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“So the Kids Won’t Understand”:
Inherited Futures of Jewish Women Writers

by

Zohar Eeda Weiman-Kelman

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender and Sexuality

in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Chana Kronfeld, Chair
Professor Naomi Seidman,
Professor Judith Butler,
Professor Daniel Boyarin

Fall 2012

**“So the Kids Won’t Understand”:
Inherited Futures of Jewish Women Writers**

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by Zohar Eeda Weiman-Kelman

Abstract

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by

Zohar Eeda Weiman-Kelman

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Chana Kronfeld, Chair

Reading poetry in Yiddish, Hebrew and English from across the twentieth century, this dissertation examines how literary lineage is constructed and challenged by Jewish women in Eastern Europe, America and Mandatory Palestine. Between Jewish women’s limited access to the past and the precarious future of Yiddish, I offer a queer genealogy based on nonlinear transmissions, affective connections and cross-temporal encounters. This genealogy serves as an alternative to teleological heteronormative narratives of Jewish history, which the lens of Yiddish and the lens of women’s writing complicate. Reading women writers undermines the binding value of the past, for women’s literature emerged despite and against historical silencing and erasure. While many feminist projects have aimed to recover women’s lost pasts, I explore what it means to write without a past, what the stakes are for recovering the past, and what complications arise when the past is not quite gone. At the same time, pronouncements of the “death of Yiddish” pose a challenge to politics of futurity (those politics conceiving of the now in service of that which is to come). Indeed, the fact that secular Yiddish speakers are no longer made in the bedroom but in the classroom means the value of Yiddish cannot depend on having a future, at least not one wedded to heteronormative reproduction and language transmission. Instead, I embrace the challenge of formulating a cultural legacy that is not primarily invested in biology, the nuclear family or the future, echoing queer theories of temporality, kinship and sociality that have questioned the priorities produced by reproductive politics.

In search of alternative histories and alternatives models of history, this dissertation turns to the interwar period as a moment of past possibility for the Jewish future. Focusing on Jewish women’s poetry of the period, each chapter offers a different model of lineage as a means of reaching back to this poetry. Through the work of early Hebrew poet Yocheved Bat-Miriam, the Introduction formulates a queer Jewish *keyt*/chain of transmission that serves as the methodological model of the

entire dissertation. Chapter One looks at how 1920s poets Anna Margolin (writing Yiddish) and Leah Goldberg (writing Hebrew) formulated their poetic identity through the histories of non-Jewish others, whereas Chapter Three shows how Jewish lesbian writers of the 1970s such as Irena Klepfisz and Adrienne Rich could reach back to the women writers who preceded them *within* Jewish history. Through real-life, literary and imagined encounters of writers such as Adrienne Rich and Yiddish poet Kadya Molodowsky, as well as between myself and writers of the 1920s and the 1970s, I create a queer dialogue that replaces (hetero-)normative models of cultural transmission and the conflict/continuity they assume. Between these two chapters, Chapter Two uses the erotic poetry of Celia Dropkin and the erotics of Yiddish at large to intervene in contemporary conceptions of Yiddish, as I attempt to replace the fetishizing *of* Yiddish with fetishism *in Yiddish*. Employing transgressive sexuality expressed in Dropkin's poetry, as well as in early sexology, Yiddish archives and contemporary kink, I offer an affective genealogy based on erotic activation past and present. Taken together, the three chapters produce queer lines of lineage that challenge the present approach to the past and the dictate of looking forward to the future, instead turning back to and with Jewish women's writing.

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A LITANY FOR SURVIVAL

For those of us who live at the shoreline
 standing upon the constant edges of decision
 crucial and alone
 for those of us who cannot indulge
 the passing dreams of choice
 who love in doorways coming and going
 in the hours between dawns
 looking inward and outward
 at once before and after
 seeking a now that can breed
 futures
 like bread in our children's mouths
 so their dreams will not reflect
 the death of ours:

For those of us
 who were imprinted with fear
 like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
 learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
 for by this weapon
 this illusion of some safety to be found
 the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
 For all of us
 this instant and this triumph
 We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
 it might not remain
 when the sun sets we are afraid
 it might not rise in the morning
 when our stomachs are full we are afraid
 of indigestion
 when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
 we may never eat again
 when we are loved we are afraid
 love will vanish
 when we are alone we are afraid
 love will never return
 and when we speak we are afraid
 our words will not be heard
 nor welcomed
 but when we are silent
 we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
 remembering
 we were never meant to survive

- Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn* 1978

Introduction

Coming Together: Queer Histories and/of Jewish Women's Writing

אַתָּ לִי בְשׁוֹרָה גִּפְעָמָה, מְצוּיָה
עַל מֵהוּת אַחֲרֵת לְשֹׁמֵר.
אַתָּ לִי פְּגִישָׁה לְאִ-צְפוּיָה, צוֹהֵלֵת,
בְּטָרָם עוֹד רְאֵתָה אוֹר.

You are to me enthused annunciation, commanding
Another essence to keep.
You are to me un-expected encounter, rejoicing
Before it still has seen the light.¹

I open with Hebrew poet Yocheved Bat-Miriam's 1932 poem, "*at li b'sora*" [to me you are annunciation]² as an expectant text of the Jewish past, awaiting my queer interpretation. Looking back to Jewish women's writing in the interwar period, and to Jewish lesbian writing from the 1970s-1980s, I find writers wrestling with their limited access to history, with their conscribed role in their disparate presents, and consequently, with the ultimate value of futurity—the same conditions that force me to look back to the past rather than forward to the future, as I search for alternatives to my own present. This search for what Bat-Miriam calls "another essence" leads me to a past I did not know existed, one so often erased "before it still has seen the light," to quote again from Bat-Miriam's first stanza. Here I find the "un-expected encounter" of Bat-Miriam's poem, forming a community across time. The following dissertation explores such encounters with the past and in the past to generate a genealogy that is not an expression of, but a resistance to biology, linearity and other hegemonic norms and dictates, offering instead an alternative history of resisting futurity through Jewish women's writing across the twentieth century.³

By "futurity" I do not mean the progression of time towards the future, but rather, I am referring to a current emphasis on the value of the future, with a particular set of dictates and goals to be fulfilled in the service of this future to come. If the future is what comes, futurity is what I call the present orientation towards that future. While

1 Yocheved Bat-Miriam, *Shirim* (Merchavyah: Sifriyat po'alim, 1972), 29. Translation mine, ZWK.

2 The word *b'sora* is used to mean "news," "gospel," or "annunciation," moving from the mundane to the transcendent. I chose annunciation because it holds in it, following its biblical origins, an ethereal encounter, which aptly fits the poem. Another possible translation in this vein would be "revelation," which I use to translate the word *giluy* in the second verse of the poem.

3 Because this dissertation is framed through Yiddish, my focus is primarily on *Ashkenazi* women's writing. At the same time, by embracing Yiddish as an alternative avenue of Jewish culture, I mean to offer a theoretical opening, undermining the same hegemonic narratives of emergence that have silenced and oppressed most non-*Ashkanzi* narratives.

this is perhaps most easily comprehended in relation to pressures of biological reproductive normativity, undermining futurity is about more than the choice whether or not to reproduce. What is at stake is a subversion of the symbolic order derived from the reproductive imperative, put bluntly by queer theorist Lee Edelman: “Fuck the social order and the child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized [...] fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”⁴ Reproductive futurity, and futurity based on the image of the child, both hold the present hostage in the name of the future. But this future-facing orientation also affects the ways that we might look back, structuring dominant modes of understanding and narrating the past, creating various histories that are, writes Brook Thomas, “similar in yoking together the modern sense of linear temporality with the celebrated logocentrism of Western thought to produce narratives of progressive emergence.”⁵ These narratives assume “that history is a chronological development through linear time,” and thus ultimately use the present outcome to justify this development, “selecting past material so as to identify a tradition leading to the present.”⁶ The manner in which we have been conditioned to place the single event in context and then link it to a chain of other contextually bound events thus constructs historical narratives that appear to be both natural and inevitable, thereby erasing the very act of construction. This, according to Jewish historian David Meyers, is historicism’s success, and has come to dominate our way of thinking about the past as a justification of our present.⁷

It is precisely out of frustration with the present that I want to “write against histories which create the impression that events from the past had an inevitable occurrence.”⁸ This challenge to linear teleology is itself rooted in the past, specifically in the interwar period (a temporal designation itself already failing by relying on linear concatenation). Writing against what he called the “history of the victor,” Walter Benjamin famously questioned the modes of generational transmission that continuous history relies on, for only those who emerge victorious from the perils of both history and historiography can generate it.⁹ In terms of Jewish language and cultural politics, the victor of the current moment is Hebrew, relegating Yiddish to the realms of the vanquished. For secular Yiddish speakers are

4 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 29.

5 Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism And Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 33.

6 *Ibid.*, 41.

7 David Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5. Myers’ model is linked to Eric Hobsbawm’s invented traditions, which “so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion.” “Introduction: Inventing Tradition,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 12.

8 Thomas, 176.

9 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), for example 1,3,1242.

no longer “made in the bedroom but in the classroom,”¹⁰ leaving “native” Yiddish to Ultra Orthodox circles. While I critique the heteronormative understanding of language transmission this pronouncement implicitly relies on, I embrace the challenge of formulating a history that does not invest primarily in the future, echoing notions of queer negativity, such as that of Edelman. At the same time, reading women writers serves to question the binding value of the past, for women’s literature emerged despite and against historical silencing and erasure. While many feminist projects have aimed to recover women’s lost pasts, I explore what it means to write without a past, what the stakes are in recovering the past, and what complications arise when the past is not quite gone. Challenging the historiography of reproductive heteronormativity as the structure that produces future generations and links them back to past generations, both Yiddish and women’s history stand queerly outside the dynamics of “mandatory conflict or continuity,” following Jack/Judith Halberstam’s definition of queer intergenerationality.¹¹ Instead of adhering to a straight generational logic and the aforementioned teleology it dictates, both forward and back, the alternative histories I am in search of offer themselves to me through their interrupted transmission, queering continuity.

און צו וואָס אָט דאָס בלוט אָן אַ טומאה
 ס'זאָל זיין מיין געוויסן, ווי אַ זיידענער פאַרם
 אויף מיין מוח פאַרבונדן,
 און מיין לעבן אָן אויסגעפליקט בלאַט פֿון אַ ספר,
 און די שורה די ערשטע פאַרריסן?

And why should this blood without blemish
 Be my conscience, like a silken thread
 Bound on my brain,
 And my life a page plucked from a holy book,
 The first line torn? ¹²

In these lines of the 1927 poem “*froyen lider*” [Women’s Poems] Yiddish modernist poet Kadya Molodowsky defiantly turns to the women of her family asking why “this blood without blemish” should be her conscience, why her life should be “a page plucked from a holy book, the first line torn.” Dividing lines of blood and of text Molodowsky opens questions of continuity and disruption, of intergenerational dialogue, of haunting and retrospection. These questions are the thread I follow throughout this dissertation, back to Molodowsky. In the poem, Molodowsky stages

10 A criticism waged against the academization of Yiddish, which I will take to task in my second chapter.

11 Jack/Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 185.

12 Kadya Molodowsky, *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*, translated, introduced and edited by Kathryn Hellerstein (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999).

an imagined encounter between the speaker and her foremothers:

עס וועלן די פֿרויען פֿון אונדזער משפּחה ביז נאַכט אין חלומות
 מיר קומען און זאָגן:
 מיר האָבן אין צניעות אַ לויטערע בלוט איבער דורות געטראָגן,
 צו דיר עס געבראַכט ווי אַ וויין אַ געהיטן אין כשרע קעלערס
 פֿון אונדזערע הערצער.

The women of our family will come to me in dreams at night

And say:

Modestly we carried a pure blood across generations,
 Bringing it to you like a well-guarded wine from the kosher
 Cellars of our hearts.

The women implicitly demand that the speaker continue their pure bloodline. The poet/speaker resists this demand in the lines quoted above, asking “*tsu vos*,” “why,” or even, “to what end” should their demands dictate how she leads her own, apparently divergent, life. The tentative nature of the encounter is emphasized by the future tense *veln* [will], and even there it is relegated to the space of the speaker’s dream. This dream realm, the place of meeting, is also cast in the poem as the “dark street,” *vu di gas iz nor tunkl*, not where a nice Jewish girl should be, but rather the dark streets where immodest female sexuality is performed. This marginal space is where the speaker can come *ankegen* [towards but also against], meeting the grandmothers halfway and asserting herself against them. As they berate her for all the hard work they put into keeping their blood-line kosher for her, she retorts that their very piety and the price they paid for it was what drove her out onto the streets, away from their legacy:

און איך וועל די באַבעס אַנקעגן גיין זאָגן:
 ווי האַרבסטיקע ווינטן יאָגן נאָך מיר זיך
 ניגונים פֿאַרוועלקטע פֿון אייערע לעבנס.
 און איר קומט מיר אַנקעגן,
 וווּ די גאַס איז נאָר טונקל,
 און וווּ ס'ליגט נאָר אַ שאַטן:

And I will go meet these grandmothers, saying:

Like winds of the autumn, your lives’
 Withered melodies chase after me.
 And you come meet me
 Only where the streets are in darkness
 And where only shadows lie:

In answering the women, the speaker disidentifies herself from them, but in the same move also binds herself to them. For she is not only haunted by their *nign*, the

sacred song of their life/story, she is also the one writing it. If patriarchal history denied much of women's cultural transmission, she recreates it, at the same time she attempts to reject it. For Molodowsky and the Jewish women of her time, becoming a woman writer meant breaking with tradition, but it is also what transmits to us the history of women, transforming the unwritten *farvelkte nigunim*, the "withered melodies" of their lives, into poetry.¹³ Without the struggle with the tradition of the past, without the poem, there would be no *seyfer*, no "holy book" that included the women of her family, whose lives remained un-narrated by the same Jewish tradition. Resist this bloodline though she might, the speaker/poet brings this line into being in her writing. As much as Molodowsky's modernist poetry, children's writing and Yiddish publishing projects separate her from the kosher lives of her foremothers, for today's reader these endeavors now serve as link, allowing us to connect both to Molodowsky and to her predecessors.

Looking back as I do to and through Molodowsky and Bat-Miriam, through Jewish women's writing more generally, and through later lesbian writers like Irena Klepfisz and Adrienne Rich, I continue their challenge to "compulsory generationality" (to echo Rich's foundational intervention in *Compulsory Heterosexuality*).¹⁴ The genealogy I am thereby in search of and participating in answers Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin's call for a "notion of Jewish identity that recuperates its genealogical moment-family, history, memory, and practice-while it problematizes claims to autochthony and indigenoussness as the material base of Jewish identity."¹⁵ While the Boyarins challenge the centrality of geographical origin to genealogical inquiry as a basis for Jewish identity, the resistance to futurity I identify and enact calls into question the notion of destination. While their intervention is largely (de-)territorial, my focus is temporal. These are complementary approaches, for the very notion of "diaspora" stands at the intersection of these two strands, indicating a secondariness both in time and in space to a primary place in past times.¹⁶ My own discomfort with the term lies not only in how diaspora is thus rendered secondary, but in how it implies of a present striving towards a future return to a past origin.¹⁷ Instead, I chart a trajectory that is

13 The *nign* is a perfect image for this move, for it is a wordless melody. For the *nigunim* were not meant to be, nor could they be, written. Furthermore, women could sing these melodies despite not knowing the Hebrew words of other prayers. Putting the *nigunim* in the mouths of women takes them out of the realm of male dominated religious tradition, while exposing how aspects of this tradition are already aligned in many ways with female experience.

14 Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" *Signs* 5:4 (Summer, 1980): 631-60.

15 Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin. "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19:4 (1993): 714.

16 Alison Schachter's account of Kadya Molodowsky and Gavriel Preil's post-war Yiddish literary production in New York further serves to figure diaspora in space and time alike, as an integral part of her innovative mapping of Jewish diaspora and the modernist poetics it produced. *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2011).

17 In recent work on queer diaspora, however, David Eng investigates "what might be gained politically by reconceptualizing diaspora not in conventional terms of ethnic dispersion, filiation, and biological traceability, but rather in terms of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency." By doing

not derived from a stable source (neither in time nor in space), and is not geared towards a necessary future, as I look for new Jewish pasts that will be usable for the precarious Jewish present.¹⁸

The interwar period was a time of great uncertainty about the future in/of Jewish literature, culture and life, for men and women alike. At the time both Yiddish and Hebrew were still nascent modern secular literary vehicles, emerging from a long past of largely religious textual orientation; these years of Jewish history were rich with possibility. Linguistically and culturally, Jewish writers could choose between Yiddish, Hebrew and also such local languages as Polish, Russian, Arabic or English,¹⁹ and even had the ability to inhabit multiple positions at once, or move fluidly amongst them. No writer could anticipate the effect of her choices in relation to how Jewish literary history would evolve, yet these choices proved critical for the lives of writers and for the course of Jewish literary history. As Dan Miron writes, the choice of language had momentous implications, “for the choice of language amounted to a choice of a cultural Jewish future.”²⁰ But the choice of a future was deeply embedded in the choice of a past as well, as Miron suggests: “in nothing did the new literatures convey their sense of troubled awareness of their newness more than in this need to choose and justify the selection, its choice of a past or pasts.”²¹ As much as men and women shared an uncertainty about the future, the available choices of a past were significantly different for women. The religious past of Jewish letters meant there was hardly a long or continuous tradition of women writing in Jewish languages, since women were generally denied access to the traditional texts

so, queer diasporas emerge as a critical site “providing new ways of contesting traditional family and kinship structures—of reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments.” David L. Eng, “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” *Social Text* 76 (2003): 4.

18 This term, coined by Van Wyck Brooks (“On Creating a Usable Past,” in *Van Wyck Brooks: The Early Years: A Selection from His Works, 1908–1925*, ed. Claire Sprague [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993], 219-26) became central to New Historicism. In the context of Jewish studies David Roskies uses the term to indicate shifts in the very method of memory: “[o]nce the search for a usable past was being waged through new venues and institutions [...] the structure of remembrance began to change as well” (David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for A Usable Past* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 3). My own use of the term applies it as the link that enables a particular present to activate a specific past.

19 See the chapter “Multilingualism” in Benjamin Harshav’s *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 23-40. It should be noted that Arabic, and the general case of Jews in Arabic speaking countries receives only marginal treatment in the present study. For a more comprehensive account, see Ammiel Alcalay’s *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Gil Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) and Lital Levy, “Reorienting Hebrew Literary History: The View from the East,” in *Prooftexts* 29:2 (2010), 127-72.

20 Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 38.

21 Ibid, 191.

upon which modern Hebrew, and to a certain extent, Yiddish, literature rely.²² While Jewish men could repurpose the Hebrew of the Bible and the Talmud to create a new secular literature, women came to writing Hebrew and Yiddish without the cultural and linguistic inheritance that traditional male education afforded. Even outside the realm of Jewish tradition women had to contend with a historical disadvantage, for they were writing without an acknowledged tradition of women writing before them, a predicament feminist literary criticism has explored extensively.²³ In terms of "women's history," the problem was first the fact that it was less likely for women to come to writing, and even when they did, their texts were less likely to be saved, circulated and passed down. The force of these dynamics left women outside of history and without access to history. Indeed, the "newness" Miron invokes as conditioning the turn to the past was particularly acute for women, for without a past, what could women's writing-future be?

