

ATLANTIS

Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies

45.1 (June 2023): 37-55

e-ISSN 1989-6840

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2023-45.1.03>

© The Author(s)

Content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence

The Quest for Self-Expression: Anzia Yezierska's Portrayal of America as a Fake Golden Country

REBECA E. CAMPOS

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

rebeca.camposf@uam.es

The aim of this study is to show how the experience of Eastern European Jewish women in America challenged the discourse of the American Dream that they had previously fabricated in their homelands at the turn of the twentieth century. As portrayed by the Polish-born American writer Anzia Yezierska, whose family migrated to New York at the time, these women initially aim their efforts towards achieving happiness through their belief that America provides equal opportunities for upward mobility. However, they eventually question their prospects of improvement and progress by creating their own Jewish American experience. In two of her short stories, "How I Found America" and "The Miracle," Yezierska reproduces the hopelessness of her Jewish characters after they have faced the burdens of social exclusion and the classist policies of philanthropic programs of integration. Rather than completely assimilating American standards, the protagonists seek to build their own American experience while maintaining their Jewish cultural background, which paradoxically finds expression through institutional courses designed for newcomers.

Keywords: Yezierska; Americanization; immigration; Jewish women; American Dream

...

La búsqueda de la expresión propia: El retrato de Estados Unidos por Anzia Yezierska como un país falsamente dorado

Este estudio muestra cómo la experiencia de las mujeres de Europa del Este en los Estados Unidos cuestionó a principios del siglo XX la legitimidad del sueño americano que previamente habían idealizado en sus lugares de procedencia. Estas mujeres, retratadas por

la autora estadounidense Anzia Yezierska, nacida en Polonia y cuya familia emigró a Nueva York en esa época, inicialmente concentraron su energía en alcanzar la felicidad a través de la premisa de que en los EEUU existían las mismas oportunidades de ascenso social que para el resto de los habitantes. Sin embargo, terminarán sustituyendo sus aspiraciones de mejora y progreso generando su propia experiencia judía y estadounidense. En dos de sus relatos cortos, “How I Found America” y “The Miracle”, Yezierska reproduce la desesperanza de sus personajes una vez se han enfrentado a la exclusión social y las políticas clasistas de los programas filantrópicos de asimilación. En vez de asimilarse completamente al modelo de integración estadounidense, las protagonistas buscan crear su propia experiencia estadounidense sin perder su bagaje cultural judío, lo que paradójicamente se consigue a través de los programas institucionales diseñados para los recién llegados a los EEUU.

Palabras clave: Yezierska; americanización; inmigración; mujeres judías; sueño americano

I. DREAMING OF UPWARD MOBILITY: AN INTRODUCTION

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, U.S. newcomers conveyed the message that the United States was an emergent land of success where any individual's desires could be fulfilled. Thus, a commonly held discourse became necessary to disseminate the influence of such success beyond federal borders. The improved economic and social status of newcomers resulted in the spread of the discourse of the American Dream, which prompted the European collective imagination to outline an illusory picture of the territory, thereby encouraging prospective immigrants to discover the real potential of that discourse by undertaking the journey westward. In Abraham Cahan's short story "Yekl," for instance, the protagonist, a recently arrived Russian immigrant, expresses his perspective on the American Dream by referring to the way that Eastern European Jews in America had upgraded their social status after departing from their former homelands: "Jews reared in the straits of need, who have here (in America) risen to prosperity" (1970, 14). Likewise, Mary Antin's account of her father's letters home to Polotsk, situated in today's Belarus, from the America of the 1890s confirms the likelihood of achieving equality and respect by acknowledging the importance of the different trades regardless of their specialty: "In America, he wrote, it was no disgrace to work at a trade. Workmen and capitalists were equal. The employer addressed the employee as *you*, not, familiarly, as *thou*. The cobbler and the teacher had the same title, 'Mister'" (1997, 119). However, as Marovitz's critical edition on the early twentieth-century Lithuanian-born Jewish American author Abraham Cahan points out, the realization of the American Dream did not always lead to a favorable result: "Living conditions for many of the immigrants were dreadful, a replay of the worst of the shtetlekh in the Old Country, [America was] the so-called 'golden land' that proved to be simply another broken promise" (1996, 16). The existence of actual testimonies compiled in both Antin's and Cahan's fictional works exemplifies the exhaustive chronicle of the controversial nature of the discourse of the American Dream, which would also become the core theme in the semi-autobiographical short stories written by the Jewish author Anzia Yezierska.

Anzia Yezierska, a Polish-born American writer who migrated to New York at the end of the nineteenth century, portrayed the process through which Jewish immigrant women were initially influenced by preconceived ideas of America—or, as some of her characters call it, "the golden country" (Yezierska 2010, 116)—and how their beliefs eventually lacked their former credibility. From the emerging identity conflict that came from their confrontation by the actual reality arose the need for new spaces in which these women could start performing the longed-for principle of equality. The American Dream, for its part, was supported by the vulnerability of the newly arrived immigrants, whose hopes for social mobility and equal opportunity employment had triggered their journey to the new land: "Though not as bestial as Nicholas, Alexander III pursued a steady anti-Jewish policy. Neither stability nor peace, well-being nor equality, was possible for the Jews of Russia" (Howe 1980, 5). Howe's historical

depiction of East European Jews and their journey across Europe toward America at the end of the nineteenth century justifies the emergence of the notion of America as “the golden land” (29) through its testimonies from Jewish immigrants about their desire to leave their lives under the czar, as in the case of a Jewish immigrant, Dr. George Price, who stated in his diary in 1882 that “it is impossible [...] that a Jew should regret leaving Russia” (28). Once landed in America, these immigrant Jews would be granted equality regardless of cultural or class differences, which for many decades had been the cause of their exclusion in their Russian homelands. At least that promise of safety and equality was what the American Dream stated.

