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## ABSTRACT

Anzia Yeziarska and Agnes Smedley grew up in the United States in poverty-stricken, working-class families. Both women became famous authors and participants in social movements of the early decades of the 20th century. Yeziarska's "Bread Givers" and Smedley's "Daughter of Earth", published in the 1920s, were fictionalized autobiographies that detailed their growing dissatisfaction with the traditional role of women in society. The books contain several similarities. Both Yeziarska's Sara Smolinsky and Smedley's Marie Rogers left home in search of a consciousness that poverty denied them and returned home again only to witness their mothers' deaths. The death scenes depicted a maternal bonding between mothers and daughters that had not existed before because the daughters had been trying to escape the harshness of their mothers' lives. While Yeziarska only touched on subjects of marriage, sex, and motherhood, Smedley wrote a polemic against marriage, as she attacked women's financial dependence, frequent childbirths, and loss of self. Both characters rejected their fathers for failure to financially support their mothers and offspring. Each book contains a scene where the daughters meet their fathers again after many years of separation. Smedley's Marie again rejected the man, while Yeziarska's Sara took her father home. Both women searched for father substitutes in selecting husbands, and Sara assimilated into society through her marriage, while Marie divorced twice. Smedley left the United States for China. She died in Europe in 1950 under mysterious circumstances following an operation. Yeziarska died in California as she still searched for a home. A 5-item bibliography is included. (DJC)

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Anzia Yeziarska and Agnes Smedley:  
Working-Class Writers, Working-Class Daughters  
Searching for Home

by

Janet Zandy

A paper presented at the  
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Anzia Yeziarska and Agnes Smedley: Working-Class Writers,  
Working-Class Daughters Searching for Home

"What I have written is not a work of beauty, created that someone may spend an hour pleasantly;...It is the story of a life." (3) That is the warning Agnes Smedley gives her reader on the very first page of Daughter of Earth (1929). In a similar vein, Anzia Yeziarska in Bread Givers (1925) calls for "the knowledge that is the living life. . . ." (181), not "words about words."

Life, for Smedley and Yeziarska, as children and young women, meant poverty, dirt, emotional and educational deprivation, uncertainty and loneliness. [1] Their writing was shaped and marked by their class, the working poor. By choosing to write out of that class perspective and refusing to tailor or quiet their voices to a more genteel, literary tone, or a more conservative political perspective, Yeziarska and Smedley risked alienating middle class American publishers and readers by writing about what they didn't want to hear. How class shaped their artistic consciousness as women writers searching for a home for themselves and for their work is a question I want to raise and explore in this analysis of their autobiographical novels.[2]

At first glance, they seem to be an odd juxtaposition. Anzia Yeziarska was a Jewish, Polish immigrant; Bread Givers is set in

the dense immigrant ghetto of New York's Lower East Side. Agnes Smedley, a many generation American, was a daughter of the rough terrain of the American Southwest; Daughter of Earth begins on a dirt farm in sparsely populated Missouri.

Further, Yeziarska became Hollywood's rags to riches girl, a fame which lasted about ten years, and a fortune which disappeared with the Depression. Smedley was an internationally known radical who was imprisoned in the United States for her involvement with the Indian nationalist movement, and who spent much of her adult life in China. Yet, despite this disparity of ethnicity and geography, or perhaps because of it, they are, in their own ways, quintessentially American writers.

Place Bread Givers and Daughter of Earth side by side and you will see common threads which run through the fibre of working class women's writing: a discernible historic context; a close association between the job, or limited economic options, and the life of the protagonist; a sense of otherness in the face of middle class and white Anglo-Saxon male values; a hunger for knowledge which doesn't fit the socialization process of American public schools; the use of folk idiom, and direct, charged language. And there are other similarities.

What is particularly striking in Bread Givers and Daughter of Earth is the protagonists' relationship to home and parents. The characters Sara Smolinsky and Marie Rogers and the writers Yeziarska and Smedley must leave home in order to survive. This is not a middle class option of leaving home in order to find

oneself and establish one's own identity, nor are they picaresque heroes setting out on an adventure. For Yeziarska and Smedley, Sara and Marie, given their economic options and choices as women, it was either leave or be crushed. Smedley writes in Daughter of Earth, "I might have remained in the mining towns all my life, married some working man, borne him a dozen children to wander the face of the earth, and died in my early thirties. Such was the fate of all women about me" (117).

