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WORK AS A MODE OF ASSIMILATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

Abstract

The focus of this article is on Jews and their relationship to labor, especially as portrayed fictionally. In discussing immigrant writers such as Anzia Yeziarska and Abraham Cahan and the post-immigrant author Daniel Fuchs I will consider the working conditions of early twentieth-century immigrants and their attitudes toward work. I will demonstrate that while education may have been the preferred method for escaping ghetto poverty and whitening (i.e. reaping the full benefits of being an American) work is the actual means for gaining that education. The article concludes with an analysis of changes that have occurred through the Americanization of the post-assimilationist generation, represented by Philip Roth and Adam Langer.

Key words

Whitening; assimilation; Jews; immigrant literature; education; labor

The Protestant work ethic has since the initial colonization of the US been one of the core concepts of American society. The key to success in the country, particularly as it was sold to arriving immigrants, centered around the idea of getting a good education as the necessary preparation for a good, and of course, high-paying job. Employment provided other benefits; the money a thrifty industrial worker and his family saved could be the nest-egg required for the bank loan needed to buy a house. The house represented property and ownership, which according to Crevecoeur granted the individual stability, status, respect, and a good name; in contemporary terminology whiteness.

In *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*, David Roediger demonstrates the blessing whiteness conferred on working-class

European ethnics who occupied an in-between status between the dominant power structure and blacks and other clearly non-white peoples in the United States prior to the Second World War. Roediger (2005: 49) indicates how certain poorly paid, manual labor jobs were labelled “Nigger work” or “Hunkie work” – for example, at blast furnaces in steel plants, which were dirty and sweaty – and thus considered unsuitable for whites, that is real people. As Mary Antin (1969: 246) succinctly put it in *The Promised Land*, to avoid “being hampered in the race for Americanization,” European ethnics, and Jews in particular, strove to rise out of the factories and sweatshops and make what George Lipsitz calls “the possessive investment in whiteness.”

Americanization, or the process of becoming white, generally came at the expense of people of color and was achieved in ways such as providing specific benefits during the New Deal, like VA and FHA loans – “old-time affirmative action” – which either “redlined” specific districts to preclude non-whites from purchasing homes or instituted polices which decided “not to disrupt preexisting patterns of neighborhoods” (Roediger 2005: 225). As Lipsitz (1998: 6–7) notes, much of this was a result of post-war urban renewal and slum clearance programs which “subsidized the growth of segregated neighborhoods,” by destroying working-class central city housing areas. He goes on to say that urban renewal helped construct a new ‘white’ identity in the suburbs by helping to destroy ethnically specific European American urban inner-city neighborhoods. Difficulties in finding accommodation in the city, with its high cost of living plus the availability of publicly supported loans for cheaper housing developments in the newly arising suburbs, to be linked by the highways increasingly being constructed through those same renovated areas, served to break down divisions between ethnic groups. This in turn hastened their departure to the larger and open spaces the suburbs offered, and compounded the division between them as whites and the non-whites who were forced into substandard housing and neighborhoods (Roediger 2005: 227). In fact, the destruction caused by such programs was not limited solely to white working-class areas, as Ernestine Silk notes in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2001: 331):

Urban renewal destroyed East Orange, there’s no doubt in my mind. [The city fathers] talked about all the great things that were going to happen [...] It scared the merchants to death and the merchants left, and the more the merchants left, the less business there was. Then 280 and the parkway cut our little town in quarters. The parkway eliminated Jones Street – the center of our colored community the parkway eliminated altogether. [...] the nice houses along Oraton Parkway, Elmwood Avenue, Maple Avenue, the state just bought them up and they disappeared overnight.

