

***Salome of the Tenements,* the American Dream and Class Performativity**

Catherine Rottenberg

*In America every one tries to better himself, acquire more
than he started with, become more important.*

Anzia Yeziarska

We do not have classes at all on this side of the water.

Theodore Roosevelt

The American Dream has, at least for the past century, been an important feature of class discourse in the United States. Jennifer Hochschild defines the dream as the promise held out to each and every American that he or she has a reasonable chance of achieving success through his or her own efforts (1995, xi). Achievement, therefore, translates into reaching “some threshold of well-being, higher than where one began” (Hochschild 1995, 16).¹ Anzia Yeziarska’s 1923 novel, *Salome of the Tenements*, brings to the fore and dramatizes various aspects of the American Dream. Success, as the protagonist Sonya Vrunsky defines it, means leaving poverty—“the prison of... soul-wasting want”—behind; Sonya is described as wanting more than anything else to move away from the “blackness of poverty” and to reach the “mountain-tops of life” (5).² The image of upwardness, whereby poverty is presented as low and wealth as high, is a central trope in the novel. In this way, Yeziarska portrays the United States not

only as a society with clear class stratifications, but also a society in which individuals are capable of changing their location in the hierarchical formation, that is, they can rise above want and need, and enjoy the “higher life,” where the “luxuries of love, beauty, plenty” abound (68).

Class takes on an urgency in Yeziarska’s writings which has not been sufficiently addressed by her critics. Many critics have read Yeziarska’s work through the lens of “assimilation” and “liminality” (Goldsmith 1999; Kamel 1983; Levinson 1994; Fishbein 1996; Weinthal 1994), contending, for example, that Yeziarska’s narratives give voice to the “misread, the marginalized, [those] who are attempting to work out a relationship between their birth-culture and a mainstream America” (Levinson 1994, 9). Similarly, Ellen Golub argues that Yeziarska’s fiction is “one of balked desires and lost homes,” (1983, 57) as the female protagonists find that their attempts to become “truly” American are complicated in various ways. However, by framing their analysis in this way, critics tend to reinforce a binary opposition between American and Jewish culture, assuming that each term constituting the binary is a monolithic and self-identical entity. The few critiques which do specifically address issues of class in Yeziarska’s novels fail to offer a convincing theoretical analysis of the way U.S. class discourse operates in her texts.³

In the following pages, I argue that *Salome of the Tenements* explicitly queries and dramatizes the logic of upward mobility and provides a fascinating staging of class “conflict” in (Yeziarska’s fictive) Progressive-Era America.⁴ This novel tells the story of Sonya Vrunsky, an orphaned child of Jewish immigrants working as a columnist on the Lower East Side, who falls in love with the millionaire and progressive philanthropist John Manning. Sonya is determined to get what she wants, and she eventually finds a way into Manning’s life. Things fall apart soon after Sonya and Manning’s marriage, however, and Sonya leaves Fifth Avenue and returns to the Lower East Side. Here, she works as a dressmaker, and through her hard work and talent, makes a name for herself as a fashion designer. At the end of the novel, Sonya re-encounters Jaky Solomon, who has also worked himself up from a lowly tailor to a Fifth Avenue designer; the two ultimately become partners, both in work and in love.

Yeziarska’s flamboyant and sometimes hyperbolic narrative style alongside her constant invocation of class norms make this text a particularly suitable site for investigating the way in which class status is constituted by and through performativity. Concentrating on the functions of class *discourse* in the novel, I contend that the narrative reveals many of the ways this discourse has operated in the U.S., and how class, *as a category of identification*—similar to gender and race—is constituted by and through certain regulatory ideals or norms. Yet, I go on to argue that class also needs to be rethought as *a specific and unique modality of performative reiteration* and therefore operates differently from gender and race.⁵

The paper begins by identifying the particular class discourse that dominates Yeziarska's text, showing how the powerful myths of the American Dream and upward mobility serve as the nexus through which class norms circulate in the novel. The subsequent two sections describe the particular norms linked to American liberal class discourse, and the way in which Sonya and Jaky attempt to approximate these norms. Not only is moving up the class hierarchy conceived to be—at least in large part—a matter of hard slog and an indomitable will, but also—unlike gender and race—class in twentieth-century America has not been perceived of as essentialist. In the penultimate section, I lay out more specifically how the absence of the assumption of essentialism in class discourse creates the condition of possibility of upward mobility and serves as the basis for the unique modality of class performativity in the United States. Although I reach this claim rather late in the paper due to the need to contextualize the discussion, this constitutes my major assertion.⁶ I conclude by arguing that an analysis of the conception of class status operative in Yeziarska's America discloses how liberal ideology has operated as one of the modalities of power by and through which subjects are individuated and thus become intelligible *qua* individuals.

The American Dream

Many American authors both before and after Yeziarska have dramatized the power of the upward mobility discourse. But due to the historical moment in which Yeziarska was writing—as part of the first generation of Jewish-American authors writing in English and specifically about the process of “Americanization” after the major waves of Eastern European Jewry immigration—her corpus helps bring into sharp focus how the American Dream helped shape U.S. identity in the early twentieth century.⁷

The American Dream is informed by a very specific notion of the social subject as an individual.⁸ The term *individualism*, however, did not come into use in the United States until the late 1820s, when market society and forms of the modern liberal state were well established. By the mid-eighteenth century, though, the notion of individual rights—promulgated much earlier in the political philosophy of John Locke—comprised an article of cultural faith (Brown 1990, 2). The idea that individuals are proprietors of their own person (and any capital they may own), for which they owe little or nothing to society, alongside the conviction that an individual's freedom should only be limited by the requirements of the freedom of other individuals rapidly became cornerstones of American liberal democracy (Fossum and Roth 1981; MacPherson 1962; Takaki 1990, 1993).⁹ Moreover, since the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, the U.S. has increasingly emphasized the formal equality of all of its citizens; that is, not only is every subject “guaranteed” equal rights, but also every citizen can—potentially—govern. Not surprisingly, the American Dream, with its central tenet of upward mobility, depends both on the emphasis of

individual rights and on the formal recognition of individual equality (Ceaser 1998, 149; Gerstle 1994, 539; Takaki 1990).

