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A GILDED AWAKENING: OTHERING THE NEW WOMAN NARRATIVE IN ANZIA YEZIERSKA'S SHORT FICTION

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The Progressive Era's New Woman, epitomized in Edna Pontellier's awakening, has been hailed as an icon of feminist rebellion. Recent scholarship, however, has interrogated the subversive potential of this icon, exposing its conservatist purchase on classism, eugenics, and white supremacism. Drawing from this intersectional inquiry into New Woman activism and literary production, this paper examines the short fiction of the Polish-American New Woman writer Anzia Yezierska (1880-1970). Through the appropriation of the awakening narrative, Yezierska sheds light on the failure of the first-wave feminist project to empower women in outsider locations and proposes alternative paths to liberation construed upon the working-class, Jewish values of community and solidarity, thus putting forward an alternative to the exclusionary designs of white feminism and anticipating intersectional demands by second and third wave feminism.

KEYWORDS: New Woman, awakening, Anzia Yezierska, Jewish feminism, intersectionality.

Un despertament daurat: la reescriptura de la narrativa New Woman a la ficció curta d'Anzia Yezierska

La New Woman de l'Era Progressista estatunidenca, personificada en el despertament d'Edna Pontellier, ha estat una icona de la lluita feminista. Tot i així, la crítica més recent ha qüestionat el veritable potencial contestatari de la New Woman, tenint en compte la seva implicació en polítiques classistes, supremacistes blanques i eugenèsiques. A partir d'una aproximació interseccional a l'activisme i a la producció literària de la "New Woman", aquest article examina un corpus d'històries curtes de l'escriptora jueva-estatunidenca Anzia Yezierska (1880-1970). A través de la reescriptura de la narrativa del despertament, Yezierska exposa les limitacions del feminisme de la primera onada per empoderar dones no privilegiades i proposa alternatives cap a l'emancipació feminista construïdes sobre els valors de comunitat i solidaritat propis de les classes treballadores jueves. Yezierska proposa, per tant, una alternativa al projecte elitista de la "New Woman" i avança les demandes d'interseccionalitat que es convertirien en lema durant la segona i la tercera onada del feminisme.

PARAULES CLAU: New Woman, despertament, Anzia Yezierska, feminisme jueu, interseccionalitat.

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Un despertar dorado: la reescritura de la narrativa New Woman en la ficción corta de Anzia Yezierska

La Nueva Mujer de la Era Progresista estadounidense, personificada en el despertar de Edna Pontellier, es un icono feminista. Sin embargo, estudios recientes han cuestionado su potencial subversivo, denunciando sus políticas clasistas, supremacistas blancas y eugénicas. Partiendo de esta aproximación interseccional al activismo y producción literaria de la "New Woman", este artículo examina un corpus de historias cortas de la escritora judío-estadounidense Anzia Yezierska (1880-1970). A través de la reescritura de la narrativa del despertar, Yezierska expone las limitaciones del feminismo de primera ola para empoderar a mujeres no privilegiadas y propone alternativas hacia la emancipación feminista construidas sobre los valores de comunidad y solidaridad propios de la clase trabajadora judía. Así, propone una alternativa al proyecto elitista de la "New Woman" y se adelanta a las demandas interseccionales del feminismo de segunda y tercera ola.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Nueva mujer, despertar, Anzia Yezierska, feminismo judío, interseccionalidad.

Since its reappraisal as a first-wave feminist classic by 1960s' gynocriticism, Edna Pontellier's awakening to artistic and sexual freedom in Kate Chopin's eponymous novel has been consecrated as the most vivid image of the American New Woman's revolt in public and critics' minds alike. In the wake of growing intersectionality within the feminist movement, however, critics such as Elizabeth Ammons have reconsidered the actual iconoclastic potential of this enduring cultural icon. White feminist criticism, she contends, has failed to acknowledge Edna's epiphany for what it is, an "utterly individualistic and solipsistic white female fantasy of freedom", purchased on the backs of "women of other races and a lower class, whose namelessness, facelessness, and voicelessness record a much more profound oppression" than Edna's (1992: 75).

Ammons' revision of *The Awakening* as a "narrative of sororal oppression across race and class" (1992: 75) is symptomatic of the recent turn in critical inquiry of New Woman activism and fiction, which has come to interrogate the progressive politics of the New Woman to expose their conservative ideological bias. Scholarship since the turn of the century has approached New Woman writing in relation to the exhilarating cultural and socio-political advances of the Progressive Era. If critical attention had mostly delved into the challenges to Victorian gender roles of first-wave feminism, recent works such as Ammons' *Conflicting Stories* (1992) and *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature* (1994), Iveta Jusová's *The New Woman and the Empire* (2005), Angelique Richardson's *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact* (2000), or Charlotte Rich's *Transcending the New Woman* (2009) have moved beyond white Anglo-American perspectives to scrutinize the connections of New Woman ideology with racism, imperialism, classism, eugenics, and other conservative impulses that permeated the gilded progressiveness of the era. These new inquiries into the shortcomings of the New Woman's rebellion

have allowed gynocritic scholars such as Elaine Showalter or Ann Heilmann to draw productive parallelisms between first-wave feminism and the women's rights struggle of the 1960s and 70s, and have also lent prominence to an emerging corpus of dissenting voices by non-white New Woman writers such as the Polish-American Anzia Yezierska, the Chinese-American Sui Sin Far, the African American Alice Dunbar Nelson, the Native American Zitkala-Sa or the Chicana Maria Cristina Mena, whose works are becoming widely available for the reading public.

