

Ausführliche Skizze

This project will reconceptualize the development of High Modernism in European literature during the 1920s; its focus will be on the Yiddish literature produced in Weimar-era Germany, in comparison with contemporaneous developments in German-language literature, popular culture, and thought. By juxtaposing this Yiddish literature with its German counterparts, I will explore the theoretical possibilities of considering these Yiddish writers as integral participants in German culture. Taking these authors as paradigms for a new understanding of German modernism—paradigmatic not in spite, but precisely because of their peripherality to German social and cultural history—suggests a new way of understanding Yiddish literature, as well as a new model for understanding German culture as a multi-lingual, borderless, deterritorialized endeavor fully reflective of the unstable and dynamic social circumstances that called modernism generally into being. This project therefore proposes to establish points of correspondence among linguistic, social, and formal instances of dislocation in order to understand the peripheral role of Yiddish in Weimar Germany, the social significance of peripherality for a culture in flux, and the use of literary aesthetics as a means of understanding the cognitive dimensions of social and political transformations.

Scholars of Yiddish literature have long understood that a proper contextualization of Yiddish requires a knowledge of the ways “major” literatures produced in German, Russian, Hebrew, and other national languages influenced, provoked, and circumscribed its development as a “minor,” stateless, deterritorialized literature. This project, however, seeks to establish the necessity of knowing Yiddish literature as a means of understanding the “minor” and therefore revolutionary potential of German culture. Yiddish literature thus serves simultaneously as an example of Weimar culture, and a parallel to contemporaneous developments within German-language belles lettres, particularly with respect to the development of new genres, representational techniques, and character types: as with the leading works of Berlin’s Yiddish culture, the German writers of the 1920s are preoccupied with strategies of estrangement, objectification, the chaos of urban existence, the demands of new technologies such as film and radio, and the aesthetic imperatives of ideological affiliation. By comparing these two literary cultures—a comparison that could

hypothetically be expanded to consider, for example, “Berlin” writing in English, Hebrew, or Russian—a sense of their complementary modes of borderless, liminal culture emerges to characterize not only the complexity of German national identity at this moment, but also the new role played by Berlin as a location for *global* modernism.

Drawing from Pascale Casanova’s *La république mondiale des lettres*, this research will examine the *literary capital* of Yiddish within European culture generally and German modernism specifically. In the aftermath of World War I, when much of Eastern Europe was in the grips of civil war, and many of the traditional centers of Jewish life lay in ruins, Berlin emerged as a leading center of Yiddish (as well as Hebrew) literature. As such, this time and place stands as virtually the only setting in which Yiddish writers worked en masse in a European literary metropolis. Given the centrality of the Weimar era to the development of High Modernism, and the quality of Yiddish literature produced in this period—by leading modernists such as Dovid Bergelson, Der Nister, Uri-Tsvi Greenberg, and Moyshe Kulbak, among others—it is perhaps surprising that these writers have never before been considered as a coterie. A consideration of these writers is compelling for many reasons: first, German and Yiddish literatures share a history of interaction stretching back from the emergence of Yiddish as a literary language in the 14th century, through the Enlightenment and *haskalah* (the so-called Jewish enlightenment), culminating in the interwar era. Furthermore, the Weimar Yiddish writers drew directly from the same aesthetic developments as their German-language counterparts. Finally, the Weimar period signifies a moment in Jewish history of extraordinary possibility, creativity, and experimentation that is rendered all the more poignant when considered in light of the catastrophe out of which it emerged, and the even greater calamity which followed it; these writers thus constitute the final flickering of modern Yiddish culture in Europe.

The impetus for this comparison ultimately derives from the book manuscript that I have recently completed. That project compares the historical development of Yiddish narrative in the 19th century with corresponding literary trends in Francophone and Anglophone African cultures during the 1950s and 60s. As this research tries to demonstrate, both African and Yiddish literatures at their inception confront a problem in defining the linguistic *space* of the literary. For Yiddish writers, this involves the status of

the language itself: in the linguistic dynamic of traditional Ashkenazic culture, Yiddish inhabits the lower strata of orality, folklore, superstition, the quotidian, and the feminine, understood against a pre-modern Hebrew inextricably bound with writing, religious law, intellectual abstraction, the sacred, and patriarchal authority. To write in Yiddish therefore obligates the modern author to create an alternative literary space to the one that tradition had consigned it, one carved out of the absurdities of daily life, folklore, and pre-modern, quasi-oral genres such as satire, parody, monologue, and burlesque.

