,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 27 (May 1906) 653.

<sup>5</sup> Milton Myron Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*, 1964, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) 98.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Lori Jirousek, “Spectacle Ethnography and Immigrant Resistance: Sui Sin Far and Anzia Yeziarska,” *MELUS* 27.1 (Spring 2002) 27.

### 1.2.2. Defining assimilation

This thesis uses the term Americanization to denote the processes of acculturation and subsequent assimilation based on the norms set by the Americanization movement. Our analysis relies on two definitions of assimilation; the first, proposed by Robert E. Park, echoes the idealistic beliefs held by Yeziarska's immigrants and stipulates that

an immigrant is ordinarily considered assimilated as soon as he has acquired the language and the social ritual of the native community and can participate, without encountering prejudice [... and] able to find a place in the community on the basis of his individual merits.<sup>8</sup>

Several key aspects of this definition are explored in this thesis. First, it stresses the acquisition of "the language and the social ritual of the native community," both of which are points of focus and contention in the immigrants' interactions with the representatives of the WASP culture in the selected texts. Moreover, the principles of both cultures are explored and accessed through their respective linguistic and social norms, which we will show to be closely related. The second notable claim Park makes is the absence of prejudice and discrimination as the indication of complete assimilation. The immigrant protagonists of the selected works, especially those of the second generation, see the tenet of equality and appreciation based on one's merit as essential to their vision of America as the land of social and spiritual freedom.

We also wish to highlight the definition of assimilation given by Arnold M. Rose, which addresses the implications of Park's definition, at least in the context of the discussed texts. Rose believes assimilation to be

the adoption by a person or group of the culture of another social group to such a complete extent that the person or group no longer has any particular loyalties to his former culture.<sup>9</sup>

The question of affiliation with one's native or assumed culture is posed constantly, as the protagonists are faced with nativist Americanizing influences as well as their own Jewish heritage and community. Both demand specific linguistic, social and cultural standards and behavior. These stand almost in polar opposition and Yeziarska's protagonists are painfully aware of it. The resulting tension is one of the main challenges to Americanization in Yeziarska's texts.

### 1.2.3. Defining acculturation

Since the selected works show immigrants in various stages of the Americanization process, we distinguish between assimilation and acculturation. Gordon defines acculturation as the "change of cultural patterns to those of the host society."<sup>10</sup> This rather vague definition becomes clearer

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<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Park, "Assimilation, Social," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1930), 281, quoted in Gordon, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold M. Rose, *Sociology: The Study of Human Relations* (1956), 557-8, quoted in Gordon, 66.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon, 71.

once we apply Gordon's concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic culture. He proposes that the intrinsic culture includes a group's "religious beliefs and practices, its ethical values, [...] literature, historical language, and sense of a common past," all of which derive from the group's cultural heritage.<sup>11</sup> The extrinsic culture comprises of "dress, manner, patterns of emotional expression" which "tend to be products of the [...] group's adjustment to its local environment" and are therefore "external to the group's ethnic cultural heritage."<sup>12</sup> This analysis makes extensive use of these concepts, establishing intrinsic and extrinsic features of the Jewish and the American cultures as represented in the selected texts. It then examines the process of acculturation and assimilation as a negotiation between them. In the context of our discussion, the term acculturation refers to the singular prevalence of either the intrinsic or extrinsic aspects of one of the two cultures, whereas a character can be spoken of as assimilated or in the process of assimilation once the two cultural selves display predominantly the WASP traits. This is in line with the rhetoric of the Americanization movement, therefore these characters can also be regarded as Americanized.

While Gordon has been criticized for his premium on the middle-class WASP standard as the prevalent paradigm for the American culture<sup>13</sup> as well as the unilaterality of the acculturation and assimilation process, they do correspond with Yeziarska's depictions of the Americanizing experience. The selected works criticize the principles and methods of the Americanization movement directly and indirectly, through the words and actions of the Jewish protagonists as well as the Americanizers themselves. Yeziarska's emphasis on education, especially literacy and the use of Standard English, shows that some acculturating influences, though formalized, may hold more merit and aid eventual assimilation more productively than others. We will examine the goals and methods of each and discuss the role of language, Standard English in particular, as the catalyst for and mediator of acculturation and assimilation.

### 1.3. Overview

The first chapter, "What is America?" describes the differing expectations of each generation and contrasts them with the response to the reality of the ghetto. It also explores how these visions informed the immigrants' views of Americanization. The following chapter, entitled "Historical continuity – transplanting the Jewish culture," explains the cultural link between the European *shtetl*<sup>14</sup> and the Lower East Side ghetto. It then discusses those aspects of the traditional Jewish

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<sup>11</sup> Gordon, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon, 72.

<sup>14</sup> A small Jewish town or village in Eastern Europe. "Shtetl," *OED Online*, 30 June 2016.

culture which influenced the characters' acculturation: the subordinate roles of women, the emphasis on education and language, and the interconnection of the three. The chapter concludes by identifying the three chief traits associated with the Jewish culture. To complete the cultural dichotomy, Chapter 4, "Americanizing forces," explores the goals and practices of the Americanization movement, comparing and contrasting organized Americanization with the individual reformers as represented in the texts. Subsequently, the impact of the Americanizing efforts on the immigrants is discussed, and the final section stipulates the American cultural traits. The next chapter is called "Common ground" and deals with the role of English and public education in the acculturation and possible assimilation of immigrants. Emphasizing the creative use of Standard English, this chapter analyzes mainly Yeziarska's depiction of college as the ultimate Americanizing experience, and the teaching profession as both an Americanizing force and the reaffirmation of the protagonist's Americanness. The final chapter, "Conflicting identities," returns to the generational aspect of the conflict. It shows how the different generations respond to the cultural dichotomy and finally proceeds to discuss *Bread Givers* and "How I Found America," which hint at the possibility of reconciliation or unification of the Jewish and American selves in two different ways, though the positive outcome of neither is guaranteed.

Such difficulty begs the question not only whether the protagonists of the examined works are able to assimilate completely, but whether such assimilation, especially in Rose's sense is even desirable. To Yeziarska, the notion of Jewishness or Americanness is not a matter of racial<sup>15</sup> or even religious identity, but rather one of belonging. Such a "sense of peoplehood," to borrow another of Gordon's terms, is the "sense of both ancestral and future-oriented identification with the group."<sup>16</sup> This, combined with the fulfillment of their individual hopes and ambitions, is the America that Yeziarska's protagonists ultimately hope to find. The final question that this thesis addresses is how, once a protagonist finds such a sense of peoplehood within the WASP culture and society, she relates to her Jewishness without compromising her American self, if that is even possible.

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<sup>15</sup> In "Affective Narratives: Harlem and the Lower East Side," *Journal of American Studies* 44.4 (2010), 791, Catherine Rottenberg argues that Yeziarska's texts are "'morphing' Jewishness from a racial category into an ethnic one." We would argue that Yeziarska's characters are not concerned with their Jewishness in terms of race but rather cultural affinity stemming from Gordon's "sense of peoplehood."

<sup>16</sup> Gordon, 29.

## 2. Chapter 2: What is America?

To the poor Jewish immigrants, Priscilla Wald points out in her essay on assimilation, America was “more an idea than a place,”<sup>17</sup> but due to the lack of accurate information, those ideas varied wildly. The differing motivations for emigration are direct consequences of these variations, and can be, in general terms, distinguished generationally. The variation in the visions of America in turn determines the immigrants’ behavior in the United States and their attitude towards the mainstream American culture, acculturation, and assimilation. Furthermore, it is also reflected in the immigrants’ response to the less than ideal conditions of the New World reality.

### 2.1. Dreams of America

Though different for each generation of immigrants, the common point of both ideals of America was improvement upon the conditions that the Jews were coping with in their homeland. The political events in tsarist Russia in the early 1880s resulted in further restriction of the already oppressed Jewish communities, curtailing their rights of movement, settlement, education, employment etc. Furthermore, the frequency of pogroms increased greatly, resulting in violence and property destruction.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the United States was undergoing massive industrialization at this point, which was limited by an extreme shortage of workers.<sup>19</sup> The prospect of stable employment was aided by the propaganda of the steamship companies promising money, freedom from oppression, and social mobility,<sup>20</sup> as well as the so-called “America letters” written home by earlier immigrants and describing “a land of unlimited opportunity, in contrast with what was available to the poor at home.”<sup>21</sup> For women, the promise of equality was even more appealing, since, as Paula Hyman remarks, they were doubly discriminated against in the old country: both as females and as Jews.<sup>22</sup>

#### 2.1.1. *Goldene medine*

The first generation immigrants had a very literal interpretation of the America they hoped to find, taking the limited and often distorted information available at face value. The America

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<sup>17</sup> Priscilla Wald, “Immigration and Assimilation,” *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*, Dale M. Bauer, ed. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) n. pa.

<sup>18</sup> Melvin Ember, ed. and David Levinson, ed., *American Immigrant Cultures: Builders of a Nation*, Vol. 1., (New York: Macmillan, 1997) 507.

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence J. Epstein, *At the Edge of a Dream: The Story of Jewish Immigrants on New York's Lower East Side 1880-1920*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007) 15.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration 1880-1920*, edition *The Jewish People in America*, Henry L. Feingold gen. ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) 41.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant*, 1939, rev. ed. 1964, (Cleveland: Western Reserve University, 1964) 103.

<sup>22</sup> Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 102.

letters were “widely circulated [...] and often read by the entire village.”<sup>23</sup> The uproar such a letter caused in a Russian *shtetl* is described in the short story “How I Found America” (HIFA) where the entire village gathers to listen:

[M]y sun is beginning to shine in America. I am becoming a person – a business man. [...] The day begins with my pushcart full of fruits, and the day never ends before I count up at least \$2.00 profit – that means four rubles. [...] four rubles a day, twenty-four dollars a week! [...] I am no more Gedalyeh Mindel – *Mister* Mindel they call me in America. [...] Lastly, my darling family and people of the Village of Sukovoly, there is no Czar in America.<sup>24</sup>

This letter exemplifies the major pull factors that attracted immigrants to America: political and social freedom and financial gain. Such hyperbolic accounts were all it took for the poor families to fill in the blanks and make the decision to leave, as *Bread Givers*' (BG) Moisheh Smolinsky's unrealistic expectations prove: “Don't you know it's always summer in America? And in the new golden country, where milk and honey flow free in streets, you'll have new golden dishes to cook in [...] You'll see yet how all America will come to my feet to learn.”<sup>25</sup> Both excerpts show significant focus on the material aspects of success and freedom in America, appropriately nicknamed *goldene medine*, or ‘the golden land,’ as well as the successful utilization of qualities the characters already possess but which are implied to be undervalued by the dominant culture of the old country.

The first generation immigrants in the selected texts do not wish to acculturate or reinvent themselves in any way other than necessary and relevant to rising up the social and financial ladder. To them, the culture of America, extrinsic and intrinsic, remains foreign. In “Hunger” (H), Sam Arkin, a self-made businessman, admits that he does not care for and could never get used to American food, but raves proudly: “‘I like the American dollar. Look only on me!’ He expanded his chest. ‘I came to America a ragged nothing – and – see –’ He exhibited a bank-book in four figures.”<sup>26</sup> Arkin's America is one of financial gain based on his skills, to which acculturation is regarded as irrelevant.

The female protagonists of the short stories – Shenah Pessah (“Wings,” “Hunger”) and the unnamed narrator of HIFA – have a similar vision of America. Both young women have vivid memories of the oppression in the old country and their primary goal is to develop their

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<sup>23</sup> Wittke, 103.

<sup>24</sup> Anzia Yezierska, “How I Found America,” *Hungry Hearts*, 1920, (Penguin Books, 1997) 154-155. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>25</sup> Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers: A Novel*, 1925, (New York: Persea Books, 1975) 9. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>26</sup> Anzia Yezierska, “Hunger,” *Hungry Hearts*, 1920, (Penguin Books, 1997) 38. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.



intellectual skills and be appreciated for their accomplishments. In the beginning of “Wings” (W), Shenah Pessah daydreams: “Ach, how grand it must be to live only for learning and thinking.”<sup>27</sup> The HIFA narrator echoes this, claiming: “What for did I come to America but to go to school – to learn – to think – to make something beautiful from my life...” (HIFA, 162). Their desire, just like the men’s, is individualistic, but the trait that they wish to make use of is their intellect or spiritual power rather than any skill in the strictest sense. It is not until later that the words “I came to America to make from myself a person” [sic] (HIFA, 162) take on the additional meaning of transformation as well as self-development. At that moment they transcend their first-generation mindset and move, in spirit, into the second generation, opening up the possibility of acculturation and assimilation.

### 2.1.2. America as a metaphor

The second generation immigrants, having been at least partially acculturated by immersion, have a more metaphorical interpretation of America as equality, acceptance and self-expression. To find their America and take advantage of it, they need to become American. But first, they have to “figure out what it means.”<sup>28</sup> Sara Smolinsky understands that to “come among [the American] people,” she needs to “make [herself] for a person” (BG, 66). All three of the younger protagonists eventually use this exact phrase, implying creation and recreation of the self, but only Sara is firmly decided to accomplish that transformation even as a child. Moreover, she follows her statement immediately by questioning her native culture: “But how can I do it if I live in this hell house of Father’s preaching and Mother’s complaining?” (BG, 66). This example illustrates the second generation’s openness to acculturation and assimilation, since personal transformation is inherent in the premise of finding the sense of peoplehood in the metaphorical America.

Delia C. Konzett remarks that Yezierska’s second generation protagonists possess “a greater sense of self awareness and irony” about the American Dream and refuse to accept it with blind trust.<sup>29</sup> We would argue that the same can eventually be said for the heroines of the short stories too, once they transcend their first-generation mindset. The shift for Shenah Pessah comes after being rejected by the Americanizer John Barnes which breaks her heart but helps define her ambition: “He ain’t just a man. He is all that I want to be and am not yet” (H, 41), by which she means a true American. The most eloquent formulation of this active approach to finding America

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<sup>27</sup> Anzia Yezierska, “Wings,” *Hungry Hearts*, 1920, (Penguin Books, 1997) 7. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>28</sup> Kessler-Harris, “Foreword,” xvi.

<sup>29</sup> Delia C. Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms: Anzia Yezierska, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Dislocation*, (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 46.

is at the very end of HIFA, where Yeziarska quotes Waldo Frank: “We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her” (HIFA, 179). By actively internalizing the metaphorical qualities of America, rather than chasing after them as the first-generation mindset would have them, the younger immigrants wish to fulfill their vision of America by becoming truly American.

The first generation immigrants trust blindly in the American Dream as it is presented, seeing America as the environment where they can achieve success that would not have been possible in the old country. However, acculturation or assimilation are only relevant as a means to that end and anything more is seen as unnecessary and even undesirable. Contrastingly, the second generation immigrants (literally or in spirit) conclude that finding fulfillment in America involves not only escaping the old paradigm, but also replacing “the traditional Judaism and east [sic] European ways of their parents in favor of an ‘American aesthetic.’”<sup>30</sup> In order to taste “the bread and wine of equality,”<sup>31</sup> they are willing to undergo a process of personal transformation, i.e. acculturation and subsequent assimilation.

## 2.2. The Reality of America

The reality of life in the Lower East Side ghetto differed wildly from either of the immigrant visions of America. The ways in which the immigrants perceive and respond to the ghetto are direct consequences of their ideals being confronted with the terrible living conditions. In the selected works, the protagonists oscillate between two tones when describing the ghetto and its inhabitants – the positive tone of idealization and nostalgia, and the negative tone, characterized by criticism and judgment. Yeziarska uses these tones to identify and accentuate the discrepancies between the characters’ intrinsic and extrinsic Jewishness and/or Americanness as represented by the various characteristics of the ghetto. It is not unusual that this tension occurs within one character, such as in BG where there is a difference between the attitudes and language of the child Sara and her adult self, who narrates the story in first-person retrospect. In this way, the responses echo both the ideals of the immigrants and their attitude towards acculturation and assimilation.

### 2.2.1. Representations of the Lower East Side

Personal experience with the Lower East Side life lends Yeziarska’s descriptions of the ghetto an exceptional vividness, which is reflected in heavy reliance on sensory impressions, auditory in

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<sup>30</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 104.