While in Eastern Europe, Yeziarska’s characters regularly refer to America as the *Golden Country*, an epithet that gained ground at the time to describe their longing for stability and success, two states that gold provides its owners with due to its long-lasting nature and its high base price. Furthermore, according to Zborowski and Herzog’s historical account of Eastern European Jewish communities, at the shtetl “money is equated with gold, and golden is used as an adjective to describe what is best” (1952, 264). Therefore, comparing America to a Golden Country in her short stories reinforces the mythical nature of the territory by emphasizing its unreachable status while also turning the characters’ journey into a heroic quest. Yeziarska’s intention when introducing this concept in her texts is clearly intended to oppose this highly regarded attribute with the hardships the characters have to tackle after arriving in America. This is certainly the case in the short story “How I Found America,” published in 1920, where the author portrays an anonymous woman’s journey westward and how she ends up questioning the prospects of the American Dream in terms of equal labor opportunities: “Me—a servant? [...] Did I come to America to make from myself a cook?” (1991, 120). However, qualifying America as a land of opportunities would also help Jewish immigrants legitimize their struggles for equality. According to scholar Susan Glenn, the designation of America as a Golden Country even encouraged immigrant women settled on the Lower East Side—the Jewish New York ghetto and principal setting of Yeziarska’s stories—to fight for their rights in the emerging shirtwaist factories.¹ Influenced by the theoretical content of the American Dream, these women’s quests found legitimacy in their discourse, or more precisely, in the validation of America as a land of gold and hope:

demands for what Eastern European Jews called *mentsblekbe babandlung* (humane treatment) [...] took on a special intensity among immigrant Jews in the United States, where images of America as the ‘goldene medine’—the golden land of freedom—were difficult to reconcile with the daily realities on the shop floor (1990, 175).

¹ According to Susan Glenn, “of all branches of garment production, the shirtwaist and dress industry held out the greatest promise of upward occupational and wage mobility” (1990, 125).

The gold-seeking premise, therefore, would increase the protagonists' anxiety about fulfilling their dreams of equality since their routine harshness reminds them of the contradiction between former expectations and current reality at the same time that locates them in a powerless position, which eradicates any attempt of improving their working conditions.

As an alternative to the context of the factories, unable to ensure equal opportunity for the Jewish workers, Yezierska also offers another controversial possibility in their quest for happiness: the erasure of their Jewish cultural heritage. As her stories demonstrate, the characters try to overcome their immigrant status by initially discarding their Jewishness, which impedes them from being publicly acknowledged as prosperous American citizens beyond the Lower East Side ghetto. As the plots develop, the process of Americanization hinders the women's adaptation and leads them to an identity crisis that frustrates their attempts at integration. Furthermore, the influence of philanthropic institutions in charge of facilitating their assimilation, such as the Social Betterment Society in "How I Found America," increases the Jewish women's awareness of labor exploitation and the downsides of such cultural cancellation. This type of institution had a great effect on Eastern European immigrants after they stepped onto American soil due to their promises of an effective adaptation by assimilating American standards: "[Yezierska] demonstrates how the assimilationist policies of philanthropic institutions intruded upon the private lives of immigrants and worked to instill a particular American sense of cultural and national identity that wrongly demanded the negation of their Old World values" (Konzett 1997, 604). Based on Yezierska's portrayal, American educational and charitable institutions supervised and consented to the eradication of the immigrants' Jewish cultural background by training Lower East Side women to comply with western middle-class ethics. However, her characters eventually decide to only partially fulfill their cultural erasure only partially, leaving enough room for themselves to claim their Americanness from their unique Jewish American experience.

According to the core of the American Dream, though, if the path toward complete adaptation to American values implies immigrants canceling the traditions that have defined their culture for centuries, the dream of America as a promising Golden Country which welcomes every individual regardless of their background or beliefs becomes a fallacy. As the author Jim Cullen states in his research into the diversity of American Dreams, the inclusive nature of the Dream inherently supports acknowledging the difference as a starting point to perform its realization legitimately: "one of the principal attractions of the American Dream, and its major moral underpinning, is that everyone is eligible" (2003, 108). In this respect, Professor Wendy Zierler qualifies Yezierska's literary production with a pessimistic atmosphere, especially emphasizing the fake nature of the American Dream propaganda: "with a few exceptions, however, Anzia Yezierska's fictions are tinged with sadness and disappointment, with a sense that the promise of America can never be truly found, that even American wealth is

an ephemeral, shallow attainment” (1993, 418). Zierler’s perspective illustrates the impossibility of attaining the ideal represented by the American Dream and how it becomes more and more evident as the characters gain access to Americanization. In addition, the assimilation of Yeziarska’s protagonists into an American lifestyle not only overlaps their existing Jewish background, which conditions their difficult adaptation, but also brings about the demystification of their earlier preconceptions about America as a prospective land of happiness. What prompts the cultural challenge in Yeziarska’s stories, however, is precisely in the way that Cullen’s stand on the American Dream as a plausible aspiration for anyone willing to undertake the journey interacts with Zierler’s concern for its failing nature, thus inspiring a hybrid status of Americanness.

By referring to the Jewish American identity as a safe space from which her characters can experience the American Dream of equality without feeling completely uprooted, Yeziarska also challenges the effectiveness of the charitable institutions supporting the idea that Americanizing programs are the only way to achieve prosperity. Yet, in her literary production, this challenge is seen as a paradox since Yeziarska assigns these institutions an essential role in the process of validating her characters’ Jewishness in America. As the final scenes depict, her protagonists persistently seek acknowledgement and understanding so that their lives outside the Lower East Side ghetto become meaningful despite the lack of proper working conditions at the factories and sweatshops. Their quest for emotional support eventually finds expression as their language fluency improves thanks to their interaction with the American night-school teachers, who help them to articulate their vulnerability and hence bridge their cultural gap. This controversial fact, along with the frustrating attempts to perform the Americanness described in the letters received in their Eastern European homelands, can, respectively, be studied in two of her short stories: “How I Found America” and “The Miracle.”

