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The Tyranny of Plot: Anzia Yezierska's Struggle to Free the Voices of Her Community through the Autobiographical Self

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The Tyranny of Plot:

Anzia Yezierska's Struggle to Free the Voices of Her Community through the Autobiographical Self

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my husband Steven who has been extremely supportive of my work, taking our two young (and precocious) daughters out of the house every weekend while I worked throughout my graduate degree. Without him, I would have nothing meaningful.

I would also like to dedicate this to my director, Tova Cooper, who believed in my ability and intelligence and therefore, helped me to believe in myself. Thank you.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the very different ways that both the novel and autobiography mediate individual and group identities by comparing Anzia Yezierska's novel *Salome of the Tenements* to her autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse.* Yezierska's texts establish the inherent difference between the novel and autobiography in that her novels contribute to the dominant ideology by colluding with the capitalist narrative of individualism while her autobiography resists that very narrative. In calling forth the multiple voices of her community, her autobiography reveals, in a series of metatextual comments, the fictional nature of the self and autobiography itself. Comparing these two narrative modes, and using the concept of the self as defined by Lacan, I will illustrate the trappings of the novel's construction, its emphasis on verb and the form of rising action, conflict, climax and resolution (what I call "the tyranny of the plot") to the sublimation of character. In foregoing character for plot, Yezierska's novels caricature Jewish identity in a way which ultimately engenders and reinforces Jewish stereotypes and also Jewish self-hatred. However, I will also argue that Yezierska's autobiography resists capitalism's master narrative of the American Dream in ways that her fiction simply does not and cannot. Not only is *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* under-studied, but the lack of any real comparative study between any immigrant fiction and immigrant autobiography is surprising. While many have theorized immigrant autobiography, there are few studies which have tried to understand the very real differences in these two modes

Introduction

What would be the good of writing unless I wrote what I felt, the way I felt it? Why must I squeeze myself into a plot?—Anzia Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*

Much attention has been devoted to the dominance of both the novel and the autobiography in the past two centuries. In 1920, Georg Lukács wrote that the novel is "the representative art-form of our age" (93). In 1981, M. M. Bakhtin suggested the overwhelming dominance of the novel when he wrote: "the novel appears a creature from an alien species. It gets on poorly with other genres. It fights for its own hegemony in literature; whenever it triumphs, the other older genres go into decline" (4). Whereas epic and tragedy have been forced into retirement, the novel still seems to be in a "process of becoming" (Lukács 73), and autobiography has prompted so much recent attention since the 1980's that critics no longer question its existence as a serious mode of study.[1] It alone survives the novel's totalizing domination.

While the success of the novel and autobiography in the modern age can hardly be disputed, their emergence as two both cooperating and competing genres has been under-theorized. While a complete comparative study is not at all my aim, I will explore the very different ways that both the novel and autobiography mediate individual and group

[1] Sidonie Smith, in her 1987 book (after which much criticism has followed) *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, writes: "Suddenly everyone in the universe of literary critics and theorists seems to be talking about autobiography, a genre critics described until recently as a kind of flawed biography at worst, and at best a historiographical document capable of capturing the essence of a nation or the spirit of an age" (3).

identities by comparing Anzia Yezierska's novel *Salome of the Tenements* to her autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse.* The comparison of these two texts demonstrates the difficulties for an immigrant woman to negotiate an identity between old world and new, the Tsarist regime in Russia and American capitalism in the early part of the twentieth century. Yezierska's texts establish the inherent differences between the novel and autobiography in that her novels contribute to the dominant ideology by colluding with the capitalist narrative of individualism while her autobiography resists that very narrative. In calling forth the multiple voices of her community, her autobiography reveals, in a series of metatextual comments, the fictional nature of the self and autobiography itself. Comparing these two narrative modes will illustrate the trappings of the novel's construction, its emphasis on the verb and the form of rising action, conflict, climax and resolution (what I call "the tyranny of the plot"[2]) to the sublimation of character. In foregoing character for plot, Yezierska's novels caricature Jewish identity in ways which ultimately engender and reinforce Jewish stereotypes and also Jewish self-hatred. While William Boelhower argues that immigrant autobiographers "sought to pass themselves off as Americans by didactically copying and promoting officially acceptable behavioral codes" (127), I will argue that Yezierska's autobiography resists this master American narrative in ways that her fiction simply does

[2] As I was revising this thesis, I discovered that the term, "tyranny of the plot" had already been coined in 1989 by Susan Stanford Friedman in her article, "Lyric Subversion of Narrative in Women's Writing: Virginia Woolf and the Tyranny of Plot" where she argues that women modernists like Virginia Woolf defy traditional tyrannical notions of plot and narrative through lyricism. I argue, on the contrary, that the tyranny of plot is an inherent condition of the fictional narrative form, but that certain authors, including Yezierska and also Woolf , are able to subvert the plot's power by focusing instead on voice and character. Friedman suggests that character actually is just another translation of the ego (165). While I agree that character can be an expression of the ego, Yezierska expresses in her autobiography the voices and characters of her community, not merely of her individual ego, as will become clear throughout this paper. That expression of one's community is tantamount to subverting the tyrannical narrative form.

not and cannot. Not only is *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* under-studied, but the lack of any real comparative study between any immigrant fiction and immigrant autobiography is surprising. While many have theorized immigrant autobiography, there are few studies which have tried to understand the very real differences in these two modes. [3]

[3] Abraham Cahan's novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* and his autobiography *The Education of Abraham Cahan* also follow a similar pattern as Yezierska. Cahan's novel reinforces the Jewish money-hungry stereotype and capitalist individualism while his autobiography speaks a multiplicity of voices as it tells the story of his socialism. See also Henry Roth's novel *Call it Sleep* for yet another look at a Jewish novel that demonizes the Jew in the figure of the domineering and abusive father. In addition, as Tiefenthaler's essay makes clear, Louis Adamic, while not Jewish, also allows his characters to overwhelm his autobiography in similar ways to both Yezierska and Cahan. While the scope of this paper is limited, the claims I will make suggest that a larger comparative study of immigrant narrative is necessary.

The Ideology of the Individual and Authorial Agency

The very fact that the novel and autobiography have flourished during similar historical moments needs first to be examined. Many critics have suggested that the birth and tenacity of the novel and the burgeoning modern autobiography emerge from the relatively recent emphasis on the individual (which also corresponds to the birth of capitalism[4]) and the loss of a narrative center (God) to which the self can relate. For example, Peter Brooks places the need for narrative (which he terms plot) in the loss of a "masterplot" in the last two centuries:

> The enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on a new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world. (203)

While Brooks enunciates the loss of a masterplot (later identified as the death of "God") as the impetus for recent obsessions with narrative, his choice of the term "life story" is equally as significant, a term which suggests (as he himself claims) an individuality that becomes both the center of fiction and of autobiography.

Lukács also characterizes the novel as essentially about the strivings of the individual in a chaotic world, "the fluctuation between a conceptual system which can never completely capture life and a life complex which can never attain completeness

[4] Smith locates the birth of autobiography with "the Industrial Revolution and its informing myth of the self-made man" (4).

because completeness is imminently utopian" (77). In other words, the novel both eternally attempts to construct the outside world mimetically (in the form of a plot) at the same time as it attempts to capture an individual life, a life that is, of course, eternally fictive and eternally elusive. This attempt to construct a narrative which copies the "real" world and the "real" individual self mirrors the very attempt of the individual to "know" the nature of reality and his own inner self as the theory of Jacques Lacan can help us to understand. According to Lacan, the "I" that one sees in the mirror is a fiction, a false identification with an "other" that is the "self." The misapprehension of a whole self that we imagine when we gaze at ourselves in the mirror parallels the misapprehension of a whole and complete individual that we reconstruct every time we read a novel. Furthermore, the mirror stage "situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone" (2). The way that the child in the mirror views the self as a unified whole, Lacan's "Ideal-I," is a fiction that engenders the ego's entire concept of agency. Our ontological self as a whole, unified being allows us to feel as if we can indeed "do" something. Lacan's use of the word "fiction," and later in the essay "drama" and "phantasies," clearly connects the mirror stage's false identification of the self with the novel's description of characters (4) and informs the novel's premise of the individual, knowable self. Every time we read a novel, every time we think we know a character, we reenact the mirror stage's drama in order to confirm our ego's own individual agency.

This alliance between the novel and its premise of the individual self succeeds in linking the novel to autobiography, as Lukács suggests, when he calls the "outward form of the novel" "essentially biographical" (77). The only real difference between the two

genres lies in the novel's neat construction, which he calls "irony"; the novel deceives "by skillfully ironic compositional tact, by a semblance of organic quality which is revealed again and again as illusory." While the novel may premise a fiction, the skill of its composition eternally forces the reader to forget and then remember its position as fiction.

This state of the novel as both continuously attempting to reconstruct reality in an "organic quality," and at the same time calling attention to its own fiction, corresponds to Roland Barthes's theory of the novel. Curiously, Barthes also links the novel to what he calls "narrated History," one form of which would be autobiography. Additionally, Barthes contends, the novel and narrated history both emphasize a society's ownership of its past:

> The teleology common to the Novel and to narrated History is the alienation of the facts: the preterite [a past tense form] is the very act by which society affirms its possession of its past and its possibility. It creates a content credible, yet flaunted as an illusion; it is the ultimate term of a formal dialectics which clothes an unreal fact in the garb first of truth then of a lie denounced as such. This has to be related to a certain mythology of the universal typifying the bourgeois society of which the Novel is a characteristic product. (77)

Situating the birth of the individual with the birth of capitalism, Barthes links the use of the preterite to both the novel and narrated history and also to an emergence of the "bourgeois mentality."