Bereft of home, Sara and Marie become emotional and economic orphans. But, Yeziarska's and Smedley's protagonists are not, literally, orphans. They have parents, a specific geography. They feel the pull of family responsibilities. They know they must choose self over family in order to get some semblance of education, the ticket out. Yeziarska's Sara doesn't visit her mother in her drive to become an American; Smedley's Marie lies to school officials that her family is dead, even though her father and siblings are very much alive. Yet in the novels, in the lives, Yeziarska and Smedley are always looking back. As they look back, they must harden themselves, turn to stone, perhaps, in order to become as Yeziarska repeatedly says, "a real person."

I want to turn now to two scenes in each novel which highlight some of the ambiguities faced by Sara/Yeziarska and Marie/Smedley in their journeys away from home. Each novel contains parallel parent scenes: a mother deathbed scene and a father recognition scene. (I decided to juxtapose these two writers after discovering these parallel scenes.)



The mother scenes first: In Bread Givers, Sara Smolinsky returns home after being away for six years and successfully putting herself through college. She travels by train, on money earned from winning an essay contest, having now become a "teacherin." On arriving home she finds her mother in bed and dying from a neglected injury:

"Then, moaning, uncovered the bandage of her foot. 'Oh, weh! The pain! I don't get better. It only gets worse.'

My God! Her toes eaten with decay and gangrene spreading. I couldn't speak" (245-46).

The mother does not get the the amputation the doctor recommends. Sara realizes, "She's dying. Mother is dying! I tried to think, to make myself realize that Mother, will all this dumb sorrow gazing at me, was passing away, for ever. But above the dull pain that pressed on my heart, thinking was impossible. I felt I was in the clutch of some unreal dream from which I was trying to waken" (251).

In the mother's final moments of life, she reunites with her daughter: "Suddenly the sorrowful eyes became transfigured with light. I could not get the words, but the love-light of Mother's eyes flowed into mine. I felt literally Mother's soul enter my soul like a miracle" (252).

In Daughter of Earth, the young Marie Rogers becomes a school teacher in an isolated one room school house in New Mexico. "The school was the best thing I had ever known. I was making forty

dollars a month and sending part of it to my mother" (121). One day she is called away from her students with a message from home that her mother was ill. Not waiting for transportation, Marie immediately straps her gun to her waist and leaves by foot on dangerous and frozen ground to reach the train station and home in time to be with her mother. She arrives (another train journey) to find her mother dying from overwork and malnutrition. Smedley writes:

"My mother was very happy as I sat by her. But I think she knew that death was near, for she said strange things to me--things touching the emotions that she would never have dared say otherwise, for affection between parents and children was never shown among my people. She called me 'my daughter'--a thing she had never said before in her life" (128).

In the final moments, this mother and daughter also reunite:

"My mother's eyes were large and glistening, and she turned them on me in an appeal beyond all speech. I bent over the bed and, for the first time in my life, took her in my arms and held her close to my trembling body. 'Marie!' My name was the last word she ever uttered" (129).

It is understandable and not altogether unpredictable that a mother should die young in a working class novel. The father recognition scenes, however, are not so predictable.

In Bread Givers, Sara Smolinsky's father, the Talmudic scholar in the Old World, the arrogant tyrant in the New, who

ruins three of his four daughters' lives by arranging their marriages, who offers no economic support, indeed, expects his wife and children to support him, who remarries thirty days after his wife's death to find another caretaker, is encountered by Sara on a public street. This is the scene:

"...when I got off at Grand Street, I was blocked by the usual jam of evening traffic....I was shoved against an old man with a tray of chewing-gun. The sudden impact knocked his wares out of his hand....I stopped to help the old man pick up the rolling packages....

'Thank you, lady!'

At the sound of that voice, my heart leaped as though a red hot knife had been thrust into it. The old man's face was half hidden in the collar of his shabby coat, his bony fingers trembled as he recovered his soiled stock. But I knew that face, those hands.

