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Trauma and Event in Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts*

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Abstract

Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* (1920) is a collection of short stories set in New York City's Lower East Side district and portrays Jewish working class women as they experience the problems of urban poverty and immigration as trauma. This article analyzes *Hungry Hearts* as a short story cycle in light of trauma theories and argues that Yezierska's protagonists suffer from what Maria Root calls "insidious trauma". Therefore, it holds that the dialectic of fragmentation and cohesion in the short story cycle form conflates with the insidious trauma of Yezierska's protagonists. From this perspective, the article claims that the narrative logic of Yezierska's work illustrates the inevitable continuity of insidious trauma because the stories follow a sequence of gradually aging protagonists. However, Yezierska also offers an alternative by creating two evental moments of intergenerational interaction in her last two stories. Drawing from Alain Badiou's concept of the "event" and Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory, this article argues that such moments function as departures from the initial narrative logic and let the characters reformulate their futures.

Keywords: Anzia Yezierska, Short Story Cycle, American Short Story, Trauma, Event

Öz

Anzia Yezierska'nın *Hungry Hearts* [*Aç Yürekler*] (1920) adlı yapıtı, New York'un Aşağı Doğu Yakası bölgesinde geçen ve kent

yoksulluğu ve göç gibi sorunları travma olarak yaşayan işçi sınıfı Yahudi kadınları anlatan bir kısa öykü derlemesidir. Bu makale, *Hungry Hearts*'ı bir kısa öykü döngüsü olarak ve travma teorileri bağlamında ele almaktadır. Makale, Yezierska'nın kahramanlarının, Maria Root'un "sinsi travma" olarak adlandırdığı travmayı yaşadıklarını öne sürmektedir. Bu nedenle, kısa öykü döngüsüne özgü parça-bütün diyalektiğinin, Yezierska'nın kahramanlarının sinsi travmasıyla biçimsel olarak örtüştüğünü iddia etmektedir. Buradan hareketle makalede Yezierska'nın yapıtındaki anlatı mantığının sinsi travmanın kaçınılmaz sürekliliğini gösterdiği saptanmıştır, çünkü öykülerin kahramanları sırasıyla hep bir öncekinden daha yaşlı karakterlerdir. Ancak Yezierska, kuşaklararası etkileşimden kaynaklanan iki olay anı yaratarak son iki öyküsünde bu duruma bir alternatif de sunmaktadır. Alain Badiou'nun "olay" kavramından ve Dominick LaCapra'nın travma teorisinden yola çıkan bu makale, belirtilen olay anlarının yapıtın başlangıcındaki anlatı mantığından ayrıldığını ve karakterlerin geleceklerini yeniden oluşturmalarına izin verdiğini öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Anzia Yezierska, Kısa Öykü Döngüsü, Amerikan Kısa Öyküsü, Travma, Olay

Introduction

In the early 1920s, when Anzia Yezierska started to use New York City's Lower East Side district as the primary setting in her literary works in order to depict and criticize the dismal conditions of immigrant life, she found herself amidst the emergence of a new critical discourse which advocated the inseparability of formal arrangement from the content. Although the movement was not called the New Criticism then, its aesthetic agenda that sought a systematic literary study by dismissing any possible relevance of the literary text to its historical context or to its author's biographical information had already germinated in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) and "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919). Three years after the publication of her first collection of short stories titled *Hungry Hearts* (1920), Yezierska responded to the contemporary critical discourse by expressing her struggle with literary form as she voiced the perpetual desperation of the Jewish immigrant community in the Lower East Side district. In her essay "Mostly about Myself", she describes her writing

process as a state of bewilderment due to starvation, the recurring metaphor in *Hungry Hearts*. While she believes that writers with a "clear, calm security of their vision" can organize their stories in a logical order and sequential pattern, she admits her weakness claiming, "the end and the middle and the beginning of my story whirl before me in a mad blur" ("Mostly About Myself" 2). Relating her process of writing to trying to suppress hunger by begging for food, she notes "my hands run out to seize a word from the end, a phrase from the middle, or a sentence from the beginning" in order to "gather these fragments, words, phrases, sentences, and [...] paste them together with my own blood" (3). Her contemporaries who reviewed *Hungry Hearts* also acknowledged the problem of form in her writing, concluding that "it would be a pity if she turned to a more polished formula" and the stories speak to "all that is best in the human heart" or "when she restrains herself, she is artistic" (qtd. in Schoen 33-34). All of these reviews identify and positively and/or negatively value the lack of form in Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts*.