While Barthes, Lukács and Brooks all describe the novel and autobiography (Lukács's biography and Barthes's narrated History) as deriving from a particular

moment in history—one driven by the emergence of the individual as an ideological construct—I find Barthes's emphasis on the preterite (the verb whose action has already been completed in the past) as the driving force of narrative to be an important one that guides my understanding of the differences between the novel and autobiography, at least when autobiography is not one of "great men" and "great deeds." I would argue, however, that while the preterite is significant in that it suggests an ownership of the past, an attempt to construct a narrative which imagines itself as history, the verb in general becomes the motivating force of narrative. Verbs are the impetus of fiction, driving ever forward the action or plot of the novel in ways that refuse to admit the individual/collective consciousness struggling within and beneath the text. I also align myself with Peter Brooks, in his essay "Reading for the Plot," who calls for a reevaluation of the centrality of plot in narrative, calling action verbs "the armature of narrative, their logic and articulation and sequence" (211). Brooks emphasizes the importance of the verb in the novel using a militaristic metaphor; the plot arms itself with verbs. Verbs act in ways that forcefully draw the reader into the story and essentially act as thugs to a tyrannical plot. The action, suspense and climax all rely on the verb to control the narrative and the realistic novel's reliance on these forms is very much driven by the tyranny of the verb to the service of a domineering plot. The plot-driven narrative only works to disguise the protagonist as a unified and thus knowable character. Thus, just as we misrecognize ourselves in the mirror (Lacan's méconaissance), we misrecognize the central character as essentially whole and complete, denying, with each character we encounter, the multiplicity of ourselves (6-7).

The totalizing action of the plot ultimately forces the realistic novel, which seemed so much to preface the importance of the individual, to denigrate the main character to a secondary position in the narrative. The central character then "becomes a mere instrument…of a certain problematic of life" (Lukács 83). More importantly, when plot assumes a central position in a narrative, it often strips the very authors who try to manipulate it of all agency, forcing the immigrant writer in particular to ape the ideology of the dominant culture. Yet even this premise of a dominant culture is a myth. As we attempt to construct a vision of ourselves as unified and knowable, we also attempt to construct a vision of our society as a unified whole, thus informing the melting pot metaphor. The melting pot transforms and reduces multiplicity into a singular and unified body politic. This myth of a unified culture then forces immigrant writers of the early-twentieth century (like Yezierska) to conform to meet market demands and finally to strive to achieve the very American Dream they construct in their novels.

Responding to the dearth of characterization prior to the 1920s, Vladimir Propp has demonstrated that the folktale remains a simplified form because of the limited number (eight) of character possibilities: the Villain, the Donor, the Helper, the Princess and her Father, the Dispatcher, the Hero and the False Hero (21). Because the folktale's main function is to instruct through the telling of a story, because the plot is so central to the tale, there is simply no room in the narrative for explorations of character. While Propp's analysis only refers to folktale, I would argue that the realistic novel also essentializes character in the drive of the plot.[5] While the central character may seem fleshed out, may seem as if it lives and breathes, as does Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet,

[5] While the realist novel often relegates character to a secondary position to the plot, the modernist novel attempts to downplay plot, as the works of Joyce, Woolf and Beckett make clear. See Jesse Matz's *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction*

her importance in the narrative only exists in relation to her actions (or even her lack of action). Elizabeth is who she is because of her relation to the events that surround her.

The genius of the realistic novel is in its essential disguise of the sublimation of character to plot. The emphasis on character over plot in the world of higher education has made reading for the plot "a low form of activity" (Brooks 202). But the academic discourse that condemns the importance of plot merely functions to conceal its utmost centrality in the realistic narrative. By discounting plot, we forget it's there, ultimately reinforcing its own powerful ideology. The reverse can be said of the realistic novel's emphasis on the individual character who ostensibly adopts a certain psychological depth. Often that depth is merely a mirage, and Elizabeth Bennett's character, while seemingly full of life and breath is reduced to a single word: Pride. And yet highlighting the plot is no better. The more the narrative affirms the centrality of its plot, the action of the story, the more character becomes merely a cumbersome problem, often leading the author to use types instead of fleshed-out characters. E.M. Forster explains the novelist's "advantage" in using types in that they are

> easily remembered by the reader afterwards. They remain in his mind as unalterable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstances; they moved through circumstances, which gives them in retrospect a comforting quality, and preserves them when the book that produced them may decay. (36)

While Forster ironically sees an advantage in using character types, I perceive more obviously a particular danger in employing them. If their very simplicity is their strength, then the stereotypical character, in its very familiarity, remains a fixed motif in the head of the reader long after the book is closed. The typed character and, by extension, the

stereotypical character, while not "fleshed out," has an even greater, more subconscious power than the character who demonstrates so-called psychological depth. While we may *remember Lolita's* Humbert Humbert for years to come, we *internalize* the characteristics of character types like the overbearing mother Charlotte Hayes.

If as we alluded to before, a novel driven by plot strips the author of agency, an autobiographer, on the other hand, often demonstrates a particularly potent form of agency. It often appears, however, that autobiographies, especially those privileged because they are written by so-called "great men," attempt to subsume character to the action of "great deeds." Conversely, autobiographies written on the margins of society (as are immigrant autobiographies) have been successful in resisting the tyranny of the plot and locating instead the collective and individual consciousness buried within the text. While the novel prefaces the event, the action, the structure of conflict, crisis and resolution, the autobiography, because it must at least resemble real life,[6] often refuses this neat construction, instead allowing character to emerge as the driving force of the autobiographical narrative. This elevation of character admits a place for consciousness both individual and collective, which a focus on the verb and plot simply does not.

Although Luckács, Barthes and others have illustrated an important codependency between the novel and autobiography, the dominance of the two genres at the particular cultural, economic and historical moment of the nineteenth century aligned with an ideology of individualism has led these critics to link the two modes far more completely than is warranted. Early theorists of autobiography, for example, limited their studies to the autobiographies of "great men." In 1980, Georges Gusdorf, for example, locates autobiography's genesis, like that of the novel's, in the West, in which "henceforth, man

[6] See Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "autobiographical pact" briefly discussed later in the paper.

knows himself a responsible agent: gatherer of men, of lands, of power, maker of kingdoms or of empires, inventor of laws and of wisdom. He alone adds consciousness to nature, leaving there the sign of his presence" (31). While the trappings of plot, or the verb, (man *gathering* and *inventing*) may indeed often force autobiographical subjects into conforming to the demands of the dominant society, as Gusdorf later suggests (31), the marginal autobiographical subject has indeed proven her own agency in the struggle between the oppressive nature of the dominant culture and her own marginalized existence. In fact, her very marginality, her exclusion, allows her to write the multiplicity of her "self."

In the last three decades, feminist theorists of autobiography have delineated the inherent flaws in definitions of autobiography like Gusdorf's, which refuse to admit the possibility for agency. Sidonie Smith calls this the "foundational myth of autobiographical storytelling" ("Performativity…" 114). The very fact that an autobiography is written on the margins allows it to transcend the totalizing narrative of individualism. As Susan Stanford Friedman makes clear:

> Isolated individualism is an illusion. It is also the privilege of power. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an "individual." Women and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex and color, have no such luxury (75).

In essence, then, women and minorities receive a "blessing in disguise" at their exclusion from the privileges of power. Their texts refuse to participate in the totalizing narrative of individualism, and in their very inability to mime the dominant culture necessarily contain more agency.

As autobiography written on the margins is not "an exterior presentation of great persons, reviewed and corrected by the demands of propaganda and by the general sense of the age" (Gusdorf 31), those marginal autobiographical subjects often resist the urge to become agents of ideology, resisting also the tyranny of plot. Instead, autobiography written on the margins calls forth the gaps that necessarily exist between the "self and self-image" which "can never coincide in language" (Benstock, 148). The marginal autobiographical subject acknowledges the fiction of the self's identification during the mirror stage, acknowledging also the inability of language to communicate otherwise, no matter how convincing it may seem.

The Immigrant Experience and the Novel as an Agent of the Dominant Capitalist Ideology

Before turning to the texts, we must first understand the immigrant experience as it relates to the dominant ideology of the time. Beginning in the 1880's, Jews from the mostly Russian-controlled regions of Eastern Europe began coming *en masse* to America seeking refuge from the oppressive Tsarist regime that kept them isolated in ghettos, unable to earn livings, and vulnerable to murderous pogroms.[7] By 1915, one in four New Yorkers was Jewish (Goldstein 388). This population boom, once encouraged by both the push of Jewish emigration and the pull of business interests in America,[8] became later a source of anxiety as the sheer number of Jews concentrated in large cities threatened the very character of U.S. society: "The overwhelming numbers, the "foreignness," and the poverty of the new immigrants drew immediate responses from Americans" (Konzett 600). Unhampered immigration finally ended in 1924 as the U.S. government began a concerted effort to seriously limit the influx of new immigrants into this country.

