“What the College Has Done for Me”: Anzia Yezierska and the Problem of Progressive Education

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When Sara Smolinsky, the protagonist and autobiographical figure in Anzia Yezierska’s novel *Bread Givers*, graduates from the university, she wins a prize for her essay on the topic “What the College Has Done for Me.” As she sits down to draft the piece, she thinks,

> What had the college done for me? I thought of the time when I first came here. How I was thrilled out of my senses by the mere sight of plain, clean people. The smashed hurdle in the gymnasium. The way I dashed into the bursar’s office demanding money for my failed geometry course. (232)

Sara reflects on her college education as a series of discrete experiences, both positive and negative, that shaped her into the woman she became. But what did college do for her? Beyond referring to these experiences, Yezierska does not provide the text of this fictional essay or any insights into how college education has transformed her protagonist’s life—and by extension, the lives of the working-class students that the character represents. The conspicuously absent text of her prize-winning essay underscores the unsettled question of whether education is more likely to help or harm working-class students.1

Although Sara’s essay leaves this question unanswered, Yezierska returns to it in almost all of her work. In doing so, she inserts herself into an educational discourse that was taking place in the 1920s when her stories and novels were first published. It was a time of tremendous social and educational changes, including the turn-of-the-century influx of millions of so-called new immigrants;2 the emergence of John Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy of education; and, under the auspices of political and educational progressivism, a widespread push for Americanization of newcomers. As a

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writer keenly interested in Americanization and the immigrant experience, Yezierska frames much of her work as a response to these trends. This is not to say that she wrote primarily for an audience of scholars or education experts; her work was popular fiction, much of it melodrama and romance. But she also participated in public and scholarly discourse about education—publishing, for instance, a scathing review of her former mentor (and erstwhile lover) John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* in which she claims that his lifeless prose would alienate the working-class readers that he sought to champion (“Prophets of Democracy”). Because she is preoccupied with immigrants’ educational experiences, her work offers what Christie Launius describes as “encounter with the academy” narratives and Renny Christopher describes as “narratives of unhappy upward mobility” (Launius 125; Christopher 79). More than mere stories, however, these narratives perform the cultural work of educational and social critique as Yezierska positions herself in relation to Dewey’s progressivism.

In raising the question of whether education—and specifically, progressive education, in its many institutional settings—can materially improve the lives of working-class students, Yezierska engages in a debate that concerned early twentieth-century educators and continues to interest composition scholars today. As a field, composition studies embodies an ethos that is decidedly “progressive” in Lawrence Cremin’s sense of the term, marked by a desire “to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals” (viii). In this essay, I use Yezierska’s work (particularly *Bread Givers*, but also her stories and other novels) to interrogate our disciplinary relationship to progressivism and its conflicted legacy for the teaching of English. Yezierska’s autobiographical work, thinly disguised as fiction, chronicles her experience in a variety of early twentieth-century educational settings. *Bread Givers*, for instance, tells the story of Sara Smolinsky, who is raised in an impoverished, orthodox Jewish family on New York’s Lower East Side. She runs away from home to escape her father, a tyrannical Torah scholar who doesn’t approve of education for women, preferring to arrange marriages for his daughters to bring himself financial gain. Sara rents a small room in the city and puts herself through night school by working in a factory and, later, in a laundry. Eventually she goes away to college in a bucolic setting outside the city. Like Sara, many of the characters in Yezierska’s stories attend classes in settlement houses, vocational schools, or American universities. Inspired by Dewey’s writing and influenced by a brief relationship with him, Yezierska examines the manifestation of progressive education in these various settings and offers a response to educators who sought to assimilate immigrant students through language.

The attempt to use literary texts to better understand literacy practices and histories of American public schooling is not a new method, but rather builds on previous calls for this kind of work. Harvey Graff has urged scholars to use literary texts for insights into the history of literacy: “human perspectives, textures, and nuances that other kinds of data—quantitative [or more traditional] sources […]—have
Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen have likewise called for the study of literary texts in order to understand how these construct “the ongoing, social process of language acquisition” and to see how such texts challenge or contribute to myths about literacy (513). Eldred and Mortensen point out that this kind of work has the potential to advance knowledge of both literacy research and literary criticism. Several recent College English publications have picked up on this line of inquiry, merging literary criticism with analyses of schooling and composing. Catherine Chaput, for instance, looks to the novels of Willa Cather to critique the notion of a “mythical past” for higher education, while Christopher Carter cites Jacob Riis’s How the Other Half Lives as one of the earliest examples of multimodal composition to reach large audiences. This movement to use literary texts as sites for historiography, then, calls our attention to the rewards attendant on broadening our methods for exploring historical trends across disciplinary borders.