Despite or possibly due to Jewish women's historical disadvantage, they were deemed an essential part of the Jewish future, as agents of reproduction producing future Jewish (male) scholars (and later, Jewish soldiers). Whereas men metaphorically birthed texts, Jewish women were clearly meant to be birthing babies, not writing. While Jewish women were recognized as readers of Yiddish literature, they were not meant to be producing it. Their access to Hebrew was even more limited; the few who were taught Hebrew being the exception rather than the rule, an exception very much dependent on the disposition of unique fathers rather than the product of a cultural norm.²⁴ Jewish women thus faced not only a lack of access to the production of a textual past and a lack of access to women's history, but also a one-track future that would perpetuate their present marginalization. Therefore, for women, to choose a "cultural Jewish future" depended not only on challenging past and present norms, but entailed a struggle against a particular form of future by gaining access to a past. True as this was for the women of the interwar period, it continued to resonate with Jewish women throughout the 20th century, and formed a central motivation of later lesbian writing. Unable or unwilling to be measured by the sons they produced (or did not produce) the Jewish lesbian poets of the 1970s challenged the role relegated to them by finding their *hemshekh*, their continuity, not in the children to come, but through the women who came before them, namely those of the interwar period. In coming to writing, in language choice, and in its particular themes, Jewish women's literature thus resists futurity by disrupting a progressive history that could follow, or, in fact bring the Jewish past into the future. The act of turning back, my turn and the turn of the writers I read, forges a new kind of lineage, what Christopher Nealon calls a "queer tribe," a

22 For an extensive account of Jewish women's education see Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2004).

23 Cf. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

24 For example the case of Dvora Baron. Cf. Sheila Jelen, *Intimations of Difference: Dvora Baron in the Modern Hebrew Renaissance* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

collectivity formed across time.²⁵ The tribe is constituted not by generative texts (say, like an expectant parent), but by “foundling texts,” orphan texts waiting to be adopted, not by the prior generation of parents but by the future generation of (queer) readings and readers, who will adopt them across time. These texts thus exist in expectancy of a looking back yet to come.

The poem by Yocheved Bat-Miriam with which I opened lends itself readily (albeit resistantly) to such an expectant reading in the very act of the poet’s self-naming as well as in its content. Bat-Miriam sets up her own foundling status by taking on a name that itself reverses the genealogy of the biblical Miriam, daughter of Yocheved.²⁶ Here, as Naomi Seidman writes, the “biological affiliation and the respect and authority traditionally invested in the older generation give way to a fluid model of imaginative and voluntary affiliations.”²⁷ Such alternative affiliations were strategically deployed in the emergence of Jewish women's writing in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as in the identity politics of the later lesbian writing I turn to. As these diverse writers subvert simple biological or linear notions of lineage, they also invite future readers to make use of their texts in ways they could not yet imagine. As both feminist and queer historical approaches come to trace their own lineage, as I too attempt to do, subversion itself remains a pertinent tool. But undoing the simple progress of time, a dialogue across time is opened up. This dialogue is thematized in Bat-Miriam’s poem. Significantly, however, the poem itself narrates preemptive resignation, the impossibility of encounter and the foreclosure of fulfillment:

את לי גלוי סך רחוק ונעלם
של ודאי החולם להיות,
של הזיה עורגת, מתעטפה,
על מה שלא יוכל היות.

You are to me revelation of a threshold distant disappearing,
Of a certainty which dreams to be,
Of a yearning delusion, enveloping,
Over that which cannot be.²⁸

This poem speaks from one woman to another, setting up desire and its impossibility, as it narrates an encounter and its negation, even “before it saw the light,” to quote an earlier line in the poem.²⁹ The encounter Bat-Miriam sets up,

25 Christopher S. Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall*, Series Q. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 67.

26 On the significance of this move see Ilana Pardes, “Yocheved Bat-Miriam: The Poetic Strength of a Matronym,” in *Gender and Text: Feminist Criticism and Modern Jewish Literature*, eds. Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 39-63.

27 Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 117.

28 Translation mine, ZWK.

29 I will be working with quotations from this linguistically challenging poem as a whole, though at this point I have only been able to provide a translation for the first two verses in full.

predicts, and forecloses takes place between the speaker and her contemporary, grammatically female addressee (the potentially lesbian object of longing, *erga*, itself a female noun), as well as between the speaker/poet and her future reader. It opens a dialogue: "you call, repeat, unseen/and to you, answer I," but as the speaker says in the next verse, she prefers her addressee in her preemptive vanishing, her hiding [*tov li he'almekh mi-panai, tov li hit'at'fekh bi-dmi*]. The speaker herself is also hiding, in the imagined realm of "the hidden distance" [*be-sitrey merchakim*]. It is there that she chooses to wait for her, the addressee who will not come, the poem tells us, but also for her, the reader, who must come and bring this reading into being, making it her own.

Remaining entirely in the present tense, the poem veers from this norm only once, the verb "to answer," "*va-a'an li-kratekh ani*" [to you answer I]. In its Modern Hebrew form this could indicate a future answer and in its biblical aspectual form it can be read as an answer past, using the "conversive *vav*," which implies a completed action: the answer has already been given. But even if it has been given, the speaker only answers "towards" [*li-krat*] the addressee, never reaching her, and thus reiterating the impossibility set up throughout the poem. The movement "towards" the addressee is also a movement towards the reader; each time the speaker utters the word "you" [*at*] a female reader is also implicated; as she repeats the phrase "you are to me" [*at li*] the female reader is brought into an unmediated encounter with the female speaker. This address is, however, as direct as it is impeded and impossible, by the very nature of the poetic address (which has already taken place and cannot receive an answer),³⁰ but also by the impossibility of encounter thematized here and in much of Bat-Miriam's poetry.³¹ The reader is further implicated here by the verbal/textual nature of the non-encounter. The encounter has *not* come into being in the same words used in Hebrew for publishing: "to see the light," in the lines quoted at the opening of this chapter. The addressee's only (reported) address to the speaker is her "calling," a word that means also "to read," thus: "you call/read" [*at koret*]. Reading can therefore be seen to enclose the impossible desire, like the very enveloping performed by the addressee, realizing this desire while reiterating its limits. Reading the word *mit'atfa*, enveloping, in its biblical meaning as a form of mourning (as in *otfa*) marks the longing-delusion as preemptively foreclosed, linking desire to mourning, with no possible fulfillment internal to the poem. The fulfillment, it seems, must lie outside the poem, in our anticipated reading. It is therefore an "expectant text," vulnerable to what comes after it and thus existing in a time of anticipation. Such texts, writes Nealon, point to "an inaccessible future in which the inarticulate desires that mobilize them will find some 'hermeneutic friend' beyond the historical horizon of their unintelligibility to themselves."³²

30 For an analysis of the political role of poetic address in the context of Hebrew and German poetry see Maya Barzilai and Katra Byram, "The Challenge of Lyric Address in War Poems by Yitzhak Laor and Ingeborg Bachmann" *The Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 53 (2007): 155-68.

31 Cf. Ruth Kartun-Blum, *Ba-Merchak Hane'elam: Iyunim be-shirat Yokheved Bat-Miryam* (Ramat Gan: Sifriyat makor, 1977).

32 Nealon, 96.

If we identify the gendered dialogue between the female lyrical “I” (*ani*) and the female addressee (*at*) as a still (or perhaps already) “unintelligible,” potentially lesbian, encounter, this poem can serve as a model for a queer reading that treats “queer” as a non-heterosexual orientation. Activating such a reading would fit the role of the “hermeneutic friend,” who uses their “historical advantage” of existing in the future to find in the past desires that were unintelligible to the past itself. But because the poem itself already narrates the foreclosure of the (potentially lesbian) encounter, we would perhaps gain more by asking what broader queer relations the poem might open through this foreclosure, in terms of the queer time invoked at the opening of this Introduction. For the queer potential that draws me to the poem is the resistance of futurity enacted in that foreclosure. The speaker prefers her addressee to disappear, she chooses to wait in vain, to see in her the revelation of that which “will come no more to me” (or: already will not/will not come again/will no longer come—*asher lo yavo od li*), generating a queerly impossible time. It is the time of Nealon’s expectant text, the time of waiting for a still inaccessible future, much like the *agune*,³³ the Jewish prototype of the abandoned wife who is one of the foremothers in Molodowsky’s *froyen lider*, who awaits not her deserting husband, but the poet who will tell her story.

In this expectancy, queerness emerges as a category transcending sexual practice; Rather, it is a relation to time itself, both practically and theoretically, a subversive relation to a norm that “can be historicized and traced across time,” to follow Carolyn Dinshaw.³⁴ The need to define this relation to norms in time forces me to simultaneously historicize my own time and the time of the historical subjects I turn to, placing the queer both in the past and in the present. At the same time, this is an anti-historicist endeavor. Anachronistically moving between disparate historical groundings, queer time undermines binary separation between past and present, undoing linear, teleological and progressive notions of time, working against the victory of historicism, the history of the victor.³⁵ This double-move plays out in my reading of Bat-Miriam’s poem, which uses the peculiarities of Hebrew grammar, especially the tension between (modern) tense and (biblical) aspect to allow the present tense to subsume any potential future as already foreclosed, creating an ahistorical time. However, it is precisely this ahistorical time that makes the impossible encounter available for my present queer reading. Reaching to and through Bat-Miriam, I find in the poem the very encounter it negates, replacing historical fulfillment with a fulfillment across and against history. Reading the poem on these terms, we might be able to be a better hermeneutic friend,

33 On the role of the *agune* in Yiddish literature from Gilkl of Hameln to Dvora Baron see Bluma Goldstein, *Enforced Marginality: Jewish Narratives on Abandoned Wives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

34 Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 41.

35 Connecting especially to a particular moment in German-Jewish philosophy epitomized perhaps in Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253-64.

noncontemporaneously meeting the poem by bringing both the past and present into play.

I want to offer this queer vision of history not just in order to reread Jewish poetry, but also to rethink formulations of Jewish history itself, responding to the historical reluctance Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi attributes in his influential work *Zakhor* to “those Jews who are still within the enchanted circle of tradition, or those who have returned to it.”³⁶ These Jews, he writes, “find the work of the historian irrelevant, they seek, not the historicity of the past, but its internal contemporaneity.” The traditional Jewish religious idea of contemporaneity Yerushalmi posits is based on a cyclical experience of time, for example the experience expressed in the command that every Jew see themselves as if they were the ones who went out of Egypt. This imperative does not question, nor does it even engage the historicity of what happened in the exodus from Egypt, but instead asks us to see, or rather *feel*, ourselves as if we were there (whenever and whoever “we” might be). In this sense, writes Yerushalmi, “the historical events of the biblical period remain unique and irreversible,” while psychologically “those events are experienced cyclically, repetitively, and to that extent at least, atemporally.”³⁷ Rather than an atemporal repetition compulsion, I want to offer a queer understanding of how the past and the present interact, whereby that which Yerushalmi terms as irreversible atemporality might instead be thought of as *noncontemporaneous contemporaneity*, a concept which opens up a new, more nuanced version of historicity itself, while widening the scope of “the enchanted circle of tradition.”

Queer medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw, for example, lays out a temporality that begins by recognizing the “experience of contemporaneity that makes historical understanding possible,”³⁸ that is, the sense of a shared connection with the past.³⁹ Attributing meaning to something in the past links it to our present, Dinshaw writes, making it contemporary. However, at the same time that this connection is established, a gap between past and present is opened up, as Dinshaw claims via quotes Jan Davidse’s formulation, “our ‘understanding’ or hermeneutic connection with the past—in fact is based on—distance.” This distance establishes the awareness that “this is something that is really past and will stay past.” Davidse thus formulates a Christian hermeneutics that recognizes difference while establishing a connection between past and present. Within religious tradition, be it Yerushalmi’s Jewish tradition or Davidse’s Christian tradition, the ability to bring the past psychologically into the present generates a cyclical mode of time. This cyclical time offers tradition instead of, or rather, in resistance to change, while still opening up

36 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 96.

37 Ibid, 4.

38 Carolyn Dinshaw, “Temporalities.” In *Twenty-First Century Approaches: Medieval*. Ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), 115.

39 The example Dinshaw gives is a mutually intelligible language; what happens when we consider languages that do not have continuous histories would no doubt lend further complication to the matter.

new ways of understanding relations across time. For Dinshaw's queer theory this serves as a "valiant attempt (in the context of scholarship on medieval historiography) to insist on contemporaneity and difference, to analyze a complex sense of simultaneously belonging to one's own time as well as to other times, and to reckon with ambivalence in our experience of time and history, including the past's own intransigence."⁴⁰ Over and against an assumption that historicity would foreclose contemporaneous connections, queer history uses bodies to make connections, implicating bodies past and present, making them pleurably touch.⁴¹ This corporeal activation undermines the linearity of time not in a repetitive psychological cycle, but in a fluctuating simultaneity that recognizes sameness and difference, altering both past and present in the process. Dinshaw offers one such model of connection across time anchored in historicity and embodied time. In her mode of queer historicism, temporality itself raises the question of embodiment and subjectivity. It is through bodies in time—"their pleasures, their agonies, their limits, their potentials"—that a queer temporality can emerge, enlarging "singular narratives of development" (122). Considering bodies generates a historical awareness that is deeply embedded in individual disparate times, while the very idea of connection across time undermines the separation between past and present, undoing notions of linear progression. Thus, embodied time offers a contemporaneity that is noncontemporaneous, "a queer historical awareness of multiplicity." It is this queer approach that enables me to bring Dinshaw and Yerushalmi into an imaginary conversation. Pushing the boundaries of both, I am in search of a historiography that could reflect queer connections across time, accounting for the ways the present can reconceive the past and thereby itself be changed by it.

Continuing this line of thought, I propose as my model for queer Jewish historiography the metaphor of the *keyt*, a linked chain of literary tradition forged through deliberate poetic, personal and political choice, constructing tradition as a process of change within time, and against time. Such a model of transmission allows for multiple and simultaneous links, backwards, forwards and sideways at any given time. I rely on the image of the chain because of its history within Jewish tradition, while taking the liberty to reimagine in it within new spatio-temporal movements, much like the mixed metaphor of web and scaffolding Bonnie Kime Scott employs to reorganize women's modernist writing, allowing for exploration of various attachments while considering their difficulties.⁴² Yerushalmi himself offers a similar version of the "Chain of Tradition" [*shalsholet ha-kabala*, which can also be translated as the chain of transmission, or even more accurately, the chain of reception]. Turning back to the model found in *Mishna Avot*, Yerushalmi

40 Dinshaw, 115 and Jan Davidse, "The Sense of History in the Works of the Venerable Bede," *Studi Medievali* ser. 3:23 (1982): 647-95.

41 My chapter on the erotics of Yiddish pushes this model of the pleasurable touch one step farther by considering the corporeal interpolation and the historiographic implications of getting turned on by Yiddish poetry.

42 Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, Volume 1: *The Women of 1928* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xvi.

understands the chain to be comprised of a “dual movement of reception and transmission, successively propelling itself towards the future.” (110) This dual movement, he writes, renders “the continuum of memory” as “links in a chain” rather than a “silken thread.” Chana Kronfeld proposes her own metaphor for the complex transmission of literary history in the image of a rope, following Wittgenstein’s illustration of familial resemblance.⁴³ If a thread implies a continuously uninterrupted connection smoothly transmitted and utterly binding, these other metaphors of scaffolding, web, rope and chain all open up a more complicated movement in the process of concatenation. It is precisely in this complicated movement between reception and transmission that Molodowsky can question the binding of tradition, revolting against the idea that “pure blood” should be her conscience, “like a silken thread,” *a zeydener fodem*,⁴⁴ bound on her brain. Stopping the inevitable forward movement, she looks back to question tradition’s hold upon her, as well as her stake in it. At the same time, she refuses to be detached from it, as she rejects the notion of her life being “a page plucked from a holy book, the first line torn,” by posing a defiant question to her foremothers (at least in the version quoted above. As we shall see in my third chapter, in a parallel version of the poem the statement is not a question but a definitive verdict). Of course, a page plucked from a holy book is still holy, and in Jewish tradition such a page would receive sacred burial in the *gnizah*, marking Molodowsky as still inextricably linked to the tradition she cannot be torn away from. Similarly, the blood-line she questions is also one that promises continuity regardless of upholding its pure state, insuring specifically matrilineal form of bequeathal and belonging.⁴⁵ By invoking the blood line and the line of text in this one verse, Molodowsky establishes the thread as a connection, challenges its necessity and continuity, and questions the inevitability of severing its binding ties, ties with the past, with tradition, with the history of women. Setting up competing modalities of lineage, that of blood and that of text, she complicates the concept of the pure, continuous and compulsory line of blood, as well as the idea of a complete break embodied in the ripped line of the *seyfer*’s text. Half a century later, Jewish lesbian poet Adrienne Rich (who translated Molodowsky’s *froyen lider* from Yiddish into English) grappled with the same dichotomy of continuity and discontinuity through the figures her own grandmothers and mother:

broken in two by one strange idea,
 “blood” the all powerful, awful theme—
 what were the lessons to be learned? If I believe

43 Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 63. I will elaborate on this model in my third chapter.

44 We can tie thread both to materials of women’s handy work, and to a form of women’s *tefilin*, as Naomi Seidman suggested. Naomi Seidman, “The Touch of Leah’s Hands,” http://www.secularjewishculture.org/leah_hands.html (September 2011).

45 On the significance of blood in Jewish tradition see David Biale, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol Between Jews and Christians* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

the daughter of one of you—amnesia was the answer.⁴⁶

Rich's solution is just the opposite to that posed by her foremothers; rejecting the solution of the daughter who is her mother, she turns to the project of remembering: "routine remembering. Putting together, inch by inch/the starry worlds. From all the lost collections."⁴⁷ Far from amnesia, she uses recovery, invention and translation of the past as a thread connecting a community of women within the political moment of women's liberation, and across history, creating a "lesbian continuum" out of the links on the chain of Yerushalmi's "continuum of memory."

Staging a queer encounter between Rich, Molodowsky, Bat-Miriam, Yerushalmi and Dinshaw, I ask how we might imagine an alternative narrative that builds at once on historicity and contemporaneity, on blood and/or text, a narrative that refuses to be in/or out of tradition but rather generates new modes of continuity through the very breaks with and in history. To those left outside Yerushalmi's "enchanted circle of tradition" (Yerushalmi himself included) I offer – through Dinshaw – "a post-disenchanted — that is to say, queer—future." (122) This future refuses to be excluded from tradition, but rather connects to the very breaks in tradition, choosing what to salvage and recognizing what was lost. This echoes Yerushalmi's own call "to understand that not everything of value that existed before a break was either salvaged or metamorphosed, but was lost, and often some of what fell by the wayside can become, through our retrieval, meaningful to us." (101) If Bat-Miriam's poem makes legible to us a future that could not come into being, it also allows us to retrieve a past that never happened. Molodowsky's poem, on the other hand, rejects continuity while creating it, telling the story of what existed and what could, therefore, be lost. As Molodowsky's own image of a ripped page with a missing first line implies, the text itself embodies the losses it is embedded in, *it is* the loss involved in the break with Jewish women's history, the same loss that enables the text to exist and tell the story of the break.

Reading today, the torn text is not just the disrupted story of Jewish women, but also the rupture in the history of Jewish language. Whereas Bat-Miriam's Modern Hebrew language is accessible to a wide audience, the Yiddish of Molodowsky's poem is not. Reading it in Yiddish itself becomes an act of retrieval, as well as a mode of recognizing loss. This reading ties together my approach to women's writing and to Yiddish writing as bound by the challenges of history, for reaching the history of Yiddish, in my personal experience and in the experience of so many others, entailed overcoming our own historical disadvantage; it meant uncovering a history very much repressed by the Israeli literary establishment where I received

46 "Granddaughter," in: Adrienne Rich, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems, 1978-1981* (New York: Norton, 1981), 37.

