

Let us remember...that in the end we go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things, we might be less apt to destroy both.

Christian Wiman

[Blacks and Jews remain] “watchful of each other, mindful of hurts and wrongs, not forgiving, but still friends.”

Emily Budick

BLACK ASHKENAZ AND THE ALMOST PROMISED LAND:
YIDDISH LITERATURE AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

Black Ashkenaz and the Almost Promised Land: Yiddish Literature and the Harlem Renaissance explores the relationship between African Americans and Eastern European immigrant Jews (Yiddish-speaking / Ashkenazic Jews) by examining the depictions of each in their respective literatures. The thrust of my project will address the representations of African Americans in Yiddish literature. An investigation of the depictions of Jews by Harlem Renaissance writers will contribute to the understanding of an African American/Yiddish interface in which attitudes towards each other are played out.

This linkage of African American and Jewish history, traditions and reflections regarding identity, culture, and language appears at a significant point in the grand narrative of ethnicity and race ideology in the United States. For Yiddish writers, their works regarding African Americans revealed their projection of what it meant to be Black, just as those of Harlem Renaissance writers projected their concept of

what it meant to be Jewish, all in a milieu which saw the redefinition of what it meant to be black, to be white, and to be American.

Yiddish writers addressed concepts of Blackness and Jewishness with an understanding of what could be gained or lost; the *push* to become American, the opportunity for social, political and economic mobility and racial alterity was countered by the *pull* of conflict with respect to assimilation, American conceptualization of exclusion based upon race, and a Jewish consciousness which rejected both.

For Jason, Sam, Matt, and Lisa

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INTRODUCTION

Black Ashkenaz and the Almost Promised Land is a project which reflects my interest in both Yiddish literature written in the United States and African American culture. My study can be viewed as an exploration of the literary and cultural convergence of Jewish Eastern European Yiddish-speaking immigrants and African Americans, in contact with one another for the very first time. This contact, in and on the pages of Yiddish writings, represents the genesis of the Black/Jewish discussion and dialogue in the United States. Traditionally, scholarship involving Jews and African Americans addresses their relationship in terms of their political and/or social alliance and the tension which inevitably comes with misunderstandings, miscommunication, and perhaps the realization of conflicting or competing goals. Whether the relationship perceived, invented or otherwise, pits them against each other or creates the notion of kinship, plays out in a narrative in which a great deal of investigation, exploration, and supposition has taken place.

In looking at Yiddish literature, specifically Yiddish poetry, I was struck by the number and kind of poems addressing African Americans and the representation of the Black experience in America. However, such connections between that experience and the Yiddish immigrant experience are typically overlooked by both African American and Yiddish critics. The implications of such literary connections in the American context, in terms of *others* writing *others*, offers multiple avenues of discussion, e.g. Jews writing Blackness as an experience vs. a color, or Blacks writing Jewishness as experiential and perceived in relationship to Biblical history, tradition, and the African continent. Thus, the concept of *otherness* becomes somehow governed by mutual intelligibility: Blacks and Jews as minority *others* able to translate, interpret, rewrite or, at the very least, understand each other's *otherness*.

My project first began with an interest in Yiddish literature, and more specifically, Yiddish poetry. I had come across poems in which African Americans were portrayed and became interested in the way in which they were depicted. I went from a handful of oblique references to forty some poems specifically addressing African Americans. The fact that that Blacks were represented at all in Yiddish

poetry attests to the level of engagement and interest between them and immigrant Yiddish-speaking Jews.

Prior to my decision to research representations of African Americans in Yiddish poetry, I spent a great deal of time and effort in assembling such poems. I had recognized that there was no anthology of poems strictly addressing the depiction of African Americans, neither were there any collections of poetry addressing people of color. There were, however, anthologies addressing the American experience, and whether in Yiddish or translated into English, such works included poems depicting African Americans. For example, Harshav and Harshav's *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*¹ includes a variety of poems addressing various themes including the urban landscape, architecture, and life in the new metropolis among others. Their selection of poetry provides an introduction to Yiddish poetry² in the United States, highlighting various literary movements, poets, and themes. It also provides information regarding the cultural context and linguistic environment in which

¹ There are indeed other anthologies addressing Yiddish poetry. *Amerike in yidishn vort* is a Yiddish-language anthology representing an overview of Yiddish poetry in and about America.

² For further discussion regarding Yiddish see Howe and Harshav and Harshav.

Yiddish poetry in America was able to flourish. That life and that new experience included contact with African Americans.

The anthologies themselves reflect the various anthologists' aesthetic, political, and ideological commitments. For Benjamin Harshav, Yiddish poetry in America shared much with the Yiddish poetry of Eastern Europe, in that it “was the product of a self-conscious society that saw itself as a spiritual nation without a territory (in S. Dubnov's terms), *Am Olam*. . .”³ As a result, we are left with a Yiddish poetry that attempts to both break away from and remain tied to its Old World roots by creating a space for itself in America. The Yiddish writers had access⁴, to some extent through translation into Yiddish, and also based upon their linguistic abilities, to the great literatures of Europe, so the American Yiddish writers had both models to imitate and new traditions to create. Perhaps problematically, Harshav breaks the poetry down into categories—Sweatshop writers, Introspectivists, Symbolists, etc--, giving the anthology both a historical and generic emphasis and making the poetry sound, for all intents and purposes, like any Western anthology of poetry. This might also help explain the

³ *Sing, Stranger: A Century of American Yiddish Poetry*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 2006, xxix.

emphasis on English translation in Harshav's anthologies: with only "a smattering of readers" of Yiddish left, the poetry has been translated for the specifically American readership⁵ because, notes Harshav, "the tragedy of Yiddish poetry in America was that it tried to promote an autonomous ethnic culture—and in a separate language, at that—at a time when the idea of the melting pot reigned supreme and exerted pressure on Jewish immigrants and their own children"⁶

For Cooperman and Cooperman, the emphasis also lay with poetry translated into English for a specifically American audience. Perhaps this is why the material chosen for their anthology, *America in Yiddish Poetry*, reflects what can best called "the American experience." While not attempting to create a complete historical overview of Yiddish poetry in America, the Coopermans instead choose a selection of poems reflecting the various experiences of Jews, Yiddish-speaking Jews, in America, e.g. the immigrant experience, isolation, patriotism, and what it means to be an American. Unlike Harshav, no effort is put into dividing the poetry generically, because elevating the status of Yiddish poetry to that of

⁵ *Sing*, xxxi-xxxii.

⁶ *Sing*, xxix.

other Western literatures is not the point here. Instead, it is how Yiddish poets described life, both for the good and bad, in America that is of import.

Like Nachman Mayzel's *Amerike in yidishn vort*, Bassin and Borokhov's anthology presents the poetry in the original Yiddish language, but that makes sense given that their collection is an overview of all Yiddish poetry, European and American alike. While the Coopermans chose Yiddish American poetry *about* America, Bassin and Borokhov provide but a smattering of Yiddish American poetry, placing it into the context of Yiddish literature as a whole. Hence America is at best an afterthought here. Further, and like the Coopermans, Bassin and Borokhov provide little critical apparatus to their anthology, letting the poetry, in effect, speak for itself.⁷

The Harshavs' *American Yiddish Poetry* includes works by the Proletarian or Sweatshop Poets, whose writings were concerned with political and social issues confronting the recently arrived immigrants. Their works were often based upon socialist inspiration and drew from the experiences and life in sweatshops and factories. Pioneers of

⁷ While not the focus of the present study, the compilation and selection process of, as well as the decision to use the Yiddish originals, or transliteration plus translation, or translation alone, remains an interesting and as yet unexplored subject for further study.

Yiddish poetry like David Edelshtat (1866-1892), Joseph Bovshover (1873-1915), and the sweatshop poets Morris Rosenfeld (1862-1923) and Morris Winchevsky (1856-1932) set a standard and paved the way for all of Yiddish poetry to flourish. Leading the way were poets like Yehoash (Solomon Bloomgarten, 1872 -1927), Avrom Reyzen (1876-1953), and Avrom Lyesen (1872-1938), who were known as the “Poets of Yiddishkayt”⁸. They exemplified writers who were of “greater self-consciousness than the sweatshop poets.”⁹ Their poetry represented a conglomeration not only of socialist themes, but nationalist themes as well. This can indeed be viewed as a response to the turmoil, desperation and anxiety associated with immigrant Jewish life on New York’s Lower East Side. They helped to bridge the gap between the Old World and the New.

⁸ Howe groups the three poets together and argues that their poetry was responsible for bridging the gap between socialist and Jewish nationalist ideology in poetry. For a detailed discussion, see *World of Our Fathers*, Chapter Thirteen: “The Yiddish Word.”

⁹ Howe, p. 425

The Blacksmiths

The Sweatshop Poets in turn gave rise to a group of poets known as *Di Yunge* or The Young Ones. This movement, beginning in 1907, started with the launch of the publication *Yugend* (Youth). The poets Mani Leyb (Brahinsky, 1883-1953), Reuven Ayzland (1884-1955), Zisha Landoy (1889-1937), and Moyshe Leyb Halpern (1886-1932) (though not central to *Di Yunge*, but whose writings were visible on its periphery), were responsible for a veritable revolution in Yiddish poetry, a rebellion of sorts, culminating in the rejection of previous writings and the demand for "art for art's sake." They forced poetry into a new and exciting, albeit non-ideological direction. They were not interested in aligning themselves with political movements or concerns. They were more concerned about the experiences of the individual and a sense of high literary quality with respect to their translations of European poetry as well as their own creations in Yiddish.

Di Yunge gave way to the rebellious writers of the *Inzikhistn*, or Introspectivists. Poets such as A. Leyeles (Aron Glants, 1889-1966),

Yankev Glatshteyn (1896-1971), and Nokhem-Borekh Minkoff [Minkov] (1893-1958) focused on individuality and pushed Yiddish poetry in the same direction as was going the mainstream Western poetry of the day. Thus, the *Inzikhistn* revolted against any semblance of sentimentality in Yiddish poetry and stressed free verse and the poetics of irony. Under the pressure of English, the Yiddish language developed into a productive, thriving literature, with poetry as one of its most popular forms. The *In Zikh* poets are credited with bringing Yiddish poetry to the edge of modernist experimentation.¹⁰

Writers on the periphery of *the Yunge* and the *Inzikhistn* are of most importance for the purpose of my present work because their works reflect a combination of their individual and personal experiences in America. Prior to their arrival in the United States, these writers had more or less no previous contact with African Americans. However, their exposure to the New World came new experiences and, of course, new encounters with 'Others', in particular with people of color. It is for this reason their works are most significant for this project as they represent the thoughts and feelings of these writers in

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion see Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, Harshav and Harshav's *American Yiddish Poetry*, Bassin and Borokhov's *Antologye: Finf hundert yor yidishe poezye* and the *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*.

response to the American “melting pot.” They wrote for a specific audience, a Yiddish reading/speaking public, who engaged in similar encounters and shared the same experiences in adjusting to a new, American way of life. Part of this new experience in America meant dealing with a non-homogenous New York population, consisting not only of white Americans, but African Americans as well as other immigrant communities (specifically, Irish, Russian, Polish, and Greek).

The writers chosen for this project, Berysh Vaynshteyn, H. Leyvik, Reuven Ayzland, Judah Leyb Teller, Avrom Reyzen, Aron Glans Leyeles, and Rayzl Zhiklinski, all wrote poetry depicting African Americans. These writers had ties to the literary movements mentioned, but they were not necessarily central or primary figures of such.

Berysh Vaynshteyn was born on March 18, 1905 in Reyshe, Galicia. His father was a scholar who immigrated to the United States, without his family, to avoid World War I. As such, young Vaynshteyn was educated by his grandmother. He also studied in both cheder and public school in Poland, and later a German school in Reichenberg, Czechoslovakia during the war. After a two year stint in Vienna, where he met his cousin (later his wife, Malke), Vaynshteyn finally made his way to the United States in 1925.

After his arrival, Vaynshteyn studied English at night school and then studied at the Hebrew teacher's seminary. In 1927, his first publications appeared in the *Tsuzamen* periodical. He also wrote for *Leym un Tsigl*, *Di tsukunft*, *Globos* (Warsaw), *Literarishe bleter* (Warsaw), *Unzer tog* (Vilna), *Yiddish Tag* (New York), and *Opatashu Leyvik Zamlbikher*. He edited the *Hemshekh* publication (1939, along with Demblin and Moyshe Starkman).¹¹

Brukhstiker, or junk / broken pieces was Vaynshteyn's first book of poetry, and it can be seen as a literary foray into the depths of New York City, its landscape and its people. Some of the poems from this publication were also included in his well-known book entitled *Poems*. Vaynshteyn's later works reveal his connections to geography and the theme of homeland and longing. His three epic poems: *Reyshe*, about his place of birth and its destruction during the Holocaust, *America*, about his adopted homeland, and *In David ha-melekhs giter* (*In King David's Estates*) about his imaginary childhood in biblical Israel. Vaynshteyn poems which address homeland and longing echo the sentiments of African Americans in the United States.

¹¹ For more information see the *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*.

H. Leyvik was the pen name used by Leyvik Halpern (1888 -1962), who adopted the pseudonym to avoid being confused with Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, another prominent Yiddish poet of the time also writing in New York. The oldest of nine children, Leyvik was born in Ihumen, Byelorussia, raised in a traditional Jewish household, and attended a yeshiva. The son of a Yiddish instructor for young servants, Leyvik particularly disliked yeshiva and depicted his experiences in his well-known poem, *Di keytn fun meshiekh* (Chains of the Messiah). He also wrote politically charged plays, including *Shop*, and may be best known for *Der golem: dramatishe poeme in akht bildern* (The Golem), his 1921 dramatic poem in eight scenes.¹²

Leyvik was a member of the Bund sometime before the Russian Revolution of 1905, and under its influence he is believed to have become secular. The Bund is also credited with compelling him to focus his writing in Yiddish rather than Hebrew. By 1906, an eighteen year old Leyvik had been arrested by Russian authorities for distributing revolutionary literature and sentenced to four years forced labor, in addition to permanent exile in Siberia. At his trial he refused legal

¹² For a complete overview of Leyvik's writings, see Leivick, H. *Ale Verk*. New York: Posy-Shoulson Press, 1940.

assistance and instead gave a speech denouncing the Russian government,

"I will not defend myself. Everything that I have done I did in full consciousness. I am a member of the Jewish revolutionary party, the Bund, and I will do everything in my power to overthrow the tsarist autocracy, its bloody henchmen, and you as well."¹³

As a prisoner, Leyvik served time in Minsk, Moscow, and St. Petersburg and it was during his imprisonment that he wrote *Di keytn fun meshiekh*. By March of 1912 he had begun his journey to Siberia on foot, a journey that would take more than four months. Leyvik was eventually smuggled out of Siberia with the help of Jewish revolutionaries in America, and by 1913 had made it to the New World, first to Philadelphia, and eventually to New York's Lower East Side.

In America, Leyvik became popular as a Yiddish poet and was hailed as "the greatest Yiddish poet and playwright of our time."¹⁴ His time spent in prison, his miserable journey to Siberia, and his unhappy childhood all reverberated throughout his writings. Whether addressing the Golem, the Messiah in chains, the story of Job or Isaac's sacrifice,

¹³ Harshav and Harshav, p. 675.

¹⁴ Harshav, p. 675.

Leyvik's expression of suffering, yearning, and frustration permeated his works, including those addressing African Americans. This expression further resonates throughout his poem, *To the Negroes*.¹⁵

Reuven Ayzland was born in Radomysl Wielki, Galicia on April 29, 1884 and probably had a religious upbringing and education. In 1900, Ayzland began writing poems in Hebrew and by 1904, in Yiddish. Regarding his own literary pursuits and those of the *Yunge*, Ayzland said,

"I began publishing poems in 1905 but only in 1912 did I feel my rhyme had ripened. Almost every poet hesitates in his early years, I and my friends were no exception. It took me longer than the others to fight my way through to my poetical pattern because I had a heavy load to unburden. My religious Hassidic childhood world was old fashioned; I did not go through any revolutionary period which could build up my way towards a free perception of things."¹⁶

By September 1903 he had arrived in America, where he later published stories and poems in the following publications: *Tsukunft*, *Literatur*, *Shriftn*, and *Der inzl*.

Together with Mani Leyb of *Der inzl*, Ayzland worked as editor of *Literatur un lebn* from March 1925 to June 1926. From 1918 on, he was

¹⁵ See p. 132 for poem and discussion.

¹⁶ Howe, p. 435.

a regular contributor to the *Tog* and later of the *Tog-Morgn-zhurnal*. In addition to his own work, including his last publication, *Fun undzer friling* (From Our Springtime) (1954) Ayzland was well-known as a translator, producing translations of a diverse selection of writings, including a series of poems and four volumes of Heine's prose, poems by Nietzsche, Robert Louis Stevenson, and a few Chinese poets among others. Further, Ayzland was one of the founders of the *Yunge*.

Judd L. Teller, also known as Yehude-Leyb Teler, was another Yiddish poet and journalist whose writings expressed the turbulence of his age and experience in America. Born in Tarnopol, Galicia, Teller suffered from starvation during World War I. His autobiographical cycle *Bafaln* (Invasion) reveals this, as well as his fear during this time. It was not until 1921 that Teller, along with his wife and two children, made his way to the United States. Though younger than the founders of the *Inzikhistn*, he remained close to this group.

Teller was considered a child prodigy and extremely well read. He wrote poems, stories, and essays in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. His first publication was a book of poetry, *Simbol* (Symbol), appeared when he was just eighteen. Early on, he began writing in a Symbolist mode. Some of Teller's initial works emphasized the self and natural

descriptions. It is such description resonates with his poem describing a young black woman.¹⁷

Teller worked as a journalist for the *Morgn-zhurnal*, and his reportage eventually saw its way into his poetry. His publication “Miniatures” revealed more suggestive and erotic poetry, whereas his next book, “Poems of the Age,” with the impending Holocaust, represented a change in tone. His later writings confronted political events, including the Nazis’ march into Vienna. Perhaps most remarkable—in contrast to his earlier work—is *Psikhoanaliz* (Psychoanalysis), a cycle of poems in which the German Jewish financier Jud Süß Oppenheimer meets Sigmund Freud, and Freud responds to the Nazis.

Avrom Reyzen was born to a literary family—his father, Kalmen, was a writer of poetry and satire—on April 8, 1876 in Byelorussia. In 1908, Reyzen immigrated to the United States, and by that time he was already well-known on the international scene as a prolific writer of Yiddish poetry and prose. Reyzen is viewed as the first major Yiddish writer to spend most of his life in the United States. Many of his works reflect his socialist leanings, expressing sympathy and compassion for

¹⁷ See p. 139 for this poem.

the poor, which helps explain why some of his best known works were adapted into folk songs. Reyzen's poems "emanate from a quiet flash, an ironic turn—what in Yiddish is called *kneytsh*, literally a crease but suggestive of a slight surprise, a sudden access of sadness or bitterness."¹⁸ It is this sense of surprise that allows the narrator of his poem, *A negerl* to reflect upon his own biases and perceptions.¹⁹

Aron Glant- Leyeles was born in 1889 in Wloclawek, Poland. The son of a writer and teacher, Leyeles grew up in Lodz, where he attended Hebrew school and a Russian commercial school before moving to England in 1905 to study at the University of London. It was during this time that he became active in the Zionist-Socialist party. Leyeles moved to New York in 1909 and studied literature at Columbia University. In 1918 he published his first book of poems, *Labirint* ("Labyrinth"). He also worked as a translator of books and poems from Polish, German, Russian, and English into Yiddish.

As one of the founders of *In zikh*, Leyeles was a major poet on the American theme in Yiddish. He was responsible for editing several sections of the publication *Der tog*, a New York Yiddish daily, in which

¹⁸ Howe, p. 428.

¹⁹ See p. 144 for this poem.

he contributed to section regarding political matters and literary criticism. Leyeles' first published book was written in German, *Der Territorialismus ist die Loesung der Judenfrage* [Territorialism is the Solution to the Jewish Question]. He also wrote two messianic plays, *Shlomo Molkho* (1926) and *Asher Lemlin* (1928) and a play about the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky. His books of poetry, *A yid oyfn yam* (A Jew on the Sea) (1948) and *Baym fus fun barg* (At the Foot of the Mountain) were well received and as such he was twice awarded the Louis Lamed Prize.²⁰

Leyeles was very active in establishing Yiddish schools in not only New York, but also in Canada and Iowa. He was instrumental as well in helping to establish many Jewish cultural organizations, including the Workman's Circle schools, the World Jewish Culture Congress, and the Central Yiddish Cultural organization.

Reyzl Zhiklinski was born on July 27, 1910 in Gombin, Poland. She immigrated with her husband and son to the United States in 1950, having survived the Holocaust by fleeing to Russia. Zhiklinski attended a Polish public school from 1916-1923, though from 1924 to 1927 she

²⁰ This was an annual prize awarded to outstanding writers of Yiddish and Hebrew. Established by Detroit Jewish community leader Louis Lamed in 1940, the foundation was active until 1960.

had a private teacher because there was no high school in Gombin. Her father was a leather worker and had travelled to the United States three times while his family remained in Poland.

Zhiklinski began writing in the 1930s and between 1939 and 1993 she published seven books of poetry in Yiddish, including *Lider* (Poems) 1936 (In Yiddish), *Der regn zingt* (The Rain Sings) 1939, (In Yiddish), *Tsu loytere breg*n (To Clear Shores) 1948, (In Yiddish), *Shvaygndike tirn* (Silent Doors) 1962, (In Yiddish) *Harbstike skvern* (Autumn Squares) 1969, (In Yiddish), *Di november-zun* (The November Sun) 1977, (In Yiddish), *Naye lider* (New Poems) 1993, (In Yiddish), *Vogelbrot: Gedichte aus funf Jahrzehnten* (Bread for the Birds - Five Decades of Poetry) 1981 (A Published German Translation). Her works were published in the United States, Poland, Israel, and France. She also published works in a collection of poems, "God Hid His Face", was translated to English and published in 1997. She, her husband, and her son left Lodz for Paris in 1948. It was not until 1951 that the family arrived in New York.

The authors listed above were chosen because of their depictions of African Americans and the themes of their poems. Although there are more authors and more poems regarding African Americans, I chose to limit my selection. I did not, for example, chose poems regarding lynching, even though there are enough poems on

this subject to warrant further study and exploration. I also did not focus on poems addressing rural settings and the American South. They would have taken my project in a completely different direction. These too, warrant further investigation. I was, however, interested in Yiddish depictions of urban life in Black America and poems which focused on describing the Black experience in America, in addition to those which emphasized a Black/Jewish connection.

There is a paucity of initial study of the literary connection between Blacks and Jews, more specifically the representation of African Americans by Yiddish writers, and to a lesser degree the depictions of Jews by Harlem Renaissance writers. Traditional Yiddish scholarship had other concerns. Although there was interest in African Americans, the context was specific to issues of labor and the prospect of including Blacks in the process of unionization, Black participation (or the lack thereof) in the political arena, and an awareness of the inconsistencies and inequalities with respect to Blacks, coupled with a desire to change that. Indeed, the lack of a conceptual framework in which to situate such an inquiry reflects the more specific cultural and/or political tendencies of the communities, both Black and Yiddish/Jewish, then and now.

I view the convergence of Yiddish literary studies and African American cultural studies in terms of a Venn diagram, in which my project falls under the overlapping, non-empty intersection. This intersection provides the basis for considerable discussion and confusion, perhaps even tension and anxiety, and sets the tone for further interaction between and among Blacks and Jews.

The critical framework necessary for a more meaningful and even fruitful discussion of the intersection of Blackness and *Yiddishkayt*—Jewishness, the essence of which is fueled by the Yiddish language, tradition, and culture²¹—requires a reconceptualization of both literary and cultural bodies of work. I have found it useful to employ the following terms with respect to the main thrust of my project, the tension between what I term *Black Ashkenaz* and *Afro Yiddica*.

My project draws on various forms of Yiddish poetry explored using my concept of *Black Ashkenaz*, while comparing and contrasting those works with some literary production of writers of the Harlem Renaissance. *Black Ashkenaz* refers to the incorporation of African Americans and Africans in Yiddish literature, whether that inclusion

²¹ For my project, I have opted to use the nonstandard *yiddishkayt* rather than the scholarly *yidishkayt* for the sake of conformity with current, popular usage.

appears within a purely Jewish cultural context or not. This inclusion is not limited to interactions and exchanges between Blacks and Jews, and includes all Yiddish writings. *Black Ashkenaz* builds upon implicit ideas including unification and integration of cultural, religious, social (including social stability and stratification) and economic aspects associated with Jewish life (although in this case, Black life), all expressed using the Yiddish language. Also, *Black Ashkenaz* can apply to a lesser degree to representations of minority “Others” (people of color) in various Ashkenazic literatures. An additional element of this construct involves the dichotomy of historical vs. aesthetic understandings of African American culture and the issue of cultural ownership of the Black experience. *Black Ashkenaz* utilizes the DuBoisian paradigm of *double consciousness*²² to further problematize conflicting definitions of African American identity with respect to perceptions of Yiddish identity, and takes into consideration Du Bois’ concepts of ‘*the veil*’ and ‘*the color line*’.²³

²² See pages 38-43 for my discussion regarding DuBoisian *double consciousness* and *the veil*, with implications for Blacks and Jews alike.

²³ For discussion of Du Bois’ concept of the color line, see pages 31-34. Du Bois’ conceptualization of the line itself, as the boundary between the “darker” and the “lighter” races would reverberate throughout African American literature well beyond the Harlem Renaissance.

On the other hand, my concept of *Afro Yiddica* refers to the incorporation of Ashkenazic individuals and/or cultural, historical elements in African American literature. The construct of *Afro Yiddica* also includes Yiddish, or more broadly Jewish lexical, historical, and cultural effects, Biblical references, notions of exile and diaspora, though it need not be limited to such. *Afro Yiddica* represents a part of the dialectic between a new awakening of Black identity, of competing notions of Black identity in the form the New Negro vs. Uncle Tom (reflecting the Du Bois vs. Booker T. debate) and the Harlem Renaissance, and Black perceptions of Ashkenazic immigrant transformation and acceptance of white American identity (Jewish identity as not only American, but in the process of becoming White²⁴). *Afro Yiddica* also makes use of the DuBoisian paradigm of *double consciousness* to further tease out conflicting definitions and perceptions of American identity, Blackness, Whiteness, and the benefits and opportunities associated with citizenship and acceptance. It includes both works of fiction, and non-fiction in addressing notions of historical memory and aesthetics in a Jewish/Yiddish/Ashkenazic cultural context. *Afro Yiddica* can apply

²⁴ See Karen Brodtkin, *How the Jews Became White*.

also to representations of Jews in other Black writings, such as those associated with the *Négritude*²⁵ movement of France, Francophone Africa, and the Caribbean, the *Negrismo*²⁶ movement of Cuba and Latin America, and the *Back to Africa*²⁷ movement rooted in the United States. The thrust of this examination, with regard to *Afro Yiddica*, will rest nevertheless with the Harlem Renaissance, including its African American and West Indian contributors.

The purpose of my project is to address the representation of African Americans in Yiddish poetry, with a focus on those works produced between 1915 and the mid 1930s. Within these parameters, I explore the prospect of an African American /Yiddish interface in both

²⁵ The *Négritude* movement, originally literary and ideological in orientation, reflected the reaction of French-speaking Black intellectuals to the colonial situation. This movement, which also served to influence not just Francophone Blacks, but Blacks all over the world, completely rejected Western political, social and moral domination. The term *Négritude* has come to represent the embodiment of Black consciousness in the broadest sense. The literature associated with this movement includes the writings of Black intellectuals, redefining the collective experience of Blacks, in affirmation of Blackness and a connection to an almost mythic Africa. *Négritude* frees all Blacks from white, European ideology with its notion of Black inferiority. This movement emerged during the 1930s led by future Senegalese President Léopold Senghor and Martinican poet Aimé Césaire. The *Négritude* movement was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance.

²⁶ The *Negrismo* movement refers to the Afro-Latino literary movement, concerned with cultural, political, and economic ideology identical to that of the *Négritude* movement.

²⁷ See section regarding Diasporic Perceptions page 51.

Yiddish poetry and that of the Harlem Renaissance. This project investigates the prospect of a textual/intertextual dialogue between African Americans and Yiddish-speaking Jews through their literary images of and references to each other. As a method of investigation, I use a conceptual framework operating within the parameters of diasporic and African American scholarship, enhanced by Yiddish historical, cultural, linguistic, and literary understandings. Harlem Renaissance writers and Yiddish writers provided the framework through which to view and perhaps even shape (to a lesser degree) discourse regarding Blackness and *Yiddishkayt* within their respective communities, in response to America's racial hierarchy and in an atmosphere of changing identity with respect to Whiteness, American-ness, and the fluidity of interwar racial definitions and ethno-racial ideology.

Such a project challenges perceptions (whether stereotypical, literary, etc) of both African Americans and Yiddish readers and speakers alike. A comparative look at their respective literatures reveals concerns and perhaps even a preoccupation with issues of identity and self-representation and self-reflection, as well as critiques of American race relations and power systems. Furthermore, this juxtaposition of self vs. the Other includes the rejection of certain

images and the acceptance of others in terms of politics, social (in)justice, and protest and act. Thus, this study investigates the voice of diasporic expression and the prospect of one marginalized group examining, depicting and conceivably judging another.