Whereas the growth of U.S. industry demanded a renewed labor supply, the size of the city itself (particularly New York City) could not seem to contain the immigrant

[7] In the first volume of *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, Cahan thoroughly describes the events that led Russian and Eastern European Jews to flee to America. In 1881, after Tsar Alexander II (whose policies towards the Jews had been relatively benign) was assassinated by radical revolutionaries, many of whom were thought to have been Jewish, the peasants of Russia began a wave of pogroms against the Jews that the new Tsarist regime did nothing to prevent. In addition, many oppressive restrictions were placed on the Jews as to where they could live, what they could do for work, etc.

[8] In *Capital*, Karl Marx writes that a "surplus population of workers…becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production" (784). In other words, capitalism demands a surplus amount of workers increasing competition among workers and thus driving down labor prices (789). In this sense, the lack of immigration policy in the United States until 1924, regardless of the tension throughout the early twentieth century, illustrates quite nicely the attempt by U.S. businesses to flood the labor market. For an explanation of how specifically American business interests encouraged immigration see David Roediger's book *Working Toward Whiteness.*

population. The ensuing reaction to the congested, immigrant communities that tended to spill into other, "whiter," parts of the city is fraught with an apparent overriding contradiction: the American upper class attempted both to divide immigrants into categories that kept them separated, in competition with each other, and thus less powerful, at the same time as they led reform movements which aimed at the "good-natured" assimilation of immigrant groups into white society.[9] Therefore, U.S. society acted both inclusively and exclusively towards various immigrant groups. David Roediger refers to this contradiction as producing the effect of "racial 'inbetweenness'" (8). The Eastern European immigrant's racial status (whether considered white or not) was deliberately made ambiguous, fluctuating based upon the needs of society at any given time. Businesses both welcomed immigrants and constructed the workplace so as to divide them. [10]

The divide-and-conquer technique is the chief characteristic of capitalism as Marx and Engels explain in *The Communist Manifesto*: "This organization of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves" (46). Even when the U.S. working class managed to strengthen in the early part of this century through organized labor

[9] See Roediger's discussion of this strategy in the section entitled "Inbetween Jobs: Class, Management, and the New Immigrant" (72- 75) in *Working Toward Whiteness*.

[10] In contradicting Roediger, Eric Goldstein explains this phenomenon in a very different way: "The Jew remained a figure of uncertainty that could not be pinned down to any one set of positive or negative characteristics and served as a reflection of white Americans' own deep ambivalence about their changing world. This ambivalence not only affected the place of the Jew in American life, but also interfered with white Americans' attempt to construct a stable racial hierarchy, ultimately threatening their own claims to the power of whiteness" (397). Hence, for Goldstein, the inherent contradiction in the ways that Jews were perceived by the dominant culture was not a function of a systematic capitalist ideology, but instead it was inherently fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies characteristic of racial discourse in general. While both Roediger and Goldstein argue convincingly, the very nature of big businesses' strategic response to the labor movement and to immigration seems to argue for itself, as Roediger's detailed study makes clear. See also Louis Adamic's *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* for a first-hand account of the systematic nature of big businesses reaction to the class struggle.

(aided by immigration), the bourgeoisie managed to adapt and become stronger than ever. Alas, the *Manifesto's* and *Capital's* idealistic vision of an inevitable proletariat uprising resulting from competition within the bourgeoisie never actually managed to materialize (*Manifesto* 45).

In his reading of Nietzsche, Foucault describes more clearly the class dynamic that characterized the U.S. during the early part of the last century. In Foucault's description of "force," we can detect an explanation of the forces involved in class warfare.

> There are also times when force [the bourgeoisie] contends against itself, and not only in the intoxication of an abundance, which allows it to divide itself, but at the moment that it weakens. Force reacts against its growing lassitude and gains strength; it opposes limits, inflicts torments and mortifications; it masks these actions as a higher morality, and in exchange, regains its strength. (149)

"Force" then reads as the victorious class in the class war**,** the class that has been successful in its "hazardous play of dominations" (148). Foucault recognizes the ability of the class in power to adapt even in its greatest moments of weakness (what Marx's hopeful rhetoric ignores). In fact, Foucault implies that a force that dominates is especially strong and especially brutal as it senses itself weakening, which would characterize the anti-labor movement of the early twentieth century.[11] At this moment, management adapted, united and tightened its control, using the propaganda of "higher

[11] Again, see Adamic's *Dynamite* for a particularly brutal description of some capitalist strategies used to counteract the growth of labor unions.

morality," philanthropy and reform to triumph again, something that Yezierska critiques, as I will discuss later. [12]

The U.S. ruling class conceived of a way to triumph through that complex mechanism of inclusion and exclusion noted earlier. Aided by various waves of immigration, the ruling class in this country was further able to divide the working class by imposing racial boundaries and limits while convincing the working class of the genuine nature of race, at once dividing them from within. In addition, the U.S. proclaimed a discourse of upward mobility that further alienated people of the same ethnicities against one another. Those who were able to rise into the middle class became in return agents of the capitalist ideology. The managers, bosses and landlords whom Marx affectionately refers to as "plundering parasites," (*Capital* 591) those who work at helping to keep the poor poor, are merely victims themselves of U.S. capitalism.

In *Working Toward Whiteness,* David Roediger insinuates this dynamic in relation to Americanization and the immigrant struggle for "whiteness." He exposes the contradictory attitudes of Progressives like Teddy Roosevelt who both appeared to compassionately welcome immigrants and their (cheap) labor and, at the same time, decried the possibility of an American "race suicide" (quoted in Roediger 60). The solution to this was a systematic program of Americanization which acted as a conquering force—a method of whitewashing, of erasing ethnic differences and absorbing immigrants into the dominant American culture. In addressing Roosevelt's contradictory policy, Roediger clarifies the real motive behind Americanization. In "conquering others from an amalgam" of immigrant "races," the new American "race"

[12] Lacan also warns against the "altruistic feeling" that characterizes the reform movement as he outlines "the aggressivity that underlines the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer" in their attempt to make the "other" conform to one's image of the "self" (7).

would become, "a distinct *race* with an exalted place in the hierarchy of races. The 'American race' could absorb and permanently improve the less desirable stock of 'all white immigrants'" (68). In its act of conquering ethnic identity, the imperialist impulse to produce purity helps to explain the seemingly contradictory attitude towards Eastern European Jews during this time. The act of Americanization only functioned to emphasize the inherent difference of the subject being transformed into an American. One cannot become white without first being something other than white. Therefore, Americanization promised assimilation or sameness while it constantly reinforced difference. In the process, Americanization made immigrants allies and agents (without agency) of their own oppression. In being sold the American dream of prosperity (and whiteness), immigrants who did succeed were asked to separate from their immigrant communities, thus destroying the collective culture of the Lower East Side.[13] The result was a group elevated in the class structure and taught to trample on those below it in an unrelenting and continuous narrative of labor exploitation: as Marx explains, "the exploitation of the worker by capital takes place through the medium of the exploitation of one worker by another" (*Capital* 695). The successful immigrant, in the meantime, became the visible oppressor, the dirty spy, the Cossack, while the capitalist elite remained aloof, invisible and benign. The face of oppression, for the poor immigrant, was not the capitalist who engendered the horrendous industrial conditions under which poor people worked, but rather the newly anointed immigrant manager in the capitalist

[13] Catherine Rottenberg argues convincingly that the American Dream rhetoric is an integral part of American capitalism: "Given the historical development of American society in the twentieth century, in which individualism increasingly has been promoted, any kind of sustained class identification has been extremely threatening to hegemonic society" (63). Therefore, as she concludes, the genius of American capitalism is that the American Dream is responsible for the alienation of the working class from itself. As some move from the working class to the middle, the original working class loses some of its own strength and class solidarity becomes nearly impossible (63).

system: the pawnbroker, the sweatshop foreman, the Americanizing German Jew, as we shall see in Yezierska's fiction.

In few places is the story of U.S. capitalism as pervasive as in the immigrant novel. The novel's emergence alongside capitalism's in the eighteenth century[14] is no coincidence, as the essential form of the novel's plot very much mirrors the discourse of capitalism. Like the novel, the narrative of the American Dream, the essential myth of American capitalism, prefaces a rise, a struggle, and finally a climax of successful rise in class status. Also, I would argue that the novelist's lack of agency is informed by the individual's lack of agency inherent in the capitalist system. While the capitalist (and the novelist) imagines himself to be an ingenious individual creating something out of nothing, "the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him" (*Capital* 381). Therefore, the system has agency—not the capitalist or the novelist.