'Father! You--you--here?' (283-284)

In Daughter of Earth, Marie Rogers' father, a storyteller infected with wanderlust, a believer in capitalism and submissive wives, a callous, ignorant laborer who abandoned his wife and children for long periods of time, a widower with three dependent children, decides to live in Oklahoma with his widowed son-in-law. Unexpectedly, Marie encounters him on a public street. This is the scene:

"Out of pure curiosity I stopped at Trinidad [Colorado]





...the scene of my childhood. It was the early gray dawn of morning....The street was silent and deserted except for one man who stumbled out of a saloon just in front of me and started down the street, reeling now and then. I watched him and remembered how my father had, years ago, gone in and out of this very saloon; but, thank heavens, my father was in Oklahoma now and far away from any saloon....

The man before me stumbled on. There was something almost familiar about his rounded, stooped shoulders--yet all working men were like that. He wore a black vest, a dirty blue shirt and no coat....A broad gray slouch hat was pulled in a rakish manner down over one eye. I was gaining on him and watching. As I came nearer...I saw...he was gesturing with his hands...as if talking to some imaginary person!...I hurried faster and faster, drawn toward something I did not want to see, until I was walking by his side. His head was bent, his drink-blurred eyes fastened on the pavement...the tobacco juice ran from the corners of his mouth!

I will never forget. It was my father" (146-47).

Agnes Smedley left the United States around 1920 for Berlin. In 1925 when Bread Givers was published she was writing Daughter of Earth on a "windswept Danish island" (MacKinnon & MacKinnon, 105). [3] In 1924 she mentioned in letters having read books by Rebecca West and Somerset Maugham and other writers, including books given to her by Emma Goldman, but nothing by Anzia Yeziarska. There is nothing in the MacKinnon very complete

biography to suggest an encounter between Yeziarska and Smedley. Louise Levitas Henriksen, Yeziarska's daughter and biographer, in a personal letter to this writer said that as far as she knew, Smedley and Yeziarska never met, although by this time they were both public figures and must have heard of each other's writing and work.[4]

Having no evidence that they could have read each other work in progress, and refusing to dismiss these parallel scenes as merely literary conventions, I will assume then that they are very arresting coincidences. What, then, do these remarkably similar scenes mean in terms of their working class authors' sense of home, of parents, of role models, of choices for their own lives? And, what do they say to us?

Let's turn to the mothers first.

In dying, the mothers of Sara and Marie do not have the words to match the depth of their emotions. Instead of dialogue, the writer shapes an elemental moment, a stripping away of the extraneous, to allow contact between the mothers and daughters, and a transference of the mothers' spirit and unmet wishes onto the daughter. These luminous moments have the resonance of the Demeter and Persephone myth. But, it was not always that way.

Sara Smolinsky's mother was a yeller. "Gazlin! Bandit! her cry broke through the house" (7) because Sara had peeled the potatoes and wasted the peelings. To recompense, Sara picks up

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her pail to look through ash cans for coal and unused wood, a task she had refused to do because it made her feel like a "beggar and a thief" (8).

Marie Rogers' mother was a silent child beater. Marie became her mother's scapegoat. "Why she whipped me so often I do not know. I doubt if she knew. But she said that I build fires and that I lied....As the years of her unhappy married life increased, as more children arrived, she whipped me more and more" (7). To avoid a beating, Marie learns to lie, to tell her mother what she wants to hear.

Despite these realities, each daughter evokes memories of her mothers' beauty and moments of gaiety. Each novel contains scenes of mutuality between the daughters and the mothers. In Bread Givers, on a cold winter night, Sara's mother travels by train to deliver a feather bed and some food to her cold and starving daughter (170-172). In Daughter of Earth, when the father abandons the family once again, Marie and her mother stand side by side at the wash tub, cleaning the neighbors' filthy laundry to survive (83). Marie physically defends her exhausted mother against her father's threatened beating (106). Sara advises her mother to have her father arrested for nonsupport (130).