This dissertation will explore the relationship between African Americans and Eastern European immigrant Jews (Yiddish-speaking Jews) by examining both the representations of African Americans in Yiddish poetry and Jewishness and the depictions of Jews by Harlem Renaissance writers. Ultimately, this study will contribute to the understanding of an African American/Yiddish interface in which attitudes towards each other are played (and written) out.

This linking of African American and Jewish history, traditions and reflections regarding identity, culture and language appears at a significant point in the grand narrative of ethnicity and race ideology in the United States. For Yiddish literary intellectuals, writing about African Americans revealed their perceptions of what it meant to be Black, which was itself reinscribed to equate such Blackness with *Yiddishkayt*, thus the Other. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance exposed their impressions of what it meant to be Jewish, set in a milieu which experienced the redefinition of what it meant to be American. Within

these boundaries of mutual depiction develops a reification of what it meant to be Black and what it meant to be White.

Perhaps their writings can and should be viewed as attempts to secure cultural, linguistic, and even ethnic identity in opposition to American-ness. After all, though America was the land of opportunity, it was also the land of disenfranchisement, exploitation, and Jim Crow. As a result, Jewishness can appear in opposition to American-ness and Whiteness as problematic; it represented a “privileged” category²⁸, but at what cost? Blackness can also appear in opposition to American-ness, however the issue is complicated with respect to Jewishness. *Yiddishkayt* reveals a distaste and disdain for the (mis)treatment of Blacks by Whites and an understanding of diasporic identification and cultural sympathies. It also reveals the ambiguity of racial categories and the tensions associated with race “mobility” or passing.

Yiddish writers addressed the juxtaposition of Blackness and Whiteness, Jewishness and Whiteness, and Blackness and Jewishness with an understanding of what was to be gained--acceptance in

²⁸ It is interesting to note how Whiteness, in this context, can be considered a privileged category given immigration quotas, anti-Semitic tendencies, etc. Admittedly, the opposite would seem more likely.

America as white²⁹ or jeopardizing the “whitening” process by alliances with Blacks or potential identification as Black. The *push* to be accepted as American, and the concomitant opportunities for social, political and economic mobility and racial alterity was countered by the *pull* of conflict with respect to assimilation, American conceptualizations of exclusion based upon race, and a Jewish consciousness which rejected both. It truly was *shver tsu zayn a yid*.

But the literary production of both the Yiddish and Black communities examined, with varying degrees of self-reflexivity, questions of identity, (in)formation and image, and it is the aim of this project to take such previously overlooked matters under consideration. The positions and expressions of marginalized groups is indeed part and parcel of the American experience. Such writings, fueled by new experiences, hopes, fears, and the promise (or, at the very least, prospect) of a new start, as well as lack of political expression, social inequality, and abject poverty, serve to provide insight into the processes of assimilation and Americanization for Yiddish-speaking, Eastern European Jewish immigrants (readers and

²⁹ As a side, this project will not address the theme of ‘passing,’ although an argument is to be made in Yiddish writers addressing such attempts at American-ness.

writers), in addition to the state of African Americans, the process of urbanization, participation, and citizenship through literary expression of the Harlem Renaissance.

Literary depictions of African Americans in twentieth-century Yiddish writings are varied and are largely dependent upon subject matter, place, setting, and time³⁰. Some depictions are loosely based on 'old Negro paradigms,' revealing slave imagery inherited from American literature, which render the Black body as pre-industrial, unskilled and clumsy, and the Black individual as simple, carefree, careless and yet utterly dependent and childlike. Within this literary milieu, an accentuation of physicality, sexuality (and hyper-sexuality), coupled with notions of exoticism, eroticism and the primitive, appear in and as stereotypical archetypes. Although these African American images display elements of cultural, religious and/or historical background, references to slavery, longing for Africa, redemption and the notion of a 'heavenly' home, they nonetheless often remain

³⁰ The same can be said about literary depictions of African Americans in Jewish American literature. English language Jewish American literary production depicting Blacks addresses similar concerns regarding their progress and status in America, African American identity, social and political mobilization, and reflects an attempt to grapple with the relationship between Blacks and Jews, given what happens in and to that relationship post 1960.

somewhat void of humanity, historic memory, cultural creativity and Black identity. They are images created based upon perceptions (false or otherwise) often gained/gleaned from information received and processed through the filter of American (white) culture³¹. As such, these representations attest to the writer's knowledge or lack of knowledge regarding African American history (with respect to American popular culture, history and thought), as well as Yiddish perceptions of Black culture, religion and identity. Most significantly, these representations attest to the determination of the Yiddish literary intellectual to grapple with and express concepts vis-à-vis American identity, American-ness, assimilation, acceptance, mutual reflections and expressions of diaspora and post-exilic perceptions of nation, state and citizenship. These writers attempted to engage the subject of identity in America by addressing the very nature of American self-perceptions with respect to self-identification. If the goal was to become American, one had to know what being American meant--to

³¹ This does not render the Yiddish writers' analysis of African Americans completely useless or unfit. Some writings manage to rise above the reliance on stereotypes, as others remain mired therein. Some writers expose stereotypes, while others pander to them.

and for oneself and to and for those who mattered.³² Such considerations also drove the African American community, and this era represented a new beginning for African Americans with respect to education (the building of educational institutions heralding the dawn of a new, post-slavery identification for Blacks), the galvanization of social, political and even spiritual organizations under new and vocal leadership in an attempt at full participation in America. It was also the time period referred to as *The Nadir*, *The Age of Lynching and Jim Crow* and "it has also been termed, derisively, the Age of Accommodation."³³ It is within this complexity of competing agendas with respect to Blacks, Black voice, and the desire for Black autonomy and agency that arise the (competing) voices of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois and other architects of the Harlem Renaissance, including Alain Locke, William Stanley Braithwaite, along with literary historians and critics Blyden Jackson³⁴, Rayford W. Logan³⁵ and Dickson

³² "To be an American, dress like an American, look like an American, and even, if only in fantasy, talk like an American became a collective goal, at least for the younger immigrants." (Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 128)

³³ McCaskill and Gebhard, 2.

³⁴ *A History of Afro-American Literature, Volume I, 1746-1895*.

³⁵ *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* Dial Press, 1954, published as *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, Collier Books, 1965, is a work in which Logan addresses the

D. Bruce Jr.³⁶. Locke's *The New Negro* provided the framework for the launch of the Harlem Renaissance, but also contributed to a negative evaluation of this epoch³⁷. For Locke and Braithwaite, pre-Harlem literary works were of no great significance. It is not until the Renaissance that Negro mastery in the arts, and in particular literature in the form of poetry, was achieved.

However, critics such as Braithwaite and Locke argued that there was very little interaction between Blacks and Jews from 1890-1914, and as a result, there is little to discuss in terms of any real Black/Jewish relationship, literary or otherwise, regarding this time period.³⁸ I would argue that a look at a pre-Renaissance Black/Jewish

Black experience in terms of post-Reconstruction. In conjunction with his later work, *The Negro in the United States: A Brief History*, Van Nostrand, 1957, it served to change the discourse regarding Black participation in the American political, social and cultural (including popular media) context. Logan's preference of the term *Negro* and rejection of the term *Black* put him in the middle of the discourse regarding the emerging New Negro American, yet later would serve to put him at odds with Civil Rights activists in the 1960's.

³⁶ *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915*.

³⁷ McCaskill and Gebhard, 3.

³⁸ Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard, *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem : African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). For detailed discussions regarding the relationship between African Americans and Jews see Paul Berman, *Alliances and Arguments, Bridges and Boundaries, and Strangers and Neighbors*.

relationship, especially with respect to literature, is consequential indeed. There is a great deal to consider in looking at the relationship between Blacks and Jews in terms of Jewish participation and involvement in and during the Civil War, the institution of slavery, and even the Leo Frank case.³⁹ These events set the tone and brought Blacks and Jews together and on a collision course with respect to their fate (perceived or otherwise) in terms of the victimization of and crimes against whites. It is, however, their literary engagement, which somewhat belies the generally accepted view by historians--including African American historians--, that 1915-1935 represents the initial period of real contact, connection and bonding between Blacks and Jews in the American context.

Nevertheless, this pre-Harlem Renaissance period revealed the beginnings of political cooperation, social co-action, alliances,

³⁹ Leo Frank was a young Brooklyn Jew living in Atlanta, Georgia. The owner of a pencil factory, Frank was accused of having murdered Mary Phagan, a young white woman. He was later convicted based upon the testimony of Jim Conley, a Black witness, who had been the other major suspect in the crime. Strangely enough, Conley seemed to implicate himself as the guilty party. In the summer of 1915, Frank was lynched by an angry mob after his death sentence had been commuted. The Frank case pitted Blacks and Jews against each other in a relationship, albeit an adversarial one. It can also be viewed as part of the impetus for the mass migration of African Americans from the agriculture-based rural South to the industrialized urban North. It also served as a wake up call for Jews. Blacks were not the only ones who could be lynched; their situation could be equally precarious.

coalitions and cultural exchange. This period also saw Jewish philanthropy with respect to the Black artistic, musical and literary creation and production of the Harlem Renaissance.⁴⁰ The late 1920s through the mid-1950s saw an increase in the number of activities with respect to Black and Jewish mutual cooperation and mutual interest, culminating with the Civil Rights activism of the 1960s. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present one sees a rupture or disconnect in the Black/Jewish relationship. In spite of the documented ruptures and disconnects, it is my contention that this relationship has its true, meaningful beginnings in and on the pages of Yiddish literature, with the arrival and subsequent Americanization of Eastern European immigrant Jews.

The social and cultural relationship between Eastern European immigrant Jews and African Americans has been (re)defined and

⁴⁰The Harlem Renaissance can be described as “the efflorescence of African American cultural production that occurred in New York City in the 1920s and the early 1930s.” This cultural production need not be limited to Harlem, in that all African Americans, irrespective of their geographical location, participated in this cultural revolution which highlighted Black participation in America, drawing upon Black empowerment and a redefinition of Black identity. The term “Harlem Renaissance” is often used interchangeably with the term “New Negro Renaissance,” “Negro Renaissance,” and “Black Renaissance”. See Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*; George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*; Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Voices From the Harlem Renaissance*; David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*; and the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*.

problematized based upon geographic, chronologic, political, historical and economic circumstances and as such has represented but one aspect of the discourse on race relations in the United States. Black/Jewish relations have been viewed in terms of coalitions and controversies, mutual assistance as well as mutual antagonism, given the discourse regarding the two groups has focused on their social, political or economic relationship. It is the literary relationship between African Americans and Eastern European immigrant Jews which I believe to be worthy of direct exploration in order to yield a more complete picture of their relationship.

An important area to be addressed in scholarship with respect to this literary relationship is a discussion regarding the appropriation of African American history, culture, and identity by the immigrant Yiddish-speaking population and, conversely, the appropriation of Jewish cultural, traditional and ritual artifact by African Americans. African Americans have employed the Ashkenazic immigrant experience as a metaphor for the attainment of the American dream, the road to prosperity and success in America. Alternatively, Eastern European Jews have used African American historical and cultural experiences as a metaphor for the Yiddish experience in the United States, particularly regarding mistreatment, poverty, social, and

political injustice. In Chapter 1, I will address the issues connecting African Americans and Yiddish writers in terms of their responses to diaspora and thematic underpinnings of Black Ashkenaz. In Chapter 2, I will explore Black identity in terms of its Yiddish constructs and identity politics, memory and the connection between the two. Chapter 3 will include a discussion on the Black body and address images of blackness. Chapter 4 will include a discussion of Harlem, the geographic space that represents the literary point of convergence for Blacks and Jews.

Ultimately, that which is revealed through my study adds to aspects of the discussion regarding race; a Yiddish understanding of African Americans and Blackness, and a contribution to the discussion of Jewish identity in the United States. In the process of Americanization, Yiddish writers would shed their "dark complexion" and become white. African Americans, on the other hand, would serve as the border for *otherness*. The possibility of crossing that border or *passing*, regardless of one's ethnicity, would be problematic indeed. It is through Yiddish literature and that of the Harlem Renaissance that the basis of the Black/Jewish dialogue begins.

CHAPTER 1

Black and White and Read All Over

Between 1915 and the mid-1930s, Yiddish-speaking Jews occupied a transitional space between African Americans (Black) and American mainstream society (White). In this chapter I will explore that space, examining the way in which understandings of and responses to diaspora and exile are realized and expressed in Yiddish literary depictions of African Americans and a few Harlem Renaissance depictions of Jews. The consequence of such inquiry involves a literary diasporic perspective, which makes use of a post-exilic language (Yiddish) in order to depict another diasporic people (African Americans). Also under consideration is the Black vernacular of the time (Jazz Age African American Vernacular English) in written expression regarding another minority/Other (Eastern European Yiddish-speaking Jews) in the United States.

According to Yiddish portrayals examined in this project, definitions of Blackness, understandings of Black culture and African Americans are expressed in both negative and positive terms and can be viewed as having been informed by discourse concerning the social construct of race. Negative imagery generally addresses the stereotypical physical features of Blacks, the sexual tensions created by the alleged promiscuity of Black women and the hypersexuality of Black men, the inability of Black men to maintain employment, and Black life in abject poverty. Whereas positive representations speak to Yiddish understandings of the status and condition of Blacks in the United States, the Black family and its determination for cultural and social continuity, religious observance and worship, and survival, strength and freedom in America, notions of brotherhood, political solidarity with respect to working conditions and labor unions, offer solid examples of cultural/historical awareness of the plight of Blacks in a society that, at best, viewed them as second-class citizens.

As exploited victims of American capitalism, African Americans living and working in a land of opportunity remained nevertheless incapable of reaping the benefits of their labor. The same applies to

poor Yiddish immigrants⁴¹ trying their hand as part of an American labor force which saw them too as a commodity. Economic hardships of lower class Jews were indeed linked to the fate of all exploited workers, often pitting Blacks and Jews (in addition to other poor immigrants) together in a brotherhood of the exploited.⁴²

Images of diligent workers and supportive Black families in rural and urban settings attempt to show insight with respect to Black social stratification, class differences, gender roles and cultural/historical awareness. However, these formulaic literary patterns require the attempts at success to end in failure, compounded by a sense of depression, hopelessness, helplessness, and the recognition of an unchanging/unchangeable state. Thus these images are the projection of post-exilic immigrant Yiddish speakers' reaction to life in the United States regarding poverty, opportunities for employment,

⁴¹ According to Gerald Sorin, skilled and unskilled immigrant Jews continued to arrive in the United States from increasingly industrialized homelands, and as such they were able to meet the needs of the expanding garment/needle trades in New York and in the process create the critical mass needed to establish labor unions and rally for improved work conditions. See *A Time for Building: The Third Migration 1880-1920*, Chapter 3.

⁴² The desire to end discrimination and the oppression of workers on not just a national but a universal scale provided the motivation for political solidarity with Blacks and represented the crux of Yiddish Bundist activity.

social and economic mobility, and religious freedom and secularization.

The fact remains, however, that while Yiddish immigrants were not completely aware of western culture and values, they were at least cognizant of a difference between Old and New World, and the necessity to assimilate to some degree. Filled with hope and often eager to become American, the Eastern European Jews attempted to fit in and begin to live the American dream. On the other hand, Africans (later to become African Americans) arrived in the New World as a result of slavery, having been kidnapped, sold and/or tricked into a system of enforced labor and inhuman conditions. Upon their arrival and subsequent settling in the United States, immigrant Eastern European Jews dealt with the physical and psychological effects of living in poverty and the daily struggle to support their families. All the while, African Americans dealt with the legacies of slavery in the guise of Jim Crow (particularly in the American South). Although the North perhaps promised opportunity, such opportunity was not devoid of poverty, poor living and working conditions, and a scarcity of

resources.⁴³ The fundamental difference lies in a reality in which African Americans watched their Yiddish immigrant counterparts pursue the American dream with success, all the while as it eluded them.

Yiddish representations of African Americans often reveal the writer's attempt to mediate the desire to create characters based upon Ashkenazic familiarity with American literature, culture and history (*push*), against Yiddish literary constructs and knowledge of Jewish history, culture and varying degrees of *Yiddishkayt*⁴⁴ (*pull*). The contextual parameters with respect to this *push-pull* model include the Yiddish language, perspectives on religion and observance, tradition, historical memory, cultural specificity, acculturation and assimilation, political and social mobility (or the lack thereof), and the conceptual awareness of America's racial hierarchy. The *push* to become American and to write American versus the *pull* of Yiddish literary

⁴³ The North had its own storied history of indentured servitude, which itself established a kind of white slavery and an immigrant underclass permanently mired in poverty. It was in no way perfect, but it did offer African Americans more opportunity than the South.

⁴⁴ "One ideology behind Yiddishkeit, never very elaborate, was developed in the 1890s by the historian Simon Dubnow. He saw the Jewish people as a spiritual community held together by historical, cultural, and religious ties, despite the absence of a common homeland or territory, and he urged the Jews to struggle for cultural and religious autonomy in whichever country they happened to find themselves" (Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 19). Dubnow's sentiments fit quite well into Black discourse regarding identity, community and cultural continuity.

understandings and Yiddish consciousness often resulted in a lack of sensibility with respect to historical and aesthetic contextualization of Blackness.

This *push-pull* model also applies to Harlem Renaissance writings; the motivation to express a new sense of Black identity, creativity and freedom culminating in the New Negro⁴⁵ (*push*) was in direct opposition to the expectation of Blacks to write about themselves in the same manner as whites had (*pull*), particularly with respect to notions of commercial success. The *push* for self-expression in and on one's own terms could be tempered based upon the relationship to audience (in group (Black) vs. out group (White)), the intent of the writing (its message and its focus) and the *push* of Black community, and Black self-representation.

Further application of the *push-pull* model reveals another dynamic, the Yiddish *push* as represented by the desire to write about oneself, one's community and culture, to further create Yiddish literature and promote *Yiddishkayt* in America vs. the African American *push*, as represented by the desire to write 'America', particularly African America. That desire, based on the notion of becoming

⁴⁵ Alain Locke, *Survey Graphic Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* (New York: Black Classics Press, 1980), 631-634.

American by writing 'America', consisted of a sympathetic understanding of what it meant to be Black in America vs. being a Black American; notions of entitlement in terms of Black and White; and an understanding of a history involving trauma, oppression and persecution.

Under the pressure of Americanization and assimilation, the Yiddish *push* to write the American Yiddish experience, complete with African Americans and reflecting the kind of established racial hierarchy in the United States, represents a desire to depict African Americans in an honest or at least sympathetic light. This is, of course, juxtaposed against the African American *push* to write their own experiences from their own perspective and addressing their concerns, reflecting ambivalence toward the self-sufficiency and the upward mobility of Jews, as well as disillusionment regarding their own status and condition in America.

When writing about African Americans from 1915 to the mid-1930s, Yiddish writers were not yet deemed to be true or 'full-fledged' Americans because they were not yet considered to be white (at least in accordance with American mainstream perceptions of the time). For the time period addressed here, Yiddish-speaking Jews occupied a transitional space between African Americans (read "Black") and

American mainstream society (read “White”). Yiddish-speaking Jews mediated their position as ‘white ethnics’⁴⁶ (emphasis on ethnic and therefore *quasi*-American) competing for ‘skin privileges’ to become or be considered American. Although they maintained a position of understanding and sympathy with African Americans, some Eastern European Jews avoided close affiliation for fear of repercussions which could jeopardize or permanently alter their status and upset their transition from white ethnic to ethnic American and ultimately to white American. It was not in anyone’s best interest to side with African Americans or be considered allied/aligned with them. Such an alliance could put the Yiddish-speaking immigrant Jew in an even more precarious position⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Other white ethnics included the Irish, Italians, Russians, and other recent immigrants populations in America who were not perceived as white upon immigration to the United States. These groups were inducted into the community of white America at various periods of time beginning in the 1950s. For further discussion see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks* and Stanley Crouch, *The All-American Skin Game, or, The Decoy of Race*.

⁴⁷ German Jews, having arrived prior to their Eastern European counterparts, were well-established and quick to distance themselves from their poor, often uneducated ‘cousins.’ They had already worked hard to assimilate, to become integrated into American society, and being lumped together with Yiddish-speaking immigrants could undo it all. See Sorin, Chapter 3, 69-108.

Acclaimed Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem⁴⁸ describes the precarious position of the immigrant and his relationship to the native population in one of his Zionist works, *Why Do Jews Need A Land Of Their Own?*

. . . So as long as the native, the one who belongs, finds things going well and easy, feels comfortable, earns enough for his needs, the stranger can get by, more or less. But when the native feels cramped, crowded out, with competition growing, and his earnings going down, then the stranger assumes enormous bulk, looks gigantic. All the troubles in the land seem to stem from him. And people begin to murmur. At first under their breath, then louder and louder. "What do we want these strangers for!" It only needs one to say it first, and the others follow. No arguments will help. No facts, no figures, to show that the stranger too is a human being, that he has also to eat, and that he can help in the common task, can be of use. Nobody will listen. Nobody wants his usefulness. Take it somewhere else, they say. We don't want it. Get out!⁴⁹

Yiddish alignment with African Americans could have limited the possibilities for employment, political involvement and participation, social and/or economic mobility, and threatened any previous

⁴⁸ Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916) born Sholem Rabinovitch, is considered the father of Yiddish literature. In addition to his many Yiddish short stories and novels there are political writings in support of Zionism, such as *Why Do Jews Need a Land of Their Own?* (1898).

⁴⁹ Aleichem, *Why Do Jews Need a Land of Their Own*, 7.

advancements or concessions granted in their process of Americanization and transition to Whiteness. It could also influence American perceptions and understandings regarding Jewish identity, which could potentially threaten the assimilation and/or the American identity of all Jews, both German and Eastern European.

Writers of the Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand, had little to lose; affiliation with Jews could risk ostracism from some members of the Black community or certain Black individuals. However, that was of little consequence with respect to perceptions of American mainstream society regarding African Americans. Writers such as Claude McKay (1889-1948), Langston Hughes (1902-1967), James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) and Fenton Johnson (1888-1958) had everything to gain in their utilization of Ashkenazic elements as models for Black renditions of the American narrative. Viewed using my concept of *Afro Yiddica*, Harlem Renaissance writers were able to participate in the writing of their 'native soil', the land in which they were created and in which their labor and creativity were usurped. They could contribute their Black voices, from a Black perspective, to a country which thought of itself as white, regardless of its true racial makeup and, as a result, privileged Whiteness. In particular, writers from

the West Indies⁵⁰ were able to participate in the writing of their adopted land, a land which offered opportunities, a chance to join other black writers and to contribute their unique perspectives regarding the relationship of African Americans to Africa and their status in their United States as a minority at the bottom of its racial hierarchy. They also wrote as immigrants themselves--about immigrant Jews. These writers wrote Jews as they saw them, particularly with respect to constructs of race, ethnicity, and color. Writer/activist James Baldwin offered an interesting summation of the color construct in his essay concerning ethnic transitions and the 'whitening' of America, with special reference to the Jewish community:

...No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country. It is probable that it is the Jewish community--or more accurately, perhaps, its remnants--that in America has paid the highest and most extraordinary price for becoming white. For the Jews came here from countries where they were not white, and they came here, in part, because they were not white; and incontestably-- in the eyes of the Black America (and

⁵⁰ Claude McKay falls under this category. He was born in Jamaica and came to the United States in 1912.

not only in those eyes) American Jews have opted to become white...⁵¹

The challenge, then, for Yiddish writers was to write about African Americans as Yiddish-speaking Jews, as Ashkenazic Jews, and simply as Jews – not as whites or probationary whites. The ability of Yiddish writers to mediate this transitional or interstitial space between black and white, both in terms of literature and between Black and white Americans, ultimately addresses the concerns for the twentieth-century. Scholar and political activist W.E.B. DuBois expresses this concern: “the problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”⁵² DuBois further expounds upon how this ‘problem’ has been so ingrained into the American psyche and responsible for a variety of its ills. It was, after all,

⁵¹ James Baldwin, “On Being ‘White’ . . . and Other Lies,” from *Black on White*, David R. Roediger, 178. Baldwin’s statement can be viewed as an abandonment of whatever solidarity may have existed between Black Americans and Jews. This may have very well been the case, but the realization of such, as well as the impact on Blacks and Jews, would remain to be seen.

⁵² W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, The Bedford Series in History and Culture, (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 17.

... a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War; and however much they who marched South and North in 1861 may have fixed on the technical points of union and local autonomy as a shibboleth, all nevertheless knew, as we know, that the question of Negro slavery was the real cause of the conflict. Curious it was, too, how this deeper question ever forced itself to the surface despite effort and disclaimer. . . What shall be done with Negroes? . . . [T]he Emancipation Proclamation seemed but to broaden and intensify the difficulties; and the War Amendments made the Negro problems of to-day.⁵³

It is this color line which has caused the creation of a [black] nation within a [white] nation, and its reverberations throughout the history, culture, society, and economy of the United States have served as obstacles for Blacks in terms of their status in America's racial hierarchy and in terms of social, political and economic mobility.

Although his discussion looks at the status, situation and condition of Blacks in America as a 'Negro problem,' it is indeed appropriate to address it as a *White problem*. In the United States, Whites were after all responsible for the systematic oppression of Blacks

⁵³ *Souls*, 17. An interesting idea occurs within this passage. Can one view American-ness or Whiteness as the shibboleth that Ashkenazic Jews (and African Americans, for that matter) sought for acceptance?

and the institutionalization of racism in political, economic, social and educational contexts. Given this, Whiteness becomes problematic for those seeking its cover and seeing its privileges. The line between racial meaning and social reality becomes blurred; Whiteness is often hated, yet desired.⁵⁴ Consequently, Eastern European immigrant Jews had a great deal to consider in their transition to--and transformation into--Americans, and ultimately to White.

For DuBois, the issue of race became an increasing problem in the 1920s, as the Harlem Renaissance began to take shape. He urged Black writers to represent life as they saw it. As such, writers of the Harlem Renaissance grappled with race, with Blackness, with Black identity and American-ness in an attempt to find their own voice in telling their own (hi)stories. After all, “[t]he Negro [was] a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yield[ed] him no true self-consciousness, but only let him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”⁵⁵ The Harlem Renaissance, with its burst of creativity, allowed African

⁵⁴ It could be viewed as the same for Ashkenazic Jews of the period. Blacks and Jews held common ground in their ambivalence toward and relationship to Whiteness.

⁵⁵ *Souls*, 10-11.

Americans to reveal their true self-consciousness and reflect, express, and proclaim Black identity and imagination to the world, especially to a (white) America that had denigrated it for so long. As a result, they were able to create a space within the absence of space, negotiating and renegotiating the boundaries of American identity, immigrant communities on the verge of assimilation, and Jewish/Yiddish identity. This space also provided the means through which to view African American identity and culture, all the while promoting and maintaining *American Yiddishkayt*.

Yiddish writers participated in establishing the foundation for Ashkenazic identity in America or *American Yiddishkayt*. As the ethos associated with Yiddish in the United States, *American Yiddishkayt* consisted of the ideological implications and associations in conjunction with the word *forverts* or 'forward'.⁵⁶ The goal of the

⁵⁶ *Forverts* is also the name of the Yiddish language daily newspaper first published 1897 and still in circulation today. This newspaper represented the culmination and perpetuation of Yiddishkayt in its newly transplanted location, the United States. *The Forverts* was viewed as the premier voice of Yiddish in America and aided generations of Eastern European immigrants in the process of Americanization. It played a key role in promoting and maintaining Yiddish culture, informing Yiddish readers about their new home, its history, its politics and its people as well as keeping in touch with things in and of the Old Country. It also reflected the tension between Old world *Yiddishkayt* and *American Yiddishkayt*.

Yiddish immigrant in the United States was to move forward, making herself/himself at home in this new land, but still managing to hold onto various historical, as well as cultural, traditional, social, religious and linguistic accoutrements. But they were not American yet, nor were they quite white. Yiddish writers were, however, allowed to cross the color line or, given their status, had the opportunity to do so. As a result, in terms of literary production, this led to a reification of the Black experience in America. Yiddish writers could produce a literature writing African Americans and the Black experience in and on their own terms, making it familiar to their Yiddish-reading-speaking audience and producing a cross-cultural evaluation of experiences and encounters.

Conversely, Harlem Renaissance writers were able to contribute their voices for the first time in a concentrated effort as cultural insiders, keepers of their own history, recorders of their own experiences, the observers of race and what it meant to be Black in America. With the increase in their writings and the growing Black population, Harlem became the point of convergence, the Black capitol and the center for Black intellectual, social, artistic, political and economic vitality:

. . . the peasant, the student, the businessman, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast, each group has come with its own special motives ... but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another.⁵⁷

Urban pluralism had indeed struck a chord in Harlem, with the 'New Negro' leading the charge, expressing racial, social, political, economic, and class consciousness. This new expression echoed throughout Harlem's streets, filled with peoples of color, other *Others*, and with it the sound of many tongues mingling for the first time:

Within Harlem's seventy or eighty blocks, for the first time in their lives, colored people of Spanish, French, Dutch, Arabian, Danish, Portuguese, British and native African ancestry or nationality, [met] and[moved] together.⁵⁸

This new awareness and the expression of self could not and would not go unnoticed, and Yiddish writers would prove not to be immune to its

⁵⁷ Writers of the Harlem Renaissance expressed their racial consciousness in terms of a Black collective. See Alain Locke, *Survey Graphic Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, 630.