Building on this thrust toward an intersectional criticism of New Woman fiction, this paper focuses on a corpus of short stories by the Jewish-American author Anzia Yezierska to analyze her denunciation of the racial and class shortcomings of white feminism in the Progressive Era. Through the revision of the awakening plot, the hallmark motif of canonical New Woman fiction, Yezierska partakes in the first-wave feminist quest for liberation, but also sheds light on white feminists' failure to form cross-class or cross-racial alliances. As she thematizes the otherwise overlooked experiences of non-white, lower-class women, she imagines alternative paths for a feminism based upon difference and inclusion, anticipating the intersectional demands and designs for inclusive feminism that would become the watchword of the second and third waves.

Locating the New Woman: The Gilded Age and the progressive movement

The rise of the New Woman movement was coetaneous to the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, two periods that straddle the turn of the 20th century. During the Gilded Age, the United States underwent a period of rapid demographic, industrial and territorial expansion. This façade of economic growth and materialism hid a reality of social inequality and unrest. Worker masses were housed in substandard slums, big business forged corrupt alliances with political parties, dismaying disparities of wealth between workers and "the leisure class" were created (Veblen, 1899), sparking continual labor conflict; and immigrants and African Americans faced systemic segregation, violence, and disenfranchisement.

Growing awareness of this social unrest and frustration toward the unresponsiveness of traditional politics triggered the rise of various reform groups that would be amalgamated into the Progressive movement. Drawing together a variety of strands, ranging from temperance and prohibition to charity organizations and the settlement-house movement, the Progressive crusade espoused the optimistic ethos of the Protestant social gospel and advocated for governmental reform. In general, Progressive crusaders embraced a moderate political stance, short-circuiting the wholesale overhaul of

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the system supported by their more radical socialist counterparts. Moreover, as Heller and Rudnick note, New Politics systematically ran up against the "brick wall" of racism and classism (1991: 7). Despite their insistence on solidarity and association, middle-class reformers never challenged racial segregation, tolerating the disenfranchisement of African American, Natives, and immigrants. Reformers also sanctioned imperialist expansion, grounded on notions of white supremacy (McGerr, 2005: 216). A similar patronizing attitude was assumed in their stance toward lower and immigrant classes, particularly within the charity movement that is the object of one of Yezierska's stories under consideration in this article, which blamed poverty on immorality, indulgence, and vice, and sought to "uplift" the destitute by subjecting their personal lives to moralizing audits that humiliated and alienated them (Perry and Smith, 2006: 69). The role of white women was especially relevant in this uplifting enterprise, due to their traditional conception as symbolic guardians of American morals and manners (Rudnick, 1991: 74).

In short, despite their lobbying for social responsibility and welfare reform, the Progressive movement fell into contradiction or, as Buenker terms it, "double-talk" in its subscribing to racist and classist policies (1991: 24). A similar self-defeating failure to enact radically empowering social change can be pinned down in the contemporary rise of the New Woman, who was both product and harbinger of the Progressive moment.

The conspicuous absences of New Woman feminism

In her account of the crisis of Victorianism at the turn of the century, Sally Ledger describes the Progressive Era as

> An excitingly volatile transitional period; a time when cultural politics were caught between two ages, the Victorian and the modern; a time fraught both with anxiety and with an exhilarating sense of possibility. (1995: 22)

The Progressive Era was indeed a heady age for women. By the turn of the century, educational and professional opportunities for middle-class white women had expanded dramatically. Together with the significant drop in birth rates and the delay of marriage, there emerged a class of college-educated, career-oriented women who sought intellectual stimulation and socialization in women's clubs. Besides, the notable presence of women among the ranks of the Progressive movement had turned an unprecedented spotlight on female reformers, who acquired an experience in organizational activism that would prove crucial for the rise of first-wave feminism.

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In this context, there rose associations of women demanding the right to access the public sphere, crystallizing into political action the debate on "the woman question" which had been simmering throughout the 19th century (Abrams, 2002: 280). These feminist reformers have come to be grouped under the umbrella term "New Woman", referring to the social and literary phenomenon that flourished in the Anglo-American context from the 1890s through the 1910s, advocating "a liberatory new concept of womanhood that departed from Victorian propriety" (Rich, 2009: 1). Demands by New Woman activism encompassed the expansion of the privileges granted to middle-class men: control over property, academic education, professional opportunities, and suffrage; as well as criticism of the institution of marriage, prostitution, and the sexual double standard enjoyed by men. These campaigns culminated in the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1919, which extended the right of suffrage to women after extensive activism by the National American Women Suffrage Association.