47 "For memory," *Ibid*, 20.

my early training,⁴⁸ and by the American Jewish establishment as well. It was a past that had to be forgotten,⁴⁹ a past without a future. But even this lack of future has a past, connecting not just to the current state of Yiddish, but to the entire (short) history of modern Jewish literature, in relation to the language politics, policy, and poetics of Yiddish and Hebrew alike.⁵⁰ Returning to the interwar period, I encounter not just a moment of potentiality, but also a moment of tension, where the balance between Hebrew and Yiddish was about to tip, just before Yiddish inherited Hebrew's role as the hallowed language of the Jewish past, a language whose future is in question, much like Hebrew's was. Today one is incredulous at reading Hebrew national poet H.N. Bialik statement made in 1905⁵¹ that those invested in the resurrection of Hebrew are also those willing to admit the possibility of the language's final demise. Our distance from this statement is the result of both a century of literary history (and what has been termed the "revolution"⁵² of the Hebrew language within the Zionist project), and of the particular way that history has been told. How differently might we read Hebrew today if we re-inscribe the fact that its present and future were once highly insecure, that it was not the obvious, natural or only choice. Embracing Yiddish through its precariousness can bring back the past precariousness of Hebrew and open a space for future precarious potentialities of a Jewish literature we cannot yet imagine. Queerly enacting Yerushalmi's model of retrieval reveals that what must be recovered is not only the Yiddish history that was not passed down, but also all of the other past possibilities that did not come to be the future we live in. Rather than investing in future viability, this literary thinking resists futurity, showing that if we are to rethink Jewish literature, perhaps the future is not where we should be looking at all. Yiddish thus offers an alternative way of looking backwards, refusing dictates of the present to look forward to the future. Instead of progressive narratives of emergence, I use the past of Jewish women and Jewish literature to imagine a queer time that challenges the dominant narratives of the inevitable course of history, "looking inward and outward/ at once before and after/ seeking a now that can breed/futures."⁵³

Jewish women's poetry of the 1920s stands at the center of this dissertation, while each chapter offers a different mode of reaching this poetry, generating its own line

48 In fact, I made my initial discovery of Yiddish women's literature through Dan Miron's employment of Yiddish women's writing as a valorized counter-example that allows him to belittle the achievements of Hebrew women writers. Paradoxically this is also the first book to canonize the importance of women's poetic modernism in Hebrew. *Imahot meyasdot, achayot chorgot* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uchad, 1991).

49 To echo the powerful title of Yael Chaver's book *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

50 As early as the writings of Echad Ha-Am and later Bialik, Ba'al Makhshoves and many others.

51 According to Kronfeld, Margins, 84. H. N. Bialik, "Chevley Lashon" (1905) in *Kol Kitvei H. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965) 197-201.

52 For Example by Benjamin Harshav in his book *Language in a Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

53 Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," in *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 32.

of lineage through different uses for this poetry in our present. While Yiddish frames the time span of the dissertation, from the 1920s to date, I read will be reading Yiddish poetry in relation to Hebrew poetry written contemporaneously with Yiddish poetry in the interwar period and English poetry written in the 1970s.

My first chapter, "What To Expect When You're Not Expecting," looks at poems from the 1920s in the context of their historical moment of multilingual possibility, and explores how they use the past to foreclose history rather than participate in it. Focusing on the Hebrew poetry of Leah Goldberg (1911-1970) and the Yiddish poetry of Anna Margolin (1887-1952), I find in their writing a joint strategy collapsing temporality and resisting futurity. They both turn back to antiquity and Christianity, taking on male personas and voicing queer desires, thereby engaging and criticizing both Jewish and non-Jewish patriarchal hegemony, generating their own model of history. Though the texts I chose formulate a politics and poetics that stand against future fulfillment (reproductive, national, messianic or otherwise), my reading activates them as expectant texts that receive a future interpretation beyond, or even against their expectation. I read my own disappointment in the future I inherited as a fulfillment of their preemptive disappointment, creating a lineage by turning our backs on the future, together.

My second chapter, "What Every *Boychick* Should Know," uses transgressive sexuality as a means of undermining (hetero)normative temporality, reaching poetry from the 1920s in an affective genealogy based on erotic activation past and present. Formulates a queer historical approach, I challenge what I diagnose as a fetishizing of Yiddish in contemporary culture. Relying on Jeffrey Shandler's analysis of Yiddish a post-Vernacular,⁵⁴ where the fact that something is said in Yiddish, fetishistically overvaluing from and devaluing content, I use erotic content and methodology to reconnect Yiddish form and content. Moving between the precarious current state of Yiddish and unexamined aspects of the Yiddish past, this chapter replaces the fetish of *Yiddish* with fetish in *Yiddish*. I use theories of the fetish from psychoanalysis, anthropology and Marxism, together with accounts of the fetishistic sexual practice of early sexology and contemporary BDSM/kink communities as well as present day Yiddish linguistic projects and archives, to read women's poetry from the 1920s. I focus on the work of Yiddish poet Celia Dropkin (1887-1956) who is known for the bold content of her poetry, which expresses sexual desire and fantasies of violence (often interweaving the two), and on contemporary Jewish lesbian poet Irena Klepfisz, whose bilingual Yiddish-English poetry (written in the early 1980s) makes radical poetic and political use of Yiddish and English alike. Bridging theories and practice from across periods and disciplines, I activate erotics simultaneously as a theoretical metaphor and as an embodied practice through which we might try to touch history and be touched by it, linking us in and across time.

54 Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language & Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

The final chapter, "1970s Lesbians and the Yiddish Women They Loved," moves between Yiddish women poets of the 1920s and American Jewish feminists and lesbians of the 1970s-80s, between Kadya Molodowsky (1894-1974) and Anna Margolin, Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) and Irena Klepfisz. Both Rich and Klepfisz were active participants and leaders of the women's liberation movement, and it was the identity politics of this movement that led them to the Yiddish past, to write about women's history and to translate Yiddish women's poetry, including the poetry of Molodowsky. Reading these English and Yiddish women writers' poetry and politics through tropes of staged cross-temporal encounter and ambivalent mutual hauntings allows me to bring together the backwards-turn of identity politics and the resistance to futurity of the 1920s. I also consider how the mediation of lesbian-feminist projects shapes my encounter with the 1920s and ask what basis of interaction is opened up by the shared turn to the Yiddish past, paying special attention to the tensions between lesbian politics of the 1970s and contemporary queer politics. Challenging prevailing models of cultural history anchored in normative conceptions of biological kinship and inheritance, I use spectral and embodied intergenerational dialogue to offer instead a queer lineage based in desire and/of difference.

Looking back to and through Jewish women's writing, the three chapters of this study share a strategy of turning backwards rather than forwards; but taken together, they offer new models of lineage and of potential continuity. Between the pasts that never happened, or whose stories I never knew, and the futures that did not end up happening, I find new possibilities for my present. Finally, I recognize that the future I inherited was only one possibility, and I encounter another past, one accessible to me precisely because it already holds the seeds of my disappointment over how the future has turned out, and "over that which will come no more to me" [*asher lo yavo od li*], to return to the words of Bat-Miriam with which I started. It is in this queer time and place of possibilities foreclosed preemptively and retrospectively that a meeting space is formed. Retrieving the *loytere blut*, the luminous bloodline of Molodowsky's *froyen seyfer* [women's holy book], I reach for Bat-Miriam's "heart-blood's rushed hope" [*tikvat dam libi ha-shlucha*], heeding her command to keep this "other essence" [*mahut acheret*] even if it never was, even if it could never have been, still, here it is, just waiting.

Chapter One

What to Expect When You're Not Expecting: Resisting Futurity through Hebrew and Yiddish Women's Poetry

The following chapter focuses on a moment in Hebrew and Yiddish women's poetry that collapses temporality and resists futurity in a particularly queer manner. While I consider moments of queer desires past, questioning their place in the generation of literary history, the queerness of this chapter is predominantly located in its multiple forms of looking back: my looking back through a specific theoretical framework across history towards the interwar period when the poems I discuss were written, but also the turn to the past enacted in the poems themselves, as the poets look to early Christianity and to Greco-Roman times, generating their own model of queer history. From the contemporary Israeli and American contexts, I reach out to the geographical expanse of the poets—spanning Eastern Europe, Germany, the United States and Mandatory Palestine in the interwar period—as they themselves invoke the time and space of Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. I explore how all these disparate pasts and places relate to the present of the authors and what kind of future the authors thus invite us to expect. I locate my own reading in that very future, inaccessible to the authors of the past. I close by considering how my present time relates to the past in which the authors lived, and the past that they imagined in their poems.

Constructing an imagined past was a vital move for early Jewish women's writing, and continued to be so for women in later times, for women were largely denied access to the texts of Jewish tradition and history, including texts written by women, as I posited in my introduction. Both Yiddish and Hebrew women writers had writing foremothers in the *haskala/haskole*, the Jewish enlightenment movement, and even earlier, yet much of this work was uncovered relatively recently and only retrospectively written into a Jewish women's history of writing and Jewish literary history in general.⁵⁵ This past was thus not readily available to women writers of the 1920s, and we cannot treat it as a tradition that they followed. Rather, more often than not, these writers felt themselves to be embarking on a new path of creation, in the face of a consistent tradition of patriarchal erasure of women's history.⁵⁶ This historical exclusion not only led women writes to construct imagined pasts, but is also, I argue, what pushed the modernist women writers I discuss to map their imagined pasts onto non-Jewish culture. Cross-cultural borrowings and historical

55 For notable examples see Wendy Zierler's *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), Carole Bailin's *To Reveal Our Hearts: Jewish Women Writers in Tsarist Russia* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000), and Tova Cohen and Shmuel Feiner's *Voice of a Hebrew Maiden: Women's Writings of the 19th Century Haskalah Movement* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006).

56 For a more general analysis of this historical dynamic see Joan Wallach Scott's *Feminism and History* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

imaginings were distinctly modernist practices, championed by female and male modernists alike. Heather Love has named this the “temporal splitting at the heart of modernism,”⁵⁷ aiming at novelty or progress, while often relying on looking backwards through classical tradition, decadent regression or modes of primitivism. However, this specific complication of temporality plays out differently for those pushed from the centers of dominant culture to its margins, and as women take on prevailing modernist strategies their exclusion from history gives the very same strategy new meaning. Indeed, marginal models of modernism, such as Hebrew and Yiddish or the works of women and other minorities can serve to create a new understanding of modernism itself, as Chana Kronfeld has shown.⁵⁸ Kronfeld’s revision reconfigures the very dynamics of center and margins, and I use her work to rethink the positioning of Yiddish and Hebrew writing by women inside and outside of history. Following Kronfeld, my aim here is to re-theorize the modernist backwards gaze in Jewish women’s writing, not as a turn against the past (which was not theirs to reject), but against the present patriarchal culture, and against the future they would have only a limited role in. Challenging the very notion of history, at least one that is grounded in (hetero)normative linear progression, women invented new ways of looking backwards, showing there was not much to look forward to.

Between the imagined past and the unexpected future, the interwar period offered Jewish writers, and especially Jewish women writers, a new range of linguistic, cultural and geographical possibilities, opening movement between the literary centers such as Odessa, Warsaw, Berlin, Tel Aviv and New York, and between Jewish languages and local vernaculars.⁵⁹ However, within this field of cultural fluidity, the choices open to men and women were very different; as I posited in my introduction, because they were largely left out of traditional Jewish education, women had far more access to local vernaculars.⁶⁰ Women’s access to Jewish languages was also different, even once Hebrew became more accessible to women, a difference evident in the fact that very few women wrote both Yiddish and Hebrew, whereas many of the male Hebrew/Yiddish writers wrote in both Hebrew and Yiddish.⁶¹ Instead, women’s literary biographies frequently note a single transition from a vernacular to Hebrew or Yiddish. The *Leksikon Fun Der Nayer Yidisher Literatur* [the Lexicon of New Yiddish Literature] repeats that “this particular writer began writing in Russian/Polish and then switched to Yiddish” in numerous biographies of women writers, rarely providing references to actual published texts, yet generating a kind of prototypical biography for a woman’s

57 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 6.

58 Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*.

59 Cf. footnote 19 in my introduction for further reading on Jewish multilingualism.

60 Cf. Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Waltham, Mass. Hanover: Brandeis University Press; University Press of New England, 2004).

61 Dvora Baron is a notable exception. Cf. Sheila Jelen, *Intimations of Difference: Dvora Baron in the Modern Hebrew Renaissance* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

coming to writing. Anna Margolin and Celia Dropkin, both central figures in this dissertation, are but two examples of many.⁶² The same is known to be true for a number of Hebrew women writers, including Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir (1902-1981), who began writing Polish and only later switched to Hebrew. The two poets this chapter focuses on, the Hebrew writer Leah Goldberg and the Yiddish writer Anna Margolin, offer two divergent models of Jewish women's movement through languages, international modernism, as well as through the space of the interwar period.

Though she was surrounded by speakers of Russian, Lithuanian, German and Yiddish, Leah Goldberg actually began writing in Hebrew and is thus exceptional among Jewish women writers. Born in 1911, she spent her early years in Lithuania and then Germany. There she found her place within the emergent milieu of Hebrew language proponents, starting with her teachers at the Hebrew Gymnasium she attended.⁶³ The poems under discussion in this chapter are of her first publications, appearing when she was less than twenty years old, while she was still living in Europe. By age twenty-four she immigrated to pre-state Palestine, where she gained prominence as a leading literary figure of the *Moderna*, the dominant pre-state modernist movement in Hebrew poetry.⁶⁴ Goldberg's first attempts at Hebrew writing are found in her childhood diary, which was recently published in Israel.⁶⁵ Goldberg began writing the diary in 1921, when she was ten years old. The very deliberate linguistic choice to use Hebrew (rather than Russian, Lithuanian or Yiddish) is not only enacted in the diary, tracking her growing mastery of the language; it is also a frequent topic discussed in it. The stories of becoming a woman, a writer and a Hebrew speaker are all constructed as intertwining processes of identity formation. One example of this confluence of construction can be found in an entry from May 19th 1925, where Goldberg creates an analogy between her personal choice of a love object and the national choice of the Hebrew language, expressing great frustration in both choices. Of the loved one she writes: "I don't know who needs this, I love him, I don't know why this is, he certainly doesn't need this, and neither do I. But nobody asked me for an answer." These deep doubts mirror exactly those she expresses regarding the choice of language: "I don't understand for what or for whom it is necessary that an entire folk speak a language it doesn't know, which is hard for the people to learn, and is not the one in which they think." By using the same term— "necessary" [*nakhutz*]⁶⁶—to discuss personal

62 Cf. Samuel Niger and Jacob Shatzky, *Leksikon Fun Der Nayer Yidisher Literatur* (New York: Alveltlekhn Yidishn Kultur-Kongres [1956], 1981).

63 Though the school was independent, it was founded under the principles of the *Tarbut* school movement, a network of secular, Hebrew-language schools, which were established and operated mainly in interwar Poland. For further information on the Jewish education networks in Poland between the two World Wars, see Miriam Eisenstein, *Jewish Schools in Poland, 1919-39: Their Philosophy and Development* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1950).

64 The same group Yocheved Bat-Miriam, the poet whose work I discuss in the introduction, also belonged to.

65 Leah Goldberg, *Yomane Leah Goldberg*, eds. Rachel Aharoni, and Aryeh Aharoni (Bene Berak: Sifriyat Po'alim, 2005).

choices of the heart and collective national considerations, the two become inextricable. Indeed, conducting this very discussion in Hebrew in the private genre of the diary personalizes the collective language choice as a difficult and even absurd one, at the time as it renders the most intimate of expressions part of the collective project, thereby contributing to its success. This joint struggle of language and love diverge as Goldberg comes of age. Whereas her choices of love object continued to be a source of pain and frustration throughout her life, as reflected in her work, her fraught inchoate attempts at Hebrew self-expression developed as she took on an active role in shaping Hebrew poetic language as we know it.

Anna Margolin (pen name for Rosa Lebnsoym), the Yiddish poet I will be reading alongside Goldberg, was born in 1887 in Belarus and spent her early years in Königsberg (Goldberg's place of birth), Odessa and Warsaw. She moved to New York twice, once in 1906 and again in 1913. In the interim she traveled to Paris and Warsaw, got married and moved to Tel-Aviv where she bore a son. Shortly thereafter she left her husband and child in Palestine, returning to New York via Warsaw. Though her archive contains correspondence in Russian, English Hebrew and Yiddish, she is only known to have published in Yiddish.⁶⁶ Immigrating to the US did not lead her to English; in fact, it was this immigration that led her to join the American Yiddish literary scene, serving on the editorial staff of the *fraye arbeter shtime* where she also published her first piece of fiction. She is best known for her poetry, which she began publishing in the 1920s. The poems under discussion here appeared in 1929 when she was forty-two, in what was to be the only book published during her lifetime. In the thirty-three remaining years of her life she only published six more poems, and is said to have ended life as a recluse, in deep depression. It is only by way of future work with her archives, writes her final partner, Reuben Iceland, that we might find a key to her poetry and to the "tragic life-entanglement [*lebens plonter*] of her final years."⁶⁷

Despite these two disparate life stories, we can read both Goldberg and Margolin as pioneering, whether writing in Hebrew or Yiddish.⁶⁸ At the same time, they were participating alongside their male colleagues in the general project of creating a new

66 Her fondness of pen names renders this statement tentative rather than definitive.

67 Reuben Iceland, *Fun Unser Friling: Literarische Zikhront un Portretn* (New York: Inzel, 1954), 130. Many of Margolin's biographical details stem from Iceland's literary portrait of her.

68 Goldberg had direct contact with one of her forerunners, the non-Jewish poet Elisheva Bikhovska, who was touring Eastern Europe, as described in Goldberg's journal entry from April 23rd 1924. Through Hebrew journals Goldberg also had access to poems by Rachel Bluvshsteyn, Yocheved Bat-Miriam, and Esther Raab, who preceded her, but also became her contemporaries as they continued publishing. Other female poets she may have read are unfamiliar names for today's readers. In a footnote to the published diaries Giddon Ticotsky lists five names of women writers published in the periodical *Netivot*, none of which are known to the average reader. I attribute this to the very same dynamic, which has interfered with the transmission of women's writing. For Margolin, a concrete past of women writing would become available only in 1928 when Ezra Korman published his monumental anthology *Yidishe dikhterins*, which includes seventy women writers past and present (though for countless of them the anthology was both their first and last publication venue). My third chapter explores Korman's anthology further.

type of modern, secular, Jewish literature. Neither of the two writers could anticipate the place of her choices in relation to how Jewish literary history would evolve, but their choices, the very act of writing, their language, and the particular themes they took on, can all be seen as disrupting a progressive history that could follow, or in fact, bring, the Jewish past into the future. Instead, these writers queerly disrupt history and resist futurity. If the future is the product of the progression of time, the term "futurity" holds within it, as I suggested in the Introduction, the queer resistance to understanding the *now* (as well as the past) in the service of that which will come.⁶⁹ Each of the poets in this chapter offers their own version of queer history, which I will seek to understand, following Carolyn Dinshaw's treatment of queerness as a relation to a norm that "can be historicized and traced across time,"⁷⁰ in relation to the past they imagine, the past they are writing in, and the time of my reading. I thus find the disruption of normative identity, desire and temporality in the poems themselves, and in my mode of reading them. It is what I am looking back to, and the way in which I am looking back. This places the queer both in the past and the present, actually serving as a way to bridge the two. Indeed, this is how the queer structures the very model of history I am advocating, making connections in and against time, away from the future.

Once She Was a *Yingling*

Anna Margolin's poem *ikh bin geven a mol a yingling* [I Was Once a Boy] opens her first and only volume of poetry, *lider*, published in New York in 1929. In this poem Margolin constructs a doubly queer temporality, crossing boundaries of gender, religion and time, as her speaker imagines a boy's coming of age within the homoerotic context of antiquity.

69 It is worth repeating that I use the term "queer" in relation to both alternative gender identification and sexual practice and other forms of disruption of heteronormative dictates, such as the dictate structuring time as consecutive, progressive and reproductive teleology. For a comprehensive introduction to contemporary theorizing of queer temporality see Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman and Roderick A. Ferguson et al, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13:2 (2007): 177-95.

70 Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 41.

איך בין געווען אַ מאָל אַ יינגלינג

איך בין געווען אַ מאָל אַ יינגלינג
 געהערט אין פאַרטיקאַס סאַקראַטן
 עס האָט מיין בוזעם-פֿריינד, מיין ליבלינג,
 געהאַט דעם שענסטן טאַרס אין אַטען.

געוועזן צעזאַר. און אַ העלע וועלט
 געבויט פֿון מאַרמאַר, איך דער לעצטער,
 און פֿאַר אַ ווייב מיר אויסדערוויילט
 מיין שטאַלצע שוועסטער.