Anzia Yezierska's novels in particular dramatize the story of capitalism and the story of the American Dream. And while they often outwardly critique the capitalist impulse, the essential forms of her novels ultimately bolster the American Dream ideology. *Salome of the Tenements* simply cannot resist the tyranny of the plot and instead, because the verb incessantly drives its action, consequentially subsumes character to a secondary position in the narrative structure. In doing so, *Salome* often essentializes identity, especially Jewish identity, therefore acting as an agent (without agency) of the U.S. capitalist culture of the early part of last century. While often it

[14] This date is heavily disputed. Some critics argue that the novel begins with Don Quixote in the seventeenth century. Others place the birth of the novel with authors like Defoe in the eighteenth. Still others, like Bakhtin, place the novel's birth even earlier. Whenever the novel "began" may be disputable but its dominance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be disputed. Capitalism's birth is also extremely controversial to locate.

appears that Yezierska critiques the U.S. capitalist class system, ultimately she doesn't resolve her characters' stereotypical behavior. As Forster advises, Yezierska often uses "easily remembered" types that "remain in his [the reader's] mind as unalterable" (36). In particular, many of her Jewish character types or stereotypes (which emerged under historical conditions that pushed Jews into the role of moneylenders in a capitalist system) spring from the narrative as villains: the miserly Jewish pawnbroker, the oppressive and abusive Jewish father, the Jewish factory owner selling out his own people for money, all of whom surface as types which stay in the mind of the reader far after the book's conclusion. The perpetuation of notions of stereotypical Jewish identity by a Jewish author reinforces the dominant culture's limiting ideas of Jewishness while at the same time encourages divisions within the Jewish community itself.

Salome of the Tenements and Its Collusion with the American Dream Master Narrative

From her short stories to her many novels, Anzia Yezierska continually tells the same burning story as her characters struggle to try to reconcile their desire for the American Dream while maintaining their Jewish identity. Her various characters are also the same: a strong-willed woman as the central character, a generally benevolent but misguided white male, and a surrounding cast of various Jewish characters and caricatures many of whom overlap different texts. In *Salome of the Tenements*, the particularly headstrong central character, Sonya Vrunsky, struggles to be faithful to her Jewish heritage as she rises out of the oppressive ghetto. However, as in Yezierska's other fiction, Sonya is only able to succeed because of her inherent difference from her Jewish brethren. Sonya is an individual whose very individuality propels her to rise above the ghetto from which she has emerged.

Sonya revels in her own individuality so much so that she proclaims, "I am I… In me is my strength. I alone will yet beat them all" (207). Sonya's faith in her own strength and her own will allows her to differentiate herself from her Jewish compatriots and Jewish heritage. Throughout the novel, Sonya proclaims her very difference and relishes when others recognize the uniqueness in her. When her upper-class white paramour, John Manning, recognizes something unique in her, Sonya proclaims, "You mean it? Something you see in me is different?" (2). This recognition of distinction then drives the plot forward, as Sonya, from this moment, begins to act in many ways very

opposite to her Jewish heritage. Her haughty aristocratic act allows her to acquire a Fifth-Avenue dress, an apartment renovation, and even $100 from the notoriously tight-fisted pawnshop owner on nothing else but her promises of Manning's name. Her difference lies in the fact that Sonya is not accountable to anyone but herself: "I'm different. I got to be what's inside of me. I got to think the thoughts from my own head" (166). Therefore, *Salome* begins immediately proclaiming Sonya as the heroic center of the novel for the very reason that she refuses to identify with any one group, lower-class Jews or upper-class whites, essentially portrayed in the novel as the polar opposites of passion and reason. Her very difference is further emphasized in her identification as artist. As her designer friend Jacques Hollins (born Jaky Solomon) explains, trying to justify his own disregarded Jewish heritage, "an artist transcends his race" (36). The ability to move fluidly through the class system, regardless of race and gender, marks the very foundation of the plot of *Salome of the Tenements*.

This concept of the unique individual "by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power" can only exist if one defines the self as a complete and knowable entity, which *Salome* proclaims throughout (Lacan 2). The concept of the self as a unique individual rewards the subject with a fictional sense of power and agency. Therefore, the desire to see the self as complete and knowable is almost irresistible, especially in the capitalist system which incessantly perpetuates this founding myth. Hence Sonya's struggle to view herself in this light is hardly surprising. After her marriage to Manning has ended, she is able to discover her "true" self and can recognize with "burning clearness every detail of her life" (196). Sonya can recognize her "true" self in her past and sees how that self connects to her present self. She is then able to

sum up her life in a single paragraph: her move from "poverty, ugliness and dirt" to "push—push—up—up—up" (196). Sonya affirms her own "possession" of her past and "its possibility" and "creates a content credible" in her own concept of self (Barthes 77, see former reference to this quote earlier in paper). As Barthes argues the novelist does with his use of the preterite, Sonya argues she can do with her own attempt to possess the past. In her recognition of the mistakes she has made in the "burning clearness" of her past, Sonya affirms the teleology of history and the continuity of the self-made (wo)man. Sonya's narrative, like the narrative of the American Dream, can only move one way—towards progress and continuity.

The subject's place in history and the teleology of the self (a self growing to maturity) only works to reinforce the American Dream ideology. After a long struggle with her self, including for a brief moment a "gnawing sense of nothingness," Sonya reconstructs the idea of her self as a unified whole, "her dreams had fallen but *she* was still left. She had to go on with what was left of her" (197, italics mine). The implication here is that Sonya has constructed her identity out of a web of ambitions only finally able to pick herself up from her failings with the new awareness of who *she* is, a narrated *I*.

Not only is Sonya's past accessible but her future is as well. In this regard, the construction of Sonya's complete and unified self transcends even limiting notions of time. The spatial nature of the mirror stage is replaced by the temporal stage that "projects the formation of the individual into history" (Lacan 4). After Sonya and Hollins marry towards the end of the book and her ex-husband John Manning is about to appear at their door, the two newlyweds sense his coming: "Something vital and impending throbbed through their self-consciousness. Something which they both knew

must come and feared" (229). Ironically, one paragraph later, Manning's ring at the doorbell can be heard and their self-consciousness is interrupted by Sonya's past. The self is "knowable" even in the future. While her "true" self is disguised throughout much of the novel by her own burning desire to rise, she has been in fact "knowable" all along. Hollins, therefore, can proclaim, "Only I understand her" and the novel gives us no indication otherwise. In fact, Hollins shows keen awareness of Sonya throughout the novel, waiting patiently for her to endure her disillusionment process and return to him after her marriage with John Manning collapses**.**

In her study of the performativity in *Salome,* Catherine Rottenberg connects Sonya's quest for the American Dream to her burning sense of individualism and agency:

> The social subject of American liberal democracy has always been conceived of an agent of choice… Sonya and Jaky, in many ways echo and reinforce liberalism's basic assumptions… the individual subject becomes the locus of agency, for he/she is presented as having the opportunity and ability to climb within the class hierarchy. (56)

Therefore, the rhetoric of the American Dream proclaims that those who want, can. By emphasizing the unique individual, the discourse of the American Dream proclaims those individuals as agents of their own destiny, able to move through the class structure with their own will and determination. *Salome* only reinforces this kind of discourse as Sonya's individual agency allows her to ascend and descend fluidly within the class structure not only through marriage but through her own work as a designer. As the American Dream proclaims, the individual is responsible for his/her own place in the class structure. Whether one moves up or down "the ladder" is a matter of one's

individual will and determination to do so. But this kind of agency is, of course, an illusion, a carefully-constructed mirage that places the onus of poverty on the oppressed themselves who then remain oppressed if they, too, but into the American Dream myth. Because *Salome* only reinforces the perceived fluidity of the class structure, the novel never fully reconciles its own characters' enunciated ambivalence towards it. Therefore, when the narrator proclaims through Sonya's thoughts that "she had achieved what she had set out to achieve. She had made herself Mrs. Manning. And what had she gotten out of her quest? Nothing—nothing," the reader is apt to think that Sonya has finally realized the myth of the American Dream (197). However, in the next narrative sequence, Sonya "picks herself up by her bootstraps" and becomes a part of the upper-middle class, ultimately reinforcing the notion of the American Dream as real and the individual's agency in achieving it. Driven by the actions of the plot, Sonya is unable to rest and reflect; instead, she must move as the plot propels her towards so-called success.

However, *Salome* often does give hints of the fact that its characters lack agency. Often Sonya's *desire* is given agency over her own passive *self*: "It wills itself in her," proclaims one shopkeeper after Sonya's determination astonishes her (22). Desire here, this mysterious "it," becomes an instantiation of an internalized capitalist ideology. The shopkeeper's realization of capitalist desire as agent only reinforces the merchant's ability to see more clearly than Sonya. Often, as Rottenberg claims, Sonya performs the qualities of Progressive Era class norms, norms representing the "hegemonic discourse" which effectually robs people of their agency as it proclaims heartily their "individual determination" (61). Therefore, the novel screams Sonya's agency while it subtly suggests that what we perceive as our agency is really only our acting out of an

internalized ideological position.[15] At one moment, Sonya even questions her own incessant drive to succeed: "Why am I so driven? Is it only to get him [Manning]? Is there nothing beyond the getting of him?" (84). Confused by her own driving desire, she nears true understanding only to bury her own question. Later, that "force" reappears which "will carry her anywhere" (92). In both these instances, her desire is given agency over her self, ultimately signifying an inherent lack of agency in the capitalist system as a whole. One is carried along in spite of oneself. Agency is a fiction of the unified self; without a unified self, there can be no fictional agency. Sonya must bury the thoughts that bring her closer to an understanding of her "gnawing sense of nothingness," or conversely to the multiplicity of the self (197). Otherwise, the agency that has been promised her by the capitalist system threatens to dissolve also into nothingness.

