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AF DER SHVEL UN IN DER FREMD: A FEUILLETON ON YIDDISH, RACE, AND THE AMERICAN LITERARY IMAGINATION

Adam Zachary Newton

Musing in his 1927 book of dispatches, *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, about the destiny awaiting *Ostjüdisch* emigrants in a country that “greet[s] all new arrivals with a gigantic statue of liberty,” Austrian writer and selectively rootless cosmopolitan Joseph Roth observed that the symbolic meaning of that “enormous monument” presaged a certain restrictive truth about American social relations:

[N]ot because they are all that serious about liberty in the new country but because they have people who are more Jewish than the Jews, which is to say the Negroes. Of course Jews are still Jews. But here, significantly, they are first and foremost whites. For the first time, a Jew’s race is actually to his advantage (“A Jew Emigrates to America,” *The Wandering Jews* 102).

“People more Jewish than the Jews”: one reading of the aperçu would construe it as an imprecise, albeit telling prefiguration of a more contemporary American formulation, viz., “how Jews became white.”¹ To be “*more Jewish*” would therefore mean to be even *more* put-upon, *more* stigmatized, *more* victimized than *even* we are, as the permanent object of racially exclusionary practices. Call this the other side of what Marc Caplan, in his [essay](#) on Joseph Opatoshu’s [short-story of racial violence](#), incisively calls “Yiddish exceptionalism”—the cultural privileging of anti-Jewish bigotry as historically, even metaphysically, paradigmatic. Another take on Roth’s observation would emphasize the prevailing Austro-Hungarian cynicism as play: Old-Work bigotries and New-World

¹ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. (Rutgers, 1998), and also Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2006).

bigotries are not so different after all. Were he to have actually read Opatoshu's story,² he might even have appreciated the author's intermittent conflation of American blacks and Slavic peasants, one among several of the text's racializing *méconnaissances*.

But what Roth almost certainly does fail to appreciate is the historical and cultural specificity of American blacks, whose arrival preceded the nation's founding by more than a century. Skewed thus by both Viennese cultivation and self-suppressing *Yidishkayt*,³ "more Jewish than the Jews, which is say the Negroes" is poised to blur if not erase the difference between two differences. It indulges a weak politics of substitution that authorizes a long and still-ongoing tradition of American Jewish identification with American blackness. At the same time, its measure might be taken in asymptotic relation with the strong poetry of African Americans' own sense of alignment with Jews of a far more ancient lineage. Much as for the Israelites in the Biblical Book of Exodus, the idea of divinely-sanctioned redemption, together with the moral force of human agency, conclusively ground black American peoplehood.⁴ As to the Jew of *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, however: no reciprocal condition obtains whereby Jews might be perceived by their African American counterpart as *more black than blacks*. For emigrant Jews—of whatever origin—to learn that lesson will become part of a twentieth-century training in "critical Americanization." Indeed, such training continues into in our own more putatively more intersectional moment for emigrant and native Jew alike.

And yet the conclusion of the port-of-entry drama staged in this penultimate chapter of Roth's book lends itself to some further critical uses. With the Jewish émigré now relocated from steerage to quarantine, "a high fence protects America from him," the narrator tells us. "Through the bars of his prison he sees the Statue of Liberty, and he doesn't know whether it's himself or Liberty that has been incarcerated" (103). But let's American-Yiddishize it. When *Yash iz gekumen*, his sightlines may be bent to a perceptual advantage over the average, already situated American. "Through the bars," the *dépaycé* Jewish writer has capacity both to see ironically and to pay a certain kind of witness—even if in the case of Opatoshu's story, such witness is ultimately muddled. Imagine, then, the final verse from Zishe Vaynper's 1921 poem "Vayskayt" [Whiteness] as limning not only its ostensible horizon of imagined blackness in an all-white world but also a subliminally Jewish one, where racialized identity remains (productively) unstable: "*un mir shvebn in a velt fun vayskayt*" [and we hover in a world of whiteness]."

If blurring blacks into Jews (Roth) or Jews into blacks (Opatoshu, Berish Vaynshteyn, and other Yiddish American writers) reflects a certain American Jewish

² Despite his Galician origins, Roth came to Yiddish rather late in life. See Sarah Bailey, "Cultural Translation and the Problem of Language: Yiddish in Joseph Roth's *Juden auf Wanderschaft*," *Transit* 1(1) <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4v0947ch>.