Coinciding with the cultural turn in the humanities, the revived scholarly interest in Yezierska's fiction in the 1970s has mainly concentrated on the liminal position of immigrant women caught between the patriarchal family structure and American class system. While some scholars have approached Yezierska's works as social commentaries, or "unconventional ethnographic texts" as Lori Jirousek calls them (29), many have also discussed her explorations in language, genre and form. For example, Delia Caparoso Konzett associates Yezierska's "making both English and Yiddish susceptible to foreign elements" (597) with the concept of double-consciousness, by which the author undermines cultural assimilation. Thomas Ferraro argues that Yezierska aimed to "update the project of realism" (532) and Nihad M. Farooq argues that Yezierska "manipulates the dual literary conventions of the Victorian sensation novel [...] and the elements of the American sensational novel of the same tradition" (84), using familiar forms to represent and voice the other. In other words, recent scholarship on Yezierska has approached her literary treatment of immigration as a resistant and subversive hybrid form. Although most of the studies have focused on the author's novels, *Hungry Hearts* has been of special interest, since this first collection of stories includes formal, thematic and stylistic choices that foreshadow Yezierska's later works. However, *Hungry Hearts* has been frequently criticized

alongside Yezierska's novels (Batker 2000, Mikkelsen 2010, Farooq 2014). In addition, the individual stories have been studied for their themes of immigration and/or cultural assimilation (Campos Ferraras 2019), or for their representation of modern Jewish-American life (Wallach 2022).

This article reads *Hungry Hearts* as a formally and thematically organized collection of short stories despite the author's own words and her contemporaries' reviews. More precisely, I argue that the stories in *Hungry Hearts* are organized into a distinct sequential order in the short story cycle form[1]. Contrary to the independent stories in a collection, the stories in a short story cycle are defined as "both self-sufficient and interrelated" (Mann 15). The interrelation in Yezierska's stories in *Hungry Hearts* is rooted in their common setting of the Jewish neighborhood in New York's Lower East Side, yet more significantly, all the stories have female immigrant protagonists who suffer from the social and economic problems of urban poverty. Rachel Lister argues that Yezierska's protagonists in *Hungry Hearts* represent a common consciousness among the Jewish female immigrants rather than individual characters and writes that "it is difficult to distinguish one protagonist from another when reading the text as a whole" (23). She contends that disillusioned by their American dream, they repeatedly and commonly retreat to their communities without a "tenuous hope" (23). In this sense, similar experiences are lived and relived in the same community, represented by the recurrence of characterization and setting, and particularly the hunger metaphor. In her introduction to *Hungry Hearts*, Blanche Gelfant also notices this repetitive treatment of disillusionment and relates it to the immigrants' stigmatization in terms of class and religion, concluding that Yezierska "felt impelled to tell the story of these women–of her self–again and again, the same story of a transformation never complete or satisfactory, of an Americanization never free of self-betrayal, of a hunger never satisfied" (xxx). Other scholars have also mentioned and discussed the interrelation of the stories in *Hungry Hearts*. For example, Cara Erdheim Kilgallen detects the immigrants' desire to receive higher education as a recurring theme (164). Focusing on the collective experience of urban space in a number of literary works including *Hungry Hearts*, Katrin Korkalainen explains the interrelation with the recurring "image of the Lower East Side as a *landscape* of Otherness and contrasts" (58).

Encapsulating her formal treatment of immigration and urban

poverty, Yezierska's "mad blur" due to the metaphorical hunger and her endeavor to "gather the fragments" respectively correspond to Dominick LaCapra's notions of "acting out" and "working-through" the symptoms of trauma. LaCapra defines "acting out" as a process "in which one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes – scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop" (21). In the process of working-through, however, LaCapra states that "one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future" (22). Yezierska's critics have already drawn attention to the effects of trauma in her writing. Ellen Golub, for example, maintains that Yezierska is among the Jewish-American writers who were members and observers of an "uprooted and traumatized generation" (55). In addition, Lori Merish takes Yezierska's fiction as a testimony to "psychological injuries and operations of class" (209), but emphasizes its affective dimensions rather than trauma's formal and thematic aspects. However, I argue that in *Hungry Hearts*, the dialectic of fragmentation and cohesion as the main affordance of the short story cycle collides with LaCapra's "interacting processes" (144) of "acting out" and "working-through" trauma. Furthermore, trauma narrative techniques such as fragmentation, flashbacks, digressions, recurrences and multiplicity of voices (Whitehead 81-88) predominate Yezierska's sequential depiction of female immigrant lives. Cathy Caruth also maintains the subject cannot make sense of the traumatic event at the time of its occurrence, but perceives it "only belatedly, in its repeated *possession*" (4) of oneself. Similarly, Gabriele Schwab asserts that "[t]raumatic memories entrap us in the prison house of repetition compulsion" (2). For Alan Gibbs, such an approach in trauma theory underscores the problem of representability, which resurfaces through "radically fragmented and experimental forms" (14). The formal devices of trauma writing such as fragmentation and repetition are integral to the short story cycle's episodic form. Gerald Lynch, for example, argues that "short story cycles are especially well suited [...] to conveying a character's fragmentary experiences" when they depict "the immigrant's divisions of loyalty and consciousness, identity issues, losses, novelty, and the episodic nature of those experiences" (223). In other words, the short story cycle provides a form through which the unrepresentability of

trauma can be translated into sequential order. In this respect, although Yezierska's stories in *Hungry Hearts* individually lack closure and are loosely connected on the most part, their sequential ordering and especially the prospects for the future in the last two stories imply a pattern that moves from acting-out to working-through.