Furthermore, the new white identity was partially a result of mass organizing drives of the skilled and unskilled in the same plants which, in quoting Lizabeth Cohen, Lipsitz (1998: 152) writes created a “culture of unity,” which replaced

ethnically based self-help organizations. He writes of the improved conditions for working-class European ethnics which came about through the actions of trade unions, specifically the CIO. According to Roediger, AFL craft unions, and even the more progressive CIO unions in the 1930s, engaged at the same time in various practices to protect the rights and jobs of their ethnic in-between members, for example, setting aside certain jobs which were “traditionally” performed by certain ethnic groups, the closed shop mandating union membership while at the same time not accepting non-white members, and employing seniority measures demanding “first hired, last fired.”

Karen Brodtkin also discusses the importance of whiteness and achieving it, especially in regard to the Jewish community, in formulating the notions of ethnoracial identity and ethnoracial assignment, or succinctly put, who we think we are and who society says we are. She uses the example of her family to portray the conflict expressed in these terms. Her immigrant grandmother and American-born parents considered themselves Jews, and the dominant society would have categorized her grandmother as Other due to her language, customs and attitudes toward work; her schoolteacher parents were in-between partially because of their progressive politics and ethnic-community based lifestyle; in fact, she notes that her father almost failed the speech test demanded for a teaching license (which many Jews perceived as designed to keep them from the field) “because he didn’t speak ‘standard,’ i.e., nonimmigrant, nonaccented English” (1998: 32). In both cases, the idea of working, or a job, is significant. When the family, like other European ethnics, moved from Brooklyn to Long Island, her mother tried to adapt to “suburban domesticity [...] to be a housewife, to enjoy the ‘freedom’ from working” (1998: 12). Brodtkin’s own ethnoracial identity is hybrid, both Jewish and American, and despite the difficulties she mentions in attempting to adapt to the “womanhood of the ‘blond people’” (1998: 23), her assignment is white. Her children, she states, are white on both counts.

Another difficulty facing whitening Jews was that despite often being labeled a homogeneous mass of socialists or communists, their Jewish socialism was a cultural politics. The socialist aspects were due to an aversion to capitalism in Russia, which was anti-Semitic, and thus yiddishkeit in America had a strong anticapitalist streak (Brodtkin 1998: 104–7). At the same time, trade unionism, as a means of protecting workers’ rights, and the associated educational and recreational activities (Workman’s Circles, literary and theater groups) tended to develop a spirit of progressivism.

My focus in this article is on Jews and their relationship to labor, especially as portrayed fictionally. I will begin with the working conditions of early twentieth-century immigrants and their attitudes toward work and concentrate on how education may have been the preferred method for escaping ghetto poverty and whitening, but work is the actual means for gaining that education.

In “The New Man and the Mediator: (Non-)Remembrance in Jewish-American Immigrant Narrative” Gert Buelens (1994: 89) focuses on this idea of not remembering, which he claims writers employed to “stabilize subjectivity, contain

social dissent, and legitimize the immigrant as acceptable to the dominant order.” He states that in recalling their experience writers of immigrant autobiography and fiction sought to present an American Jew acceptable to the WASP norm, as a figure capable of achieving American identity. He maintains that little is made of the Jewish desire to escape from social marginality, and “what is really at stake is the American Jew’s attempt to represent himself as part of an economically privileged class” (1994: 89), or becoming white. Moreover, Roediger remarks that “claiming white racial status was axiomatic for Zionist intellectuals” like Horace Kallen, who, writing at about the same time as the immigrant authors, before and after the First World War, sought to create “new terms and new meanings for old terms [i.e. race, ...] ethnic group, ethnic faction, and ethnic type, for example” (2005: 22).

Let me begin with an example of Anzia Yeziarska’s heroines. They believe in the miracle of America. Her prescription for characters like Sara Smolinsky in *Bread Givers* or a similar figure in the story “Soap and Water” is to emancipate themselves from their paternalistic homes and then begin a dual life as sweatshop worker-night school student or laundry worker-college student, which will eventually culminate in their gaining a teacher’s certificate. Thus the job is for these heroines not only a method of achieving an independent selfhood as well as a means of survival, but a stepping stone into Beulens’s economically privileged class, gaining a fully whitened future.