The "exhilarating sense of possibility" created by the New Woman was met with anxiety and hostility (Ledger, 1995: 22). Her challenge to male supremacy was repeatedly demonized in the press, which drew dubious connections between her and the rising socialist parties and described the New Woman in a vocabulary of apocalypse and insurrection, painting the picture of "an anarchic figure who threatened to turn the world upside down in a wild carnival of social and sexual misrule" (Showalter, 1990: 38). Yet, neither the radically subversive potential described by the contemporary press, nor the iconoclastic rebellion against Victorianism sympathetically ascribed to her in our collective imaginary, correspond with the New Woman's actual goals and achievements, which indeed ran up against the same racial and class barriers as Progressive Era's New Politics. The traditionally enshrined manifestation of the New Woman activist presents a white, well-educated, urban, Protestant woman, individualistic and privileged in her economic security, most famously associated with Kate Chopin's heroine Edna Pontellier. The striking absence of non-white or lower-class women from the movement's forefront should give us pause: while earlier scholarship ascribed it to their disinterest in the woman's cause, the latest turn of critical inquiry toward intersectional readings of the New Woman discloses how the Edna Pontellier type was often "blind to her own privilege and power to oppress" (Ammons, 1991: 95), and articulated her feminist identity in collusion with hierarchical notions of race and class, thus alienating her racialized and lower-class sisters from the feminist project.

In fact, despite the rising numbers of educated, career-oriented African American activists, the rhetoric of solidarity and association voiced by New Woman activism failed to encompass Black women, who were marginalized

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from the movement.[1] Working women's specific demands were likewise ignored by the privileged New Woman, who showed little sympathy for the socialist leanings of the mobs and adopted a patronizing, bourgeois outlook. Indeed, the uplifting charity labor conducted by women's clubs often translated into imperialist practices of acculturation of the African American and immigrant masses, which did not guarantee their entrance into civil rights or material prosperity as much as their forced assimilation to white ideals, to the point of being dubbed "eugenic" by critics such as Richardson (2004). This erasure of the experiences and demands of underprivileged communities from New Woman feminism was sanctioned by the foregrounding of gender discrimination and the idea of women as an oppressed sexual caste in activist discourses. This focus on gender, as bell hooks discloses, allowed white women to "erase and deny difference, eliminate race from the picture, to take center stage, and claim the movement as theirs", projecting a "utopian vision of sisterhood" that downplayed racial and class hierarchies among women (2000: 56).[2]

Thus, white feminists failed to appreciate the transgressive possibilities that emerged from the non-white, lower-class experience. For instance, the egalitarianism that characterized the extended networks of kinship among African Americans was pathologized and discarded by the charity movement in favor of the Western nuclear structure (Davis, 1983: 22). Likewise, the politically charged feelings of solidarity and association harbored between racialized and working women and men were downplayed in favor of the

[1] African American women were systematically excluded from white women's reform clubs. Besides, many New Woman activists staunchly opposed the enfranchisement of black men on the grounds that it would render them superior to the more "deserving" upper-class white women. For instance, the famous suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that universal male suffrage was but a form of "adding power to hold women at bay" and that "it is better to be the slave of an educated white man, than of a degraded, ignorant black one" (Stanton et al., 1887: 94).

[2] The espousing of white supremacist notions by New Woman leaders proves particularly hypocritical if read beside the analogy between women's oppression and slavery that was repeatedly invoked in abolitionist and early feminist discourses. Once basic citizenship was granted to the African American population under the 13th Amendment, Progressive feminism shifted from this foregrounding of common oppression to a focus on gender discrimination, again illustrated by Stanton in her 1860 speech before the New York Legislature: "The woman may sit at the same table and eat with the white man; the free negro may hold property and vote. The woman may sit in the same pew with the white man in church; the free negro may enter the pulpit and preach. Now, with the black man's right to suffrage, it is evident that the prejudice against sex is more deeply rooted and more unreasonably maintained than that against color" (2001: 548).

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common banner of gender oppression and the middle-class values of individualism and personal achievement.

Writing the New Woman: Narratives of awakening

These contested understandings and demands of the first-wave feminist icon permeated her translation into literature, which became "an ideological site for the struggle to (re)define gender, class, and race" and the primary vehicle for the formulation and popularization of feminist ideology (Gere, 1997: 141). Hence, the diverse body of New Woman fiction proves a privileged medium to study the points of intersection and friction, similarity and difference, within the first-wave feminist movement.

The Progressive Era witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of women writing in America, energized by the New Woman feminist endeavor.[3] Although in no way a homogenous body of work, New Woman fiction can be located in the realist tradition, drawing from the muckraking practice of the press for the creation of programmatic narratives and protest literature. New Woman writings contested stereotypical images of womanhood, and furthered the feminist cause, shedding light on issues of sexual exploitation, the failure of marriage and Victorian notions of romantic love and sexuality, and creating unruly heroines who actively disrupted male authority and Victorian conventions (Heilmann, 1998: 22). Indeed, the authors of New Woman fiction often epitomized in their own lives this liberated ideal.