However, Yezierska's female characters in *Hungry Hearts* do not suffer from a specific traumatizing incident; they rather exhibit what clinical psychologist Maria Root calls "insidious trauma" (240). With reference to Root, Laura Brown explains insidious trauma as the traumatic effects "that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (107). In other words, insidious trauma does not necessitate a traumatic shock, but as Stef Craps and Gert Buelens argue, it indicates "the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities" (3). In the case of *Hungry Hearts*, although the female protagonists have no familial relationship, they inherit a common narrative of poverty and inequality from their hometowns in Eastern Europe, which remains uninterrupted after their immigration to the United States. In this sense, the possibility of working-through becomes problematic in *Hungry Hearts*, because the process demands a confrontational retrospection into the moment of trauma so that one can depart from it and reorganize one's future accordingly. That insidious trauma does not overwhelm the individual momentarily and but incessantly impacts one's life and is transmitted to younger generations raises the question as to how Yezierska can possibly organize *Hungry Hearts* for a direction towards working-through without its definitive marker.

Yezierska depicts the continuity of insidious trauma by organizing the stories in the order of sequentially aging female protagonists. Following this order, the stories suggest increasing helplessness, since the trauma remains intact, it gives no sign of resolution as the women get older, and is thus inevitably transferred to the next generation, leaving the female characters named Shenah Pessah, Hanneh Hayyeh and Hanneh Breineh with no choice but to act out the symptoms of their insidious traumas[2]. In addition, Yezierska devises a way to prevent the transmission of insidious trauma by creating two evental moments of intergenerational interaction which bring together female characters of different age groups in the last two stories of *Hungry Hearts*. Drawing from Alain Badiou's concept of

"event" and Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory, I argue that although these moments are transformative rather than traumatizing, they have formal similarities with trauma, and that they afford breaks from the narrative logic so that characters can reformulate their futures and thus work through their traumas.

The Prisonhouse of Transgenerational Oppression

Yezierska's first story, "Wings", in *Hungry Hearts*, starts with Shenah Pessah looking up through the window to "the dawn of spring" that is only available to her by "a timid ray of sunlight" entering "the gray, cheerless, janitor's basement" she is located in, and wishes for an end to her loneliness (5). External to the basement yet penetrating through it, connecting the outside to the inside, the single ray of sunlight signifies the potential of transforming Shenah's desires into the tangibility of light and warmth as she "hungrily" reaches out towards it (5). Shenah's response to light echoes the process of working-through the symptoms of insidious trauma, since she expects a new juncture which would mark a break from the present conditions that are strictly determined by the past. Having lost her impoverished family in Poland and then entered the protection of her poor and conservative uncle, she values Americanization as a new identity formation that would satisfy her longing for a larger community. However, her lack of education and her being the uncle's and the tenement's only caretaker hamper her desire. Regarding such characteristics in Shenah, JoAnn Pavletich rightfully calls her "the paradigmatic Yezierskan heroine" (86), but "Wings" can also be considered "paradigmatic" because it constitutes a pattern of compulsive returns to the past and constant failures in unreachable goals. In LaCapra's terms, Yezierska's treatment of sunlight proves that Shenah's past and future are not reconcilable. Signifying the succession of seasons, the springtime sunlight promises Shenah her summer; however, the simultaneously implied natural temporality anticipates her fall as well. Yezierska thus constructs Shenah's insidious trauma as a reality that is naturally insecure and that constantly invalidates her will to overcome it.

When John Barnes, the middle-class sociologist researching the education of immigrant Russian Jews in New York asks to rent a room, Shenah finds an opportunity to reach out to the world outside. For

Shenah, Barnes is initially the embodiment of the promising sunlight, but counterintuitively reminds her of her insidious trauma. Maria Root remarks that the external stressors of insidious trauma cause the activation of "survival behaviors" (241), such as "egocentrism, quickness to anger, social and emotional withdrawal, rumination, or shutting down" (248). Barnes likewise triggers in Shenah certain behavioral patterns of trauma by leaving her in a double-bind which forces her into rearranging her present position. In the line of LaCapra's emphasis that working-through is "an articulatory practice" (21), Shenah's attempt to overcome this dilemma can be traced in her first dialogue with Barnes. Explaining to him the reason for her immigration, Shenah says "What did I have out there in Savel that I should be afraid to lose? The cows that I used to milk had it better than me" (*Hungry Hearts* 8). With the impact of Barnes as a stressor, Shenah positions herself in the past tense rather than verbally capitalizing on the present and future prospects of living in the United States. Furthermore, she makes herself the only subject of her narrative and thus denies the collective dimension of perpetual transgenerational oppression. In other words, Shenah resolves the double-bind by reconnecting with the past as Barnes expects of her and simultaneously distinguishing herself from her community.

For an intimate relation with Barnes, Shenah not only returns to the past, but also constructs an imagined version of it. As Pavletich aptly underlines, Shenah firstly pawns her late mother's feather bed for fashionable clothes with the mother's approval (89), imagining that "she'd cut herself in pieces, she'd tear the sun" (*Hungry Hearts* 14) to help Shenah impress Barnes by her looks. She then uses the money to buy an outfit after a pleasantly imagined memory of her hometown since "the magic of those cherries on her hat brought back to her the green fields and orchards of her native Russia" (16). That Shenah devises a pragmatically imagined past might contradict her narrative to Barnes and provide an opening for the future, but without a confrontation, this version of the past is far from offering her a resolution. Furthermore, similar to Yezierska's expression of her own troubles in gathering the elements of her fiction, Shenah's imagined past compromises the cohesive impression she intends to achieve, because the change on her appearance is noticeable. When Barnes meets Shenah with her new outfit on, he exclaims, "Haven't you blossomed out since last night!" (19), because he immediately spots both her emotional investment and

her inability to combine a dress in the middle class American look she aspires to.