In spite of having been ostracized by America for their Otherness they do maintain their hope. In “Soap and Water” the protagonist has her diploma withheld by a dean who believes her personal appearance too unkempt to allow her to be a schoolteacher, Yeziarska’s sweaty, stinking laborers keep the establishment white, a fact the WASPs lose no time in impressing upon them. The irony is that this student had spent four years working in a laundry before and after classes and fatigue left her little time for the “little niceties of the well-groomed lady” (1985: 166). Despite this obvious case of discrimination and the character’s anger at being forced into a lower-paid and uncertain job as a substitute teacher, she still holds on to the belief of the visionary immigrant that the persecuted of the world could find peace and happiness in America. Yeziarska clearly believes that the sacrifices are worth making, that whitening is the answer. There is a sense of ambivalence in this as the prevailing ideology of the country creates a sense of unprecedented and unlimited opportunity for the Jewish immigrant. Though little space is devoted to the actual study setting in either work, both clearly counterpoint Jewish values of education. There is little joy to be gained for the serious student – discussion is consciously put aside, the college is no community of scholars but just another workplace, an education factory, just a means of achieving a further stage of life and increased whiteness, through a teaching job.

Abraham Cahan’s 1917 classic *The Rise of David Levinsky* starts out with the protagonist embarking on a similar educational path. He resigns himself to his job, to long hours over a sewing machine to earn as much as possible in the shortest possible time. The accumulated wages “lent reality to [his] vision of

college. Cloak-making was now nothing but a temporary round of dreary toil, an unavoidable stepping-stone to loftier occupations” (1960: 167): to a profession such as medicine, engineering or law. A fluke event, however, transforms Levinsky into “one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States” (1960: 3). In accumulating his more than two-million-dollar wealth across the backs of his ‘non-white’ co-religionists, his industrial practices are no different from the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts or Goulds. In shifting from exploited to exploiter, the business methods Levinsky has employed are devoid of morality, or clearly amoral if we accept the view that there can be no place for scruples if the sole purpose of business is to maximize profit. Considering Brodtkin’s notion of Jewish socialism, he would have drawn only scorn from all segments of the Lower East Side community. Levinsky undercuts the wage scale by operating a non-union shop whenever conditions allow and a paternalistic company shop: hiring *landsleit*, greenhorns from his hometown and often paying their trans-Atlantic passage in return for their services when conditions are not conducive. By “observing the Sabbath,” keeping his shop closed on Saturday, he can employ pious workers at lower wages. Levinsky dotes on the fact that Russian-Jewish “cockroach” shops operate on a lower profit margin than the larger German-Jewish operations. He is not opposed to paying kickbacks to material suppliers and bribes to union infiltrators. He has an almost blind hatred of socialism and trade unions though he himself is a “graduate of the sweats.” Nor is he adverse to stealing designs from other manufacturers or ridding himself of the unnecessary partner upon whose designs the company was originally founded. Then again, such methods are mandatory to whiten, differentiate himself from his othered co-religionists.

In challenging the paradigm of the hard-working immigrant, in *Allrightnik’s Row, Haunch, Paunch and Jowl: The Making of a Professional Jew* Samuel Ornitz rejects school education and opts for dishonest means to escape the ghetto. There is only on-the-job training for the street-wise. His Meyer Hirsch is in direct contrast with the ghetto intellectuals, the professionals serving their community, the social reformers, utopian socialist, syndicalists, the doctors giving ceaselessly to improve the conditions of mothers and children in the ghetto. These characters have succeeded in the Horatio Alger sense to become credits to their community. They have worked their way through college, spent long hours sewing knee-pants in a sweatshop or as singing waiters in a downtown dance hall, they have demonstrated that idealism and education go hand in hand. Others are the fictional counterparts of Irving Berlin, Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, who worked hard to reach the vaudeville stage and Tin Pan Alley, to build the American entertainment industry.

Ornitz is not particularly interested in these noble characters, but plays them off against Meyer and his uncle Philip, a Talmudic scholar cum capitalist. The former is the professional Jew of the title, who makes his living, lines his pockets and feathers his political nest by demagogically stirring up rumpuses, alarms, furors over every fancied grievance, insult and reflection. He is a master manipulator, an opportunist par excellence serving only a credo of expediency.

