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Amy M. Kiel '03
Illinois Wesleyan University

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**“Make Yourself for a Person”
Anzia Yezierska’s alternative Americanization**

Amy Kiel
Dr. Robert Schultz
Senior Seminar
Dr. April Schultz
Research Honors
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As more than two and a half million Jewish immigrants flooded America between 1880 and 1920, women struggled to define their role in the Jewish community. While men in the Old World expected women to be submissive to their authority, the New World provided a spirit of independence for youthful women. Women like writer Anzia Yeziarska sought out this independence and escaped the oppression of Old World traditions by creating fiction which mimicked her struggles as an immigrant. In her semi-autobiographical novel *Breadgivers*, Yeziarska depicts Sara Smolinsky as the youngest daughter of Reb, a Torah scholar, who forces his daughters to financially and emotionally support his devotion to prayer. Rather than sacrifice her life for her father, Sara embraces the New World spirit and leaves seeking an education. She triumphantly declared "I'm smart enough to look out for myself. It's a new life now. . . Thank God, I'm not living in olden times."¹ As Sara flew for the door in search of her new life in college, she thought, "The Old World had struck its last on me."² Only after college did Sara realize that the oppression of not only her father, but the burdens of the generations before him still lay upon her. Young female protagonists like Sara believed they were pioneers who in becoming American shed the ethnicity that robbed them of the wealth, education and respect of Anglo middle-class "whites."

As Yeziarska's work reemerged, feminist scholars attempted to pinpoint her purpose for creating the young and rebellious female protagonists in her fiction. Author Janet Handler Burnstein describes Jewish immigrant women writers of this period as creating young female protagonists in their fictional short stories to define the manifold self. Yeziarska contributed her viewpoint on different issues of Americanization including ethnicity, language, class, poverty, charity, education and familial relationships. Jewish American women writers like Yeziarska between 1900 and 1929 embodied the new

¹ Anzia Yeziarska, *Breadgivers: A struggle between a father of the Old World and a daughter of the New* (New York: Doubleday, 1925), 137.

² Ibid., 138.

woman, attended school, and wrote fiction to help define their existence. They created a space for themselves to enter the Americanization debate of the Lower East Side through their literature. This essay will expand Burnstein's argument, in that Yeziarska contributed to the Americanization debate by using different versions of herself in short stories to define her stance on these issues. In reevaluating her fiction, scholars have chosen one issue such as language or charity to define all of Yeziarska's fiction. One claim does not encompass all of her work or all of the definitions of herself. In defining each version of herself, Yeziarska tackled a different obstacle of Americanization. In a reexamination of these scholars' work, it will be shown that to understand Yeziarska and her fiction during the 1920s, the intangible issues of Americanization must be pieced together and analyzed as a whole.

Expounding upon Burnstein's thesis, more recent scholars have examined only one aspect of Americanization to define Yeziarska's purpose for writing. For example, Delia Caparoso Konzett refutes the claims made by historian Alice Kessler Harris and writer Mary Dearborn that Yeziarska was the epitome of the American dream. Konzett cites Harris' writing that Yeziarska's "tales paved the way to success and adulation: she became the American dream come true. And her fiction illuminates the meaning of the dream."³ Konzett refutes this claim by arguing that Yeziarska ". . .questioned the cultural and national narratives surrounding the making of Americans. . . .Her unique contribution lies in the critical presentation and dramatization of ethnic speech under the encroachment of national linguistic standards."⁴ The underlying debate between Harris and Konzett that Yeziarska either supported or did not support Americanization provides the foundation for all of the scholars' work. Kessler Harris cites that Yeziarska supported Americanization

³Delia Caparoso Konzett, "Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yeziarska's *Hungry Hearts*," *American Literature* 69 (September 1997): 596.

⁴Ibid., 603.

and further perpetuates this idea through her young female protagonists' desire to be people which they find through assimilation; however, Yeziarska struggles to find a solution through her characters. In each narrative, she offers an alternative solution to Americanization than what the Anglo community prescribes.

While Konzett examines Yeziarska's use of linguistics to enter the Americanization debate and refute Harris' claims, which fall under scrutiny by other scholars, professor Chip Rhodes believes Yeziarska's fiction centered around the ideal of freedom through education. Others like JoAnn Pavletich believe Yeziarska used emotional expressivity and affect in her fiction to expose the racist white Anglo-Saxons' attitude during the 1920s against what they believed were inferior immigrants, especially women who were overtly emotional. Both Blanche H. Gelfant and Melanie Levinson focus on Yeziarska's use of ethnicity albeit using different methods. While Gelfant examines Yeziarska's use of "the possessive self," an immigrant's way of claiming her place in America, Levinson believes Yeziarska manipulated her characters so they defined their space by "passing" as a white Anglo-Saxon. These authors and others use only one aspect of Yeziarska's writing to define her stance on Americanization. Although Konzett's examination of linguistics is enlightening, other aspects of Americanization must be combined with her study to understand Yeziarska's literature. These include "passing" as another ethnic group, emotional expressiveness, possessiveness of American ideals, immigrant aid and education. It is evident that Yeziarska disagreed with traditional routes of Americanization provided by WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants) culture. Instead, she championed alternative, ethnic inventions of assimilation on the Lower East Side.

Between the ages of eight and ten years old in 1890, Yeziarska emigrated to the United States with her family from the village Plotsk in the Polish part of Russia like her character Sara in *Breadgivers*. Since her older brother Mayer Yeziarska had been in America for two years, he greeted them at Ellis Island where they began the process of Americanization. Anzia took on the name Hattie Mayer like Mayer had taken on Max.

Like in so many of her mother's stories, Yeziarska's daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen describes the family's move into a "dark, airless tenement railroad flat that looked out at the blank wall of the next house."⁵ The fiction that Yeziarska later created came from the Lower East Side ghetto that was not only her home, but her muse as well.

