

BLOOD AND IRON: NEGOTIATING A HYBRID IDENTITY IN ANZIA YEZIERSKA'S *BREAD GIVERS*

DIANE TODD BUCCI

The first waves of European immigrants, especially those from eastern Europe, encountered many obstacles in America, but especially challenging was the identity crisis that they experienced when they were confronted with an unwelcoming host society. While theorist Judith Butler does not explicitly address race in *Gender Trouble*, in her discussion of identity formation, she explains that 'the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself' (xv). In fact, the same can be said of immigrants and the formation of their American identities, and while they may have a difficult time defining the variable notion of 'American', they know what it is not: the unassimilated immigrant that they see in themselves. Thus, because they were eager to overcome their minority status and wanted to be recognised as Americans, being 'un-American' was undesirable, so European immigrants willingly assimilated by shedding traits that identified them as outsiders. Sometimes the transformation was superficial; for example, greenhorns were quick to dress in American styles. At other times, though, the change was far more momentous in that it might lead to a complete rejection of the immigrant's cultural ties. Ultimately, an often unacknowledged aspect of 'American success' is overcoming the fractured self that many members of ethnic minorities experience because of their developing, and often conflicting, bicultural identities.

Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* tells this familiar story of an orthodox Jewish family coming to America to escape political and financial repression in their homeland of Poland. Reb Smolinsky's wife's and daughters' identities are shaped by his fiercely religious, patriarchal beliefs: 'God didn't listen to women.... Women had no brains for the study of God's Torah, but they could be the servants of men who studied the Torah' (9-10). Reb believes that a Jewish woman has little to hope for as an individual; instead, the whole of her identity is defined by her role as wife and mother. Reb's daughters unquestioningly obey their father and accept their prescribed identities except, that is, for Sara, the youngest Smolinsky and, understandably, the daughter most influenced by America. Sara does not accept her father's rigid interpretation of the Torah; instead, she is drawn to American ideals and the possibilities that

exist for women in America. Certainly, novels that focus on the formative years of a protagonist show that character's evolving self in conflict; indeed, this coming of age novel portrays Sara negotiating the identity crisis that she experiences as she confronts both gender and cultural expectations as she struggles to become an independent woman in the New World. The novel portrays a series of events that illustrate Sara's development into an Americanised individual, the legacy of which, as noted, required denial of the ethnic self and, indeed, Sara finds satisfaction in her American solitude; however, there are also moments when Sara feels achingly alone. I would like to argue that Sara's true growth occurs when she recognises that, although she achieves the so-called American Dream, she must accommodate her Jewish roots, and in turn accept the Jewish part of her fragmented identity to experience complete fulfilment. It is because of this reconciliation and acceptance that, contrary to much critical opinion, the novel has a hopeful ending.

Chip Rhodes notes that *Yeziarska* was '[f]amous in her day as a Horatio Alger-esque figure who succeeded through tenacity and talent' (295), and indeed, it is with the ambition of the mythic rags-to-riches Alger character that Sara, *Yeziarska's* literary doppelganger, pursues her America-inspired goals. In his discussion of the portrayal of the self-made man in American fiction, John G. Cawelti explains that among the values embodied by Alger's characters is 'hard work' (121). Like Alger's heroes, Sara begins her journey to independence when she is a child, and her understanding that hard work is required to be an American is evidence of her acceptance of American ideals. The need for money was so great for immigrant families that children were expected to work, and young Sara's 'job' is to search the neighbourhood for unburned pieces of coal and wood to heat the family's apartment. In her study of lower East Side immigrant women, Elizabeth Ewen notes that this was not uncommon: 'Both foreign and native-born working-class families tried to offset the expense of heat by utilizing the "city forest": wood from abandoned construction sites, industrial debris, and pieces of coal from the railroad tracks, dock areas, or fallen from the delivery truck' (152). Ewen adds, 'In fact, a large part of the minimum necessary to support life could be picked up on the streets by boys and girls whose hunting instincts have been sharpened by necessity' (153). But despite the fact that it was not uncommon for a child to scavenge, doing so makes Sara feel 'like a beggar and thief' (*Yeziarska* 6). Even at ten, self-respect is a fundamental part of her identity: young Sara is determined to make an honest living and even resists charity. When Muhmenkeh, a helpful neighbour, offers to give her herring for nothing, Sara refuses: 'I'm no beggar!' (21), she insists. Instead, Sara uses her only quarter to