Yezierska’s work, like that of some of her early twentieth-century contemporaries, has received considerable attention from literary scholars. Although the relationship between Yezierska and Dewey is chronicled in Mary Dearborn’s biography Love in the Promised Land, critics have had little to say about the extent to which Dewey’s pragmatism shaped Yezierska’s work. This connection merits further exploration in terms of its literary significance, but in this essay I make the case that it is equally compelling for scholars in composition and rhetoric studies. Yezierska’s work provides evidence that has so far been missing from the historical record of our profession—firsthand accounts of immigrant students who experienced the schools’ attempts to assimilate them through language under the auspices of the new, progressive approaches of the early twentieth-century schools. Ultimately, Yezierska is in dialogue with the premises that form the basis of our profession today. Her critiques are remarkably prescient: she recognizes that the progressive movement was marked by competing tensions that working-class students could negotiate but never fully resolve. Because she (and her protagonists) experienced the movement firsthand, she is in a unique position, within the gaps of its competing currents, to offer a rhetorical response and a means of dealing with these conflicts. She does this specifically, as I will argue later in the essay, by returning to the authenticity of the immigrants’ experience, privileging a materialist view over some of the more abstract or bureaucratic strands of the movement, and demonstrating that the impact of progressive education is always constrained by the institutional structures that shape it.

Progressivism, Composition, and Critical Pedagogy

Progressive education was a broad movement that did not concern itself exclusively with the teaching of writing. Nonetheless, it has been an important influence on composition-rhetoric, which, as Chris Gallagher notes, has always been, to some
extent, a “progressive enterprise” (10). In his landmark book *The Transformation of the School*, Cremin notes that educational progressivism has historically been marked by three tendencies: (1) an effort to broaden the mission of the schools to address community needs and the “whole life” of the students; (2) a move to use scientific principles and empirical research to discover the best practices for teaching and learning; and (3) an attempt to adapt education to the needs of individual students (viii–ix). For Dewey, progressivism is both a social endeavor and a process of growth: it “is not something done to [students]; it is something they do” (*Democracy and Education* 42). This view echoes William James’s belief that knowledge is created in a process of renewal and growth, rooted in experience. Like James, Dewey seeks to reconcile competing dualisms, such as divisions between the individual and the social or between culture and vocation. He rejects the traditional distinction between classes of students, in which the privileged few study liberal arts and culture while working-class students learn narrow skills to prepare them for factory jobs. The heart of Dewey’s philosophy is the belief that “education […] is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (“My Pedagogic Creed” 87).

Though today’s composition and rhetoric studies clearly has roots in progressive education, the legacy of progressivism presents a problem for the field in that scholars have grappled with Dewey’s relationship to contemporary pedagogies, in particular to critical pedagogy. Even the word *progressive*, as Gallagher notes, carries various meanings: it is used in the sense of being forward thinking or socially conscious, but it can also “refer to a ‘naïve liberalism’ or to pedagogical positions that are deemed insufficiently radical” (xv). One reason that progressivism presents a conflicted legacy is that when we talk about the movement, it is not always clear which progressivism we’re referring to. Whereas Cremin has treated progressive education as a more or less unified movement (though not without some division and ideological differences), subsequent scholars have pointed out that what we think of as progressive education is not a cohesive social movement, but rather is a pair of competing impulses that have often been at odds with one another. Or, even as Brian Jackson and Thomas Miller put it, progressive education is a set of “shifting coalitions” (97). Dewey is most often associated with *pedagogical progressivism*, which “sought to put the schools in service of democracy and social justice” by fostering change in classroom practices (Gallagher 12). The role of education in fostering social justice was epitomized by Jane Addams’s settlement house model and lauded in Yezierska’s novel *All I Could Never Be*. The novel’s main character attends one of Dewey’s settlement house lectures, and emerges with the breathless realization that she is participating in a process of “emancipation of mankind from prejudice and ignorance” (33). The other branch of the movement, which David Tyack refers to as *administrative progressivism*, was advocated by policymakers who “sought centralization of control and social efficiency” with a philosophy that was “self-consciously
‘modern’ in its deference to the expert and its quest for rational efficiency” (127). We see these aspects of administrative progressivism emerge in Yezierska’s narratives when her characters are urged to “learn a trade” instead of becoming intellectuals, or when university professors complain that their working conditions resemble those of an assembly-line factory (“How I Found America”; Bread Givers).

In their essay “The Progressive Education Movement,” Jackson and Miller argue that one way of viewing the gap between various factions of progressivism is to see it as a disjuncture between those who were creating educational policy versus those who were on the front lines working with students, “intimately involved in the day-to-day challenges” (109). Jackson and Miller suggest that this gap is precisely what makes the progressive movement a compelling case study for composition-rhetoric today: it mimics divisions between advocates of critical pedagogy and administrative-managerial professionals responsible for the day-to-day work of running writing programs (111). For some composition scholars, Dewey’s pragmatism has become a productive frame for thinking through the ethics and politics of doing such administrative work. In his essay “The Arts of Complicity,” Richard Miller, for instance, sees the potential for a “pragmatic pedagogy” in “promoting a fluency in the languages of the bureaucratic systems that regulate our lives; a familiarity with the logics, styles of argumentation, [and] repositories of evidence deployed by these organizational bodies” (23). Miller’s description of teaching focuses on how institutions shape students’ lives, but in effect it also challenges us to remember that progressive movements in the teaching of writing have always been constrained by the institutions that have housed them.