As her older sisters followed the Jewish economic tradition of supporting the family by finding work in a shirtwaist factory, the young Anzia learned the English language and Gentile ways in public school. Learning about the American dream ignited a rebellious spark in Anzia and she left public schools. She worked as a house servant, factory worker and laundress as she saved money to attend New York City Normal College against her father's wishes. In defiance of her father, a Talmudic scholar, and her mother, she declared her independence and pursued her education by taking a room at the Clara de Hirsch Home for working girls. The home was founded by New York's German Jewish elite to train young women for domestic service. She convinced the home's patrons to pay for her tuition at Columbia University to become "one of the ghetto's first college-educated cooking teachers."⁶ For Yeziarska, like Sara in *Breadgivers*, college taught subjects like Household Chemistry and Home Sanitation. Yeziarska wanted to study politics, social ethics and Shakespeare. Teaching cooking immediately became monotonous and tedious and lost the attention of Yeziarska. Instead of teaching children how to cook, Yeziarska wanted to teach adults about her ghetto experience.⁷

After struggling as a theater actress, Yeziarska decided to become a writer. Her first inspiration was her sister, Annie, a blond beauty. As a mother of ten children, Annie organized the women in her Jewish community into a "mother's society." She worked to promote their responsibilities as mothers and gain benefits for their families. Yeziarska

⁵Louise Levitas Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska: A Writer's Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 14.

⁶Henriksen, *Anzia Yeziarska*, 17.

⁷Mary V. Dearborn, "Anzia Yeziarska and The Making of an Ethnic American Self," in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 105-123.

became enthralled listening to Annie's speech about her life in the Lower East Side. Her vernacular included broken English and Yiddish mixed into a rolling thunder of conversation and gestures. This inspired Yeziarska's first short story, "The Free Vacation House." Charity workers from the Social Betterment Society provided the mother in the story one week of relaxation in a country home with baby-sitters for the children. When the charity workers declared that almost every room in the house and the front grass were off limits to the boarders, the mother realized that the home was for display. When patrons came to see what their money provided, the boss "took them over to the back to look on us, where we was sitting together, on long wooden benches, like prisoners. I was always feeling like cheap like dirt, and mad that I had to be there, when they smiled down on us."⁸ The mother found happiness back in her tenement where she was free from the rules of the charity home. Yeziarska had crafted a new form of language from Annie's speech and dramatized her life to spark a successful career in the 1920s.

In addition to her family, which added vitality to her short stories, the turning point in her personal life came in 1917, when she met the educational philosopher John Dewey. He fell in love with her emotionalism and independent spirit which both of them believed she help her open herself and her people to him. Dewey believed in Yeziarska's intellectual and writing potential so he enrolled her in his social and practical philosophy seminar at Columbia University. Although Yeziarska felt as if she were in the presence of gods since philosophers like Albert Coombs Barnes and Margaret Frances Bradshaw participated in the seminar, Dewey believed she deserved to engage in intellectual discussions with them. Under his direction, Yeziarska studied the assimilation of Poles, focusing on women's domestic role. She later wrote about this experience in her short story "All I Could Never Be" (1932). After her brief affair with Dewey ended, Yeziarska used this experience in

⁸Anzia Yeziarska, "The Free Vacation House," with an introduction by Vivian Gornick. *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yeziarska*. (New York, Persea Books, 1991), 48.

almost all of her fiction. Portraying Dewey as the Anglo-Saxon sociologist who falls in love with his ethnic subject of study, Yezierska attempted to open up her characters' heritage to her audience.⁹

With Dewey's encouragement and gift of a typewriter, Yezierska pursued her career as a writer. After her short story, "The Fat of the Land," 1919, was selected best of the year by Edward O'Brien, Jewish, Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn offered her a \$10,000, three-year movie contract to turn her short story collection *Hungry Hearts* into a film. At 27 or 28 years old, Yezierska found success until she suffered writer's block living in California. She had lost her muse, the Lower East Side. She had lost the fervor from the ghetto experiences to create fiction that represented her views on Americanization. The "sweatshop Cinderella" as the media had dubbed her, returned to her home. With little money during the Depression, she found work with the WPA Writer's Project, but no publisher. In 1950, she resurrected her writing career with the autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and as a reviewer for the *New York Times*. As an old-age activist, she wrote articles dealing with issues facing the elderly. In 1970, Yezierska died as a once well-known and talented author who brought to life the issues that her fellow Jewish women faced living in the 1920s. Critics who had once praised Yezierska for her emotionalism quickly forgot her work.¹⁰

Not until feminist scholars rediscovered her work in the 1970s did Yezierska's prose find its way into historians' discussions. Her 1925 novel *Breadgivers* carried a feminist theme with Sara's battle between traditions of the Old World and opportunities for freedom in the New World. In 1975, Alice Kessler Harris wrote an introduction and edited the forgotten novel reintroducing its theme of self-reliance and self-determination. In 1979, Harris did the same for a collection of Yezierska's short stories. While studying

⁹Dearborn, "The Making of an Ethnic American Self," 111-112.

¹⁰Carol B. Sochen, *Anzia Yezierska*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 1.

the education philosopher John Dewey, scholar Jo Ann Boydston discovered and published, in 1977, a book of love poems written by Dewey and Yeziarska during their affair. This kindled interest in Yeziarska's daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen, who was left by her mother. Yeziarska could not raise Louise and pursue a career writing. Henriksen reexamined her mother's work and wrote her biography which was published in 1988. The surge of feminist interest opened Yeziarska's fiction to a reevaluation by scholars who saw her attempt to enter the Americanization debate of the Lower East Side in the 1920s.¹¹

As a primary source, Yeziarska's literature provides historians with the lens through which the writing immigrants viewed themselves. Jewish American women's writing from this era reflects the struggles they faced in assimilating to a new culture. Author Charlotte Baum describes the importance of literature as ". . . a rich resource for answering such questions-if not absolutely, at least as a perspective from which to view a people's way of defining itself."¹² She examines reality through fiction and finds that ". . .there is often a good deal of information about intangible matters such as cultural ideas and assumptions, matters which are especially important in attempting to understand the process of assimilation."¹³ As her only means of spreading her view on issues of Americanization, Yeziarska created fiction to offer insight into the debates occurring on the Lower East Side of New York between 1900 and 1929.

