

Plotting Gotham: Interwar Jewish Writers and the Politics of Place

by

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Dedication

For my parents, who made everything possible.

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upholstered sewer.” He frequently asked me, “Will I be in your book?” Though neither he nor my grandmother lived to see its conclusion, both are, in ways large and small, on every page of this dissertation. And finally, no words can ever express my gratitude to my parents, Robin Tanenbaum and Steven Pollak, who raised me among books, and to whom this dissertation is dedicated. Their delight in reading and their veneration for learning set me on this course, and their love and support for me have sustained me in all my efforts.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the formative and fraught relationship between interwar Jewish writers and the working-class Jewish neighborhoods and leisure sites of Manhattan and Brooklyn, illuminating political discourses and intertextual exchanges that informed representations of Brownsville, Coney Island, and the Lower East Side. More than settings drawn from life, these neighborhoods were literary staging grounds for radical critiques of American economic and social relations. While scholars have described the post-WWII period as a Jewish literary “renaissance” in America, this dissertation foregrounds the interwar literature of New York and the forms of Jewish alterity it depicted as the imaginative bedrock on which an American Jewish literary tradition was constructed. Interwar texts established an urban milieu, an investment in social and economic justice, and a transnational, interlinguistic frame of reference as signifiers of the “Jewishness” of secular Jewish writing.

Chapter one examines Yiddish works by Sholem Asch, Moyshe Nadir, and Lamed Shapiro that invoke Coney Island as a symbol of the promise and threat of American mass culture. Chapter two revisits Anzia Yezierska’s influential narratives of the Lower East Side, arguing that her allusions to the lives and writing of fellow Jewish immigrant women allowed her to construct a radical feminist literary tradition under the sign of Manhattan’s “Jewish ghetto.” Chapter three compares four Communist writers’ (Howard Fast, Mike Gold, Samuel Ornitz, and Budd Schulberg) uses of the venerable tropes of the “garden,” “the “jungle,” and the urban “wasteland” to represent characters’ struggles for imaginative and intellectual growth

within the dehumanizing, deterministic environment of the Jewish “ghetto.” Chapter four focuses on Charles Reznikoff *By the Waters of Manhattan* (1930). Overwriting the material reality of the city with pastoral scenes from his protagonist’s reading, Reznikoff creates a new “urban pastoral” sensibility by establishing a symbolic opposition between his protagonist’s developing poetic imagination and the city through which he moves. The coda concludes by looking ahead to the postwar period, demonstrating the formative influence of interwar literary traditions by reading Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City* (1951) as a critical revision of representational conventions from Jewish tenement narratives of the 1920s and ’30s.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Jewish Literary Traditions and the Intertextual Cityscape of New York

In 1955, the musician, biographer, and novelist Samuel Chotzinoff (1889-1964) turned his considerable literary talents to the subject of his own childhood, publishing a memoir wistfully titled *A Lost Paradise*.¹ Readers drawn to reviews of the memoir by intriguingly paradoxical headlines such as “Golden Ghetto” and “With Richness in Poverty” might have been surprised to discover that the “golden” ghetto in question was in fact Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the neighborhood that, by the time the Chotzinoff family had settled there at the turn of the century, was already one of the nation’s most infamous slums. Could this be the “lost paradise” of the memoir’s title? Readers might have been excused for suspecting Chotzinoff of irony, yet such an assumption, the *New York Times* assured readers, would have been incorrect. “Life was rich and wonderful to this boy,” the *Times*’s review reported. “So vividly does this lucky child of the slums evoke the glorious days of his poverty that you see why his memoir has the lingering nostalgic sadness of ‘A Lost Paradise.’”²

¹ Chotzinoff made a reputation as an accompanist to singer Alma Gluck (1884-1938), her husband, violinist Efreim Zimbalist (1890?-1985), and Jascha Heifetz, whose sister, Pauline, he later married. He worked as music critic for the *New York World* and the *New York Post* before assuming the position of music director of the NBC Symphony Orchestra and later for the network. He published a sequel to *A Lost Paradise* (New York: Knopf, 1955), *Day’s at the Morn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), as well as a 1956 biography of his friend, the conductor Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957), *Toscanini: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: Knopf, 1956). Chotzinoff is also the author of *Eroica: A Novel Based on the Life of Ludwig van Beethoven* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1930), among other works related to music and the lives of musicians. Biographical information is from Samuel Lipman, “Out of the Ghetto,” *Commentary*, March 1, 1985, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/out-of-the-ghetto/>.

² Anzia Yeziarska, “With Richness in Poverty,” review of *A Lost Paradise*, by Samuel Chotzinoff, *New York Times*, May 1, 1955, Sunday Book Review, 3; Marcia Davenport, “Golden Ghetto,” review of *A Lost Paradise*, by Samuel Chotzinoff, *The Saturday Review*, April 9, 1955, 27, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1955apr09-00027>.

Readers with longer memories would have been all the more surprised to discover that the reviewer who had penned these words was none other than Anzia Yeziarska (1880?-1970), the immigrant novelist who had, in six books published between 1920 and 1932, compiled one of the most vivid catalogs of the social, psychological, and economic ills of life on the Lower East Side. “My one story is hunger,” Yeziarska had written in 1923.³ And this story of hunger was always set against the backdrop of a slum “where every breath of beauty was blotted out with soot, drowned in noise – where even the sky was a prisoner and the stars choked,” where people were “ragged, brutal, dirty – crowded into subhuman cubbyholes – without light – without air.”⁴ The intervening decades had done nothing to soften Yeziarska’s memories of the Jewish ghetto. Only five years before her review of *A Lost Paradise*, Yeziarska had broken a nearly two-decade-long silence by publishing her own memoir, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950). “The clearest thing she . . . disclose[s] in ‘Red Ribbon on a White Horse’ is the painful difficulty of a life like hers,” *New York Times* staff reviewer Orville Prescott (1907-1996) had concluded. “In childhood she could not speak English, she could not go to school, she knew the depths of poverty and the humiliation of anti-Semitic prejudice.”⁵ As children less than ten years apart in age, Chotzinoff and Yeziarska had lived only blocks away from each other. The experiences they describe, however, might well have taken place on opposite ends of the globe.⁶

Both Chotzinoff and Yeziarska were part of the tidal wave of immigration that landed two and a half million Eastern European Jews on America’s shores between 1880 and 1924.

They were also among the estimated 63 percent of those immigrants who made their first home

³ Anzia Yeziarska, “Mostly About Myself,” in *Children of Loneliness* (1923), reprinted in *How I Found America* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), 136.

⁴ Anzia Yeziarska, *Arrogant Beggar* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 16; Anzia Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (New York: Persea Books, 1987), 97.

⁵ Orville Prescott, “Books of the Times: Emergence From Hester Street From Lucrative to Hard Writing,” review of *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, by Anzia Yeziarska, *New York Times*, September 11, 1950, 21.

⁶ For a brief discussion of the role gender plays in structuring Chotzinoff’s and Yeziarska’s different relationships to urban space, see chapter five.

in the United States on New York's Lower East Side, among the crowded warren of streets and tenement buildings nestled between the East River and the Bowery, Fourteenth Street and Market Street.⁷ Although the "Jewish ghetto," as the neighborhood soon came to be known, occupied only 1.2 percent of New York City's total area, it was by far its densest residential district – the *world's* densest, some speculated – housing fully one-sixth of the city's total population by 1914.⁸ The Lower East Side's ragged profile of five and six story tenement buildings, crisscrossed with washing lines and reverberating to "the whirl of a thousand sewing-machines" lodged in scores of sweatshops made it fertile ground for reformers, social workers, and sociologists.⁹ Muckraking journalist and reformer Jacob Riis (1849-1914) wrote of Manhattan's "Jewtown" in 1890, "Penury and poverty are wedded . . . to dirt and disease" and "[I]f here means the hardest kind of work almost from the cradle."¹⁰ Yet the Lower East Side was not only the nation's archetypal ghetto; it was also "an immigrant Jewish cosmopolis," home to a vibrant café culture, a bohemian vanguard of revolutionaries and artists, a thriving Yiddish press, and a booming Yiddish theater district.¹¹ These multiple aspects of the neighborhood – ghetto and cosmopolis, penury and bohemia – were visible to observers, and the aspect writers chose to emphasize often said as much about their own investments as it did about the neighborhood. Riis, for instance, was in pursuit of housing reform, publishing *How the Other Half Lives* in 1890 as the first salvo in his "battle with the slum," to quote the title of another of

⁷ Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 111; Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 79-80.

⁸ Rischin, *Promised City*, 79-80; Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 82.

⁹ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 85.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹¹ Rischin, *Promised City*, 6. On Yiddish theater in New York, see Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

his books.¹² The anarchist journalist and bohemian Hutchins Hapgood (1869-1944), in contrast, published *The Spirit of the Ghetto* in 1902, not in an effort to change the East Side, but as a celebration of the spirit of proletarian bohemia and radical thought he discovered there. “The Jewish quarter of New York,” he wrote, “is generally supposed to be a place of poverty, dirt, ignorance and immorality – the seat of the sweatshop, the tenement house, where ‘red-lights’ sparkle at night, where the people are queer and repulsive.” Such an assessment, Hapgood acknowledged, was “as true as it is trite,” but it also overlooked the substantial “charm” of the “men and things there.” “No part of New York,” he insisted, “has a more intense and varied life than the colony of Russian and Galician Jews who live on the east side and who form the largest Jewish city in the world.”¹³

The works by Hapgood and Riis, Chotzinoff and Yezienska were all part of a vast corpus of writing that set out to capture the teeming life of the Lower East Side. Indeed, the neighborhood’s population density was almost rivaled by the sheer volume of literary description, analysis, and narrative it inspired, making the Jewish ghetto one of the most thoroughly documented spaces of its size in the United States. The Lower East Side’s literary interest proved more durable than its residential appeal, however. By the time Yezienska had published her first book in 1920 – a full three and a half decades before the publication of Chotzinoff’s memoir – Jews had already begun to stream out of the neighborhood, creating Jewish enclaves in Harlem and Washington Heights, in the lower reaches of the Bronx, and, with the opening of the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridges in 1903 and 1909, respectively, across

¹² Jacob Riis, *The Battle with the Slum* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1902).

¹³ Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1902), 5, 9.

the East River in the Brownsville and Williamsburg sections of Brooklyn.¹⁴ These neighborhoods spawned their own literatures of Jewish life and labor, as did popular sites of Jewish working-class leisure, such as Coney Island and even the Brooklyn Bridge, where residents of the nearby Lower East Side strolled on summer evenings in search of relief from the stifling heat of the tenements. These spaces of Jewish communal life, labor, and leisure are invested with a lasting vitality in hundreds – perhaps thousands – of works of fiction and history, memoir and sociology, poetry and journalism. As the differences among the four writers previously mentioned reveals, however, the larger political and cultural significance with which writers invested these spaces were the subject of as much dispute as consensus. These representational trends and disputes – and the personal and political investments that inspired them – are the subjects of this dissertation.

Identity and Place: Conceptualizing an Interwar Jewish Literary Tradition

“Plotting Gotham: Interwar Jewish Writers and the Politics of Place” tells the story of New York City’s emergence during the interwar years (1917-1941) as the most capacious and contentious site of Jewish literary encounters with American modernity. Only a book as vast and inexhaustible as New York City itself could hope to do justice to a literature so rich and voluminous, and so, inevitably, my account has had to be selective. Of course, the Jewish literature of New York did not begin in 1917, nor did it end in 1941. (Indeed, the coda of this dissertation casts a glance forward into the post-war period through its reading of Alfred Kazin’s [1915-1998] memoir *A Walker in the City* [1951]). Nonetheless, the interwar period witnessed several crucial developments in American Jewish writing. Most significantly for this study, during these years, a substantial body of Anglophone writing by East European immigrants and

¹⁴ Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in American* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 49.

their children began to reach a mainstream audience, forming the first easily identifiable Anglophone American Jewish literary tradition. Much of this literature, though certainly not all of it, both emerged from and was set in New York. “German” Jewish writers, descendants of an earlier wave of mid-nineteenth century immigration from Central Europe, had published novels as early as the postbellum period, but scholarly attempts to forge literary traditions from nineteenth-century American Jewish writing, though productive, have had to rely on a diverse array of texts from disparate genres (including diaries and correspondence not intended for publication) and far-flung parts of the country, bringing together texts that were only rarely written in dialogue with each another.¹⁵ The first cohesive Jewish literary tradition in the United States may thus be said to be that of Yiddish poetry, which blossomed with the “sweatshop poets” of New York in the 1880s and ’90s and continued to thrive until well after the Second World War.¹⁶

The interwar Anglophone literature of New York can be seen as an extension of the city’s older Yiddish literary traditions. Most of its authors grew up in bilingual Yiddish- and English-speaking communities, and, like the poetry and serialized novels their parents read in the Yiddish dailies, their writing reflects an urban sensibility, a cognizance of “the old country” (whether from personal knowledge or from family legend), an eagerness to interrogate America as both an idea and a reality, a sense of ethnic difference, and a heightened class-consciousness. It is, in many ways, America’s most uncomplicatedly “Jewish” Anglophone literary tradition, even while its authors were often ambivalent in the extreme, if not downright hostile, toward Judaism as a

¹⁵ See, for instance, Diane Lichtenstein, “The Tradition of American Jewish Women Writers,” in *The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), and “Literature of Arrival, 1654-1880,” in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, eds. Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 17-106.

¹⁶ Marc Miller, *Representing the Immigrant Experience: Morris Rosenfeld and the Emergence of Yiddish Literature in America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 146, and Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990), 161.

religion. Indeed, religion has hardly any role in this study, and its role in the literature I discuss is typically one of attenuation or rejection.¹⁷ Yet for all that, Jewish ethnicity (as opposed to Jewish religiosity) is largely unquestioned in the interwar novels and memoirs I discuss for reasons of time and place: time, because the “Russian Jews,” as the East European immigrants and their children were typically called, were largely understood to be a “racial” group prior to World War II; and place, because of the identification of certain communities, neighborhoods, and even city blocks as “Jewish” communities, “Jewish” neighborhoods,” and “Jewish” blocks.¹⁸ Terms like “the Jewish ghetto” and “Jewtown” for the Lower East Side (the latter was also applied to the Jewish sections of Williamsburg), were part of an intricate ethnic geography that associated identity with place. Consider, for instance, this interaction in Henry Roth’s (1906-1995) *Call It Sleep*: The young protagonist, David Shearl, has wandered over to the East River docks by Eighth Street and Avenue D when he is accosted by two Irish boys. “W’ere d’yiz live?” one asks him, and when David points to his building, the boy responds, “Dat’s a sheeney block . . .” to which his companion adds, “Yea. Yer a Jew aintchiz?” When David tries to deny the accusation, realizing that honesty will only be rewarded with violence, one of his interrogators insists, “Only sheenies live in dat block!”¹⁹

Or consider Alfred Kazin in *A Walker in the City*, recalling how he used to wonder, “Was being a Jew the same as living in Brownsville? Were they really Jews, those who lived beyond Brownsville?”²⁰ The mature Kazin recognizes this question as naïve without, however, rejecting

¹⁷ Rose Gollup Cohen’s shock, shortly after arriving in America, at seeing her father handling money on the Sabbath is an archetypal moment, variations of which appear in many immigrant narratives. Rose Gollup Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995), 78-79. Mike Gold’s attacks on Jewish religiosity as hypocritical and neurotic in *Jews Without Money* (1930) are a particularly strident version of another common theme. Michael Gold, “Buffalo Bill and the Messiah,” in *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 174-190.

¹⁸ See the discussion of racial discourse in chap. 2.

¹⁹ Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon Books, 1968), 250.

²⁰ Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1979), 103.

its premise. To be from Brownsville was to be interpellated (from birth, for Kazin) into one of the social groups within the city's intricately mapped ethno-racial geography, however ambivalent the identification.²¹ "I learned long ago," the twenty-eight-year-old Kazin wrote in 1944, "to accept the fact that I was Jewish without being a part of any meaningful Jewish life or culture."²² Kazin would later come to discover meaning in the particular version of "Jewish life" and "culture" in which he grew up, as his three memoirs – the last of which is tellingly titled *New York Jew* – attest. Writing of his father's local synagogue in the first of these memoirs, Kazin recalls, not without deep ambivalence and even resentment,

I felt I was being pulled into some mysterious and ancient clan that claimed me as its own simply because I had been born a block away. Whether I agreed with its beliefs or not, I belonged; whether I assented to its rights over me or not, I belonged; whatever I thought of them, no matter how far I might drift from that place, I belonged. This was understood in the very nature of things; I was a Jew. It did not matter how little I knew or understood of the faith, or that I was always reading alien books; I belonged, I had been expected, I was now to take my place in the great tradition.²³

Whether because of the external identification of being from "a sheeney block" or neighborhood, or from the internal pull of a community that claimed and demanded its children's allegiance, to be from "that place," for Kazin and many other children of the city's Jewish neighborhoods, was to be a Jew, "no matter how far [one] might drift." This process of interpellation transcended the actual demographics of urban spaces. Chotzinoff might have believed that Manhattan's "Cherry

²¹ Louis Althusser, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), describes "interpellation" as the process by which ideology "hails . . . individuals as subjects," or in other words, the process by which individuals assume recognizable identities within an ideological system. Althusser, moreover, understands ideology to be pervasive and inescapable ("ideology *has no outside*"). (175; italics in the original) I also draw on Catherine Rottenberg's application of the concept to the early-twentieth-century American context in *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African and Jewish-American Literature* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2008). Rottenberg explains, "I understand identification as being constituted, initially, by the primary address or interpellation through which a subject is initiated into the dominant social order as a gendered, raced, classed, and 'ethnicized' being . . . This preliminary interpellation both inaugurates the subject qua subject and imposes an initial identification with a specific gender, race, class, or ethnicity . . ." (10-13)

²² Alfred Kazin, contribution to "Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7, no.1 (February 1944), 11.

²³ Kazin, *Walker*, 45.

Street was completely Irish and Catholic, while the neighborhood of East Broadway and Rutgers Square was predominantly Jewish,” but Jews (the memoirist Rose Gollup Cohen [1880-1925], for one) did live on Cherry Street, and Italians and Irish shared space with Jews in the “Jewish” sections of the Lower East Side.²⁴ Nonetheless, the association of streets and neighborhoods with ethnic communities made Jewish ethnicity a largely unquestioned, if often uncomfortable, social category for writers emerging from the “Jewish” sections of the city. To paraphrase David Biale’s definition of “culture,” Jewishness, or Jewish ethnicity, was broadly understood to be “how we do things around here.” Jewish culture did not need to adhere to specific forms. It was “the practice of everyday life” within certain communities that self-identified and were identified by others as Jewish.²⁵

To structure a study of Jewish writing around the axes of historically specific cultural and communal spaces, then, is to acknowledge the “pull” of community and of place of origin and to recognize its formative influence, however unwelcome or coercive it was perceived to be. The use of specific sites in New York as an organizing principle also makes visible the relationship between individual texts and what Barbara Smith has described, in the context of Black women’s writing, as “an identifiable literary tradition” whose authors “manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experiences they have been obliged to share.”²⁶ Divided by gender, age, generation, and individual personality, the Jewish writers discussed in this dissertation did not all share the same experiences. Nevertheless, their awareness of representing the same economic class and

²⁴ Samuel Chotzinoff, *A Lost Paradise: Early Reminiscences* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 86.

²⁵ David Biale, “Preface: Toward a Cultural History of the Jews,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), xvii.

²⁶ Barbara Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982), 163-164. See also Lichtenstein, “The Tradition of American Jewish Women Writers.”

ethnicity, as well as similar neighborhoods, led them to “manifest common approaches” – as well as polemically divergent ones – toward their subject matter. “Plotting Gotham” undertakes to map – or “plot” – the contours of this literary tradition by attending to the representational trends and debates, the intertextual allusions and polemics, and the social and political networks that informed Jewish writers’ representations of several such “common” spaces in New York: the Lower East Side, Brownsville, Coney Island, and Brooklyn Bridge.

By tracing trends and divergences in these representations of space and place, “Plotting Gotham” calls attention to “ways of seeing” the city and to the politics of imagery, adopting John Berger’s premise that “[e]very image embodies a way of seeing,” and that the “way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.”²⁷ Images have much to tell us about the investments of their creators, particularly in the case of literary images, which are particularly susceptible to overdetermination because of writing’s sensory distance from vision. Moreover, the vastness of the metropolis, its dizzying pace of construction and demolition, its migratory flux, and its endlessly shifting tides of fashion and capital make it inevitable that representations of New York would be interpretive rather than mimetic. How was a writer to convey the overwhelming scale and pace of New York, that “most immoderate of human texts,” as Michel de Certeau has described it?²⁸ This problem was particularly acute during the years of Jewish mass migration, when the city experienced its most disorienting period of growth. “Such a rapid urban transformation,” historian John Kasson writes of the period, “challenged the power of newcomers and longtime residents alike to comprehend the city as an entity. The problem of

²⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1990), 8, 10.

²⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 92.

reading the city dates from this time.”²⁹ A similar observation might be made with regard to the problem of representing it. As art historian Rebecca Zurier notes, “The size, speed, and strangeness of turn-of-the-century New York posed a representational challenge to visitors and natives alike.”³⁰

Kasson and Certeau posit the view from above as the most emblematic attempt to bring order and clarity to the swirling urban panorama, yet there are other strategies as well. Zurier describes urban representations as “a fundamental form of sense-making activity” used to make the modern metropolis “legible” and to make “urban knowledge” possible.³¹ The writers I discuss were less interested in attaining an objective “knowledge” of the city, however, than they were in achieving and conveying critical, interpretive insights into the significance and causes of urban life as it was experienced by the city’s poorest residents. To this end, writers often made recourse to symbolic synecdoches and to loaded clichés as verbal ideograms, or images that carried larger burdens of critical and analytic meaning. The tenement, for instance, was frequently invoked as a synecdoche for the ghetto, as was the sweatshop for the city’s exploitative system of economic relations. Similarly, the clichés of the garden, the jungle, and the urban wasteland circulated as signifiers of sociological and psychological understandings of the effects of urban life on social and personal development. Indeed, even the frequently invoked concept of the Jewish “ghetto” – applied to Brownsville, the Bronx, and Williamsburg, as well as to the Lower East Side – was itself as much symbolic as it was descriptive, demarcating sites of poverty and demographic homogeneity, but also evoking the sense of economic and ethnic alterity the writers discussed in these pages associated with Jewish life in New York. By taking

²⁹ John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990), 72.

³⁰ Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006), 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*

such symbols and clichés seriously, this dissertation excavates a larger currency of visual tropes that served as an intertextual shorthand for political ideas that were debated by interwar Jewish writers both on and off the page.

The Politics of Place

These ways of seeing the city, I argue, were often forged in the crucible of left-wing political thought and an acute class-consciousness. If interwar narratives of Jewish New York were linked to forms of ethnicity grounded in the human geography of neighborhoods and communities, they were also rooted in the economic life and class politics of those neighborhoods. When Kazin wonders if “they [were] really Jews, those who lived beyond Brownsville?” he is referring primarily to the middle-class neighborhood of Eastern Parkway, whose Jewish residents, “*alrightniks*, making out ‘all right’ in the New World, . . . were still Gentiles to me.”³² Kazin’s memoir was published in 1951, well after he had written his way out of Brownsville and into the middle class, yet I read *A Walker in the City* as part of a working-class literary tradition. In describing tenement narratives like Kazin’s as “working-class writing,” I draw on Janet Zandy’s theorization of the genre as writing that “centers the lived, material experiences of working-class people,” regardless of the class position of its author, “who may be living a middle class life.”³³ This more expansive definition illuminates the political stakes of narratives such as Kazin’s, revealing the continuities between Anglophone tenement narratives and the older traditions of labor writing by Yiddish playwrights, sketch writers, and “sweatshop poets” of turn-of-the-century New York.

³² Kazin, *Walker*, 9, 103.

³³ Janet Zandy, *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 90-91.

Despite their focus on the lives of the working poor, texts like Kazin's memoir have rarely been discussed as working-class writing, just as their political content has often been glossed over. This can be attributed to several factors. Scholarship in the field of Jewish literary studies has tended to hew to historical narratives that view the Jewish ghettos of New York – the Lower East Side, Brownsville, Williamsburg, and sections of Harlem and the Bronx – as stopping points on the upwardly mobile journey from Ellis Island to the prosperous suburbs of Westchester and Long Island. Chroniclers of the Lower East Side Abraham Cahan (1860-1951) and Anzia Yeziarska, for instance, are presented in the canon-forming *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* as “transitional figures, lifting one foot out of their native Yiddish-speaking immigrant culture while, with the other, stepping toward the English-speaking American culture they aspired to.”³⁴ Such an assessment presents these narratives as ethnographic testimony to a fleeting historical moment, substituting the relatively brief immigrant experience for the more enduring class experience of which it was a part. It also downplays the political allegiances of the authors (socialist, in the case of Cahan, and what might be described as labor-feminist, in that of Yeziarska). Moreover, that so many of the novels and memoirs set in the tenements of New York were coming-of-age narratives written by authors who had achieved professional success and financial security has led scholars to read them as nostalgic, rather than as political, as assimilationist testimonials for the American dream, rather than as testimonies from the American realities of working-class life. And that several important postwar contributions to the genre – Kazin's *A Walker in the City* and Chotzinoff's *A Lost Paradise* among them – recalled this reality with a measure of fondness has only added force to this argument.

³⁴ Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein, eds., “The Great Tide, 1881-1924,” in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 120.

The remarkable contrast in sensibility between Yeziarska's and Chotzinoff's representations of the Lower East Side, invoked at the beginning of this introduction, would seem to endorse the common critical view. In attempting to account for these representational contrasts, scholars have typically offered one of two explanations, the first and simplest of which points to nostalgic hindsight, positing an implicit dichotomy between real (negative) representations and false (positive) ones. A second, related explanation advanced by Jewish historians and cultural commentators emphasizes a more collective, communal form of nostalgia. Drawing on theories of "collective memory" and "*lieux de mémoire*" (sites of memory), scholars have taken note of the emotional hold the Lower East Side has exerted on the imaginations of many American Jews, including – perhaps especially – those who were born long after the neighborhood had ceased to be a center of Jewish population and culture.³⁵ Historian Beth Wenger has persuasively shown that this memory culture was already a thriving part of the "Jewish collective consciousness" as early as the 1920s, when Jewish migration away from the neighborhood sparked a new nostalgic reverence for the slum whose inhabitants were so eager to escape it. "During the interwar years," Wenger writes, "the East Side ceased to be the center of Jewish population and activity and became instead a primary site of Jewish memory and a physical space for the invention of Jewish identity in America."³⁶

The Lower East Side's privileged status only increased in the decades that followed. By the postwar period, the story goes, Jewish Americans' sense of loss and their search for "a usable past" was exacerbated by the multiple ruptures of mid-century: on the home front, suburbanization, acculturation, and a sense of discontinuity with Jewish religious, linguistic, and

³⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser, *The Heritage of Sociology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, special issue, *Memory and Counter-Memory*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), 7-24.

³⁶ Beth Wenger, "Memory as Identity: The Invention of the Lower East Side," *American Jewish History* 85 no.1 (March 1997), 3.

cultural traditions; and in Europe, the destruction of longstanding centers of Jewish cultural and religious life during the Holocaust.³⁷ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi gives voice to the scholarly consensus when she writes, “The endemic American quest for a lost – and irrecoverable – community will dovetail eventually with a nostalgia for Jewish spaces . . . Whether through acts of translation or imaginative appropriation, both the shtetl and the Lower East Side will become mythic Jewish fields of reference in the postwar imagination.”³⁸

The influence of demographic trends and historical ruptures on the Jewish literary imagination cannot be discounted, but they tell only half the story, overshadowing the role that intertextuality and the awareness of participating in a larger literary tradition played in determining the representational investments of narratives of Jewish working-class life. The encounter between Yeziarska and Chotzinoff in the pages of the *New York Times* is but one example of the intertextual dialogues that are the focus of this study. As I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the remarkable volume of writing on the working-class Jewish neighborhoods of New York exerted its own pressures on ways of seeing the city. Certainly, this was apparent to Marcia Davenport (1903-1996), another reviewer of Chotzinoff’s memoir, who, in addition to being a fellow music critic, biographer, and novelist, was also a close personal friend of the memoirist.³⁹ Comparing *A Lost Paradise* to the stories of “the legion of talented, immensely successful Americans whose origins and early lives parallel Mr. Chotzinoff’s,” Davenport admits that “it is only natural to inquire whether he has much to tell that has not been told many times before.” Emphatically concluding that “he has,” Davenport points to the warmer sensibility of Chotzinoff’s memoir: “He weaves a spell of quiet magic, in which everything

³⁷ The phrase is from Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial*, 64 (April 11, 1918): 337-341.

³⁸ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 215.

³⁹ Davenport was the daughter of Alma Gluck and stepdaughter of Gluck’s second husband, Efrem Zimbalist, for both of whom Chotzinoff served as an accompanist. See n. 1.

seems new against the multifarious familiarities of the lower East Side at the turn of the century, amid the swarmed, packed Russian Jews . . . whose stories have been told and retold. . . . Others bred in that teeming medium have given us pictures of tragicomedy sharpened by hunger, poverty, and the clamorous family life of ghetto Jews,” she continues. “But Samuel Chotzinoff’s world beyond all these ingredients holds many more.”⁴⁰

Market forces and the artist’s imperative to “make it new” were not the only influences shaping contributions to the tradition of Jewish tenement narratives. Kazin, though often chided by scholars for neglecting Jewish writing in his landmark study of American literature, *On Native Grounds* (1942), had begun his literary career in the 1930s by reviewing novels of Jewish tenement life by Daniel Fuchs (1909-1993), Isidor Schneider (1896-1977), and Jerome Weidman (1913-1998).⁴¹ His valorizing representations of Brownsville in *A Walker in the City*, I demonstrate in the coda, respond polemically to what he saw as the overly critical and deterministic depictions of Jewish working-class life in these and other works, such as Mike Gold’s (1894-1967) *Jews Without Money* (1930) and Samuel Ornitz’s (1890-1957) *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* (1923). Yeziarska, writing decades before Kazin and Chotzinoff, saw her work as participating in a radical tradition of Lower East Side feminist writing that included fellow immigrant writers Rose Gollup Cohen, Sonya Levien (1888-1960), and Rose Pastor Stokes (1879-1933). Her descriptions of the Jewish ghetto as the symbolic locus of intersecting structural oppressions, composed at a time when the neighborhood was already becoming a site of nostalgia in the Jewish imaginary, reveal the degree to which representations of the city were

⁴⁰ Marcia Davenport, “Golden Ghetto,” review of *A Lost Paradise*, by Samuel Chotzinoff, *The Saturday Review*, April 9, 1955, 27, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1955apr09-00027>.

⁴¹ Alfred Kazin, review of *Low Company*, by Daniel Fuchs, in “Some of the Leading Spring Fiction,” *New York Herald Tribune Books*, February 14, 1937, 8-10X; Alfred Kazin, “A Racketeer Among Fools,” review of *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, by Jerome Weidman, *New York Herald Tribune Books*, May 9, 1937, 2X; Alfred Kazin, “Second Generation,” review of *From the Kingdom of Necessity*, by Isidor Schneider, *New York Times*, November 10, 1935, Sunday Book Review, 20.

always ideologically constructed. In doing so, it calls into question the conventional dichotomy between realist critique and nostalgic distortion implicit in most scholarly narratives of twentieth-century Jewish writing. As these examples suggest, New York's Jewish writers were well aware that they were not simply representing the reality around them but were contributing to a vast and ever expanding textual edifice, an intertextual cityscape comprised of dozens – eventually hundreds – of novels and memoirs that imbued specific neighborhoods and spaces with heightened meaning.

Jewish American Renaissances: Rethinking Literary Chronologies

Reading interwar narratives of Jewish New York as an intertextual tradition reorients the chronologies of Jewish American literary history. Scholars in the field have typically identified the two decades after World War II as “the golden age of Jewish American fiction,” a moment of “breakthrough” in which Jewish writers moved from the margins to the center of the world of letters.⁴² This “renaissance” in Jewish writing has been attributed to the traumas of midcentury: World War II, the Holocaust, and, most significantly, disillusionment with collectivist leftist ideologies following the Soviet purges of 1936 and the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. “After the revolution,” as Mark Shechner has characterized this period, Jewish writers were unchained from the yoke of leftist literary strictures and given free imaginative range.⁴³ “Ideology crumbled,

⁴² Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2000), 161; see also, among numerous other examples, Leslie Fiedler, “The Breakthrough: The American Jewish Novelist and the Fictional Image of the Jew,” in *Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views*, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 84-109; Louis Harap, *In the Mainstream: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Benjamin Schreier, s.v. “Jewish American Novel,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*, eds. Peter Melville Logan, Olakunle George, Susan Hegeman, and Efrain Kristal (Chichester, West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 359-363; Theodore Solotaroff, “A Vocal Group: The Jewish Part in American Letters,” *Times Literary Supplement*, November 6, 1959, 652.

⁴³ Mark Shechner, *After the Revolution: Studies in the Contemporary Jewish American Imagination* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987). See also Ruth R. Wisse, “Jewish American Renaissance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 190-211.

personality bloomed,” wrote Irving Howe, himself a former Trotskyist who compared his experiences in “the movement” to membership in a “cult.”⁴⁴ The result of this new introspection and individualism, Alfred Kazin agreed, was the “first great era of ‘Jewish’ imaginative writing.”⁴⁵ This narrative of rupture and rebirth has proved so seductive that, for some critics, it has all but obscured the very existence of Jewish literary production prior to midcentury. “Jewish-American literature,” novelist Martin Amis (b. 1949) opined in a recent article for the *New York Times Book Review* “is above all new: it began with Saul Bellow, circa 1950.”⁴⁶ Few scholars would endorse Amis’s hasty generalization, but his view is symptomatic of the larger tendency to dismiss interwar Jewish writing as insignificant or, at best, an opening act to the main show.

When placed within a tradition of New York writing, however, a very different picture of American Jewish literary history emerges. As my discussions of Kazin’s *A Walker in the City* and Chotzinoff’s *A Lost Paradise* reveal, the postwar “renaissance” did not arise from the ashes of ideology, but rather was constructed on the sturdy foundations of interwar writing. Indeed, as Alan Wald has shown, many of the writers who rose to prominence after the war “owe a considerable portion of their intellectual awakening and social vision to adventures with the Communist and Trotskyist movements.”⁴⁷ Narratives of the Jewish ghettos of New York such as Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* (1920 – later a Hollywood film), Samuel Ornitz’s *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* (1923), Mike Gold’s *Jews*

⁴⁴ Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 48, 133.

⁴⁵ Alfred Kazin, “Though He Slay Me . . .,” review of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, by Saul Bellow, *New York Review of Books*, December 3, 1970, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1970/dec/03/though-he-slay-me/>.

⁴⁶ Martin Amis, “Towering Figures,” review of *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books*, by Claudia Roth Pierpont, *New York Times*, October 20, 2013, Sunday Book Review, 17.

⁴⁷ Alan Wald, “Jewish American Writers on the Left,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 175.

Without Money (1930), Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), and Howard Fast's (1914-2003) *The Children* (written 1934, published 1937) were widely reviewed in mainstream publications and avidly discussed in literary and intellectual circles. These works established the Jewish tenements and sweatshops of New York as archetypal topoi in the American imaginary, and Jewish writers as contributors to important emerging genres: Cahan as a leading realist, Gold as the "Dean of American Proletarian Literature," and Roth as one of the chief American importers of a Joycean stream-of-consciousness modernism.

But if these writers were often celebrated for their formal contributions to genre, they also had important social roles. Many of them were also seen as spokespeople for the immigrant proletariat, as pioneers of socialist and Communist letters, and as respondents in the raging debate over the "Jewish questions" revolving around race and Americanization. This literature and the forms of ethnic, economic, and gender alterity it depicted, I argue, forms the imaginative bedrock on which a secular Jewish American literary tradition was constructed. It established an urban sensibility and milieu, a form of ethnic cosmopolitanism, and an investment in leftist politics and social justice as primary signifiers of the "Jewishness" of secular American Jewish literature. These signifiers continued to be operative in important works of postwar fiction and memoir, such as Bernard Malamud's (1914-1986) *The Assistant* (1957), Grace Paley's (1922-2007) stories published between 1959 and 1985, Kate Simon's (1912-1990) *Bronx Primitive* (1982), E. L. Doctorow's (b. 1931) *World's Fair* (1985), Michael Chabon's (b. 1963) *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), Jonathon Lethem's (b. 1964) *Dissident Gardens* (2013), and Meredith Tax's (b. 1942) *Rivington Street* (1982) and the larger genre of the "Lower East Side romance novel" – as well as numerous other works, the memoirs by Chotzinoff and

Kazin included.⁴⁸ These texts, in different ways, can be productively read as responses, revisions, homages, and riffs on the themes and scenes of the interwar literary tradition discussed in this dissertation. Indeed, many of them are even set during the interwar period.

The postwar “golden age” was thus in many ways the product of an earlier interwar renaissance. This renaissance had important continuities with the still earlier tradition of New York Yiddish writing referenced above. In particular, it drew much of its strength from Yiddish writers’ unapologetic normalization of the life and culture of the Jewish folk subjects for “serious” modern literature – a practice guided not only by New York Yiddish writers’ almost exclusively Jewish audience, but also by their engagement with forms of anticipatory multiculturalism fostered in the city’s Jewish socialist labor movement.⁴⁹ But it was the emergence of English as the dominant language of Jewish American letters during the interwar period – a linguistic shift that can be traced to the rapid acculturation of Jewish immigrants and their American-raised children, to mid-1920s legislation that cut off immigration from Eastern Europe, and to the city’s unparalleled opportunities for free and affordable higher education – that allowed Jewish writing to make its triumphant entrance onto the national stage. Interwar Jewish writers, emerging from working-class districts of “modernity’s capital” had stories to tell about the most urgent social issues of their time, and they could tell them in a language that most Americans could read.⁵⁰

Theirs is a literature of intense engagement with the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the modern city, but it is not the kind of “modern literature” or “modern city” that

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the “Lower East Side romance novel,” see Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 73-79.

⁴⁹ Daniel Katz, *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011), 5-6. Terming this early form of multicultural advocacy “mutual culturalism,” Katz argues that the Jewish labor movement encouraged cultural production rooted in ethnic traditions in the belief that “the struggle to assert cultural identity is a class struggle as well” (6).

⁵⁰ Christine Stansell, *Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 6.

has most often been the subject of studies of literary representations of urban space. Grounded in specific working-class sites in the city, these narratives have little patience for “loneliness, isolation, fragmentation, [and] alienation” that Hana Wirth-Nesher has identified as “platitudes” of the literature on urban modernity.⁵¹ The scale and influence of this other modern literature, made visible when its constituent works are brought together as an intertextual tradition, calls into question scholarly assumptions that link the novel and the city as, respectively, the principle representational medium and “the principle theater of bourgeois life,” to cite the guiding assumptions of Robert Alter’s study of “urban experience and the language of the novel.”⁵²

Rather, the interwar Jewish literature of working-class New York constitutes a no less significant if generally overlooked “subaltern modernism,” as cultural historian Michael Denning has described the larger genre of tenement narratives (he calls them “ghetto pastorals”) to which so many, though not all, of the texts I discuss belong. Denning identifies the genre as “tales of growing up in Little Italy, the Lower East Side, Bronzeville, and Chinatown, written by plebeian men and women of these ethnic working-class neighborhoods.” This undertheorized genre, Denning notes, “refigured the lineaments of the American tale, inflecting much of twentieth-century fiction, film, and broadcasting.”⁵³ The tenement bildungsroman also became a central genre of ethnic American literary canons, characterizing frequently studied and assigned narratives such as Ann Petry’s (1908-1997) *The Street* (1946), James Baldwin’s (1924-1987) *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), Paule Marshall’s (b. 1929) *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Piri Thomas’s (1928-2011) *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), and Esmeralda Santiago’s (b. 1948)

⁵¹ Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

⁵² Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), ix.

⁵³ Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), 230-31.

When I Was Puerto Rican (1993), to cite only several of the many examples set in New York alone. Denning's pathbreaking discussion of the "ghetto pastoral" features works by several prominent Jewish writers, acknowledging Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* (1896) as a precursor of the form, and citing Anzia Yeziarska's fiction of the 1920s as among its earliest works.

Nevertheless, Denning principally associates the genre with "the plebeian writers who had emerged in and around the proletarian literature movement [1929-1934] and the Popular Front [1935-1939]," discussing it as a literary form sprouting from the radical soil of the Great Depression.⁵⁴

An examination of the tenement narrative of Jewish New York reorients this chronology as well, locating its emergence in the two decades *prior* to the Great Depression. Cahan was certainly an early exemplar of the genre, but by the early interwar period, his lead had been followed by other chroniclers of Jewish tenement life in both English and Yiddish: Sholem Asch's (1880-1957) Yiddish sweatshop novel *Onkl Mozes* (Uncle Moses, 1918); Rose Gollup Cohen's Lower East Side memoir, *Out of the Shadow* (1918); anarchist organizer Marie Ganz's (1891-1968) memoir (written by her future husband, Hurst journalist and Williamsburg native Nat J. Ferber [1889-1945]), *Rebels: Into Anarchy – and Out Again* (1919); Bertha Pearl Moore's (1890?-1925) novel *Sarah and Her Daughter* (1920); Ornitz's *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* (1923); Yeziarska's novels *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), *Bread Givers* (1925), and *Arrogant Beggar* (1927); and Bella Cohen Spewack's (1899-1990) Lower East Side memoir *Streets* (written in 1922 but only published in 1995). During the 1930s, writing in this genre continued to gain momentum, as Edward Dahlberg (1900-1977), Howard Fast, Daniel Fuchs, Mike Gold, Joseph Gollomb (1881-1950), Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), and Henry Roth made valuable contributions. Even this partial survey of Jewish tenement narratives should give a sense of the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

remarkable literary production and the lasting (if underappreciated) influence of New York's interwar Jewish writers.

That so many Jewish authors wrote in the politicized tradition of the tenement narrative, or “ghetto pastoral,” before the genre gained broader traction should not be surprising. If the Depression's widespread unemployment and dispossession drew American workers into the ranks of the socialist and Communist left in unprecedented numbers, these workers were only belatedly discovering realities New York's Jewish proletariat had learned decades earlier in the sweatshops, picket lines, and firetrap tenements of the Lower East Side. Since the late nineteenth century, Manhattan's Lower East Side had been the vibrant pulse of American socialist and labor movements, which would also come to have a strong presence in the working-class Jewish communities that developed later in the Bronx and in the Brownsville and Williamsburg sections of Brooklyn. This phenomenon can be attributed to several historical conditions. Even more than the pogroms that ravaged Jewish communities across the Russian Pale of Settlement, it was the pauperization of East European Jews that spurred immigration to the United States between 1880 and the enactment of anti-immigration legislation in 1924.⁵⁵ When the earliest East European Jewish immigrants arrived on the Lower East Side in the late nineteenth century – at the time, the neighborhood was still referred to as Kleindeutschland, or Little Germany – they were welcomed by the neighborhood's largely non-Jewish German inhabitants, who, in historian Tony Michels's words, had already established “a thriving socialist labor movement” which sought conscripts among the new arrivals. After 1905, Jewish activists and intellectuals from anarchist, labor (the Bund), and socialist-Zionist groups fleeing the fallout of the failed Russian revolution joined the Lower East Side's radical intelligentsia. The conditions on the Lower East Side and in other

⁵⁵ Eli Lederhendler, chap. 1 “Down and Out in Eastern Europe,” in *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880-1920: From Caste to Class* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 1-37.

working-class Jewish neighborhoods, such as Brownsville, were propitious for the spread of radical labor politics. Michels reports,

An estimated 1,400,000 Jews lived in New York in 1914, the majority of whom were working class and poor. . . . According to a 1916 survey, more than 50 percent of economically active Jews worked in factories, sweatshops, and tenement apartments: 300,000 in New York's booming garment industry and another 100,000 in construction, cigar manufacturing, food processing, printing, and smaller industries.⁵⁶

Luminaries of the radical left such as Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) sojourned on the Lower East Side, where Trotsky's writings were published in Yiddish translation in the *Forverts*. The famous ghetto was also a regular stop on the itineraries of other leading Russian left-wing writers and activists during their tours of the United States. Anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), Bolshevik novelist Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), and "Grandmother of the Russian Revolution" Katerina Breshko-Breshkovskaia (1844-1934), among numerous others, received warm welcomes from working-class Lower East Side Jews. By the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century, the Jewish voting districts of New York City had elected representatives of the Socialist Party to the City Council, the State Assembly, and even, in the case of Meyer London (1871-1926), the United States House of Representatives.⁵⁷

This radicalized, labor-oriented atmosphere, I suggest, contributed to the remarkable outpouring of narratives describing the Jewish working-class quarters of the city. Much as the proletarian literature movement of the late 1920s and early '30s would do, the Jewish left's emphasis on the importance of working-class experiences and concerns encouraged Jewish writers to discover the literary value of their own experiences in the tenements, streets, and factories of New York. It was from this radical climate that the Jewish tenement narrative

⁵⁶ Tony Michaels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2-9.

⁵⁷ Michaels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 6; Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 95-98; Howard M. Sacher, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 177.

emerged, establishing the genre as a major form of left-wing letters during the 1910s and '20s. Understanding these texts as a tradition of Jewish working-class writing, rather than simply as reflections of immigrant experience (although they were often that too), acknowledges the material and economic realities from which this literature emerged, making visible its political content and motivations. The proliferation of Jewish tenement narratives before the Depression suggests that the roots of the “ghetto pastoral” can in fact be traced back to the economic and cultural matrix Michels refers to as “Yiddish socialism,” and to its rich literary legacy: the socialist and anarchist Yiddish sweatshop poets, the radical playwrights of the Arbeter Teater Farband (ARTEF), and the stories, poetry, and serialized novels that were regularly published in the Socialist *Forverts* [Jewish Daily Forward] and the Communist Party-affiliated *Frayhayt* [Freedom] newspapers.⁵⁸

“Plotting Gotham” acknowledges the intellectual crosscurrents between Yiddish and English writers by beginning with Yiddish writing in its second chapter before moving on to Anglophone tenement narratives, many of them emerging from a bilingual milieu, in the following three chapters and coda. Chapter two, “Polemical City: Yiddish Coney Island and the Image of America,” explores a range of Yiddish-language representations of the Brooklyn pleasure ground that were published during the interwar years, showing how Yiddish writers used Coney Island as a widely recognizable metonym for America’s particularly flamboyant

⁵⁸ New York also had widely-circulated Yiddish newspapers not associated with the left, such as the *Yidishes Tageblatt* (discussed in greater depth in chapter three), the *Tog*, and the *Morgn-Zhurnal* that published *belle-lettres*, but the *Forverts* and *Frayhayt* were the most renowned for their literary contributors. Yiddish scholar Dovid Katz has argued that “nearly all Yiddish writers in America published in newspapers and magazines affiliated with various socialist movements.” He notes, “Both [*Forverts* editor] Cahan and [*Frayhayt* editor] Olgin sought to attract to their newspapers (and to their ‘satellite’ literary journals) serious literary talent in addition to popular writers. Although somewhat of an oversimplification, Cahan was the clear winner in prose, having on his staff such giants of Yiddish fiction as Sholem Asch (1880-1957), Israel Joshua Singer (1893-1944), and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991). Olgin was the victor in attracting great poets, including Menachem Boraisho (1888-1949), Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886-1932), H. Leivick (1886-1962), and Avrom Reisin (1876-1953), as well as the classic prose humorist Moyshe Nadir (1885-1943) and the ‘poetic novelist’ Isaac Raboy (1882-1944).” Dovid Katz, “The Days of Proletpen in American Yiddish Poetry,” introduction to *Proletpen: America’s Rebel Yiddish Poets*, eds. Amelia Glaser and David Weintraub (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 6-7.

brand of capitalist mass culture, which was perceived to be the greatest threat, not only to serious and politically committed art, but to the Yiddishist project of constructing a lasting secular Yiddish culture in America. For writers such as Sholem Asch, Menke Katz (1906-1991), Moyshe Nadir (1885-1943), and Lamed Shapiro (1878-1948), Coney Island presented a tangible, if decidedly surreal, counterpart to the pre-immigration fantasy of America as a “golden land” of easy money and extravagant pleasure. Mapping political ideology onto a symbolic urban landscape, Yiddish writers created a polemical geography that used local sites to interrogate the promise of American prosperity and abundance and to contest or endorse – almost always the former – the vision of utopian capitalism on which it was premised.

The following three chapters and coda deal predominantly with the Anglophone tenement narratives that emerged out of the tradition of radical Yiddish letters. Chapter two, “Under the Sign of the Ghetto: Anzia Yeziarska and the Jewish Lower East Side Literary Tradition,” remains anchored in a bilingual literary milieu, tracing the tradition of Jewish immigrant women’s writing in which Yeziarska sought to position her tenement narratives. By presenting fellow Jewish immigrant women writers as engaged in a similar literary enterprise (despite the significant differences in their careers and writing), and by politicizing their literary production by associating it with the multiple oppressions – economic, racial, and patriarchal – unified under the sign of the Jewish ghetto, Yeziarska engaged in a project of minority canon formation that in many ways anticipated the literary politics of the late-twentieth century multicultural academy.

It was Yeziarska’s overwhelmingly critical image of the East Side ghetto, rather than the nostalgic image of the neighborhood already coming into wide circulation, on which the writers discussed in chapter four, “The Garden in the Jungle: Communist Writers and the Allegorical Landscape of the Ghetto,” elaborate. Escape and reform were the keynotes of Yeziarska’s

critique of the ghetto, but Communist Party-affiliated writers such Howard Fast, Mike Gold, Samuel Ornitz, and Budd Schulberg (1914-2009) told bleaker, more allegorical stories about the ghetto's tenacious grip on the lives of its inhabitants. To this end, they adapted venerable literary tropes – the Edenic garden, the dehumanizing jungle, and the anti-pastoral urban wasteland – to symbolically represent the struggle for imaginative and intellectual growth within a deterministic environment. These narratives breathe new life into the old opposition of city and country, urban and pastoral, conscripting the latter as a symbol of imaginative resistance and artistic and intellectual growth achieved in battle against the dehumanizing environment of the slums, which is presented as a reflection of the Darwinian struggle for survival under the regime of American capitalism.

The association of the pastoral with imaginative agency and artistic growth would, I argue, eventually lead to new ways of seeing and representing Jewish working-class New York. While the historical and demographic ruptures of midcentury certainly contributed to a more celebratory turn in postwar representations of once-reviled neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side, I argue that new ways of seeing can also be understood as intertextual responses to the literary developments traced in the following three chapters of this dissertation. In chapter five, “Crossing Brooklyn Bridge: Charles Reznikoff’s *By the Waters of Manhattan*,” I shift from a multi-author methodology to focusing on a single prose work – composed by an author best known for his poetry – that both responded to and rejected the widely shared representational tropes and conventions discussed in previous chapters. Published the same year as Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930), *By the Waters of Manhattan* adopted the association of pastoral imagery with the literary imagination to radically new ends.⁵⁹ Rejecting the convention of depicting the

⁵⁹ Reznikoff fictionalized family memoir of 1930 should not be confused with the two other books he published under the same title, *By the Waters of Manhattan: An Annual* (New York: C. Reznikoff, 1929), a self-published

Jewish ghetto as a deterministic environment, Reznikoff represents the developing poetic imagination of Ezekiel, his semi-autobiographical protagonist, through a series of literary mediations of the urban environment that overwrite the material reality of the city with pastoral scenes recalled from his voracious reading. These literary meditations allow Ezekiel to assert his imaginative agency over the deterministic urban environment. Brooklyn Bridge, which Ezekiel frequently crosses during his walks, serves as a recurring setting and symbol for the imaginative, aestheticizing distance he is able to obtain from the oppressive urban environment.

“Plotting Gotham” thus traces the circulation of spatial tropes across a sizeable corpus of interwar texts set in New York’s sites of Jewish working-class life and leisure. The dissertation’s coda, “Looking Ahead: Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City* and the Tenement Narrative Revisited,” gestures toward the larger significance of this body of writing by reading Kazin’s 1951 memoir, *A Walker in the City*, as an attempt to critically respond to and revise the conventions of the interwar tenement narrative. *A Walker in the City* is one of the most frequently cited examples of the postwar “renaissance” that scholars have attributed to a rejection of ideology and what Robert Alter has described as “the American Jewish intellectual’s newfound nostalgia for Jewish origins.”⁶⁰ As I show, however, Kazin’s memoir was not an inward turn away from politics, but rather an early Cold War-era attempt to redeem what he saw as the radical, socialist milieu of Brownsville, the working-class Jewish neighborhood in which he came of age. Kazin’s lyrical, valorizing representations of Brownsville were at once a reflection of the democratic socialism he still espoused at mid-century and an anti-Communist critique of narratives such as the ones discussed in chapter four.

collection of verse and prose; and a volume of poetry, *By the Waters of Manhattan: Selected Verse* (New York: New Directions, 1962). Reznikoff would also republish parts of the 1930 book in *Family Chronicle: An Odyssey from Russia to America* (New York: Marcus Weiner, 1963).

⁶⁰ Robert Alter, “The Education of Alfred Kazin,” *Commentary* 65, no. 6 (June 1978): 47.

In the chapters that follow, I chart a literary tradition beginning in the Yiddish literature of New York and emerging during the interwar period as an Anglophone literary renaissance centered on the working-class genre of the tenement narrative. As the coda demonstrates, reading the Jewish literature of New York as a tradition organized around place, politics, and the forms of secular ethnicity emerging from local and class identification reveals productive continuities among key texts in the larger tradition of Jewish American writing. Such a view of Jewish writing, moreover, reveals both the literary, constructed nature and the political seriousness of texts that have too often been read reductively as ethnographic records of a transitional immigrant experience. Instead, as the chapters that follow will show, interwar writers established a rich intertextual tradition of secular Jewish writing rooted in the native soil of the city that remains a cardinal point on the map of modern and contemporary Jewish writing.

Chapter 2

Yiddish Coney Island and the Image of America

The wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe that crested between 1880 and 1924 coincided with the emergence of Coney Island as America's preeminent working- and middle-class resort. Coney Island differed from older genteel resorts like Saratoga and Newport in its enthusiastic embrace of new amusement technologies that were then being introduced to eager crowds in the carnival midways of World's Fairs in Philadelphia, Chicago, Buffalo, and elsewhere.¹ By the turn-of-the-century, the small spit of land on the southern tip of Brooklyn had emerged as the nation's preeminent working- and middle-class pleasure ground, a permanent midway whose futuristic spectacles and mechanically reproducible amusements made it, in historian John F. Kasson's phrase, "the unofficial capital of the new mass culture."² Home to three of the world's earliest and most innovative amusement parks, Coney Island was instrumental in pioneering the mass production of standardized leisure.

Coney Island's futuristic array of attractions – gravity-defying rollercoasters that “looped the loop”; “scenic railroads” that carried visitors through dioramas of foreign lands; elaborately staged reenactments of naval battles, tenement fires, and catastrophic floods; huge dancing

¹ Jon Sterngass, *First Resorts: Pursuing Pleasure at Saratoga Springs, Newport, & Coney Island* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2001).

² John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 87. “Coney Island” historically refers to the entire peninsula on the southern shore of Brooklyn comprising, from west to east, the Sea Gate, Coney Island, Brighton Beach, and Manhattan Beach areas. Once an island separated from mainland Brooklyn by the Coney Island Creek, it became a peninsula when the creek was filled in during the nineteenth century to create a roadway connecting the island to the mainland. In this chapter, I follow common usage in employing the designation “Coney Island” to refer only to the western section of the peninsula traditionally known by that name.

pavilions; and dining halls that accommodated thousands at a sitting – drew hoards of fascinated journalists, writers, and cultural commentators among the densely packed throngs of pleasure seekers. The working- and middle-class resort also boasted astonishing technological and architectural innovations. In 1878, visitors to Coney Island could ride a steam elevator (itself a novelty) to the top of the Centennial Observatory, a 300-foot iron observation tower purchased after the close of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and transported to Coney Island, which stood taller than any structure in Manhattan. Seven years later, visitors marveled at a new architectural feat: the Elephant Colossus, a 150-foot wooden elephant covered in blue tin that housed a hotel, a cigar store, and a diorama. “Seeing the elephant” soon became a popular euphemism for a trip to the seaside city of wonders. And Coney Island was still in its infancy. By the turn of the century, it was home to the world’s first self-enclosed amusement parks, including the spectacular Dreamland pleasure grounds (operative from 1904 until 1911, when it was destroyed by a fire), in which neonatal incubators debuted as a sideshow attraction before making their way into the city’s hospitals.³ At night, the towers and minarets of the amusement parks were illuminated by thousands of electric lights that dazzled evening visitors with a skyline brighter even than Manhattan’s. Coney Island, many observers agreed, offered a window onto the new century and the dawning technological age.

Some journalists, naïvely traveling to Coney Island in search of seaside relief from Manhattan’s “din and crowds and nervous strain,” recoiled from the “worse din, denser crowds, and . . . infinitely more devastating nervous strain” they encountered in “New York’s City of

³ Michael Immerso, *Coney Island: The People’s Playground* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 22-23, 38-39, 60-82.

Play.”⁴ Most, however, responded with praise as extravagant as the carnival midway itself. “Why, surely, Coney is all the wonders of the world in one pyrotechnic masterpiece of coruscating concentration,” poet Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947) wrote in *Cosmopolitan* in 1905, explaining, “I write – or try to write – in this style on purpose – for am I not writing of Coney Island?”⁵ It was not only poets who were driven to flights of literary excess. In 1924, the *New York Times* wrote retrospectively – and with complete sincerity – that at Coney Island, “Man’s feet trod at last the final pinnacle of civilization, accessible for a nickel fare.”⁶ These articles were representative of the outpouring of enthusiastic reportage and pop social analysis that appeared in newspapers and magazines each summer during the first three decades of the twentieth century. “This age of electricity and science has certainly done much to overthrow the superstitions of our youth,” the *Outing Magazine* observed, “but . . . it would seem that the same age which has destroyed our illusions has created in its place something which is as near Fairyland as we ever dreamed of in our days of tops and pinafores.”⁷ And if some reporters suffered “nervous strain” in the whirlwind midways, far more numerous were those who eagerly attested to the “Human Need of Coney Island,” as Gallienne titled his article. Even the Methodist Episcopal *Christian Advocate* prescribed a trip to Coney Island as a cure for social malaise: “All the fun producers at Coney, with but a few exceptions, do good,” a 1914 article assured readers. “The ready-made amusement they hand out is not merely harmless – it is a positive, constructive force. Coney Island makes a decided contribution to morality.”⁸

⁴ Rollin Lynde Hartt, “The Amusement Park,” *The Atlantic Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science, Art, and Politics*, May 1907, 677; Robert Wilson Neal, “New York’s City of Play,” *The World To-Day*, August 1906, 818-826.