Even after she renounces her desire to marry John Manning and become her so-called own woman, Sonya's marriage to Jacques Hollins undermines that very proclamation of agency. The relationship between Sonya and Jacques may at first seem active on Sonya's part as she makes "herself a person" before their reunification in order to meet Hollins again on equal terms (215). However, as she constructs the masterpiece dress that would demonstrate her success, she looks at it "reverently" and says, "It's Hollins' hands working in me" (217). It is logical to imagine that Sonya would be influenced by such an established and well-trained designer, but the phrase "hands

[15] According to Louis Althusser, this internalized ideological position is most strongly reinforced through the ideological state apparatus of the school which reproduces "the relations of production of a mode of production" (157). However, the school, for Althusser, only functions as the most effective form of ideology because "it is so silent!" (155) as it seeks to represent itself as a "neutral environment purged of ideology" (156). However, as Althusser insists, there is no outside to ideology (175) and ideology forever acts out a "hailing of individuals as subjects" (175). In proclaiming the unified subject an individual, ideology acts to make the subject into "a subjected being" (182). In other words, we internalize the dominant ideology through such early constructs as the family and school especially as those constructs hail our own individual agency.

working in me" suggests something more. It suggests that Sonya does not create the dress, but Hollins does. Even as the novel positions Sonya in the guise of a New Woman, successful on her own merit, it immediately undermines Sonya's claim of individual agency. As the character of Sonya struggles to determine her own destiny, the novel as a whole struggles to come to terms with the self as a multiple being. Therefore, Sonya is continuously performing the actions of those around her. In stripping its main characters of agency, the novel as a whole reinforces the lack of agency of subjects in a capitalist system even while that system emphasizes the plot of the American Dream so forcefully.

As *Salome* subtly reveals, the Subject is a locus for the expression of various agencies. When Hollins, the designer/artist, is fitting Sonya for the dress which will help her "catch onto" Manning, Sonya submits to his control: "For a moment she was all on guard. But their relationship of mutuality, he as the artist and she the subject—he, the giver; she, the receiver—made her feel how absurd subterfuge would be" (39). Sonya as artist's/man's/capitalism's subject undermines her entire claim to agency throughout and mirrors the lack of agency of characters in a novel in general. The novel's triangulation of artist/man/capitalism that motivates Sonya's decisions reveals not only the subject's lack of agency but, in particular, the woman's lack of agency in a patriarchal culture. As the artist paints his subject in the nude and men control their wives/daughters through marriage, capitalism transforms the woman into a consumer (among other things). Furthermore, the novelist controls the characters as Hollins, Manning, and the American Dream all control Sonya. Sonya becomes Lukács's "mere instrument," only meant to serve the particular "problematic" of The American Dream (83).

Towards the end of the novel, Sonya seems to make a real attempt at agency; however, the dynamic present in her attempt reveals that she cannot escape the discourse of assimilation and Yezierska metatextually reveals the impossibility of any real agency in her own art. As Sonya assembles her dress/masterpiece at the end, transforming herself into an artist,

> She looked at the other samples and realized that she must keep within the prevailing fashion, in order that her creation might be a commercial success…She applied her mind to the problem and found that the worst atrocity of the prevailing mode was the excessive surface of the shining braid. She resolved it by cutting the braid in half widths and inserting it edgewise between soft folds, running it along under surfaces, so that a bare thread of it appeared, lending richness to the shadowed parts of the dress (216-17).

In Sonya's attempt to transmute her own creation into the prevailing fashion, the reader can see a metaphor for assimilation and for the structure of the novel as a whole. Sonya, with her characteristic, sophisticated flair, transforms a gaudy, lower-class, decorative trim into something soft beneath the surface, understated elegance. Instead of Sonya, the immigrant, (and Yezierska, the author) marking her influence on the dominant culture, she becomes an agent of assimilation for the Lower East Side Jewish community. Racial and class influence only moves one way: downward. She will make "a shop of the beautiful," her "settlement" within the "ready-mades of Grand Street," bringing the upper-class aesthetic to the poor of the Lower East Side (228). Sonya, then, shows no real agency; rather she becomes an agent of the dominant capitalist ideology of assimilation. While the novel tries to struggle against the romance of the rags-to-riches myth in many

ways, it only succeeds in doing service to a more subtle class movement narrative, a respectable but not-too-ambitious rise in class. *Salome* denounces Sonya's attempt to marry into the upper-class, aristocratic white world by suggesting an unbridgeable gap between the two worlds and instead rewards her for a more tempered move to the upper-middle class, Jewish world. As John Manning's character is ultimately critiqued and his well-bred veneer shatters, the novel suggests that the goal for the immigrant should not be a drastic rise to the upper class, but rather a more restrained movement to the upper-middle class. That kind of movement reinforces the dominant ideology while Sonya's original class movement threatens it.

While Sonya is a passive "subject" of Yezierska's hand, Yezierska's novel also becomes a passive "subject" of the capitalist hegemony, an ideology which prefaces the self (and the other) as a knowable entity through its emphasis on plot. We saw this impulse in Sonya's metatextual construction of the dress. As Sonya attempts to temper Lower East Side fashion by infusing it with upper-class refinement, Yezierska's novel also attempts to bring acclaim and sophistication to the Jewish community through its sale. Therefore, Yezierska realizes that she must "keep within the prevailing fashion" in order to sell her novel (216). The reader can recognize that prevailing fashion in the narrative of upward mobility that structures her novel. The rising action, which lasts practically the entire novel, is driven by verbs of action; "rise," "emerge," "wrestle," "strive," "struggle" all appear crowded within single sentences (22) and the suspense of the plot forcefully drives the narrative ever forward, incessantly repeating the eternal quest for The American Dream. Yezierska's verbs of movement, of struggle, frame the narrative in a way that propels the plot forward like "the driving madness" of Sonya's

desire (85). The novel disguises Sonya as central when, in actuality, the movement of the plot is central. The reader becomes almost obsessed with Sonya's character, at the same time, failing to realize the plot working beneath her character to reinforce our notions of the American Dream myth. Sonya's unceasing desire very much mirrors our own relentless desire to know who she truly is inside. As Lacan theorizes, once the subject emerges from the mirror stage, his or her entire existence is mediated "through the desire of the other" (5). Therefore, the aggressive motion/action of *Salome's* plot mirrors our own desire to capture the "other" in the form of the main character. But whereas, the "other" is never really knowable in the world outside the text, the very nature of *Salome* as a novel allows its reader to become victorious in its quest for the "other" through the workings of the tyrannical plot. The tightly woven plot, the gradual build-up of suspense, the satisfying final moments when we discover the main character's "true" identity, all function to satisfy the reader's desire for the "other," essentially helping to release our "aggressivity " (Lacan 6). Almost like the climactic moment of orgasm, the reader finally feels the satisfaction of "true" knowledge of the "other" after its very long pursuit.

However, in *Salome*, sometimes the plot moves too quickly, so quickly that characters are not developed enough to plausibly do the things that they do, hence disrupting our fictional journey to capture the "other." "Honest" Abe, the quintessentially crooked pawnshop dealer who enjoys measuring the power he has over his victims, suddenly becomes a sympathetic ear to Sonya's request for a loan as he remembers his own youthful dream. As he sarcastically questions her arrogant demand for $100 on the promise of interest after her presumed marriage to John Manning, Sonya

replies that her "hopes are more solid than dollars" (78). Abe's characteristic response would be to laugh derisively, but a sudden transformation overwhelms him:

> Ripples in the dark pool of memory began to break through the hard surface of his being. "Hopes more solid than dollars?" he kept repeating. Dim voices, vague shapes, echoes long forgotten began to stir within him. Ach! Ages and ages ago, there had been a time long buried in his youth when hopes and dreams were more solid than dollars. (78)

Abe's sudden transformation is explained as a vague remembrance of a traumatic event in his youth when his dreams of becoming a singer were shattered. This kind of narrative recall, according to Ian Watt, is a particular design of the novel which uses "past experience as the cause of present action" and which "tends to give the novel a much more cohesive structure" (22). The plot is compelled by past experience, a device which makes the novel feel more real and complete. Yet, because Yezierska's novel moves so quickly in the present, she has little time to interweave the past and present. Therefore, directly after Abe has decided to give her the money, he is transformed just as quickly back into the miserly pawnbroker, charging her five times the interest in two weeks' time. The memory, which the narrative proclaims has had such power, has been merely a trick to propel the plot forward, a device without which the inflexible Abe could not have been persuaded to lend Sonya the money. But alas, the speed of the narrative moves too quickly to develop Abe's character. As Sonya's actions propel her towards the American Dream, the narrative mimics her brisk speed. *Salome* ultimately sacrifices character for plot, for the verb, for suspense and action, just as the capitalist American Dream instructs the immigrant to sacrifice relationships and class solidarity for upward mobility.

Many critics have recognized the lack of nuanced characterization in Yezierska's fiction. Rottenberg suggests that the poor Jewish characters such as Gittel and Lipkin lack individuation (66). In her introduction to *The Open Cage,* Alice Kessler-Harris writes that Yezierska's "characters never so much developed as emerged: full blown archetypes of a culture" (v). Ron Ebest, in his study of Yezierska's fiction as it figured in the popular periodicals at the time, also acknowledges the stereotypical nature of many of Yezierska's Jewish characters. He claims, however, that Yezierska attributes the negative traits of the Jews in her fiction not to any inherent racial characteristics, as many of the popular periodicals at the time suggested, but to "an American product to which Jews were subjected" (113). In other words, poor working conditions and the "spiritual poverty which characterized the 'living grave' of ghetto life" (113), places the onus of blame for stereotypes on U.S. capitalism, not Jews themselves.