They differ, at least in degree, when it comes to sex and the unhallowed ground of marriage. In large part, the difference is cultural. A single Jewish woman in Yeziarska's day didn't exist. Of course, she did exist, but she was not recognized or seen as an acceptable cultural choice. Despite the disastrous marriages her

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husband arranges for her other daughters, Mrs. Smolinsky, fearing Sara will become an old maid, wants her daughter to get married. And at the end of the novel, with the too-good-to-be-true Hugo Seelig by her side, Sara, now that she's made of herself a person, seems destined for wedded bliss. Yeziarska, the idealist, holds out the possibility of a true marriage. (Yeziarska herself was twice married. And realized early that it was a situation that was incompatible with her drive to be a writer).[5]

Further, for all the sweaty crowdedness of tenement life, Yeziarska is discreet in her treatment of sexuality. Occasionally, there is romance, an embrace, a touch of Yiddish-theater emotionalism, but no direct reference to sex. Perhaps she felt it didn't need to be said directly, that surely her readers would make the connections in her before and after portraits of her sisters' lives. For example, the once beautiful Mashah is now imprisoned by poverty and the needs of small children. Perhaps it was one of those publishing and societal taboos that caused the writer to self-censor. Or, perhaps, given Yeziarska's contradictory feelings about sex and her ambivalences toward motherhood, it was just too painful.

Agnes Smedley's Daughter of Earth, on the other hand, is a polemic against marriage. She attacks everything about it: women's financial dependence, frequent childbirth, loss of one's name, one's body, one's freedom, indeed, one's self. "All girls married, and I did not know how I would escape, but escape I determined to. I remember that almost without words, my mother

supported me in this." (119) Smedley is very clear about women's choices: either wife or prostitute. Even the notion of old maid is inappropriate for these working class women since that assumes some access to an income, or support from a male relative.

Smedley, who was a close associate of Margaret Sanger, writes very directly about sex, what her father called a woman's "dooties." "Slowly I was learning the shame and secrecy of sex. ...that male animals cost more than female animals...(11). In her log home of two rooms, Marie Rogers witnesses her parents having intercourse: "One night I was awakened by some sound.... An instinct that lies at the root of existence had reared its head in the crudest form in my presence, and on my mind was engraved a picture of terror and revulsion that poisoned the best years of my life" (12). She learned the double standard of sex: it ruined a woman, but made a man (343).

Emma Goldman made a distinction between love and marriage, Smedley makes a distinction between sex and love: "sex had no place in love. Sex meant violence, marriage or prostitution, and marriage meant children, weeping nagging women, and complaining men..." (181) Marie's spur-of-the-moment marriage to Knut, (Ernest Brundin, Agnes Smedley's first husband), what she thought would be a marriage of true minds and friends, ends after two abortions. Furthermore, for all the politics of Daughter of Earth it is often forgotten that it includes a rape scene, for which the victim blames herself. The rape is a traitorous act by a member of the Indian movement. Early in her political life Smedley

recognized the inadequacies of any liberation movement that did not include the liberation of women.

The alternative to love, sex, and marriage for Marie and Sara was the dilemma of a woman alone: the difficulty of renting a room, of sexual harrassment, of a double standard for men and women regarding wages, even how much food is served in a cafeteria. While it is probably true that Smedley, as a Westerner, felt less pressure than Yeziarska to conform to the ideal of the American lady, they both acutely felt the deprivation of human companionship, intellectually and physically, and the need for tenderness.

Sara and Marie learn lessons about the economics of marriage from their mothers and sisters, and how a woman's tenderness may be used against her. Yeziarska knows that Bessie, the "burden bearer" allowed herself to be sold to Zalmon the fish peddler because of her sympathetic feelings for his sick child (109,ff.). Marie says directly, "I would not be a woman...I would not" (149). Like Sara, she must harden herself to the pull of blood: "I threw up fortifications to protect myself from the love and tenderness that menace the freedom of women" (150).

Clearly, Yeziarska and Smedley were aware of the specificity of women's oppression. Their mothers were not role models for them, because that would have been impossible. It is fair to say, though, in studying the daughters' relationships with their mothers that what they hated were the conditions of their mothers lives and the limitations of their choices, not their mothers.