⁵ Richard Le Gallienne, “Human Need of Coney Island,” *Cosmopolitan*, July 1905, 239.

⁶ “How Coney Island’s Magic Was Evolved,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1924, 20.

⁷ Charles Belmont Davis, “The Renaissance of Coney,” *Outing Magazine*, August 1906, 522.

⁸ Willard Price, “Coney: The Tom-Tom of America,” Vol. V, “Midsummer Nights in New York,” *Christian Advocate*, September 3, 1914, 1237.

Jewish immigrants were well represented among the crowds who took advantage of Coney Island's opportunities for affordable leisure. In his memoirs, the novelist and long-time *Forverts* editor Abraham Cahan recalls of the early 1880s,

We [Jewish immigrants] were just beginning to discover Coney Island. . . .

Even though my memories are confused, I remember how different that Coney Island was from today's. We strolled through dense, happy crowds, all gentiles, with only a rare Jew in their midst. I remember the beach, with no Jews, and I can still hear the shouts of the peddlers and ticket-sellers for the small carts and the loop-the-loop and the Ferris wheel and the merry-go-rounds.⁹

This had dramatically changed by the first decade of the twentieth century, however. In 1909 and 1910, respectively, moviegoers were expected to laugh with recognition at the antics of *Cohen at Coney Island* and *Levi and Family at Coney Island*.¹⁰ By that time, the association of Jews with Coney Island had become so entrenched in the popular imagination that a 1909 issue of *The Reform Advocate* could joke that the "attempt to enforce 'blue laws' on Coney Island . . . will drive out hundreds of Jewish owners of restaurants and places of amusement, since that famous resort is so invaded by Jewish enterprise and Jewish visitors that Coney Island may be rightly called Cohen's Island."¹¹

Despite Coney Island popularity among Jewish immigrants, and in striking contrast to the enthusiasm it inspired in the Anglophone press, Yiddish writers, with the notable exception of Sholem Asch, were overwhelmingly critical in their representations of the world-famous pleasure grounds. As I argue in the pages that follow, Coney Island's affordable abundance and technological modernity offered Yiddish writers a powerful symbol for the novelty of American life and cultural values. If the Lower East Side was an ideal setting for accounts of the poverty

⁹ Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, trans. Leo Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 398-99; originally published in multiple volumes as *Bleter fun mayn lebn* (Pages from my life), an untranslatable pun on the word "*blat*," which can mean both "page" and "newspaper."

¹⁰ Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984), 38.

¹¹ George Selikowitsh, "Flats and Sharps," *Reform Advocate*, May 29, 1909, 455.

and hardship Jewish immigrants encountered in America, Coney Island presented a tangible, if decidedly surreal, counterpart to the pre-immigration fantasy of America as “a vast, continuous fair,” as it is imagined by characters in Yiddish novelist and playwright Leon Kobrin’s (1873?-1946) 1918 novel *Fun a litvish shtetl biz’n tenement hoyz* (From a Lithuanian village to a tenement house, translated by Isaac Goldberg in 1920 as *From a Lithuanian Village*).¹²

It is important to remember that in the tumultuous first decades of the twentieth century, America’s status as a home in the diaspora was anything but a foregone conclusion to Jewish immigrant writers, who, encountering the realities of poverty, exploitation, and anti-Jewish discrimination in New York, were quickly disabused of their hopes for immediate economic and political salvation in the “golden land.” As historian Beth Wenger notes, “The trope of expectation followed by disappointment emerged as a theme throughout Jewish accounts of first encounters with America . . .”¹³ In the accounts of working-class immigrant life produced by these writers, the roiling streets of New York became a metonym for the larger nation. As this chapter will show, their representations of New York were often presented as critical evaluations of “the new country” as it was experienced by the residents of its most densely Jewish city. These images of New York rarely stood in isolation. Rather, they were invoked in pointed contrast both to the *shtetl* (a small, densely-Jewish village in the Russian Pale of Settlement) and – usually with devastating irony – to the mythical image of America as the “*goldene medine*,” the “Golden Land” of easy money and social equality.¹⁴ The Galician-born Yiddish poet Beresh

¹² Kobrin, *A Lithuanian Village*, 184.

¹³ Beth Wenger, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 34.

¹⁴ As early as 1892, for instance, Eliakum Zunsner’s popular Yiddish verses in “The Golden Land” depicted “the narrow streets” of New York “where the mass stands compressed, / . . . One sacrifices his child for a cent, / Another is thrown from his dwelling for not paying rent, / Many immigrants in depressed mood, / Fall from hunger on the street, / Much poverty and sickness, too, / Are all found in this golden land.” Translated and quoted by Beth Wenger in *History Lessons*, 34-35. Published in Yiddish as Eliakum Zunsner, “Dos goldene land,” in *Ale verk in dray band*

Vaynshteyn (1905-1967) might have been summarizing the question behind several generations of immigrant narratives when he asked at midcentury, “When all is said and done, isn’t the world crazy / to say: / that the best land is America!”¹⁵

For Vaynshteyn, writing after the Holocaust and the destruction of East European Jewry, the answer was a resounding affirmative: “A world is, after all, not crazy / to say: / that the best land is America!”¹⁶ Until the late 1930s, however, this was still very much a matter of debate to the Jewish writers who arrived in New York to discover the sweatshops and tenements of the Lower East Side and the city’s other “Jewish ghettos.” For many interwar writers, the geography of New York took on a highly politicized significance. Specific streets and neighborhoods were invoked as evidence in an ongoing debate that staged critical comparisons of material and cultural conditions in America both with memories of Eastern Europe and with America’s own national mythology. Mapping ideology onto an urban landscape that was often more symbolic than mimetic, Yiddish writers created a polemical geography that used local sites as indexes of the larger values of the nation. Coney Island is an important, if often overlooked, point on this map. Representations of Coney Island allowed Yiddish writers to interrogate the promise of American prosperity and industrial modernity and to challenge or affirm the vision of utopian capitalism invoked by metaphors such as the “golden land,” or, in later years, the “American dream.”¹⁷ Yiddish scholar David Roskies, in “Coney Island, USA: America in the Yiddish

(Complete works in three volumes), vol. 1 (New York: Aba Katsenelenboygen, 1920), 274-79. For a discussion of Zunser in relation to the writing of Anzia Yezierska, see chapter three.

¹⁵ Beresh Vaynshteyn, *Amerike/America* (bilingual excerpt), in *Proletpen: America’s Rebel Yiddish Poets*, eds. Amelia Glaser and David Weintraub (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 38-39. These lines and the ones quoted in the following paragraph are my more literal revision of Amelia Glaser’s translation. Vaynshteyn’s epic poem was originally published as *Amerike (poeme)* [America (an epic)] (New York: Culture congress, 1955).

¹⁶ Vaynshteyn, *Amerike*, 38.

¹⁷ I use the phrase “utopian capitalism” to invoke both the naïve pre-immigration myth of capitalist America as a “golden land” of universal prosperity, and the larger constellation of ideas that posit free market capitalism as an egalitarian, self-correcting system that equitably distributes wealth according to individual merit and effort, resulting over time in what Adam Smith describes as “that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the

Literary Imagination,” the only other scholarly treatment of this subject, has argued that, “[b]y the first decade of the twentieth century, Coney Island became the physical and psychological boundary between the Old World and the New, a liminal, conflictual space where one’s longing – and loathing – for the Old World were experienced most keenly . . .”¹⁸ By the 1920s, however, the Brooklyn pleasure grounds had assumed quite a different symbolic resonance in the work of Yiddish writers. For satirist Moyshe Nadir, fiction writer Lamed Shapiro, and poet Menke Katz, Coney Island was a quintessentially American phenomenon, indeed, the very apotheosis of the technological and cultural novelty of the “new country,” as well as a vivid illustration of capitalist mass culture: the matrix of low-brow popular entertainment, cultural commodification, and capitalist spectacle. In the resort’s frenetic crowds and amusements, they saw an expression of the brash, fast-paced culture of novelty and sensationalism they associated with life in America.

Sholem Asch’s 1918 novel *Onkl Mozes* (translated by Isaac Goldberg as *Uncle Moses* in 1920) is exceptional among Yiddish treatments of Coney Island in its presentation of the leisure site as a symbolic vindication of the American Dream. For other writers, Coney Island offered a more ominous and ironic vision of the golden land. *Uncle Moses* was published at the height of Coney Island’s popularity and fame, but by the late 1920s, the resort had begun to decline, as fires and bankruptcy ravaged its once-palatial amusement zone. Although Coney Island’s changing fortunes might have been expected to signal a corresponding decline in its importance as a cultural symbol, the opposite was true in Yiddish fiction. Its status as a familiar feature in the New York landscape, as well as the increasingly threadbare spectacle of its amusement parks,

people.” Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776, The Harvard Classics, 10, ed. C. J. Bullock (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), 16.

¹⁸ David Roskies, “Coney Island, USA: America in the Yiddish Literary Imagination,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70.

made it at once an easily recognizable setting and a potent symbol for the transience and shallow decadence of the American culture of novelty, sensation, and spectacle. Unlike Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919), who used Coney Island as a metaphor for his emancipatory, kaleidoscopic Beat aesthetic, Nadir, Shapiro, Katz, and others invoked the resort in polemical contrast to symbols of Jewish cultural inspiration and continuity – the golden peacock, the courtyard of the Vilna synagogue, and the *shtetl*, respectively – as a metaphor for the elements of American life that seemed to pose the greatest threat to the project of establishing an indigenous secular Yiddish literary culture in New York.¹⁹ By the late 1920s, Yiddish writers already knew what historians would later observe in retrospect: that American mass culture competed with Yiddish literature for more than the immigrant’s attention and time. It was also a powerful means of acculturation that represented both a symbolic rejection of *yidishkeyt* and a path to assimilation that would ultimately diminish both the linguistic audience and the community of interest for which Yiddish literature was produced.²⁰

Yiddish writers with left-wing investments were particularly troubled by Coney Island’s culture of mass-produced novelty, but they were far from alone in regarding mass culture with anxiety. Prominent intellectuals and public figures Robert Underwood Johnson (1853-1937), Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833-1908), and William Dean Howells (1837-1920) summed up

¹⁹ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New York: New Directions, 1958). Ferlinghetti’s title is borrowed from Henry Miller’s 1936 prose piece “Into the Night Life . . . A Coney Island of the Mind,” in *Black Spring* (New York: Grove Press, 1963). Ferlinghetti attributes his title to Miller, noting that “[i]t is used out of context but expresses the way I felt about these poems when I wrote them – as if they were, taken together, a kind of Coney Island of the mind, a kind of circus of the soul.” Ferlinghetti, *Coney Island*, 8.

²⁰ As early as 1896, Abraham Cahan parodied the immigrant’s attempt to acculturate through participation in American leisure institutions (boxing and the dance hall) in his classic Anglophone novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896). Kasson notes, “For immigrants and especially for their children, notoriously eager to assimilate, Coney Island provided a means to participate in mainstream American culture on an equal footing. Far more immediately and successfully than agents of the genteel culture, Coney’s amusement parks and other institutions of the new mass culture incorporated immigrants and working-class groups into their forms and values.” Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 39-40. See also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

the American literary establishment's sense of embattled opposition to the new entertainment technologies in a letter that declared the newly founded American Academy of Arts and Letters a partisan in the fight for "dignity, moderation and purity of expression" against the rising forces of "vulgarity, sensationalism," and "the tyranny of novelty."²¹ As polyglots and cosmopolitan intellectuals, America's Yiddish writers participated in this broader debate; but as Yiddishists – as proponents of a modern, secular Yiddish culture – a unique matrix of economic, political, cultural, and communal imperatives further complicated their situation. Yiddish writers were almost universally bilingual if not trilingual, and their use of Yiddish often reflected the belief – made explicit in the 1908 Czernowitz Conference on the Yiddish language – that Yiddish, as a language of the Jewish folk, was also the most appropriate linguistic vessel for the creation and maintenance of an autonomous, non-territorial Jewish culture.²² Drawing inspiration from nineteenth-century European national movements, with their emphasis on indigenous folk cultures, this stance was further bolstered by the folk-oriented leftwing discourses that dominated

²¹ R. W. B. Lewis, "1898-1907: The Founders' Story," in *A Century of Arts & Letters*, ed. John Updike (New York; Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1998), 22. See also Nancy Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Bentley points out, however, that even the more conservative members of the American Academy of Arts and Letters found inspiration in the technologies and aesthetics of mass culture: "[I]t is a mistake to assume that artists at the highest levels were unmoved by the novel sensory experiences and iconic events that drew mass audiences. For leading artists and intellectuals, evocations of vertigo, speed, and collective shock began to supply creative structures and informing energies for use in even the most refined or cerebral of their works" (4).

²² Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking*, Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 80-82. Miron notes that the Yiddishist "assumption, that Yiddish being the language of the folk could become the vehicle for a modern, humanist Jewish culture that would retain its autonomous existence without a territorial basis," although tenaciously "clung to" by many Yiddish writers, became increasingly unrealistic during the interwar period (176-181). On bilingualism, Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich (1894-1969) has observed that "Ashkenazic Jews . . . have always been a minority in a non-Jewish milieu; hence they always had to be bilingual; most members of the Jewish community had to know – some more, some less – besides their Jewish language, the language of the coterritorial majority." Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, ed. Paul Glasser, trans. Shlomo Noble with the assistance of Joshua A. Fishman (New Haven: Yale University Press and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2008), 247. In addition to knowing national languages such as English, Russian, or Polish, most Yiddish writers would also have acquired some knowledge of Hebrew from religious training early in life. Anita Norich has cautioned against overemphasizing the concept of "choice" in discussions of writers' decisions to write in a particular tongue, advocating a switch from the language of "choice" to that of "use." Anita Norich, "Language Choice," in "Critical Terms in Jewish Language," *Frankel Institute Annual*, eds. Anita Norich and Joshua Miller, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11879367.2011.006>.

Yiddish political and cultural life in New York in the first half of the twentieth century. Yiddish authors wrote for the Jewish masses, but they were at pains to distinguish their own efforts from the bread and circus of a mass culture focused on cheap sentimentality and sensationalism. Theirs was the work of intellectual uplift and political awakening; the new mass culture cultivated unthinking conformity in the service of financial profit.

Such clear distinctions between “high” and “low” culture, however, were often difficult in the Yiddish literary environment of New York. As Ruth Wisse has observed,

Since Yiddish writers . . . could hope for no wealthy patron to support them, no government to honor them, and no institution of higher learning to sponsor them, they were forced, if they wanted to earn a living by the pen, to work for the press. . . This was to prove one of the critical differences between the artistic life of Greenwich Village and its Yiddish counterpart only a few blocks away on the East Side. As the gap between high and low culture widened throughout America, the best Yiddish writers were absorbed by the organs of mass appeal.²³

This wedding of “serious” literature with the most powerful institutions of Yiddish media appealed to the leftwing, populist sensibilities of both the Yiddish writers and the socialist and Communist newspapers that employed them (most prominently the democratic socialist *Forverts*, founded in 1897 under the editorship of Abraham Cahan; and the pro-Soviet Communist *Frayhayt*, founded in 1922 by Moyshe Olgin [1878-1939]). But this reliance on newspapers also underscored the precariousness of the Yiddish writer’s position in America, since “serious” literature had to compete for readers’ attention with sensationalist news stories (many of them fictions in their own right), advertisements for the Yiddish theater and popular sites of leisure like Coney Island and the Catskills, and with the “extraordinarily popular” *shund*, or “trash,” stories that, in the words of Anita Norich, “often vie[d] with [serious literature] for space on the very same pages.”²⁴

²³ Ruth R. Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* (Cambridge: MA; London, England: 1988), 109.

²⁴ Anita Norich, “Yiddish Literary Studies,” *Modern Judaism* 10, no. 3 (October 1990), 305.

Newspapers like the *Forverts* and the *Frayhayt* gave Yiddish writers a wider circulation and audience than they might otherwise have hoped for, but it is clear that those with modernist ambitions and political commitments feared that they were losing the battle for the attention of their readers. Interwar political and demographic developments threatened to further shrink America's Yiddish-reading audience, a predicament that became increasingly acute after the 1924 passage of anti-immigration legislation that staunched the influx of new Yiddish readers and writers to America. As Yiddish and Hebrew scholar Dan Miron has noted, the decline of immigration had ominous implications for Yiddish writers, who realized that their audience would grow increasingly smaller as young Jewish intellectuals – those more resistant to the lure of mass culture – turned to Anglophone writing instead of filling the places left vacant by an aging generation of Yiddish intellectuals. Miron paraphrases Yiddish poet Aaron Glants-Leyeles's (1889-1966) grim assessment of the situation in the late 1930s: “[T]hose who could understand the Yiddish modernists had stopped reading Yiddish, while those who could still read Yiddish would not understand the modernists.”²⁵

Sholem Asch and the Promise of America Prosperity

These concerns were less urgent for Sholem Asch than for the other writers discussed in this chapter. In contrast to the embattled Yiddish modernists of New York, Asch's work comfortably straddled the divide between high and low culture, earning him serious critical attention (as often negative as positive) as well as a wide international readership both in Yiddish and in translation. Born into a Hasidic family in Kutno, Poland (then in the Russian Empire) in 1880, Asch received a traditional religious education, which he supplemented with forbidden readings from the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) and secular European literature. In 1900, he

²⁵ Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 176-77.

moved to Warsaw, where his literary efforts received valuable encouragement from the famed Yiddish writer and mentor to young talent, Y. L. Peretz (1852-1915). In Warsaw, Asch wrote prolifically, earning a reputation as a prominent voice in the Yiddish literary vanguard for his novella *A Shtetl* (1904) and his controversial play *Got fun nekome* (God of vengeance, 1907). With the outbreak of war in 1914, he and his family moved to New York, where they enjoyed short periods of residence in the Bronx, Greenwich Village, and the outskirts of Coney Island, before finally settling in rural Staten Island. Asch became a United States citizen in 1920, although he resumed his travels after the end of the war, resettling for a time in Warsaw. “The first Yiddish author to rank among the West’s leading contemporary novelists,” as literary scholar Ben Siegel has written, Asch was “the most translated and widely read of modern Yiddishists” as well as “a near-idol of the Yiddish-reading masses” until near the end of his career. By the interwar period, his writing had made him rich, an almost unheard of feat for a Yiddish writer. In the midst of the Great Depression, while other Yiddish writers were barely subsisting, Asch constructed a lavish villa replete with swimming pool, orchards, and bowling green on the outskirts of Nice in the French Alps. “Villa Shalom” was completed in 1934, but with war threatening once again in Europe, he returned to the United States in 1938.²⁶

A celebrity among Jewish audiences, and one of the few Yiddish authors to receive widespread attention in the Anglophone press, Asch had no reason to share his contemporaries’ anxieties about the effects of American mass culture on the tastes and leisure practices of New

²⁶ Joseph Sherman, s.v. “Sholem Asch,” in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Asch_Sholem. Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch: An Introduction to His Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976), 1-2, 8, 45, 54-55, 111. As Anita Norich discusses in “Sholem Asch and the Christian Question,” in *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, ed. Nanette Stahl (New Haven: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2004), Asch’s popularity among Yiddish readers would quickly turn to animosity with the publication of his three Christological novels (*The Nazarene*, 1939; *The Apostle*, 1943; and *Mary*, 1949), which presented a flattering portrait of Jesus of Nazareth and the early Christians in a naïve attempt to argue for the theological and historical kinship of Judaism and Christianity. Asch’s fall from grace in the world of Yiddish letters, however, was matched by a no-less dramatic ascent among Anglophone and Christian audiences who read him in translation.

York's Yiddish-speaking immigrants. It should not be altogether surprising, then, that Asch was also an exception among Yiddish writers in celebrating Coney Island's mass culture as a utopian solution to the inequality and exploitation associated with daily immigrant life. Setting three central chapters of his 1918 novel *Uncle Moses* on Coney Island, he depicts the resort as the spectacular fulfillment of the promise of American capitalist abundance.

Uncle Moses tells the story of Masha, a plucky fourteen-year-old girl who catches the eye of "Uncle" Moses Melnick, the autocratic sweatshop boss for whom her father works. In a pathos-laden illustration of the social costs of sweated labor, Masha, while still a girl, is tacitly sold to Uncle Moses, who in return favors her impoverished parents with gifts and money while he waits for her to come of age. As Masha nears her majority, Asch introduces the reader to Charlie, Masha's childhood friend and an ardent, if newly minted, socialist who serves as Uncle Moses's chief ideological foil and romantic rival. This narrative of sexual exploitation allows Asch to address what Roskies has identified as "the twin themes of class and generational conflict that so preoccupied American Yiddish audiences and readers throughout the whole period of mass immigration," but he does so in service of a broader critique of the conditions of labor in America.²⁷ In *Uncle Moses*, as in so many Jewish immigrant novels, the social, political, and economic values of the nation are metonymically represented by the geography of New York, which in turn takes its character from the economic and sexual struggle waged in its sweatshops and factories. The trope of the sweatshop (an institution with which all the novel's characters are, in one way or another, involved) recurs throughout the novel as a metaphor for the life the immigrant encounters in America. A character's decision to return to his Polish hometown, for instance, provides an opportunity for the narrator to reflect on the larger values of the nation: "[The parents] had brought their children to America. And America had taken the

²⁷ Roskies, "Coney Island, USA," 76.

children away. America was spewing them forth, throwing them out as if they were a bit of rags. America had parted them in their old age. It still had a little use for the old mother. The aged father it was sending home to die.”²⁸ The narrator’s broad references to “America” identify the national ethos with the economic logic of the New York sweatshop.

While Manhattan’s and Brooklyn’s working-class Jewish neighborhoods illustrate the failures of American capitalism in *Uncle Moses*, Asch’s celebratory depiction of “the summer beaches of Coney Island . . . interprets them as a metonym of American democracy, a glowing epiphany promising freedom, equality, and joie de vivre,” as Miron has noted.²⁹ In contrast to the dystopian picture of Manhattan, seen from Williamsburg Bridge at twilight, that Asch paints at the beginning of the novel – a “new confused Babylon” of “towering, darkened structures” traversed by the “wild iron creatures” of the elevated trains – the illuminated “palaces” and “flaming spires” of Coney Island appear with “the splendor of a Mecca, a Jerusalem,” forming a “holy wonder-city . . . that br[ings] joy, exaltation and pleasure to millions.”³⁰ The contrast is pointed. Manhattan and Williamsburg, neighborhoods of Jewish residence straddling the East River, are compared to the Israelite encampments “by the rivers of Babylon” (Psalm 137: 1), the archetypal site of Jewish exile and dispossession. Coney Island, in contrast, though only the destination for a brief afternoon getaway, is compared to the Jewish Biblical homeland and the Muslim site of pilgrimage. These allusions to Biblical geography set up the novel’s invocation of Coney Island as a utopian model for the as yet unrealized potential of life in America. Coney

²⁸ Sholem Asch, *Uncle Moses*, trans. Isaac Goldberg (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), 76. The changing gender dynamics of Jewish life in America have been analyzed in such works as Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1976); Anita Norich, “Mother, Mother Tongue, and Motherland: The Family in Jewish American Fiction,” *YIVO Annual*, vol. 23, ed. Deborah Dash Moore (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1996), 159-180; and Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

²⁹ Dan Miron, “God Bless America: Of and Around Sholem Asch’s *East River*,” in *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, ed. Nanette Stahl (New Haven, CT: The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2004), 165.

³⁰ Asch, *Uncle Moses*, 1-2, 143.

Island, for Asch, is the American space that most nearly lives up to the Jewish “myth of America as the new Zion, an alternate form of the Promised Land.”³¹

The beach provides the setting of the first two of the three chapters Asch devotes to an outing Charlie and Masha take to Coney Island. These chapters emphasize the diversity of the largely immigrant crowd, celebrating the demotic resort as a site of equality and social release. Ecstatic at the sense of camaraderie and mutual hilarity he sees there, Charlie exclaims to Masha,

There are folks who don't care for Coney Island, because, they declare, it's the resort of the uncultured masses. They dirty the ocean with their awkward, ugly bodies, say such folk. Yet it seems to me that only in a crowd can you find contentment and happiness, – in a vast, crude multitude. It would bore me to have my pleasure all by myself. It would chafe me to be a lone happy mortal, or to belong to a happy chosen few who alone possess the means of pleasure. Real pleasure may be had only in a place like this, beholding a vast crowd enjoying itself. At such times it seems that all evil and suffering have vanished from the earth, and joy belongs to all. Here it seems, one may enjoy pleasure to the utmost.³²

Charlie's celebration of the crowd must be understood in the context of his recent conversion to socialism. For Charlie, the leftwing trope of “the masses” finds its physical analogue in the city's diverse immigrant crowds; and his pleasure at the spectacle of the “vast crowd enjoying itself” at Coney Island emerges in implicit opposition to the conditions of disunity and alienation that characterize the workaday existence of the proletariat in other sections of the novel. Elsewhere in the city, the Uncle Moseses of industry keep firm hold of the means of production, but at Coney Island, at least “the means of pleasure” are shared equally by all, just as “joy belongs to all.”

Published a year after the October Revolution of 1917, at the height of what scholar of the Yiddish literary left Gennady Estraiikh has called the “Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism,” *Uncle Moses* is a somewhat muddled concession to Jewish political enthusiasms

³¹ Wenger, *History Lessons*, 38.

³² Asch, *Uncle Moses*, 129-30.

of the day.³³ In *Uncle Moses* as in his other works, Asch shows a canny ability to capitalize on the latest political debates and developments; in his personal convictions, however, Asch was both more conservative (at least, by the radical standards of Yiddish letters) and less dogmatic than his young hero, an inconsistency that appears tellingly in the novel's Coney Island chapters. Despite Charlie's revolutionary hopes and professed class solidarity, the image of the working-class resort that emerges from *Uncle Moses* ultimately suggests a solution to the problem of inequality and exploitation that would have been anathema to Charlie's political comrades: in short, the standardization and mass production of culture as a means of reconciling the reality of life in America with the idealized image that Anzia Yeziarska has called "the golden legend of the golden land."³⁴

At Coney Island, Charlie and Masha can join the pleasure-hungry masses acting out the extravagant fantasies of leisure and wealth that popular lore associated with life in America. As night approaches, they abandon the beach for the amusement midway. They pool their money, which, despite being little over a dollar, proves sufficient to allow them to feast on hot dogs and Cracker Jack before visiting a series of elaborate attractions. Accepting the amusement parks' invitation to suspend disbelief, Asch's narrator adopts what might be described as a perspective of credulity, allowing his protagonists to inhabit fully the diegetic worlds of the sideshow adventures they visit. For five cents, they "gaz[e] upon 'the seven wonders of the world.'" Later, they pay two more nickels, the first to see a "sleeping Chinese princess, with her tiny compressed feet and her golden slippers." The second nickel goes to pay for a glimpse of Aladdin, who, "sprung to life out of their childhood dreams and their fairy-tale books," rubs his magic lamp and makes a "table laden with gold and silver vessels" appear in mid air. The narrative whisks them

³³ Gennady Estraikh, *In Harness: The Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

³⁴ Anzia Yeziarska, "How I Found America," in *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Signet Classic, 1996), 210.

from what the narrator describes as “one palace of enchantment to the next,” finally depositing them astride two Arabian thoroughbreds bedecked with “huge, costly diamonds, rubies, sapphires and other precious stones.” Now elevated to the status of “prince and his princess,” the young protagonists find themselves, with the fall of night, atop a Ferris wheel, looking down at the dreamlike spectacle of the illuminated city: “The burning wheels, the flaming spires, the illuminated streets, merged into the splendor of a Mecca, a Jerusalem, and their majestic, radiant, holy glow drew all hearts toward them. And every worshipper thanked and blessed the holy wonder-city of Coney Island that brought joy, exaltation and pleasure to millions.”³⁵ In the “wonder-city” of pleasure and play, Masha and Charlie are inaugurated, if only for the evening, into a democratized leisure class in which the pleasures of travel, adventure, and indulgence are simulated for mere nickels. Indeed, the repeated mention of the five-cent entrance fee, juxtaposed with the spectacular account of Charlie and Masha’s adventures, emphasizes the resort’s standardization of leisure. For the cost of subway fare, Asch’s protagonists come into intimate, if imagined, contact with astounding riches: the “golden slippers” of a princess, a “table laden with gold and silver vessels,” horses decked in “costly diamonds, rubies, sapphires and other precious stones.” On the beach Charlie and Masha experience an exhilarating equality and release from social convention, but in the amusement parks of the boardwalk, they are lifted into the ranks of royalty.

In setting this pageant of prosperity at Coney Island, Asch was responding to the resort’s innovative use of space and spectacle. The narrative’s transition from the Ferris wheel ride into a long description of Coney Island at night effectively recasts the sprawling amusement grounds as a unified “totalizing” image, as Michel de Certeau famously describes the view from the World Trade Center. For Certeau, the attempt to see the city as a whole corresponds to an impulse for

³⁵ Asch, *Uncle Moses*, 139-143.

control and possession allied with the interests of capital and power. The desire to “mak[e] the complexity of the city readable” associated with the view-from-above is subtly undermined, however, by the agency of street-level pedestrians whose unscripted movements complicate and rewrite spatial masternarratives.³⁶ At Coney Island, however, even street-level movements followed a pre-scripted course. Drawing on techniques of stagecraft and tropes of myth and adventure, amusement park owners reimagined the space of the city as the setting for a dramatic narrativization of movement and play. Entering the gates of any of the three amusement centers, patrons were implicitly asked to suspend disbelief as they moved through a predetermined sequence of staged adventures and encounters with the exotic. Pleasure-seekers participated in rides and spectacles that invited them to assume the simultaneous roles of actor and spectator. Riding a “scenic train” through elaborate sets designed to evoke adventurous encounters in distant lands, patrons were enlisted as actors in the spectacles they simultaneously participated in and observed, immersing themselves in what one contemporary journalist referred to as “an enchanted, story-book land.”³⁷ Looking back on Coney Island’s development, a 1924 *New York Times* article describes “the transformation of the spectator from mere spectator into participant” as the final and most important “stage” in the “evolution” of the resort.³⁸

In *Uncle Moses*, the “transformation” proves empowering for Charlie and Masha, who are, if only for the evening, lifted beyond the poverty and care of their daily lives. Such relief can be achieved only in the liminal space of Coney Island – liminal both temporally, as a holiday destination, and spatially, as a site on the periphery of the city. For Asch, however, even this

³⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 91-93.

³⁷ Albert Bigelow Paine, “The New Coney Island,” *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, August, 1904, 535.

³⁸ “How Coney Island’s Magic was Evolved,” 20.

Scholars of American leisure culture have since noted this blurring of boundaries between the actor and spectator. Writing of George C. Tilyou’s Steeplechase Park, Kathy Peiss observes, “Audience participation, the interaction of strangers, and voyeurism were incorporated into Tilyou’s conception of mass entertainment.” Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 135.

brief glimpse of a different reality reveals the utopian potentialities of a more humane capitalism. These chapters resuscitate the much-battered dream of America as a land of opportunity and abundance. Yet Coney Island is, for Asch, less a tangible reality than an instructive vision, a dress rehearsal performance of “America, as the oppressed of all lands have dreamed America to be,” not “America *as it is*,” to quote Anzia Yeziarska’s once again.³⁹ Coney Island is, after all, “a dream,” “a legendary city sprung to life out of a children’s book,” and the rest of the novel reinforces the bitterness of the reality to which Charlie and Masha must awake. Back in the city of sweatshops and slums, Charlie has few opportunities for economic success, and Masha’s only possibility for escaping her family’s poverty lies in her willingness to allow herself to be transformed into yet another of Uncle Moses’s possessions. At Coney Island, however, Charlie and Masha are granted economic agency through the democracy of supply and demand: the resort’s recognition of the collective buying power of the working class and the profit-making potential of mechanized leisure. Asch acknowledges the ephemeral nature of this performative prosperity, staging it as a vision as yet unrealized, a simulacrum of a city that does not exist. Yet the ability to imagine such an alternate reality, he suggests, is itself reason for faith in progress and, therefore, the best argument for a more moderate politics than the revolutionary socialism espoused by Charlie.

Moyshe Nadir Responds

Asch’s ability to perceive a utopian dimension to Coney Island’s mass culture reflects his greater willingness (no less apparent in *East River* [1946], his most ambitious novel of Jewish New York) to invest hope in the American Dream despite the waking reality of social inequality. While most Yiddish writers invoked the trope of the golden land as an ironic indictment of the

³⁹ Yeziarska, “How I Found America,” 217.

tarnished reality of life in America, Asch, despite his years of residence in the United States, retained his ability to view America as an abstraction – not as a land but as an idea – to paraphrase the title of a speech he reportedly delivered to a group of New York’s German Jewish elite.⁴⁰ Asch’s liberal politics appear quite progressive by today’s standards, but in the radicalized atmosphere of interwar New York, where writers associated with the socialist *Forverts* were known as “Di Rékhte,” or the “right wing” camp, Asch’s writing were generally seen as politically disengaged or even conservative.⁴¹

Asch had close associations with the Yiddish literary left in the United States, but such associations were inevitable in a literary marketplace where “nearly all Yiddish writers . . . published in newspapers and magazines affiliated with various socialist movements.”⁴² He “sympathized strongly with the socialist workers and intellectuals” of the failed Russian Revolution of 1905, according to Siegel, and, in Norich’s words, “was attracted . . . intermittently to socialism. . .”⁴³ Certainly, Asch, a longstanding contributor to the socialist *Forverts*, was grouped among the “Rékhte” during the 1920s, when the already factional world of American Yiddish letters was increasingly riven by the ideological battles between anti- and pro-Soviet camps, represented by the *Forverts* and the *Frayhayt*, respectively.⁴⁴ When the influential critic and *Frayhayt* editor Moyshe Olgin became a leading advocate of proletarian literature in 1926, he called for an ideological restructuring of the Yiddish canon that, according

⁴⁰ Moyshe Nadir refers to this speech in a 1929 open letter to Asch, “Est dir nisht op s’harts, Sholem Asch!: A Brivl tsu Sholem Asch mikoyekh zany brivl vegn Nombergs toyt,” (Don’t eat your heart out, Sholem Asch!: A little letter to Sholem Asch regarding his letter about [Hersh Dovid] Nomberg’s death), in *Di nayste verk: Polemik* (New York: Yidburo Publishers, 1936), as a hundred dollar engagement “to speak through the telephone with some ‘Yehudim’ [wealthy German Jews] from Riverside [Drive] . . . and write a wild article on the subject that ‘Amerike iz nisht keyn land, nor an ideye’ [America is Not a Land, but an Idea]” (82).

⁴¹ Dovid Katz, “The Days of Proletpen in American Yiddish Poetry,” introduction to *Proletpen: America’s Rebel Yiddish Poets*, eds. Amelia Glaser and David Weintraub (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴³ Siegel, *Controversial Sholem Asch*, 33; Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture During the Holocaust* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 74.

⁴⁴ Katz, “Days of Proletpen,” 6.

to Estraikh, rejected “90 percent of Sholem Asch’s works . . . as being unpalatable for the worker.”⁴⁵ After Abraham Cahan of the *Forverts* broke with Asch over his flattering portrait of the life of Jesus in *The Nazarene* (1939), Asch signed on with the Communist *Frayhayt*, which published the novel both in serial form and as a book. Estraikh has suggested, however, that Asch’s association with the *Frayhayt* was “a marriage of convenience” rather than a reflection of political commitment (simply put, the *Frayhayt* paid when the *Forverts* would not), and Yiddish scholar Mikhail Krutikov has characterized Asch’s writing as exemplifying a “neoromantic apology [for] the bourgeoisie and social harmony.”⁴⁶ Certainly, Asch was among the few Yiddish writers whose bank accounts qualified them for membership among the bourgeoisie, and his conspicuous wealth made him a target of personal resentment as well as ideological opposition.

Moyshe Nadir, the *Frayhayt*’s star writer and one of New York’s leading Yiddish literary talents, was among Asch’s most strident opponents. Born Yitskhok Rayz in eastern Galicia in 1885, Nadir, like Asch, had a traditional religious education as a young boy. In 1898, he immigrated to the United States with his mother and siblings, settling on the Lower East Side with his father, who had preceded the family to New York. As an adolescent, Nadir found work as a manual laborer to supplement the family’s income, but by his early adulthood, he had made a name for himself as a satirist associated with the modernist Yiddish poets known as “Di Yunge” (“the youth,” or “the youngsters”).⁴⁷ The Yunge earned a reputation for advocating art

⁴⁵ Estraikh, *In Harness*, 92-93.

⁴⁶ Gennady Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War* (Leeds: Legenda, 2008), 11; Mikhail Krutikov, *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle: Expressionism, Marxism, and Yiddish Literature in the Life and Work of Meir Wiener*, Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 248. It should be noted, moreover, that Asch’s association with the *Forverts* says more about the latter’s mainstream appeal (it was, after all, the most widely read Yiddish daily in the United States) than about Asch’s political commitments.

⁴⁷ Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein, eds., “Moyshe Nadir, 1885-1943,” in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 230. For more on the Yunge, see Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*.

for art's sake, famously dismissing the older "sweatshop poets" as "the rhyme department of the Jewish labor movement," in poet Zishe Landau's (1889-1937) memorable phrase.⁴⁸ Nadir, however, took a more openly political stance. Though never a "card carrying" member of the Communist Party, he was an outspoken supporter of the Communist agenda from 1922 until 1939, when he broke with the party and its Yiddish organ, the *Frayhayt*, over the Hitler-Stalin Pact.⁴⁹

In a 1929 open letter to Asch, "Est dir nisht op s'harts, Sholem Asch!" (Don't eat your heart out, Sholem Asch!), Nadir puts Asch publicly on trial for insincerity and economic opportunism. Like many of the disputes among leading figures in the intimate world of Yiddish letters, Nadir's critique of Asch is as much ad hominem as aesthetic. His letter begins with a description of the near-empty Coney Island boardwalk in winter, where he has gone to "heal his lungs" with the sea air and to "chew on the little sun that deigns to warm our drop of land."⁵⁰ On the boardwalk, Nadir buys the evening edition of the *Forverts*, in which he comes across an open letter from Asch paying tribute to the recently deceased Yiddish writer Hersh Dovid Nomberg. Accusing Asch of profiting from a show of false camaraderie, Nadir bitterly quotes the fee of 37 dollars and 50 cents (a large sum for the time, especially for a Yiddish writer) that Asch earned for the article. "How many [of your] tears have our brother-writers already divided among their fresh graves – for a minimum of 15 dollars and as much as 37 dollars and 50 cents – or perhaps still more?" he asks scathingly.⁵¹ Throughout the letter, Nadir implicitly contrasts Asch's conspicuous wealth – his collection of valuable ritual objects and his "ten-room villa in France,

⁴⁸ Landau's words are quoted in Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, with the assistance of Kenneth Libo (New York & London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 429.

⁴⁹ Chametzky et al., "Moyshe Nadir," 230; Joel Schechter, *Messiahs of 1933: How Yiddish Theatre Survived Adversity through Satire* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 12.

⁵⁰ Nadir, "Es dir nisht op s'harts," 80.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

where a friend must *not* spend the night” – with his own more modest circumstances and with those of the writers whose deaths Asch so publicly and profitably mourns.⁵²

Coney Island, here, is little more than a stage set for Nadir’s attack, and after devoting the first three paragraphs of the letter to describing the forlorn boardwalk, he doesn’t mention it again. But why bring up Coney Island at all? Nadir’s letter suggests two reasons for this inclusion. Most immediately, the shabby luxury of an afternoon on “the desolate [*farlozene*] winter-streets of Coney Island” offers a vivid contrast and an implicit rebuke to the opulence of Asch’s French villa. More importantly, however, the figure of Coney Island weds Nadir’s personal attack to an implicit critique of Asch’s writing on America. Evoking the well known Coney Island chapters in *Uncle Moses* (a book with which Nadir would certainly have been familiar; it was famous enough to be adapted into a Yiddish film three years later, in 1932), Nadir’s description of the lonely boardwalk deflates Asch’s utopian vision of Coney Island, presenting it as the fantasy of a writer whose wealth has become an insurmountable obstacle between himself and the common folk whose lives he claims to represent. The vision of a “holy wonder city” Asch paints in *Uncle Moses* seems laughably, even callously, naïve when compared to the forlorn boardwalk scene Nadir presents. “You have estranged yourself, Sholem Asch!” Nadir exclaims in lyrical outrage. “With whom are you connected? . . . You’ve wrapped your wings . . . in holy parchment so they don’t get stained with the dust and fumes of the road.”⁵³ This distance from the grime of common experience, Nadir suggests, accounts for the insincerity he perceives in Asch’s writing. In this context, the shabby Coney Island boardwalk where Nadir must travel for a little sun testifies to his grounding in the mundane reality of the

⁵² Ibid., 84; italics in the original.

⁵³ Ibid., 83.

folk, while Asch, who can relax beside the swimming pool in his French villa, has become hopelessly disconnected from the lives of his colleagues and readers.

Nadir's choice of Coney Island as the setting for his attack on Asch reflects the working-class resort's emergence as an ideological battleground in the fraught landscape of American Yiddish letters. A year earlier, Nadir had published *Moshiakh in Amerike* (Messiah in America), a scathing critique of Jewish involvement in the American mass culture industry and a broadside against the moral and cultural corruption that he saw as endemic to capitalism. Set primarily in Coney Island, with its opening act taking place on Broadway, Nadir's play should also be read as a satirical response to Asch's novel of a decade earlier. If *Uncle Moses* presents Coney Island as a messianic prefiguration of the American Dream ("It was as if a Messiah had come and had lifted all bans," Asch writes of the crowded beach at Coney Island), *Messiah in America* mocks the salvational rhetoric that depicted America as a secular promised land of refuge and opportunity.⁵⁴

Presenting Coney Island as both symbol and example of capitalist mass culture in its purest form, Nadir's play invokes the degrading spectacle of a society whose cultural values have been shaped by the profit motive. Menakhem-Yosef, a producer of cheap novelty acts on Broadway, and his rival, Mr. Zipkin, the owner of a Coney Island circus, compete to market salvation to the American public in the persons of actors hired to play competing messiahs. Menakhem-Yosef hires the pious "greenhorn" (unassimilated) uncle of his assistant, a Galician Chasid with beard and *peyes* (sidelocks), to act as the first messiah, soliciting donations from the crowd of ecstatic believers who gather outside his Broadway office when news is leaked of the longed-for visitation. For those not present at the messiah's coming, Menakhem-Yosef opens "The First Messiah Redemption-Society," through which the masses can invest in their personal

⁵⁴ Asch, *Uncle Moses*, 134.

salvation at “five dollars a share,” with fifteen shares required for complete redemption.⁵⁵ Zipkin, hearing of his competitor’s success, attempts to outplay Menakhem-Yosef at his own game by hiring a young Zionist from Lithuania. (The latter’s place of origin is intended to accentuate the contrast between the rival messiahs, since Lithuania was historically a stronghold of the *misnagdim*, or “opponents” of Chasidism). Unlike Menakhem’s messiah, who capitalizes on his persona as a humble representative of Old World piety and humility, Zipkin’s messiah is a flashy, modern competitor, an athletic, English-speaking “messiah for women,” “a sort of Douglas Fairbanks,” as Zipkin explains.⁵⁶ “Our messiah won’t come crawling on a donkey like yours,” Zipkin gloats to Menakhem-Yosef’s assistant. “He’ll knock around New York on a motorcycle, attended by a squadron of firemen in yellow cars. Over his head will fly our airplane with an announcement written in red: ‘Messiah has come – *He is here!* The very newest messiah. *Latest style!* – Latest fashion, *Comme il faut, Nothing better*’—.”⁵⁷ The entrepreneurs’ false saviors are emissaries, not of divine deliverance, but of the more exalted power of “business” (and, as a member of Zipkin’s Coney Island audience loudly explains, in America, “Business is higher than God”).⁵⁸ This higher power takes as its temple the Broadway/Coney Island stage, and as its liturgy the commercial voice of mass media, as represented in the play by the sensationalist Yiddish press, which eagerly collaborates in the producers’ deception.⁵⁹

Nadir’s satire of commercialized messianism works in service of a broader critique of capitalist spectacle. The play’s frequent references to American tastes and cultural values remind

⁵⁵ Moyshe Nadir, *Moshiakh in Amerike* [Messiah in America], in *Di Nayste Verk: Teatertekstn: drames, eynakters, shpiln, retshitatsies, peydzhshents* [Newest work: Theater-texts: Dramas, one-acts, plays, recitations, pageants] (New York: Freiheit Publishing, 1932), 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8, 46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 58. Italics signify words originally written in English or another language other than Yiddish. Words in languages other than English and Yiddish are left in the original language.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁹ The *Frayhayt* is absent from Nadir critique. As Joel Schechter notes in *Messiahs of 1933, Moshiakh in Amerike* was first published in the pages of the *Frayhayt* in 1928 and then in book form by the Frayhayt press in 1932 (30).

the audience that Menakhem-Yosef and Zipkin's grotesque sense of taste and morality cannot be attributed to them alone, but to the larger culture whose values they have eagerly assimilated. Deception, greed, and a thirst for novelty and spectacle, the play suggests, are the organic cultural byproducts – or “cultural logic,” in Fredric Jameson's resonant term – of unbridled free market competition.⁶⁰ As the farcical plot of *Messiah in America* makes abundantly clear, American capitalism is, for Nadir, an economy of deception in which industry and business attempt to defraud the public through the spectacle of advertising, selling as little as possible for as much as can be charged. By filtering this critique through the lens of false messianism, moreover, Nadir satirically elevates artifice to the status of a civil religion, the one true faith in a land where “even the stones are *treyf* [unkosher],” as Menakhem-Yosef's messiah observes, repeating a popular phrase.⁶¹ For Nadir's messiah-mongering producers, false advertising is a creed: “I believe in bluff,” Zipkin earnestly tells one of his employees. “The God of Bluff is the greatest god in the world . . . Greater than Jesus of Nazareth, greater even than Edison or Ford. He is the only God, and for him one must pray with a full heart. . . . People think that I bluff just to make money, but that isn't true. I am an idealist . . . I bluff for the sake of bluffing.”⁶² Through the figures of Zipkin and Menakhem-Yosef, Nadir offers the tricks of showmanship as powerful metaphors for a social and economic system that hides its spiritual impoverishment behind the smoke and mirrors of a Coney Island sideshow.

While *Messiah in America* is primarily set in Coney Island, the popular resort functions less as a tangible setting than as a synecdoche for the larger national ethos. For Asch, Coney Island's simulation of prosperity may have presented the still-attainable vision of America as

⁶⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁶¹ Nadir, *Moshiakh*, 17.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 65.

capitalist utopia (a state brought ever nearer through modern technologies of affordable mass production), but for his more leftwing rival, Coney Island was not a holiday from the exploitation of the sweatshop and the factory, but rather its cultural apotheosis. The scenes of degrading physical exploitation at Zipkin's circus would be sufficient to bring this point home to the play's audience, but Nadir also articulates the message directly through Zipkin's voice. "All America is Coney Island," Zipkin tells the young man who plays the Bearded Lady in his circus. *Fake, swindle, bluff*. – On these stands America!"⁶³ The point is reinforced by Nadir's subtle play with the English word "fake," which he transliterates as פֿײַק (feyik). Throughout the play, Nadir adheres to a strictly phonetic orthography, in keeping with the *Frayhayt*'s style guidelines.⁶⁴ In his transliteration of the word "fake," however, he passes over the most obvious orthographic possibility, פֿײַק (feyk), choosing instead a spelling that would more naturally be pronounced "fey-ik," the Yiddish word for "capable" or "bright." While it is clear from the context that the English word "fake" is intended, it is no less clear that, for Zipkin, the two words mean much the same thing. To be capable or bright in America is to be adept at artifice, at fraud and swindling. Indeed, Zipkin says as much when considering the possibility of collaborating with his rival, Menakhem-Yosef: "[B]ecause he's a bandit, because he's a cut-throat, one should take him for a partner, because after all he's a capable/bright man [*a feyiker mentsh iz er*], nobody can deny that."⁶⁵ "Feyiker," here, refers to Menakhem-Yosef in his capacity as impresario and entrepreneur; and the echo of "fake" (Nadir might as easily have used a synonym

⁶³ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁴ On *Frayhayt* orthographic conventions, see Katz, "Days of Proletpen," 7. Despite competing attempts, Yiddish orthography has never been fully standardized. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research's standardized orthography (officially codified in 1936 in collaboration with the Polish Central Yiddish School Organization, or TsISHO) is today the most widely accepted in academic and secular contexts, but it is less common in religious publications. David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 89, 94.

⁶⁵ Nadir, *Moshiakh*, 54.

like “*mesugl*” to describe Menakhem-Yosef) underscores the connection between artifice and capitalist enterprise.

The human cost of this business ethic is made apparent at the end of the play. After blackmailing each other into a deadlock, Zipkin and Menakhem-Yosef agree to determine the “true” savior by staging a prize fight between the competing messiahs at Zipkin’s Coney Island circus. Menakhem-Yosef’s Old World messiah is by far the frailer of the two, but with the aid of a horseshoe, which he is tricked into stashing in his boxing glove for good luck, he delivers a crushing knockout blow that lands his bloodied opponent on the floor, where the young messiah soon expires, ignored by the blood-thirsty crowd. After patriotic speeches by Menakhem-Yosef and his assistant, the curtain falls as the crowd stands for “our national anthem,” which turns out to be “Hatikva” played to the tune of “Yankee Doodle.”

Nadir’s choice of exit music neatly encapsulates the ironic contrast between messianic longing and shallow spectacle, deliverance and exploitation that undergirds the play’s absurdist humor and its earnest political critique. “Hatikvah,” the Zionist anthem, expresses the longing and faith (the song’s title translates as “the hope”) in the possibility of Jewish national redemption through political and territorial autonomy in the Biblical “Promised Land.” This earnest longing for national deliverance is Americanized and deflated through the melody of “Yankee Doodle,” the mock-heroic folk song that evokes the comic image of the would-be American dandy riding into town astride a pony, too unsophisticated and self-satisfied to realize his own absurdity. In Americanizing “Hatikvah,” Nadir satirizes not only the empty promise of Menakhem-Yosef’s and Zipkin’s false messiahs, but, more broadly, the salvational hopes Jewish immigrants placed in America as a refuge from persecution, a land of opportunity and a home in the diaspora. Once again, Coney Island is implicitly compared to America’s mythic reputation,

but for Nadir, this comparison reveals the ultimate disappointment of the immigrant's hopes rather than the possibility of their future fulfillment. *Messiah in America* is a satirical refutation of the myth of the "golden land," a warning to those who immigrate with hopes of New World redemption. As Nadir warns his audience in the play's verse prologue, "In the land of commerce, messiah is business . . . / . . . So make yourselves comfortable, open your eyes and your ears, / soon will be opened America's gate. / The Goddess of Dollar with lofty hand, / stands guard over the threshold of the golden land."⁶⁶

Nadir's false messiahs allegorize a broad critique of American capitalism as empty salvation, but they also provide an occasion for Nadir to take stock of the challenges of artistic creation in an age and nation of increasingly standardized and mass-produced culture. Asch may have been able to celebrate the democratizing effects of affordable amusement at Coney Island (for a nickel, both the wealthiest pleasure seeker and the poorest worker can shoot the chutes and loop the loop, and both will be offered the same experience), but Nadir was less sanguine about the effects of mass culture on the future of Yiddish letters. Nadir, like many leftwing intellectuals, distrusted the seductions of popular culture, which he saw as empty spectacle and novelty for novelty's sake. Like a diet of carnival food, it was an unwholesome palliative that quieted the immediate rumblings of the masses without assuaging their deeper hunger. As Zipkin observes, "From the oldest times on, the people [*dos folk*] have wanted 'bread and circus.' Today they want the same! And the less bread [they have], the more circus one must give them. And we give it to them, don't we? After all, circus is cheaper than bread, especially a Coney Island circus."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 62.

The critique here is double edged. The American culture industry may be playing the audience for suckers, but whether they manufacture public taste or cater to already existing desires, it was clear by 1928 that the American public preferred the smoke and mirrors of a Coney Island sideshow to the more intellectually challenging pleasures of “serious” (or earnestly satirical) literature and theater. This time, Menakhem-Yosef elucidates the point:

In show-business there is no ‘too much.’ The more money an artist gets, the greater an artist he is. So thinks the idiot-audience [*oylem-goylem*]. Ha-ha. The aristocratic idiot-audience loves to be made a fool of. Remember when I put on “The Golden Peacock”? In the beginning . . . we played for a low price and nobody came, and the musicians with the choir cost a boatload of money. So what did I do? I threw out half the musicians, gave up half the choir, doubled the price of tickets, and then people started to come.⁶⁸

In extolling bluff as the most important trick for marketing “culture” to the masses, Menakhem-Yosef blames the crass materialism of the public for the degraded state of art in America. His use of the Yiddish idiom “*oylem-goylem*” (literally, “[the] audience [is a] golem”), however, gestures to the responsibility held by those who produce and market culture.⁶⁹ Like the rabbi of lore who sculpts a golem from clay, breathing life into it and guiding its actions according to his dictates, the artist or producer has the power to shape the tastes and guide the actions of his or her audience. As Nadir’s play implicitly argues, this didactic task is the sacred responsibility as well as the greatest challenge of the artist, and it is a challenge made all the more difficult in a culture obsessed with shallow novelty, sensation, and spectacle.

In contrast to the remarkable success of Menakhem-Yosef’s false messiah, “The Golden Peacock” is invoked as a failed early attempt to bring serious theater to the American stage. The title is significant. It could refer to any number of texts, including a classic Yiddish folksong

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁹ Menakhem-Yosef’s philosophy of the art of bluff is a clever echo of what historian Neil Harris has described as the “self-justif[ying]” analysis of swindlers and con artists in showman P. T. Barnum’s *The Humbugs of the World* (1865). Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 214-216. I am grateful to Deborah Dash Moore for bringing the similarities between Barnum and Nadir’s impresarios to my attention.

about lost love, first anthologized by Saul Ginzburg and Pesach Marek in their 1901 volume *Yiddish Folksongs in Russia*, modernist Yiddish poet Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's (1886-1932) 1924 book *Di goldene pave* (The golden peacock), a Yiddish poem by Itzik Manger (1901-1969), or a Hebrew poem by H. N. Bialik (1873-1934). Yiddish poet Anna Margolin (1887-1952) would publish yet another poem of the same title in 1929, a year after Nadir first published *Messiah in America*. In the context of the play, however, "The Golden Peacock" is best understood as a reference, not to any one work, but to Yiddish folk culture and poetry, and, in particular, to an idealized organic relationship between "serious" literature, such as Halpern's modernist poetry, and the indigenous culture of Eastern European Jews. This important form of art, which builds on the sturdy foundation of a rich Yiddish cultural heritage, Nadir suggests, must fight for survival against overwhelming odds in the "land of sensationalism [*land fun di gele*]." ⁷⁰

At the heart of *Messiah in America*, then, are anxieties about the role and future of the artist of integrity – and, particularly, the Yiddish artist – in the age of mass culture. As a poet, prose writer, and playwright, Nadir's livelihood, as well as his political and artistic impact, depended on his ability to reach a wide readership. Menakhem-Yosef's anecdote about staging "The Golden Peacock" can be read as Nadir's own lament, since *Messiah in America* should be taken as one variant of the Yiddish culture that Menakhem-Yosef's *oylem-goylem* would have ignored. ("I come to tell you what theater means," Nadir writes in the prologue, suggesting that the play itself will serve as an illustration.) ⁷¹ *Messiah in America* is thus a forceful, if blunt, attack on the institutions it depicts and a stubborn insistence on the value of artistic integrity over market-forces and the profit motive. It is appropriate, then, that when it was finally staged in full in 1933 at the Artef Theater (Arbeter Teater Farband, or Worker's Theatrical Union), tickets

⁷⁰ Ibid., 9. "Gele" ("yellow") alludes to American "yellow journalism," which favored sensational, eye-catching headlines over journalistic integrity.

⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

were cheap, selling for only thirty-five cents, in contrast to the \$1.75 Menakhem-Yosef charges for tickets to see his false messiah.⁷² And indeed, the history of *Messiah in America* and the theater in which it was staged has shown the cynical wisdom in Menakhem-Yosef's anecdote about "The Golden Peacock." As theater scholar Joel Schechter notes, the Artef Theater never found a wide audience: "Even Yiddish-speaking audiences generally preferred to see Second Avenue's other theatres – where famous actors performed melodramas and musicals, and provided theatrical escapes from national crisis rather than confrontations with it." *Messiah in America* fared even worse. Though, as Schechter notes, Nadir's satire in many ways anticipated the farcical antics of Mel Brook's hit *The Producers*, it shared none of the later production's success. The play was staged only twice during Nadir's lifetime, as a one act in 1929 and in full in 1933, and today it is all but forgotten.⁷³

Lamed Shapiro's Coney Island "Requiem"

Nadir's sense of writing in and against the maelstrom of mass culture was shared by other Yiddish writers, many of whom also found an apt symbol of their predicament in Coney Island. The insight behind architect Frederic Thompson's design for Coney Island's Luna Park – that "[e]laborated child's play is what [adults] want on a holiday," and that "[s]liding cellar doors and the make-believes of youngsters are the most effective amusements for grown-ups" – was a disheartening realization for the serious poets and prose writers who were competing with these "effective amusements" for the hearts, minds, and, most urgently, the scarce pocket money and leisure time of the predominantly working-class Yiddish readership.⁷⁴ In Yiddish literary treatments of New York, the sound and fury of the carnival midway offered a fitting metaphor

⁷² Schechter, *Messiahs of 1933*, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2-10.