Although I have set out some of the ways in which Dewey’s progressivism has been framed by scholars as an alternative to critical pedagogy, in the next section I wish to look more closely at the other side of that argument—particularly at Gallagher’s assertion that insofar as he sees pedagogy as a fundamental tool for social justice and cultural transformation, “Dewey’s ideas [. . .] are far more radical than they are represented to be by his foes and friends alike” (xv). Ultimately, the most significant textual link between Yezierska and Dewey is their mutual investment in the belief that education can help students to become more fully human. Although Yezierska exhibits a faith that education can deliver on the promise of individual and societal transformation, she also shows a prescient understanding of the fault lines in the movement and of the power of administrative progressivism to undercut the intentions of teachers and practitioners committed to social change. More specifically, she understands that literacy and formal learning are constrained by the institutions that sponsor them and shaped by the ideologies of those bureaucracies. She suggests that through critical reflection and productive use of experience, students can begin to understand the relationship between their individual experiences and the larger social forces that have shaped them. In this sense, Yezierska wholeheartedly endorses
Dewey’s pedagogical progressivism and, like Dewey, she anticipates the liberatory pedagogies that emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. In her depiction of studying grammar, for instance, she explicitly rejects the notion that students are empty vessels that need to be filled with decontextualized information or narrow skills. Yezierska’s work brings other tensions more sharply into focus as well. She is constantly thinking through, for example, the power of language to oppress immigrant students versus the potential for them to be empowered by the ability to move between vernacular and mainstream discourses. She engages with some of the central dualisms of Dewey’s pragmatism, particularly the conflict between what Dewey calls *education for culture* versus *education for vocation*. She aspires to become a more rational, critically thinking person even as she criticizes the administrative progressives’ tendency to privilege science and reason over lived experience. Rather than merely critique the progressive movement, however, Yezierska articulates a vision for addressing some of its shortcomings by returning to the power of *experience*, a term that is rooted in Dewey’s and James’s philosophy but given particular resonance in her depictions of immigrant life. For Yezierska, experience becomes an essential requirement for the acquisition of critical literacy: a means by which students can use language to mediate the conflicts and power imbalances inherent in the process of cultural assimilation. In the next section, I show that experience serves to mediate several important conflicts within Dewey’s progressivism—the notions of *language*, *work*, and *representation*.

**To Make Myself a Person: Critical Literacy, Language, and the Use of Experience**

To explain how Yezierska suggests the use of experience as a key concept for examining the divisions inherent in progressivism (and Americanization as well), I turn first to Dewey’s definition of the term, which is rooted in James’s understanding of how we come to know the world. For Dewey, experience is both active and passive, a central tool of epistemology (the study of knowledge-making) and ontology (the study of being):

> It is not an *experience* when a child merely sticks his finger into a flame; it is *experience* when the movement is connected with the pain which he undergoes in consequence [. . .]. [It is] cumulative growth which makes an experience in any vital sense of that term [. . .]. To “learn from experience” is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. (*Democracy and Education* 139–40; emphasis added)

For Dewey and James, experience is the primary means by which we come to know the world and arrive at an understanding of what is true. For James, this process involves confronting new evidence in light of our previously held beliefs, recognizing
the disjunction between the two, and establishing new truths that account for both. The pragmatist view of experience, then, treats it as the critical factor in shaping our knowledge of the world, an ongoing process by which new knowledge builds on previous frameworks.

For Yezierska, the meaning and use of experience are tied to the acquisition of language. She shows that language serves a central role in mediating experience at several levels. First, it is the primary mark of the immigrants’ “Otherness,” the signal that they do not share the cultural assumptions and worldview of middle-class Americans. Moreover, language is the means by which Yezierska’s characters articulate their experiences and make sense of them in relation to larger social structures. Finally, language is a contradictory force on her immigrant protagonists in that acquisition of the standard dialect is both an essential step in their pursuit of upward mobility and a tool of their subjugation, especially for women. In her essay “All Words, Words, about Words,” Ruth Anolik notes that all of the romantic relationships in Bread Givers are mediated through language. As a teenager, Sara develops her first crush on her sister’s suitor after reading his poetry, and later, she falls in love with her boss, feeling an attraction tinged with admiration for his correct speech. Linguistic differences also highlight the conflicts between school and home. As Sara becomes educated, she distances herself from her family by discarding her Yiddish dialect and acquiring Standard English. Ironically, the trace of her working-class dialect is an outward marker that separates her from her well-to-do classmates just as her loss of the vernacular language distances her from her family, creating a dual sense of alienation.

The back-and-forth movement between Standard English and Yiddish-inflected working-class vernacular reflects the “in-between” status of characters like Sara. But Yezierska’s use of vernacular language is also a way of asserting the value of immigrants’ lived experiences in the face of a public movement to suppress multilingualism. As Delia Konzett puts it,

The strength of Yezierska’s work lies in her […] effort to promote the anti-assimilative potential of the immigrants’ idiolect […] Her unique contribution lies in the critical presentation and dramatization of ethnic speech under the encroachment of national linguistic standards. (“Administered Identities” 603)

Konzett points out that the “low” English spoken by Yezierska’s immigrant characters symbolizes their subordinated status, but it also serves as a method by which they assert their identity in the face of prejudice and humiliation. Her characters’ language may be “deliberately clumsy, emotional, and nonmetaphorical,” but it stands in contrast to the “overwrought and overdetermined discourse” of the middle class (613). I would complicate Konzett’s argument, however, by noting that Yezierska nonetheless insists on the importance of acquiring the standard language for those
who seek upward mobility. In *Bread Givers*, for example, the syntax and vocabulary of the novel gradually shift from vernacular, working-class English to Standard English as Sara assimilates into middle-class society and moves away from her Old World family traditions.