⁵⁸ W. A. Domingo, *Survey Graphic Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, 648.

charm. Their awareness of Harlem and of this Black Renaissance would find its way into Yiddish literature in the United States.

Insights and Perspectives

Drawing on the insight of African American and Yiddish writers/theorists, the necessary framework through which to approach Yiddish depictions of African American identity, culture, and history, emerges in the form of diaspora studies, more specifically a post-exilic literary perspective.

The development of Yiddish literature in America sets the foundation for my constructs of *Black Ashkenaz* and *Afro Yiddica*, which focus on this relationship and provides for a paradoxical relationship between Jew and Black. This juxtaposition of opposites (White vs. Black, Jew vs. Gentile, immigrant vs. native--Manichean pairings) creates an African American/Yiddish dialectic regarding the transition into a comparative diasporic perspective, i.e. a transnational discourse through representation (written gesture) across ethnic, cultural, social, and religious boundaries. This comparative expression relies on an interanimation of words and meanings relevant to and

dependent upon diasporic and exilic understandings and conceptualizations.

Diasporic literatures are at once literatures of exile and literatures of homecoming. The language of such literatures—here Yiddish and the African American Vernacular English of the Harlem Renaissance—each represent “an oppositional language, one embedded within another culture and hence simultaneously addressed to an external one.”⁵⁹ As a result, the Yiddish writer is able to survey Black culture through the lens of an insider, *quasi*-American, but using a non-white, Yiddish/Eastern European filter. Harlem Renaissance writers, in their usage of English and more specifically their vernacular, African American Vernacular English and the jazz-infused language of the 1920s and 1930s, are able to survey Black culture and Black expression, as well as American cultural understandings of African Americans and immigrant Jews. This allows for a Black critical self-reflection, perhaps for the first time and in/on their own terms, and represents the initial attempt to grapple with notions of the self as self vs. self as perceived by others, as well as wrestle with double consciousness on the

⁵⁹ Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 28.

individual level and an understanding of its relationship in terms of community and 'nation-ness'.

In this way, DuBois' writing addressed this duality of identity, the concept of a kind of unity within disunity, a nation within a nation, which is expressed in and through his concept of double consciousness. As represented and illustrated in African American literature, double consciousness is often described as the phenomenon in which literary texts reveal and further problematize two conflicting definitions of African American identity: a devastating and demoralizing European (White) American definition as well as a self-defined African (Black) American definition. For this project, one is confronted with something quite different: an often sympathetic Eastern European Yiddish (or not yet/quite white) definition of identity and an enlightened, progressive (Black) one. Literary production by writers of the Harlem Renaissance addressed and wrestled with Dubois' concept of *the veil* and, more specifically, notions of "two-ness", the divided awareness of one's identity, and an understanding of the consequences described as

. . . a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that

looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁶⁰

This literary characterization of double consciousness can be understood in relation to DuBois' description of the psycho-philosophical double consciousness as represented in *The Souls of Black Folk*. This duality of and in identity is described as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." DuBois himself further described it as a kind of categorical proposition in which the Black man was neither American nor Negro, but at the same time both. This identification (or lack thereof) created a tension and struggle in which the Black individual must deal with the inconsistencies and potentially problematic relationships created by being Black and by being American.

This struggle was intensified in that the Black individual had to not only understand but also live up to the expectations of each constituency, Black and American, both yet neither, and govern himself/herself accordingly. This ambivalence, according to DuBois,

⁶⁰ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 12.

was at the very heart of the African American experience and the core of the Black identity consciousness conflict. The awareness of existing in two worlds manifested itself as an internal struggle, marked by external consequences. In one world, African Americans were scrutinized and devalued on the basis of the color of their skin. In the other world, this same identification of skin color provided the category in which to group Blacks as a (pseudo) nation, as family, as brothers and sisters, and as a race in the DuBoisian sense:

...[a]vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily struggling together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. ⁶¹

Although such double consciousness is expressed in terms of a duality, as a type of identity dialectic, it is not clearly differentiated.

DuBois' theory of double consciousness can also serve as a metaphor for 'otherness' in a variety of Yiddish texts and contexts. This same conceptualization can be used to problematize the immigrant Jews' position within America's racial hierarchy and dominant cultural

⁶¹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

hegemony. As part of the framework with which to address the literary constructs and reconceptualization of African Americans in Yiddish literature, *the veil* can be seen as having been appropriated by the Yiddish literati and used as a cover to disguise ethnic identification and subordination within the American dialogue known as race. *The veil* became a vehicle for Americanization and would allow Yiddish writers/narrators to assume Black identity and express their perceptions and understandings regarding race in America and reposition themselves (and Blacks) accordingly. As such, DuBois' words could be recast:

one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, **if only quasi, not Black and not yet white with one eye still on the shtetl and the other looking toward the future**, a **Jew**; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark **soon-to-become-white** body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

As a result, the Yiddish-speaking immigrant Jew, a minority in the greater American dialogue regarding ethnicity, became a member of majority society, while Blacks retained their minority status, all within the fictionality of the text. *The veil* at once concealed and provided the impetus for double consciousness. The Yiddish speaking Jew, possessing his own particular brand of double consciousness given his

status within America's racial hierarchy, at once cultural insider and outsider, aware of his immigrant status and the desire to become American, as well as understanding the advantages and privileges of Whiteness and white identity, participated in the creation of an American Yiddish literature from the vantage point of being able to speak not only for himself, but also for African Americans.⁶² *The veil* was a safe place from which Yiddish writers could address their status.⁶³

The Yiddish construction of double consciousness varies from that of African Americans in that the color aspect becomes a more complex issue; DuBois' color line becomes somewhat distorted and a different dynamic comes into play—Jew vs. Gentile and Jew vs. Christian. Yiddish perceptions of self, contending with realizations of non-Blackness and Whiteness, but always with Jewishness, yielded a

⁶² German Jews were often considered more assimilated, having arrived in the United States in significant numbers prior to mass immigration of Eastern European Jews. Also, German Jews were historically viewed as more cosmopolitan, modern and educated when compared to their Yiddish-speaking counterparts. Eastern European Jews have been described as peasants, unable to speak German and as a result, had to rely on Yiddish, a jargon (*zhargon*) and often viewed as 'bastardized' or 'corrupted' form of German, as a mode of communication. Eastern European Yiddish-speaking Jews were sometimes seen as the poor cousins of German Jews.

⁶³ Using *the veil* as a blind, a rhetorical shield of sorts, was couched to ensure the safety of culture and societal position. As such, whether Yiddish writers are to be held accountable and if so, to what degree, remained to be seen. More interesting, however, is the fact that one can view African Americans as stand-ins for Jews, which ultimately renders Yiddish writings about African Americans simply as writings about themselves.

rather interesting and often precarious position. Once again, Sholem Aleichem acknowledges these same sentiments which have continued to reverberate throughout the twentieth-century. The question is thus posed,

So what are we? Well, we have our own religion. We have our own language. And, of course, there are a few million of us, people who pray from the same prayerbook, who keep the Sabbath, eat matzoth at Passover time . . . we hold on to our Jewishness so long, that we have not been wiped off the face of the earth like many others, nations who have left no trace behind – that itself is proof that we can and with God's help will be a nation with all the signs and symbols of a nation.⁶⁴

Sholem Aleichem further articulates the parameters in the writing of a nation within a nation. And for this new nation (American Ashkenaz) within a nation (the United States), Yiddish literature flourished.

Yiddish writers in America wrenched themselves from Old World notions of literary topics and traditional themes to accommodate the literary milieu in the new national (American) context. The New World meant changes--in the way Jews dressed, talked, educated their children, observed Judaism, and in the way they remembered and

⁶⁴ Aleichem, *Why Do Jews Need a Land of Their Own?*, 7.

recorded history. This leads one to look at Yiddish culture and *Yiddishkayt* in the New World in syncretic terms. If *syncretism* is the “reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief, as in philosophy or religion, especially when success is partial or the result is heterogeneous,” and if “. . . the syncretizing process really lay at one pole of a continuum that stretched from situations where items from two or more cultures in contact had been fully merged to those situations where there was the unchanged retention of pre-existing ones” with “. . . the proposition that cultural contact produces cultural change, and that cultures of multiple origin do not represent a cultural mosaic, but rather become newly integrated . . .,”⁶⁵ then these changes can be viewed as a reflection of the duality (or multiplicity) in and of the Yiddish immigrant experience in the drive toward Americanization and assimilation, even secularization.⁶⁶ Themes such as American capitalism, Black materialism, Black morality, and Yiddish perspectives regarding the sacred and the profane and morality vs.

⁶⁵ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston,: Beacon Press, 1969), 1-3.

⁶⁶ It can be argued that syncretism reflects the first generation, but slips into assimilation with subsequent generations.

vulgarity become commonplace, as the poor Yiddish immigrant writes the poor Black.

Negers, shvartses, Negroes, Afro-Americans, Blacks, African Americans, or niggers: regardless of the appellation⁶⁷, these represented for the Yiddish writer the consummate other--different, yet somehow similar, and foreign, yet somehow familiar. As recently arrived immigrants, their preoccupation with African Americans represented cross-cultural exploration in addressing immigration and migration, with respect to Judaism and Christianity, in terms of Jewish/Yiddish culture and Black culture, and in *other* writing *other*. The New World called for a redefinition of what it meant to be Jewish, and at the same time it offered a definition of what it meant to be Black (even if one were Jewish, Irish, etc.). A cultural revolution was in order in terms of secularization and socialization in the process of

⁶⁷ The word *shvartse(r)* has been viewed as a neutral term, simply meaning black female (male). It is however in the American context and upon entering English that it acquires negative connotations. The term *neger* is unmarked and is the equivalent of the term *Negro*. There are indeed other terms in Yiddish used to refer to African Americans, including *Afrikan-Amerikaner, Afrikan-Amerikaner, Afro-Amerikaner*, all entered into Yiddish from American English. There is another category of words used to refer to African Americans, particularly if it was clear that they understood the word *shvarts*. These 'code' words include *tunkele* ('dark'), *bloy* ('blue'), *grin* ('green'--also used to refer to recently arrived Yiddish immigrants or greenhorns [*griners*]). The words *khoyshekhs* or *khoyshekhdike*, from the Hebrew word for 'darkness,' and *kushim*, from the Hebrew for 'Ethiopian,' are also used when referring to Blacks.

creating a new national awareness, forming a new national and cultural memory and establishing roots in a 'new homeland.' In other words, a new consciousness, complete with internal and external consequences, was in the making.

Literary manifestations of double consciousness in the diasporic context include, but need not be limited to, "satire, experimentation, and transgression."⁶⁸ Here the notion of transgression is vital to Yiddish literary portrayals of African Americans in that boundaries are crossed in order to transfer identity from immigrant to American and from Yiddish-speaking Jew to Black. Through portrayals of African Americans, some Yiddish writers (or rather Yiddish-speaking narrators) are permitted to transgress and speak on behalf of, and more significantly in place of Blacks, which is at the very least problematic, and at most reflects the continuation of a paternalistic, racist attempt to silence them.

Some Yiddish writers appropriated the Black voice, often using it to describe and reveal their own condition and status in the United States. These writers could use the Black experience to vent their own frustrations. The assumption of a Black voice/identity is used to mask (or

⁶⁸ Goffman, *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*, 3.

veil) geographic, linguistic, and/or ethnic origins. Through Black images, these writers were able to engage in discourse pertaining to acceptance, prejudice, race, identity and culture in America, and to offer suppositions regarding the legacies of slavery, oppression and the current status of Blacks. Some Yiddish writers in America had a general understanding of the plight of African Americans and recognized and appreciated what it meant to start a new life (forced or otherwise) in a new land with a new language, all the while wanting to maintain one's own traditions, memories and culture. For such writers, the possibility of using the Black voice as a mask (*veil*) for their own did indeed exist. However, one should keep in mind that on some level, this represented a manipulative, even racist move in and of itself, in which the Black experience was used by another, hence replacing/erasing the original. Nonetheless, the result renders Blacks voiceless.

Some Yiddish writers were able to bring into the American context the influence of the traditional Hasidic *mayse*⁶⁹, a sense of restoring order, and mending broken lines of communication between

⁶⁹The traditional Hasidic *mayse* was used by members of Hasidism to teach disciples and followers piety and humility among other things. The Hasidic movement began during the middle of the 18th century, lead by Israel Baal Shem Tov. Storytelling contributed to the spread of the movement throughout Eastern Europe.

individual and fellow human beings. Furthermore, the traditional form enabled and encouraged the narrator to probe new, dangerous and perhaps otherwise forbidden topics, combining folk elements and sophisticated wit, drawing from both European and Jewish literary traditions. The relationship between African American and Yiddish writer is further revealed through the filter of an understanding of the legacy of diaspora vs. American promises of an egalitarian society in which upward mobility was possible.

The complexities shaped by internalized double consciousness become embedded in both African American and Yiddish expression. Consequently, literary production integrating such expression addresses representation and identity, here African American identity within the white American context and against a backdrop of a Yiddish, non-white, pre-1950s liberal identification, as opposed to Jewish identity from an African American, literary and artistic renaissance, Jazz Age perspective.

If representation implicates/intimates the position from which one writes, then one must take into consideration Yiddish enunciations with regard to the writer (Yiddish speaking-reading-writing immigrant Eastern European Jew) and the subject written about (African American at the bottom in a system of racial hierarchy, living in a land

of liberty) vs. Harlem Renaissance proclamations with respect to the writer (African American in a literary, artistic, creative high-time) and the subject addressed (immigrant Jew on his way to becoming American and perceived as white and as having greater access to resources, etc). What emerges from such exploration is the beginning of a dialogue regarding notions of diaspora, identity, otherness, space and the postcolonial linkage with respect to an African American/Yiddish interface.

Diasporic Perceptions

Diasporic understandings⁷⁰ and cultural sympathies serve as a link between Black and Jew. The project of creating a Jewish homeland was linked to the same project by some African Americans to create and re-establish themselves in Africa. For them, the Jewish model was *the* one to emulate. The project of homeland then was not simply a matter of literary, cultural or even religious expression; there were indeed geographic implications. Concepts and expressions of

⁷⁰ However, any discussion concerning diaspora, whether in terms of Jewish or Black thought, must question whether these two concepts of diaspora are indeed entirely the same or even viewed in the same fashion. Similarly, one needs to determine whether it is beneficial to understanding the 'fragmentary' relationship between Jews and Blacks by attributing the birth of Zionism and Black Nationalist thought as responses to modernity, independent of the ambivalence experienced by both groups inside and outside of modernity vs. viewing diaspora as a 'device' with which to explore this relationship. It is indeed interesting to view the concept of diaspora in terms of its intercultural history. Given this, answers to the following questions will perhaps shed some light upon the conceptualization of an historical understanding of DuBois' work within the discussion of notions of exile. To what degree do DuBoisian notions of double-consciousness fit into the concept of diaspora? Does double-consciousness exist in non-diasporic communities and/or cultures? Or is it only evident in instances in which 'nations within nations' exist? How do Jews fit into this line of thinking if they are/can be considered a 'non-national nation?' Does the condition of exile change or reveal anything significant if that condition is forced vs. voluntary?

Zionism, and for Blacks the Back to Africa movement,⁷¹ required the articulation of identity with respect to both Jews and Blacks.

Diasporic perceptions, which govern Yiddish constructs of Blackness, as well as Black expressions of Jewishness, should be viewed in terms of how they frame Blackness. That is, the frame or position of Blackness is extended or applied to the articulation of its relation to Jewishness/*Yiddish-ness* and American-ness. In other words, the representations of Blacks and Jews rely on the control of the framing apparatus--Blacks write Jews into Harlem Renaissance literature, Jews write Blacks into Yiddish literature in America. As a result, the Yiddish language and the 1920s Black vernacular of the Harlem Renaissance become integral parts of the framing apparatus. Blacks had very little if

⁷¹ Marcus Garvey believed in unity and as such, it represented the only path to improve the lives of black people throughout the world. In August of 1914, the Universal Negro Improvement (UNIA) was launched and by 1917 Garvey and the organization were active in Harlem. For Garvey, the only place for black people to gain autonomy and self emancipation was to return to Africa, hence the Back to Africa movement. As President of the UNIA, Garvey's intent was to bring together "all the people of African ancestry of the world into one great body to establish a country and government absolutely their own." In order to achieve that goal, Garvey articulated UNIA objectives as follows; to promote the spirit of race, pride and love; to administer to and assist the needy; to reclaim the fallen of the race; to establish universities, colleges and secondary schools for the further education and culture of the boys and girls of the race and to conduct a worldwide commercial and industrial intercourse. By 1920, the association boasted over 1,100 branches in more than 40 countries. As a side, it is interesting to note that Garvey was often referred to as 'the Black Moses' in his endeavors to lead black people back to Africa, back to 'the Promised Land'.

any access to Yiddish and Yiddish-speaking Jews had little access to Harlem Black vernacular. Language then becomes a necessary component in framing Blackness, Jewishness and American-ness; Blackness in the American context vs. the Yiddish context, Jewishness in the Black context and American-ness, in both.

However, it is important to realize, with respect to African American and Jewish interaction and contact during the Harlem Renaissance, there are two competing Jewish factors, two components of Ashkenaz. On one hand there is an Eastern European/Yiddish Ashkenaz, writing about their experiences with African Americans, engaging in terms of literary occupation without any precept of preoccupation. Opposite this are Americanized, assimilated German Jews who predate their Eastern European counterparts, and who were instrumental in (including financially) supporting African Americans in their literary and artistic pursuits, engaged in Black theater (as both writer and audience), Black music (collaborators, purveyors, producers, and agents) and Black art (benefactors particularly of literature, painting and sculpture). However, it was not exclusively in the arts that African Americans and Jews were brought together.

“Issues of tradition and memory provide a key to bringing together the histories of Blacks and Jews within modernity in some sort of mutual relation.”⁷² It is within the confines of Yiddish literature written in the United States that these histories are brought together, maintained and allowed to flourish. The experience of Eastern European Yiddish writers who settled on New York's Lower East Side and their first contacts with African Americans is representative of the clash between Old World tradition and ideas with New World sensibilities and encounters. It is a central theme in the Eastern European Jewish immigrant experience and part and parcel of the foundation of an African American/Yiddish interface.

The components of this interface can be viewed from a variety of perspectives--a firm commitment to *Yiddishkayt* vs. American 'progress', Yiddish as the link to a collective historical past, to memory and tradition vs. English as a sign of evolution, Yiddish as *quasi*-sacred in terms of its relationship and usage in tradition vs. English as secular and the new symbol of learning. These contexts represent the transition from a Jewish past into an American present, from a 'dark' ethnic past

⁷² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 212.

to a 'white' American future. They also contribute to the depictions and perceptions with respect to Black Ashkenaz.

The other component in this interface with respect to Harlem Renaissance depictions of Jews is equally complex and also can be viewed from a variety of perspectives; the firm commitment to self-representation in the arts and literature of the Harlem Renaissance vs. representations assumed or desired for commercial success. This self-representation finds expression in the tension between African American Vernacular English as an in-group phenomena and the link to a Black urban collective with roots in Africa and the West Indies vs. a sub-standard English usage as a sign of the inability of Blacks to speak/learn 'proper' English⁷³, as well as the Harlem Renaissance as a period of Black empowerment with respect to self, community and notions of citizenship and participation culminating in the 'New Negro' vs. status quo, no creativity (no literature, music or art), and silence (no poetry, protest or political/social activism) by African Americans on the heels of Plessy vs. Ferguson and under the thumb of Jim Crow.

⁷³ The same was said about Jews speaking German.

CHAPTER 2

Literary Blacksmiths: Identity and Memory

The beginning of the twentieth-century saw a number of significant writings by Jews about African Americans.⁷⁴ These writings addressed Black history, the status and treatment of Blacks in America, and the future of African Americans, along with their relationships with Jews. Yiddish writers⁷⁵ offered keen, detailed descriptions of how they “saw” African Americans. Whether the subject of literature or intellectual debate, African Americans and their connection to America, to Africa and to Jews themselves, provided a great deal of literary fare. According to Itzik Rontsh (1899-1985),⁷⁶ “The Jew and the

⁷⁴ See works by Franz Boas, in *Race, Language and Culture*, Melville Herskovits, *The American Negro* and *The Myth of the Negro Past* and Louis Wirth, *Urbanism as a Way of Life*.

⁷⁵ Reuven Ayzland (1884-1955), Avrom Reyzen (1876-1953), Rayzl Zychlinski (1910-2001).

⁷⁶ *America in Yiddish Literature: An Interpretation* New York: Marstin Press, Inc. 1945, 239.

Black are in the same boat. They know that in fighting for their human rights, they will become closer. . . . The Yiddish writer has felt that for quite some time." Rontsh goes on to write that "the Black is an integral part of our Yiddish literature here." Rontsh's interpretation offers insight regarding the appeal or the draw of Yiddish literary images addressing African Americans. Many Yiddish writers engaged in writings depicting images of African Americans.

Writers such as Y.-Y. Shvarts (1885-1971), Aron Glants-Leyeles (1889-1966),⁷⁷ and Zishe Landoy (1889-1937)⁷⁸ were concerned with the

⁷⁷ Also known as A. Leyeles was a member of the *Inzikhistn* or Introspectivist poets. The *Inzikhistn* were led by Jacob Glatstein (1896-1971), Leyeles, and Nakhum Borekh Minkoff (1893-1958), whose manifesto rejected earlier Yiddish poetry. Their poetry reflected a more subjective expression and emphasized the importance and usage of Yiddish poetry as the means by which one could and should interpret one's environment, in conjunction with one's *Weltanschauung*. According to their manifesto of 1919, "*The difference, however between us and those other poets, both Yiddish and non-Yiddish, ancient and modern, is that we are dedicated to deepening, developing, and expanding the introspective method. . . . The world exists and we are part of it. But for us, the world exists only as it is mirrored in us, as it touches us. The world is a nonexistent category, a lie, if it is not related to us. It becomes an actuality only in and through us.*" ⁷⁷ Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, p. 774. Raised in Poland, Leyeles spent time in England before coming to the United States in 1909. He studied literature at Columbia University in New York and published his first book of poetry in 1918.

creation of non-ideological writings and expressionistic poetry recounting experiences with African Americans in the New World. Other writers, such as Berish Vaynshteyn (1905-1967) and H. Leyvik (1888-1962)⁷⁹, specifically wrote collections of poems addressing various themes, including African Americans and their experiences in their own communities, as well as their experiences in relation to and at the hands of certain members of American society. According to writer Avrom Lyesen (1872-1938), "the Negroes, as we can see, are in many

⁷⁸ Landoy was a member of *Di Yunge*, a precursor to the *Inzikhistin* and a Yiddish literary movement which advocated poetry independent of political message. *Di yunge*, consisted of writers such as Mani Leyb (1884-1953), Moshe Leyb Halpern (1886-1932), Zisha Landau (1889-1937), Reuben Ayzland (1884-1955), Y.-Y. Shvarts (1885- 1971), Joseph Rolnick (1879-1955), Moshe Nadir (1885-1943), David Ignatoff (1885-1954), Isaac Raboy (1882-1954), Joseph Opatashu (1886- 1954) and M. J. Haimowitz (1881-1958). It is possible to consider *di yunge* and *in zikh* as literary movements in competition with each other, each vying for the respect and recognition of Yiddish readers and writers alike, not to mention memorialization in Yiddish literary history and a place in the Yiddish canon. They must be understood, however, as *American Yiddish* literary movements responding to and rebelling against an older Eastern European Yiddish tradition. The writers of these two movements defined themselves in their negation and revision of Yiddish literary, linguistic, ideological, social, political, spiritual, emotional, secular and economic concerns as established by their literary predecessors. Artistic innovation, notions of rebellion and crisis, and expressions of the conflict between Old World modes of understanding and traditions and New World sensibilities and experiences all serve to underscore the impetus of *di yunge* and *in zikh* in their endeavor to 'slay their literary fathers,' and assume their respective places at the head of the Yiddish literary table in not only the United States, but in the New World.

⁷⁹ H. Leyvik is the pseudonym of Leyvik Halpern. Born in Belorussia, Leyvik spent years in prison for his participation in political activities before immigrating to America in 1913. He was also associated with *Di Yunge*.

respects our brothers in suffering . . . It makes no difference that their skin is black."⁸⁰ These words, written in a 1915 article for *Tsukunft*⁸¹, set the stage for Yiddish literary and discursive iterations for the twentieth-century. For Lyesen, the United States represented “. . . the Negro *goles* [diaspora], which is similar to the Jewish *goles*, and in many respects worse.”⁸² This awareness and comparison of the African American and the Jewish experience provided the backdrop against which other Yiddish writers would/could position themselves and their writings addressing the Black experience. This experience includes the relationship with Jews in urban and rural environments and encounters with Black individuals, as well as Black communities, including discussions of American identity, history and Black identity.

Depictions which offer more sympathetic views of African Americans reveal an understanding of their position in America. These portrayals bring to light a perception of African Americans as not so different from the new immigrants, working to escape poverty and

⁸⁰ Ethan Goffman, *Imagining Each Other : Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*, SUNY Series in Modern Jewish Literature and Culture. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 3.

⁸¹ *Tsukunft* (Future) was the name of a Yiddish monthly, socialist in its orientation, edited by Lyesen. It was first published in 1892, with the goal of enlightening the masses of Yiddish speaking immigrants.

⁸² Goffman, 5.

create better lives for themselves and their families. It is this understanding which gives these Yiddish writers insight with respect to issues of acceptance, tolerance, and participation by Blacks in American society. They were able to see themselves in African Americans, in terms of the perceptions held by whites regarding people of color and the manner in which they were treated in the United States.⁸³

Yiddish literary production addressing African Americans appropriated the Black experience in America to illustrate and illuminate memories (historical, cultural, religious, social) beliefs, traditions, customs and emotions. Similarly, a number of writings of the Harlem Renaissance have utilized the Ashkenazic immigrant experience as a model to emulate and expand Black elements of religious, historical, cultural, and political desiderata.

The literary creation of a new (and perhaps different) African American, as rendered by an immigrant culture and as depicted by the Yiddish literati, can be interpreted by Yiddish readers and African American as one aspect of collective representation based upon a

⁸³ One can make a connection in the American context, in terms of Klan rhetoric. Rendering Jews as 'mud people,' made them no different than African Americans.

collective understanding of Otherness, Blackness, and the Black experience in America. This understanding is partially acquired and perpetuated through the utilization of stereotypes from social and cultural perspectives, as well as a cognitive perspective.

In addressing literary (re)creations, discussion regarding stereotypes, memory and the relationship between the two provides a framework allowing for an alternate perspective when reading culture and ethnic and cultural representations. One cannot underestimate the importance of memory and its connection to identity, community, and in creating a collective. "The link of memory and space is closely connected to the reinforcement of national identity, a process in which the ideological constructions of uniquely shared land, language, and memory become props for the threatened integrity of the nation-state."⁸⁴ One of the vehicles with which to transmit memory is language, in this case Yiddish and the language of the Harlem Renaissance; without memory and language, there is neither collective consciousness nor the expression of such.

When viewed as a collective construct, Yiddophone Ashkenazic memory allows for the reconstruction of geography, community,

⁸⁴ Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 1.

culture, and people based upon a collective understanding of American history and African American history, processed through the filter of Jewish history.⁸⁵ With respect to Yiddish depictions of African Americans, the result is a new literary constituency of African Americans, with representations often based on facts, perceived facts, racial folklore, stereotypes and perceptions held by authors and readers. This can be problematic in that

'stereotypical biases' influence memories and perceptions of the social world. Experience with different groups of people leads to the development of stereotypes that capture their general properties, but can spawn inaccurate and unwarranted judgments about individuals.

⁸⁶

In other words, stereotypical images could act as fuel to the fire, with respect to misunderstandings and/or conflicts to the African American/Yiddish (Jewish) interchange. They could serve to contradict, confirm or control some of the perceptions held by both

⁸⁵ African American history does not become American history until after African Americans are considered American and entitled to the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship – post 1960.

⁸⁶ Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*, 1st Houghton Mifflin ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002), 10. Psychologist and memory specialist Schacter proposes the categorization of malfunctions of the memory. He refers to the seven categories of memory failure as fundamental transgressions or sins.

readers and writers alike. The oversimplification of images, whether Black or Ashkenazic, are influenced by collective understandings, relationships, behaviors, treatments, feelings and projections of those viewed as different and possessing different value systems, other ways of thinking, dress, speaking and engaging with the world or somehow perceived as in competition for resources, access and/or mobility. All of this comes into play with respect to Yiddish depictions of African Americans and Harlem Renaissance depictions of Jews.