The social subject of American liberal democracy has been conceived of as an agent of choice. As we will see in the next section, *Salome of the Tenements*, through its depictions of the two main protagonists, Sonya and Jaky, in many ways, lays bare liberalism's most basic assumptions—assumptions that prioritize a self understood to be “an active, willing agent, distinguishable from [his/her] surroundings, and capable of choice” even in the most difficult situations (Sandel 1998, 19). The individual subject becomes the locus of agency, for he/she is presented as having the opportunity and ability to climb the class hierarchy. In addition, the notion of success, which the American Dream promulgates, while not necessarily reducible to acquiring great wealth or even to attaining upper-middle class status, is certainly inextricably related to moving *up* the class hierarchy.

The conviction that one can ascend the class ladder actually points to an interesting tension within American class discourse. On the one hand, the American Dream seems to suggest that the United States is not a class society of the traditional European type (because anyone can potentially move up the ladder), while on the other hand, the discourse assumes the existence of some kind of class formation, for otherwise the very notion of moving up the hierarchy would be nonsensical. It could be argued that the difference between the traditional European class society and the one in the United States is that the latter does not posit structural class limitations which unfairly hinder the individual. Even Karl Marx argued that “[in] the United States of North America . . . classes, indeed, already exist,” but they have not become fixed; rather they “continually change and interchange their elements in a constant state of flux . . .” (1998, 25).

In *Salome of the Tenements*, Sonya's relationship to John Manning's class position reveals this interesting tension within the American Dream and class discourse.¹⁰ According to Sonya, Manning is the one of the “American-born higher-ups;” he belongs to a particular social milieu, a different “class where there were social rules and regulations to be observed” (36). There is a very clear recognition of class difference and social barriers between classes. But, throughout the novel, Sonya also invokes the ideal of formal equality and the lack of structural limits on individual upward mobility. “You and I, com[e] from the opposite ends of society,” she tells Manning, “[b]ut here, in America we come together and eat by the same table like born equals” (36). Moreover, Sonya is depicted as believing in the possibility of individual class transformation, and the narrative actually has her realize that possibility: first by marrying Manning, but then, perhaps more importantly, by becoming a successful designer who lives far above want and need.

Performing Upward Mobility: Willpower, Hard Work, and Moral Uprightness

As the novel discloses, the possibility of climbing the class hierarchy is contingent upon the individual's readiness to emulate certain norms that are produced, reinforced, and circulated by and through the American Dream. More specifically, the norms of determination, hard work, and moral uprightiness are revealed to be regulatory ideals or normative injunctions, which the protagonists must constantly endeavor to approximate and embody if they wish to "better themselves." The text dramatizes—and in some ways can be seen to (re)produce—the idea that without a will of steel, hard work and some kind of moral sensibility, individuals will be unable to take advantage of the opportunities America offers; and if they fail to make good on the American Dream, they have only themselves to blame.

The potential powers of the individual will, for instance, play a crucial role in the text from the moment we are introduced to Sonya. Sonya's first meeting and interview with John Manning, millionaire and philanthropist, is described as a result of her perseverance and ingenuity: "[T]he force of her will had materialized her desire into flesh and blood" (3). And as obstacles arise during her daring and spectacular courting of Manning, Yeziarska has Sonya constantly invoke the liberal conception of the will, in which the autonomous subject's determination to do or change something is immediately translated into a deed, as a way of motivating herself. Whenever she feels her plan is faltering, Sonya reminds herself that where there is a will there is a way (see 8, 47); and though she is occasionally cowed by the difficulties that seem to frustrate her grand plan, Sonya does not give up. Against all odds, she convinces a famous Fifth Avenue designer to create a thousand-dollar dress—gratis—for her lunch date with Manning. She also persuades her rapacious "Essex Street tyrant" landlord to paint and renovate her dilapidated apartment (41). In the end, "her indomitable will" wins the day, and Manning and Sonya get married (97).

While the narrative of Sonya's success is usually described in terms of her desire and constant attempt to live up to the norm of unswerving determination, Yeziarska's depiction of Jaky Solomon's rise to fame stresses the potential benefits of hard work. From his early days Jaky recognizes that he is no "common tailor," but he works in factory after factory, saving his money for the day when he can sail to Paris (18). His determination finally bears fruit when a rich customer invites Jaky to be her private designer; he is then able to realize his dream of developing his talent in Paris—"At last after years of struggle!" (20). He "*worked himself up* from a Division Street tailor to a Paris designer" (22, emphasis added). The narrative exposes that in order to live up to the norm of the hard-working subject, one must—among other things—adopt a certain conception of time where non-productive activity is perceived to be wasteful. That is, in order to "be" a hard-working subject, subjects must incessantly repeat and endeavor to

approximate the norms that come to define what a hard working subject “is” in a given context.