By 1910, New York City housed 1.25 million Jews, and by 1924 had the highest concentration of the four million Jews in America. At this time, the Lower East Side of New York City seethed with tenements, pushcart peddlers and street vendors. German Jews and assimilated European Jews, who had arrived earlier than the Eastern European

¹¹Carole S. Kessner, "The Fall and Rise of Anzia Yeziarska," *American Jewish Archives* 42 (1990): 183-187.

¹²Charlotte Baum, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), 190.

¹³*Ibid.*, 190.

Jews that Yeziarska writes about, either bestowed their charity on the new, poverty-stricken Jewish immigrants or looked upon them with scorn. The Lower East Side became a separate entity in New York, segregated by ethnic background. Prior to World War I, Jewish socialism intertwined with Jewish religious tradition molded the lives of immigrants. White Anglo-Saxons and Americanized immigrants believed the Jewish immigrants were an inferior politicized working-class.¹⁴

While one million Europeans emigrated to America each year between 1910 and the start of World War I, a debate arose over immigration restriction. It was in the aftermath of this debate that Yeziarska wrote her fiction. Following World War I, restrictions implemented their isolationist ideology and racist attitudes to promote legislation limiting immigrants. Fueled by eugenicists at the time, WASP culture feared inferior races would take their labor, thus competition would keep wages low. In addition, WASP culture had adopted the idea of social and cultural unity to keep America prosperous and they held “. . .a conviction that the flow of immigrants of different languages, customs, and religions. . .must be limited to numbers readily assimilable, in order to safeguard our national and social unity and order.”¹⁵ By 1921, Congress heeded the restrictionist ideology and passed legislation signed by President Warren G. Harding limiting immigration to only three percent of that nationality counted in the 1910 United States census. By 1924, the year was switched to 1890, when the new immigrant population was significantly smaller, and the percentage was reduced to two percent. This limited immigrants to 150,00 per year.¹⁶ In passing this legislation, Congress hoped to limit the downtrodden immigrants who were fleeing an oppressive Old World to find

¹⁴Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 34.

¹⁵Poyntz Tyler, ed., *Immigration and the United States* vol. 28, *The Reference Shelf*, (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1956), 31.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 29-30.

freedom and the American dream. The WASP Congress hoped to prevent an upheaval of the American way of life.

Although restrictionist policy was reflected in legislation, anti-restrictionist policy affected American culture. Anti-restrictionists held that by limiting immigrants, the cheap labor pool would diminish leaving big business to pay out higher wages. They proposed that instead of limiting immigrants, middle-class Anglos should Americanize foreigners making them more acceptable to the restrictionists who feared ethnic diversity. Two prominent scholars of the time, Horace M. Kallen and Randolph S. Bourne acknowledged the failure of a WASP guided Americanization program. Instead, Bourne believed Americans should readjust their outlook on assimilation and accept immigrants' role in a changing America. More important for understanding Yezierska's literature is Kallen's essay "Democracy versus the Melting-Pot: A Study of American Nationality" written in 1915. He argued that such efforts at Americanization failed to produce a melting-pot. Rather than a WASP culture which forces conformity upon new arrivals, Kallen argued that a "harmony" should be reached in which each ethnic culture can display its heritage while still attaining the American dream. He defined Americanization as immigrants who conform to the ideology and spirit of Anglo-Saxons in six or seven years of living in one spot in the United States and using the widespread mobility of standard English. In depicting the inevitable dichotomy of immigrant's lives, Kallen noted the importance of Americanized writers of this period. Writers like Yezierska who left the ghetto to lead successful careers created fiction that depicted the struggles of immigrants to Americanize according to WASP guidelines. He further defined the second generation immigrants that Yezierska uses in her narratives to depict the urgency to Americanize. Through public school, adolescents quickly learned to cut their ethnic ties and blend with the middle-class.

Although second-generation immigrants eagerly embody the ideals of WASP culture, Kallen described the importance of an ethnic group's individuality. He depicted the Jews as the most cultivated of immigrant groups in that they recognize their heritage

more than others. The more cultivated a group is, Kallen recognized that the “. . .more it is aware of its individuality, and the less willing it is to surrender that individuality.”¹⁷ After noting the Herbrew associations established in Jewish communities to preserve their ethnic ties to the Old World, Kallen also described their willingness to become Americanized. Without a homeland and in a constant state of diaspora, Jews accept the responsibility of becoming American; however, they focus on their ethnic unity. He cited H. G. Wells description of the Lower East Side as “. . .a city within a city,. . .although it is far more in tune with Americanism than the other quarters, it is also far more autonomous in spirit and self-conscious in culture.”¹⁸ Yeziarska’s literature reflects Kallen’s description of Jews on the Lower East Side in that their plight for Americanization does not always yield the promises of the American dream as their ethnic heritage weighs upon them.

As Kallen argued for a harmonious society in which WASP culture recognizes ethnic groups individually, he championed a new idea of American civilization. In eliminating the oppression, war and prejudice of ruling European leaders, ethnic groups can achieve the American dream while maintaining their heritage. At the end of his essay, he acknowledged that the dominant American classes do not want ethnic groups to achieve that equal social level.

In their plight to prevent ethnic groups from achieving equal status, another historian describes middle-class Anglos attempt to Americanize immigrants through adult education. The Progressive Era reformers focused their efforts on social justice and returning order and efficiency to the government. In their humanitarian movements, reformers established settlement houses and charity programs, some of which even gave

¹⁷Horace M. Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot: A Study of American Nationality,” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 82.

¹⁸Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot,” 87.

immigrants the opportunity to utilize their Old World skills. As a result of their fear of ethnic groups' ascension, WASP culture moved toward "an imperious demand for conformity."¹⁹ Robert A. Carlson notes that anti-restrictionists at the turn of the century believed that immigrants could demonstrate patriotism without being Americanized. He cites a Progressive reformer's warning that "Unless we can assimilate, develop, train and make good citizens out of them, they are certain to make ignorant, suspicious and un-Americanized citizens out of us. Unless we Americanize them they will foreignize us."²⁰ Progressive reformers wanted to teach the immigrant to change their eating habits, dress differently and spend their money in America.