Working in consort with the conceptualization of stereotypes is bias, which can be defined as the rewriting of the past based upon present beliefs. This in turns allows for the reconstruction of the past,⁸⁷ a past often distorted based on misattribution (assigning a memory to the wrong source), suggestibility (implanting false memories), and persistence (which concerns intrusive recollections that we cannot

⁸⁷ For a rather interesting take on reconstructions of the past see Lauren Slater, *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. Her text represents an exercise in the interplay of the literal/factual with the metaphorical/fictional. According to Slater, "the neural mechanism that undergirds the lie is the same neural mechanism that helps us make narrative. Thus all stories . . . are at least physiologically linked to deception" (164). Similarly, Miriam Moses addresses the notion of reality and how to address writing one's experience. In her own writing she reveals the uncertainty in relating events from one's own perspective; "it may certainly be assumed that much of this never really happened, but then it may just as certainly be assumed that much of it really did happen, for I no longer know about realities. Realities are for me the reflected memories . . . that hold illusions of what is real and imagined" (in Jules Chametzky, *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 1112).

manage to forget--even when we wish we could). These processes should be taken into consideration when addressing Yiddish representations of African Americans and Harlem Renaissance characterizations of Jews: "human beings are storytellers, and we tend to tell stories about ourselves, [*we also tend to exaggerate and make things up*]. Thinking and talking [*and writing*] about experiences not only helps to make sense of the past, [*and serve to create an alternative perspective of the past*] but also changes the likelihood of [*our*]⁸⁸ subsequent remembering."⁸⁹

⁸⁸ All emphases, additions and inflections are my own.

⁸⁹ Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*, 31.

Zakhor and Jewish Memory

Memory is always problematic, usually deceptive, and sometimes treacherous.

. . . [W]hile memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi

The word *zakhor*, or 'remember,' in addition to the act of remembering itself, both represent important themes in Yiddish writing in that they are part and parcel of the Jewish experience.

Altogether the verb zakhar appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with Israel or God as the subject, for memory is incumbent upon both. The verb is complement -ed by its obverse – forgetting. As Israel is enjoined to remember, so it is adjured not to forget. Both imperatives have resounded with enduring effect among the Jews since biblical times⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron and David N. Myers, *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Brandeis University Press, 1998), 5.

It is throughout time, in this context, and upon this foundation that Yiddish writers as social, political and linguistic purveyors are able to record the events of the day, express individual and community concerns, and provide both a connection to and an outlet for the longings, hopes, fears and sentiments of the people. Their writings and, as a result, their memories (from biblical time onward) represent the receptacle of their desires and their hatreds, as passed down from generation to generation and from place to place. Yiddish writers, by virtue of their Jewishness, were charged with the task of remembering and recording for and as members of the collective. Their contributions to Jewish memory in general, and more precisely an American Yiddish memory, provided a portion of the framework through which to explore and tease out the proposition of an African American/Yiddish interface.

If "individual memory is structured through social frameworks, and . . . collective memory is not a metaphor but a social reality transmitted and sustained through the conscious efforts and institutions of the group"⁹¹ then, through their literary contributions in creating a Black Ashkenaz, Yiddish writers in the United States were able to forge

⁹¹ Yerushalmi, Carlebach, Efron and Myers, xxxiv.

an American identity aided by precepts of otherness and self-identification as not Black. By positioning themselves in relationship to Blacks (as not black) and Whites (as possibly, plausibly and/or potentially white)--appellations reflecting an understanding or at the very least an awareness of the repercussions of each--Yiddish writers were able to bolster their identity, thereby augmenting Jewish identity in America. Their very construction of Blacks, Blackness and Black identity had far-reaching implications for their construction of identity as Jews in America. I do not intend to imply that Jews are white, only that Jewish identity in the United States was posed vis-à-vis Whiteness and in opposition to Blackness. With Whiteness came certain privileges and advantages; with Blackness came something entirely different. This does not mean that Jewishness and Whiteness could not be viewed as conflicting categories. Jews were not necessarily presumed white; however, they did resist being included in the category of Black⁹². The construction and negotiation of Jewish identity in the United States, based upon these Yiddish writings, can be

⁹² This category would render Jews near or at the bottom of America's racial hierarchy and severely limit the possibility of social, economic and/or political mobility. The repercussions of identification with the Black category could have serious implications regarding full participation in what America had to offer.

defined, delineated, differentiated and determined in reference to Blackness, non-Blackness and Whiteness. There was indeed a great deal at stake for Yiddish writers. Their depictions further revealed insight into the negotiation of self and self-reflexivity in terms of a burgeoning American, i.e. Yiddish (Jewish) American identity. In the process, they provided the basis for an American Yiddish memory.

Yiddish memory then, in the American context, can be viewed as the recording of events and collecting of information as experienced, expressed, understood, perceived, viewed and interpolated by Yiddish speaking, reading, writing Jews in the United States. Their writings, influenced by their *Yiddishkayt* and the quality of their *Yiddishkayt*, serve as text memorials to a particular time in the American Yiddish (soon to be American Jewish) experience and in the establishment of Yiddish and African American relationship, if only in the literary context.

African Americans and Memory

The African American struggle for religion, for education (from the plantation onward), the fight for human rights, perceptions of a common fate, and Black folklore are all at the foundation of African American memory. Tied to the vision of freedom and the collective understanding of Black life in the United States, African American memory is the receptacle of the collective consciousness of a people (made up of many peoples – a nation) whose roots, deeply embedded and flourishing in another continent, were severed and transplanted into an American institution devoid of humanity (within a nation). The collective memory⁹³ of Africa America is based upon trauma, a national trauma⁹⁴ in the form of slavery⁹⁵ in the United States,

⁹³ For more regarding collective memory, see Maurice Halbwachs 1925 work entitled *On Collective Memory* (Translated 1992 by Lewis A. Coser) London: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd. It is here that Halbwachs introduces the concept of '*mémoire collective*'.

⁹⁴ Eastern European anti-Semitism, from which many Yiddish writers fled, can be seen as national trauma as well.

as a collective phenomenon. Given that racism persisted long after slavery ended, the national trauma for African Americans was two-fold. This compounded trauma, as the foundation for common memory, is crucial to African American identity and distinguishes Black American identity from any other American identity. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier described this trauma in his seminal work addressing Blacks in the United States:

Probably never before in history has a people been so nearly completely stripped of its social heritage as the Negroes who were brought to America. Other conquered races have continued to worship their household gods within the intimate circle of their kinsmen. But American

⁹⁵ In 1918, when Ulrich B. Phillips published his *American Negro Slavery*, a methodically researched work addressing Black labor and the development of the plantation system, he set the stage for further treatments regarding the nature and the discussion of issues of cultural traditions concerning Blacks in the United States. However, this seminal study did not attempt to reveal the composition of the transplanted culture of slaves, their languages or their religions, but recount their (hi)story of labor and document the economic and social specificities entailed and entrenched in the institution of slavery itself. A discussion of cultural traditions with regard to Negro labor and their establishment as a community of an enslaved population was indeed lacking. Phillips' work paved the way for discussions concerning the cultural continuities of Blacks transplanted in the U.S. *American Negro Slavery* allowed for the possibility for discourse on slavery beyond the parameters of labor, economics and means of production, race and ideology. In terms of the perception of cultural and/or traditional survivals and characteristics among Blacks in the United States, Phillips addressed the issue rather succinctly, "No people is without its philosophy and religion," but he nonetheless acquiesced to echoing the sentiments of so-called 'benevolent' plantation owners and paternalistic advocates of slavery, that "the Negro was what the white man made him." He would also turn out to be what the Yiddish writer made him.

slavery destroyed household gods and dissolved the bonds of sympathy and affection between men of the same blood and household. . . Through force of circumstances, they had to acquire a new language, adopt new habits of labor, and take over, however imperfectly, the folkways of the American environment.⁹⁶

For Frazier, echoes from the trauma of slavery would continue to reverberate for Blacks in America. The very nature of the stripping of Black social, cultural and linguistic heritage would prove to be a significant obstacle for African Americans. Overcoming these obstacles would attest to the strength of African survivalisms and the persistence of Africa in the Black imagination.

As a result, it can be argued that the cultural memory⁹⁷ of African Americans is based and built upon African survivalisms (as based upon various enslaved African peoples, their forms of religion

⁹⁶ Edward Franklin Frazier and Anthony M. Platt, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 34.

⁹⁷ Regarding cultural memory see Jan Assmann. According to Assmann, cultural memory is the 'outer dimension of human memory' (1992:19) embracing two different concepts; *Erinnerungskultur* or 'memory culture' and *Vergangenheitsbezug* or 'reference to the past'. It is the second concept which is part and parcel of the African American experience; a sense of unity and an identity based upon a shared past (slavery) and in creation of an historical consciousness (involving emancipation/struggle). Memory culture perpetuates collective/collected identity through African American music (including Negro spirituals), dance, art, language and writing.

and religious ritual, dance, music and language, etc) as created by the shared experience of a cultural crisis based upon a national trauma experienced by various enslaved African peoples. African American culture and cultural memory was syncretic and innovative. Africa represented a *distant past*, beyond any individual memory and yet a part of the collective memory of Blacks in the United States. The 'dark' continent would turn out to weigh rather heavily upon the Black *present* of the Harlem Renaissance, as the source of the later transplanted African American experience. Consequently, the Black distant past drew upon ideological, Biblical, royal/regal, linguistic and formulaic understandings and perceptions with respect to Africa.

Connecting and Reflecting

The 1920s saw critical discussions regarding the meaning of Africa and African American ties to the continent, the search for self, the significance of Black folk culture in an urban and increasingly secular setting, notions of racial authenticity and an emerging Black aesthetic among African American intellectuals took place. Countee Cullen echoes the search for the meaning of Africa in his well-known, frequently cited poem entitled *Heritage*.⁹⁸

*What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?*

⁹⁸ Although other readings of this poem address its homoeroticism, that is not of concern for this project. My reading strictly addresses the search for meaning in and of Africa. Only the first stanza of the poem appears here. The entire poem can be found in the appendix.

The narrator's search for the meaning of Africa is highlighted by his distance from and proximity to it. "One three centuries removed / From the scenes his fathers loved" underscores two concepts: geographic and chronologic distance to/from Africa and a connection to Africa through family ancestry. This represents another aspect of the *push-pull* model; the push of Africa to be remembered as the point of origin (homeland/motherland) vs. the pull of time and place. Africa is clearly a part of the narrator's past, but does not truly represent home. The United States is home, the place where he has established roots, the place to which he is connected vs. Africa, the place to which he has a connection.

In its search for meaning, for a connection to home (or an ancestral homeland) Cullen's poem is echoed in Berysh Vaynshteyn's poem entitled 'Oyf Dayn Erd Amerike'⁹⁹. The narrator reveals his 'heritage,' his connection to the Old World and his own distant past.

⁹⁹ The first, second and last stanzas appear here. The poem in its entirety can be found in the appendix. Vaynshteyn was born in Rzeszow, Galicia, in March in 1905. After brief stints in Bohemia and Vienna, he made his way to the United States (1925). His first published work appeared in 1927. *Oyf Dayn Erd Amerike* can be viewed as semi-autobiographical. For Vaynshteyn, although he spent a great deal of his life in New York, Rzeszow, the center of Hassidism, remained home. He never let go of his 'Old World' connection as evident is his later epic poem, *Reyshe*, in which he laments its obliteration and mourns the destruction of its people, his people, the Jews or Rzeszow.

אויף דיין ערד, אַמעריקע

אויף דיין ערד איז מיר באַשערט צו זינגען דאָס געזאַנג פֿון דיין
לאַנד.
כ'האַב אַזוי פֿיל מענטשן, אַזוי פֿיל שיפֿן אין דינע ברייטע האַפֿנס
געזען
און ביי דינע פֿעלקער פֿון לשונות זיך געלערנט זיין אין דער
פֿרעמד,
און אַנגעהויבן פֿאַרשטיין, אַז כאַטש ריישע, גאַליציע, איז מיין
היים,
איז מיין שטאָט ניו-יאָרק – מינע גאַסן: דילענסי, רידזש און פיט,
און היימישעו נאָך ביסטו מיר פֿון יענעם טרויעריקן טאָג אָן געוואָרן
ווען כ'האַב אויף דיין ערד, אַמעריקע, געזען מיין טאַטע-מאַמע
שטאַרבן,

Oyf dayn erd mir bashert tsu zingen dos gezang fun dayn
Land.
Kh'hob azoy fil mentshn, azoy fil shifn in dayne breyte
hafns gezen
Un bay dayne felker fun leshoynes zikh gelernt zayn in der
Fremd.
Un ongehoynbn farshteyn, az chotsh reyshe, galitsie, iz
Mayn heym,
Iz maynshtot nyu york – mayne gasn: dilensi, ridzsh un pit;
Un heymisher nokh bistu mir fun yenem troyerikn tog on
Gevorn,
Ven kh'hob oyf dayn erd, Amerike, gezen mayn tate-
Mame shtarbn.

On your soil I was destined to sing the song of your land.
I have seen so many people, so many ships in your broad
harbors,
And from the tongues of your peoples I learned to be a
stranger.
And began to understand that though Reyshe, Galicia is
my home,
My city is New York – my streets: Delancey, Ridge and Pitt;
And you have become homier to me from that mournful
day on,
When I saw on your soil, America, my father and mother
die.

The first stanza of the poem reveals a connection with the Old World, with Galicia, but also an awareness of its passing. It nonetheless remains 'home' as America gains prominence. The narrator's city is New York, his streets, his turf; he belongs. He has taken ownership as it gradually is becoming home, replacing 'home' as it were; after all, it was 'destined' to be that way. This sense of having met his destiny in New York adds to the overall comfort of being in the United States. However, there is a twist. The deaths of the narrator's parents in America literally tie him to its soil. He is connected to the land through family and consequently now has roots in America.

In the second stanza, the narrator provides details regarding his personal history. He in effect provides the reader with his *yikhes*.

היימישע טאַטע-מאַמע — אייניקלעך פֿון אַמסטערדאַמער יידשע
 וואָגלערס ;
 פֿון די אור זיידעס נאָך פֿון דזשאָרדזש וואַשינגטאָנס גרויסע צייטן ,
 וואָס האָבן מיט שרעק איבער מבולדיקע וואַסערן זיך זעגלען
 געלאָזט
 מיט זייערע בענטש-ליכט, תליתים און תפילין פֿונעם אַלטן
 האָלאַנד
 און פֿאַרן ראַדן לינקאָלן געבראַכט די חכמה פֿון " האָלי-מאָזעס,"
 אויף די באַוול-פֿעלדער צו קענען מילדערן דאָס געוויין פֿון נעגערס.

Heymish tate-mame–eyniklekh fun amsterdamer yidishe
 Voglers;
 Fun di ur-zeydes nokh fun dzshordzsh vashingtons groyse
 Tsaytn,
 Vos hobn mebuldike vasern zikh tseglekh gelozt
 Mit zeyere bentsh-likht, talisim un tefillin funem altn holand
 Un farn darn lincoln gebracht di khokme fun „holi-mozes.“
 Oyf di bavel – felder tsu kenen mildern dos geveyn fun
 Negers.

Father and mother from home – grandchildren of
 Amsterdam Jewish vagabonds;
 Of great-grandfathers, from George Washington's great
 times,
 Who sailed in fear over waters of the flood
 With their Sabbath candles, tallises and tefillin from old
 Holland
 And brought to the thin Lincoln the wisdom of "Holy
 Moses,"
 To soften the cry of Negroes in cotton fields.

The reader learns that the narrator's parents, people of the Old World, were the grandchildren of Dutch Jews. More importantly, his family's connection to the United States is explained. "Fun di ur-zeydes nokh fun dzshordzsh vashingtons groyse tsaytn" establishes the family's arrival sometime between the late 1780s and the late 1790s, the formative years of this nation. Despite this history, despite the fact that his family arrives a hundred years or so before the last major wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration, "Reyshe, Galitsie, remains [his] heym."

The journey motif, which appears in the first stanza, "azoy fil mentshn, azoy fil shifn," reappears in the second: "vos hobn mebuldike vasern zikh tseglekh gelozt." It is subsequently echoed throughout other stanzas, bringing to mind the journey of Africans to America. In strengthening this connection between Black and Jew, the narrator reveals that his family too undertook a long fearful journey, but most importantly, it was his ancestors who were responsible for bringing to Lincoln "di khokme fun 'holi Mozes,'" in which the journey motif expands into that of *exodus*. That wisdom was to help lead African Americans out of slavery and into the Promised Land. He further connects Jews and Blacks in a narrative involving redemption and salvation. It is through the Jew that the burden of slavery is somewhat

lessened, in that it is the inhumanity of slavery, and indeed its cause for abolition, that is supported by *Tanakh*.

It is, however, the final stanza of the poem which further underscores the African American/Jewish connection. As the seasons change and time progresses, there are some things that remain constant:

אין נאָוועמבער ווערן אַלע זאַכן דאָ ראָסטיק, ווערן געל.
יינגלישע פֿײַערן סמאַליען פֿון צענאָגלטע קאַסטנס, ברעטער און
קאַנען,
גאַט, סאַראַ בענקשאַפֿט ס'קוקט פֿון פֿנימער ייִדישע, נעגערישע,
איטאַליענישע
” איסט-סייד, וועסט-סייד” — אומעטום די זעלבע פֿענצטער, די
זעלבע נאַכט.
און שטאַרבט אַ מענטש אויף דיין גרויסער, ברייטער ערד,
אַמעריקע,
איז ווי ר'וואָלט דאָ געשטאַרבן אין אַ סך לענדער מיט אַ מאָל !

In November vern ale zachn do rostik, vern gel.
Yinglishe fayern smalien fun tsenoglte kastns, breter un
Kanen.
Got, sara benkshaft s'kukt fun penimer yidishe, negerishe,
Italienishe.
"Ist-sayd, vset-sayd"-umetum di zelbe fentster, di zelbe
Nacht.
Un shtarbt a mentsch oyf dayn groyser, breyter erd,
Amerike,
Iz vi r'volt do geshtorbn in a sach lender mit a mol!

In November all things here become rusty, grow yellow.
Boyish fires smolder with nail-studded crates, boards and
tin cans.
God, what longing looks out of faces, Jewish, Negro,
Italian.
"East-Side, West-Side"-everywhere the same windows, the
same night.
And when a man dies on your great wide soil, America,
It is as if he died in many countries at once!

Time and death serve as the great equalizers. Over time, all things age, "vern ale zachn do rostik, vern gel," and for the narrator, people are not immune to such changes. *Jewish, Negro, Italian*, each from some place else and now (trans)planted in America, longing for *home*, for something different, for some place without "di zelbe fentster, di zelbe nacht." With the diverse immigrant population, the narrator proclaims America as the multiethnic crucible and precursor to the melting pot, "un shtarbt a mentsch oyf dayn groyser, breyter erd, Amerike, iz vi r'volt do geshtorbn in a sach lender mit a mol"! Previous stanzas reveal the narrator's sensing of sadness and loneliness found among some immigrants and among some Blacks in America. America as *home* could exacerbate feelings of isolation and a desire or longing for the Old World for immigrant Yiddish-speaking Jews and a different time, space and place for African Americans.

Vaynshteyn's sentiments are echoed somewhat in George
Reginald Margetson's "The Fledgling Bard and the Poetry Society Part
I"¹⁰⁰.

We hail thee, land of liberty,
Star of our hope and destiny
Where long we've been and long must be
In freedom's fabled place.

We bless thee, land, in love's sweet name
Whereto as slaves our fathers came
Where still we struggle lashed and lame
As exiles torn from grace.

The first stanza here further echoes the sentiments of "*Oyf dayn
erd, Amerike*," particularly the theme of destiny with respect to the
United States, "Where long we've been and long must be." However,
the tone of the poem then changes. This "land of liberty, freedom's
fabled place" is meant to be satiric. The idea of America and
freedom is antithetical to the Black experience. America could be
equated with bondage, deprivation, oppression and death, whether

¹⁰⁰ The entire poem can be found in the appendix.

cultural, spiritual, linguistic or physical. The narrator further acknowledges this with the next stanza; “we bless thee, land, in love’s sweet name/ whereto as slaves our fathers came.” Although there was no immediate ‘freedom’ for Africans brought to the U.S., it remained their dream and that of their progeny. They existed in a place as “exiles torn from grace.” How could such a place conjure up notions of freedom and of home? Images of slavery, human suffering at the hands of men, and the notion of exile both serve to connect the Black and Jewish experiences, if only thematically.

In another poem by Vaynshteyn, “*Negerish*,”¹⁰¹ African American and Jewish stories and histories are once again linked by projecting images associated with and familiar to a Yiddish-speaking-reading audience, utilizing the perspective of the Black experience in America. Vaynshteyn is able to weave together notions of Jewish destiny and impressions of Black culture and religious affinity. This results in a dichotomy of Black and Christian vs. non- Black and Jewish.

¹⁰¹ ‘*Negerish*’ can be translated in a variety of ways, including; Blackish, Black, Negro-ness, Negro-ish, Negro, etc. Additionally, this poem appears in its entirety in the appendix. Only portions of it are used in this section.

נעגערֿיש

אין האַרלעמער געטאָ, אין אַזאַ גלות,
ווערט אַפֿילו פֿון גאַט אַ נעגער.
מאַנסבילן ליגן פֿנעניש ביי די באַרטנס אַרום
און נעכטיקן אויף נאַסע, אויסלענדישע פֿעסער;
רעדן צו די קלעצער, וואָס שלאָגן דעם ברעג.
פֿאַר אַלעמענס אויגן, רויש פֿון פֿלאַמיקן שוים
פֿון אַמעריקעס שטאַטנדיקע אינדזלען,
וואָס דערציילן פֿון קייטן אויף הענט, אויף פֿיס
אַפֿגעפֿירטע—אין אַ הייסן צפֿון-לאַנד.
טרויעריק און ענלעך איז האַרלעם
צום אַריענטאַלישן ירושלים:
טעכטער אין לעצטן בלוי פֿון זייער גאַס
וואַרטן מיט אויסגעשטרעקטע כלים אויף ברויט,
ווי די דינסט-פֿרויען אין שלמה המלכס צייטן.
אויף אַלע אַוונטיקע שוועלן נעגערישע פֿנימער.
די פֿון הונגער, טראָגן זיך אין פֿרעכע טענץ;
וויקלען זיך מיט גלוסט אין די טויערן אַרײַן.

Negerish

In Harlemer geto, in aza goles,
Vert afile fun got a neger.
Mansbiln lign canenish bay di bortns arum
Un nekhtikn oyf nase, oyslendishe feser;
Redn tsu di kletser, vos shlogn dem breg.
Far alemens oygn, roysh fun flamikn shoym
Fun Amerikes shtatndike indzlen,
Vos dertseyln fun keytn oyf hent, oyf fis
Opgefirte- in a heysn tsfun-land.
Troyerik un enlekh iz Harlem
Tsum orientalishn Yerushalim:

Tekhter in letstn bloy fun zeyer gas
Vartn mit oysgeshreckte colim oyf broyt,
Vi di dinst froyen in shloyme hamelekhs tsaytn.
Oyf ale ovntike shveln negerishe penimer.
Di fun hunger, trogn zikh in frekhe tents;
Vikhlen zikh mit glust in di toyern areyn.

Negro-ish

In the Harlem ghetto, in such exile,
Even God becomes a Negro.
Men, like Canaanites, lie on the banks of the river,
And spend their nights on wet, kegs from foreign lands
Talk to the logs, which strike against the shore.
In front of everyone's eyes, noise from flaming foam
From America's stately islands,
That tells of chains on hands and feet
Carried away- into a hot north-land.
Harlem is sad,
And like an Oriental Jerusalem,
Daughters in the last blue of their street
Wait for bread, with outstretched plates
Like the maidservants in the times of King Solomon.
On every evening threshold, Negro faces.
Some, from hunger, throw themselves into lewd dances
Whirling with lust into the gates.

Vaynshteyn's poem offers the reader a different depiction not only of Blackness, but of Black life. Through the weaving of Harlem and Jerusalem and the theme of exile and America, the fate of Blacks and that of Jews is intertwined. Urban life, and more specifically ghetto

existence in Harlem, becomes a focal point and center of and for Black people. Although the ghetto itself does not represent anything new for Yiddish readers, for this poem Harlem is a ghetto and represents *goles* or exile. This is an interesting choice of word, given its significance in Jewish history, including the Ashkenazic experience. This exilic or diasporic allusion is also significant to and for African American history, particularly given the Black urban (vs. rural) experience in the United States.

Ghetto existence, whether in the Jewish (Yiddish) or African American context, represents a fragmented urban existence. It is an existence not central to a city in terms of its functions; however, it is in terms of individual experience and in viewing the city as a whole. This fragmentation, in terms of its separation from the rest of the city--whether the result of natural barriers, such as natural landscaping (i.e. rivers, streams, etc) or constructed barriers such as walls, fences, dead-end streets (or the lack of streets)--leads to double consciousness with respect to city dwellers given their location within the ghetto vs. outside its walls vs. their proximity to its walls.

For this poem, Harlem is a "Negro ghetto, a street with long Negro-ish exile, on a far-away shore." It is an isolated, lonely place, whose location is not in close proximity to any other place, yet is

reminiscent of another place. Harlem is in effect an urban island, but one which would have had a certain degree of familiarity to Yiddish readers. The “*orientalishn Yerushalim*” would evoke images of a familiar place of another time, which in turn would render Harlem as a familiar place of their present.

Vaynshteyn’s “*Negerish*” is filled with imagery from *Tanakh*, which simply cannot be overlooked. Details are revealed through specific Biblical events, which provide for further comparisons between African Americans and Jews. As a result, Blacks are rendered as ‘people of the Book.’ The Bible operates as a polarized lens, forcing the reader looking through it to see two contrasting positions working in concert: Jews and Jewish history and African Americans and their history. Consequently, Harlem represents exile, God becomes a *Negro*, and Black men are compared favorably to the Biblical men of Canaan. This, however, is not a compliment given that Noah cursed Canaan, the son of Ham¹⁰², and his descendants to a life of slavery. To be like the Canaanites was to be condemned to servitude and to be of base character.

¹⁰² Ham was also the brother of Cush (Ethiopia).

Harlem is further revealed as an “*orientalishn Yerushalim*,” thereby offering a rather interesting fusion (linguistically, geographically and culturally) of the exotic and/or the foreign (oriental), with the (culturally and historically) familiar (Jerusalem). This image creates a juxtaposition of Harlem, foreign (yet somehow familiar if only in a cultural, historical, geographical context) and perhaps even exotic to Eastern European immigrant Jews, and the ghetto, something familiar (known, lived, experienced as a part of Jewish history), although here rendered Black and non-Jewish. The notion of an “*orientalishn Yerushalim*” could also evoke images of the past, of a by-gone era, which is looked upon as the golden age or high time of a given place. This indeed works for Black Harlem as well.

Fenton Johnson’s “The New Day”¹⁰³ further links Blacks and Jews through the usage of Biblical reference and imagery. His poem begins with an awakened narrator describing the ‘vision’ recently revealed. The vision was of war and destruction, with “the Prince of Peace hovering over no man’s land.”

From a vision red with war I awoke and saw the Prince of
Peace hovering over No Man’s Land.

¹⁰³ Johnson’s entire poem appears in the appendix.

Loud the whistles blew and the thunder of cannon was
drowned by the happy shouting of the people.
From the Sinai that faces Armageddon I heard this chant
from the throats of white-robed angels:

Johnson's usage of "No Man's Land" is applicable to the situation of Blacks in America. If Africa signified the motherland, the ancestral homeland, and the urban North, a symbol of possibility and the Promised Land, then the rural South could be considered a no man's land. However, more specifically, the post war rural South represented the quintessential no man's land, the place in which the true state of the American Negro was dangerous, uncertain, insecure and tenuous at best (the place and state of immigrants remained to be seen). This no man's land was a place of bondage, of violence and the ravages of war, and yet it also remained the cradle of African America (given the slave trade and subsequent settling in the region). The No Man's Land metaphor is also applicable to the Yiddish immigrant experience in the U.S. Their position between black and white and between Blacks and Whites could be viewed as a racial No Man's Land, in which forays into Blackness, Whiteness, religious observance or secularism could have dire consequences.

After a chorus of white-robed angels ends their chanting, the reader is then left with the following:

From Ethiopia, groaning 'neath her heavy burdens, I heard
the music of the old slave songs.
I heard the wail of warriors, dusk brown, who grimly fought
the fight of others in the trenches of Mars.
I heard the plea of blood-stained men of dusk and the
crimson in my veins leapt furiously.

Ethiopia is revealed as the place of origin and the very geographic and historic point of convergence in terms of meaning, understandings and prominence for African America. Here, the continent itself is not depicted. However, the ravages of war and warriors, of men and blood are. Ethiopia also represents Africa as a whole, an Africa as the origin of all slaves, and it is “‘neath her heavy burdens” that the weight of African people, sold into slavery and having survived the journey of the Middle Passage to a land in and on which slave songs and Negro spirituals were created and transformed various African survivalisms (religious, linguistic, and oratory) into a folk culture. Through “the wail of warriors” and “the plea of blood-stained men” came a visceral, emotional art/music form and folk culture, in which the link between Jewish past as Biblical (distant) past and

African American present (i.e. proximity, and as far as redemption was concerned) would be forever inexorably linked.

Discussions regarding the sophistication of folk culture, including the Negro spiritual, in addition to the usage of the Black vernacular in literary and artistic production, all served to further delineate the parameters of the Black nation and help determine its usable past vs. its literary and cultural persistence and presence, and toward its productive (literary, cultural, musical, theatrical, etc) future. This collective notion represented an attempt by African Americans to (re)construct their past as a nation within this (white, American) nation. The Black nation would work to (re)construct its memory through writing – writing about the past, pre-slavery, the Middle Passage, life on the plantation, urban landscapes, and beyond. It is within this context that Negro spirituals resonate through the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and through some Yiddish poetry.