Following Sonya’s decision to leave Manning, she forces herself to work as a waitress: “Much as she hated the work of the restaurant, she was determined to stick it out at all costs until by strictest economy she had saved up enough to go to a school of design” (167). And as soon as she sees her opportunity, she grabs it; she convinces a manufacturer to take her on as a machine hand. Given that she has a goal in front of her, she is not afraid of grueling labor: “After the shop closed, she sat up half the night reading fashion books, poring over designs. At lunch time, she hurried through a scant meal and greedily spent every moment...studying how the more exquisite gowns were made” (169). And, sure enough, through her hard work and resolution, she proves herself to be a talented dressmaker. When the reader takes leave of her, Sonya has become a successful and sought after designer.¹¹

Jennifer Hochschild and Emmett Winn have both convincingly argued that moral uprightness has also been an important aspect of U.S. cultural discourse vis-à-vis class (Hochschild 1995; Winn 2000).¹² Historically, there has been a subtle but very real equation of “failure” to move up the class hierarchy with lack of virtue, while “success” is often identified with goodness. Moreover, only individuals who capitalize on the (supposed) lack of class structural barriers in America and work hard can move up the ladder. As we will see in the next section, those who do not take advantage of the promises the American Dream holds out to them are coded as pathetic or failures. Thus, mobility is moralized, and success is “justified because (and only when) it is associated with virtue” (Hochschild 1995, 59). Fame, power, and wealth in and of themselves are not necessarily enough to warrant respect. Rather, the motives and the way in which a person transforms him/herself are important and must correspond in some way to the dominant perception of moral uprightness. Honesty, or honest economy and toil, integrity, charity, and realizing one’s aims and purposes in ways compatible with an equal liberty for others are some of the virtues that have traditionally been attached to moral probity in America (Sandel 1996; Hochschild 1995; Takaki 1990, 1993).

Sonya’s desire to return to her roots in order to democratize beauty plays a crucial part in countering her image as willing to do anything to get what she wants: “I’ll rob, steal or murder if I got to,” she tells Gittel at the beginning of the novel (8). Once she thought she could reach the “higher up place” through dissimulation and marriage, through grabbing “love” and “power” by force (162). Sonya is initially described as “an egoist with driving force that will carry her anywhere” (71). Later in the novel she changes course and succeeds in reaching the “mountain-tops of life” through hard work and selling the promise of democratization by opening an inexpensive boutique on the Lower East Side. In other words, Sonya’s return can be seen as yet another attempt on her part to embody and approximate the norms that allow for upward mobility. We have

seen how, after she leaves Manning, Sonya constantly attempts to embody the ideals of hard work and determination. Here, I argue, she is performing the norm of moral uprightness. Yeziarska, wittingly or unwittingly, both exposes how and, in some ways, helps (re)produce the notion that upward mobility is permitted and applauded “with the moral proviso that one does not abandon one’s personal and spiritual values in harvesting the rewards of the materialistic myth of the American Dream” (Winn 2000, 7). Whereas her marriage and life with Manning are described as undermining Sonya’s personality and her belief in “true” democracy, her success as a designer coupled with her future store seem to reinscribe the various aspects of the myth, wherein subjects may, “with proper motives, enjoy social mobility and moral well-being” (*ibid.*). Sonya cannot reap the benefits of a higher class status until two criteria are met: one, she has to achieve material well-being through her own efforts and not vicariously through Manning, and two, her newfound success must include some form of “charity,” which will signify, in turn, her newfound moral probity. It should not be forgotten, however, that Sonya and Jaky plan to open a little shop on Grand Street “*on the side*” (178, emphasis added).

Class Discourse and the Lack of Assumption of Essence

If upward mobility is posited as something possible and desirable, as it seems to be in the novel, then class status is something one can change; it is not a determining attribute. In stark contrast to other categories of identity, like race, gender, and perhaps even ethnicity, in twentieth-century America class was not constructed—even in hegemonic discourse—in an essentialist way. In fact, the lack of assumption of essentialism in class discourse constitutes the very condition of possibility of the discourse of upward mobility, and I believe that it is here that the unique and irreducible modality of class performativity lies.

The conception of class status as transformable has important and far-reaching consequences. Since in America gender and race have historically been conceived of as essences, as biological facts that cannot be altered, the norms concatenated to these categories of identification have been construed as natural attributes. According to hegemonic conceptions of gender, women *are* feminine—they *are* nurturing and emotional, etc.; blackness, in the United States’s white racist regime, has been stereotyped as lack of intelligence, laziness, licentiousness, etc. However, in the U.S., hard work, willpower, and moral uprightness are not so much attributes that are naturally concatenated to (social) groups but rather characteristics that can be acquired by particular and individual subjects. Michael Sandel highlights this point through his distinction between attributes that one *has* and attributes that one *is* (1998, 20). This distinction informs the notion of possessive individualism operative in hegemonic U.S. class discourse and which underlies the liberal subject and the myth of the American Dream. “The possessive aspect of the self . . . means that there must

always be some attributes I have rather than am” (*ibid.*). Twentieth-century U.S. class discourse has not only tended to emphasize the acquisitive aspect of the self, but has also helped produce the very notion of possessive individualism. Hegemonic race and gender discourses (which in many ways actually undermine or contradict the paradigm of the liberal subject), by contrast, rely on essence: one does not *have* certain attributes; one is understood *to be* those attributes.

As a result of Yeziarska’s constant and even hyperbolic invocation and reiteration of Progressive-Era class norms, her text becomes a useful site for investigating the ways in which hegemonic discourse tends to enforce a belief that *certain* attributes are manifestations of individual determination and not biologically determined characteristics. Consequently, the narrative can be seen to suggest that norms associated with class status can be wielded in a way that gender, race and ethnicity cannot; as Sonya’s performance of “being a lady” dramatizes, they can be donned and doffed more easily and with fewer repercussions. After having approached her landlord in her everyday clothes and failed to convince him to fix up her apartment, Sonya dons the suit Jacques Hollins (Jaky Solomon’s trade name) has made for her. Instantly, it seems, she is transformed into a “lady.”¹³ The stenographer in the landlord’s office, as well as the landlord himself, do not realize that Sonya is the same woman who unsuccessfully pleaded her case the day before. The stenographer is obsequious, and when Sonya enters the restaurant in which the landlord is eating, he is described as feeling that “a superior being from another world had dropped down from the sky” (50). Sonya not only dresses the part of the lady, but she adopts the mannerisms associated with this class. That is, she assumes a haughtiness and a “commanding confidence” (59). And after she sees how easy it is to “pass” as a “lady,” she uses her performance in various situations. Her assumption of privilege convinces others that she is privileged. In this way, Yeziarska highlights the way in which “being a lady” is constituted by performativity.