Yezerksa's lover, John Dewey, wrote against the Progressive's Americanization campaign which began in 1916. Carlson cites Dewey's argument against conformity in that "...the problem is not to reduce. . .[immigrants] to an anonymous and drilled homogeneity, but to see to it that all get from one another the best that each strain has to offer from its own tradition and culture."²¹ His philosophy influenced Yezerksa's writing in that he believed that by betraying one's ethnicity and conforming to Anglo standards, immigrants did not fully understand the meaning of America. In further response, immigrants followed Dewey's cultural pluralism agenda and shared their resentment. Carlson depicts the foreign press in America as condemning the Americanization movement. Yezerksa's characters find America when they realize that they do not have to completely abandon their Old World traditions while they embrace New World ideals of liberty. As writer Delia Caparoso Konzett explains, "The Lower East Side thus functioned . . . as a cultural vortex in which the habits of the Old World could be recast to suit the cultural topography of contemporary America."²² In this transitional space and the

¹⁹Robert A. Carlson, "Americanization as an Early Twentieth-Century Adult Education Movement," *History of Education Quarterly* 10 (Winter, 1970): 445.

²⁰Ibid., 447.

²¹Ibid., 454.

²²Konzett, "Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation," 601.

context of intellectual debates engaged by such thinkers as Bourne and Kallen, Yeziarska offered alternative solutions to the Americanization offered by Anglo society.

In her narratives, Yeziarska defined the manifold self of Jewish women as they attempted to distance themselves from their ethnic background. By employing the African-American literary tradition of “passing,” in which a black character with light skin sheds her ties to the black community, Yeziarska depicted her young female heroines as “passing” into the white, Americanized community. Scholar Melanie Levinson describes passing as being easier among women, especially of the second generation since they experience more of the public sphere of whites than their mothers who are bound to the domestic sphere. As an intricate part of Yeziarska’s attitude toward her protagonists and herself, she leads them with a rebellious spirit against a racially prejudiced WASP community. Like the characters in her stories, Levinson describes their passing as, “. . .to lead an economically easier life, but they are not blind to the ironies of their existence in a strictly white world.”²³ In the same way that African American characters pass into the white world, Jewish women long to experience the middle-class, Protestant sphere that discriminates against them.

While Jewish women desire for acceptance from the Anglo community, the psychological implications of “passing” place this literary technique at the core of the Americanization debate. Do the “passing” of Yeziarska’s characters imply that she supports Americanization? Levinson questions the technique and asks “Is it ethical to abandon one’s birth culture if to do so offers you other opportunities, or is an individual’s responsibility primarily to him or herself?”²⁴ Levinson describes Yeziarska’s use of “passing” as her way of allowing her characters to define themselves.

²³Melanie Levinson, “To Make Myself for a Person: ‘Passing’ Narratives and the Divided Self in the Work of Anzia Yeziarska,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 13 (1994): 3.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

In two examples of Yeziarska's texts, her characters reconcile their ethnicity with the New World. As part of her short story, "The Fat of the Land," Rachel Ravinsky returns to her home in the ghetto following her education at Cornell University. Although she wants to again leave the ghetto and her parents, she admits that she is ". . .yet too green for the new."²⁵ As with Yeziarska's other heroines, the young women cannot find full acceptance from the new world or the old once she has left the ghetto. In Yeziarska's most famous novel *Breadgivers*, Sara returns home after college to teach and marry her male equal, Hugo Seelig. Although her father Reb, had burdened her with the weight of the Old World while she lived at home, he is now alone and in need of her help. Instead of turning him away, she allows him to live with her. While Kessler Harris sees Sara's return home as triumphant since she has made herself for an educated person, Levinson disagrees since Sara still suffers from the weight of her father's Old World traditions. In this instance, "passing," or becoming an Americanized woman, for Yeziarska did not bring the peace that her character Sara had struggled for throughout her adolescence. The theory of "passing" into the Anglo community proves to be difficult for Yeziarska's female characters. Levinson argues that in her fiction, Yeziarska, like African American authors, finds that ". . .one must either be completely absorbed by mainstream culture. . .or acknowledge the culture with which one identifies, to which one is bound by some communal or familiar tie."²⁶ Yeziarska depicts through her fiction that becoming one of "them" does completely break the ties to their ethnic heritage or receive acceptance of their families who are still living in the ghetto. Instead, Yeziarska's characters find reconciliation in accepting their role in the New World as one of incorporating their ethnic heritage into American ideals.

²⁵Ibid., 6.

²⁶Ibid., 8.

In another attempt to Americanize and pass into the Anglo community, young Jewish women in the Lower East Side spent their wages on flamboyant clothing and accessories to the embarrassment of first-generation immigrant Jews. The disapproving Jews named the young women who dressed in exaggerated, fashionable clothing and vibrant colors the Ghetto Girl. They stood out among the poor, struggling immigrants of the Lower East Side. In her attempt to pass, “she was the nightmare of excessive Americanization and desire projected by professionals and middle-class Jews onto young working-class Jewish women.”²⁷ Prell describes the young Jewish girls’ attempt to pass as their response to feeling shunned by the rest of America. As nineteenth-century immigrants found themselves on the edge of Americanization, they formed a working-class in attempt to become participants in the capitalist nation that had promised them the American dream of wealth but did not classify them as assimilated citizens.

Without acceptance from the Anglo community, first-generation members of the Jewish Lower East Side shunned the Ghetto Girl. They feared that she would leave them in search of a wealthy suitor which could not be found at home. They also believed that the Ghetto Girl should put her wages toward supporting her family instead of pleasure. Jewish mothers and fathers saw this as a betrayal of Jewish economic tradition in which young women worked in factories to support their families. Not only did their Jewish families shun their ostentatious dress, but so did the middle-class Anglos who supported Americanization. The Ghetto Girl found resistance from WASP culture since she challenged the sphere of separation between white and ethnic communities.²⁸

Even in Yezierska’s support of “making yourself for a person”, in her fiction, she did not allow her female protagonists who dressed like the Ghetto Girl to define herself through clothing. In her short story, “Wings,” the young female protagonist Shenah

²⁷Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 24.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 21-57.