Despite this focus on feminist emancipation, the subversive politics of New Woman literary production were also tainted by the racial and class biases that co-opted its activism. As Heilmann notes, in best-known New Woman fiction feminist solidarity was limited to upper or middle-class women (1998: 59). Workers were rarely brought into the spotlight; if so, narratives channeled stereotypical and paternalistic depictions, and relations between middle-class, white women and their lower-class and racialized counterparts were usually those of wife and mistress or lady and servant. A similar bias has dictated the New Woman authors enshrined as canonical, as critics have privileged Anglo-Saxon, upper-class writers such as Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, or Mona Caird. Even though this period saw an unprecedented number of literary works by immigrants and African Americans, their accomplishments have been relegated to the margins of scholarship and deprived of a reading public.

[3] The growth of New Woman writing was accompanied by the rise of alternative reading practices, such as the creation of feminist press publications, women's bookstores, or reading clubs within the ranks of women's organizations (Green, 2003: 224).

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A particularly idiosyncratic element of New Woman writing is the awakening plot, pinned down by Susan Rosowski as the cornerstone of hallmark works of New Woman fiction such as Chopin's *The Awakening* and "Wiser than a God", Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and the writings of George Elliot and Willa Cather. These narratives revolve around the women protagonists' epiphanic awakening to their wish for personal, intellectual, and artistic realization, in a society that expected women to define themselves through love, marriage, and motherhood. In many awakening narratives, such as *The Awakening* or "Wiser than a God", artistic creation is the protagonists' vehicle toward self-definition and the acquisition of personal and political agency. Indeed, Chopin's novella has been proclaimed as the "distilled example of the novel of awakening" (Rosowski, 1987: 44) in its portrayal of Edna Pontellier's pursuit of self-definition, agency, and independence as she steps out of her expected role as mother and wife, inextricably linked to her passion for music and painting as tools for self-expression. As Rosowski notes, this endeavor toward self-definition implies a dual movement, "both inward to self-knowledge and outward, toward awareness of social, ethical, and philosophical truths" (1987: 58). The acquisition of knowledge about the self and the outer world triggers "an awakening to limitations" (43), as the protagonists' "imaginative release" is frustrated by the restrictions they face in their public roles as women under the regime of Victorian gender roles (46).

In spite of the renewed attention paid to multiethnic New Woman writers since the turn of the century, the prevalence of the awakening theme in the works of New Woman writers outside the canon has remained relatively underexplored. Awakenings, this paper contends, are a recurrent motif in the fiction of multiethnic New Woman writers, who harness their protagonists' epiphanies both to showcase the constraints of Victorian True Womanhood, in the fashion of the model identified by Rosowski, and to expose the foibles of the Edna Pontellier type's liberation for those in outsider racial and class positions. If, according to Rosowski, New Woman fictions revolve around "an awakening to limitations" (1987: 43), the rewritings of this motif by multiethnic writers shed light on the limitations of Progressive New Woman feminism. In this vein, the following sections will examine two short stories by the Jewish-American New Woman writer Anzia Yezierska, which rehearse the awakening plot to denounce the racist and classist prejudices that permeated the New Woman's enterprise and propose alternative paths to liberation constructed on solidarity, difference, and hybridity rather than on individualism and exclusion.

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Anzia Yezierska: The New Woman of the tenements

The Progressive Era witnessed an upsurge in Jewish population immigrating from Eastern Europe. In the new continent, Jewish women faced a double alienation. On the one hand, Orthodox Judaism imposed rigid gender divisions, allocating religious and intellectual power to men. On the other, Eastern European women were constructed as promiscuous and exotic Others and met with rampant Nativist xenophobia in the New World (Zaborowska, 1995: 29), to the extent that the entrance of single women into the country was forbidden for fear of potential miscegenation with native-born men.

The Eastern European collective became the object of the assimilationist rhetoric of the Progressive New Woman, materialized in settlement homes and charity programs that entertained a conception of immigrants as an outsider group in need of intervention and reform. Despite the New Woman's promises of uplifting, Jewish women were excluded from her emancipatory enterprise, as they were deemed inferior and potentially disruptive due to their links with labor movements (Zaborowska, 1995: 23). Yet, an intersectional approach to the Jewish woman's situation shows that, despite the stereotypical defenselessness that inflamed Progressive uplifting discourses, the working-class and Jewish location of Eastern European women lent them a gateway into organizational activism unavailable for their old-stock American counterparts. As Paula Hyman notes in her overview of Jewish women's radical tradition, Judaism allowed women a great deal of autonomy in the secular sphere, as they were expected to provide economic support for the family and work toward social welfare (1991: 224). By the turn of the century, the rise of *Haskalah* and socialism reinforced this legacy of autonomy and relative equality outside the home. Early working experiences wielded Jewish women an arena to exercise political struggle, as well as cemented a sense of partnership with their working-class brothers. Besides, the urban community of the ghetto provided a base for grassroots political action,[4] which Jewish women harnessed to campaign for feminist issues such as birth control and women's suffrage. This legacy of alternative New Womanhood put forward by the experience of the Jewish immigrant takes a central role in the writings of Anzia Yezierska.