In the United States, as in other societies, class has been one of the regulatory categories of identification through which a subject’s identity becomes recognizable and coherent to her/himself and to other members of society; subjects are initiated or interpellated into society as classed subjects, just as they are concomitantly initiated into the symbolic order (i.e., the dominant norms circulating in society which render subjects intelligible as subjects) as gendered and raced beings. This preliminary interpellation imposes—on the subject—an initial identification with a specific class; in other words, this interpellation *entails* an enforced primary identification.

Thus, in the following analysis, I am moving away from traditional Marxist conceptions of class, i.e., as an already-existing social group defined by its relation to the means of production. Drawing on the insights of twentieth-century neo-Marxist theorists like Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, and Louis Althusser, among others, I problematize the economic conception of the

relationship between the material base and the ideological superstructure. Ideology and hegemony, as all of these theorists have argued in different ways, help *produce* our perception and definition of the world in general, and thus of class more specifically. However, I go further, contending that the narrative discloses how class is constituted by and through certain regulatory ideals or norms and needs to be rethought as a unique modality of performative reiteration.¹⁴

Like norms of gender and race identification, class norms operate by initially compelling subjects to assume or identify with certain identity categories. In the case of gender, subjects are interpellated into the symbolic order as either men or women and thus (initially) compelled to identify as either one or the other; in the case of race, subjects have—historically—been forced to identify as black, non-white or white. In the case of class, they are compelled to identify as under or working, middle or upper class subjects.

But this, I argue, is where the similarity ends. Heterosexual regimes of the U.S. type have operated by *engendering*, *encouraging*, and *compelling* a specific type of relationship between identification and the “desire-to-be,” which induces and urges the subject to live up to hegemonic *norms*. In heteronormativity, identification with “being a woman” almost always implies (and is inextricably intertwined with) the desire to “be a woman,” that is, a desire to live up to the norms of femininity in a particular symbolic order. Femininity is posited by the hegemon as desirable, and as something that “women” *should* approximate. While there are two idealized genders under regimes of compulsory heterosexuality, albeit with a very great power differential between them, this hierarchy has postured as “difference” rather than as good/bad or high/low. By compelling and encouraging “women” to live up to norms of femininity, heteronormative regimes reinforce their hegemony. The linking and thus collapsing of identification and “desire-to-be” is fundamental to the operations of heteronormativity (Rottenberg 2004a).

The operation of identification vis-à-vis class is different, however. Unlike gender discourse (and to a great extent race discourse), which has historically camouflaged hierarchy by employing the euphemism of difference, class discourse posits a clear hierarchy without any attempt to conceal the social stratification. Class is, I believe, necessarily rather than contingently a hierarchical concept precisely because the discourse that partially constitutes it does not assume essential distinctions among individuals. Given the hierarchical nature of class discourse, norms that are associated with the positions higher up on the ladder have been patently privileged—privileged without the disguise or mask of difference.

In the United States, the forced identification with the lower or under classes has not historically been linked with a desire to live up to the norms connected with these classes. Rather, *in order to sustain a non-marginal existence*, subjects who are initially interpellated into a lower class are urged to privilege and thus

strive to live up to norms associated with the middle and upper-middle classes. Dissimilar to heteronormativity (but comparable to white racist regimes), U.S. liberal discourse has created and encouraged a distinct bifurcation between identification and “desire-to-be,” such that certain subjects who are (initially) forced to identify with the lower classes are simultaneously encouraged to privilege and thus desire attributes associated with the classes that are higher up on the ladder. In other words, the prevalent psychoanalytic conflation of identification with the “desire-to-be” cannot be sustained. Identification can no longer be understood simply as “an endless process of violent negation, a process of killing off the other in fantasy in order to usurp the other’s place, *the place where the subject desires to be*” (Fuss 1995, 9; emphasis added). For identification with the lower classes has historically not only been coerced, but has also been coded as *undesirable*. I believe that the delinking of identification and “desire-to-be” is key to understanding the particular mechanisms by and through which norms of class operate.

It might seem that power should operate by encouraging those subjects interpellated into the symbolic order as lower class to approximate the attributes associated with this class. This would function as a mechanism of control because the subject’s attempt to approximate these norms would ensure that subject’s subordination. But herein lie the paradox and the complex workings of positive and negative power. If a regime privileges particular attributes, then it must also encourage subjects to desire and strive to embody them. It can and does attempt to bar certain subjects from accessing privilege and positions of power through classification—or compelling race identification—but it cannot completely control the effects of its own discourse. So long as the attributes associated with the lower classes are coded as undesirable in class societies, only those class subjects who strive to embody attributes associated with the middle class gain admittance to some of the benefits of privilege and power.¹⁵

When Sonya bursts into Jaky Solomon’s (now Jacques Hollins) Fifth Avenue shop by saying she wants to see her old friend, Jaky is surprised. He does not recognize himself in the old name: “[H]e had buried his Division Street pedigree under five years of Fifth Avenue success and was puzzled as to who this ‘old friend’ might be” (22). Jaky Solomon is described as having almost completely disidentified with his initial interpellation as lower-class tailor. Moreover, he is not punished for changing his name to Jacques Hollins, but rather his transformation into wealthy designer is posited as inevitable given his genius. This lack of sustained identification with class status makes sense since class in America has not been understood in ontological terms. Because individuals can and are even encouraged to acquire attributes associated with a higher class and to appropriate that class’s belief system, there is nothing necessarily subversive or disruptive about class passing. By contrast, race passing and gender passing—when exposed—are much more threatening to the powers that be than class

passing, because class “passing,” or more precisely potential class transformation, is one of the key promises of the American Dream.

Furthermore, given the United States’s historical development in the twentieth century, in which individualism has been increasingly promoted, any kind of sustained class identification has been threatening to the powers that be, since it can potentially lead to class solidarity and a disruption of capitalist development. I return to this in the next section.