⁷⁴ Frederic Thompson, "Amusing the Million," *Everybody's Magazine*, September 1908, 386.

for the culture of empty sensationalism that was high culture's greatest existential threat, and by the 1930s, Coney Island had become a shorthand for the qualities in art that were to be most strenuously avoided.

Nadir himself was not immune to such accusations. Writing of Nadir in his 1945 memoir *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder* (The writer goes to school), Lamed Shapiro recalls being among the audience at the 1929 performance of the first act of *Messiah in America*: "The grotesquery of Jewish America held the hall in an incessant convulsion of laughter. . . . We laughed not just at America, but also at messiah. I too laughed – and was ashamed, as if I had laughed at someone down on his luck."⁷⁵ It is not Nadir's mockery of America that causes discomfort, but rather his irreverence for what Shapiro describes as the tradition of messianic hope that sustained Jews in the *shtetl*. Shapiro suggests that Nadir has attempted – though not with complete success – to silence in his work the voice of the "*pintele yid*," the essential Jewish core or spark. Instead of listening to this voice, Shapiro charges, Nadir writes with a heedless bombast that is both ideologically and aesthetically foreign to Yiddish literature. "Is there still doubt," he writes, "that Moyshe Nadir is a rare phenomenon in our literature? An incessant fountain. An inexhaustible battery of fireworks and rainbow colors." He continues, "It is only a shame that the fountain so often sprays mud. And how can one see things in their true light when he is dazzled by [the light of] his own rocket?"⁷⁶

Few critics would have compared Shapiro's writing to pyrotechnics. Hailed as a master of Yiddish fiction for his stories of Jewish suffering during the pogroms that followed the 1905 Russian revolution (published between 1908 and 1910) and for the stories of Jewish life in New York collected in *Nyu-yorkish un andere zakhn* (New Yorkish and other things, 1931), Shapiro's

⁷⁵ Lamed Shapiro, "Moyshe Nadir," *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder* (The writer goes to school) (Los Angeles: Book Fund Farlag "Alein," 1945), 86.

⁷⁶ Lamed Shapiro, "Moyshe Nadir," 84-87.

prose style has been praised as “impressionistic,” “condensed, precise, . . . starkly beautiful,” and “very different from anything else known in Yiddish stylistics.”⁷⁷ Born in 1878 in a town outside of Kiev, Leyvi-Yehoyshua Shapiro (“Lamed” is the Yiddish equivalent of the letter “L,” as well as an echo of the word “*lamdn*, or “learned man”), like Asch and Nadir, had a traditional religious education but was drawn to secular European literature. While still in his teens, he began writing in Hebrew, Russian, and Yiddish, and in 1896, he traveled to Warsaw to seek the guidance and mentorship of Y. L. Peretz, arriving four years before Asch would make a similar pilgrimage. His career was slower in taking off than Asch’s, however. After spending several years back in his hometown, Shapiro once again returned to Warsaw, where he published his first Yiddish stories, rooming with Hersh Dovid Nomberg. In 1905, during the wave of pogroms that followed the failed Russian revolution, Shapiro immigrated to the United States with his mother, settling in New York, where he gravitated to the Yunge and wrote for the *Forverts* before a falling out with Cahan ended his brief tenure at the paper. It was in the United States that he published the pogrom stories, including “The Cross” (1909), which made him famous.⁷⁸

Shapiro was not content to restrict his energies to writing, however. Ambitious and hapless in equal measures, Shapiro traveled widely, trying his hand at a number of business ventures, all of which failed. Between 1909 and 1911, the newly married Shapiro and his wife lived in Chicago, Warsaw, and Zurich, returning to New York in 1911, where they opened a café, which, despite becoming a haunt of the Yunge, was also a failure. Shapiro moved restlessly between New York and Los Angeles, selling used books in New York and squandering months in Los Angeles in the futile attempt to invent a new process for producing color film (a

⁷⁷ Dovid Katz, s.v. “Shapiro, Lamed [Leyvi-Yehoyshue] (1878-1948),” in *Encyclopedia of Modern Jewish Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Glenda Abramson (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 827.

⁷⁸ Katz, “Shapiro,” 827; Leah Garrett, introduction, *The Cross and Other Jewish Stories*, ed. Leah Garrett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), ix-xiv.

technology already in existence, though still in its infancy). Despite his business ambitions, Shapiro became active in Communist cultural circles, working as literary editor of the Communist journal *Funken* (Sparks) in 1920 and joining the *Frayhayt*'s stable of literary talent. He resigned from the *Frayhayt* in protest at the end of the decade after the paper issued its infamous apologetic for the 1929 Arab massacres of Jewish residents in Hebron, Palestine, but Shapiro continued to identify as a Communist, although his Jewish allegiances always took precedence over his political activities. "Certainly I am a Communist," Shapiro declared in the 1940s, "but the problem is that the Bolsheviks aren't the Communists that the Essenes were."⁷⁹ Shapiro's invocation of the Essenes, a Jewish sect from the late Second Temple period famed for their eschatological convictions, their zealous asceticism, and their relinquishment of personal property, attests to his Jewish communalist investments.

These priorities inform Shapiro's critique of Nadir's writing. In Shapiro's evocative if vague formulation, Nadir's callous ability to choose Communist ideology over Jewish solidarity (Nadir continued to write for the *Frayhayt* after Shapiro and other prominent writers resigned in 1929 over the paper's handling of the Hebron pogroms) is inseparable from the impetuous spectacle of his writing. Although Shapiro does not invoke Coney Island by name, the metaphors he uses to attack Nadir's writing – rockets (*raketh*), fireworks (*fayerverk*), fountains (*fontan*), and rainbow colors (*regnbogndike kolirn*) – work in service of a critique that bears ironic similarities to Nadir's own satire of capitalist spectacle. Indeed, the rockets, fireworks, spewing fountains, and rainbow colors Shapiro associates with Nadir's writing would all have been at home in Zipkin's circus or in any of Coney Island's amusement parks; and Shapiro's use of Yiddish words that either resemble or stem from their English cognates – he chooses the word

⁷⁹ Garrett, introduction, xiv-xxi. Lamed Shapiro, "Mentsh—velt," *Ksovim* (Writings), ed. Sh. Miller (Los Angeles: L. Shapiro Ksovim Komitet, 1949), 380-81; quoted in Garrett, introduction, xxi.

“*kolirn*” instead of the Germanic “*farbn*,” for instance – invokes the Americanness of Nadir’s writing as further evidence of a lack of artistic integrity and communal allegiance.

Despite Shapiro’s accusations against Nadir, his use of carnival imagery suggests that both writers shared similar anxieties about the influence of American mass culture. Indeed, Shapiro echoed Nadir’s pointed invocation of Coney Island as a metonym for the values of the larger nation in “Doc,” a story in his 1931 collection *Nyu-Yorkish un andere zakhn*. In “Doc,” one character shouts to another upon arriving in Coney Island, “Hey brother-in-law, “How does America please you?!” Neither character is described as a “greenhorn” (a newly arrived, un-Americanized immigrant). Indeed, the story’s eponymous protagonist, Benny “Doc” Milgroy, is a medical student who has been in America for several years, while his companion Joe, a self-described “tough guy,” presents himself as a guide to American customs. The question, rather, serves to identify Coney Island as the symbolic locus of American cultural values, while also parodying the immigrant’s attempt to acculturate through participation in American leisure institutions such as amusement parks, dance halls, and sports arenas. “Who studies on Sunday?” Joe asks rhetorically when Milgroy attempts to beg off from the Coney Island excursion. “Sunday a person should go out a little. This is America, *you know!* Nu, Doc, no *monkey business*. Shave, and let’s go. My *treat*.” Joe’s claim to authority on American customs and culture is bolstered by the English idioms (signified here with italics) with which he peppers his Yiddish speech.⁸⁰ His promise to “treat,” moreover, firmly locates the trip to Coney Island within the context of American leisure practices as adapted by immigrant Jews. As historian Andrew R.

⁸⁰ Lamed Shapiro, “Dok,” (Doc), in *Nuyorkish un andere zakhn* (New Yorkish and other things) (New York: Farlag “Alein”, 1931), 136-37; Lamed Shapiro, “Doc,” trans. Henriette Kallus, in “A Translation of Two Stories by Lamed Shapiro” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 1980), 44-46, http://digitool.Library.McGill.CA:80/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=43651&silolibrary=GEN01. Quotations are my more literal revisions of Henriette Kallus’s unpublished 1980 translation. Citations will be from the Yiddish followed by page numbers from the Kallus’s translation.

Heinze has noted, treating was a “distinctly American custom” that young East European Jews quickly adopted, incorporating it into their leisure practices as a form of acculturation through adjustment to the American norm of “present[ing] an image of financial ease regardless of . . . economic condition.”⁸¹

Joe’s insistence on the necessity in America of “go[ing] out a little,” moreover, was part of a larger social trend among younger Jewish immigrants, who equated modern forms of diversion with Americanization.⁸² If acculturation was signified by a familiarity with American leisure institutions like the amusement park, the resort, the dance hall, and sports like boxing and baseball, “greenness” was associated with aversion for the immodest physicality of American entertainment, as well as a preference for study and piety over frivolous amusements. This split in Jewish attitudes toward leisure was often presented as a generational conflict that was inseparable from issues of acculturation. As the Anglophone writer Mike Gold neatly puts it in “A Jewish Childhood in the New York Slums,” a series of autobiographic articles from 1959, “My father wanted me to strive for education, not for basketball.” Even as Gold laments the “ghetto life” that made Jewish immigrants like his father shrink from “the joys of the body,” he also condemns the “gulf of misunderstanding between generations [that] had terribly widened in the new country.” He continues, “Many of the East Side young cast off like rusty shackles the old ways, the religion of the fathers, the respect for parents and elders, the love of learning and even the *Mama Loshen*, Yiddish, Mother-Tongue so loved by Jews, the family speech so warm and tender, so rich with humble poetry and humor of the folk.”⁸³ It is this last institution, Yiddish culture, which is ultimately at stake in Shapiro’s “Doc.” For Shapiro, as for Nadir, the popularity

⁸¹ Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 121.

⁸² Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 31.

⁸³ Michael Gold, “A Jewish Childhood in the New York Slums,” in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 295.

of American institutions of mass culture constituted a serious threat to the project of establishing a vital Yiddish political and literary center in New York. Invoking East Broadway and Union Square as centers of Yiddish literary production and Jewish political life, Shapiro presents Coney Island as a third cardinal point on the map of this symbolic geography, standing as a metaphor for the American culture of novelty and spectacle into which, Shapiro fears, Yiddish literary and political culture had fatally assimilated.

Although Yiddish letters flourished in New York in the 1930s despite increasingly bitter political and aesthetic disputes among its leading figures, “Doc,” written at the beginning of the decade, anticipates the implosion of the city’s Yiddish literary scene. As literary scholar Leah Garrett has noted, “‘Doc’ was Shapiro’s requiem to the hopes of a secular Yiddish culture in America.”⁸⁴ Indeed, by the end of the story, East Broadway and Union Square have succumbed to what Shapiro describes as a transience and decadence fostered by America’s culture of novelty. No longer spaces that stand in principled opposition to Coney Island, they have succumbed to the latter’s pervasive ethos, assuming its degraded character. East Broadway, the address of the *Forverts* and the symbolic address of the socialist anti-Soviet “right,” is “a fair which has become not simply impoverished, but also louse ridden.”⁸⁵ Union Square, the territory popularly associated with the pro-Soviet Yiddish “left,” which took the *Frayhayt* as its institutional center, has fared no better.⁸⁶ “Once it was like a tempest in a tea pot, and at midday the cries of the newspaper boys split the heavens,” Shapiro writes.

Here also the *Frayhayt* sprung into existence like a bomb blast. It sizzled and spit with fire, and the life around it became sharper and more exciting than ever before. The Square began to have a face, a Jewish face – of years back. One could have imagined that in a hundred years – no, for the Vilna synagogue courtyard the time had passed, but something like that had begun to happen here. And now . . . – the *Tageblatt* [Daily news]

⁸⁴ Garrett, introduction, xvii.

⁸⁵ Katz, “Days of Proletpen,” 8; Shapiro, “Doc,” 77.

⁸⁶ Katz, “Days of Proletpen,” 8.

has died, the *Morgen Zhurnal* [Morning journal] has gone to the Bowery, the *Tog* [Day] has one foot somewhere else. The *Frayhayt* has overwhelmed Union Square, and there it shoots on all sides of the horizon, and not always with fire. And only the *Forverts* stays in its place, like a paralyzed giant in his own excrement. – America. The urban population wanders like the sand in the desert. Neighborhoods die without showing their aging like cut off too green bananas that spoil before they ripen. To found something here which will have to be carried out years from now – is a serious mistake. Everything here lives quickly and dies young. And East Broadway is even worse than death.⁸⁷

The charge of explosive imagery Shapiro detonates in his critique of Nadir reappears here the signifier of a transient vitality that quickly collapses into feeble decadence. Instead of creating a lasting culture that can sink its roots deep into a nourishing soil, as represented by the courtyard of the Vilna synagogue, the institutions of Yiddish letters have fallen victim to the general transience of life in New York, a city whose ceaseless reinvention is driven by the shifting currents of fashion and commerce.

To see what Shapiro has in mind when he compares East Broadway to a louse-ridden fair, it is only necessary to turn back to the story's early Coney Island scene. Joe's triumphant question – "How does America please you?!" – is premised by a description of grotesque "freak show" attractions, which include "a live horse without a head, and a head without a horse – a creature which was half woman, half fish – [and] a wild African with an eye in his forehead," as well as the infamous stall – shamefully, not a fabrication – in which patrons "tried to hit a curly Negro's head with a ball." And once again, as in Nadir's play, the scene is accompanied by the melody of "Yankee Doodle," this time played by an organ grinder.⁸⁸ The metaphorical desert through which the "urban population wanders" is foreshadowed in the culmination of the pleasure seekers' amusement park rounds, a "journey in the desert" on two camels named Moses and Aaron who carry their riders around a 300-foot track. Like the comically incongruous Yankee Doodle, the dignified, prematurely balding "Doc" Milgroym is forced to hang on for

⁸⁷ Shapiro, "Dok," 171-72; Kallus trans., 77-78.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 137; 46.

dear life as his camel, following a mischievous impulse, takes off on a run.⁸⁹ The scene is as much allegory as farce. The rich historical legacy of Jewish culture, invoked by the allusion to Exodus, is turned into a burlesque, and Doc, having participated in the degrading spectacle, finds himself a Jewish Yankee Doodle, a figure every bit as ludicrous as his surroundings. Even Joe meets disappointment and shame at Coney Island. Having promised to treat his companions, he is humiliated to find that he lacks the necessary money when it comes time to pay. No revelation will come during this journey through the desert, and no land of milk and honey awaits the travelers at its end. As a new promised land, the America Joe and Doc find at Coney Island turns out to be as false a road to salvation as the one offered by Nadir messiahs.

The 1930s and Beyond

In Shapiro's "Doc" and in Nadir's *Messiah in America*, the culture of Jewish Eastern Europe (invoked through the symbols of the golden peacock and the Vilna synagogue courtyard) and that of Coney Island stand on opposite ends of an ideological spectrum, the former as metaphors for a rich Jewish cultural heritage, the latter as a metonym for the forces of commercialization and Americanization that threaten Yiddish continuity. If Menakhem-Yosef and Joe are caricatures of the acculturated Jew, Coney Island is a caricature of American culture.

This politicized treatment of the famous pleasure grounds continued through the 1930s among New York's Yiddish writers. In 1938, the Lithuania-born Yiddish poet Menke Katz was pilloried by fellow members of Proletpen (an abbreviation of "*proletarishe* [proletarian] pen," the union of the pro-Soviet Communist writers from 1929 until 1938) for the traditional subject

⁸⁹ Ibid., 138-39; 47-48. In comparing the city to a desert, Shapiro also invokes a literary trope with roots that extend back some two thousand years to the Greek philosopher Strabo's formulation, "A great city is a great desert." Literary scholar Kevin Dunn notes, "In its original context, the proverb comments on urban blight at a time when many Hellenistic cities had become depopulated . . . The phrase was canonized . . . by Erasmus in his *Adagia* in the form '*Magna civitas, magna solitudo*,' 'A great city is a great solitude.' Kevin Dunn, "'A Great City Is a Great Solitude': Descartes's Urban Pastoral," *Yale French Studies* 80 (1991): 94.

matter of his epic *Brenendik shtetl* (Burning shtetl). His son, Yiddish scholar Dovid Katz, recalls, “[S]talwarts of Proletpen launched a barrage of attacks against *Burning Village* for being steeped in the past, in the Jewish shtetl and ancient Jewish traditions, for not bringing happiness to working people and for ignoring the entire list of requirements for “constructive” poetry.⁹⁰ In his response to his detractors, a four-part poem titled “Der braver pakhdn” (The Brave Coward), which was published in the *Frayhayt* in the summer of 1938, Menke Katz follows Shapiro in invoking Coney Island as a metaphor for the intellectual corruption of the Stalinist left, the same group which Shapiro accused Nadir of blindly following.⁹¹ Defending his right to creative liberty, Katz insists on the value of the past, no matter how lachrymose: “I’ve seen / every fire hidden by a spark; / seen / tomorrow lit by blind yesterday’s dark.” In contrast to the humble enlightenment offered by the *shtetl* (personified by the figure of the poet’s dead grandmother in a 1939 revision of the text), Katz associates his ideological opponents with the hollow bombast of Coney Island: “Because you are as gloomy as a thousand Coney Island suns, / your joy is gloomier than gloom itself; / . . . a poet’s gloom can be more joyful than joy . . .”⁹² Literary integrity and inspiration, once again, are defended against the normative novelty and spectacle of the American culture of cheerful novelty – values, Katz suggests, which his critics affirm, however unintentionally, in their rejection of the East European past as inspiration for Yiddish literary creativity.

Katz’s brief invocation of Coney Island carries meaning within a symbolic geography already mapped by Nadir and Shapiro. Indeed, by the end of the 1930s, two decades after Asch’s celebration of Coney Island in *Uncle Moses*, the resort had assumed a relatively fixed

⁹⁰ Katz, “Days of Proletpen,” 23.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Menke Katz, “The Brave Coward,” trans. Amelia Glaser. *Proletpen: America’s Rebel Yiddish Poets*, eds. Amelia Glaser and David Weintraub (Madison, WI: University of Madison Press, 2005), 307.

significance in the polemical landscape of American Yiddish fiction. The 1930s also saw the first significant literary treatments of Coney Island by Anglophone Jewish writers such as Edward Dahlberg, Daniel Fuchs, and Delmore Schwartz, all of whom also had close associations with the literary left. These Anglophone works departed from the blueprint established by Nadir, Shapiro, and their Yiddish contemporaries. In Dahlberg's 1932 novel *From Flushing to Calvary*, the sensory delirium of the Coney Island Mardi Gras celebration triggers the painful return of repressed memories in the protagonist, while in Delmore Schwartz's classic 1937 story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," the young narrator dreams he is watching a grainy film of his parent's ill-fated courtship.⁹³ His father takes his mother to Coney Island, where he asks her to marry him over dinner in a boardwalk restaurant, and the narrator looks on in mounting horror as the dissolution of his parent's marriage is foreshadowed in ominous visits to a boardwalk photographer and a fortuneteller. Daniel Fuchs's 1937 novel *Low Company*, in contrast, de-exoticizes Coney Island (Fuchs calls it "Neptune Beach" in the novel) by depicting it in its newly acquired character as a neighborhood of Jewish working-class residence, rather than showing it in its other role as a destination for pleasure-seekers.⁹⁴ Instead of focusing on the amusement parks and boardwalk, which are referenced but never depicted, Fuchs explores the lives of the

⁹³ Edward Dahlberg, *Bottom Dogs, From Flushing to Calvary, Those Who Perish, and Hitherto Unpublished and Uncollected Works* (New York: Minerva Press, 1976); Delmore Schwartz, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," in *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories*, ed. James Atlas (New York: New Directions, 1978).

⁹⁴ Scholars have typically read "Neptune Beach" (presumably named after Neptune Avenue, which runs east-west across the Coney Island peninsula) as an alias for the Brighton Beach section of Coney Island, rather than for the more famous western section simply known as "Coney Island." Fuchs taught at P.S. 225, a Brighton Beach elementary school, for several years, but I do not think this common identification of "Neptune Beach" is accurate for two reasons. First, the novel explicitly names Brighton Beach, suggesting that it exists as a distinct region in the narrative's geography, whereas Coney Island is never named. Second, and far more conclusively, the narrative describes "rides on the Whip, the Thunderbolt, [and] the Canal of Romance" as features of an outing at Neptune Beach. This is an unmistakable reference to the Coney Island midway. Not only did Brighton Beach have very little in the way of carnival rides, the Thunderbolt was a famous Coney Island rollercoaster that operated from 1925 until 1982. Today, it is best remembered as the rollercoaster beneath which Alvy Singer grows up in Woody Allen's 1977 film *Annie Hall*. Daniel Fuchs, *The Brooklyn Novels: Summer in Williamsburg, Homage to Blenholt, Low Company* (Boston: Black Sparrow, 2006), 827, 913. Biographical information on Fuchs is from Gabriel Miller, *Daniel Fuchs*, Twayne's United States Authors Series 333 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 16.

shopkeepers, gamblers, and pimps who live in the shadow of the amusement zone and cater to its visitors. In depicting Coney Island as a site of labor as well as leisure, a neighborhood as well as a resort, Fuchs's novel anticipates later treatments of Coney Island as the setting of local, neighborhood-based coming-of-age narratives, both fictional and autobiographical. In Norman Rosten's 1968 novel *Under the Boardwalk* and Joseph Heller's 1998 memoir *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*, the area is recast as the setting of nostalgic childhood memories of afternoons on the beach and play among the rickety carnival attractions.⁹⁵

These later Anglophone narratives reflect changes in Coney Island that are all but invisible in the Yiddish literature of the 1920s and '30s. By the Depression, the once-spectacular amusement midway, ravaged by fires and bankruptcies, was waging a losing battle against new, more affordable entertainment technologies. Working-class New Yorkers still thronged the beaches on hot summer afternoons, but movies and radio, in John Kasson's words, "presented elaborate, convincing illusions at a price Coney Island could not match."⁹⁶ At the same time, Coney Island was becoming increasingly residential in character, as working- and middle-class New Yorkers, Jews prominent among them, settled in the bungalows and apartment buildings that had sprung up in the Coney Island and Brighton Beach sections of the peninsula. Between 1920 and 1930, Deborah Dash Moore notes, Coney Island (including Brighton Beach) was among the areas of Brooklyn that "burst onto the Jewish map of New York City with 700 percent increases in Jewish Population."⁹⁷ Coney Island's transformation from the "capital of the new mass culture" into one of the city's many working- and lower-middle-class Jewish neighborhoods is barely registered in interwar Yiddish literature, however. The persistence of its

⁹⁵ Norman Rosten, *Under the Boardwalk* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991); Joseph Heller, *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

⁹⁶ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 112.

⁹⁷ Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 24.

polemical symbolism demonstrates the self-sustaining momentum of literary traditions and their power to determine the terms and iconography of urban representation.

Isaac Bashevis Singer's (1902-1991) 1970 story "A Tog in Kuni Ayland" (published in Yiddish in the *Forverts* in 1970 and in English translation in the *New Yorker* in 1971 as "A Day in Coney Island"), is the last significant literary treatment of the Brooklyn resort to appear in Yiddish. Singer, who wrote primarily for an Anglophone audience who read him in translation, bridges Anglophone and Yiddish representational traditions. He follows Fuchs and Rosten in acknowledging Coney Island's status as a Jewish residential community, while simultaneously aligning his writing with earlier Yiddish treatments of Coney Island as a metonym for an American culture of spectacle that portends the obsolescence of the Yiddish writer. The autobiographical story is set in the Coney Island of the late '30s, where the first-person narrator is living in a boarding house after fleeing Poland. (Singer lived in Seagate, a residential neighborhood on the west end of Coney Island, after arriving in the United States in 1935.)⁹⁸ The narrator's sense of being "lost in America," to borrow the title of a volume in Singer's memoirs, is invoked through the jarringly foreign spectacle of the Coney Island boardwalk.⁹⁹ "I had been in America for eighteen months, but Coney Island still surprised me," he recalls.

The sun poured down like fire. From the beach came a roar even louder than the ocean. . . . Everyone bellowed in his own way: sellers of popcorn and hot dogs, ice cream and peanuts, cotton candy and corn on the cob. I passed a sideshow displaying a creature that was half woman, half fish; a wax museum with figures of Marie Antoinette, Buffalo Bill, and John Wilkes Booth; a store where a turbaned astrologer sat in the dark surrounded by maps and globes of the heavenly constellations, casting horoscopes. . . . A half-naked man with a black beard and hair to his shoulders hawked potions that strengthened the muscles, beatified the skin, and brought back lost potency. He tore heavy chains with his

⁹⁸ Sea Gate, a quiet gated community, was initially hostile to Jewish settlement but by the time of Singer's arrival had become an "enclave of Yiddish writers and intellectuals," in Janet Hadda's words. Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81; Moore, *At Home in America*, 36-37. Among these "writers and intellectuals" were Singer's more famous older brother, Israel Joshua Singer, and the Yiddish poet and mother-in-law of Woody Guthrie, Aliza Greenblatt, who would write of the neighborhood in the 1957 collection of poems *In si-geyt, baym yam* [In Sea Gate, by the sea] (New York: Farlag Alizah, 1957).

⁹⁹ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Lost in America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1981).

hands and bent coins between his fingers. A little farther along, a medium advertised that she was calling back spirits from the dead, prophesying the future, and giving advice on love and marriage.¹⁰⁰

Given the mythological and supernatural motifs in the scene, Coney Island would seem an appropriate – even an inspiring – setting for a writer who describes himself as a specialist in the Jewish mystical occult. Yet the opposite proves true in the story, which begins by explaining its narrator’s writer’s block as a response to his new environment. “Today I know exactly what I should have done that summer – my work,” Singer begins the story.

But then I wrote almost nothing. ‘Who needs Yiddish in America?’ I asked myself. Though the editor of a Yiddish paper published a sketch of mine from time to time in the Sunday edition, he told me frankly that no one gave a hoot about demons, dybbuks [possessing spirits], and imps of two hundred years ago. At thirty, a refugee from Poland, I had become an anachronism.”¹⁰¹

Instead of acknowledging the thematic resonances between his autobiographical protagonist’s work and Coney Island’s attractions, Singer allies his authorial persona with earlier Yiddish writers such as Nadir and Shapiro, who viewed Coney Island’s mass culture as an existential threat to the continuity of their literary vocation.

“A Day in Coney Island” is significant, however, precisely because of this anachronism. Even as Singer invokes the politicized geography of the interwar Yiddish literary tradition, he does so in a retrospective tense, situating his anxieties about literary production in America within the intimately remembered landscape of Coney Island’s rooming houses, cafeterias, and cafés. He recalls the “group of old men” who gather to debate Communism on the boardwalk, as well as Sea Gate’s vibrant Yiddish literary milieu.¹⁰² By 1970, such gatherings had become increasingly rare. In works by Saul Bellow (1915-2005) (*Humboldt’s Gift*, 1975) and Grace

¹⁰⁰ Isaac Bashevis Singer, “A Day in Coney Island,” trans. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Laurie Colwin, in *A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories* (Greenwich: CT: Fawcett Crest, 1974), 39-40.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 40-45.

Paley (“Dreamer in a Dead Language,” 1985), Coney Island’s Jewish radicals, intellectuals, and schemers have retired to the old age homes that were built on the ashes of former amusement parks.¹⁰³ Singer’s literary fortunes, meanwhile, had enjoyed a dramatic reversal, and his stories of “demons, dybbuks, and imps of two hundred years ago” had found an enthusiastic audience in English translation. “A Day in Coney Island” was published in the prestigious *New Yorker* in 1971 before being reprinted in Singer’s *A Crown of Feathers* (1973), which would go on to win the National Book Award. By that time, Yiddish had lost its battle against American mass culture and linguistic acculturation, and Singer, who would be awarded the 1978 Nobel Prize in Literature, had assumed the mantle of spokesperson, not only for Yiddish letters, but for the language itself, a role he would consolidate in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech by framing the “high honor bestowed upon [him] by the Swedish Academy” as “a recognition,” not simply of his literary achievements, but “of the Yiddish language” itself.¹⁰⁴

By invoking Coney Island as the setting of his early alienation, then, Singer puts an old trope to new uses. The disorienting spectacle of the midway no longer carried weight as a politicized metaphor in a relevant debate. By the time he published “A Day in Coney Island, not only was Singer an American success story, but his popularity was due in no small measure to his reputation as the surviving voice of a language disappearing from use by secular Jews in America and decimated by the Holocaust in Europe. The question, “Who needs Yiddish in America?,” therefore, did not carry the urgency for Singer that it did for Nadir or Shapiro. Whether Yiddish was “need[ed]” or not, Singer’s most appreciative audience had long been reading him in English. By posing this question amid the ghosts of a Coney Island afternoon

¹⁰³ Saul Bellow, *Humboldt’s Gift* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 325-349; Grace Paley, “Dreamers in a Dead Language,” in *The Collected Stories* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1994).

¹⁰⁴ Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Nobel Lecture,” *Nobelprize.org*, December 8, 1978, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-lecture.html

nearly four decades past, Singer thus assumes the mantel of the literary tradition whose requiem Lamed Shapiro had sounded four years before Singer had even arrived in America. On the Coney Island boardwalk, he claims his place as the last defender of a “wise and humble language” in a brash and transient nation.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 3

Under the Sign of the Ghetto: Anzia Yeziarska's Lower East Side Literary Tradition

If Coney Island held up a satirical funhouse-mirror to the image of America as a “golden land” of equality and abundance, the squalid, tenement-lined streets of the Lower East Side offered a more direct image of the nation’s failure to live up to its egalitarian ideals. This chapter examines the Lower East Side’s symbolic place in the intertextual landscape of interwar Jewish writing, demonstrating how writers’ awareness of participating in larger literary traditions informed their representational politics and practices. These pages focus, in particular, on the writings and early social circle of Anzia Yeziarska, who, I argue, carefully positioned her work within a radical tradition of Jewish immigrant women’s writing emerging from Manhattan’s Lower East Side. By tracing her allusions to the lives and work of other female writers associated with the “Jewish ghetto,” this chapter illuminates the social networks and institutional contexts that informed her literary politics. Yeziarska, I show, presented the distinctive obstacles Jewish immigrant women writers faced in their pursuit of publication and public recognition as a metaphor for the intersecting oppressions that obstructed Jewish immigrant women’s access to full participation and partnership in the economic and political life of the nation. Understanding Yeziarska’s personal and professional relationships to a community of writers that included memoirist Rose Gollup Cohen, screenwriter and editor Sonya Levien, radical journalist, playwright, and activist Rose Pastor Stokes, and Yiddish and English-language journalist and playwright Miriam Shomer Zuner (1882-1951), among others, thus reveals the political stakes of Yeziarska’s much scrutinized authorial persona as a “ghetto” writer. At the

same time, this chapter uses Yeziarska's writing to tell the larger story of a literary community, excavating the complex web of personal and institutional connections that brought together an extraordinary group of Jewish immigrant women whose influence on each other's careers has too often been overlooked by scholars more interested in sensational stories of their romantic relationships with powerful non-Jewish men.¹

Born in a small Polish town in the Russian Empire between 1880 and 1883 – her date of birth was never recorded – Yeziarska emigrated to the United States with her family in 1893, settling in the densely crowded Jewish quarter of downtown Manhattan.² In interviews and autobiographical writings, Yeziarska makes it seem as if she lived in a Lower East Side tenement until 1920, when the publication of her first collection of stories, *Hungry Hearts*, brought her overnight fame and financial security. The reality, however, was less dramatic. As scholars have been quick to point out, Yeziarska spent at most seven years on the Lower East Side, leaving her parents' household in 1900 to move into a room in the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, a settlement house on East 63rd Street in Manhattan.³ Although she never attended high school, she secured a scholarship to attend Columbia University's Teacher's College in preparation for a career in the city's public schools. Yeziarska was

¹ Yeziarska's brief romantic relationship with philosopher John Dewey, for instance, has been the subject of much scholarly interest, including Mary V. Dearborn's book-length treatment of the subject, *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yeziarska and John Dewey* (New York: Free Press, 1988). Similarly, interest in Rose Pastor Stokes has focused on her sensational marriage to the Protestant millionaire social worker James Graham Phelps Stokes.

² On her lack of a birth date, see Louise Levitas Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska: A Writer's Life*, with assistance from Jo Ann Boydston (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers UP, 1988), 14; Anzia Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse: My Story* (New York: Persea Books, 1987), 38-39; and "Mostly About Myself," in *Children of Loneliness* (1923), reprinted in *How I Found America* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), 138. There has been disagreement about the town where Yeziarska was born. Magdalena Zaborowska notes that Yeziarska's scholars and biographers have variously named her town of origin as Plotsk, Plinsk, Plöck, and Ploch. Zaborowska's own "theory" is that Yeziarska was born in Plock, a guess which archival research conducted by Yeziarska's second biographer, Bettina Berch, tentatively endorses. Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *How We Found America: Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 311ft6; Bettina Berch (*From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Life and Work of Aniza Yeziarska*. New York: Sefer International, 2009), 19.

³ Berch, *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, 35. Henriksen dates Yeziarska's admittance to the Clara de Hirsch Home to 1899 (17), but Berch's chronology, based on Yeziarska's application for residence in the Home, seems more reliable.

eager to study at one of the nation's most prestigious universities, but at Columbia, she was frustrated by the terms of her scholarship, which restricted her to the gendered field of "domestic science." Biographer Bettina Berch explains, "Yeziarska wanted a real, classical college education of the sort that young men got, not this ersatz, pseudo-education for housewives."⁴ After graduating, she worked fitfully as a cooking instructor, a job that by all accounts thoroughly bored her. She married twice (the first marriage was annulled, the second ended in divorce), gave birth to a daughter, and studied acting before finding her vocation as a writer when she was already in her early thirties. By then, she had lived in several Manhattan neighborhoods (though never again on the Lower East Side), as well as in the Bronx and far-flung San Francisco. Before she had published her last novel in 1932, she would add Hollywood, California; Madison, Wisconsin; and Arlington, Vermont to this list of residences.⁵

Why, then, did Yeziarska so firmly ground her authorial persona in the Lower East Side, and why did she set nearly all of her published fiction amid the neighborhood's sweatshops, tenements, and pushcarts? Biographers and literary historians have interpreted her authorial identification with the Lower East Side as a savvy self-promotional strategy. Literary scholar Mary Dearborn, for instance, links it to the contemporaneous rise of the public relations industry in the 1920s, and critic Lisa Botshon is representative in her perception that "Yeziarska recognized the marketability of the stories in which she described the impoverished and anguished lives of Lower East Side inhabitants who strove to achieve upward mobility. She was also aware," Botshon adds, "that her very existence as a former Hester Street immigrant would allow her a certain privileged access to publication."⁶

⁴ Berch, *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, 39.

⁵ Berch, *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, 36-37; Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 19, 37, 44-45, 56, 62-65, 155-57, 234, 238-39.

⁶ Mary Dearborn, "Anzia Yeziarska and the Making of an Ethnic American Self," in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 117-119; Lisa Botshon, "Anzia Yeziarska and the Marketing of the Jewish Immigrant in 1920s Hollywood," in *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*, eds. Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith (Boston, Mass: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 206.

That Yeziarska's identification with the Lower East Side sparked interest in her first books is undeniable, yet her decision to "live my life writing and rewriting my story," as she later described her obsessive focus on the lives of immigrant women on the Lower East Side, was hardly calculated to bring her sustained book sales or critical praise. By the early 1930s, reviewers were expressing exasperation with her lack of variety in subject matter. "[B]ecause of her personal background and history [her books] demand some attention," a *New York Times* reviewer grudgingly wrote in 1932, but this personal interest did not, in his view, compensate for her writing's thematic redundancy:

This last book of hers, "All I Could Never Be," is no more a new book than a new edition of a previous publication. Again it is the story she has told before, to no small degree her own story, the tale of the inarticulate but passionate Jewish immigrant young woman who seeks sympathy and understanding among those who, because of a more austere background, cannot or do not know how to give them. This has been her thesis and theme over and over again; this has also been her plot.⁷

Even though the anonymous author of this review was willing to read *All I Could Never Be* as Yeziarska's "own story," it is clear that, by her sixth book, she had already exhausted that story's critical and commercial capital.

If Yeziarska's career-long identification with the Lower East Side was a calculated rhetorical strategy, then, it served a purpose other than the merely financial. Indeed, its primary motivations were more radical – and more sincerely invested – than Botshon's and Dearborn's readings would suggest. From her first published stories in *Hungry Hearts* (later a Hollywood movie on which she was hired to work as a screenwriter), throughout her published writings in the 1920s, Yeziarska establishes the central conflict of each narrative as a young woman's struggle to "make of [her]self a person in the world" in and against the oppressive environment of the Jewish ghetto, which she depicts as the direct product of the forces of poverty, exploitation, and social and political disenfranchisement enforced by the racial and class prejudices of an American-born "Anglo-Saxon"

⁷ "Thwarted Love," review of *All I Could Never Be*, by Anzia Yeziarska, *New York Times*, August 21, 1932, Sunday Book Review, 11.

elite.⁸ These forms of oppression were compounded by a patriarchal social structure that made the pursuit of a literary career doubly difficult for immigrant women, who had to find time to write while working long hours to compensate for a reduced wage scale. Marriage offered no respite, since many immigrant wives and mothers held down jobs while shouldering the full burden of domestic labor. Yeziarska uses the common metaphors of “voice” and “voicelessness” to express the conflict between her characters’ personal ambitions and these oppressive social conditions, which she represents metonymically through the Lower East Side. By grounding her heroines’ fight to gain a public voice in the setting of the Lower East Side, the site most directly associated with the Jewish immigrant proletariat, Yeziarska was able to present their efforts – and the opposition they faced – as a collective issue faced by women of her ethnic and class background.

That Yeziarska was invested in the rights of women, workers, and Jewish immigrants will come as no surprise to her readers. What has yet to be fully appreciated, however, is the degree to which her self-presentation as a “primitive voice from the ghetto,” rather than merely as a compassionate observer, was essential to her political investments and ambitions as an author.⁹ Paradoxically, however, this very identification with the Lower East Side has caused critics to question the sincerity of her politics, leading Bettina Berch and others to conclude that, at heart, Yeziarska “was not a political person.”¹⁰ While noting that Yeziarska’s “work sounded one theme repeatedly: that of the immigrant misunderstood and betrayed by America,” Mary Dearborn, for instance, takes this thematic consistency as a sign, not of the depth of Yeziarska’s political commitments, but as a cynical attempt to capitalize on a public “fascinated by the immigrant” and willing to pay well in book royalties to indulge their fascination. Dearborn explains that Yeziarska

⁸ Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, 94.

⁹ Laura Wexler, “Looking at Yeziarska,” in *Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994), 160; Dearborn, “Anzia Yeziarska,” 108; Ferraro, 53.

¹⁰ Berch, *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, 12.

threw herself into “the business of self-promotion,” enthusiastically remaking herself as “a specimen advertised to the public as a genuine immigrant fresh from the ghetto of New York’s Lower East Side.”¹¹

Dearborn’s reading, which has become widely influential over the last two and a half decades, reproduces what literary scholar John Guillory has criticized as a tendency among multiculturalist advocates of “noncanonical” literatures to commit a newer form of the old biographical fallacy. “The typical valorization of the noncanonical author’s experience as a marginalized social identity,” he writes, “necessarily reasserts the transparency of the text to the experience it represents.” Scholars of ethnic and women’s writing, Guillory suggests, seek a direct parallel between authorial subject position and the identities described in the author’s writing, premising the legitimacy of the latter on the authenticity of the former. This insistence on “the transparency of the text to the experience it represents,” as Guillory notes, elides the role of literacy – itself a mark of relative privilege, however hard-won – in determining “[w]ho writes” and “[w]ho reads.”¹² While Yeziarska was painfully aware of the social barriers upward mobility could erect between a writer and her former community, she did not believe that these barriers prevented her from speaking for that community. On the contrary, she recognized that education, which could not be achieved without some measure of upward mobility, was in most cases the precondition for becoming a communal spokesperson. As her allusions to fellow immigrant women writers reveal, Yeziarska believed that her own literary success was, through the synecdochal logic of group identification, a collective triumph for “the ghetto.” Such identity politics, as they would be called by a later generation, might sound like clichés today. For Yeziarska, however, nothing was more urgent.

¹¹ Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 140-41.

¹² John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 10-18.

Ironically, then, Yeziarska does not refute the assumptions that have been used in recent decades to question her political sincerity: the assumption that the political value of a work depends, in Guillory's terms, on the degree to which "the work is perceived to be immediately expressive of the author's *experience* as a representative member of some social group."¹³ Even though Yeziarska was no longer one of the immigrant proletariat, she felt that she could still write "[a]s one of the dumb, voiceless ones" because she *had* come of age in poverty as a girl on the Lower East Side. Yeziarska reinforced this claim to authority, not only by comparing herself to other Jewish immigrant women writers, but by contrasting her authorial perspective – her ability to empathize with and to speak for her working-class, immigrant characters – with that of middle-class and native-born writers who also sought to give voice to the experiences of the Jewish immigrants. Yeziarska's critical representations of the American-born "German" Jewish Fannie Hurst (1889-1968), as I will show, allowed her to demarcate the boundaries of the subaltern literary tradition in which she situated her writing.

In this sense, Yeziarska's literary politics anticipated the "pluralist critical tradition" and the identity-based politics of recovery that would only gain traction in the academy in the last decades of the century.¹⁴ In situating her work within a tradition of Jewish immigrant women's writing, then, Yeziarska was consciously framing it as part of a radical "minor literature" in a sense very close to the one in which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would later use the term. Their argument that, in a "minor literature," "what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren't in agreement," corresponds closely to Yeziarska's self-image as a radical author and her determination to be read as a writer

¹³ Ibid., 10; emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

whose political consciousness and social identity were forged during the difficult years of her adolescence on the Lower East Side.¹⁵

Uptown/Downtown

In the first decade of the twentieth century, when Yeziarska was taking her first halting steps up the ladder of economic mobility as a part-time cooking teacher, the Lower East Side had already gained wide currency in the public imagination as a symbol and metonym for the immigrant Jewish proletariat. Historian Hasia Diner has attributed the Lower East Side's lasting resonance to its status as a "powerful metaphor of the American Jewish experience," yet it was not the experience of all American Jews – or even all New York Jews – that the neighborhood represented.¹⁶ If the Lower East Side was associated with working-class Jewish immigrants, the wealthier "uptown" neighborhoods symbolized the hard-won prosperity and bourgeois respectability of the more assimilated "German Jews," the Jews of Central European descent who had arrived in the United States after 1830, several decades before the mass influx of Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire. "During the heyday of the Lower East Side," Deborah Dash Moore writes, "New York Jews saw themselves in geographic terms. There were the Downtown Jews – the immigrants: the poor, the Yiddish speaking, the orthodox, the radicals. Opposite them stood the Uptown Jews: the wealthy, acculturated American Jews of German-Jewish background, the Reform Jews. . . . Where you lived explained what you were."¹⁷ These two Jewish communities, separated by far more than the commercial district of midtown Manhattan, frequently found themselves at odds during the years when Yeziarska was growing up on the Lower East Side. German-Jewish factory owners in the garment industry often

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 30 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 17.

¹⁶ Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 128.

¹⁷ Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 21.

exploited their “Russian” coreligionists as a source of cheap labor, but they were less eager to engage them as social equals, seeing the impoverished Yiddish-speaking immigrants as an embarrassment and a threat to their social standing. “‘Uptown’ and ‘downtown’ separated employers from employees, desirable from undesirable, ‘classes’ from ‘masses,’ [and] ‘Americans’ from ‘foreigners,’” historian Moses Rischin explains.¹⁸

Some of the prosperous German Jews attempted to distance themselves as much as possible from their East European coreligionists, often by means of bitter attacks “colored with racist phraseology” in the Anglophone Jewish press.¹⁹ Many others, however, followed a different course, channeling their embarrassed disapproval into reform and uplift projects intended to Americanize the East European masses and drag them, willingly or not, into the American twentieth century. “The Germans found it hard to understand what could better serve their ill-mannered cousins than rapid lessons in civics, English, and the uses of soap,” cultural critic Irving Howe writes in *World of Our Fathers*, a form of charity, he notes, whose undisguised paternalism was often resented by its recipients. “A struggle ensued,” Howe writes, “sometimes fraternal, sometimes fractious, about the best ways to help the hordes of east Europeans find a place in the new world.” This struggle was waged in community centers, educational institutions, and settlement houses (institutions that combined communal and educational programming with residential quarters for social workers and members of the community) that sought to Americanize immigrants Jews.²⁰

Of all the German Jewish philanthropic institutions that began to crop up on the Lower East Side, the Educational Alliance looms largest in histories and memories of the time. Formed in 1889

¹⁸ Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews: 1870-1914* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962), 98. I follow Rischin in using the term “German Jews” to designate Jews of German descent, many of whom were born in the United States. In this chapter, I also use the historically appropriate, if geographically imprecise, term “Russian Jews” to designate to Jews of East European origin and descent. As Rischin notes, “At the turn of the century all East Europeans, despite their diversity, were characterized as ‘Russians’” (110).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁰ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, with the assistance of Kenneth Libo (New York & London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 229-30.

by several Jewish organizations to offer an “oasis” of “sweetness and light . . . in the desert of degradation and despair” – the phrase significantly invokes Matthew Arnold’s homogenizing vision of cultural uplift – the Educational Alliance took up residence in 1891 in a five-story building on Jefferson Street and East Broadway in the heart of the Lower East Side.²¹ It was, writes Howe, a “curious mixture of night school, settlement house, day-care center, gymnasium, and public forum” – a “tangible embodiment of the German Jews’ desire to help, to uplift, to cleanup and quiet down their ‘coreligionists.’”²² Although the Alliance did not offer dormitory housing for East Side youth, it seemed to offer almost every other kind of cultural, educational, and recreational amenity. “The range of activities offered by the Educational Alliance was impressive indeed,” notes historian Melissa Klapper. “Classes in everything from bookkeeping to psychology, German literature to mandolin, millinery to mathematics attracted sizeable numbers of students, ranging in age from kindergartners to adults.” Most significant for young immigrants with literary aspirations, however, were the Alliance’s classes in literature and composition and its literary societies, including two well-attended literary societies for women.²³

The philanthropic institutions of the settlement movement, the Alliance chief among them, were instrumental as training grounds for young immigrant literary aspirants whose limited access to formal education might well have otherwise barred them from careers as writers. “The turn-of-the-century settlement house was the source of a great deal of Jewish American literature from this period,” literary scholar Laura Fisher observes. “[T]housands of immigrants and second-generation Jews had their first taste of English-language literary engagement through the settlement’s system of

²¹ *Official Souvenir Book of the Fair in Aid of the Educational Alliance and Hebrew Technical Institute* (New York: De Leeuw & Oppenheimer, 1895), 23, qtd. in Rischen, 101.

²² Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 230.

²³ Melissa R. Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860-1920* (New York & London: NYU Press, 2005), 117-118.

literary clubs, lectures, and libraries . . .”²⁴ The settlement movement’s far reach is reflected in the writing of Jewish immigrants whose careers it facilitated, although its paternalistic ethos earned it as much bitter denunciation as fulsome praise.²⁵ As critic Carol J. Batker notes in a comparative study of Progressive Era Jewish, African American, and Native American women’s writing, Yeziarska’s fiction, and particularly her novels *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), “expose middle-class desires for social control and the inability of philanthropy to alleviate poverty. Yeziarska’s characters argue forcefully that self-interest motivates middle-class charity, which aims to make immigrants content with deprivation . . .”²⁶ Such was Yeziarska’s explicit critique of charity and reform institutions, yet the assistance she derived from the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls and the Educational Alliance, where she found work as a cooking teacher between 1901 until 1905, reveals a more productive, if ambivalent, engagement with reform institutions.²⁷

Beneath her explicit denunciations of paternalistic reform, moreover, Yeziarska’s fiction also exposes the crucial role the Alliance played as a crossroads and makeshift salon for young Jewish immigrant women with literary ambitions. These women – Cohen, Levien, Pastor, and Zunser – offered guidance and a professional network, served as role models and cautionary tales, and,

²⁴ Laura R. Fisher, “Writing Immigrant Aid: The Settlement House and the Problem of Representation,” *MELUS* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 84.

²⁵ For a well-constructed survey of the range of responses to the Educational Alliance, see Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 234-35.

²⁶ Carol J. Batker, *Reforming Fictions: Native, African, and Jewish American Women’s Literature and Journalism in the Progressive Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 113.

²⁷ This chronology is based on several sources. Mary Dearborn cites the 1901-02 *Alliance Review*, a newsletter of the Educational Alliance, as noting that “Twelve young ladies . . . have organized a Cooking Class under the leadership of Miss Hattie Mayer [Yeziarska’s American name, which she abandoned for her birth name when she began to publish in the mid-1910s].” Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, 40-41. Miriam Shomer Zunser’s recalls Yeziarska being present when Rose Pastor told her of her engagement to James Graham Phelps Stokes (discussed later in this chapter), and *The New York Times* reports that Stokes announced his engagement to Pastor in a press conference on April 5, 1905. Miriam Shomer Zunser, “The Jewish Literary Scene in New York at the Beginning of the Century: Reminiscences Occasioned by a Photograph from 1905,” in *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, vol. 7, ed. Koppel S. Pinson (New York: YIVO Yiddish Scientific Institute, 1952), 292; “J. G. Phelps Stokes to Wed Young Jewess: Engagement of Member of Old New York Family Announced: Both Worked on East Side,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1905, 1.

ultimately, allowed Yeziarska to politicize her literary production by framing it as part of a collective labor-feminist project.

“Our Group”

Of these contemporaries, Rose Gollup Cohen was the writer whose early life and career most nearly resembled Yeziarska’s. There is no concrete documentary evidence that Yeziarska and Cohen knew each other personally, but that they came into personal contact is all but certain. Indeed, their lives tracked closely until Cohen’s apparent suicide in 1925 at age forty-four. Born in a small town in Belarus in 1880, making her at most three years Yeziarska’s senior, Cohen immigrated to America in 1892, just a year before the Yeziarskas passed through Ellis Island.²⁸ Like Yeziarska, moreover, Cohen was forced to forego education at an early age in order to contribute to the family income by working in garment industry sweatshops. As a young woman, she too married and gave birth to a daughter, resuming her studies and pursuing her literary ambitions despite competing demands from her family and at great personal sacrifice.²⁹

The similarities between Cohen’s life and Yeziarska’s do not end there, however. Like Yeziarska, Cohen’s early literary opportunities came through her contact with settlement houses. She first caught the attention of the famous Progressive Era reformer and nurse Lillian Wald (1867-1940) at the Henry Street Settlement, which Wald founded in 1893. Wald would become one of Cohen’s most influential friends and supporters, finding work for her with the pioneering socialist, suffragist, and union organizer Leonora O’Reilly (1870-1927) and later helping to publicize Cohen’s memoir,

²⁸ Some debate surrounds the Yeziarskas’ (or Meyers/Mayers, as they were known in America) point of entry. Berch, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 29-30, refutes the common account that they passed through Castle Garden, pointing out that immigrants were processed in Ellis Island in 1893.

²⁹ Thomas Dublin, introduction to *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side*, by Rose Gollup Cohen (Ithica, NY: Cornell UP, 1995), xii-xiii. Relatively little is known about Cohen’s life (even her apparent suicide cannot be confirmed), and Dublin’s well-researched introduction to Cohen’s memoir is the definitive source of biographical information her. I am grateful to Dublin for his generous responses to my inquiries for more information about Cohen’s life and career.

Out of the Shadow, upon its publication in 1918.³⁰ Following the birth of her daughter, Cohen augmented her meager schooling at the socialist Rand School of Social Science and the philosopher Thomas Davidson's Breadwinner's College, a night and weekend school that provided advanced education for workers under the auspices of the Educational Alliance.³¹ She might well have become acquainted with Yeziarska at either of these institutions, perhaps encountering Yeziarska between her cooking classes at the Alliance, or meeting her at the Rand School, in whose dormitory Yeziarska lived from 1909 until 1910.³² Cohen and Yeziarska also both enrolled in creative writing classes through Columbia University's Extension program, Yeziarska in the winter of 1918 and Cohen at some point between 1918 and 1924, and the two aspiring writers were published alongside each other in the anthology *Copy 1924*, which reprinted published writing by students who had attended writing courses in the Extension program.³³ That Cohen and Yeziarska would have crossed paths in at least one of these institutions is more than likely, and inhabiting the intimate world of New York's Jewish literary scene, they were doubtless aware of each other's writing years before appearing together in the Columbia anthology.

What is certain is that Yeziarska recognized in Cohen a fellow combatant in the literary trenches whose political allegiances and personal struggles as an immigrant woman with literary ambitions resonated with her own history and identity as a Jewish immigrant and an aspiring writer. Yeziarska's interest must certainly have been piqued by the publication of *Out of the Shadow*, which

³⁰ Dublin, introduction, xii-xiii. Wald wrote a favorable review of Cohen's memoir, *Out of the Shadow*, upon its publication in 1918. Lillian D. Wald, review of *Out of the Shadow*, in "The Gossip Shop," *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life*, November, 1918, 378.

³¹ Dublin, introduction, xii-xiv. Biographical information on Thomas Davidson is from Milton R. Konvitz, "Morris Raphael Cohen," in *The 'Other' New York Intellectuals*, ed. Carole S. Kessner (New York & London: New York University Press, 1994), 129-31.

³² Berch, *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, 241.

³³ Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 310n120; *Copy, 1924: Stories, Plays, Poems, Essays, Selected from the Published Work of Students in the Special Courses in Writing, University Extension, Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924). Neither the Columbia University Archives nor the Office of the Registrar were able to provide information about the dates of Cohen's enrollment in response to my inquiries, and Cohen's papers have not been preserved.

appeared three years after she had first succeeded in seeing a story to print but two years before her triumphant arrival on the national stage with *Hungry Hearts*. This interest in Cohen's career is the premise of Yeziarska's 1927 story "Wild Winter's Love," a fictional portrait of Cohen that stages several encounters between Ruth Raefsky, author of "*Out of the Ghetto*," and a first-person narrator who is also an aspiring writer. As the narrative unfolds, the narrator finds herself irresistibly, even obsessively, compelled to discover the story behind Raefsky's suicide. "Ever since I read in the papers about Ruth Raefsky," the narrator explains, "I've gone around without a head. I can't pull myself together somehow. Her story won't let me rest. It tears me out of sleep at night. It leaps up at me out of every corner where I try to hide."³⁴ Why does the narrator find herself so irresistibly drawn to Raefsky's story? No direct explanation is offered. Instead, Yeziarska makes two gambles: first, that the reader will identify the story's narrator with its author; and second, that the reader will be familiar enough with Yeziarska's well-publicized rags-to-riches story to see its similarities to Raefsky's biography, thereby interpreting the narrator's intense investment in Raefsky as the product of personal identification and perhaps even as an attempt to query her own fate by learning the circumstances of Raefsky's decline.³⁵

Indeed, Yeziarska actively encourages this reading, allying her own writerly project with Cohen's by crafting Raefsky's story as a composite biography of the two authors and contemporaries. As Henriksen notes, Yeziarska used the basic facts of Cohen's biography but "filled the story with her own memories," centering its drama around two central events: Raefsky's increasing alienation from her husband, who resents her writings' interference with what he sees as her domestic responsibilities; and Raefsky's subsequent decision to separate from her family and begin an

³⁴ Anzia Yeziarska, "Wild Winter Love," *The Century Magazine*, February 1927, 485.

³⁵ Yeziarska's fictional portrait of Cohen has not to my knowledge received any substantial critical attention either at the time of its publication or subsequently, making it impossible to know whether her gamble paid off.

emotionally consuming affair with an older married “Anglo-Saxon” man.³⁶ Both circumstances link Yeziarska’s life with Raefsky’s. After Yeziarska ended her second marriage because of her husband’s expectations that she devote her time to housework instead of writing, she entered into a short but emotionally intense relationship with famed Columbia University professor and educational philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952), who reappears under various guises throughout her fiction. Raefsky’s older paramour bears notable resemblances to Yeziarska’s other portraits of Dewey, including his rationality and emotional coolness – “Outwardly my lover is one of those cold reasonable Anglo-Saxons. . . . A respectable citizen. Devoted to his wife. Adores his children,” Raefsky confides – and, most tellingly, his ultimate decision to sacrifice his passionate romance with Raefsky for the sake of family obligation.³⁷ Other details also subtly unite Cohen and Yeziarska within the figure of Raefsky. While records indicate that Cohen moved out to Brooklyn after her marriage, Yeziarska places Raefsky in the Bronx, “the up-town ghetto” where Yeziarska had lived during her unhappy second marriage.³⁸ Moreover, while Cohen reveals in a short autobiographical essay from 1922, “To the Friends of ‘Out of the Shadow,’” that her writing alienated her from her husband and daughter, who had “grown away from” her during her years of labor on the memoir, there is no evidence that she separated from her family, as both Yeziarska and Raefsky do.³⁹

Despite these creative liberties with Cohen’s biography, Yeziarska proves herself a close reader of her contemporary’s writing. In “Wild Winter’s Love,” she amplifies biographical details from *Out of the Shadow* and “To the Friends of ‘Out of the Shadow,’” that emphasized the commonalities between the two women’s lives. In attributing Raefsky’s suicide to the unhappy conclusion of what Yeziarska depicts as an interracial affair, Yeziarska was certainly drawing on her

³⁶ Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 206; Yeziarska, “Wild,” 489-90.

³⁷ Yeziarska, “Wild,” 489.

³⁸ Dublin, introduction, xv; Yeziarska, “Wild,” 485.