Their fathers were another matter. What the recognition scenes don't reveal is how much the daughters indentified with their fathers. Sara and Marie each claim to be their father's daughter. Sara had her father's stubbornness, singlemindedness and love of learning. Marie's wanderlust comes from her vagabond father, as well as her love for music and dance. And both fathers are storytellers. Without this connection, the hatred they truly feel for their fathers would be less complicated. Also, it is more than a matter of individual blame, both writers are aware of the context that produced fathers like Reb Smolinsky and John Rogers. How each writer resolves the problem of what to do about father is the most telling difference between the two books, and the point where Yezierska ends, and Smedley really begins.

The old world scholar and the old west laborer have much in common. Neither one is capable or willing to fulfill the traditional role of breadwinner. One would go to the synogogue, the other to the saloon. They are indifferent to the needs of anyone but themselves. Instead of mutuality, they offer confrontation. They are tyrants and bullies. They consider themselves men of the world, superior to women, yet they are tricked and swindled by other men. Their wives have more savvy, more insight into the system, and are the ones who save the family and keep it intact.

Smedley writes poignantly of life in mining camps and company towns, and of her mother's "instinctive and unhesitating sympathy for the miners....Through the years she had been transformed from

a poor farming woman into an unskilled proletarian. But my father was less clear....he had men working for him and yet he was an ignorant working man himself, and however hard he worked he seemed to remain miserably poor" (111-112).

When her husband is tricked into investing in an empty store, Sara's mother asks her husband: "Why do you never trust your own wife? Why do you only trust strange people? But there is no way to reach him: "You think I'm like you, mistrusting everybody? I trust people. The whole world is built on trust. The banks, the mines, the Government could never exist unless people trusted each other" (124).

Reb Smolinsky and John Rogers are disappointed dreamers and believers. Each man finds himself in a social and economic context, a real American geography, which is a far cry from the ideals of the American Dream and Rugged Individualism of their imaginations. America does not support scholars and holy men. America will use the labor of John Rogers and not make of him a millionaire. Out of disappointment, ignorance and rage each man kicks the dog and thair women pay. Yeziarska's Sara and Smedley's Marie understand this. They also know that their sympathetic understanding can be a trap.

Let us turn to Yeziarska's answer to the father problem. Before the encounter on the city street, Reb Smolinsky had cast his daughter out of the family when she refused to marry his mistaken notion of a "golden young man" (207). "Just as I looked to Father for love, he rose up to stone me." (204) He belittles



her education, the enormity of that effort: "Pfui on your education!...You think millions of educated old maids like you could change the world one inch! (205) Sara realizes that her father is a tyrant of the old world, a failed prophet, and she is a daughter of the new world. And there is no bridge between them. She must face life alone. But she doesn't. Yeziarska can't let it go.

Enter Hugo Seelig, an immigrant also, who pulls himself up to become not only educated, but the school principal. He corrects Sara's classroom lapses into the idiom of the ghetto. He becomes Yeziarska's deus ex machina, the balance, the bridge to link Reb's Old World and Sara's New. He is not the American Adam that Yeziarska idealized in her relationship with John Dewey, but close enough. Seelig agrees that they will take in father, and he will learn Hebrew from him. Perfect resolution? Happy ending?

No. Imagine this family tableau. Sara keeps a Kosher kitchen and runs around doing chores to keep happy the two men in her life. Of course she had to give up her teaching job when the first baby was born and now with three children there is less and less time to study. Every year she sees the lamp of learning, what she wanted more than anything else in the world, fade dimmer and dimmer.

Yeziarska, whose models were the Pilgrims, the Founding Fathers, and Emerson's "Self-Reliance," does not find a solution for the father problem. (It is noteworthy that, although she drew

heavily on her childhood experiences in writing Bread Givers, she leaves out of the story her very real six brothers.) Even in the sunny happy ending of Bread Givers there is that shadow. Sara hears her father at prayer; she doesn't like the misogyny of the words, but she likes the music. "Then Hugo's grip tightened on my arm, and we walked on. But I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me" (297).