Interestingly and importantly, Sonya’s failure to approximate upper middle-class norms during her wedding reception is ascribed to her “ethnicity” rather than her “class” by Manning’s upper-class friends; Sonya’s inability to pass as a “higher up” is described as due to Sonya’s being a Russian Jewess and not to the fact that she is from the working class (128). “Astonishingly well-dressed,” the wealthy guests admit, but “[h]er gesticulating hands show her origin” (121). This scene reveals how class status, while present as a social force, becomes unarticulated and rendered invisible; insuperable difference is deflected away from class and projected onto ethnicity. If the American Dream is to retain its powerful hold on subjects’ imaginations and desires, limitations vis-à-vis mobility must be explained away by “essential” differences and not class status. It is not that one cannot move from the lower to upper classes, as the text seems to suggest, but rather that a Jew cannot become an Anglo-Saxon. In this way, the possibility of upward mobility is maintained, structural limitations based on class are denied, and a glass ceiling based on ethnicity (and race and gender) is created.

In contradistinction to both white racist and heteronormative regimes climbing from one class to another, and thus potentially disidentifying with one’s initial interpellation is posited as something desirable (Hochschild 1995, 35). Rather than the “identify as black (or else) but aspire to be white” which, as I have argued elsewhere (Rottenberg 2004b), has been operative in race performativity under white racist regimes, there seems to be a different kind of injunction regarding class. Perhaps it can be stated in the following way: This is who you are now, but you can be something better if only you persevere, work hard, and maintain some kind of socially-recognized moral probity.

While initial identification with a particular class is necessary as part of the functioning of class societies—otherwise the upward mobility discourse would cease to be meaningful—it does not signify in the same way as it does in either gender or race discourse. In U.S. liberal discourse there is the promise and therefore possibility of complete transformation, including the subject’s very identification. As Rita Felski proposes, “One can change one’s class in a way that one cannot change one’s sex or race. . . . [I]f one has become upper-middle-class as a result of social mobility, then one really is upper-middle-class” (2000, 38). Felski’s comment simultaneously reveals just how entrenched the notion of essentialism has become within race and sex discourse as well as the difference the lack of assumption of essence makes regarding the construction of class.

Thus, disidentification with the initial interpellation vis-à-vis class may actually be encouraged rather than punished. I would even go so far as to argue that in the United States this initial interpellation is less powerful psychically, and that any kind of lasting identification with this or that class may even be actively *discouraged*.

Individualism versus Class Consciousness

The emphasis on the individual, as we have seen, subtends the norms of hard work, willpower and moral uprightness. But what the success stories of Jaky and Sonya also bring into sharp focus is that upward mobility depends on a rejection of any notion of class solidarity or identification along class lines, as well as an embrace of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed the “cult of the self” (1984, 414). This cult of self celebrates and thus reinforces the belief in subjects as autonomous agents. Individual personalities with their set of unique properties, gifts, and talents are valorized, creating a culture that privileges the private and intimate as against the public and the collective (Bourdieu 1984, 414-416). The corollary of this orientation towards individual mobility and the cult of self is the break-up of solidarities.

In his *German Ideology*, Marx famously argues that separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry out a common battle with another class; otherwise they are “on hostile terms with each other as competitors” (1995, 82). The cult of self tends to negate any possibility of “common battle,” suggesting that the American Dream serves to individuate subjects by holding out the promise of upward mobility to *individuals* who endeavor to live up to certain norms while simultaneously encouraging society to blame the “unsuccessful” *individuals* for their own failure. Whereas dominant gender and race discourses tend to homogenize subjects by insisting on similarities or dissimilarities across groups, hegemonic U.S. class discourse has actually operated as a heterogenizing force.

Perhaps one could even go so far to assert that class subjects gain much of their intelligibility as individuals through and by this discourse. Class discourse can thus be seen to operate as one of the modalities of power “in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality” (Foucault, 1979, 192). In other words, U.S. class discourse has *helped* produce, circulate, and reinforce the idea and reality of the individual and of individuality. Consequently, the possessive individualism underpinning twentieth-century American class discourse, whereby individuals have been encouraged to “acquire” and perform a variety of characteristics that can potentially distinguish them from the masses alongside the cult of self which stems from the same source and lionizes individual personalities and attributes, has assisted in spawning the individuated subject and in making him/her recognizable *qua* individuals.

It is in large part due to Sonya’s belief in upward mobility and the American Dream that she is able to say, “I am I. . . . In me is my strength. I alone will yet

beat them all” (162, emphasis added). Sonya’s belief in her own strength, in the power of her own will, enables her to differentiate herself from her acquaintances. Her project of bettering herself entails leaving acquaintances like Gittel Stein and Lipkin behind. Gittel, resigned to poverty and unable to take her fate into her own hands, is not a desirable companion for Sonya, who does everything she can in order to change and overcome her circumstances. The text points to the entrenched U.S. belief that resignation is something one chooses; things for Gittel might have been different had she empowered herself with a belief that she could change her lot. “[W]hy should I hate [Sonya] simply because she stretches out her hands to life as I’d like to do, if I only had it in me!” Gittel is described as asking herself (11). Gittel is, on the one hand, described as envying Sonya, which points to her desire to become more like her colleague and thus the way in which the “desire-to-be” helps shape and comes into play even with subjects who fail to live up to middle class norms. On the other hand, her lack of “willpower” seems to warrant and justify her static and gray existence. She has “accept[ed] failure in love and in life” (94). That is, Yeziarska’s depiction of Gittel seems to gesture towards the way in which both positive and negative power—in the Foucauldian sense—operate in order to create and maintain certain class norms.