While Barnes's pity towards Shenah is maintained, his affection is not, and the second story, "Hunger" shows how she takes command of her life no sooner than being abandoned by Barnes. Furthermore, after a series of verbal attacks, the uncle finally reminds her of her past: "What were you out there in Savel? The dirt under people's feet. You're already forgetting how you came off from the ship – a bundle of rags full of holes" (27). The uncle's description of her clothing counteracts the combination of her "first American dress" (19) and hence unmasks the denial mechanism through which she forges an imaginary self. Hearing her story from her second external stressor, Shenah is also confronted with the fact that the uncle's narrative of her oppressed past is itself a means of exploitation, and she leaves her home and finds work in a sweatshop, where she again tries to symbolically stitch the past with the present. When her new co-worker Sam Arkin asks the same question as Barnes, Shenah slightly changes her narrative: "How I suffered in Savel. I have never had enough to eat. [...] But I still love it. [...] My heart always hurts me for what is no more" (37). This version of the same narrative ends as the effects of trauma gradually usurp her agency, illustrated by the dramatic shift from the subject "I" to "my heart". Finally, Shenah declines Arkin's marriage proposal because of her continuing love for Barnes, telling him "All that my mother and father and my mother's mother and father ever wanted to be is in him [...] it's the hunger of all my people back of me, from all ages, for light, for the life higher!" (41). Positioning herself firstly as the object of the conditions she cannot change, and then retrogressively connecting herself with the insidious trauma of the older generations, Shenah resorts to the past rather than seeking an opening for the future.

The third story "The Lost 'Beautifulness'" entertains the idea that aesthetic beauty might act as a way of working-through trauma. The story starts with Hanneh Hayyeh's joyful exultation as she observes the kitchen she recently painted, and quickly moves on to the photograph of her son in uniform. The son's being a soldier suggests that Hanneh Hayyeh is older than Shenah and can as well be at the age of Shenah's late mother. The story therefore connects Hanneh and Shenah not only as women who live in the same neighborhood, but also in a quasi-familial succession. Similarly, the ray of light that is mentioned in the first two stories enters the domestic space of the kitchen in "The

Lost 'Beautifulness'" with cleanliness and whiteness. In this sense, the light that was once promising but finally unattainable for Shenah is not only transmitted to the newly painted kitchen but also, from Hanneh's description, "lights up the whole tenement house for blocks around" (49). Unlike Shenah's individual ray of light, the kitchen's light has the potential to resolve the next generation's inherited insidious trauma and further transform the entire neighborhood. The light associated with the whitewashed kitchen walls, suggesting the Americanization of immigrant populations, is presented as the sole path toward working-through trauma.

Although Hanneh's domestic work of painting the kitchen is a symbolic act in resolving generations-old trauma, the story reveals that Hanneh takes her inspiration from her work experience at Mrs. Preston's house. Living in "the old Stuyvesant Square mansion" (43) and described as displaying "cultured elegance" (49), Mrs. Preston shapes Hanneh's aesthetic norms. Hanneh internalizes and reproduces Mrs. Preston's radiant "beauty and goodness" (49) to such an extent that she is described by Mrs. Preston as "an artist laundress" (49). However, Hanneh cannot earn her landlord's respect with the newly painted kitchen. The landlord demands a rent increase, thinking that she has enough money to spend on home improvement and that in its present condition the tenement deserves more rent. Consequently, art that Hanneh considers a way out of trauma is rendered inefficient, and especially when the notice of the second rate increase arrives, Hanneh becomes so desperate that Mrs. Preston sees in her "the ravages of worry and hunger" (55) rather than artistic beauty. To ameliorate Hanneh's suffering, Mrs. Preston's solution is charitable help; however, Hanneh is now disillusioned with the prospects of art and declines charity for justice. Applying to the court yet receiving a decision that confirms the landlord's demand, Hanneh finally returns home "hair disheveled, clothes awry, the nails of her fingers dug in her scalp, stared with the glazed, impotent stare of a madwoman" (59) and destroys her kitchen "with savage fury" (60). Yezierska clearly shows that oppression is structural. For this reason, Hanneh's working-through with the aesthetic standards of the upper-middle class in order to transform the next generation and her neighborhood ultimately fails. Consequently, her final acting-out not only does damage her home from which she is immediately evicted, but also leaves her returning son homeless. Rebeca Campos Ferraras finds in story's ending an "ironic display"

in that whereas lower-class immigrants enroll to the American army to safeguard the American social and economic ideal, the others are deprived of reaching it (22). The age-based logic of characterization in *Hungry Hearts* adds a further layer of irony. Accordingly, the United States deprives the young returning soldier of his access to the American home his mother could at least imagine, and leaving the immigrant youth with a future determined strictly by the past.