The complicated status of language in Yezierska’s work reflects a broader tension between the two branches of progressivism and two views on language and nationality. With her frequent references to the settlement houses and night schools for immigrants, Yezierska frames her work as a response to Americanization, an offshoot of progressivism, which provides the backdrop for many of her immigrant tales. The Americanization movement sought to assimilate immigrants into mainstream society by urging them to embrace English only. I have argued elsewhere that the movement was ultimately unsuccessful because, even in cases where educators were motivated by activist or humanitarian goals, the predominant pedagogy made little use of students’ experience, instead casting them in the role of passive learners to be “made over” into complacent workers and patriotic citizens.9 In his essay “Americanization as an Early Twentieth-Century Adult Education Movement,” Robert Carlson notes that Americanization is best understood as one manifestation of progressivism. As such, it was bifurcated by the competing tensions of that broader movement. On one hand, the humanitarian branch of Americanization embraced cultural pluralism, envisioning American identity as linguistically heterogeneous.10 In contrast to teaching methods that made use of students’ home languages, the other branch, which Carlson calls the order and efficiency aspect, treated multilingualism as a threat to the image of the United States as a linguistically homogenous nation. As an advocate of cultural pluralism, Dewey promotes the use of vernacular language in *School and Society*. He notes, “Language is primarily a social thing, a means by which we give our experiences to others and get theirs in return. When it is taken away from its natural purpose, it is no wonder that it becomes a complex and difficult problem to teach language” (55–56).

Linguistic conflict is brought into focus in *Bread Givers*, where language is both a tool of personal agency and one of oppression. Moreover, educational institutions play a central role in using language as a tool of oppression, despite cases of individual resistance. The novel’s romantic subplot effectively illustrates the institution’s power to promote upward mobility through the acquisition of the standard language and to subjugate those who do not assimilate. Although Sara admires her fiancé’s refined way of speaking, she suffers from his public corrections of her speech. In one scene, Sara offers a lesson on pronunciation in her role as a new schoolteacher. She turns to see that her fiancé Hugo, the school principal,

had quietly entered the room and stood enjoying the performance. I returned his smile and went right on. “You try it again, Rosy. The birds sing-ggg.” “Sing,” corrected
Mr. Seelig, softly. There it was. I was slipping back into the vernacular myself. I tried again and failed. He watched me as I blundered on. The next moment he was close beside me, the tips of his cool fingers on my throat. “Keep those muscles still until you have stopped. Now say it again,” he commanded. And I turned pupil myself and pronounced the word correctly. (272)

The act of placing his hands on her throat heightens the sense of Sara’s powerlessness, and illustrates Hugo’s officially sanctioned role as a critic of her linguistic faults (and her students’). Despite her fondness for her pupils, Sara’s ability to foster their individual empowerment is constrained by the institutional expectation that she assimilate them (and herself) into the dominant discourse. Ultimately, Yezierska’s attempt to reconcile the conflicts between the Old World and the New World—and between vernacular language and Standard English—by having Sara and Hugo marry is unsatisfying, revealing that the administrative progressives’ impulse toward social control and linguistic conformity permeated even the intimate relationships of upwardly mobile students.

I have argued thus far that *Bread Givers* reveals a conflict between the two views of language endorsed by the competing branches of progressivism. Beyond merely highlighting this conflict, however, Yezierska suggests a way of mediating it through an emphasis on students’ lived experience. Put another way, the dominant discourse retains more power to alienate working-class students when they have no means of situating it within their experience in the way that Dewey advocates. This alienation is evident when Sara enrolls in night school and studies formal grammar, and later, when she takes psychology at the university. She laments her difficulty in trying to hammer into my thick head the difference between a noun, a verb, and a preposition. Oh, the noise around me. But I tried to struggle on with the lesson. . . . “A noun is the name of anything . . . ? A verb is the predicate of action . . . ? A preposition connects words . . . ?” The more I repeated the definitions, the more mixed up I got. It was all words, words, about words. (164)

Similarly, the language of psychology is foreign to her because it does not relate to any previous experiences. As Sara puts it, “At first, psychology was like Greek to me. So many words about words. ‘Aperception,’ ‘reflex arc,’ ‘inhibitions.’ What had all that fancy book language to do with the real, plain everyday?” (222). Her reaction to a pedagogy based in memorization—“all words, words, about words”—reveals that the efficiency mindset inherent in the administrative branch of progressivism extended to beliefs about language. The “banking” models of grammar instruction were not limited to methods of teaching grammar or psychology; they encapsulated an ideology in which education’s goal became the factory-line assimilation of immigrant students and the erasure of home language, vernacular culture, and all of the outward signs of their lived experiences.
In contrast to pedagogical approaches that decontextualized language use, Yezierska shows that students could benefit from progressive pedagogy when they used their experience to make sense of the world and to read it critically. Sara develops this kind of critical literacy when her psychology professor asks her to give examples from her own life to help her understand concepts that initially seem foreign to her. She reflects on her time growing up on New York’s Lower East Side and comes to the realization that

when I sold herring in Hester Street, I was learning life more than if I had gone to school. The fight with Father to break away from home, the fight in the cafeteria for a piece of meat—when I went through those experiences I thought them privations and losses; now I saw them [as] treasure chests of insight. What countless riches lay buried under the ground of those early years that I had thought so black, so barren, so thwarted with want. (223)