In Sonya’s eyes, the poet Lipkin is also a pathetic character: “Try as she would to be sympathetic, he only exasperated her” (69). She has no patience for his acceptance of poverty and his general submissiveness. “Everything comes to him who goes to fetch it,” is Sonya Vrunsky’s motto; people who do not manage to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps” have only themselves to blame (41). Here we see not only the intricate ways in which individualism is linked to hard work, willpower, and thus to upward mobility, but also the moral tinge of this linkage. People who fail are presumed to lack talent, will, or moral uprightness. The American Dream discourse very clearly helps to “recode social problems as individual problems with individual solutions” (Winn 2000, 3). Success or failure to live up to the norm of the “higher life,” where the “luxuries of love, beauty” abound is, accordingly, contingent on the individual, thus bringing not the group but the individual—with all of his/her talents, abilities, and attributes or lack thereof—into sharp focus.

As we have seen, hegemonic discourse seems, on the one hand, to hold out the promise of upward mobility to all and sundry. With determination and hard work, there does not seem to be any reason why one cannot better (and individuate) oneself. The possibility of moving into the middle class is something that seems to be realizable even to the newest and poorest immigrant. On the other hand, the cult of the self also encourages the belief in individual talent and genius, and emphasizes the need to “fulfill individual potential.” Sonya and Jaky work hard and have the will to succeed, but they are also described as having redoubtable talent, Jaky as a “virtuoso” and Sonya as an “unfolding genius” (17, 174). This tension, I believe, plays an important part in preserving

the status quo and effectively serves to explain why, at the end of the day, many people like Gittel and Lipkin find themselves trapped in and by their “class.” For while the discourse circulates the belief that it is possible for anyone to move up the class hierarchy, the caveats on exceptional talent alongside the emphasis on personal qualities that make an individual worthy of upward mobility work to help justify why certain subjects manage to “better” themselves while most people cannot seem to. Hard work and determination may be enough to transform oneself into an outstanding individual, but not necessarily.

Sonya’s dislike of the settlement house project is accordingly not merely related to the attempt to enforce “the Gospel of Simplicity” and the emulation of Anglo-American upper and middle-class norms, but also is intricately tied with her objection to the attempts to socialize the “worthy poor” in a way that stands in contradiction to the U.S. belief in and desire for individuality.¹⁶ In the novel, all of the institutions for the working poor are described in terms of their lack of “human warmth,” of any “touch of individuality” (134, 162). Settlement work, it seems, actually undermines the cult of the self and discourages the notion of unique personalities; it homogenizes the poor rather than encouraging individual self-expression. Charity, which is attached to endless codes of conduct, is opposed to Sonya’s individual vibrancy and desire to make it on her own in her own way.¹⁷

Following Meredith Goldsmith, I contend that Sonya’s success and desire to make beautiful clothes accessible and affordable to working-class women points to Sonya’s “internalization of the subtlest, and most insidious, principles of Americanization” (1999, 171). By inculcating working-class women into American ideals of beauty, Sonya “unwittingly conscripts” the factory girls into the same repressive ideology (*ibid.*). In contrast to Goldsmith, though, I believe the norms Sonya and Jaky have “internalized” are the ones linked to the “cult of self,” in which the ideal of beauty constitutes only one dimension. By returning to the Lower East Side in order to open up a “little shop on Grand Street . . . [B]eauty for those that love it, beauty that is not for profit” (178), Sonya and Jaky are reinforcing—in a subtle but very effective way—the class system and all of the norms associated with it. First, Jaky and Sonya are described as American success stories, and as such their presence on the Lower East Side can be seen to buttress the notion that anyone can live out the American Dream. Second, the democratization of beauty through the creation of a clothing store offers the working class a chance to make *themselves* more beautiful, even while they continue to be exploited in their everyday lives. This democratization thus diverts attention away from structural inequalities in America and allows working men and women to concentrate on their individual self-expression. And, as we have seen, the idea that each citizen can and should choose to express her/himself as an individual is not only consistent with but is foundational to liberalism.

This “cult of self” and emphasis on individuality also manifests itself in Sonya and Jaky’s obsession with beauty and aesthetics. Throughout the novel, Sonya rejects the “cheapness of the[se] ready-mades,” that is, the mass produced clothes of the Lower East Side (15). She hungers for clothing that will express her personality, her self. When she convinces Jaky Solomon to design a dress for her lunch with Manning, Yeziarska describes Sonya as being intoxicated by the sense of “release from the itching shoddiness of ready-mades—the blotting out of her personality in garments cut by the gross” (33). Jaky shares and reinforces Sonya’s belief in the transformative power of clothing. He tells Sonya that she “don’t have to be a second-hand pattern of a person—when [she] can be [her] own individual self” (26). Nothing, according to both Jaky and Sonya is beautiful but “what’s intensely personal” (112). Sonya and Jaky’s desire for individuated beauty is a clear rejection of mass production and the homogenization process that goes along with it.

By way of conclusion, I would like to address the manner in which these two processes—mass production and individuation—that seem so much at odds, actually strengthen and undergird one another in the U.S. twentieth-century context. There appears, at first glance, to be a major contradiction in liberal class discourse in the United States, with its particular historical fusion of republicanism, the Protestant ethic and capitalist accumulation. On the one hand, U.S. class discourse has encouraged capitalist mass production (and settlement work), which tends to produce homogeneity and commonality. On the other hand, the remnants of the Protestant ethic and republicanism have tended to stress the importance of individual self-reliance and accomplishments. Mass production, as Sonya’s description of the ready-mades indicates, creates sameness. It also, in many ways, offers—parallel the American Dream—the promise of material well being to all and sundry since items are sold at very affordable prices. In other words, it feeds into and reinscribes the notion of “formal” equality. Anyone, it seems, can buy the basic and necessary commodities which allow for the “good life.” The leveling aspect of mass production, in turn, prompts those subjects who wish to distinguish themselves to reject the “shoddiness of the ready-mades” and strike out on their own; obviously, individuation assumes that there is something from which one must distinguish oneself.