Pessah falls in love with an older man John Barnes, a sociology professor, who comes to visit her in her uncle's building where she works as a janitor. He rents a room to observe her for his study of the "Education Problems of the Russian Jews." Since Shenah Pessah has never seen an American school, he offers to show her a library. When Shenah Pessah realizes how shabby her clothes have become, she pawns the only remnant of her family's wealth, her mother's featherbed. With the money, she purchased a dress made of the brightest green organdie and a hat with cherries red enough to eat. When Barnes took her to the library, she notices the women's plain attire, and her teacher's attitude toward the librarian when he comments, "I too like to see a woman's face above her clothes."²⁹ Shenah Pessah realizes that a man respects a woman for more than her appearance and clothes. After a brief moment of intimacy between the two, Barnes abandons Shenah to her dismay. She finds strength in knowing that to receive respect she must make herself an independent person through education and not the clothing of a Ghetto Girl. Yeziarska offered a different route to passing, one not through appearance. In the end of the story, Shenah realizes that Barnes "...opened the wings of her soul."³⁰ Yeziarska's character finds exaltation in Barnes opening Shenah's eyes to education. Instead of taking the traditional route to Americanization through dress, Shenah changes her attitude, sheds her Ghetto Girl clothes and wants to go to school.

In another rebuttal of Anglo supremacy, Yeziarska employs the use of highly emotional female characters to elevate women's place in the Americanization debate. As early 20th-century icons like the gangster, flapper and bootlegger came to an end in the regulated capitalist America, society changed its response to emotional expressivity. The Anglo community resisted emotionally expressive, ethnic women as they segregated the Eastern European immigrants into the exotic other and labeled them as racially and

²⁹Anzia Yeziarska, "Wings," with an introduction by Vivian Gornick. *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yeziarska* (New York, Persea Books, 1991) 13.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 16.

ethnically inferior. In her study of Yeziarska's use of immigrant authority and affect, JoAnn Pavletich cites author Arnold Bennett of the dominant class: "in certain strata and streaks of society on the East Side. . . things are comprehended with an intensity of emotion and understanding impossible to Anglo-Saxons. This I know."³¹ During the 1920s, authors like Bennett criticized Yeziarska's short story collection *Hungry Hearts* for its characters' emotional expressiveness. In the opening story, "Wings," professor Barnes remains throughout emotionally restrained, never sharing his feelings for Shenah Pessah. Pavletich praises Yeziarska's narrative employment of emotional expressiveness in that it ". . . exposes the limits of an emotion culture that emphasizes restraint and reserve as markers of civilization while it offers the passionate emotionalism of the immigrant as the antidote to those limits."³² By placing Shenah alongside Barnes, Yeziarska demonstrates that an emotionally charged, ethnic woman surpasses WASP restraints. Instead of succumbing to the Americanization campaign, she seeks an independent life through her high capacity for emotion.

In further demonstrating the use of affect, Pavletich expands on "Wings" by depicting the emotional cultural exchange that Shenah performs as she assimilates. Pavletich describes the ambiguous stance Yeziarska takes on acculturation: ". . . her protagonist welcomes the sacrifice, or rather release from the latter tradition, and gives up the former only, after much painful soul searching."³³ Shenah's anger at the pawn shop dealer when he bargains with her over her last memory from Russia, the feather bed, shows that Yeziarska's character wants to retain her heritage, but in giving up the bed would rather acculturate and purchase Ghetto Girl clothing. Yeziarska emphasizes this moment of the story to show the intense emotions of her race as she writes " 'Five

³¹JoAnn Pavletich, "Anzia Yeziarska, Immigrant Authority and the Uses of Affect," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 19 (2000): 85.

³²Ibid., 86.

³³Ibid., 89.

dollars?’ gasped Shenah Pessah. Her hands rushed back anxiously to the feather bed and her fingers clung to it as if it were a living thing. She gazed panic-stricken. . . .”³⁴ Her vivid description of a young Jewish girl parting with her last memory of her mother to become a part of America demonstrates the emotional struggle women faced in assimilation.

In addition to her desire to Americanize, Yeziarska also uses Shenah Pessah’s relationship with Barnes to show how the world of academia viewed the exotic other. Pavletich cites Sander Gilman and Nancy Stepan’s claims that at the beginning of the 20th century, social scientists established and maintained the inferiority of immigrants through their methodical studies lacking emotion. Pavletich uses Barnes statement: “There it is. . . the whole gamut of the Russian Jew-the pendulum swinging from abject servility to boldest aggressiveness.”³⁵ After a brief conversation with the young girl, Barnes believed he had seen the racially inferior emotions of a Russian immigrant, instead of an excitement to become educated. He viewed Shenah as an exotic primitive useful for his study. By portraying Barnes as emotionally restrained, Yeziarska depicts the academic and racial superiority that accompanied his aloof attitude. Pavletich argues that Yeziarska uses Shenah’s emotionally charged personality to seek an education and make herself an equal to Barnes. By depicting a character like Shenah with a large emotional capacity to make herself an intellectual equal, Yeziarska condemns the ethnic barriers established by the Anglo community which place Jewish women in the category of exotic other because of their emotional expressiveness.

Finding another way to lessen the divide between the ethnic Jewish community and the rest of society, Yeziarska uses the act of possession in her fiction. She allows her characters to claim possession of an item that they do not have the access to claim. In

³⁴Yeziarska, “Wings,” 10.

³⁵Pavletich, “Anzia Yeziarska,” 91.

claiming possession over an item that would not be considered part of the ethnic Jewish community, her characters are Americanizing; however, they are not following the WASP prescribed pattern of Americanization. Instead they are making themselves an independent person with claims to American territory that WASP society would not approve. Writer Blanche H. Gelfant cites Yeziarska's possession of "the soul-the spirit-of America," "my own people, and "my own kind," as an assumption or adoption of the American dream. Gelfant writes that Yeziarska's "books were to be the equalizing force-the books these hungry heroines read, the books they imagined themselves writing, and the books they wrote."³⁶ By adopting America and writing its literature, Yeziarska strived to affect WASP ideas. Gelfant cites Yeziarska's short story, "All I Could Never Be," in which she portrays this merger as an American professor offers to the young woman writer: ". . . I have read it. It has become a part of me. You have made me live your life."³⁷ In taking possession of American literature, Yeziarska attempts to build a bridge between herself and the rest of society.