Contrary to the previous stories, "The Fat of the Land" questions the possibility that immigrant women, too, might rise up the social ladder. The story starts as Hanneh Breineh reaches out and knocks on her neighbor Mrs. Pelz's window with her "bare hands" (110), like Shenah's move toward the sunlight. Hanneh also shares the same name with Hanneh Hayyeh in "The Lost 'Beautifulness'". Hanneh Breineh is therefore introduced as the character-signifier of continuity and, with the "hungry gleam in her eyes" (111), the embodiment of the recurring hunger metaphor. However, unlike Shenah and Hanneh Hayyeh, she and Mrs. Pelz suffer from their worsened economic conditions since they settled in the United States. "The world is a wheel always turning," (111) says Mrs. Pelz and complains about her reversal of fortune rather than a predetermined and unchangeable present. In contrast to Mrs. Pelz's neutralization and normalization of their dismal conditions by her reference to the natural succession of time, Hanneh Breineh wishes for immediate solutions as a means of acting-out. When she spiritedly voices her desire for death and destruction, saying "a thunder should strike" the landlord's agent and "I take time to draw a breath, and beg only for death" (113), Mrs. Pelz reminds her that only the next generation can change the course of her misfortune, arguing in favor of maintaining patience and hope for gradual improvement. She advises her to give birth to more babies and patiently wait until they reach the age of work, despite the fact that part of Hanneh's problems lies in her economic incapacity to raise her children. Similar to the naturalization of insidious trauma in "Wings" by the transience of springtime sunlight, female reproduction is presented in this story as a natural mechanism that not only does evade and mask the present effects of structural oppression by entrusting the new generation with the task of tackling it, but also reproduces them by transmitting insidious trauma. Since Hanneh adheres to Mrs. Pelz's explanation and advice, it is clear that both women rely upon the younger generation for a change in their current conditions.

When Hanneh's children reach adulthood and become wealthy years later, all established hierarchies in the Lower East Side are reversed for her as well, letting two of her children become factory owners. In other words, the matrilinear continuity of insidious trauma that is initiated with Shenah seems to end when Hanneh's children start to reproduce the poor working conditions of the immigrants and improve their own social status. Besides, at her new home, Hanneh is described in her "white-tiled kitchen" and with her "silk dress" (121) on, suggesting that she revisits Hanneh Hayyeh's and Shenah's failed processes of working-through trauma. However, Hanneh's continuing complaints about her loneliness in her new neighborhood mark her lack of resolution. This problem is determined by the logic of age-based characterization in *Hungry Hearts*. Although her exact age is not mentioned, Hanneh Breineh considers herself old, asking "[w]hat worth is an old mother to American children" (127). Besides, for her adult children who regret that "the ghetto of the Middle Ages and the children of the twentieth century have to live under one roof" (128), she is not only old, but she also belongs to an antiquated period. In other words, Yezierska positions Hanneh Breineh as the last step in the gradually increasing helplessness of her female protagonists. Hanneh decides to resolve the problem by not attending the new apartment building's restaurant where she is expected to act in polite manners. She rather visits her old neighborhood to buy fish and garlic to cook in her kitchenette as a means of symbolically working-through trauma by combining the ingredients and preparing a meal. However, when she returns home and but not let in with her basket, her daughter Fanny, accompanied by the wealthy Mrs. van Suyden, her prospective mother-in-law, embraces the building's regulations rather than defending her mother. Fanny then voices her "shame of mother" (128) because of Hanneh's lower-class background and dates the problems in their mother-daughter relationship back to her formative years, remembering Hanneh with her "everlasting cursing and yelling" (132) and as the "tragedy of [her] life" (131). Yezierska shows that Fanny has already internalized the exchange mechanism that allows the younger generation's reversal of fortune, and thus replaced her mother with Mrs. Van Suyden. In this way, Yezierska eventually puts the mother and daughter into a gray area where the oppressed/oppressor binary collapses and both women are trapped in an unresolvable continuity of insidious trauma. In a moment of acting-out, Hanneh goes back to her old neighborhood, but understands that she can neither "endure

the sordid ugliness of her past" (135) nor reunite with her children. The oldest female protagonist's process of working-through insidious trauma therefore remains unresolved.

Reaching Out and Working-Through

Shenah's, Hanneh Hayyeh's and Hanneh Breineh's attempts to resolve their insidious traumas finally lead them to retreat to a position in which they acknowledge their pasts but cannot actively implement any plausible change. Left in the repetition-compulsion of trauma, the mentioned characters formulate their subjectivities through an internalized sense of helplessness. However, Yezierska also provides alternatives to such a subjectivity in the last two stories of *Hungry Hearts*, and creates two different moments as radical breaks that potentially lead to the process of working-through. In particular, the young Sophie Sapinsky's meeting with the not-yet-elderly Hanneh Breineh in "My Own People", and the young unnamed protagonist's conversation with the schoolteacher in "How I Found America" function as "events". Explaining his theory of the subject, Alain Badiou writes, "whatever convokes someone to the composition of a subject is something extra, something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for" (*Ethics* 41). For Badiou, therefore, what is foundational for subjectivity is the transgression of the already present form of existence. In Badiou's theory, this transgression is caused by the intervention of a spatio-temporal object which he terms an "event", and which produces a rupture that "compels us to decide a *new* way of being" (41). Badiou's examples include a wide range of defining moments, from the insurrection of 10 August 1792 during the French Revolution to "a personal amorous passion" (41). However, Badiou thinks of the event as a paradoxical concept, because the event "vanishes as soon as it appears" (67), forming a void that resists being properly articulated in the symbolic order, similar to Jacques Lacan's conception of the Real as the primordial and unrepresentable experience. Badiou describes the event as an "interval" (*Being and Event* 206) and "excrescence" (209), meaning that the void remains unnamable because it cannot be named with the set of terms already invalidated by the event, and a new vocabulary to include "the new way of being" has still not developed. As a result, Badiou concludes that "the event is only possible if special