There were indeed some Yiddish writers aware of Negro spirituals. Vaynshteyn's "*On the Sidewalks of New York*"¹⁰⁴ is one such example. The poem chronicles life in New York and serves as homage to the Charles Lawlor and James Blake song of the same title. Their

¹⁰⁴ The entire poem appears in the Appendix.

song, *On the Sidewalks of New York*, was written in 1894¹⁰⁵ and for a time was considered the theme of New York City. The song's title can also be viewed in terms of center and margin, whereby the streets of New York signify the center (mainstream urban America) and the sidewalks the margin (the experience of immigrants in America as on the periphery of **the** American experience and not central). Although New York represents a center, the experience of immigrants, including Yiddish writers, as well as that of African Americans, was not at its core. Their experiences, however, are often viewed in terms of their attainment or progress in achieving the American dream. Their experiences come to represent or translate as America and American.

The poem begins with a comparison between 'tregers' (porters) and 'negers' (Negroes) in New York and those of the author's beloved home, Reyshe. It is the instances in which African Americans are

¹⁰⁵The well-known and popular song was used as a campaign theme by Al Smith, the governor of New York in the 1920's, in his unsuccessful presidential bid. It was also the name of 1923 film, a 1927 stage production starring Lester (Bob) Hope and Ruby Keeler, and a 1931 film starring Buster Keaton. As such, the poem would have been identifiable as somehow related to or influenced by the song. It would have resonated with readers in perhaps the same way; life on the streets of New York, a life that included contact between native New Yorkers/Americans and immigrants from various places throughout the world. The song, co-written by an Irish immigrant, mentions the names of some of his playmates and the 'ginnie,' (a racist, derogatory term used to refer to Italians) who played the organ. For more information regarding the song see Nancy Groce, *New York: Songs of the City*. The complete lyrics to the song appear in the appendix.

present and how they are viewed, described, and perceived, particularly by *griners*¹⁰⁶, which is most noteworthy. “On the Sidewalks of New York” is from Vaynshteyn’s “*Tregers un Negers*,” a short collection of poems, all addressing African Americans. The poem, much like the song, reveals a rather picturesque description of the sights, sounds, and people of New York, with a distinctly nostalgic nod at the past. The added attraction of Vaynshteyn’s New York is the inclusion of Blacks, gentiles and Jews, and his particularly interesting take on Harlem’s inhabitants and their contact with each other. The narrator’s New York is a multi-ethnic metropolis, bustling with pushcarts and people, Jews and gentiles all combining to create an urban American landscape, picturesque, vibrant, and complex and yet somehow maintaining a sense of intimacy.

¹⁰⁶The term *griner* or greenhorn was used to refer to newly arrived Yiddish-speaking immigrants. *Grin* or green referred to their lack of sophistication and experience with and in the New World.

"On the sidewalks of New York."

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טרעגערס אין ניו-יאָרק,
זײַנען נישט ווי אין ריישע אויפֿן מאַרק,
וואָס שליענטשען אָן טעג אויף די פֿורן;
אין פֿאַרמעיליקטע קליידער, פֿאַרפּראַכטע בערד
און וואַרטן אויף רײַזנדערס פֿון דער פֿרעמד.
דאָ, טראָגן אַלע דאָס זעלבע טרעגער־ישע העמד
און ס'איז שווער צו וויסן דעם חילוק
צי מ'איז אַ פּאָליאַק, אָן איטאַליענער צי אַ ייד,
אַז אַלע זעען אויס שווער, שוואַרץ און מיִד.

Tregers in Nyu- York,
Zeynen nisht vi in Reyshe oyfn mark,
Vos shlientshen—on teg oyf di furn;
In farmeilikte kleyder, farprakhte berd
Un vartn oyf reyznders fun der fremd.
Do, trogn ale dos zelbe tregerishe hemd
Un s'iz shver tsu visn dem hilukh
Tsi m'iz a poliak, an italiener, tsi a yid,
Az ale zeyen oys shver, shvarts un mid.

Porters in New York,
Are not like those in Reyshe on the market place,
Who hang around - on days on the journey;
In uniform, with glorious beards
And wait for foreign travelers.
There, they all wear the same porter-like shirt
And it is hard to tell the difference
If one is a Pole, an Italian, or a Jew,
Because they all look heavy, black and tired.

The narrator sets the scene by describing the various *tregers* in New York and whether Polish, Italian or Jewish, they all look the same. Although from various points in the world, these men, once in New York and a part of its landscape, lose their individual identity; they become indistinguishable from each other. The implication is that there are discernible differences between these individuals and the narrator is privy to that information. However, it is of little consequence. From the narrator's perspective, New York has become a 'melting pot,' rendering all men the same or at the very least similar.

...וואָס איז האַרלעם פֿאַר אַ גרין ייִנגל ?
פֿאַרשוואַרצטע פֿענצטער פֿון נעגערישע פּנימער;
וויסלדיקע אויגן און שוועבלדיקע ציין ;
שאַפֿענע האָר אויף קרייזלדיקע קעפּ.
אַ מאַכיקער ריח פֿון זייערע שטיבער ציט,
און פֿלוימענדיקע אָפלען שפּאַרן צו דיר,
און דעם ייִנגל שרעקט זייער געזיכט.

. . . Vos iz Harlem far a grin yingl?
Farshvartste fentster fun negerishe penimer;
Vaysldike oygn un shvebldike tseyen;
Shopene hor oyf kreyzldike kep.
A mokhiker rikh fun zeyere shtiber tsit,
Un floymendike oplen shparn tsu dir,
Un dem yingl shrekt zeyer gezikht.

What is Harlem to a green boy?
Windows blackened with Negro-ish faces;
Whites of eyes and matching teeth;
Nappy hair on round heads.
A musty odor draws from their houses,
And plum-like nipples press toward you,
And their faces frighten the boy.

To the newly arrived immigrant, perhaps never having seen or had exposure to Black people, Harlem could indeed represent a fearful place, with its “*farshvartste fentster fun negerishe penimer.*” Although immigrant porters in New York may lose their distinctiveness, African Americans--on account of their Blackness--retain theirs. The manner in which Blacks are described, are racist; their eyes, their hair and even their smell and their bodies, represent an assault on the *griner*, attacking his very senses with their mere presence, and frightening him.

האַרלעמער נעגער!
שוואַרצ איז ער ווי די ערד פֿון עין-גדי.
נישט קוק אויף דעם וואָס ר'איז פֿאַרבראַנדזט,
וואָרים נישט די זון האָט זיין ליב אָפּגעברענט!
די ווייסע זין האָבן אויף זיי געצאָרנט;
זיי געמאַכט פֿון זייערע ווינגערטנער די היטער,
נייערט, זייער "ווינגאַרטן" האָבן זיי נישט געהיטן.
אַ נעגער! דו. וועמען עס האָט מיין זעל ליב, זאָג
ווי פֿיטערסטו, ווי הויערסטו אינמיטן טאָג?
שיין ביסטו, שענער נאָך טו איך דיר לויבן;
עס פֿלאַטערן דינע אויגן אויף מיר ווי טויבן!

Harlemer neger!
Shvarts iz er vi di erd fun ein-gadi.
Nisht kuk oyf dem vos r'iz farbrondzt;
Vorim nisht di zun hot zeyn leyb opgebrent!
Di veyse zun hobn oyf zey getsornt;
Zey gemakht fun zeyere veyngertner di hiter,
Neyert, zeyer „veyngortn“ hobn zey nisht gehitn.
O, neger! Du vemen es hot meyn zel lib, zog
Vu fiterstu, vu hoyerstu inmitn tog?
Sheyn bistu, shener nokh tu ikh dikh loybn;
Es flatern deyne oygn oyf mir vi toybn !

Harlem Negro!
He is black, like the earth of the Garden of Eden.
Don't look at he who is bronzed;
Why has the sun not burned up his body!
The white sun took out its anger on them;
They make from their vintner the ,
Near their vineyard they have no protection.
O, Negro! You who loves my soul, tell me
Where do you feed, where do you crouch in the middle of
the day?
You are beautiful, more beautiful than I praise you;
Your eyes seem to flutter to me like doves!

The shock of an encounter with Blackness, particularly with Black people,¹⁰⁷ could cause great concern and thought regarding the encounter and its impact: “nisht kuk oyf dem vos r’iz farbrondzt / vorim nisht di zun hot zeyn leyb opgebrent!” Their Blackness must certainly be the result of anger, anger on the part of nature (the sun), working conspiring to create difference in, and perhaps even disgust for Blacks.

¹⁰⁷ There were indeed Black Jews in New York, and more specifically in Harlem. According to sociologist Howard M. Brotz, between 1919 and 1931 there are records indicating no less than eight Black Jewish cults having originated in Harlem. Their leaders were all acquainted and in several cases associated with each other, as congregations would rise, split, collapse, and eventually reorganize. Brotz's *The Black Jews of Harlem* represents one of the first attempts to address Black Jews and issues of Negro Nationalism and Negro leadership, in religious, social and political contexts. Brotz's research revealed that "... Black Jews contend that the so-called Negroes in America are really Ethiopian Hebrews or Falashas who had been stripped of their knowledge of their name and religion during slavery. The term Negro, they further contend, is a word invented by the slavemasters and imposed upon the slaves together with the white man's religion in order to demoralize them; and they did this by instilling in the slaves the view that they had no gods, no ancestors, no principles of right and wrong-nothing worthwhile-of their own" (10). According to Rabbi Wentworth Matthew, the leader of the Commandment Keepers Congregation of the Living God, (also known by their lodge name-The Royal Order of Aethiopian Hebrews, the Sons and Daughters of Culture, Inc.) the largest of the Black Jewish congregations, "during slavery they took away our name, language, religion, and science, as these were the only possessions the slaves had, and they were pumped full of Christianity to make them more docile. The word Negro is a badge of slavery which comes from the Spanish word *niger* meaning "black thing." Those who identify themselves with Negroes identify themselves with black things, not human beings. ...All so-called Negroes are the lost sheep of the House of Israel which can be proved from scripture and they all have birthmarks that identify their tribe". For further discussion see pages 1-26. For a different perspective and more nuanced discussion regarding Black Jews, see Ella Hughley, *The Truth About Hebrew-Israelites*; Yosef Ben Jochannan, *We the Black Jews Vol. 1 and I,I* and Rudolph Windsor, *From Babylon to Timbuktu*.

The white of the sun, in its heat, its anger, has burned and produced blackness. The juxtaposition of light and dark, of the sun's whiteness against the earth's blackness (soil/dirt), sets the context. As a result, the Negro is a creation of nature, and as such, remains a *creature*.

This is the most interesting, yet disturbing aspect of this stanza; it is clear that 'Harlemer negers' are not human; they are creatures, animals. The narrator reveals this in his use of the vocative to address and question where the *neger* 'feeds' or 'grazes,' and not where he eats; where he 'crouches,' (retreats or hides) and not where he resides or spends time during the day. Even though this creature is beautiful, it is only through the allusion to animals and nature that is expressed.

דייוו, ביי זיך אין האַרץ,
איז אַנדערש פֿון אַנדערע וואָס זײַנען שוואַרץ.
אין חצות,
גייט ער אויף אין לשון-קודשדיקן אות.
דער לאַמפּ אין זיי שטוב שאַטנט קוים
און באַזילבערט זײַן באַרד ווי שוים.
ווי די בערג וואָס האָבן זיך געשלאָגן
מ'זאָל אויף זיי ס'בית-המקדש בויען
ווייל דייוו אויף זיך די תורה טראָגן.
די גאַסן אַרום זײַנען מעסערדיק און בלינד,
שוואַרצע טעכטער פּלאַנטערן זיך אין ווינט
און גליען ווי בורשטינען וואָס זײַנגט:
"All God's childern got wings."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Complete lyrics and variation can be found in the Appendix.

Deyv, bey zikh in harts.
Iz andersh fun andere vos zeynen shvarts.
In hats of,
Geyt er oyf in loshn-koydeshdikn oyses.
Der lamp in zey shtub shotnt koym
Un bazilbert zeyn bord vi shoym.
Vi di breg vos hobn zikh geshlogn
M'zol oyf zey s'bet-hamikhdesh boyen
Vil Deyv oyf zikh di toyre trogn.
Di gasn arum zeynen meserdik un blind,
Shvartse tekhter plontern zikh in vint
Un glien vi burshtinen vos zingt;
"All God's childern got wings."

Dave, in your heart,
Is something different from others who are black.
At midnight,
He recites in loshn-koydesh-like letters.
The lamp in their house hardly casts a shadow
And silver-plates his beard, like foam,
Like the shore that strikes itself.
One should build the Temple in Jerusalem for them
Dave wants to carry the torah.
The surrounding streets are sharp and blind,
Black daughters stammer in the wind
And glow like amber, which sings;
"All God's childern got wings."

The reader then learns of Dave, who is somehow different from other Blacks. The simple fact that "er geyt oyf in loshn-koydeshdikn oyses" alerts the reader to the precise difference. Dave's Jewishness distinguishes him from Blacks, though with respect to Jews his Blackness

is of no consequence. His Jewishness makes him and his Blackness somehow familiar, acceptable and non-threatening. Dave represents the possibility and positivity of and in Blackness, its redemption if you will, but in and through Jewishness. Dave's Blackness is solidified and ultimately pronounced through the last line of the stanza, "All God's childern¹⁰⁹ got wings."

This line is from a well-known and popularized Negro spiritual entitled "All Over God's Heaven," but also known as "Heav'n, Heav'n," and perhaps more commonly as "All God's Children Got Shoes"¹¹⁰. Its inclusion in a Yiddish poem serves multiple purposes. First, it shows the poet's awareness and familiarity with the specific aspect of Black culture—the Negro spiritual as it crossed over into mainstream popular (white) culture and Jewish consciousness¹¹¹. Second, the usage of the

¹⁰⁹ *Childern, chillun* and *chilluns* are all variants of the word *children*.

¹¹⁰ The song is commonly viewed as a spiritual of protest against slavery and a condemnation of the hypocrisy of slave-owning Christians. *All God's Chillun Got Wings* was also the title of a two act play by Eugene O'Neill and performed in 1924 in New York to considerable uproar with Paul Robeson starring opposite a white actress (Mary Blair). The story is that of a Black man marrying a White woman. The theme of Black and White relationships or at the very least their close proximity reverberates throughout Vaynshteyn's poem.

¹¹¹ The song is sung by Ivy in the Marx Brothers' film *A Day At The Races*, which was the second of their films to use a variation of the song, the first being *Duck Soup*, 1933 (the song is rendered as *All God's Chillun Got Guns*). Prior to this, it is sung by Al Jolson in *Big Boy*, 1930, a film in which Jolson performs the song complete with blackface.

spiritual reveals perhaps an awareness of the plight and history of Blacks in America, given its particular meaning. And third, it places the idea of Black protest, as a part of Blackness and Black identity into Yiddish literature. The usage of the spiritual further underscores Black and White interaction, as well as a Black and Jewish connection, not only in terms of the Marx Brothers and Al Jolson, but in terms of something deeper, a Negro spiritual of protest against slavery in the hands of a people all too familiar with slavery (even if only in terms of their distant past), and a parallel to slavery in the African American context. It was after all like Jewishness--matrilineal.

A contrast to the sidewalks of New York appears in depictions of the *shtetl*, particularly, the black *shtetl*. In the Yiddish literary tradition, the *shtetl*, the small rural village setting populated by Eastern European Jewry, was home to the ethos and essence of *Yiddishkayt*. The word *shtetl*, according to translator Joachim Neugroschel, has

“...passed sentimentally into English, describing the small towns where Jews lived in Eastern Europe for centuries. . . . Historians and sociologists have somewhat gone along with this synthetic memory, leaving us with a simplified, often stereotyped image of a relatively serene, self-

contained world, troubled only by foreign politics generally summed up in pogroms and survival."¹¹²

It is the sentimentality that does not make its way into Yiddish depictions of the rural black experience. This yearning for the *shtetl*, the longing for home and the simple life, often present in writings involving the *shtetl*, seem to be absent in the fictionalized Black community. The absence of Caucasians in some of these depictions aids in creating a picture of an isolated, homogenous Black community, devoid of contact with the white world. Indeed, such contact for Blacks was, for the Yiddish writer, a point of ambivalence. This could be viewed as an attempt to create the impression of a primitive community wrought with savage desires and as a result unable to coexist with whites in same community. Black peasant or rural depictions are often degrading; however, they can be perceived as artistic interpretations of the 'simple' life in the Black *shtetl*. The richness of impressions, through sights, sounds, smells, and colors, along with the reproduction of sense impressions such as thirst, heat, terror, and desire, in addition to the use of ironic humor, exaggerated

¹¹² Joachim Neugroschel, *The Shtetl: A Creative Anthology of Jewish life in Eastern Europe*, 13.

accusation of the oppressor, racial sensitiveness, bitterness and pride, all serve to create a precise, integrated, seemingly realistic and authentic picture of Black community and life. Such depictions allow the reader to develop an understanding of and/or appreciation of Black America, but to also visualize Black America, which did not become a part of the Yiddish experience until the immigration of Eastern European Jews to the United States. The Yiddish writer in this instance can be viewed as the purveyor of African America.

The residents of the Yiddish *shtetl* represented a close-knit community, with a few Jewish families, where everyone knew each other (there were instances in which most of the residents were Jewish). At the center of *shtetl* life was the *shul* or synagogue, and at the very core of *shtetl* life was the *mishpokhe*, the family (the extended family, including all members.) Status came from scholarship (learning Torah), wealth, and of course, *yikhes*. The *shtetl* also had a system for supporting even the poorest of its residents including its *shnorrers*, local beggars. Everyone was expected to contribute to charity, thereby creating and contributing to the sense of community. This self-supporting community, when rendered Black, takes on a different, yet familiar configuration. The Black *shtetl* is decentralized in that there may be a church, but it does not represent the center of the

community. However, religious inference and Biblical reference are part and parcel of their experiences. Although family life is important, in the Black *shtetl* it is not about their interactions as much as it is about their descriptions and characterizations. Status comes from what one has or what one does, and *yikhes* in this context refers to the sense and history of a connection to Africa, in addition to that which was gained post-slavery--freedom.

Some Yiddish renderings of black rural life provide a glimpse into the stereotypically uncomplicated, simple life of African Americans, with their lack of sophistication and often superstitious nature. Black life is portrayed, complete with Blacks working in the fields, sweating beneath the hot sun, on sleepy, lazy days (most days in the life of Blacks are described often as “sleepy” and/or “lazy,” attributes often used to describe African American individuals as well). Such portrayals often exude an air of racist sentimentality, evocative of depictions of the “happy” or “lighter side” of life on the plantation, often witnessed in American literature. It is that spirit of paternalism which is often transmitted into Yiddish portraits of African Americans.

Vaynshteyn's poem “Negerish *Dorf*” [‘Negro Village’] presents a rather picturesque, rural community or Black *shtetl*, complete with its “starry sky.”

נענעריש דאָרף

ס'בליט דער הימל קאַלט און אויסגעשטערנט איבער נעגערישע
כאַטעס.
אָפּגערינענע וואַסערן פֿון מילדן שניי, גליווערן דין אין אייז.
קוימענס שטייגן רויכיק און טונקעל, נאַפֿט פֿלעמלעך באַפֿלעמלען
די שויבן,
און דורך די שויבן זינגען נעגער אין אַ זונטיק, אין נעגערישן דאָרף.

S'blit der himl kalt un oysgeshternt iber negerishe khates.
Opgerinene vasern fun mildn shney, glivern din in eyz.
Koymens shtaygn roykik un tunkl, naft-flemplekh baflemlen
Di shoybn,
Un durkh di shoybn zingen neger in a zuntik, in negerishn
Dorf.

The sky blooms cold and starry above Negro huts.
Waters, run off from the mild snow, freeze thinly into ice.
Chimneys raise smoking and dark, kerosene lamps flicker in
windowpanes,
And through the panes Negroes sing, on a Sunday, in the
Negro village.

The reader is allowed to approach the black *shtetl* and view its residents from outside, looking through the window panes. Without an invitation, s/he is able to observe their Sunday evening worship. With the sky in bloom, as it were, and the refreezing of melted snow, the

narrator sets the scene and reveals a rather idyllic depiction of what amounts to Blacks worshipping on 'their Sabbath.' Although it is cold outside, the smoke from the chimneys and the flickering of the kerosene lamps convey warmth, and an escape from the cold and snowy night.

Another interpretation, however, is that the reader in effect becomes a spectator, a voyeur watching African Americans on display. This kind of portrayal, of watching the 'Other,' contributes to their *otherness*. They are to be watched, to be looked at, but not touched. There is also no need to interact with them. Putting indigenous peoples and/or ethnic minorities on display is a way of 'introducing and educating' the majority (i.e. often homogeneous) population on the 'diversity' of its surrounding inhabitants. In this instance, Yiddish readers are able to 'meet' Blacks in a setting that is not too unfamiliar—a rural location and its place of worship.

The first stanza of the poem offers a neutral rendering of a Black rural locale, not unlike that of a traditional *shtetl* located in the Old World of Eastern Europe. The first sentence of the second stanza authenticates the black *shtetl* through the usage of the word *heymlekh*. In fact, this Black *shtetl* is cozy and inviting. It seems to be a

special place, where one would be at ease, particularly on a winter Sunday evening,

ס'איז היימלעך אין נעגערישן דאָרף אין אַ זונטיקדיקן ווינטער-
אָונט.

S'iz heymlekh in negerishn dorf in a zuntikdikn vinter-ovnt.

It's homelike in a Negro village on a Sunday winter evening.

Perhaps as such, there was no need for an invitation. Although the line above describes the feel of the black *shtetl*, and its impression of home and hominess, immediately upon reading the next lines, that image is disturbed. The previously peaceful place, with its depiction of worshipping Blacks is altered, and the reader is 'thrust' into a place of sexual imagery. The solemnity of worship is juxtaposed with the excitement and frenzy of pursuit.

שוואַרצלייב אין הייסן זייד, לאַקערן אויף שטראַזן נאָד אַ נעגער
יונג
און אַנטרינען גלוסטטיקע מיט געלענדטע היפֿטן פֿון ווילדע הענט,
דורך שכנותדיקע פֿעלדער, וואָס שטייען האַרט און שווער מיט
נאָענטן ווינט.

Shvartslayb in heysn zayd, lokern oyf shtrozn nokh a neger
Yung
Un antrinen glustike mit gelendte hiftn fun vilde hent,
Durkh shkheynisdike felder, vos shteyen hart un shver mit
Noentn vint.

Black flesh in hot silk, lurking on roads for a Negro boy
And fleeing passionately with swaying hips from frenzied
hands,
Through neighboring fields that stand hard and heavy with
approaching wind.

The appearance of 'Black flesh in hot silk, lurking,' is rather suggestive. The perceived lustful nature of Blacks is exposed, as the Black female lies in wait for a young Black man. She is the huntress, and he her prey. The 'swaying hips' and 'frenzied hands' evoke images sexual in nature, and simulate the act of foreplay. The rest of the line, 'vos shteyen hart un shver' ['that stand hard and heavy'], further underscores the sexual imagery, and serves to represent an even more heightened state of arousal. Here, the reader is presented with not only the idea of "the hunt" and "the huntress," and the pursuit of sexual conquest, but the taunting and teasing of the "swaying hips," which in turn leads to "frenzied hands." The Black woman is rendered as sexual and encourages sexual attention as she, like a prostitute,

waits for, teases, and taunts potential clients. She holds a position of power as a seductress ready to dole out sexual favors.

The third stanza of the poem supplies the reader with information regarding the sophistication, and the lack thereof, of the Black *shtetl*-folk. Those who have experienced 'the city' are sophisticated. This is revealed in the comparison and contrast between those who have been exposed to the city and those who have yet to breach the parameters of their *shtetl*.

אין נעגערישן דאָרף, זענען קלוג די נעגער וואָס ווייסן שוין פֿון
גרויסע שטעט,
וואָס טראָגן קליידער מיט שטאָטישן-שניט, און אַ ווונד פֿון אַ ווילדן
מעסער.
פֿון זייערע פֿיס רירט זיך ריטמישער דזשעז, גליטשיק און גרינג
איבערן דיל.
נעגערטעס זעצן זיך שעמעוודיק אויף זייערע קני, מיט אָפֿענע
שויסן.

In negerishn dorf, zenen klug di negers vos veysn shoyn fun
Groyse shtet,
Vos trogn kleyder mit shtotishn shnit, un a vund fun a vildn
Meser.
Fun zeyere fis rirt zikh ritmisher dzhez, glitshik un gring ibern
Dil.
Negertes setsn zikh shemevdik oyf zeyere kni, mit ofene
Shoysn.

In the Negro village, wise are the Negroes, who know of
large cities,
Who wear clothing with a city-cut, and a wound from a
wild knife.
From their feet moves rhythmic jazz, slippery and low
across the floor.
Negresses sit coyly on their knees, with open laps.

Blacks who have experienced city life are described as 'klug'. They differ in their appearance; their clothing has a 'shtotishn shnit'. They have a conceivably cosmopolitan look about them and are further described as having "a wound from a savage knife." This is an allusion to how they have changed as a result of their exposure to 'the city'. The city has not been kind to them, and as such, they bear its scars upon returning to their *shtetl*. Not only do they think, look and act differently, their bodies move in a different manner. Their exposure to jazz and to urban entertainment has altered their sense of rhythm and the way in which they move their feet.

The Black *shtetl* itself serves as a metaphor for the Black *shtetl*-folk. They are portrayed as unsophisticated and even crude. The rural setting is a reflection of their own characteristics: plain, simple, slow, and even dirty, yet in some way, cozy and welcoming. There is,

however, another possibility. Perhaps this also serves as a warning regarding the dangers of the city and by extension, the New World. The Black *shtetl* mirrored the traditional *shtetl*, but it also reflected the downside of the New World. Big cities had the power to change one, and not necessarily for the better.

It is the last line of this stanza that offers the reader yet another 'peek' into the perceived character of Black women, in terms of sex and sexuality.

נעגערטעס זעצן זיך שעמעוודיק אויף זייערע קני, מיט אָפֿענע
שויסן.

Negertes setsn zikh shemevdik oyf zeyere kni, mit ofene
Shoysn.

Negresses sit coyly, on their knees with open laps.

The black women here are depicted assuming a particular position and as sexually inviting, "with open laps." They, like the village, are welcoming. But more importantly, they assume a submissive position.

They are depicted on their knees and are described as “coy.”¹¹³ The juxtaposition of imagery – playful vs. sexual, uninhibited vs. submissive, and inviting vs. coy represents the stereotypical, sexist attributes often present in Yiddish poetry addressing Black females. They are the embodiment of the earthy, lusty, sexual expression in and of nature.

Nature itself is highlighted in the fifth stanza, as the reader is alerted to actions taking place on the outskirts of the Black *shtetl*.

אין וואַלד, העט הינטערן נעגערִישן דאָרף, העט הינטערן
נעגערִישן סמענטאַש,
טליען פֿייערן און שאַטענען-אַפּ אויף ברייטע געזיכטער, שווערע
קופערנע הענט.
העק פֿאַכען געשמאַק איבער ביימער, אין דורכזיכטיקן רויך,
און ס'ברעכן זיך שאַרפֿע צווייגן, טרוקן שפּרינגען אָפּ שפּענער אין
דער נאַכט.

In vald, het hintern negerishn dorf, het hintern negerishn
smentash,
Tlien feyern und shotenen-op oyf breyte gezikter, shvere
kuperte hent.
Hek fokhen geshmak iber beymer, in durkhzikhtikn roykh,
Un s'brekhn zikh sharfe tsveygn, trukn shpringen op shener
in der nakht.

¹¹³ The word 'shemevdik' in Yiddish can be translated as 'coy' or 'coyly', but it can also be used to indicate 'shy' or 'bashful'. I have chosen use the word 'coy'. It underscores the teasing, taunting, and sexually playful nature of Black women as described in the poem.

In the woods, way beyond the Negro village, way beyond
the Negro cemetery,
Fires smolder and cast shadows on broad faces, heavy
copper hands.
Axes wave heartily over trees, in transparent smoke,
And break into sharp branches, dryly chip off in the night

Beyond the *shtetl* and in the woods something is happening, as
branches and tree splinters fly through the air and fires smolder during
the night. The reader is left to ponder the purpose of such activity until
broaching the following stanza.

ס'שטייט אן אָפּגאָט אַזאַ ווי אומעטום, ס'זינקט אַ קלויסטער אַזאַ
ווי אומעטום.
נאָר אויפֿן סמענטאַש אַ שוואַרצער קברן, אַ שוואַרצער גלח,
שוואַרצע מתיים.
אַ לוייה מיט אויפֿגעהויבענע אָרעמס, יעמערט פֿאַר אַן אָפֿן קבר אין
יעלהדיקער תפילה,
און קיל שמעקט די צעגראָבענע ערד מיט אַ פֿריש טרונעלע, מיט
אַ פֿריש געשטאָרבן קינד.

S'shteyt an opgot aza vi umetum, s'zinkt a kloyster aza vi
umetum.
Nor oyfn smentash a shvartser kabren, a shvartser galekh,
shvartse meysim.
A levaye mit oyfgehoybene orems, jemert far an ofn
keyver in yaylediker tfile,
Un kil shmekt di tsegrobene erd mit a frish trunele, mit a
frish geshtorben kind.

There stands a cross just like everywhere, there sinks a church like everywhere.
But in the cemetery a black gravedigger, a black priest, black corpses.
A funeral with uplifted arms, wails before an open grave in a lamenting prayer,
And the dug up earth smells cool with a fresh little coffin, with the fresh body of a child.