<sup>31</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse: My Story*, 1950, (London: Virago, 1987) 107. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

particular – her “emphasis is on the noise, on the bustle, on the ‘squalid humans’.”<sup>32</sup> Her descriptions of the streets, both positive and negative, often include “peddlers yelling,” the “noisy playing of children” (BG, 22), while the sweatshop is mainly characterized by “the clatter and the roar [...] of the pounding machines” (HIFA, 160). Of her visuals, the play of light and dark or black and white are the most prominent, especially when interiors are described; more than one tenement flat is called a “black hole” (BG, 174). The sensuality of this typically Jewish environment is in stark contrast with the general sterility and lack of sensory impressions associated with the American environments, which is also reflected in the characters’ descriptions (cf. BG, 290).

#### 2.2.1.1. *Idealization and nostalgia*

This predominantly positive tone, although it acknowledges the poverty, dirt and general unsightliness of the ghetto, chooses to focus on the protagonists’ emotional relationship to their surroundings. The characters relate to the ghetto either from inside (idealization), or outside of it (nostalgia). The idealization of America, seeing the ghetto as a sort of precursor to the *goldene medine*, is most evident in the newly arrived immigrants, whose disillusionment is still offset by optimism. In this case, the immigrant may choose to focus on the perceived luxuries of America as opposed to the native land:

“Here’s your house with separate rooms like in a palace.” Gedalyeh Mindel flung open the door of a dingy, airless flat. [...]

“It ain’t so dark, it’s only a little shady. [...] Look only” – he pointed with pride to the dim gaslight. “No candles, no kerosene lamps in America, you turn on a screw and put to it a match and you got it light like with sunshine.” (HIFA, 160)

The optimism of the first generation’s idealization of the golden land chooses to ignore the negative aspects of the American reality. In some cases, the manifestations of the ghetto struggles, through the lens of optimism, actually confirm the idealistic vision; Sam Arkin finds that the “streets growing black with swarming crowds of toil-released workers [...] the roaring noises of the elevated trains resounded the paean of joy swelling his heart” (H, 37). In keeping with Yeziarska’s emphasis on sensory impressions, Sara Smolinsky, upon making her first money peddling herring, recalls that “all that was only hollering noise before melted over [her] like a new beautiful song” (BG, 22). Later, the desire to take full advantage of the possibilities America presents, provides powerful motivation. In order to achieve her dream of going to college, she resolves: “By the whole force of my will I could reason myself out of the dirt and noise around me” (BG, 160). This illustrates the persistence of the positive vision of America in Yeziarska’s protagonists, which echoes mainly the first generation’s sentiment of improved conditions, even

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<sup>32</sup> Rottenberg, 788.

if only in perception. Sara's example also shows that the second generation's sentiments, despite being critical of what the ghetto represents, can also take the focus away from the distinctly un-American conditions, at least for a time.

The nostalgic tone appeals to the characters' ancestral connection with the ghetto, recalling their sense of Jewish peoplehood. It either deliberately ignores the negative aspects of the ghetto altogether, or incorporates them as run-down charm, focusing on the more poetic features. These include the intoxicating "old tunes of the hurdy-gurdy" (BG, 269), the vitality of the people and the pulsing street life. The positive emotional focus is particularly evident when the character has at least partly moved outside the cultural and/or geographic space of the ghetto. Most of Book I of *Bread Givers*, accordingly entitled "Hester Street," is colored by a sense of togetherness in the face of hardship, and Renny Christopher points out that it is "situated in the collectivity of working-class life. It is the story not of an individual, but of a family, and that family's struggles with poverty."<sup>33</sup> That is not to say that Sara idealizes her impoverished childhood or domineering father; on the contrary, the dissatisfaction with these aspects of her life fuel her ambition for assimilation. Yet the family as part of the Jewish community provides a sense of peoplehood that is largely missing in the latter sections of the novel. It is therefore the cultural removal from the Jewish community which produces a far more acute nostalgia than the geographic, as the case of the mother in "The Free Vacation House" (FVH) shows: "All these ugly things was grand in my eyes. Even the high brick walls all around made me feel like a bird what just jumped out of a cage"<sup>34</sup> [sic]. An extreme example is Hanneh Breineh, the protagonist of "The Fat of the Land" (FOTL), who, while living with her Americanized daughter Fanny, longs for the "good old days of poverty."<sup>35</sup> The desire for the familiar social and cultural patterns of the *shtetl* overpowers the negative impressions or memories, but only up to a certain point.

The positive tone gives both generations temporary solace by providing a sense of peoplehood in familiarity. Even the second generation characters, who wish to Americanize, can find temporary respite from the constant insecurity of acculturation and assimilation. Sara, who desired to escape the poverty and noise, upon her return from college rejoices at the sight of the ghetto unchanged with "the same tenements with fire escapes full of pillows and feather beds" (BG, 269), and for Hanneh Breineh, "the old, home-like odors of herring and garlic" (FOTL, 130), which her

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<sup>33</sup> Renny Christopher, "Rags to Riches to Suicide: Unhappy Narratives of Upward Mobility: *Martin Eden*, *Bread Givers*, *Delia's Song* and *Hunger of Memory*," *College Literature* 29.4 (Fall 2002) 91.

<sup>34</sup> Anzia Yezierska, "The Free Vacation House," *Hungry Hearts*, 1920 (Penguin Books, 1997) 71. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>35</sup> Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land," *Hungry Hearts*, 1920 (Penguin Books, 1997) 130. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

Americanized daughter finds pungent, are a source of joy and comfort. However, both the idealistic and the nostalgic view of the ghetto are shattered in confrontation with the full experience.

#### *2.2.2.1. Criticism and judgment*

The negative tone of both generations is the direct result of the prolonged confrontation of their dream of America with the reality of the ghetto. Its two points of view parallel the nostalgic and idealized images of the Lower East Side, speaking either from inside (criticism), or outside of the ghetto (judgment). The disillusioned descriptions highlight what the optimistic ones omit. Their language tends to be much more affective, with stronger emphasis on the loudness of the noises, extensive use of the sharp contrasts of light and darkness, and the omnipresent blackness.

The switch from the positive to the negative tone is caused by the loss of hope. In her criticism, one immigrant notes: “In Russia, you could hope to run away from your troubles to America. But from America where can you go?” (HIFA, 167). At that moment, the free country where “everybody got to look out for himself” [sic] (W, 12) becomes a prison, especially for the woman who is tied by familial and financial obligations. In other words, she does not only have to look out for herself, but also for her family. This stifling hopelessness results in the desire to escape, either by accepting help (from charities, friends, family etc.) or by motivating the woman to leave, free herself from her traditional role and “make [herself] for a person” (BG, 66). The only times a woman is shown to continue to bear her burden are when that character serves as a foil to the protagonist, who then adds this forced submissiveness to her critique of the backward Jewish culture, such as Sara’s sisters Mashah and Bessie. The critical voices of the insiders thus either support the second-generation ambition to escape the oppression by assimilating, or serve to further confirm the role of the woman as the burden-bearer as described in detail in Chapter 3.

The ‘outside’ judgment of the ghetto comes when an (at least partially) acculturated character is forced to reconsider her nostalgic view by becoming involved in the ghetto life again. This brief excursion is always filtered by her American experience and its consequences parallel the effects of Americanization. When Sara looks out of the window after returning from college, she sees “the city as it lay below [her], sharp and black and grimy. The smoke of those houses kept rising sullenly, until [she] couldn’t help but breathe the soot of that far-reaching tragedy below” (BG, 182). There is a crucial difference between this observation and similar complaints from the ‘insiders’; Sara, in her hotel room, has literally risen above the “dirt of poverty” (BG, 147). Hanneh Breineh, spending a night in the tenement after a quarrel with her daughter, is even more dismayed:

For years she had been accustomed to hair mattresses and ample woolen blankets, so that though she covered herself with her fur coat, she was too cold to sleep. But worse than the cold were the creeping things on the wall. And as the lights were turned low, the mice came through the broken plaster and raced across the floor.

The foul odors of the kitchen-sink added to the night of horrors. (FOTL, 135)

For Hanneh Breineh, (partial) acculturation occurred only in the area of extrinsic culture, which alienates her from the ghetto, while her unchanged intrinsic culture is not enough for her to endure “the sordid ugliness of her past, and yet she [cannot] go home to her children” (FOTL, 135). Hanneh Breineh feels alienated from both cultures, since, due to her first-generation mindset, is not keen on assimilation either.

The effect of the confrontation on Sara is different. Her extrinsic culture is wholly altered, and the intrinsic change, after years in an American college, is well underway and she is becoming assimilated. Her initial disconcertment, similar to Hanneh Breineh’s, is quickly replaced by compassion. Her sympathy, however, stems more from anxiety than identification:

Poor people of Hester Street! With new pity I looked at them. I hurried on, but the verve of my winged walk was dulled by the thick, shuffling tread of those who walked beside me. My own shoulders, that I always held so straight, sagged because of the bowed backs that hemmed me in. (BG, 282)

Having worked so hard on Americanizing herself, when Sara is confronted with “the sordid ugliness of her past” (FOTL, 135), she finds herself drawn back into old habits and becomes terrified of losing her carefully constructed Americanness. Resorting to the WASP model of treating the ethnic other, she adopts the attitude of a settlement or charity worker, which allows her to keep her distance and avoid dealing with her ambiguous relationship to Jewishness. She shifts the basis of the problem a little bit, as Rottenberg notes: “If the problem with this space is primarily poverty and not its perceived ‘Jewishness,’ then there is hope of improving it.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, by becoming an Americanizing force herself, she can effectively tackle the most obvious manifestation of her inner conflict between the American and the Jewish without actually confronting it.

The differing generational visions of America influence and directly parallel the characters’ descriptions and responses to the reality of the ghetto. The first generation’s individualism and focus on the literal interpretation of success in America directs their interests away from acculturation and assimilation, rendering it undesirable and therefore decreasing its potential effectiveness. Their reaction to the ghetto reflects this view; the positive tone focuses only on those aspects of the ghetto which correspond with the ideal of the *goldene medine*, or provide the

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<sup>36</sup> Rottenberg, 789.

solace of a familiar Jewish environment, reducing the need to Americanize. The negative tone serves to confirm the Jewish stereotypes as described in the following chapter, providing contrast to the second generation characters who choose to defy them by Americanizing. This choice is the consequence of the second generation's metaphorical vision of America as freedom and equality, which is shown to imply personal transformation by acculturating and assimilating. The corresponding positive tone is nostalgic, signifying that cultural removal from the ghetto, despite the oppression it represents, is traumatic and breeds unsettlement. As the negative judgmental response shows, even partial Americanization distances the characters from their Jewish origins, prompting an active response in line with the WASP sentiments on the part of the second generation. For the first generation, due to their resistance to Americanization, the result is alienation from both cultures.

### 3. Chapter 3: Historical continuity - transplanting the Jewish culture

This chapter explores the relevant aspects of the East European Jewish culture as represented in Yeziarska's works, how the American cultural and social environment affected them, and the ways in which they influenced the characters' views or chances of Americanization. Throughout the following discussion, we will also identify the chief cultural traits associated with Jewishness as they are implied in the selected works. This identification is possible due to the specificity of the Jewish community of the Lower East Side, of which Yeziarska's texts take full advantage. According to Deborah Dash Moore, the immigrants perceived their settlements in the United States as ghettos, meaning "characteristically Jewish environments connected through history with earlier patterns of Jewish urban residence."<sup>37</sup> This notion of historical continuity as well as the "self-contained communal life of the immigrant colonies served as a kind of decompression chamber in which the newcomers could, at their own pace, make a reasonable adjustment,"<sup>38</sup> also presented significant obstacles to Americanization.

#### 3.1. The Lower East Side *shtetl*

Though by no means all of the East European Jewish immigrants originated from the rural *shtetlakh* (sg. *shtetl*), the word has been used as a general term for a Jewish community, especially in relation to the traditional lifestyle and religious practice of East European orthodox Jewry.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, in the context of this thesis, we use the term to describe the society where the traditional lifestyle is prevalent. The established and growing Jewish community of the Lower East Side, though by no means homogeneous, was connected linguistically by Yiddish or Hebrew, and the culture they represented: "Secular Jewish culture, based on either Yiddish or Hebrew, was a living reality for millions of East European Jews. For the majority of Russian Jews secularization was not accompanied by assimilation, [...] or even by acculturation."<sup>40</sup> This culture created and maintained the idea of the Lower East Side as a ghetto in Moore's sense, which helped ease the culture shock and provided, for at least one generation, a sense of Jewish communality and peoplehood. In her writing, Yeziarska makes extensive use of this sense of historical continuity of the New York ghetto as a temporary bubble of East European Jewry. This

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<sup>37</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, "The Construction of Community," *The Jews of North America* (1987), quoted in Delia C. Konzett, "Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yeziarska's *Hungry Hearts*," *American Literature* 69.3 (September 1997) 601.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon, 106.

<sup>39</sup> Joshua Rothenberg, "Demythologizing the Shtetl," *Midstream* (March 1981) n. pa.

<sup>40</sup> Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, ed. and Jehuda Reinharz, ed., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 348.



lends her excellent space to represent the issues of acculturation and assimilation as a generational conflict.

### 3.3. Roles of women

The traditional Jewish society is patriarchal, therefore the roles that women are expected to assume are not only subordinate to men's, but also largely defined in relation to them. As Cynthia Ozick accurately notes: "'Jew' means 'male Jew.' When the rabbi speaks of women, he uses the expression [...] 'Jewish daughter.'"<sup>41</sup> The dependent status of women is reflected by Moisheh Smolinsky's claim: "No girl can live without a father or a husband to look out for her. It says in the Torah, only through a man has a woman an existence" (BG, 137). Sara Smolinsky confirms this by saying "if [women] let the men study the Torah in peace, then, maybe, they could push themselves into Heaven with the men, to wait on them there" (BG, 9-10). In Yeziarska's rendering of the *shtetl*, a woman is either a daughter or a wife/mother and there is very little she can do to alter that position.

Relocation to the United States forced economic participation on all family members, yet the prescribed feminine roles remained largely unchanged. In the selected works, the emphasis is especially strong on the labor of women whose patriarchal figures either refuse to, or are incapable of, securing an income (*Bread Givers*, "Wings", "Hunger"); in other cases, they are not mentioned at all ("The Fat of the Land," "The Free Vacation House"). On one hand, the increased contact with the outside world meant a higher number of assimilating opportunities for women<sup>42</sup> (though this is questionable in the ghetto setting), but on the other, an economically active woman was in direct contradiction to the dependent roles of women promoted by the American mainstream culture of the period.<sup>43</sup> Because of that, the adversity that Yeziarska's female characters cope with is twofold: first, it is their traditional subordinate role in the Jewish society, which forces them to earn money over which they have little control in the end, and second, the omnipresent American rhetoric of equal opportunity, subverted by gendered ideas of femininity. The following sections compare and contrast Yeziarska's depictions of the differences between the roles of women in Europe and the United States.

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<sup>41</sup> Cynthia Ozick, "Notes Toward Finding the Right Question," in Susannah Heschel, ed., *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1983) 125.

<sup>42</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 72.

<sup>43</sup> Kessler-Harris, "Introduction," *Bread Givers: A Novel*, xxiv-xxv.

### 3.3.1. Wives and mothers

In traditional Judaism, the woman's obligation as a wife and mother lay in providing the best possible conditions for her husband to perform his religious activities, running a proper household, and, equally as important, instilling "love of the Jewish people in her child or [educating] her child either as a responsible person (*mentsh*) or as a Jew."<sup>44</sup> This ideal gave rise to the so-called "Yiddishe mamma" who is "a romanticized model of self-sacrifice for her children and a marvel of domestic wizardry [...] the emotional center of her family."<sup>45</sup> Though the Yiddishe mamma does appear frequently in Jewish American fiction, Hyman emphasizes that

Ashkenazic women in Central and Eastern Europe were far different from the stereotypical Yiddishe mamma. They were traditionally responsible for much of what we would now describe as masculine roles. It was not uncommon, for example, for the Jewish wife to be the primary breadwinner of the family, particularly if her husband was [...] to devote himself to study.<sup>46</sup>

Thus the wife/mother in the *shtetl* was characterized not just by selflessness and nurturing, but also by persistence and resourcefulness when it came to providing for her brood. Sara admires her mother's bargaining skills and stands by her when Shenah Smolinsky begs her husband to allow her more control over family finances, to which he angrily replies: "Woman! Stay in your place! [...] You're smart enough to bargain with the fish-peddler. But I'm the head of this family" (BG, 13). As Kessler-Harris stresses, a "woman's virtue was measured by how well she helped her husband to live a pious existence,"<sup>47</sup> proving that this toughness when dealing with the outside world only confirmed her subordinate status at home.