The subsequent sections in this research will bring to light the adversities that Yeziarska’s characters endure along the path toward achieving a Jewish-American identity, which eventually challenges the process of Americanization advertized by the charitable institutions as the only successful way to achieve Americanness. By displaying the realization of its inconsistencies, Yeziarska portrays Americanization as an insufficient initiative that prompts her characters to retrieve their Jewish cultural background and perform a cultural hybridization, thus giving shape to their Jewish American identities. Consequently, these hybrid experiences reassert the feasibility of the American Dream as they exemplify the diverse versions of success and prosperity that America promises to offer. In this respect, the Jewish American experience enacts the very essence of that inspirational core set of beliefs by reinforcing the idea of individual freedom and diversity as its prime motivators when pursuing equality. Furthermore, the protagonists demonstrate that the American values represented by the philanthropic teaching programs only contribute to weakening the ideals of the American Dream because they cancel the possibility of experiencing one’s identity outside the cultural boundaries of prevailing Americanness.

2. LETTERS FROM THE GOLDEN COUNTRY: DIFFUSING THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

In Anzia Yezierska's stories, the spread of the American Dream and its attainable realization gains credibility through the arrival of letters that the Jewish newcomers send from America to their relatives. In the short story "How I Found America," the scene first takes place in a Russian-held Polish town where Masheh Mindel, one of the main character's neighbors, receives a letter from her husband, who is now living in the United States. In the letter, he reports how he has achieved public acknowledgement in accordance with his social rank, which means that he is no longer called exclusively by his name, or surname, but rather by his hierarchical position: "I am becoming a person—a business man, [...] I am no more Gedalyeh Mindel—Mister Mindel they call me in America" (1991, 111). In this scene, the successful experience of Masheh's husband appears not only as the desirable outcome of the process of Americanization but also as the alternative to remaining in their Eastern European homeland and, therefore, accepting low-class standards and anonymity. Mister Mindel compares his current high-class status in America to the lack of social acknowledgement he experienced back in Europe, which increases Masheh's urge to become an inhabitant of such a promising land. The author Barbara Schreier claims that shop windows have always been a popular Americanizing strategy regarding the adaptation of newcomers to a new territory: "Window-shopping was more than diversion; it was an agent of acculturation" (1994, 104). In the scenario mentioned above, Mister Mindel's letter also participates in Americanization because it acts as a shop window through which Eastern European onlookers can imitate Americanness and give credit to how the American Dream successfully grants happiness and upward mobility. Moreover, the fact that he uses the term *America* to allude to the people referring to him as *Mister Mindel* highlights his assimilation to American standards after climbing the social ladder. Also, as soon as Masheh receives the letter, she informs her neighbors about it by saying: "A letter from America" (1991, 110), which also confirms her involvement in spreading her husband's favorable adaptation to the American identity. As scholar Catherine Rottenberg states, since "in the United States class has not been perceived as an essence" (2010, 791), this type of recorded experience directly influenced Eastern European inhabitants by displaying upward mobility as a likely attainable enterprise, regardless of cultural background.

Once the letter has conveyed Mister Mindel's success, the main character's mother begins to recreate their upcoming life in America by claiming feelings of joy and freedom: "Has not every heart the same hunger for America? The same longing to live and laugh and breathe like a free human being?" (1991, 111). Yezierska's characters live out the experiences described in these letters by initially resorting to the imagination, which has little effect on the actual realization of the American Dream. Cullen refers to the uncertainty of such recreation stating that "ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether

they will reach their goals” (2003, 7). Through the mystifying process, these Jewish characters feel entitled to achieve Mister Mindel’s success because of their sharing a common background outside of Americanness. The Jewish cultural bond between Masheh’s neighbors and her husband legitimates dreaming as his success guarantees similar prospects to each of them. Becoming American, or being acknowledged in the public space as American, grants Yeziarska’s characters upward mobility, which would make Masheh’s adversities disappear: “The worry for bread that had tightened the skin of her cheek-bones was gone. The sudden surge of happiness filled out her features, flushing her face as with wine. The two starved children clinging to her skirts, dazed with excitement, only dimly realized their good fortune by the envious glances of the others” (1991, 111). Rather than intending to achieve Mister Mindel’s position by maintaining their Jewish cultural background, the fulfillment of these characters’ dreams rests precisely with being acknowledged as American, an identity that would allow them the possibility of reaching the social status, and subsequent happiness, to which they aspire.

In the same way that a letter inspires Masheh’s neighbors to migrate to America, the short story “The Miracle” is also an epistle that encourages a Jewish family to seek better job opportunities abroad. In this case, Sara Reisel, who lives in a Polish town called Savel, receives a letter from the young Hanneh Hayyeh, a former neighbor now living in America. In the letter, Hanneh describes America as “a lover’s land,” stating that “in America millionaires fall in love with poorest (*sic*) girls” (2010, 115), and in this way they can escape “the system of arranged marriage” (Medding 1998, 31) firmly rooted in the Shtetl tradition at the time of Yeziarska’s arrival in New York. Regarding America as the opposite to Eastern Europe also contributes to the perpetuation of the ideals of the American Dream, strongly sustained by binary standards of what is considered success and failure, the “golden country” of equality (Yeziarska 2010, 116) or the “darkness” of anonymity (118). Moreover, Hanneh explains how she will herself fulfill the American Dream by becoming engaged to an affluent Jewish man: “I, Hanneh Hayyeh, will marry myself to Solomon Cohen, the boss from the shirtwaist factory, where all day I was working to sew on buttons” (115). Sara envisages Hanneh’s freedom and happiness as the consequence of distancing herself from Jewish practices illustrated in the role of matchmakers—“Matchmakers are out of style, and a girl can get herself married to a man without the worries for a dowry” (115)—, whose main concern was to engage potential partners without necessarily having their active consent (Howe 2003, 225).