Philip Gold represents another side of work. Where Hirsch works the ethnic issue, like Levinsky, Philip rides on the backs of the workers themselves. Consumed by a hatred of the German Jewish factory owners “who look down upon Russian Jews as an animal” (1986: 28), he seeks the same power, pride, wealth and whiteness they possess, but goes them one better, saying:

I’m not as elegant as they are. I’m not veiling myself with hypocrisy. I’m going to make money direct from the cheapest greenhorn labor I can find. ... A good business man makes the most of competition. So he beats down, screws down the competing contractors. Oh, no, the German Jewish garment magnates do not employ sweat labor. No, the contractors do. ... That’s how I’ll beat them. I’ll beat them because I am unashamed, unafraid to face facts. I’ll have no middleman squeezer. I’ll do my own sweating. ... I’ll work the women and children in the tenements. They’ll come to my shop and be glad to get work to do at home. ... glad to earn a little extra money at home, and, even so, they’ll thank me. (1986: 103)

A further example of the questionability of honest and/or noble labor is found in Daniel Fuchs’s *Williamsburg Trilogy*, particularly in his gangsters, Papravel in *Summer in Williamsburg* and Shubunka in *Low Company*. Papravel rejects the notion that he is a criminal. Strong-arming for a bus company owner, he notes that “I come from a good family in the old country and there is no one in Williamsburg more honest than me. It is true people call me a crook, but I work hard for a living and no one can ever say I cheated a customer” (1972b: 126). Papravel is certain he is an honest businessman, believing that people have to make a living and he performs certain services and is strictly paid for them. He is appalled by the thought that his organization might be “tarnished, its reputation damaged in the community, if it was to be associated with the signs of common thuggery and gangsterism” (1972b: 238) and proud of the quality of the work he provides as well as being an American. The novel ends with this self-made man singing the praises of America for the opportunity given him:

“Look at me, look how I worked myself up in four short years. In America everyone has an equal chance. I don’t know how things are in Russia now, even God Himself don’t know what’s going on there these days, but even so, where, I want to know, where in the world could a Jew make such a man of himself as right here in America?” (1972b: 380)

Fuchs, however, ironically drives this point home with the tears of Mrs. Van Curen, her name alluding to the earliest settlers of the area, and her weeping over the fact that such a fine, upstanding, kind young man as Papravel cannot get to heaven since he is unbaptized. Thus to the Protestant Dutch American he is still the Other.

On the other hand, no such fate awaits Shubunka, whom Marcus Klein describes as a “ghetto Gatsby,” Like Gatsby, Shubunka has employed rather unor-

thodox methods to rise from the mire of the immigrant East Side, to enjoy relative celebrity in Neptune Beach. But years of trying to make a living in various legitimate businesses had taught him the lesson similar that “you couldn’t win fortunes working with your hands. You had to sell something, ... [y]ou had to sell them something they really wanted, something they were willing to pay for well” (Fuchs 1972a: 56–57). Shubunka shares Papravel’s attitude towards his business, prostitution, which he believes to be practically legitimate – he always paid his bills, owes money to no one and is opposed to strong-arm tactics – and is secure in his conviction that this stamps him as a solid, honest businessman. And like Gatsby acquiring his wealth to recapture his lost love, Shubunka’s labor has also been for a nobler purpose; all he has really sought has been “some girl who could bring him a home, a family, companionship” (1972a: 254) – the joys of being fully American. Unfortunately, the country no longer has a place for this type of “respectable” merchant. He has been pushed aside by the faceless combine; he has worked long and hard to build his kingdom and truly believes in the morality of his toil. The irony lies in the fact that being non-white, he can still incredulously ask the thugs sent to lean on him, “How can you take what I have done and kick me out? What am I? A dog? You have no right to do this! It is not the way for one human being to treat another!” (1972a: 150).