However, *Salome* never suggests that American capitalism is to blame for Honest Abe's character. Honest Abe only becomes a villain after falling victim to the class injustice of another country, Poland. Abe, a one-time virtuoso singer, after seeking a doctor to operate on his throat, must resort to going to a charity hospital in Poland: "The operation was performed—by inexperienced students, who cut up the poor for nothing to learn how to operate on the rich" (78). The power of so-called charity to destroy is made literal here. We *can* draw the parallel to charity in the U.S., whose scientific social experiments managed to benefit the rich, but Abe's greed results from European brutality, not American. The implication is that the characteristics assigned to Jews are inherent, or at least predate their emigration to the U.S. The stereotypical characteristics assigned to

Jews in *Salome* result from a lack of development of the characters since the plot is so central.

Failing to place the blame on U.S. capitalism, *Salome* instead blames the Jews who have risen into the positions of managers and landlords for the plight of the poor Jew, thus always reinforcing the dominant ideology's attempt to reduce the notion of the "other" as knowable. So-called Jewish greed is attributed, not to the class system, but to a lust for money which characterizes the Jewish character in the new world and the old. In fact, Yezierska very often ascribes greed directly and necessarily to Jewishness. When Sonya meets Hollins, the narrator clarifies the source of this stereotypical greed: "The Jew in him measured her. The rapacious greed of his race for money and power leaped up in his dark eyes" (26). Even Hollins, supposedly assimilated into U.S. society, cannot wash himself of his "corrupt" heritage and instantaneously transforms into the Jewish money-hungry stereotype. His measuring of Sonya, however, mirrors the narrator's measuring of him as a money-hungry Jew, mirroring also the reader's measuring of both Sonya as narrator and Jacques as non-assimilatable Jew. All four, the characters, the narrator and the reader, collude in a conspiracy to define the self/other as knowable.

Yezierska's use of stereotypes that reinforce the reader's beliefs about Jews often mimics the notions of Jewishness that she saw plastered all over the popular media of the time. Therefore, the novel both informs and is informed by the dominant ideology. As Eric Goldstein writes, after the 1890's, the attitude towards the racial status of the Jew shifted and "cartoons lampooning Jews became a regular feature of humor magazines such as *Puck* and *The Judge*" (387). Ron Ebest thoroughly reviews the ways that Jews were portrayed in the popular periodicals of the time in terms of their personality, their

business practices and their political nature. According to Ebest, Jews were presented as clannish and unable to be assimilated into the dominant U.S. culture (109). More threatening to the U.S. power structure was the notion of Jewish "greed" which emerged repeatedly alongside the notion of a Jewish quest for power as if "American Jews were in the process of conspiring to parlay wealth into governmental control" (115). In other words, Jews were consistently attributed with characteristics of greed, untrustworthiness, and conspiring natures, characteristics that Yezierska's novels ultimately confirm in their stereotypical characters.

Most of Yezierska's characters in *Salome* and elsewhere confirm U.S. assumptions of Jewishness while at the same time encouraging a type of self-loathing or self-hatred in the Jewish immigrant community, what Sander L. Gilman considers a condition of the "Other." This self-hatred is a response to the contradictory attitude of whites to both encourage assimilation and at the same time to distance the "Other" so as to "preserve the reification of its power through the presence of the powerless" (2). Jews have been encouraged to think to themselves in the following way: "perhaps I am truly different, a parody of that which I wish to be." Therefore, the struggle to both Americanize Jews and, at the same time, to isolate them in ghettos worked to not only confuse Jews into misrecognizing themselves as "others," but also to help author's like Yezierska to parody their own difference.

Yezierska's own condition as "other" then prompts her to forever mime the dominant culture's notions of Jewishness. *Salome* portrays the miserly Jew, the animal Jew, and the intellectual Jew. Therefore, we meet Honest Abe whose "one passion was his cash-box" (77) and the animalistic landlord Rosenblat (also greedy) whose "thick

hairy paws" envelop her hands as he tries to initiate an affair (66). More developed but equally as problematic is the impotent "shabby poet" Lipkin, the poor Jewish intellectual who falls in love with Sonya before she leaves the ghetto. Manning recognizes him as a type after they meet, labeling him as one of "those Jewish intellectuals—those chaotic dreamers" (103). The dominant notions of Jews as money-hungry, as Bolshevik intellectuals, as clannish animals are reflected in the caricatures of Jewish identity in *Salome,* ultimately undermining any ability for the Jewish community to unite in any meaningful way.

Red Ribbon on a White Horse and the Resistance of the Self to Individuation

Red Ribbon on a White Horse is probably the most under-studied of nearly all of Yezierska's works. Many critics have written on *Salome*, *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers*, but very few have touched *Red Ribbon.*[16] Even William Boelhower, who studies the genre of immigrant autobiography, chooses the short story "Mostly about Myself" (which he calls autobiographical) over it. Boelhower is not the only critic to have studied Yezierska's fiction as if it were autobiography. Hannah Adelman Komy claims that "the bulk of Yezierska's fictional works are largely read as autobiographical, and that her novel *Bread Givers* has been generally categorized in contemporary works on women's autobiography as an autobiography" (34).[17] Kevin Piper, in a study of the comparison between Louis Adamic's autobiography *Laughing in the Jungle* and Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, justifies using *Bread Givers* as autobiography because he feels it follows the form of the *bildungsroman* (100). Curiously, Piper's use of the term *bildungsroman* does more to situate *Bread Givers* as a novel than as an autobiography, since the term refers originally to the fictional coming-of-age story.

If *Bread Givers* has often been studied as autobiographical, critics have shied away from *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* because it often obscures the borderline

[16] The few critics who do write about *Red Ribbon* choose often to compare it to Yezierska's real-life events. See for example Leslie Fishbein's "Anzia Yezierska: The Sweatshop Cinderella and the Invented Life" and Mary Dearborn's *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* (158-161). See also Komy.

[17] Komy also points out that in Smith's and *Watson's Women, Autobiography and Theory*, *Red Ribbon* is not even listed as Yezierska's autobiography while *Bread Givers* is.

between fact and fiction, instead affirming *Bread Givers* as her "true" autobiography. As the afterword written by Yezierska's daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen clarifies, *Red Ribbon* meshes fact with fiction as Yezierska both omits and adds at will, utterly inventing some of her characters. However, the tendency of some critics to affirm *Bread Givers* as autobiography only works to underscore the importance and centrality of a fictional plot. In its introduction, Kessler-Harris writes that *Bread Givers*, like *Red Ribbon*, "blurs the boundaries between the self and the world, fiction and truth, myth and self-creation" (xiii). However, while *Bread Givers* might be somewhat autobiographical, it succumbs to the same melodramatic story as *Salome* turning to the demand for plot as critics of *Red Ribbon* turn to a demand for historical truth. In service to the plot, *Bread Givers* also essentializes Jewish identity, creating a character in Sara's (the main character) father who peddles his daughters into terrible marriages so he can continue to study the Torah. *Bread Givers* also paints Zalmon the fishmonger, Sara's sister's husband, as a stereotypically unyielding and sexist patriarch, aligning him with Sara's own father, as he orders the main character Sara back to her cruel father because "a girl's place is under her father's hand" (141). *Bread Givers*, like *Salome of the Tenements*, presents the reader with stereotypical Jewish characters which confirm already suspect notions of Jewish identity at the time.

Red Ribbon, on the other hand, treats its Zalmon the fishmonger with a level of development that allows for a relationship to blossom between him and Yezierska's autobiographical self. *Red Ribbon's* Zalmon becomes a sympathetic voice in the ghetto as he listens to all that is "eating" her "out of her heart" (118). Regardless of *Red Ribbon's* inventions, even because of them, the text ultimately refuses Yezierska's

fiction's tendency towards essentialism while claiming wholeheartedly that the self and the other are ultimately unknowable.

Yezierska's choice to call *Red Ribbon* her official autobiography is an important one, ultimately making "this fictional autobiography more truth-revealing" (Henricksen 222). In its utter disregard for historical accuracy, *Red Ribbon* critiques the entire originating notion of "truth" in the same way that poststructuralist critics like Jacques Derrida declared the postmodern "absence of the center" (280). The entire central and centering motif of the autobiography, as Philippe Lejeune explains with his "autobiographical pact," has been a proclamation of truth at its very foundation:

> As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a "reality" exterior to the text, and so submit to a test of *verification* (22).

Yet if, as Derrida claims, our need for a referential center only produces "a fundamental immobility" (279), then our desire for "historical" accuracy in autobiography only limits possibility. In rejecting the reader's demand for the "reassuring certitude" of historical truthfulness (279), Yezierska instead, affirms the nature of "play," as Derrida explains it: "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin" (292). In her refusal to center her autobiography on limiting notions of truth, Yezierska can freely play with the reader a fruitful game of hide-and-go-seek.