procedures conserve the evental nature of its consequences" (221), and therefore, a strict adherence to the event emerges as a necessity, which Badiou terms "fidelity". Therefore, Badiou writes, "to be faithful to the event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by thinking [...] the situation 'according to' the event" (*Ethics* 41). For Badiou, fidelity is the second step in what he calls a "truth-process" (67), because it is fidelity that "gathers together and produces" (68) the "truth" of the event. Consequently, the subject is not subjected to an already existing ideology, not interpellated, but is subjectivized in one's engagement with the event (*Being and Event* 393). The two events in the last two stories of *Hungry Hearts* similarly function as ruptures that let the characters reconsider and reformulate their past traumas on condition that they remain loyal to the transformation made possible by their unexpected interactions.

The two ruptures in trauma's compulsive pattern in *Hungry Hearts* imply formal similarities between event and trauma. Both event and trauma connote decisive momentary experiences that occur as a break from the existing order. Event is a participatory and transformative process that demands the faithful subject's reconsideration of the past, present and future. Vincenzo Di Nicola argues that such a subject embraces radical changes and a subsequent ambiguity, whereas "the reactive subject [...] experiences rupture as trauma", and thus feels threatened by the impact of change (75)[3]. Di Nicola's argument offers a radical break with trauma psychiatry, which, for him, addresses "only trauma and the closing down of possibilities" (117). Discussing the viability of Badiou's event in trauma theory, Gregory Bistoen et al. also recognize the formal similarities between the concepts, and while they cautiously distinguish between the "positive valence of [event] and the detrimental nature of trauma", they agree that trauma that is experienced by specific groups, as in sexual or domestic violence, might offer a relatively positive change on the subject, so long as it is transformed into collective acts, such as forming or joining social organizations for political and social change (848).

In this essay, my reading of Yezierska's last two stories in *Hungry Hearts* integrates LaCapra's "working-through" and Badiou's "fidelity" to the "event". In this sense, by retrospectively evaluating one's trauma, and resolutely working on its signification process, the subject might resolve the impasse that is caused by trauma's forceful repetition-compulsion. In addition, working-through is not

necessarily limited to the event's social aspect but might integrate the social and psychological dynamics. In other words, the intra-psychic retrospection functions as a starting point for the traumatized subject's reconnection to society. Although he does not resort to Badiou's theory, Greg Forter has discussed and applied the consecutive processes of retrospection and reconnection in his reading of William Faulkner's *Absalom*, *Absalom!*. Tentatively departing from the Caruthian theory, which capitalizes on traumatic shock, Forter turns his attention to how Faulkner's novel depicts perpetual trauma as a site where "historical systems of domination *enter into* the subject at the very moment of its formation" (97). In this sense, his argument illustrates the mechanism of insidious trauma. Forter shows that Sutpen's traumatization does not stem from his exposure to a specific traumatic shock. Drawing from Sigmund Freud's earlier writings, rather than his later works that have informed Caruthian theory, Forter reminds that traumatic experiences are repressed at the moment of exposure, and but they remain in the subject's unconscious until an external stressor reactivates them (101). In other words, the initial exposure remains dormant, while its belated realization causes the traumatic experience. In the case of *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, Forter demonstrates that an unexpected occurrence leads Sutpen into retrospectively realizing his insidious trauma. However, this occurrence does not materialize into an event for Sutpen, but rather traumatizes him[4]. In *Hungry Hearts,* a similar pattern applies to Shenah's dialogues with Barnes and her uncle, whose humiliations trigger Shenah's behavioral patterns of trauma. Shenah subsequently acknowledges her trauma as a limitation of her possibilities, instead of working-through it, which is illustrated by her fixation on upward social mobility via marriage with a middle-class intellectual like Barnes. For the more hopeless Hanneh Hayyeh and Hanneh Breineh, the realization of previous exposure to insidious trauma results in instances of acting-out, which are even more detrimental to their present condition, illustrated by the former's spoiling the walls and losing her tenement, and the latter's leaving for her old tenement but having to return home to her disapproving children. However, in the last two stories of *Hungry Hearts*, characters approach their insidious traumas not as closing down of their potentials and opportunities, but as a call for transformative acts.