Although modern Yiddish writing emerges initially as a didactic literature of critique, premised simultaneously on the absurdity of traditional Jewish life and the incompatibility of Yiddish as a “hybrid” (fusion) language with an aesthetic of beauty, over the course of the 19th century Yiddish writers develop a mythopoetic discourse in which the traditional Jewish community, the shtetl, functions as an ahistorically all-Jewish microcosm encompassing both the dysfunctionalities of Eastern European modernity and a spatial transcendence of Jewish powerlessness and statelessness: the shtetl, figured mythically, is at once the epitome of diasporic homelessness *and* a symbolic re-figuring of the lost homeland. Such a parodic re-figuration, drawing on the language of ridicule and ritual laughter, articulates a *structure of resistance* against both the hegemony of the Jewish tradition, which constricted the extent to which its adherents could interact with the modern, non-Jewish world, as well as an imperial modernity that denied Jews, like colonized Africans, the right to participate in modernity as autonomous subjects, both modern and Jewish at the same time. This structure of resistance, signified formally by the choice of folkloric genres and oral discourse, continues to characterize aspects of Yiddish literature even as it leaves the shtetl, both figuratively and literally, after World War I. In the transition from the 19th century to the 20th, the persistence of pre-modern strategies in Yiddish narrative calls attention not only to the *belatedness* of Jewish modernity in Eastern Europe, but also to the *anticipatory* potential of these satiric, fantastic, and grotesque discourses to pre-figure the fragmentation and dislocation of 20th century metropolitan modernism.

Although the authors included in this survey have long been recognized among the leading figures in early-20th century Yiddish literature—in this regard the books *Kesem ha-dumdumim* (“The Lure of Twilight,” 2003) by Avraham Novershtern and A

Bridge of Longing (1995) by David Roskies offer significant studies of individual authors considered in my research, as does the 2007 collection *David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism*, edited by Joseph Sherman and Genady Estraiikh—there has to date never been an effort to link these Yiddishists together as part of a larger phenomenon within the cultural history of Weimar Germany, despite the often remarkable correspondence between the aesthetic and thematic characteristics of this literature and its German-language counterparts. Similarly, social histories such as Michael Brenner’s *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (1996), Delphine Bechtel’s *La Renaissance culturelle juive: Europe centrale et orientale 1897-1930* (2002), and Genady Estraiikh’s *In Harness: Yiddish Writers’ Romance with Communism* (2005), offer a sense of how these writers functioned, briefly, as a coterie within Jewish culture, but generally focus on historical and social questions to the exclusion of formal, aesthetic analysis of their work and its complicated relationship with literary modernism. What emerges from the comparison I am engaged with is therefore at once a new way of conceptualizing Yiddish literature, a new way of defining interwar German culture, and a theoretical investigation of the intersection between two deterritorialized languages, Yiddish and German, at a volatile and innovative moment in European cultural history.

This current project of situating Weimar Yiddish writers within the history of German High Modernism constitutes an effort at continuing my earlier research on the development of modern forms in Yiddish narrative, in that the current project reconceptualizes Yiddish literature within the larger history of European modernity, rather than relegating it to the margins of a hermetically Jewish intellectual and aesthetic genealogy. These two comparisons, of Yiddish with African literature and Yiddish with German culture, respectively, thus propose a re-examination of “minor” literary theory, as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In so doing, they each elaborate on the historical and formal characteristics of a “minor” or peripheral literature.

To the three essential characteristics by which Deleuze and Guattari define “minor” literature—deterritorialization of language, political immediacy, and the assemblage structure—it is necessary to add a focus on orality as opposed to literacy, as well as a more complete understanding of the role of myth in the peripheral literary

discourse. Orality in this context not only provides Yiddish writers with the rhetorical and generic strategies to subvert the hegemonies of tradition and modernity, but also becomes the conduit through which these writers call attention to the belatedness of their own modernity; this belatedness removes them, historically, from the dominant temporality of the modern, and thus enables them to mobilize pre-modern strategies on behalf of their own subversive mythopoesis. With respect to myth, I attempt to elaborate upon Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's discussion of Homer's *Odyssey* in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, which illustrates a dynamic whereby the epic form's subordination and domestication of myth corresponds to the processes by which "enlightened" civilization dominates and marginalizes the cultures it subordinates. Implicit in the epic dialectic of man against nature, though explicit in later tragedies such as Euripides' *Medea*, is the conflict between Greek and Barbarian: from the "mastery" of nature, Greek civilization moves inevitably to the domination of other groups of people, a process duplicated in every other imperial culture. As Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, enlightenment's repression of myth creates a psychic wound, what Adorno refers to in implicitly kabalistic terms as "a damaged life," that modernity inflicts on others as well as the self.