אין רויזנקראַנץ ביים וויין ביז שפעט
 געהערט אין הויכמוטיקן פֿרידן
 וועגן שוואַכלינג פֿון נאַזאַרעט
 און ווילדע מעשיות וועגן יידן.

71

I Was Once A Boy

I was once a boy, a stripling
 Listening in Socrates' portico,
 My bosom-buddy, my sweet darling,
 Had Athens' most beautiful torso.

Was Caesar. And from marble constructed
 A glistening world, I the last there,
 And for my own wife selected
 My stately sister.

Rose-garlanded, drinking wine all night
 In high spirits, hear tell the news
 About the weakling from Nazareth
 And wild tales about Jews.⁷²

The speaker of this poem enters the most prized spaces of masculinity, including its positions of power, at the heart of western culture and scholarship, and has access to the ultimate male privileges, exclusive male bonding and the right to take a wife.

71 Anna Margolin, *lieder* (New York: Oriom Press, 1929), 5.

72 Translated by Kathryn Hellerstein, in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzky (New York: Norton, 2001), 265.

To maintain the gender indeterminacy Margolin sets up, I will use the gender neutral pronouns "ze" [she/he] and "hir" [his/hers] for the rest of the discussion. But gender fluidity is not the only indeterminacy at play here, for the speaker imagines himself not only in the privileged position of a man, but also that of a non-Jew, who looks down on the Jews of the "wild tales." In a unique move, Margolin aligns Jesus (the "weakling from Nazareth") and early Christianity in general with the weak effeminate Jewish males of her present, for "weakling" is the dominant stereotype of diasporic Jewish masculinity of the time.⁷³ She thus manages to conflate past and present Christian and Jewish men, equally belittling both groups that have historically had more power than Jewish women. Margolin allows herself to access to the realm of power, the realm of Philosophers and rulers, Pagans, Jews and Christians. Furthermore, she does so to pass criticism on it, undermining the way history and power operate.

The very language of the poem, a markedly Germanized and internationalized Yiddish, allows Margolin to trespass into the realm of non-Jewish cultural capital through the idiom of European "high culture." Yiddish is by nature a composite language in which elements of German, *loshn koydesh* ("holy tongue/language," that is, Hebrew and Aramaic), Romance languages and Slavic languages are fused together.⁷⁴ Yiddish is able to absorb form and content, grammar and vocabulary, from its geographical and intercultural encounters, at times integrating the foreign elements, and in other cases leaving them un-fused, still marked as foreign. In the meeting of these various elements, different emphasis can be given to each component, for different reasons. For example, the use of pseudo-Germanized Yiddish [*Daytshmerish*] used to feign fluency in German high culture in the literature of the early Enlightenment period and in later fiction; or the use of Hebrew components in a phrase such as "*der orl iz meyvin kol dover*" ["the non-Jew understands everything--" so don't use standard Yiddish in his presence], creating a sentence whose vocabulary is nearly exclusively *loshn koydesh* words, with the exception of the Germanic verb form "*iz*," "to be," so as to ensure that non-Jews would not understand. The language of Margolin's poem is striking in its general avoidance of Judaic components, except for one word, *mayses*, which I discuss below. It relies particularly heavily on the Germanic and international components, and what is most unusual, on the Greek (*torso, portico*), making the language of the poem itself an "othered" form of Yiddish, and yet another way for Margolin to usurp power and privilege that are not her own. Margolin juxtaposes these disparate linguistic elements in her rhyme scheme, which both highlights their difference [*shpet/nazaret* (late/Nazareth)] but also unites them in the strictly structured poetic

73 For an historical analysis of the construction of Jewish masculinity see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

74 For further reading on the particular nature of Yiddish as both a fused and open language see Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). For additional accounts of the history of Yiddish in general cf. Uriel Weinreich *et al* (eds.), *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Yiddish Language, Folklore, and Literature* (New York: Linguistic Circle of New York, 1954-1993), Joshua A. Fishman, *Yiddish: Turning to Life* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1991).

product.⁷⁵ Barbra Mann has insightfully deemed the rhyming strategy of this particular poem as "a prosodic representation of the impossibility of isolating a singular narrative concerning 'Jewish' history"⁷⁶ Before examining the notions of "Jewish history" set forth by this poem, I will turn to the way the speaker himself enters history and invites us to join hir.

The speaker is marked from the outset as both male and non-Jew by the word "*Yingling*" ("boy" in Hellerstein's translation) which is a distinctly German word, rather than a fully fused Germanic word in Yiddish (such as *yingl*, or *yinglekh*). If we could simply take the speaker of this poem to be male, then the statement "I was once a boy, a stripling" could be taken at face value, but reading the feminine signature complicates this in advance. What is at play here is the presumption that in the lyric poem the *I* of the poet and the *I* of the speaker are of the same gender, until the text signals otherwise. The opening of the poem could have been taken as such evidence, but the particularities of the sentence, especially around the phrase *amol* [once], activate all of the statement's possible ambiguities. Consequently, instead of being read simply as coming from a male speaker referring to his childhood, the statement can be read "I used to be that way, namely male," opening the possibility that a female speaker is describing herself as having once, previously, for her whole past or at a certain point in that past, been a boy. Many translations have attempted to mask this ambiguity by translating the word *yingling* in non-gendered forms such as "I was once a youth"⁷⁷ or even the romantic-sentimental "once I was young,"⁷⁸ erasing the gender bending complexities the poem so distinctly opens up.

The transgression, as we shall see, is not limited to gender, but extends also to transgressions of temporality, allowing for an understanding of gender not as fixed but as shifting over time, and in relation to time. This can be seen to prefigure, literalize and mobilize Judith Butler's treatment of gender not "as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow" but rather as "an identity tenuously constituted in time."⁷⁹ Margolin's use of the shifting gender of her speaker, together with multiple drastic shifts in historical time and place, expose the ways in which gender is embedded in the temporal and social, the way in which it *is* the time of society, what Butler calls a "constituted social temporality" (179). The temporality of gender as I understand it through the poem addresses not just the manner in which gender is constituted in the temporality of one's own life, but also the way it

75 Notable here is also the phonetic spelling of *nazaret*, chosen over the Hebraic spelling, which would be pronounced *notseres*, and would not rhyme.

76 Barbara Mann, "Picturing the Poetry of Anna Margolin," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 63:4 (2002): 512.

77 In Ruth Whitman's translation in *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* (New York: October House, 1966), 133.

78 In Marcia Falk's translation in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, Irving Howe, Ruth Wisse and Khone Shmeruk eds. (New York: Viking, 1987), 218-19.

79 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.

is constituted in different historical periods, directly linking the shifts in personal story and the phases of western history. This contextual grounding is crucial for the move both my reading and Margolin's poem itself undertake, attempting to understand and utilize gender and identity backwards, across disparate material and discursive realities. In this poem, the temporal shifts are part of what enables the poem's explicit gender-bending and homoeroticism. Furthermore, the disruption of sexual and gender norms seems to be what propels the historical shifts themselves. For example, mid poem, the speaker refers to himself as "the last" [*der letster*], shifting away from a reproductive, heteronormative concept of historical progress while showing a distinct obliviousness about possible phases of history to come. Such obliviousness fits well within the logic of the poem, in which the progression of generations is executed outside the logic of reproduction; for the move from one empire to another, from Greek to Roman, does not take place through a reproductive succession of generations, but rather happens through the body of the male lover, the "bosom buddy" of the speaker. We shall see this both thematically and syntactically.

The "was" of the poem's opening line points us to a past soon proven to be not just a simple biographical past, but a distant classical non-Jewish past, that of Socrates, and later of Caesar and Jesus. Through Socrates' "portico" we enter an all-male scholarly space. The fact that it is not a space of Jewish learning is significant, for as a Jewish woman Margolin was barred mainly from Jewish scholarship, and not from the realm of secular learning. Indeed, since the Enlightenment Jewish women were important agents of secular learning precisely because they were not barred from non-Jewish texts the way they were forbidden even to touch the rabbinic ones. In the classical sphere of secular learning the speaker invokes, however, both women and Jews would have been excluded. The potential homoeroticism of this space is activated by the speaker's declaration of having a "*buzem fraynd*," a male-gendered friend or lover, who could be read either as Socrates or as a fellow listener, for he is brought into the poem directly after the mention of Socrates, and has no further introduction or even punctuation to distinguish him from Socrates. Reading him as Socrates being admired by the young speaker poses an interesting inversion in terms of power dynamics, since in the ancient Greek pederastic model of love it was the old courting the young. All we know of the "bosom-friend" is his torso, in what Mann has termed a "visual pun" between the idiomatic expression "bosom-buddy," a term borrowed either from German or from English, and his chest, represented via synecdoche as an isolated torso.⁸⁰ Mann notes: "it may seem strange to describe a living person as having a nice torso, which perhaps explains why one translation reads 'chest' instead (Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk, 218).⁸¹ However, Margolin would have been attracted to this term precisely for its aesthetic inflection." (511) For indeed, marble torsos and other incomplete sculptures are the way in which we know Greek bodies, the fragmented material trace through which we encounter the corporality of the ancient past. The fragment is also in line with Margolin's

⁸⁰ Mann, 511.

⁸¹ Referring to Marcia Falk's translation in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (cf. ft.78).

modernist sensibilities, tying this poem not only to contemporary Yiddish modernist experimentation, but also to German and Hebrew modernist poetry.⁸² But these fragmented relics are not actual bodies; rather they are representations of bodies mediated by the art of the sculpture, and it is only the representation that can survive the perils of time, thus serving as parallel to the poem itself and its ability to travel through time. Also, significantly, these sculptures represent the forbidden "graven image" of Judaism, whereby having such a Greek statue as the love object counters an entire history of Jewish martyrology based on refusing to bow down before such idols, for example the tale of Chana and her seven sons from *midrash eichah rabbah* [the Book of Lamentations]. Evoking this form of idolatry connects Margolin to Jewish imagism, which according to Mann "exemplified modern Jewish culture's larger revolution regarding the Second Commandment taboo on graven images" (501). Mann points out that Jewish imagists' "radical formal experimentation [...] reflects one of modernism's abiding tensions, between image and text, and engages essential questions of individual and collective identity at a time of enormous social, political, and geographic upheaval" (504). By exploiting and collapsing the divide between image and text, Mann writes, "Jewish imagism simultaneously announced its participation in international modernism and its engagement in internal Jewish debates" (505). Mann identifies both Yiddish and Hebrew modernist writing as turning to Jewish imagism, in a joint trend that can be shared in the face of the tension between the international and the internal.

The torso also already signals the marble of the "glistening world" to come, in the progression of both history and the poem.⁸³ Consequently, the move from one empire to another does not take place through reproductive succession of generations, but rather happens through the body of the lover, through his torso. From the Greek we then move to the Roman, introducing the figure of Caesar. But both the Yiddish and the English allow us to read doubly: there was Caesar, or, I was Cesar. This ambiguity, like the one regarding the speaker, is based in grammatical indeterminacy, focused in the concept of the word "was." Here it is the structure of the verb, which leaves out the subject pronoun, stating "was Caesar" [*gevezen tesar*], thereby opening the possible existence of the pronoun "I" [was Caesar] or the distancing "there" [was Caesar]. Omitting half of the verb form, the very half that would distinguish between "I was" [*(ikh) bin geven*] and "there was" [*(es) iz geven*] opens the sentence to ambiguous interpretation. At the same time, it also definitively marks the shift in subject (whether between Socrates and Caesar, or in the speaker's own identity), in its declarative tone, elliptical structure, as well as in

82 In fact, the image of the torso in Margolin's poem directly echoes Rainer Maria Rilke's (1875-1926) "Archaic Torso of Apollo," which in turn connects Margolin's poem also to Hebrew via the epoch-making poem by Shaul Tchernichowsky's (1875-1943), "Before the Statue of Apollo."

83 The image of the marble torso has added significance in Margolin's poetic vocabulary, most notably in the poem that was used as her epitaph. The marble appears in the first two lines, lines which she actually chose not to have included on her tombstone (itself a form of marble!): "She with the cold marble breasts/And the narrow light hands" who in death now "lies with a shattered face." Translation by Shirley Kumove, in Shirley Kumove, trans. *Drunk From the Bitter Truth: The Poems of Anna Margolin* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2.

its rich sound pattern, created by using the form *gevezen* instead of the more commonly used form *geven* (the form of "was" used in the opening line). Finally, starting this sentence with a verb marks causal narrative progression, for otherwise the Yiddish would require the verb to appear second in the sentence. If this structure marks causality in a narrative, it is indeed the torso of the lover, if not his very existence which we must read as propelling the move from one empire to another. The speaker himself, whether or not ze is Caesar, has the power to use the marble (and thus the homoerotic love signaled through the lover's torso) to create a "glistening world" in this second phase of non-Jewish history introduced by the second stanza. In addition to this power of construction, the speaker gets to choose a wife, but calling her *hir* sister implies an incestuous bond, which would fit Hellerstein's guess that the emperor being referred to here is Claudius the first who married his niece, against Roman law, which he then changed.⁸⁴ The combined naming of sister and wife could also gesture to the biblical epithet "my sister, my bride." Pointing out the repeated metaphorical use of "brother" and "sister" in the Bible in general (Gen. 19:7; 2 Sam. 1:26; Job 30:29), and the prevalence of the combination "sister" and "bride" in the Song of Songs in particular (4:9,10,12, 5:1), Chana Bloch explains in her translation to the Song of Songs that this combination is meant to signal intimacy, and "is not to be taken literally as implying a wedding ceremony, though it may well convey a hope for marriage in the future."⁸⁵ Finally, "sister" could be a figure of speech to mark a de-eroticized bond with the wife, over and against the homoerotic bond between the male scholars, which furthers our reading of the first stanza, highlighting the homoerotic aspects of the poem.

The next phase of western history, the rise of Christianity, seamlessly enters through the final stanza, hinting at the speaker's future downfall. First, the *royznkrants*, the rose-garland conjures distinctly Christian imagery, through Mary's crown of roses. This Christian connotation is then further materialized when Jesus is actually alluded to, though not as a prominent figure (as opposed to Caesar or Socrates) but rather as "the weakling," an effeminate Jew, part of "wild tales about the Jews." Using the Hebraic word *mayse* brings us, for the first time in the poem, into the Jewish realm of Jewish discourse, and more specifically, an internally Jewish discourse that marks the tales as "wild" and thus clearly fictitious. We might even read these "wild tales" as holding concrete accusations against the Jews, the notorious European blood libel, echoing one of the most marked expressions of Christian oppression that has shaped Jewish history. But the poem opens this traumatic memory by transposing the Jewish discourse about Christian persecution onto the lips of the Romans, who were themselves persecuting the early Christians. Notably, however, the *mayses* [tales], also allude to *bobe mayses*, the Yiddish term for old wives' tales, not to be taken seriously, told in "high spirits," negating the

⁸⁴ *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, 265.

⁸⁵ Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 175.

dramatic history of suffering and redemption alike.⁸⁶ In this case it is the progression of religious time that we can see as being disrupted (rather than reproductive time), and though Christianity will come to rise, and *di letster*, he who is last, will be first, the poem also implies that Jesus, like Socrates and Caesar, is ultimately destined to fall.

Margolin thus queerly collapses Jew and Christian, oppressor and victim, self and other, male and female, homo and hetero, Greek and Roman, past, other past, and present. Within this alternative, anti-binary space, Margolin writes herself back into the past and out of Jewish society. In this realm of otherness, in which otherness itself is replaced by fluidity, Margolin is not a bystander but rather an active participant who overcomes the limitations of her contemporary male-dominated society. This position, the ability to join histories past, is part of the queerly generated historical perspective, what Dinshaw calls the queer historical impulse activating "the potential of making pleasurable connections in the context of postmodern indeterminacy."⁸⁷ Indeterminacy is indeed Margolin's main tool for navigating multiple times and spaces, and further exemplifies Dinshaw's idea of using juxtaposition to make affective relations between historical periods, making entities past and present touch.⁸⁸ This touch is what Margolin uses to queer the private biography and western culture all at once. While tracing the freedom of this queer movement, it must be recognized that the gaze it enables is a backwards one, in which hindsight proves the perils of the past, and the future that awaits it emerges as inevitable tragic.

Hot/heys Hauntings

The queer touch of history allows us to transcend narrow boundaries of gender identity and sexual orientation, and can serve as method both for history and for reading. But this method itself can also touch explicitly queer sexual themes. Anna Margolin can serve not only as a model for a queer methodology, but as a rare Yiddish source of queer content. We have glimpsed some of this in the reading above, but we can delve even deeper into these themes, for Margolin is one of the few Yiddish poets to narrate explicitly lesbian desire. In her poem "On a Balcony," the poet describes a subtle yet highly erotic interaction between two women.

86 The term used here for high sprits, *hokhmutikn fridn*, could perhaps better be translated as "arrogant satisfaction." The non-fused German nature of the term makes it possible to read echoes of Nazi anti-Semitism in these lines published in 1929.

87 Dinshaw, 36.

88 Ibid, 12.

On a Balcony

From a distant summer hot laughter
floats toward me
From two small and dainty women
Leafing through a book.
Their hands meet in longing.
Soft shoulders searching quivering.
Over a thirsty, orange-red landscape
The bright bodies leap in confusion.

A man towers over them
With heavy grace,
Like a grand superfluous decoration.⁹⁰

פֿון ווייטן זומער פֿליט צו מיר אַ הייס געלעכטער
פֿון צוויי קליינע צאַרטע פֿרויען.
זיי בלעטערן אַ בילדערבוך.
זייערע הענט באַגעגענען זיך אין בענקשאַפֿט.
די ווייכע אַקסלען זוכן זיך און צוקן.
איבער אַ דאַרשטיקער אַראַנזשן-רויטער לאַנדשאַפֿט
וועלן זיך פֿאַרווירט די העלע ליבער.

איבער זיי טורעמט מעכטיק אַ מאַן
מיט שווערע גראַציע,
ווי אַ פֿרעכטיקע און איבעריקע דעקאָראַציע.

Beginning with the speaker positioned outside of the two women's interaction and closing with the towering man, this poem sets up a complex dynamic of voyeurism. The speaker is not part of the intimate, erotic, interaction. Instead, she has the panoramic point of view, which allows her to see what the women (might choose to) overlook, the man who "towers powerfully over them." Though the speaker is reached by the audio signal of the women's laughter, rather than by their visual image, the poem gives a progressively explicit description of the women's physical beings, while at the same time gradually distancing the realities of these bodies. The initial description of the "small and dainty" women frames the desire (soon to be activated) very much in the realm of sameness.⁹¹ This sameness is further constructed in the image of the meeting hands. Describing the hands collectively as "their[s]" refuses to distinguish which hand belongs to whom, which might be touching and which being touched, playing out this same-sex desire in the realm of undifferentiated symmetry. Through the synecdoche of the hands the poet can articulate desire, as the hands freely meet each other in a longing [*benkshaft*] that would perhaps be too much to ascribe to the women themselves. The distance from the actual women continues in describing "[t]he soft shoulders," which drops the possessive pronoun "their," replacing it with the article "the" and transferrs the agency of the "quivering searching" to the independent shoulders. The third

89 Margolin, *lider*, 128.

90 Translated by Shirley Kumove, *Drunk From the Bitter Truth: The Poems of Anna Margolin*, 233.

91 For a discussion of the tensions between positioning lesbian desire as a story of sameness vs. a desire propelled by difference, see Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

corporeal image is the most explicit one in the poem, that of "bright bodies leaping in confusion." Again, the article "the" instead of the possessive pronoun "their" and placing the bodies after the spatial description ("over a thirsty orange-red landscape") serves to link the different images, while accentuating the distance of the earlier metonymical descriptions of the women. This opens the closing couplet of the stanza to a double reading. Standing at the end of the stanza describing the women, it can either be read as a continuation of the women's physical interaction, their bodies intermingling, or as the image they are looking at in the picture book. Placing the detached bodies of the women reading the book, or of the women in the book (or men, as the "bright bodies" in question are actually not gendered), "over" [*iber*] the landscape (whether the landscape is under the balcony or in the pictorial representation in the book) preemptively foreshadows the man towering over the reading women. But if the man acts as mere decorative background, as a *dekoratsye* hanging over the women, the women's bodies are portrayed interacting with the landscape they loom over, activating it as an erotically charged "thirsty" backdrop (or more literally—underpinning), rather than a mere decorative background.