This cycle is reminiscent of the tension I discussed above involving the simultaneous and contradictory assumptions circulated by U.S. class discourse that there are no classes per se in the United States and that anyone can potentially move up the class ladder. Homogeneity and individuation, upward mobility and classlessness are part and parcel of the same “relationships of force” that Foucault has described and which I believe Yeziarska lays bare in her text. Homogeneity is the condition of possibility of individuation, just as the assumption of the lack of essence vis-à-vis class is the condition of possibility of upward mobility. These tensions operate productively within the same discourse and effectively

spawn and manipulate subjects' "desire-to-be." Where sameness is coded as undesirable, individuation and the desire to be exceptional will be encouraged by the hegemon. And what all of this teaches us, I believe, is that in order to understand the process of class materialization, we must continue to emphasize the *productive* and *material* nature of discourse.

Notes

1. Robert Fossum, John Roth, and Alan DeSantis have argued that the American Dream is rather amorphous and has meant different things at different historical periods (DeSantis 1998; Fossum and Roth 1981). As these critics have pointed out, the historian James Truslow Adams only popularized the term in 1931. In his text *In the Epic of America*, Adams refers to America as the "dream of a land, . . . with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (6). While I agree with the assessment vis-à-vis the changing meaning of the Dream, I also believe that the promise of upward mobility through hard work has served as a relatively constant and major aspect of the Dream at least since the turn of the century (DeSantis 1998; Ferraro 1993; Fox-Genevise 1990; Higginbotham and Weber 1992). Indeed, Adams' 1931 conception of the Dream—as the above quote discloses—is very similar to Hochschild's.

2. Anzia Yezierska. (1995) *Salome of the Tenements*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. All subsequent references to the novel come from this edition and will be given in parenthesis.

3. Martin Japtok, for example, explores the tension between individualism and communalism in *Bread Givers*. However, he does not discuss how individualism is specifically related to U.S. class discourse or to the American Dream. Moreover, he does not present a theoretical framework for his discussion on class (Japtok 1999).

4. Two qualifications need to be made from the outset. First, class is isolated in this paper so that some of the specific processes which have produced classed subjectivities in America can be examined. While the separation or isolation of class is necessary for methodological and analytical reasons, in social practice (as in novels) the categories of race, class, gender, and ethnicity work simultaneously as a background for one another and often find their most powerful articulation through one another. I believe this separation of class from other categories of identification to be necessary in order to show how class norms and the identification and desire they compel have had their own particular and distinct genealogy. Second, I am not attempting to describe how class actually operates on the level of social practices. This constitutes a second but related methodological move, since I am making a distinction between regulatory norms on the hegemonic level and how they operate on the level of social practices. I read *Salome of the Tenements* through this methodological lens, focusing on the how the hegemonic norms circulating in the novel help create the very desires of the protagonists.

5. Invoking critics such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and others, I argue that power operates *primarily* in a positive fashion by producing objects of inquiry and knowledge, constituting norms, and thus helping to create and shape subjects' identities, preferences, aspirations, and behavior. But in order to understand how hegemonic norms have helped to shape who and what we are, we must first identify and investigate these dominant ideals. Thus, if class—like gender and race—is indeed one of the hegemonic categories of identification through which subjects become intelligible as subjects, then I believe we must first examine the normative injunctions, i.e., norms, which have come to be linked to class in the United States. Only then will we begin to understand the ways in which class discourse has come to materialize and naturalize certain class subjects and class relations. Rosemary Hennessey reminds us that discourse "is a material force in that it (re)produces what counts as reality" (1993, 75).

6. While my inquiry focuses on one particular text, I do believe that even a specific examination of class performativity can provide conceptual apparatuses and tools for theorizing the differences among gender, class, and race norms in other settings and contexts.

7. Following a number of theorists, I believe that literary narrative and texts are sites where theory takes place (Butler 1993; Christian 1990). Due to Yezierska's description of Sonya as someone who desperately wants to approximate U.S. class norms, this text becomes a particularly helpful site for investigating the way dominant class norms operate on the level of identification and desire.

8. Gary Gerstle argues that American liberalism has actually been quite flexible and must be examined historically. In his article "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," he describes the change in liberal discourse from the Progressive Era to the New Dealers period. Whereas the Progressive Era was concerned with "individual vice and virtue . . . and intent on reforming individuals and improving character" the New Dealers were not so interested in remaking

individuals or uniting all Americans into a single moral community. Rather, they reserved their passion for “economic reform” (1994, 1044). Gerstle, however, reminds us that liberalism has consistently underscored emancipation, rationality, and progress. Thus, the discourse may have differed in emphasis, but one of the foundational principles of American liberalism remained intact: the basic tenet of individual rights (Gerstle 1994, 1046).

9. Ronald Takaki points out that the old republican insistence on defining people as individuals responsible for themselves and on the importance of judging people according to their individual merits or lack of them continues to hold sway in the twentieth century (Takaki 1990, 299).

10. Manning himself embodies the tension in this class discourse. His inability to overcome his class prejudices and privilege are juxtaposed against his desire to eliminate “all artificial class barriers” and to promote human brotherhood (78, 120).

11. Although I do not address the feminist aspects of Yezierska’s text in this paper, Sonya’s decision to leave Manning and set out on her own certainly has important feminist overtones. Thomas Ferraro describes how Sara Smolinsky in Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* sees the “differences between having wealth and social position through men and commanding that wealth and position on one’s own. Independence is a powerful enough lure that Sara is willing to pay the price, risking both security and comfort to begin again, economically speaking, at ground zero” (1993, 72). This description also fits Sonya to a tee. Here we begin to see how American gender and class discourse are intricately interconnected and can potentially reinforce one another through and in liberal discourse.

12. One could even argue that this moral overtone is linked to or inherited from the once dominant republican ideology rooted in the Protestant ethic, with their emphasis on individual self-rule and accumulation of capital as signs of grace (see Takaki 1990).