The sequential continuity of trauma due to oppression is at once maintained and then broken in "My Own People", the first of the last

two stories. In the story, the young Sophie Sapinsky leaves “the peace of home, the security of a regular job” (*Hungry Hearts* 139) and with an aspiration to become a writer, moves to the tenement where Hanneh Breineh used to live when she was younger and poorer. Similar to the elderly Hanneh and her adult children, the traumatizing experience of oppression for Sophie and her family is left in the past, but Sophie still has a “wild, blind hunger to release the dumbness that choked her” and to start “the uprooting of her past” (139). Sophie, then, acts contrary to Hanneh’s adult children and seeks to overcome the traumatic past by revisiting it. In this sense, Yezierska interrupts the sequential ordering of *Hungry Hearts* to change the predetermined end of “The Fat of the Land”. Sophie’s release of traumatizing oppression is associated with her act of writing, yet similar to Yezierska herself, she is initially troubled by her impulsive vehemence. Holding the pencil “with tense fingers” and checking her notebook with her “hundred beginnings, essays, abstractions, outbursts of chaotic moods” (139), she struggles to find a coherent voice and language. Being the formal aspect of trauma narratives, the fragmentation and incoherence in her writing mirror the traumatic past of transgenerational oppression, but the process of working-through also requires the coherent narrativization of this troubled past. In this respect, Sophie’s troubled writing comes from her willed return to the past and her deliberate search for a new voice echoing that of the older generation.

Because Yezierska’s protagonists act out and work through the traumatic effects of oppression, their traumas lack the representation of a shocking effect that is integral to Caruthian trauma theory. However, in *Hungry Hearts*, Yezierska substitutes the absent traumatic shock in the temporal order of the individual stories with an interruption to the story cycle’s age-based sequential ordering of transgenerational trauma, and creates an evental rupture. In this sense, Yezierska uses the symbolic effect of traumatic shock as a narrative conjecture to give a new meaning to the past, present and future. Priscilla Wald argues that Yezierska’s female characters belatedly make sense of “the creative nature of their desire” (63). Similarly, Hanneh’s authentic expressions of her traumatic oppression from her time in Poland and in her present life in the Lower East Side lead Sophie to imagine “her own life in Hanneh Breineh’s life” (143-44). The hunger that determines the female protagonists in *Hungry Hearts* emerges in this story as Sophie’s hunger to write, and she finally discovers the voices of her “own people”

(151) in the tenements. Consequently, Yezierska enables a productive interaction between the two women, although they have a non-familial relationship. In her essay on Yezierska's treatment of women's labor, Susan Edmunds argues that the author's works in the 1920s need to be read in the context of the Bolshevik Revolution and writes that these novels "rework the Cinderella plot central to the working girls' labor culture along the lines that resonate strongly with the revolutionary ideals of Kollontai" (406). At this point, Alexandra Kollontai's name is significant for her advocacy of "collective housekeeping" (Kollontai 255) such as day nurseries, infirmaries or free lunch provided at school, which would relieve women of domestic labor and consequently revolutionize the family institution and establish social equality (259-60). From this perspective, a solidarity that does not naturally develop between Hanneh and her own daughter emerges in the non-familial relation between two women. Therefore, unlike Fanny, Sophie can finally murmur "At last it writes itself in me" (*Hungry Hearts* 151), giving voice to the collective suffering through herself while also distinguishing the other's voice from hers. As a result, for Sophie, insidious trauma is experienced as an "event", which leads her to rewrite the past in her own words.

After the dramatic shift from the elderly Hanneh's desperation despite her higher economic status to the young Sophie's newly found hope for the future through Hanneh, the final story titled "How I Found America" presents a new chronological and episodic structure that reorders the previously broken continuity and depicts the decisive phases in its unnamed female immigrant character's life. The story does not have a named female protagonist but configures its first-person narrator as a single voice for representing the experiences of all the female protagonists in *Hungry Hearts*. Its first episode depicts a period when the unnamed protagonist still lives in Czarist Russia with her impoverished and oppressed family, who finally immigrate to the United States. The second episode features the troubles of immigration and housing. This part of the story constitutes the major themes of *Hungry Hearts* recurring until "My Own People". For example, the protagonist describes her sensory experience at the sweatshop as "the merciless grind of the pounding machines" and "a whirlpool of noise" (161), which consequently limits her physical and emotional capacity to work through her insidious trauma. Specifically, she finds the effects of her continuing oppression in her "stifled heart", in "the

dark chaos of [her] brain" and "the wound of [her] wasted life" (161). As a counterpoint to her bodily exhaustion, she compulsively returns to the past. Yezierska configures the character on the further edge of bare survival to the extent that she is hit by a car when imagining "the starved villagers of Sukovoly" and hearing "a thousand voices within [...] and about" (166) her in an incorporeal and dreamy state. Similar to Sophie's retrospective meeting with Hanneh, this accident acts as a shocking effect for her steps into her process of working-through, because she is immediately approached by a friend, who suggests she go to night schools for further education.