Clearly detracting from rather than adding to the scene, the man is hardly described as a desirable participant, and the idea of some kind of inadvertent erotic interaction with him (as with the thirsty landscape) seems foreclosed by the negativity with which he towers mightily [*turemt mekhtik*] over the women, overshadowing the brightness of their bodies. Despite the threatening potential this description evokes, it should be noted that he is being described from the speaker's vantage point, which is even more external than his own, while the women seem oblivious to both his presence and his potential threat. To the external speaker, he may not pose a threat, but he certainly serves as disruption, as we can gather from the description of him as superfluous [*iberik*] to the scene. His image is constructed through the apparent tension between his power and superfluosity, between grace and heaviness. The word used for grace, *gratsye*, is not the common Hebraic Yiddish term for grace, *chen*. *Gratsye* often serves in Yiddish as a derogatory, even misogynist slang term for a self-important pseudo-aristocratic "lady." Here the word seems to stand alone as an entity, being a feminine noun with its own adjective rather than an adjective merely describing the man. The line break detaches the grace from the act of standing it describes ("gracefully"), highlighting the preposition *mit* (with) and the independence of the grace. Possessing this grace, the man is clearly feminized. The idea of a man as decorative is also part of this feminization, invoking the misogynist cliché of women as decorative objects and women's creativity being associated with the decorative arts. This feminization of the male figure could be in line with other references in Margolin's poetry to Jewish men's alternative masculinity, but the adjectives "heavy" and "towering" mark the oppressive potential encoded even in this effeminate male figure. Heavily towering, the man continues Margolin's uses of the sculptural. Triangulated with the two women, another artistic resonance is born, as the man's *gratsye* intertextually evokes the Three Graces of Greek mythology, echoing the history of Classical art Margolin critiques in her rhyming reference to the man as an *iberike dekoratsye*, a superfluous decoration. Rhyming *dekoratsye* and *gratsye* forms a closed couplet,

further isolating the man in the first line of the stanza, who though he may tower, is poetically and thematically rendered entirely external to the intimacy among the women. Since these closing lines are the only perfect rhyme in the poem, they also enact their own decorativeness and their superfluousness to the poem, which may thus be read as a thematized negation of pre-modernist art forms along with gender norms so distant from the modernist poetics championed by Margolin and her generation.

Indeed, the title of the poem "*oyf a balkon*" [on a balcony] reads like the title of a modernist painting that makes art of the quotidian scene. It sets up the ambiguity of the positions of the speaker, the man, and the two women, making it equally likely that the women are the ones on a balcony, that the towering man is on that balcony (though it is enough for him to be standing behind them to have that height advantage), and that the speaker is the one witnessing the scene from the balcony. Avraham Novershtern argues that the speaker is positioned in an equally superfluous position to the man, as an external voyeur. He argues that the speaker's subjective prism, through which "the image is filtered, actually receives limited space."⁹² Novershtern sees this as a way to counter the potential sentimentality of the scene itself, allowing the poem to bring together "various elements whose purpose is to dull or weaken its portrayal of intense emotion." Whereas Novershtern counts the speaker's point of view as one of the stylistic elements that "weaken" the emotion in the scene, I would argue that the necessity of emotional diffusion originates from the speaker herself, who proves to be anything but external. As the hot laughter "floats" or even "flies" [*flit* in the Yiddish] towards her, she is drawn into the scene, which she in turn narrates into being. The laughter comes not just from a spatial distance (between street and balcony) but also from a gap in time, as the memory of a "distant summer," reaches, writes Novershtern "through temporal distance to touch the poet as well." (453). What does it mean for the poet to be "touched," as Novershtern suggests, by this erotic interaction? This non-consensual, uninvited touch renders the speaker passive and the women active, much in line with impressionist poetry, as the world leaves its mark on the passive consciousness of the speaker.⁹³ This might negate sentimentality (as Novershtern suggests), but it also removes the safe distance of the voyeur. The speaker becomes part of the scene whether she wants to or not, just as the man is part of the scene whether or not the women consent to it. The queer touch of history, of that distant

92 Avraham Novershtern, "'Who Would Have Believed That a Bronze Statue Can Weep': The Poetry of Anna Margolin," *Prooftexts* 10:3 (1990), 453.

93 Virginia Woolf has defined this well for prose: "[l]et us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness." Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 150. In Yiddish poetry we see this perhaps most distinctly in the work of *di yunge*, the poetic movement Margolin began publishing with in New York, although their work is associated, in addition to impressions, also with aspects of aestheticism and symbolism. Cf. Kronfeld's chapter "David Fogel and Moyshe Leyb Halpern: Liminal Moment in Hebrew and Yiddish Literary History," in *On the Margins of Modernism*.

summer and its hot [*heys*] interactions, reverse the voyeuristic invasion allowing the women to haunt the speaker, not she them.⁹⁴

The women themselves are also engaged in a kind of voyeuristic indulgence, in the shared pleasure of "leafing through a picture book," though with the ensuing series of physical interactions it would seem that the aesthetic pleasure is secondary, indeed even a pretext for the physical pleasure and closeness that it enables. In this erotic economy the gaze is not what affords power, for neither the speaker nor the man possesses it. The objects of this gaze, the women, have full agency, becoming desiring subjects of each other. Closed to external intervention, they themselves intervene in the speaker's memory or psyche, and make present times past. This closed scene is mediated for us, the readers, through poetic narration. What makes this intimate scene known to us, the readers, is then the craft of poetry, the "superfluous decoration," echoing role the man plays in the poem. Through the poetic narration the readers become unwittingly complacent voyeurs as well, leafing through the book of poems as the women depicted in the poem leaf through the picture book. But we do not get to touch them, as the fantasy so often created by an objectifying gaze would have it; instead, the poet implies, they get to touch us. We have no choice but to be touched by them, as queer specters, as distant memory, forgotten or unspoken desire. Making this desire thematically seen and heard, the poem itself becomes a medium of queer haunting that reaches out to us, in what Carla Freccero calls "queer spectrality" that demands of us "to live with ghosts (neither forgetting nor mourning) and to understand oneself as ghosted."⁹⁵ Let me turn now to a Hebrew modernist poem by Leah Goldberg that further narrates the haunting of queer desire, as the speaker dreams herself as Jesus. Using Christian imagery, Goldberg offers her own Hebrew version of Margolin's Yiddish cross-gendered and cross-temporal identification.

94 My next chapter will expand on the idea of erotic interactions between past and present and the corporeal history they produce, whereas my third chapter will return to queer haunting.

95 Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 78.

Dream of a Girl

("Saint Magdalene"- a painting by Carlo Crivelli, in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin)

I dreamt that I was-- you, man,
and Crivelli's Magdalena
was serving me a steaming drink, pure
in a gold plated crystal goblet
and her curl – coiled soft snake –
as she passes, touches my cheek,
and my entire body drunk with the scent of tuberose.

I dreamt that I was-- you.
and the face of a pale girl
was wiped from my memory forever.
Now I thirst⁹⁶ for Magdalena.

and there was no way out of dream's horror,
and there was no escaping Magdalena.⁹⁷



96 This is the only gendered verb in the poem, and its gender is masculine. The adjective “drunk” is also grammatically masculine, describing not the speaker, but her (or his) “body” [*guf*] which is grammatically masculine in Hebrew.

97 Leah Goldberg, "*chalom na'ara*" [Dream of a Girl], in *ketavim* (Mer'havya: Sifriyat po'alim, 1972), 71. The poem was first published in 1931, and then included in her first collection, *Taba'ot ashan* [Smoke Rings], in 1934. Translation mine, ZWK.

חֵלֹם נַעֲרָה

“מגדלגה הקדושה” – תמונה מאת קרלו קריוולי

נמצאת ב-Kaiser Friedrich Museum ברלין

אָנִי חָלַמְתִּי שְׂאֲנִי – אַתָּה,
 וּמַגְדֵּלְגָה שֶׁל קְרִיוֹלִי
 לִי מִגִּישָׁה מְשֻׁקָה רוֹתֵחַ, וְנָךְ
 בְּגִבֵּיעַ – בְּדֹלֶחַ מְצֻפָּה זָהָב,
 וְתִלְתֵּלָהּ – נַחֵשׁ גִּפְתָּל וְרָךְ –
 מִדֵּי עֲבָרָה, נוֹגֵעַ בְּלִחֵי,
 וְכָל גּוֹפֵי שְׂכוֹר מְרִיחַ טְבָרוֹזָה.

אָנִי חָלַמְתִּי שְׂאֲנִי – אַתָּה.
 וּפְרִצוּפָה שֶׁל נַעֲרָה חוֹרֶת
 נִמְחָה מִזְכָּרוֹנֵי לְעוֹלָמִים
 וְאֲנֹכִי צָמֵא לְמַגְדֵּלְגָה.

וְלֹא הִיָּה מוֹצָא מִתּוֹךְ זִוְעַת-חֵלֹם,
 וְלֹא הִיָּה מִפְּלֵט מִמַּגְדֵּלְגָה.

Both the poem itself and its title, *chalom na'ara* [dream of a girl], hold the ambiguity of “girl” as object of the dream and girl as dreamer. This ambiguity is present in translation and in the original Hebrew title’s genitive construct [*smikhut*], which also plays on the idiom *chalom balahot* (or the plural, *chalomot balaha*), meaning nightmare. If we understand the poem to be a girl’s dream, then we can assume the speaker of the poem is female. However, the poem opens with the statement “I dreamt that I was you,” using the second person address *ata*, which in the Hebrew original is distinctly gendered as male. In my translation, the masculine first person address is broken down to “you” and the vocative “man” to indicate the gendered

marking, and the possibility of the pronoun *ata* [you] standing for what the female speaker dreamt she was (as in: "I dreamt I was a 'he'").⁹⁸ Just like the identity of the speaker is ambiguous, so too is the identity of this "you," the addressee, which can only be inferred in relation to the woman who is named in the poem, Mary Magdalene, whose depiction in the poem invokes her biblical encounters with Jesus. While it is clear that Goldberg is activating the biblical context of the Magdalene, and thus implicitly identifying the addressee with Jesus, the primary context is that of the speaker's dream and her poem, rather than the symbolic, collective and religious resonances of the Christian narrative. The specificity of the particular Magdalene is part of this relocation of the collective symbol. For this reason, Goldberg insists on identifying her as "Crivelli's Magdalena," both under the poem's title and within the poem itself. Thus, it is not the Magdalene of Jesus, nor even of Christianity in general, but rather that of one particular artist, and by extension, that of this particular poet. In this sense, the verbal narrative of history is mediated by visual art, which in turn is mediated by the verbal unfolding of the poem. At the same time, the dream context serves Goldberg as a realistic motivation for positioning her speaker in the role of Jesus, and can thus be differentiated from Margolin's self-fashioning in "Once I was a Youth," which does away with, and even acts against, such realistic grounding.

The Magdalene is the "other woman," not just in the biblical narrative where she competes with Mary at the same time as she is conflated with her,⁹⁹ but also in the poem where she competes the "face of a pale girl," the one who is supposedly erased from the speaker's memory in the dream-poem. This pale girl face is easily identifiable with Goldberg's construction of self in other poems.¹⁰⁰ By erasing this trace from memory, but not from the poem, the speaker inscribes in the poem the very image (possibly her own image) that she is trying to disavow, creating a split; If this "other woman" can erase the speaker's *I*, and the male addressee can replace the speaker's *I* for the duration of the poem/dream, then perhaps they both stand in equally for the lyrical "I", causing the speaker's desire to be Magdalene (instead of the pale girl)¹⁰¹ to mesh with her desire to have her, armed with the male persona of the Jesus of her dream. Staging the encounter with the dreamed woman in the name of a male persona still has a queer resonance, for the woman is the one who possesses the symbolic phallus (in the form of that curling snake) and imposes

98 I am grateful to professor Galit Hasan-Rokem for this linguistic insight. Yosefa Raz and Rachel Wamsley also gave valuable feedback on all of the Goldberg translations. Rachel Wamsley and I worked collaboratively on Goldberg and Margolin in 2006, and some of our joint efforts are reflected in this chapter.

99 Echoed in Goldberg's poem *madonot al parashat drakhim* [Madonnas at a Crossroads]. In the poem, which we will turn to shortly, the speaker joins the Madonnas in defying the knowledge of Jesus's betrayal, asking so what if "on his lips they read the name of the other," in Leah Goldberg, *Ketavim*, 39.

100 See for example, "You are a not pretty woman, twenty two years old/ an extinguished candle on the shabbes-table," in Leah Goldberg, *Ketavim*, 28.

101 While the poem seems to set up a dichotomy between "the face of a pale girl" and Magdalene, Crivelli's image itself can be interpreted as a girl's pale face, leading to a further blurring between the figures in the poem.

herself on the speaker, who is powerless against her. The desires to be and to have, a classical "lesbian pathology," as patriarchal discourse would have it,¹⁰² are here complicated by the extreme negativity associated with both forms of desire, as expressed in the closing couplet.

Mapping this haunting desire onto the experience of Jesus, originating in the New Testament narratives, doubly relocates the discourse of forbidden desire to the realm of the past as well as to a non-Jewish discourse.¹⁰³ Focusing on a particular masculine subject, possibly identified as Jesus, could be said to relocate the Christian fear of female sexuality from within church dogma into personal experience. While the poem echoes Christianity's fear of female sexuality in general, it does so not through an average woman, but through Magdalene, who is closely associated with sinful and demonized sexuality. In this move Goldberg is also reversing the biblical context she draws from, for in scripture Jesus repeatedly accepts Magdalene, alongside others who are labeled as sinners. The biblical context alluded to is the scene from Luke in which a woman, who is generally identified as Mary Magdalene, a "known sinner," washes Jesus' feet with her tears, anoints them with oil and kisses them. While the Pharisee criticizes Jesus for allowing this, Jesus condones her behavior and turns against the Pharisee accusingly: "You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet" (Luke 7:45). This retort condones sexuality in its juxtaposition with servitude, and opens a surprising space for homoerotic interaction. While we do not get to see the Pharisee kissing Jesus' feet in Luke, we do see Judas doing so in Goldberg's poem "Pieta."¹⁰⁴ Goldberg's poems thus activate a range of subtle intertextual interactions with the Christian texts, highlighting the sources' own ambivalence regarding sexuality, where heterosexuality produces as much anxiety as homosexuality, while sinful sexuality (like that of Magdalene) is condoned and homoeroticism (amongst the Jesus and the apostles) is even invited.

In Luke's narrative and in Crivelli's painting the woman carries an alabaster flask to anoint Jesus' feet. In the poem this becomes a drink in a "gold plated crystal goblet." The drink is tied to the thirst for Magdalene expressed by the speaker, but also to the words uttered by Jesus on the cross: "Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty'" (John 19:28). Rewriting this final thirst, as her speaker thirsts for Magdalena, Goldberg shows that not "all was completed," or perhaps, that another end is available, where the return, the resurrection and the second coming, are not of Christ but of Magdalena. The drink also resonates intertextually with another of

102 De Lauretis' reading, which I offered to complement the reading of Margolin's poem "On a Balcony," could prove to be illuminating here as well (cf. footnote 24)

103 Of course, the context of early Christianity is also a Jewish context, as Daniel Boyarin has argued, showing the artificiality of the "border-markers" set to distinguish the former from the latter. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Goldberg's turn to early Christianity, on the other hand, is still rooted very much in transgressing said "border-markers."

104 "Pieta," Leah Goldberg, *Ketavim*, 38.

Goldberg's Christian poems, "*be-minzar pazaislio*" ["In the Pazaislio Monastery"].¹⁰⁵ This poem is named for the monastery Goldberg visited east of Kovno, while she was working for a Christian family that hired her to teach their children Lithuanian. Giddon Ticotsky and Yfaat Weiss write that this was Goldberg's first experience of total immersion in a Christian environment, and based on her letters to Mina Landau, they claim this experience led to her disenchantment with the culture that she had earlier found particularly alluring.¹⁰⁶ "In the Pazaislio Monastery" indeed sets up the allure of Christianity, monastic life and the ideal of motherhood, all of which the speaker ultimately rejects. In the poem, the speaker is served a drink by a "foreign god image." This drink is described as poisonous [*kos kuba'at tar'ela*, alluding to Isaiah 51:17], and later on in the poem the speaker describes her blood as poisoned by "tales of foreign land" [*agadot nekhar*]. The effect of the poisoning words makes it impossible for her to resist the temptation of kneeling before the foreign deity. These foreign tales echo the wild tales, the *vilde mayseyes* of Margolin's poem, and here too they are words placed in the mouth of the other. In addition to the implications of idol worship in Margolin's poem, here the kneeling is also tied to the Christian ideal of submission. But for the speaker of this particular poem, to kneel would actually be an act of defiance against, and betrayal of, her Judaism, rather than submission. Unable to take this transgressive step, she heeds the Jewish "voice of generations" which whispers in the final verse: "let go of the folly;/Not for you Madonna's mourning tear,/and the mothers' laughter not for you." She must disavow Christianity, along with its venerated image of maternity, as well as its sanctified image of suffering. At the same time, it is the Jewish dictum that women bear children to produce future generations, and the abdication of motherhood can be associated with a Christian monastic tradition entirely foreign to Judaism.

In an earlier version of the poem, published in 1928 (five years before the version included in Goldberg's first book, *taba'ot ashan* [Smoke Rings]), the conflict posed by the temptation of the mourning Madonna is cast in the national terms rather than personal ones: "not in the name of a mourning Madonna/did the best of your people burn at the stake" [*lo be-shem madona mit'abelet/alu tovey amekh al ha-moked*]. Ticotsky and Weiss, who briefly mention this fascinating original version in a footnote, attribute the shift from the national to the personal to Goldberg's "understanding that she was not meant to be a mother" (262). I would argue instead that both versions offer a complicated position vis-a-vis the national collective; in the original line the reference is to the best of *your* people [*amekh*, feminine], highlighting the speaker's personal role in relation to that collective; in the later version, the role of motherhood Goldberg's speaker relinquishes is itself a subversion of a national project aimed at reproducing the nation. As the "voice of generations" whispers her away from Christianity, it is also whispering her away from actively participating in the (re)production of future generations, and thus, away from *her* people. The "voice of generations" is particularly charged in the

105 "*be-minzar pazaislio*" [In the Pazaislio Monastery], Leah Goldberg, *Ketavim*, 69.

106 Leah Goldberg, Yfaat Weiss, and Giddon Ticotsky. *Ne'arot Ivriyot: Mikhtevey Le'ah Goldberg Min Ha-Provintsya, 1923-1935* (Beney Berak: Sifriyat Po'alim, 2009), 262.

context raised by the poem "In the Pazaislio Monastery," which forecloses both foreign Christianity and the possibility of actual motherhood alike. This double move is consistent with much of Goldberg's early poetic vocabulary, a vocabulary that often juxtaposes Christian imagery with themes of motherhood. Considering that the bulk of these poems includes a rejection of motherhood ("not for you the mothers' laughter"), the use of the Christian monastic discourse can be seen as facilitating this position, which pushes against both the Zionist and the Jewish reproductive imperatives. But Goldberg does not merely adopt this polar possibility; instead, as we saw above, she activates the complicated range of meaning found in the original Christian context, drawing on Christian dogma's venerated virgin motherhood together with its condemnation of female sexuality. Examining the activation of this binary and the way Goldberg utilizes its full complexity reveals the subtlety of Goldberg's engagement with this discourse.