13. Although there are certainly gendered components to “being a lady,” I concentrate here on the class aspects of Sonya’s “performance.” Nan Enstad’s *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* offers a fascinating account of how Progressive-Era working women performed “ladyhood” as a way of asserting their subjectivities. While Enstad’s argument focuses on the way dominant norms were appropriated, misappropriated and “performed differently” on the level of social practices, in this paper I am concerned with outlining the constituent aspects of those dominant norms. Moreover, I am interested in asking how the very desire to emulate “ladyhood” was produced and encouraged. Only then, I believe, can we ask after its subversive (or not so subversive) misappropriations.

14. It is important to note here that to think about class as performativity is not in any way to ignore its materiality. Following Julie Bettie, I would argue that the “materiality” of class includes both economic and cultural resources, or economic and cultural capital, which only come to have meaning by and through a particular grid of intelligibility or symbolic order. The process of materialization in class processes has to do with power’s ability to naturalize and sanction certain class subjects and class relations (2000, 10).

15. Here again, we see how norms of class, gender, race, and ethnicity are—in social practice—inextricably intertwined. The norms associated with the lower class—laziness, submission, resignation, lack of hygiene—intersect with and serve as the background for norms associated with both gender and race.

16. Sonya desires a certain kind of simplicity; this becomes very clear as Sonya renovates her tenement apartment in order to impress Manning: “She had achieved the vivid simplicity for which she had longed all her life. Her personality breathed through the fabrics and colors with which she had surrounded herself” (65). Ironically, as Yezierska reveals in the renovation scene, a lot of hard work and money goes into “vivid simplicity.”

17. Christopher Okonkwo reads Sonya’s sartorial success as a Yezierskian commentary on Americanization, which “suppresses the ethnic self and presupposes hegemony” (2000, 8). In contradistinction, the Sonya Model “positively articulates the ethnic or immigrant woman” (2000, 7). JoAnn Pavletich, on the other hand, recognizes the problematic endings of most of Yezierska’s novels: “Bourgeois culture remains the protagonists’ unproblematicized goal” (2000, 93). But rather than focusing specifically on the reinscription of the “cult of self” and individualism in narratives such as *Salome of the Tenements*, Pavletich describes Yezierska’s use of affect and the way in which affective bonds come to be substitutes for political involvement in her texts.

References

- Bettie, Julie. (2000) “Women Without Class: *Chicas, Cholas*, Trash, and the Presence/Absence of Class Identity.” *Signs* 26.1: 1-35.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- . (1998) *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Brown, Gillian. (1990) *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Butler, Judith. (1990) *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- . (1993) *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge.
- . (1997) *Excitable Speech*. New York: Routledge.
- . (1999a) "Preface." *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- . (1999b) "Interview with Judith Butler" *Theory, Culture & Society* 16:2: 163-74.
- Ceaser, James. (1998) "Multiculturalism and American Liberal Democracy." In *Multiculturalism and American Democracy*. Arthur Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M Zinman eds. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- DeSantis, Alan D. (1998) "Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners: The Chicago Defender and the Great Migration of 1915-1919." *Western Journal of Communication* 62.4: 474-511.
- Enstad, Nan. (1999) *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Felski, Rita. (2000) "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class." *PMLA* 115.1: 33-46.
- Ferraro, Thomas. (1993) *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fishbein, L. (1998) "Anzia Yezierska, the Sweatshop Cinderella and the Invented Life." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 17: 137-41.
- Fossum, Robert and John Roth. (1981) *The American Dream*. London: British Association for American Studies.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. (1990) "Between Individualism and Fragmentation: American Culture and the New Literary Studies of Race and Gender." *American Quarterly* 42.1: 7-34.
- Foucault, Michel. (1979) *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- . (1990) *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fuss, Diana. (1995) *Identification Papers*. New York: Routledge.
- Gerstle, Gary. (1994) "The Protean Character of American Liberalism." *The American Historical Review* 99.4: 1043-1073.
- Goldmith, Meredith. (1999) "'The Democracy of Beauty': Fashioning Ethnicity and Gender in the Fiction of Anzia Yezierska." *Yiddish* 11.3-4: 166-87.
- Golub, Ellen. (1983) "Eat Your Heart Out: The Fiction of Anzia Yezierska." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 3: 51-61.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. (1993) *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*. New York: Routledge.

- Hochschild, Jennifer. (1995) *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kamel, Rose. (1983) "'Anzia Yeziarska, Get out of Your Own Way': Selfhood and Otherness in the Autobiographical Fiction of Anzia Yeziarska." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 3: 40-50.
- Kaplan, Cora. (1986) *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism*. London: Verso.
- King, Desmond. (2000) *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Levinson, Melanie. (1994) "'To Make Myself for a Person': 'Passing' Narratives and the Divided Self in the Work of Anzia Yeziarska." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 13: 2-9.
- MacPherson, C.B. (1962) *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marx, Karl. (1995). *The German Ideology*. New York: International Publishers.
- . (1998) *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers.
- Okonkwo, Christopher N. (2000) "Of Repression, Assertion, and the Speakerly Dress: Anzia Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*." *MELUS* 25.1: 129-45.
- Ouellet, Pierre. (1999) "The Invisible Spector of Class." *Peace Review* 11.2: 283-89.
- Pavletich, Jo Ann. (2000) "Anzia Yeziarska, Immigrant Authority, and the Uses of Affect." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 19.1: 81-104.
- Rottenberg, Catherine. (2004a) "Passing: Race, Identification and Desire." *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 45.4: 435-52.
- . (2004b) "Race and Ethnicity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and *The Rise of David Levinsky*: The Performative Difference." *MELUS*, forthcoming.
- Sandel, Michael. (1996) *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- . (1998) *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Takaki, Ronald. (1990). *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . (1993) *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Weinthal, Edith. (1994) "The Image of the City in Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 13: 10-13.
- Winn, J. Emmett. (2000) "Moralizing Upward Mobility: Investigating the myth of class mobility in *Working Girl*." *The Southern Communication Journal* (66:1): 40-51.
- Yeziarska, Anzia. (1995) *Salome of the Tenements*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.