³⁹ Rose Cohen, “To the Friends of ‘Out of the Shadow,’” *The Bookman*, March 1922, 39.

own despair after the termination of her relationship with Dewey, but she was also referencing Cohen's scandalous if ultimately abortive engagement, disclosed at the end of *Out of the Shadow*, to a young Jewish man who had converted to Christianity.⁴⁰ Even more importantly, Yeziarska recognized in Cohen a reflection of her own all-consuming struggle to find a public voice, to put words to her thoughts, and to insist on the importance of her story and the insights it yielded into the experiences of Jewish immigrant women. Cohen's description in "To the Friends of 'Out of the Shadow'" of "the hardship and labor" of "writ[ing] even the shortest letter" and the "nights of lying awake when a single sentence, the torment of the day, would pass and repass before my wakeful eyes" resonated with Yeziarska's own struggles to find a literary voice.⁴¹ Indeed, Yeziarska echoes this experience in an essay published the following year, graphically describing the difficulty of writing as "the vivisection I must commit on myself to create one little living sentence."⁴²

It is not surprising, then, that in "Wild Winter Love" Yeziarska returns to the theme of voicelessness, using the difficulty of writing in a newly acquired language as a metaphor for the Jewish immigrant's sense of political and social helplessness in America. "I've seen the dumb who wanted to say something, but were too confused to know what they wanted to say," Yeziarska's narrator says of Raefsky.

Here was a woman who knew what she wanted to say, but was lost in the mazes of the new language. And more than the confusion of the new language was the realization that she was talking to strangers, to whom she always felt herself saying too much, yet not enough. To cold hard-headed Americans she was trying to make clear the feverish turmoil of the suppressed desire-driven ghetto.⁴³

⁴⁰ Rose Gollup Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (Ithica, NY: Cornell UP, 1995), 292-306. Characteristically, Yeziarska presents the romance as the transgression of racial, rather than religious, boundaries. In describing the relationship to the narrator, Raefsky refers to the "centuries of antagonism between his race and mine," explaining paradoxically that it is "because he and I are of a different race that we can understand one another so profoundly." The story contrasts Raefsky's "volatile, tempestuous, Slavic temperament" with her lover's "calm Anglo-Saxon" demeanor. Yeziarska, "Wild," 490.

⁴¹ Cohen, "To the Friends," 36, 39.

⁴² Yeziarska, "Mostly About Myself," in *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yeziarska* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), 132; originally published in *Children of Loneliness* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1923), 10.

⁴³ Yeziarska, "Wild," 486.

This passage suggests the larger investments undergirding Yeziarska's decision to create a composite portrait of Cohen and herself in "Wild Winter Love." To "the confusion of the new language" were added the shared difficulties of finding time to write amidst the consuming responsibilities of a wife and mother, and the struggle to find a receptive publisher in a literary marketplace to which both immigrants and women were outsiders. Casting their hard-won literary successes as a victory for immigrant women, and presenting this victory in the context of a shared identification with the "suppressed desire-driven ghetto," Yeziarska conscripts Cohen as an ally in a radical, if recently initiated, literary tradition.

This tradition also included Rose Pastor Stokes, Sonya Levien, and, more peripherally, the Boston-based Mary Antin (1881-1949), whose 1912 autobiography, *The Promised Land*, remains one of the most influential immigrant memoirs.⁴⁴ If Yeziarska's early biography most nearly resembled Cohen's, her closest friend among this small cohort of writers was Rose Pastor Stokes, whom she met at the Educational Alliance in the summer of 1903 when Pastor was hired as a substitute for the regular summer counselor of girls.⁴⁵ By the following summer, yet another young Jewish woman with literary ambitions had joined the Alliance staff. Miriam Shomer Zuser (née Manya Shaykevitch) was born in Odessa in 1882, making her only three years younger than Pastor, who was the oldest of the four women. Like Yeziarska, Pastor, and Cohen, moreover, Zuser had immigrated to America as a young girl, arriving in New York in 1889. In her teens, she took classes in the visual arts at the Educational Alliance, and by 1904, she had

⁴⁴ Cohen, for instances, recalls being assigned Antin's memoir in an English class at the Rand School. The memoir, which Cohen "could not find," accompanied an autobiographical writing assignment that would become the seed of *Out of the Shadow*. Cohen, "To the Friends," 37-38. Her instructor, Joseph Gollomb, would later write his own Lower East Side coming-of-age narrative, *Unquiet* (1935).

⁴⁵ Arthur Zipser and Pearl Zipser, *Fire and Grace: The Life of Rose Pastor Stokes* (Athens, GA & London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 8, 25. I will refer to Rose Pastor Stokes as "Pastor" rather than as "Stokes" to prevent confusion between her and James Graham Phelps Stokes.

joined its faculty as a drawing instructor.⁴⁶ In a 1949 essay, “The Jewish Literary Scene in New York at the Beginning of the Century,” Zunser describes the afternoon when she first learned of Pastor’s engagement to the millionaire social worker James Graham Phelps Stokes, a scion of one of the city’s elite Protestant families. Bursting into the Educational Alliance classroom where Zunser had just finished teaching, Pastor summoned Yeziarska, “the third friend in our group,” who was teaching a cooking class in the building that day. “Children,” Pastor announced to her friends, “listen to me. I am making history. I am going to be married to the millionaire Stokes. Riches and poverty, Jew and Christian will be united. Here is an indication of the new era.”⁴⁷ The newspapers agreed, and the improbable romance was soon the subject of national headlines and the talk of the Lower East Side. Yeziarska would mine her friend’s romance for the plot of her first novel, *Salome of the Tenement* (1923). By then, large cracks were showing in Pastor-Stokes marriage, and by 1925, the fairytale romance had ended in acrimonious divorce.⁴⁸

Zunser’s recollections foreground the intimacy among women of a similar generation in the “Jewish Literary Scene in New York,” illuminating the personal connections that informed a rich body of writing in English and Yiddish. Indeed, Yeziarska was not the only one among the “group” of friends who became a professional writer. Zunser, the daughter of the popular Yiddish “*shund*” (“trash,” or pulp) novelist Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch (1849?-1905, known by his penname, Shomer, which the family adopted as their surname), had occupied an enviable position in the heart of New York’s Yiddish literary community from her arrival in the United States in 1889. Within two years, her stock in literary *yikhes* (family prestige) would rise to new heights when she married the lawyer and social worker Charles Zunser, son of legendary Yiddish

⁴⁶ Eric L. Goldstein, s.v. “Miriam Shomer Zunser (1882-1951),” in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, March 1, 2009, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/zunser-miriam-shomer>; Zunser, “The Jewish Literary Scene in New York,” 292.

⁴⁷ Zunser, “The Jewish Literary Scene,” 292.

⁴⁸ Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 260-62.

folk bard Eliakum Zunser (1836-1913). A red letter event in the social calendar of the Lower East Side literati, their wedding was attended by a roster of Yiddish heavyweights, including playwright and theatrical director Avrom Goldfajn (1840-1908), lexicographer Alexander Harkavy (1863-1939), and *Yidishes Tageblatt* (Jewish daily news) editors Abraham Fromenson (1873-1935), Johann Paley (1871-1907), and Israel “Tashrak” Zevin (1872-1926).⁴⁹

Yet Miriam Shomer Zunser’s place in the city’s Jewish literary scene was earned as well as inherited. As a nineteen-year-old, she was already a contributor to the *Yidishes Tageblatt*, where she met Rose Pastor, who had recently moved to New York to work as a columnist for the paper.⁵⁰ By the early 1920s, Zunser had embarked on a successful career as bilingual playwright, writing popular plays in Yiddish and English. Working in collaboration with her sister, Rose Shomer Bachelis (1882-1966), she coauthored *Ayne fun folk* (One of the people, 1921), which, according to historian Eric Goldstein, was “received with critical acclaim” and had the further distinction of being “among the first Yiddish plays written by women.” The sibling playwriting team penned two additional Yiddish dramas, including *Syrkus meyd* (Circus girl, 1928), starring the Yiddish stage legend Molly Picon. Zunser’s efforts in English included the Broadway production *Goldenlocks and the Bears* (date unknown).⁵¹

Pastor, too, had literary credentials as both a journalist and a playwright. Born Rose Harriet Wieslander in 1879 in Augustów, a small city in the northeastern region of modern-day Poland, she lived in London’s East End and in Cleveland, Ohio during her childhood and teens. With her mother and step-father unable to support the family on their meager earnings, Rose was forced to leave school and join the workforce before her tenth birthday, augmenting her father’s unreliable income with her wages as a laborer in a shoe factory and, for a time, as a child actor in

⁴⁹ Zunser, “The Jewish Literary Scene in New York,” 283-291.

⁵⁰ Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 24.

⁵¹ Goldstein, “Miriam Shomer Zunser.”

a Whitechapel, London theater. After immigrating to the United States in 1890, the eleven-year-old Rose went to work as a cigar maker in Cleveland's ill-paying and poorly ventilated "buckeyes," as small cigar-making sweatshops were known.⁵²

Writing rescued Pastor from the work that had consumed her childhood and her health. In 1901, in her eleventh year as a cigar maker, she responded to a call for reader contributions from *Yidishes Tageblatt* editor Abraham Fromenson, submitting a letter to the paper's English page. Fromenson printed the letter and encouraged Pastor to submit more of her writing. She soon became a regular contributor, writing under the penname Zelda, and within two years, Fromenson had persuaded her to move to New York to become a full-time columnist. At the *Tageblatt*, Pastor blossomed as a writer. As Zelda, she penned a popular English-language advice column, "Just Between Ourselves, Girls," dishing out advice to young Jewish women who sought her council each week. She wore other hats on the *Tageblatt*'s English page, as well, writing sketches of East Side life for the "Observer" column, coining aphorisms under the initials R.H.P., and publishing articles and poems under her full name. She also conducted interviews for the paper, and it was in this capacity that she met Rose Cohen's benefactor, Lillian Wald, as well as her future husband, who had moved to the Lower East Side to work in the University Settlement.⁵³

Today, Pastor is best remembered for her sensational marriage and for her work as a spokesperson first for the Socialist Party and later for the Communist Party. Though often overshadowed by these roles, however, her writing was always an important part of her activism. Her biographers, Arthur and Pearl Zipser, observe, "Rose began writing verses, jingles, and prose while still a cigar maker. For the rest of her life she toiled over her poetry. She wanted to

⁵² Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 11-17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5, 8, 22, 25.

be a poet; she felt she was a poet.”⁵⁴ Although her political work often left her with little time or energy to write, she continued to compose poetry throughout her life, using her increasingly frequent periods of illness to catch up on her writing.⁵⁵ In 1914, she collaborated with the translator and anthologist Helena Frank (1872-1954) on a translation of *Songs of Labor*, a slim volume of poetry by the Yiddish socialist “sweatshop poet” Morris Rosenfeld (1862-1923).⁵⁶ She also became interested in theater around this time. “From 1911 on, and particularly from 1913,” Zipser and Zipser write, “Rose was usually working on a play. . . . Her plays are concerned with social issues, mostly with workers trying to survive in a society they do not control, and they stress the special problems women workers face in relation to work, love, marriage, motherhood, and birth control.”⁵⁷ In 1916, G. P. Putnam’s Sons published *The Woman Who Wouldn’t*, a didactic drama whose heavy-handed plot hinges on the themes of unionism, birth control, and the politics of love and partnership.

Pastor would write several more plays, becoming involved in radical playhouses, including the People’s Playhouse, where she worked with Samuel Ornitz (1890-1957), a Communist social worker-turned-playwright, novelist, and Hollywood scriptwriter, and the author of the Lower East Side novel *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl* (1923, discussed in greater depth in the following chapter).⁵⁸ Pastor’s collaboration with Ornitz blossomed into a lasting friendship to which Ornitz paid tribute in *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, using Pastor as the model for the character Esther, who “dazzle[s]” the corrupt protagonist and narrator “with her exquisite

⁵⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 147, 151-52.

⁵⁶ Rose Pastor Stokes and Helena Frank, trans., *Songs of Labor and Other Poems*. by Morris Rosenfeld (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914).

⁵⁷ Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 151.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 155.

beauty” and shames him with her idealism. “She seems to live in a world wholly apart from mine,” the narrator acknowledges with regret.

She teaches school and directs girls’ clubs in the little social settlement Barney Finn [a stand-in for James Graham Phelps Stokes] started with his aunt’s money. . . . Mine is a busy, pushing, pulling, scheming, contriving life, but I cannot put Esther out of my mind. . . . When I am with her she obscures my other world. . . . I quail before her clear, broad understanding . . . and to talk with her is a refreshing relief from the humdrum rot of my daily doings.

Like Pastor, the radiant Esther finally marries a Protestant settlement worker, becoming the talk of the Lower East side, which is rocked with gossip about the “poor Jewish girl” who married the millionaire “goy” (non-Jew).⁵⁹ Ornitz also encouraged Pastor to write her own story. “I am particularly interested in your biography . . . I hope you haven’t dropped it,” her wrote her in 1923, revealing that Pastor had already begun to think about composing her memoirs.⁶⁰ Ornitz’s encouragement continued until Pastor’s death from cancer in 1933. Only a year earlier, he wrote, “How I wish I could sit with you and talk about your book. You have such an important thing to say, perhaps the most important warning for both masses and intellectuals. . . . Make it a full book; make it warm, rich and vibrant as your voice, and I believe your book will be like it.”⁶¹

While certainly unique, Pastor’s story would be part of a growing genre of immigrant memoirs and semi- and mock-autobiographical fiction set in the Jewish slums of New York. This genre included Anzia Yezierska’s stories and novels (her 1923 fictionalization of the Pastor-Stokes marriage among them); Ornitz’s *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, which he originally published anonymously as the “autobiographical” confessions of its corrupt narrator; and Cohen’s *Out of the Shadow*. Pastor’s interest in writing her memoirs might also have been

⁵⁹ Samuel Ornitz, *Allrightniks Row: “Haunch, Paunch and Jowl”: The Making of a Professional Jew*, *Masterworks of Modern Jewish Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1986), 76, 186, 262.

⁶⁰ Samuel Ornitz to Rose Pastor Stokes, 17 December 1923, Rose Pastor Stokes Papers, Yale University Library, quoted in Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 244.

⁶¹ Samuel Ornitz to Rose Pastor Stokes, 1 December 1932, Yale University Library, quoted in Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 120-121.

sparked by the literary endeavors of her friend Bella Cohen Spewack, who was born in a town outside of Bucharest in 1899, and who had also arrived in the United States as a young girl, settling on Manhattan's Lower East Side (Spewack is best remembered as the co-author with her husband Sam of the Tony Award-winning musical *Kiss Me, Kate* [1948]).⁶² In 1922, a year before Ornitz's letter of encouragement to Pastor, the twenty-three-year-old Spewack had begun writing her own memoirs of her childhood as the daughter of a single mother living in desperate poverty in the Jewish immigrant slums. Neither Spewack nor Pastor succeeded in publishing their memoirs during their lifetimes, Spewack because of a loss of interest, Pastor because of cancer. Realizing that her health would not allow her to complete the book, Pastor and leading figures in the Communist Party worked to secure a commitment from Samuel Ornitz to finish writing the memoir as a biography, but Ornitz, despite his early enthusiasm for the project, never undertook its completion. A year after Pastor's death, he wrote to Earl Browder, then the Communist Party's Secretary, with obvious regret: "I read her manuscript and quite agree with . . . others that the contents were unorganized, diffuse and suffered particularly from the bourgeois tradition of memoir writing . . . I was placed in a position of refusing . . . not only a dying woman . . . but a great revolutionary martyr."⁶³ Pastor's memoir finally saw print nearly sixty years after her death, when it was published by the University of Georgia Press in 1992 as *I Belong to the Working Class: The Unfinished Autobiography of Rose Pastor Stokes*.

Pastor had also appealed to Yeziarska for assistance on her autobiography – not in completing it, but in finding a publisher. Yeziarska, though neither woman could know it at the time, was about to publish her last book for almost two decades. *All I Could Never Be* (1932), a

⁶² On Pastor's friendship with Spewack, see Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 238; for Spewack's biographical information, see her posthumously published memoir, *Streets: A Memoir of the Lower East Side* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1995), 1-3.

⁶³ Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 303; Samuel Ornitz to Earl Browder, 6 August 1934, Yale University Library, quoted in Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 121.

fictionalized account of Yeziarska's brief and devastating romance with John Dewey, was to be published by George P. Putnam, the husband of Amelia Earhart and the publisher of Pastor's *The Woman Who Wouldn't*. According to one account, Yeziarska used her acquaintance with Putnam to try to interest him in Pastor's autobiography. "He wanted to buy the book and sell serialization rights to *Liberty* magazine," Zipser and Zipser recount. "But *Liberty* did not want it," and "Putnam's interest cooled."⁶⁴ Yeziarska's daughter and first biographer, Louise Levitas Henriksen, gives a slightly different account, quoting letters from Yeziarska that suggest Putnam's fortunes had declined so dramatically during the first years of the Depression that he was financially unable to take on the project: "Publishing is in such a bad state that Putnam has . . . taken a job in the story dept of the Paramount movies," Yeziarska wrote Pastor. "His name is still with the firm but he is practically out of it."⁶⁵

Although Yeziarska proved unable to help, this anecdote reveals the dramatic reversal in fortunes that had occurred in the two women's lives. By the early 1930s, Yeziarska had become the more experienced and successful of the two writers, the one with more valuable literary contacts. This had not always been the case, however. In 1917, when Yeziarska was still struggling to place her first stories, Pastor was already a published journalist, poet, and playwright, and it was Yeziarska who assumed the role of supplicant. "Dear Rose," she wrote in July of that year,

I am presuming on your friendship in asking you this favor. Will you read over the enclosed 4 stories & will you take them to the editor of *Everybody's* & then to Miss Levine of the *Metropolitan*? . . .

Need I tell you what a tremendous help it is to have you interest the editor in the stories? – it is like helping the dumb to become articulate – the self-bound to become socially free.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid., 291.

⁶⁵ Anzia Yierska to Rose Pastor Stokes, Yale University Library, quoted in Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 245.

⁶⁶ Anzia Yeziarska to Rose Pastor Stokes, 25 July 1917, Anzia Yeziarska Collection, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, quoted in Alan Robert Ginsberg, "The Salome Ensemble and the Dialectics of

Yeziarska's description of herself as one of "the dumb" and "self-bound" recalls her later description of Ruth Raefsky (the Rose Cohen figure) as resembling "the dumb who wanted to say something, but were too confused to know what to say" and of herself, in 1922, as "one of the dumb, voiceless ones."⁶⁷ It also anticipates her later description of Sonya Vrunsky, the Rose Pastor figure in *Salome of the Tenements*, as "a dumb thing" with "no language."⁶⁸

What could such descriptions mean? Clearly, they cannot be taken literally, and their inaccuracy is too obvious for them to be credible as attempts at willful misrepresentation, since all three women – as well as their fictional reincarnations – were professional writers. There can be no suspicion, moreover, that Yeziarska was trying to play on her friend's personal and political sympathies by attempting to pass herself off as something other than the highly literate, self-made woman she was. Pastor knew her too well for such a deception to have succeeded. On the contrary, I propose that it was precisely because Pastor did know her so well that Yeziarska could make such an appeal, as her choice of the phrase "[n]eed I tell you" indicates. To say that Yeziarska saw her writing as an inherently political act is a cliché, yet it is a valid cliché and one in which Yeziarska wholeheartedly believed. Indeed, as her application of the term "dumb" to nearly all of her protagonists suggest, her very status as an immigrant was itself a cliché of sorts, an experience whose vocalization was of crucial importance precisely because it was representative rather than unique. Literary scholar Ruth Limmer, writing of Bella Spewack, might also have been describing Yeziarska when she wrote, "Clearly, Bella Spewack was extraordinarily gifted and adventurous. Nevertheless, what she lived through was in no way

Visibility: Rose Pastor Stokes, Anzia Yeziarska, Sonya Levien and Jetta Goudal," (MA thesis, Columbia University, 2011), Columbia University Academic Commons, 74.

⁶⁷ Yeziarska, "Wild," 486; Anzia Yeziarska, "America and I," *Scribners*, February 1922, 157, reprinted in *Children of Loneliness* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1923), 35.

⁶⁸ Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 30.

unusual. However harsh, however painful, her experiences were the stuff of urban immigrant life during the decades that marked the greatest influx of peoples into America that had ever been known.”⁶⁹

Pastor, too, had shared this experience, and she well knew what a challenge – and a triumph – it was for a woman whom poverty had driven into the workforce as a child first to gain literacy and then to leap the hurdle into professional writing. In her memoir, Pastor recalls her first year and a half as a paid contributor to the *Tageblatt*, when she was still working as a cigar maker during the day and several evenings a week, and as an English teacher for immigrants on the evenings when she was not making cigars. “I was then the only support of the family – eight of us,” Pastor recalls.

Strain as I might from eleven to twelve hours daily, I could not earn more than five or six dollars a week in the factory. . . . The only hours in which I could earn the two extra dollars at writing [for the *Tageblatt*] were those torn from sleep. . . . [M]y mother feared that I . . . would break. The question had to be settled: ‘Shall I earn an uncertain extra two dollars and risk my health, or drop writing and stay at the [cigar maker’s] bench for a more or less certain five or six dollars?’ Of course I dropped the writing.

Although popular demand and personal affection eventually led Fromenson to bring Pastor to New York to resume her writing on a full-time basis, it is clear from her recollections three decades later that she still viewed the job on the *Tageblatt* as an almost miraculous deliverance from the “annihilation” of poverty.⁷⁰

If Pastor understood the challenges Yeziarska faced – Yeziarska’s were of a lesser magnitude, but certainly of a similar order – she also understood the larger economic and social forces responsible for these challenges: the economic forces that kept the poor impoverished, the bigotry that closed avenues of upward mobility to Jews and other racialized minorities, and the

⁶⁹ Ruth Limmer, introduction to *Streets: A Memoir of the Lower East Side* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1995), xv.

⁷⁰ Pastor Stokes, “*I Belong to the Working Class*”: *The Unfinished Autobiography of Rose Pastor Stokes*, ed. Herbert Shapiro and David L. Sterling (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), 80-83.

rigid gender norms that compounded these factors for women who were expected to be wage earners as well as domestic laborers, and whose work in the public sphere was restricted to the lowest paying occupations and was paid on a lower wage scale than men's labor. To describe these conditions in writing was thus a fundamentally political act, and to write from under these conditions and despite them was doubly so. Like Deleuze and Guattari's "minor literature," then, the works Yeziarska, Pastor, and Cohen succeeded in seeing to print were both personal triumphs and works of "a collective value." Precisely because their experiences were representative rather than unique, their contributions to this "minor literature" make their individual expression, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, "a common action" that "is necessarily political, even if others aren't in agreement."⁷¹

There was little disagreement, however, among this group of young women as to the larger implications of the economic and social conditions in which they had lived as children and adolescents. Indeed, Yeziarska might well have expected "Miss Levine of the *Metropolitan*," no less than Pastor, to understand these challenges. The "Miss Levine" to whom Yeziarska refers in her letter was, after all, Sonya Levien, at the time, an up-and-coming editor at the *Metropolitan* as well as a frequently published editorialist and writer of stories and humorous sketches (Levien adopted the unusual spelling to make her name more memorable).⁷² Levien was younger than Yeziarska and Pastor, but her biography nonetheless shares important details with theirs. Born in 1888 in Panimunik, a Lithuanian town in the Russian Empire, Levien immigrated to the United States with her family in 1896, settling on the Lower East Side. Although she was unusual among Jewish girls in that she received an early education in religious texts from her grandfather, Levien too was forced to leave school at an early age to take up factory work to

⁷¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 16.

⁷² Zipser and Zipser, *Fire and Grace*, 26.

support her family.⁷³ Writing in a 1918 autobiographical sketch, she described her adolescence on the Lower East Side in words that could easily have come from one of Yeziarska's stories:

Poverty had embittered young life for me. I had come here to the trumpet call of liberty. A feather-duster factory swallowed up my teens at four dollars a week. . . . Another period of illness or unemployment, and the charity organization would have its tentacles upon us.

. . . If I would live I must escape from the East Side. If my body did not die, my mind and spirit would.⁷⁴

After leaving school, Levien continued her studies at the Educational Alliance, where she likely came into contact with Yeziarska in 1903. It was there, too, that she met and befriended Rose Pastor, for whom she worked as a personal secretary after Pastor's marriage in 1905.⁷⁵

With the help of James Graham Phelps Stokes's richly furnished library, Levien studied to take the qualifying exams for law school, eventually enrolling in New York University, although her career in law would be as short-lived as those of the poets Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976, the subject of chapter five) and Yankev Glatshteyn (1896-1971), both of whom also attended law school at NYU. (High school and bachelor's degrees were not requisites for attending law school at the time.) Instead of practicing law, Levien pursued a career as a writer, working in various capacities for *Success* and the pro-suffrage *Woman's Journal*, before moving on to the progressive *Metropolitan*, where she edited Theodore Roosevelt's (1858-1919) contributions to the magazine. She eventually left the publishing industry for Hollywood, where she enjoyed a long and notable career as a screenwriter, earning screen credits for such blockbusters as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1941) and *Oklahoma!* (1955). A committed advocate of women's suffrage and, until her late twenties, an outspoken socialist, Levien was an intimate of well-known feminist and socialist writers, including members of the feminist

⁷³ Larry Ceplair, *A Great Lady: A Life of the Screenwriter Sonya Levien* (Lanham, Md. and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1996), 1-9.

⁷⁴ Sonya Levien, "In the Golden Land," *Metropolitan*, April, 1918, 8.

⁷⁵ Ceplair, *A Great Lady*, 10-11.

Heterodoxy discussion group and the young Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951), with whom she had a brief but serious romantic relationship.⁷⁶

Although Levien was already well on her way to a successful career by the time Yeziarska's stories made their way onto her desk, it is likely that she heard in them an echo of her own early longings and frustrations. What is certain is that Levien offered invaluable assistance to Yeziarska during her first years as a writer, publishing several of Yeziarska's earliest stories, including her second story to see print, "Where Lovers Dream" (1918), and "The Miracle" (1919), the story that, according to John Dewey scholar Jo Ann Boydston, "marks the beginning of [Yeziarska's] use of the Dewey *persona* and life in her writings . . ."⁷⁷ While Dewey's influence on Yeziarska's writing has been widely discussed, however, Levien's influence has only been acknowledged in passing, a reflection of a troubling scholarly trend of substantiating the importance of Jewish women writers by reference to their relationships with non-Jewish men (Emma Lazarus's [1849-1887] much-discussed friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson [1803-1882] comes to mind). Henriksen, however, notes that "Sonya Levien . . . had virtually started Anzia's career by buying 'Where Lovers Dream,'" and Yeziarska herself publicly credited Levien with jumpstarting her career.⁷⁸ Although she had published her first story, "The Free Vacation House," in the *Forum* in December of 1915, she later told an interviewer that "Sonya Levien of the *Metropolitan Magazine* was the first editor to accept a manuscript from me."⁷⁹ Boydston cites this interview as evidence of Yeziarska's tendency to play fast and loose with the historical record, but it is better understood as a conscious attempt to

⁷⁶ Ibid., 12-16, 21, 26.

⁷⁷ Jo Ann Boydston, introduction to *The Poems of John Dewey*, by John Dewey, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), xxxvi.

⁷⁸ Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 123.

⁷⁹ Anzia Yeziarska, "My Ambitions at 21 and What Became of Them," interview by Adolphe W. Roberts, *American Hebrew*, August 25, 1922, 342, quoted in Jo Ann Boydston, introduction, xxxvi.

emphasize her personal and professional ties to the community of immigrant women writers she discovered at the Educational Alliance in the first years of the century.⁸⁰

Yeziarska valued Levien as both a professional connection and an inspiring example of the literary success she so desperately sought. Pastor, who moved in even more exalted literary, political, and social circles, and who had published her first play with Putnam only a year before Yeziarska's letter, could offer similar inspiration and material assistance. And finally, both Pastor and Zunser provided a sense of personal connection to the older tradition of Yiddish labor writing that Yeziarska would cite decades later as her earliest literary inspirations: Pastor, as the translator of Morris Rosenfeld's poetry, and Zunser as the daughter-in-law of Eliakum Zunser. (There is no evidence that Yeziarska admired Shomer's writing.) Rosenfeld's and Zunser's writing dealt with the challenges and ambitions of the Jewish proletariat, for whom both men were regarded as unofficial spokespeople. In a series of interviews conducted between 1968 and 1969 by Ralda Meyerson Sullivan, at the time a doctoral student at Berkeley, Yeziarska recalled, in Sullivan's paraphrase, "hear[ing] the songs of Eliakum Zunser" when still "a child in Poland and on the East Side." Comparing Zunser's influence to that of Bob Dylan, Yeziarska told Sullivan that "it was first Zunser who inspired her with the idea of being a spokesman for her people through literature . . ." And if Zunser "had been the poet of her childhood," Sullivan adds, it was Morris Rosenfeld's poem "The Machine" that captured her imagination "[w]hen she was about sixteen and working in a factory . . ."⁸¹ Pastor's and Zunser's friendship, then, not only connected Yeziarska to the future she hoped to create for herself, but also gave her a sense of continuity with older Yiddish models for the kind of politically engaged literary spokespersonship she would seek to emulate in her own writing.

⁸⁰ Boydston, introduction, xxxvi.

⁸¹ Ralda Meyerson Sullivan, "Anzia Yeziarska, An American Writer" (PhD diss., UC Berkeley, 1975), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 49-50

Pastor provided another form of inspiration, as well. Brought out to Hollywood to work on the screenplay for *Hungry Hearts*, Yeziarska and her editor at Houghton Mifflin agreed that she should capitalize on her successes with a novel. Attempting to make progress on the manuscript, however, Yeziarska suffered writer's block. "She wrote and tore up useless efforts," Henriksen recounts. It was only when she decided to abandon her previous outline and use Rose Pastor's marriage as the foundation for her novel that the writing began to flow again. "Putting aside the novel she had intended to write . . . and goaded by increasing pressure from publishers and editors, Anzia rushed into *Salome of the Tenements*," Henriksen writes. "On this novel she was able to work in a fury of haste, whole scenes emerging with turbulent emotion, almost as fast as she could write them . . ." ⁸² Sonya Levien lent additional support to the project by publishing an excerpt of the novel in the *Metropolitan*. ⁸³ Not long after, Levien moved to Hollywood, and when the Famous Players-Lasky purchased the film rights to *Salome* in 1924, she was hired to write the screenplay as one of her first Hollywood assignments.

Salome of the Tenements

Why did the fictionalization of Rose Pastor's story come so easily to Yeziarska? It is only possible to speculate, but it seems likely that the speed with which the manuscript emerged from her typewriter can be at least partially attributed to her close sense of identification with Pastor's experiences and politics – at least, as Yeziarska understood them. "It was a story Anzia could step into and fill with her own experiences," Henriksen writes. ⁸⁴ Indeed, the story is as much a composite portrait of the group of young women who had met at the Educational Alliance almost twenty years earlier as it is a portrait of Pastor.

⁸² Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 154, 163, 171.

⁸³ Ceplair, *A Great Lady*, 56.

⁸⁴ Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 170.

Salome of the Tenements is the story of Sonya Vrunsky, the “rapacious” but sympathetic Lower East Side “siren” who meets the millionaire settlement house worker John Manning when she interviews him for the *Ghetto News*, an immigrant publication loosely based on the *Yidishes Tageblatt*. The first half of the novel recounts Sonya’s increasingly compromising efforts to escape the poverty and restricted social horizons of her life in the Jewish ghetto through marriage to the millionaire social worker. Yeziarska is at pains to show that Sonya’s determination to “catch on to a man like Manning” cannot simply be attributed to material and social ambition, however. More significantly for Sonya, Manning’s wealth represents opportunities for internal growth and an escape from the moral and intellectual dangers of the ghetto. Sonya sees direct correlations between economic environment and psychological and moral development, arguing that “[t]he struggle for a living makes men coarse-grained and greedy . . .”⁸⁵ She is eventually disabused of this view by her discovery of the emotional and intellectual hollowness of her husband’s social set, yet this early condemnation of the East Side environment is reflective of the contemporary concerns of social workers, reformers, and developmental theorists who believed that environment determined intellectual and social development. Writing only three years before the publication of *Salome*, neurologist Abraham Myerson observed of the Jewish communities in Europe that “ghetto life was not only unwholesome physically, but unwholesome mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.”⁸⁶ Similar arguments were common in the literature about the Jewish ghettos of the United States.

In her sense of the moral and intellectual threat posed by life on the Lower East Side, and in her determination to find a means of escape, Sonya Vrunsky echoes these arguments while

⁸⁵ Yeziarska, *Salome*, 6-7, 63, 66; I follow Yeziarska’s practice of referring to Sonya Vrunsky by her first name and John Manning by his last name.

⁸⁶ Abraham Myerson, “The ‘Nervousness’ of the Jew,” *Mental Hygiene* 4 (1920): 65-72, reprinted in *Jews & Race: Writings on Identity & Difference, 1880-1940*, ed. Mitchell B. Hart (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 133.

also recalling Levien's insistence that "[i]f I would live I must escape from the East Side. If my body did not die, my mind and spirit would." This similarity is more than incidental. Yeziarska invokes Levien, Pastor, and Mary Antin by name in the text of the novel, presenting their literary success and upward mobility as triumphs over shared obstacles. "To think how I once hated settlements," Sonya recalls after meeting Manning.

"Where else can a poor girl like me meet her millionaire if not in the settlement?" Sonya rationalized her inconsistency. "How did Rose Pastor catch on to Graham Stokes? How did Mary Antin get the chance to climb higher up? How did Sonya Levien, a plain stenographer, rise to be one of the biggest editors?"⁸⁷

Pastor would, of course, have rejected the suggestion that her marriage was opportunistic, but Sonya's reference to Pastor, Levien, and Antin cannot be confused with Yeziarska's own feelings. Throughout the first half of the book, Yeziarska depicts her protagonist in a decidedly unsympathetic light, attributing sentiments to her that she herself would never have endorsed: in particular, Sonya's stated willingness to "rob, steal or murder" to ensnare her millionaire, her notably anti-feminist description of him as "the end, the purpose of life," and her self-loathing avowal that "the Anglo-Saxons are superior to the crazy Russians." The novel's unfolding plot methodically disproves each of these early assumptions. After her marriage, Sonya soon repents of her early statements and actions, separating from Manning and learning to capitalize on her own internal resources by parlaying her charm and innate taste for the beautiful into a promising career as a dress designer. Reflecting on her early mistakes, Sonya solicits the reader's sympathy: "[T]he world cheated me of my youth. It burned in me for beauty and here I was trapped by poverty in a prison of ugliness – dirt – soul-wasting want. What chance had I to tear myself out from the black life of poverty but to marry myself rich?"⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Yeziarska, *Salome*, 82-83.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 8, 65, 68, 150. Yeziarska is once again echoing the language of contemporary social science. Myerson, for instance, insists that "*the Jew, though his restrictions, was cheated out of childhood.*" Meyerson, "The

Sonya's explanation is, like many of her statements, richly contradictory. At once a condemnation of an exploitative economic system and the restrictive gender norms that make marriage the most available means of upward mobility for a young working-class woman, her logic is implicitly contradicted by the greater success of her efforts at self-invention when she becomes a designer in the garment industry. The superior value of Emersonian "self-reliance" – a favorite theme of Yeziarska's – is subtly reinforced by the allusion to Levien, Antin, and Pastor, all three of whom, despite marriages to successful non-Jewish men, made their mark as writers through their own talent, hard work, and insistence on the value of their contributions to the nation's literary-political discourse.

Yeziarska's references to fellow Jewish immigrant women of letters thus underscores the significance – both personal and political – of self-expression in the context of the Jewish ghetto. The struggle for a "voice" and an attentive audience takes different forms in Yeziarska's writing, but its narrative centrality is consistent throughout her work. "I'd live my life writing and rewriting my story," she explains in her fictionalized autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. "The story of immigrants as helpless as deaf-mutes—children who came seeking the life of America and found themselves in the dead end of the sweatshop" (78). While this is not precisely Yeziarska's "story," as her critics have been quick to note – she soon found a way out of the "dead end" of the sweatshop and was hardly "helpless," "deaf," or "mute" – it is nonetheless a sincere statement of allegiance, of identity, and of literary mission. It invokes Yeziarska's self-assigned role as a spokesperson for the Jewish immigrant community and her understanding of her own public expression as urgent political speech.

'Nervousness' of the Jew," 133, italics in original. Myerson is referring to the legal "restrictions" on Jewish life in Europe, but Yeziarska perceived a different but still pernicious set of economic and social restrictions in the United States.

If Yeziarska saw Jewish immigrants as mired in the “dead end of the sweatshop,” she saw in the careers of Cohen, Levien, and Pastor a way out. Literacy, the attainment of knowledge, and the ability to impart knowledge through writing are the most direct paths out of the “dead end” of economic and domestic exploitation for Yeziarska’s young female protagonists, but they are not the only means she presents of finding a public voice. Several of her characters – Sophie Sapinsky in “My Own People” (1920) and “To the Stars” (1921), Ruth Raefsky in “Wild Winter Love” (1927), and Fanya Ivanowna in *All I Could Never Be* (1932) – are writers, but many more choose different forms of expression. The unnamed protagonist of “Soap and Water” and Sara Smolinsky of *Bread Givers* elect to become teachers in the New York City school system, choosing one of the few forms of white collar labor then open to Jewish immigrant women. However, like Yeziarska, who found her work as a teacher “hateful tedium,” these characters find that the gendered educational philosophy of the time afforded few opportunities for intellectual expansion and personal expression.⁸⁹ “Now I was the teacher,” Sara Smolinsky muses near the end of *Bread Givers* (1925). “The goal was here. Why was I so silent, so empty? All labour now – and so far from the light.”⁹⁰

Yeziarska’s other heroines fare better in their career choices. Adele Lindner of *Arrogant Beggar* opens a “beautiful” Parisian-style café in the heart of the ghetto that offers nutritious food, piano music, and “poetry evenings around the fireplace” to provide beauty and nourishment to her poor clientele for whatever they can afford to pay.⁹¹ Sonya Vrunsky, unlike Pastor, is not a skilled writer, despite her employment on the *Ghetto News*: “Poets when they’re in love they can write poems to win their beloved,” Sonya laments. “But a dumb thing like me –

⁸⁹ Henriksen, Anzia Yeziarska, 19.

⁹⁰ Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea Books, 2003), 270.

⁹¹ Anzia Yeziarska, *Arrogant Beggar* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 127, 132.

I got no language – only the aching drive to make myself beautiful.”⁹² This “consuming passion for beauty” is later channeled into a form of aesthetic uplift when, with the help of the Jewish clothing designer Jacques Hollins (né Jacky Solomon, a fellow immigrant from the Russian Empire), whom she marries after her divorce from Manning, Sonya establishes an affordable clothing boutique on Hester Street for the “millions on the East Side dying for a little loveliness” who “*never, never* have it.”⁹³ Pastor, the labor organizer and political orator, would likely have found Sonya’s affordable boutique an insufficient response to the systemic inequalities of capitalism, but Yeziarska believed otherwise. However naïvely, she saw access to beauty and the elevating influence of art as a resource as essential for social and intellectual development as proper nourishment was for physical growth. “How could the soul keep alive here – where every breath of beauty was blotted out with soot, drowned in noise – where even the sky was a prisoner and the stars choked?” Adele Lindner of *Arrogant Beggar* laments.⁹⁴ To write, then, and to write about this world “blotted out with soot” was also a way of exerting control over an oppressive environment. In describing the ugliness of the slums, Yeziarska could, in Keats’s formulation, at least bring to them the beauty of truth.⁹⁵

Yeziarska’s Political Thought

Unlikely happy endings such as Adele Lindner’s, always facilitated through economic collaboration and romantic partnership with a sympathetic Anglo-Saxon or Americanized Jewish man, have been a source of consternation for “feminist readers who would prefer a defense of a single woman’s independence to a conventional romantic resolution,” in Magdalena

⁹² Yeziarska, *Salome*, 30.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 22, 177, emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ Yeziarska, *Arrogant Beggar*, 16.

⁹⁵ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush, Riverside Editions B42 (Boston: Riverside Press, 1959), 207-208.

Zaborowska's words.⁹⁶ Noting Yeziarska's decision to seek independence first from the economic exploitation of a patriarchal father and later from the restricting domesticity of conventional marriage, scholars have asked why she did not uphold these radical ideals in her fiction.⁹⁷ Yeziarska's unrealistic endings do indeed present a problem for readers who attempt to isolate her feminist investments from her other political concerns. More allegorical than realist, however, these endings can be more productively understood as symbolic resolutions to the issue of gaining a public voice, which, as Yeziarska recognizes in her writing, suggested productive parallels between the obstacles confronting women and those confronting the masses of Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire. To make public expression meaningful, it was necessary to have an audience willing to listen and eager to understand. The intermarriage plot thus provided an allegory for the generative union Yeziarska believed possible if Protestant America would only accept the Jewish immigrants as equal partners in the national project.

Yeziarska was center stage for the great political debates of the early twentieth century, and, as her writing shows, she was more than a passive listener. In the years when she was coming of age intellectually, socialist thought was sweeping the Lower East Side, where labor and housing conditions offered a vivid illustration of capitalism's failures. As early as 1893, the year the Yeziarska family arrived in New York, one journalist noted that "the Russian Jews are naturally radicals on all social questions. . . . Thousands of disciples of Karl Marx may be found among the organized Jewish workingmen. Their intense desire to study and discuss social questions I have never seen equaled."⁹⁸ And if socialism was in the air, Yeziarska breathed it in ever greater doses between 1909 and 1910 while living in the dormitories of the Rand School of

⁹⁶ Zaborowska, *How We Found America*, 118.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115-16.

⁹⁸ Ida Van Ettan, "Russian Jews as Desirable Immigrants," *Forum* 15 (April 1893), 173, quoted in Tony Michaels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2.

Social Science, a hub for radical intellectuals in New York. According to one sympathetic chronicler of its early years, the “purpose of the school [was] twofold: (1) To offer to the general public facilities for the study of Socialism and allied subjects; (2) To offer to Socialists such instruction and training as may make them more efficient workers in and for the Socialist and labor movement.”⁹⁹ Unlike Pastor, Yeziarska never officially enrolled in the swelling ranks of the Socialist Party, but her writing and biography suggest her investment in socialism’s ideals.¹⁰⁰ At the Rand School, she also received a crash course in the latest radical feminist thought. There, according to literary scholar Blanch Gelfant, Yeziarska “encountered radical ‘new ideas’ that reinforced the feminist views of the ‘new women’ gravitating to Greenwich Village. Listening to outspoken and influential women – Charlotte Perkins Gilman [1860-1935], Olive Schreiner [1855-1920] . . . , Mary Austin [1868-1934], Mabel Dodge Luhan [1879-1962], Emma Goldman [1869-1940] – Yeziarska absorbed iconoclastic notions about marriage, love, divorce, women’s rights, and women’s independence.”¹⁰¹

The trope of voicelessness, more than any other single theme in Yeziarska’s work, suggests the fundamental inseparability of her class, feminist, and ethnic investments. In her most direct statements of political and literary purpose, Yeziarska presents voicelessness as an economic and racial problem, positioning herself as a spokesperson for the immigrant masses whose voices are ignored and suppressed. Yeziarska’s stilted approximation of Yiddish syntax, a cultivated and calculated affectation, reminds readers with exaggerated force of the additional difficulties an immigrant from a non-Anglophone nation faced in attempting to master the

⁹⁹ Marion Lucas Bird, “Rand School Begins 15th Year as Workers’ Educational Center,” *The Call Magazine*, October 12, 1920, <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1920/1010-bird-randschool.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Such sympathy is revealed in a 1912 letter from California, where Yeziarska was visiting one of her sisters: “I have come in touch with a few interesting people with whom I have started a class in the study of socialism.” Anzia Yeziarska to Arnold Levitas, March 11, 1912, quoted in Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 52.

¹⁰¹ Blanche H. Gelfant, introduction to *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), xiv.

literary idiom. As Yeziarska recognized, moreover, the hardships immigrants faced were only compounded for women, for whom class and racial barriers were reinforced by repressive gender norms both within the traditional Jewish family structure and, with only somewhat less rigidity, in American society more broadly. Restricted to the domestic sphere, married immigrant women often lagged behind their husbands in acquiring English fluency. Even women who had arrived in America young enough to spend at least some period of time in the city's public schools were not supposed to possess the intellect or independence requisite for pursuing literary careers, and in traditional religious families such as Yeziarska's, there was the added expectation that women would work to support a pious father's life of study and prayer. In her autobiography, Yeziarska dramatizes this conflict in a scene in which her father reprimands her for her literary ambitions. "You're my only unmarried daughter," he admonishes. "Your first duty to God is to serve your father."¹⁰² Even in more liberal households, daughters' ambitions were often curtailed by economic necessity. In working-class immigrant families such as Yeziarska's, Cohen's, Levien's, and Pastor's, it was common for children to be forced to leave school, often well before the legal working age, which was a mere twelve-years-old until 1903, when it was raised to fourteen.¹⁰³ And if many children of working-class Jewish families were forced to abandon their educations prematurely, sacrificing long-term ambitions for short-term needs, this painful sacrifice was unequally shouldered by girls. It was not uncommon for immigrant parents to send a daughter to work to support a brother's continued education, since families recognized that men had more earning power and would be able to put their educations to more profitable use in

¹⁰² Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, 33.

¹⁰³ Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920*. Vol. 2, *City of Promises: A History of the Jews of New York*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 122.

professions barred to women.¹⁰⁴ This was the situation in which Cohen, Levien, Pastor, and Yeziarska found themselves. Even Yeziarska, who was eventually able to attend college, was frustrated in her ambitions to obtain a liberal arts education.¹⁰⁵

Yeziarska does not explicitly link the issue of voicelessness to gender, but contemporary readers would have associated the trope with a rich history of feminist advocacy for women's voice in the public sphere, an issue that gained increased attention as the fight for women's suffrage reached a boiling point during the years when Yeziarska was embarking on her career as a writer. In those years, Yeziarska would have been exposed to any number of arguments that presented the "woman question" in the language of voice and voicelessness, and it is possible to find echoes of this theme in the works of the New Women writers Yeziarska is known to have admired. Olive Schreiner, a South African novelist and early feminist thinker whose work Yeziarska cites approvingly in a story in her first collection, had predicted in *Women and Labor* (1911) that war would be abolished only "when [woman's] voice is fully and clearly heard in the governance of states . . ." Schreiner explains, "It is not because of woman's cowardice, incapacity, nor, above all, because of her general superior virtue," but because, unlike man, "she knows the history of human flesh; she knows its cost; he does not."¹⁰⁶ Schreiner's emphasis on women's distinctive contributions to public discourse and policy, muddying the boundary between gender essentialism and constructivism, clearly resonated with Yeziarska's developing thinking.

In the early 1910s, Yeziarska had also been captivated by the arguments in Swedish feminist Ellen Key's (1849-1926) treatise on *Love and Marriage*, published the same year as

¹⁰⁴ Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age*, 61.

¹⁰⁵ Berch, *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, 39.

¹⁰⁶ Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labor*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1911, 178-79. Yeziarska alludes to Schreiner's writing in "Wings," *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Signet Classic, 1996), 6.

Schreiner's *Women and Labor*.¹⁰⁷ Key argues for "[w]oman's right to participate in public life," justifying it, like Schreiner, not through anti-essentialist arguments of equality but by insisting on women's ability to "bring to [public life] something really indispensable, new, and peculiar to herself." For Key, "This new thing is her idealism and enthusiasm, however finely and easily they may blaze up, since woman is so much more inflammable than man, so much more eager to translate her enthusiasm into action." Building on this gendered understanding of sentiment and character, Key concludes, "It is the masculine feeling alone which has decided the structure of society. Not until woman's feeling has the same scope as man's; not until each can counterbalance what is extreme in the other . . . will society in its fatherliness and motherliness really provide for the rightful needs of all its children."¹⁰⁸ The two sexes, then, form the two terms of a larger political and social ecology, each part of which is incomplete and unbalanced without its counterweight.

Yeziarska embraced these stereotypes in her own writing, applying them to her protagonists, whom she describes in language that echoes Key's. She gives Key's argument for a dialectical balance of the genders a more expansive scope, however, endorsing its understanding of women's distinctive contributions to public life while simultaneously extending its logic into the domain of race. Employing the language of racial essentialism to "strategic" ends, to paraphrase postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Yeziarska depicts her protagonists as impassioned idealists whose volatility, intensity, and hunger for beauty, framed as racial traits, are their greatest potential contributions to American society.¹⁰⁹ She also adapts Key's vision of the national discourse as the synthesis of two opposing sensibilities to the relationship between

¹⁰⁷ Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 45-46.

¹⁰⁸ Ellen Key, *Love and Marriage*, trans. Arthur G. Chater (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons; The Knickerbocker Press, 1911), 264-65.

¹⁰⁹ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," interview with Elizabeth Grosz, in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-16.

Jew and Gentile, which is always also the relationship between a woman and a man in Yeziarska's writing. Thus, *Salome of the Tenement's* Sonya is "a Russian Jewess, a flame – a longing. A soul consumed with hunger for heights beyond reach," as well as "the urge of the ages for the free, the beautiful that never yet was on land or sea."¹¹⁰ Her marriage to the millionaire reformer John Manning is presented as the union of opposites, but for Yeziarska, the fundamental differences between Sonya and her husband are racial as well as gendered. Together, they are "the mingling of the races," "[t]he oriental mystery and the Anglo-Saxon clarity that will pioneer a new race of men."¹¹¹ In these lines, Yeziarska adopts Key's vision of distinctive gendered contributions to a national discourse, but she applies Key's language of "idealism and enthusiasm" – mixed with a strong dose of racial primitivism – to Jewish immigrant women, rather than to women more broadly. This is not to say that Yeziarska appropriates Key's language while discarding her feminist investments; significantly, her characterizations of Russian Jews emerge out of her gendered descriptions of the character traits of her female protagonists. Even though these traits are generalized through the language of race, they are only directly applied to women in Yeziarska's writing, suggesting that the conditions of "Jew" and "woman," unified in the archaic term "Jewess," cannot be neatly disambiguated in her writing.

In describing the Jewish-Protestant intermarriage of Sonya and Manning as a "mingling" of fundamentally distinctive "races," Yeziarska was writing within the racial discourse of the day, which often presented Jews as "other than" or "less than" white. The full discriminatory weight of this racialized status was not borne by the acculturated uptown "German" Jews, however, but by the "Asiatic" "Russian Jews" of the Lower East Side. Indeed, in the early

¹¹⁰ Yeziarska, *Salome*, 37.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

twentieth century, the use of race as a heuristic for distinguishing among different “white ethnicities” was commonly applied to the different national and extra-territorial groups in Europe and was, until well into the middle of the century, elaborated into a complex system of hierarchical classifications wedded to a white supremacist worldview.¹¹²

There was some disagreement among racial thinkers regarding the status of Jews, who refused to fit neatly into any of the larger European racial categories. But while assessments varied, most theorists of race agreed that Jews, however defined, occupied a degraded place at the very bottom of the hierarchy of European races. For the Harvard-trained anthropologist Lothrop Stoddard (1883-1950), Jews were too racially “mixed” to be identified with any other single European race, although he described them as both “Asiatic” and “Negroid.” Writing in *Racial Realities of Europe* (1924), he observes, “The mixed racial make-up of the east-European Jews shows plainly in the wide varieties of physical appearance and temperament which appear in the stock, this extreme variability frequently producing very unusual ‘disharmonic combinations.’” Stoddard illustrates this statement with some pointed observations on the nature of Jewish stature and physiognomy, writing that Jews are characterized by “a dwarfish stature, flat faces, high cheekbones, and other Mongoloid traits.”¹¹³ Writing some fifteen years later, Harvard and University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Carleton S. Coon (1904-1981) disagreed with Stoddard’s assessment of Jews, announcing, “[W]e have established the existence of a definite and very constant Jewish racial entity, variable within itself but varying equally in all

¹¹² See, for instance, William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (New York: D. Appleton, 1899); Carleton S. Coon’s successor to Ripley’s influential book, *The Races of Europe* (New York: Macmillan, 1939); and Lothrop Stoddard’s *Racial Realities in Europe* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924). Stoddard was also the author of the anti-Semitic pamphlet, *A Gallery of Racial Types, Indicating “A Negroid Strain Undoubtedly Exists in Jewry,” This Explains Why Jews Support and Finance the NAACP*, (Marietta GA: Thunderbolt, Inc., 1970), reprinted from a 1926 article.

¹¹³ Stoddard, *Racial Realities*, 171-72.

geographical groups. This Jewish racial entity is almost purely Mediterranean.”¹¹⁴ Despite the predictable failure to agree on any coherent racial classification for Jews, the efforts of these early anthropologists succeeded nonetheless in giving the imprimatur of scientific legitimacy to nativist and racist policies of Jewish exclusion and subordination. Whatever Jews were, racial theorists agreed, they were to be feared and kept apart for, as the well-known eugenicist Madison Grant (1865-1937) suggested, they posed a threat not only to the social but also to the genetic fabric of society. Grant warns readers in his widely-read *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), “The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian; the cross between a white man and a Negro is a Negro; and the cross between any of the three European races [the Nordic, the Alpine, and the Mediterranean, according to Grant, who follows Ripley’s classificatory scheme] and a Jew is a Jew.”¹¹⁵

Yeziarska began her literary career in this discursive environment, and her intermarriage plots must be read in its context. If *Salome of the Tenement’s* presentation of Sonya and Manning’s intermarriage as the admixture of “[t]he oriental mystery and the Anglo-Saxon clarity that will pioneer a new race of men” sounds naïve and even reactionary from a contemporary perspective, it is radical when read next to Grant’s anti-miscegenation screed. Writing a mere seven years after Grant, whose theories were still in wide circulation, Yeziarska set the stage for just such a “racial” admixture, arguing instead that the cross between a “Russian Jewess” and an “Anglo Saxon” would produce, not degraded offspring, but a new and vastly improved “race of man.” Yet this union never occurs. In her boldest response to the anti-Semitic racial theories of the day, Yeziarska does not reject racial thinking but inverts its value structures, presenting Manning’s emotional and sexual coldness as Anglo-Saxon racial traits. If Manning finds himself

¹¹⁴ Coon, *Races of Europe*, 639.

¹¹⁵ Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race; or, The Racial Basis of European History*, Revised and Amplified Edition (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918), 18.

drawn to what he thinks of as “the primitive fascination of the oriental” and “the intensity of spirit of the oppressed races,” Sonya ultimately discovers in Manning “the winter coldness of a sterile race.” She recoils from him, rejecting their union before it can bear offspring. In language that invokes and inverts the association of racial superiority with whiteness, Sonya mocks Manning’s frigidity as “paler passions – paler needs; paler capacity – paler fire!”¹¹⁶

Yeziarska’s decision to frame Sonya and Manning’s romance as the “mingling of the races” reveals the larger allegorical contours of the novel’s marriage plot. Their union invokes the procreative emphasis of eugenicist thought while upending its hierarchical racial schema. It is not the biological “mingling of the races” with which Yeziarska is most concerned, however, but their social and economic integration: the ability of the “Russian” Jewish immigrants to work and live alongside Anglo-Saxon Americans, and the opportunity to work together for the betterment of the nation in which they both live. For this to be possible, Yeziarska suggests, the Jewish immigrant must have a “voice,” but the “native” Americans must also be willing to listen – to form, in other words, a union of equality. Thus, the failure of Sonya and Manning’s marriage mirrors the failure of Manning’s settlement house work, a connection enforced by Sonya’s final condemnation of Manning as both a husband and a reform worker. Yeziarska metonymically describes Sonya as appealing to Manning with “[a]ll the loneliness of the immigrant – the hungry, the homeless,” but she makes it clear that, because of their differences in economic and racial background, Sonya “can’t tell [Manning] a thing [he]’d understand.” Similarly, his reform work is rendered hollow by his inability to understand the people he seeks to help, and this failure of understanding results in the degrading paternalism that adds “insults . . . to the injuries of the poor.”¹¹⁷ The intermarriage plot, then, is not a betrayal of women’s

¹¹⁶ Yeziarska, *Salome*, 100, 146.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101, 148-49.

independence, as some critics have assumed; in fact, it is less a statement about the relationship between two individuals than it is about the relationship between two *groups* of people: the Jewish immigrant proletariat and the wealthy Protestant elite.

This is not to say that Yeziarska ignored the gendered inequalities of marriage. Acutely aware of the unequal balance of power enforced by conventional marriage norms, she invokes the disempowerment of women and the “helpless[ness]” of the Jewish immigrants as analogous and mutually illuminating conditions, using the metaphor of voice and voicelessness to invoke both.¹¹⁸ The protagonist of one early story explains to an unsympathetic reform worker, “I got ideas how to make America better, only I don’t know how to say it out.” Her predicament is presented in gendered terms: seeking a liberal arts education, she, like Yeziarska, is instead offered the opportunity to train as a cook or as a sewing machine operator. Yet the narrator quickly expands this example of reformist paternalism to encompass the immigrant masses more broadly. As she explains, “[T]here’s got to be a change in America! . . . Us immigrants want to be people – not ‘hands’ – not slaves of the belly! And it’s the chance to think out thoughts that makes people.”¹¹⁹ This deceptively simple declaration, couched in Yeziarska’s signature idiom of Yiddish-inflected English, suggests the significance of writing both as self-creation and as political activism. The idiomatic phrase “to think out,” a calque from the Yiddish “*oystrakhtn*” (to think up, to imagine), suggests the importance of thinking through a social problem and

¹¹⁸ Yeziarska’s sense of the oppressive nature of married life and motherhood is documented in her unpublished notebooks. In one passage, she describes her dawning awareness of the restrictions imposed on women by the expectations and restrictions of marriage and domesticity: “Women who have known the independence of earning their own livings before marriage . . . feel most poignantly the humiliations they have to live through while being ‘supported.’ If there was some way out, they would all rush back to the offices, shops or factories. But they cannot go back. . . . By the time they realize the full meaning of being ‘supported,’ they have a baby or two to care for. A baby is like the ball and chain of the prisoner that keeps him bound to his cell.” Quoted in Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 58.