Sara concludes by comparing herself to the person she used to be: “I [have] learned self-control. I [am] now a person of reason” (223). It is significant that she views her experiences as “treasures” that help her understand the meaning of her poverty and privations. This realization mimics the “cumulative growth,” the “backward and forward” connections that Dewey discusses when he defines the ways in which we make sense of lived experience. Moreover, this use of experience allows Sara to become transformed into a more logical, scientific thinker who can take a critical stance toward the world. In All I Could Never Be, the novel that most faithfully re-creates Yezierska’s relationship with Dewey, the protagonist Fanya makes this realization shortly after meeting Henry Scott, the Dewey figure, when he speaks at her neighborhood settlement house. As she leaves the lecture room, Fanya is filled with inspiration: “Henry Scott [had] given her a place in history. Her problems were world problems” (33). Reflecting the foundational assumptions of Dewey’s progressivism, Yezierska shows that this ability to make productive use of experience was not merely an individual achievement, but one with the power to contribute to broader social reform.

Yezierska’s use of experience shows that it not only allows students to gain a critical understanding of the relationship between their individual and social positions, but also gives them the power to articulate the meaning of that relationship. In drawing out the discursive power of experience, Yezierska anticipates the move toward liberatory pedagogy that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century. When they are able to make use of experience to “read” the world and identify the social forces that have shaped them, her characters achieve critical literacy in the sense in which Ira Shor defines it: a method for “questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished,” a means of “[challenging] the status quo” in order to “[connect] the political and the personal, the public and the private” for the purpose of “rethinking our lives and promoting justice in place of inequity [. . .].
Critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self.” Seen through the eyes of Yezierska’s protagonist, the ability to “read the world” and understand the larger social forces that have constructed her become critical tools for the reflection and action necessary to become transformed, or to “make herself a person,” as she frequently puts it.

**Experience, Work, and Representation**

In the previous section, I argued that Yezierska uses the pragmatist concept of experience to show how immigrant students mediated linguistic conflicts to become engaged citizens who could read the world with new awareness. In a similar manner, she illuminates the divide between other conflicts within progressivism, particularly the dualisms between education for culture versus education for vocation, and the problem inherent in ethnographic approaches to representing the immigrant.

A central tension in Dewey’s philosophy is the meaning of work and its relationship to education. For administrative progressives, a narrow, vocational approach seemed an efficient way to prepare immigrant students for assembly-line work or other low-skill labor. This approach prevailed in the night schools that sprang up in the United States as adult education emerged in the early twentieth century. But a narrow emphasis on skill-based learning was not compatible with Dewey’s belief that students should be active participants rather than passive vessels to be filled with knowledge. Moreover, Dewey was committed to the notion that schools should prepare students to do meaningful work. In *School and Society*, he notes that the rise of industrialization dramatically changed Americans’ working lives, creating a system in which workers were more alienated than ever. While he praises the move toward vocational education (which he calls *manual training*), he emphasizes that it is beneficial only insofar as it focuses “not on the economic value of the products, but the development of social power and insight” (18). If studying sewing, for example, students would examine the origins of the fabric—tracing the process by which cotton is grown and picked, and learning how to work with raw material, fashion it into cloth, then sew it into garments, and so on. Dewey’s concept of *work*, then, is one in which the laborer is not performing isolated tasks, but is producing items from start to finish and acquiring an understanding of each stage of the process. Dewey makes a distinction between “work” and “drudgery”: the former is “purposeful activity” while the latter is “activity carried on under conditions of external pressure or coercion [. . .] not carried on for any significance attached to the doing” (*Democracy and Education* 204). Dewey is thus not naïve about the reasons that people work, but he believes that in an ideal world, work should be enjoyed as an end in itself, not merely for material reward.

Like Dewey, Yezierska is preoccupied by the theme of work, returning to it
frequently in her novels and stories. The most important distinction for her is also the difference between work and drudgery, though she tends to cast that distinction as a matter of physical versus intellectual labor, and to insist on the right of working-class women to pursue a life of the mind. She suggests, moreover, that the institutional structures put in place for immigrant students narrow that possibility. For instance, the unnamed narrator in the short story “Soap and Water” is denied her teaching certificate by an administrator who chastises her for being “utterly unmindful of the little niceties of the well groomed lady.” [The dean] pointed out that my collar did not set evenly, my belt was awry, and there was a lack of freshness in my dress. And she ended with: “Soap and water are cheap. Anyone can be clean.”