In attempting to build a bridge between different ethnic groups, Yeziarska seeks to discover America. Gelfant shows that in Yeziarska's self-expression in her writing, she questions the existence of America when she does not feel like an assimilated immigrant. As her heroines struggled to assimilate, they were left to wonder if they would ever fully acculturate, or if their ethnic heritage would be marked upon their chest. In defining herself, and "my own kind," as she often wrote in her narratives, Yeziarska searched for the Jews who were in constant state of diaspora. In her short story, "America and I," the autobiographical piece depicts Yeziarska's sense of confusion when the young female who leaves work as a servant to work in a button factory, still does not feel independent. She questions herself, "Who am I? . . . Where is America? . . . I couldn't find it-my America,

³⁶Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Possessive Self in Mary Antin and Anzia Yeziarska." *Prospects* 23 (1998): 357-377.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 364.

where I could work for love and not for a living.”³⁸ After the young woman begins to study American history in classes offered at the factory, she found that the Pilgrims created a new land of liberty which she expected to exist in its completed form. Instead she had a revelation as she saw America as a country still changing and, “. . .it was the glory of America that it was not yet finished. And I, the last comer, had her share to give, small or great, to the making of America. . . .”³⁹ Yezierska’s characters unknowingly acculturate by realizing that they, as young women, can offer their ethnic contributions which make America.

In a similar vein to employing the possessive self, Yezierska projected the voice of her people through her self-created ghetto idiom. Although she learned the English language, she “. . . wrote defiantly in a colloquial style inflected with curses, wailing cries, prayers and a mimetic Yiddish accent.”⁴⁰ In a cultural exchange, Yezierska fused American English with Yiddish dialect to create the emotional dialogue of her characters. Professor Delia Caparoso Konzett explores the hybrid cultural linguistic model that Yezierska created to attempt to prove that her language offered a liberal democratic society that accepted the immigrant’s foreign world. As the Lower East Side became a transitional space for immigrants, Yezierska offered a linguistic alternative to the standard English that she and her characters were expected to master before Anglo society accepted them.

Konzett focuses on the struggle between the two languages on the Lower East Side by citing W.E.B. DuBois’s double consciousness argument: “a ‘two-ness’ in which ‘two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals’ remain in an uneasy relationship.”⁴¹ In Yezierska’s attempt to open up her culture to mainstream

³⁸Yezierska, “America and I,” with an introduction by Vivian Gornick. *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York, Persea Books, 1991), 148.

³⁹Ibid., 152.

⁴⁰Gelfant, “The Possessive Self,” 366.

⁴¹Konzett, “Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation,” 597.

America, she melted her Yiddish language with English to depict the creation of the Jewish nationalist identity. With strict immigration restriction in 1924 from the National Origins Act, ethnic awareness was suppressed as foreigners were forced to learn and use English. Konzett notes the fear by Anglo society as Theodore Roosevelt notified the public of “our most dangerous. . .the foreign-language press. . .which holds the alien to his former associations and through them to his former allegiance.”⁴² Anglos believed in a national unity through standard English, which they believed to be a symbol of America. They disregarded the idea of a melting pot in which Yezierska created a new form of cultural linguistics. Correctly spoken English became an ethnic barrier between assimilated immigrants and unassimilated immigrants.

With an ethnic divide caused by English, Yezierska’s work appeals to scholars like Konzett because her ghetto idiom demonstrated the resistance by immigrants to Americanize. In her collection of short stories, *Hungry Hearts*, Yezierska depicted her disdain for the Hebrew Charities and working girls homes like the Clara de Hirsch Home where she had resided. In her Americanization process, she used these philanthropic organizations to make the transition from ghetto to “sweatshop Cinderella,” but never respected their methods of pushing Anglo conformity onto immigrants. In her stories, she presents the American dream to her young heroines, but awakens them with the realities of the domination it represented.

In her short story “Soap and Water,” the young heroine encounters the dean, Miss Whiteside, who almost denies her entrance to college claiming the young Russian girl failed to keep clean. While the young girl worked before school and after school until bedtime, she did not have the energy or the money to clean and adorn herself in proper attire. She felt that “inside the ruin of my thwarted life, the *unlived* visionary immigrant hungered and thirsted for America . . .I did not find America in the sweatshops, much less

⁴²Ibid., 602.

in the schools and colleges.”⁴³ Not until the young girl found a former teacher and unburdened her soul upon the older woman, did she find America. Throughout *Hungry Hearts*, the same theme is repeated as the young women find themselves by expressing their struggles to an Anglo who does not discriminate against their ethnic background.

With her first story based upon her sister Annie’s life as a mother of ten in the Lower East Side ghetto, Yezierska used her Yiddish vernacular combined with English to create the new immigrant English. As the mother in “The Free Vacation House” is questioned by the teacher offering her a week in the country, the language she uses establishes her social position as compared to the teacher. Properly spoken English places the teacher and the philanthropic workers on a higher social level than the mother. She uses what Konzett terms a childish form of English, speaking at a lower and slower level than her Anglo peers. As the teacher asks her if she would like to go, the mother responds “‘Gott im Himmel!’ says I. ‘Don’t I know I need a rest? But how? On what money can I go to the country?’”⁴⁴ Once at the country house and the mother realizes that she will not be experiencing a vacation, she mocks the charity worker who announces the rules with “We dassen’t.” The mother thinks to herself, “Gott im Himmel!. . .Ain’t there going to be no end to the things we dassen’t do in this place?”⁴⁵ Yezierska’s depiction of her character mocking the charity worker demonstrates immigrants’ resistance to philanthropy which forced them to follow rules like a child. Konzett cites linguist David Gold who noted that since some Progressive reformers believed immigrants to be unassailable, they viewed Yiddish as “. . .under the pressure of linguistic assimilation to be perceived as a comic language suitable only for the language play of children or vulgar humor.”⁴⁶ Instead

⁴³Yezierska, “Soap and Water,” with an introduction by Vivian Gornick. *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York, Persea Books, 1991), 75.