Yezierska was born in the 1880s in today's Poland and entered the U.S. months before the opening of Ellis Island. Recoiling from ideals of domesticity, Yezierska moved out of the family home at an early age, risking scandal and shame. While attending night school, she supported herself by working

[4] According to Hyman, at least one quarter of unionized women in the 1920s' United States were Jewish (1991: 229). Jewish women were also responsible for boycotts and mass strikes against rises in food prices and rents throughout the 20th century.

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menial jobs as laundress, waitress, and sewing machine operator. Around the age of twenty, she moved into the Clara de Hirsch home for working girls, where wealthy patrons sponsored her tuition at Columbia University. Despite Yezierska's craving for a liberal arts education, her benefactresses pushed her, benevolently if condescendingly, to pursue a training in domestic science. Finding no joy in the teaching career, she turned to writing in her late twenties. She also contrived two unconventional marriages through secular rites with two of her close friends, the first one lasting only one day. After her second betrothal, Yezierska led the life of a wife and mother for two years, but bent on her desire to pursue creative writing, she divorced and renounced the custody of her daughter. The inclusion of "The Fat of the Land" in the volume *Best Short Stories of 1919* was the starting gun for her overnight success: between 1921 and 1932 she produced four novels and two collections of short stories, sold the film rights of *Hungry Hearts* to a Hollywood studio, and rubbed shoulders with the literary *haut monde*. Yet, partly because of the deep alienation she felt in this elite environment and also due to the loss of interest in her accounts of immigrant hardships with the onset of the Great Depression, Yezierska fell into oblivion and died a forgotten author in 1970.

Her stellar rise from the sweatshop to stardom was hailed by contemporary press as an instance of the rags-to-riches ascent that the American "mother of exiles" offered to the immigrant masses. However, this "sweatshop Cinderella" narrative, upheld by her daughter's partial biography *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life* (1988), fails to account for Yezierska's militant criticism of the racial and class prejudice that made the American dream nothing but a mirage. As can be inferred from the biographical account given above, Yezierska subscribed to the New Woman's endeavor to live on her own terms, eschewing the patriarchal notions imposed by both orthodox Judaism and American Victorianism. Although not known to have supported any particular organization, Yezierska was actively engaged with feminist issues throughout her life: she voiced a revolutionary view of marriage as "a mental companionship", divorced twice, used birth control, and kept up with radical literature produced by feminist and socialist circles. She also took part in local projects to collectivize domestic duties through cooperative nurseries, kitchens, and laundries and was associated with members of the Heterodoxy group (Edmunds, 2011: 407).

Yezierska's experiences of assimilation and militant feminist convictions were thematized in her writings, which revolved around young women's struggles to lift themselves from material and spiritual poverty, battling against the workings of patriarchy and the racist and classist prejudice of old-stock Americans. This portrayal of the immigrant woman's experience faced

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with the particularities of the Progressive Era granted Yezierska's consecration as a pioneer of Jewish-American feminism under the canopy of gynocriticism, along with her contemporaries Emma Lazarus, Mary Antin, and Edna Ferber. Following this approach, the ensuing sections will focus on two short stories from the collection *Hungry Hearts* —"The Lost 'Beautifulness'" (1920) and "My Own People" (1920)— to illustrate Yezierska's denunciation of the shortcomings of first-wave New Politics and her imagining of an alternative New Womanhood built from the location and values of the tenements through the reworking of the awakening plot.

"The Lost 'Beautifulness'" and "My Own People" (1920)

In "The Lost 'Beautifulness'", Hanneh Hayyeh is an immigrant laundress who does domestic work for the upper-class suffragette Mrs. Preston. The latter inflames Hanneh with promises of how American democracy is to give everybody "a chance to lift up his head like a person, to bring together the people on top who got everything and on the bottom who got nothing", to make "everybody in America with everybody alike" (69). This new-found democratic conviction unleashes in Hanneh a wish to "make [herself] for an American" (Yezierska, 1920a: 69), articulated as an aspiration for artistic self-expression, in particular through the refurbishing of her tenement flat's kitchen. Against her husband's wishes, she pinches pennies for months to afford to make up the room, which she paints white in the fashion of Mrs. Preston's lodgings. The kitchen's "beautifulness" makes Hanneh, who is tired of living like "a pig with my nose to the earth, all the time only pinching and scraping for bread and rent", forget that she is only "a nobody, feel [she is] also a person", and lifts her "with high thoughts" of dignity and democracy (68-69). The room is likewise admired by Hanneh's neighbors and patroness, who significantly assures her that she is not a "nobody" but an "artist" (78). However, when the flat's landlord finds out about the renovations, he raises Hanneh's rent and dismisses her complaints, arguing that "if you can't pay, somebody else will. In America everybody looks out for himself" (82). Bewildered and devoid of her brief joy, Hannah cuts down on her meat and milk to afford rent, but the landlord raises it again. Upon hearing the news, Mrs. Preston offers her economic help, but Hannah recoils at the suggestion and puts forward a call for social justice worth quoting at length, as it forces Mrs. Preston, a stand-in for the Progressive New Woman, to awaken to her own blindness:

> "Ain't I hurt enough without you having to hurt me yet with charity? You want to give me hush money to swallow down an unrightness that burns my flesh? I want justice."