The second important trait of the Yiddishe mamma – being the heart of the family – often translates into over-emotionality. The mothers in Yeziarska's fiction oscillate between the profoundest declarations of love one second, and cursing, wailing and complaining the next; since their children are usually closest at hand, they are the most frequent recipients of both. Hanneh Breineh, the protagonist of "The Fat of the Land," is a perfect example, as another character observes: "With one breath she blesses [her son] when he is lost, and with the other breath she curses him when he is found" (FOTL, 120). This is not limited to first generation mothers, though; Sara's sister Mashah demonstrates a similar ambivalence towards her own children: "Since the babies came I'm like in a prison. And yet, come see how lucky I am, they are so good. [...] When I have them like this, I feel I'm holding the riches of heaven in my arms. [...] Such a miserable existence! I wish they were never born" (BG, 147-8). While the mothers are the most prominent

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<sup>44</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 117. Italics original.

<sup>45</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Paula Hyman, "The Jewish Family: Looking for a Usable Past," in Heschel, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, "Introduction," xxii.

example of over-emotionality, this characteristic extends, to a degree, to all of the characters identified as Jewish. The Jewish mothers in the selected works resemble the idealized Yiddishe mamma in their selfless, caring nature and devotion to the family as well as the acceptance of their subordinate position in the male-dominated society, but combine them with the agency of the Eastern European women.

The Jewish mother in the New World was still expected to “carry the whole burden of [her husband’s] house for [him]” (BG, 96), her role as a potential breadwinner unchanged. Factory work was uncommon for married women, but sweatshop labor, piecework or taking in boarders were in line with the traditions brought over from Europe.<sup>48</sup> Because of this and the communal nature of the ghetto, the first generation mothers in particular were perceived as major obstacles to Americanization.<sup>49</sup> They were less likely to respect the English-only sentiment that permeated public education, or attend any courses themselves. While Americanizers attempted to reach the mothers through their children as well as charitable initiatives, the advertising industry recognized “the role of the wife and mother as consumer, [and] American companies advertised widely in Yiddish.”<sup>50</sup> This strategy proved effective in promoting extrinsic, material markers of the American culture. Nevertheless, it also further confirmed the role of the wife as the keeper of the home, constantly “busy in order to make her husband [...] feel like a king at home,”<sup>51</sup> as even the reform-minded Yiddish press and literature presented her.

Sara’s sisters Bessie and Mashah both succumb to their father’s will and enter into arranged marriages, copying their mother’s fate. Bessie, established as the most traditional of the daughters, becomes the epitome of the Yiddishe mamma, slaving at her husband’s shop and taking devoted care of his five children from a previous marriage, while she suffers in silence. Mashah, on the other hand, wishes to Americanize both before and after marriage, but her efforts are centered on the extrinsic markers of Americanness in addition to being in the traditional female domains of cooking (BG, 55-56) and housekeeping (BG, 146-147). She remains subordinate to her abusive husband and gradually adopts additional traits of the more traditional Jewish mother.

Mothers in the traditional Jewish society were intimately connected with emotions, but also the secular Jewish culture and the sense of peoplehood. Their position, despite significant personal

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<sup>48</sup> Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore, *Gender and Jewish History*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) 360.

<sup>49</sup> Wald, n. pa.

<sup>50</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 98.

<sup>51</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 119.

strength, was subordinate to the men in both the Old World and the New. The married characters in Yezierska's fiction, associated also with motherhood, never escape some form of dependence and repression, therefore their opportunities for acculturating into the mainstream society are limited to non-existent.

### 3.3.2. Daughters

The obligations of a Jewish daughter foreshadowed those of a wife, as her primary goal was to marry well to start fulfilling her womanly duties. Shenah Smolinsky, the model of traditional Jewish womanhood in BG, describes her experience as a coveted bride in the Russian Pale:

“I was known in all the villages around [...] for my beauty. [...] I didn't give a look on your father till the day of the engagement, and then I was too bashful to really look on him. [...] Nobody in all the villages around had dowry like mine. [...] My curtains alone took me a whole year to knit.” (BG, 31-32)

This extract shows all the desirable features of a prospective Jewish bride: beauty, chastity, obedience, a substantial dowry, and skillfulness at the feminine arts. Furthermore, like the mother, if economic necessity required, the daughter could help in the family business, take up piecework, or seek employment as a domestic servant; factory work only began rising in popularity around the turn of the century in the Pale of Settlement.<sup>52</sup> Yet wage earning was not to take priority over family life; once past the marriageable age, a single woman was labeled an old maid, becoming a social outcast. The stereotype of the traditional daughter is depicted only as precursor to the more important role of wife/mother in the selected works.

The daughters, or more generally the second generation immigrants, deviated most prominently from their traditional roles in Yezierska's versions of the *shtetl*. While the metaphorical vision of America and the resulting openness to Americanization were important factors, the economic situation also contributed to the shift of priorities from family to personal growth and self-actualization. In America, factory work became the most frequent employment for unmarried women.<sup>53</sup> Not only did this mean more exposure to the American culture, but also, as Hyman points out, “[e]arning a salary and deciding precisely how much to contribute to the family budget reinforced American notions of independence.”<sup>54</sup> The possibility of economic self-reliance inspires the protagonists to find the metaphorical America of their dreams, encouraging Americanization in the long run.

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<sup>52</sup> Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir, “Split Labor Market and the State: The Effect of Modernization on Jewish Industrial Workers in Tsarist Russia,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 92.6 (May, 1987) 1440.

<sup>53</sup> Epstein, 70.

<sup>54</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 110.

The possibility to develop oneself intellectually and spiritually also encourages the protagonists' sexual independence. As Sara begins to understand the possibilities self-reliance opens, she finds the courage to say: "I don't want to get married. I've set out to do something and I'm going to do it" (BG, 177). Shenah Pessah's statement "[i]n America, if a girl earns her living, she can be fifty years old and without a man" (W, 13) echoes this sentiment. Zaborowska summarizes the change in attitude: "[B]y rejecting sexual dependence and the economic reliance it involves, Yeziarska's heroine simultaneously rejects the institution of marriage as an obstacle preventing a woman from becoming her own person,"<sup>55</sup> to which Ann R. Shapiro adds that the protagonists "reject the role of their mothers [...] and identify instead with father figures, men respected for their learning."<sup>56</sup> The protagonists subscribing to the second generation vision of America are determined to defy the traditional paradigms and transform themselves by becoming spiritually, sexually and financially independent.

While this is true for Sara, the necessity for unmarried girls to support the family could also result in the father figure's refusal to marry them off, lest he would lose his standard of living (however low it may be). Shenah Pessah's uncle turns down a matchmaker's offer for her, arguing "who'll do me my work? [...] I'd have to give up the janitor's work to let her go, and then where would I be?" (W, 12). Similarly, Moisheh Smolinsky refuses to marry Bessie to a man unwilling to compensate him for his losses, and ends up bartering her to an old widowed fish-peddler who can continue to support him financially. In *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Anzia's<sup>57</sup> father maintains his right to his emancipated daughter's wages, even as he practically disowns her culturally: "[Anzia's sisters] have their own husbands to look after. You're my only unmarried daughter. Your first duty to God is to serve your father. But what's an old father to an *Amerikanerin*, a daughter of Babylon?" [italics original] (*Red Ribbon*, 33). This illustrates that while economic agency can serve as powerful motivation and a means to seek spiritual fulfillment and self-realization, in accordance with the dominant American rhetoric, it can also perpetuate dependence and reinforce existing oppressive patterns. On its own, economic independence may influence the desirability of assimilation for the individual protagonist, but does not increase its effectiveness.

The selected texts show the prevalent feminine roles as dependent on men. The most important feminine role is that of a wife and mother who is intimately connected with the sense of Jewish

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<sup>55</sup> Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *How We Found America: Reading Gender Through East European Immigrant Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 138.

<sup>56</sup> Ann R. Shapiro, "The Ultimate *Shaygets* and the Fiction of Anzia Yeziarska," *MELUS* 21.2 (Summer 1996), 82.

<sup>57</sup> Yeziarska's semi-fictional alter-ego. Despite being an autobiography, *Red Ribbon* contains almost as much personal experience colored by imagination as her explicitly fictional works.

peoplehood and the secular Jewish culture. The ultimate representation of this role is the Yiddishe mama and though the full realization of this stereotype is barely utilized in the selected texts, they argue that the domestically tied immigrant women have little hope of Americanizing. They are shown to be less affected by Americanizing efforts in addition to sharing the first-generation mindset, which decreases the desirability of assimilation. In fact, both traditional roles of women are incompatible with the individual ambitions of the metaphorical vision of America as self-expression and equality. While the generational distinction between mothers and daughters is relatively unimportant in the Old World, in the New it influences the desirability as well as effectiveness of acculturation and assimilation. In spite of the geographical relocation bringing the possibility of economic independence which enables the escape from the traditional roles, by using Sara's sisters as examples, Yeziarska implies that other factors are necessary. The second-generation vision of America is shown to empower some of the younger immigrants to use the possibility of financial independence as a starting point to set out for the metaphorical America, and the process of acculturation and assimilation they believe will lead there.

### 3.4. Language and education

Language and education figure prominently in Yeziarska's fiction, and their importance for both the Jewish and the American culture, as well as the process of acculturation and assimilation, are discussed thoroughly in Chapter 5. However, within the orthodox society, literacy, combined with the linguistic hierarchy of Hebrew, Yiddish, and the national language, was yet another way of separating the masculine and feminine spheres of cultural influence.

#### 3.4.1. Education and literacy in the Jewish tradition

Literacy has traditionally been held in high regard by Jewish communities since it is associated with religious practice. Because of this, Abraham Cahan was able to write in 1905 that "every Russian and Polish Jew [...] can read his Hebrew Bible as well as a Yiddish newspaper, [...] not to speak of the large number of those who can read and write Russian."<sup>58</sup> Granted, Cahan's purpose was defending the East European immigrants against the increasing anti-Semitism and his figures were therefore exaggerated. Nevertheless, East European Jewish children usually received some form of education in Yiddish and/or Hebrew. This training was generally provided by a man of letters like *Bread Givers*' Moisheh Smolinsky, whose occupation was to explicate the Scriptures, to "hold up the Light of the Law" (BG, 64) to the community. Such personalities were respected in the *shtetl*, and religious training for boys was regarded as a privilege. Richer families would hire tutors or send their sons to private Jewish schools, but even for the poor the

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<sup>58</sup> Abraham Cahan, "The Russian Jew in the United States," 1905, in Mendez-Flohr and Reinhartz, 534.

training would last for as long as possible. Girls, on the other hand, “went to school only long enough to learn the rudiments of Hebrew letters and to become literate in Yiddish. After that they learned by following their mothers’ examples. Too much learning [...] was frowned upon.”<sup>59</sup> In this respect, women were excluded from the religious sphere of influence, which, aside from being crucial to the orthodox culture, was also the only area of intellectual development available to the poor Jews. This tradition of high learning and the separation it represented influenced the female protagonists’ vision of America, in which intellectual and spiritual growth plays a significant role.

#### 3.4.2. Language hierarchy: The ‘holy tongue’ and the *mama loshen*

Cahan’s statement also suggests that the relationship between Hebrew, Yiddish and the national language was hierarchical; Konzett states that “[i]n contrast to Hebrew, the ‘holy tongue’ spoken by fathers and sons in their study of the scripture, Yiddish was the mother tongue or the language of the home.”<sup>60</sup> This division of language is perfectly in line with the feminine and masculine spheres of the traditional Jewish culture. Yiddish, regarded as the *mama loshen* – the ‘mother tongue’ – was the language of the practical aspects of the East European Jewish culture. Therefore, it was useful even for girls to be basically literate in Yiddish, whereas literacy in Hebrew was seen either as an added bonus or unnecessary bookishness. Due to the relatively self-contained nature of the European *shtetl*, the national languages (e.g. Russian or Polish) were of tertiary importance, even though most people did speak them. This hierarchical order was impossible to maintain in the New World, where the relative isolation of the *shtetl* gave way to the policy of radical integration.

The selected texts present intellectual development as an integral part of the second-generation vision of America, associating it with self-expression and equality. All of these can be traced back to the tradition of Jewish learning and linguistic hierarchy as the means of separating the masculine and feminine spheres and promoting the female stereotypes as shown in the previous section. The texts then present education as a way of both defying the traditional stereotypes and transforming the self, fulfilling both aspects of the second generation’s vision of America. Additionally, the association of mothers as the representatives of the personal Jewish culture with Yiddish becomes important once the Old World linguistic hierarchy is challenged by English in the process of Americanization.

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<sup>59</sup> Kessler-Harris, “Foreword,” xxii.

<sup>60</sup> Konzett, “Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation,” 613.

The previous sections have summarized several aspects of the East European Jewish culture which the selected works, through the notion of historical continuity, associate with the Lower East Side ghetto. It became a temporary *shtetl* in the United States, tying the immigrants, for at least one generation socially, linguistically, and culturally to that very spot. This allows Yeziarska to present the cultural conflict of the Jewish and the American as a generational confrontation of the first and second generation immigrants. The subordinate roles of women in the orthodox society as either wife/mother (manifesting in its extreme form as the Yiddishe mama) or the dutiful daughter, are represented by the characters sharing the first-generation mindset. While the generational division does not become apparent until confronted with the American environment, the gender differentiation of the masculine and feminine spheres of influence is supported by the separation in educational goals and the linguistic hierarchy. Higher learning and intellectual growth, sources of great respect, are shown to be associated with Hebrew, as well as the religious sense of Jewishness, and remain in the masculine domain. The women, mothers especially, are connected through Yiddish as the *mama loshen* to the secular Jewish culture and therefore a more personal sense of Jewishness. The close connection between language and culture, the respect for intellectual accomplishment, and the gender separation that they represent form the basis of the second generation vision of America as equality and self-expression, making acculturation and assimilation more desirable and consequently increasing its efficiency.

### 3.5. Jewish cultural traits

From Yeziarska's sketch of the Lower East Side *shtetl* we can infer three typical traits associated with the Jewish culture: sensuality, emotionality, and Yiddish as both the carrier of the Jewish culture and the medium for representing its traits. The first trait of sensuality, meaning pertaining to the senses, manifests most clearly in juxtaposition with the American sentiments, as the negative voices of the 'outsiders' have shown in the previous chapter. It features prominently in the physical descriptions of the ghetto and the focus on sensory impressions. It is associated with Yiddish through the loudness and bustle of the Lower East Side, with "the peddlers yelling" and "the noisy playing of children" (BG, 22).

The second trait that the selected works associate closely with Jewishness is the intense emotionality. Intrinsicly, it manifests as the excitability of the characters and is most obvious in the first-generation mothers who are also most closely associated with the Yiddish language. Their ability to move from profoundest love or elation to deepest despair is demonstrated time and again in the selected works. The texts also illustrate extrinsic representation of this essential



Jewish trait, highlighting the Jewish “patterns of emotional expression,”<sup>61</sup> in the wailing of the mothers and the unrestricted emotional outbursts of the daughters. The passionate exclamations are realized almost exclusively in Yiddish or Immigrant English, which connect the intrinsic and extrinsic culture. The contrast of Yiddish or Immigrant English and Standard English in relation to self-expression and consequently acculturation is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Lastly, Yiddish or Immigrant English (which utilizes numerous Yiddish interjections, especially for emotionally heightened speech) has been shown to be the Jewish community’s “historical language”<sup>62</sup> and the carrier of the secular culture as a whole. It is used in and associated almost exclusively with spoken language, while its obvious differences from Standard English explicitly mark the difference between the characters who identify as Jewish or American in the primary works.