purchase the herring which she then peddles to earn money to help the family pay the rent: 'I want to go into business like a person' (21) and '[e]arning twenty-five and sometimes thirty to fifty cents a day made me feel independent, like a real person', claims the young entrepreneur (21, 28). These feelings of independence help to validate Sara's emerging Americanised identity, but still Sara is not satisfied with such meagre rewards: 'More and more I began to think inside myself, I don't want to sell herring for the rest of my days. I want to learn something. I want to do something. I want some day to make myself for a person and come among people [sic]' (66), so she takes another job in a paper-box factory where she is 'the quickest "hand" on the floor' and earns 'bigger wages than the big women' (89). These actions exhibit Sara's work ethic, yet she is frustrated that, in spite of her determination, she cannot rise above her working-class, immigrant status. One day she reads about a young woman like herself, 'slaving away in the shop. Her hair was already turning gray, and nothing had ever happened to her. Then suddenly she began to study in the night school, then college. And worked and studied, on and on, till she became a teacher in the schools' (155). This story enables Sara to recognise that to escape the oppression of the ghetto, she must do more than work hard; she must transform her identity by obtaining an education. This, too, is a necessity in the Alger success stories: as Cawelti notes, the hero 'has to educate himself' (118).

Indeed, Sara's persistence does not falter as she pursues her goal of becoming educated, and she recognises that it will be a solitary pursuit. Sara takes a job working long hours in a laundry and attends night school, and she finds a filthy room in a tenement that costs more than she can afford. She must bribe the woman by paying a month's rent in advance, but Sara is determined to have solitude in her quest. Despite the refusal of many landlords to rent to a single woman, Sara is unrelenting: she must not share a room. Ewen notes the significance of an immigrant woman living alone: 'Only in rare cases did young women move out to live and manage [on] their own' (108). Sara identifies having a room of her own with a door to ensure privacy as the 'bottom starting-point of becoming a person' (159), and she values the 'stillness' that she experiences for the first time in her life: 'I, alone with myself, was enjoying myself for the first time as with grandest company' (157). Given her strong familial and cultural ties, Sara's self-interest is unusual. Ewen explains that '[t]he sense of [family] obligation was strong among [immigrant] daughters' (105). In her introduction to the 1975 edition of the novel, Alice Kessler Harris writes, '[W]hen a woman's autonomy involved the search for personal fulfillment, it

became nothing short of revolutionary' (ix). Sara, however, is like the New Woman of America. According to Nancy F. Cott,

By the early twentieth century it was a commonplace that the New Woman stood for self-development as contrasted to self-sacrifice or submergence in the family. Individualism for women had come of age, so to speak. The material conditions of wage-earning and urban settlement made it feasible for a significant minority of women to distinguish themselves from the lot of women, to assert individual choice in livelihood, personal relationships and habit of dress and living. (39)

In sharp contrast to the New Woman was the immigrant woman, for whom '[e]stablishing one's independence was often equated with getting married' (Ewen 229). But it is not surprising that Sara does not marry a respectable suitor, Max Goldstein. Christie Launius believes that Sara refuses Max because she realises that her 'desire for education and class mobility is incompatible with romance and marriage to a working-class man' (127). However, there is greater significance to this rejection because although Max has adopted some of the ways of the New World, he continues to subscribe to a patriarchal interpretation of the Torah. In her discussion of the heterosexual matrix, Butler notes that 'the bride...does not *have* an identity' (*Gender Trouble* 50). Indeed, Sara does not marry Max because she realises that he is much like the domineering Old World father who has denied Sara's identity: 'To [Max] a wife would only be another piece of property' (199). Knowing that marriage to Max would not permit her the autonomy that she craves, Sara again chooses independence and continues her pursuit of an education. This is when it becomes most apparent that Sara has rejected the values of her family, for even her sisters are disappointed when she refuses to marry Max. Fania asks Sara, 'who wants to be an old maid?' (177), and she questions Sara's desire to be educated: 'For what does a girl need to be so educated? You can read and write. You know enough' (174). However, Sara believes, 'I'm smart enough to look out for myself. It's a new life now. In America, women don't need men to boss them' (137). Clearly, it is the influence of the New World that causes Sara to shun the Old World beliefs that define her family and, especially, her father. Sara tells Reb, 'Thank God, I'm not living in olden times. Thank God, I'm living in America! You made the lives of the other children! I'm going to make my own life!' (137-38). To her