Yeziarska faces, as well, the immigrants' dilemma: in "making it" in America, she risks losing the inner freedom her soul craves. In her choice of male models, of fathers, she could not possibly win: take in the father of the old world and she loses herself to tradition; take in the father of the new world (Hugo Seelig) and she loses herself to assimilation, and in a larger sense, capitalism and patriarchy. Reject him and she is utterly alone. At the end of her life, nearly blind, Yeziarska writes to her daughter: "I like loneliness. I make an art of being lonely" (Levitas-Henriksen 294). Never finding a sustaining alternative community, nor developing a political consciousness, Yeziarska dies without really finding a home anywhere.

Agnes Smedley sees her own father as a victim and casualty of capitalism. But, unlike Sara, Marie does not take father in. Nor is she able to save her brothers: George is killed digging a ditch, "dragged out with his mouth and eyes stopped with mud" (236). Dan joins the army. "Now he was offering his life for a



country that could not feed or educate him" (246).

Like Yeziarska, Smedley looks for father substitutes and is drawn to older men. Marie Rogers in Daughter of Earth is attracted to the Indian nationalist Sardar Ranjit Singh (Lajpat Rai, a spokesman for the cause of Indian nationalism in California and New York, circa 1915-1916) because of a need "for someone to take the place of a father,...and when I found a person who seemed to promise this, I did not lightly release my grip" (253).

Marie's second "marriage" to Anand (Chatto-Agnes Smedley's common law husband, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya) is another attempt to achieve an ideal of true comradeship in marriage. This relationship is spoiled, too, when Smedley realizes that theoretical political pronouncements are one thing, practicing sexual equality another.

Although Smedley had many male friends and lovers and was a political associate of a pantheon of world leaders, what one begins to see, particularly when her relationship with Chatto ended, is a kind of exorcism of a need for a hierarchy of individual male models. (I am reminded of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy.") Her illegal arrest, imprisonment and six months in the Tombs prison (in 1918) catapulted her not only into fame in Left circles, but into a sophisticated analysis of oppressive systems, a theoretical sense tested by the fire of her own experience. Now it was not a matter of letting father in or out, but of transforming the very ground that turns fathers into tyrants.

The American edition of Daughter of Earth ends with Marie



Rogers' exodus: "Out of this house--out of this country...."

Although the original title of the novel was "An Outcast," the elliptical ending promises a continuation of Smedley's search for home. What had been simmering, simmering in the pages of Daughter of Earth emerges first in her international work involving the (Asian) Indian nationalist movement, and then fully in her writing and journalism from China. Her models become collective rather than individualistic,, Whitmanesque rather than Emersonian, the American Indian, rather than the Pilgrim. Historical circumstances--the reactionary climate in the United States, and the revolutionary forces in China--combine to fuse Smedley's individual voice with the oppressed of the earth.

Smedley is a true democrat. She followed no party line, though; her models were the peasants and the poor, and she insisted on one's obligation to choose sides. While it is true that Smedley was estranged from what remained of her family, and suffered the guilt, like Yeziarska, of the working class daughter who leaves in order to make her own life, it should not be concluded that in her mind she abandoned her roots. She never separated her past from her immediate politics or writing. Her reportage, as well, is recursive, looping back into past images and realities.

For example, in "Mining Families," Smedley writes, "It was difficult to realize, except for the language, that I was talking to Chinese miners, and their wives, sisters and daughters. Some way or other, the miners of all countries look alive, move alike,

have the same kind of hands into which coal dust is beaten or rubbed (Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution 163-164). The blackness is reminiscent also of Smedley's many references to her mother's hands black from constant labor.

Further, Agnes Smedley had little use for what she called "salon socialists," and outright contempt for those of the privileged class who blamed poverty on the peasant's or proletarian's unwillingness to work hard enough. Smedley was able to make an intellectual leap that Yeziarska could or would not make. Smedley saw the class struggle of her own parents as part of a much larger international struggle of the oppressed many against the powerful few. It just so happens that Smedley's opportunities for participating in that struggle were international rather than national. Smedley's family is the human family. Her territory, the earth. Her goal, freedom--for everyone.

In a letter written in 1930, she says, "Always I think that I shall write one more book before I die--just one book in which I shall, many years from now, try to show what the capitalist system, with its imperialist development, has done to the human being--how it has turned him into a wolf" (MacKinnon and MacKinnon 145).