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<sup>61</sup> Gordon, 79.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

## 4. Chapter 4: Americanizing forces

This chapter deals with the American side of the cultural opposition, exploring the organized Americanizing efforts and the means that the Americanization movement used to inculcate the middle-class WASP values. Exploring the responses of the immigrants, it also addresses the effectiveness of each method, and finally derives the intrinsic and extrinsic traits that the selected texts imply as quintessentially WASP which, in the given context, is equated with American.

Natural assimilation of immigrants is a lengthy process and often spans one or two generations. Furthermore, in a cultural setting as specific as the Lower East Side ghetto, this process is even more difficult, since the immigrants hardly ever need to interact with the American cultural environment. Moreover, in the process of natural acculturation and assimilation, the exact form of the resulting individual culture can vary. The proponents of the Americanization movement were aware of this and, in an effort to produce a homogeneous society, designed a complex network of organizations and activities aimed at various age groups of both genders. Their goal was to encourage and accelerate the adoption of the WASP values and habits by immigrants, reflecting Rose's criterion of "no particular loyalty to [the immigrant's] former culture."<sup>63</sup> Operating from the vantage point of WASP superiority, the movement sought to instill the notion of the native culture as backward and primitive in order to encourage the adoption of the appropriate values. This impacted mainly the immigrant children and youth, leading to shame, alienation and often complete denial of the parent culture.<sup>64</sup> While it would not be fair to say that there were no options for the older (and especially female) immigrants to interact with Americanizing forces, it is true that the younger one was, the more options they had to find an activity best suited to their tastes. Despite concerning the other side of the Americanization debate, this echoes the generational and ideological separation of the first and second generation immigrants, confirming that the first generation's reluctance to Americanize was not the single cause of their inability to do so.

### 4.1. Organized Americanization

The Americanization movement hoped to reach all strata of the immigrant society, but in the selected works, Yeziarska only deals with the Americanizing efforts that she had come into contact with or actively took part in as either the Americanized or the Americanizer. As

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<sup>63</sup> Rose, in Gordon, 66.

<sup>64</sup> Gordon, 137.

mentioned earlier, the main target-group, which also had the highest success rate, were children and youth who were also being Americanized by public education (as discussed in Chapter 5).

Working in concert with Yiddish- and English-language press, Americanizing agencies maintained the notion of WASP racial and cultural superiority, despite being influenced by the Progressive philosophical movement,<sup>65</sup> which emphasized personal experience and creative thought as simultaneously the method and goal of education. They ranged from charitable organizations, to various institutes and youth associations whose focus was adult education (civic and practical), entertainment and recreational activities, to settlement houses that aimed to educate the immigrants in the more practical aspects of American life such as hygiene and cooking. In accordance with the selected texts, this analysis makes no distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish Americanizing agencies.

#### 4.1.1. Settlement houses

Laura R. Fisher summarizes the mission of the Settlement house movement as “teaching [the immigrants] the cultural norms, manners, and deportment of the white middle class in ways both concretely pedagogical (through classes, clubs, and drills) and more personal (through contact with representative Americans).”<sup>66</sup> These “representative Americans” were the reformers and educators actually living in the settlement houses located in the impoverished neighborhoods. Aimed primarily at children and young adults, the movement had a considerable amount of success, serving to “‘Americanize’ the children – and some parents too – and to advance the civic well-being of the crowded quarter.”<sup>67</sup>

Generally, Yeziarska’s characters in the examined texts do not come into much contact with settlement workers, at least not explicitly, though there are brief mentions of them attending classes, such as Mashah’s course in American cooking (BG, 55). However, her effort meets with little success; Mashah wants to learn to cook American food to impress her Americanized beau, but the reader gets no indication of his reaction. Later, the man’s rich father, coming to meet the Smolinskys, does not even stay long enough to taste the food before he leaves, repelled by the poverty, taking the young man with him. Mashah’s other efforts to adopt the extrinsic American culture, as presented by the reformers and fashion or housekeeping magazines, fail even more miserably. They remain mere attempts to cover her Jewish social and cultural environment with the material markers of extrinsic Americanness. This illustrates that the Settlement house

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<sup>65</sup> To distinguish the Progressive philosophy from the general use of the pronoun, only the former is capitalized.

<sup>66</sup> Laura R. Fisher, “Writing Immigrant Aid: The Settlement House and the Problem of Representation,” *MELUS* 37.2 (Summer 2012) 87.

<sup>67</sup> Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews: 1870-1914*, (Cambridge - London: Harvard University Press, 1977) 206.

movement as represented in the selected texts did little to aid successful acculturation, let alone assimilation, of the immigrant women. Shown only as offering ways to acquire gendered, stereotypical marks of Americanness, the movement is not given enough space in the selected works for its methods to be considered effective.

#### 4.1.2. Charitable institutions

For the purpose of this discussion, the heading includes various organizations whose shared goal was to offer immigrant aid in addition to serving as Americanizing forces. Yeziarska's personal account of working for the United Hebrew Charities is very explicit about the reality of immigrant aid, calling it "the dirtiest, most dehumanizing work that a human being can do [...] people are crushed and bled and spat upon in the process of getting charity."<sup>68</sup> Here, as in the selected works, Yeziarska emphasizes that the problem of organized charity work is its externality and distance from the actual poverty, and the resulting lack of empathy or even sympathy. In addition to that, the ever-present sense of WASP superiority eventually reveals them as yet more attempts at Americanization rather than acts of true charity.

Yeziarska's frustrations are formulated in "The Free Vacation House," which is based on her sister's real experience. In this story, the true purpose of charity becomes blatantly obvious. The protagonist, an unnamed overworked mother, is visited by a teacher who questions her about her children's constant tardiness. She subsequently refers the narrator to a social worker to be recommended for a relief program which sends poor mothers and their children to an all-expense-paid two-week vacation in the country. The social worker then questions the mother in a condescending manner, a procedure which is repeated time and again by various officials. The mother's humiliation and the condescending attitude of the teacher and charity officials are the chief focus of the first part of the story. The official authority is underscored by the contrast of the use of English, as Konzett summarizes:

From the start, the teacher sets the tone and direction of the conversation. Her declarative sentences are spoken in grammatically correct standard English, establishing her power to explain and dictate as well as asserting her position as a spokesperson for an elite WASP culture and an agent of Americanization. [...] The subordinate position of the mother is further underlined by her emotional responses, making her seem a demanding and willful child.<sup>69</sup>

This strategy is repeated by all the other officials, but eventually subverted by the mother's paraphrases which gradually replace their direct speech. Later in the story, the mothers' movement and activities in the vacation house are just as restricted as their children's; in fact, the

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<sup>68</sup> Yeziarska's letter to Rose Pastor Stokes, quoted in Konzett, "Administered Identities," 604.

<sup>69</sup> Konzett, "Administered Identities," 607-608.

housekeeper presents a list of house rules so long that the mother wonders whether there is to be “no end to the things we dassen't do [sic] in this place?” (FVH, 69). The reduction of the mother as a representative of the adult immigrants to the status of a child perfectly illustrates the general manner in which immigrants were treated: as undisciplined, willful children who needed to be properly cultured. With this in mind, the entire vacation reveals itself as much more an act of Americanization than charity, intended as an immersive course in “American home life at its best.”<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, while most contemporary reports regard such vacations as explicitly aimed at the children’s welfare,<sup>71</sup> Yezierska’s story shows that they were to enlighten the mothers as much as their children, if not more so. We have established earlier that the immigrant mothers were especially difficult to Americanize. However, when they were exposed to the clean and orderly environment of the vacation house, the perfect representation of extrinsic Americanness, the Americanizers expected a thoroughly positive response. The instant desire to internalize the proposed extrinsic and intrinsic values was to follow. In fact, the mother’s original feeling is relief and excitement:

I soon forgot all my troubles. [...] For the first time in ten years I sat down to the table like a somebody. Ah, how grand it feels, to have handed you over the eatings [sic] and everything you need. (FVH, 68)

Unfortunately, the empowering and hence potentially productive feeling of being “a somebody” [sic] (FVH, 68) is disrupted time and again, first by yet another line of questioning and then the list of rules and regulations. The objectification of the immigrants is further reflected in the mother’s remark that they were treated like “dogs what have got to be chained in one spot” (FVH, 71). Finally, due to the rigid schedule and restricted access to certain parts of the house for both the mothers and the children, the vacation house becomes a prison, a show of empty appearances and procedures which hold no attraction for any of the residents. Like the mothers, the children also recognize it as a failed attempt at Americanization, claiming that it is “worsen than school” [sic] (FVH, 70). Nevertheless, the restrictions are not merely an attempt to instill a sense of discipline and order.

The mother’s paraphrase of the nurse’s soliloquy confirms that “the house must be kept perfect for the show for visitors” (FVH, 69), who turn out to be the ladies sponsoring the vacation house.

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<sup>70</sup> Eugene T. Lies, “Country Outings for City Children,” *Charities* (June 2, 1904), quoted in Kenneth L. Kusmer, “The Functions of Organized Charity in the Progressive Era: Chicago as a Case Study,” *The Journal of American History* 60.3 (December 1973) 667.

<sup>71</sup> E. Munsterberg, “Poor Relief in the United States. View of a German Expert II,” *American Journal of Sociology* 7.5 (1902) 683-684.

This touches upon another aspect of organized charity work and completes the picture of this Americanizing enterprise as an utter failure. Like the culture they represent, the ladies are depicted as distant and somewhat unreal, and there is no personal contact between them and the residents. The mother observes:

Always when the rich ladies came the fat lady, what was the boss from the vacation house, showed off to them the front. Then she took them over to the back to look on us, where we was sitting together, on long wooden benches, like prisoners. I was always feeling cheap like dirt, and mad that I had to be there, when they smiled down on us. (FVH, 70)

It is difficult to infer from this brief encounter whether the women arrived to inspect the vacation house, the staff, or the residents, but that is irrelevant since the latter seem to be regarded as part of the inventory. As Jirousek remarks, “immigrant displays inspire patrons to uplift efforts, and patrons display their immigrant successes. While this pattern enhances the patron’s status, it has the opposite effect on the immigrant.”<sup>72</sup> Individuals are unimportant in the rotation of poor women and children, as long as there is the “restful place” (FVH, 70), which the ladies generously provide. In *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Anzia does not come into direct contact with the patronesses either, but she does overhear them “planning our food and directing our destinies” (*Red Ribbon*, 151). There the benefactors openly assume the position of custodians, directing and shaping the immigrants’ lives as they see fit. This is similar to Hanneh Breineh’s daughter’s attempts to ‘uplift’ her mother by relocating her to the Riverside Drive apartment building where there is no kitchen in which the old woman could display undesirable behavior (i.e. doing housework or cooking her own meals).

The evidence offered in BG and FVH indicates that such organized efforts are counterproductive. The limited accounts of the settlement houses, while introducing the potentially useful method of representative Americans, are shown to focus on generic, gendered markers of extrinsic Americanness without providing intrinsic stimulation. The charity work, on the other hand, is explored extensively, but proves equally ineffective, since it aims at Americanization by restricting the native culture. The immigrants are supposed to take in the extrinsic marks of American culture as if by osmosis, which is then to lead to the desire to alter their intrinsic culture as well. The restrictions placed upon the immigrants, however, discourage productive change in either, and only serve to affirm the superior status of the patrons and their WASP values. The singular positive aspect of this may be that since the endeavor is disliked by the first and second generation alike, it may be the only Americanizing effort which does not lead to generational

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<sup>72</sup> Jirousek, 36.

alienation but unified resistance. Unfortunately, this may hinder acculturation on all fronts, and when the children eventually do acculturate, the generational gap will be wider for it.

#### 4.2. Individual reformers

Several famous accounts by non-Jewish authors documented the immigrant plight of the period. Their graphic descriptions of the poverty established the discourse that Jirousek terms “spectacle ethnography.”<sup>73</sup> The Samaritan impulse of such publications, combined with the Progressive philosophy, and the criticism of the methods of systematic Americanization, inspired a number of ambitious reformers to study and simultaneously educate immigrants according to their own Progressive ideals. Some of these reformers were active in the Settlement house movement, others became interested in sociology, and others yet decided for a true hands-on approach and found temporary homes in the immigrant neighborhoods. Unfortunately, despite their arguably good intentions and reasonably enlightened ideology, these reformers could not avoid a number of the same pitfalls that hampered the efforts of organized Americanization.

The theme of an educated non-Jewish (or Americanized) man serving as an Americanizing mentor and a potential love interest for the protagonist is recurrent in most of Yeziarska’s fiction. Of the selected works, the short story “Wings” deals with the issue most explicitly. Here the protagonist, Shenah Pessah, is approached by John Barnes, “the youngest instructor of sociology in his university” (W, 7), currently working on his thesis about the education of Russian Jews. After a short conversation which reveals that she taught herself English out of a book, Shenah Pessah begs him to give her English lessons. Even though he is appalled by her “lack of contact with Americanizing agencies” (W, 9), or perhaps because of it, he accepts and offers to enroll her in a library to “teach [her] to read sensible books” (W, 9).

The story, though narrated in the third person, alternates between Shenah Pessah’s and Barnes’ point of view, juxtaposing not only the blatant linguistic differences but also the characters’ mindsets and the way they regard each other. Shenah Pessah is ecstatic, seeing a way to escape her dependent role, and does not hesitate to let her benefactor know. Barnes, on the other hand, is taken aback by her unabashed eagerness and emotionality which he immediately pegs as one of the typical traits of the Russian Jew (W, 10). He takes pity on her, recognizing the horrid conditions of the basement she lives in, and though Shenah Pessah’s “beseeching look of a homeless dog, begging to be noticed” (W, 18) makes him uncomfortable, he recognizes her as “a

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<sup>73</sup> Jirousek coins the term “spectacle ethnography” and defines it as “the practice of Americans, primarily ‘Anglo-Saxons,’ observing, discussing, and writing about the ethnic Other in order to affirm their own race, culture, or both.” Jirousek, 26.

splendid type for his research,” (W, 7) “an opportunity for a psychological test-case” (W, 9). Through the use of such terminology, Yeziarska makes the reader immediately aware that Barnes’ intentions are first and foremost scientific. Although we may distinguish an unmistakable tinge of sarcasm on her part, it does illustrate the author’s point by bringing out the true motives for charity as well as Americanization. On this topic, Jirousek notes:

Spectacle ethnography shaped American discourse concerning immigrants, taking two main forms: observers discovered inflexible race characteristics that supported immigrant exclusion or observers uncovered hidden potential that demanded their own intervention in order to Americanize the immigrant.<sup>74</sup>

Barnes, a typical spectacle ethnographer, establishes what he believes to be an objective scientific distance, but his remarks and thoughts betray that the distance is rather a matter of social and cultural status, much like with the patrons of the vacation house. While those women saw direct contact with their beneficiaries as unnecessary and preferred to facilitate acculturation at a distance, without substantial regard for its effect (fulfilling Jirousek’s first claim), Barnes enjoys the juxtaposition of his own, ‘superior’ culture with that of the ‘primitive’ immigrant. This places him in the second category.

The scene at the library further reveals Barnes as a spectacle ethnographer. In her excitement, Shenah Pessah purchases a new “American dress-up” (W, 19) which is met with Barnes’ mixed reaction, since he regards it as “bold and garish” (W, 21). At this point, even Shenah Pessah begins to doubt his altruism. Observing Barnes’ interaction with a librarian, she notes that they are “of the same world and that she [is] different” (W, 20). Nonetheless, Barnes is pleased by her eagerness to Americanize and find a proper job, yet he immediately instructs her that she must first read a book to find out what she is “best suited for” (W, 19). Furthermore, he cringes when she hopes for an intellectual occupation rather than a manual one (W, 19). This suggests that he too would prefer if she kept within the bounds delineated by the dominant society, albeit in a subtler way than when the vacationers are required to sit on “long wooden benches, like prisoners” (FVH, 70) during the patrons’ visit. These examples further demonstrate that even though extrinsic changes towards Anglo-conformity as well as intrinsic changes through instruction were encouraged, they were to take place along clearly designated lines.