The epistolary experiences of America for both Mister Mindel and Hanneh Hayyeh act as a driving force for the characters still settled in Eastern Europe to such an extent that they are willing to pawn their Jewish heirlooms and sacred relics in order to afford the journey to America. This is the case for Sara’s family, who decides to pawn the most valuable objects inherited from their Jewish ancestors in order to pay for the tickets and travel by ship to the promised land. Determined to rid themselves of their cultural

background, these characters undertake not only a commercial transaction but also a disavowal of their identity, as Sara's father clearly demonstrates: "He looked like a man for whom life is bleeding away" (2010, 123). Likewise, the anonymous family in "How I Found America" experiences the same controversial rootlessness when they decide to pawn their Jewish assets in favor of covering their travel expenses to America: "my father shyly pushed forward the samovar" (1991, 112). The father's reaction highlights the crisis of identity resulting from this process of cultural erasure, which implies leaving behind a tradition that cannot be upheld after departing from their hometowns to take on a still-in-the-making identity, which up to this point has only been shaped through optimistic and glowing pictures of America: "In America you can say what you feel [...]. In America is a home for everybody. The land is your land" (113). By pawning rather than selling their belongings, though, the characters' past is not left behind completely, merely suspended. This incompleteness symbolically anticipates their later need to balance their cultural heritage and their eventual willingness to integrate into American society successfully. Therefore, the inconclusive location of their Jewish identities determines how Yezierska's characters undergo their adaptation in America haphazardly in that it relies on the tension between the expectations they originally create while in their home country and the reality of their experience after arrival. Scholar Roland Végső also exposes this tension when he refers to America as a place where the American nationality comes into conflict with its never-ending lack of definition due to the migrant nature of its inhabitants: "not infinitely open; rather it is a perpetual conflict between an infinite openness (the act of perpetual immigration) and an irreducible drive toward an immutable national identity" (2010, 42). The conflict between these two opposing perspectives mirrors the identity crisis that Yezierska's Lower East Side characters, including both the anonymous young woman and Sara Reisel, experience throughout her short stories.

The incomplete substitution of the Jewish identity for the desired American one, which will remain on the horizon throughout the protagonists' journeys, can be sensed in different scenes that Yezierska portrays from the immigrants' perspective. For instance, when Sara explains both her feelings and what she observes while departing from her Polish hometown, she distinguishes between her prospective success, related to the unreal universe she has not yet experienced, and what her senses perceive while on the train, that is, the objective world she is taking distance from: "as soon as I got into the train, although my eyes were still looking back to the left-behind faces, and my ears were yet hearing the goodbyes and the partings, the thoughts of America began stealing into my heart" (2010, 126). In "How I Found America," however, when the mother arrives in the New York Lower East Side ghetto and notices "pale-faced children scrambling in the gutter" (1991, 114), she unwillingly merges the objective reality she perceives with the corresponding emotional urge she experiences: "'Where are the green fields and open spaces in America?' cried my heart. 'Where is the golden country of my dreams?'" (114). There therefore seems to be a previous stage where the

characters' aspirations control their perception, which involves the distinction between what is objectively happening and what is being recreated under the illusion. Later in each of the stories, however, the demystifying process takes place, and their senses and imaginations converge to reunify their perception with their current location, making them aware of what they are truly witnessing, social alienation and work exploitation, thereby becoming what scholar Adam Sol calls "blood-less ciphers" (2001, 224). Sol's dehumanizing reference about Yeziarska's characters contributes to understanding the state of anonymity they impersonate by becoming agentless and inanimate figures, which connects with their feelings upon arriving in America. Their quest for an American identity begins by establishing mythification as the symbolic first step before attaining a desired identity. Consequently, the replacement, or rather updating, of their former selves is expected to become effective after a period of observation and imitation of the new cultural patterns of behavior. Even before Sara arrives in America, she starts to visualize her future experience in the only way she can, namely basing her dreams on the success of her fellow countrymen: "I was thinking how soon I'd have my lover and be rich like Hanneh Hayyeh" (2010, 126). Sara's lack of objective perception helps to understand the subsequent crisis she endures after becoming aware of the difficulties of maintaining American middle-class standards without a steady income. The absence of stable wages renders these characters vulnerable and powerless, reinforcing the idea of their inanimate state and their imposed anonymity.

Regarding the letter sent from America as a metaphorical shop window that displays the advantages experienced there by immigrants/emigrants, the Eastern European inhabitants act as a consumer audience which longs to possess certain commodities that would grant them social status. This interdependence created between the prospective Jewish immigrants and the already Americanized individuals becomes essential to strengthening the channels through which the discourse of the American Dream was efficiently transmitted. Due to the linguistic nature of its credo, the American Dream smoothly worked its way into the characters' minds while generating illusory episodes of its realization: "I saw nothing of the foulness and ugliness around me. I floated in showers of sunshine; visions upon visions of the new world opened before me" (1991, 112). Not participating in an experience from an empirical point of view, Yeziarska's characters remain in a dream state which prevents them from judging the extent to which the commodities displayed in that "shop window" consistently rely on their eventual fulfillment.

