

WINDMILLS IN BROOKLYN A STORY OF THE SPANISH IMMIGRANTS IN NEW YORK

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American cities, and especially New York, grew spectacularly during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. People from all over the world – especially from Europe– poured into the New York harbor looking for a better life. These people contributed to the population, economy and culture of the city.

The scholarly production on the immigrants' contribution to New York is quite abundant, both about general immigrant life and also specific studies dealing about the various ethnic groups.¹ The large ethnic groups such as the Irish, Jews, Germans, Italians, Poles, Russians, and others are well studied. Smaller groups are covered in monographs. The Spaniards, however, never having arrived in New York in large numbers, had been far less studied than other national groups.² Yet, a significant number of Spaniards

1. Among the studies about immigrant life in New York see Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977; James S. Lapham, «The German-Americans of New York City, 1860-1890,» Ph. D. dissertation, St. John's University, 1977.

2. The main study among the Spaniards in the United States is Germán Rueda, *La Emigración Contemporánea de Españoles a Estados Unidos*, Colección MAPFRE 1492, Editorial MAPFRE, Madrid, 1993. Other studies of interest are: M. Carbó Peiro, *La emigración española hacia los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica: 1898-1936. Aproximación a su conocimiento con especial atención a las fuentes de cuantificación y caracterización*. Tesis de licenciatura inédita. Universidad de Barcelona; Miguel García de Saéz, «Panorama general de la emigración española a los Estados Unidos,» *Información Comercial Española*, nº 409, p. 141-144, Enrique Ruiz Fornells, «Cultura y Emigración: el caso de España y los Estados Unidos», *Arbor*, 451-454, 1983; A. Ruiz

the terminology Sollors uses in setting up his anthropological model—«consent» is more formative of the experience of immigration than «descent,» and the history of their adaptation explains more than an abstract, separated and introflexed idea of culture.² The uprooting, the migration, the adaptation, and the construction of community are experiences that the immigrants have in common with the founders. Deconstructing the opposition between ethnicity and modernity, traditional and American, in *Beyond Ethnicity* Sollors has also maintained that «assimilation and modernization take place in ethnic and even ethnocentric forms.»³ In this essay, I will attempt to explore these ideas by examining two novels by women: Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*.⁴ In particular, I will focus on how ethnicity is fictionalized in the representation of family relationships. These works can be taken as examples of how novels by American ethnic writers fictionalize the dialectical relationship between consent and descent through the representation of tensions that characterize the immigrant family and the dynamics of generational conflicts; of how these novels function as laboratories where individual identity and sense of belonging to a community can be remodeled in order to further the process of adaptation and upward social mobility; how present and past can be questioned and reinvented for the same purpose, in short, as laboratories where that process of alchemical hybridization of cultures takes place.

In spite of the enormous distance that separates the two texts' dates of publication and the different ethnic backgrounds of their authors and protagonists—not to mention their diametrically opposed temporal structure, one strictly chronological and the other constantly circling backward to reveal progressively deeper layers of history—their plots, themes and the underlying ideology strike me as bearing similarities which can be interpreted in terms of Sollors' theory of ethnicity.

If we assume the attitude of those who focus on works by American ethnic writers for their ethnic content and for their «exotic» nature, we tend to overlook the dialectic between ethnicity and American identity. It then becomes vital that we investigate how national and ethnic ideologies are challenged and or perpetuated in such works. To

2. Werner Sollors, in his introduction to *Beyond Ethnicity. Consent and Descent in America Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 5-6 identifies the central drama in American culture in the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral: between *consent* and *descent*. He explains: «Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of 'substance' (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of 'law' or 'marriage.' Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents... to choose our spouses, our destinies and our political systems.»

3. Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 245. See also Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

4. Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers, A Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New* (New York: Doubleday, 1925); Fae Myenne Ng, *Bone* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994). Further references to these works will be made parenthetically within the text.

tackle the complex interplay of ethnicity, national identity and gender, we can begin to explore how the ideologies regulating ethnic «province» and American «national» territory interact with both patriarchy and class. Both *Bone* and *Bread Givers* may be interpreted as transforming constructions of literary reality by implying not only the amalgamation of ethnicity and mobility but the remaking of mainstream culture itself.