¹¹⁹ Anzia Yeziarska, “How I Found America,” in *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Signet Classic, 1996), 225-26.

imagining new solutions, but it also implies the necessity of thinking out loud, of “speaking out,” and of demanding that the larger nation pay heed.¹²⁰

Class and Authenticity

If *Salome of the Tenements* allowed Yeziarska to limn the contours of a literary tradition of Lower East Side Jewish women’s writing, it also brought her to the attention of a Jewish writer from a very different background: the wildly successful novelist and short story writer Fannie Hurst. Although Hurst was not a member of the uptown Jewish elite by birth, her origins in a prosperous Midwestern family of German Jewish descent and the 10,000 square feet of prime Manhattan real estate she occupied from 1937 until her death in 1968 in the Hotel des Artistes on Sixty-Seventh Street and Central Park West marked her social distance from the downtown immigrant community in which Yeziarska had come of age. Born in Ohio in 1885, Hurst grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, the pampered only child of prosperous American-born parents.¹²¹ In stark contrast to the early memories of the other writers discussed in this chapter, Hurst later described her early life as “a girlhood singularly free of responsibilities.”¹²² After graduating high school in 1905 (a luxury none of the immigrant women had enjoyed), Hurst matriculated at the private Washington University in St. Louis, where she received her bachelor’s degree in 1909.¹²³

After graduating from college, Hurst moved alone to New York City over the objections of her parents. Her biographer, Brooke Kroeger, writes that Hurst was fond of painting her life during these first years in New York as a “portrait of anguish and struggle, rebuff and triumph over bruising odds.” The reality was less romantic, however. Supported in comfort by an ample

¹²⁰ I am grateful to Anita Norich for pointing out this inter-linguistic play.

¹²¹ Susan Koppelman, “Fannie Hurst,” in *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, Vol. One: The Authors, ed. Philip A. Greasley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 280.

¹²² Fannie Hurst, “I Come Across,” *American Magazine* 87, no. 3 (March 1919), 39; quoted in Kroeger, *Fannie*, 10.

¹²³ Kroeger, *Fannie*, 4, 10.

allowance remitted punctually from St. Louis, Hurst's efforts to break into print soon met with success, and by 1912, the twenty-seven-year-old writer found herself the subject of "an avalanche of positive national attention" for her sympathetic if sentimentalized portraits of tubercular shop girls, hardworking and under-appreciated servants, and overburdened tenement mothers.¹²⁴

With her rise to fame as a writer for popular magazines (including Levien's *Metropolitan*), Hurst became a visible spokesperson for progressive causes, particularly civil rights for African Americans and women's suffrage and economic independence. Hurst "embraced Socialism" in the mid-1910s, but her commitment lacked depth. She later became a personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), and her most partisan political efforts would be in service of the New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration.¹²⁵ Not inaccurately referred to as the "world's highest paid short-story writer," Hurst was "a national opinion-maker" whose literary celebrity and willingness to speak publicly in support of progressive causes made her one of the most influential cultural figures of her day.¹²⁶

Is it not surprising, then, that Yeziarska was delighted to learn that Hurst had contacted her publisher, Horace Liveright, with words of praise for *Salome of the Tenements*. Eager to cultivate Hurst's friendship and pleased by her warm endorsement of a book whose reception had otherwise been chilly, Yeziarska seized the opportunity to strike an acquaintance with the more seasoned writer. "Horace Liveright gave me your comment on Salome," she wrote to Hurst in February of 1923,

Your few words mean so much to me and yet I hardly believe they're real, because so few people have understood the book with that warmth that you understand.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 4, 10, 15.

¹²⁵ Ibid., xiv, 33-36, 177, 187.

¹²⁶ Brooke Kroeger, "Fannie Hurst," in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, eds. Maurine H. Beasley, Holly C. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 260.

Mr. Liveright is so impressed by your vivid words that he would like to use your letter in an ad, if you don't mind.

I have been wanting to meet you for ever so long and I take this opportunity to ask you if you would care to have lunch with me, some time, at your convenience, at any place agreeable to you.¹²⁷

Yeziarska's eagerness to enlist Hurst as a friend and supporter was understandable. That same year, Hurst's skyrocketing career reached dizzying new heights with the publication of *LummoX* (1923), a novel that wedded a stream-of-consciousness modernist style with labor themes.

Though largely forgotten today, *LummoX* was a sensation at the time of its publication, marking Hurst's most successful bid to win the admiration of serious critics. Enthusiastic reviewers, noting her aspirations to a high modernist style, drew overstated comparisons to Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Guillaume Apollinaire, and the London *Observer* gushed that *LummoX* was "not only the best novel we have had from America for at least a decade," but also "one of the best novels in English we have read for years . . ."¹²⁸ The story of Bertha, a docile, inarticulate domestic servant who is exploited and abused by a series of rapacious and unfeeling employers from New York's fashionable upper crust, *LummoX* also won the admiration of readers on the radical left, who praised the novel's sympathetic treatment of labor. When Hurst made a tour of Soviet Russia in 1924, she was gratified to discover that *LummoX* had won the approval of no less a figure than Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) himself. When they met, Hurst later claimed in her memoir, Trotsky declared himself "a great admirer of [her] work" and then proceeded to recite passages of the novel from memory.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Anzia Yeziarska to Fannie Hurst, 21 February 1923, Fannie Hurst Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

¹²⁸ Heywood Broun, "It Seems to Me," *New York World*, 30 October 1923, 1; Joseph Collins, *Taking the Literary Pulse: Psychological Studies of Life and Letters* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924), 123; "An American Novel," *The Observer*, 2 March 1924, 4, all quoted in Kroeger, *Fannie*, 92-93. For negative response to the novel, see also Kroeger, *Fannie*, 92-93.

¹²⁹ Fannie Hurst, *Anatomy of Me: A Wonderer in Search of Herself* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), 297.

Like Yeziarska's writing, *Lummox* emerges from a tradition of naturalist fiction that sought to illuminate the systemic forces that condemned the working class to lives of poverty and social exclusion. But while Yeziarska's protagonists seek paths out of the "dead end of the sweatshop," Hurst's Bertha more closely resembles the conventional "waif amid forces" of naturalism.¹³⁰ Moving from one household to another over the course of two to three decades (the timeframe is vague), Bertha suffers silently through a series of brutal confrontations with her own powerlessness. One employer accuses her of theft, another of murder, while a third dismisses her for witnessing his wife's sexual repugnance for him. In the novel's opening episode, Bertha is raped by her employer's son, an aspiring poet whose house she flees after discovering the resulting pregnancy.

Although Bertha is born in "a lodging house in Front Street" in New York, Hurst describes her as a kind of ethnic everywoman who has the trace of an accent and "a look of steerage" about her – characteristics Hurst attributes to the "Baltic bloods" that "flowed in sullen and alien rivers through Bertha's veins." Using the hoary racial language of blood, Hurst describes her silent protagonist as the eternal immigrant, unassimilated and inassimilable: "There must have been a good smattering of Scandinavian and even a wide streak of western Teutonic. Slav, too. Because unaccountably she found herself knowing the Polish anthem." Bertha's ethnic indeterminacy makes her a personification of New York's immigrant masses; she is labeled a "[m]elting pot" by one character, and, when asked who her "people" are, she responds vaguely, "Those are my people. Out there. All. Everywhere."¹³¹

Hurst's writing, like Yeziarska's, reflects the discourse of racial primitivism, but while Yeziarska subverts conventional racial hierarchies in *Salome of the Tenements*, Hurst's writing

¹³⁰ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), 1.

¹³¹ Fannie Hurst, *Lummox*, *Plume American Women Writers* (New York: New American Library, 1989), 1, 43, 88, 107.

puts primitivist ideas to more conventional ends. Both *Salome*'s Sonya Vrunsky and *Lummox*'s Bertha are depicted as being close to nature – in Sonya's case, human nature; in Bertha's the natural world – and both are portrayed as having an intuitive affinity for the beautiful.¹³² Bertha is heir to “[t]he knowledge that came to her in chimes from the dark forests within her where the trees could somehow seem to stand with folded arms regarding her and the air to be wisps of old sound.” Unlike Sonya, however, Bertha is never able to give voice to this “knowledge.” Hurst writes, “It was hard to talk. Words. Frail beasts of burden that crashed to their knees under what she wanted to say.”¹³³ Literacy and articulateness, here as in Yeziarska's writing, are presented as preconditions for empowered citizenship and upward mobility. But unlike Yeziarska's protagonists, perceptive social critics who find forms of expression that facilitate their economic and social emancipation, Bertha remains imprisoned in her silence, the victim of forces beyond her understanding. “It was terrible to be dumb,” Hurst writes of her. “She could have shrieked, ‘I am all locked! You hear! Prairies are flowing in me and oceans and I am under them. Locked!’ Words! Words!”¹³⁴ Bertha's suffering at each progressive stage of her career is presented as the combined effect of her employers' bigotry and her own inability to speak in defense of herself.

Bertha's silence – and the emotional depths it masks – is framed as a larger problem of class and gender. One of her fellow servants, Helga, explains the necessity of gaining a public voice:

We can't tell the truth about the kitchen side of the door, because we ain't got the voice of organization. . . . There's nobody to get up and explain for us. The [policy-making] men don't know. They get all their information from their women. That gives us a helluva chance, don't it? And who is to dispute it all? We can't. We ain't got the voice

¹³² Marianna Torgovnick describes this discourse in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): “Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces – libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. Primitives exist at the ‘lowest cultural levels’; we occupy the ‘highest,’ in the metaphors of stratification and hierarchy commonly used . . .” (8).

¹³³ Hurst, *Lummox*, 2.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

or the language. Nobody writes pieces or prints articles about us from our side of the fence.¹³⁵

To have a voice as a woman and a laborer is thus to have the ability to represent one's own interests, to be able to defend oneself against the hegemony of capital and patriarchy, and to argue for one's rights. Yet this ability eludes Hurst's characters. Just what is lost in its absence is revealed in Bertha's brutal first disappointment, when the son of her employers rapes her.

Recognizing her inarticulate feeling for beauty and framing it in the language of primitivism, the son tells her, "You are the poem of the woman whose feet are rooted in the secrets out of the soil.

. . . You are a – a tower of silence that is buried under some sea. I want to write you into great oxen words." After leaving Bertha's room, he writes *The Cathedral Under the Sea*, a long poem that earns him a reputation as a leading modernist. As Hurst makes clear, however, *The Cathedral Under the Sea* is more Bertha's work than his. The poem is the literary transcription of "[t]he submerged grandeurs she had laid to his ear with the roaring shell of her heart."¹³⁶

Through this act of sexual violence and intellectual theft, Hurst unifies the themes of economic, sexual, and intellectual exploitation, pointing to literacy and articulateness as the most important instruments of political agency.

Had Bertha been fully literate, might she have written *The Cathedral Under the Sea* herself? The text's association of the poetic with the primitive makes this seem unlikely. Bertha's coworker, Helga, has the language and consciousness Bertha lacks, but her worldly knowledge is depicted as coarse rather than poetic, and it ultimately leads to despair and suicide. Bertha cannot find upward mobility through education and assimilation, for she would lose her primitive gifts, but she also cannot survive in a society that fails to recognize the gift that her difference represents. Indeed, Bertha is only saved from destitution by a form of *deus ex*

¹³⁵ Ibid., 220.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 16, 26.

machina that lifts her out of the industrial metropolis, transplanting her into the heart of a loving family of German immigrants who accept her as one of the family and make space for her in their home in the vaguely mapped countryside beyond the city. The social problem is not resolved – not even in symbolic microcosm; it is only escaped.

For Yeziarska, whose years on the Lower East Side meant so much for her identity as a writer, such an evasion might well have suggested a failure of empathy on the part of a woman who had never experienced the hardships her characters routinely endure. Whereas Yeziarska's racial primitivism is strategic and contradictory, always falling away before her characters' desire for education and self-invention, Hurst immures her protagonist within the walls of type and caste, proving herself unable to bridge the gap between the idea of the immigrant and the immigrant's individual subjectivity. Indeed, Bertha has little interiority: "She thought so dimly, almost as if she had breathed on a mirror and reflection could not come through. For that matter she even felt dimly."¹³⁷ Hurst might have set herself the task of "tell[ing] the truth about the kitchen side of the door," but Yeziarska, who had herself worked as a domestic servant, believed that such knowledge could only be abstract for a writer of middle-class origins, such as Hurst.¹³⁸ As the protagonist of Yeziarska's *Arrogant Beggar* puts it, "Can a well-fed person feel what a hungry one feels?"¹³⁹ That Yeziarska saw herself as possessing the experiential basis for authorial empathy is clear. Her description of *Salome of the Tenements*' Sonya as "a soul consumed with hunger" might well have applied to herself.¹⁴⁰ "My one story is hunger," Yeziarska wrote elsewhere, employing the term both literally and figuratively. "When I first started to write, I could only write one thing – different phases of the one thing only – bread

¹³⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁸ Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 16.

¹³⁹ Anzia Yeziarska, *Arrogant Beggar*, 112.

¹⁴⁰ Yeziarska, *Salome*, 37.

hunger. At last, I've written out my bread hunger. And now I can write only the different phases of the one thing – loneliness, love hunger, the hunger for people.”¹⁴¹ Practitioners of the New Criticism, still distant on the cultural horizon, would certainly have objected to this implied conflation of authorial biography and literary expression, yet this biographical logic, however reductive, animated Yeziarska's understanding of the politics of literary production. Indeed, Yeziarska may have written her way out of “bread hunger,” but she saw her memories of poverty as no less valid a source of literary authentication. “[A]s a writer,” she argues, “the experience of forcing my way from the bottomest bottom gave me the knowledge of the poor that no well-born writer could possibly have.”¹⁴² She saw herself as sharing this experience with Cohen, Levien, and Pastor, but not, as she makes clear, with Hurst.

Despite Yeziarska's attempts to win the friendship of the more established writer, it seems that the two women never became more than polite acquaintances. The archive of Hurst's correspondence reveals little surviving communication between them, with Yeziarska initiating each brief exchange of letters. In 1930, Yeziarska wrote to request an appointment with Hurst.¹⁴³ No record of the meeting has survived, but it is likely that Yeziarska was again requesting assistance. The stock market had crashed the year before, wiping out her savings. “Anzia lost most of her small fortune as stocks became worthless, and her royalties were dwindling,” Henriksen writes.¹⁴⁴ At the time, Yeziarska was at work on her fourth and final novel, *All I Could Never Be*. She had hoped that its publication would resuscitate the flagging interest of publishers and readers, as well as supplying a much-needed infusion into her savings account. When it appeared in 1932, however, it proved yet another commercial and critical

¹⁴¹ Yeziarska, “Mostly About Myself,” 136.

¹⁴² Ibid., 139.

¹⁴³ Anzia Yeziarska to Fannie Hurst, 11 November 1930, Fannie Hurst Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁴⁴ Henriksen, *Anzia*, 238.

disappointment. Her once-promising career had come to a grinding halt, leaving her without income or savings.

It was with a new note of desperation, then, that Yeziarska once again turned to Hurst for assistance in January of 1933 – this time with a surprising request. Hurst had just been asked by Eleanor Roosevelt to head a committee that would establish recreational centers (called “rest rooms”) for unemployed women, and Yeziarska, unable to interest publishers in her writing and increasingly desperate for income, asked Hurst to help her secure work as a staff member at one of the centers. Unfortunately for Yeziarska, as Kroeger recounts, the “staffing of the rest rooms was to be by volunteers, so that would not have been an employment opportunity for the author.”¹⁴⁵ Yeziarska’s correspondence with Hurst corroborates this account. After an initial exchange of letters apparently followed by a phone conversation, Yeziarska sent an apologetic letter that, recurring to the theme of hunger, also reveals the degree of her financial need. “I feel I must ask you to forgive me for my over-pressing eagerness over the phone.” Yeziarska wrote. “In my famine for work it seemed to me that I was just the person for this and it seemed to me that you too would think so. I did not stop to think that you might have others on your list.”¹⁴⁶ Hurst responded with words of conciliation two days later, correcting what was apparently a misunderstanding on Yeziarska’s part:

I think you are both hasty and wrong in your reaction of what I said over the telephone the other morning.

I wanted to explain to you that so far as I am able to see, Mrs. Roosevelt has already secured the services of volunteer workers.

If any workers are to be taken on, you may rest assured that I will suggest your name immediately, not only because of my desire to meet your pleasure in the matter, but I think you can be of service and value to Mrs. Roosevelt’s enterprise.

What are you doing and how are you?

I’d like it a lot if you would come in and visit with me.”

¹⁴⁵ Kroeger, *Fannie*, 181.

¹⁴⁶ Anzia Yeziarska to Fannie Hurst, 11 January 1933, Fannie Hurst Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Meanwhile, as soon as a committee meeting is called, I shall notify you.¹⁴⁷

Whether Yeziarska accepted Hurst's invitation to visit is unknown, and the record of their correspondence breaks off after this letter.

Despite Hurst's accommodating response, this exchange seems to have left a deep impression on Yeziarska, gaining retrospective significance as a marker of her allegiance to a working-class literary tradition. Writing almost two decades later in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Yeziarska recalled the incident, referring to Hurst as an "author who had once been loud in praise of my work." In Yeziarska's retelling, her interaction with Hurst situates the two writers in the roles, familiar from Yeziarska's novels, of supplicant and wealthy philanthropist.

Yeziarska begins the conversation:

"I read in the papers of all you're doing for the unemployed." Then I plunged in and blurted, "I'm looking for a job—"

"You? You want a job?" The tone of her voice and the way she was looking at me made me feel it was a crime to want a job. "What about your writing? I could stop eating easier than stop writing."

She was a voluptuous creature. Good food was in her face. She thrived on helping people. . . .

How could I explain what I was going through to this prolific author who wrote a story a month and a best seller a year and still had the energy to be a leading committee woman and a champion of the newest public-welfare projects?

I glanced about her chapel of achievement. The room with its stained-glass windows was like a medieval church. Saints looked down from the walls. Old parchments and books hand-lettered in fine vellum were placed with careful carelessness on one table. On another table there was a Florentine casket and from the partly opened lid tumbled colored Venetian beads.

"I wish I could live in a little hall room with a trunk under my bed," she murmured.

I smiled. "If you really had to live in a hall room with a trunk under your bed, you wouldn't find it so romantic."

"A writer can get along in a slum as well as in a palace."

A coldness came into her eyes. I could feel her curiosity giving way to fear. I had brought hall rooms too close to her.

¹⁴⁷ Fannie Hurst to Anzia Yeziarska, 13 January 1933, Fannie Hurst Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. I am grateful to Brandeis University and Washington University in St. Louis for permission to quote from this letter.

“It’s been nice seeing you,” she said, taking me to the door. “I’ll let you know if anything turns up.”¹⁴⁸

Except for the last line, which echoes the final words of the letter quoted above, this representation was neither accurate nor fair to Hurst. Its harshness might well explain Yeziarska’s decision to leave Hurst unnamed, but there are other, more compelling explanations for this decision and for Yeziarska’s creative liberties. Her account of this otherwise minor episode allows her to distinguish her own representational politics from those of the middle-and upper class novelists who claimed to speak for immigrants and the working class. What is at stake in this scene is representational empathy, the ability to inhabit the subjectivity of the “lower” classes. Hurst’s failure to offer Yeziarska assistance is linked to her inability to fully imagine the lived experience of poverty. In this scene, Hurst personifies the literary convention of celebrating the picturesque integrity and simplicity of the poor, a practice that, whether intentionally or not (and for Hurst, it was almost certainly unintentional), had the effect of buttressing the status quo. Yeziarska’s omission of Hurst’s name can thus also be understood as a rhetorical move designed to extend her critique to a class or type of writer and, through personification, to a bourgeois, sentimental literary tradition from which Yeziarska sought to distance her own writing.

The setting of this encounter is also significant for understanding the motivations for Yeziarska’s ungenerous portrait of Hurst. The unnamed author’s “chapel of achievement,” which Yeziarska compares to “a medieval church,” is unmistakably the “Gothic chapel-like writing studio overlooking the . . . crenellated stone terrace” of Hurst’s “gargantuan triplex” on Sixty-Seventh Street and Central Park West.¹⁴⁹ Whether Yeziarska ever accepted Hurst’s offer to “come in and visit with me,” however, their meeting could not have taken place in Hurst’s

¹⁴⁸ Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, 137-39.

¹⁴⁹ Kroeger, *Fannie*, 328.

famous residence in the Hotel des Artistes, since Hurst did not move there until 1937, four years after her meeting with Yeziarska would have occurred. Was Yeziarska's decision to stage the meeting in Hurst's palatial home an envious jab at the other writer's greater success? Was it simply a reflection of Yeziarska's gift for dramatic embellishment? Perhaps it was a bit of both, but importantly, it allowed Yeziarska to dramatize her claim that "no well-born writer could possibly" understand the needs of the poor. How could Hurst, enthroned in opulence, understand what it felt like to "live in a hall room with a trunk under your bed," no matter how frequently she wrote about such experiences? Yeziarska gave added force to this contrast in authorial subject position by setting the meeting at Hurst's uptown address, invoking the old patronage relationship between uptown and downtown, "German" and "Russian" Jews.

These identity politics were not altogether fair to Hurst, who was well aware of her own personal distance from the lives of the characters she created. For her American-born father, "Russian Jews were 'kikes,'" and "[f]oreigners beat their wives and wear small collar sizes."¹⁵⁰ Hurst, however, considered them objects of fascination and sympathy. She readily admits that the stories that resulted from her long walks through the Jewish ghetto were "born not out of direct experiences. . ." Nonetheless, the impact of these walks on her imagination was profound:

The crowded Lower East Side swarmed through my mind. Silhouettes of charwomen swabbing the deserted night floors of office buildings, interiors or tenements glimpsed from passing trains seemed to take form against my inner lids when my eyes were closed for sleep. People becoming persons."¹⁵¹

This description reveals Hurst's tendency to sentimentalize poverty as the picturesque, but its last sentence strikes a note that would have been familiar to Yeziarska, whose own desire to "make of myself a person in the world" is echoed by nearly all of her protagonists.¹⁵² Was this phrase a

¹⁵⁰ Hurst, *Anatomy*, 22.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁵² Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon*, 94.

subtle tribute to the writing Hurst had praised in her note to Horace Liveright years before? It is impossible to know with any certainty, but it is clear that Hurst did gain a deeper understanding of the hardships and ambitions of the “Russian” Jews through her reading of books like *Salome of the Tenements*. Looking back on those first years in New York from the vantage point of 1958, Hurst acknowledged the daily battle against poverty that Yeziarska, Cohen, Levien, and Pastor record in their writings: “The settlement houses and the educational centers bulged at the seams with boys and girls who worked in factories and shops by day, studied and inched themselves up by night . . .” She acknowledges,

I realized none of this [when I first arrived in New York]. I only knew that despite the backwash of crime, the hordes of tired old people with prunelike eyes, the flabby-breasted women old at forty, the rickety-looking children, the life and the hope of these sodden streets tingled through the soles of my shoes, vibrated in the night classes and crowded reading rooms of East Side libraries!¹⁵³

Yeziarska and the other writers of her Lower East Side literary tradition had been among these “boys and girls” “inch[ing] themselves up.” Hurst may well have learned to see these picturesque figures as individual people over the course of her long residence in New York. To Yeziarska, however, Hurst and other writers of American birth and upper-middle-class origin would always be slumming tourists wandering through the East Side, eyes wide and mouth agape at the spectacle of a poverty whose desperation “no well-born writer” could possibly understand. Indeed, Hurst’s ability to celebrate “the life and hope” of the neighborhood one of Yeziarska’s characters described as “a prison of ugliness – dirt – soul-wasting want” was still, despite her gains in empathy, a sign of her imaginative remove from the lived experience that Levien feared would kill her “mind and spirit” if not her body.

¹⁵³ Hurst, *Anatomy*, 249.

Bringing It Back Home

Yeziarska never did return to the Lower East Side after escaping it as a young woman, yet in novel after novel, her characters make the return trip to the Jewish ghetto after achieving the means and the “voice” that will enable them to work for its improvement. These endings are as much allegorical as literal, however. As Yeziarska well knew, “you can’t be an immigrant twice.”¹⁵⁴ Her own return would have to take the form of a literary commitment to combating the oppressions she had experienced as an adolescent on the Lower East Side, instead of leaving those experiences in her past. Moreover, in a time when the label “Russian Jew” was as much a racial as a geographic designation, and when the terms “Jewish ghetto” and “Russian Jews” were all but synonymous, Yeziarska’s identification with the Lower East Side would not have been so easy to shake. On the immutability of Jewishness, Yeziarska had infelicitously punned, “We Can Change Our Moses But Not Our Noses.”¹⁵⁵ The poverty she had experienced as a child left a no less indelible mark on her sense of self. Visiting Yeziarska during the Depression after she had lost most of her savings, Henriksen recalls that “nothing much had changed” in her mother’s lifestyle. Her “frugality and fear of poverty – she never bought a newspaper, for instance, picking up discards from the street trashcans – were no different than they had been in the days of her comparative wealth.”¹⁵⁶ These fears, Yeziarska suggests in her portrait of Hurst, were foreign to writers who had never experienced poverty; in contrast, Yeziarska and the other Lower East Side writers to whom she compared herself would always write from this subject position and from its basis in lived experience.

¹⁵⁴ Anzia Yeziarska, “You Can’t Be an Immigrant Twice,” interview by Richard Duffy, in *Children of Loneliness* (New York & London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1923).

¹⁵⁵ Anzia Yeziarska, “We Can Change Our Moses But Not Our Noses,” typescript, Anzia Yeziarska Papers, Boston University Library, quoted in Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 237.

¹⁵⁶ Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 250.

Writing under the sign of the ghetto allowed Yeziarska to call attention to the political dimensions of her writing while also talking back to those powerful voices, whether “well-born” novelists or patrician racial theorists, who sought to reduce the inhabitants of the Jewish ghetto to the picturesque or the grotesque. Even the best intentioned writers, Yeziarska suggests, could only reproduce the paternalism of settlement house uplift, with its pretensions to understanding working-class immigrants better than they understood themselves – “the whole sickening farce of Big Sistering the Working Girl,” as one of her characters describes the charity of uptown philanthropists.¹⁵⁷ For Yeziarska, as for Jacob Riis before her, François Rabelais’s (1494-1553) dictum that “one half of the world does not know how the other half lives” might as easily have been spoken of the geography of New York.¹⁵⁸ Uptown, Yeziarska suggests in book after book, could never truly know how downtown lived.

For Yeziarska, the material reality of the Lower East Side mattered less than the forms of oppression it symbolized, and her writing cannot be understood simply as a call for reform in one specific quarter of the city. By the time Yeziarska was appearing regularly in print, such reforms had already begun to be enacted, and the Lower East Side was a very different place from the one she had known as a young woman. “Beginning in the 1920s,” Beth Wenger notes, “lawmakers and politicians conducted a sustained campaign to ‘clean up’ the East Side.”¹⁵⁹ The neighborhood was also becoming less demographically Jewish. By the first decade of the century, substantial numbers of the neighborhood’s Jewish residents – over sixty percent – had already departed for better housing in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Upper Manhattan.¹⁶⁰ These

¹⁵⁷ Yeziarska, *Arrogant Beggar*, 55.

¹⁵⁸ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), 275, quoted in Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), 1.

¹⁵⁹ Wenger, “Memory as Identity,” 12.

¹⁶⁰ Moore, *At Home in America*, 19.

urban migrations, Deborah Dash Moore observes, had “destroyed the old distinctions between Uptown and Downtown Jews.”¹⁶¹ They also stimulated a shift in Jewish perceptions of the neighborhood. The nostalgic Lower East Side memory culture that became such a staple of the late-twentieth-century Jewish imaginary was already developing in the years when Yeziarska was publishing her bitter denunciations of life in Manhattan’s Jewish slum district.¹⁶²

No such nostalgia is visible in Yeziarska’s writing, however. Reviewing *A Lost Paradise* in 1955, she could achieve sufficient professional objectivity to acknowledge Samuel Chotzinoff’s fond longing for his own Lower East Side childhood. But in her own memoir, published only five years earlier, she was willing to make no such concession to nostalgia, just as she had resisted the idealization of the “Old East Side” that was already beginning to take place in the 1920s. In the clash of these conflicting images, one exaggeratedly critical, the other ahistorically affirmative, the latter would ultimately prevail. In the short term, however, Yeziarska’s polemical invocation of the ghetto as a symbol of protest would have a more visible impact on Jewish writing, resurfacing in the 1930s in the work of writers such as Mike Gold, Howard Fast, and Budd Schulberg (1914-2009). In the following chapter, we will see just how deeply Yeziarska’s version of the Jewish ghetto took root in the radicalized soil of the Great Depression, and we will see to what uses it was put by the new voices of the Jewish literary left.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶² Wenger, “Memory as Identity,” 4.

Chapter 4

The Garden in the Jungle: Communist Writers and the Allegorical Landscape of the Ghetto

For the politically engaged writers of the interwar years, the night-and-day contrast between the palatial uptown homes of the elite “four hundred” and the dark, malodorous tenements and firetrap sweatshops of the ghetto revealed the city as a spatial homology of capitalism’s unequal distribution of wealth and power. Where else was the exploitation of the masses and the extravagance of the capitalist class set in such vivid relief as in the circumscribed geography of Manhattan, where a short ride on the elevated could take a passenger from the pushcarts of Hester Street to the liveried doormen of Riverside Drive? For the writer with political objectives and sociological predilections, the island of Manhattan was a petri dish for studying the experiment of industrial capitalism and for monitoring and inventorying its human costs.

This view of New York gave new form to the centuries-old urban-pastoral dialectic, which cultural historian Leo Marx has described as the “contrast between two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication, which has been used by writers . . . since the time of Virgil.”¹ This binary proved central to the construction of Jewish literature’s intertextual cityscape: the highly symbolic landscape whose

¹ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 19. Marx notes elsewhere that this contrast is constitutive of pastoralism in its more recent manifestations: “In the modern era [pastoralism] continues to manifest itself wherever we become aware of a conflict between two ways of life, one identified with social complexity, the other with natural simplicity.” Leo Marx, “Does Pastoralism Have a Future?” in *The Pastoral Landscape*, ed. John Dixon Hunt (Washington: National Gallery of Art; Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992), 213.

constitutive features and tropes – developed across a wide body of narratives through exchange and influence – were a critical interpretation, rather than a mimetic representation, of the city’s cultural, social, and economic institutions and values. Many writers on the political left, and particularly the four discussed in this chapter, recognized that the architecture and infrastructure of the city – indeed, its very origin and development – were products and reflections of the larger economic structures of the nation. Their representations of the city work from the unstated premise that “most American cities,” in historian David Schuyler’s words, “developed as economic institutions, places that existed primarily to serve the needs of commerce.”² In this view, the American city became the spatial manifestation of the logic of capitalism and, therefore, of alienation in the Marxist sense of the term. This vision of an oppressive urbanism gave rise to its dialectical opposite, a vision of pastoral nature invoked as a rebuke to the urban reality whose shortcomings it placed in such high relief. If the city was the locus of alienation, “in the pastoral,” as Northrop Frye noted in 1965 at the height of scholarly interest in the genre, “man is at peace with nature, which implies that he is also at peace with his own nature . . .”³

This polemical invocation of nature is a characteristic feature of Jewish representations of the Lower East Side. Ignoring the countryside’s relationship to agricultural capitalism, not to mention its dependence on metropolitan centers for its primary markets, Jewish tenement writers depicted the country, not as a place where people lived and labored, but as the symbolic antithesis of the city, a mistily imagined Arcadia that provided a yard stick by which to measure the *unnaturalness* of urban poverty. Images of inflated urbanism and idealized pastoralism thus assumed the status of political ideograms, much like the images of Coney Island and the Jewish Ghetto discussed in the previous two chapters. This symbolic repurposing of the hoary urban-

² David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 1.

³ Northrop Frye, “Varieties of Literary Utopias.” *Daedalus* 94, no. 2 (Spring 1965): 339.

pastoral binary was especially apparent in the work of Communist Party-affiliated writers, whose depictions of the Jewish ghetto tended to be more openly allegorical and satirical than those of their socialist and progressive contemporaries.

The binary draws its force from the contrast between an idealized, nostalgically remembered “Old Country” and the dystopian present of the slum, as in soon-to-be-Party member Henry Roth’s 1934 novel *Call It Sleep*, in which the protagonist’s abusive father attributes his disordered character to his disorienting surroundings: “[W]hen you come out of a house and step on the bare earth among the fields you’re the same man you were when you were inside the house,” he confides in a rare moment of openness. “But when you step out on pavements, you’re someone else. You can feel your face change.”⁴ Roth’s novel is more invested in Freudian psychoanalysis and a Joycean stream-of-consciousness modernism than in the aesthetic programs of the Communist left. Nonetheless, the nostalgic contrast between “Old Country” and “New,” Edenic nature and dystopian urbanism could also take the form of a “revolutionary romanticism,” a controversial aspect of social realism popularized by novelist Maxim Gorky in his speech to the Soviet Writers’ Congress of 1934. For Gorky, revolutionary romanticism was the projection of a utopian, revolutionary future onto a realist narrative: “[I]f to the idea extracted from the given reality we add – completing the idea, by the logic of hypothesis – the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image,” Gorky argued, “we obtain that romanticism which is . . . highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way.”⁵ As scholars Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre explain, revolutionary romanticism embraces the paradox of a “utopian future [that] draw[s] the heart of its inspiration from the past,” and, in particular, as Alan Wald notes in

⁴ Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon Books, 1968), 31-32.

⁵ Maksim [Maxim] Gorky, H. G. Scott, et al., *Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 44.

his gloss on their argument, a preindustrial, precapitalist past.⁶ This romantic vision of preindustrial society, as this chapter will show, exerted a powerful hold on the imaginations of Communist tenement novelists, facilitating critiques of industrial capitalism while simultaneously conjuring a picture of the post-revolutionary millennium in the familiar nostalgic imagery of the mythic *shtetl* and the Biblical Eden.

This chapter explores the influence of symbolic tropes related to the urban-pastoral binary on the formation of character and setting in four works by prominent writers who were, at different times and to different degrees, associated with the Communist literary left: Samuel Badish Ornitz's mock-bildungsroman *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl: An Anonymous Autobiography* (1923), Mike Gold's fictionalized autobiography, *Jews Without Money* (1930), Howard Fast's forgotten novella *The Children* (1937), and Budd Schulberg's critical rewriting of the rags-to-riches narrative, *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941). These politically engaged writers adapted the traditional urban-pastoral dialectic to fit the context of the new social realities of the Jewish ghetto, embedding both character and setting in a larger symbolic matrix that would play an important role in shaping the literary image of the Lower East Side and its inhabitants for years to come.

In the pages that follow, I trace several interrelated tropes and metaphors – the urban jungle; the anti-pastoral wasteland of stone, cement, and refuse; and the pastoral garden – excavating an intertextual ecology of symbols freighted with allegorical meaning. The meaning conveyed by these symbols was central to the political objectives and stakes, as well as to the narrative trajectories, of each work under consideration. Metaphors of the jungle and urban wasteland offer two superficially divergent paths to closely related conclusions about urban life.

⁶ Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 169; Alan Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 35.

The jungle vividly presents the city as a de-civilizing and brutalizing environment in which human nature assumes its most savagely Darwinian forms, while the wasteland invokes the city's alienation of nature as an analogy for the "unnatural" social pathologies it produces. The overdetermined trope of the garden mediates between these two extremes, representing a metaphorical ideal of cultivated nature, a utopian if vaguely realized vision of the perfected cooperative society achieved through the new social and economic order.

Before proceeding, a word on terminology and selection criteria is in order. By "Communist," I refer to writers who were, at some point in their literary careers, members of the Communist Party of the United States (abbreviated here as the CPUSA or the "Party"). This is not to say that Party affiliation dictated the form and content of the writing discussed in this chapter or, for that matter, that the writers grouped in these pages shared the same level of Party commitment. On the contrary, while Fast, Gold, and Ornitz had relatively long relationships with the CPUSA (Gold's being the longest), Schulberg appears to have spent less than a decade in the Party before becoming an outspoken anti-Communist and unrepentant informer in the early 1950s. Significantly, the nature of the Communist Party itself changed over the years in which these writers were active. Party membership during the relatively moderate years of the Popular Front from 1934 to 1939 was not the same as membership during the "Hitler-Stalin" Non-Aggression Pact of 1939-1941 or during the fraught period of the Second Red Scare from roughly 1947 through the mid-1950s. By emphasizing Party affiliation in such a politically diverse group of writers, then, I hope to complicate rather than endorse the common narrative of slavish literary conformity to dictates handed down from Moscow. While the discussion that follows at times reveals efforts at creative control and discipline on the part of Party representatives, the similarities of imagery and ideology among the narratives brought together

here stem from dialogue and shared convictions, rather than coercion and unquestioning compliance.

With this in mind, I employ the term “Communist writers” as a shorthand for a more complex range of political stances that are nonetheless grounded in a critique of capitalism and an acceptance of core Marxist precepts such as the alienation of labor under capitalism and the necessity for an egalitarian, classless society based on principles of collectivism. Communism is not a hermeneutic for interpreting the tropes under discussion here, then, but rather an organizing principle that allows me to put works published over the span of nearly two decades in productive dialogue, illuminating parallels between ways of seeing social and economic relations and ways of seeing the city. More tangibly, Communist Party affiliation is also significant in that it provided a shared forum for debate and the exchange of ideas through the circulation of publications widely read among its members (as well as by unaffiliated writers), such as the *New Masses* (an officially independent publication which nonetheless had close ties to the Party) and the CPUSA organs the *Daily Worker* and *People’s World*. The Party also encouraged personal contact among young writers through venues such as the John Reed Clubs and the Young Communist League, where the politics of literary representation were subjected to rigorous and often contentious debate. Significantly, such publications and meeting grounds made it more likely that Party members would read each other’s work than if they had remained unaffiliated, facilitating mutual influence and a discernable intertextual dialogue.⁷

Although Jews featured prominently in the organizational and cultural life of the CPUSA, scholars of the literary left have tended to treat the literary production of Jewish Communists as

⁷ Evidence of this can be seen in the pages of the novels discussed here and in published statements by the authors in question. For instance, Budd Schulberg references the title of Gold’s *Jews without Money* in *What Makes Sammy Run?* and Howard Fast acknowledges his debt to the writing of fellow Party member and John Reed Club participant Henry Roth in his memoir *Being Red*. Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?* (Garden City, N.Y.: The Sun Dial Press, 1943), 119; Howard Fast, *Being Red* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 64.

separate from – if not directly hostile to – any identifiable Jewish literary tradition.⁸ This chapter calls this distinction into question. By examining tropes of the garden, the jungle, and the urban wasteland as part of a larger intertextual currency in spatial symbols, it becomes possible to appreciate the contributions of Communist Party-affiliated writers to larger literary discourses that shaped the image of the neighborhood Hasia Diner has called “the focal point of American Jewish remembrance.”⁹ At the same time, by taking these spatial clichés seriously, this chapter challenges assumptions about the genre of the literary pastoral that have only recently begun to be called into question. Since cultural theorist Raymond Williams’s landmark 1973 study *The Country and the City*, the pastoral genre has been viewed as an insidious tool of reactionary collaboration with the interests of the reigning aristocratic or capitalist class. Literary scholar Roger Sales, writing in a series edited by Williams, gives blunt expression to the critical consensus when he describes the pastoral as “propaganda for the establishment” and an “argu[ment] in favour of the existing social structure.”¹⁰ According to this view, the pastoral’s celebration of simple virtues, its elevation of the wealth of nature over material prosperity, and its elision of the real conditions of agricultural and rural labor preach the virtues of quietism and contentment with one’s station in life. Even critic William Empson, whose famous characterization of proletarian literature as a form of “Covert Pastoral” was so objectionable to Williams, saw the traditional pastoral as a “trick” used to “imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor,” encouraging the reader to “th[ink] better of both.” “[T]he praise of simplicity,”

⁸ Alan Wald’s chapter on “Jews without Judaism” in *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 216-249, and “Jewish American Writers on the Left,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, eds. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge, U.K.: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) are notable exceptions to this trend.

⁹ Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.

¹⁰ Roger Sales, *English Literature in History: 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics*, English Literature in History, series ed. Raymond Williams (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 17, 24.

Empson wryly concludes, “usually went with extreme flattery of a patron.”¹¹ My discussion of the Jewish literary left’s critical use of the trope of the garden challenges this vision of pastoralism, suggesting that the pastoral scene and “mode” have radical as well as reactionary, left- as well as right-wing applications.¹²

If the pastoral has been written off as reactionary on the subject of class, Communist writing has been viewed as hostile to nature and the environment.¹³ My discussion of the garden in the jungle as a form of radical pastoralism therefore serves as a reminder that the literary production of the politically committed writers of the CPUSA should not be conflated with the aesthetic dogma of socialist realism, which, as Russian scholar Katerina Clark has observed, initially endorsed the “Five-Year Plan values” of “industrial utopianism” and the “cult of the machine”¹⁴ The literary works discussed here are therefore both an illustration of the creative autonomy of many American writers with Communist affiliations and, at the same time, an illustration of the Party’s potential, particularly prior to the 1940s, to serve as a meeting ground for literary talent and a spur to creative exchange. Party membership facilitated extra- and intertextual dialogue among politically like-minded writers, but it did not isolate these writers

¹¹ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 6, 11-13.

¹² In describing pastoralism as a “mode,” I follow Leo Marx, who argues that the pastoral is a “mode” as well as a “genre.” Using the exams of “the tragic” and “the sonnet” to illustrate the difference between these two categories, respectively, Marx explains: “A mode . . . is the broadest, most enduring and inclusive category of aesthetic kinds; it derives its character not from its formal properties, as a genre does, but rather from a special perspective on human experience, one that stresses the significance of certain conditions, aspects, or qualities of life to the relative neglect, necessarily, of others.” Marx, “Does Pastoralism Have a Future?” 210.

¹³ John Bellamy foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 10.

¹⁴ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 94, 98-99. Clark’s chapter on “The Machine and the Garden: Literature and Metaphors for the New Society” offers an insightful discussion of these themes. Her description of “High Stalinist Culture” during the period of the first Five-Year Plan suggests that Soviet writers, at least until 1932 (the fifth year of the Plan), used the symbols of the machine and the garden in a manner antithetical to their uses in the work of the Jewish Communist writers discussed in this chapter. Arguing that “[t]he machine stood for harmony, progress, control,” Clark writes that official Soviet culture during these years “subsumed under the one ritualized myth of industrialization not only the economic but the political and social revolutions as well. They even believed that social ills could be cured by industrialization” (94). Clark notes that after 1932, “the machine was quickly jettisoned as the root metaphor of the new society,” and “[m]etaphors from nature began to supplant machine metaphors” in Soviet literature and in official public pronouncements (98-99).

from the larger context of interwar Jewish letters. By examining the contribution of Communist Party members to the larger intertextual cityscape of Jewish New York, therefore, this chapter seeks to restore the writing of several important CPUSA members to the larger tradition of interwar Jewish writing while simultaneously preserving political affiliation as a meaningful unit of analysis.

The Jungle Logic

In Jewish narratives of the Lower East Side, the trope of the urban jungle is perhaps the most commonly used and widely recognized metaphor for describing the city. The near-ubiquity of this metaphor allowed it to serve as shorthand for more complex evaluations of urban life, uniting several strands of critique in a single powerful image and connecting different writers and works in an ongoing dialogue about the social effects of urban modernity. Most famously used as the title and controlling metaphor of Upton Sinclair's (1878-1968) 1905 novel about labor conditions in Chicago's meatpacking industry, the trope of the jungle derives its immediate power from the force of its violent contrast with the Platonic ideal of the ordered polis as a center of culture, enlightenment, and progress.¹⁵ It presents the city as an atavism in the heart of civilization, a wilderness of tenements and skyscrapers where the rules of cooperative enterprise and civility succumb to those of Darwinian survival.

This shock of contrast – not city but jungle, not civilization but savagery – was well suited for conveying what Beth Wenger has called the “trope of expectation followed by disappointment [that] emerged as a theme throughout Jewish accounts of first encounters with

¹⁵ *The Jungle* was serialized in the socialist journal *Appeal to Reason* in 1905 before being published as a book in 1906.

America.”¹⁶ Thus, the eponymous protagonist of Abraham Cahan’s 1917 novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, having emigrated from the small Russian city of Antomir (now in Lithuania), where he spent the first twenty years of his life, registers the foreignness of New York – and, by extension, America – through the familiar metaphor: “A train hurtling and panting along overhead [on the elevated railway] produced a bewildering, a daunting effect on me. The active life of the great strange city made me feel like one abandoned in the midst of a jungle.”¹⁷ The metaphor conveys the overwhelming scale and frenetic pace of the city, as well as its frightening foreignness, evoking the “paradoxical experience of terror and wonder” that, according to literary scholar Christophe Den Tandt, characterizes the “urban sublime.”¹⁸ Not only does the trope of the jungle speak to the experience of shock accompanying the newcomer’s first exposure to New York, critic María del Pilar Blanco notes that it also marks “a confrontation between narrator and unspeakable, unspoken other.”¹⁹ In *The Rise of David Levinsky* and other immigrant narratives, this use of the jungle as a signifier of otherness implicitly subverts nativist rhetoric; it is not the immigrant who is foreign and savage in Cahan’s novel but the American city. When Levinsky finally recognizes a fellow Jew among the New York crowd, he notes with relief, “It was like coming across a human being in the jungle.”²⁰

The trope also unites the image of a savage environment with a deterministic critique that underscored the causal links between social conditions and their economic and social determinants. As a sphere of ungoverned competition for the means of survival, the jungle

¹⁶ Beth Wenger, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 34.

¹⁷ Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1966), 90.

¹⁸ Christophe Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 4. Den Tandt cites these same lines from *The Rise of David Levinsky* as a representative example of the “urban sublime.”

¹⁹ María del Pilar Blanco, “The Poetics of the Jungle in Counterpastoral Fictions of the Americas: Writing the ‘Dark’ Place,” in *New Versions of Pastoral: Post-Romantic, Modern, and Contemporary Responses to the Tradition*, ed. David James and Philip Tew (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 197.

²⁰ Cahan, *David Levinsky*, 90.

provided a forceful caricature of unregulated free market capitalism as a system that alienates the worker from his or her fellows, dehumanizing and degrading every participant in the consuming struggle for subsistence. As Blanco notes, “the jungle becomes the epistemic site and texture of a literary critique of modern systems of labor . . .”²¹ The economic dimensions of this critique gained additional scope in the work of Jewish immigrant writers, who frequently used New York as a synecdoche for the larger nation. David Levinsky might hail his coreligionist as “a human” among savage animals, but it soon becomes apparent that his interlocutor has already undergone the necessary process of acculturation to the brutality of his environment. He turns out to be an ambitious cloak contractor, scanning the docks for freshly arrived immigrants, who are his most submissive source of “cheap labor.”²² What awaits his future workers is clear, both from the narrative of David Levinsky’s morally compromising scramble to the top of the industry, and from scores of contemporary novels and stories such as Sholem Asch’s *Uncle Moses* and *East River* and Jerome Weidman’s *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* (1937) that decried labor exploitation in the Lower East Side’s infamous sweatshops. In Anzia Yeziarska’s “How I Found America” (1920), for instance, the story’s unnamed protagonist confronts the boss of the sweatshop where she works after he announces a pay cut, only to lose her job and the support of her fearful coworkers. Shocked at their betrayal, she reflects,

I wept not so much because the girls had deserted me, but because I saw for the first time how mean, how vile, were the creatures with whom I had to work. How the fear for bread had dehumanized their last shred of humanity! I felt I had not been working among human beings, but in a jungle of savages who had to eat one another alive in order to survive.²³

²¹ Blanco, “Poetics of the Jungle,” 197.

²² Cahan, *David Levinsky*, 91.

²³ Anzia Yeziarska, “How I Found America,” in *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Signet Classic, 1996), 219.

In Yeziarska's story as in Cahan's novel, the city-as-jungle becomes a spatial metaphor for presenting the free market as the arena for an all-consuming battle royal waged with tooth and claw for economic survival.

The metaphor of the jungle often marked a deterministic understanding of environment, a progressive sociological argument that was popularized in the work of a wide range of authors writing from a variety of loosely allied political positions on the left. Cahan, the editor and guiding force of the Yiddish daily *Forverts* from its founding in 1897 until his retirement in 1946, was a committed democratic socialist, and Yeziarska was a feminist labor sympathizer conversant in socialist thought as well as in the more mainstream progressive discourses of the settlement house movement and the campaigns for women's suffrage and economic equality. Not surprisingly, however, the most forceful and sustained explorations of the city-as-jungle trope came from the pens of writers with the most radical political commitments: the writers who were attracted to the Communist Party. Staunch Party member and ambassador of the literary left Mike Gold, for instance, makes the connection between the metaphor of the jungle and a deterministic view of environment apparent in his fictionalized autobiography, *Jews without Money* (1930). For Gold, a personal friend and outspoken admirer of Upton Sinclair, the Lower East Side is "a jungle, where wild beasts prowled, and toadstools grew in a poisoned soil – perverts, cokefiends, kidnapers, firebugs, Jack the Rippers."²⁴ As this enumeration of social deviances suggest, the metaphor of the jungle establishes a causal relationship between the "poisoned soil" of the ghetto and its pathological harvest. The analogic substitution of soil for

²⁴ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 60. Gold devotes several pages of a November, 1928 *New Masses* column, "In Foggy California," to Upton Sinclair, whom he had gotten to know while sojourning in California from 1923-24. After a brief sketch of Sinclair's personality and writing, Gold praises him as "our great American pioneer in revolutionary fiction" and "the most important writer in America." Mike Gold, "In Foggy California," *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 166-171.

environment, moreover, elevates the sociological theory of determinism to the status of a natural law, invoking the common wisdom of biology and husbandry to substantiate the theories of progressive sociology.

Indeed, Gold's use of analogies from the natural world to illustrate the causal links between environment and social development situated his narrative of the Jewish Ghetto well within the discursive tradition of contemporary social science. As cultural critic Yoonmee Chang observes in a study of Chinatown literature, early sociological research on American ghettos took its cue from the theories of Robert E. Park (1864-1944), who drew inspiration from research in the natural sciences:

Drawing from Danish scientist Eugenius Warmings's *Plantesamfund* [Plant Communities], Park likens the urban landscape to an ecological system in which 'species' compete for resources and survival. . . . In the same way that the strongest plant species secures its survival and thrives over others by taking root in the richest soils and most temperate climates, the strongest of the immigrant species (the 'keen' and 'energetic') adapts to the characteristics . . . of the stronger group in order to thrive. Those remaining in the ghetto languish and die, as befits a weaker species The ghetto is not just irredeemable, but is scientifically so, its residents fated to be casualties of the inexorable processes of natural selection.²⁵

Park's star pupil, the Jewish sociologist Louis Wirth (1897-1952), revised some of his mentor's conclusions in his landmark 1928 study *The Ghetto*, but he preserved the Darwinian foundations of what Chang terms the "*Plantesamfund* model of the ghetto."²⁶ Wirth writes, "Ever since the days of Darwin, isolation has been recognized as one of the basic factors in the development of biological variants."²⁷ Gold and the other writers discussed in this chapter did not employ the language of natural selection to advocate "the survival of the assimilated," in Chang's phrase, but

²⁵ Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 32; Chang's paraphrase is from a 1921 essay by Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess, "Plant Communities in Animal Societies," in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, ed. Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 175-76, 178.

²⁶ Chang, *Writing the Ghetto*, 33.

²⁷ Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 66.

rather to invoke the understanding, advanced by both Park and Wirth, that environmental forces determined the course of social development.²⁸ They would certainly have endorsed Park's view that the ghetto "has put its imprint, not only upon the manners of the Jew, but upon his character," but whereas Park viewed the Jewish ghettos of America as sites of voluntary self-segregation, Gold had a more far-sighted understanding of the structural class inequality responsible for slums like the Lower East Side.²⁹

These Jewish Communist writers also took the Darwinian analogy further, stressing its emphasis on violent competition for the survival of the fittest. Samuel Ornitz, Rose Pastor Stokes's close friend (see chapter three) and a member of the Communist Party from the 1920s through the 1950s who would be best remembered as one of the blacklisted "Hollywood Ten," provides a less pointed if more sustained illustration of the jungle analogy in his first and most successful novel, *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl: An Anonymous Autobiography* (1923).³⁰ Rising from "the mud" of an impoverished childhood on Ludlow Street "into the murk" of the corrupt inner circles of Tammany Hall, its protagonist, Meyer Hirsch, embodies the lesson imparted by his mercenary uncle that, in "Dollar Land," "life [is] a grim truth of dog eat dog, man devour man."³¹ Hirsch's notable girth – the "haunch, paunch and jowl" of the novel's title – offers a visceral suggestion of just how many men he has "devour[ed]" on his ascent through the ranks of Tammany.

The young anti-heroes of *The Children*, a 1937 novella by Howard Fast, who would become a prominent spokesperson for the Communist Party during the years of his membership

²⁸ Chang, *Writing the Ghetto*, 33.

²⁹ Robert E. Park, forward to *The Ghetto*, by Louis Wirth (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), vii-ix.

³⁰ Information on Ornitz's Party membership is from Alan Wald, e-mail message to author, June 13, 2014.

³¹ Samuel Ornitz, *Allrightniks Row: "Haunch, Paunch and Jowl": The Making of a Professional Jew*, *Masterworks of Modern Jewish Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1986), 43, 100, 227.

(1943-1957), learn a similar lesson about America, which one character condemns as “a land of barbarians.”³² This indictment is born out by the violent behavior of the American-born generation of Jewish, Irish and Italian street urchins who have learned from an early age that “[l]ife was, always, eat or be eaten.” Fast’s narrator extends the metaphor, linking the brutal and brutalizing fight for survival among capitalism’s dispossessed to the primal struggle in the wild for evolutionary primacy: “No law existed beyond the strength of your body, the quickness of your fists. This land [the children] lived in was the land of fang and claw. A man stood in himself; the weak perished and the strong became stronger.”³³ The similarities of language, imagery, and critique among these works are striking, and they point to the circulation of ideas – and a corresponding symbolic lexicon – among the literary left in the interwar years.

Fast’s novella predates his Party membership by six years, but the book reflects a proletarian aesthetic and a materialist view of poverty that resonated with left-wing critiques of the unequal division of wealth and opportunity under capitalism. Indeed, the book was inspired by the advice of Sarah Kunitz (dates unknown), a Party member in good standing, whose brother, Joshua Kunitz (1896-1980), “was among the most highly educated Communist intellectuals and the Party’s undisputed authority on Russian literature,” according to Alan Wald.³⁴ After meeting Sarah Kunitz in 1932, an infatuated Fast had been stirred to join the Party, but Kunitz, questioning the maturity and depth of his new commitment, convinced him to postpone official membership in favor of participation in the New York chapter of the Party-endorsed John Reed Club, a national literary society that served as a meeting place and testing

³² Howard Fast, *The Children* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947), 84.

³³ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁴ Gerald Sorin, *Howard Fast: Life and Literature in the Left Lane* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 20; Wald, *Exiles*, 127.

ground for aspiring radical writers.³⁵ As Fast notes in his 1990 memoir, *Being Red*, he sent Kunitz copies of his first two novels, the historical romances *Two Valleys* (1933) and *Strange Yesterday* (1934), neither of which was a commercial or critical success. “She read both books, one [*Two Valleys*] still in manuscript,” Fast recalls, “and she was neither kind nor restrained in her criticism. . . . How was it, she demanded, that we could have dozens of middle-class writers writing about the poor in this time of a great Depression while the valid working-class writer Howard Fast spins fairy tales as historical novels?”³⁶ The criticism stung, but Fast soon came to share her point of view. With Kunitz’s assistance, he discovered, like Yeziarska and Gold before him, the historical and political value of his own childhood experiences and the radical potential of autobiographical fiction for someone of his background. The result was *The Children*, written in 1934 but published in 1937, which Fast describes as his first and last novel based on his own experiences of “poverty [and] hunger,” which were still “too close, too confusing, and too filled with pain” for comfort.³⁷ Although Fast found the book painful to write, it marked his arrival as a serious writer, as well as his first bid for consideration by the literary left, many of whose members, Kunitz included, “read *The Children* in 1937 and were immediately exuberant about it.”³⁸

If *The Children* marked an early effort to court the literary wing of the Communist Party, screenwriter and novelist Budd Schulberg’s 1941 bestseller *What Makes Sammy Run?* was written in the last flush of its author’s active involvement in the Party.³⁹ The son of a Hollywood executive father and a successful talent agent mother, Schulberg was born in a middle-class

³⁵ Fast, *Being Red*, 53-54; Sorin, *Howard Fast*, 20-21.

³⁶ Fast, *Being Red*, 63.

³⁷ Fast, author’s note, *The Children*, xi; Fast, *Being Red*, 42, 65.

³⁸ Sorin, *Howard Fast*, 28.

³⁹ According to Schulberg’s testimony for the House Un-American Activities Committee, he completed the novel in “February or March 1940,” although it wouldn’t be published until a year later, in March of 1941. Budd Schulberg, HCUA [*sic*] Testimony, May 23, 1951 (hereafter cited as HUAC Testimony), appendix A in Nicholas Beck, *Budd Schulberg: A Bio-Biography* (Lanham, Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001), 84.

section of Harlem but grew up “an authentic Hollywood prince” in his biographer’s assessment.⁴⁰ As Schulberg later acknowledged, his “was not exactly a proletarian or Marxist background.”⁴¹ After graduating from high school, he attended Dartmouth College, where he gained his first introduction to radical politics.⁴² Reflecting on his brief stint in the Communist Party in a 1952 article published in *The Saturday Review*, “Collision with the Party Line,” Schulberg recalls being swept up in the radical political atmosphere of the Depression. “In 1923 I think I would have shrugged off politics as a subject for wet-smacks [dull misfits],” he wrote. “But that summer of 1933 economics and world politics were in the air.” During his college years, he became increasingly interested in Marxism and the still young Soviet state, which he visited while a student at Dartmouth. After graduating from college, he joined a “Marxist study class” in Hollywood that soon “evolved into a Communist youth group,” and in 1937, he officially joined the Communist Party.⁴³

That same year, Schulberg published the short story that became the seed of *What Makes Sammy Run?* He later claimed that the story had met with immediate Party condemnation for its “individualistic” and “pessimistic” themes, and when he announced his intention to expand it into a novel, he reports, members of his youth group responded negatively, demanding that he “submit an outline, on the basis of which there would be a group discussion.”⁴⁴ According to his account, Schulberg took a principled stand against creative interference, refusing both his youth group’s demands and high-level pressure from John Howard Lawson (1894-1977) to “submit [a draft of his] novel for party approval.”⁴⁵ (Lawson, a playwright and screenwriter, was a literary

⁴⁰ Beck, *Budd Schulberg*, 1.