family's dismay, Sara rejects them, her culture's traditions and, concomitantly, the ethnic part of herself. 'The Old World had struck its last on me' (138), she proclaims in a major act of rebellion that firmly establishes her identity as a self-motivated American individual.

When Sara lights out for unfamiliar territory on her solitary journey to college, she associates herself with other mythic pioneers who have pursued their dreams in America: 'I felt like Columbus starting out for the other end of the earth. I felt like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homeland and all their kin behind them and trailed out in search of the New World' (208). Sara, too, has left behind her family and all that is familiar and, indeed, the college town is a New World for Sara because it is unlike anything she has experienced. She sees an idyllic version of America that is a sharp contrast to the crowded, filthy New York ghetto to which she is accustomed. She notices

a town of quiet streets, shaded with green trees. No crowds, no tenements. No hurrying noise to beat the race of the hours. Only a leisured quietness whispered in the air.... Each house had its own green grass in front, its own free space all around, and it faced the street with the calm security of being owned for generations, and not rented by the month from a landlord. (210)

The residents of this quaint town are privileged, native-born Americans and, unlike Sara, they have not been hardened by the suffering of immigrant life. Sara observes, 'So these are the real Americans.... There was in them that sure, settled look of those who belong to the world in which they were born' (210-11). More than ever, Sara is aware that despite her attempts to assimilate and notwithstanding the fact that she self-identifies as an American, she remains an outsider in America.

Ironically, the American solitude that Sara cherishes is sometimes painful as she learns about the enormous value that is placed on appearances in America. During her years of dogged mobility, Sara finds it difficult to fit in with the Americanised young women and men she encounters. At the laundry she studies while the other girls laugh together over their lunches. 'A longing to join the crowd and be happy with them came over me' (179), says Sara, but her dreary Old World clothes identify her as an outsider and prevent her from belonging. Barbara A. Schreier explores the importance of clothing for the Jewish woman who is attempting to assimilate and explains: 'To newly arrived immigrants a change of clothes was the most visible way they could

identify themselves as American Jews. This first act of initiation helped to blur the obvious differences between the “greenhorn” and the “real” American’ (50). Desperate to overcome her greenhorn status and be accepted, Sara buys lipstick, lace collars, and roses for her hat, hoping that her altered appearance will make her more like the other Americanised girls. However, as Schreier explains, ‘Some women learned the painful lesson that Americans established their own code of social rank for newcomers and that assimilation went far beyond material possessions’ (12). Indeed, this superficial change does not enable Sara to overcome her working–class status, and the girls laugh at her awkward attempts: ‘I turned to my work, raw with the shame that I had tried to be like the rest and couldn’t’, says Sara (183). At college, Sara is even more conscious of her conspicuous appearance: ‘What a sight I was in my gray pushcart clothes against the beautiful gay colours and the fine things those young girls wore’ (212). Again, Sara does not fit in: ‘I kept asking myself, “What’s the matter with me? Why do they look at me so when I talk with them?”’ (214). Once more, she is certain that ‘if I could only look a little bit like other girls on the outside, maybe I could get in with them’ (214). Again, Sara is bitterly disappointed: when the fresh collar that she adds to her worn dress does not transform her, she realises that her perceived identity as an immigrant renders her invisible to the ‘real’ Americans: ‘I was nothing and nobody. It was worse than being ignored. Worse than being an outcast. I simply didn’t belong. I had no existence in their young eyes’ (219). Butler wonders, ‘by virtue of what exteriority is recognition conferred...? [U]nder what conditions do some individuals acquire a face, a legible and visible face, and others do not? (‘Giving an Account’ 23). Ultimately, Sara’s native–born contemporaries recognise her presence by cheering for her when she wins an essay contest. This is a significant moment, not simply because Sara is awarded one thousand dollars, but because her classmates’ acknowledgement of her is proof that she is no longer invisible to them. So while Rhodes claims that ‘Sara’s occasional attempts to be accepted socially [at college]...all fail’ (305), he is incorrect. In fact, Yeziarska’s point is that education empowered and transformed Sara, thereby making her visible to her peers, and this is evidence that, in fact, character and brains that have been honed by an education *do* reap rewards. Rhodes admits that ‘education becomes the “great equalizer”’ (304) and ‘is designed to give its recipient a sense of selfhood’ (301) and, indeed, it has, in the eyes of Sara’s peers as well as herself, for when she returns to New York after four years at college, she proclaims that she has ‘changed into a person’ (237).