³ Also perhaps not incidentally, his companion later in life was the half-Afro Cuban Andrea Manga Bell, whose prior marriage to a Cameroonian and later sojourn with Roth are narrated in Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884–1960* (Cambridge, 2013).

⁴ On the tropes of exodus and holocaust for African American and Jewish American communities, see Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Harvard, 2009).

propensity toward staging racial difference, whereby at the same time as such difference is creatively (or phantasmally) obscured, it is also unwittingly mismanaged. Marc Caplan's dissection of "Lintshery" instructs us in this cautionary counter-lesson. On this account, Jewish-Yiddish exceptionalism can be as much a function of the bars that impede fuller vision as a desired peering through or beyond them. Caplan calls this interference pattern *polytonal*: "like a musical composition played in two keys at the same instance" (177). But it's also ocular: a compromise with what the eye *lets itself* see. Several decades removed from the limited spheres and modes of nineteenth-century Jewish encounter with Black Americans (and largely unaware of the homegrown movement of African American Judaism),⁵ American Yiddish culture sustained an unsurprisingly empathetic yet also predictably selective perception of black Americans. To that degree, its exponents can be said simply to have participated in the currents of American literary modernism, for the majority of whose white, Anglophone authors (say, Stevens, Williams, O'Neill) black persons and their experiences remained totemically Other. This was especially the case among the interwar generation of Yiddish secular modernists from the 1920s through the 1940s, writers whose literary production was informed by socialist print culture and writers' unions.⁶

In his introduction to the poetry anthology *Amerike in yidishn vort* (1955), for example, Nakhman Mayzel accounts for a distinctive genre of "Negro poems" by American Yiddish *dikhter-dertseylers* predicated on a not-so-secret sharing of persecution, urban estrangement (sometimes transposed to rural Southern settings), and social marginalization. We can, with Merle Bachman,⁷ consider such poetry, often politically inflected, as a counterweight to the vernacular Jewish appropriation of blackness—as mask or masquerade—on familiar display in the early twentieth-century popular culture of song, stage, and screen.

As the translations of texts by [Markish](#) and Opatoshu and the accompanying commentary by Marc Caplan and [Jessica Kirzane](#) illustrate, one extravagant iconographic locus for such identification was the lynched male black body—grotesquely, luridly defamiliarized in a corpus of poems that reached their crescendo during the Scottsboro trial (1932-1937). They include Yehoash's "Lintshin" (1919), Y. A. Rontsh's "Gitn dzhab nemakht" (1933), Yosl Cutler's "Nekst" (1934), Moyshe Leib-Halpern "Salyut" (1934), Berish Vaynshteyn's "Lintshing" (1936) and "Neger shtarbt" (1938). Often ignored by or unknown to historians of American

⁵ Jacob S. Dorman, *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and James E. Landing, *Black Judaism: Story of a an American Movement* (Carolina Academic Press, 2002).

⁶ See the account of *di Rekhte* of East Broadway (Cahan's *Der Forverts*, Bernstein's *Der Tog*, and the *di Linke* of Union Square (Moyshe Olgin's *Frayhayt*, the *Yidisher kultur farband*) in Dovid Katz's excellent introduction to *Proletpen: America's Rebel Yiddish Poets*, ed. Amelia Glaser and David Weintraub (Wisconsin, 2005). Hasia Dinar's *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Johns Hopkins, 1995) provides a helpful socio-historical background.

⁷ Chapter 4, "The Strangeness of Translation: Yiddish Poets Writing Black Experience," in *Recovering "Yiddishland": Threshold Moments in American Literature* (Syracuse, 2008). See also Y. A. Rontsh's essay "Der neger in undzer literatur" from *Amerike in der yidisher literatur: an interpretatsye* (Marstin Press, 1945).

modernism,⁸ poems in Yiddish about lynching represent a singular contribution to twentieth-century American literature, especially when juxtaposed with a more familiar set of texts about racial trauma by African Americans, e.g., Claude MacKay's "The Lynching" (1922) or Langston Hughes's nearly three-dozen lyrics published across the arc of his career.⁹