The pseudo-scientific distance then helps the progressive and supposedly objective reformer to seemingly depersonalize his or her disdain for the immigrant’s native culture. While the depiction of John Barnes is quite unforgiving, the employment of objective distance is a common feature

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<sup>74</sup> Jirousek, 26.



of the contemporary discourse on immigrants. Lillian Wald is noted for documenting her work as a nurse and educator. According to Fisher, she succeeded in

instituting distance between herself and the problematic Jewishness of her own settlement work by devising a prose style that described immigrant need while avoiding the kind of human portraiture that might suggest Jewish squalor.<sup>75</sup>

In this way, Wald, like the college-educated Sara Smolinsky, managed to describe the conditions of the impoverished and arouse sympathy, without drawing unwanted attention to their Jewishness and, more importantly, her own. In the cases of Barnes, the settlement or charity workers and the patrons, the distance serves as a veil for judgment and condescension, whereas Sara uses it to mask her insecurities about her own intrinsic culture, recognizing she is still “between two worlds” (BG, 153).

When contrasted with the organized Americanizing efforts, the individual approach, as seen in W, is presented as a minor improvement. Avoiding the fault of offering completely depersonalized and generic examples of Americanness, the Progressive reformers, represented by John Barnes, wish to become representative Americans and guide the immigrants through the process of extrinsic as well as intrinsic change. However, these two levels of acculturation are disconnected in both approaches and therefore cannot lead to successful assimilation. The academic use of Standard English on Barnes’ part, as well as the suggestion that Shenah Pessah will find her true calling in what we can assume to be an immigrant guidebook, echo the charity workers of the previous section, highlighting the use of language as the means of restriction and assertion of authority. Additionally, the individual approach makes more explicit the employment of spectacle ethnography and ‘objective’ distance as one of its characteristics, deepening instead the rift between the Americanizer and the Americanized.

#### 4.3. The effect of forced Americanization on the immigrant

In Yeziarska’s representation, all of the Americanizing efforts share the same underlining characteristic – the conviction of WASP superiority in general, and especially in relation to the immigrant culture which is regarded as inferior simply because it is alien and happens to be cultivated in poverty. Spectacle ethnography presents the perfect base for any kind of organized acculturating activity since it provides the scientific backing necessary to maintain the illusion of objectivity and still leaves room for goodwill if the situation requires it. By presenting themselves as well-meaning bearers of a superior culture, willing to impart it on less fortunate individuals, the Americanizers are able to affirm their own position, whilst the view of the immigrants as

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<sup>75</sup> Fisher, 99.

either incapable of change or in need of intervention frees them of the responsibility for the negative psychological impact of the process on both the immigrants and their native culture.

In order to escape poverty, the immigrant heroine is required to discard her Jewishness and adopt the ready-made and extrinsic attributes of the middle-class WASP lifestyle. It is also important that she accepts them gratefully and without question, otherwise she risks punishment in the form of further contempt. The lack of personal choice and self-expression in the form and pace of one's acculturation generates feelings of inferiority in the female Jewish protagonists whose starting position is already subordinate. As it is, the analyzed texts seem to argue that organized Americanization of either sort cannot be effective in creating a complete American self, rooted in both intrinsic and extrinsic culture, since it approaches them separately and in a restrictive manner. Even though, as Shenah Pessah shows, it may initially be desired, the prolonged experience results in the counterproductive feeling of discontent on the part of the immigrant.

#### 4.4. American cultural traits

We have already established that the ultimate goal of the Americanization movement was the creation of a homogeneous society, based on the middle-class WASP values.<sup>76</sup> By examining the methods of organized Americanization which represent this conscious effort, we may infer three cultural traits which characterize the Americanizers as WASPs and are also inherent to the requirement of Anglo-conformity.

These key features are distance, restriction and, most importantly, Standard English. First of all, there is the physical aspect of distance and restriction, manifesting as an almost clinical sterility and orderliness, associated with the American environments (BG, 290), as opposed to the sensuality and crowded chaos of the ghetto.

In the characters, distance and restriction manifest intrinsically and extrinsically, with the two levels connected by Standard English as the carrier of the WASP culture, paralleling the relationship of Yiddish to the Jewish culture. Restriction manifests intrinsically in opposition to the volatile emotionality of the Jewish characters, for example in John Barnes' instinctive recoil at Shenah Pessah's excited outburst (W, 10). The extrinsic emotional restriction takes the form of polished manners and the "sure, all-right look of the Americans" (HIFA, 179). The following chapter shows how Sara's adoption of this trait enables her to start assimilating.

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<sup>76</sup> Gordon, 78.

Distance is employed intrinsically as the objective/emotional distance of the Americanizers, allowing them to depersonalize the immigrants, and extrinsically as the social distance between the middle and working class, indicated among other things by the use of correct Standard English. Together, they form the basis of spectacle ethnography. Over the course of the discussion, we will also illustrate how the Americanized Sara uses distance to relate to her Jewish heritage as suggested above.

Both extrinsic manifestations of the American traits are signified by the use of grammatically correct Standard English as exemplified above. Consequently, in addition to mediating between the intrinsic and extrinsic, Standard English is also used by the Americanizers to assert authority, distance and enforce restriction and authority, as Konzett remarks.<sup>77</sup> We may conclude this section by inferring that the only characters who find their ideal America through the process of organized Americanization, are the Americanizers themselves.

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<sup>77</sup> Konzett, "Administered Identities," 607-608.

## 5. Chapter 5: Common ground – the role of language and education

While the cultural traits, as implied in the previous chapters, stand in opposition, both the Jewish and American cultures, put significance on education and literacy, which are also intimately associated with language. Albeit the specific motivations may differ slightly in each culture, we will show that education and language, due to the possibility of individual investment, can be used both for repression or liberation in the analyzed texts. Most importantly, Yeziarska's immigrant heroines perceive education as a more desirable acculturating force than the Americanizing practices discussed in the previous chapter, because it echoes the second-generation metaphorical vision of America. Meanwhile, its connection to language as the carrier of culture makes it more effective.

### 5.1. English as the new national language

The relative unimportance of the national language for the European *shtetl* community could not stand in the United States. Konzett notes that “[l]inguistic homogeneity became the ultimate goal of the reform and Americanization movements, developing into the single most important aspect of assimilationist ideology. [...] Properly spoken English became the touchstone of modern American identity.”<sup>78</sup> The systematic approach of the Americanization movement was employed by educational institutions nationwide, especially with regard to English acquisition. Even though in the New World, as in the Old, Yiddish was the carrier of a flourishing secular culture, with its own press and literature, in addition to being the primary spoken language of the first generation immigrants, its eventual fate was sealed. Through its role as the cultural transmitter and the *mama loshen*, Yiddish became associated with the general backwardness of the immigrant culture “as a ludic language suitable only for the language play of children or low comedy and vulgar humor,”<sup>79</sup> as opposed to English as the language of the higher culture. Its importance as the ‘mother tongue’ was analogically connected with the ‘unassimilable’ older immigrants, whose shamefully accented Immigrant English set them apart. Yeziarska acknowledges the effectiveness of this alienating strategy when Hanneh Breineh’s Americanized daughter Fanny complains that she cannot take her mother to meet her socialite friends: “Whenever she opens her mouth, I’m done for” (FOTL, 127).

As exemplified by the prominence of language in the cultural dichotomy, Yeziarska realized the importance of language for the social patterns and cultural heritage, i.e. intrinsic culture, as well

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<sup>78</sup> Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms*, 27.

<sup>79</sup> Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms*, 34.

as the “patterns of emotional expression”<sup>80</sup> which are part of the extrinsic culture. By highlighting the role of language in maintaining the established order, she also acknowledges its influence on the formulation of the characters’ opinions and goals. Through her characters, Yeziarska deals with the notion of English superiority in two major ways, each representing one side of the cultural conflict. On one hand, there is the Immigrant English of her unassimilated or older characters, with its odd syntax and interjections in Yiddish or Russian; and on the other, she acknowledges English as the gateway into the mainstream society, which places special emphasis not just on linguistic competence, but more on its proper, unmarked form. The following sections discuss how each one reflects the characters’ level of acculturation or assimilation.

### 5.1.1. Immigrant English

Although the so-called Immigrant English in Yeziarska’s work tends to be associated with and used by the un-accultured and/or older characters presumably as “the primary mark of the immigrants’ ‘Otherness,’ the signal that they do not share the cultural assumptions and worldview of middle class Americans,”<sup>81</sup> it has also been pointed out that “Immigrant English [...] revealed its speaker’s difference in relation to English and Yiddish.”<sup>82</sup> It is therefore the perfect language for Yeziarska’s emphasis on displacement, rather than a more or less accurate representation of immigrant speech. Like Yiddish, it is also primarily associated with spoken language rather than writing and the immigrants’ emotionality as opposed to the reserved manners of the Americans. This is especially apparent in *Bread Givers*, where Sara “distances herself from her family by discarding her Yiddish dialect and acquiring Standard English” as the novel progresses;<sup>83</sup> the language thus reflects the progress of her acculturation and assimilation.

Echoing the linguist Sander Gilman, Zaborowska notes that “[t]he young woman’s Yiddish and Hebrew have to be replaced with English, her Jewishness has to be removed in order for her to become American,”<sup>84</sup> accentuating the connection of intrinsic and extrinsic change through language. When in one of the final chapters the largely assimilated Sara becomes overwhelmed with strong emotions upon hearing about her father’s remarriage, her immediate reaction is in line with her new American self: “I was too angry to speak. My lips tightened, struggling to control myself” (BG, 258). The intrinsic emotional restraint is reflected in her inability to express herself in the WASP Standard English. Yet later, in the company of her sisters, she finally lets

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<sup>80</sup> Gordon, 79.

<sup>81</sup> Amy Dayton-Wood, “‘What the college has done for me’: Anzia Yeziarska and the Problem of Progressive Education,” *College English* 74.3 (January 2012) 221.

<sup>82</sup> Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms*, 39.

<sup>83</sup> Amy Dayton-Wood, “‘What the college has done for me,’” 221.

<sup>84</sup> Zaborowska, 101.

her emotions out: “‘*Mazel-tof!* Rejoice!’ I dropped into a chair, weeping wildly. ‘*Mazel-tof! Mazel-tof!*’” (BG, 261). Only Immigrant English with its Yiddish interjections is the proper language for such violation of the WASP intrinsic and extrinsic norm. By reverting partially to the ‘mother tongue’, Sara not only recalls her own mother who was closely associated with the language on both the cultural and personal level, but also expresses emotions that her American self cannot.

### 5.1.2. Standard English

Americanizers stressed learning English “as a service to the nation,” to ensure the successful transfer of the WASP values,<sup>85</sup> which would lead to a complete transition and the promise of upward social movement. They emphasized unaccented speech and gradual fading of bilingualism as essential to the democratic existence, arguing, among other things that the immigrants “have a very limited need for communicating their thoughts in written English”<sup>86</sup> beyond basic literacy. Contrary to that, Yeziarska sees the liberating potential of English not only in its association with the omnipresent vision of democratic America which her heroines greatly admire, but also in the act of writing itself. In Orthodox Judaism, the production of letters is held in the highest respect, but only for men.<sup>87</sup> Hence, to her protagonists the act of writing and, more generally, learning to formulate their thoughts, is a privilege which would not have been possible in the old country. Finding one’s own expressive voice in Standard English, the language of social mobility, is presented as liberating. Sara Smolinsky or the unnamed narrator of HIFA regard it as the means to escape both the cultural oppression of Judaism, represented by the father figures, and its social order, embodied by the other female characters who never become fully literate in English, or, like Sara’s sisters, do not get completely rid of the accent that marks their origins.

#### 5.1.2.1. Standard English as the key to assimilation

Being the only character to progress from acculturation to assimilation, Sara Smolinsky is also the perfect example of the mediating influence of Standard English on the intrinsic and extrinsic change. Sara must, in essence, learn English twice. The first time is relatively easy, as she learns through primary public education and reading, but upon starting college, she realizes that to conform, she must change her personal culture completely. After unsuccessful attempts at outward transformation and conflicts due to unconventional behavior, Sara eventually graduates with an award-winning essay entitled ‘What the college has done for me’. This is the ultimate

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<sup>85</sup> Amy Dayton-Wood, “Teaching English for a Better America,” *Rhetorical Review* 27.4 (2008) 403.

<sup>86</sup> Henry Harold Goldberger, *How to Teach English to Foreigners*, 1918, quoted in Dayton-Wood, “Teaching English for a Better America,” 407.

<sup>87</sup> Kaplan and Moore, 13.

triumph for her, since she “finds her own commitment to the American values [...] through secular education,”<sup>88</sup> and manages to express herself creatively, through writing in the language of freedom.

Additionally, Sara’s success can be appropriated as a triumph by the Americanizers (in this context her college professors and the dean). First, although the text of the essay is not presented, it is implied that it is a take on the rags-to-riches story which, as a representation of the American Dream, is a powerful argument for Anglo-conformity. Second, it is undoubtedly written in impeccable Standard English, which formally betrays none of Sara’s social or cultural background. Sara’s Jewishness, while it may or may not be referred to in the essay itself, thus becomes a mere point in her standardized Americanizing narrative – such a text could not have been effective in simple or Immigrant English. Zaborowska concludes that “by using English to narrate their acculturation – the erasure of their difference – [...] the] narrators [...] describe their own ethnic deaths with the idiom that embodies this death.”<sup>89</sup> This echoes the incompatibility of the sets of the Jewish and American cultural traits and the inevitability of abandoning the former in the process of adopting the latter, perceived by the characters.

This observation is supported by Yeziarska’s struggle to achieve the appropriate form of her literary Immigrant English. While in *Red Ribbon* she describes her beginnings of writing in English as learning “to piece together thoughts and feelings about the people around [her]. [...] writing] half in Yiddish, half in English, feeling [her] way in the new language” (*Red Ribbon*, 77), according to her daughter, when it came to writing her first major short story, Yeziarska consulted her sister and attempted to “depict her colorful idiom. In spite of her being a first-generation immigrant, she had difficulty translating the spoken language into a written text.”<sup>90</sup> This points to the fact which is implicit in BG, namely that once a character reaches a certain level of Standard English, she gradually progresses from acculturation to assimilation, as the newly acquired language mediates the change in both intrinsic and extrinsic culture. At that point, it is difficult to relate to the original culture without bias, even for creative purposes. This is a different representation of the disenchantment felt by acculturated characters reentering the ghetto.

Nonetheless, if BG were merely a tale of successful assimilation, it may well have ended with Sara’s triumphal graduation with all that it represents. Sara, however, does return to become a

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<sup>88</sup> Kessler-Harris, “Foreword,” xvi.

<sup>89</sup> Zaborowska, 101.

<sup>90</sup> Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms*, 30-31.

school teacher. Through public education, she hopes to educate children who “murder the language as [she] did when [she] was a child of Hester Street. And [she wants] to give them that better speech that the teachers in college had tried to knock into [her]” (BG, 271). Sara’s choice of profession is more than appropriate, as formal public education was by far the most impactful and effective way of Americanizing immigrants.

The selected works present English as the language with the potential for liberation as well as oppression. On the one hand, in the hands (or mouths) of the Americanizers, Standard English has been shown to emphasize the immigrants’ inferiority by comparison with their Immigrant English. At the same time, despite the distinction between Immigrant and Standard English, the universality of English as the national language ties it to the metaphorical vision of America as opposed to the linguistic hierarchy of the Old World. Thus, Yeziarska’s second-generation protagonists simultaneously subvert the WASP notion of Standard English as the tool of oppression. As demonstrated by Sara’s essay, the act of writing is the ultimate self-expression negating possible differences in speech, bringing the second generation protagonists tantalizingly close to finding their metaphorical America of equality and self-expression. However, the selected works also hint at the ambivalence of the ability of language to mediate between intrinsic and extrinsic culture. Standard English enables successful acculturation and even assimilation, yet the same power also makes its user capable of suppressing their Jewish self. This characteristic becomes even more prominent, and its effects acquire poignancy, once English is combined with education.

## 5.2. Education

The selected works present education as the ultimate goal of the younger protagonists, whether their vision is individualistic development or the broader sense of peoplehood and the desire for self-expression. Due to the Jewish tradition of high learning and the gender separation it enables, the protagonists equate the prospect of becoming educated (especially in English) with the ultimate act of defiance of the gender, linguistic and spiritual repression that they perceive as integral to the parent culture. In this respect, it opens them up to cultural transformation. The Americanizers were well aware of the transformative power of education and intended to use it to the fullest, to varying degrees of success, as the following analysis illustrates.