The centrality of the experience of the encounter with America and the appropriation of the typically American middle-class ideology of upward mobility are apparent even from a superficial, literal reading of the two texts. At the level of plot, both books include recurrent narrative patterns of middle-class ascent: each work emphasizes the contrasts in the father-daughter relationship that fictionalizes the dialectic of consent and descent (community independence) that plays out in both books with the youngest daughter rebelling against the family and physically abandoning it to strike out on her own; in both books there are failed attempts to enter the world of business which involve the whole family and that are set against the children's individual struggles for both independence and middle class status, to do better than their parents.

The rhetoric of generations is a recurrent and insistent theme in these texts. *Bone* is narrated by Leila, the eldest of three daughters brought up in San Francisco's Chinatown. They are

lucky, not like the bondmaids growing up in service, or the new born daughters whose mouths were stuffed with ashes... the courtesans with their three-inch feet and the frightened child brides. Nina, Ona and I, we're the lucky generation. We know so little of the old country. We repeat the names of grandfathers and uncles, but they have always been strangers to us. Family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history. (35-36)

What emerges here is a vague sense of ancestry. The connections to the «bondmaids.» The «new born daughters,» the «courtesans,» and the «child brides» that the narrator seems to claim, are immediately undermined by the concrete reality of her ignorance of the past. This is intertwined with a sense of it almost being a duty owed to the preceding generations to be successful in America. The history to which they are connected is more the history of the humiliation of their parents in America which they want to make up for than that of their ancestors in China whose names they barely know. The stories about the ancestors are only second-hand stories received through their parents from a distant time and place; they lack the strength of lived experience that connects children to parents and makes the parents' experiences more formative and more relevant to the children's lives than distant Chinese ancestry. The tie that binds these generations turns out to be more the common effort toward the attainment of middle-class status than some vague sense of cultural inheritance.

The attempt to construct a sense of natural family cohesion in the new world is enacted here through the rhetoric of generations that functions as a naturalizing code.

We also get the sense that the generations are divided by conflicting, ethnicized versions of the «American Dream,» the expectations of the parents weigh on the second generation and compete with their desires for independence. At the opening of the novel, Leila's youngest sister, Nina, tells her that their parents «have no idea what our lives are about. They don't want to come into our worlds. We keep on having to live in their world. They won't move one bit.» (33) Unable to put up with their bickering, she has moved to New York. When Ona, the «middle girl» throws herself from the thirteenth floor of a housing project, Nina blames the «stifling atmosphere of the family and their insular neighborhood of Salmon Alley» (153) for her death.

Generational conflict is also at the core of Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*, with the book being subtitled «A Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New.» To gain independence and fulfillment as a new American woman, Sara Smolinsky must rebel against her self-righteous and authoritarian father and the patriarchal culture he represents. In the first part of the novel, she can only watch as this «tyrant from the old country» bargains off her three sisters to men they abhor. Her father, Reb Smolinsky, is portrayed as an inept parasite, immersed in the study of the Torah, who fails to provide for his starving family. «In America they got no use for Torah learning. In America everybody got to earn his living first,» comments Berel Bernstein, the rejected suitor of Sara's eldest sister, Bessie. Reb Smolinsky's «old world» way of life is here in clear conflict with the American capitalist injunction to work, the requirement of making money, in order to survive, and he is portrayed here as unadapted, linked to the «old world» and ignorant of or unwilling to fulfill the demands of the New. Inheriting her father's Blood and Iron (*Blunt-und Eisen*) personality, Sara alone challenges him:

Wild with all that was choked in me since I was born, my eyes burned into my father's eyes. «My will is as strong as yours. I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country. I'm American!» (138).

This father-daughter conflict is coded in terms of an «old world» versus «new world» struggle; despite their similar possession of strong will, Reb's gets him nowhere early in the story because of his failure to change his ways. Sara, on the other hand, becomes more successful in the pursuit of her own will because she knows the demands of her culture and works within them rather than working against or restraining them.