The resistance to this act of aggression, as well as to the expectation that enlightenment's violence always be internalized, constitutes itself as the return of the repressed mythical culture via satire and fantasy, two rationalizing modes that in turn suggest the subterranean affinities among literary genres as well as the polarities of "traditional" and "modern" or "minor" and "major." Modern Yiddish literature demonstrates the uses of folkloric laughter in the articulation of a modernist critique of industrial modernity; these are the lessons of satire that the leading German-language modernists of the interwar era taught themselves, as well. In the absence of direct lines of influence between Yiddish and German modernism, the evolution of Yiddish modernism nonetheless offers a structural model for understanding the social and formal characteristics that both these literatures share. As such, a historical and comparative investigation of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "minor" literature, one quite different from the speculative discussion they initiate in their monograph on Kafka, not only conceptualizes the relationship of "minor" to "major" literatures, but also confirms the circular, reciprocal relationship between peripheral and metropolitan cultures. Indeed,

elevating the concept of the “peripheral” as a theoretical category suggests not only a dynamic and nuanced chronotope for understanding via literature the specific historical, territorial, and cultural dislocations elided in Deleuze and Guattari’s work, but also proposes in spatial terms a non-hierarchical re-formulation of the “minor” and the “major” in which the semantic subordination of one mode to the other is replaced by a consideration of the commonalities of dislocation shared by both.

Stated provisionally, the structure of this study will consist of chapters devoted to the five most significant Yiddish writers active in Berlin, in tandem with corresponding German figures. Each chapter will be divided into two sections, with one part focusing on a specific comparison between a Yiddish and a German work, and the other discussing more general formal, aesthetic, and social questions regarding the role of Yiddish at that moment in German and Jewish culture. Chapter One will consider the historical background of German-Jewish and German-Yiddish interactions, the reciprocal perceptions of German and East European Jews, and the historical circumstances that changed the relationship of East European and German Jews after World War I. These are familiar themes in the contemporary scholarship on German-Jewish relations, but I will consider underappreciated sources in order to re-conceptualize these discussions; among the works to be considered in this introduction will be the Russian-Yiddish writer S. Ansky’s little-studied travelogue of wartime Eastern Europe, *Khurbn Galitsye* (“The Destruction of Galicia,” 1920), which details the dire situation of Eastern European Jews in relationship to the Russian army and their Polish neighbors, as well as their ambivalent attitude toward occupying German and Austrian armies. The second section of this chapter will consider the transformation of East-European Hasidic legends by pre-war German Jews under the popularizing auspices of figures such as Martin Buber (1878-1965) and M. Y. Berdichevsky (Micha Josef Bin Gorion, 1865-1921)—the latter an author in particular need of reappraisal as a liminal figure between centuries, ideologies, and languages, in light of his differentiated work in German, Yiddish, and Hebrew.

Chapter Two—preliminary versions of which I have presented at conferences organized by the Association for Jewish Studies and the American Comparative Literature Association—will consider the Yiddish author Dovid Bergelson (1884-1952), who was active in Berlin during the 1920s, and the German novelist and associate of

Bergelson's, Alfred Döblin (1878-1957). This comparison will focus on two works: Döblin's travelogue *Reise in Polen*, which details his inability to identify with the Polish-Jewish milieu in which he was born, but from which he had been estranged since his arrival in Berlin at the age of nine; and *Mides ha-din* (roughly, "Strict Justice"), Bergelson's first novel about Soviet-dominated Ukraine, written from the distant and distanced perspective of Berlin. This comparison suggests not only the problem of defining the concept of "home" for two East European Jews residing in Berlin, but also their divergent efforts to re-define subjectivity through two radically "post-Judaic" belief systems—Catholicism for Döblin and communism for Bergelson. In a separate section of this chapter, Bergelson will again provide the focus for the impact of Berlin as a cultural and political center on the development of German and Yiddish High Modernism via a comparative focus on the "*pension* narrative," a dominant genre in interwar Berlin fiction, by expatriate writers such as Christopher Isherwood and Vladimir Nabokov, and the primary locus for Bergelson's fiction set in Berlin. The *pension* genre, of course, was a staple of German-language narrative prior to World War I, and its adaptation by expatriate writers in the interwar era provides another instance of a *belated* genre illuminating both literary and social history from a peripheral perspective.

