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Urban existence and Americanised identity in Anzia Yezierska's Hungry Hearts

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'There was none of that sure, all-right look of the Americans about her' (Yezierska)

Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* is a collection of short stories that explore the attempts of Russian Jewish immigrants to reconcile their dual immigrant and American identities in early twentieth century New York. In *Wings* and *How I Found America* – the first and final stories in the collection, respectively – Yezierska offers contrasting models of assimilation that are inextricable from the urban environments in which they are attempted: Americanisation through imitation, for *Wings*' Shenah Pessah, and Americanisation through self-expression and intercultural dialogue, for the anonymous protagonist of *How I Found America*. The two stories exist in conversation and in their critical engagement with the form of ethnography function as 'interven[tions] in ethnographic exchange' (Jirousek 20). Yezierska presents immigrant identity not as a status to be overcome, but one to be investigated against preexisting ideas of American identity, which itself is in a constant and dialogic process of creation.

In *Wings*, the relationship between John Barnes and Shenah Pessah is that of the urban sociologist with his subject of study, casting the distinction between American and non-American identities in stark contrast. As a sociology professor 'preparing his thesis on the "Educational Problems of the Russian Jews",' (5) Barnes lives temporarily on the East Side of New York 'in order to get into closer touch with his subject' (5). Yezierska presents a relationship that is at once romantic, for Pessah, and anthropological, for Barnes. Specifically, it presents the ethnographical method of participant-observation 'the practice of living among, observing, and recording a studied culture and its member informants' (Jirousek 19). This relationship is inherently hierarchical; Pavletich observes, 'as a scientist, [Barnes'] powerful, culturally authorized gaze fixes Pessah in the position of the interesting, but ultimately inferior primitive object of study' (87). Framed by the language of intellectual study, Yezierska renders their relationship with 'the enthusiasm of the scientist for the specimen of his experimentation – of the sculptor for the clay that would take form under his

touch' (9). In their respective designations as 'sculptor' (9) and 'specimen,' (9) Barnes is elevated by his ethnographic status to the creator of immigrant identity, and Pessah is reduced to the object of his interest. Immigrant identity is objectified in metaphor as 'clay,' (9) suggesting that, unlike the mythological and resolute 'golden legend' (261) of America, it is malleable and moulded by those empowered in the hierarchical ethnographic exchange. Despite living among those he studies, Barnes writes immigrant identity from the outside. Yezierska therefore makes the participant-observation method of urban sociology contradictory and problematic for its fundamentally othering approach to identity.

The relationship between Pessah and Barnes, and the monologic model of urban ethnography in which it is grounded, is connected to Pessah's futile attempt at Americanisation through imitation. This assimilative attempt is voiced through clothing: in her 'first American dress-up,' (25) Pessah looks for 'in the myriad-colored shop windows the one hat and the one dress that would voice the desire of her innermost self' (21). The selfhood sought by *Hungry Hearts*' protagonists is here made purchasable and the commodity of clothing is personified as the voice of selfhood. The urban consumer environment is, for Yezierska, an Americanising agent, as the shop window functions as advertising for American identity and personhood, becoming, as Schreier states, 'an agent of acculturation' (104). In this model of assimilation, Yezierska presents American identity as costume, and a predefined ideal that can be emulated by the immigrant through consumption. Americanisation in *Wings* is thus framed as a passing narrative. Pessah realises her falling short of this cultural passing – that 'there were other things to the person beside the dress-up' (27) – when Barnes, 'appalled' (8) by 'her lack of contact with Americanizing agencies,' (8) takes her to the library, where,

> in the few brief words that passed between Mr. Barnes and the librarian, Shenah Pessah sensed that these two were of the same world and that she was different . . . She had noticed their well-kept hands on the desk and she became aware that her own

were calloused and rough. (27)

Emulation fails and it is her hands—the immigrant body itself—that, in her mind, identify her as Other. Hands function as Yezierska's motif for immigrant alienation throughout the collection, with the factory workers later addressed in dehumanising synecdoche as 'hands' (268) in *How I Found America*. In the stories' shared language of the othered immigrant body, Yezierska suggests the imitative attempt at Americanisation is not only futile, but objectifying.

Yezierska grounds this problematic attempt in Pessah's internalisation of hierarchy, which she illustrates with her relationship to the urban environment. In a moment of Pessah's desperate reckoning with her unrequited love for Barnes, the narrator asks:

> What was she to him? Could she expect him to greet the stairs on which she stepped? Or take notice of the door that swung open for him? After all, she was nothing but part of the
> house. So why should he take notice of her? She was the steps on which he walked. She was the door that swung open for him. And he did not know it. (22)

In her metaphorical absorption into the physical environment, Pessah's janitress profession is presented to reduce her to an inanimate part of an urban world to which Barnes has free access. Pessah's focalisation here agonises a third-person narrative voice impassioned by unrequited love. Her perception of her low status has seemingly settled in her consciousness and Barnes' elevation in the ethnographic relationship is intensified by his worship by Pessah. When dressing in front of her 'broken bit' (21) of mirror, she 'breathlessly' (21) articulates her desire to be beautiful 'not for [herself], but only for him' (21). Breathlessness serves as the collection's leitmotif for its characters' unsatiated and consuming hunger and is accompanied by the symbol of the broken mirror, suggesting that, in Pessah's attempt at Americanisation, her self-formation is incomplete and her identity can never be wholly

reflected. Her rejection by Barnes inspires a self-deprecating resolve as she instructs herself, 'push, push yourself up till you get to him and can look him in his face eye to eye' (34). The kinetic motif of 'push[ing] yourself up' (34) used throughout the collection, invokes a language of hierarchy. Yezierska thus undermines Pessah's hunger to prove her worth by entangling it in her internalisation of her perceived low status.