This act of playfulness, of trickery, is easier for a woman autobiographer to adopt as her work is necessarily questioned by the very fact that she is a woman. Because

autobiography has been dominated by the voices of "great men," a woman's choice to adopt its form problematically forces the woman to "commit herself to a certain kind of 'patrilineal' contract" (similar to Lejeune's "autobiographical pact") writes Sidonie Smith in her book *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*. Therefore, in autobiography the reader and the writer enter into a unique kind of relationship that includes a type of "detective" work on the part of the reader as he/she looks for "breaches of contract" (14). The traditional autobiography then takes on the form of an exchange as the writer sells his life story to the reader who examines his "goods" for any defects or defaults, for any sense of being cheated. Mirroring economic exchange, this kind of suspect relationship between reader and author is disrupted in the story of a woman, as Smith explains. "Although her 'life' reenacts the figures and supports the hierarchy of values that constitute patriarchal culture, it remains nonetheless the story of a woman" and therefore, "vulnerable to erasure" (53). If the autobiography of a "great man" is questioned, it usually still conforms to Lejeune's autobiographical pact in that the male author is able to silence the doubts of his readers by invoking the centering notions of history as much as possible. But the woman has no such ability to silence her reader's doubts and, therefore, her autobiography is fraught with an even deeper, more implausible sense of untruth. If a reader is constantly questioning the male autobiography, he/she is forever undermining and deflating the female. Yezierska's own daughter, who sadly gets the last word in *Red Ribbon*, admonishes: "Less than anyone I can think of could she [Yezierska] be trusted to tell the unadorned truth" (221). Yet, as Derrida reminds us, the concept of history is a myth (284). There is no way for us to really say truthfully why we acted in a certain way at a certain time in the first place, because we probably didn't even know or understand

our actions at the time. The entire ideal of autobiography as historical truth that Henricksen is working from is misguided given the theory of the self and the self at play that post-structuralism has developed.

However, while Henriksen gets the last word in the book, seriously threatening to undermine her mother's claim at autobiography, Yezierska gets the last laugh. In writing a fictionalized autobiography, Yezierska openly writes a historically untrue autobiography thus helping to undermine the validity of the autobiographical pact to begin with. If the reader forever interrogates and undermines a woman's text, then Yezierska's trickster (and by trickster I suggest Derrida's quintessential player) ways slyly defeats her readers' assumptions about autobiography and women. In claiming her fiction as autobiography, Yezierska subtly undermines patriarchal culture's attempts to strip her of authority.

In a series of metatextual references to her writing career, Yezierska critiques further the notion of truth in history and truth in the self. In her description of Hollywood's ability to copy Hester Street so realistically that Yezierska's narrator almost expects "to see cockroaches crawl out of their nests" on set (51), Yezierska playfully warns readers not to believe what they see, no matter how truthful it may seem. In fact, the more realistic something seems, as does Hollywood, the more it approaches fiction. Even Yezierska's autobiographical self is tricked by the ability of Hollywood to seamlessly mimic reality. She is stunned as she enters the set and sees her native Poland:

> I was suddenly back in Plinsk. The past which I had struggled to suggest in my groping words was recreated here in straw and plaster. I stepped into one of the huts, touched the old battered cookstove, the benches scratched from wear, the

> feather beds piled high, covered with an old gray shawl. I closed my eyes and could almost see Mother spreading the red-checked Sabbath tablecloth. The steaming platter of *gefűllte* fish, the smell of fresh-baked *hallah*, Sabbath white bread (49).

No matter how much experience Yezierska has had with the historical Poland, Hollywood's ability to copy the world in such an "organic quality," (as Lukács claims every novel does (77)) fools the viewer into believing its truth, even as it continuously reveals itself as fiction. One can read Hollywood as a self-referential commentary on the nature of storytelling. Storytelling attempts to construct such a seeming reality that the reader is forever forgetting it is enmeshed in a fictional world, just as Hollywood draws Yezierska's autobiographical self right back to her days in Plinsk in such a way that her senses imagine herself there. Storytellers, even ostensibly autobiographical storytellers, are always framing and structuring how they tell a story, revealing how the nature of the self in autobiography is always constructed, is always a product of fiction.

Red Ribbon never really premises historical truth as its obviously-crafted plot structure declares immediately its designed nature, thus upsetting the structures of the dominant forms of the typical novel and autobiography. Whereas her novels follow the traditional form of rising action, climax and release, *Red Ribbon* inverts that structure by beginning with the climax and gradually releasing the reader from tension throughout the book. Therefore, the book begins with Yezierska's success at selling her collection of short stories, *Hungry Hearts*, to a Hollywood studio so as to invert the movement from rags to riches.

Instead, *Red Ribbon* relates the narrator's disenchantment with the romance of the American Dream discourse. While initially very excited about her success, Yezierska's autobiographical self continually questions that success and recognizes early on the counterfeit nature of the reporters who "stared at me as if I were some strange animal on the way to the zoo" (36). Instead of being treated as an equal in Hollywood, Yezierska's "otherness" always interferes with the ways that she is seen. The autobiographical self's own recognition of herself as "other" differs from the way that her novels' characters imagine themselves as capable of being equal to elites like John Manning in *Salome*.

Not only does Yezierska reverse the traditional structure of her novels, but she also seems to switch genres as the work progresses. Beginning as a plot-driven, melodramatic story of adventure, like many of her novels, *Red Ribbon* later switches to an emphasis on character typical in autobiographies written on the margins.[18] Therefore, the plot in the beginning, as in *Salome* and *Bread Givers*, moves too quickly for Yezierska to develop her characters, and she uses stereotypical characters to keep from distracting the reader from the events in the story. Again, she introduces the reader to a miserly, cheating pawnbroker Zaretsky whom Yezierska approaches for the car fare up to her agent's office. Zaretsky "was a bald-headed dwarf, grown gray with the years in the dark basement—tight-skinned and crooked from squeezing pennies out of despairing people" (27). Yezierska then introduces the reader to her dirty father, the smell of whose room made her "want to run" (32). Finally, we meet the Jewish movie director who drives his actors as if they were slaves, "whipping the actors with curses" (54). These stereotypes at once recall the stereotypes in her novels as Jews become physically

[18] See especially Cahan's and Adamic's autobiographies for examples of this phenomenon.

deformed, smelly and viciously money-driven. Yet, these caricatures disappear by the end of the first section of *Red Ribbon* as the autobiographical self becomes more aware of the illusion of the American Dream: "But I wanted the impossible of life, of love. And so stood empty, homeless—outside of life" (74). Recognizing her own marginality (and hence the marginality of those Jews she has caricatured throughout the first section) in the American Dream discourse of often impossible assent, Yezierska's narrator apprehends the emptiness and loneliness that often emerge from a disillusionment with U.S. society and its means of maintaining class structure. Without a referential central storyline, Yezierska feels homeless and alone. As Lukács claims in relation to the novel, "In the absence of the ideal…the gap between reality and the ideal becomes apparent" (78-79), and Yezierska recognizes in this gap an essential emptiness.

Not only does Yezierska's autobiographical self identify emptiness in the gap between reality and the ideal, but she also recognizes the individual's inherent lack of agency as it repeatedly apes the demands of the dominant culture. For example, William Fox, the powerful movie producer who offers Yezierska an unbelievable, long-term contract, boasts to her that he "dictated every pose, every move she [the actress Mary Carr] made" (86). He then threatens to do the same to Yezierska, whose burgeoning sense of the reality of Hollywood and the unreality of the American Dream refuses to allow her to sign the contract.

By recognizing the inherent lack of agency in the capitalist system, Yezierska's autobiographical self can avow that writing itself has been a performance of the dominant plot-driven mode, a fraud akin to the Hollywood experience that necessarily does service to the capitalist ideology in its rapidly moving plot and happy ending. In other words,

Yezierska's autobiographical self realizes that writing has become a "mere instrument," an ideological construct (Lukács 83). Every time she had thought she was writing out her self, she was really writing books in the service of the American Dream. She expresses quite succinctly her lack of authorial agency in her discussion with another writer: "I never know what I'm trying to write until it's written" (60). Yezierska's narrator tries to contrast this way of writing to the dominant way of writing represented by her writer-friend whose "plots come spinning so fast, I don't take time to develop the characters" (60). However, Yezierska's *own* lack of agency has forced her to create such plot-driven narratives as *Salome* and *Bread Givers*. Her writer-friend's complaint merely mimics Yezierska's own form, and the lack of agency she feels in writing expresses her suspicion of her collusion in the tyranny of the plot and the dominant ideology.

With another metatextual reference, Yezierska illustrates the way the dominant ideology forces the writer into aping its mode. The main character remembers emphatically arguing with her writing teacher who had demanded that she follow a typical plot style of beginning, middle and end, that she perform the dominant mode. She responds, "What would be the good of writing unless I wrote what I felt, the way I felt it? Why must I squeeze myself into a plot?" (78). This important comment points to Yezierska's awareness of the honesty in emotion and the contrived nature of fiction which uses plot as a binding force between the writer, the work and the reader, stripping all of real insight or agency.