Chapter Three—an abbreviated version of which will appear in the volume *Between Two Worlds: Yiddish-German Encounters*, edited by Jerold C. Frakes and Jeremy A. Dauber (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press Studia Rosenthaliana, 2009)—will take up the story *Unter a ployt* ("Behind a Fence," 1929) by Der Nister (Pinkhes Kahanovitsh, 1884-1950) in comparison with the film *Der blaue Engel* (1930) directed by Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969); each of these works is an adaptation of the novel *Professor Unrat* (1905), by Heinrich Mann (1871-1950). As such, they each illustrate the simultaneous centripetal and centrifugal imperatives of peripheral culture; each work derives and departs from a work of German "high" literature, but both Sternberg, the Austrian-born American director, and the Soviet-Yiddish author Der Nister re-orient this central work toward the emerging dominant culture centers of Hollywood and Moscow, respectively. Sternberg and Der Nister are both peripheral figures in Weimar Berlin, but by deterritorializing Mann's novel along formal, linguistic, and political lines, they also situate their own productions at the avant-garde periphery of

either Hollywood cinema or Soviet literature. To further develop the profound yet ambivalent connections between Der Nister and German literature, a separate section of this chapter will focus on the development of his symbolist narrative poetics with emphasis on his simultaneous debts to Hasidic storytelling and to German romanticism.

Chapter Four will compare the Yiddish poetry of Uri-Tsvi Greenberg (1896-1981) with the poetry of Else Lasker-Schüller (1869-1945), to consider their respective affiliations with literary expressionism; thereafter Greenberg's subsequent, post-expressionist affiliation with radical Zionism will be considered in comparison with the emerging Marxist affiliations of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), in order to discuss the connections between modernist aesthetics and ideologies of political "extremes." Chapter Five will discuss the narratives of Moyshe Kulbak (1896-1940) in comparison with the novel *Hiob* (1930) by Joseph Roth (1894-1939). This comparison will discuss the parodic uses to which these authors put Jewish tradition, as well as the similarities in their use of quasi-folkloric narrative structures. A final comparison in this chapter will consider the use of messianic motifs in Kulbak's writing, especially in light of his subsequent return to the Soviet Union and the incompatibility of his writing with the dictates of socialist realism, with respect to the utopian pessimism of Walter Benjamin's various meditations on apocalypse and redemption.

What emerges from this study, therefore, is a consideration not merely of the historical circumstances that brought a coterie of diverse, experimental Yiddish modernists to Berlin—along with several other artistic, political, and scholarly figures from Eastern Europe working in Jewish languages—but also a theoretical engagement with the aesthetic and formal affinities their Berlin creativity shares with contemporaneous Berlin modernists working in German. By focusing on a peripheral phenomenon for both German culture and Yiddish culture, this comparison proposes to offer a new understanding of European modernism as well as German modernity at their respective apex: the marginal, in this study, holds the key to reveal the structure and significance of the metropolis. Moreover, the pairing of Yiddish modernism with contemporaneous German culture, two endeavors that for centuries had occupied parallel and inverted, "doppelganger" positions in their respective perceptions of one another, exposes the subterranean proximity these cultures had always shared with one another, in

the last historical moment when they would ever come into contact. Their mutual confrontation, a confrontation that is theoretically suggestive precisely to the degree that it was historically serendipitous, represents the essential temporal condition of Weimar culture, “between” epochs: unstable, confused, tenuous, but also a moment of *becoming* that in retrospect acquires a resonant urgency in the ineluctable awareness of what it actually *became*.

Kurze Zusammenfassung

This project will focus on five leading Yiddish modernists active in Berlin during the 1920s, taken in comparison with contemporaneous figures in German-language literature, film, and critical theory, to understand the role of peripheral languages in the creation of Weimar culture and its contributions to European High Modernism. This model for understanding German culture as a multi-lingual, borderless, deterritorialized endeavor draws on and critiques Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “minor” literature, proposing a spatial revision of their hierarchical inversion of the “minor” and the “major” along circular lines of center and periphery to understand the reciprocal affinities between German and Yiddish cultures as two constituents of a dislocated, dynamic, urban modernism. By focusing on the pre-modern features of Yiddish literary discourse, such as its mobilization of quasi-oral genres of satire, parody, monologue, and burlesque to critique the processes of modernization, this comparison will consider the *belatedness* of East European Jewish modernity as a characteristic that serves to *anticipate* the fragmentation and dislocation of 20th century modernism. Because the lessons of folklore, satire, and ritual laughter parallel characteristics of German-language modernism in the interwar era, Yiddish literature in this comparison provides a structural model for understanding the social and formal characteristics that these two cultures, which were brought into proximity with one another by processes of dislocation that had deterritorialized them both. Yiddish literature in the Weimar era therefore not only provides a means of understanding German culture, but also participates in the constitution of that culture— because of its peripherality, not in spite of it.

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