The narrator laments that

"while they condemned me as unfit to be a teacher because of my appearance, I was slaving to keep them clean [. . .]. Eight hours of work a day, outside my studies. Where was the time and strength for the “little niceties of the well groomed lady?” At the time when they rose, and took their morning bath, and put on their fresh-laundered linen that somebody had made ready for them, when they were being served their breakfast, I had already toiled for three hours in a laundry. (72)

The “Soap and Water” story illustrates the dynamic by which bureaucratic figures wielded power to stigmatize students for their status as low-wage workers, to disregard the material realities and necessities of such work, and to deny them opportunities to do professional or intellectual labor. This barrier affected not only college students, but also those who entered the vocational schools aimed at immigrant students. Yezierska’s depictions of vocational education show that it did not offer the meaningful experience that Dewey (and others, such as Addams) advocated, but rather that it was an educational path intended to reify the status of the working class as manual workers and to discourage them from pursuing upward mobility. In Yezierska’s story “How I Found America,” the narrator goes to the local School for Immigrant Girls, where the headmistress suggests that she study sewing or cooking. The narrator replies that she did not come to America to become a servant, and tells the woman,

“I got ideas how to make America better, only I don’t know how to say it out. Ain’t there a place I can learn?”

A startled woman stared at me. For a moment not a word came. Then she proceeded with the same kind smile: “It's nice of you to want to help America, but I think the best way would be for you to learn a trade. That’s what this school is for, to help girls find themselves, and the best way to do is to learn something useful.” (120–21)

In response, the narrator laments, “Ain’t thoughts useful? Does America want only the work from my body, my hands? Ain’t it thoughts that turn over the world?” Finally, the headmistress says, “We only teach trades here. I think you will have
to go elsewhere if you want to set the world on fire” (121). The similarity of the trade schools, where manual labor was the only path presented to students such as Yezierska, and the teacher’s college, where physical labor was a stigma that marked working-class students as Other, reveals the difficulty inherent in merging culture with vocation in the way that Dewey advocates.

These narratives reveal the oppressive power of institutional structures and the degree to which the administrative ideology permeated the interactions of teachers and students. Yezierska shows that this tendency toward a dehumanizing, narrow view of vocational education was part of a larger, assembly-line approach to education that was equally oppressive to teachers and students. For instance, when Sara Smolinsky goes to night school, she studies “five nights a week in a crowded class of fifty, with a teacher so busy with her class that she had not time to notice me” (162). When Sara arrives at the university, she overhears her psychology instructor lamenting, “I was a fool to take this job. No sweatshop labor is so underpaid as the college instructor.” His companion replies, “[H]ow do they expect us to live? I get a thousand dollars a year and I teach sixteen periods a week” (225). Although Yezierska (through her character) espouses an idealistic vision of a university where she would find “the inspired companionship of teachers who are friends,” she encounters instead “a factory [where the] the teachers [are] machines turning out lectures by the hour” (Bread Givers 225). She seeks intellectual work, but finds intellectual drudgery.

While Yezierska expresses great hope for formal education, she nonetheless shows that it has a tendency to dehumanize both students and teachers, requiring strenuous work yet stigmatizing those who must do physical labor to support their educational goals. She casts doubt on Dewey’s view that vocational training can be enriching for students. She shows that “work” is a category that divides working-class students from their well-to-do classmates rather than bringing students together across class barriers. And she suggests that the university is an exploitive environment in which both students and teachers sometimes fill the role of oppressed workers. In her essay on class mobility in immigrant literature, Launius uses examples from Bread Givers to argue that Yezierska’s critiques of the academy are not substantive, but rather stem from “the mismatch between [her character’s] working-class worldview and the middle-class values of the institution” (129). Though I agree with Launius that Sara’s struggles result from conflicting ideologies, I would counter that Yezierska’s critiques of the academy are substantial, grounded in a specific view of what education should be. Sara’s experiences reveal real lapses in the academy: its indifference to the needs of immigrant students and ignorance of their lived realities. By pointing to the institutional structures that humiliate immigrant students, Yezierska does not simply criticize the academy or reveal the difficulties that students face. Rather, she shows that the problems are systemic and structural; they reveal a fundamental mismatch between what working-class students need and what the institution offers them.13
I have argued that Yezierska embraces Dewey’s vision of pedagogical progressivism while pointing to the institutional structures that constrain it, and that she casts doubt on the ability of vocational education to offer the meaningful preparation that Dewey envisions. I have suggested that she roots her critiques in the discursive power of immigrants’ lived experience. This emphasis, however, raises another challenge to Dewey’s philosophy, because experience itself defies attempts to document and interpret it. Despite the differences between pedagogical and administrative progressives, the two camps shared a faith in empiricism and the potential for scientific models to improve teaching. This reliance on empirical research coincided with the rise of social science methodologies and the formation of academic disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology in the early twentieth century.