Smedley would not romanticize the poor as noble savages either. What she studied in her life and saw in China was the effect of circumstances of birth and environment on human beings. Writing became a process, then, of not overcoming that background,

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but coming to terms with it, and working to transform it.

Yeziarska also realized that overcoming one's background is not the deliverance she imagined. In leaving their families, Smedley and Yeziarska were striking a claim for the right to have a consciousness which the poverty of their environment would have denied them.

Finally, Daughter of Earth and Bread Givers are testimonies to the very contradictions that define America. The ideal of America as manifested in Yeziarska's pilgrims and immigrants looking for religious freedom, or Smedley's Jeffersonian democracy and Tom Paine radicalism is, unhappily, still in the making. Because they refused to conform to the traditional role of women, home, in a conventional sense, was denied them, and, because they had the insights of the dispossessed they realized that home, in a truly patriotic sense, was hollow. What remained for Yeziarska when she died (at nearly ninety years of age in California) was a kind of no-woman's land of America still in the making.

The closest Agnes Smedley came to finding an external home to match her inner spiritual home was in China. She was on route there when she died somewhat mysteriously on May 6, 1950 in England after an operation, that was serious, but not life-threatening, (MacKinnon and MacKinnon 344). Prior to the surgery, and feeling the weight of the Red Scare of the Fifties on her, she wrote a friend, "I expect to pass thru the operation, yet I have little interest. American Fascism, and what in reality is my exile, has caused this serious situation. I see no hope in

sight for myself or for the U.S.A." (qtd. in MacKinnon and MacKinnon 344).

In writing about anyone's life and work there is the danger of romanticizing, of smoothing out the wrinkles of contradiction. Anzia Yezierska and Agnes Smedley were complicated women. In seeking spiritual kinship, a home in the world, they join an old and wide human odyssey. Yezierska and Smedley didn't head out for the territory, kill bears or lampoon sperm whales. They were pioneers in showing the limitations of the territorial imperative.

Coming from the "left-out's" of the world, they knew all about boundaries. By choosing to write from the perspective of their own class, that is, the working class, they established a new mythos for women writers. Their dragons, those that have yet to be slayed, are the beasts of greed, ignorance and exploitation.

As individuals whose literary "I" echoes the voices of the silenced many, they have much to teach us.



## Notes

1 See Louise Levitas Henriksen, Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), and Janice R. MacKinnon and Stephen R. MacKinnon, Agnes Smedley: The Life and Times of an American Radical (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). These two recent biographies are crucial references in untangling the knotty connections between the writers' lives and their work.

2 In many ways the ideas presented here are a continuation of a dialogue/interview I had with Margaret Randall on the symbolic meanings of home, as a concept and metaphor. (Rochester, N.Y., May 13, 1988). I am grateful for her insights and responses.

3 At the end of her relationship with Chatto, and in a state of physical and mental collapse, Smedley began her autobiographical novel at the urging of her Berlin analyst Dr. Elizabeth Naef. According to Smedley's biographers, Naef departed from Freud's Vienna group in looking at "the social causes of emotional disturbance" (MacKinnon and MacKinnon 91). The Danish novelist Karin Michaelis offered Smedley a quiet haven in which to write. Smedley wrote the first draft of Daughter of Earth on Thuro, an island in Denmark in the company of Karin Michaelis and Alexander Berkman (MacKinnon and MacKinnon 104-105).

4 Personal letter from Louise Levitas-Henriksen to Janet Zandy, May 15, 1988. The only concrete connection that I found between Yezierska and Smedley was Margaret Sanger. Hannah Mayer Stone, Anzia's niece, the daughter of her oldest brother, Max, was



the medical director of Margaret Sanger's first birth control clinic. Agnes Smedley also worked for Sanger in New York, and was long associated with her and her movement (cf. Levitas-Henriksen 188).

5 After her first marriage of six months was annuled, Yeziarska married Arnold Levitas (she had trouble deciding). Obviously dubious about marriage from the start, she had a religious ceremony, but not a civil one. As a result, Levitas had to adopt his own child, Louise (Levitas-Henriksen).

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