That Which Will Come No More to Me

Expressing both queer desire and a rejection of motherhood vis-à-vis non-Jewish discourse serves Goldberg as a calculated displacement: by drawing attention first and foremost to the foreignness of her thematics, the full impact of her subversiveness might appear to be mitigated. Allusions to the New Testament, though not uncommon in Jewish modernism, had a huge shock effect for a reading public forbidden to touch the "other" Christian texts. Thus, readers were (and still are) more likely to call these Goldberg's "Christian poems" than her "queer" or "anti-motherhood poems," when in fact the poems weave together these multiple transgressive positions. The final Goldberg poem I will read in the chapter, *madonot al parashat drakhim* [Madonnas at a Crossroads],¹⁰⁷ continues the conflation of transgressions, pushing the boundaries of Christian and Jewish messianic traditions while undoing religious and reproductive teleology. The poem strikingly employs Christian narrative rooted in Eastern European iconography. Given the historical context, this cannot but be seen as subversive of the dominant Zionist poetics focused on a "Return" [shiva] to the Land (Zion) and its pre-diasporic Jewish/Israelite history. At the same time, the poem also counters the Zionist version of secular messianism that advocates actively bringing about redemption (of the land) rather than passively awaiting it (that is, the traditional belief that Jews should return to the land of Israel when, and only when, the Messiah comes, in fact the dominant rabbinic notion that "rushing" the footsteps of the Messiah along is a catastrophic transgression). The "action" in this poem is actually an extreme form of prototypical female passivity—eternal anticipation. While waiting does fit in with both Jewish and Christian messianic traditions, as expressed in the biblical dictum "though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry" (Habakkuk 2:3, KJV translation). However, in the poem, the waiting is declared to be waiting in vain [*tzipiyat shav*], which negates the messianic potential and the sense of ultimate purpose attached to it. Here Goldberg is also overtly subverting the Christian discourse she is borrowing from, replacing the messianic anticipation of the Second

107 This poem was first published in 1933 and was included a year later in her first collection, together with the other poems read in this chapter. Leah Goldberg, *Ketavim*, 39.

Coming of Christ with a personalized, painful, anticipation that is acknowledged in advance as futile. Goldberg's poem thus recasts "expectancy," offering anticipation as an act of resignation and waiting in vain, and creating a queer time that resists future fulfillment. This poem will therefore complement my reading of Yocheved Bat-Miriam in the Introduction, offering a queer construction of time that roots itself in the present (in Goldberg's case, through the Christian past), in order to foreclose the future. In this move Goldberg also joins Margolin in undermining the linear progression of time dictated not only by reproductive heteronormativity but also by Christian and Jewish messianic teleology, mutually destabilizing both hegemonic traditions.

Madonnas at a Crossroads¹⁰⁸

I've resigned myself to wait in vain
remembering without anguish blessed days.
Wooden Madonnas at a crossroads
peaceful, like me, in the ice light of fall.

Wooden Madonnas, worn and silent
know: he will no more be resurrected.
He will not come silently to wipe a tear
at a crossing,¹⁰⁹ frozen and desolate.

They will not get to kiss his feet,
did they hear the laughter of the child of Nazareth?
And so what if they saw him on the cross
and on his lips they read the name of the other?¹¹⁰

But they remember blessed days
and resign themselves to expecting in vain.
Like them, I—at a crossroads
cold and so quiet in the ice light of fall.

מדונות על פְּרִשֶׁת דְּרָכִים

אֲנִי הִסְכַּנְתִּי לְחַכּוֹת לְשׂוּא
וּבְלִי יַגּוֹן לְזִכֹּר יָמִים מְבָרָכִים.
מְדוֹנוֹת עֵץ עַל פְּרִשֶׁת דְּרָכִים
שְׁלוֹת כְּמוֹנֵי בְּקָרָח אֹרֵי הַסֵּתוּ.

מְדוֹנוֹת עֵץ בְּלוֹת וְדוֹמָמוֹת
יֹדְעוֹת: הוּא לֹא יָקוּם עוֹד לְתַחִיהָ,
הוּא לֹא יָבוֹא לְמַחֹת דְּמָעָה בְּדוּמְיָהָ
עַל אִם דְּרָכִים קְפוּאוֹת וְשׁוּמָמוֹת.

הֵן לֹא תִזְכְּרֶנָּה לְנִשֵּׁק הַרוֹם רַגְלָיו,
הֵן שָׁמְעוּ אֶת צְחֹק הַיֶּלֶד מִנְּצָרָתָה?
וּמָה גַם אִם רְאוּהוּ עַל הַצֵּלָב
וְעַל שִׁפְתָיו קָרְאוּ אֶת שְׁמָהּ שֶׁל הָאַחֶרֶת?

אֵךְ הֵן זֹכְרוֹת יָמִים מְבָרָכִים
וּמִסְכִּינּוֹת לְצַפִּית הַשׂוּא –
כְּמוֹהֵן אֲנִי: עַל פְּרִשֶׁת דְּרָכִים
קָרָה וְכֵה שׁוֹקֵטָה בְּקָרָח אֹרֵי הַסֵּתוּ.

108 Translation mine, ZWK.

109 The Christian resonance of "crossing" is entirely absent from the Hebrew. Instead, the Hebrew invokes maternity through the idiom given for "crossing" is *em drakhim*, built from the combination of "mother" and "roads." I chose "crossing" rather than "crossroads" since I use crossroads to translate *parahsat drakhim* in the opening and closing stanzas.

110 The "other" is gendered female, and could also be translated as "another woman."

I read this poem as an expression of anti-futurity and collapsed temporality, using a concrete element in the present—an icon—to activate the discourse of a Christian past. The Madonnas of the poem derive from the common practice of placing wooden representations of the Virgin Mary at rural crossroads in Eastern Europe. The focus on the iconic furthers the visual poetics of re-appropriating idol worship that Mann identified in the “Jewish Imagism” of Margolin. Taking part in this Hebrew-Yiddish literary trend, Goldberg moves beyond a simple relocation of the symbol to utilize the multiple levels of meaning invoked by these Madonnas simultaneously, from their material qualities (wooden, worn, stationary, mute), through their symbolic power as icons (multiple representations, each possessing part of the sanctity of the original, and thus worthy of worship), and not least, their referents’ narrative/biographical role in the life of Jesus. Goldberg thus both personifies and multiplies the single image of the Madonna, creating a group representation of women who share a similar fate. Goldberg gives the Madonnas a story, but not quite a voice, so the Madonnas serve as a silent chorus, speaking in a collective voice that only the poet can hear, allowing her to join their ranks. That the speaker is able to position herself amongst them by the end of the poem is enabled only by her redefinition of their significance, rewriting both the Christian intertext and the dominant Zionist politics and poetics of Goldberg’s time.

Perhaps the most striking conflation of these two elements, the Christian and the Zionist, is expressed through Goldberg’s rejection of the possibility of redemption. Declaring explicitly that “he will no more be resurrected,” or, “revived” [*lo yakum od li-tchiya*] Goldberg directly may be pointing us to the Hebrew poetic movement that preceded her own period (the *Moderna*), namely the *Tchiya*, the revival period, which displaces the term describing (messianic) resurrection onto a linguistic Zionist context. This period, ranging from the 1880s to the 1920s, is seen as marking both the revival of the Hebrew language and literature, and the return of the literary center—by the end of this period—to “the Land of Israel,” with the first three waves of major immigration. While Goldberg participates in the immediate aftermath of this period in her own biography, arriving in Palestine in 1935, this particular poem also marks her deviation from it. She is not returning the scriptural figures to their native Palestine, reinscribing Mary as a Jewish mother; and she is not using them to celebrate a sense of historical continuity and a renewed bond with the land, as her predecessors and contemporaries have done. Indeed, it was not unusual for Hebrew and Yiddish modernist writers to use Christian imagery,¹¹¹ especially the figure of Jesus. In *From Rebel to Rabbi*¹¹² Matthew Hoffman emphasizes the national appropriations of the Jesus figure. He describes the writers’ use of Jesus as a prototypical modernist Jew to engage a wide variety of topics, from pogroms in Russian to Jewish nationalism in Palestine. But whereas Hoffman mainly focuses on

111 Uri Tsvi Greenberg writing both Hebrew and Yiddish can serve as a notable example. One of his poems, *Uri Zvi farn Tzelem INRI* [Uri Zvi Before the Cross INRI] is even typographically set up in the form of a cross. In addition, see works in Hebrew by Avraham Shlonsky, Yitshak Lamdan and Yosef Hayyim Brenner and Yiddish works by Itsik Manger, Shalom Asch, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern.

112 Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

the transplantation of Jesus and other Christian figures onto various Jewish landscapes, I argue that Goldberg, much like Margolin, place the Christological distinctly within the realm of it otherness.

Activating the intricacies of their original context, whether in the New Testament or Church dogma (indeed playing the two against each other), allows Goldberg to make subversive statements regarding her gendered and national present. The general trend of modernist Jewish writers of the time, writes Hoffman, was to transfer "ownership of the figure of Jesus, and all of the cultural patrimony that flowed from him, to the Jews." He asserts that in the modernists' views, "Christians had misunderstood Jesus' intrinsically Jewish teachings and kidnapped their ancient Jewish brother, who now had to be returned home."¹¹³ In the poems we are reading, however, these Christian figures cannot simply be identified as being "reclaimed" by Judaism. For even where the speakers identify with them, it is precisely their otherness that is foregrounded, whether as compelling or deterring. When Christian figures are identified with Judaism, as we saw in Margolin's description of Jesus as "the weakling of Nazareth," this serves a double distancing; allowing the female poet/speaker to express distance from Christian figures, and from the Jewish men they are like. This may be due to the fact that for these writing women, both Christianity and Judaism share something of a foreignness. At the same time female poets utilize their own exclusion from the centers of Jewish text and life as enabling freedom of movement and cross-identifications,¹¹⁴ across time and gender, and most importantly here, across culture. This type of cultural fluidity was less accessible to Jewish men of their time, whose firm grounding in Jewish tradition placed them at odds with both Christianity and with western culture as a whole. Just as the Christian figures are both inside and outside Judaism, so too do the female poets occupy a liminal space, which they use to critique both Christian and Jewish hegemonic tradition while mobilizing gender against normative nationalist concepts of Jewish identification triumphing all others.

In order to understand Goldberg's subversive position, I want to focus on two disruptions of temporality in poem *madonot*, both relating to the rewriting of the time of the evoked Christian intertext. The first complicates the narrative of Mary's biography and the second defiantly challenges Jewish and Christian theology, negating the present promise of future redemption. The poem strikingly merges the roles of the different women in Jesus's life, and the different periods of his life and afterlife, collapsing the particular biographical chronology by deeming Mary mother, lover, mourner and worshipper all at once. Cast as a chorus, the Madonnas are "post"—in the sense that they speak after the life of Jesus, and in that they are past their prime (even the word used for "worn," *balot*, means menopausal in Biblical

113 Hoffman, 2-3.

114 I borrow the term cross-identification from Daniel Boyarin, who applies it both cross-temporally and across genders in his thrilling portrait of Bertha Pappenheim, "Retelling the Story of O.; Or, Bertha Pappenheim, My Hero," *Unheroic Conduct: the Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 313-59.

Hebrew),¹¹⁵ but they are also "pre"—before the resurrection, which will never come and yet is anticipated in its very negation. In this liminal space the linear temporality of the narrative is collapsed, blurring the distinctions between what may have happened in the past ["did they hear the laughter?"], what happened but is in a sense disavowed ["so what if they saw"], and what may have occurred in the past but is now distinctly foreclosed ["they will not get to kiss his feet"], conflating that which is meant to happen in the future (after the resurrection), that which never happened, and that which will never happen. The collapsed temporality of the Madonnas is perhaps most extreme in their position of "resigning themselves to expecting in vain." Choosing to wait can be read as a position of relinquishing the present in the face of the the future, but choosing to wait in vain forecloses the future as well, for it suggests that the future will be a static continuation of the unfulfilled present. I read this resignation as a form of what Carla Freccero terms "a politics of passivity, queer, as only a passive politics could be said to be."¹¹⁶ And yet, she writes, "the passivity—which is also a form of patience and passion—is not quite the same thing as quietism. Rather, it is a suspension, a waiting, an attending to the world's arrivals (through in part, its returns)." I see this as the counterpoint to the Zionist politics and poetics of action of creating "facts on the ground," offering waiting, again in the words of Freccero, "not as a guarantee or security for action in the present, but as the very force from the past that moves us into the future"(104). Mapping the waiting onto the past, Goldberg's speaker is the future of those Madonnas whose (a)temporality she creates so that she can join it. But that, of course, is not what they are waiting for; she is not their redemption, since they are not hers.

Goldberg was only twenty years old when this poem was published, yet she already offers a distinct sense of what will happen in the future, or rather, what will not happen (including, in her own life: a foreclosure of heteronormative romantic fulfillment, namely in the form of marriage, and reproduction). The text thus enacts what Heather Love has termed "proleptic mourning,"¹¹⁷ where a loss is called into being by the mourning that would normally follow the already-existing loss, much like Bat-Miriam's preemptive foreclosure (as we saw in the Introduction). This reading runs the risk of what Michael André Bernstein has termed "backshadowing,"¹¹⁸ an anachronistic reading influenced by the outcome of certain events, mixed with the (often unfortunate) tendency to limit poetic interpretation to the biography of the poet, a risk particularly pertinent in the case of female poets. Furthermore, backshadowing presumes a deterministic view of historical progression, precisely the premise this study questions. Instead of deterministic progression, I identify anachronistic projection as the very strategy of Goldberg's work in this poem, as she herself stages the scene of proleptic mourning for the

115 The word Goldberg uses for "desolate" (in the last line of the second stanza), *shomemot*, is also tied to bareness, joining the word "worn" [*balot*] to bolster the non-reproductive reading.

116 Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 104.

117 Love, *Feeling Backward*, 93.

118 Michael André Bernstein, *Forgone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Madonnas. In a similar strategic anachronism, Margolin uses her own hindsight regarding the ultimate fall of the Roman Empire in "Once I was a Youth," ironically portraying the Pagans mocking the Christians, not knowing their own days as an empire are numbered. These past mappings do not turn back in order to recreate linearity or teleology, but in order to undo them. They offer "a mode of looking backward that is not exactly nostalgic, as the world [being longed for] is not one of presence, but of absence, loss" (93), to quote Heather Love again. In this sense Goldberg's text offers a double move of resignation, past and present, as the past closes itself off to the future, already enacting a mode of proleptic mourning the future will imitate, in what we might see as a queer secular and feminized form of *Imitatio Christi*.

The Sowers Who Will Not Reap

Joining the ranks of the Madonnas, Goldberg, like Margolin, makes a claim about her place in the present of Jewish letters by refusing the idea of a "better future," in particular one generated by reproductive futurity and other models of teleological historical progression. These poets are using the past, in Love's words, "to imagine a future apart from the reproductive imperative, optimism, and the promise of redemption."¹¹⁹ Both Love and the poets I discuss here argue against two modes of future: reproductive futurity, and a version of messianic teleology. What Love offers instead, very much following Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History,"¹²⁰ is "a backward future," one the poems I read construct by turning to an imagined past, by disrupting linear temporal progression, and by denying the viability of futures produced biologically or through teleological ideology, religious or nationalistic. I want to argue for the vitality of the backward future, as a means for these writers to carve out a space for themselves within and against the dominant discourse. Using Margolin's own version of history to understand this backward future reminds us of the traditionally cyclical view of Jewish history, of the folly and dangers of trying to write the history of the victor, which is always shortsighted. For the historical centers of power with which Margolin aligns her speaker are those of greatness that did not last, though they are still regarded as the classical site of Western culture. Margolin may enter that site only with the knowledge that its power was temporary, pointing perhaps to the fleeting power of other dominant groups whose oppression she is still facing. While she may join the victors of the moment in mocking that "weakling from Nazareth," the joke, we can say, is on that past, which did not last, but also on the speaker "who once was" a non-Jewish boy, but is now (in the time of the poem) a Jewish woman, and is, after all, subjected to Christianity's often anti-Semitic rule, along with the oppressive patriarchy of Judaism itself. In this case, we might ask what, or, who is the future really good for?

¹¹⁹ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*, 147.

¹²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253-64.

Echoing this question, modernist writers have foregrounded resistance to futurity as a major poetic tenet. In her introduction to *On the Margins of Modernism*, Kronfeld points out this resistance, highlighting the choice of Hebrew over German made by the first Hebrew modernist poet, Avraham Ben-Yitzhak (Sonne) (1883–1950), a choice that forced him to simultaneously assert and deny "the possibility of his project ever leaving a mark" by "refusing to constitute his modernist project as productive."¹²¹ The poem Kronfeld reads celebrates "the sowers that will not reap,"¹²² and is, in fact, the last poem Ben-Yitzhak published, one of only a handful to see the light in his life time.¹²³ This anti-productive position is tied to both his poetic sensibilities¹²⁴ as well his ambivalence towards institutional Zionism.¹²⁵ And yet, the poet did manage to leave his mark, specifically on the Leah Goldberg. When Goldberg writes her 1952 tribute to Ben-Yitzhak, *pgisha im meshorer* [*Meeting with a Poet*]¹²⁶ she expresses her admiration for his minimalist poetic project, as well as her sense of responsibility to pass on the "precious treasure" [*otsar yakar*]¹²⁷ she received from knowing him, a treasure she believes is too precious to keep private [*bi-rshut ha-yachid*]. In a poem she published the same year and dedicated to Ben Yitzhak,¹²⁸ Goldberg returns to Christian imagery (significantly, Catholic and monastic, as Kronfeld stresses)¹²⁹ to valorize his position, which she cogently terms "the calm of refusal." Turning to Christianity to bolster an oppositional stance, specifically one of preemptive resignation, resonates strongly with the poem "*madonot*." In fact, Ben Yitzhak's poem "Happy are the Sowers" shares a number of points of intertextual encounter with Goldberg's *Madonnas* poem, most evidently, the idiomatic expression for "crossroads," *em drakhim* (literally, "mother of roads," as I explained earlier in my reading). Additionally, the penultimate verse in Ben Yitzhak's poem "Happy are those who know what their heart calls from the desert/and on their lips will blossom silence" foreshadows the *Madonnas*' disavowal of the knowledge of both death and betrayal: "So what if they saw him on the cross/and on his lips read the name of the other?" In the Hebrew original, Goldberg's text reads even more directly as an allusion to Ben-Yitzhak's, for the word for "call" and "read" are the same. The position taken on by Goldberg's *Madonnas* and speaker, by Ben Yitzhak's idealized model, and by Goldberg's projected image of Ben Yitzhak, all share a recognition of the futility of action,

121 Kronfeld, 17.

122 From "*Ashrey ha-zor'im*" ["Happy Are the Sowers"]. The various versions we have of the poem date from 1925 to 1928 (Kronfeld, ft 23).

123 Even Hanan Hever's publication of all of Ben Yitzhak's work does not amount to more than a thin volume of poetry. Hannan Hever, *Pri'hat Ha-Dumiya: Shirat Avraham Ben-Yitzhak* (Tel-Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-me'u'had, 1993).

124 Interpreted, writes Hever, as a clear declaration of preference for resignation and becoming silent in order to achieve "the real advantage in eternity." Cf. Hever, 107.

125 Kronfeld refers to the "vivid candor" with which Leah Goldberg describes Ben-Yitzhak's "intensely critical association with institutional Zionism" ("Introduction," ft. 20).

126 Leah Goldberg, *Pgisha im meshorer: Al Avraham Ben Yitzhak Sone* (Merchavyah: Sifriyat po'alim, 1952).

127 *Ibid*, 5.

128 Leah Goldberg, "Avraham Ben-Yitzhak," *Ketavim*, 232.

129 Kronfeld, "Introduction," ft. 23.

valuing inaction and silence, while the narration of passivity becomes the very message which has the power to generate future poetry.