⁴¹ Budd Schulberg, “Collision with the Party Line,” *The Saturday Review*, August 30, 1952, 6.

⁴² Beck, *Budd Schulberg*, 1.

⁴³ Schulberg, “Collision,” 6-7, 31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 32; Schulberg, HUAC Testimony, 83, 85.

enforcer for the Party. Later, he would stand beside Ornitz as one of the “Hollywood Ten” jailed for contempt of Congress.) After these efforts to censor his writing, Schulberg recalls that he “simply drifted away” from the Party, which, for its part, retaliated by denouncing *What Makes Sammy Run?*⁴⁶ By the 1950s, Schulberg had become an outspoken critic of Communism, and in 1951, he cooperated with the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) as a “friendly witness,” naming fifteen of his acquaintances as current or former members of the Communist Party.⁴⁷

It is difficult to judge the accuracy of Schulberg’s account of his break with the Party. Published only a year after his testimony before HUAC, his rendition of his abortive career as a Communist was clearly an attempt to justify what many saw as a shameful act of collaboration with congressional red-baiters. In retrospect, it seems likely that Party spokespeople condemned *What Makes Sammy Run?* less for its maverick sensibility, as Schulberg claimed in his HUAC testimony and in his *Saturday Review* apologia, than as retaliation for his refusal to submit to Party discipline.⁴⁸ As Alan Wald has concluded, at the time of the novel’s publication, it seems clear that “Schulberg was not as disaffected [with Communism] as he later claimed,” an assertion supported by the novel itself.⁴⁹

Indeed, *What Makes Sammy Run?* reflected the political convictions that had first drawn Schulberg to the CPUSA, as evidenced by the enthusiastic response it initially received from the left-wing press. Samuel Sillen (1911-1973), literary editor of the *New Masses*, praised the novel as a “brilliant” satire that exposes “the dog-eat-dog ethics . . . operating in capitalist society.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Schulberg, “Collision,” 33.

⁴⁷ Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2003), 239-41.

⁴⁸ Schulberg, HUAC Testimony, 81-83.

⁴⁹ Wald, *American Night*, 54.

⁵⁰ Samuel Sillen, “Sammy Glick and Johnny Dobrejcek: Two Americans and Where They Went,” review of *What Makes Sammy Run*, by Budd Schulberg and *Out of this Furnace*, by Thomas Bell, *The New Masses*, April 29, 1941, 22-23.

Sillen's review was a resounding endorsement that effectively promoted the novel "as a model of fiction for the post-Popular Front moment," in Wald's words.⁵¹ In the *People's World*, a West Coast publication of the CPUSA, reviewer Charles Glenn (dates unknown) heralded *What Makes Sammy Run?* as a "bold and daring work" and the radical "Hollywood novel" for which left-wing critics had been waiting. Applauding Schulberg's "materialist" determinism, Glenn singled out for praise "the insight and understanding which allowed [Schulberg] to penetrate a disgraceful social system which fosters the Sammy Glicks," singling out for praise a chapter that depicted the "degrading, criminal, lustful" Lower East Side "society which formed Sammy."⁵² In an embarrassing twist to the story, Lawson met with Glenn to chastise him for his favorable review of the novel, which Glenn retracted under duress three weeks later in a shamefaced "re-evaluation."⁵³ In his retraction, Glenn condemned Schulberg for providing fodder for antisemites and for giving short shrift to the rank-and-file workers of the film industry and the writers' fight to unionize through the Screen Writers Guild.⁵⁴ The controversy surrounding Glenn's review confirms Wald's observation that works were often praised or pilloried by Communist cultural arbiters, not for their aesthetic merit or even their explicit political orientation, but based on "hair-trigger political evaluations of where a particular writer was thought to stand politically."⁵⁵

As Sillen's laudatory review and Glenn's initially positive response suggest, *What Makes Sammy Run?* is a forceful attack on the competitive, brutalizing ethos of capitalism, as well as one of the most thorough literary investigations of environmental determinism. The novel, as its title announces, offers an extended inquest into the causal factors behind the rapacious Sammy

⁵¹ Wald, *American Night*, 54.

⁵² Charles Glenn, "What Makes Sammy Run?—Story of a Hollywood Heel," *People's World*, April 2, 1941, 5, and *Daily Worker*, April 7, 1941, 7, reprinted in Beck, *Budd Schulberg*, 135-36.

⁵³ Wald, *American Night*, 52.

⁵⁴ Charles Glenn, "Hollywood Vine," *People's World*, April 24, 1941, reprinted in Beck, *Budd Schulberg*, 137-39.

⁵⁵ Wald, *American Night*, 51.

Glick's headlong sprint from a home in a Lower East Side tenement and a menial job as copyboy for the *New York Record* to a career as a high-powered Hollywood executive. Sammy's repugnantly single-minded pursuit of success, purchased at the cost of friendship and moral integrity, reimages the rags-to-riches story as a cautionary tale, the flip-side to Horatio Alger's paeans to capitalism's meritocratic possibilities. Schulberg's characterization of his anti-hero, as the reviews by Glenn and Sillen suggest, is grounded in the sociological understanding of environment conveyed by the metaphorical shorthand of the jungle. Indeed, Schulberg later reflected,

Of all the questions about the book that have been put to me through the years, [what *does* make Sammy run?] is the only one I find irresistible. It is not so much the novelist as the frustrated sociologist in me that stops for this one. In fact, one of my favorite sociology professors at Dartmouth once greeted me with, "Well, I see you got most of our Socy 1 course into *Sammy*. I'll be interested to see what you'll be able to do with Socy 2."⁵⁶

Schulberg might well have been reading Park or Wirth in that college class, for the language of natural selection predictably makes an appearance in his descriptions of Sammy. Early on in the novel, Al Manheim, the novel's likeable narrator, identifies Sammy as "a much more predatory animal than any wildcat." And when Manheim confronts him for stealing ideas and credit from an unassertive coworker, Sammy sneers, "Don't be a sap. . . . You've heard of the survival of the fittest. . . . [W]hen you come right down to it it's dog eat dog."⁵⁷

Manheim, who attributes his own affability to his upbringing "in a small New England town where life was always peaceful and friendly, and where my father, the town's only rabbi, had led a life of community service and true Christ-like gentility," rejects the antisemitic

⁵⁶ Budd Schulberg, introduction to *What Makes Sammy Run?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xvi.

⁵⁷ Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*, 14, 93-94.

explanation for Sammy's unscrupulous pursuit of wealth.⁵⁸ At the same time, however, he recognizes that Sammy's story is not "an open and shut case of environment," since the same environment that had produced Sammy had also produced at least an equal number of "Jewish *nebs* [*nebbish*: a timid, hapless person] and poets and starving tailors and everyday little guys." Only after visiting the Lower East Side, where Sammy grew up, does Manheim arrive at an answer to the question posed by the book's title. Describing the East Side ghetto as "one gigantic prize-ring through the ropes of which everyone has to climb at birth," Manheim realizes that the Sammy Glicks and the "everyday little guys" are part and parcel of the same phenomenon; the rare fighter leaves the ring standing, while the majority of the combatants go down for the count.⁵⁹

What Makes Sammy Run? is thus both a critical reimagining of the rags-to-riches tale and a satirical bildungsroman, the story of a miseducation in the schoolyard of American capitalism. While Sammy hustles to make his first million, Manheim achieves the less tangible satisfaction of a deeper understanding of society and the individual. After his visit to the Lower East Side, Manheim begins to draw broader sociological and psychological conclusions from Sammy's case study. He thinks back on Sammy's childhood:

I thought of Sammy Glick rocking in his cradle of hate, malnutrition, prejudice, suspicious, amorality, the anarchy of the poor; I thought of him as a mangy little puppy in a dog-eat-dog world. I was modulating my hate for Sammy Glick from the personal to the societal. I no longer even hated Rivington Street but the idea of Rivington Street, all Rivington Streets of all nationalities allowed to pile up in cities like gigantic dung heaps smelling up the world, ambitions growing out of filth and crawling away like worms. I saw Sammy Glick on a battlefield where every soldier was his own cause, his own army and his own flag, and I realized that I had singled him out not because he had been born into the world any more selfish, ruthless and cruel than anybody else, even though he had

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27, 119. In later editions of the book, Schulberg would change "Christ-like gentility" to "Isaiah-like vision" in a reflection of the more ethnically assertive ethos of post-war American Jewish culture.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 119, 228.

become all three, but because in the midst of a war that was selfish, ruthless and cruel Sammy was proving himself the fittest, the fiercest and the fastest.⁶⁰

In this expository passage, Schulberg generalizes his observations about Sammy, abstracting from “the personal to the societal” and from Rivington Street to the larger economic and social structures of the “dog-eat-dog world.” If the impoverished ghetto is the site where the struggle for survival is waged most nakedly, it is only a microcosm for the larger nation. Indeed, Schulberg uses Sammy’s trajectory from a Lower East Side tenement to a manor in Beverly Hills to show that both ends of the economic spectrum participate in the same corrupting system. The Jewish ghetto may be a “prize-ring,” but Hollywood is no less “a jungle [where] the smaller animals have to run for their lives,” as Schulberg wrote in one of the stories on which the novel is based.⁶¹ In extending the metaphor from the Lower East Side to Hollywood, Schulberg insists that the tenement and the manor are two sides of the same coin. The trope of the jungle thus serves to implicitly situate the ghetto in synecdochal relation to the larger country, framing it as the spatial apotheosis of the logic of capitalism.

“The Most Urbanized City in the World”

The jungle was not the only metaphoric vehicle for critiques of the industrial metropolis in wide circulation among Jewish writers on the literary left. At the same time that Schulberg, Fast, and Ornitz portrayed the ghetto as the site where the exigencies of economic survival reduced humans to their basest animal natures, they also invoked contradictory images of the city as the antithesis of the natural world, a perversely *unnatural* space whose alienation of the land from natural growth offered an implicit analogy for the alienation of industrial labor, with its perceived stunting of moral and intellectual development among the urban proletariat.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 249.

⁶¹ Budd Schulberg, “What Makes Sammy Run?” *Liberty Magazine*, October 30, 1937, reprinted in Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 299.

The uncritical dismissal of the industrial present, almost always couched in polemical contrast to an anti-modern pastoral ideal, might at first blush seem perversely conservative, an uncritical longing for the “good old days” that overlooks the harsh realities of agrarian capitalism. Indeed, Marxist thought has typically been seen as promoting the immediate needs of labor at the expense of environmental preservation, privileging industrial progress over ecological considerations.⁶² While this characterization was often accurate in practice – certainly in the case of the Soviet economy – the Jewish literary left’s romantic celebration of nature as a utopian counter-symbol to the urban reality also has a Marxist intellectual genealogy, as John Bellamy Foster’s research into the environmental dimensions of Marx’s writing suggests.⁶³ In *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, Foster draws suggestive parallels between the alienation of the land and the alienation of labor. The “estrangement of the worker from (1) the object of his/her labor, (2) the labor process, (3) human species-being (that is, the transformative, creative activity that defined human beings as a given species), and (4) each other – which together constituted Marx’s concept of the alienation of labor – was inseparable,” Foster argues, “from the alienation of human beings from nature, from both their own internal nature and external nature.”⁶⁴ This critical link between “internal” and “external” nature would exert a powerful influence on the narrative landscape and the development of characters in Communist writers’ literary treatments of the Jewish ghetto.

The two most significant tropes for conveying the interrelated alienation from internal and external nature are the metaphors of contaminated soil and the nature-less city, both framed

⁶² Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 10.

⁶³ Alastair Bonnett’s research into the role of nostalgia in left-wing political discourse is also instructive. In *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Continuum, 2010), Bonnett describes an anti-modern nostalgia, of which “the urban evocation of pastoral Edens” is one manifestation, as a constituent ingredient in left-wing radical discourse in the twentieth century and earlier (1, 44). Bonnett explores the significance of this trope in the context of anti-colonialism.

⁶⁴ Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 72.

in opposition to an often-sentimentalized pastoral ideal. In Ornitz's *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, metaphors of spoilage and contamination connect an indictment of the unnaturalness of life in the urban ghetto with a deterministic vision of its unwholesome fruit. Throughout the novel, Ornitz uses flowers as an easily accessible, if somewhat clichéd, counter-symbol to the ghetto, which is depicted in terms of filth and rot. Young female prostitutes are described as "a garland of strangely strung and varied flowers" that "has dragged in the dust of many roads." He extends the metaphor:

But flowers are flowers . . . what if they are rumped and faded, soiled and dropping with rough handling . . . anyway there is left the suggestion of fragrance and charm and beauty . . . but they are not the posies they once were. Now they are downtown flowers – who came Chinatown way after being discarded by uptown. . . . Tenderloin gets the fresh-cut flowers . . . later the gutter wash drifts them down to Fourteenth street, and then the changing tide flings them on to the mud flats of the Bowery and Lavelle's, where they stay until dumped into the garbage cans of Five Points, Mulberry Bend and the waterfront back rooms. . . . The trench in Potter's Field is the last stop.⁶⁵

Health and virtue, here, are associated with nature in full blossom. The corruption of the vice-ridden city is contrastingly figured as "the dust of many roads," "the gutter," "the mud flats," and finally "the garbage cans" that spoil the once pristine flowers. Ornitz returns to these images throughout the novel. Encountering a young, fresh-faced girl growing up in an apartment above a cabaret and brothel, the narrator "wonder[s] how a morning glory grows in a garbage can." Telegraphing his determinist thesis, Ornitz provides the answer a sentence later when the narrator mentions that he saw the girl again two decades later in his capacity as a Superior Court judge. "She was convicted of robbing a man in a panel game," he coldly reports. "She was friendless, without home or money, and a hopeless morphine addict. I sent her to State's

⁶⁵ Ornitz, *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, 142, ellipses in original.

Prison.”⁶⁶ Once again, flowers signify a state of innocence and naturalness, wilted and spoiled in the rotting “garbage can” of the city.

While the hackneyed image of young womanhood as a flower has troubling if unsurprising resonances, presenting women as objects of aesthetic adornment with little utilitarian value, Ornitz extends the metaphor to encompass characters – male as well as female – whose contributions to society go unrecognized by the capitalist value structure. Writers and artists – implicitly, Ornitz himself – also fall into this category. “A poet,” one character cynically comments, “is a bright colored weed in a potato patch.”⁶⁷ A “bright colored weed,” of course, is an unwanted flower, something that provides no direct sustenance and which, therefore, is rooted out and discarded. In contrast, the city and, by extension, the larger nation are implicitly depicted as a potato patch, a swath of land turned to its most utilitarian use. The cynical comment plays on the reader’s aesthetic tastes and sympathies, invoking a grey world in which aesthetic pleasure – conventionally understood to cultivate and appeal to the more exalted sentiments and faculties – is uprooted to create space for a drab cash crop.

The metaphor of the poet as flower in a landscape of weeds has deep roots in Ornitz’s small corpus of work. Ornitz, the son of middle-class wool merchants, grew up on Hester Street in the heart of the Lower East Side. The poverty he witnessed as a child had a deep impact on his political development, and by the time he was twelve, he had become a committed socialist and a precocious soapbox orator. Between 1908 and 1920, he devoted himself to social work, finding employment with the New York Prison Association and the Brooklyn Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, of which he was the associate superintendent.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid., 137.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁶⁸ Bernard F. Dick, *Radical Innocence: A Critical Study of the Hollywood Ten* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 12.

While still working for the Brooklyn Society, Ornitz began to write radical plays under the fanciful pen-name Don Orno. One play in particular, a one-act reimagining of *Crime and Punishment* titled *The Sock* (1918), anticipated *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*'s treatment of the figure of the artist. In the play, Oscar, a young violinist, murders his miserly landlady and steals the bulging sock where she has stashed her savings in order to send his consumptive lover, Clara, to a sanatorium in the mountains. The murder is justified in the play by the higher ideals of art and love. Clara is a "poet with a new inspiration" whose value to society is presented in familiarly organic terms. Oscar proudly explains, "I destroyed an ugly, strangling weed to preserve a beautiful plant. I serve posterity. One artist means more to the march of ages than ten million money-grubbers!"⁶⁹ Here, the "money-grubb[ing]" ethos of capitalism is personified in a single character who is triumphantly sacrificed for the revolutionary cause of the "new" poetic "inspiration," whatever form that might actually take (Ornitz does not offer any hints). In *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, however, the forces of truth and beauty do not fare so well. Davy Solomon, the "bright colored weed" in question, is also tubercular, but while Clara presumably uses the stolen money to recover, Davie dies in the prime of his youth from the illness Ornitz identifies as "the [sweat]shop sickness, the plague of Dollar Land."⁷⁰ The trope of the doomed, tubercular poet was echoed in at least two later novels of New York by writers on the Jewish literary left: Albert Halper's (1904-1984) *Union Square* (1933) and Howard Fast's *Place in the City* (1937). Today's readers might associate this archetypal figure with the much-mythologized life of John Keats, but Jewish writers in New York's leftist literary circles might have thought of a figure far nearer to home: the Yiddish anarchist poet and New York sweatshop laborer Dovid

⁶⁹ Don Orno [Samuel Ornitz], *The Sock: A Play of Protest* (Brooklyn, NY: The Three Pamphleteers, 1919), n.p., <https://archive.org/details/sockplayinoneact00orni>.

⁷⁰ Ornitz, *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, 43.

Edelshtat (1866-1892), whose death at twenty-six from tuberculosis made him a fitting emblem for the fate of the idealistic artist under the regime of industrial capitalism.

The artist may seem useless from the perspective of an economy focused on scarcity and commodification, but Ornitz's use of metaphors from the natural world subtly argue for the artist's less quantifiable but no less essential influence on the moral and behavioral development of society. Indeed, the seemingly banal association of flowers with poetry and moral virtue is more barbed when read in the context of the now largely forgotten reformist discourses and urban planning schools of thought – most significantly, the City Beautiful movement – that created such urban oases as Manhattan's Central Park. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century reformers and social critics, pointing to the prevalence of crime and vice in the nation's growing metropolises, as well as to the frequent epidemics that ravaged their poorest quarters, condemned urban life as harmful to the morals and manners, not to mention the physical well being, of city dwellers. With the endorsement of the medical establishment, diagnosticians prescribed “pastoral nostrums for urban ills,” in historian John F. Kasson's phrase, advocating the medicinal benefits of vacations in the country or at the shore.⁷¹ Proponents of the City Beautiful movement, Central and Prospect Park designers Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) and Calvert Vaux (1824-1895) prominent among them, urged the construction of public parks where the city's poorer inhabitants could be exposed to the uplifting and ennobling influence of nature. “No one who has closely observed the conduct of the people who visit the Park,” Olmsted wrote of Manhattan's Central Park, “can doubt that it exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and most lawless classes of the city, – an influence favorable to courtesy,

⁷¹ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 100.

self-control, and temperance.”⁷² Such an influence was not to be found in the wilds of untamed nature or in the neatly ordered fields of the farm, however. As historian David Schuyler has noted, mid- to late-nineteenth century reformers and city planners “cherished nature as the best environment, but what [they] meant by *nature* was quite different: instead of the plantation or the farm, [they] more and more celebrated a specific set of scenic qualities and social values they identified with a pastoral or domesticated environment . . .”⁷³ Neither the jungle nor the “potato patch,” this vision of the city beautiful was more in keeping with the “domesticated” landscape of the park, where nature was offered up as an aesthetic object for the uplift and edification of its viewers.

Ornitz’s opposition between flowers or “bright colored weeds,” on the one hand, and the alternatives of the “potato patch” and the gutter or garbage can, on the other, builds on this tradition, adapting the tropes of an older reformist discourse for his more radical materialist critique. He was not alone in turning these conventional tropes to radical purposes. They reappear with even greater allegorical force seven years later in Mike Gold’s *Jews without Money*, which was hailed as a model for proletarian writing upon its publication in 1930. A leading figure of the literary left, Gold (né Itzok Granich) grew up on Chrystie Street in the heart of the Lower East Side. He joined the Communist Party shortly after its formation in 1919. By then, Gold had become “a nationally known symbol of the fully ‘committed’ writer,” according to Alan Wald, serving briefly alongside Claude McKay as an executive editor of the *Liberator* in 1922, and helping to found the *New Masses*, which he edited between 1928 and 1930.⁷⁴ During the Depression, he reached national audiences as a columnist for the CPUSA-published *Daily*

⁷² Frederick Law Olmsted, “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,” in *Civilizing American Cities: Writings on City Landscapes*, ed. S. B. Sutton (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 96, quoted in Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 15.

⁷³ Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*, 2.

⁷⁴ Wald, *Exiles*, 39, 51.

Worker. While significant numbers of Jewish Communists fled the Party in waves of disillusionment – in 1929, following Moscow’s apologetics for the Hebron massacre in British Mandate Palestine; in 1936-’38, during Stalin’s infamous “Show Trials”; *en masse* in 1939, when the Soviet Union signed the infamous non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany; and in 1956, following Khrushchev’s revelatory denunciation of Stalin – Gold remained loyal to the Party until his death in 1967.

Gold’s fictionalized autobiography, written and revised throughout the 1920s but published shortly after the 1929 stock market crash when the Communist Party was poised to move into its period of greatest influence, is at once an anti-capitalist parable and one of the most sensitive, lyrical, and enduring of the many coming-of-age narratives set in Manhattan’s Jewish ghetto. Constructed as a series of vignettes of his childhood on the Lower East Side, the book draws forceful parallels between the concentrated poverty of the ghetto and scenes of suffering, cruelty, and desperation, building to a teleological conversion narrative in which the tragic events of Gold’s childhood lead to his salvational discovery of communism and the labor movement. This political awakening proved formative for Gold, who found in socialism a lens for interpreting his experiences and in the CPUSA an institutional platform from which to express his ideas.

In *Jews Without Money*, as in *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl*, the larger systemic causes of the ghetto’s concentrated poverty are invoked through the contradictory metaphors of contaminated nature growing wild and a complete absence of nature, both of which are presented in direct contrast to a pastoral ideal.⁷⁵ In Gold’s treatment, the familiar tropes of left-wing critique take on a lyrical, hallucinatory intensity. As we have already seen, he describes the

⁷⁵ For a Marxist eco-critical analysis of Gold’s treatment of nature, see Tristan Siple, “Proletarian Pastoral Reconsidered: Reading Mike Gold in an Age of Ecological Crisis,” *Cultural Logic: An Electronic Journal of Marxist Theory and Practice* (2010), <http://clogic.eserver.org/2010/Siple.pdf>.

ghetto as a “jungle, where wild beasts prowled, and toadstools grew in poisoned soil.” At the same time, and no less metaphorically, he informs his readers that “Earth’s trees, grass, flowers could not grow on my street; but the rose of syphilis bloomed by night and by day.” This anti-pastoral description of the East Side is characteristic of Gold’s dialectical cityscape. The real city of parks and visible if notably sparse greenery is submerged beneath the polemical alternatives of a hyper-urban landscape and a bucolic natural ideal. “New York is a devil’s dream, the most urbanized city in the world” he writes.

It is all geometry angles and stone. It is mythical, a city buried by a volcano. No grass is found in this petrified city, no big living trees, no flowers, no bird but the drab little lecherous sparrow, no soil, loam, earth; fresh earth to smell, earth to walk on, to roll on, and love like a woman.

Just stone. It is the ruins of Pompeii, except that seven million animals full of earth-love must dwell in the dead lava streets.

This romantic invocation of the natural world is inseparable from Gold’s dystopian vision of New York as a city of “just stone.” He does not describe a real city, or, for that matter a real countryside. Rather, his idealized vision of “fresh earth” stands in Edenic contrast to the allegorical images of New York as an environment of “poisoned soil” or “no soil.”⁷⁶

Glimpses of the Garden

Gold’s vision of “earth-love” notably omits any reference to agricultural labor. The uncontaminated earth exists “to smell,” “to walk on,” “to roll on,” and “to love like a woman,” but not to till, to sow, or to harvest. Where does this perplexingly erotic vision of nature fit into the symbolic ecology of *Jews without Money*? The triangulated symbolism of nature, essentialized femininity, and utopian anti-capitalism resonates with revolutionary romanticism’s search for images of a utopian future in the preindustrial past, while also drawing on the venerable literary convention of gendering the countryside and the city female and male,

⁷⁶ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 15, 40, 60.

respectively.⁷⁷ Many male authors of left-wing tenement narratives adopted this convention, allying women – particularly immigrant mothers – and the rural countryside in symbolic resistance to the competitive ethos of the hyper-masculine “dog-eat-dog” world. Proletarian fathers are either absent from the narratives discussed in this chapter (as in Fast’s *The Children*) or serve as cautionary tales of the hazards of capitalism’s false promises. (Mikey’s father, for instance, after striving to become a “boss painter,” suffers lead poisoning, losing his health and plunging the family into poverty.) Mothers, in contrast, are represented by the authors discussed here as preservers of human integrity, isolated from the degrading competition of the labor market by their relationship with the space of the home and the forms of domestic labor associated with nurturing and sustaining the family.

These representations are consonant with the interwar convention of “associat[ing] the [immigrant] Jewish mother with home, family, tradition, and religion – the bodily representation of all that was familiar, loved, and therefore missed,” in historian Joyce Antler’s words. But while Antler has interpreted this trope as a response to second-generation Jewish “anxieties” about acculturation into “the mainstream American world that beckoned them,” Fast, Gold, Ornitz, and Schulberg invoked sentimental images of home-bound mothers to more radical and polemical ends.⁷⁸ Like Yeziarska before them, they put gender essentialism and primitivism to strategic, albeit less feminist, uses.⁷⁹ Gold refers to Mikey’s mother as “an unhurried peasant,” a self-described “work horse” who “wanted no diamond rings, no fancy dresses, no decorations,” and who possessed “that dark proletarian instinct which distrusts all that is connected with

⁷⁷ On the gendered landscape of American fiction, see Louise H. Westling, *Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

⁷⁸ Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17.

⁷⁹ Marianna Torgovnick notes in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), “Sooner or later those familiar tropes for primitives become the tropes conventionally used for women” (17). For a description of these tropes, see my discussion of primitivism in the writing of Anzia Yeziarska and Fannie Hurst in chapter three.

money-making.”⁸⁰ Schulberg uses similarly primitivist language to describe Sammy Glick’s self-sacrificing immigrant mother, writing that she possessed in her Yiddish speech “that mysterious sense of poetry all peasants seem to have.”⁸¹

Mothers in Fast’s *The Children* and Ornitz’s *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* are more pointed critical of the world in which they must raise their children. The protagonist’s mother in *The Children* laments the “pain and horror” of urban poverty, and Meyer Hirsch’s mother in *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* helplessly protests her brother’s ambitions to join the capitalist class by opening a non-union sweatshop: “[Y]ou’re a sweatshop workman yourself,” she objects. “You see what it does. You saw my husband sweated drop by drop into his grave.”⁸² After the uncle’s death, Meyer’s wife insists “that a just retribution had overtaken the ruthless Philip.” His mother concurs, but Meyer tellingly dismisses his wife – and by implication, his mother – as “[p]rimitive, natural in all her emotions and reactions.”⁸³ Her “primitive” reaction, Ornitz makes clear, is the “natural,” humane response to the savage world whose *unnatural* values her brother and son have assimilated. In the most moving passage of *Jews Without Money*, Gold addresses his mother directly: “I must remain faithful to the poor because I cannot be faithless to you! I believe in the poor because I have known you. The world must be gracious for the poor! Momma, you taught me that!”⁸⁴ Gold describes his mother as the “heroine” of the book in an

⁸⁰ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 148, 157-58, 214.

⁸¹ Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*, 224. Schulberg adopts the convention of contrasting Sammy’s mother’s “awkward and ignorant” English speech with her “poetic” Yiddish from Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, a technique Howard Fast also acknowledges using in *The Children*. Fast writes that he “had his [protagonist’s] mother speak only the most broken English; but when his mother’s Yiddish was translated formally, it emerged as classical English, full of *thee*’s and *thou*’s. I got the idea from Henry Roth’s wonderful book, *Call It Sleep*.” Fast, *Being Red*, 64.

⁸² Fast, *The Children*, 37; Ornitz, *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, 103.

⁸³ Ornitz, *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, 287.

⁸⁴ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 158.

author's note from 1935, underscoring the connections between his political commitments and his mother's example.⁸⁵

Though invoked in service of radical economic critiques, these representations of motherhood, however affectionate, also have a troubling, conservative dimension. The celebration of feminine self-abnegation and nurturing, though powerfully suggestive of the collectivist, cooperative ethos expected to emerge from a classless society, notably ignores women's professional and personal ambitions, undercutting feminist efforts to achieve economic and educational equality. After all, the repressive expectation of ambitionless, self-sacrificing motherhood was one of the greatest obstacles Anzia Yezierska, Rose Cohen, and fellow immigrant women confronted in their pursuit of professional achievement and political expression through literary careers. The working-class mothers of tenement narratives are not exempt from toil – Gold writes that Mikey's mother “had known nothing but work since her tenth year” – but none of the mothers in the four novels discussed in this chapter are actively engaged in labor outside the household.⁸⁶ Rather, their work is primarily reproductive and nurturing, suggesting further parallels between representations of motherhood and utopian images of fertility and growth in the uncontaminated soil of the pastoral countryside.

In *Jews Without Money*, motherhood and nature imagery are thus combined to evoke an idealized image of work as a labor of love. Gold's romantic elision of the harsh realities of agrarian capitalism, like his elevation of motherhood into a revolutionary ideal, might seem paradoxically conservative, yet his gendered representations of nature suggests a more radical allegorical meaning. By reading Gold's description of “earth-love” in the context of Marx's association of alienated labor with alienated land, it is possible to see the emergence of a secular,

⁸⁵ Gold, author's note to *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 2004), 12.

⁸⁶ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 158.

Marxian revision of the biblical story of Eden. *Jews Without Money* is an appropriately anti-religious work for a Communist writer, but it is not areligious. Gold rejects Jewish belief, which he associates with his mother's traditional observance, but he intentionally invokes sacred imagery and convictions in order to replace them with analogous revolutionary scenes and principles, showing how his own faith in Marxist socialism could emerge from his mother's pious belief in Scriptural doctrine.

Describing his adolescent despair at finding himself "caught like [his] father in poverty's trap," Gold writes that he "developed a crazy religious streak. I prayed on the tenement roof in moonlight to the Jewish Messiah who would redeem the world." Religion, however, offers empty solace, the opiate of an impossible hope rather than an active plan of action. On the same page, Gold discovers a more productive solution in the labor movement, using parallel imagery and language to emphasize the substitution of one faith for another. Instead of prayer on the moonlit rooftop, "one night" he encounters a "man on an East Side soap-box" whose words lead him to the "true Messiah" of the "workers' Revolution," instead of the false messiah of the Jewish religion.⁸⁷ Following a similar logic, Gold's romantic presentation of a bountiful natural landscape unmarred by agricultural labor invokes the tropes of Eden only to secularize them by substituting Marxist doctrine for religious dogma. Allusions to Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden into a world of "toil" by "the sweat of [the] face" from Genesis 3:17-19 are secularized as metaphors for the alienation of labor under the regime of capitalism.⁸⁸ Through an intuitive process of association, the workers' alienation from the products and process of their labor, from

⁸⁷ Ibid., 308-309.

⁸⁸ These lines are from the 1917 Jewish Publication Society's translation, the most likely reference text for a Jewish intellectual writing at the time Gold was at work on *Jews Without Money*.

their fellow workers, and finally from themselves and each other, is reflected in their estrangement from nature in the “dead” streets of the city.⁸⁹

In this context, the biblical vision of a garden that requires no cultivation is repurposed as the prefiguration of the socialist millennium, in which backbreaking, unremunerative toil is replaced with the kind of creative, fulfilling, and freely undertaken work that Marx referred to as “life-activity” and that Gold associates with the work of motherhood.⁹⁰ His erotic vision of the land thus creates an equivalency between production and reproduction, reimagining the former as a labor of love that is as pleasurable and generative as the latter. This association between erotic love and “life-activity” also appears in the negative form of an anti-pastoral in passages devoted to the role of prostitution in the local economy of the Lower East Side, as when Gold writes of the “rose of syphilis” that “bloomed” on his block.⁹¹ The interpersonal alienation that Marx attributes to the estrangement of labor is felt most keenly in this transformation of an act of intimacy and reproduction into a hazardous commercial transaction. At this early point in the narrative, the image of the garden seems faint and distant indeed.

It gains clarity in the twelfth chapter of the book, “Mushrooms in Bronx Park,” a pastoral interlude that allegorically prefigures the post-revolutionary millennium. At the height of a summer so hot that “Jewish babies whimpered and died” – summers were notoriously cruel in the overcrowded, unventilated tenements – young Mikey’s parents decide to take him and his sister on a Sunday excursion to Bronx Park, the 718 acre oasis that houses the New York Botanical Gardens and the Bronx Zoo. The debate over the destination for their outing underscores the gendered opposition between country and city. Mikey’s father initially proposes

⁸⁹ Karl Marx, “Estranged Labor,” in *The Political Theory Reader*, ed. Paul Schumaker (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 139.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 15.

an excursion to Coney Island. He is drawn to “the razzle-dazzle, the mechanical blare, the gaudy savage joys of Coney Island,” but Mikey’s mother is intractable. “She hated the pushing and excitement of a million frantic people,” implicating the mass culture pleasure grounds in the logic of the urban jungle by condemning it as “a madhouse” and “a place for monkeys.” Defending herself against her husband’s accusation that she is “an old Baba grandmother” who “would like to sit by the stove all [her] life,” she explains, “[I]n Hungary I went to places. I used to walk there in the fields and the woods. But Coney Island is different. It has no fields.”⁹² If Mikey’s father dismisses his mother’s aversion to urban crowds as the prejudices of an Old World grandmother unable to adapt to American modernity, the narrative vindicates her longing for nature within a symbolic framework that nostalgically associates the rural past with egalitarian collectivism. In the vignette describing their trip to Bronx Park, Gold invokes nature’s bounty as the negation of materialistic laws of private property: “We looked for signs: KEEP OFF THE GRASS. There were no signs. So we walked into the middle of the field, and found a wonderful tree. This tree we made our own.”⁹³ This scene is both realism and allegory. Absent the signifiers of ownership and exclusion, the edifices of capital and the ubiquitous signs that restrict movement and access, Mikey’s family can freely share in the bounty of nature, laying claim to it as their “own,” as might any other visitor to the park.

Throughout this vignette, Gold presents the pastoral woods and fields of Bronx Park in dialectical opposition to the alienating urban world, invoking the utopian dimensions of the former through a subtle inversion of the logic of capital and private property. Mikey’s family may make a tree in the park “their own,” but their act of possession is implicitly temporary and collective: they can lay claim to it precisely because it belongs to every visitor to the park and

⁹² Ibid., 147-48.

⁹³ Ibid., 141, 151.

every taxpayer in the city. Ownership, here, is reimagined as a novel and emancipatory state of harmony with the external environment, and Gold depicts the “forest” as a house shared equitably by its inhabitants:

In the forest everything suddenly became cool and green. It was like going into a mysterious house. The trees were like walls, their leaves made a ceiling. Clear, sweet voices sang through the house. These were the birds. The birds lived in the house. Little ants and beetles ran about under our feet. They lived on the floor of the house.

I smelled queer, garlicky smells. I saw a large gold coin lying in a bed of green. I looked closer, and knew I was fooled. It was sunlight. The sun made other golden lines and circles. I heard running water.

My mother walked in front of us. Her face looked younger.

In this rich passage, Gold systematically invokes and then upends the signifiers of private ownership, presenting the longed-for millennium in symbolic microcosm. The forest becomes both house and home to the city-weary family, who share it peacefully with the birds and insects. In this state of prelapsarian harmony, the wealth of nature replaces human-made currency, as the “large gold coin in a bed of green” is revealed to be sunlight dappling the grass. In this Edenic context, Mikey’s careworn mother grows more youthful, rounding out the allegory with her embodied illustration of the profound influence, this time positive, of environment. “I’m so happy in a forest!” she exclaims at the end of the chapter. “You American children don’t know what it means! I am happy!”⁹⁴

The pastoral, as unveiled in the Bronx Park episode, is presented in opposition to a vision of the industrial metropolis, serving as an illustration of the freedom and possibilities for self-actualization that are so difficult to find in the latter. “New York,” Gold wrote in a 1928 piece for the *New Masses*, “is too noisy for continuous thinking. It is a machine that grinds the mind to powder. It is a battlefield.”⁹⁵ These scenes contrast the rural with the urban, the pre-industrial

⁹⁴ Ibid., 152-155.

⁹⁵ Michael Gold, “In Foggy California,” *The New Masses*, November, 1928, reprinted in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 162.

past with the mechanized present, but in doing so, they also conjure the image of a better world against the gray backdrop of urban poverty. The city, and particularly the ghetto, becomes both superstructure and symbol of capitalism, while the pastoral sketches the roseate vision of the socialist future. Mikey's mother's contentment in Bronx Park thus prefigures the worker's liberation from alienation in a world freed from the constraints of private property and competitive production.

This interpretation is further suggested by Gold's famous profession of revolutionary faith at the end of *Jews Without Money*:

O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit.

O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live.

O great Beginning!⁹⁶

These lines, which conclude the narrative, present the idealized worker's society in explicitly pastoral terms as a secular Eden. The landscape of the garden is neither the jungle nor the city of stone. Unlike the atavism of the former and the unnaturalness of the latter, the "garden for the human spirit" reverses the conditions of alienation associated with capitalism and the urban environment – not through anarchism, but, to extend Gold's pastoral metaphor, through careful planning and cultivation.

The Garden in the Jungle

For Gold, as for other Communist writers of the twenties and thirties, the garden is nowhere to be found in this world, but is to be created through revolution and the construction of a classless society. Young Mikey and his family may gain a tantalizing glimpse of this new order in Bronx Park, but their visit is couched in allegorical terms and set far apart from their

⁹⁶ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 309.

workaday lives by time and space. After all, Bronx Park is located in the northern reaches of the city, whereas the family might more easily have spent the day in Central Park, a far shorter trip from the Lower East Side. Yet Central Park, flanked by some of the city's most exclusive residences, was forbiddingly genteel and upper class. If it offered relief from the sweltering tenements of the Jewish ghetto, it also served as a reminder of the structural inequalities responsible for the city's slums. The long trip from the Lower East Side to the city's northernmost borough, moreover, is symbolic of the experiential distance between the dangers and discomforts of the Jewish ghetto and the Edenic tranquility of Bronx Park. To reach the Bronx, Mikey's family must survive an almost purgatorial journey on a hot elevated train "crowded with people to the point of nausea," traveling, to borrow Dante's hierarchical scheme, from the inferno of downtown, through the purgatory of the subway, before finally reaching the paradise of nature.⁹⁷

The utopian garden is similarly described as an absence in Ornitz's *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*. "Looking back," the novel's corrupt narrator muses, "I try hard to remember when it was that we city street-bred boys had an age of innocence. It seems that we were born with a bit of apple from the tree of knowledge in our mouths. Things as they are were but rarely treated as anything else but as things as they are."⁹⁸ "Things as they are," in the sordid world of Ornitz's ghetto, refers to theft, prostitution, even murder: the mundane realities of the environment in which Ornitz's cast of "street-bred boys" come of age. Ornitz does not imbue the garden with the allegorical logic it assumes in Gold's treatment; invoked as absence, it foregrounds the association of the ghetto with the most harmful effects of poverty in a culture that values profit over morality.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 149.

⁹⁸ Ornitz, *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, 52.

In Fast's *The Children*, the garden is also a poignant reminder of the state of peace and harmony that is so antithetical to the world of the ghetto. If Gold was popularly hailed as the "Dean of American Proletarian Literature," by the end of the 1940s, Fast was "the public face of the Communist Party in America," according to his biographer, Gerald Sorin.⁹⁹ Born in 1914, Fast grew up "a badly neglected, rough-and-tumble street kid" in "a deteriorating section" of Washington Heights. His family was so poor that, by the time he was ten, he had learned to feed and clothe himself by begging for change outside the Polo Grounds and by stealing "bread from front stoops and . . . shirts and pants from clotheslines."¹⁰⁰ The neighborhood was rough in other ways, as well. "I did not have to be instructed about poverty or hunger," Fast recalled in his memoir. "I had lived them both. I had fought and been beaten innumerable times . . . because I was Jewish."¹⁰¹

Although he later described *The Children* as his only attempt to write about "myself and my childhood," the story is set in a geographically unspecified every-slum known only as "the block," that compresses New York's many ethnically divided ghettos into a single crucible of interethnic violence.¹⁰² One of the most harrowing accounts of a ghetto childhood in New York, the novella traces the escalating brutality of a group of street children who, by dares, threats, accusations of cowardice, and routine beatings, spur each other on to increasingly appalling acts of violence that culminate in the lynching of the leader of the local African American gang. This last horrific act, which Fast later claimed was based on a real incident that had occurred in his neighborhood during his youth, is depicted as abhorrent even to its perpetrators who recoil in

⁹⁹ Sorin, *Howard Fast*, 4. Sorin explains, "With so few writers and intellectuals left in the CP [after the Soviet alliance with Germany in 1939], Fast, almost by default, became the most prominent cultural spokesman in, and for, the American Communist Party well into the 1950s."

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 12-14.

¹⁰¹ Fast, *Being Red*, 42.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 65; Fast, *The Children*, 11.

horror from their own actions.¹⁰³ Substantiating the determinist thesis with common wisdom from the field of social psychology, Fast makes it clear that the children go along with the lynching and lesser acts of brutality out of fear and an evolutionary instinct for self-preservation, realizing that complicity in violence is a necessity of survival in a space where “[n]o law existed beyond the strength of your body, the quickness of your fists.”¹⁰⁴ The children’s actions cannot be attributed to natural cruelty, as their horrified reactions make clear; rather, the blame must be laid squarely at the feet of their environment and its larger economic and social causes. “[T]he slum,” Fast wrote in the “author’s note” that prefaces the novella, is “the jelly on which the germ [of race-hatred] is bred. . . . If this small tale does anything to help replace [the slums] with decent housing, it will be well worth the printing.”¹⁰⁵

The causal connection between environment and social pathology is made all the more pointed by Fast’s insistence on the innate, if easily corruptible, goodness of his characters. If the slum is a predatory jungle, the children’s longing for a more peaceful and harmonious existence is evoked through the familiar Edenic metaphor. Early on in the novella, the narrator, a bookish Jewish boy named Ishky, confides, “I read about the secret garden somewhere, and then I began to look for it. A beautiful garden, where you simply have to be happy. I knew it was somewhere.” At first, Ishky believes he can find this space of tranquility within the confines of the ghetto. “Behind our house,” he continues, “there is a yard, surrounded by a high wooden fence. . . . And just at the bottom of the fence, a little grass grows. I knew the secret garden was

¹⁰³ In *Being Red*, Fast sets the lynching he claims to have narrowly avoided witnessing as a child on Coogan’s Bluff, which he misidentifies as “Macomb’s Bluff, the ridge over the Polo Grounds” (42-43). Coogan’s Bluff overlooked the old Polo Grounds, but it is also possible that Fast might have been thinking of Macomb’s Dam Park, near Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, although it is less likely. Sorin repeats the story of the lynching without substantiating evidence, locating it on “McComb’s [*sic*] Bluff over the Polo Grounds.” Sorin, *Howard Fast*, 15. I have not been able to find a record of a lynching at either site, making it likely that Fast fabricated the story, which Sorin repeated without verification.

¹⁰⁴ Fast, *The Children*, 73.

¹⁰⁵ Fast, author’s note, xii.

there, though I had never been there.” Ishky is soon disabused of his illusions, however, when it occurs to him that he can see over the fence from the roof of his tenement. Peering over, he is heartbroken to discover that “in the garden, there was nothing but piles of rubbish.”¹⁰⁶ In this collision of the tropes of the garden and the trash heap, it is possible to hear echoes of Gold and Ornitz, among other chroniclers of Jewish tenement life (Fast later acknowledged his debt to fellow CPUSA member Henry Roth’s “wonderful book” *Call It Sleep*¹⁰⁷). As in *Jews Without Money*, the garden is nowhere to be found in the city; indeed, even a nearby “woods” – loosely modeled on Coogan’s Bluff, a promontory overlooking the old Polo Grounds – assumes the logic of the jungle when it becomes the scene of the lynching.¹⁰⁸

Unlike Gold, however, Fast does not directly associate the absent garden with the post-revolutionary workers’ society. Rather, he uses it as a poignant counter-symbol to urban reality, invoking nature as a metaphor for the conflict between the children’s aspirations and their unnatural, dehumanizing urban environment. Ishky describes the magic garden to his sensitive friend Shomake, an Italian violin prodigy, who understands that “[i]f it’s a magic garden, den it c’n be anywhere at all.”¹⁰⁹ Shomake’s realization suggests that the garden exists within the children’s own imaginations and interiorities, rather than in the brutal world they inhabit. This seemingly banal observation has more far-reaching implications. More broadly, it suggests that the harsh realities of life as the children know it is not inevitable or “natural,” but rather susceptible of transformation through an act of collective will premised on the ability to imagine a different and better reality. More narrowly, it associates personal redemption with the intellectual resources and agency of the individual, associating acts of artistic imagination –

¹⁰⁶ Fast, *The Children*, 17, 39.

¹⁰⁷ Fast, *Being Red*, 64.

¹⁰⁸ See n. 98.

¹⁰⁹ Fast, *The Children*, 138.

literary, musical, or otherwise – with the ability to effect revolutionary change in the long term and personal salvation in the short term.

It is significant, therefore, that the “secret garden” alludes not only to Eden but also to Frances Hodgson Burnett’s 1911 novel of that title. The pastoral is always a self-consciously literary mode of seeing, an idealization of nature with polemical referents, rather than a mimetic form of representation. Fast’s easily identifiable allusion to Burnett’s novel thus serves to directly connect his characters’ vague longings for a better life with the means of attaining that life both collectively through art as a “social weapon” and individually through art as a means of upward mobility and personal growth. To this end, Fast draws explicit parallels between the “secret garden,” Ishky’s avid reading, and Shomake’s “fiddle” playing. “I could never forget the wonder of it,” Ishky recalls of his friend’s musical gift. “Even the secret garden was not as splendid as this beautiful fiddle.” Indeed, Ishky’s fiddling, like Burnett’s writing, is presented as transportive, carrying Ishky to a space of harmonious nature that, like the garden, is once again associated with literacy and literature: “In the music, there is a beach!” Ishky realizes. “I read about a beach in a book, and it has palms growing upon it.”¹¹⁰ Most immediately, this literary gloss brings home the sad realization that Ishky, confined to his neighborhood, has never seen a real beach or garden and has only encountered them in books. More to the point, however, his references to his reading prefigure his later mastery and transcendence of his environment through a career in writing, which will allow him to redeem the pain of his childhood by making sense of its seemingly senseless violence and by transforming his raw experiences into the critical medium of literature.

Loosely based on Fast’s own childhood, *The Children* is thus a form of *künstlerroman* in disguise, with Ishky standing in for its author. The reader is never explicitly told that Ishky will

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 24, 113.

become a writer, but his passion for reading suggests his likely later profession. His stance as a first-person narrator and the disconnect between the elevated tone of his narration and the inarticulate street slang of his speech in the novel – a device borrowed from Henry Roth – also evoke the older, educated writer looking back on his childhood from the vantage point of maturity.¹¹¹ “That was long ago, or not so long ago, I guess,” Ishky says of his story, suggesting a further parallel between his character and the twenty-year-old author fictionalizing the events of his own recent childhood.¹¹² If Ishky also survives the jungle in which he grows up, then, it is because of his ability to imagine a world other than the one in which he lives. And that he *will* survive his environment is foreshadowed by his powerfully literary imagination. “Surely this is the least beautiful spot in the world,” he acknowledges of his block. “East to west it is nothing but drab walls of wood and brick. . . . I guess that when it does look beautiful, it is something inside of you that makes it beautiful.”¹¹³

This form of perceptual and writerly agency – the ability to imagine a “secret garden” in the midst of the ghetto or “a garden for the human spirit” in place of the East Side slums – is, ultimately, the precondition for all the narratives discussed in this chapter. The metaphor of the jungle may signal a space of determinism and terror, but its very status as a metaphor signals the presence of authorial agency: the author’s ability to overwrite the material reality of setting, disregarding verisimilitude for an interpretive, politicized image of the city. Indeed, the logic of metaphor, with its expository comparison of two unlike objects or states, reveals the far reach of the literary imagination, a form of intellectual and representational agency that stands in stark relief to the convention of depicting characters as helpless in their confrontation with the city around them. In invoking the trope of the garden in the jungle, then, Jewish writers ultimately

¹¹¹ Fast, *Being Red*, 64.

¹¹² Fast, *The Children*, 23.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

signaled their own emancipation from determinism and their own triumphant survival and transcendence of the dangers, temptations, and hopelessness of the world in which they grew up. In the following chapter, we will see how Charles Reznikoff adapted the trope of the garden in the jungle in *By the Waters of Manhattan* (1930) to signal his protagonist's interior resistance to the oppressive city around him.

Chapter 5

Crossing Brooklyn Bridge: Charles Reznikoff's *By the Waters of Manhattan*

In the summer of 1930, the experimental poet Charles Reznikoff published *By the Waters of Manhattan*, a genre-defying narrative of Jewish life in Czarist Russia and working-class, immigrant New York.¹ At the time, the thirty-six-year-old Reznikoff was almost completely unknown outside a small circle of young Jewish poets in New York, but he had high hopes that his first book of prose would receive the attention that his previous six volumes of verse and three books of plays, almost all self-published, had failed to receive. He had reason to be hopeful. The respected publisher Charles Boni (1894-1969), brother of Albert Boni (1892-1981) of Boni & Liveright and Modern Library fame, had accepted the manuscript, and just months earlier, Mike Gold had published *Jews Without Money*, his own fictionalized memoir of Jewish life on the Lower East Side, to huge sales and international acclaim.²

That April, while working on the final revisions to the book, Reznikoff confided his ambitions in a letter to Marie Syrkin (1899-1989), the Labor Zionist author and educator whom he would marry later that year: "I think of myself as one of a hundred thousand Jews who is an operator, a peddler, and goes into business and faces laborious and uncertain and meager years,"

¹ Charles Reznikoff, *By the Waters of Manhattan* (1930; repr., New York: Marcus Wiener Publishing, 1986), the primary subject of this chapter, is the second and most famous of three different books to which Reznikoff gave the same title. The first is *By the Waters of Manhattan: An Annual* (New York: C. Reznikoff, 1929), a self-published collection of verse and prose. The third is *By the Waters of Manhattan: Selected Verse* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

² For a comparison of *By the Waters of Manhattan* and *Jews Without Money*, see R. Barbara Gitenstein, "Reznikoff's *By the Waters of Manhattan* and Gold's *Jews Without Money*," in *Modern Jewish Studies Annual* 5 (1984): 42-48.

he wrote,

– at last to have everything. . . . I feel as if there were a gigantic motor within me – whirling a propeller – the hum of a small lonely aeroplane that fills the great vault of heaven. Of course, I may plunge to earth – but I think most of them reach their fields. The whole point is, I think, one must work long enough, hard enough, with enough enthusiasm to become competent. Then, success is only a matter of time.³

By the Waters of Manhattan came out two and a half months later. It was Reznikoff's first bid for a wider audience, and, by those standards, it was a resounding failure, selling few copies and attracting little critical notice. If his plane had reached its field, few people were there to greet it.

Despite the recent stock market crash, the summer of 1930 should have been an auspicious moment to publish a narrative of Jewish immigrant life. The recent success of *Jews Without Money* stemmed in part from Gold's status as a leading voice of the newly energized literary left, but Gold had also capitalized on an audience whose tastes were primed by over two decades of popular tales of the "Jewish ghetto" by authors as diverse as Abraham Cahan, Montague Glass (1877-1934), Fannie Hurst, Samuel Ornitz, and Anzia Yezierska. Although *By the Waters of Manhattan* shared central settings and thematic concerns of works like Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* and Yezierska's stories in *Hungry Hearts* – Russian Jewish life, immigration to New York, garment industry sweatshop labor, and generational conflict between immigrant parents and their Americanized children – it had few stylistic and representational similarities with these literary antecedents.

Indeed, while *By the Waters of Manhattan* belongs to the tradition of Jewish interwar tenement narratives, it had little in common with that tradition's other constituent works.

Reznikoff referred to the book as a "novel" in his private correspondence, but it could not, in fact, be comfortably assimilated into any one literary genre, whether fictional or

³ Charles Reznikoff to Marie Syrkin, 7 April 1930, in *Selected Letters of Charles Reznikoff, 1917-1976*, ed. Milton Hindus (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), 127.

autobiographical.⁴ The book unites two loosely connected stories – a mother’s and her son’s – written in different styles, both of which start at seemingly arbitrary places in their protagonists’ lives, and both of which leave their protagonists’ stories unresolved. The first and longest of the book’s two parts is not even fiction but rather the “autobiography” of Reznikoff’s mother, Sarah Yetta Wolvovsky (he preserves her given name but shortens her surname to “Volsky” in the book). As he later did with his father’s story for a different work, Reznikoff transcribed, translated, and extensively rewrote his mother’s story, which she would have related to him in Yiddish, the household language of the family.⁵ The second and final part of the book, the narrative of Sarah Yetta’s son, Ezekiel, has most often been read as strictly autobiographical but is better understood as a composite portrait of Reznikoff and at least two of his acquaintances.⁶ As if this weren’t unusual enough, *By the Waters of Manhattan* stubbornly resists the dramatic devices of conflict and suspense, while also refusing its readers the easy gratification of

⁴ Charles Reznikoff to Marie Syrkin, 23 February, 1930, in *Selected Letters of Charles Reznikoff, 1917-1976*, ed. Milton Hindus (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), 90.

⁵ Eric Homburger, “Charles Reznikoff’s *Family Chronicle*: Saying Thank You and I’m Sorry,” in *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, ed. Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation; University of Maine at Orono, 1984), 328. Reznikoff referred to his mother’s narrative as her “autobiography” in his correspondence with Syrkin, although his own substantial artistic labor on the story is suggested in a letter to her from April of 1930: “I have finished – not quite to my satisfaction – about 25 pages of my mother’s autobiography and have 90 left to do. I consider this the hardest part of the job . . .” Reznikoff to Syrkin, 7 April 1930, 127. A letter to Syrkin from May of the same year refers to “a translation and rewriting of my father’s book.” Charles Reznikoff to Marie Syrkin, 3 May 1930, in *Selected Letters of Charles Reznikoff, 1917-1976*, ed. Milton Hindus (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), 150. His father’s story, which employs a style similar to his mother’s, was published independently in 1936 as Nathan Reznikoff and Charles Reznikoff, *Early History of a Sewing-Machine Operator* (New York: C. Reznikoff, 1936), and again in 1963 in Charles Reznikoff, *Family Chronicle: An Odyssey from Russia to America* (New York: Marcus Weiner, 1963), which also includes Sarah Yetta’s story and an explicitly autobiographical narrative by Charles Reznikoff.

⁶ In a letter to Syrkin, Reznikoff writes that the book’s subject “is to be an old acquaintance – Joel Stein.” Reznikoff to Syrkin, 23 February 1930, 91. That the character of Ezekiel (the protagonist) is also modeled on Reznikoff himself is suggested by Ezekiel’s status as Sarah Yetta’s son, his literary inclinations, and his affinity for long, solitary walks through the city (a favorite pastime of Reznikoff). It is also significant that Ezekiel was Reznikoff’s Hebrew name, given in memory of his grandfather, who appears as a character in Part I of *By the Waters of Manhattan*. Milton Hindus, introduction, *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, ed. Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation; University of Maine at Orono, 1984.), 16. Finally, Jay A. Gertzman, in “The Promising Jewish Poetry of a Pariah: Samuel Roth,” *American Jewish Literature* 28 (2009), 55, has convincingly suggested that the character of Ezekiel is “modeled on” the controversial publisher and poet Samuel Roth (1893-1974). Reznikoff’s book *Poems* (New York: S. Roth at the New York Poetry Book Shop, 1920) was originally published by Roth, one of the few publishers to take interest in Reznikoff’s early work. It seems likely that Ezekiel is a composite of the three men.

sentimentality and sensationalism (indulged to such dramatic success by Hurst and Yeziarska), while no less firmly resisting the humorous exploitation of ethnic stereotypes that had brought Glass such wide popularity for his “Potash and Perlmutter” stories two decades earlier.⁷

Reznikoff’s stylistic and representational choices were a no less radical departure from the conventions of the Jewish tenement narrative. Part one, the story of Sarah Yetta’s early life, beginning in Elizavetgrad, Russia (now in Ukraine) and ending in Brownsville, Brooklyn, is told in a matter-of-fact style that often reads like a communal record of events, names, and sums of money spent and earned. Although unusually dry – “soporific,” one reviewer called it – this part of the book is more conventional in its themes and sensibility than the second part.⁸ Its evocation of the overwhelming strangeness, novelty, and scale of New York City has resonances with the Yiddish Coney Island narratives of chapter two and, albeit to a lesser extent, the trope of the urban jungle discussed in chapter four. Its descriptions of garment industry sweatshops and the economic discrimination faced by women in the labor market, moreover, places it in dialogue with the tradition of Jewish immigrant women’s writing discussed in chapter three.

If Sarah Yetta’s narrative reveals continuities with other interwar literary traditions, her son’s narrative in the second part of the book upends the representational conventions discussed in previous chapters. Sarah Yetta’s narrative abruptly breaks off after her marriage and her decision to move with her husband from the Lower East Side to the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, where Reznikoff himself was born. Part two begins after the family has returned to the Lower East Side, opening when Sarah Yetta’s son, Ezekiel, is already in his early twenties. A

⁷ Glass, an English-born Jewish writer, was hired to rework Anzia Yeziarska’s screenplay for the Hollywood version of *Hungry Hearts*. Yeziarska, who felt that Glass’s edits had “murder[ed]” her story “with slapstick,” would later described him as a “man who made a living burlesquing Jews for *The Saturday Evening Post*.” Yeziarska worried, not without reason, that “Americans reading his Potash and Perlmutter stories thought those clowning cloak and suiters were the Jewish people.” Anzia Yeziarska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (New York: Persea Books, 1987), 81-82.