### 5.2.1. Public education as an industry

On the whole, public education of the period had two main goals: to address illiteracy and lack of training in order to solve social issues<sup>91</sup> and to acculturate the immigrants by inculcating the WASP values. Unfortunately, most educational programs shared the Americanization movement's ambition "to instill middle-class sensibilities while preserving class distinctions by preparing immigrants for low-wage factory work."<sup>92</sup> Beyond elementary and high school, the main options available to first and second generation immigrants were vocational training and manual labor.<sup>93</sup>

Both Sara and the HIFA narrator are bitterly disappointed by the reality of the turn-of-the-century system of public education in the United States, which was designed to produce relatively uniform citizens with a comparable level of basic skills as well as a unified interpretation of citizenship. As such, it was very successful; nonetheless, it left a lot to be desired when one's ambition lay beyond the mold of the standardized working-class citizen. Sara comments on the assembly-line approach to education, asking if school in America is "only a factory and the teachers machines turning out lectures by the hour on wooden dummies, incapable of response" (BG, 224), criticizing passivity on the part of both teachers and students. Such passivity, Sara's complaints imply, is counterproductive to acculturation.

### 5.2.2. "In America learning flows free"

For Yeziarska's immigrant heroines, free public education regardless of gender and, ideally, social status, is the ultimate representation of America as the land of freedom. When first considering the possibility of emigration with her family, the narrator of "How I Found America" fantasizes: "I saw before me free schools, free colleges, free libraries, where I could learn and learn and keep on learning" (HIFA, 159). To her, America is not the golden land her parents see, where "the President holds hands with [the common man]" (HIFA, 158). It is the land where "learning flows free like milk and honey" (HIFA, 158), even for women. Sara Smolinsky's expectations may not be quite as high, but even her dream is motivated by an account far from reliable:

The story from the Sunday paper. A girl - slaving away in the shop. [...] Then suddenly she began to study in the night school, then college. And worked and studied, on and on, till she became a teacher in the schools. (BG, 155)

Both young women, along with Shenah Pessah, share the dream to "make myself for a person" (BG, 66) and "[b]y studying they signify their repudiation of the cultural backwardness and

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<sup>91</sup> Dayton-Wood, "Teaching English for a Better America," 400.

<sup>92</sup> Dayton-Wood, "Teaching English for a Better America," 405.

<sup>93</sup> Rischin, 100.

female subordination they associate with the traditional Judaism and east [sic] European ways of their parents in favor of an ‘American aesthetic’.”<sup>94</sup> Their individual motivations, though, differ slightly and yet again reflect the differing expectations of America.

Shenah Pessah and the HIFA narrator view the American ideal of equal opportunity as a means of escape and unlimited possibilities as opposed to the old country. Their ambition, inspired by the first generation immigrant vision of America, is individualistic: to rise above poverty and achieve their own interpretation of liberty – learning “to form the thoughts that surged formless in [them]” (HIFA, 174). Reaching out first to self-education, they strive for personal growth rather than transformation of the self. Only later, as they come into contact with Americanizing influences, do they begin to consider Anglo-conformity. Shenah Pessah, who teaches herself English out of a Yiddish-English reader, jumps at the opportunity to take English lessons from Barnes and be enrolled in a library. Yet it is only after she tries “to see herself through his eyes” (W, 10), once she entertains the possibility of being educated by and among Americans, that she realizes her own difference from them and categorizes it as undesirable (W, 14).

In the case of the HIFA narrator, acculturation is barely addressed; perhaps because she does not come into contact with a representative American appealing enough to provoke the questioning of her extrinsic culture. She is rejected and treated as inferior, but the American cultural and behavioral standards are never explicitly given to her. The narrator understands that “[a]lways something comes between the immigrant and the American. [...] they see only his skin, his outside,” (HIFA, 177), but she never uncovers the nature of this divide. That is, until the very end of the story where she encounters a female teacher who “is like a real person” (HIFA, 175), seems genuinely interested in her thoughts, and treats her like an equal. While the narrator is happy to have found an accepting educator and companion, she has also finally encountered her representative American. The story ends on a hopeful note with the narrator fantasizing that with the teacher’s help, she will be able to “think out thoughts that makes people” [sic] (HIFA, 170).

Sara Smolinsky also desires to escape poverty and her traditional female role, but her starting position is different from the previous two characters. Born and raised in the United States, she is miles ahead of the first generation immigrants in terms of acculturation. She is fluent in English, albeit in its less desirable form, and aware of the WASP cultural paradigm, its promoted superiority, and her otherness with respect to it. While she is critical of the way immigrants are regarded and treated by the Americanizers, she repeatedly remarks that her father, as a

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<sup>94</sup> Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 104.

representative immigrant, “could never understand [Sara]. He was the Old World. [She] was the New” (BG, 207). This demonstrates that the idea of the Jewish culture is antiquated does at least partially resonate with her.

Motivated by a strong belief in equality, Sara is convinced the academic world will accept her based on intellect only, not her looks or background (BG, 183), echoing Park’s definition of assimilation. Her ambition of becoming a school teacher has two main sources, which come from opposite sides of the cultural dichotomy; the first complete outline of her ambition is formulated in the Sunday paper and is yet another version of the American Dream, promoting Americanness as part of both the story and the career itself. At the same time, her decision to become an educator echoes her father’s occupation as a Talmudic scholar. Just as passionate about her books as he is, she is merely holding up a different kind of light to the community. To Sara, becoming an English teacher and returning to the ghetto when she believes her own educational and assimilating experience is finished, to mold a new generation of Americans, reaffirms her American identity in the same way that her father’s studies and daily prayers did his Jewish one.

The difference between Sara Smolinsky and the other two protagonists’ motivations for becoming educated can thus be reduced to the first and second generation expectations of America and the resulting openness to personal transformation or lack thereof. The latter two’s desire does not spell Americanness in the cultural sense – they start out seeing the mainstream American culture as an environmental factor which enable them to reach out for their dreams but not as a means of achieving them. Only after encountering compelling representative Americans do they consider personal transformation, or acculturation. Sara, on the other hand immediately knows that in order to find her America, to find a sense of peoplehood among Americans and be able to reaffirm that by teaching, she must transform her personal culture. What she does not realize is the extent of the transformation.

### 5.2.3. Acculturation and assimilation through public education

It has been shown that the prospect of becoming educated regardless of gender or social status does speak directly to the metaphorical visions of America. However, the following discussion shows that due to the differing motivations of the WASP educators and their immigrant students, the process did not always yield the desired results for either party.

#### 5.2.3.1. Adult learning

For the working immigrant woman who “ain’t been to school like the American-born” (HIFA, 162), the most viable options for systematic education were evening courses. They ranged from

citizenship lessons based on history, civics or English, to elementary mathematics, various public lectures and vocational training. Most such institutions prioritized practical skills, offering first and foremost courses in domestics, cooking, machine-operating etc. However, Sara and the HIFA narrator expect more when they enroll at night school. When Sara comes in with the specific, though naïve, request to get a “quick education for a teacher,” the response is “a hard laugh” (BG, 162). The HIFA narrator’s experience with the “School for Immigrant Girls” (HIFA, 168) is described in more detail, illustrating the condescension of the benefactress and the protagonist’s frustration:

“What trade would you like to learn – sewing-machine operating? [... or] to cook? There’s a great need for trained servants [...] That’s what this school is for, to help girls find themselves, and the best way to do is to learn something useful.” [...]  
“Us immigrants want [...] the chance to think out thoughts that makes people [sic].”  
“My child, thought requires leisure.” (HIFA, 170)

Recognizing this attitude as simply a different incarnation of the restrictive stereotype that she is trying to escape, the narrator leaves the school in frustration and, like Shenah Pessah, eventually begins to educate herself by reading. At this point, though, neither the HIFA narrator nor Sara are discouraged from public education altogether, and still hope to find a course that would challenge them intellectually.

Even though some educators advocated Progressive ideals, encouraged their students’ creativity and embraced their cultural heritage, most adhered staunchly to what Dayton-Wood terms “textbook pedagogy,” whose educational “texts urged immigrants to be docile, compliant citizens, [while] teaching methods also emphasized passive roles for the learner. [...] Even the advanced books advocated reading, a passive act, over writing.”<sup>95</sup> This is evident in the experiences the HIFA narrator and Sara Smolinsky, who laments: “Even in school I suffered, [...] I irritated the teachers, stopping the lessons with my questions. [...] The other students] weren’t excited about anything they were learning” (BG, 180). The passivity of both teachers and pupils and their mutual disinterest in the subject matter results in exasperation and discouragement. Sara voices her dissatisfaction and is mocked for it by teachers and classmates alike. The HIFA narrator is put off by her experience of a tedious literature class and she ultimately returns to self-education, having tried many different schools. That serves her main goal to grow first and foremost as an individual well enough. Contrastingly, Sara persists, driven by her ambition to go to college.

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<sup>95</sup> Dayton-Wood, “Teaching English for a Better America,” 407.

### 5.2.3.2. *College*

To Sara Smolinsky, college is the ultimate representation of her dream of education and the ultimate metaphor for the American liberty. She sees the intellectual community as a semi-mythical land “where only the thoughts you give out count, and not how you look” (BG, 183). This illustrates Sara’s belief that she will be able to integrate regardless of her otherness from both the Jewish and the American culture. With these grand expectations, she sets out to colonize her New World, feeling “like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homeland and all their kin behind them” (BG, 210), but soon after arrival, she discovers that while the “New America of culture education” (BG, 210) is exactly as she had imagined, her deviations from the WASP cultural standards are even more blatantly obvious there.

Sara immediately stands out due to the homogeneity of the intellectual community, which at the time was comprised almost exclusively of WASP Americans (born or assimilated) who were also members of the same social class. Upon entering the classroom, she sees “young men and girls laughing and talking to one another without introductions” (BG, 213), whose curious looks say “From where do you come? [sic] How did you get in here?” (BG, 214). Desperate that in college she feels even more isolated than in Hester Street (BG, 220), Sara spends her first semester working ceaselessly “not only earning a living and getting an education, [but also] trying to break into this new college world” (BG, 221) by saving up money to gradually change her appearance. The only notable result, however, is failing one course due to physical exhaustion and lack of time. Sara’s attempts at change in order to fit in are unsuccessful because they only address the extrinsic culture without the intrinsic context, much like the organized Americanizing efforts in the other works.

The process of connecting the two is initiated by the unintentional yet crucial influence of a representative American. This man, Mr. Edman, is Sara’s psychology instructor and the object of her brief affection, represents a similar demi-god figure that Barnes does to Shenah Pessah. With the same fervor, Sara attempts to win his attention not through wooing, but in ways consistent with her Jewishness – by being caring, almost motherly. His annoyed rejection of her advances echoes Barnes’ disdain for Shenah Pessah’s Jewish behavioral patterns. The effect of this rejection on the heroine is also similar. After a brief period of emotional turmoil when she questions whether the reason for her passion was “the desire for the man or desire for knowledge” (BG, 230), Sara resolves to cease to be one of the “thousands of needy, immigrant girls” (W, 21), and become “colder than the coldest” (BG, 230), shutting out her greenhorn over-emotionality once and for all.

This decision is the turning point in Sara's college experience and in fact her entire life. Finally, she realizes that by rejecting the "typical [emotional] gamut of the Russian Jewish immigrant" (W, 10), connected through Yiddish and Immigrant English with her Jewish heritage, she is taking the first steps towards the intrinsic change required for assimilation. Sara describes her transition as follows:

Little by little, I began to get hold of myself. [...] As time went on, I found myself smiling at the terrible pain and suffering [...] foolish madness which, though it nearly killed me, made me grow faster in reason. (BG, 230-231)

Adopting the American traits of reserved manners and "objectivity" (BG, 226) enables her to view her experiences with an almost scientific distance, since she "learned to think logically for the first time in [her] life. [...] She] might have remained for ever [sic] an over-emotional lunatic" (BG, 226). Thanks to this distance, she can begin to draw on her experience in classes and gradually even befriend the dean, because her Jewish background is now filtered through the new lens of Americanness. The teachers gladly become representative Americans for her, in exchange for rediscovering, through Sara's assimilating consciousness, the benefits of their own culture for both themselves and their representative immigrant in the nature of true spectacle ethnographers. The dean even likens her to his pioneer grandmother (BG, 232), echoing her earlier hopes and confirming her status as an emerging American. Encouraged by their openness, Sara gladly accepts their guidance, and just a few paragraphs later, she is already graduating college with her award-winning essay. At this point, she does not question whether her American identity will stand the test of returning to Hester Street, but asks instead: "[W]ill I be able to find these real American people again – that draw me so?" (BG, 233).

#### 5.2.3.3. *Teaching*

The acculturating influence of elementary school is explored through Sara as a teacher, from the vantage point of an already acculturated and largely assimilated young woman who sees her ghetto origins from a distance, not unlike that of the charity workers, albeit with more empathy. Though the children's perspective on the school and the teachers as Americanizing forces is missing from BG, Yezierska does describe her own experience in *Red Ribbon*:

The teacher was talking to the children. They knew what she was saying and I knew nothing. I felt like the village idiot in my immigrant clothes so different from the clothes of the other children. But more than the difference of appearance was the unfamiliar language. (*Red Ribbon*, 39)

This brief account "reveals the insistence of the dominant culture on remaking the newcomers, on erasing their alien ethnicity in the efforts to produce uniform and compatible Americans"<sup>96</sup> in

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<sup>96</sup> Zaborowska, 100.

its emphasis on English and conformity among children who may be just as ‘green’ as young Anzia. The teacher as an English speaking role model is significant; the child Sara’s views of her teacher as a “superior being” (BG, 269) are reflected through adult Sara’s nostalgia coupled with the child’s adoration. Nevertheless, when Sara herself becomes a teacher, she is mystified by not experiencing the superiority which she had projected onto her instructor (BG, 269). With this realization comes the first shadow of doubt as to having completely assimilated into the middle-class WASP culture. Fortunately, her occupation allows her to reaffirm her Americanness by becoming a representative American herself.

Seeing herself in the children, Sara wishes to instill in them the middle-class values that she had to discover and acquire on her own; in short, to become their representative American and thus facilitate their easier assimilation. Echoing her critique of the other educational options, Sara observes that “not one of the [other] teachers around [her] had kept the glamour. They were just peddling their little bit of education for a living, the same as any pushcart peddler” (BG, 270). To Sara this means that they had resigned on their middle-class WASPness and reverted back (at least partially) to the working-class and possibly Jewish origins they had been conditioned to regard as inferior. This makes them unsuitable representative Americans for the children, placing the acculturating responsibility on Sara’s shoulders. The only exception is Hugo Seelig, the school’s principal and Sara’s future love interest, who still has the “living thing” that she admired as a child (BG, 270). That is why, as soon as Sara finds herself “slipping back into the vernacular” (BG, 272) of Immigrant English during a lesson with her pupils, she allows him to correct her pronunciation several times. In so doing, she accepts him as a guide and teacher in a manner similar to the college dean, and yet another representative American with whose help she hopes to assimilate further. This indicates Sara’s underlying insecurity about her Americanness and the need for its reaffirmation by a WASP representative, questioning the completeness of Sara’s assimilation. This issue is further explored in Chapter 6 when Sara is forced to confront her Jewishness.

#### 5.4. Public education in contrast with organized Americanization

While desirable in theory, the approach of the adult learning institutions is too reminiscent of the organized Americanizing efforts to be effective. As a means of promoting or achieving acculturation, it fails for precisely the same reasons, presupposing the passivity and inferiority of the immigrants. In this respect, self-education is a more viable approach since it enables individual spiritual growth, if not acculturation, and brings the immigrants closer to the first-generation interpretation of America.

College education is not only a desirable means of achieving the metaphorical America in the heroine's eyes, it also proves an effective way of acculturation, though for different reasons than Sara initially expects. The text highlights the use of Standard English as a medium for connecting the intrinsic and extrinsic culture resulting from a motivating encounter with a representative American. Combining the two most effective aspects of the Americanizing efforts, Sara's college experience gives her the tools to recognize and effectively adopt the intrinsic and extrinsic traits of Americanness. The response of the instructors suggests an emerging sense of American peoplehood and affirms Sara's belief that she is not only acculturated but also assimilated. Her final question echoes this conviction, as she aligns herself with the WASPs intrinsically and extrinsically, dismissing the upcoming confrontation of her Jewish heritage with the new American identity.