Like "My Own People", Yezierska halts the continuity of insidious trauma in "How I Found America", by using intergenerational dialogue to extend the definition of being an immigrant and an American. While Sophie's aim was to find a voice from within her own community, the protagonist searches for a sense of belonging to the United States. Yezierska makes this possible by having the young protagonist interact with characters older than her. In doing so, Yezierska does not categorically mark intergenerational relationship as a solution. Conversely, the protagonist can connect to only one older character among the depicted three. At the end of the second episode, the protagonist tells Mrs. Olney about her wish to be enrolled in the Immigrant School, but quickly changes her mind upon hearing that the school only provides training for practical skills. When she can finally find time to attend the night school at the beginning of the third episode, she considers the English course syllabus irrelevant and vocally criticizes her instructor. Lastly, she approaches another instructor, Miss Latham. In a lengthy conversation with her, she feels empowered upon realizing that her comments and wishes are valued, and that the instructor was an immigrant through first generation. Miss Latham supports her views with reference to Waldo Frank, who writes "We go forth all to seek America. And in seeking we create her. In the quality of our search shall be the nature of the America that we create" (179-80). These words prove to the unnamed protagonist that her struggles were not in vain and that she was right in not having "stopped at the husk–a good job–a good living–but pressed on, through the barriers of materialism" (180) like Hanneh Breineh's children.

The protagonist's interaction with Miss Latham is evental, because it lets her reconsider her disadvantaged situation as a counterintuitive advantage, and reformulate the meanings of immigrancy

and imagination. Since Miss Latham's inclusion to the story widens the experience of immigration and promises ways for structural change, the protagonist perceives the instructor not as a threat or stressor, but as a social ally. Miss Latham's reference to Waldo Frank for supporting her argument is also significant. As a popular contemporary figure in the American literary scene, Frank is known to embrace the plurality of voices in the United States, particularly through his support for Jean Toomer and his interest in Hispanic cultures. The quotation selected by Miss Latham also calls for the protagonist's active work. In this sense, the evental interaction in the story is meant to activate the protagonist's process of working-through. As a result, the fantasies of good life that mark the downfall of Shenah Passeh, Hanneh Hayyeh and Hanneh Breineh are invalidated by the protagonist's determination to embrace the future potentials arising from her eventual interaction.

Conclusion

Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* depicts the inevitability of transgenerational transmission of insidious trauma through the sequential order of gradually aging protagonists. In her stories, when individual protagonists do not work through their desperation caused by their traumatic pasts, the collective immigrant self is compelled into acting-out and investing on the younger generation for resolution. However, by reversing this seemingly inevitable pattern through the interaction of the young and old, Yezierska proposes a way for working-through insidious trauma. In this sense, the last two protagonists depart from the hegemonic and assimilative perspectives of the male and/or middle-class external stressors of their precursors, and approach female elders for guidance. Since they perceive such potentially distressing interactions as radical changes from the established norms held by society and internalized by themselves, they embrace the event as a prospect through which they can redefine themselves and their position in society.

It is true that *Hungry Hearts* does not feature what happens when Sophie Sapinsky in "My Own People" completes her book and publishes it, or after the unnamed protagonist in "How I Found America" renews her faith in becoming a valued member of a multicultural American society. Yezierska's short story cycle thus

ends without maintaining a definitive closure. However, with this ending, Yezierska shows that closure is conditional, and entrusts the two protagonists with their loyalty to the process of working-through. Besides, as Sophie takes up writing and the unnamed protagonist narrates her own story and declares that she will actively create the America she has been seeking, they reclaim their subjectivities on their own terms and their connection with the past is no longer determined by trauma's repetition-compulsion. As a result, with the intervention of Badiouian events in "My Own People" and "How I Found America", Anzia Yezierska writes all her female characters' experiences and then symbolically resolves their sufferings through the instances of non-familial female solidarity within different ethnic and age groups.

Notes

[1] I draw this argument from *The Composite Novel* (1995), co-written by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, but as the title of their study implies, the authors consider *Hungry Hearts* a composite novel, which they define as "a literary work composed of shorter texts that – though individually complete and autonomous – are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (xiii). Dunn and Morris specifically use the term "composite novel" to emphasize the genre's "kinship to the novel" (4) and hence "the integrity of the whole" (5). In his book on contemporary American short story cycles, James Nagel does not mention *Hungry Hearts* as a precursor to the genre's recent examples but asserts that in the American literature of the 1980s and 1990s, the short story cycle "became the genre of choice for emerging writers from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds" (17).

[2] Between Hanneh Hayyeh's and Hanneh Breineh's stories there are four other stories with different autodiegetic narrators. I will not examine these stories since they do not have protagonists older than Hanneh Breineh and therefore do not undermine the logic of Yezierska's short story cycle.

[3] Although this quotation is from *Psychiatry in Crisis* (2021), co-written by Di Nicola and Stoyanov, I only mention Di Nicola's name, because the related chapter was written by him.

[4] For this argument, Forter uses the passage in which Sutpen is sent to the plantation house to deliver a message as a teenager and is refused entrance by the black house-slave, telling him to use the back door. For Forter, this incident momentarily paralyzes Sutpen, who until then has no distressing awareness of his life in poverty and the class and race dynamics in the plantation. Sutpen, then gains access to his dormant insidious trauma, which is only "retrodetermined as trauma" (Forter 113). However, such a retrospection is not positively transformative for Sutpen, since he comes to see his family's position from the plantation-owner's perspective, and thus complies with the existing order and hierarchy in the South. Forter then concludes that Sutpen's subsequent motivation to climb up the social ladder is due to his oedipal rivalry with the plantation-owner, and with this, Faulkner illustrates how the American South has reproduced slavery.

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