At the same time that Goldberg was taking on the symbol of the Madonnas, Anna Margolin dedicated a poem cycle of poetry to a character she names "*Mari*," creating a persona that relates to the Virgin Mary and activates Christian intertexts and culture more broadly. The poem "*Mari's tfile*" ["Mary's Prayer"], for example, relates directly to the New Testament's narrative of Mary's life, as Kathryn Hellerstein has shown,¹³⁰ while the poem "*Mari un der prister*" ["Mary and the Priest"] invokes contemporary Christian religious roles and practice. Most significantly for the present discussion, two poems in the cycle resonate deeply with Goldberg's use of Christian imagery to portray a negotiation (and negation) of motherhood, as well as themes of waiting and unrequited love. In the poem "*Vos vilstu mari*" ["What Do You Want Mary"]¹³¹ the speaker generates a fantasy of a child napping in her lap, but this is not a beatific image of Madonna and child, but rather one of anticipation: "*pamelekh vartendik/alts vartendik un vartendik*," "slowly waiting/still waiting and waiting," for a man who does not love her. Constructed by words marking the tentative nature of the scene, *efsher* and *zol* (Yiddish parallels to "perhaps" and "should"), the relation to fulfillment here, just as in Goldberg's "*madonot*" poem, is one of negation and futility, where the fantasy of the child will not come to be. In another poem, "*Mari un di gest*" ["Mary and the Guests"], "the child" arrives at the mother's door from "very far." This "guest" is described in eerie terms, "*kleyun un ful mit troyerikayt*" ["small and full of sadness"], "*shtil und vays*" ["quiet and white"]. The speaker seems to speak silently, directly to the child's gaze: "eyes don't judge me/eyes don't look away." Like Goldberg, Margolin uses Christian intertextually to construct an ambivalent position regarding romantic fulfillment and motherhood. But perhaps for Margolin the ambivalent and even negative mother-child relationship is less than surprising considering the child she left behind in Palestine. I turn here to the biographical not in order to produce a reductive reading of her poetry, but rather as a means to connect her poetry to the politics of her time, and to my time, through a letter I found in her archive. The letter written by her son, Na'aman, the child she bore and left in Mandatory Palestine with her first husband, the writer Moshe Stavski (Stavi). Eight-year-old Na'aman writes:

130 Kathryn Hellerstein, "Translating as a Feminist: Reconceiving Anna Margolin," in *Prooftexts*, 20:1-2 (2000): 191-208.

131 This poem is in dialogue with Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Der Wahnsinn," (1899) with its refrain "Wer bist du denn, Marie?" [Who are you then Mary?]. The beggar woman image of Rilke's poem is also echoed in Margolin's poem "Mary and the Beggar" in the same cycle. Rilke's poem appeared in Yiddish translation by Itsik Manger, under the title "*shigoen*" (crazyness) in Manger's journal *getseylte verter* 1:2 (August 1929): 2. Significantly, these first issues of the journal are replete with references to Jewish literary engagement with Christian imagery. Manger chastises *di klasiker*, the "first family" of Yiddish literature, for ignoring their surroundings: "Here we remain, my dear, standing for a moment, to think, perhaps there are deeper reasons we need to uncover, to understand why the Christ figure is missing (even decoratively) from the realistic landscapes of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, and from the visionary landscapes of Y. L. Peretz." In *getseylte verter* 1:4 (September 1929): 2. Leah Goldberg, on the other hand, in her activation of the landscape of the cross, certainly falls in line with Manger's demands of modern Jewish poetry.

Your letter was read and translated for me by father and I was very happy about it. I don't understand and I also can't read "jargon," [a derogatory term for Yiddish] and I don't understand why you are so eager about your jargon. [...] Write to me in Hebrew so that I'll be able to read and answer you. *shalom u-bracha* from me, your son, Na'aman.¹³²

Margolin had little contact with the child after she left for America, and this letter is a fascinating testament to a relationship marked by his not so subtle (if understandably passive-aggressive) revolt not just against the abandoning mother, but also against Yiddish, the *mame-loshn*, the mother tongue that she uses, that she represents as a poet. The child's negation of Yiddish aligns him with the language of the father, the author who switched from Yiddish to Hebrew and who took on his son's name as a literary pseudonym. His works, orientalist tales of Palestinian natives in Hebrew, were signed in Arabic *Abu-Na'aman* ["father of Na'aman"], following the Arabic model of naming the father for his eldest son. As opposed to Yocheved Bat-Miriam's mother/daughter genealogical reversal and the complicated continuity it creates,¹³³ here the future replaces the past, in an attempt to erase the diasporic past through the native-born child, as well as through appropriative tactics, which reconstitute the immigrant author as a native of his adoptive land. Na'aman and the men of his generation indeed grew up to be the "New Jews," the generation their fathers yearned for, reshaping Jewish diasporic identity and culture. With the establishment of the State of Israel, the Hebrew language revolution came to fruition, forming a national Jewish language with its own geography and native speakers. Na'aman Stavi became the first Military Governor of the Galilee, appropriating not just Palestinian culture, as his father did, but taking control of Palestinian lives and land in the 1948 war and military rule [*mimshal tzva'i*] that followed it.

Hebrew literature, according to the dominant literary historiography, emerged from the moment of uncertainty of the 1930s as the victorious Jewish language.¹³⁴ Israeli language politics, Jewish assimilation in the Diaspora, Stalinist purges and the *Khurbn* (the Nazi extermination project), shaped the present and put into question the future of Yiddish as a Jewish language of secular culture. Reading Margolin's Yiddish poetry, which transgresses borders of temporality, gender and culture, we are reminded of the worlds Yiddish used to represent and create, expanding the boundaries of the language itself in doing so. Not yet knowing that the language of her modernist vision of history would itself become a thing of history, Margolin

132 Letter from Na'aman Stavski/Stavi to Anna Margolin, YIVO Archives, folder 1166/1. Translation mine, ZWK.

133 In my Introduction I discuss how Yocheved Bat-Miriam takes on a name that reverses the Biblical genealogy, where Yocheved is the mother of both Miriam and Moses. See footnote 26 in my Introduction.

134 For example in Benjamin Harshav's *Language in a Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and Chaim Rabin's "The National Idea and the Revival of Hebrew," in Jehuda Reinharz and Anita Shapira eds. *Essential Papers on Zionism* (New York: NYU Press, 1996).

finally joins the ranks of the rulers and emperors amongst whom she imagined her poetic speaker, sharing their ultimate downfall. Falling silent shortly after her first and only book was published, Margolin stopped producing poems even before readers of Yiddish poetry stopped being reproduced.¹³⁵ On the other hand, reading Goldberg's early Hebrew poetry, with its deep rooted commitment to European culture and landscape, alongside its resistance to productivity, reproduction and the premature celebration of redemption so characteristic of Zionism, reminds us that Jewish history had more than one inevitable future, geographically, linguistically and politically. These readings reveal that the present moment is not the only necessary future, and is not necessarily the best one. The seeds of disappointment seem evident from the early moments of inception of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature by women, both due the "problem of the past" discussed above, and to the ways in which women's bodies and images were being employed to (re)produce a Jewish future.¹³⁶ For the writers read in this chapter, neither redemption (be it secular or religious) nor reproduction seemed much worth waiting for. It is the backward future that spoke to their present ambivalence about the future, and it is that same tactic that allows me to turn back and find them waiting, perhaps not just in vain. These poems let me look back with them and at them, free from nostalgia (over the past) or utopian optimism (about the future). This reading does not provide a happy end (of days), perhaps just the opposite. But still, an unexpected genealogy is created, not by looking forward at, or rather to, each other, but backwards, turning our backs on the future, together.

135 I will discuss the stakes of the shift away from language transmission via heterosexual reproduction in the following chapters.

136 On this topic in Hebrew Statehood Generation poetry see Hamutal Tsamir, *Be-shem ha-nof: le'umiyut, migdar ve-subyektiviyut ba-shira ha-isra'elit bi-shnot ha-chamishim ve-ha-shishim* [In the Name of the Landscape: Nationalism, Gender, and Subjectivity in 1950s and 1960s Israeli Poetry] (Tel Aviv: Keter, 2006).

Chapter Two

What Every Boychick Should Know: Activating the Erotics of Yiddish

Yiddish poet Rivka Basman's collection of poetry *Onrirn di tsayt* [*Touching Time*],¹³⁷ published in Tel Aviv in 1988, embodies anachronism, existing outside of the time and space of *Yiddishland*, when/where Yiddish served as a Jewish vernacular and a secular language of literature. The book's very appearance shows the power of poetry to undermine linear temporality and its neat division of past and present. Letting times touch by moving between the current state of Yiddish and the complex realities of the Yiddish past, I wish in this chapter to create an erotic lineage, an affective genealogy using scholarship and archival material from across the twentieth century alongside past and present theories and practices of sex. Generating what Elizabeth Freeman calls "erotohistoriography," I use the past and historicity itself "as a structure of tactile feeling, a mode of touch, even a sexual practice"¹³⁸ in order to open "a politics of unpredictable, deeply embodied pleasures that counters the logic of development."¹³⁹ It is the present precarious condition of Yiddish that requires us to counter the logic of development, and I am offering embodied pleasure as a means to encounter a Yiddish past and feel its present, despite this precariousness or, perhaps, through it.

A YIDDISH SPEAKER IS MADE (IN THE BEDROOM)

"*In Yiddish it sounds better,*" goes the saying (usually in Hebrew), indicating that the joke's punchline lies elsewhere; it simultaneously renders Yiddish as absent and Hebrew as incomplete without it, inadvertently invoking the multilingual history of Jewish culture. For indeed, at the time when Modern Hebrew emerged, Yiddish was the most widely spoken Jewish vernacular, used first in central Europe and then in Eastern Europe for over a thousand years.¹⁴⁰ Beginning with the Jewish Enlightenment movement of the mid-nineteenth century and culminating with the national and socialist movements of the early twentieth century, Hebrew and Yiddish both underwent dramatic processes of development and repurposing, as they competed against each other and against local vernaculars over the role as *the* Jewish language. The present outcome of this competition can be roughly summarized as follows: Hebrew has become the official language of the State of Israel (together with English and Arabic, although in 2011 a political motion aimed at removing Arabic from the list received significant support); This renders Hebrew a national language rather than a Jewish language,¹⁴¹ whereas Yiddish has been

137 Rivka Basman, *Onrirn di tsayt* (Tel Aviv: Isroel Bukh, 1988).

138 Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography," *Social Text* (2005): 66.

139 Ibid, 59.

140 Cf. ft. 74.

141 Dan Miron's recent work tries to address how Jewish literature might be reconfigured by the non-Jewish voices writing in Hebrew, yet, as I will argue in the coda, he does not account for the particular stakes of writing Hebrew within the State of Israel. Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

decimated by the *Khurbn* (the Yiddish term for the Nazi extermination project), Zionism, Stalinism and the more gradual (and less overtly violent) processes of assimilation, virtually ending its role as a language of secular Jewish life and literature. However, the history of this competition is far more complex, as are the ways its effects linger on today. Instead of accounts bemoaning the death of Yiddish and celebrating the revival of Hebrew, I want to call for and create more nuanced versions of this history outside the binary model that has reigned for too long.¹⁴² Such alternative narratives should not reverse the power dynamic by declaring (or promoting) the triumph of Yiddish; rather, they would come closer to accounting for what has been lost, and ask what is still there to be retrieved.

Recognizing the losses entailed in this charged history means acknowledging that Yiddish is as much *nito* (not-here, non-existent) as it is *do* (Yiddish for “here”), rendering lack and absence central to the present appearance of the language. Today, one is most likely to encounter Yiddish as a “fragment of a language, an accent, or a sensibility evoked by means of other languages—anything but a full, vernacular language,” writes Jeffrey Shandler.¹⁴³ It appears as “a translated language, an unintelligible language, a secret language,” thus always marked by what it is not, by that which is not there. Marking this absence, Shandler, following Cecile Kuznitz,¹⁴⁴ identifies the current stage of Yiddish as “postvernacular.” Perhaps the most striking marker of this stage is the way the language largely ceases to be transmitted in the (hetero)normative route, from parents to children, amongst secular Jews. “*A Yiddish speaker should be made in the bedroom, not in the classroom,*”¹⁴⁵ Shandler is told, but in fact, more and more individuals are making an active choice to learn the language as adults, often through academic or community programs, and the classroom is the setting from which most Yiddish speakers today emerge.¹⁴⁶ Recognizing the fact that Secular Yiddish speakers are no longer “made in the bedroom,” my current project embraces the artificiality of the classroom-born

142 For example, Yiddish continues to be spoken by ultra-orthodox Jews, attempting to protect the sanctity of Hebrew while resisting assimilation into local cultures. The dominant narrative of Hebrew’s death and subsequent revival has equally been challenged. Cf. Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

143 Jeffrey Shandler, “Queer Yiddishkeit: Practice and Theory,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25.1 (2006): 109. While Shandler is specifically describing queer uses of Yiddish, his astute description aptly characterizes the state of Yiddish in general.

144 Cecile Kuznitz “Yiddish as a Post-Vernacular Language,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman, Jeremy Cohen, and David Sorkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

145 Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language & Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

146 As an example of the range of students of Yiddish today, consider my own experience at the Vilnius Yiddish institute, where the youngest participant was a fifteen-year-old boy from Mexico and the oldest was a Polish-born woman in her nineties. My roommates were both students, one a German student of Jewish Studies, the other a linguist from Tokyo. An Israeli military professional and an American businessman boarded next door. The majority were Jewish, and the second largest affiliation group was LGBT. Shandler has written about what draws queers to Yiddish in his wonderful aforementioned article, “Queer Yiddishkeit: Practice and Theory.”

Yiddish speaker as queer, precisely because s/he is produced outside of heteronormative reproduction. Though classroom settings often take a lead in solidifying heterosexual norms and national identities, the case of Yiddish sharply differs from these norms. For example, the fact that Yiddish has no set national geography is made evident from the very first lesson of the most prominent Yiddish text book, Uriel Weinreich's 1949 *College Yiddish: "yidn voynen in ale lender"* (Jews live in all countries), thus marking Jews and specifically Yiddish speaking Jews as primarily detached from nationalistic projects. While the textbooks do still rely on the stereotypical nuclear family, the very act of arriving at the Yiddish classroom often defies cultural transmission within this nuclear family, thus, in a way, undermining it. Instead, individuals are often seeking connections with grandparents or earlier ancestors, skipping over, or indeed subverting the authority of the parental generation. For non-Jewish students, many of whom come from Germany or Eastern Europe, the same element of transgressing the nuclear family, biological and historical lineage might manifest even more extremely.

Embracing this transgression, the present chapter moves beyond Shandler's definition of the queer ways of inheriting and speaking Yiddish by bringing Yiddish back to the bedroom in another sense, tying queer and explicitly transgressive practices of sex to historical desires, desires in history and of history. Making use of the erotics of Yiddish, I want to open the possibility of having an erotic interaction *in* or *with* Yiddish across history. By "erotics" I mean sexual desire, arousal and consummation, embodied in poetics and practice. Queerly activating the erotic touch both as historical method and as object of study, I am treating erotics simultaneously as theoretical metaphor and as corporeal reality. Indeed, I will argue for the future potential of allowing the two to interact. Placing this project within the context of what Carolyn Dinshaw calls "a queer desire for history,"¹⁴⁷ my aim is not to make this a history of queerness (though sometimes it is), or a history done by queers (though many of those engaging with Yiddish are indeed queer identified).¹⁴⁸ Instead, the very impulse of this history, the possibility Dinshaw offers of "touching across time" (128) is queer in the challenge it poses to binary divisions of past and present. Allowing us to divert the linear direction of reproductive heteronormative history, which is set on teleological futurity, Yiddish itself might offer instead "queer time."¹⁴⁹ The current state of Yiddish realizes this queer time both in its alternative mode of transmission and in the precarious relation it has to the future. Without the anticipation that it will be handed down through biological generations, its future is brought into question, and therefore Yiddish culture cannot be said to invest its future inheritance in the normative ways enacted by dominant culture and by other major literatures. Taking on the non(hetero)normative relationship Yiddish has to the future, I use a queer approach to access its history.

147 Carolyn Dinshaw, as cited in Elizabeth Freeman, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ* 13:2 (2007): 178.

148 Shandler, "Queer Yiddishkeit."

149 As discussed in detail in the previous chapter.

In the previous chapter I used Carolyn Dinshaw's model of queer history to describe how Yiddish poet Anna Margolin's self-alignment with histories past could be read as activating "the potential of making pleasurable connections in the context of postmodern indeterminacy."¹⁵⁰ The present chapter will push Dinshaw's model from the metaphorical to the literal (or the literary-literal, as I might term erotic poetry) to explore explicitly erotic interactions *in* and *with* the Yiddish past. As in Freeman's erotohistoriographic method, the erotic mode of reading Yiddish texts "admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding" (96). Beyond methodology, I read historical and literary materials that are explicitly erotic, describing and eliciting "bodily responses." Through erotic poetry in Yiddish, I examine how the body of the reader becomes implicated in this interaction with (and understanding of) history. In the interaction we, as readers, are being sexually solicited, though there is no physical contact between us and the sexual act we are perceiving through the verbal art of poetry. This distance does not inhibit erotic activation; in fact, as in many other erotic genres, the erotic charge is based on the very lack of direct contact. This distance is fundamental not just to erotic poetry, but even to pornography, a genre aiming, by definition, to involve the viewer in the sexual interaction it depicts. As film theorist Linda Williams explains, the absence of contact is essential to how pornography itself works, for it is what causes the viewer to have an encounter with his or her own flesh; "viewing and hearing thus makes for a material experience of embodiment; it is a series of mediated exchanges of our social bodies, the film's body, and the body on the screen."¹⁵¹ To be sure, there are important generic distinctions between the media film and poetry, and between erotic material and pornographic material, but when discussing explicitly erotic poetry, the comparison to pornographic film is relevant for understanding the unique relation created between the reader/viewer and the sexual acts depicted in the text. In my close reading I will explore this relation by focusing on the artistic devices the poets I discuss use to depict sexual acts and to create an erotic interaction with the reader. Rather than take a stand in the heated debates on the value of pornography, contemporary or historic, my investment here is in the position of the viewer/reader, and what s/he stands to gain from *feeling* history. For being turned on by erotic materials in Yiddish activates not only the bodies of the readers, but also the imagined bodies past, returning to them the corporeality that time (and the particular perils of Yiddish history) has denied them. Asking what an erotic interaction with Yiddish can do for us today, I aim to give the language a new past, and perhaps through it, a new future.

150 Dinshaw, 36.

151 Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 20.

Sex, The Material Counterpart of Romantic Nostalgia

The particular present attitude to the Yiddish past I want to counter is one of romanticizing nostalgia, associated specifically with the *shtetl*, the archetypal small town in which many Jews lived in Eastern Europe. Though *shtetl* life, and Jewish life in Eastern Europe in general, was in fact woven of diverse and intricate socio-cultural threads, we have inherited a simplistic and monolithic view of the Jewish past.¹⁵² This inheritance was created by those who left the *shtetl* and by those grappling with its demise. Dan Miron's *The Image of the Shtetl* analyzes the myth surrounding the image of the Jewish small town, as it was expressed in literature. For literature was "nominated as the official custodian of the national collective memory, guaranteeing accessibility to the recent past to those who had drifted away from it, to maintain emotional ties with the past and yet belong to the present."¹⁵³ Readers "wanted the works of the masters not only to 'preserve' the world they had lost, but also to justify their 'betrayal' [of it]," keeping the memory of the *shtetl* alive while explaining and legitimating its abandonment. Even though *shtetl* life is decidedly a thing of the past (rather than a rejected reality still lurking), the particular set of emotional and political concerns Miron invokes continue to shift. "More often than not," bilingual English-Yiddish poet Irena Klepfisz writes, "political concerns and contradictions are rendered invisible in our own looking back on the past."¹⁵⁴ For, Klepfisz suggests further, "*shtetl* life and Yiddish literature have been wrapped in a veil of nostalgia which obscures their true complexity." Nostalgia, generally indicating an idealizing disposition to the past, participates in obliterating not just past complexities but also present ones. I want to continue Klepfisz's feminist project of looking back "without caving into nostalgia,"¹⁵⁵ constructing a queer history that aims to counter obliteration past and present by offering sex and other visceral engagements as the material counterpart of and resistance to romantic nostalgia. Turning to the erotic, it is my hope that our bodies will become engaged in a new way that will recognize the past's corporeality, and with it, the past's complexity, as well as our own.