Sara's prize money enables her to shop on Fifth Avenue at the Sport Shop, 'where the college girls get their college clothes' (239). Sara admires the fine clothing in the window, and she instructs the salesperson, 'Show me the best' (240). In addition to a suit, Sara buys 'shoes, stockings, new underwear, gloves, and fine handkerchiefs' (240). Cawelti notes that for Alger's protagonists, the 'most crucial event in the hero's life is his acquisition of a good suit' (118). In his discussion of how an individual's identity is defined by possessions, Andrew R. Heinze confirms the significance of this purchase for an immigrant: 'In the world of Jewish newcomers, the new suit of clothes...became *symbolic* luxuries...because they stood for something other than what they were' (14). Indeed, this is an important moment for Sara because the suit is tangible proof of her accomplishments. In her discussion of the role of clothing in Yeziarska's work, Katherine Stubbs explains that 'women's ready made clothing was...imitative' (162). In fact, Sara's attempt to emulate the girls in the laundry is just that: imitative. She has yet to rise above her immigrant status. On the other hand, several years have passed and, it is significant to note, Sara has been empowered by a college education when she shops on Fifth Avenue, and she is not purchasing a cheap representation of what the college girls wear because she is, in fact, purchasing *precisely what they wear*. Schreier notes that 'the dark blue serge suit that she guards so zealously symbolizes her transformation into a successful, educated, "real American" woman' (2). Indeed, Sara's ability to afford these high-quality accoutrements is an indication, albeit a superficial one, that she has transcended her immigrant status and is a 'real American'. More to the point, though, is that education has been the key element in enabling this transformation, not the material trappings of consumerism.

Sara is amazed by her success: 'I, Sara Smolinsky, had done what I had set out to do. I was now a teacher in the public schools. And this was but the first step in the ladder of my new life. I was only at the beginning of things' (241). It is no coincidence that the third and final section of the novel, 'The New World', begins here, with her new life. It could, just as easily, end here, with a classic American ending: through hard work and determination, Sara becomes educated, finds gainful employment, and is able to afford American luxuries, all components that comprise the myth of the 'American Dream'. But the novel does not end here, in fact, because the novel is not about achievement of the American Dream; it is about coming to terms with one's authentic identity. So although Sara is proud of her success, she is unhappy because while she is living the life of the successful American individual that she coveted, loneliness haunts her. Despite the fact that American individualism has appealed to her,

there is an element of the American individual that is off-putting to Sara. For example, when the family moves to Elizabeth, New Jersey to run a grocery store, Sara dislikes the ‘lonesome street, at the edge of a dead town’ (128). She cannot bear the stillness of the small town and its aloof residents. She notices a ‘wooden-faced American farmer’ (130), and believes that living there ‘was like living among walking chunks of ice. The each-for-himself look froze me to the bone’ (128–29). At college, Sara is disappointed by the unresponsive students. She wonders, ‘Was the college only a factory, and the teachers machines turning out lectures by the hour on wooden dummies, incapable of response?’ (224). So although Sara has been influenced by American ways, it is obvious that the core of her authentic identity remains connected to the Old World, and she comes to realise that American individualism does not suit her. She longs for the company of her family: ‘Even in our worst poverty we sat around the table, together, like people’, reflects Sara (173). Kessler Harris notes that ‘on the way to successful Americanization lay another kind of anguish. Becoming an American cut women off from their culture and their past. It brought the fearful recognition that they were adrift in the world’ (xiv). Despite the satisfaction that she feels because of her many accomplishments, Sara is emotionally adrift and feels the absence of the anchorage that her family can provide. As Gay Wilentz notes, ‘on the surface of this novel, Sara succeeds in the Anglo-American world she longed to penetrate, but...Sara finds the rewards empty because of the loss of her cultural identity’ (38). Native American writer William Bevis observes that American literature focuses on the journey of the individual:

American whites keep leaving home: *Moby Dick*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Great Gatsby* — a considerable number of American ‘classics’ tell of leaving home to find one’s fate farther and farther away.... The Bildungsroman, or story of a young man’s personal growth, became in America, especially, the story of a young man or woman leaving home for better opportunities in a new land. (16)

Bevis refers to this type of writing as ‘leaving plots’, and he believes that they ‘embody quite clearly the basic premise of success in our mobile society. The individual advances, sometimes at all cost, with little or no regard for family, society, past, or place. The individual is the ultimate reality’ (16). In contrast, explains Bevis, ‘In Native American novels,

coming home, staying put, contracting, even what we call “regressing” to a place, it is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good’ (16). Thus, although Sara’s tale of assimilation and upward mobility is, on the surface, a leaving plot in which Sara cultivates her Americanised identity, she comes to recognise the value of her familial and cultural ties and understands that she must, ironically, ‘regress’ and reunite with her family.

Indeed, it is obvious that Sara is Americanised because she no longer speaks in a Yiddish dialect but instead uses Standard English. Cawelti notes that eliminating ‘slang and colloquialisms from his speech’ was also important to the Alger character’s development of an Americanised self (117). Additionally, at her mother’s funeral, she refuses to have her clothing cut, which is an important Jewish funeral ritual. Not participating in this cultural tradition is another way that Sara demonstrates, as one mourner comments, that she is an ‘*Americanerin!*’ (255). In his discussion of immigrant behaviour, John Higham explains that immigrants ‘who cast off the old ways and the old identity became in speech and manners indistinguishable from the native white population, [and] gradually faded into’ America (177). Certainly Sara could have continued on the path to upward mobility by blending into middle-class America; however, as Carol Batker notes, ‘New Womanhood for Yeziarska involves a return to a wage-earning Jewish immigrant community and a rejection of middle class domesticity’ (86). In her discussion of Yeziarska’s novel *Salome of the Tenements*, Natalie Friedman observes:

The immigrant characters in the novel do not succumb to the seductive lure of American middle-class upward mobility, which requires an erasure of their past identities and an abandonment of the Lower East Side. Sonya [the novel’s protagonist], can thrive only when she remains within the close quarters of her people (Jewish immigrants) and her enclave (the Lower East Side). (178)

The same can be said of Sara because despite her earlier determination to flee the ghetto, Sara regresses: she returns to her old neighbourhood to teach English to Jewish children. But this regression should not be regarded as a step backward because by returning to the ghetto as an educator, Sara will enable her poor Jewish students to be empowered by education, just as she was. Sara’s acceptance of her ties to her culture is also evidenced by her plans to marry a man with a similar background.

Hugo Seelig, the principal at her school, is also a Jew. Hugo's and Sara's 'beginnings were the same.... Our families had uprooted themselves from the same land and adventured out to the New World' (277). Hugo is interested in their heritage and asks Reb to teach him Hebrew. Although he is not an American-born man, Hugo has been influenced by the New World. Sara describes Hugo as 'a dreamer' who is 'not like Father with his eyes on the past' (272). Hugo respects the Americanised Sara's independence and her choice to be a working woman, yet he also places value on their Old World ties, best illustrated by his support of Sara's reconciliation with her father.