The location is somber as the *shtetl*-folk stand around the open grave, wailing and lamenting at the passing of one of its young members. The smell of freshly exposed earth pervades the scene as the image of the “fresh little coffin” allows the reader to understand the previous night’s activity, an event which has led to the preparation of a child’s funeral. Nature is renewed with the smell of fresh earth, yet the scene is about death. The coolness of the dirt and the freshness of the child’s body are juxtaposed against the emotion and lamenting of the mourners; nature is cold, but emotions are warm.

The Black cemetery has a Black undertaker, a Black priest, and Black corpses. This Black community is like any other rural, village community. Instead of a traditional Jewish community, here the reader encounters a traditional Black one. Instead of a synagogue, there is a church, with Black nuns who dress just like white ones. And instead of

the Mogen Dovid, there is a cross. Here the features of the *shtetl* are not only 'colored' black, but also made Christian.

This proves to be an interesting way of depicting Blacks with a certain degree of familiarity, yet managing to retain that which serves to keep them separated--religion. Although the setting would be recognized by readers, the inclusion of Christian worship would remind them that they are different. This idea of depicting similarities and differences becomes clearer in H. Leivick's poem, "To the Negroes,"¹¹⁴ in which the narrator declares and almost decries the differences between Blacks and Jews. Although there are similarities, the best the two groups can do is to somehow work together and support each other in their endeavors. It is in this poem that Leivick expresses the notion of connected or shared fate of Blacks and Jews.

I will change nothing in you, Negroes; I grant
Not from far nor from close range.
We will not become one, become the same we can't,
And our skins will not change.

Your lips will not become thin,
And mine, will not grow full.
And for a moment's craving for a white sin
You will still pay with a death horrible.

¹¹⁴ The entire poem is located in the Appendix.

In the first two stanzas the narrator is quick to note the differences in skin color and in stereotypical physical features between Blacks and Jews. He also declares that his intention is not to change the Black man. He is not interested in making him neither *somewhat* less black nor *somehow* more Jewish. However, the narrator does something much more significant. He expresses an awareness of what the difference in skin color means in terms of the 'legal consequences' for a Black man to look at a White woman. The 'death horrible' is lynching and, as the poem continues, the sixth stanza offers a sympathetic understanding, albeit with a bit of a paradox.

It seems-what? I myself am one ever tormented,
Hanging, like you, on ropes with hate athrob.
My face, however, is for you not less malevolent
Than the face of each one of a lynching mob.

Even though the narrator has known suffering and torment similar to that of Blacks, he articulates a stark difference in their experiences. To the African American the immigrant Jew was white. Whites were responsible for lynchings, for the oppression and torment of Blacks. And based upon similarity of skin color, the narrator too, belonged in the white category. Could it be that difference, and the experience

that comes with it, that the narrator would not want to change? Can he look at a white woman and not suffer the same consequences? Perhaps his intentions are to express not his unwillingness to change Blacks, as much as it is to express his gratitude in not being black. Could there be some solace, if not relief, in the last two lines; after all, his face "is for [the Black man] not less malevolent than the face of each one of a lynching mob."

The last stanza of the poem suggests a relationship, a kinship in the sense of exploited brothers, Blacks and Jews, who both have been oppressed. Should they join together as the narrator suggests, and become friends?

Let the word be our friend redeeming
And us fraternize, the last and dominated we,
And among crowds of enemies, friendship sing.
My Yiddish song shall the first of many be.

What is to be gained by Blacks in such an undertaking, (the coming together in friendship,) is unclear. The reader is not left with the impression that this would somehow transform the relationship between Blacks and Whites or somehow alter the perception of Blacks by Whites.

The Yiddish writer, however, has much to gain. In fact, the narrator suggests a joining in song and through word; he does not recommend political or social action. He encourages a relationship in which *he* is able to be productive. *He* would continue to write about their relationship, about their solidarity and perhaps even camaraderie. Through song, Blacks and Jews would be closer; they would face their enemies together. This would seem to be a mutually beneficial arrangement. However, Blacks are used for their experiences and what they can add to Yiddish literary pursuits. What would Blacks gain in return?

CHAPTER 3

Images: Bodies, Beauty and Blackness

The representations of African Americans in Yiddish literature relies all too often on common stereotypes, depicting such time worn clichés as 'African lust', savagery, primitivism and exoticism, alcoholism, the promiscuity of Black women, the depravity of Black men and their desire for white women, the unabashed religious fervor associated with Black Christians in their worship (despite their simplistic understanding and interpretation of the Bible) and their oft-described childlike nature. Sadly this could in fact be interpreted and accepted by Yiddish readers as truth or accurate information. This suggests the recreation of Black identity based upon a distorted past or a perceived past (an understanding of history based upon a variety of memory-based sins or transgressions).

The dichotomy of images and representations portrayed reveal the problematic nature of the relationship between Yiddish

writer/reader/individual and African American (or at least the writer's interpretation and/or literary creation of that individual/community). "Negative stereotypes . . . of Blacks by Jews reflect an acceptance of dominant cultural values. Sympathetic portrayals, on the other hand, are an indirect means of narrating one's own struggle, of identifying with one's people."¹¹⁵ One can argue that negative portrayals (or stereotypes) of Jews by Blacks represent a part of that same reflection and relationship to the dominant culture, whereas sympathetic portrayals provide something else – a way of connecting Blacks and Jews in a grand narrative reflecting a Biblical link, in addition to narrating the inequities in the African American experience in the United States vis-à-vis that of immigrants. This does not however negate the possibility of negative portrayals based upon negative personal experiences with African Americans. Conversely, there is indeed room for genuinely positive portrayals of Blacks based upon real experiences. For some Yiddish writers Americanization came with an appropriation of predominant views, perceptions and understandings with respect to African Americans. For these writers, to be(come) American meant taking a side, choosing to accept

¹¹⁵ Goffman, *Imagining Each Other : Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*, 3.

particular stances regarding African Americans while securing their own status and identity in the process. For other writers, there was a reluctance to accept such a practice. The appropriation of dominant cultural views of Blacks was not a part of the process of Americanization. Their writings reveal universals vis-à-vis the human condition in addressing the links and disconnects between African Americans and Jews. Their depictions encouraged their readers to view the Black experience in America in and on their own terms. For them the history of African Americans was compelling in that it was familiar; it brought to mind their own past (distant past), yet could inform them about the potentialities of the present (and their future) in America. Simply, how are Blacks treated and what does this mean for immigrant Yiddish-speaking Jews/Jews in general? Could being Jewish in America equate to being Black in America? And what does that say about Jewish identity, Black identity and American identity?

Thus, their literary construction of Black life and culture can be viewed as an attempt to create an atmosphere of familiarity with African Americans and Black culture. However, when this creation of Blackness, Black identity and/or culture is understood to be authentic, it can serve to misinform and 'miseducate' readers and to reinforce

certain stereotypes, thus further complicating the already complex relationship between African Americans and Jews.

An examination of selected Yiddish writings/texts reveals the persistence of certain types of depictions or images. The first involves images regarding physical descriptions and characteristics. Such stock images attest to the exotic (African), primitive (African), clumsy, animal and/or grotesque attributes of Black bodies – both male and female. Black bodies are described as not human, unsightly and without agency. These bodies are objectified and at the mercy of those who wish to do as they wish. Some Yiddish depictions of the black body, particularly with respect to the black female body, often focus on sexuality or hyper-sexuality. The sexualized female body is often equated with prostitution or simply as promiscuous and sexually available. The Black woman in Reuven Ayzland's poem "*Negerins*" also appears to be unattractive and somehow deformed, aberrant, and possessing exaggerated facial and physical features as a kind of distorted being created by God. But for what purpose?

The narrator poses this question at the end of the poem and leaves it unanswered. He allows himself two possibilities of how to react to the presence/existence of the Black woman: he can either 'shame' her or 'embrace' her. Either way, the decision is his, not hers.

She has no say, no agency. No matter his choice, he views her only in terms of her sexuality and as an object for his desire and gratification. He can choose to 'love' her or to 'hate her.

Negerins

A mol a kalb a mol a hunt dermonen ay're oygn,
Vi bay khazayrim zaynen ay're lipn grob,
Un ay're baycher hengen glaych vi zek arop,
Vi bay a frosh iz ayer noz zetsoygn;
Un hent hot ir vi afn
Bashafn gots verk zu farshemen –
Oder mikh arumtsunemen.

Negresses

Sometimes a calf, sometimes a dog,
Your eyes remind me,
Like pigs, your lips are thick and crude,
And your stomachs droop like sacks,
Like a frog your nose stretches,
And hands have you like apes
Creations of God's work to put to shame –
Or for me to embrace.

The usage of animal features in describing African American men and women is certainly not new. Racist depictions of Blacks can be found in a variety of places with respect to a variety of literatures. Eyes like a calf's or a dog's convey the unknowing, almost innocent or

simple nature ascribed to Blacks in writings reflecting the early history of African Americans in the United States. This 'unknowing' look ascribed to Blacks is the hallmark of little or no intelligence. It symbolizes a lack of common sense, the absence of thought and intellectual activity, which have been used as rationale for treating Blacks like animals or, at the very least, like children. This look also allowed for others to make certain assumptions about Blacks, to make decisions for Blacks, and to determine their futures. Such depictions render them as primitive and incapable of learning/education. It also serves to underscore paternalistic sentiments.

However, the image of the filthiest animals in all of Jewish tradition serves to support feelings not only of disgust, but also feelings of superiority by some members of the immigrant Jewish community to their Black neighbors on the Lower East Side. The *khazer* (pig) is *treyf* (unfit for consumption), unclean and prohibited by dietary laws. Further, the consumption of pork is believed to generate animal lust and prevent one from attaining true holiness, thus referring to Blacks as *khazeyrim* (pigs) equates them with bestial, indecent or lewd behavior. More importantly, it serves to render African Americans as *treyf* and, as a result, not to be touched and perhaps even unfit for social interaction. Blacks, by proxy, become lewd, filthy animals.

The comparison of Black lips to those of a pig also illustrates the grotesque nature of racist descriptions of the Black body. It attests to perceptions of Blacks as deformed and repulsive, in effect dehumanizing them. Black lips are often described as large, crude, protruding, swollen and even unnatural, some form of anatomical aberration. The same applies to other body parts, such as hands, arms, and legs. In Ayzland's poem, the arms of black women are described as 'ape-like' in nature. In this instance, the Black woman is compared to and viewed as a primate, distinctively different, and most importantly, not human. Once dehumanized, the black body becomes a crude object with no consequences for its (mis)use—sexual or otherwise.

Another image of Black women can be found in Jehuda Leib Teller's "To a Negro Girl. The poem opens with sexual imagery through bulging hips and bursting breasts.

The hips bulge out of the dress.
The breasts burst out of the brassiere.
Odors beat off you and with depths,
With Solomon's flowing beard,
With white lace
Of the Queen of Sheba.

The night is swirling, delirious.
The waiter wipes the damp porcelain.
Your shoulders twitch in savage measures,
With a husky scream.

The combination of sights and motion serves to create sexual tension as the Negro girl appears to come out of or at least test the very limits of her clothing. With beating odors, twitching shoulders, and 'a husky scream', this black girl is seen as savage, wild, unrestrained, and exotic. Her exoticism can be explained in her connection to the Queen of Sheba through her connection to Africa. These characteristics are appealing to the narrator. He follows her. There is both repulsion (horror) and excitement (joy) in her movement, her sound, and her scent. She is the 'Negro Eve' the mother of African Americans.

I follow your lustful swing.
Horror and joy have colored and charged
The Negro Eve with
Raw idolatry,
With passionate anguish.

I follow your small, jocular steps,
Your mellow, womanly swing.
The evening is aglow.
Your gait in the street is naked,
Like Bathsheba's ripe loins
In the high grasses.

So much daring in the whites of your eyes!

Rayzl Zhiklinski's poem entitled "Kh'vil Zeyn a Negerin," offers the reader a different perspective regarding the black female. The narrator expresses her desire, in physical terms to be a black woman; "mit gele oygn, grobe lipn and shvartse fis."

כ'וויל זײַן אַ נעגערין

כ'וויל זײַן אַ נעגערין
מיט געלע אויגן
טרינקען די לבנות,
מיט גראָבע ליפן זויגן
שוואַרצע זאַפֿטן פֿון די נעכט.

Kh'vil zeyn a negerin

Kh'vil zeyn a negerin
mit gele oygn
trinken di levones,
mit grobe lipn zoygen
shvartses zaftn fun di nekht.

I want to be a Negress

I want to be a Negress
With yellow eyes
To drink the moons,
With crude lips suck
Black juices of the nights.

Unlike in Ayzland's poem, Black physicality and Blackness itself are of value and therefore sought after, on their own terms and for their own sake. For this narrator, the desire to be Black signifies a kind of freedom in the ability to "arumflien iber der shtot" and to be reborn, in the sense of not only becoming but heralding a "nayem mentsh."

אויף הויכע, שוואַרצע דינע פֿיס
אַרומפֿליען איבער דער שטאָט
און מיט די ראָזע פּיאַטעס
אַנזאָגן
אַ נײַעם מענטש.

Oyf hoykhe, shvartse dine fis
Arumflien iber der shtot
Un mit di roze piates
Onzogn
A nayem mentsh.

On tall, black, thin legs
Flying around above the city
And with the ruddy soles
Announcing
A new person.

Although the narrator does present her model black woman with thick, crude lips and even yellow eyes, the tone here is different. She has tall, thin black legs. The juxtaposition of the thickness and

crudeness of her lips in the first stanza with her tall and thin legs of the second stanza offers the reader a merger of ugliness and beauty, resulting in a somewhat realistic representation of a woman. It is also possible to view the narrator as seeing beauty, even dignity and strength in the primitiveness and perceived freedom of the black female. For the narrator, the black woman is not repulsive and grotesque like Ayzland's *negerin*. The yellow of her eyes and the Blackness of the nights are weighed against the Blackness of her legs and the ruddiness of the soles of her feet. The combination of colors, in addition to contrasting light and dark, add to the overall fantastic feel of the poem. As she expresses a sense of freedom in her ability to fly above the city, the poem gives the impression of other-worldliness and escape. The black woman is human, yet somehow not of this world. Through the narrator, this black female gains agency; her purpose is not to be determined by someone else, and she is in control of herself.

In Avrom Reyzen's poem "A Negerl," the reader is not provided with animal imagery depicting Blacks, but something else just as interesting. Reyzen's poem, in which a child is used to illustrate assumptions and perceptions regarding race and positions of privilege, offers the reader a Black child's body desexualized and degendered. What the reader is left with is, in effect, a black creature. The narrator

describes a *negerl* (a black child), and looking at this child the narrator is shocked by what he sees, and later by how he thinks.

אַ נעגערל

אַ נעגערל, אַ קליינס, ווי סאַזשע שוואַרץ,
האַב איך געזען זיך שפּילן ביי אַ הויז,
עס האָט געטרויערט און געשראָקן זיך מיין האַרץ:
מיין גאָט! ווי שוואַרץ דיין באַשעפֿעניש זעט אויס!

A Negerl

A negerl, a kleyns, vi saszhе shvarts,
Hob ikh gezen zikh shpiln bay a hoyz,
Es hot getroyert un geshrokn zikh mayn harts:
Mayn got! vi shvarts dayn bashefenish zet oys!

A Little Negro

A little Negro, a tiny one, as black as soot
That I saw playing by a house
Saddened and terrified my heart:
My God! How black your creature looks!

The narrator's reaction to the sight of this child, as black as soot, playing near a house, results in a surprising (re)action: an emotional response, one of sadness and terror (shock), revealing something of

the nature of his/her perception of Blackness. For the narrator, to be black is to be dirty and somehow less than human. *Black as soot*, this 'little Negro' is equated with having created a sense of terror and fright. God's creation, this black creature, is capable of eliciting a negative response, causing the narrator to go as far as to address God for having created just such a being: "My God! How black your creature looks!"

און פלנצלינג האָט דאָס קינד דאָס שוואַרצע זיך צעלאַכט,
זיך קויקלענדיק און שפּילנדיק אויף דר'ערד:
מיין גאָט! וואָס איז מיט מיר אַזוינס? האָב איך געטראַכט,
ווי האָב איך ערגעץ אַזאַ לאַכן געהערט?

Un plutzling hot dos kind dos shvartse zikh tselakht,
Zikh koyklendik un splendid af dr'erd:
Mayn got! vos iz mit mir azoyns? hob ikh getrakht,
Vu hob ikh ergetz aza lakhn shoy'n gehert?

And suddenly the black child burst out laughing,
Rolling and playing on the ground:
My God! What's happening to me? I thought,
Where have I heard such laughter before?

איך האָב דערמאָנט זיך, אַז מיין ברודערל אַמאָל,
מיין ווייס ברודערל, ווען ס'איז געוועזן קליין,
האָט אויך געלאַכט אַזוי, עס איז דאָס זעלבע קול—
און גלייך איז מיר דאָס קינד געוואָרן ליב און שיין . . .

ikh hob dermont zikh, az mayn bruderl amol,
mayn vays bruderl, ven s'iz gevezen kleyn,
hot oykh gelakht azoy, es iz dos zelbe kol—
un glaykh iz mir dos kind gevorn lib un sheyn.

I remembered that once my little brother,
My little white brother, when he was small,
Also laughed just like this, in the same voice—
And right away the child became beautiful and dear . . .

With “*un plutzling hot dos kind dos shvartse zikh tselakht*” the narrator is aware of his own thoughts, prejudice and is shocked by his initial reaction. The sound of the child’s laughter reminds him of his little brother, his little **white** brother. With that sound and its startling familiarity, the black creature becomes human. The narrator identifies himself as white in making reference to his brother and sets up a white vs. black dynamic; white equals human, black equals creature (non-human). It is not until the narrator thinks about his own brother and his Whiteness that the black **child** is viewed as anything other than a child. Once that happens, the relationship between black and white is made

in which the connection between Black and Jew is completed. Upon this completion, the black child becomes beautiful. Black in effect becomes beautiful, but only through the lens of Whiteness, thereby situating Whiteness in a position of privilege with implications for *Yiddishkayt*/Jewishness. Jewishness accepts Blackness, but clearly identifies with Whiteness. Jewishness and Whiteness are posed in opposition to Blackness, allowing Jews to become white.

Interestingly enough, the narrator addresses God once again, however, it has nothing to do with the black creature, but everything to do with another of God's creations, the narrator himself. Although the narrator registers surprise and dismay at his own reaction or transformation ("mayn got! vos iz mit mir azoyns?"), he simply leaves it at this rather temperate self-invective. While the memory of his brother allows him to view the black child as a child, not unlike his own flesh and blood, the result, "*un glaykh iz mir dos kind gevorn lib un sheyn. . .*" reveals something more. The poem is not so much about the 'little Negro' as it is about the narrator and his perceptions of Blackness.

Black is perceived as the antithesis of *sheyn* (beautiful) and *lib* (dear). The narrator relives an event from his past in order to accept the black child of his present. In doing so, black becomes acceptable. The black child no longer elicits shock or sadness, but instead becomes

a catalyst, which in turn brings to mind for the narrator a fond memory. It is through and with this memory that the realization of Blacks as utterly different, foreign and even other-worldly, becomes somehow more familiar.

To what extent such characterizations are based upon imported images from majority (white) American culture, literature, media, and/or music, or whether they simply represent indigenous creations from within the Yiddish literary and/or folk scene, is not the focus of this project but remains to be seen¹¹⁶(and certainly worthy of investigation). The result is nonetheless a depiction of Black life in white America, as rendered by an immigrant community aware of the status and position of African Americans and their own desire to become American. America represented the “promised land,” and the opportunity to reap its benefits served as the primary motivation for Americanization and assimilation. America provided Eastern European Yiddish-speaking immigrants with a first-hand view of its system of racial

¹¹⁶ Although not the focus of this project, to what degree and precisely in what way Yiddish writers were influenced by dominant popular culture may be difficult to fully ascertain, however must/should be kept in mind with respect to their depictions of the Black experience in America. They did not exist in a vacuum. They had access to literature, newspapers and radio and were familiar with or at least had an understanding of African American history. Whether or not their understanding was accurate is an entirely different matter.

hierarchy and the prospect of positioning themselves within that construct. By contrast, African Americans' position within that hierarchy left no room for posturing. Their position, at the bottom of this hierarchy,¹¹⁷ would remain intact.

With regard to economic positioning in literary treatments, the struggles against poverty are similar, but the tradition of breaking out of the ghetto, along with the importance of education and better lives for their children, manages to elude the fictional Black community of Ashkenaz.¹¹⁸ For these Blacks, their roots remain not in Africa, but in the Black *shtetl* in America (African Americans after all are 'made' in America). They remain poor, uneducated, and often hopeless.

A connection to Africa as the homeland of Black American origin or the source of African cultural retentions is not at issue for these

¹¹⁷ It is possible and indeed even plausible to view Native Americans at the bottom of this hierarchical construct. However, in terms of the orientation of this project, Native Americans do not figure into the literary, social, or racial conceptualizations of posturing and positioning.

¹¹⁸ Ashkenaz simply refers to the literature of Ashkenaz as a (inter)national whole, including Yiddish literature as well as American, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, South African, etc. (geographic designations of Ashkenaz) literatures which address Jewish themes, Yiddishkayt, and the Jewish experience, as written by members of that community.

Yiddish writers.¹¹⁹ They too, behind the veil of the narrator, can make claims to an African origin and acknowledge that differences in skin color make for different experiences. It also determines the way in which one is treated. However, they can also make the connection with Africa as a part of a grand narrative with Biblical, historic, cultural and religious implications.

Aron Glanz-Leyeles' poem "*Ikh Kum Fun Abisinie*"¹²⁰ is one such example of Yiddish understanding and sensibility regarding issues of not only color but African heritage/legacy. References to Abyssinia, the historical name for Ethiopia, with its King Menelik - the product of the union between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba - further strengthens the Black/Jewish connection¹²¹. The royal house of

¹¹⁹ For further discussion on African retentions see Melville J. Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past*. His writing, which can be viewed as discourse regarding identity, culture and race, addresses the dichotomy of African identity, but in terms of "the possibilities and pitfalls of an African identity in the twentieth century."

¹²⁰ The entire poem appears in the Appendix.

¹²¹ It is through Ethiopia and through Solomon that the union between Blacks and Jews occurs. According to Tanakh, Talmud and Ethiopian Jewry, the sexual union between Solomon and Bathsheba produced a son. As a side note, among Black nationalists, Ethiopian ancestry represented the link or connection between Black and Jew; in fact, in their conceptualization the Jew was indeed black. For them, the "black man . . . is a direct lineal descendent of Abraham. Isaac, son of Abraham was the father of Esau and of Jacob. Jacob's descendent Solomon mated with the Queen of Sheba, who returned to Africa, where she bore him as son, known as Meneliki. From his descendents emerged a line of kings who ruled continuously in Ethiopia for

Abyssinia or Ethiopia is said to have descended from this line (and Black Jews in the United States were certainly aware of this connection).

איך קום פֿון אַביסיניע

איך קום פֿון אַביסיניע,
אַ וויסער אַביסיניער,
און בין—
אַ פֿרעמדער.
וואָלט איך געוועזן שוואַרץ,
וואָלט מען מיך פֿלינק אויסגעלייגט און אויפֿגעראַלט
און געלייענט ווי אַ מגילה אויף שוואַרצן פֿאַרמענט מיט אותיות פֿון
גאַלד.
נאָר איך בין העל.
שנאַפן פֿאַרדאַכטן אַרום מיין שוועל.
מיין בלאַנדקייט—
אַפֿשר לויער איך ביים גאַלדענעם טויער אין דער דעמער-שעה
אַפצובייסן אַ שטיקל זון.
מינע בלויע אויגן—
אַפֿשר רייב איר זיי אָן מיט טורקוזן אום האַלבע נאַכט
ווען די טויטע קומען פֿון די קבֿרים,
און די מכשפֿים האָבן זייער שליטה.
אַפֿשר בין איך אַליין פֿון אַשמדאַיס סוויטע.

three-thousand years, complete with an unbroken succession . . . to . . . Haile Selassie." For further discussion see Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem*.

Ikh kum fun abisinie.

Ikh kum fun abisinie.
A vayser abisnier,
Un bin a fremder.
Volt ikh gevezn shvarts,
Volt men mikh flint oysgeleygt un oyfgerolt
Un geleyent vi a megile oyf shvartsn parmet mit oysyes fun
Gold.
Nokh ikh bin hel.
Shnafn fardakhn arum mayn shvel.
Mayn blondkayt –
Efsher loyer ik baym goldenem toyer in der demer sho
optsubaysn a shtikl zun.
Mayne bloye oygn –
Efsher rayb ikh zey on mit turkutsn um halbe nakht
Ven di toyte pumen fun di kvorim.
Un di mekhashfim hobn zeyer shlite.
Efsher bin ikh aleyn gun asmodais svite.

I come from Abyssinia.

I come from Abyssinia.
A white Abyssinian,
I am –
A stranger.
Had I been Black,
They would have laid me out, unrolled me
And read me like a scroll of black parchment with letters
of gold.
But I am fair.
Suspicious sniff around my threshold.
My blondness –
Perhaps I lurk by the golden gate at twilight
To bite off a piece of the sun.

My blue eyes –
Perhaps I rub them with turquoise at midnight
When the dead come out of their graves.
And the sorcerers have their power.
Perhaps am I myself from Asmodeus' retinue.

The narrator understands the significance of his fairness, his Whiteness, in acknowledging his alienation and foreignness. In effect he proclaims himself a Jew, evidenced by an awareness of the Jewish line of Ethiopia, yet he clearly distinguishes himself from other Abyssinians/Ethiopians (he has blonde hair and blue eyes). His different color causes him to be looked upon with suspicion, and perhaps he is somehow connected to evil in the form of Asmodeus, the king of demons. This demonizing of Whiteness is juxtaposed against a historically perceived (acknowledged) demonization of Blackness previously in play. Blacks were looked upon with suspicion (perhaps even by Jews, unless they themselves were black). Here, however, Whiteness is worthy of suspicion and, as a result, the narrator is a stranger in a not-so-strange/foreign land.

Most significantly, the narrator concedes in (t)his context the importance or value in Blackness. Had he been black, he would have been not only above suspicion, he would have been given the

utmost care and been treated with honor and respect. He would have been relegated to the realm of the sacred and not the world of the profane.

Harlem Renaissance writings depicting Jews reveal a different aspect of other writing other. Some depictions are based upon Biblical understandings and interpretations of Jews as people of the book, oppressed and persecuted not unlike themselves, with a history involving slavery, diaspora and exile, in addition to being based upon personal experiences and understandings generated by mainstream America.

Claude McKay's "Africa" provides an interesting connection between Blacks and Jews in a grand narrative all its own. Africa represents the point of origin and the dawn of civilization. It is slavery which provides the link between the Jews of old and the Blacks of new.

Africa

The sun sought thy dim bed and brought forth light,
The sciences were suckling at thy breast;
When all the world was young in pregnant night
Thy slaves toiled at thy monumental best,
Thou ancient treasure-land, thou modern prize,
New peoples marvel at thy pyramids!

The years roll on, thy sphinx of riddle eyes
Watches the mad world with immobile lids.
The Hebrews humbled them at Pharaoh's name.
Cradle of Power! Yet all things were in vain!
Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Fame!
They went. The darkness swallowed thee again.
Thou art the harlot, now thy time done,
Of all the mighty nations of the sun.

The reference to Hebrews humbling themselves before Pharaoh, marking the end of their bondage in Egypt with Moses leading them to the Promised Land, resonates with African Americans in that the Exodus reflects their own struggle for freedom.

Nevertheless, the connection to Africa remains in the form of 'primitive, exotic and wild' dances and music. Their tie to the Black *shetel* is also a tie to America and is bound together with the names of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln, and a special type of American paternalism inherited as a legacy of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow.

This brand of American paternalism and its manifestation in the treatment of African Americans rests upon what social anthropologist Melville Herskovits referred to as the 'myth' which, when perpetuated, served to legitimate thoughts and beliefs of Black inferiority. This myth governs the relationship between individuals and the color line to which DuBois referred. According to Herskovits,

[t]he myth of the Negro past is one of the principal supports of race prejudice in this country. Unrecognized in its efficacy, it rationalizes discrimination in everyday contact between, Negroes and whites, influences the shaping of policy where Negroes are concerned, and affects the trends of research by scholars whose theoretical approach, methods, and systems of thought presented to students are in harmony with it. Where all its elements are not accepted, no conflict ensues even when, as in popular belief certain tenets run contrary to some of its component parts, since its acceptance is so little subject to question that contradictions are not likely to be scrutinized too closely. The system is thus to be regarded as mythological in the technical sense of the term [because] it provides the sanction for deep-seated belief which gives coherence to behavior.¹²²

In his discursive challenge to Phillips' (et al)¹²³ notion of Blacks and their lack of any useable or identifiable past (which he called into

¹²² Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 1-3.