Feminist critics, including Carol Schoen and Alice Kessler-Harris, have limited their investigations into the ethnic drama of Yeziarska's fiction to the script summarized on the novel's title page: «the Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New.»⁵ Such critical commentary focuses on the daughter's struggle to carve out

5. Carol Schoen, «Anzia Yeziarska: New Light on the Sweatshop Cinderella,» *Melus* 7.3 (1980):3-11; Alice Kessler-Harris, «Introduction» to Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* (New York:

a space for herself in the patriarchal domains in which she travels. In a more recent and more nuanced reading that focuses on the economic aspects of *Bread Givers*, Thomas Ferraro has pointed out that the opposition between the Old World (supposedly embodied by the Father) and the New World/American Dream (embodied by Sara) is not as clear cut as the narrator portrays it: the figures of Sara and Reb Smolinsky, instead, stand for two competing pathways through which Jews were «making themselves at home» and working themselves up in America. Throughout «The Old World,» Sara «participates in her father's profoundly ethnic version of the American dream,» in which Orthodox traditions and patriarchy are adapted to «the structures of opportunity in twentieth century America.»⁶

The family businesses, first a boarding house and then a grocery store in Elizabeth, New Jersey, are run under strict patriarchal control. Reb moves his books from the front room to the kitchen to make room for the boarders, but continues to leave all the work to his wife and daughters. «Long hours of brainless drudgery are only for grubby grinds who have no high thoughts to think out,» (123) he says of the grocery business. Yet he continues to exercise his authority tyrannically and finally precipitates Sara's flight by berating first a customer for requesting breakfast food bran and then Sara for extending a two-cent credit to a girl who lives just next door. Sara's defiance is thus not so much a rebellion against Judaism or even patriarchy *tout court* but rather dissent from a particular strategy of adapting to America: for her, the strains of the patriarchal family enterprise outweigh the material gains of lower middle class status. By instead identifying with Emersonian self-determination, Sara is not establishing but revising her American dream in the light of what family enterprise has taught her.

For Reb Smolinsky, on the other hand, ethnic ties to his family and community and Orthodox tradition function as basic capital from which to make himself at home in America: he uses the patriarchal structure of his family and the Eastern European tradition of leaving the work of «bread giving» to his wife and daughters in order to run his small business. Ethnicity, ancestry, and patriarchy are all reshaped in the pursuit of wealth and success as he utilizes the traditional structures of relationships in order to reformulate and consolidate his own position within the new context of American capitalism. In Reb Smolinsky's case, as Ferraro suggests, Orthodox tradition and social and economic ascent are mutually supporting: not only does he use the family and 'old world' tradition to run his business, but he spends the profits of his business to support his Talmudic studies, to keep the family together, and to help the Jewish poor in his community. The

Doubleday, 1975). See also Rose Kamel, «Anzia Yezierska, «Get Out of Your Own Way: Selfhood and Otherness in the Autobiographical Fiction of Anzia Yezierska.» *Studies in Jewish American Literature* 3 (1983): 4-50.

6. Thomas J. Ferraro, «'Working Ourselves Up' in America: Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*.» *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 89 (1990):547-581.

interplay between consent and descent is much more complicated than a merely conflictual relationship between the «old ways» and the new ones, with a very strong interrelationship of reinforcement as the old ways further Reb's capitalist economic ascent and, at the same time, his new capitalist success allows him to more fully pursue his «old world» values of family, religion and ethnic community.