Regarded as by far the most effective Americanizing influence by the texts in question, primary education, explored through the teaching profession, combines the model of representative Americans with the use of Standard English even more successfully than the college experience. Once the immigrant protagonist becomes an acculturating agent, she can not only reaffirm her Americanness in displaying and promoting the American traits, but also find her America of equality and self-expression. Echoing both the defiance of the oppressive stereotypes Sara associates with the Jewish culture, and the personal transformation through spiritual achievement, she seems to finally have found her America. Thus, when contrasted with organized Americanization, formalized education is presented as the most effective and desirable way of acculturation and assimilation, provided it employs language and encourages active participation of the student and ideally the teacher. Nevertheless, the selected texts also exemplify that this way of acculturation and assimilation is only relevant to the second generation protagonists and widens the generational and cultural gap. Therefore, the generational aspect of the cultural conflict and the subsequent relationship between an individual's Jewish and American selves remain unresolved. Only in the final chapters of BG does Sara begin to question whether her two identities, separated by cultural, social and linguistic barriers within and without, can be reconciled.



## 6. Chapter 6: Conflicting Identities

The conclusion of the previous chapter suggests the most effective methods of acculturation and assimilation, as seen in the analyzed texts, yet uncertainties still remain about the completeness and desirability of the Americanization they facilitate. Returning to the generational aspect of the conflict, we will now address the final question of how the acculturated or assimilated younger protagonists relate to the first generation as the representatives of their own Jewishness. In contrast, the depictions of the first generation's responses will be discussed. The primary texts separate the generations by cultural, social and linguistic barriers, paralleling the opposition of the Jewish and American selves. We will explore how this separation affects the characters' sense of Jewish or American peoplehood, addressing finally the possibility of reconciliation of the opposing selves.

### 6.1. Rejection of the parent culture as the result of assimilation

In Yeziarska's fiction, the second generation immigrants, with their intrinsic and extrinsic selves being pulled in opposite directions initially respond by rejecting their native culture as backward, in line with the dominant rhetoric of Americanization. The selected texts associate this rejection of Jewishness with defying the oppressive male authority and the subordinate female roles, which the protagonists see as integral to the Jewish culture. At the same time, the rejection is offset by the intense desire to belong and be accepted, in other words, to find a sense of peoplehood within a society which would also accept the protagonists' opinions and ambitions.

Earlier, we have shown that the rejection affects both the extrinsic and the intrinsic culture, but while the extrinsic change is depicted in quite extensive detail, the mechanics of intrinsic change are seldom described. Ron Ebest notes that part of Yeziarska's way of dealing with this is an "awakening on the part of the poor female protagonist."<sup>97</sup> Though his observation applies to the reconciliation of class differences associated with the heroines' assimilation, the same strategy can be discerned in the process of rejection. This process is depicted as a series of realizations and decisions provoked usually by emotional crises, which are followed by renewed resolve and a prompt narrative jump to the following stage of acculturation. This pattern may suggest that Yeziarska herself had trouble finding satisfactory paths towards intrinsic change, or at least convincing ways to relay them in the narrative.

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<sup>97</sup> Ron Ebest, "Anzia Yeziarska and the Popular Periodical Debate over the Jews," *MELUS*, 25.1 (Spring 2000) 118.

Thus when we witness the characters' attempts to acculturate, we see them focusing primarily on the extrinsic traits, and most of their efforts fail precisely due to the limited scope on which they are made. When Shenah Pessah purchases her American clothes, she tries to see herself "from head to toe," but the broken mirror can "only show her glorious parts of her" (W, 16-17), foreshadowing that her effort will be unsuccessful. Similarly, when Sara applies makeup in order to fit in with the factory girls, she observes dejectedly that her "painted face [does not] hang together with the rest of [her]" (BG, 182-183). While it is possible for the younger protagonists to buy or otherwise acquire the material, extrinsic markers of Americanness, the emphasis is always on the incompleteness and superficiality of such a change and its incongruity with the intrinsic Jewishness they still possess. Shenah Pessah tries "[o]nly to be beautiful! [...] 'Not for [herself], but only for [Barnes]'" (W, 17), and is completely oblivious to the inevitable failure of an effort thusly motivated. In this way, the texts further confirm that for acculturation to be productive in creating an American self, both intrinsic and extrinsic culture must be employed simultaneously.

Moreover, even though the protagonists associate the oppressiveness of the old culture primarily with the domineering male figures representing the rigid orthodox religion, the practical and material aspects of abandonment of said culture are tied to the mothers. The mothers are associated with the home and the secular Jewish culture and therefore with the more personal sense of Jewishness. When Shenah Pessah needs money to buy her American dress, she pawns the featherbed she inherited from her mother (W, 15-16), and when Sara's mother dies, the young woman refuses to cut her new clothes as a traditional sign of mourning (BG, 255). Through these acts, they consciously sever the emotional links with their Jewishness instead of merely defying it. On the other hand, these protagonists are so concerned with escaping their native culture that they have no time to feel ashamed of it in the way Hanneh Breineh's Americanized daughter Fanny does. In spite of this difference, though, Fanny's relationship to Jewishness is still explored through her regard for her mother as a representative of the Jewish culture, even in the absence of its religious aspect.

The evidence here further confirms the notion which recurs throughout the selected texts - that the rejection of the parent culture, and the Jewish traits, is inevitable if the character decides to adopt the WASP culture. However, the incomplete results of such rejection also imply that the severance of one's past connection to the secular Jewish culture, represented by the mothers, runs counter to the metaphorical notion of the freedom of America since it requires suppression of the self.

## 6.2. The first generation's response

In the selected works, none of the older first generation characters become acculturated, and most of them do not show any inclination to do so. They respond to the Anglo-conformist pressure in exactly the opposite way; they reclaim their traditional cultural roles and move closer to their respective stereotypes in order to affirm their Jewishness. This is most obvious in the case of the mothers, who shift so close to the self-sacrificing Yiddishe mamma that they begin to border on martyrdom.

This is especially true of Shenah Smolinsky, who is repeatedly shown going to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate her love, especially for her estranged daughter, and waiting tirelessly on her husband, despite his verbal abuse and an utter lack of appreciation. Even on her deathbed, she implores Sara: “Be good to Father. [...] Helpless as a child he is. No one understands his holiness as I” (BG, 245). While Hanneh Breineh lacks the saint-like qualities of Shenah Smolinsky, she too would do anything to make her Americanized children happy. At first, she hopes to please them by attempting to adopt their new American ways, but “[n]o matter how hard she tried to learn polite table manners, she always found people staring at her, and her daughter rebuking her for eating with the wrong fork or guzzling the soup or staining the cloth” (FOTL, 129). Hanneh Breineh tries to recover her self-confidence by returning to the ghetto to reconnect with her Jewishness, but eventually ends up returning to Riverside Drive, perhaps resolved to give acculturation another try. The crucial difference between her and the second generation characters is that for Hanneh Breineh this is just another form of self-sacrifice, confirming her stereotypical role. The only mother who rejects acculturation with a vengeance is the narrator of “The Free Vacation House,” whose distrust of anything American also brings her closest to the men’s attitude.

Ruth Bienstock Anolik notes that as the Smolinsky daughters acquire English (in whatever form) and move towards acculturation, “the patriarch remains staunchly a scholar in Hebrew.”<sup>98</sup> Having lost everything he took for granted, Moisheh Smolinsky shuts himself off to the American world and will have nothing to do with his daughter whom he regards as a pariah and a traitor: “What’s an old father to heartless American children? Have they any religion? Any fear of God? Do they know what it means, ‘Honour [sic] thy father?’” (BG, 284). His second wife, far from the selfless creature Shenah had been, attempts to enforce the American role division, sending him to work while she stays at home, which destroys the old man almost completely, but still does not change

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<sup>98</sup> Ruth Bienstock Anolik, “‘All Words, Words, about Words’: Linguistic Journey and Transformation in Anzia Yezierska’s *The Bread Givers*” [sic], 2002, quoted in Hefner, 192.

him. The effects of forced Americanization, whether organized or individual are thus shown to be destructive for the first generation characters whose vision of America as the *goldene medine* had failed. At the end of *Bread Givers*, Sara recognizes the danger posed by her father's new wife's refusal to support him and decides to intervene. She is thus forced to confront her Jewishness directly.

While the second generation's ideal America is presented as at least partially achievable in the selected works, the first generation characters all become disillusioned by the failure of their expectations. Reflecting the disenchantment of Yeziarska's parents (*Red Ribbon*, 32), the *goldene medine* proves as a failure. Unable to alter that vision and choose to Americanize, the parents struggle to maintain some amount of self-respect. To do so, they reaffirm their Jewishness in the Lower East Side *shtetl* and its stereotypes. Nevertheless, this affirmation is far from empowering as it further isolates the characters and broadens the generational and cultural gap. For the first generation, therefore, Americanization is presented as not only ineffective and undesirable, but also destructive.

### 6.3. Reconciling the differences

Finding America in the metaphorical sense, the primary works argue, also entails achieving acceptance. While assimilation has been shown to facilitate that to a certain degree on the societal level, the individual nature of this metaphorical vision also implies self-acceptance. The struggle of Yeziarska's second generation protagonists' to relate to their Jewishness reveals that their acculturation does not guarantee self-acceptance. As the case of Sara Smolinsky shows, even a character who regards herself as Americanized is still disconcerted by her Jewishness. Therefore, to achieve self-acceptance and truly find the metaphorical America, the selected works offer two possible ways of reconciling or balancing the Jewish and the American.

#### 6.3.1. Hugo Seelig – the Americanized Jew

Towards the end of BG, Sara forms a bond with Hugo Seelig, an Americanized Jew who is the principal of the school where she works. Initially, she admires his professional commitment, remarking that his special hobby is English pronunciation (BG, 270). Only later does she actually describe the man in more personal detail: "A Jewish face, and yet none of the greedy eagerness of Hester Street any more. It was the face of a dreamer, set free in the new air of America. Not like Father" (BG, 273). It is apparent that the character of Hugo Seelig is intended to unify the possibilities of America with the Jewish heritage of the past; as Shapiro summarizes, an "educated man is attractive because [...] if he is an antithesis of the Jew who owns a herring stand on Hester

Street, he also bears a resemblance to the father she both resents and respects.”<sup>99</sup> This character type, usually a Gentile rather than an Americanized Jew in the primary works, represents what Zaborowska calls the protagonists’ “New World father.”<sup>100</sup> Unlike the Orthodox Old World father figure, he encourages the heroine to explore the possibilities of America, learning and acculturation, although this encouragement in itself is problematic, as Chapter 3 has shown.

Because of his Jewish heritage, Hugo Seelig should bring resolution to the struggle between Sara’s Jewish and American selves, as they are “*landsleute* – countrymen” who speak “one language” and have “sprung from the same soil” (BG, 277-278). Furthermore, being a Jewish scholar whose domain is the liberating American language, Hugo parallels Sara’s father more openly than any of the other Dewey figures. However, the text hints at the problematic nature of Hugo’s unifying role from the start. Firstly, he is introduced in the American educational context and immediately corrects Sara’s imperfect pronunciation of Standard English (BG, 272). Secondly, based on the conversations depicted in the novel, the “one language” (BG, 278) that Hugo and Sara speak is clearly not Immigrant English or Yiddish, but Standard English. Finally, Sara is shown to be unable to express strong emotions (positive and negative) to Hugo on two separate occasions (BG, 274 and 275). All that clearly indicates that it is the American selves which are to shape and maintain their relationship, rather than the Jewish. This challenges Hugo’s unifying role and brings him closer to the Americanizers.

Although Hugo is shown to understand and accept the peculiarity of Sara’s Jewishness, represented by her father and stepmother, as part of the background which she cannot escape from completely, he also stresses Anglo-conformity on her part as well as his own. While Hefner argues that, by marrying Sara to Hugo Seelig, “Yeziarska emphasizes both the ability of her characters to become American and the important heritage that will always frame that Americanness,”<sup>101</sup> Dayton-Wood counters that this attempt at reconciliation is unsuccessful, since it reveals how the reformers’ pressure for social and linguistic control affects even the immigrants’ intimate relationships.<sup>102</sup> Thus Sara’s final triumph of reconciling the Jewish and American intrinsic culture by marrying Hugo, taking in her father to rescue him from his wife, and Hugo’s request that Moisheh teach him Hebrew, acquire a bitter aftertaste.

Despite Hugo’s eagerness, Sara still feels anxious about sharing her home with the father who represents everything she has tried to deny. She worries: “If he lives with us we’ll lose our home,”

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<sup>99</sup> Shapiro, 81.

<sup>100</sup> Zaborowska, 150.

<sup>101</sup> Hefner, 202.

<sup>102</sup> Dayton-Wood, “What the college has done for me’,” 223.

to which Hugo replies: “Not at all. Our home will be the richer if your father comes with us” (BG, 296). In the end, the decisive impulse comes from Hugo, not Sara:

Then Hugo’s grip tightened on my arm and we walked on. But I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me.” (BG, 297)

Being the closing lines of the novel, these musings show not only that Sara is still unsure of who she is as an American, but also reveal the deep discomfort she feels when confronted with the overwhelming power of her “ancestral identification”<sup>103</sup> with the Jewish people. Pressed upon her by her “Americanized Jewish husband, who uses her to explore his ‘heritage’,”<sup>104</sup> the enormity of the tradition which she had tried to deny threatens her new American identity. Despite Hugo’s apparent role as the unifier of the Jewish and American culture, closer examination reveals him to be culturally affiliated with the WASPs rather than the Jews. His “easy enthusiasm” (BG, 296) about taking in Sara’s father is reminiscent of Barnes’ excitement about Shenah Pessah and further associates him with spectacle ethnographers. Moreover, Sara’s American self is from now on to be shaped and affirmed under the auspices of her husband, rather than Sara herself. Therefore, even the ostensibly happy ending of BG as a standard Americanizing narrative begs the question to what degree it actually represents Sara’s level of assimilation as comfortable enough to go back and relate to her heritage without the fear of ‘slipping back’. This implies that, in spite of appearances, Sara still cannot reconcile her Jewish and American selves and does not come any closer to the self-acceptance of the metaphorical America.

### 6.3.2. The New World mother

The only other protagonist who explores both the formation of her American self and its consequences for her Jewishness is the narrator of “How I Found America.” Though she is nowhere near Sara Smolinsky’s level of assimilation, she connects with her sister’s teacher, Miss Latham, who encourages her students to explore and express their thoughts (HIFA, 176). The narrator identifies Miss Latham with America even before actually meeting her, since, to her, the teacher represents the metaphorical qualities associated with the New World (HIFA, 176). Miss Latham welcomes the immigrant with open arms and, to the narrator’s astonishment, states that the young woman can help her, saying: “I have always wanted to know more of that mysterious vibrant life – the immigrant. You can help me know my girls” (HIFA, 178). The narrator is overjoyed at finally finding a friend in America with whom she can talk about her ideas and who will encourage her intellectual and spiritual development.

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<sup>103</sup> Gordon, 29.

<sup>104</sup> Zaborowska, 150-151.

The teacher in this short story is clearly a stand-in for the Progressive-minded Dewey figure, whose motivations have been established as questionable. Whether that is the case in HIFA as well can only be guessed at, since the teacher does not appear long enough to reveal if her motives are genuine. Much of what she says and does is reminiscent of the other Americanizers. Quoting Waldo Frank's *Our America* and encouraging the narrator to read it may parallel Barnes' resolution to "teach [Shenah Pessah] to read sensible books" (W, 9). Another such connection could be the gentle remark that the young woman is too intense (HIFA, 179; W, 10). Though, unlike Barnes, Miss Latham offers the explanation that the intensity is just energy which needs to be released in a more productive way (HIFA, 179), hinting perhaps at further self-development and transformation. Similarly, Miss Latham's interest in immigrant life recalls spectacle ethnography, and the likening of her own pilgrim ancestors to the poor immigrants (HIFA, 179) is reminiscent of the dean's words (BG, 232). Based on this evidence, Miss Latham's less restrictive and therefore more productive Americanizing influence could be regarded as questionable.