In both stories, America is described as a destination which guarantees the performance of everyone's expectations so long as they keep the faith in the dream of upward mobility, which Mister Mindel's letter corroborates. In "How I Found America," however, the anonymous Jewish father expresses his concerns about the veracity of the letter's content after seeing the reaction it has triggered in his wife: "Empty hands—empty pockets—yet it dreams itself in you America" (1991, 112). Despite his skepticism, the character's warning only finds acceptance when his daughter,

once settled in America, complains about the effect that Mister Mindel's display of prosperity produced in her back in their hometown: "it dreamed itself in me" (118). On the basis of the grammatical structures the characters use to refer to their hopes, it is not their dreaming about America, but rather America itself that becomes an entity capable of controlling their desires. Moreover, in the first quotation, which the father expresses before departing to America, the choice of the present simple tense indicates that the characters are still immersed in the mystifying process. In contrast, in the second quotation, expressed by his daughter in America, the past simple tense indicates her willingness to distance herself from the illusory state, which highlights the regret she experiences after witnessing the disappointing reality: "From the outside, Anzia Yezierska's city is [...] a mental space or an idea that has been formed not by personal experience but by the conveyed experiences of many immigrants before them" (Billeter 2011, 60). The two quotes thus represent the controversies that the discourse of the American Dream raises when its fulfillment relies mainly on the experiences of their former hometown neighbors. In this context, the letters from America induce Eastern European families' hopes and higher aspirations, yet they also portray a deceitful image of the American Dream in that the realities they report do not entirely represent the Jewish community's assimilation of American standards, which to a large extent involves their integration into the labor market.

3. DEMYSTIFYING THE AMERICAN DREAM: SWEATSHOPS AND AMERICAN EDUCATION

In Yezierska's fiction, working in factories and sweatshops plays an essential role in the way the newcomers' hopes for a better life collide with a classist reality. The workplace thus appears depicted as a challenging prelude where immigrant women witness the cancellation of their prospects for equality. In the story "How I Found America," no sooner has the daughter of the Russian family started working in a "sweatshop prison" (2010, 114) than the manager fires her because of her complaints about a recent reduction in wages. The scene becomes more complex when she does not find support from her Jewish coworkers after exposing the manager's abuse of authority when undermining their rights: "The new hope that had flowed in me so strong bled out of my veins. A moment before our togetherness has made me believe us so strong—and now I saw each alone—crushed—broken" (117). Since the immigrants' hopes for a better life sustain the American Dream and its credibility, then the support young Jewish immigrant longs for cannot be legitimately claimed because it jeopardizes her coworkers' income and, therefore, their chances of fulfilling upward mobility. Due to their low-class condition, the injustices these women suffer in her workplace remain invisible and emphasize their social vulnerability yet again. When Glenn states that "the oppressive behavior of bosses and supervisors [...] clashed with Jewish immigrants' image of America as a land of freedom" (1990, 153), she accurately describes the reason

why Yeziarska's characters develop a conception of America as an unfriendly space and, consequently, casting doubt on their belief in the principle of equality. In addition, the cultural weight of the Jewish tradition influences these female characters insofar as they presume the existence of a network of solidarity that cannot be found within the walls of the New York factories. Likely influenced by the European working-class experience (Wald 2003, 61), the scene depicts the consequences of attempting to put into practice actions based on mutual solidarity: "the influence of socialism among Jews grew stronger in America than it had been in the Old World [...]. Yet capitalist America was no utopia, and disillusionment fed radical discontent" (Glenn 1990, 180). The community values shared by Jewish immigrant women in their homelands no longer seem valid in the new territory. After Yeziarska's attempts to rescue that community bond in "How I Found America"—"I was not I—the wrongs of my people burned through me till I felt the very flesh of my body a living flame of rebellion" (1991, 116)—, her female protagonist eventually surrenders and accepts her failure: "my faith is dead" (118). The very pragmatic discourses that persuaded these women to come to America are the same ones that now alienate them in those factories packed with low-class newcomers. Working at a shirtwaist factory, the character Sara Reisel also realizes the immigrants' increasing vulnerability and their lack of workers' rights, which greatly favors disappointment: "All that my face saw all day long was girls and machines—and nothing else [...]. Is this lovers' land? [...] Where are my dreams that were so real to me in the old country?" (2010, 128). Instead of climbing the social ladder, these immigrant women discover that achieving the longed-for American Dream by toiling and tolerating mistreatment at the workplace becomes a long-term endeavor that reinforces their low-class limitations.

Although the Jewish women's experiences in the New York factories explain why their former expectations of a brighter future in America end up being disregarded, Yeziarska also depicts her characters' inclusion in the philanthropic training courses promising rapid admission to other jobs as an affordable alternative to the sweatshops. However, the role of the philanthropic network as the only route to gaining access to education becomes highly regarded in the process of the characters' disillusionment, which will be monitored by the presence of the benefactresses and their constant surveillance: "While Yeziarska expresses great hope for formal education, she nonetheless shows that it has a tendency to dehumanize both students and teachers, requiring strenuous work yet stigmatizing those who must do physical labor to support their educational goals" (Dayton 2012, 227). Yeziarska's lack of confidence in American institutions determines her characters' experience inside their teaching programs, which deliberately hinder upward mobility by perpetuating class differences based on the immigrants' cultural background: "she [Yeziarska] resented the Americanization programs sponsored by reform-minded Americans of the Progressive Era, particularly the affluent and established Americanized German Jews" (Konzett 1997, 596). Settled decades before their Eastern European neighbors, the German Jews shaped the