Similarly in *Bone*, Nina pursues her own version of the American Dream which consists of economic independence and self-determination and implies forgetting the sweatshop work and poverty that characterizes her memories of the past life with her family. When Leila visits her in New York and proposes Chinatown as a place to eat «Nina said it was too depressing. «The food is good there,' she said, 'but the life's hard down there. I always feel like I should rush through a rice plate and then rush home to sew culottes' . . .» (26) However, her pursuit of independence does not imply renouncing her cultural heritage; her original culture represents a path towards economic independence and self-determination as she works using her knowledge of Chinese. Just as Nina only uses chopsticks in her hair, she redeploys her ethnic heritage not as a connection to her family and to Chinese community, but as a means of attaining economic and personal independence as a tour guide to China. In *Bone*, the bones can be seen as subsuming and connecting, at a symbolic level, the idea of tradition, ancestry and family to the experience of the struggle to work oneself up in America. The bones of Grandpa Leong, that Leon fails to send back home, embody the tradition that Leon fails to revere. Leon promises to send Grandpa Leong's bones back to China, «but in the end the bones remained here,» (84) as if almost to found a new lineage, a new tradition. In Leila's memory, the bones are those of the pigeons that the three young Leong sisters pick while watching *I Love Lucy*. They evoke the memory of the poverty from which the Leong family started out and which they mythologize particularly when they are set in contrast with the squab dinners served by a smiling waiter in the restaurant where Nina and Leila meet.

In Leon's mind, the get-rich schemes with which he is constantly busy, the appeal of middle-class comparative prosperity, certainly have a stronger influence than the far removed tradition of sending the bones back «home.»

Significantly, after Ona's death, Leon blames it on his failure to send the bones back to China. The «restless bones» become the object on which he displaces his sense of guilt for his failures as a father, as a husband, as a businessman, as a son, albeit a paper son.

The whole idea of descent as a natural and fixed category is questioned in *Bone*. Leon, Leila's stepfather, literally invents his ancestry. To pass the interrogation on Angel Island, he pays Grandpa Leong five thousand dollars to claim him as his own son. After finding in Leon's suitcase full of paper the false document attesting Leon's ancestry, Leila comments: «I am the stepdaughter of a paper son and I have inherited this whole suitcase of lies. All of it is mine. All I have are those memories and I want to remember them all» (61). Family thus is defined not only by blood and histories, but also by

money and paper. Leon, the «paper son,» asserts that «In this country, paper is more precious than blood.»

This process of invention, of the falsification of the past and traditions, can also be found in *Bread Givers*. Significant to this purpose is the way in which Reb Smolinsky modifies the tradition of the dowry, turning it into a source of profit. In the Old World, fathers could exercise the authority of arranging marriages for their daughters, but they also had to provide as rich a dowry as possible. Smolinsky reinterprets this tradition as an opportunity to fund the social and economic mobility of the family: as they can earn their own wages, his daughters represent the initial capital that Smolinsky invests on the American marriage market to take advantage of its intersection with the larger capitalist economy. This capitalistic logic can explain why Smolinsky demands cash in exchange for Bessie's income-producing labor: in his view, Berrel Bernstein should compensate him for the loss of his best «bread giver.» When he will finally manage to marry two of his daughters (Fania and Masha) off to two men who are initially believed to be a diamond trader and a clothier, he can finally establish himself in the Hester Street Jewish community as a businessman, a professional matchmaker, and broker for the marriage of Bessie and Zalmon claiming a five hundred dollar commission. What Reb is doing here is trying to turn his fatherhood and the tradition of dowry into a source of profit.⁷

In both books, ethnicity and tradition are invented and used to further the process of adaptation to America: in *Bread Givers* it functions as a way for Reb Smolinsky to obtain a position of respect and prestige in the community and enter the business world, and in *Bone* it works as an expedient that earns Leon admission to America. The objective is success, middle-class ascent, and ethnicity is used as a support, to justify and further it.

I hope to have shown through this analysis how these two novels by American ethnic writers present similar ways of fictionalizing the interplay of consent and descent in the representation of the encounter of immigrant families with the American reality. Categories such as traditions, ancestry, ethnicity, and patriarchy, typically imagined as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable and static entities, are instead manipulated in order to facilitate the adaptation and insertion into a new reality through processes of falsification and invention that are similar across ethnic groups, not because of anything inherent to that group, but in the common experience of encountering America as immigrants.

7. Mary V. Dearbon, «Anzia Yezierska and the Ethnic American Self,» in *The Invention of Ethnicity* 105-123.