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> The woman's words were like bullets that shot through the static security of Mrs. Preston's life. She realized with a guilty pang that while strawberries and cream were being served at her table in January, Hanneh Hayyeh had doubtless gone without a square meal in months.
>
> "We can't change the order of things overnight," faltered Mrs. Preston, baffled and bewildered by Hanneh Hayyeh's defiance of her proferred [sic] aid.
>
> "Change things? There's got to be a change!" cried Hanneh Hayyeh with renewed intensity. "The world as it is is not to live any longer. You was always telling me that the lowest nobody got something to give to America. And that's what I got to give to America—the last breath in my body for justice."
>
> "Hanneh Hayyeh," said Mrs. Preston, with feeling, "these laws are far from just, but they are all we have so far. Give us time. We are young. We are still learning. We're doing our best."
>
> Numb with suffering, the woman of the ghetto looked straight into the eyes of Mrs. Preston. "And you too—you too hold by the landlord's side?—Oi—I see! Perhaps you too got property out by agents. Nothing can hurt me no more—And you always stood out to me in my dreams as the angel from love and beautifulness. You always made-believe to me that you're only for democracy." (Yezierska, 1920a: 88-90)

After this inflammatory speech, Hanneh hauls her landlord into court, but is denied any rights over the flat and subsequently evicted. To spite her landlord, she tears down the "beautifulness" of the kitchen, but in so doing "kills her own soul, the pulse of her own flesh" (Yezierska, 1920a: 95). The end of the story depicts Hanneh, "cowering and broken" (96), stood with her belongings under the rain.

As shown by this summary, "The Lost 'Beautifulness'" features a working-class woman's awakening to the possibilities of fulfillment and independence promised by the New Woman Progressive endeavor, realized through artistic creation. As in Chopin's novel, Hanneh's "consuming passion for beauty" acquires wider political meaning (Yezierska, 1920a: 78): her determination to show her patroness "what's in me, that I know what beautiful is" (78) is not only an attempt at personal self-definition, but also at being uplifted into the dignity pledged to immigrant newcomers by the American *mother of exiles*,

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materialized in the access to art and beauty. The political significance of this enterprise is particularly poignant if we consider that Hannah targets the idiosyncratic locus of women's subjugation, the kitchen, which can be read as an attempt to "open up the sky" on women's restricted domestic sphere (77), bringing about political agency and empowerment.

However, as is the case in prototypical New Woman awakening plots, Hanneh's path toward personal and political realization is short-circuited by "an awakening to limitations" imposed by the outer world (Rosowski, 1987: 43). Her pursuit of beauty and dignification is truncated by the inexorable machinery of the individualist capitalist market and the reproduction of inequalities under American democracy, which runs over the weakest members of society if they try to "lift up [their] head" and transcend the subhuman status allotted to them (Yezierska, 1920a: 69). The limitations of the Progressive democratic ideals to combat these mechanisms of inequality are exposed by Mrs. Preston's awakening to the lack of universality of her position as a white, upper-class suffragette. Hanneh and Mrs. Preston's double realization evidences that the New Woman's endeavor for artistic self-definition and political liberation is short-lived for those unprotected by her class and racial privileges, those who must suffer the gap between the era's gilded New Politics and its reality of social inequality. Despite her lip service to reformist and democratic tenets, Mrs. Preston fails to materialize them into any effective help when her friend is in need, and her offer of money strikes as patronizing and unavailing. The suffragette's hypocritical inaction and collusion with the landlord's interests become particularly poignant in contrast with Hanneh's stubborn fight for democratic ideals, which reverses the nativist self-congratulatory rhetoric that fueled the acculturating interventions of the Progressive movement by posing a lower-class immigrant, in theory backward and in need of enlightenment, as the lone custodian of the all-American values of equality, democracy, and meritocracy, against the passive and complicit figure of the Anglo-Saxon suffragette.

A similarly futile attempt at enacting the New Woman's promises of progressiveness and association is pointed out by Yezierska in her writings about charity work, which was one of the hallmark fields of action of first-wave feminist organizations.[5] The alienating politics of charity workers take center stage in Yezierska's "My Own People". In this story, the aspiring writer Sophie Sapinsky rents a room of her own in a squalid tenement bedsit, sublet by the

[5] For a detailed reading of the surveillance politics of Progressive Era charity settlements as depicted in Yezierska's production, see Rebeca E. Campos' article "Charity Institutions as Networks of Power: How Anzia Yezierska's Characters Resist Philanthropic Surveillance" (2017).