By contrast, the assimilative attempt in *How I Found America* succeeds in the reciprocal relationship between the story's anonymous protagonist and Miss Latham, the teacher of her younger sister. *Hungry Hearts* is bound at its open and its close by two mirrored pleas for connection: by Pessah's asking herself, 'who gives a care what's going to become from you?' (2); and *How I Found America*'s protagonist's desperate prayer, 'God — God! If I could only find one human soul that cared' (292). The two characters are connected in their experience of the city as isolating and uncaring: an experience that exemplifies Wirth's anxiety that, in the city, 'frequent close physical contact, coupled with great social distances accentuates the reserve of unattached individuals toward one another and . . . gives rise to loneliness' (16). The search for connection – a pull that 'beckoned to [her] almost as strongly as America had on the way over in the boat' (292) – supplants the newly disillusioned 'golden legend' (261) of America. In Miss Latham's asking 'to know more of that mysterious vibrant life [of] the immigrant' (295) the inherited weight of immigrant experience lifts. 'The repression of centuries seemed to rush out of [the] heart' (295) of the protagonist, who cries and thinks: 'It was the first time that an American suggested that I could help her' (295). Unlike the hierarchical, objectifying inquisition found in the ethnographic exchange between Pessah and Barnes, *How I Found America*'s characters are liberated by the mutual interest contained in their reciprocal relationship. As Jirousek observes, Yezierska offers an early recognition of modern anthropological notions of 'ethnographic responsibility' and 'reciprocity,' (28) by which the form departs from the

documentary and often alienating mode of traditional urban ethnography to one that prioritises mutual benefit.

In its reciprocity and dialogue, the relationship between the story's anonymous protagonist and Miss Latham amends the failure of urban American educational institutions to fulfil the intellectual hunger of the collection's immigrant characters. When the protagonist asserts the necessity of self-formation through expression – that 'it's the chance to think out thoughts that makes people' (282) – the teacher at the School for Immigrant Girls responds with the infantilising rebuttal: 'My child, thought requires leisure' (282). Miss Latham, in contrast, sees she has 'had no one to talk to — no one to share [her] thoughts' (296) and recognises the daughter's suffocation by a 'smoke of repression' (296) from the 'divine fire which if it does not find expression turns into smoke' (296). In a suffering exemplified by Wittgenstein's contemporaneous notion '*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world' (204, emphasis in the original), the boundaries of self-expression strangle Yezierska's protagonists' experience of the city. At the conclusion of both the story and the collection, Yezierska offers connection and relationship as a remedy to this suffering. This relationship also functions as Yezierska's mouthpiece for the intercultural dialogue that reconciles immigrant and American identities. Together, they interrogate the relationship between immigration and America: the daughter suggests Miss Latham's family's claim to be 'descendants of the Pilgrim fathers' (297) makes her 'as plain from the heart as an immigrant,' (297) asking 'weren't the Pilgrim fathers immigrants two hundred years ago?' (297). Yezierska inserts immigrant status into American creation myth, suggesting the American identity to which her protagonists attempt to assimilate is in fact an immigrant identity in itself.

At the collection's close, Yezierska also detaches Americanised identity from the superficial image to which her characters previously aspired. The protagonist questions if

Miss Latham is ‘a born American,’ (297) as ‘there was none of that sure, all-right look of the Americans about her’ (297). Where *Wings* poses the imitative attempt at Americanisation, *How I Found America* answers with a criticism of the city’s focus on surface and its seeing ‘only [the immigrant’s] skin, his outside’ (294). Yezierska leaves her protagonist, and her readers, with nothing to imitate in ‘American dress-up’ (25) and makes necessary a new understanding of American identity. This new identity is encapsulated by the words of social critic Waldo Frank read by Miss Latham: “We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her. In the quality of our search shall be the nature of the America that we create’ (297). Rather than departing entirely from urban sociological tradition, Yezierska concludes the collection with a constructive alternative that modifies the hierarchical version found in *Wings*. Campos suggests the story’s intercultural communication ‘sets a starting point from which the discourse of these Jewish immigrants interacts [with] and enriches the American experience’ (53). In this final section, however, Yezierska offers a redefinition of ‘American experience’ as not merely enriched, but actively created, by immigrants. Intercultural dialogue allows the protagonist to ‘[find] the soul – the spirit – of America!’ (298) as the story ends with an invocation of the crucial double meaning contained in its title. *How I Found America*, and *Hungry Hearts* as a whole, contain both the America that is physically discovered – the lonely, often hostile, urban environment – and the America that is ‘founded’ in a constant process of mutual and collective constitution. At the collection’s close, Yezierska suggests a true Americanised identity is realised in the latter.

In conclusion, *Wings* and *How I Found America* present two models of Americanisation grounded in their protagonists’ experience of New York: in their experience of its loneliness; and in the distillation of the ethnographic study of the city itself in the relationships experienced within it. *Hungry Hearts* culminates in Yezierska’s offering of reciprocity as the remedy to the conflict of immigrant and American identities. Americanised

identity, for Yezierska, is not a static ideal to be achieved through emulation and the 'overcoming' of immigrant identity, but a dynamic, dialogic identity found in the process of its intercultural creation.

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