Shifting from this early literature to what Ted Solotaroff refers to as post-immigrant literature bring us to *Goodbye, Columbus*, where Philip Roth’s working-class protagonist Neil Klugman is employed in a routine job at the Newark Public Library. He is a far cry from his upper-middle-class foil Ron Patimkin, who is totally useless at work at the family sink factory. Ron epitomizes the Jewish wealth gained through the “mode of production” in the post-war period, as Riv-Ellen Prell (1996: 89) writes in “Why Jewish Princesses Don’t Sweat,” which “created the [whitened] children whose enlarged vistas revealed affluence and professionalization.” Despite his college education and his obvious dreams of social mobility, in his work Neil retains those attitudes of Jewish socialism, supporting what at the time would have been referred to as the “underprivileged,” the black boy who comes to the library to look at Gauguin paintings in the art section. Neil encourages him to get a card and borrow books, perhaps unconsciously espousing the manner employed by Jews, who believed they were “smart and that [their] success was due to [their] own efforts and abilities, reinforced by a culture that valued sticking together, hard work, education and deferred gratitude” (Brodkin 1998: 26). Neil is seemingly alone in his attitude toward the boy, as other employees seem to fear his possibly dirtying or destroying the books. This fear is expressed by the Irishman McKee, “You know the way they treat the housing projects we give them [...] They’re taking over the city” (Roth 1969: 25). This is clearly a call to his working-class European ethnic co-workers to engage in “the culture of unity,” thus keeping the black Other uneducated, no threat to their jobs and protecting their newly achieved but still tentative whiteness.

Newark is the setting for many of Roth’s novels and the community was held together by Jewish socialism. In *American Pastoral* it is remembered as a place

where the factories “churned up people and churned out goods” (1998: 219), but in the pre-Second World War period it was also a non-Jewish city where almost-white working people worked collectively. This epitome of this unity is Lou Levov’s “one complete Italian sentence, ‘Na mano lava ’nad’ – One hand washes the other” (1998: 222).

New Deal liberals like Lou and his son Swede portray themselves as enlightened, paternalistic employers – in direct contrast to Levinsky or Gold – defending their actions and ideals (for instance, keeping their glove factory in Newark) while recognizing the difference between outraged self-made white and outrageous black. His work force is no longer comprised of the ethnic working class who took pride in their skilled labor, but unskilled, lazy blacks, who are at fault for the Newark’s demise; according to the Lou Levov mourning the city: “I built this with my *hands!* With my blood! They think somebody gave it to me? Who? Who gave it to me? Who gave me anything, ever? Nobody! What have I built! With work – w-o-r-k! But they took that city and now they are going to take that business [... and] leave it *all* in ruins!” (1998: 163–4).

But through his whiteness, Swede the liberal is now at the other pole in respect to the Newark of his past. At the height of the 1967 Newark riots, he is the courageous white hero remaining at his post, around the clock at the factory. Seemingly performing individually, he is really acting for the greater group (the factory’s employees are black), like a father protecting the rights (and livelihood) of his children in the face of an alien onslaught. It is the encirclement of the wagon train in a new Jewish context: instead of the Other protecting itself against the incursion and threat by the dominant society, it is now dominant society defending its property from the Other. More significantly, however, Swede is not truly alone in defending the plant, but is joined by his “black forelady, Vicky, thirty years with Newark Maid, a tiny woman of impressive wit, stamina and honesty” (1998: 161). Such qualities as well as her attitude toward the company, “This is mine too. You just own it” (1998: 162), may qualify her for “honorary whiteness.”

Having started on the shop floor like Levinsky, Swede still knows the glove-making process inside out. Though he makes the daily trip to the factory in Newark, he becomes a gentleman farmer by proxy: his wife Dawn begins raising cattle. Landownership and agriculture recall the noble labor of the American yeoman farmer proclaimed by Jefferson and another child of immigrants, Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, as the way to complete freedom.