¹²³ Herskovits' work represented the first comprehensive analysis of historical beliefs and cultural notions vis-à-vis Blacks in the United States. This analysis served to address and examine the inclusion and persistence of Africanisms (traditional African origin traits) passed from African slaves to their Black progeny. *The Myth of the Negro Past* is indeed oriented towards the study of Blacks in the United States, but does so through data collected taking into consideration traits whose origins can be traced to West Africa, South America and the West Indies. In *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits examined, investigated, and even problematized the role (perceived, presumed, or actual) of cultural continuities in 'New World' Black life, which had not been revealed to the same extent heretofore neither in the body of academic discourse nor public intellectual exchange.

question and problematized), Herskovits argues that this myth is perpetuated based upon the following assertions; (a) Blacks are by nature childlike and easily adapt to adverse circumstances, (b) only inferior (less intelligent, more vulnerable) Africans were enslaved, (c) the diversity of their cultural backgrounds made a unified ethnic culture all but impossible among Blacks; (d) African (Black) culture is, by comparison to European (white) culture, inferior, that Blacks would have come to prefer it over their own.¹²⁴ This historical baggage allowed for an environment in which white ethnics were given the opportunity for social, economic, and most importantly racial mobility.¹²⁵ The continuation of the myth with regard to African Americans initially benefited immigrants and was often further perpetuated by subsequent generations. Yiddish writers recognized that this New World meant freedom for them, but within that freedom, within American democracy, there was indeed a population that could not reap the same benefits – African Americans.

The immigrant Yiddish community in America would retain its connection to Eastern European Ashkenaz. Their tie to the *shtetl*

¹²⁴ Herskovits, 4-12.

¹²⁵ This in no way means that white ethnics were welcomed with open arms.

would remain in the form of yearning as illustrated in folksong, music, poetry, theater, and film. On the literary front, quite often their literary voices resonate with the clatter of efforts to recreate the *shtetl*, but in terms of Black America. By recreating the *shtetl*, they are attempting to negotiate their rural past with their urban present. The loss of this space, of a rural homogeneity, serves as the impetus for creating new space. This in turn causes them to create and to attempt to mediate a space between a utopian, albeit nostalgic place of their past (the traditional Yiddish *shtetl*), with a construct which can be identified and symbolic of their culture but transformed and virtually created anew (Black *shtetl*).

Yiddish writers portraying Blacks in their literary creations understood their sense and perception of 'American-ness' as an opposition to 'African American-ness.' They also understood the sense of alienation associated with otherness, longing, nostalgia, the desired construction of a new homeland, and attempted retention of cultural, historical, traditional, and religious artifacts. Such is the creation of diasporic expression in a New World. This yearning and desire for the past, for the homeland, or of a sense of being at home and comfortable in one's environment is a common theme in Yiddish literature. The attempt to reconcile this theme is often expressed by

the following generation, for example in Jewish American literature written in English. The task of early immigrant Yiddish writers involved their acceptance of the challenge to mediate a position between Western culture (in terms of social, philosophical and economic considerations) and notions of a trans-national (trans-ethnic) Yiddishist identity.

This reification of the *shtetl* serves as an example of the persistence of the *shtetl* and its imagery in the minds and the collective memory of these Yiddish writers, as rendered into Yiddish literature. This memory/imagery is further transformed and perpetuated in the minds of its readers, and serves to continue forming and maintaining the collective impression of the *shtetl* and collective understanding of African Americans, albeit in a Yiddish context, as well as a Yiddish construct. Evoking the image of the *shtetl* serves as a literary link between these two cultures. This metaphorical bridging of the cultural gap allowed the Yiddish literati to share and express the dusty Old World *shtetl* with a shiny New World veneer.

The images portrayed in certain works of Yiddish literature should be interpreted in terms of their cultural, historical and social contexts, and in terms of the notion of text and its relationship to transforming and transmitting culture, ideology, and intellectual pursuits. The

images created depicting African Americans were written by, printed by, published by, and produced for a Yiddish speaking audience. These works depicted Yiddish expression and emphasized a Yiddish aesthetic. Involved in this literary manufacture is the culmination of Yiddish views regarding the fabrication of an African American type. The creation of such includes physiological descriptions of Blacks as individual and as a community, as parents and children, as workers, and Christians, complete with all of their limitations and imperfections. Included along with these depictions is no caveat regarding objective images, artistic intention, or the question of audience. The Yiddish community, with its burgeoning press, in the form of journals, periodicals, weeklies, and dailies, provided the ideal forum for literary expression. The size of the Yiddish speaking population, coupled with the number of publications in circulation, allowed for great dissemination of information and a variety of vehicles in which to accomplish it. Some writers constructed their own manifestos, with regard to the purpose of their writings and stressed the importance of 'art for art's sake'. Others were concerned with the creation of non-ideological writings and expressionistic poetry recounting experiences in the New World. And still others wrote series of poems, addressing various themes, including African-Americans and their experiences in

their own communities as well as experiences in relation to and at the hands of certain members of American society. In viewing the works of these writers, one cannot help but notice the way in which definitions and details of identity are used, described, illustrated, and even circumvented. Instances revealing double consciousness and the rather nebulous cloud of Otherness abound. These works also reveal the tension and unease found in works addressing and characterizing notions of self and the relationship to one's environment, imaginary and/or otherwise. Self-identification with Otherness plays a significant role in that it is in these passages, these moments where double consciousness, along with the desire to fit into one's environment, is revealed. For the Yiddish writer this indeed represented a multifaceted proposition/task – how to render the various components expressing a Yiddish identity, compelling and convincing enough to allow readers to identify, understand, and even suspend any inkling of disbelief with regard to its Yiddish integrity. The Yiddish writer had to provide his readership a convincing portrait of Yiddish-ness, *Yiddishkayt*, and Yiddish culture, reflecting that which they knew to be true, factual, or

at the very least believable characterizations reflecting Otherness, double consciousness and a type of *Yiddish vitalism*.¹²⁶

Yiddish vitalism is the term I use to define that which is used to maintain and further perpetuate Yiddish culture and ways of living, including music, folksong, literature, theater and art. It is the driving force behind Yiddish creativity which may have been diminished (based upon the annihilation of the majority of its speakers/proponents), however it has never completely ceased. It is this sense of vitalism, which when rendered in/through Yiddish letters, that served to revitalize and reinvigorate the Yiddish masses upon reaching and establishing themselves in America. Vitalism meant/means the survival of *Yiddishkayt* and the creation of *American Yiddishkayt*, but it also meant a certain degree of cultural segregation and isolation.

African Americans are depicted in ways in which Jews are not - sexual and savage, passionate and primitive. The Yiddish writers here are able to free Yiddish literature from the confines of the 'prim and proper' and create images that are diverse, raw, sensual, violent,

¹²⁶ This *Yiddish vitalism* continues to manifest itself in the creation and continuance of Yiddish courses, festivals, programs, and the renewed interest in Klezmer, reading circles, and retreats.

depressing, and even uplifting. Within the boundaries of Yiddish literature, the Yiddish writers constructed a paradigm in which their community became the dominant (ethnic) group in a literary (re)conceptualization of America. This paradigm, based upon the Yiddish immigrant experience, allowed for notions of double consciousness to be revealed, thus creating the foundation for an African American/Yiddish interface.

CHAPTER 4

Harlem: Two Tales of a City, Or the Poetics of Place

*Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia.*¹²⁷

The purpose of this chapter is to address Harlem as a venue of Black cultural renewal and as a symbolic place for Yiddish writers. With the advent of the New Negro, Harlem represented a space that captured the creative, artistic, aesthetic, and emotional imagination of writers of its Renaissance and Yiddish writers alike. Through their works, distinctive, intricate pictures of Harlem emerge, offering varying impressions and of understandings of place, space, home, collective and community, independent of whether Harlem is viewed or perceived as a ghetto, an ethnic enclave, or celebrated as an urban

¹²⁷ Alain Locke, *Survey Graphic*, 629.

center for cultural production and creativity: the quintessential Black city.

Yiddish speakers, readers, and writers had no opportunity for contact with African Americans before coming to the United States (and subsequent settling in New York). Consequently, their depictions are not based upon a history of contact with or connection to Blacks. Their portrayals can be seen as based upon their personal encounters with Blacks as well as the stereotypical imagery expressed by and in dominant American society and discourse. This fusion, when viewed in terms of a dialectic in which the representations created by the Yiddish literati (synthesis) are the product of firsthand experience and contact with African Americans (thesis) and the historical relationship and tradition of Blacks in the American context (antithesis)--all viewed from an immigrant Eastern European Jewish perspective--, can be seen as the foundation of Black and Jewish relations in the United States.

The relationship between these two cultures, between Blacks and Jews, is illuminated in and through their respective literatures and reciprocal representations. In the United States, this relationship can be viewed as a combination of protests and praise, struggles and coalitions, attempts to overcome adversity, and for this project,

situated in the heart of the Black capital and steeped in Black capital, Harlem.

Harlem itself represented not only a point of convergence, but a transitional place and space. Its existence was symbolic of change and renewal. The mere mention of its name meant something exciting, something provocative, and most importantly, something quintessentially Black. However, that was not always the case. Its transformation into Blackness took a great deal of time. It is, however, its last change, from Jewish to Black, which served to create its dominance and import for African America. Perhaps the Harlem Renaissance writer James Weldon Johnson summed it up best:

In the history of New York, the significance of the name Harlem has changed from Dutch to Irish to Jewish to Negro. Of these changes, the last has come most swiftly. Throughout colored America, from Massachusetts to Mississippi, and across the continent to Los Angeles and Seattle, its name, which as late as fifteen years ago had scarcely been heard, now stands for the Negro metropolis. Harlem is indeed the great Mecca for the sight-seer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious and the talented of the whole Negro world; for the lure of it has reached down to every island of the Carib Sea and has penetrated even into Africa¹²⁸.

¹²⁸ *Survey Graphic Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, 635.

Harlem, or rather the mystique of Harlem, captured the spirit and imagination of Black people everywhere. It also came to represent, to a lesser degree, a lengthy episode of political cooperation and socio-cultural exchange in which Blacks and Jews worked together to combat injustices. For Locke, “neither racial militancy nor socialist nostrums could improve the current conditions of Afro-Americans,”¹²⁹ rather, “the more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective.”¹³⁰

As a result, and independent of the historical, political, economic, and civil cooperation, some Yiddish writers were able to address the sense of solidarity they felt with their ‘Black brethren.’ The connection and concern was addressed in terms of humanity and equality vs. inhuman treatment and social inequality. Other writers expressed empathy and sensitivity to the plight of Blacks in America, particularly with respect to living conditions, and the work restrictions, which affected both groups. Still others chose to create racist depictions, serving to further perpetuate negative stereotypes and

¹²⁹ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, pg. xxvii.

¹³⁰ Lewis, quoting Locke in *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, pg. xxvii.

sexist imagery, denigrating both Black women and men in the process.¹³¹

In looking at Harlem Renaissance writers' depictions and descriptions of Harlem vs. those of Yiddish writers, one thing is abundantly clear--Harlem meant different things to different people. For participants in its Black Renaissance, Harlem represented the Black Mecca, the Negro Capital, and the center of Black cosmopolitanism. For Johnson and others, "in the make-up of New York, Harlem [was] not merely a Negro colony or community; it [was] a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world." Harlem represented the point of

¹³¹ The latter claim has been leveled in another linguistic and artistic context with respect to Jewish (viewed as white) representations of Blacks. George Gershwin's *Porgy & Bess* (1934) has been viewed in the same way. The folk opera, based on the 1925 novel, *Porgy*, by Dubose Heyward (and later adapted into a play (1927) by Heyward and his wife, Dorothy) tells the story of the maimed and beggar Porgy, resident of Charleston's Catfish Row (South Carolina) who commits a murder, in defense of Bess, the woman with whom he falls in love. The folk opera, with score credited to Gershwin, a Russian Jew, has been touted as the most important American opera of the twentieth century. It has also been considered racist in its depictions of Blacks and served to further perpetuate racial stereotypes. According to composer Virgil Thomson, "folk lore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935." For more, see Virgil Thomson, in *Modern Music*, November-December 1935, 16-17. To highlight the inconsistencies and racial/racist pitfalls in non-Blacks writing the Black experience, perhaps writer and literary editor Jessie Fauset best summed up the underpinnings of the Harlem Renaissance and the celebration of Black creativity and self-representation. She reasoned that, "here [in the United States and the world over] is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us. Let us who are better qualified to present the truth than any white writer, try to do so." See *When Harlem Was in Vogue* for further discussion.

convergence for Black people – artists, writers, musicians, singers, actors, and playwrights during the 1920s. From the rural South to the urban North and various points throughout the world, Harlem called-- and they came.

A dusky tribe of destiny seekers, these brown and black and yellow folk, eyes filled with visions of their heritage-- palm fringed sea shores, murmuring streams, luxuriant hills and vales—{ made} their epic march from the far corners of the earth to Harlem. They {brought} with them vestiges of their folk life--their lean, sunburnt faces, their quiet, halting speech, fortified by a graceful insouciance, their light, loose-fitting clothes of ancient cut telling the story of a dogged, romantic pilgrimage to the El Dorado of their dreams. ¹³²

Whether returning from the front after the Great War, fleeing the rural South and Jim Crow in the Great Migration, or venturing to the United States from the Caribbean, Black people made their way to Harlem. This New Negro metropolis developed into Black space. It also provided a convergence or concentration of diverse Black peoples--rich and poor, rural and urban, immigrant and native--, a microcosm of the new Black nation.

132 W.A. Domingo, *Survey Graphic Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, 648.

Engagement, Texts and Contexts

Yiddish engagement with issues of Black space and place, Blackness, Black acceptance by whites, and the Black condition represented a way of working out and working through issues of Yiddishness/Jewishness, Jewish identity, and *Yiddishkayt* in America. The Jewish press, and more specifically the Yiddish press, was indeed motivated to write about Blacks for a number of reasons. In addition to notions of sympathy, empathy and ethical responsibility, a healthy dose of self-interest provided the impetus to address Black concerns. As civic-minded soon-to-be-white Americans, it was not simply their responsibility, it was their duty. For these writers, Black America, specifically Harlem, provided a forum for them to tease out, problematize, and interrogate issues of importance to Jewish life, acceptance, and survival in the United States. For historian Hasia Diner,

[T]he years 1915 to 1935 American Jews, especially the elite, witnessed with dismay growing anti-Semitism at

home and abroad. They also experienced steady economic success and greater prominence in society. Out of these contradictory conditions of American life there emerged an intensified Jewish interest in and involvement with black affairs. From these contradictory conditions of American life emerged a need to come to terms with the new reality as well as to preserve the old.¹³³

It is within this context that Yiddish writers and by proxy Jewish culture as a whole came to understand and appreciate the position and status of Blacks in America. For all involved, Harlem represented the point where immigration and migration collided. Recently arrived Eastern European Jews and well-established German Jews, as well as recently migrated Southern Blacks and their northern counterparts and some from the West Indies, came into contact and even conflict. Their engagement established the basis for further connections, future exchanges and discussions regarding Blacks and Jews in the United States.

German Jewish participation in the Harlem Renaissance did not precede Yiddish involvement with African America. It was, however, more profitable (at least in the financial sense). It represented the

¹³³ Diner, Hasia, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 27. As a note, the title of my project pays homage to Diner's groundbreaking work.

starting point of Black and Jewish commercial engagement, and, for some participants of this Black Renaissance, it also represented a doubled-edge sword. Composer George Gershwin (1898-1937), Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld (1869-1932), writer Fannie Hurst (1889-1968), photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), and even international banker, philanthropist, and patron of the arts Otto Kahn (1867-1934) all made stops in Harlem. These individuals were well-known on the literary, theater, and artistic scenes and socialized with the "*Niggerati*," the upper echelon of the Black writers and Black intelligentsia who contributed to and made up the Harlem Renaissance, and the "*salon Negrotarians*," the white philanthropists who aesthetically and financially supported Black artists, as writer and activist Zora Neal Hurston liked to call them.

Social activism, which saw a Jewish/Black coalition, came through the organization and founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Arthur Spingarn, Civil Rights advocate and attorney (1878 -1971) was head of the NAACP's legal committee, while his brother Joel (1875-1939) literary critic and educator, headed many leadership positions and committees and was responsible for a great deal of policy within the Association. The Spingarns (of Austrian Jewish descent) were major supporters of and

contributors to the Harlem Renaissance. They were responsible for supporting the careers of various scientists, writers, artists, musicians through the Spingarn Medal (established by the older Spingarn, Joel) for the “highest and noblest achievement for an American Negro.” The prize was awarded under the auspices of the NAACP and would serve to call to attention not only to the Association, but to the reward associated with Black creativity. German Jews were responsible for a variety of philanthropic endeavors in Harlem, but what did their Eastern European counterparts bring to the table?

As poor immigrants finding their way in their new country, they were often plagued by the same issues affecting African Americans. The search for employment and the wish for improved living conditions, in addition to the fight against poverty, and the desire to make themselves at home, furthered the desire of both Blacks and Yiddish-speaking Jews to participate in American life. All of those obstacles had to be removed in order for success in the U.S.

So why did Yiddish writers write Harlem? They realized it was integral to Black participation and integration in American urban life. Additionally, they exhibited a genuine desire to write the Black experience and, as *quasi* whites, it was of great interest. Yiddish writers who addressed African Americans and Harlem in their writings

attempted to speak to themes such as Blackness and the Black experience in an urban setting, of course, from the perspective of recently arrived immigrants. For them, America did not live up to their expectations. Where was liberty? How could a land based upon the oppression of African Americans, call itself a democracy and still deny Blacks and others access to that liberty? This often **colored** their perceptions with respect to Harlem.

An engagement with Black interests, concerns, and conditions allowed Yiddish writers to position themselves as *more* American than perceived, established Americans and not Black. Writing Blacks meant writing America. In addressing and writing Harlem and the Black urban experience, they further positioned themselves as cultural and social mediators, arbitrating race relations and understandings in America, if only in literary terms. Yiddish depictions of Blacks and Black life could in fact change the world view of other recently arrived Yiddish readers and influence the way in which they would subsequently perceive and relate to African Americans.

Harlem meant opportunity, particularly with respect to the migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. It highlighted the transition from rural to urban to industrialized Black society. It meant a life without Jim Crow and some sense of if not

equality, then at the very least a chance at participation in America. Harlem also meant cultural space -- Black cultural space with geographic specificity; personal yet communal; with spiritual, political and symbolic importance.

For Yiddish writers, it was viewed somewhat differently. Harlem did indeed represent space, Black urban space and a model Black city for Jews to observe, investigate, and interrogate. Whether through their depictions of urban squalor, poverty, or Black life in the northern city, their writings revealed the sometimes negative aspects of Black participation in life in Harlem. At times, these depictions can be viewed as reflections of their own living situations in tenement housing on the Lower East Side. For other writers, Black life in Harlem revealed positive aspects of Black life and the human condition.

As poets, and in effect social commentators, Yiddish writers had a great deal to say and write about their new experiences as 'strangers in a strange land', their experiences with African Americans, and their perceptions of Black Harlem. They wrote about their encounters with Blacks, other people of color, white Americans, and other immigrants. They had much to write about their experiences in a land that offered possibility, mobility, and a great degree of flexibility. Their writings represented "...the living reality of the East European Jew

getting settled in an environment so utterly unlike anything he had known in the shtetl"; furthermore, "[they picture[d] his getting into stride in the America which had promised him so much and which, though it pressed his soul, gave him only what he was strong enough to take."¹³⁴

Yiddish writings regarding Harlem are filled with moments of happiness and sadness, laughter and tears, and glimpses of the future as well as nostalgic looks back to the past. Yiddish literature in the United States provided Eastern European Jews with their own literary, cultural and linguistic space. If the Yiddish language represented one of the national languages of Jews, then Yiddish literature gave them a voice in the American context. The language of their expression, the vehicle of secular Jewish life, represented the witness to and purveyor of things American and things African American in the process of assimilation and Americanization. Or simply stated, Yiddish literature brought ". . . the Jew into meaningful relationships with the non-Jewish world."¹³⁵ In this case it brought Yiddish-speaking Jews and African Americans into literary contact, as well as cultural and social proximity.

¹³⁴ Henry Goodman, *The New Country : Stories from the Yiddish About Life in America*, Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art., 1st Syracuse University Press ed. ([Syracuse, N.Y.]: Syracuse University Press, 2001), xxiii.

¹³⁵ Goodman, xviii.

Whether Harlem or on the Lower East Side, New York was the point of contact.

In the literary context, Yiddish references to Harlem further attest to its prominence as the Black capital. Alain Locke, in an attempt to define Harlem and its significance to Blacks, provided a comparison in a non-Black context.

... [In the] final analysis, Harlem is neither slum, ghetto, resort or colony, though it is in part all of them. It is--or promises at least to be--a race capital. Europe seething in a dozen centers with emergent nationalities, Palestine full of a renascent Judaism--these are no more alive with the spirit of a racial awakening than Harlem; culturally and spiritually it focuses a people.¹³⁶

Harlem was the venue that provided the critical mass of Blacks and Yiddish-speaking Jews, in contact for the very first time, in an urban environment allowing readers and writers alike to experience varying perceptions of each other, of race in America, and particularly of Harlem. I use the term *Yiddish Harlem* to describe the literary Harlem created by Yiddish writers. Writers of such were indeed aware of

¹³⁶ Alain Locke, *Survey Graphic*, 629.

Harlem, who lived there, and the fact that prior to African American occupancy Harlem had been Jewish. Up until the 1920's, Harlem was home to a sizeable Jewish community. With the increase in Blacks making Harlem their home, the demographic of the area changed. It was not until Jews began to leave and move to other parts of New York that Blacks moved in en masse. In the final analysis, Jewish Harlem became Black Harlem, and in the hands of Yiddish writers, became Jewish once again.

The increase in friction between the two groups set the tone for the ensuing decade, if only (or mostly) in the commercial sense. Although they moved out of Harlem, Jewish business owners retained their economic ties as landlords and store owners. This helped to fuel the negative portrayals and stereotypical characterizations of Jews as exploiters of poor Blacks, consumed with a desire for financial gain. This represents the beginning of a mutual antagonism that, when left unchecked, resulted in Black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism.

Writer Langston Hughes captures the relationship and the tension between Blacks and Jews in his poem, "Likewise." The title itself reveals something specific about that which the reader is to encounter-- something similar. The first stanza of the poem provides some information with respect to Jews, or at least the narrator's (Black)

perception of Jews. The inclusion of certain words could invoke a certain response in a Jewish context, particularly in Harlem.

“The Jews,” as it were, owned a great deal of the shops and stores located in Harlem. It was in this context that African Americans and Jews came into contact. It was also in this context that some of the negative stereotypes regarding Jews were formed and further perpetuated.

Likewise

The Jews:
Groceries
Suits
Fruits
Watches
Diamond rings
THE DAILY NEWS

The reference to ‘groceries’ alludes to Jewish ownership of such, which many Blacks patronized in order to provide for themselves and their families. This activity required regular contact and created the perception that Jews were ‘taking’ from Blacks and not giving anything in return. Buying and selling would prove to be a point of contention between the two groups; who would sell (what and at

what price), who could buy (what and for what price) and who would and could reap the benefits (profit, subsequent employment, and contribution to the (Black) community.

For Harlem Blacks, Jews dominated the needle trades (hence the suits), the jewelry business (hence the watches and diamond rings), and the media (hence The Daily News and a concomitant perception of no voice for Blacks). The point of contention continued in that the poor Negro of Harlem could not afford expensive suits or jewelry, yet the Jew had these things to sell. Why was this the case? Why was there such inequality if Jews had arrived as immigrants and Blacks were made in America? It was this perceived inequality that caused the narrator to pause and reflect upon the situation: "Some folks blame high prices on the Jews/ (Some folks blame too much on the Jews)." The stanza further underscores the tension in the relationship between customer and business, in which the dissatisfied Black customer finds no remedy in his complaint to the Jewish storeowner. In Harlem the storeowners 'don't answer back," they simply shrug their shoulders. There is nothing to be gained in any other response and Harlem certainly does not require it. There is no response and no communication between the two groups, only stereotypes based upon perceived injustices and perceived mistreatment. A sense of

apathy is echoed in the repetition of the phrase, "what's the use?"
The narrator further underscores the commercial relationship between
Black and Jew: "Jews sell me things." A break in that relationship
occurs on Yom Kippur when Jewish owned businesses are closed for
the holiday.

Jews sell me things.
Yom Kippur, no!
Shops all over Harlem
close up tight that night.
Some folks blame high prices on the Jews
(Some folks blame too much on the Jews.)
But in Harlem they don't answer back,
Just maybe shrug their shoulders,
"What's the use?
In Harlem?
What's the use?
What's the Harlem
use in Harlem?
What's the lick?

Hey!
Baba-re-bop!
Mop!
On a be-bop kick!

Sometimes I think
Jews must have heard
the music of a
dream deferred.

The last stanza reveals the meaning behind the poem's title. When the narrator makes reference to a 'dream deferred' the connection between Black and Jew in America is made complete. The reference here is to another Hughes poem, "A Dream Deferred."

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

By echoing the notion of the dream deferred, the narrator has changed the Black/Jewish dynamic. The two are no longer in contention with each other, but represent the two sides of the same coin--the result of a loss of promise and unfulfilled desire, which results in destruction. The apathy of Harlem storeowners, the devaluation of the relationship between Blacks and Jews as primarily commercial, the

negative perceptions of Jews held by Blacks, and the loss of opportunity, led to bitterness, nastiness, and dissatisfaction.

Berysh Vaynshteyn's poem "Negerish"¹³⁷ echoes some of the same sentiments as Hughes' "Likewise," with its first lines;

אין האַרלעמער געטאָ, אין אַזאַ גלות,
ווערט אַפֿילו פֿון גאָט אַ נעגער.

In Harlemer geto, in aza goles,
Vert afile fun got a neger.

In the Harlem ghetto, in such exile,
Even God becomes a Negro.

To be in Harlem was to be in *exile*. For the Yiddish reader, the correlation between Harlem and *exile* was profound and perhaps even prophetic. With the Diaspora as a part of their historical memory and part and parcel of their collective consciousness, and with having left/fled Eastern Europe as a continuation in modern times as another form of diaspora, placing Harlem in the same context in effect

¹³⁷ See Appendix for complete poem.

judaized it. Writing Harlem could serve two purposes. It could allow readers to become familiar with Black urban life, in manageable terms. This would allow them to begin the process of thinking American. But it could also provide them with a kind of foresight. If Black life in an urban setting like Harlem meant poverty and apathy, what could it mean for them? Blacks weren't immigrants to America, they were native, they were Other, and they were dark. Yiddish writers came as immigrants, they were Other, and they too were considered dark in terms of complexion and features. Would their fate prove to be the same?

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, one can argue the historical narrative of African Americans and Jews in such a way that the following story is revealed: Blacks and Jews enjoyed a special relationship, which in recent times has been described as an alliance of sorts, particularly regarding social justice, political activism, and cultural exchange and collaboration. There have been, however, moments in which that alliance has been tested, destroyed, or at the very least filled with tension, mistrust, and suspicion.

Such a narrative, which tended to highlight the semblance of a 'Golden Era of Black and Jewish Relations,'¹³⁸ pitted the two hyphenated Americans and white ethnics in the same position, on the periphery of American society, attempting to thrust themselves if not

¹³⁸ There is a tendency to view the 1960s as the Golden Age of Black and Jewish relations. I would argue that the true Golden Age is somewhat earlier, beginning with the founding of the NAACP in 1909 through the 1930s. That era comes to an end with the transition of Jews to whiteness and the Black desire for self representation and self government (particularly with respect to the NAACP), culminating in a sense of betrayal and misunderstanding by both groups.

into the center, at least closer to its inner margins. As outsiders, they could relate to each other through narratives of discrimination, histories of enslavement, persecution, and suffering. Both were subjected to segregated communities or enclaves—ghettos, *shtetls*, ghettos. With the Leo Frank case, it became clear that Jews would be and could be subjected to the same treatment as Blacks in the form of lynching¹³⁹ and other maltreatment: if not government-sanctioned persecution, then state-sponsored repression. Blood libel and accusations of Black depravity with respect to whites (specifically Black men toward White women) brought the two groups together as social pariahs, allegedly responsible for a variety of ills.

The attempt to re(make) themselves into full-fledged Americans and as a result move closer to the center came in a variety of forms. For Jews, it involved political engagement in the form of Bundist activity and union organizing, social commitment in the formation of pro-Jewish, anti-discrimination organizations, and cultural or countercultural activities. Included among those activities is the creation of music, theater, and most importantly for my project,

¹³⁹ Jews in The United States were never lynched en masse. The Frank case, however, caused Jews to at least think about the possibility of such.

literature—Yiddish literature writing America and the American experience.

For African Americans, political engagement was not initially at issue. They had no voice, no say, no way of participating in America. Based upon their history in the United States, they believed what was needed for them was a way of showing that they too had something to contribute. They too were America and American. Their attempts to participate in America (they were after all made in America, there was no need to (re)make themselves) focused on cultural production as well: music, theater, art, and literature—the writings of the Harlem Renaissance.

As Yiddish writers grappled with what it meant to be American, what it meant to be white, to adapt to their new home and to record and recount their new experiences, writers of the Harlem Renaissance tried to negotiate America, their native soil, in a way in which it was clear that they had shed the mantle of slavery. In effect, Jews had become the New Negro. It was no surprise that the two groups would write each other. Yiddish writers recognized the issues that African Americans faced in the United States, and understood the Black experience as not unlike their own. Similarly, those of the Harlem Renaissance saw the Jewish community as a model. They found

notions of group self-sufficiency and support, in addition to self-governance and the ability to effect social and political change, appealing.