In the recognition of her own lack of agency, Yezierska's autobiographical self acknowledges her own complicity in the capitalist system, a system which uses her to inform its driving myth of The American Dream. As she asks a group of girls at a

lecture, "What is the difference between a potbellied boss who exploits the labor of helpless workers and an author who grows rich writing of the poor?" (133). Not only have her novels merely functioned to exploit the poor, but the narrative created about her own life has threatened to further underscore the dominant ideology. The Sweatshop Cinderella myth circulates through newspapers and magazines, even threatening at one point to become history, as one professor asks to immortalize the media-created myth in "a textbook of American literature… to illustrate the opportunity America offers to every ambitious immigrant" (79). This is particularly ironic given that Yezierska struggled economically during the thirties after rejecting Hollywood's notion of the American Dream, illustrating the ephemeral nature of the kind of success that the professor wished to canonize. The narrator's awareness of the subtleties of the American class system causes her to forcefully remove herself from the business of writing.

By admitting her own complicity in the capitalist system, Yezierska's autobiographical self begins to question also the notion of the individual self. Hence, she fails to recognize her picture in the newspaper "any more than I could recognize my own life in the newspapers' "stories of my 'success'" (40). In her failure to identify herself in her picture, Yezierska's subject inverts Lacan's mirror stage, destroying the "Ideal-I" created by the "jubilant assumption of his [the infant's] specular image" (2). The image of herself in the newspaper no longer flatters her ego as the image of the self in the mirror flatters the ego with a complete and unified self. Yezierska's narrator's denial of the ideal of the American dream in the newspapers' stories causes her to question the very notion of an ideal self. While autobiography premises an "autonomous identity that most fully realizes 'his' unique potentiality" (Smith, *A Poetics*… 52), in reality

> The cultural injunction to be a deep, unified, coherent, autonomous "self" produces necessary failure, for the autobiographical subject is amnesiac, incoherent, heterogeneous, interactive. In that very failure lies the fascination of autobiographical storytelling as performativity… It is as if the autobiographical subject finds him/herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity. (Smith "Performativity…" 110)

In the act of performing identity, the subject's identity gets pulled in so many directions at once in competing and incomplete discourses, that the act of performance necessarily produces gaps and fissures in which can be seen glimpses of understanding. Like her novels' main characters, the narrator of *Red Ribbon* also performs, but the difference lies in her growing awareness of that performance. At one point after she breaks with the lawyer John Morrow (another incarnation of the John Manning character[19]), she wonders, "Could it be true that my love wasn't love, my suffering only acting?" (117). In acknowledging her own performativity, Yezierska's narrator takes the necessary first steps in acknowledging the capitalist fiction of the individual self.

The denial of the capitalist expression of the individual self leads to a consciousness of the self as heteroglossic,[20] incoherent and interactive. This heterogeneous self emerges from the voices of the narrator's community, whether the Jewish community of her birth or the quasi-socialist community of the WPA, the

[19] This recurrence of the upper-class white male character, interestingly, has been identified by critics such as Mary Dearborn as an incarnation of her love affair with philosopher John Dewey.

[20] M.M. Bakhtin defines his concept of *heteroglossia* as "a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships" (263). While Bakhtin argues that the novel is essentially heteroglossic, I would argue that the realistic novel often tries to silence the multiple voices within the narrative. Instead of privileging the individual's voice as a separate and complete entity, *Red Ribbon* explores the nature of the self as heteroglossic and multiple, a product of the many different voices in one's community and nation.

government-sponsored writing project that Yezierska joins during the depression. In her close relationship to the fishmonger Zalmon Shlomoh, she begins to get a flash of insight into herself:

> Startled, I looked at him, and I saw myself as in a mirror. I saw my own hump of inferiority. Here was life, right here on my own block, in the house where I lived, and I cried for the moon. Hannah Breineh, the janitress, cursing and shrieking at the children she loved until they fled from her in hate. The old Jew, sitting on the sidewalk, discussing the cabala with his cronies, his eyes on the stars and his feet in the gutter. That moment I saw a little bit of what I was trying to understand. In all of them I saw a part of myself. (118)

In identifying with her Jewish community, she finds a little glimpse of her self, a self which rejects the ego's desire for individual agency and finds agency in the collective voice. These are no longer the stereotypical characters that began *Red Ribbon*; they are glimpses of the self through the competing communal voices of others.

Yezierska's narrator ultimately fluidly moves in and out of identifications with those around her and their voices inform her own. The autobiographical subject discovers herself in her connections to others. In fact, throughout the last third of the book, Yezierska's characters dominate the narrative, the plot only moving in relation to them. In the section on the WPA's Federal Writers' Project, the characters each come briefly to the forefront with little explanation or interference from the narrator. In addition, their appearance in the text often seems to serve no other purpose but to highlight their characters. John Barnes, the alcoholic writer who runs the Writers'

Project, moves in and out of the story with very little explanation as to his function in the narrative.

Some of these characters from the Writers' Project, however, do serve a purpose, a purpose which finally destroys the narrator's last capitalist impulse towards individuality. Instead she moves towards a concept of the self as multiple, informed by the heterogeneous voices of her WPA community. Yezierska's subject, for example, recognizes herself in Richard Wright as his performance as a writer becomes merely "stage fright" (196). The narrator also beholds her former self in him as she "looked at him and knew what he was in for." This connection to a black male is interesting in that *Red Ribbon* portrays a possible community other than the Old World ghetto. No longer concerned with constructing the opposition of Jew/Christian, as in *Salome,* Yezierska portrays a world in which dichotomies lose their ability to oppose one another as she refuses to do service to the capitalist impulse which informs them. Like Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic self, the internal is informed by the external heteroglossic voices of the community and vice versa. Inside and outside no longer stand in opposition to one another and the concept of self becomes a multiple and "heterogeneous phenomenon" (Bakhtin 292).

Yezierska's autobiographical self is then able to make a strong connection with the failed writer, Jeremiah Kintzler, whose life's work, *Life of Spinoza*, metatextually mocks the autobiographical act as it prefaces the knowable individual life of the "great man." As Yezierska's autobiographical self discovers after his death, Kintzler's life's work is just a chaos of fragments and notes. Jeremiah's attempt to "know" Spinoza is absolutely impossible as complete knowledge of the self and the other is an absurd goal

in the first place. As the narrator tries to piece together meaning in the fragmentary text in Jeremiah's notebook, she says:

> Pages and pages of such barren abstractions. Every phrase creaked with the labor of incompetence… I paced the room, bewildered by what I had read. There must be a trace of the real Jeremiah somewhere. I tried to read again. But even when I came to the type-written pages held together by dirty string, I could find only an occasional living passage. (191)

In trying to discover the "real" Jeremiah, the autobiographical subject is thoroughly frustrated by the fact that Jeremiah's (the other's) self is unknowable to the narrator but also by the fact that a self (Spinoza's self) is unknowable in the first place. After this failed attempt at an epistemology of the self, the only possible act of language is Jeremiah's mystical heteroglossic ravings: "Spinoza propels me with the speed of light out of my normality toward abnormal concepts of eternity" (191). This comment cannot be explained by a discussion of Jewish religious discourse, nor with the discourse of the dominant ideology, and not even with the discourse of Spinoza himself. Instead, Jeremiah's mysticism is informed by all these intermingling discourses, ever emphasizing the multiplicity of language and the self.

The frustration that the narrator feels at the discovery of Jeremiah's so-called incompetence slowly subsides as she comes to terms with her self as multiple. She realizes that he was not "crazy" after all, that "maybe there were other fragments buried in that jumble of notes, but I could not stand any more chaos" (192). As the reader needs narrative coherence, so does the narrator desire some form of structure and continuity, a story.

However, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* resists the individual reader's demand for the cohesion and comfort of a center, instead ultimately affirming the power of community in informing more active notions of the self. With the loss of the notion of a unified self comes the realization that the world is merely chaos, a "futile turmoil" threatening to envelop us (194). And the narrative which began as a structured whole, with neatly woven plot lines, dissolves into a series of chaotic stories with no beginning, middle or end. Therefore, the narrator of *Red Ribbon* finally realizes that the anxiety of lacking direction had kept her "on the run" her entire life and that "the fear of my nothingness" is what made her struggle to see herself always as an individual. At these moments of recognition, the narrative begins to form itself into some of the same mystical ranting as Jeremiah Kintzler, "a quasi-mystical spiritual sphere of her inner psyche" which achieves "certain wholeness through a turn inward" (Tiefenthaler 46). And like all good mystical visions, it begins with a dream, a dream of her old self struggling on a directionless train, encompassing her in fear. Her solution to this burning fear of nothingness prompts her to a search for community, the community lost to her when she left the ghetto to go to Hollywood.

Whereas the book begins a story of the individual victorious in the American Dream, it ends in the heteroglossic voices of community and ultimately in an identification with the community of her birth. Eventually, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* becomes a song "of a creature condemned to solitude and devoured by a longing for community," as Lukács sees the poetic voice as often approaching (45). In her disillusionment with the American Dream and in her realization of the "self" as unknowable, Yezierska's character recognizes her true loneliness and longs for

community in the very people and the very part of herself that she has rejected so many times before. The narrative ends with a proclamation of community, not a proclamation of self. In the autobiographical form, Yezierska is finally able to break free from the drive of plot, the drive of the American Dream, and to focus instead on the voices of community, the sense of community that is necessarily severed in the process of achieving the American Dream.

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