social hierarchy between both migratory groups, thereby increasing the mistrust and suspicion toward their role as benefactresses and the discourses of Americanization they attempt to disseminate among the Jewish newcomers. Performing the predominant American values helped these established German Jewish émigrés take part in the labor dynamics of both charity and educational institutions where the American ideal of femininity taught newcomers how to behave and look like proper American women: “they became, in some ways, models of the successful American Jewish woman for the Eastern European immigrants who followed them” (Baum 1976, 17). In this way, Eastern European women were placed on an inferior stage insofar as their transit toward the acquisition of the American identity implied their obedience to and imitation of the more established German Jewish women. However, their becoming aware of the actual purpose of the institutional aid will be decisive for the demystifying process to take place. For instance, and this is the case of the young Jewish character Adele Lindner—the protagonist in another of Yezierska’s works, *Arrogant Beggar*, published shortly after her short stories—, who attends the training course for Domestic Sciences in a German-Jewish philanthropic institution: “Gratitude you want? For what? Because you forced me to become your flunkey—your servant?” (Yezierska 2004, 86). Likewise, when the protagonist of “How I Found America” proclaims that she has lost her faith, she abandons her previously supported belief in the equality of opportunities that American denizens are supposedly able to enjoy. Consequently, she is not able to define her identity from the position that American institutions have prepared for the newcomers, either inside the factories or within the Lower East Side.

The bewilderment that Yezierska’s characters suffer when arriving on American shores confirms the consequences of having followed a set of preconceived ideas that could only be experienced through their imagination. In “How I Found America,” when the Russian family settles in the Lower East Side and Mister Mindel leads them to their flat, the mother expresses her disheartening impression and wonders whether living in America actually fulfills their pursuit of happiness: “‘Where is the sunshine in America?’ She went to the window and looked out at the blank of the next house. ‘Gottuniu! Like in a grave so dark’” (1991, 114). Likewise, Sara Reisel in “The Miracle” expresses her lack of belonging and her disappointment after realizing that even matchmakers in America are unaffordable for a sweatshop worker: “‘Where am I? Is this the world? Is this America?’” (2010, 132). The awakening of the characters’ experience does not strengthen their cultural roots; rather, they find solace only in their despair and their urge to communicate their emotions. Scholar Joyce Antler rightly describes the reason for their vulnerability by pointing out the uprooting nature of their distress: “These women felt like strangers in their cultures, outsiders to either the Jewish or the American world, or to both” (1997, xi). Therefore, and in line with Yezierska’s depiction, the protagonists’ realization of their alienation will prompt their need to express their despair through the language mainly taught by the American institutions in charge of ensuring their profitable adaptation.

Aware of their socially vulnerable position, both Sara Reisel and the anonymous Russian Jewish girl in “How I Found America” decide to give linguistic expression to their hopelessness by attending classes in an American institution of education. As Priscilla Wald claims, Yeziarska portrays how these newly arrived Jewish women feel the need to overtly communicate with their surrounding context, which also underscores their lack of understanding and emotional support after their arrival in America: “East European Jewish immigrants seemed particularly eager to share their experiences with each other and with the American public more broadly” (2003, 55). Glenn also refers to this need, stating that “the dream of schooling in America was a powerful attraction for many girls” (1990, 47). As for Yeziarska’s characters, Yetta Solomon, one of the Russian daughter’s former workmates, advises her young friend to attend classes in a place called the School for Immigrant Girls, which she describes as “a new school for greenhorns where they learn anything they want” (1991, 119). In both stories, resorting to American institutions to fulfill the realization of the American Dream seems to be the only way these characters compensate for their misfortunes after trying to earn a reasonable income on their own. In the case of Sara Reisel, she trusts the American institutional resources to guarantee her path toward success and happiness: “‘Make a person of yourself,’ I said. ‘Begin to learn English. Make yourself an American if you want to live in America’” (2010, 132). In this context, mastering the mainstream language, American English, implies reducing the invisibility and isolation Sara struggles to overcome, which may also symbolize the triumph of solidarity and understanding that she did not find at the factory. Gaining access to schools grants not only self-expression in a hostile and classist context that would otherwise alienate Yeziarska’s characters, but it also allows for the acknowledgement of the women’s right to education, which they were forbidden to gain admission to in their Eastern European towns: “Women often became breadwinners so that their husbands could devote themselves to study” (Howe 1980, 6). Thus, Sara’s eagerness to participate in the educational programs offered by the American institutions would permit her to widen her experience while she can build her own linguistic discourse and find expression for her disappointment and frustration.

The idea of understanding education as a tool for intellectual enrichment, as well as the means to integrate more efficiently into American society, comes from the Jewish tradition and the highly regarded study of the Torah: “Not every Jew in the shtetl is a scholar or even a learned man [*sic*], but intellectual achievement is the universally accepted goal” (Zborowski 1952, 102). In another short story entitled “Soap and Water,” published in the same literary compilation as “How I Found America,” Yeziarska depicts the extent to which Jewish immigrant women have to toil relentlessly to gain admission to the academic world which would otherwise be inaccessible to them: “How I pinched, and scraped, and starved myself, to save enough to come to college! Every cent of the tuition fee I paid was drops of sweat and blood from underpaid laundry work” (1991, 74). In the same way, in “How I Found America,” the young

Russian immigrant encounters difficulties, such as the benefactresses' discouragement and excessive questioning, especially when she attempts to enroll in the teaching programs the American institutions offer. While at the American Immigrant school she attends, for instance, Mrs. Olney, the benefactress in charge of the course, questions the protagonist's attempt to express her desire to assimilate and improve her skills for a trade and, consequently, to transform America in the process: "It's nice of you to want to help America, but I think the best way would be for you to learn a trade... Perhaps you made a mistake in coming to this country. Your land might appreciate you more [...]. We only teach trades here" (121). As Yezierska shows in this scene, her principal characters wrongly believe that through American education they would build a channel to give linguistic shape to their unstable identities. In this respect, the idea of adapting to a new territory through institutional strategies is steadily challenged in her stories, where philanthropic programs for immigrants aim to perpetuate class hierarchy by teaching low-profile Americanness, as Adele Lindner in *Arrogant Beggar* recognises when she rejects learning the trade she considers to be servitude.