Stark though such the Yiddish texts are designed to be—perhaps particularly so because, as several critics have noted, there is no native word in Yiddish for “lynching” itself—Bachman isolates an aspect that ties them to the contrastively anodyne portraits of black folk composed by Yiddish poets in the same decades: of childhood and maternity (Avrom Reyzen's “A negerl” (1919), Sarah Barkan's “Neger-lied” (1929), Alter Eselin's “Geburt” (1932), and Roza Nevodorska's (undated) “Negershe kinderlekh”); of neighborhoods and locales, like Levy Goldberg's “In a neger kvartal,” Vaynshteyn's “Neygerish dorf” (1936) and “Harlem—a neger geto” (1949); of figures in the metropolitan New York backlight, such as A. Leyeles's “In Sobvey III” (1926) Malka Lee's “Neger in sobvey” (1933), and Yosl Grinshpan's “Banakht in Grand Central” (1932). This is the aspect of *witnessing*, which Bachman, adapting a verse by Berish Vaynshteyn, will also locate “*in der fremd*”: the place where immigrant Americans who address their adopted nation state in idioms inextricably bound to Jewish linguistic difference, where American poets write for both an emergent American Yiddish present and a Yiddish American posterity, stage elective affinities with racially displaced, estranged, and persecuted American others.

What the proto-American glimpses through Roth's latticework is the very site where critical consciousness comes later to pose the question of who exactly has been incarcerated—or rendered oblique. Not coincidentally (cross-pollinating Bachman with Caplan), it can also be the place where untutored racial consciousness, hindered by bars of cultural difference, *archives* racial stereotypes. In other words, it recycles the sorrier aspects of American national culture rather than convincingly repudiating them, which is so obviously the case with Opatoshu's “Lintsheray” and its internally un-reconciled textual energies. Maybe the story's most interesting moment, then, is its pregnant first sentence: *Af der shvel in shtotn iz gezesn an alter neyger* [At the threshold in the shadows sat an old Negro]. Will the text remain thus ideologically, self-critically *af der shvel*? At any rate, whether this “threshold quotient” also haunts the fascinating series of poems about black bodies by Berish Vaynshteyn or some of the other American Yiddishists listed above—lyrics in which the protocols of literary realism, the bedrock for Opatoshu's story, obviously don't apply—is a question for further inquiry. In the

⁸ See, for instance, Hollis Robbins, “The Literature of Lynching,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (10 August, 2015) <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Literature-of-Lynching/232185/>; Jon Woodson, “Anti-Lynching Poems in the 1930s,” *Flashpoint Magazine* 17 (Spring 2015) http://www.flashpointmag.com/Woodson_Anti_Lynching_Poems_in_the_1930s.htm; Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Indiana, 1984). Finally, see the excellent review essay on the history of lynching by David Levering Lewis, “An American Pastime,” *The New York Review of Books* (November 21, 2002).

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2002/11/21/an-american-pastime/>.

⁹ On Hughes, see W. Jason Miller, *Langston Hughes and American Lynching Culture* (Florida, 2012), and Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (Routledge, 2003).

meantime, as another direction to signpost provisionally, certain pairings of Yiddish American-African American poems deserve their moment of critical (polytonal?) reckoning; one thinks particularly of “Flag Salute” (1940) by the Harlem Renaissance poet and activist Esther Popel (1898-1958) in conjunction with Halpern’s “Salyut,” or Richard Wright’s “Between the World and Me” (1935)—the poem whose title stands behind Ta-Nehisi Coates’s meditation on being black in twenty-first century America—coupled with “Lintshing” or “Neger shtarbt” by Berish Vaynshteyn. That would be yet another chapter to outline in the history of literary conversation between African Americans and American Jews.¹⁰ To my knowledge, an encounter between the literature on lynching by African Americans and American Jews writing in Yiddish has not thus far been conducted, either in parallel or contrapuntally. At least for the moment, that interface will have to remain *af der shvel*.

¹⁰ See Sundquist’s *Strangers in the Land*; Emily Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge, 1998); my own *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge 1999); and Marc Caplan’s of correlation of modernist African and Yiddish literary traditions in *How Strange the Change: Language, Temporality, and Narrative Form in Peripheral Modernisms* (Stanford, 2011).