Sara's willingness to reunite with her father is the greatest evidence of her understanding of her true self and shows her acceptance of her cultural ties. This reunion is, in fact, proof that Sara 'has mediated a place between her own culture and the dominant one' (Wilentz 38). Sara recognises that she 'got the iron for the fight' from her father (Yeziarska 279), who called her 'Blood and Iron' when she was a child. In her discussion of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, Butler notes that 'one can only tell an autobiography, one can only reference an "I" in relation to a "you": without the "you", my own story becomes impossible' ('Giving an Account' 24). Thus, in order for Sara's self to be complete, she must acknowledge the part of her self that she got from her father. By acknowledging what she and her father share, Sara has grown and come full circle, which should not be interpreted negatively, because, in fact, she has come to see her authentic self:

I suddenly realized that I had come back to where I had started twenty years ago when I began my fight for freedom. But in my rebellious youth, I thought I could escape by running away. And now I realized that the shadow of the burden was always following me, and here I stood face to face with it again. (295)

Finally, Sara acknowledges that although negotiating the divide between her Old and New World identities is difficult, she cannot deny her ties to her Jewish culture: 'I felt the shadow still here, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me' (297). Indeed, Butler notes that 'we cannot exist without addressing the Other and without being addressed by the other' ('Giving an Account' 25), so a denial of her father and a denial of her culture is, in fact, a denial of her self. Martin Japtok points out that 'although Sara has achieved the goals set by her individualist strivings, duty and love are bonds that tie her irrevocably to family and community' (27).

Wilentz observes that Sara ‘gains her rights as an independent woman choosing the man and career that she wants and is still a part of her ancient heritage’ (38). Thus, in her portrayal of Sara, Yeziarska demonstrates that one need not become a generic ‘American’ because as Butler points out, ‘No matter how much we each desire recognition and require it, we are not therefore precisely the same as the Other’ (‘Giving an Account’ 25). In fact, the very nature of what it means to be American is not fixed. Wilentz believes that: ‘As many Jewish immigrant writers have recorded, the price of Americanization was high — the loss of Jewish traditions and the rich, cultural life of the *shtetl*’ (34); however, Yeziarska shows that the two cultures can co-exist and, as a result, a hybrid ethnicity is formed, one that is a ‘product of the old world ethnicity represented by her father and the influences of the new world environment’ (Japtok 28). Indeed, it is because of her acceptance of her hybrid identity that Sara’s is a true success story.

However, not all critics believe that the novel ends on a positive note. Renny Christopher explicitly states, ‘The novel does not have a happy ending’ (93), Rhodes calls it ‘uneasy’ (311), and Wilentz believes that ‘the novel ends as a Jewish lament rather than in a happy-ever-after’ (35). As well, Lisa Muir points to some of the reasons that she believes the novel does not have ‘a fairy tale ending’ (641). Muir thinks that Sara’s reunion with her father and her marriage to Hugo are problematic: ‘As readers we would like to believe that Sara will not be subjugated by Hugo in their new domestic space, but throughout the novel we see that Sara has difficulty living without the influence of a strong man’ (641). Muir anticipates that Sara will ‘become doubly burdened domestically as wife and daughter in the same setting’ (642). Muir elaborates on Sara’s relationship with both men:

Her father has not lost his hold over her, and the only true self-worth she has found has come because of a man, not because of her accomplishments. The hint that Hugo will be different than the other men of the novel leaves the reader with some hope, but the fear engendered by his desire to learn Hebrew from his future father-in-law portends that Sara may nonetheless spend her life with someone just like her father. (642)

However, several of Muir’s points are inaccurate. Sara succeeded without the assistance of anyone, including a man and, in fact, rejected an earlier opportunity to marry because her suitor was too much like her

father. Additionally, Sara chooses to marry a man who accepts her Americanised identity.

Together, Hugo and Sara will live as Jewish Americans: they will maintain their ties to their culture while also pursuing their American goals. Perhaps having an in-law live with a newly married couple is not an ideal arrangement, but Sara's willingness to care for her father shows compassion and growth: 'Then suddenly the pathos of this lonely old man pierced me.... It was within my power to keep lighted the flickering candle of his life for him' (296). Although he has angered and disappointed her, Sara accepts the complexity of her Jewish American identity and understands that she and her father share undeniable familial and cultural bonds made of blood and iron.

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