Yezierska had an opportunity to participate in empirical research efforts when she took part as a translator and a cultural informant in Dewey’s ethnography of immigrants in Philadelphia, as Dearborn and Lori Jirousek have noted. In her essay “Spectacle Ethnography and Immigrant Resistance,” Jirousek argues that for Yezierska, this kind of research represented an attempt by middle-class professionals to treat immigrant subjects as exotic Others “in order to affirm the superiority of their own race, culture, or both” (26). In Jirousek’s analysis, many significant figures within the progressive movement, including Dewey and Addams, adopted the goals of spectacle ethnography rather than true participant-observation, emphasizing “the immigrant need for cultural uplift and the observer’s duty to facilitate this transformation” (27). Yezierska’s novel *All I Could Never Be* and short story “Wings” present her experience in the project and her disillusionment with what she viewed as the researchers’ lack of respect for the immigrant experience. As Yezierska wrote in a letter to one of her contemporaries,

> The “scientific approach” of these sociology professors seemed to me so unreal, so lacking in heart and feeling [. . .]. At the end of the study, it seemed to me that they knew less about the Poles than when they began [. . .]. They began turning out reports that seemed to bring out to me the deep, unutterable gulf between the professors who were analyzing the Poles and the Poles who were being analyzed. (Qtd. in Dearborn 125)

Yezierska’s insistence on the need for “heart and feeling” illustrates her harshest critique of Dewey, the one she leveled at him in her review of *Democracy and Education*. Although the character of Sara may take pride in becoming a “person of reason,” Yezierska suggests that reason cannot replace emotion and that scientific philosophy does not trump lived reality. To become “fully human,” in her view, is a balancing act between hope and despair, between empowerment and subjugation, where individuals prevail through the strategic use of material experience, analysis, and critical reflection. And she insists on the right of working-class students to interpret their own experience rather than be passive subjects represented by others.
Ultimately, Yezierska is a writer in dialogue with the most influential pedagogical movement of the twentieth century. Her work reveals the tensions and conflicts inherent in progressive education, but more than that, it shows us how these were viewed through the lens of the immigrant student. Earlier in this essay, I raised Jackson and Miller’s claim that the divisions between various branches of composition-rhetoric today mimic tensions within progressive education, and I cited Gallagher’s claim that Dewey’s philosophy is far more liberatory and radical than is commonly acknowledged. Though it would be beyond the scope of this (or perhaps any) essay to neatly resolve questions about competing branches of progressive pedagogy and their legacy for composition and rhetoric studies today, Yezierska offers us one way of thinking about those questions. She shows that pedagogical progressivism has had tremendous potential to tap into students’ lived experiences and transform these students into more fully realized, engaged citizens. At the time she wrote, that power was constrained within institutional structures that had more power than the individual students and teachers who pursued social change and individual transformation within their confines. But nonetheless, we can read her faith in the possibility of personal and social change as an embrace of the radical possibility for pedagogical progressivism. Yezierska offers us a way of grappling with some of these tensions by insisting on the value of working-class students’ lived experiences above abstract philosophy. She emphasizes the power of the vernacular dialect and the right of students to move between dialects as needed. Though characters such as Sara may be subjugated to the extent that they relinquish their dialect, and though Yezierska herself shed her home dialect as she assimilated, her choice to re-create the dialect in all of her fiction is a rhetorical move to assert its value. She insists on the rights of working-class students to pursue a life of the mind, to participate in intellectual rather than merely manual labor, and to represent their own experiences rather than submit to “spectator researchers” who would usurp this authority.

This investigation of the intersections of Dewey’s philosophy and Yezierska’s fiction suggests new ways of thinking about relationships among composition-rhetoric, literary criticism, and English studies more broadly. In speaking back to a cultural and pedagogical movement, Yezierska participated with some of her contemporaries in forging a new, activist genre of immigrant literature. The body of immigrant writing that emerged in the early twentieth century provides some of the only firsthand accounts of immigrants’ educational experiences of the era, particularly their impressions of educational progressivism. The work of Yezierska, like that of her contemporaries Mary Antin, Edward Bok, and Sui Sin Far, is compelling for its historical and educational insights as much as for its literary merits. In suggesting that we look more carefully at these texts as historical sources, I echo
Graff’s point that literary works can provide us with perspectives on literacy that may otherwise be missing from the historical record (281). Yezierska’s books and those of her contemporary ethnic modernists are now being taught more frequently in college classrooms. By situating her work within a tradition that is both rhetorical and literary, activist and pedagogical, college English teachers can begin to think through new ways of approaching these early twentieth-century immigrant texts with our students.

Finally, I suggest that our disciplinary histories need to look more closely at the relationships among educational progressivism, Americanization, and the formation of college composition in the United States. In the early twentieth century, adult students were likely to study writing not only in postsecondary institutions, but also in settlement houses, night schools, and so-called university extension programs that helped working-class students transition into the university. Boundaries between these institutions were unstable and in flux, in some ways more flexible than their twenty-first-century counterparts. As histories of composition continue to examine the role that writing instruction has played in fostering civic participation and shaping our notions of nationhood, early twentieth-century immigrant texts give us one lens through which to understand this phenomenon and a new way of thinking about our disciplinary past.

Notes

1. I wish to thank John Schilb and the anonymous College English readers for their feedback on this essay. Thanks also to Julianne Coleman, Alex Cook, Lisa Scherff, Stephen Schneider, and Bo Wang for their comments on an earlier draft.

2. The immigrants who came to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century tended to be from southern and eastern Europe rather than western or northern Europe. Mostly non-English speaking and non-Protestant, they settled in urban areas and were considered slow to assimilate. In his book Coming to America, historian Roger Daniels notes that the distinction between old and new immigrants is problematic, however, in that it masks the economic, cultural, and social changes that led to new immigration patterns, sustaining a misperception that the new immigrants themselves were intrinsically different or less adaptable than their predecessors.