An argument in Miss Latham's favor is her apparently egalitarian approach to the immigrants. Zaborowska argues uncompromisingly that

[t]he ending, featuring [the narrator's] illumination about "creating in the seeking," is a fine piece of immigrant propaganda, but it provides an ironic coda to the narrator's endless everyday struggle and the intellectual ambitions unheard of in one from her social class.<sup>105</sup>

Here, she points to the class aspect of the cultural exchange the teacher offers, although that is left wholly unaddressed in the story. The absence of the notion of social inferiority the other Americanizers associate with immigrants may be the key difference between them and Miss Latham. In the long line of Dewey-like characters and Americanizers in general, she is the first one who does not refer to the protagonist's poverty, which would seem to suggest that the potential relationship between these two characters will not be significantly affected by it. This would diminish one of the bases for the 'objective' or 'scientific' distance employed by the other Americanizers. In contrast to Zaborowska's claim, we conclude that the "creating in the seeking" reflects the expression of the protagonist's (and Yeziarska's) hope that a more direct cultural exchange can be established, despite substantial evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, Yeziarska self-consciously subverts her own hopes by hinting at the limited commitment Miss Latham makes to aiding the narrator with her self-development and cultural transformation. Even

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<sup>105</sup> Zaborowska, 128.

with her disregard of social differences, she vows to assume the passive role of a listener and provider of reading material (HIFA, 179) rather than an active cultural mediator.

The final difference between Miss Latham and the other representative Americans in the discussed texts is that she is a woman. This affects her position in the cultural transmission she is about to provide; to paraphrase Zaborowska's notion of the "New World father,"<sup>106</sup> she becomes the narrator's 'New World mother'. Given the importance of mothers in the Yiddish culture and their affiliation with the personal rather than religious sense of Jewishness, forming an acculturating bond with such a figure may imply connecting the two cultures and identities on a different level. The teacher may provide specific examples of American womanhood rather than generic Americanness with the help of English as the new, liberated *mama loshen*. As such, she may serve as a more relatable and hence more usable representative American than the ones in the other texts.

Such connection makes Miss Latham potentially the most productive but still problematic acculturating and assimilating force. Given the relatively passive role she seems to have assumed and the concept of the 'New World mother', combined with the gendered feminine roles promoted by the mainstream American society which she represents, the eager protagonist may absorb both the desired American cultural traits, and the negative stereotypes of the dominant culture. Due to the nature of this learning process, which is much closer to natural acculturation, the narrator may also accept them much more readily than if they were presented by the more proscriptive Americanizers, whose authority she had learned to question. This may mean that the acculturating character could avoid the initial begrudging of her Jewishness as was the case of the academically assimilated Sara Smolinsky. However, leaving the ending open with only the narrator's resolution to create her own America provides virtually no clue as to the real possibility of reconciliation of the Jewish and the American.

### 6.3.3. Replacing one stereotype with another

At the end of BG, Yeziarska subverts Sara's ambition to find the America of equality, self-expression and independence by having her marry Hugo Seelig, a representative of the early twentieth century WASP society. In so doing, Sara comes closer to becoming a WASP American than ever before, but simultaneously complicates the matter of identifying herself as an American in the metaphorical sense. Unlike Hugo, who after their marriage continues to work as a teacher,

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<sup>106</sup> Zaborowska, 150.



further reaffirming his Americanness every day, Sara's status as a married woman probably denies her that opportunity. Since "at that time one was either a wife or a schoolteacher,"<sup>107</sup> Sara is unlikely to continue her employment, thus losing the chance to affirm her Americanness in the productive way that teaching has been shown to be. Even considering the unmistakable 'WASPness' of the Seelig household, domesticity is consistently regarded as incompatible with women's individual satisfaction and fulfillment in Yeziarska's texts.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, in order to maintain Moisheh Smolinsky's Jewishness, Sara will be required to reinstate some aspects of the Jewish culture, such as cooking kosher meals (BG, 95). Thirdly, while Hugo's wish to learn Hebrew can be interpreted as an act of spectacle ethnography, it can also be read as an attempt to assert further dominance by recalling the linguistic and educational hierarchy of the Old World. The combination of these factors alone brings Sara dangerously close to "slipping back" not "into the vernacular" (BG, 272), but into the domestic drudgery that it represents. In marrying the Americanized Jew, she may simply exchange one oppressive stereotype for another.

As we have shown, Miss Latham as the HIFA narrator's New World mother has the capacity to instill the American traits and values with more permanent results than the males. Nevertheless, in the context of the early twentieth century middle-class WASP society, the prevalent role of women was still largely subordinate. Consequently, despite the potential of the narrator's learning Americanness by example as a daughter would from her mother, the eventual outcome of replacing Jewish stereotypes with the American ones may remain unchanged. In this respect, even if both heroines may find America and become American in the literal sense, its metaphorical meaning of complete equality would still elude them.

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<sup>107</sup> Zaborowska, 149.

<sup>108</sup> Kessler-Harris, "Foreword," xv.

## 7. Conclusion

To the first and second generation immigrants of Yeziarska's fiction, finding America means many different things. However, in the five short stories and the novel *Bread Givers*, the characters of both generations ultimately seek a sense of peoplehood, or the "special sense of both ancestral and future-oriented identification"<sup>109</sup> within a culture which would accept them along with their personal views and ambitions, and not in spite of them. The acculturation and assimilation of the immigrants in the selected works is conducted chiefly under the auspices of the Americanization movement, which promotes complete Anglo-conformity. We relied on two definitions of assimilation, one as the acquisition of "the language and the social ritual of the native community" by the immigrants to the degree where they do not encounter prejudice,<sup>110</sup> and the other emphasizing the immigrants' "no particular loyalty to [their] former culture."<sup>111</sup> We have also utilized Gordon's concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic culture, identifying the specific cultural traits of both the Jewish and American cultures as represented in the texts in question. We have identified emotionality, sensuality and the Yiddish language as the typical Jewish traits, associated also with the ghetto as the Jewish cultural space. The examination of the Americanizing practices yielded restriction (or restraint), distance and Standard English as the traits associated with the WASP culture and its proponents. These sets of traits are frequently placed in polar opposition in the texts, resulting in a cultural rift. Through the notion of historical continuity of the East European Jewish culture and the first generation characters as its representatives, Yeziarska creates a temporary *shtetl* in the United States. This allows her to present the cultural conflict of the Jewish and the American as the confrontation of the first and second generation immigrants.

In our discussion, we have regarded the characters as assimilated once the transfer of the typical cultural traits has occurred successfully on both the extrinsic and the intrinsic level. With this framework, we have sought to answer three questions which the selected works pose. First, whether the methods of organized Americanization as encountered by Yeziarska's immigrant protagonists are shown to be effective in creating a viable American self, firmly established in both the intrinsic and the extrinsic culture, resulting in complete assimilation. Second, whether such complete assimilation is desired and desirable, since its assumption is shown to be the adoption of a single set of cultural traits, echoing Rose's definition of assimilation rather than

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<sup>109</sup> Gordon, 29.

<sup>110</sup> Park, quoted in Gordon, 63.

<sup>111</sup> Rose, quoted in Gordon, 66.

Park's. Our final concern whether the protagonists are able to relate to their Jewishness without compromising their American self.

Initially, we have shown that the first generation's individualism and focus on the literal interpretation of success in America directs their interests away from acculturation and assimilation, rendering it undesirable and significantly decreasing its potential for effectiveness. Their reaction to the reality of America reflects this view; either it corresponds optimistically with the ideal of the *goldene medine* or confirms the Jewish stereotypes in an attempt at reassurance. The second generation's vision of America is metaphorical, equating it with equality, self-expression and acceptance. This ideal is shown to enable and encourage personal transformation by acculturating and assimilating. The judgmental response to reentering the ghetto serves as evidence that, in the given texts, even partial Americanization distances the characters from their Jewish origins. As a representative of the second generation, Sara Smolinsky employs the WASP trait of distance to avoid confronting her Jewishness and affirm her new American self. For the first generation, due to their reluctance to Americanize, the result is alienation from both cultures.

Subsequently, we analyzed the roles of women and the importance of education and language in the East European Jewish culture as represented in the selected works and related them to the immigrant visions of America and the process of Americanization. The generational division between the wives/mothers and the daughters does not become apparent until confronted with the American environment, where the opportunities separate the generations not so much by their age, but rather by the vision of America as established earlier. On the other hand, the gender differentiation is shown to influence all of the characters. Education and intellectual prowess are associated with Hebrew, as well as the religious sense of Jewishness, and remain in the masculine domain. The women, represented in the selected texts by the mothers, are associated through Yiddish as the *mama loshen* with the secular Jewish culture and characterized by a more personal sense of Jewishness. The interconnection of language and culture, the prominent position of intellectual achievement, and the gender separation that they embody form the basis of the second generation vision of America. Regarding America as equality and self-expression in defiance of the traditional order makes acculturation and assimilation more desirable and consequently increases its potential for success. Contrastingly, the first generation immigrants are represented as difficult to assimilate as they prefer the reassuring, familiar patterns of the Lower East Side *shtetl*.

The next point of our analysis were the methods and practices of the Americanization movement, as encountered by the immigrant protagonists. In regards to organized Americanization, the limited accounts of the settlement houses show them to provide generic, gendered markers of extrinsic Americanness without intrinsic stimulation. Nevertheless, this section introduces the concept of representative Americans as models of WASP Americanness for the immigrants to copy. Through the experience of the mother in “The Free Vacation House,” the charitable institutions are revealed as thinly veiled Americanizing efforts. They prove equally as ineffective as the settlements, aiming at Americanization by severely restricting the protagonists’ native culture. Those restrictions discourage productive change in either and imply that the juxtaposition of the proposed superior and inferior culture empowers the representatives of the WASP culture, affirming their dominant status.

In contrast, the individual approach, as seen in “Wings,” is a small improvement. Avoiding the pitfall of offering completely depersonalized examples of Americanness, the Progressive reformers, represented by John Barnes, wish to become representative Americans. However, the employment of distance and the attempts to control the process of Shenah Pessah’s acculturation through Standard English echo the charity workers. Moreover, the intrinsic and extrinsic cultural levels are disconnected in both approaches. Therefore, they are regarded as incapable of facilitating assimilation, based on the conditions established by the texts in question. Finally, the individual reformer approach is shown to employ spectacle ethnography, creating personal as well as social distance and deepening the rift between the Americanizer and the immigrant. On the whole, in the analyzed texts, Yeziarska maintains that organized Americanization cannot be effective in creating a complete American self, rooted in both intrinsic and extrinsic culture, since it approaches them separately and in a restrictive manner. Even though the example of Shenah Pessah shows that it may initially be desired, the prolonged experience reveals the motivations of the Americanizer and results in resentment on the part of the immigrant.

For Yeziarska, the point of convergence of the Americanizing efforts and the Jewish culture is the emphasis on language and education, though the selected works illustrate that English has the potential for repression as well as liberation. The Americanizers are shown using Standard English to emphasize the immigrants’ inferiority in juxtaposition with the odd syntax and their Immigrant English. Contrary to that, to the second generation immigrant women, the universality of English as the national language recalls the metaphorical vision of American equality as opposed to the linguistic hierarchy of the Jewish tradition. Through this connection, Yeziarska’s heroines defy not only the Old World hierarchy, but also the WASP notion of Standard English

as the means of control. As demonstrated by Sara's essay, the act of writing is regarded as the ultimate self-expression, bringing the protagonists within reach of the metaphorical America. The selected texts, *Bread Givers* especially, also emphasize the ambivalence of language as the cultural mediator. This characteristic becomes even more prominent once English is used in the educational context. Though Standard English enables successful acculturation and even assimilation, Sara exemplifies that it also makes its user capable of suppressing the Jewish self. In BG, college represents the ultimate American environment where Sara finally adopts the tenets of Americanness – restriction, distance and Standard English. Her transformative experience demonstrates the ability of language to mediate between intrinsic and extrinsic change, showing that language use, as opposed to language instruction, connects the two processes and enables advancement from separate developments (acculturation) to unified progress (assimilation).

Organized Americanization, the efforts of the reform workers and public education are all represented as a means of transferring the American WASP cultural traits, and therefore fall into the category of formalized Americanization. From the comparisons of the Americanizers' methods and their effectiveness, we may conclude that in order for acculturation to be successful in creating an American self, rooted in both intrinsic and extrinsic culture, the process must involve both simultaneously. This can only be achieved by the active engagement of language, in this case Standard English, as the mediating force between the two and the carrier of the dominant culture. The only Americanizing forces shown to employ this method are college and Sara's profession as a school teacher; in addition to that, both also utilize the effective concept of representative Americans and display a degree of compatibility with the metaphorical ideal of America. Consequently, these are the only means of formalized Americanization which have the potential of enabling not only the move from acculturation to assimilation as seen above, but also theoretically offer the possibility of complete assimilation as defined by both Park and Rose.

So far, the second generation ideal of America would seem at least partially achievable. Contrary to that, the first generation characters in the selected works invariably become disillusioned when America does not prove to be the *goldene medine* of their dreams. Unable to alter that vision and choose to Americanize, the parents hope to reaffirm their Jewishness in the Lower East Side *shtetl* and its stereotypes. Nevertheless, this affirmation does not empower them by reinforcing their sense of peoplehood; instead, it further isolates them from the American culture and deepens the cultural rift, resulting in alienation and loss of confidence. With respect to the first generation, therefore, Americanization is presented as not only ineffective and undesirable, but destructive. The textual evidence also confirms that the rejection of the parent culture is regarded as a

necessary (though perhaps undesirable) step in abandoning the Jewish traits in favor of the proposed WASP characteristics.

By becoming the representative American for her students, Sara can continuously reaffirm her own Americanness, but in order to be considered a valid Americanizing agent, she must present herself as fully Americanized on both the intrinsic and extrinsic level. While her effort succeeds in interaction both with the Jewish and the American culture, the fact that she needs Hugo Seelig as another representative American, and seeks from him the external WASP reaffirmation of her Americanness, suggests that Sara's assimilation is still not complete. In fact, Yeziarska's texts consistently argue that the characters are unable to accurately assess their own level of acculturation or assimilation. This is also apparent in Shenah Pessah's "American dress-up," the mystification of the HIFA narrator when being discriminated against, and the shame and anger of Hanneh Breineh's daughter Fanny. This evidence suggests that, in the selected texts, the level of a character's acculturation or assimilation is not shown by their affiliation with the dominant WASP culture, but rather in the way they relate to their Jewishness.

Despite the outwardly hopeful ending of HIFA and the attempt at reconciliation in *Bread Givers*, both texts share the underlying apprehension about the possibility of balancing the Jewish and the American self. While hinting at the possibility of successful assimilation as the result of pursuing the metaphorical vision of America in creative and productive ways, Yeziarska also doubts that the reality can live up to the ideal. Suggesting that even this way of acculturation and subsequent assimilation may result in the replacement of one repressive stereotype with another, she reminds the reader that the protagonists' metaphorical America lies in finding a sense of peoplehood within a culture and society which would accept them along with their ambitions, not in spite of them. To sum up, the selected texts seem to propose that the complete assimilation based on the adoption of traits is theoretically possible, but ultimately not desirable since it is incompatible with the metaphorical vision of America.

As a result, the selected texts argue that the ultimate goal of the heroines' assimilation should not be to adapt to the norms of either the Jewish or the American culture and society, or to find a definite resolution of the relationship between one's Jewishness and Americanness, but to find liberation of the self. In *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Yeziarska expresses this sentiment explicitly, claiming: "My idea of success is to be wholly myself" (*Red Ribbon*, 131). If this be the case, the selected texts argue, then the sense of peoplehood will emerge out of the creating in the seeking, to paraphrase Waldo Frank, common to all who embrace the metaphorical vision of America. This individualistic idealism permeates the ending of "How I Found America,"

“Wings,” “Hunger,” and numerous other works, yet Yeziarska’s characters never transcend their open-ended optimism. They are shown taking a new empowering breath, but never actually take the plunge and test their resolution in interaction. In this respect, the bleak ending of *Bread Givers* seems at least a tentative step. While the narrative level of the selected works reflects Yeziarska’s uncertainty as to the viability of such individualistic resolution, she was able to achieve it on the formal level. In creating her own version of Immigrant English as the medium of relaying the immigrant experience of seeking peoplehood, Yeziarska’s texts truly document the act of finding America.

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