Nevertheless, Yezierska's main characters eventually manage to translate their experience into words and happiness after enduring the hardships of social exclusion and alienation, in the case, respectively, of the Russian daughter and Sara Reisel. In "How I Found America," when the anonymous young Jewish woman decides to go back to the shirtwaist factory after rejecting the charitable services offered by the Betterment Society, which in fact only appears when her family is evicted from their tenement flat, she realizes that the labor conditions have unexpectedly improved. The recruitment of a new manager has allowed for a weekly wage increase, which subsequently makes enrolling in a night school and joining the literature class affordable. This exemplifies scholar Ellen Gollub's point that "the Yezierska heroine burns to be more than *in* America and *among* Americans; she wants to be *of* America" (1983, 57; italics in the original), which explains why Yezierska's characters focus their efforts on assimilating into American standards by first mastering the language. In this way, Sara Reisel in "The Miracle" finally manages to channel her frustration by accepting the help of her night-school teacher, who she falls in love with. Likewise, the anonymous young woman in "How I Found America" finds relief to her despair after contacting her sister Bessie's teacher, Miss Latham, whose learning methods remind her of the supportive understanding she has longed for from the beginning of the story. Regarding Gollub's statement in relation to these characters' desire for belonging, the fact that the anonymous character considers Miss Latham "a friend" (Yezierska 1991, 127) confirms her need—and Sara Reisel's—to be heard and understood as the first step in her quest for happiness in America: "Each of these women attempts to attach herself to America by filling her hungry mouth with American culture and language" (Gollub 1983, 58). Indeed, the interest shown in her by Miss Latham encourages the anonymous Jewish girl to speak about her past in Sukovoly, revealing first-hand information about the anti-Jewish pogroms and the hopes raised about coming to the new land prompted

by Mister Mindel's letter. Furthermore, in the discourse addressed to Miss Latham, Yeziarska also introduces the tension between the young woman's Jewish background and her ongoing adaptation to American values: "I'm an immigrant many years already here, but I'm still seeking America. My dream America is more far from me than it was in the old country. Always something comes between the immigrant and the American" (2010, 126). The dichotomy the character refers to appears to emphasize the impossibility of inhabiting both statuses, immigrant and American, in simultaneously cohabiting the same individual experience. If the status *immigrant* means that the Americanization aspect has not yet been carried out, this implies that the first-wave German Jewish women had overcome this status, thus strengthening the hierarchy of the two migratory groups in terms of a successful adaptation. However, if *immigrant* acts as an identity layer which qualifies every American individual, then the experiences of both groups of Jewish women would be the same, resulting in the longed-for universal equality Yeziarska's characters aspire to. In this respect, the status *American* would also assume the immigrant experience, and vice versa, and therefore be integral to shaping the principle of equality that sustains the American Dream.

The Jewish characters in Yeziarska's stories, however, struggle to reconcile their status as immigrants with American values by means of relying on the American educational system, which raises discrepancies with respect to the discourse that alienated them on their arrival in America. Although Miss Latham is American-born, she resolves the controversy by stating that she is a descendent of European travelers who first stepped on American territory during colonization: "Weren't the Pilgrim fathers immigrants two hundred years ago?" (2010, 127). Therefore, so long as Miss Latham defines herself as an immigrant, both the anonymous Russian daughter and Sara Reisel become eligible in terms of their Americanness without undertaking the quest for the American identity through philanthropic institutions. As the American teacher illustrates, she and Yeziarska's protagonist share a common background as descendants of former immigrants, which should be acknowledged by the institutions responsible for the inclusion of all newcomers. In this respect, Mihai Mîndra argues that in "How I Found America," Yeziarska tries to solve the conflict of Americanness by "acknowledging assimilation as a personal process of individual, inner, experimental re-creation of the adopted country" (2003, 85). Mîndra's argument supports the fact that Americanizing strategies such as attending language or domestic science programs do not essentially determine these women's fates, but rather help them build their own paths toward their Jewish American identities. When Miss Latham quotes Waldo Frank, a contemporary Jewish writer born in America, she confirms the inclusive nature of the quest for the definition of the American Dream: "We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her" (2010, 127). Consequently, Frank's quotation relieves the anonymous Russian girl's concern about her incomplete adaptation by loosening the identity restrictions that American institutions appear to adhere to. Moreover, this quotation represents Yeziarska's protagonists' urge for self-

expression and transformation, which contributes to the perpetuation of the notion of America as the land of opportunity and equality.

4. CONCLUSION: FINDING AMERICA THROUGH SELF-EXPRESSION

At the onset of both "How I Found America" and "The Miracle," Yezierska portrays the conflict that emerges when people still in their homeland attempt to experience the realities of life in the U.S. through the discourse of other individuals, such as Mister Mindel and Hanneh Hayyeh, something which ultimately leads to disappointment and delusion once the individuals have themselves made the displacement to the U.S. After discrediting the epistolary experiences in such letters from America and facing the hardships of social exclusion, the characters' original émigré aim of economic prosperity and happiness adjust to the search for self-expression and empathy, as Wald notes: "[B]y replacing the external goals—financial success, the unattainable love object—with the goal of self-expression, they [immigrants to the U.S.] can take pleasure in the hunger itself and in the quest to express it" (2003, 63). Both the anonymous immigrant girl and Sara Reisel prioritize their urge, or *hunger*, for self-expression over their former dreams once they have demystified America, as it represents the only strategy for the survival of their Jewish background. For this purpose, the discourse of the dream of success that initially prompts Yezierska's characters to move to America also assumes the status *American* as an ongoing identity that should grant Eastern European Jewish newcomers the same access to prosperity as the already Americanized Jewish community holds. Based on this premise, Yezierska's protagonists in "How I Found America" and "The Miracle" eventually become aware of their eligibility to channel self-expression and attain happiness in the new context because they find their dreams legitimized by Miss Latham and the night-school teacher. In the act of intercultural communication, the author sets a starting point from which the discourse of these Jewish immigrants interacts and enriches the American experience.