3. Dearborn’s book Love in the Promised Land chronicles the brief relationship between Yezierska and Dewey. Dewey ended the affair with the request that she return the letters and poems he had written her. Instead, she published excerpts of them in her stories and novels, and she retold the story of their relationship in much of her work. Some of Yezierska’s characterizations of Dewey are no doubt motivated by anger over the failed romance. But it would be overly simplistic to dismiss her critiques as expressions of romantic disappointment. They are too systematic for that, and too perceptive in revealing the U.S. education system’s failure to meet immigrant students’ needs.

4. See, for example, Anolik; Christopher; Dearborn; Jirousek; Konzett; Launius; and Werner. In terms of her place within early twentieth-century American literature, Yezierska is part of a group of immigrant writers (including Antin, Bok, Abraham Cahan, Far, and later, Henry Roth) who documented the process of assimilation in autobiographical or semi-autobiographical forms. Sollors and Konzett have used the term ethnic modernists to refer to this group of writers, who performed the “cultural work of recasting the United States as a multiethnic country” (Sollors 13). To paraphrase Benedict Anderson, they reimaged the nation for an audience of native-born and immigrant readers alike, promoting a new
cultural pluralism and in the process redefining what it meant to be American (13). In general, critics have offered a mixed appraisal of Yezierska’s literary contributions. Konzett notes that she has been alternately characterized as both an “ethnic protest writer” and “an ardent assimilationist” (Ethnic Modernisms 7).

5. One exception to this gap is the work of Jirousek, whose work on Yezierska’s book All I Could Never Be treats the text as a rejection of Dewey’s anthropological research methods.

6. One way to understand Dewey’s influence on critical pedagogy is to look at his work in dialogue with that of Paulo Freire, as do Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy as well as Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald. In John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope, Fishman and McCarthy argue that Dewey and Freire share a belief in the power of hope and a vision of education as a process of critical reflection on the relationship between individual experience and broader social trends. Like Fishman and McCarthy, Roskelly and Ronald see critical links between Dewey and Freire, particularly the element of hope combined with an emphasis on practice (or praxis, in Freirian terms) and civic engagement. A close look at their language reveals the influence of Dewey on Freire: Dewey’s assertion that we must not think of education as “pouring knowledge into a mental and moral hole” (Democracy 51), for instance, anticipates Freire’s critique of the “banking system” of education.

7. In much of her work, Yezierska explicitly engages with Dewey’s ideas. Many of her stories retell the story of the immigrant student who falls in love with her Deweyan professor. Bread Givers, for instance, introduces three male characters loosely based on various aspects of Dewey’s relationship to Yezierska, as does the short story “To the Stars.” The novel All I Could Never Be and short story “Wings” recount Yezierska’s experiences participating in Dewey’s ethnography of immigrant populations in Philadelphia. Several literary critics have made passing references to the connection—see Jirousek; Konzett’s “Administered Identities”; and Dearborn’s Love in the Promised Land, which offers examples of Yezierska’s many textual references to Dewey.

8. Yezierska’s use of vernacular dialect has generated criticism upon publication and in the present day. One reviewer lamented in 1926 that their working-class language made her characters appear unintentionally comical. Much more recently, critics such as Joyce Carol Oates have argued that Yezierska failed to “take an interest in the craft of fiction” (qtd. in Konzett, “Administered Identities” 609). Her stilted style may give that impression, but the opposite is true. Dearborn notes that although Yezierska presented herself as “untutored and crude” (Dearborn 142), she actually studied creative writing at Columbia University. Moreover, Louise Levitas Henriksen (Yezierska’s daughter and biographer) notes that Yezierska did not speak the dialect of her characters. She frequently consulted with working-class family members in order to re-create their language in her manuscripts. See Dearborn; Henriksen; and Konzett, Ethnic Modernisms, introduction and chapter 1, for further discussion of Yezierska’s use of dialect.


10. The term cultural pluralism is most closely associated with Horace Kallen, a philosopher and acquaintance of William James who wrote extensively about the Americanization movement, arguing in favor of a linguistically heterogeneous national identity.

11. See Joseph Kett for an account of the emergence of modern adult education in the early twentieth century.

12. This view was influenced by Addams’s work at Hull House and its Labor Museum, which Dewey visited. The museum showcased Old World artisan traditions and emphasized the processes by which goods were made. This emphasis on the origins of goods and the process by which they were produced was a direct response to the social alienation and isolation brought on by industrialization and assembly-line labor.

13. By pointing to the ways in which Yezierska critiques the structure of educational institutions, I do not suggest that Dewey is unaware of the problems inherent in them. In fact, he is very concerned with the structure of schools and the material conditions in which students learn. In School and Society, for instance, he gives considerable attention to matters such as the appropriate design of classrooms. My point is that Yezierska used narratives rhetorically to show how institutional constraints affected working-class students disproportionately, and to reveal that the mechanisms by which these students were dehumanized were often invisible to those responsible for upholding the status quo.
WORKS CITED