⁴⁴Yezierska, “The Free Vacation House,” 43.

⁴⁵Ibid., 48.

⁴⁶Konzett, “Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation,” 608.

of accepting immigrants as equals, reform workers placed unassimilated immigrants on an inferior social level by distinguishing between languages.

Moving beyond the language she used, Yeziarska further identified her ethnicity in her fiction through the New Woman and what Progressive reformers termed immigrant aid, otherwise known as Americanization. Anglo, middle-class women guided Eastern European immigrants through Ellis Island, helped them find homes, taught them English and helped them apply for citizenship. As part of the Americanization process, the Anglo charity workers not only helped immigrants settle in the United States, they also taught them values of cleanliness, financial planning and meal planning to acculturate easier. In order to do this, they provided settlement houses and programs in which charity workers entered immigrants' homes and taught Eastern European women about American culture. In response to these activities, author Carol J. Batker dissects Yeziarska's approach to philanthropic activities in the 1920s. In the same way Yeziarska offers alternatives to ethnic barriers in the process of assimilation, her young heroines according to Batker, ". . . ultimately revise reform ideology, rejecting domesticity in favor of other forms of wage labor that allow them the freedom insisted upon by the New Woman."⁴⁷ The New Woman that emerged during the 1920s offered women the opportunity to focus upon self-development rather than domesticity. Yeziarska's characters, like Sara in *Breadgivers*, embody the New Woman as she strays from her home, finds wage-earning labor in a factory and enters college to make herself independent from her family.

As she entered the debate of immigrant aid, Yeziarska wrote two novels which directly challenged the predicted benefits of charity. Her novels, *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), in addition to her short story collection *How I Found America*, depict charity workers as using their position to embrace the New Woman, and

⁴⁷Carol J. Batker, *Reforming Fictions: Native, African and Jewish American Women's Literature and Journalism in the Progressive Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 111.

do so in a racially prejudiced manner. Batker cites her characters in *Arrogant Beggar* as they critique settlement house patrons as “the high-hat stuff. . .the fat mamas and giving the glad hand to the poor little sister.”⁴⁸ Her characters respond to their domestic training questioning their expected gratitude: “For what?. . .Because you crushed the courage out of me when I was out of a job? Forced me to give up my ambition to be a person and learn to be your waitress?”⁴⁹ By criticizing charity during this time, Yeziarska discouraged young Jewish women in the ghetto to use this method of Americanization to embody the New Woman.

Batker considers Yeziarska’s version of the New Woman as one of a young woman who achieves independence from her family through her own means and returns to the ghetto to teach women like herself how to succeed. In her novel *Breadgivers*, the young protagonist Sara leaves home in search of independence. She works in a laundry as she attends school and becomes a teacher. Instead of teaching the children of the middle-class, Sara returns to the ghetto where she was raised and teaches the children who suffered from poverty and ethnic discrimination like herself. As a teacher, she could give the children the knowledge that they needed to escape the poverty of the ghetto. In her own classroom on Hester Street, she looked out the window to see the same tenements and push-cart peddlers that had been there years before. She remembered the excitement as a child of seeing a “teacherin.” Yeziarska reversed the theory of immigrant aid as she turned the young immigrant girl from the ghetto into the New Woman who pioneered for social mobility without charity.

Away from the Jewish New Woman, Yeziarska discredited charity and the miserly attitude of middle-class landlords on the Lower East Side. In her short story, “The Lost Beautifulness,” Yeziarska depicts the plight of a woman expecting the return of her son

⁴⁸Ibid., 111.

⁴⁹Ibid., 111.

Private Abraham Safransky from World War I. Hanneh Hayyeh lived in a dirty tenement on the Lower East Side with dark walls. As she prepared for her son's return home, she wanted to paint her kitchen walls the brightest white like she had admired in Mrs. Preston's home, Stuyvesant Square Mansion. Despite her husband Jake's resistance to spending money on a luxury such as paint, Hannah Hayyeh saved by extra washing and painted her walls herself. Jake could not understand why Hannah Hayyeh would want to fix up a tenement for which she paid rent to a greedy landlord. Hannah Hayyeh responded that she wanted to embody American ideals since her son Aby had been in the United States Army. In her enjoyment of her shining apartment, Hannah Hayyeh showed everyone in the neighborhood, including her landlord, Mr. Benjamin Rosenblatt, her freshly painted walls. Two weeks later, Mr. Rosenblatt sent a note to Jake and Hannah for an increase in their monthly rent since he believed if they had extra money for paint, they should have extra money for rent. He told Hannah, "If you can't pay, somebody else will. I got to look out for myself. In America everybody looks out for himself."⁵⁰ Mr. Rosenblatt could charge another tenant more money for the newly painted apartment.

In a rage against Mr. Rosenblatt's injustice, Hannah Hayyeh seeks Mrs. Preston's advice. Instead of offering her a solution, Mrs. Preston offers Hannah Hayyeh money which she hastily declines as she tells her, "Ain't I hurt enough without you having to hurt me yet with charity? You want to give me hush money to swallow down an unrightness that burns my flesh? I want justice."⁵¹ Hannah Hayyeh wanted to change the way in which landlords treated their already poverty stricken tenants as they raised rent to the point that immigrants did not have money for food. Without money for rent, Mr. Rosenblatt served Hannah and Jake with an eviction notice. On the night before they were to leave, Hannah Hayyeh chopped her kitchen to pieces with an ax in heated resentment and punishment for

⁵⁰Yezierska, "The Lost Beautifulness," with an introduction by Vivian Gornick. *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York, Persea Books, 1991), 37.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 39.

her landlord. Although she had intended to hurt her landlord, the wounded kitchen represented the wounds that she suffered from an American dream she could not completely see. Rather than allowing charity from Mrs. Preston, Hannah Hayyeh lost the beautiful home that she had worked so diligently to achieve. In her disillusionment with charity, Yeziarska chose for her characters a life of poverty instead of a handout from a middle-class woman like Mrs. Preston who had never known the suffering of immigrants.