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immigrant housewife Hanneh Breineh, aiming to devote herself to artistic creation. Despite her initial intention to focus exclusively on her writing, Sophie gradually empathizes with her landlady's despair at her children's starvation and the ludicrous help of the charity workers, who teach them "how poor people should live without meat, without milk, without butter, and without eggs", while failing to provide the financial stability that would allow her children to attend school rather than work (Yezierska, 1920b: 244). Sophie is invited to share with the family a cake and a bottle of wine, sent by a friend from the old continent, but their communion-like feast is interrupted by an unannounced "friendly visitor" of the charities sent to monitor the immigrant families' behavior. At the sight of their merrymaking, the charity worker inspects the husband's correspondence, and upon finding references to previous food gifts from friends, she charges them with "intent to deceive and obtain assistance by dishonest means" (246). After the "friendly visitor" has left the slums in her limousine, Hanneh laments to herself: "What will she do now? Will we get no more dry bread from the charities because once we ate cake?" (244).

Much like "The Lost 'Beautifulness'", "My Own People" criticizes the ineffectual policies of the Progressive Movement, which catechized about the Americanization of immigrants and the alleviation of their poverty, while often working to preserve the gap between lower and middle classes, old-stock Americans and racialized newcomers. More cogently, the short story also revisits the New Woman narrative of artistic and political awakening, this time formulating an alternative way toward liberation that strays away from the straitjacket of individualist white feminism toward an ethos of empathy and solidarity based on the reclaiming of working-class and ethnic values.

In the fashion of Edna Pontellier's retirement to her "pigeon house" in *The Awakening*, which again offers fertile ground for comparison, in "My Own People" the aspiring writer Sophie rents Hanneh's bedsit as a "room of her own" where she can "be by herself and think", and achieve artistic realization and personal independence (Yezierska, 1920b: 228). This individualist enterprise of artistic creation, which Ammons associates with the tradition of "controlled, intellectual, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant patriarchal art" (1992: 164), demands a radical isolation from the community: to achieve success, Sophie must leave her family behind and sacrifice "all comfort, all association, for solitude and its golden possibilities" (Yezierska, 1920b: 232). Yet, neither this "uprooting of her past" nor her life-long efforts to combine a stifling sweatshop job and a meager night-school education to afford this artistic isolation bear the expected fruit (228). Despite her weeks of strenuous efforts in her particular "pigeon house", drafting and discarding titles for her essays fashioned after the Emersonian tradition", she can only produce "flat, dead

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words" that fail to register "the intensity of experience, the surge of emotion that had been hers when she wrote, the life-beat and the passion she had poured into them" (229). As in "The Lost 'Beautifulness'", then, the path toward artistic achievement and personal fulfillment rehearsed by New Woman awakening narratives, which posit the community as a hurdle for self-definition, proves barren for the working-class immigrant.

Sophie finds her way out of this *cul-de-sac* through the identification with the community of the tenement, in an epiphanic moment that brings about her true awakening to artistic and political agency. Hanneh's outrage against the abuses of the Progressive charity system, much like Hanneh Hayyeh's outburst in ""The Lost 'Beautifulness'", offers Sophie a new source of identification and inspiration. Suddenly, the Emersonian essays she devotedly studied seem to her "stiff and wooden" compared with Hanneh's "bubbling phrases", which "dance with a thousand colors" and "burn through the depths of every experience" (Yezierska, 1920b: 242). Ammons associates Hanneh's passionate words with the "inherited female Jewish oral tradition" (1992: 164), in contraposition to the patriarchal literary tradition which bears no personal or artistic realization for the aspiring Jewish-American writer. If Sophie's sublet "room of her own" stood for individualism and isolation, in turn Hanneh represents the values of solidarity and community, particularly in the Jewish-specific iteration of *tsdokeh*:[6] despite their staggering poverty, she does not hesitate to invite Sophie into their feast, and treats her "like a mother in her own home" (Yezierska, 1920b: 227). This notion of selfless solidarity is shared by the tenement community: Hanneh's husband gives all he has to his children, the herring-woman reserves bargains for her neighbors, and the tenement shoemaker patches up the shoes of children for free and shares with them "the last bite from his mouth" (248). This empathy between equals is constructed as a specifically lower-class value, placed in contrast with the trickle-down, self-interested sympathy of the assimilated, upper-class "friendly visitors" of the charities.

Sophie, who had alienated herself from this Jewish, working-class community attempting to follow the path of the white New Woman artist,

[6] *Tsdokeh*, a Hebrew word meaning "social justice", refers to a religious and social tradition of charity in Jewish communities, which dictated beneficence as a duty of each member of the community according to their resources, and conceived it not as charity, but as a form of social fairness and responsibility for communal welfare. Within this paradigm, the relation between donor and recipient is one of equality and interdependence, and donations are often anonymous. The *tsdokeh* tradition stands in sharp contrast with the practices of philanthropy carried out by Progressive charity networks, which deprived the recipient of dignity and privacy and were harnessed as a form of public self-congratulation for the donor.