Both the Yiddish writers and those of the Harlem Renaissance shared in the creation of and participation in a dissident cultural milieu in which they encouraged protest, the call to action, and the end of oppression. For Blacks, Jews understood oppression and persecution and, as a result, could aid them in their struggle. For Jews, Blacks were oppressed and as such they (Jews) could provide moral and financial support in working to eliminate discrimination and inequality for both.

Yiddish writers understood that African Americans were an integral part of not only the American experience, but their American experience as well. They also understood the sense of alienation associated with Otherness, longing and isolation, nostalgia, the desired construction of a new homeland, notions of return, recovery, and the attempted retention of cultural, historical, traditional, and religious artifacts as part and parcel of diasporic expression in a New World. This yearning and desire for the past, for the homeland, the Old country, or the sense of being home yet not feeling at home or completely comfortable in one's environment, is a common theme in Yiddish literature. The attempt to reconcile these themes is often

expressed by the following generation in Jewish American literature written in English.

However, for some Yiddish writers, an attempt to reconcile such themes was made through and in writing about African Americans. In appropriating DuBois' *veil* and using Black voice, experience, and history, they were able to draw upon Black religion and the notion of redemption, slavery and its legacy, and the continent of Africa. DuBoisian *double consciousness*, whether addressing Yiddish identity in America or Yiddish renderings of African Americans, yielded similar results: Blacks in America could serve as a bridge to Americanization and assimilation for Jews. As cultural, social, and *colored middlemen*, Blacks acted as a buffer between white American society and Jews.

For Harlem Renaissance writers, Jews also represented *ethnic middlemen*. They were not quite white and as such could serve as a bridge between White and Black America. They understood Black culture (to a greater degree than White America), a history of struggle, and the notion of collective trauma. As a result, they were able to aid in transmitting and translating Black (popular) culture to the white masses. They were in a position to mediate the Black experience and constructs of Blackness (as juxtaposed with Jewishness and Yiddishness), in conjunction with a sense of self-preservation and self-

interest. Yiddish writers, as *literary middlemen*, brought their perceptions of Black cultural, social, and religious elements to their Yiddish-reading audiences. They provided information regarding Blacks to an audience steeped in Old World tradition and sensibilities attempting to make the New World their new home.

Prior to their immigration to the United States, Yiddish writers had no opportunity for previous contact with African Americans. Their depictions are therefore not based upon a long, detailed historical tradition of contact with African Americans, as is seen in American literature.¹⁴⁰ Thus their depictions can be viewed as based upon firsthand experience, revealing generalizations, analogies, comparisons, and contrasts, often combined with stereotypical imagery as expressed by and in dominant American society, discourse, media, and popular culture. As a cultural, non-white insider, the Yiddish writer was privy to African America. English language Jewish writers inherited this literary, social, and cultural legacy. Their

¹⁴⁰ For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a central text of the Abolitionist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, which was based on second hand accounts and oft repeated stories of the treatment of Blacks in the antebellum South. Interestingly, the novel was translated into Yiddish for the new immigrant readership.

experiences differed as time progressed and the relationship between Blacks and Jews changed.

Images of African Americans depicted in works of Yiddish literature (and Jewish American literature) should be viewed in terms of their cultural, historical, and social contexts. Positive and negative images of Blacks reflected personal opinions, understandings, perceptions, stereotypes, fact, fiction, fantasy, and everything in between. Yiddish depictions represented the Yiddish experience in their New World. Some of the images are raw and sensual, addressing Black physicality and the Black body. Other images are emotional and violent, concentrating on the perceived nature and personality of Blacks and their relationship to Whites. Still other depictions are depressing, and concerned with the economic, as well as spiritual poverty that some Blacks faced.

Celebratory images affirming Black spirituality and religious worship, and the Black connection in Biblical terms, offered Yiddish readers a glimpse at Black America in a familiar context. Blacks, as 'people of the Book,' were rendered a part of the Jewish experience. The connection in Biblical times carried over into their new American experience. Ethiopia provided the origin of the Black Jewish experience, as well as the Black and Jewish experience.

Within the parameters of Yiddish literature (and Jewish American literature), Yiddish writers constructed literary paradigms in which they coexisted with African Americans, connected by a sense of understanding regarding notions of social and economic mobility, cultural schizophrenia, and grappling with connections to and disconnections from African Americans.

APPENDIX

Poetry and Song

אויף דיין ערד, אַמעריקע

אויף דיין ערד איז מיר באַשערט צו זינגען דאָס געזאַנג פֿון דיין לאַנד.
כ'האַב אַזוי פֿיל מענטשן, אַזוי פֿיל שיפֿן אין דינע ברייטע האַפֿנס געזען
און ביי דינע פֿעלקער פֿון לשונות זיך געלערנט זיין אין דער פֿרעמד,
און אַנגעהויבן פֿאַרשטיין, אַז כאַטש ריישע, גאַליציע, איז מיין היים,
איז מיין שטאָט ניו-יאָרק – מינע גאַסן: דילענסי, רידזש און פיט,
און היימישעו נאָך ביסטו מיר פֿון יענעם טרויעריקן טאָג אָן געוואָרן,
ווען כיהאַב אויף דיין ערד, אַמעריקע, געזען מיין טאַטע-מאַמע שטאַרבן,

היימישע טאַטע-מאַמע — אייניקלעך פֿון אַמסטערדאַמער ייִדשע וואַגלערס;
פֿון די אור-זיידעס נאָך פֿון רזשאַרזש וואַשינגטאָנס גרויסע צייטן,
וואָס האָבן מיט שרעק איבער מבולדיקע וואַסערן זיך זעגלען געלאָזט
מיט זייערע בענטש-ליכט, טליתים און תפֿילין פֿונעם אַלטן האַלאַנד
און פֿאַרן ראַדן לינקאָלן געבראַכט די חכמה פֿון "האַלי-מאַזעס",
אויף די באַוול-פֿעלדער צו קענען מילדערן דאָס געוויין פֿון נעגערס.

אַזוי פֿיל טרויעריקע גאַסן זינען אויף דיין ערד, אַמעריקע, פֿאַראַן!
אומהיימלעך גייען ייִדן אַרום געבויגענע איבעו שטיבער
מיט מיסחרדיקע פעק אויף שווערע, מידע אַקסלען אַנגעהאַנגען
און האַנדלען מיט געוואַנטן, גאַלד ווי אין וואַרשע, ווי אין לאַדזש
אויף די שפּראַכן פֿון ענגליש, שפּאַניש, איטאַליעניש און ייִדיש.

אין דינע פֿאַרנעפֿלטע נעכט — אויף די עוועניוס, אויף די סקווערן,
קען מען זען ווי עלנט עס קענען זיין מענטשן אויף דיין ערד.
דינע סוף-חודשדיקע לבנות גייען-אויף דינער און בלאַסער
און גיסן זייער אומעט אויף געזיכטער, אויף שיכורע ליבער,
ווען דיין ערד, אַמעריקע, איז אין ווינט, איז אין בלויזן שניי,

ערגעץ אין שווערע ווייסן, אין בלויע טיפֿן — אַוועק.
זעגלען די שיפֿן אויף דינע אַוונטיקע, געבויגענע וואַסערן,
אויף די צעהאַנגענע בריקן פֿון מאַנהעטן, ברוקלין, קווינס,
ציען רינדער מיט חלפֿימדיקן ליכט אויף זיך, צו שחיטה
און מאַכן גרויער נאָך ס'ביסל עלנט פֿון דיין ערד, אַמעריקע.

נעכט רייכערן שטאָטיש און שלאָגן האַרבסטיק פֿון קאַלטע דעכער.
דער בלוי פֿון די הימלען ווערט אומעטיק ווי די שטאָט, ווי די שויבן.
לענג-אויס דינע וואַסערן – ציען פֿלעמלדיקע שלעפּ-שיפֿלעך
און שאַרן פֿון זיך פֿלאַמיקן שוים, טרייסלען ס'געהילץ פֿון די ברעגן.
ס'האַפֿנדיקע ליכט פֿון סקלאַדן ווערט ווינטערדיק און גראָשנדיק;
סמוטנע גייען וועכטערס אַרום איבער דינע אויסלענדישע סחורות.

אַוונטיקע באַרטנס וואָס זיינען פֿון נעפלען שיכור און טריב.
העל און ברין-קויטיקע מאַטראַסן שטייען באַנפֿנדיק אין די שענקען :
שטייען ביי דרימלדיקע "באַרס", מיט אַראַפּגעלאַזטע קעפּ
און רעדן צו די אויסגעוועפטע ביר-גלעזער, מיט צעגאַסענע מיילער,
פֿון שטריק און פֿון אַנקערס זיינען זייערע הענט האַרט און פֿלינק
און קענען מאַסטן ציען אין מיטן דער וועלט — אין מיטן ים.

אין נאָוועמבער ווערן אַלע זאַכן דאָ ראַסטיק, ווערן געל.
יינגלישע פֿייערן סמאָליען פֿון צענאָגלטע קאַסטנס, ברעטער און קאַנען,
גאָט, סאַראַ בענקשאַפֿט ס'קוקט פֿון פּנימער ייִדישע, נעגערישע,
איטאַליענישע
"איסט-סייד, וועסט-סייד" — אומעטום די זעלבע פֿענצטער, די זעלבע נאַכט.
און שטאַרבט אַ מענטש אויף דיין גרויסער, ברייטער ערד, אַמעריקע,
איז ווי ר'וואַלט דאָ געשטאַרבן אין אַ סך לענדער מיט אַ מאָל !

נעגערֿיש דאָרף

ס'בליט דער הימל קאַלט און אויסגעשטערנט איבער נעגערֿישע כאַטעס. אַפּגערינענע וואַסערן פֿון מילדן שניי, גליווערן דין אין אייז. קויענענס שטייגן רויכיק און טונקעל, נאַפּט פֿלעמלעך באַפֿלעמלען די שויבן, און דורך די שויבן זינגען נעגער אין אַ זונטיק, אין נעגערֿישן דאָרף.

ס'איז היימלעך אין נעגערֿישן דאָרף אין אַ זונטיקדיקן ווינטער-אָוונט. שוואַרצלייב אין הייסן זייד, לאַקערן אויף שטראַזן נאָך אַ נעגער יונג און אַנטרינען גלוסטטיקע מיט געלענדטע היפֿטן פֿון ווילדע הענט, דורך שכנותדיקע פֿעלדער, וואָס שטייען האַרט און שווער מיט נאַענטן. ווינט.

אין נעגערֿישן דאָרף, זענען קלוג די נעגער וואָס ווייסן שוין פֿון גרויסע שטעט, וואָס טראַגן קליידער מיט שטאַטישן שניט, און אַ ווונד פֿון אַ ווילדן מעסער. פֿון זייערע פֿיס רירט זיך ריטמישער דזשעז, גליטשיק און גרינג איבערן דיל. נעגערטעס זעצן זיך שעמעוודיק אויף זייערע קני, מיט אַפֿענע שויסן.

אין איטלעכן הויף, פֿאַר איטלעכער שוועל, ליגן רויק געלאַסענע הינט, די העלדזער אויסגעקראַכן, צוגעטשעפעט צו אַ געפֿונען שטיק ברוכוואַרג; זיי זענען באַרימהערציק צו אַ דורכגייער און עסן פֿון אַ פֿרעמדער האַנט, און מאַכן היימיש אַ מענטש, וואָס שטעלט זיך אַפּ אַמאָל ביי נאַכט אין נעגערֿישן דאָרף.

אין וואַלד, העט הינטערן נעגערֿישן דאָרף, העט הינטערן נעגערֿישן צמענטאַש, טליען פֿייערן און שאַטענען אַפּ אויף ברייטע געזיכטער, שווערע קופּערנע הענט. העק פֿאַכען געשמאַק איבער ביימער, אין דורכזיכטיקן רויך, און ס'ברעכן זיך שאַרפֿע צווייגן, טרוקן שפּרינגען אַפּ שפענער אין דער נאַכט.

ס'שטייט אַן אַפּגאַט אַזאַ ווי אומעטום, ס'זינקט אַ קלויסטער אַזאַ ווי אומעטום. נאָר אויפֿן צמענטאַש אַ שוואַרצער קברן, אַ שוואַרצער גלח, שוואַרצע מתים. אַ לוויה מיט אויפֿגעהויבענע אַרעמס, יעמערט פֿאַר אַן אַפֿן קבר אין יעלהדיקער תּפֿילה, און קיל שמעקט די צעגראַבענע ערד מיט אַ פֿריש טרונעלע, מיט אַ פֿריש געשטאַרבן קינד.

ס'דאָרף טרויערט דורך שכרות, דורך פֿאַרכט און דורך מילדער שטאַמלונג.
ס'טראָגט קיינער אויף קיינעם נישט קיין קללה, אויף אַלעמענס ליפן אַ שטילע
באגריסונג.

אַ נר-תמיד אויפֿן קייזער־וועג לייטערט "לינקאַלנ'ס" געזיכט אין ליכטיקן
טרויער

און ס'קוקן זינע אויגן אַראָפּ מיט אַזוי פֿיל באַשערמונג צום נעגער־ישן דאָרף.

די לבנה גייט אויף אַ צעוואָרפֿענע אויף די פֿענצטער, אַ צעוואָרפֿענע איבער
דעכער,

און גרינלעך-קיל, העלן אויף די שויבן; שוימיק, ווי אָוונטיק וואָסער אין ווינט.
דורך אומעטיקע שפיגלען אַנטפלעקט זיך אויסגעטאַן אַ פּלוצימדיק לייב,
און ברוינלעך-שווער ווערן די שטיבער ענג מיט וואָרעמען נעגער־ישן ריח.

ס'טאָגט אויף דער מאָרגן איבער מאַגערע פֿעלדער. קינדער קוויטיקן אין די
וויגן.

טויבן רירן זיך פֿויל, קלאַפּן טרוקן מיט די פֿליגל און וואָרקן אויף נידעריקע
נעסטן.

נעגער־ישע נאַנעס אין קליידער אַזעלכע ווי וויסע, עפֿענען טרויעריק
איטלעכנס טיר

און לאַזן נאָך זיך אַ שטיל ביסל עסן, אַ וואָרעם לייבל און אַ געוואַשן העמדל.

פֿונעם נעגער־ישן דאָרף ציען קאַליקעס, און גייען זיך פֿונאַנדער אין פֿרעמדע
שטעט.

די וואָס זענען שטום, בלינד, פֿירן מיט זיך אַ קינד, אַ ווייב, זאָל העלפֿן בעטן.
און די מיט צערונגע געזיכטער, מיט בלוטיקע אויגן און אויסגעשטאַרצטע
ליפּן,

צעשטעלן זיך רחמנותדיק אויף די ראָגן, פֿאַרגייען אין שכרות און שטאַרבן
קלוג.

האַרלעם—אַ נעגער-געטאַ.
אַ גאַס מיט אַ לאַנגן נעגערֿישן גלות.
אויף אַ ווייטלעכן באַרג

אַ הויכע נאַכט, אַ קלויסטער אונטער גרין
מיט אַ צעטיילטע לבנה אין די שויבן.
עס שטאַפלט אַ צלם אָן אַ צוגענאַגלטן גאַט.
איבער שטיינער מיט טרויעריקן מאַך
און איבער ביוסטן פֿון געהאַקטן מאַרמאָר:
קוקט לינקאַלן, דזשעפֿערסאָן אין אַלטקייט
מיטן אומעט פֿון נעגערֿישע דורות.
שקיעה אין איטלעכן פֿענצטער
און שטומער באַנדז אויף אַ יעדן נעגער.
פנימער דורך הייסן גלאַז
שפּאַרן מיט ריח פֿון געהילץ און ראָסט,
און אַלץ טונקלט ווען נעגערס קוקן דורך זייערע שויבן.

פֿון אַן אומעט אַזאַ,
ווערט שאַרלעכער רויט, שלאַפֿער רויט.
קינדער וויגן זיך אין די מאַמעס אַרײַן
און וויינען ווי תהילים, אויף די הענט.
אַ, טרערן פֿון נעגערֿישן תהילים.
סמוטנער גרוי, אָוונטיקער גרוי!
און האַרלעם בליט ווי מנחה-מעריב:
רויכן ציען פֿון נעגערס אָוועק
אין אַ פֿאַרנאַכט פֿון פֿלאַטערדיקער קעלט.
אַזוי פֿיל טריב בײַ די באַרטס פֿון האַרלעם!
שיפֿן פֿון נאַנטע, נעפלדיקע ברעגן
טראָגן זיך פֿאַרבי אַמאָל מיט ווינט פֿאַר אַ שויב
און דערמאָנען אין אַ פֿאַרשקלאַפֿטן נעגער,
ווען אַלע זאָגן קריאת-שמע צו דער וועלט.
עס פֿאַרציט דער הימל טיפֿער אין חצות
אַן אַ לבנה, אָן אַ שטערן,
און לאַזט פֿאַרבענקטער אַלע דעכער,

און וואַלקנס גיסן—
אַזאַ רעגן אויפֿן אור פֿון נעגערֿישע דורות;
אויף די שאַפֿענע בערד פֿון זייערע זיידעס,
אַדער אפֿשר גאַר אויפֿן בלוט פֿון לינטש

ערגעץ אויף אַ בוים אין די באַוול-פֿעלדער.
דאָס געזאַנג זייערס איז שוואַרצער פֿון אַלע שבֿטים!
אָיעדעס לייב איז אָסיענדיק, איז ליים;
אינגעשראָקענער גנאָד—איטלעכעס אויג,
פֿון צופֿיל בייטשן און פֿון צופֿיל רחמים.
און דערציילן קאָן אַ נעגערישע באַבע אַ סך, אַ סך:
פֿון קינדער אין זעק צו די רוקנס געבונדן
אויסגעטראָגענע—אויף הוילע אַקסלען
אונטער אַ זון פֿון שלאָגנדיקן שווייס,
פֿון געוויין צו די פֿעלדער אַראָפּ.

אין האַרלעמער געטאָ, אין אַזאַ גלות,
ווערט אַפֿילו פֿון גאָט אַ נעגער.
מאַנסבילן ליגן פֿנעניש ביי די באַרטנס אַרום
און נעכטיקן אויף נאַסע, אויסלענדישע פֿעסער;
רעדן צו די קלעצער, וואָס שלאָגן דעם ברעג.
פֿאַר אַלעמענס אויגן, רויש פֿון פֿלאַמיקן שוים
פֿון אַמעריקעס שטאַטנדיקע אינדזלען,
וואָס דערציילן פֿון קייטן אויף הענט, אויף פֿיס
אַפֿגעפֿירטע—אין אַ הייסן צפֿון-לאַנד.
טרויעריק און ענלעך איז האַרלעם
צום אַריענטאַלישן ירושלים:
טעכטער אין לעצטן בלוי פֿון זייער גאָס
וואַרטן מיט אויסגעשטרעקטע כלים אויף ברויט,
ווי די דינסט-פֿרויען אין שלמה המלכס צייטן.
אויף אַלע אָוונטיקע שוועלן נעגערישע פֿנימער.
די פֿון הונגער, טראָגן זיך אין פֿרעכע טענץ;
וויקלען זיך מיט גלוסט אין די טויערן אַרײַן.

שטילער ברענענדיקער פֿראָסט פֿאַר די הייזער
צײַט פֿון אַפֿענע נעכט אין זייערע שטיבער אַרײַן.
אַ קאַלטע ווינטער-לבֿנה אויף די שויבן גרינט,
אַ פֿראָסט אויף אַ נעגער-פֿענצטער מאָלט די "ביבל";
דעם באַרוועסן משהן מיט אַ שטעקן דורכן ים;
די לוחות פֿון גאָטס אויסגעקריצטער חכמה.
קינדער—נעגערישע, פֿלאַקסענע
וואַקסן ווי פֿון תנ"ך אַרויס,
וואַנדערן זיך אויף דער סיבה פֿונעס מבול
אויף נחס טויב, אין אַלע זייערע פֿענצטער.

אין אַ נאַכט פֿון קאַלטער לבֿנה,
געגליכן איז אַ נעגערישער חצות צו חומש.

לויט די מעשיות פֿון זייערע באַבעס, זיידעס—
אַפֿילו דזשעפֿערסאָו קומט איצט פֿונעם אור!
בלויז "טאַמס קעבין" זײַנען ווילדע קאַפיטלעך.
אַינגעביבלט אַזוי איז אַ יעדעס נעגעריש הויז,
ווען עס שטייען די שטיבער אין טיפֿן ווייס
אַינגעשטילט פֿון פֿאַלנדיקן שניי.
פֿאַרשנייעטע באַבעס שטייען אויף, ווי תפֿילות,
און וויינען נעגעריש אויף זייערע דורות.

איך קום פֿון אַביסיניע

איך קום פֿון אַביסיניע,
אַ וויסער אַביסיניער,
און בין—
אַ פֿרעמדער.
וואָלט איך געוועזן שוואַרץ,
וואָלט מען מיך פֿלינק אויסגעלייגט און אויפֿגעראָלט
און געלייענט ווי אַ מגילה אויף שוואַרצן פֿאַרמענט מיט אותיות פֿון גאָלד.
נאָר איך בין העל.
שנאַפֿן פֿאַרדאַכטן אַרום מיין שוועל.
מיין בלאַנדקייט—
אפֿשר לוייער איך ביים גאָלדענעם טויער אין דער דעמער-שעה
אַפצובייסן אַ שטיקל זון.
מינע בלויע אויגן—
אפֿשר רייב איר זיי אָן מיט טורקוזן אום האַלבע נאַכט
ווען די טויטע קומען פֿון די קבֿרים,
און די מכשפים האָבן זייער שליטה.
אפֿשר בין איך אַליין פֿון אַשמדאַיס סוויטע.

ס'אַראַ ווונדער, אַ עדגאַר,
וואָס אין די קינדערצימערן
פֿאַרבייט נאָך ניט מיין נאָמען—
די שוואַרצע קאַץ און דעם ווילקולאַק.

כ'וויל זײן אַ נעגערין

כ'וויל זײן אַ נעגערין
מיט געלע אויגן
טרינקען די לבנות,
מיט גראָבע ליפן זויגן
שוואַרצע זאַפֿטן פֿון די נעכט.

אויף הויכע, שוואַרצע דינע פֿיס
אַרומפֿליען איבער דער שטאַט
און מיט די ראָזע פּיאַטעס
אַנזאַגן
אַ נייעם מענטש.

האַרלעמער נענערס

אַוונטן וואָס פֿאַרגעסן אַמאָל צעצונדן די שטערן אויפֿן האַרלעמער הימל
רינען אָפֿ פֿונעם עלווייטער מיט טונקעלן רעגן און שטאַלענער פֿוילקייט,
און פֿירן נאָס אַהיים אַ שווערן נעגערישן טאַטן צו זײַן הויזגעזינד
און אין זײַן שטוב פֿאַרען די ווענט מיט אויפֿגעלייגטן ריח פֿון געקעכצן.

הענט וואָס ציען מעבל דורך הויכע פֿענצטער, פֿאַרציען ס'שלאָפֿצימער מיט
ראַלעטן
און גלוסטן צו ברייטע בעטן, צו אַ געשפּאַנטן קאַרסעט פֿול מיט שוואַרצלייב.
אין דער פֿינצטער באַנאַכט זענען במילא אַלע לייבער שוואַרץ און ווילד,
און נעגערס, צווישן זיך, ווייסן שוין וועלכעס פנים פֿון אַ נעגרטע איז שײַן.

פֿון אַזאַ נאַכט, פֿון אַזאַ פשוטער גלוסטונג וואַקסן אויס האַרלעמער
נעגעריונגען;
טעכטער וואָס ווייסן, אַזוי ווי ווייסע, צו פֿאַרציען אַ היפֿט פֿאַר אַ מאַן אין גאַס
און קענען שטייפֿן דעם גוף, וואַרפֿן די ברוסט מיט רייץ אונטער זיידענע
בראָזירן
ריטמיש פֿאַר באַזאַפֿענע מענער, מיט הייסן געזאַנג פֿון נעגערישע
מעלאָדיעס.

האַרלעמער נעגעריונגען זענען שטאַטישער ווי אַנדערע פֿון אומעטום ניו-
יאָרק.
זיי זענען בלייכהויטיק און טראַגן שטענדיק אַ געפרעסטע הויז, אַ לאַקירטן
שוך,
מאַנזשעטן מיט פּערלמוטערנע קנעפּ, פֿרישע קראַגנס אויף אַ טונקעל-
געשוירענעם קאַרק,
און אויף די פֿינגער עלעגאַנטע רינגען, קלוגע מאַנירן נאָך ווייסער
באַהעפֿטונג.

To the Negroes

H. Leivick

I will change nothing in you, Negroes; I grant
Not from far nor from close range.
We will not become one, become the same we can't,
And our skins will not change.

Your lips will not become thin,
And mine, will not grow full.
And for a moment's craving for a white sin
You will still pay with a death horrible.

Oh, you should with decision passionate
Encircle me and my talk laugh off in peals
When, with curious step, among you I ambulate
As though an equal to equal.

When I come with candor and confessional hymn
Under a sky which cannot be pitiless
Against the cry of your skin and limb,
It's ridiculous, the crying of my consciousness.

Under your window I stand, at your threshold
I let myself stumble over stairways irregular.
Oh, I beg for pity for the dying soul
Of your nightly long-suffering guitar.

It seems-what? I myself am one ever tormented,
Hanging, like you, on ropes with hate athrob.
My face, however, is for you not less malevolent
Than the face of each one of a lynching mob.

Let the word be our friend redeeming
And us fraternize, the last and dominated we,
And among crowds of enemies, friendship sing.
My Yiddish song shall the first of many be.

To a Negro Girl

Judah Leib Teller

The hips bulge out of the dress.
The breasts burst out of the brassiere.
Odors beat off you and with depths,
With Solomon's flowing beard,
With white lace
Of the Queen of Sheba.

The night is swirling, delirious.
The waiter wipes the damp porcelain.
Your shoulders twitch in savage measures,
With a husky scream.
I follow your lustful swing.
Horror and joy have colored and charged
The Negro Eve with
Raw idolatry,
With passionate anguish.

I follow your small, jocular steps,
Your mellow, womanly swing.
The evening is aglow.
Your gait in the street is naked,
Like Bathsheba's ripe loins
In the high grasses.

So much daring in the whites of your eyes!

Lyrics: James W. Blake and Charles E. Lawlor
Music: James W. Blake and Charles E. Lawlor

"The Sidewalks of New York" (1894)

1.
*Down in front of Casey's,
Old brown wooden stoop,
On a summer's evening,
We formed a merry group;
Boys and girls together,
We would sing and waltz,
While the "Ginnie" played the organ
On the sidewalks of New York.*

CHORUS
*East side,
West side,
All around the town,
The tots sang "ring a rosie,"
"London Bridge is falling down;"
Boys and girls together,
Me and Mamie Rorke,
Tripped the light fantastic,
On the sidewalks of New York.*

2.
*That's were Johnny Casey,
And little Jimmy Crowe,
With Jakey Krause the baker,
Who always had the dough,
Pretty Nellie Shannon,
With a dude as light as cork,
First picked up the waltz step
On the sidewalks of New York.*

(CHORUS)

3.

*Things have changed since those times,
Some are up in "G,"
Others they are wand'ers,
But they all feel just like me,
They would part with all they've got
Could they but once more walk,
With their girl and have a twirl,
On the sidewalks of New York.*

(CHORUS)

All Over God's Heaven

Traditional

*I got wings, you got wings,
All o' God's children got wings.
When I get to Heaven, gonna put on my wings
And gonna fly all over God's Heaven, Heaven, Heaven.
Every talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there;
Heaven, gonna fly all over God's Heaven.*

*I got shoes, you got shoes,
All o' God's children got shoes.
When I get to Heaven, gonna put on my shoes
And gonna walk all over God's Heaven, Heaven, Heaven.
Every talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there;
Heaven, gonna walk all over God's Heaven.*

*I got a harp, you got a harp,
All o' God's children got a harp.
When I get to Heaven, gonna put on my a harp
And gonna play all over God's Heaven, Heaven, Heaven.
Every talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there;
Heaven, gonna play all over God's Heaven.*

*I got a robe, you got a robe,
All o' God's children got a robe.
When I get to Heaven, gonna put on my a robe
And gonna shout all over God's Heaven, Heaven, Heaven.
Every talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there;
Heaven, gonna shout all over God's Heaven.*

GOING TO SHOUT ALL OVER GOD'S HEAVEN

*I've got a robe, you've got a robe
All of God's children got a robe
When I get to Heaven goin' to put on my robe
Goin' to shout all over God's Heaven*

*Heav'n, Heav'n
Ev'rybody talkin' 'bout Heav'n ain't goin' there
Heav'n, Heav'n
Goin' to shout all over God's Heaven*

*I've got a crown, you've got a crown
All of God's children got a crown
When I get to Heaven goin' to put on my crown
Goin' to shout over God's Heaven*

*I've got shoes, you've got a shoes
All of God's children got shoes
When I get to Heaven goin' to put on my shoes
Goin' to walk all over God's Heaven*

*I've got a harp, you've got a harp
All of God's children got a harp
When I get to Heaven goin' to play on my harp
Goin' to play all over God's Heaven*

*I've got a song, you've got a song
All of God's children got a song
When I get to Heaven goin' to sing a new song
Goin' to sing all over God's Heaven*

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