In Yeziarska's attempt to reconcile the ethnic barriers immigrants faced in their plight for the American dream, she offered education as an escape from the ghetto; however, she believed the education she offered needed to be revised. Author Chip Rhodes dissects *Breadgivers* in his argument that Yeziarska used the influential philosophy of Progressive education reformer John Dewey. Although education promises freedom from the ghetto, the economic structure of the family renders it impossible for most young women who have to work to support their families. Yeziarska's characters embody the spirit of rebelliousness and independence required to leave home and attend school. Rhodes identifies that Yeziarska's purpose in using education liberates Sara in *Breadgivers* from the patriarchal oppression of her father. Sara believes education will free her from the economic oppression of the ghetto. Instead Sara finds classes such as domestic sciences that she believes will not help her to find future employment other than as a house servant.

Rhodes argues that Yeziarska writes that education must be placed in the hands of Progressive reformers that do not have a business or assimilationist agenda. Although some school boards remained under the auspice of business-controlled school boards which lent their influence for teaching industrial skills, Progressive reforms did infiltrate the school system as Rhodes notes with “. . . vocational training, school assembly and extra-curricular activities.”⁵² He argues that her writing depicts a Progressive-run school

⁵²Chip Rhodes, “Education as Liberation: The Case of Anzia Yeziarska's *Breadgivers*.”

in which students would learn how to apply knowledge to social experiences, thus enabling them with the ability to escape the ghetto.

In his depiction of Sara's educational critique, Rhodes offers different examples of her disappointment in her classes. When Sara is forced to take gym at college, she reports to class for the first two days of lifting dumbbells and jumping over hurdles. After an hour of scraping herself on the hurdles while the other students laugh at her, she smashes a hurdle into pieces. She immediately goes to the dean's office where he tells her that, in her case, physical education is not necessary. Yeziarska uses this scenario to show that a dean with a Progressive agenda would understand that a young immigrant girl like Sara must perform physical labor after school and does not need more exercise during the day when she could be working to pay her tuition. Yeziarska offers this as an example of her non-assimilationist, Progressive reform. With the dean's help, Sara can manage to still work and while earning her degree.⁵³

As Progressive ideals formed the foundation of schools, Yeziarska believed that students should learn how to think rather than what to think. This ideal guides Sara and other young heroines like her in finding her "true" self. Rhodes defines the self by what it Yeziarska believed it is not: "It is not materialistic or competitive; it does not desire wealth or power beyond individual need; it is not fixated on leisure pursuits and consumerism. But it's driving desire for education and its respect for learning are left entirely unquestioned."⁵⁴ As in all of her narratives, Yeziarska wants her young protagonists to become an independent person like Rhodes describes. Sara in *Breadgivers* defines her identity as she returns home to Hester Street with a college degree and announces her change into a person. She finds her self and her identity through education. Through

Science & Society 57 (1993): 303.

⁵³Chip Rhodes, "Education as Liberation," 303.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 299.

education she has been able to embrace the New Woman upon her return home to teach children like herself.

In explaining how college aids Sara's return home, Rhodes defines Yezierska's educational philosophy. He depicts an education that ". . .allows us to master our instincts through the application of reason; education presents the necessary tools to convert out individual experience into knowledge; education allows us to order the chaos with which life presents us."⁵⁵ Education puts Eastern European immigrants like Sara on an equal social level with the middle-class by allowing her to find employment other than factory work. On the Lower East Side, Sara learned that money allows for social ascension, but its capitalist distribution is ethnically skewed in favor of Anglos. With an education that will allow her a position such as a teacher, Sara will earn the respect of the middle-class. This respect, however, is not Yezierska's goal for her character. Rather, Rhodes identifies Yezierska's goal for Sara to recognize her potential as a person and her willingness to implement the Progressive ideology into her own classroom.⁵⁶ In using education as an alternative to Americanization prescribed by WASP culture, Yezierska revised the ethnically biased system.

Throughout all of her work, Yezierska offers an alternate version of Americanization. She combines Old World traditions with New World values to champion different versions of ethnic women. Her contribution to the Americanization debate occurring on the Lower East Side during the 1920s lies in her ability to create a new woman who does not follow WASP directions. Although Kessler Harris and Dearborn believe that Yezierska and her characters embody the epitome of the American dream, Konzett was correct in her assertion that Yezierska's real significance to the Lower East Side was her creation of ethnic alternatives. While Konzett's research sheds light onto the

⁵⁵Rhodes, "Education as Liberation," p.301.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 309.

subject of Yeziarska's view on Americanization, it cannot be fully understood without contributions from other authors like Pavletich, Gelfant, Levinson and Rhodes. By combining Konzett's linguistic study with "passing" as another ethnic group, emotional expressiveness, possession of American ideals, immigrant aid and education, it is evident that Yeziarska offered ethnic alternatives to WASP Americanization.

While Burnstein describes writing as creating a manifold self to embody the ideals of the new immigrant woman, we take her argument one step further. In defining her self through young and rebellious female protagonists, Yeziarska offered the Lower East Side Jewish community a different viewpoint in the debate over Americanization. Yeziarska's literature offered young women a route to the new woman and new freedom rather than the choice between conforming to WASP ideals or falling into the abyss of poverty. She encourages young Jewish women to embrace their ethnicity while they uphold the American spirit of independence.

Like her character Sara in *Breadgivers*, Yeziarska wanted to find freedom by cutting ties with her family. As in many of her stories, Yeziarska and her characters realize that although they cannot always find a solution, the women reconcile their ethnicity with the American dream. Yeziarska's literature examines the ambiguities faced by young Jewish women as they struggle with WASP ideals and their heritage. Although Sara in *Breadgivers* escapes from the ghetto and embraces the new woman, she returns to find her aging father who is in need of her help. She realizes, "So there it was, the problem before us-the problem of Father-still unsolved. . . .I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me."⁵⁷ In overcoming the burden of generations, Yeziarska carved out her space in the 1920s Americanization debate of the Lower East Side by offering young women like herself an alternate route to freedom.

⁵⁷ Anzia Yeziarska, *Breadgivers*, 296-297.

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