⁸ Leonard Ehrlich, “The Defeated Dream On,” review of *By the Waters of Manhattan*, by Charles Reznikoff, *Saturday Review*, August 9, 1930, 39.

literary-minded dreamer unfit for factory labor, Ezekiel spends his days at the Forty-Second Street Library or aimlessly wandering the streets of the city, returning at night to the cramped tenement apartment he shares with his parents and two sisters. Instead of the list of accomplishments and failures that form the sum of Sarah Yetta's story, Ezekiel's narrative looks inward to the shifting terrain of his emotions as he opens a small bookstore in Greenwich Village, obtaining both the space and inventory on credit through a combination of naïve audacity and simple luck, and enters into an ambivalent relationship with Jane Dauthendey, a young woman who visits his store. When his narrative reaches its inconclusive end, Ezekiel is left unsatisfied both in labor and in love, giving the reader little hint of his future.

In this section, a more contemplative, poetic style replaces the factual, businesslike narration of Sarah Yetta's story. Though still precise in diction, the writing in this section becomes more descriptive and intertextual, as well as more metaphorical. Reznikoff does not strive to enlist the reader's sympathy and outrage through a dramatization of the evils of poverty. On the contrary, his semi-autobiographical protagonist seems singularly immune to the more pernicious effects of his environment, even deriving a sophisticated form of aesthetic pleasure from the urban landscape. This surprisingly affirmative depiction of a young man's coming-of-age in the slums of New York, as well as the unusual format and style of the book, help explain its failure to gain traction among Depression-era readers eager for a sequel to Gold's *Jews Without Money*.

But if *By The Waters of Manhattan* jarred with the literary sensibility of the time, it anticipated the more affirmative, epicurean ways of seeing Jewish working-class New York that emerged in postwar narratives such as Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* and Samuel Chotzinoff's *A Lost Paradise*. This new representational sensibility – what I will call, borrowing

a phrase from Philip Roth, “the pastoralization of the ghetto” – has little to do with Ezekiel’s affection for the urban environment and still less to do with nostalgia for a romanticized “world of our fathers.”⁹ On the contrary, the images of a tranquil, contemplative cityscape that flicker into view in Ezekiel’s narrative are in fact a product of his imaginative *resistance* to the material reality of the city. Reznikoff evokes Ezekiel’s developing poetic sensibility and intellectual agency by filtering the sights and sounds of the city through his character’s intertextual imagination, which overlays the concrete and steel vistas of New York with pastoral scenes from his voracious reading. Reznikoff thus engages the terms of the polemical urban-pastoral binary discussed in chapter four, adopting the convention of using pastoral imagery as a mark of resistance to the deterministic space of the ghetto and as a signifier of the literary and artistic imagination’s opposition to the coldly economic logic inscribed in the social geography and the very architecture of the city.

This chapter recovers the significance of Reznikoff’s representational choices within the historical context in which he was writing, focusing on the crucial relationship between individual and environment, character and setting. In particular, it examines Reznikoff’s use of the device of walking in the city to facilitate the transformation of *environment* into *landscape* – in other words, the transformation of the city from a space of antagonistic determinism into a scene of pleasurable aesthetic contemplation. The stakes of this discussion are multiple. An analysis of the role of walking in *By the Waters of Manhattan* challenges the conceptual hegemony of the flâneur as the dominant model for theorizing urban mobility in the modern novel, showing how class and ethnicity determine the narrative significance of spatial practices. No less importantly, its discussion of urban landscape complicates Raymond Williams’s understanding of “landscape” writing as a reactionary perspective that erases the marks of labor

⁹ Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York, London, Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 132.

from the countryside.¹⁰ Reznikoff's "pastoralization" of his urban surroundings suggests other, more radical possibilities within the genre of the tenement narrative for the transformation of a lived and labored environment into an aestheticized landscape.

This chapter travels the familiar terrain of the Lower East Side and Brownsville, but it lingers on Brooklyn Bridge. A recurring setting in both Sarah Yetta's and Ezekiel's narratives, the bridge is a liminal, transitional space at once of the city and apart from it, connecting frenetic Manhattan to somnolent Brooklyn. The bridge thus offers a fitting symbol for the narrative span of *By the Waters of Manhattan*, which bridges the Russian Empire and the United States, the immigrant generation and their America-born children, and, most significantly for my purposes, two different ways of seeing the city represented by the two parts of the book. A figure for migrations and mobility, and an aestheticizing vantage point on the city, Brooklyn Bridge is a symbolic figure for the two narratives' negotiation between an alienating, unwelcoming urban landscape and a newly "pastoralized" vision of the city.

A "Rare Quality"

Like his first full-length work of prose, Reznikoff did not fit neatly into New York's interwar literary scene. Born in Brownsville in 1894 (the same year Mike Gold was born on the Lower East Side), Reznikoff left New York to study journalism at the University of Missouri when he was sixteen (an unusual choice for a second generation Jewish New Yorker), but soon returned to New York, where, two years later, he enrolled in law school at New York University, graduating second in his class. After his first unsuccessful foray into the courtroom, Reznikoff retired from practice, resolving to dedicate his energy to poetry. Unable to support himself through his writing, he lived austere on an allowance of twenty-five dollars a week from his

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 120.

parents until their millinery business failed in the late-1920s. After that, he found editorial work at a publishing house that specialized in legal encyclopedias, using much of his modest salary to defray the steep cost of self-publication.¹¹

Reznikoff did not write in isolation, but he moved in a different circle from the ones discussed in previous chapters. Primarily interested in poetry, he established close relationships with a group of younger Jewish poets – George Oppen (1908-1984), Carl Rakosi (1903-2004), and Louis Zukofsky (1904-1978) – who gained recognition in the 1960s as the “Objectivist” group. With the support of the more famous William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972), the small circle of poets established the cooperative Objectivist Press in 1933.¹² “We couldn’t get our poetry accepted by regular publishers,” Reznikoff later recalled, “so we thought it would be nice if we organized our own publishing firm, with each of us paying for the printing of his own book.”¹³

Despite Reznikoff’s lack of literary stature in 1930, *By the Waters of Manhattan* attracted the notice of three Jewish writers and public intellectuals who were familiar with the book’s cultural and communal referents as well as with the conventions of the genre of tenement narratives. The identities of these reviewers suggest the gravitational pull of the city’s interwar Jewish literary scene, as well as its participants’ awareness of contributing to a literary tradition in which, to return to Deleuze and Guattari’s language, “everything . . . is political” and

¹¹ Hindus, introduction, 16-27; Marie Syrkin, “Charles: A Memoir,” in *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, ed. Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation; University of Maine at Orono, 1984), 38.

¹² Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ed. *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 371n4; Reznikoff later explained that “We called our firm The Objectivist Press, not because – as far as I was concerned – we had any new doctrine to offer: the name was suggested by [Ezra] Pound’s stress on ‘objectivity’ in his correspondence as printed in *Poetry* and we – at least Zukofsky and I – heartily agreed with his do’s and don’t’s.” Quoted in Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.

¹³ Charles Reznikoff, interview by L. S. Dembo, *Contemporary Literature* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 196.

“everything takes on a collective value.”¹⁴ Their reviews, moreover, register their sense of the book’s innovative departures from the expectations of this “collective” tradition.

In a favorable assessment for the *New York Herald Tribune*, the Communist poet and editor Isidor Schneider, who five years later would publish his own tenement bildungsroman, *From the Kingdom of Necessity*, observed, “To the very small body of books about Jewish life, Mr. Reznikoff’s ‘By the Waters of Manhattan’ adds substance and beauty,” concluding, “I cannot recall any book that gives so clear, so unemotional a presentation [of the subject].”¹⁵ Leonard Ehrlich (1905-1984), another writer associated with the Communist left – today, he is best remembered for his novel *God’s Angry Man* (1932) about the militant abolitionist John Brown – also praised Reznikoff’s book. Only four months earlier, Ehrlich had written a glowing review of Gold’s *Jews Without Money* for the *Saturday Review*. Passing judgment on *By the Waters of Manhattan* in the same pages, he acknowledges that readers “will find flaws” in the book, but insists that it also possesses a “rare quality,” which he describes as “a sense of wonder, a kind of faint, fragile brightness.”¹⁶

By far the most perceptive review, however, came from the pen of the young Lionel Trilling (1905-1975), then a part-time instructor at Hunter College and a friendly acquaintance of Schneider’s. Trilling’s essay appeared in the *Menorah Journal*, which had published an excerpt of Gold’s novel earlier that same year.¹⁷ (He had been asked to review the book by *Menorah*

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 30 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 17.

¹⁵ Isidor Schneider, “From Russia to America,” review of *By the Waters of Manhattan*, by Charles Reznikoff, *New York Herald Tribune*, July 20, 1930, XI 3.

¹⁶ Ehrlich, “The Defeated Dream On,” 39.

¹⁷ Michael Gold, “Portrait of My Mother,” *Menorah Journal* (January 1930); cited in Alan Wald, “The Menorah Group Moves Left,” *Jewish Social Studies* 38, no. 3, American Bicentennial (Summer-Autumn 1976): 294. For additional sources on the *Menorah Journal* and the Menorah Association, see also Daniel Greene, *The Jewish Origins of Cultural Pluralism: The Menorah Association and American Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); and Mark Krupnick, “The Menorah Journal Group and the Origins of Modern Jewish-American Radicalism,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1979): 56-67.

editor Henry Hurwitz [1886-1961], who had previously published several of Reznikoff's poems.) In his review essay, Trilling praises *By the Waters of Manhattan* as "not merely a finer but a truer story than previous attempts in the field of American-Jewish immigrant fiction," attributing this distinction to Reznikoff's avoidance of the "crude ('stark') or melodramatic prose" style that had conventionally been associated with representations of "sordid" and "painful" subject matter and which "all attempts to write about Jewish immigrants in America have shared." Trilling clearly has the tradition of working-class tenement novels in mind. He praises *By the Waters of Manhattan* as "remarkable and original in American literature, because [it] brings to a 'realistic' theme a prose style that, without any of the postures of the 'stylist,' is of the greatest delicacy and distinction," contrasting the "soft liveliness and warmth" of Ezekiel's narrative with other "novels of the old East Side," and, in particular, *Jews Without Money*. He describes Gold's novel as "admirable and moving," but nonetheless criticizes Gold for describing "filth and misery" "so objectively . . . and so melodramatically that its stench becomes racy and Chaucerian . . ." ¹⁸

Trilling does not confuse the "warmth" of Reznikoff's prose with nostalgia or affection for his immediate world. He recognizes that Ezekiel, like his parents and grandparents before him, "is caught in the web of economic circumstances." The difference between the generations, he argues, stems from Ezekiel's developing literary sensibility and the imaginative agency it allows him to exert over the world around him. "Unlike his grandfather and his mother," Trilling observes, "[Ezekiel] does not try to make the practical world support his mind: rather he uses his poetic mind to conquer the practical world." Trilling isolates "the struggle of poetic mind with practical world" as the main drama of Ezekiel's narrative, concluding that Ezekiel "experiences life's and the world's malevolence but his mind absorbs it, molds it, extracts from it even a

¹⁸ Lionel Trilling, "Genuine Writing," review of *By the Waters of Manhattan*, by Charles Reznikoff, *Menorah Journal* 19, no. 1 (October 1930): 88-92, reprinted in *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, ed. Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation; University of Maine at Orono, 1984), 371-76.

sensuous gratification.”¹⁹ This ability, which distinguishes Ezekiel’s experience of his environment from that of the older generations of his family, is also the most significant difference between Ezekiel’s story and other works in the tradition of “old East Side” representations. Trilling locates the effects of Ezekiel’s poetic imagination in the book’s prose style, noting “an almost complete coincidence of the prose with the mind of the boy.”²⁰ More significant, however, are the ways in which Ezekiel’s struggle to assert mind over matter change his relationship to – and thus the narrative’s representations of – his urban surroundings. It is possible to gauge the representational effects of this imaginative conquest of environment by contrasting Ezekiel’s narrative with his mother’s.

Education and the Intertextual Cityscape

Sarah Yetta’s story is not as overtly political in its treatment of urban space as the works examined in the second and four chapters, and it does not employ any of the polemical tropes evident in those works. Nonetheless, New York emerges from her account of her first years in America as disorientingly urban and distressingly novel. The city forms an indistinct backdrop to her early struggle to make a home for herself in America, and her relationship to it is largely economic and utilitarian. The names of streets and neighborhoods, when mentioned at all, are invoked as points on her journey from residence to residence and from job to job. The narrative whisks her from “a factory on Walker Street” to “an address on Lispenard Street,” noting their locations but describing both only in respect to the kind of work or reception Sarah Yetta finds there.²¹ More often than not, however, her narrative refuses to offer even these terse geographic markers. Sarah Yetta’s different residences are more often identified simply by the names of the

¹⁹ Ibid., 374.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 121-22.

families with whom she boards (the Budinovs, the Rothsteins), or by the economic opportunities they promise. After striking out for Brownsville, she and her husband, Saul Rubinov, “moved to another street” that is identified, in typically utilitarian fashion, only as a location where “the rent was a dollar less and the neighborhood better for a retail store.”²² The city is the realm of labor, which extends into the home as well, where much of Sarah Yetta’s work takes place. She appears blind to her surroundings, and the pages devoted to her early days in New York contain only the bare minimum of detail – references to the city’s astonishing crowds, for instance – necessary to register the foreignness of her new environment.

Her narrative concludes on a melancholy note. Watching children emerge from a nearby school, she “remember[s] how she, too, had longed for an education. ‘We are a lost generation,’ she said. ‘It is for our children to do what they can.’”²³ These words mark the bridge (the term is apt) between Sarah Yetta’s narrative and her son’s, presenting Ezekiel’s life as the *telos* of his mother’s efforts.²⁴ Sarah Yetta’s concluding words, with their immediately recognizable allusion to Gertrude Stein’s (1874-1946) aphoristic description of the post-WWI generation of artists as “a lost generation,” made famous four years earlier as the epigraph to Ernest Hemingway’s (1899-1961) 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*, are a surprising conclusion to the immigration narrative. It is highly unlikely that Sarah Yetta, with her minimal English and even more minimal leisure time, would have had access to the latest modern fiction.²⁵ These are not her words in more senses than one. Reznikoff and his semi-autobiographical protagonist would have been aware of Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway, but not Sarah Yetta. Her citation of a text she

²² Ibid., 141.

²³ Ibid., 146.

²⁴ Alfred Kazin would echo this description of immigrant parents in a famous line from *A Walker in the City*: “We were the only conceivable end to all their strivings; we were their America.” Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1979), 56.

²⁵ Homberger, in “Charles Reznikoff’s *Family Chronicle*,” 328, notes that Reznikoff’s mother was trying to learn to write English during the 1920s, but it is highly unlikely that she would have been able to read Hemingway’s novel.

would not have been able to read thus prefigures the next generation's greater access to a liberal arts education, troublingly suggesting that her son must speak for her and put words to her emotions. This seam in Sarah Yetta's story, through which her son can be heard speaking for her, reflects the narrative's textual history, which, despite originating in the real Sarah Yetta Wolvovsky's oral history, had to be translated, transcribed, and heavily edited by her American-educated son. Sarah Yetta must inevitably lose control over her own story during this process of translation, revision, and ventriloquism, and this loss speaks to the larger costs of her obstructed access to formal education.

The larger affective and intellectual ramifications of this generational divide can be perceived in the differences between Ezekiel's response to poverty and his mother's. For Sarah Yetta, poverty is both a physical and a cognitive state. Without access to a formal education and with little time for compensatory autodidacticism, her ability to imaginatively "mold" the world around her, or to extract even the smallest measure of "sensuous gratification" from it, in Trilling's language, is severely circumscribed. Unlike Yeziarska, who sacrificed custody of her child in order to gain a public "voice" as a writer, Sarah Yetta makes the opposite but also painful sacrifice, symbolically losing her voice in order to devote herself to long days of domestic and garment industry labor. She can speak in the language of everyday life, but her inability to express deeper thoughts and feelings, even in Yiddish, anchors her to the material conditions of her environment as much in mind as in speech:

She would have liked to pour out her love for her son in a long psalm of blessing and counsel, such as she heard in synagogue when a girl, but her tongue, fluent enough to scold and bargain, was now stiff. Her husband spoke little and had taken to grunts and gestures, their tongues grown coarse as their hands and faces.²⁶

Textual learning and the opportunity for intellectual pursuits, the narrative suggests with more

²⁶ Charles Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 193.

than a whiff of educational snobbery, are the preconditions for agency of perception and verbal expression.

Nonetheless, Sarah Yetta recognizes the limits her lack of education has imposed on her life, and those limits are subtly underscored by her failure to understand her son's bookish vocation as his own way of taking full advantage of the education he has received. Near the end of the book, the narrator returns to her predicament:

It seemed to her that if she only had had time to read when she was young, she would have patterned her life on the wisdom in the books and lived wisely and happily. So, time and again, she had spread a pattern carefully on cloth and cut others a garment that fit and was becoming. And yet her son with all the education so cheap in America, this blessed land – Sarah Yetta took up her long fork to turn the meat in the pot. As she lifted the cover the steam rose and gathered in a mist over her eyeglasses.²⁷

Sarah Yetta's inability to perceive the use to which her bookseller son has, in fact, put his education invokes the common theme of generational miscommunication, but it also poignantly highlights the intellectual possibilities Sarah Yerra has been denied by poverty and the restrictive gender norms that first barred her access to book learning and later mandated that domestic labor extend her already full workday through the mornings and evenings.

Ezekiel is, in the most literal sense, patterning his life on the books he reads by dedicating himself to the sale and production of literature, but Sarah Yetta, deprived of the time and resources for reading, lacks the frame of reference necessary to understand that her son is pursuing the life of the mind she had desired for herself as well. Instead of being able to draw on the "wisdom" of books, she can only imagine the possibilities that have been foreclosed to her in the familiar terms of the garment industry labor (spreading a pattern, cutting a garment) that has stood in the way of her education. This failure of imagination is reflected empathetically in the omniscient narrator's interrupted syntax. Attempting to understand her son, Sarah Yetta's train of

²⁷ Ibid., 253.

thought is cut short in mid sentence, as yet more labor – in this case, domestic – demands her immediate attention. Reflection is interrupted as she turns back to the stove, and the paragraph ends with the symbolic image of her steam-fogged eyeglasses in yet another invocation of the wisdom and expanded perception she has been forced to sacrifice. Though compassionate and attentive to the roots of Sarah Yetta’s predicament in patriarchy and poverty, this conclusion is nonetheless troubling, suggesting an assumption on the part of the narrator that education correlates with greater emotional and intellectual depth.

Ezekiel, in contrast, though still living off his parents’ labor at the opening of his narrative, has learned to privilege the “spiritual” over the “material,” and to mediate the latter by means of the former (thanks, in no small measure, to his mother’s sacrifices). His hunger, threadbare clothes, and lack of employment are presented as voluntary, the marks of his artistic temperament and his refusal to settle for work he does not find fulfilling. “He was through working for others – when he worked,” the narrator notes, not without an edge of satire, of the twenty-one-year-old Ezekiel. Forgetting to take his meals at home in the excitement of opening his bookstore, Ezekiel wanders the streets of Manhattan dizzy with hunger, searching the gutter for coins to use in the automat: “He saw himself a savage hunting for a root he knew of to stop his hunger. If there was woodcraft, Ezekiel thought, he was master of a new science, citycraft”²⁸

The rural analogy goes to the heart of the differences between Ezekiel's relationship to his environment and that of his mother. His scavenging, unlike Sarah Yetta's search for employment, reveals a view of the city, not as the site of alienated labor, but as an environment that, if properly understood and perceived, can be cultivated to yield its own distinctive harvest. This bounty, Ezekiel suggests, is the inheritance of those who have achieved an intimate knowledge – a “master[y]” – of the life of the city’s streets, and his prompt discovery of a quarter gleaming in

²⁸ Ibid., 147, 179, 251.

the gutter affirms the value of this knowledge.

Ezekiel's status as aficionado of the urban distinguishes his scavenging from similar scenes in the literature of the Depression. William Saroyan's (1908-1981) celebrated story "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" (1934), for instance, retells this narrative in a key of high desperation. After pawning the last of his saleable possessions, the story's nameless protagonist (a literary twenty-two-year-old, like Ezekiel) wanders the streets of an unnamed city in the delirium that directly precedes his death from starvation. He unsuccessfully applies for work at a series of employment agencies and department stores, and though, like Ezekiel, he spots a coin in the gutter, the coin proves to be only a penny. "There was almost nothing a man could do with a penny," he realizes with despair. The young man's impending starvation is symbolized by his sense of alienation from the city:

From a hill he saw the city standing majestically in the east, great towers, dense with his kind, and there he was suddenly outside of it all, almost definitely certain that he should never gain admittance, almost positive that somehow he had ventured upon the wrong earth, and now a young man of twenty-two was to be permanently ejected from it.

The protagonist's symbolic position outside the city allegorizes his exclusion from productive labor and human society, marking the rejection of what he sardonically thinks of as his "*Application for Permission to Live*."²⁹

Saroyan's story reflects the literary convention, exemplified by the trope of the garden in the jungle, of depicting the city as a symbol of the individual's fight for survival in a hostile economic and social order. Reznikoff, however, signals his departure from this convention through the term "citycraft," which reverses the polemical opposition between city and nature, suggesting that the former, when viewed from the proper perspective, can assume the nutritive, nurturing characteristics associated with the latter. Because of Ezekiel's familiarity with the city's

²⁹ William Saroyan, "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," in *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 19-21; emphasis in the original.

streets – his memories of finding change in the gutters as a child, and his knowledge of the rhythms of the street cleaner's movements – he is able within minutes to acquire enough money for “a feast.”³⁰ The image of Ezekiel as “a savage hunting for a root” reflects a degree of bitter class-consciousness, but it also insulates him from the embarrassment of his actions. Similarly, his recourse to the analogy of woodcraft elevates these actions into a “new science” and a form of productive labor, distancing them from the degrading privation commonly associated with scavenging. Of course, scrounging in the gutter is anything but a “new science,” as Ezekiel’s recollection of finding coins in the gutter as a child makes clear. The children in Betty Smith’s (1896-1972) *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), for instance, call it “rag pick[ing],” and the sensitive protagonist, Francie, recoils in shame when she is observed in the act.³¹

Significantly, Ezekiel’s education and his intertextual imagination – his ability to use literature as an interpretive lens and a protective armor – allow him to overcome any shame at scavenging, transforming a familiar act of desperation into a bold adventure. A native of Brownsville and the Lower East Side, Ezekiel can hardly be expected to have acquired first-hand knowledge of the devices of rural subsistence. During the first years of the twentieth century, Brownsville was still an urban frontier, home to farms and undeveloped land. While Brownsville felt like the country to Jews accustomed to the noise and crush of the Lower East Side, however, Ezekiel would hardly have been able to learn the techniques of woodland foraging and survival from first-hand experience.³² Rather, his reference to “woodcraft” should be understood as an allusion to literary accounts of rural and pre-industrial life, which he would have discovered

³⁰ Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 179-80.

³¹ Smith, Betty, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (Philadelphia: Blakiston Company, 1943), 2-3.

³² Ezekiel’s childhood is omitted from his narrative, which begins on the Lower East Side. It is safe to assume, however, that he would have spent his early years in Brownsville, since Sarah Yetta’s narrative ends in that neighborhood shortly after her marriage to Ezekiel’s father. Reznikoff himself would have gained a first-hand acquaintance with more rural areas of the nation traveling to the University of Missouri, but Ezekiel, unlike Reznikoff, does not seem to have attended college or to have spent much time outside the city.

during his reading at the Forty-Second Street Library and in his bookstore. Breaking the quarter into change, he once again uses a literary reference to exalt the mundane: “At an automat . . . he changed it into real nickels, and smiled at the thought that the cashier might say, This quarter is no good: ‘’tis of the unsubstantial fabric of a dream.’”³³ Through an intertextual alchemy, the fruits of his scavenging are further dignified by means of a reference to Prospero’s famous lines in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which present the vanishing scenery of the court masque as an analogy for the transience of life:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherits, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.³⁴

By the end of the nineteenth century, this famous passage had been compressed and paraphrased into the more concise but still identifiably Shakespearean phrase “the unsubstantial fabric of a dream.” It appears, for instance, in the 1895 book *The Spirit of Judaism* by essayist Josephine Lazarus (1846-1910), sister of poet Emma Lazarus, in reference to the transience of worldly concerns (“we half expect to see the brilliant pageant crumble before our sight, and disappear like the unsubstantial fabric of a dream”).³⁵ More famously, the lines reappear three years later in future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s (1874-1965) frequently quoted reflection on seeing the shrouded bodies of dead soldiers in *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An*

³³ Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 179-80.

³⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, The New Folger Library Shakespeare (New York: Washington Square Press, 1994), act 4, scene 1, lines 165-175.

³⁵ Josephine Lazarus, *The Spirit of Judaism* (Cambridge, MA: Dodd, Mead and Co. and University Press: John Wilson and Son, 1895), 68.

Episode of Frontier War (1898). “Looking at these shapeless forms, confined in a regulation blanket, the pride of race, the pomp of empire, the glory of war appeared but the faint and unsubstantial fabric of a dream.”³⁶

This intertextual framework is evidence of Ezekiel’s wide and promiscuous reading, but it also fulfills a more direct and necessary psychological function in his narrative. Shakespeare’s reflection on the transience of human vanity, filtered through its more recent adaptations by writers such as Lazarus and Churchill, offers Ezekiel a comforting stay against the stigma of scavenging and the embarrassments of poverty (he is acutely aware of his threadbare appearance, for instance, comparing himself to “an express package, battered in transit, with a wrapper dirty and a little torn”). At the same time, his literary allusions provide a poetic, ennobling lens through which to view his more mundane and unadventurous life. Drinking the coffee he has purchased with change from the scavenged quarter, Ezekiel, invokes Shakespeare’s shipwrecked sailors and Churchill’s battle-weary cavalymen by “th[inking] of himself a soldier, resting from battle, or a sailor, during a lull in the storm, drinking hot coffee.” Inhabiting the worlds of his reading, Ezekiel sits back to enjoy his modest “feast.”³⁷

Throughout the course of his narrative, Ezekiel continues the practice of transmogrifying the mundane and painful elements of his environment through literary references that valorize his place in the city. This device becomes explicit at points, as when, later in the narrative, Ezekiel uses his intertextual perspective to regain the sense of freedom he has sacrificed to his duties as the proprietor of a now thriving store. Lingering in a park on the way to work, Ezekiel recalls the frontispiece of an edition of the *Song of Roland* that shows the eponymous hero

³⁶ Winston Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War*, Longmans’ Colonial Library (London and Bombay: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1901), 206. For an insightful analysis of Churchill’s adaptation of Prospero’s speech, see Paul K. Alkon, *Winston Churchill’s Imagination* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2008), 123-124.

³⁷ Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 166, 180-81.

“ambushed in the mountain pass” with “his back to a rock.” “Whenever he found himself troubled,” Reznikoff writes, “Ezekiel liked to think himself Roland. Now he also thought of himself as a tree, sending its roots far and wide through the black earth, pushing stones aside or encircling them: ‘he shall be like a tree planted beside the streams of water.’”³⁸ Both images provide a degree of solace, allowing Ezekiel to regain a sense of imaginative agency, even if his time is no longer his own. The first reference recasts the monotony of shop keeping as the “excited and unhappy years” of a warrior’s duty, his brave resistance, back to a stone, to the daily siege of responsibility. Building allusion upon allusion, Ezekiel buttresses his resolve with the reference to Psalm 1:1-4, which compares the righteous “man that hath not walked in the counsel of the wicked” to “a tree planted by streams of water,” contrasting him with the transience of “the wicked,” who “are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.”³⁹ Comparing his fulfillment of an economic responsibility to the psalmist’s strict sense of moral duty, Ezekiel begins to regain a sense of control over his place in the world of labor.

He is not prepared to embark on the day’s work quite yet, however. In defiance of the hectic city of “errand boys, and men, their faces set, their feet on errands,” Ezekiel remains in the park a few minutes longer, willing himself into a state of quiet resolve:

Then, as with a faucet, he turned off the thoughts splashing into the sink of his mind. He sat, a stone image, his feet on asphalt, overhead the long grey clouds, and looked quietly at the somber world. Men came and went. Still he sat there, his stone heart calm, his stone mind untroubled by thoughts, his stone fingers in his lap, his feet without walking to do. The noisy city rushed about him, a brook about a stone.⁴⁰

In this final passage, which concludes the section, Reznikoff adds yet another intertextual layer to the previous two allusions. The image of the stone standing firm as water rushes around it

³⁸ Ibid., 248.

³⁹ This quotation is from the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation, a likely candidate for Reznikoff’s source text. I have not been able to identify a translation that corresponds to Reznikoff’s exact wording.

⁴⁰ Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 249.

masterfully links the earlier invocation of Roland standing with his back against a rock to the Psalmist's image of the stationary "tree planted beside the streams of water," uniting the two in a third image, this one adapted from *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*: "To be like the rock the waves keep crashing over. It stands unmoved and the raging of the sea falls around it."⁴¹ This aphorism reinforces the stoic resolve of the previous allusions. Fortified by their counsel, Ezekiel finally succeeds in regaining his "calm" and "untroubled" resolve, sitting at peace in the midst of the rushing city that is also the gray "unhappy world" of commerce and labor.⁴²

Filtering his circumstances and environment through a lens of literary allusions, as Trilling suggests, allows Ezekiel to gain a sense of imaginative control over his circumstances, "us[ing] his poetic mind to conquer the practical world."⁴³ As the previous passages demonstrate, however, Ezekiel's "poetic mind" also allows him to reimagine, or re-image, the landscape of the city. The pastoral becomes the generic signifier of this imaginative conquest of environment. As in the case of the narratives discussed in the previous chapter, idealized images of the natural world (Samuel Ornitz's flowers or Howard Fast's garden) symbolize the artistic imagination's resistance to the competitive, dehumanizing logic of the industrial metropolis. *By the Waters of Manhattan* goes a step further, however. Reznikoff does not simply invoke images of nature to show what is *absent* from the city; he allows his protagonist to inhabit those images and to project them onto the world around him, turning the "noisy city rush[ing] about him" into "a brook [flowing] about a stone." The act of reimagining allows Ezekiel to achieve the "state of being in which there is no tension either within the self or between the self and its environment"

⁴¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 48. Milton Hindus identifies this allusion in his preface to *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, ed. Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation; University of Maine at Orono, 1984), 8. Hindus identifies the allusion in Reznikoff's extended poem "Autobiography: Hollywood" (1941), which reuses the image.

⁴² Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 248-49.

⁴³ Trilling, "Genuine Writing," 374.

that is characteristic of the pastoral genre and “mode” of writing.⁴⁴ This is similar but not identical to the form of “urban pastoral” Robert Alter has characterized as a form of close engagement with “urban experience” that “can provide the sense of invigoration, harmony with one’s surroundings, and enraptured aesthetic revelation that is traditionally associated with the green world of pastoral.”⁴⁵ If, in the case of the classic pastoral, the harmony between character and setting is an inherent aspect of the natural environment, in Alter’s “urban pastoral,” it emerges from an enthusiastic embrace of urban modernity in all its sensory immediacy. In *By the Waters of Manhattan*, however, Ezekiel achieves a state of peaceful wellbeing only through victorious opposition to his environment by means of intertextual mediation. Ezekiel’s “citycraft” is thus more than a means of survival; it is both an example of and a metaphorical figure for his ability to extract emotional and creative sustenance from the streets of New York.

Reznikoff’s Urban Poetics

Reznikoff’s recourse to the pastoral mode places the narrative of city life on a self-consciously literary footing. Even when Ezekiel is not quoting directly from other texts, his evocations of natural scenery implicitly allude to the more verdant worlds of his reading, as opposed to the primarily urban sphere of his experience. Perhaps surprisingly for a poet known for the “objectivism” and directness of representational style – his attempt to present “the thing itself,” unadorned by interpretive or metaphorical glosses – Reznikoff readily adopts the hoary convention of using pastoral metaphors and similes as signifiers of the good and the beautiful. In a poem from his first book, *Rhythms* (1918), for instance, Reznikoff writes of an unnamed woman, “Her kindness is like the sun / toward dusk shining through a tree. / Her understanding

⁴⁴ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 13. On the pastoral “mode,” see chap. 3, n. 9.

⁴⁵ Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 105.

is like the sun, / shining through mist on a width of sea.”⁴⁶ Besides the graceful rhymes, the imagery of the natural world provides a ready-made, even hackneyed vocabulary of praise and valorization. This use of nature is paired with the no less conventional image of the stifling, ominous metropolis, which appears in the first stanza of the first poem in the same book (“The stars are hidden / the lights are out; / the tall black houses / are ranked about”) and again in the fifth poem (“The dead man lies in the street. / They spread a sack over his bleeding head. / It drizzles. Gutters and walks are black”).⁴⁷ Reznikoff’s early books of poetry also have short poems of only one or two lines that consist of a single pastoral image, suggesting Reznikoff’s use of nature as a signifier of the poetic no less than of the good and the beautiful. His 1921 poem “Evening,” for instance, reads in full: “The trees in the windless field like a herd asleep.”⁴⁸ At the same time, Reznikoff began to experiment with a new narrative realism in the verse published in *Poems* (1920) and *Uriel Acosta: A Play and A Fourth Group of Verse* (1921).⁴⁹ These terse vignettes in poem-form depict the desperation, the hardship, and the grim compromises with necessity made by Jewish immigrants, while also recounting the second generation’s struggle for freedom from the stifling poverty and parental expectations of life in the Jewish ghettos of New York. Together, they read like thumbnail sketches for a Yeziarska novel, presenting unremittingly bleak pictures of Jewish immigrant and working-class life.

Reznikoff’s shift away from this sensibility in *By the Waters of Manhattan* can, in part, be

⁴⁶ Charles Reznikoff, “Her kindness is like the sun,” poem 15, in *Rhythms* (1918), in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, ed. Seamus Cooney, vol. 1, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 16.

⁴⁷ Charles Reznikoff, “The stars are hidden,” poem 1, and “The dead man lies in the street,” poem 5, in *Rhythms* (1918), in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, ed. Seamus Cooney, vol. 1, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 13, 14.

⁴⁸ Charles Reznikoff, “Evening,” poem 14, *Uriel Accosta [sic]: A Play and a Fourth Group of Verse* (1921), in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, ed. Seamus Cooney, vol. 1, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 44. Bibliographic information for the rare original publication of *Uriel Acosta* uses the more conventional spelling with one “c,” suggesting that the spelling used in the volume edited by Seamus Cooney is incorrect.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, the cycle “Ghetto Funeral,” in *Poems* (1920), in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, ed. Seamus Cooney, vol. 1, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 30-34; and the cycles “The Burden,” “The Belly,” and “Provided For,” in *Uriel Accosta*, 51-56.

explained by the development of what Louis Zukofsky described as his “sincerity and objectification.” (This description of Reznikoff’s aesthetic comes from the title and keywords of Zukofsky’s frequently cited introduction to the 1931 “objectivist” issue of *Poetry* magazine, which first gave an identity to the loosely allied group comprised of Reznikoff, Oppen, Rakosi, Zukofsky, and, more peripherally, William Carlos Williams.)⁵⁰ Zukofsky’s impressionistic definition of “objectification” resists easy interpretation. Indeed, when asked about his response to the essay decades later, Reznikoff, despite the fact that his work was Zukofsky’s primary subject of analysis, admitted that he “could not follow all that Zukofsky had to say about ‘objectification’ or, for that matter, ‘sincerity.’”⁵¹ What Reznikoff certainly would have agreed with, however, is Zukofsky’s description of “objectification” as the use of words that “all resolve into a structure . . . to which the mind does not wish to add . . . any more than when it contemplates a definite object by itself.”⁵² Reznikoff echoed these ideas in a 1968 interview. When asked to define objectivism, he answers by quoting the eleventh-century Chinese poet Wei T’ai: “‘Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling.’ . . . These comments . . . are a very accurate expression of what the objectivists were trying to do.” Later in the same interview, Reznikoff adds,

By the term ‘objectivist’ I suppose a writer may be meant who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law; and who expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject matter . . .⁵³

This attempt at retrospective definition is useful for understanding Reznikoff’s representational investments, but it also suggest some of the difficulties that accompany any effort to isolate their

⁵⁰ Louis Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff,” *Poetry* 37, no. 5 (February 1931), 272-285.

⁵¹ Reznikoff, interview, 197.

⁵² Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification,” 275-76.

⁵³ Reznikoff, interview, 193-94; the quotation from Wei T’ai is from A. C. Graham, ed. and trans., *Poems of the Late T’ang* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 9.

guiding philosophy.

After all, Reznikoff did not restrict himself to an “objective” presentation of what he saw and heard; nor does he achieve Wallace Stevens’s (1879-1955) ideal of a poetry that conveys “the very thing itself” “without evasion by a single metaphor,” although he cites Stevens’s words as an illustration of what he and other objectivists attempted to achieve in their writing.⁵⁴ On the contrary, Reznikoff would increasingly use metaphors – and particularly pastoral metaphor – to “defamiliarize” features of the urban scenery, presenting them in their full aesthetic richness and strangeness as if seen for the first time.⁵⁵ This could cut both ways, facilitating either appreciation or criticism of the New York cityscape. In several poems from *Jerusalem the Golden* (1934), Reznikoff uses metaphors from nature as an implicit argument for the latent beauty of the city, writing, “About an excavation / a flock of bright red lanterns / has settled.”⁵⁶ In other poems in the same volume, however, images of the natural world offer the more conventional polemical criticism of the urban landscape, as in this description of a subway station: “our sky, cement; / the earth, cement; / our trees, steel; / instead of sunshine, a light that has no twilight . . .”⁵⁷ In other poems, metaphors from nature take on both roles:

Walk about the subway station
in a grove of steel pillars;
how their knobs, the rivet-heads—
unlike those of oaks—
are regularly placed;
how barren the ground is
except here and there on the platform a flat black fungus

⁵⁴ Wallace Stevens, “Credences of Summer,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 373; quoted in Reznikoff, interview, 198.

⁵⁵ Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” chap. 1 in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ Charles Reznikoff, “July,” poem 25, in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1934), in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, ed. Seamus Cooney, vol. 1, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 113.

⁵⁷ Charles Reznikoff, “For an Inscription over the Entrance to a Subway Station,” poem 20, in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1934), in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, ed. Seamus Cooney, vol. 1, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 111.

that was chewing-gum.⁵⁸

With its complete reliance on metaphor, this poem illustrates the complexity of Reznikoff's use of nature imagery in his city writings around the time of *By the Waters of Manhattan's* publication. On the one hand, the comparison of the "regularly" spaced "rivet-heads" of the steel pillars to the knobs of oak trees, and of old gum stains to "flat black fungus" critically points to the dull artificiality and unnaturalness of the built environment. At the same time, however, the metaphor of the grove of oaks showcases the steel pillars in their full material and visual objectivity, divorcing them from their functional uses and isolating them from conventional symbolic associations.⁵⁹ By comparing the pillars to organic objects that exist independently of human meaning and use, in other words, Reznikoff invites his readers to view them as purely formal elements within an aesthetic composition no less worthy of visual interest and appreciation than a more conventional rural landscape scene.

In this sense, Reznikoff's metaphors often collaborate, perhaps despite themselves, in the objectivist project of presenting the thing itself. At the same time, however, this practice cannot be divorced from Reznikoff's subjectivity and his assertion of imaginative control of the objects he describes. This practice may lead to "the attempt to discover the beautiful in mean objects, usually in an industrial or urban setting," in critic L. S. Dembo's words, but this discovery

⁵⁸ Charles Reznikoff, "Hellenist," poem 18, in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1934), in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, ed. Seamus Cooney, vol. 1, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 111.

⁵⁹ The subway is one of urban modernity's most frequently invoked symbols. The *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*, for instance, notes, "The subway has become an attribute of the imaginary of metropolitan areas, entering collective imaginations and discourses. It found its way into culture through music, films, literature, and art, which turned the subway into an icon of modern urbanity." More specifically, the entry emphasizes uses of "the image of the subway as a space of fear and danger . . ." Stefan Höhne and Bill Boyer, s.v. "Subway," in *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*, ed. Ray Hutchison (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.4135/9781412971973.n278>. Of more immediate relevance to the Jewish poetry of New York, Julian Levinson has observed that the subway was a "common topos in Yiddish American poetry in the 1910s and 1920s . . . offer[ing] a setting for exploring the dangers, thrills, and confusion of the American city." Julian Levinson, "On Some Motifs in Moyshe-Leyb Halpern: A Benjaminian Meditation on Yiddish Modernism," *Prooftexts* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 74.

ultimately reveals more about Reznikoff's own imaginative power than it does about the city.⁶⁰ The use of metaphors to compare two unlike objects or states, as suggested in the previous chapter's conclusion, reveals the reach of authorial agency, as does the use of pastoral imagery for describing urban scenery. This is particularly apparent in two other poems from *Jerusalem the Golden*. In one of them, part of a sequence titled "Hunting Season," the pastoral analogy becomes explicitly pedagogical, offering instructions in perception to the reader accustomed to seeing only the ugly functionality of the city. The poem begins with a line that might either invoke the romantic image of a wood-burning stove or the soot of an industrial cityscape, a tension Reznikoff plays with in the poem's three short lines. It reads in full: "This smoky winter morning— / do not despise the green jewel shining among the twigs / because it is a traffic light."⁶¹ The nature imagery in the poem offers the reader a short lesson in urban landscape appreciation. The metaphor of the "green jewel" may apologize for the mundane functionality of the traffic light, but it also points to the aesthetic pleasure that can be extracted from the quotidian sights of the city. This use of the pastoral as instruction and urban apologetics allows a more affirmative and gently luminous image of the city to emerge in Reznikoff's poetry around this time. "Feast, you who cross the bridge / this cold twilight," he writes of Brooklyn Bridge in the same volume, "on these honeycombs of light, the buildings of Manhattan."⁶² This is not precisely "objectivism," as Reznikoff defines it, but it is a form of representational vision that makes use of romantic and pre-romantic tropes of nature to present a vision of the city that was radically new within the context of Jewish working-class writing.

Reznikoff's celebration of the view from Brooklyn Bridge points back to the prose

⁶⁰ L. S. Dembo, "Objectivist or Jew: Charles Reznikoff in the Diaspora," in *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, ed. Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation; University of Maine at Orono, 1984), 189.

⁶¹ Charles Reznikoff, "Hunting Season," poem 48, in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1934), in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, ed. Seamus Cooney, vol. 1, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), 116.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 116.

descriptions of the city in *By the Waters of Manhattan*, and, in particular, to the “rare quality” of Reznikoff’s prose that Leonard Ehrlich had described as “a kind of faint, fragile brightness.”⁶³ As a transitional space between the borough of Brooklyn, Reznikoff’s birthplace, and downtown Manhattan, where he spent several formative years of his childhood, the Bridge also serves as an apt symbol for the shift from one generation to the next and from an older mode of seeing and representing the city to the new one that Reznikoff was quietly pioneering in his verse and prose. Reznikoff emphasizes the difference in generational and aesthetic sensibility through the contrasting responses of his characters to the shared setting of Brooklyn Bridge. Shortly after arriving in New York, Sarah Yetta takes a wrong turn in her search for the address of a prospective employer and finds herself at the bridge. “She had never seen so many people,” Reznikoff writes. “At Brooklyn Bridge, she watched them pouring out of the street-cars and the railway station.” She does not take note of the iconic structure itself; instead, she looks at the crowds around her and thinks, “All strangers . . . and felt very lonely.” The narrative returns again and again to the bridge in conscious echoes and variations on this first encounter with one of the city’s most celebrated landmarks, a source of inspiration for artists from poet Hart Crane (1899-1932) to painter Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986). Before asking Sarah Yetta to marry him, Saul invites her “to walk with him to Brooklyn Bridge,” not because of the beauty of its neo-Gothic towers and swooping suspension cables, but because it is “the only place to get a little fresh air” in the city. On the way over, they coolly discuss the economics of marriage. Neither the bridge nor the view from it (“the honeycombs of light” Reznikoff evokes in his poetry) is described; the narrative only notes that “[i]n the meantime they had reached the bridge. They found a bench and rested. The air was cool and refreshing.”⁶⁴ The landscape of New York passes

⁶³ Ehrlich, “Defeated Dream On,” 39.

⁶⁴ Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 114, 123-125.

unseen in this “meantime,” and even the pleasure of the fresh air is itself a context for transacting the practical business of marriage, which Sarah Yerra and Saul arrange with a minimum of ceremony.

In contrast to Sarah Yetta's narrative, the second part of the book anticipates the more affirmative urban aesthetic that characterizes so many of Reznikoff's poems in *Jerusalem the Golden*. During his short narrative, Ezekiel crosses Brooklyn Bridge several times, always keenly aware of the aesthetic pleasures it offers. In a scene that highlights the differences, both in sensibility and in responsibility, between generations, Ezekiel unknowingly reenacts the scene of his parents' brief courtship when he invites his romantic interest, Jane Dauthendey, for a walk on the bridge on their first Sunday together. The two scenes of courtship could not be more different. In a reversal of Sarah Yetta's and Saul's matter-of-fact discussion of marriage and their almost complete disinterest in the scenery around them, Ezekiel finds himself tongue-tied when he tries to articulate his romantic desires. Instead, he can only comment on the aesthetic pleasures of the evening: “It's nice to walk on this wooden planking. What lovely twilights we have in New York.”⁶⁵ His failure of heart foregrounds the differences between his perspective and that of his parents. If work has made Sarah Yetta and Saul “coarse,” the opportunities for education that have allowed Ezekiel to cultivate a more heightened aesthetic sensibility have also largely unfitted him for life's more practical demands.

As a point of observation that transforms the overwhelming immediacy of the metropolis into a distanced view, the bridge also offers a spatial analogy for Ezekiel's aestheticizing gaze. This use of the bridge is most richly displayed in Ezekiel's first narrated walk across it, moving from the tumult of Manhattan into the relative calm of Brooklyn:

He was glad to find himself on the bridge, the tenements and the office buildings behind

⁶⁵ Ibid., 219.

him, his face towards the sky. Soon the roadway changed to slats of wood, springy under his feet after so many miles of asphalt. Ezekiel was pleased, too, after the even curves of gutters and the straight lines of pavements and houses to see the free glitter of the water. He was now in the rhythm of walking, that sober dance which despite all the dances man knows, he dances most.⁶⁶

Recalled from the vantage point of the bridge, and filtered through the lens of Ezekiel's perception, the city is recomposed into a modernist canvas, its gutters transformed into "curves" and its "pavements and houses" (the term "house" is itself a tellingly transformative description of the towering edifices of downtown Manhattan) into "straight lines." The passage climaxes in Reznikoff's lyrical description of walking as an aesthetic act, a "dance" that, in the distinctive perspective shared by narrator and protagonist, transforms one of the most mundane necessities of city life into part of a vast choreography perceptible only to Ezekiel and the reader.

The convention of aestheticizing the city through a distancing perspective is visible elsewhere in the tradition of New York tenement narratives as well. In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, for instance, Francie's father takes her up to the roof of their new apartment building in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where she gains a similar perspective on the city around her:

She saw a whole new world. Not far away was the lovely span of the Williamsburg Bridge. Across the East River, like a fairy city made of silver cardboard, the skyscrapers loomed cleanly. There was the Brooklyn Bridge further away like an echo of the nearer bridge.

"It's pretty," said Francie. "It's pretty the same way pictures of in-the-country are pretty."⁶⁷

The close symbolic association of the distancing view from the roof with the imaginative agency of artistic creation is suggested by Francie's comparison of the scene from her rooftop to a "picture." Like Ezekiel, moreover, Francie, can only give voice to the surprising beauty of the cityscape by comparing it to a pastoral scene of "in-the-country."

Both the view from the roof and the view from the bridge mark the transformation of a

⁶⁶ Ibid., 169-70.

⁶⁷ Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 93.

lived *environment*, with all the privations and dangers of urban poverty, into an observed *landscape* that can be appreciated aesthetically from a safe distance. It is useful here to recall Raymond Williams's distinction between "landscape" and "country." "A working country is hardly ever a landscape," he writes in *The Country and the City* (1973), adding, "The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation."⁶⁸ This quality of "separation and observation" is clearly present in the view from the roof and the bridge, yet what Williams describes as a reactionary erasure of the signs of labor – a perspective that overlooks and naturalizes the exploitation of agricultural workers – takes on a radically different significance in the context of the literature of Jewish working-class New York and, particularly, in the genre of the ghetto *künstlerroman*. The conversion of a deterministic environment into a "pastoralized" landscape self-reflexively projects the writer's transmutation of the material city into a literary setting in works with autobiographical and semi-autobiographical referents. This aestheticizing perspective, however, is neither a denial nor an apologetics for the structural inequalities writ large across the topography of New York. The forms of literary production it allegorically prefigures are, after all, contributions to the critical genre of the tenement narrative, with its emphasis on working-class life. The distancing perspective available from Brooklyn Bridge and the tenement roof may reveal an element of striking beauty in the cityscape, then, but this beauty is a reflection of the writer's triumphant sense of representational and interpretive mastery of his or her material, rather than an attempt to place the city's inequalities under erasure. For Francie, whose movements are circumscribed by gender norms restricting female access to public space, this perspective is only available from the safety of her rooftop or her tree-enclosed fire escape. Ezekiel, in contrast, uses his long walks through the city to extend this aestheticizing perspective from the vantage point of the bridge down onto the streets of New York.

⁶⁸ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 120.

Walking the City

Among the autobiographical qualities with which Reznikoff endows Ezekiel, their shared affinity for long, solitary walks through the city is the most striking. In her published reminiscences about Reznikoff, Marie Syrkin recalls the “obsession” that led him to take hours-long walks each day:

After poetry, walking was his chief passion. . . . The role of walking in Charles’ life went far beyond the jogger’s mechanical therapy; it was spiritual as well as physical exercise. Unless he walked a number of miles, dwindling through the years from twenty to six daily, he suffered psychic deprivation. ‘I did not walk today,’ he would announce with an air of tragic loss that the simple fact did not seem to justify. The obsession had started in his boyhood. . . . Charles never wearied of assuring me that his walks were a major source of experience: he saw, he felt, he wrote. The small notebook he always carried to jot down lines that occurred to him testified to this productivity. Crossing Brooklyn Bridge . . . walking along the Hudson, or glimpses of fellow-diners in an automat – these were the daily excitements whose record is to be found in his poetry.⁶⁹

As Syrkin’s recollections suggest, walking was a source of aesthetic inspiration for Reznikoff, providing images and “experience[s]” on which he drew for his writing. The connection between walking and writing extends well beyond the collecting of “experience” and impressions, however. Reznikoff’s description of walking as a “sober dance” indicates the aesthetic potential of the act as a means of transforming the hectic city into a vast stage, and the “feet on errands” into the feet of dancers. This use of walking as an aesthetic practice anticipates Michel de Certeau’s description of the movements of urban pedestrians as a collaborative textual practice that creates “unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others . . .” These collective pedestrian movements, for Certeau, have a subversive, emancipatory potential, disrupting the “totalizing” “clear text of the planned and readable city.”⁷⁰ Reznikoff’s descriptions of Ezekiel’s long strolls through New York resonate with this understanding of

⁶⁹ Syrkin, “Charles,” 42.

⁷⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 92-93.

walking, but they also complicate it. Certeau's "ordinary practitioners of the city [who] live 'down below'" are always an undifferentiated and largely unconscious collective whose constitutive "bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it."⁷¹ In contrast, Ezekiel's long walks through New York are a consciously textualizing practice performed with full awareness of its literary and political potential. By walking for leisure and for pleasure, Ezekiel refuses to allow his movements to be subordinated to the prescribed routes of the commercial city, but his resistance is stubbornly individual rather than part of a collective textual practice. His long, leisurely strolls through the city defiantly resist commodification, the flip-side of Sammy Glick's mad dash after money and power in *What Makes Sammy Run?*. If Sammy runs, as Budd Schulberg concludes, because he has succumbed to the competitive logic of the "dog-eat-dog world" in which he was raised, Ezekiel dances his "sober dance" through the city streets in a refusal even to enter the race.⁷²

Ezekiel's refusal to allow his time and movements to be commodified recalls the figure of the flâneur, which cultural historian Mary Gluck describes as "the consummate urban stroller" and connoisseur of urban spectacle. Gluck explains, "As an observer of the everyday occurrences of the city, the flâneur was explicitly contrasted to the busy professional, who was oblivious to the fleeting nuances of modern life."⁷³ Yet to label Ezekiel a flâneur would be to overlook the distinctiveness of his relationship to the space of the city and to underestimate the role of class in determining his uses of that space. The flâneur was "[i]nvariably depicted as a man of leisure," Gluck notes, and this is certainly how he emerges from Charles Baudelaire's (1821-1867)

⁷¹ Ibid., 93.

⁷² Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?* (Garden City, N.Y.: The Sun Dial Press, 1943), 249.

⁷³ Mary Gluck, s.v. "Flâneur," in *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*, ed. Ray Hutchison (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.4135/9781412971973.n102>.

influential writings of the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁴ Baudelaire describes the flâneur as the archetypal “painter of modern life” whose “passion and . . . profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur . . .” Baudelaire continues, “it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.” In more concrete terms, the Baudelairean flâneur is a sketch artist or writer of light vignettes, a connoisseur of urban ephemera fascinated with the spectacle of modernity. Yet as a member of the cosmopolitan elite, a “*prince* . . . in incognito,” the flâneur must seek a temporary oneness with the crowd without ever truly finding it.⁷⁵ He is a beneficiary of the privileged mobility afforded by gender, race, and class status, and his fascination with the crowd is inseparable from its perceived otherness: the frisson of discovery and the boast of acquired intimacy with the foreign. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), whose writings on Baudelaire popularized the figure of the flâneur, compares him to a scientist examining a new specimen under the microscope, writing, in a famous phrase, that the flâneur “goes botanizing on the asphalt.”⁷⁶ The flâneur takes different forms in Benjamin’s often-contradictory writings. In another frequently quoted passage, Benjamin writes, “There was the pedestrian who would let himself be jostled by the crowd, but there was also the *flâneur* who demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure.”⁷⁷ But if the flâneur was a gentleman of leisure, a figure of opposition to the “busy professional,” he was not independent of market forces. On the contrary, Benjamin writes, “In the flâneur, the intelligentsia sets foot in the

⁷⁴ Gluck, “Flâneur”; my use of the male pronoun is intentional. As Janet Wolff has influentially argued, “the dandy, the *flâneur*, the hero, the stranger – all figures invoked to epitomize the experience of modern life – are invariably male figures . . . Women,” she notes, “could not stroll alone in the city.” Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 2, no. 3 (November 1985), 41.

⁷⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2001), 9; emphasis in the original.

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London and New York: Verso, 1983), 36.

⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 172.

marketplace – ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer.”⁷⁸ The flâneur may be independently wealthy – the “prince” in incognito – or he may occupy a liminal position “on the threshold . . . of the middle class,” as Benjamin suggests.⁷⁹ In both instances, however, his perspective is famously that of the outsider, the spectator critical of but nonetheless irresistibly drawn to the spectacle of urban modernity. The flâneur’s fascination for cultural theorists – whatever form he takes – lies in his status as the recording angel and archetypal chronicler of the frenetic life of great modern cities.

Ezekiel has more in common with the flâneur than he does with Certeau’s “everyday practitioners.” Like the *flâneur*, he is a young artist figure, a male spectator of urban life, and a consummate city walker. While Ezekiel and the *flâneur* engage in similar practices, however, their variant subject positions attach vastly different meanings to their actions. The flâneur, in his classical contours, is always imagined in the act of walking, seemingly without origin or destination, but it is precisely his implied origin in the tightly regulated private space of the bourgeois home that gives the savor of adventure and novelty to the public space of the boulevard and the arcade. The tenement-street dialectic of working-class narrative such as *By the Waters of Manhattan* upends this structuring opposition between interior and exterior, private space and public space. In the tenement, there is no “private sphere” in the conventional sense of the term. The crowd is, if anything, densest within the tenement’s walls. Writing of his childhood on the Lower East Side in *Jews Without Money*, Gold bluntly stated, “It’s impossible to live in a tenement without being mixed up with the tragedies and cockroaches of one’s neighbors. There’s

⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin; trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Lingstone, Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 104-105.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

no privacy in a tenement.”⁸⁰ This was especially true of Gold’s childhood neighborhood, which Jacob Riis famously described as “the most densely populated district in all the world, China not excluded.”⁸¹ Its overcrowding only worsened over the following decades. “[By] the second decade of the new century,” Moses Rischin notes, “the Lower East Side . . . had become a mass settlement of Jews, the most densely packed quarter in the city.”⁸²

This population density made the Lower East Side a vibrant, bustling center of Jewish cultural and commercial life, but it could also present problems for an aspiring writer who needed space for thought and at least a degree of privacy for reading, writing, and quiet contemplation. “Space was the stuff of desire,” Irving Howe writes of the Lower East Side; “a room to oneself [was] a luxury beyond reach.”⁸³ Samuel Chotzinoff recalled of his own East Side childhood, “Privacy in the home was practically unknown. The average apartment consisted of three rooms: a kitchen, a parlor, and a doorless and windowless bedroom between. The parlor became a sleeping-room at night. So did the kitchen when the families were unusually large.”⁸⁴ Such overcrowding structures the experiences and cognition of characters in the working-class literary tradition of Jewish tenement narratives, in which it is presented as one of the largest obstacles to intellectual and artistic development. Anzia Yezierska, for instance, describes one character’s difficult decision to leave her family and go out in search of a “room of her own” so she can attempt to write: “Had she not left her own sister, sacrificed all comfort, all association, for solitude and its golden possibilities? For the first time in her life she had the chance to be by herself and think.”⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 30.

⁸¹ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 82.

⁸² Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 79-80.