Yezierska's characters, therefore, achieve the American Dream in terms of mutual understanding and through the act of sharing and communicating, which becomes possible, paradoxically, through their temporary involvement in the American institutions of education for immigrants whose classist tendencies the author harshly exposes. The lack of a general social awareness of their invisibility encourages the protagonists in these stories to rely on philanthropic programs as the only means for them finally to give expression to their frustration, thus transforming their social exclusion into a more rewarding experience once it is openly transmitted. In this way, the fact that it is only with the approval of American individuals that Yezierska's characters recover their faith in the American Dream confirms the need for hybridity and assimilation. As claimed by the Polish American author in her works, the steps toward adaptation require the characters' ability to communicate their experience in such a way that they can properly reconcile with their Jewish background and cultural differences. To

this end, in both “How I Found America” and “The Miracle,” the participation of the characters in the American educational system involves them yielding to Americanizing strategies, which Yeziarska steadfastly examines throughout her literary production. Indeed, their involvement with these institutions acts as an achievement after they have been forbidden access to education due to the gendered discrimination in their Eastern European homelands. Yeziarska’s characters eventually fulfill the American Dream by undergoing an assimilationist enterprise—the acquisition of the standard language—that allows for their self-expression in their ongoing quest for the Golden Country.

WORKS CITED

- ANTIN, Mary. (1912) 1997. *The Promised Land*. USA: Penguin Books.
- ANTLER, Joyce. 1997. *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America*. New York: Schocken Books.
- BAUM, Charlotte, Paula Hyman and Sonya Michel, eds. 1976. *The Jewish Woman in America*. New York: Dial Press.
- BILLETER SAUTER, Irene. 2011. *New York City, “Gilt Cage” or “Promised Land”? Representations of Urban Space in Edith Wharton and Anzia Yeziarska*. Bern: Lang.
- CAHAN, Abraham. (1896/1898) 1970. *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York*. New York: Dover Publications.
- CULLEN, Jim. 2003. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. New York: Oxford UP.
- DAYTON-WOOD, Amy. 2012. “‘What the College Has Done for Me’: Anzia Yeziarska and the Problem of Progressive Education”. *College English*, 74 (3): 215-233.
- GLENN, Susan A. 1990. *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP.
- GOLLUB, Ellen. 1983. “Eat Your Heart Out: The Fiction of Anzia Yeziarska”. *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 3, *Jewish Women Writers and Women in Jewish Literature*. Pennsylvania: Penn State UP: 51-61.
- HOWE, Irving. 1980. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life they Found and Made*. New York: Bantam Books.
- KONZETT, Delia Caparoso. 1997. “Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yeziarska’s *Hungry Hearts*”. *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, 69 (3): 595-619.
- KRAMER, Michael P. and Hana Wirth-Nesher. 2003. *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- MAROVITZ, Sanford E. 1996. *Abraham Cahan: Twayne’s United States Authors Series*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- MEDDING, Pater Y., ed. 1999. *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*. Volume 14: Coping with Life and Death: Jewish Families in the Twentieth Century. Oxford: Oxford UP.

- MÎNDRA, Mihai. 2003. *Strategists of Assimilation: Abraham Caban, Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska*. Bucharest: Romanian Academy.
- RIV-ELLEN, Prell. 1998. "Marriage, Americanization and American Jewish Culture (1900-1920)". In Medding, 1999, 27-48.
- ROTTENBERG, Catherine. 2010. "Affective Narratives: Harlem and the Lower East side". *Journal of American Studies*, 44, (4): 777-793.
- SCHREIER, Barbara. 1994. *Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880-1920*. Chicago: Chicago Historical Society.
- SOL, Adam. 2001. "Longings and Renunciations: Attitudes towards Inter-marriage in Early Twentieth Century Jewish American Novels". *American Jewish History*, 89, (2):215-230.
- VÉGSÖ, Roland. 2010. "The Mother Tongues of Modernity: Modernism, Transnationalism, Translation". *Journal of Modern Literature*, 33, (2):24-46.
- WALD, Priscilla. 2003. "Of Crucibles and Grandfathers: The East European Immigrants". In Kramer and Wirth-Nesher 2003: 50-69.
- YEZIERSKA, Anzia. (1920) 2010. *Hungry Hearts*. USA: Lexington, KY: Forgotten Books.
- , (1920) 2010. "The Miracle," in *Hungry Hearts*: 114-41.
- , (1920/1923) 1991. "How I Found America," *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska*. New York: Persea Books: 108-128.
- , (1927) 2004. *Arrogant Beggar*. Durham: Duke UP.
- , 1991. "Soap and Water," in *How I Found America*: 71-77.
- ZBOROWSKI, Mark and Elizabeth Herzog. 1952. *Life is with People. The Culture of the Shtetl*. New York: Schocken Books.
- ZIERLER, Wendy. 1993. "The Rebirth of Anzia Yezierska". *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, 42, (4): 414-422.

Received 1 April 2021

Revised version accepted 2 February 2022

Rebeca E. Campos is currently lecturing Literature in the department of English Studies at Complutense University and in the department of English Philology at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Her current research has a particular focus on the diversity of queer experiences portrayed in contemporary narratives and the ways in which these portrayals shape a new perspective from which to approach the concept of intersectionality in English Studies.