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becomes aware of her own belonging to this collective through the emphatic identification of her plight with Hanneh's:

Suddenly Sophie's resentment for her lost morning was forgotten. The crying waste of Hanneh Breineh's life lay open before her eyes like pictures in a book. She saw her own life in Hanneh Breineh's life. Her efforts to write were like Hanneh Breineh's efforts to feed her children. Behind her life and Hanneh Breineh's life she saw the massed ghosts of thousands upon thousands beating—beating out their hearts against rock barriers. (Yezierska, 1920b: 242)

This awakening fills Sophie "with a drunken rapture to create", an urge to capture the "real life" of those "massed ghosts of thousands" in her writings (Yezierska, 1920b: 242), to produce art that inscribes the *located* experience of her people rather than imitating Emersonian —that is, upper-class, Anglo-Saxon— models. At the end of the story, Sophie achieves the longed-for artistic fulfillment and becomes part of the community's network of empathy, like Yezierska herself, through her artistic choice to represent "her own people":

Presently the barriers burst. Something in her began pouring itself out. She felt for her pencil – paper – and began to write. Whether she reached out to God or man she knew not, but she wrote on and on all through that night. The gray light entering her grated window told her that beyond was dawn. Sophie looked up: ""Ach! At last it writes itself in me!" she whispered triumphantly. "It's not me – it's their cries – my own people – crying in me! Hanneh Breineh, Shmendrik, they will not be stilled in me, till all America stops to listen." (Yezierska, 1920b: 249)

If in New Woman texts artistic realization is equated with self-definition and feminist liberation, then this awakening spells an alternative path to emancipation, built upon embracing the subversive possibilities of the inter-class and inter-racial alliances within the Jewish community that were downplayed by the white feminists' exclusive focus on gender. In Yezierska's tenements, the characters' distance from the American norm —deemed a sign of backwardness under the Progressive assimilationist rhetoric— becomes the steppingstone to achieve personal expression, artistic success, and political agency. Yezierska, then, denounces the narrow liberation offered by the Edna Pontellier type for those lacking her social and racial status, and lays bare the pro-status quo agenda that informed much progressive activism. Against these faulty models, her stories imagine the possibility of a Jewish, working-class New Womanhood that inscribes difference within the feminist struggle, anticipating the claim for emancipatory *politics of location* that second-wave intersectional feminists would make half a century later, best voiced in the Combahee River Collective statement: "We believe that the most profound

and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity" (1979: 365).

Indeed, second-wave feminism shared many of the impulses and contradictions of the turn-of-the-century New Woman, both in the co-opting of the movement by ethnocentric white activists and in the response of their less privileged counterparts. In both historical moments, the movement's *sisters outsiders* denounced the conniving role of white activists in the exploitation of racialized and working-class communities, as well as the generalizing of middle-class, white experiences into a universal or essentialist understanding of womanhood. Against this, they set out to represent the "lived experiences and historical positioning" of their marginalized identities, to build upon them "a feminism rooted in class, culture, gender and race in interaction as its organizing principle" (Brewer, 1997: 239). A similar "politics of location" (Rich, 1986: 215), even if only in "embryonic form" (Heilmann, 1998: 12), can be pinned down in Yezierska's attempt to construct an outsider New Womanism in her writings, which can be appraised as a forebear to the intersectional politics of second- and third-wave feminists.

Conclusion

Building on the intersectional reappraisal of New Woman's activism and literary works in scholarship on first-wave feminism, this article has examined the reworking of the awakening motif pivotal to canonical New Woman works, such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, in the short fiction of the Jewish-American New Woman writer Anzia Yezierska. Through her appropriation of the awakening plot, the author exposes the limitations that tainted the liberating enterprise of the *fin de siècle* New Woman, who confronted the patriarchal oppression that confined women to domesticity, but failed to acknowledge the axes of racial and class oppression of which the bourgeois white suffragette was agent and promoter. Capturing the double plight of Eastern European Jewish women, "The Lost 'Beautifulness'" and "My Own People" suggest that the road to feminist liberation rehearsed in canonical New Woman awakening narratives proves ineffectual and traumatic if followed by those outsiders to the Edna Pontellier type. As an alternative to the narrow pathways of Progressive feminism, Yezierska's texts inscribe Jewish, working-class difference into the endeavor for liberation, and advocate for a feminism where ethnic and class specificity is leveraged to break free from patriarchal domination and create wide-based communities of solidarity.

As this revision of New Woman activism and writing has argued, the victories and flaws of Progressive Era feminism have set the blueprint for later developments of the movement. Thus, much can be gained from establishing dialectical connections with the works of these marginalized New Women

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writers, which not only complicate our celebration of the first steps of women's liberation, but also trailblaze the intersectional concerns and politics of difference that have become central to the second and third waves of feminism. In a 21st-century context which once again witnesses the clash between an exhilarating horizon of liberation for the oppressed and the implacable waves of reactionary backlash, the work of New Woman writers such as Anzia Yezierska, Sui Sin Far, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Zitkala-Sa, and Maria Cristina Mena continues to provide valuable insights, as contemporary activism still falls short from the paths toward radically inclusionary feminism that they imagined. If we strive for an awakening open to all women, the persistence of this gap seems to suggest that it is Yezierska's outsider politics, rather than Edna Pontellier's gilded awakening, that contemporary feminism ought to reclaim as its artistic and political lineage.

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