I would like to conclude with a brief examination of Adam Langer’s post-assimilationist novel *Crossing California*; published in 2005 and set in 1979–81, it demonstrates Jewish attitudes towards work that mirror those in immigrant and post-immigrant fiction. Langer presents three families living in a Jewish area in northern Chicago; each represents a different socio-economic class and strata of whiteness. California Avenue, or at least its west side, is the modern equivalent of Ornitz’s Allrightnik’s Row or Short Hills in Roth’s *Goodbye, Columbus*, and represents becoming fully whitened. The Rovners, living west of California, en-

joy a dysfunctional family life similar to Swede Levov's, with little if any contact with their Jewish past. Their participation in the Jewish community, with the children attending Hebrew school, bat mitzvahs and related social events, is completely superficial. The radiologist and psychologist parents are alienated from their work as much as their children – family dinners are take-home affairs rarely lasting more than 15 minutes – and open wallets and purses link parents and children. Daughter Lana is a 12-year-old latter-day version of Roth's JAP, only severely class-biased, success-driven and far more demanding. Brother Larry has proclaimed his re-birth by embracing Orthodox principles and writing music derivative of Bob Dylan, with titles such as "Sad Eyed Lady of the Sinai." Neither child realizes the value of money nor has ever worked an honest job. They are the Patimkins twenty years down the road.

Charlie Wasserstrom and his daughters live well east of California and before the death of his wife his dream was to cross the avenue. Charlie is a remnant of working-class Chicago Jewry and Jewish socialism who has long worked happily managing restaurants. Having lost his job, he is offered a new one selling cars but declines, balking at the owner's use of "lump of coal" in referring to black customers and related sales practices, refusing to adopt company racism to earn a living. A marked success selling advertising, but too compassionate, he fails miserably in collecting from his customers and attempts to appease the newspaper's owners (his wife's family) by paying a portion of the overdue accounts himself. It seems Malamud's Morris Bober has landed in Chicago.

His daughters are at the opposite pole from Lana Rovner, carry-overs from Sixties radicalism. The older Michelle lashes out at social regulations and what she considers unjust through her drug use, drinking and sex; the younger Jill is the idealistic pre-teen always adopting or at least attempting to understand unpopular causes and positions: the Palestinians vs. Israel, fundamentalist Iran during the hostage crisis, questioning the reality of the 'rights' provided by the Constitution. Manual labor, even when mindless, is not alien to Michelle but a necessity; learning is for both an intellectual exercise, and potentially a vehicle for moving out of their "inbetween" ethnoracial position.

Langer's third family lives even farther east, in an area less Jewish and more non-white. The Wills/Silvermans are multiracial, the Wills, mother Deirdre, who cleans for the Rovners and works in the library, and son Muley are black, absentee father Carl Silverman is a prototypic wigger, performing blackness in his world of blues as a successful record producer. Though not Jewish, mother and son reflect earlier Jewish immigrant values: hard work and striving for education are Deirdre's means of advancement, becoming a schoolteacher; Muley is inventive earning money building crystal radio sets and creative as a radio personality, writer and film-maker. In his working-class origins Silverman is reminiscent of the Levinskys and Hirschs: his rise is made across the backs of his workers and ghettoites, by exploiting them. Moreover, as in the case of the Jewish vaudeville performers employing blackface, he has appropriated African American culture as a stepping-stone to whiteness.

Crossing California appears to demonstrate a continuum in attitudes towards work in Jewish American literature. As in the early twentieth-century literature, to say nothing of the Jewish proletarian works I have been forced to ignore here, Langer portrays Jews both as exploited and exploiters, both seeking to make and maintain their investment in whiteness. Over the course of a century, their conditions and points of departure have obviously improved and the Jewish work force usually depicted in contemporary literature is totally professional; work is no longer central to survival but only one activity in life. As the immigrant writers and Roth have indicated, Allrightnik's Row, be it the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Morris County or now California Avenue, often leaves the whitened Jew wholly empty and alienated, but does not stop other Jews from pursuing it. In fact, by the end of Langer's novel all his families have crossed California.

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