⁸³ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, with the assistance of Kenneth Libo (New York & London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 171.

⁸⁴ Samuel Chotzinoff, *A Lost Paradise: Early Reminiscences* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 81.

⁸⁵ Anzia Yezierska, “My Own People,” in *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Signet Classic, 1996), 187.

Yet a room of one's own was only rarely attainable for the children and young adults of New York's Jewish ghettos, and it is not a possibility for Ezekiel, even after opening his bookstore. The apartment he shares with his parents and two sisters is so overcrowded that he must make his bed in the kitchen by pushing several chairs together. For slightly more privacy, he can spread his blanket in the hall outside his parents' top floor apartment, but in the night, his sleep is disturbed when he feels the wet muzzle of a rat brush against his face.⁸⁶ Instead of seeking solitude indoors, then, Ezekiel and other protagonists of tenement narratives must turn to the streets, although this alternative was accompanied by greater dangers for girls and young women. Thus, while Yeziarska's protagonist must ultimately jump the economic hurdle of renting a room, her *New York Times* review of Chotzinoff's memoir acknowledges that a different solution was available for boys and young men. She writes, "In the crowded railroad flat that was Sam's home there was no privacy. That could only be found in the streets, the alleys – among the hordes of kids around the fountain of Seward Park."⁸⁷

This surprising paradox – that "privacy" can be found "in the street" and "among the hordes," rather than indoors – is the material, experiential context that gives the act of walking in the city its distinctive character in *By the Waters of Manhattan*, as in other Jewish tenement novels and memoirs. This form of privacy, rivaled only by the escape available through reading, suggests important connections between Ezekiel's long walks, his immersion in literature, and his dawning awareness of the city as a literary space susceptible of imaginative transformation and aestheticization. For Ezekiel, the street is an emancipatory space, a region of paradoxical solitude that offers freedom from interruption in which an aspiring writing can indulge in extended thought.

⁸⁶ Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 183-84.

⁸⁷ Anzia Yeziarska, "With Richness in Poverty," review of *A Lost Paradise*, by Samuel Chotzinoff, *New York Times*, May 1, 1955, Sunday Book Review, 3; Marcia Davenport, "Golden Ghetto," review of *A Lost Paradise*, by Samuel Chotzinoff, *The Saturday Review*, April 9, 1955, 27, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1955apr09-00027>.

Ezekiel thus seeks out the liminal out-of-the-way spaces of the city, rather than the crowded thoroughfares that are the haunts of the flâneur. He wanders the streets at night and in the early morning, drawn to the parks and beaches, and endlessly crossing and re-crossing Brooklyn Bridge. It is easy to imagine Ezekiel, like Reznikoff, viewing these walks as “a major source of experience” and even “jot[ting] down lines” while traversing the city.⁸⁸ But unlike the flâneur, who must “retail [his] wares by the column inch or text box,” Ezekiel does not gravitate to parts of the city that offer the most commercially marketable literary material. On his walks, his ambition is to escape the multitude, not to drink in its exuberant spectacle.

Ezekiel’s resistance to literary commodification and his aversion to the spectacle of urban modernity, like his use of intertextual frames of reference to mediate his environment, suggest a politics of resistance more passive than the forms of protest found in narratives previously discussed. Ezekiel is a conscientious objection to the city’s competitive free market ethos, not a revolutionary martyr like Ornitz’s doomed poets. Other, more radical models for engaging with the streets of New York were available at the time, as Deborah Dash Moore’s analysis of Depression-era street photography in “Walkers in the City: Young Jewish Women with Cameras” demonstrates. As Moore argues, young Jewish women affiliated with the left-wing New York Photo League, braving the predominantly male space of the street, showed their “radical” political investments in their rejection of “standard representations of New York as a vertical, inhumanly scaled Gotham,” privileging a more affirmative vision of the working-class life of New York’s ethnic neighborhoods. “Their photographs portrayed poetry in prosaic details and lyricism in mundane movements,” Moore writes.⁸⁹ Like these young photographers, Ezekiel’s movements

⁸⁸ Syrkin, “Charles,” 42.

⁸⁹ Deborah Dash Moore, “Walkers in the City: Young Jewish Women with Cameras,” in *Gender and Jewish History*, eds. Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 281-285.

through the city's streets allow him to discover the poetry and lyricism of the urban landscape, but this discovery is inseparable from his avoidance of crowds and his imaginative suppression of the teeming life of the street.

The association of walking with solitude, privacy, and escape makes it the engine for Ezekiel's introspection and self-discovery: for looking inward, rather than for losing himself in what Baudelaire describes as "the ebb and flow of movement." This distinctive use of space, quite different from that of the flâneur, the street photographer, and the "ordinary practitioners" of Certeau's writing, results in a very different image of the urban landscape. If the flâneur, to take the most famous of these walkers in the city, is the "painter of modern life," preserving the fleeting image of crowds, new technologies, and consumerist spectacle, Ezekiel's long walks, like his intertextual imagination, work to deurbanize and "pastoralize" the cityscape. The image of the city that emerges from these walks is antithetical to the alienating, fragmentary metropolis commonly associated with the literature of modernity.

Instead, the New York streets become spaces of contemplative thought and restored harmony between character and setting, yielding images of startling beauty. Reznikoff describes the scenery through which Ezekiel passes during one of his early morning walks through the Lower East Side:

No one was in the street but the milkman. Lights were shining in the groceries: he could see the grocers and their sleepy boys filling paper bags with rolls, the warm smell of which filtered through the open doors

Ezekiel took deep breaths of the cold air. Even these streets were quiet now. . . . In the bright morning he looked eagerly at the houses, at each horse and milkwagon – some had the lantern hung from the axle still burning – and at each vivid laborer that passed.

More and more people were in the streets, until Ezekiel, thinking of Wordsworth, found himself in the light of common day.

All the tropes of Reznikoff's urban pastoral are on display in this remarkable passage. The disorienting whirlwind of metropolitan life is absent from the nearly empty early morning streets.

Each detail Ezekiel observes is presented in its full sensory objectivity, divorced from its larger utility or significance. Finally, the passage climaxes in a literary allusion that affirms the poetic nature of the scene. In this calmed and aestheticized world, the city of concrete and steel flickers and gives way to glimpses of the pastoral – a transcendent, twilight calm in the eye of the urban storm.

As Ezekiel's store occupies more and more of his time, he begins to take long walks after closing the shop at night, seeking out the solitary freedom of the streets as an antidote to his time in the store, which he comes to view as "a prison cell he himself had built." During these solitary excursions, he passes through a cityscape made intimate by a nighttime tranquility that reintegrates the built environment into the diurnal rhythms of the natural world. "When he thought of the heavens, it was of stars and the moon or of a black sky," Reznikoff writes. "The streets for him were dark, except when snow made the pavements and gutter bluish white. . . . And, sometimes, he would walk one of the bridges to Brooklyn, making a path through the unbroken snow." In these recurring scenes, the natural world – and, by extension, the world of poetry – asserts its logic over and against the urban environment. On one walk, Ezekiel makes his way from lower Manhattan across the Brooklyn Bridge, stopping only when he reaches the sea at Coney Island. He watches the waves until nightfall: "How often had he seen the coming of the stars and still it moved him, as a cadence in stanza after stanza."⁹⁰ The connection between nature and poetry, the pastoral mode and the literary imagination are made explicit in this passage.

It is difficult to imagine that Ezekiel, watching stars come into view as the waves disappear into darkness, is standing on the same beach that Moyshe Nadir had invoked only two years earlier as a symbol of the hollow sensationalism and bombast of American mass culture. No less striking is the contrast between Ezekiel's dawn walk through the quiet streets of the Lower East Side and

⁹⁰ Reznikoff, *By the Waters of Manhattan*, 185, 198, 203, 237.

Budd Schulberg's description of these same streets just eleven years later as "one gigantic prize-ring."⁹¹ What explains these radical differences in representational perspective? The usual explanation of nostalgia cannot account for Ezekiel's pastoral vision, emerging as it does from his imaginative resistance to the material and economic realities of the urban environment; nor can historical master narratives about demographic and economic changes in Jewish American life explain his poeticizing representations of New York, published during the darkest years of the Great Depression. Such contrasts cannot be assimilated into conventional scholarly schema that posit a shift from condemnatory realism to nostalgic distortion, or that rely on generation models for interpreting changing literary investments. As Anita Norich cautions us to remember, "literary or cultural time" cannot be "equated . . . with political or historical time."⁹² Instead, we would do better to consider these works as *literary* responses to *literary* conventions within an intertextual tradition of interwar Jewish writing.

Throughout this chapter, I have traced a complex network of intertextual allusions within *By the Waters of Manhattan*, but I have refrained from discussing the book's most obvious and important intertext: the famous first lines of Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon," which lament the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the southern Israelite tribes to Babylonia. This allusion places Reznikoff's narrative of immigration and displacement, of trying to put down new roots in the rocky soil of a foreign land in dialogue with a far older and more prestigious Jewish literary tradition than the one I have been discussing. Throughout the second part of the book, Ezekiel draws connections between himself and his "ancestors" who "were great readers of the Bible . . . [and] perhaps, helped write it." Seeing the stars above a "side street" on

⁹¹ Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*, 228.

⁹² Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture During the Holocaust* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 20. See also Julian Levinson's critique of the generational model in *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literature Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 145-46.

the Lower East Side “where the stores were few and dimly lit,” Ezekiel again recalls the Babylonian Exile, allowing himself to be “comforted” by the stars “as they had comforted his ancestors in Chaldea.”⁹³ This invocation of the *longue durée* of Jewish history affords Ezekiel a sense of dignity and permanence despite his family’s tenuous economic foothold in the new country and their status as ethnic minorities in a period of heightened anti-Semitism. For Ezekiel, moreover, his ancestral connection to the authors of the Hebrew Bible legitimizes his claim to a place in a literary world in which Jews were still second-class citizens barred from holding professorships in many university English departments.

Reznikoff’s use of the Babylonian Exile as a metaphor for New York’s Jewish immigrants, and his comparison of the rivers surrounding Manhattan to the rivers, or “waters,” of Babylon should also recall a more contemporary intertext, however. Sholem Asch’s *Uncle Moses* begins by describing the Manhattan skyline as a “new confused Babylon” of ominous “towering, darkened structures.”⁹⁴ Asch’s comparison of the tenements of the Lower East Side and Williamsburg to the Israelite encampments on the shores of the Euphrates symbolically introduces his critique of America’s reception of its immigrants, dramatizing America’s failure to live up to its reputation as a new Promised Land for Jewish immigrants. Reznikoff, however, invokes the archetypal site of Jewish exile to different ends. Ezekiel’s long walks through the New York streets are not a search for a new home. Neither the exilic wanderer nor the modern flâneur, Ezekiel is best understood as a “saunterer” in Henry David Thoreau’s (1817-1862) sense of the term, as a person “*sans terre*, without land or home, which therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere.”⁹⁵ To paraphrase George Steiner, Ezekiel’s homeland is the

⁹³ Reznikoff, *By the Waters*, 174, 238.

⁹⁴ Sholem Asch, *Uncle Moses*, trans. Isaac Goldberg (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), 1-2.

⁹⁵ Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 597.

remembered texts he brings with him wherever he walks, and which he projects onto the landscape around him.⁹⁶ It is this portable homeland that allows him to sing songs of praise while walking the streets of New York. His parents may experience America as exile, but Ezekiel, like the narrative that brings him to life, is at home within deeply rooted literary traditions.

⁹⁶ George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," *Salmagundi*, no. 66 (Winter-Spring 1985): 4-25.

Coda

Looking Ahead: Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* and the Tenement Narrative Revisited

“[W]ithout New York,” Alfred Kazin wrote in a 1966 article on “The Jew as American Writer,” “it would no doubt all have been different . . .” The American Jewish writer, Kazin explained, was a product of an indigenous New York cultural tradition that drew its energy from the “pent-up eagerness of penniless immigrant youngsters [who] met the raw urban scene on its own terms.”¹ Kazin was in a position to know. Born in Brownsville in 1915 to a struggling house painter father and an overworked seamstress mother, both immigrants from Russia, Kazin made his triumphant entrance onto the national stage with the 1942 publication of *On Native Grounds*, a magisterial history of American prose writing from the late nineteenth century through the Great Depression. This precocious achievement launched the twenty-seven-year-old Kazin’s career as a public intellectual and an arbiter of literary taste, earning him a prestigious post as books editor at the *New Republic* and opening doors at other leading intellectual publications, which eagerly commissioned reviews and essays from “the boy wonder of American literary criticism.”²

Kazin’s next book, however, was not a work of scholarship but a contribution to the tradition of Jewish working-class tenement narratives: the now-classic 1951 memoir *A Walker in*

¹ Alfred Kazin, “The Jew as American Writer,” *Commentary* 41, no. 4 (April 1966): 37-38; Sections of this coda were originally published as Benjamin Pollak, “Reassessing *A Walker in the City*: Alfred Kazin and the Image of Immigrant New York,” *American Jewish History* 97, no. 4 (October 2013), 391-411, and are excerpted by generous permission of *American Jewish History* and its editor, Dianne C. Ashton.

² Orville Prescott, “Books of the Times,” review of *On Native Grounds*, by Alfred Kazin, *New York Times*, October 30, 1942, 17.

the City, which lyrically recalled Kazin's coming-of-age in Brownsville during the 1920s and early '30s. Kazin would pen three additional memoirs over the course of his long career – *Starting Out in the Thirties* (1965), *New York Jew* (1978), and *Writing Was Everything* (1995) – bridging the genres of literary and personal history, and using his own experiences to bring to life the swirling intellectual currents of the city that was the central locus not only of his own remarkable story but of the larger epic of American Jewish culture and literature during the twentieth century.

As a writer who “start[ed] out in the thirties” but became a representative figure of the postwar American Jewish “renaissance,” Kazin provides a mid-century vantage point from which to take stock of the legacy of interwar Jewish writing. The preceding four chapters have illuminated the intertextual dialogues and debates, the social networks and political discourses that led to an outpouring of Jewish literary creativity between the two World Wars, and, in particular, to the emergence of the tenement narrative as a central genre of Jewish and ethnic American writing. This coda uses Kazin's *A Walker in the City* to gauge the impact of these interwar literary developments on Jewish writing from the latter half of the century, facilitating a reconsideration of central assumptions that have led scholars to underestimate the continuities between interwar and postwar Jewish literature. In the pages that follow, I read *A Walker in the City* as both a continuation of and a critical intervention in the left-wing tradition of Jewish tenement narratives, which Kazin saw as excessively deterministic and grim in their representations of working-class Jewish life. By examining *A Walker in the City* in the context of Kazin's representational politics as revealed in his journals, his critical and autobiographical writings, and his notes and typescript drafts for the memoir, this coda shows how his ambivalent

investment in the Jewish literature of the 1920s and '30s contributed to the emergence of a new, more valorizing image of the Jewish immigrant neighborhood.

Scholars have cited the lyricism and warmth of Kazin's representations of Brownsville as a primary illustration of "the American Jewish intellectual's newfound nostalgia for Jewish origins," in Robert Alter's phrase.³ According to Kazin's biographer, Richard Cook, the memoir reflects the broader "inward" turn of Kazin's generation, for whom "living and writing after [the Second World War and the Holocaust] meant a narrowing of political hopes and an increased attention to the self."⁴ These critical master narratives, I suggest, have obscured both the radical investments of Kazin's memoir and its productive relationship to earlier Jewish literary traditions. Though certainly influenced by the cultural discourses of the postwar years, *A Walker in the City* was not an uncritical reflection of discursive trends, nor was it a clean break with pre-WWII literary antecedents. Rather, it was a pointed response to literary and political ideas that had been of deep concern to Kazin since as early as the mid-1930s, the tumultuous decade in which he began his career as a writer and critic. This coda thus looks back to the introduction's claims that the working-class milieu, urban sensibility, and radical investments of the Jewish literature of interwar New York furnished the imaginative bedrock on which a secular Jewish literary tradition was constructed in the latter half of the twentieth century. Kazin's memoir offers a powerful example of the continued significance of the intertextual dialogues and debates traced in the four preceding chapters. This is not a "conclusion," therefore, but a continuation of the earlier chapters that opens out onto the expansive vista of American Jewish writing in the latter half of the twentieth century.

³ Robert Alter, "The Education of Alfred Kazin," *Commentary* 65, no. 6 (June 1978): 47.

⁴ Richard M. Cook, *Alfred Kazin: A Biography* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 108.

A Walker in the City is a particularly appropriate work for testing scholarly assumptions about Jewish writing both because of its central position in the postwar literary canon and because of the key role Kazin played in shaping that canon's contours. Literary scholar Morris Dickstein has identified Kazin as one of the more "aggressive" champions of "the Jewish-American renaissance of the fifties," and Kazin helped to define that period as a break with preceding literary forms and sensibilities.⁵ In widely read articles and reviews, Kazin described the postwar years as the "first great era of 'Jewish' imaginative writing," and the period in which "American Jews began to publish imaginative works and intellectual studies of distinction . . ."⁶ He supported these arguments by contrasting writers who rose to prominence in the 1940s and '50s with "the social realists of the 30s," who "were often boxed in, mentally, by the poverty and hopelessness of their upbringing and the bitterness, deprivations, and anti-Semitism of depression America."⁷ Written in the mid-1960s, this critique is a gentler version of his earlier criticism of Depression-era narratives. In *On Native Grounds*, he had taken to task the "left-wing naturalists" of the 1930s for their "need of demonstrative terror and brutality" and their adherence to a "left-wing theory of literature, which was so riddled with determinism" that it insisted that "spiritual insight was to be won only by proving how little there was of it in life."⁸ This reductive assessment of the radical literature of the Depression has earned Kazin the justified censure of scholars of the literary left. Cultural historian Michael Denning laments that Kazin's dismissal of the "social novels" of the 1930s "came to dominate literary interpretation for a generation," and Alan Wald has described Kazin's "belief that 1930s literary-radicalism

⁵ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 30; quoted in Cook, *Alfred Kazin*, 220.

⁶ Alfred Kazin, "Though He Slay Me . . .," review of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, by Saul Bellow, *New York Review of Books*, December 3, 1970, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1970/dec/03/though-he-slay-me/>; Kazin, "The Jew as American Writer," 40.

⁷ Kazin, "The Jew as American Writer," 39.

⁸ Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), 385-86.

was a time-conditioned minor episode with no long-term future” an “indefensible . . . generalization.”⁹ Wald also points out that Kazin’s use of the term “naturalism” is an inaccurate generalization.¹⁰

While these critiques are well deserved, I suggest that Kazin’s relationship to the literature of the 1930s was more complex than his often-dismissive assessments of it would suggest. If Kazin saw himself as part of a postwar intellectual vanguard who had “saved Jewish writing in America from . . . the moral wreckage of the 30s,” he also celebrated the “radical strength” of the “plebeian” writers of the “revolutionary Thirties” who emerged from “the working class, the lower class, the immigrant class, the non-literate class” – an *earlier* vanguard to which he also claimed allegiance.¹¹ In *Starting Out in the Thirties*, he conspicuously numbers himself among the radical writers of that decade: “What young writers of the Thirties wanted,” he explained, “was to prove the literary value of *our* experience to recognize the possibility of art in our own lives, to feel that we had moved the streets, the stockyards, the hiring halls into literature – to show that our radical strength could carry on the experimental impulse of modern literature.”¹² These are not the words of a chastened ex-radical-turned-literary cold warrior. Indeed, as *A Walker in the City* demonstrates, Kazin was deeply invested in the project of showing “the literary value” in Jewish working-class experiences. The problem, for him, was the “brutality” and “determinism” he saw as endemic to the literature of the ’30s, representational qualities that he believed negated, rather than revealed, the presence of “art in our own lives.”

⁹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 250; Alan Wald, “In Retrospect: On Native Grounds,” *Reviews in American History* 20, no. 2 (June 1992), 280-81.

¹⁰ Wald, “In Retrospect,” 281.

¹¹ Kazin, “The Jew as American Writer,” 40; Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 12, 136.

¹² Kazin, *Starting Out*, 15; my italics.

Kazin may have overstated his criticism, but he was far from alone in associating representations of Jewish tenement life with a style of blunt, harsh realism. Lionel Trilling had also decried the “strong literary convention [that] decrees” that poverty and hardship must be depicted “in crude (‘stark’) or melodramatic prose,” a style which he believed led to a “falsification” of experiential and moral truth.¹³ The lyricism and warmth with which Kazin recalled the Brownsville of his youth in *A Walker in the City*, like Charles Reznikoff’s urban pastoral, is not an uncritical or nostalgic erasure of the inequalities writ large across the urban landscape, but rather an attempt to clear a space for personal agency and “spiritual insight” in an oppressive environment. Kazin’s poetic prose style, with its heavy debt to the indigenous romanticism of Walt Whitman and the Transcendentalists, was both the vehicle and the expression of his opposition to the blunt, often brutal materialism he associated with the left-wing writers of the ’30s. He did not reject their political investments or their “plebeian” subject matter; on the contrary, he attempted to correct what he saw as their failure to fulfill their ambitions.

“Soft” Sensibility and the Politics of Style

Early reviews of *A Walker in the City* suggest that the innovative nature of Kazin’s representational choices was readily apparent to readers at the time of the book’s publication. Praising its lyrical prose style, reviewers pointed to the memoir’s “extraordinary evocation” of Jewish Brownsville in the 1920s and early ’30s.¹⁴ “There is certainly no recent autobiographer with so exact and lyric a memory,” philosopher (and one-time Anzia Yezieska classmate) Irwin Edman observed in a 1951 review for the *New York Times*, adding,

¹³ Lionel Trilling, “Genuine Writing,” review of *By the Waters of Manhattan*, by Charles Reznikoff, in *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, ed. Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation; University of Maine at Orono, 1984), 371; originally published in *The Menorah Journal* 19, no. 1 (October 1930): 88-92.

¹⁴ Irwin Edman, “Urban Landscape, with Figures,” review of *A Walker in the City*, by Alfred Kazin, *New York Times*, October 28, 1951, 168.

Kazin does not sentimentalize . . . Yet before the reader has finished these 176 pages, he has come to see with sympathetic vision the whole texture, color and sound of life in this tenement realm which is revealed as tapestried, as dazzling, as full of lush and varied richness as an Arabian bazaar.¹⁵

Literary critic Leslie Fiedler makes a similar observation, noting that Kazin “has succeeded in imposing a beauty of honesty and coherence on the seediness and squalor of the world where he began.”¹⁶ This seeming mismatch of subject and sensibility, the blending of poverty and the poetic, made it difficult for reviewers to assimilate *A Walker in the City* into preexisting genres. It was “a sort of perambulatory memoir in lyric form,” according to Brendan Gill of the *New Yorker*, and a “Brownsville Idyll,” as literary historian David Daiches aptly titled his review for *Commentary*.¹⁷

This early awareness of Kazin’s representational innovations, visible when *A Walker in the City* is read alongside other tenement narratives, has been lost in recent years, as critics have reductively viewed the narrative’s treatment of Brownsville as a reflection of postwar “nostalgia for the disappearing way of life of ‘the world of the fathers,’” compounded by “a certain tendency to Whitmanesque lyric effusion.”¹⁸ Such assessments, however, overlook both the historicity and the politics of Kazin’s representational choices. Indeed, his “‘soft’ sensibility,” as Fiedler approvingly termed it, was a calculated rhetorical strategy, an ethics of style with urgent political implications.¹⁹ For Kazin, who described his memoirs as “personal history” – an idiosyncratic form of autobiography whose “passion and beat come from my life in history” –

¹⁵ Edman, “Urban Landscape,” 168; Louise Levitas Henriksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer’s Life*, with assistance from Jo Ann Boydston (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers UP, 1988), 90.

¹⁶ Leslie Fiedler, “The City and the Writer,” review of *A Walker in the City*, in *The Devil Gets His Due: The Uncollected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, ed. Samuele F. S. Pardini (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), 185; originally published in *Partisan Review* 19, no. 2 (March-April 1952): 238-41.

¹⁷ Brendan Gill, “Two Self Portraits,” review of *A Walker in the City*, by Alfred Kazin and *Two Cheers for Democracy*, by E. M. Forster, *New Yorker*, November 17, 1951, 180; David Daiches, “Brownsville Idyll,” review of *A Walker in the City*, *Commentary* 12, no. 6 (December 1952): 604.

¹⁸ Richard H. King, “Emersonian Thinker at Large,” review of *Alfred Kazin: A Biography*, by Richard M. Cook, *Jewish History* 23, no. 1 (2009), 91; Alter, “The Education of Alfred Kazin,” 47-48.

¹⁹ Fiedler, “The City and the Writer,” 185.

the personal was always political, and nowhere more so than in his reflections on his early years in Brownsville.²⁰

Written in the years immediately following the Second World War (according to his own reckoning, Kazin worked on the slim book over the course of four arduous years, from November 1946 to November 1950), *A Walker in the City* was a masked response to the political environment in which he was then uneasily living.²¹ Its implicit critique of what he termed the Depression-era “Revival of Naturalism” targeted the dogmatic literary prescriptions of the Communist left, to which he was opposed both as an advocate for artistic freedom and as a socialist who bitterly recalled “watch[ing] Communists break up socialist meetings” during the 1930s.²² At the same time, Kazin’s poetic, valorizing portrait of working-class Brownsville, with its rich history of solidarity with socialist causes, offered a timely reminder of the idealism – the hope for a better, more egalitarian world – that was becoming increasingly unfashionable and even dangerous in what he described as the Cold War climate of “anti-liberal and anti-intellectual tyranny.”²³

Though a democratic socialist like his father and so many of his classmates and peers, Kazin had never been particularly engaged in the movement, avoiding public activism and

²⁰ Alfred Kazin, “The Self as History: Reflections on Autobiography,” in *Telling Lives: The Biographer’s Art*, ed. Marc Pachter (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books/National Portrait Gallery, 1979), 75.

²¹ Alfred Kazin, *Alfred Kazin’s Journals*, ed. Richard M. Cook (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), 148.

²² Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 363; Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out*, 4. Kazin recalls his horror at watching Communist Party members disrupt a Socialist Party meeting in Madison Square Garden in February of 1934 by “throwing chairs . . . down on the decent trade unionists” who had gathered to protest Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss’s recent massacre of Viennese socialists. For Kazin, this brutal attempt at censorship reflected the spirit of ideological rigidity and intolerance he associated with the literary strictures of the “doctrinaire radicals . . . who worried in the *New Masses* whether Proust should be read after the Revolution and why there seemed to be no simple proletarians in the novels of André Malraux.” *Starting Out*, 4-5.

²³ Cook, *Alfred Kazin*, 144. In *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), Irving Howe describes Brownsville as “[p]redominantly working-class in composition,” adding that “the Brownsville Jewish community took on a distinctive character of its own, with strong religious and socialist segments; Pitkin Avenue, its major thoroughfare, would long be famous as a place where Jewish socialists held street meetings and people buzzed about discussing politics” (132).

staying away from the famous political skirmishes that were waged daily in the alcoves of the City College of New York during his undergraduate years there.²⁴ Nonetheless, socialism provided a set of beliefs and a perspective on the world that were central to his self-conception and sense of social and political morality.²⁵ Kazin later renounced his socialist affiliation, adopting a liberal political stance even as he grew increasingly outspoken in his opposition to the “neoconservative” positions embraced by so many of his contemporaries.²⁶ At the time he was writing *A Walker in the City*, however, he was still a principled, if increasingly disillusioned, advocate of a democratic socialism that stood in opposition “both to Communism and ‘anti-Communism.’”²⁷

In the uncertain and increasingly ominous cultural atmosphere of Cold War America, Kazin turned to the literature and politics of the 1930s in an attempt to recover his generation’s sense of bold possibility while accounting for the flaws in its vision. The young writers of the 1930s had created a literature that spoke to his historical moment and his sense of individual and class identity, but they had gotten it wrong, as he saw it. Kazin would return to these representational issues repeatedly over the course of his long career. Only years before his death in 1998, he applied the critique of “naturalism” he had first developed in *On Native Grounds* to two of the most influential Jewish novels of the Depression, writing a somewhat scurrilous introduction to a 1996 reprint of *Jews Without Money*, and publishing a 1991 essay on novelist Henry Roth’s modernist classic *Call It Sleep* (1934) in the *New York Review of Books* (Kazin had

²⁴ Cook, *Alfred Kazin*, 24-25.

²⁵ Kazin, *Starting Out*, 6.

²⁶ See Alfred Kazin, “Saving My Soul at the Plaza,” *New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1983, 38-42.

²⁷ *Alfred Kazin’s Journals*, 90. Kazin’s politics at the time he was writing *A Walker in the City* are indicated by his decision to vote for the Socialist Party candidate, Norman Thomas, in the 1948 presidential election. *Alfred Kazin’s Journals*, 122.

previously played an important role in the mid-century rediscovery of Roth's novel).²⁸ His late-career writings on these books extend and clarify his earlier critique of Depression-era tenement narratives, revealing the personal investments that informed it. Roth's novel is made to speak for Kazin's own literary project, while Gold's fictionalized memoir stands in as an example of "the abject surrender to naturalism" he had criticized in his first book.²⁹ *Call It Sleep*, he insists, "is not a naturalist novel, in which character is shaped largely by environment . . . Roth presents the city not as an external document but as formed, instant by instant, out of [its protagonist's] perceptions."³⁰ In contrast, *Jews Without Money* is characterized by "Gold's unstoppable insistence that every misfortune in life, every distortion of character, everything we vainly want, is due to poverty and nothing else."³¹ He credits Gold's "single-mindedness on the subject" with the narrative's "emotional authenticity" but suggests that this perspective led to a narrowing of artistic and intellectual possibilities.³²

In Kazin's harsh assessment, this overly simplistic way of thinking had dangerous social implications. After noting at the beginning of the introduction that genteel writers such as Henry James and Henry Adams were "astonished and repelled by the proliferation of Jews" in downtown New York, depicting them as "less than human," he begins his discussion of *Jews Without Money* by charging that Gold, "[o]ddly enough, . . . does not attempt to refute such disparagements and insults about poor Jews on the Lower East Side."³³ This, ultimately, was the failure of literary determinism, as Kazin saw it. The causal logic that attributed crime and social

²⁸ See Alfred Kazin, in "Neglected Books" [often cited as "The Most Neglected Books of the Past 25 Years"], *American Scholar* 25 (Autumn 1956), 486.

²⁹ Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 371.

³⁰ Alfred Kazin, "The Art of 'Call It Sleep,'" *New York Review of Books*, October 10, 1991, 16. Julian Levinson has persuasively argued that Kazin's reading of Roth's novel directly influenced *A Walker in the City. Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008), 164-165.

³¹ Alfred Kazin, introduction to *Jews Without Money*, by Michael Gold (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

deviancy “to poverty and nothing else” inevitably reduced the individual to the sum of his or her economic environment. No room was left for individual perception and growth, for “spiritual insight” or for “the possibility of art in our own lives.” From this perspective, even scenes of communal pleasure and camaraderie lost their value: “Gold does not make any concessions to our real heart’s need, which apparently is not joy in a wine cellar but the [Communist] Messiah who will end poverty forever.”³⁴ In pointed contrast, *A Walker in the City* describes Kazin’s youthful fantasy of a socialist utopia in familiar, domestic terms: “Socialism would be one long Friday evening around the samovar and the cut-glass bowl laden with nuts and fruits, all of us singing *Tsuzamen, tsuzamen, ale tsuzamen!* (Together, together, all together!).”³⁵ The image is intentionally naïve, but it points to the different investments that Kazin brought to his memoir. Whereas Gold premises his vision of the socialist “Messiah” on the destruction of the Lower East Side slums, Kazin casts his utopian longings in the image of a familiar scene of Jewish working-class community.³⁶

Scholars have typically read Kazin’s later writings on Jewish fiction as part of a return to the communal fold after publishing *On Native Grounds*, which has been interpreted as “a work of assimilation” and “one of the era’s most sustained personal efforts at national ‘possession.’”³⁷ There is evidence, however, that Kazin was already actively thinking about the literature of Jewish New York long before he began work on *A Walker in the City*. His first published

³⁴ Ibid., 6.

³⁵ Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1979), 61.

³⁶ Michael Gold, (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 309.

³⁷ Cook, *Alfred Kazin*, 69. Cook’s reading resembles John D. Hazlett’s earlier argument in “Repossessing the Past: Discontinuity and History in Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City*,” *Biography* 7, no. 4 (Fall 1984). Hazlett writes of the memoir’s young protagonist, “[I]t seems clear that the young boy’s search for an American identity entailed the denial of his own cultural past. Ultimately, this denial necessitated the writing of the book [*A Walker in the City*]” in order to recover “the self he lost in his effort to become an American.” (329) Hazlett points to *On Native Grounds* as evidence of the young Kazin’s rejection of his cultural roots, writing in the accompanying endnote that “Kazin’s ‘loss’ of his childhood is reflected indirectly in *On Native Grounds*,” which “conspicuously omits any discussion of the contributions of Jews to American literature” (339n8).

writings for the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, appearing as early as 1935 (seven years before the publication of *On Native Grounds*), include reviews of important novels of working-class New York by Howard Fast, Daniel Fuchs, Isidor Schneider, and Jerome Weidman.³⁸ In these reviews, Kazin also indicates his wider reading in the field, alluding to Gold's and Roth's novels, among other narratives set in the city's Jewish immigrant quarters.

That Kazin had these literary precedents in mind as he began work on his Brownsville memoir is to be expected. In fact, an early typescript draft of *A Walker in the City* contains a telling allusion to Gold and Samuel Ornitz. "In those days," Kazin writes,

we rarely heard of 'proletarian' literature, and even B., our one true Leninist, would snort in contempt when the local C. P. [Communist Party] organizer got us on Pitkin Avenue and... his eyes feverish with pride, would tell us of Samuel Ornitz and Michael Gold, who were writing in the correct Marxist spirit the story of the East Side slums.³⁹

Brownsville was geographically and historically distinct from the "East Side slums," but the two neighborhoods shared important characteristics, prompting comparisons and analogies.⁴⁰

Deborah Dash Moore has called Brownsville "a miniature East Side," citing its "vigorous radical community" among its ideologically diverse political and cultural groups.⁴¹ Although "[l]ong in the Lower East Side's shadow," in Moore's words, Brownsville, like its more famous cousin across the East River, was a demographic and cultural center of Jewish immigrant life in New

³⁸ Alfred Kazin, "Domestic Adventure," review of *Place in the City*, by Howard Fast, *New York Times*, August 8, 1937, Sunday Book Review, 7; Alfred Kazin, review of *Low Company*, by Daniel Fuchs, in "Some of the Leading Spring Fiction," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, February 14, 1937, 8-10X; Alfred Kazin, "A Racketeer Among Fools," review of *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, by Jerome Weidman, *New York Herald Tribune Books*, May 9, 1937, 2X; Alfred Kazin, "Second Generation," review of *From the Kingdom of Necessity*, by Isidor Schneider, *New York Times*, November 10, 1935, Sunday Book Review, 20.

³⁹ Alfred Kazin, unpublished typescripts of *A Walker in the City* with the author's manuscript corrections, vol. 4 (n.d.), the Alfred Kazin Collection of Papers, the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library (hereafter cited as Alfred Kazin Papers), 113a. All materials from the Alfred Kazin Papers are quoted by generous permission of Judith Dunford.

⁴⁰ Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer note, "By 1920, 80 percent of the 100,854 residents of Brownsville were Jewish, and the neighborhood resembled the Lower East Side in its density, poverty, and Jewishness." *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920*, vol. 2 of *City of Promises: A History of the Jews of New York*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 131.

⁴¹ Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home In America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 70-71.

York; in fact, Brownsville was more homogenously Jewish than the Lower East Side ever was.⁴² And while Brownsville was seen as more suburban than its notoriously overcrowded Manhattan counterpart, it also numbered among the city's poorest neighborhoods by the time of the Depression, earning a national reputation for violence and criminality, with no small help from the local crime syndicate, Murder, Inc. Thus, when the Communist Party operative lectured Kazin and his friends on the "correct Marxist spirit" in which to write "the story of the East Side slums," he was also instructing them on how they should see, understand, and, by extension, represent a world to which they could readily compare their own. Kazin omitted the reference to Ornitz from subsequent revisions of the typescript, and finally, several drafts later, he eliminated Gold's name as well. Nevertheless, this early reference to radical tenement narratives – and Kazin's choice of two Jewish novelists as its representatives – is a significant reminder of the hidden polemic at the heart of *A Walker in the City*. It reveals Kazin's awareness of writing within a literary tradition with roots in the interwar period, while simultaneously signaling his intention to revise what he saw as that tradition's overly dogmatic conventions.

Revising Brownsville

From the outset, then, *A Walker in the City* was to be a very different kind of story about New York's "Jews without money." Discarding the polemical, symbolic treatment of sites of Jewish working-class life, the memoir evolves as a series of poetic meditations on the associative, highly literary connections its young protagonist makes between his developing interiority and the sights, scents, and sounds of the city around him. "The book is not and should not be easily labeled," Kazin writes in his unpublished notes on the project.

⁴² Deborah Dash Moore, review of *The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*, by Jerald E. Podair, and *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the ghetto*, by Wendell Pritchett, *American Jewish History* 91, no. 1 (2003): 176; Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 49.

It is not simply autobiography, but more like a meditation, and was often, indeed, written pretty much as one writes a poem. . . .

It is a book first of all about the growth of a soul; and about the city of New York, the capital of the world's immigrants; and about the struggle against an environment which did not afford that boy much spiritual support.⁴³

As this passage makes clear, Kazin conceived of the book less as a story or confession than as a kind of extended poem, a romantic celebration of perceptive interiority as it fastens on the sensory profusion of the world around it, written in the spirit of Walt Whitman's poetry of New York and Henry David Thoreau's essay on "Walking" (1862, discussed in the conclusion of chapter five). In his journal, Kazin refers to the book as "my *Walker* poem," and, as he writes in his unpublished notes, a line from Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," which later served as the memoir's epigraph, inspired the "technique of the book."⁴⁴ That line – "The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings – on the walk in the street, and the passage over the river" – establishes the associative, free-form logic of the memoir while alerting the reader to its poetic ambitions and its ecstatic relationship to the sensory landscape of the city.⁴⁵ "That is what the walker lives in," Kazin notes in a conscious echo of Whitman, "– the seeing, smelling, breathing in, touching, hearing. And one of the greatest themes in the book is the discovery of language and the growing realization by the boy that the ecstasy of the senses and the power of language have an intimate connection."⁴⁶

These lines suggest one of the central tensions of Kazin's memoir. His description of Brownsville as "an environment" that largely denied him "spiritual support" recalls his criticism of the "naturalist" narratives of the 1930s, which he described as being "so riddled with

⁴³ Alfred Kazin, holograph and typescript notes on *A Walker in the City*, with folder inscribed "Notes for the Walker," [1951?], Alfred Kazin Papers, 1-2.

⁴⁴ *Alfred Kazin's Journals*, 217; Kazin, holograph and typescript notes, 2.

⁴⁵ Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in *Leaves of Grass (1850-1881)*, The Modern Student's Library: American Division (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 162.

⁴⁶ Kazin, holograph and typescript notes, 2.

determinism” that “spiritual insight was to be won only by proving how little there was of it in life.”⁴⁷ To depict Brownsville as such an environment would replicate the shortcomings he associated with writers such as Gold, who, though powerful in their outrage, confused the “desire to write violently on violent subjects for a criticism of society.”⁴⁸ Kazin’s ambitions, in contrast, resembled Reznikoff’s goal for his protagonist, Ezekiel: to show “the growth of a soul” and of its powers of literary expression through the walker’s sensory exploration of the city. His intention to use the setting of Brownsville to connect inner growth with the “ecstasy of the senses” – and to show the two as inseparable – could hardly be achieved in a narrative that depicted his childhood neighborhood as a place that “did not offer that boy much spiritual support.” Something would have to give.

As earlier drafts of the memoir reveal, it was the image of Brownsville that changed under the pressure of these literary investments. No one would confuse Kazin’s Brownsville with “the hallowed middle-class districts” of Brooklyn, but absent, for the most part, are the privation, violence, and brutality that Communist writers such as Fast, Gold, Ornitz, and Schulberg so sedulously linked to poverty.⁴⁹ This contrast cannot be attributed solely to geographic and historical differences between Brownsville and the Lower East Side. It should not be forgotten that Kazin’s memoir includes the first years of the Depression or that Brownsville, even before the economic crisis, was notorious for its poverty and crime. In 1947 alone, the year Kazin completed his first rough draft of the memoir, two novels about Jewish criminality and gang violence in Brownsville – Irving Shulman’s *The Amboy Dukes* and David Dortort’s *Burial of the Fruit* – were published to great publicity, reminding American readers of Brownsville’s reputation as a hotbed of violent crime.

⁴⁷ Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 385.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁴⁹ Kazin, *Walker*, 12.

The neighborhood's legendary toughness is also visible in *A Walker in the City*, but its contours are softened and blurred over successive typescript drafts. There is still the trace of violence in his description of the block, but even the suggestion of conflict quickly gives way to a moment of joyous solitude, when, "playing one-o'-cat by myself in the sleepy twilight, at a moment when everyone else had left the block," Kazin covers its length "with perfect satisfaction," "never kn[owing] how happy I was . . ." ⁵⁰ Kazin does not redact all references to violence; they are still present but deemphasized and muted, without the power to shock or inspire fear. Instead, he points to a very different image of the streets of New York. In another echo of Reznikoff's *By the Waters of Manhattan*, Kazin depicts the street, not as a site of danger and temptation, as Gold had done in *Jews Without Money*, where it is home to "perverts, cokefiends, kidnapers, firebugs, Jack the Rippers," but as a path to freedom and discovery, a contemplative space where the young walker learns to reflect on his environment in a prefiguration of his later mastery of it as a writer. ⁵¹ In *A Walker in the City*, the street is the sovereign territory of the young walker, a place whose "intense silence and heat" in summer afternoons "delivered me to all my joy." ⁵²

Kazin was well aware, as were his more historically minded readers, that his warmly valorizing portrait of Jewish Brownsville was more an effect of his literary politics than a reflection of lived experience or an expression of nostalgia for a "disappearing" world of Yiddishkayt. Kazin's feelings for Brownsville did change for the better, but only as a consequence of writing the memoir, not the other way around. Indeed, in consciously reshaping his memories of Brownsville, it would seem that Kazin succeeded in revising his own feelings for the neighborhood as well. In this sense, the entire narrative fulfills the promise of the

⁵⁰ Kazin, *Walker*, 85.

⁵¹ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 60.

⁵² Kazin, "1st draft of Walker," 47/53; Kazin, *Walker*, 156.

pastoralizing view from the roof and the bridge, in which anticipation of authorial control over the urban scene endows it with a sense of harmonious calm. In a journal entry from the fall of 1949, Kazin notes with pleased surprise,

I have been catching in myself these last few days a more sympathetic, unconsciously loving, attitude toward the city, which has nothing to do with *liking* it better. It is merely that the great insight of my recent life has been *acceptance*, an inexpressibly delicious feeling of being *me*, no one else, of not wanting to be anyone else, of being grounded in this life, this city, this body, and in no other.⁵³

This new “insight,” emerging two years after Kazin began work on *A Walker in the City*, was undoubtedly a product of the process of converting memory into memoir. In the latter, he had created a space for agency and “spiritual insight” in his depictions of Brownsville, and having done so, this journal entry suggests, he found himself freer to appreciate the environment he had once described as providing him with so little “spiritual support.”

This act of revision was so apparent to Kazin that, in later years, he would forget how “sociological” his descriptions of Brownsville could seem. Reading Irving Howe’s mild suggestion in *World of Our Fathers* (1976) that his “affectionate stress on the Jewish sources of his sensibility seem[s] mainly the judgment of retrospect,” Kazin was outraged, not that Howe would question the verisimilitude of his representations, but that he felt it necessary in the first place to make what seemed to Kazin so obvious a point.⁵⁴ In a 1980 letter to a graduate student who was writing a dissertation on him and Howe, Kazin wrote, “Imagine taking a book like mine, so obviously ‘constructed,’ based on images, a conscious deliberate literary work in every way and hinting that the experience behind it was different! It was not only different, ... it was

⁵³ Kazin, *Alfred Kazin’s Journals*, 135.

⁵⁴ Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 600.

so different I had to write A WALKER IN THE CITY to forget the difference, to wipe out the pain and insignificance of much behind it.”⁵⁵

This therapeutic process seems to have been largely successful. In the published memoir, Kazin does not attempt to challenge his readers’ association of Brownsville with poverty and social disenfranchisement, but his redaction of the scenes of violence and terror that were conventionally associated with New York’s poorest neighborhoods signals a conscious attempt to revise the image of the Jewish “ghetto” as articulated in the literary traditions discussed in the second, third, and fourth chapters of this dissertation. The poverty remains: “We were the end of the line,” he writes early on in the book. “We were the children of the immigrants who had camped at the city’s back door, in New York’s rawest, remotest, cheapest ghetto...”⁵⁶ The difference is that poverty, in this case, is not presented as a monolithic determinant of culture and behavior. In *A Walker in the City*, the reader encounters familiar material conditions, but a radically different affective and aesthetic response to them. The imaginative agency Kazin exercised over his childhood memories during the process of composing the memoir is thus projected onto the experiences of his youth, giving the young walker a sense of freedom in – and control over – his immediate environment.

Interwar and Postwar: Conclusion

This new perspective on Brownsville can be seen most clearly in the epicurean delight the young walker takes in the sensory details of his neighborhood and the surrounding city. Indeed, this pleasure in detail is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Kazin’s prose style as it emerges in the published version of the memoir: the long, rhythmic enumerations of sight,

⁵⁵ Alfred Kazin to Eric Glaberson, 29 April 1980, Alfred Kazin Papers, 2.

⁵⁶ Kazin, *Walker*, 12.

sound, and smell, and the lyrical, associative flights of imagination they inspire. The following passage is representative of his descriptions of the urban landscape:

Walking with my mother to the El at the other end of Sutter Avenue, I would stop under the awning of the remnants store to watch the light falling through the holes in the buttons lining the window, and as we went past Belmont Avenue would stare in hungry pleasure at the fruits and vegetables on the open stands, the cherries glistening with damp as the storekeeper walked under his awning lightly passing a watering can over them; I would smell the sweat on the horses pulling the Italians' watermelon wagons — 'Hey you ladies! *Freschi* and good!'; and breathe in the cloying sweetness of the caramels and chocolate syrup in the candy wholesaler's, the fumes of Turkish cigarettes from the 'Odessa' and 'Roumanian' tearooms, the strange sweetness from the splintered crates where blotches of rotted fruit could still be seen crushed against the nailheads.⁵⁷

All of the senses except touch are invoked in this passage, and Kazin's delight in them is unmistakable. In passages like this one – and there are many of them – the mundane details of the life of the Brownsville streets and tenements become invitations to the sublime, to transcendent joy and revelation. It is a world in which “everything is so rich to overflowing,” where the “old drugstore on the corner” is “the most exciting threshold I had ever crossed” and “[r]ipeness filled our kitchen,” a room “so wild with light, it made me tremble.”⁵⁸ Kazin's consciously poeticizing treatment of the tawdry, everyday details of life in Brownsville not only demonstrates the individual's ability to develop refined literary sensibilities despite the material poverty of the environment in which he or she is raised; it grounds this sensibility in the very environment whose transcendence it is supposed to mark, implicitly arguing that aesthetic, cultural, and moral riches are no less available in poor Brownsville than in the city's wealthier neighborhoods.

If the earliest drafts of *A Walker in the City* contain more direct references to the brutality of daily life in Brownsville's streets and schoolyards, they are also more explicit about Kazin's desire to redeem the neighborhood from what others saw as its historical insignificance. “I hated

⁵⁷ Ibid., 136-37.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 73, 113, 163.

to admit that I was the only one interested in the history of my native place,” Kazin writes in an early typescript.

What I did get from my inquiries was never a dependable fact, but a deepening revelation of how little of its local history is known in New York, of how few New Yorkers – except for a handful of amateurish and pitifully snobbish antiquarians, court chroniclers to the old ruling families – are even interested in it; even as a boy I knew that I would have to dig out the most elementary facts about despised Brownsville for myself – not in libraries, where there was hardly any material on the place, but on my walks, from the iconography of the streets themselves. History, and especially the most intimate local history of my family in its migrations, of my neighborhood, of my people, of my city – of all I lived with – was my first intellectual passion... And so I started with the streets I walked every day, and when I discovered in the local libraries how sparse and how dubious were all those formal accounts of local neighborhood history – (I was always getting hurt by their polite but unmistakable bitterness against the ‘swarm of Jews from Eastern Europe’) – I went back to those streets – (they were already the great workshop of my senses) – to discover for myself the historical texture in the life all around me.⁵⁹

Kazin’s fiercely defensive relationship to “despised Brownsville” is palpable in these lines. In the published version of the memoir, the young walker’s fascination with recent American history and with the worlds of his reading is more easily interpreted as a sign of his longing for escape and assimilation, whereas this earlier typescript reveals that his long walks and his fascination with the “historical texture in the life all around” him began with his investment in the history “of my neighborhood, of my people,” and in his deep-seated resentment of the genteel snobbery and antisemitism of the “court chroniclers” whose attention was focused on the city’s wealthier districts.

That Brownsville merited a more deeply invested and respectful historical record is taken for granted, not only because of Kazin’s strong identification with the neighborhood, but because of its status as “one of the largest Jewish settlements in the world, an unforgettable landmark in the history of Israel,” as Kazin writes in the first typescript draft of the memoir.⁶⁰ His defensive stance toward Brownsville should not be confused, however, with uncritical affection. On the

⁵⁹ Kazin, unpublished typescripts, vol. 1, 15.

⁶⁰ Kazin, “1st draft of Walker,” 8.

contrary, it can be more clearly understood in comparison to Anzia Yeziarska's invocation of her Lower East Side background as a means of authenticating her literary politics. While Yeziarska substantiates her radical authorial persona through furious denunciations of the material and social inequalities manifest in the East Side tenements and sweatshops, however, Kazin offers a corrective to the view, expressed by Sonya Vrunsky in *Salome of the Tenements*, that the "struggle for a living makes men coarse-grained and greedy . . ." ⁶¹ Kazin's feelings for Brownsville were deeply ambivalent, but to adopt the convention of portraying the city's Jewish "ghettos" as deterministic "jungles" or "wastelands" would be to betray his personal experience of the neighborhood's streets as "the great workshop of my senses." It would also fail to do justice to Brownsville's status as a distinctively American, working-class chapter "in the history of Israel."

The political dimensions of Kazin's defense of Brownsville have gone largely unremarked by scholars who have overlooked the memoir's relationship to pre-WWII literary contexts, reading it as a manifestation of postwar filiopietism. ⁶² To understand how Kazin's identification with Brownsville might contribute to his sense of political identity and allegiance, however, we must once again turn to the historical context of the decade in which he began his career, to the period of national crisis and the consequent radicalization of American letters during the Great Depression. The culture of the anti-Fascist Popular Front (1935-39) brought new sympathetic attention to the experiences of the working-class and the oppression of Jews, whose plight in Europe was becoming increasingly apparent as the decade progressed. To be the son of Jewish workers in this fraught context was thus to be doubly marked by the political discourses of the age. Kazin was primed, moreover, to recognize the larger political significance

⁶¹ Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 6.

⁶² Alter, "The Education of Alfred Kazin," 47.

of his Brownsville childhood by works such as those by Fast, Gold, Ornitz, and Yeziarska, which presented the Jewish ghettos of New York as strategic battlegrounds in the fight against economic inequality and ethnic discrimination. As a young writer coming up in the radical climate of 1930s New York, then, Kazin was ideally situated to recognize the historical significance of his own identity and background. “There are times in history,” he explains, “when a group feels that it is at the center of events. Poor as we were, anxious, lonely, it seemed to me obvious that everywhere, even in Hitler Germany, to be outside of society and to be Jewish was to be at the heart of things... I did not mind being poor, Jewish, excluded, for I knew that history was on the side of such things . . .”⁶³ In this passage, Kazin gently mocks his youthful assumptions, but he does so to illustrate both the political atmosphere of the times and the sense of experiential authority and authenticity his identification with Jewish working-class Brownsville gave him.

Of course, this historically minded appraisal of his childhood may also be “the judgment of retrospect,” to use Howe’s phrase; nevertheless, it is certain that a sense of historical centrality powerfully informed Kazin’s literary treatment of his childhood neighborhood in *A Walker in the City*. From the vantage point of the postwar years, the Brownsville of his youth, where Sabbath evenings had given him an image of proletarian solidarity as communal warmth and camaraderie, presented an achingly poignant alternative to the extreme ideologies of both sides of the Cold War political spectrum. “Can it be that the *Walker* was written out of nostalgia for my poor, old, revolutionary home,” Kazin wondered in a journal entry from July, 1957, “— can it be that my obsession more and more with the heroic isolation and eternal fightingness of the

⁶³ Kazin, *Starting Out*, 47-48. This passage describes how Kazin felt in 1935, but it is clear from his other writings that he sustained this perspective over the course of his long career. In *New York Jew* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), he writes in similar language, “We [Jews] had been stage center at all the great intellectual dramas and political traumas of this century.” (293)

real, the true Jews, the few Jews, deals also with this longing for the old militancy, the old expanse?”⁶⁴ This question is implicitly answered in the affirmative in Kazin’s first memoir, as well as in subsequent publications, yet the “nostalgia” he invokes is not for a lost world of Jewish tradition, but for the radicalism and socialist hopes of his “poor, old, revolutionary home.” When asked in 1983 to talk about his relationship to Brooklyn, Kazin presented his childhood experiences as an education in class consciousness: “A great deal of Brooklyn for me has to do with poverty and the life of the immigrant working class,” he begins.

I’ve always had a great sense of social antagonism because of my early background. I think I benefited very much from growing up in a cold-water flat in Brownsville with hardworking and rather desperately poor parents. It gave me a sense of what really goes on in American life. So that when a great many Jews of my generation have turned what is called neoconservative and are proud of their connections with power, I look upon them with distrust. Brooklyn gave me a lasting sense of the kind of powerlessness and suffering that are endemic in our society.⁶⁵

Kazin’s affirmative representations of Brownsville do not attempt to gloss over this “powerlessness and suffering.” Instead, they show how these experiences might be morally ennobling and intellectually stimulating, as well as taxing and degrading.

Writing *A Walker in the City* in the midst of what was, for him, the age of disillusionment, Kazin turned to the Brownsville of the 1920s and early ’30s to recover the sense of political possibility and the faith in organized efforts to create a better, more just world that he associated with the neighborhood and community of his youth. So too did Kazin turn to the genre of the tenement narrative, which had emerged from the Jewish ghettos of New York during those same years. Although a conscious revision of the polemical, symbolic ways of seeing emblemized by the trope of the garden in the jungle and the polemical cityscape of Yiddish Coney Island, Kazin’s invocation of Brownsville as a signifier of political and ethnic allegiances

⁶⁴ Alfred Kazin’s *Journals*, 221.

⁶⁵ Alfred Kazin, in “Brooklyn, Borough of Writers,” compiled by Lyle Rexer, *New York Times*, May 8 1983, A12.

engages the conventions of the working-class genre of the interwar tenement narrative. In particular, it resonates with Yeziarska's understanding of the political significance of writing under the sign of the Jewish ghetto. Of all the narratives discussed in "Plotting Gotham," however, Reznikoff's *By the Waters of Manhattan*, with its emphasis on walking as a device for asserting imaginative agency within the urban environment, is *A Walker in the City*'s most immediate precursor. From the remove of over half a century, both books' affirmative depictions of the New York cityscape might seem evidence of the distortions of nostalgic hindsight. When read within the context of the intertextual tradition of New York tenement narratives, however, it becomes possible to recover their more immediate significance and meaning for their authors and for their contemporary readers.

If reading *A Walker in the City* as a response to – and a continuation of – interwar literary traditions sheds light on Kazin's representational choices and investments, it also reveals the resonant continuities between interwar and postwar Jewish writing. World War II and the postwar upward mobility and suburbanization of American Jews, despite their wide-reaching ramifications for Jewish communal life, did not mark an end to the literary traditions discussed in the preceding chapters. During the latter half of the century, Jewish authors continued to add to the architecture of the intertextual cityscape constructed by the writers brought together in these pages. Indeed, important novels and memoirs from the postwar period – Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957), which Leslie Fiedler called "a belated novel of the Thirties"; Meredith Tax's *Rivington Street* (1982), set on the turn-of-the-century Lower East Side; and E. L. Doctorow's semi-autobiographical *World's Fair* (1985), set in the Depression-era Bronx – return to the gritty tenement landscape and working-class concerns of pre-World War II New York.⁶⁶ Yet other

⁶⁶ Leslie Fiedler, "Jewish Americans, Go Home!," in *Waiting for the End: The American Literary Scene from Hemingway to Baldwin* (New York: Stein & Day, 1964), 92.

works, such as Grace Paley's stories (published between 1959 and 1985) and Jonathan Lethem's recent novel *Dissident Gardens* (2013), adapt the urban, neighborhood-oriented sensibility and the leftist politics of the tenement narrative to stories of lower-middle-class Jewish life in postwar New York. In a different vein, Saul Bellow's narratives of alienation and interracial violence in a hostile, disorienting Gotham – *The Victim* (1947) and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) – can be productively read as increasingly reactionary appropriations of the trope of the barbarous urban jungle and as attempts to replot the predominantly left-wing Jewish literary politics of place.

All of these works, in different ways, revise, challenge, and reinvigorate the New York literary traditions analyzed in this dissertation, implicitly drawing on interwar writers' close association of Jewish ethnicity and political allegiance with the city's Jewish working-class neighborhoods and leisure sites. Long after these neighborhoods had ceased to be centers of Jewish cultural life, writers returned to them as sources of literary inspiration and as loci of an indigenously American form of secular Jewish ethnicity. Yet such returns were more than nostalgic trips down memory's crowded thoroughfares. For twentieth-century Jewish writers, postwar as well as interwar, the working-class quarters of New York offered widely recognizable cultural reference points for affirming or challenging Jewish commitments to economic and racial justice, to feminist politics and to communal continuity. Resonant with cultural memory, freighted with political symbolism, these points on the map of New York City were the living backdrop against which the drama of twentieth-century Jewish literary culture was enacted.

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