The body of Yiddish-English poetry written in New York by Klepfisz in the 1970s and 80s beautifully illustrates such possibility of erotic contact with the Yiddish past, for it utilizes the interaction between the two languages along with the

152 Epitomized perhaps in the photographs of Roman Vishniac, depicting the poverty and piety of a world on the verge of extinction. This photographic legacy has recently been exposed as carefully crafted, editing out of the frame much of the Jewish diversity the photographer actually encountered on his expeditions in the 1930s. See Alana Newhouse, "A Closer Reading of Roman Vishniac," *New York Times*, April 1, 2010.

153 Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 8.

154 Irena Klepfisz, "*Di feder fun harts*/The Pen of the Heart: *Tsveyshprakhikayt*/Bilingualism in Jewish American Poetry" in *Jewish American Poetry: Reflections, Poems, Commentary*, eds. Jonathan Barron and Eric Murphy Selinger (New England: University Press of New England, 2000), 341.

155 Irena Klepfisz "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers" in *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, eds. Frieda Forman et al (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994), 324.

material and discursive realities they evoke. In taking on Yiddish, Klepfisz is responding to the larger context of lesbian identity politics, much like her friend and comrade Gloria Anzaldúa writing in Spanish and English as part of the Chicana movement. Like Anzaldúa, Klepfisz played an integral part in the radical lesbian movement of the 1970s that led the struggle against patriarchy, classism and racism. Yiddish serves Klepfisz to assert her Jewish difference from this movement (against whose anti-Semitism she bravely spoke out), as well as her difference within the Jewish community (which she constantly criticized for its patriarchal misogyny and militarism).¹⁵⁶ Using Yiddish to express her contemporary concerns as a secular Jewish feminist lesbian, Klepfisz gives the language itself new life, while at the same time recovering and constructing a new Yiddish past. Klepfisz thus enacts the present queer engagement in Yiddish history I am advocating for. For example, in her bilingual poem “*Etlekhe verter oyf mama loshn/A few words in the mother tongue*,”¹⁵⁷ rather than presenting an idyllic or denigrated façade of *shtetl* life, or of Jewish life in general, Klepfisz takes on multiple representations of Jewish women to imagine what this past might have looked like, and more so, what the past *felt* like, and what feeling the past does to us, by allowing the Yiddish and English to touch, even push, each other as well as the readers.

156 Section II of *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes* includes three essays speaking to this range of issues, linking them inextricably. Cf. “Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian/Feminist Movement,” “Resisting and Surviving America” and “Jewish Lesbians, the Jewish Community, Jewish Survival,” in Irena Klepfisz, *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes* (Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990), 53-83.

157 Irena Klepfisz *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1971-1990)* (Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990).

Irena Klepfisz

Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn/

A few words in the mother tongue

עטלעכע ווערטער אויף מאמע לשון

lemoshl: for example

di kurve the whore
a woman who acknowledges her
passions

di yidene the Jewess the
Jewish woman
ignorant overbearing
let's face it: every woman is one

di yente the gossip the
busybody
who knows what's what
and is never caught off guard

di lezbianke the one with
a roommate though we never
used
the word

dos vaybl the wife
or the little woman

in der heym at home
where she does everything to keep
yidishkayt alive

yidishkayt a way of being
Jewish always arguable

in mark where she buys
di kartofl un khalah
(yes, potatoes and challah)

di kartofl the material counter-
part of *yidishkayt*

mit tsibeles with onions
that bring *trern tsudi oygn*
tears to her eyes when she sees
how little it all is
veyniker un veyniker
less and less

di khalah braided
vi ihr hor far der khasene
like her hair before the wedding
when she was *aza sheyn*
meydl
such a pretty girl

di lange shvartse hor
the long black hair
di lange shvartse hor

a froy kholmt a woman
dreams *ihr ort oyf der velt*
her place in this world
un zi hot moyre and she is
afraid
so afraid of the words

kurve
yidene
yente
lezbianke
vaybl

zi kholmt she dreams
un zi hot moyre and she is
afraid
ihr ort
di velt
di heym
der mark

a meydl kholmt
a kurve kholmt
a yidene kholmt
a yente kholmt
a lezbianke kholmt

a vaybl kholmt
di kartofl
di khalah

yidishkayt

zi kholmt
di hor
di lange shvartse hor

zi kholmt
zi kholmt
zi kholmt

Imitating a dictionary or the glossary in a language-learning primer, Klepfisz gives us first the Yiddish word, for example, "*di kurve*," then the English translation, "the whore," followed by the explanatory sentence "a woman who acknowledges her passions," which of course is anything but the expected elucidation of "whore" in either Yiddish or English speaking circles. Or: "*di lezbianke* the one with/ a

roommate though we never used/the word.” This translation moves from the “objective” explanation to the subjective experiential pragmatics of lexical use—or lack thereof. Providing in-line translation, and making poetic and political utility of Yiddish, Klepfisz activates the language, its past context and its present relevance. Klepfisz is inculcating us into the “secrets” of the Yiddish she uses, but at the same time, the secondary, subversive interpretation of the words that she provides also instruct the reader that there is no neutral translation, and that certain words are translated into silence and erasure. She thereby exposes the mechanism by which dominant discourse dictates norms of language and behavior. These are the norms that define what a *sheyn meydl* is (a pretty girl, as I used to hear from my grandparents, always with a wistful tone, bemoaning how short my hair is, how masculine my clothing). These same norms demand that *lezbianke*, a word seldom, if ever, used in Yiddish,¹⁵⁸ must remain unspoken even in its English version, lesbian, erasing it through the closeted and/or homophobic euphemism “roommate.” Adding the qualification “though we never used the word,” Klepfisz highlights both the presence and the unspeakability of the lesbian dwelling in the term “roommate,” and in the Yiddish word *lezbianke*, which may be explicit, but is equally unused.

Rather than an assimilationist progress narrative in which we move from an oppressive traditional world (in Yiddish) to a modern liberated world in English, Klepfisz alternates between languages and registers, letting them take turns being both oppressive and expressive, thus resisting a simplistic dichotomy in which English represents the progressive discourse over and against the dark Jewish past, or one that would make Yiddish radical by force of being a queer reclaimed language (resisting mainstream English language culture). That way the woman in the poem gets to “acknowledge her passion” in English, and be a *lezbianke* in Yiddish. Klepfisz thus uses the interaction of the languages and the complication of translation to undermine our grasp of both the Yiddish and the English, subverting the dominant discourse in both languages.

Klepfisz repurposes and changes both the Yiddish and the English to generate her own queer history, her Yiddish dream. This is where the poem ends, moving gradually from the conflict with the dominant discourse, represented as tensions between English and Yiddish, into the world of women represented *through*, and later solely *in* Yiddish. This ending is the meeting place of material *yidishkayt*, and the dream of a woman, or a woman’s dream: “A woman dreams/the potatoes/the challah/ *yidishkayt*/ the hair/ the long black hair/ she dreams/ she dreams/ she dreams.” This is a dream of Yiddish, in Yiddish. It allows the “other,” the Yiddish, the feminine, the lesbian, the past, to be present. If the dictionary form of the poems’ opening was based on a tension between English and Yiddish, as well as between

158 In his recent study, *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), Warren Hoffman traces how the encounter with American terminology of homosexuality made Yiddish-speaking audiences less tolerant of homosexual content (referring specifically to Sholem Asch’s play *Got fun Nekome* [God of Vengeance]). My own research into Yiddish sexology and its close ties to European and American sexology lead me to doubt the notion of a Yiddish culture existing free of “foreign” notions of homosexuality.

dominant and counter-discourse, by the time the poem is transformed into a Yiddish language poem, Klepfisz has created a counter-discourse in which the Yiddish and the queer (the feminine, the lesbian) are politically and poetically inseparable. As the poem takes flight in untranslated Yiddish that the poet has equipped us to understand in the process of the poem, the English/ Yiddish distinction that would otherwise be so sharp gets blurred, and the counter-discourse can replace the dominant discourse.

Reading this poem we follow Klepfisz like children in the traditional Jewish *cheder* (school room), who recited the sacred language of the Hebrew bible and followed it by a Yiddish translation called *taytsh* (a translation which was often far from literal, much like Klepfisz's own subversive translation). But unlike this mode of traditional learning (denied to Jewish women and described by many Jewish men as extremely oppressive), the poem demands our active participation in its deciphering. At first the poem shows us that the dictionary it supplies given cannot be trusted. Later in the poem the English and Yiddish are interwoven in a manner that demands reading them together (and through each other) in order to make sense of the verses. Finally, the poem moves into a realm that is solely in Yiddish, compelling us to activate the knowledge she has given. This is another way in which the distance between poem and readers, Yiddish and English, is narrowed and even collapsed, and becomes an essential component in the meaning-making of the poem. The reader must move the poem into legibility, opening herself up to being moved by it.

The *cheder taytsh* language, the mechanical language drills and even the dictionary do not invoke educational opportunities, but rather instruction without understanding, as well as the exclusion of women from such study practices in traditional Jewish society. The poem can indeed be seen as parodying such modes of language instruction and cultural transmission (or lack thereof), referring perhaps most directly to the popular genre of mock Yiddish-English dictionaries, which according to Shandler well outnumber legitimate Yiddish dictionaries since World War II. These comic texts are formatted like dictionaries, but rather than giving equivalent glosses or actually translating Yiddish terms into English, they offer comically "bogus definitions."¹⁵⁹ While Shandler claims these fake definitions are premised on an understanding of both languages (and the discrepancies between them), I would argue that as fewer and fewer people actually speak the Yiddish, these mock dictionaries base their humor primarily on the knowledge of English, and the Yiddish words they "translate" are ones that have already been incorporated into English. These dictionaries, alongside other items Shandler collects and analyzes, use Yiddish within primarily American and English-speaking environments, detached from the original Yiddish *svive*/surroundings.¹⁶⁰ Without their original meaning or context, the words are used in their Yiddish form to

¹⁵⁹ Shandler, *Adventures*, 166.

¹⁶⁰ These contexts and the languages themselves do not, of course, have hermetic borders, and have fruitfully influenced each other in many ways. But the power dynamics of this interaction must be reconfigured once Yiddish no longer stands on its own as a secular vernacular.

activate either their sentimental or their comical value. At times this means the words themselves are not even in Yiddish but merely *sound* as if they were,¹⁶¹ or *look* as if they were (by graphically altering Yiddish font into legible English letters). In this way, Yiddish words are reduced to their visual or auidial materiality, which becomes valued over their referent, or more concretely, over the material reality they may be referencing.

If in popular culture offers mock-dictionaries to understand a language, it should come as no surprise if the language itself is then treated as a mock language. The idea of reducing a language to a parody of language has been explored in other linguistic contexts, for example through linguistic anthropologist Jane Hill's work on "mock-Spanish."¹⁶² Hill describes three strategies for using mock Spanish; in the first strategy, "semantic derogation," a positive or neutral Spanish word is borrowed as a mock-Spanish expression and given a humorous or negative meaning. A Yiddish parallel would be the word *kvetch*, used in English to mean "whining," whereas in Yiddish it means "to squeeze."¹⁶³ In the second strategy a mock-Spanish form serves as a euphemism for the corresponding rude English word, without being any more appropriate than the word it replaces. A Yiddish case in point could be the widespread use of the word *shtup*, meaning literally "to push," or "shove," but used in Yiddish and in mock-Yiddish to mean "to fuck," often in settings where the expression "to fuck" would be considered inappropriate.¹⁶⁴ Michael Wex uses the Yinglish example *shmuk* (Yiddish for "cock") and explains that if you would not use the English word in a particular setting, then the Yiddish equivalent should remain equally inappropriate: "no fuck, no *shmuk*" is the rule he offers.¹⁶⁵ In the third strategy Hill describes, two elements of Spanish grammar, the definite article "*el*" and the masculine-gender suffix "*-o*" are used with English words to give them "a new semantic flavor, ranging from jocularly to insult, or to enhance an already somewhat negative connotation." A Yiddish/English/Yinglish example would be the hybrid word *boychik*, adding the Slavic-Yiddish diminutive suffix to the English word "boy," or, as my favorite t-shirt spells it, *boychick*, turning the Yiddish-English hybrid into a gender-bending label, using a Slavic-English homophone via Standard Yiddish morphology to suggests how the three languages can combine to create not just a new word but also a new gender.

161 Like "to *futz*," meaning something like "to mess/toy with," or "waste time doing trivial things."

162 Jane Hill "Mock Spanish: A Site for the Indexical Reproduction of Racism in American English," *Language and Culture Symposium 2*, Binghamton University, October 9 1995. <http://language-culture.binghamton.edu/symposia/2/part1/index.html>

163 This is probably also influenced by the German word "quatschen" (also used in Yiddish, *kvatshn*), which means "to talk nonsense" or "to babble."

164 Similar strategies are used for both Yiddish and Arabic curse words in Hebrew. In the case of Yiddish it is not simply that the word passes as appropriate by virtue of it being in another language, but also that this language is perceived as lacking speakers who might be offended. In the case of Arabic, the strategy might even be seen as purposefully offensive to native speakers.

165 Michael Wex, *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All Its Moods* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 249.

Mock-Spanish, according to Hill, is used by educated English speakers and is predicated on negative associations with actual Spanish speakers, rendering it a racist linguistic practice. Mock-Yiddish, on the other hand, is more widely used by people of Jewish heritage, though certainly not exclusively so, as words such as *shlep* or *shpiel* are widely used in the US, often with no recognition of their Yiddish origin.¹⁶⁶ And even though there are Yiddish examples for each of Hills' mock-Spanish strategies, there are significant differences in the deployment of mock-Yiddish and mock-Spanish, first and foremost in the fact that Spanish continues to be a widely spoken language, whereas mock-Yiddish has, to a certain extent, replaced actual Yiddish in circulation outside of the ultra-orthodox community. This mode of mock-translation and mock-Yiddish more generally is a prime example of Shandler's definition of the postvernacular mode, where "the fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as important as the content of what is said, if not more so" (91). Postvernacularity is characterized by a distinctive consciousness about language, in which its secondary, symbolic level of significance is privileged over its primary level of meaning as an instrument of communication (2). Shandler refers to a range of contemporary manifestations of postvernacular Yiddish, from novelty items to queer performance art, which generally entail a mixture of Yiddish and English, leaving the Yiddish untranslated, very often for humorous effect. The untranslated, maybe half-understandable Yiddish "works" because it is Yiddish, not because of the meaning of the words themselves. The meaning behind the words, and the world they are taken from, often remain opaque, veiled, devaluing their content. In effect, this reduces a complex semantic system to something of an "arbitrary object," which ties in with the neat way postvernacular Yiddish is packaged and marketed, where a t-shirt saying "*shikse* goddess" is more likely to sell than a volume of Yiddish poetry.

The humor in such a t-shirt is generated both by attaching the positive term "goddess" to the derogatory term "*shikse*," and by allowing the (presumably non-Jewish) wearer of the t-shirt to self-identify in relation to the "in-group" of Jews, recognizing her complex position vis-à-vis the group, as both object of desire and of contempt. The real punchline, however, lies in the fact that many of those who would be called *shikses* would not know what that means, making non-Jewish women the butt of a potentially racist and misogynist label.¹⁶⁷ Klepfisz could have easily included the word *shikse* on the list of words the woman in her poem is afraid of: *kurve*, *yidene*, *yente*, *lezbianke*, *vaybl*. Instead of making light of male/female and Jewish/non-Jewish power dynamics (as the t-shirt does), including *shikse* in Klepfisz's list would have accentuated the daunting challenges for self-determination women confront, taking on patriarchal language in order to take it apart, in Yiddish and English alike. But with Klepfisz being the exception rather than

166 Interestingly, they are often spelled as though they were being borrowed from German. While this is linguistically logical, as these are words of Germanic derivation and people are more likely to have been exposed to German, the connotations of these words are entirely Yiddish, and more specifically, *New Yorkish*.

167 Or is the joke on the men looking for a *shikse* goddess, putting the *shikse* that knows she's one a step ahead of the *putz* who objectifies non-Jewish women and devalues Jewish women?

the rule, in popular culture (around us and as read by Shandler) we are more likely to find the complex system of signs that is Yiddish reduced to arbitrary objects; punchlines, funny or sad merely because they are in Yiddish and because they are juxtaposed with English (or other languages) in a cross-cultural context. Whereas the fragments of Spanish affect and even harm a population of Spanish speakers, the Yiddish fragments do not point (positively or negatively) at a speaking population, but rather at its loss. The comparison to mock-Spanish thus illuminates how the broader circulation of Yiddish fragments within English marks the destruction of Yiddish itself, and the ways its subsequent absence is cemented in what I call a fetishization of Yiddish. In what follows I will trace the fetish in its multiple contexts, from anthropology through Marxism and psychoanalysis to contemporary kink, showing how many of its basic functions—the arbitrary stand-in functionality, the disavowal of loss, and the over-valuation of form and de-valuation of content—characterize post-vernacular Yiddish. While I use these theoretical investigations to problematize the foundation of Yiddish as absence, leading to a fetish *of* Yiddish, I turn to the conscious re-appropriation of the fetish as erotic practice, together with erotics more generally, to offer a fetish *in* Yiddish, as a new mode of feeling history.

Oy Vey! Does that Hurt Good: Feeling Yiddish Fetish

Encountering the “truth of the *shtetl*” instead of its mythical literary image entails a painful loss, according to Miron, when readers must either reckon with or refuse, as suggested earlier. It is this painful loss, Miron writes, that makes people who are otherwise sensible and astute recoil from the truth.¹⁶⁸ Recoiling from the truth constitutes the Freudian concept of “disavowal” and forms the basis of the psychoanalytic fetish. “To put it plainly,” Freud writes, “the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forgo—we know why.”¹⁶⁹ The fetish is a reaction not to seeing something, but to “nothing to be seen,” repressing the truth of the lack, and allowing instead for a stand-in for what is not there. This stand-in becomes fetishized instead of that which is missing, and allows for the disavowal of that which is actually seen. The response to the lost *shtetl* (its lost image and its lost reality) and the larger losses tied to the turbulent history of Yiddish, bind the language itself to such a traumatic encounter with lack. The truth being recoiled from in this case is twofold: the fact of the loss and that which was lost; Just as the fetish is an object chosen in order to defer the loss entailed in encountering a lack, at once replacing the lost object and marking the absence that loss has created, Yiddish as it figures today points to, and simultaneously obscures, its own demise and the vast destruction that was concurrent with it; by virtue of representing an eradicated reality and being a trace that speaks beyond that eradication, Yiddish itself can be characterized as a fetish,

168 Miron, *Image of the Shtetl*, 10. Note that I am quoting from the English version of this essay, which differs significantly from the Yiddish original. In this sense Miron may be making a specific case for the reaction of an English speaking audience, whose relationship to the *shtetl* is already more mediated than that of those Yiddish speakers still alive who actually came from these Eastern European Jewish towns.

169 Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism” (1927), in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1997), 214.

at once denying loss and declaring it in a tongue on the verge of silence.

This complex attitude towards loss and language is expressed poetically in an unpublished poem by Rivka Basman, the poet who opened this chapter. In response to hearing from the doctor that “there is nothing here” that should pain her, Basman’s speaker replies: “he doesn’t understand, it is *the not-here*¹⁷⁰ that pains me,” *der nito tut mir vey*. This exchange marks the active presence of a loss and its illegibility to the doctor/reader, evoking a disavowal the poet refuses to engage in—as she writes within—the lack of Yiddish. Ironically, the poem itself remains illegible to most, for it has not been translated from Yiddish, and unavailable to Yiddish readers, as it has not been published. As a present marker of lack, much like the fetish, Basman’s unpublished and untranslated Yiddish poem tells the story of the *nito*, the not-here, in its very existence, in both form and content, in what Kadya Molodowsky calls Basman’s *durkhoysiker nit-doyikayt*, her “thorough not-hereness.”¹⁷¹ Taking Basman’s work as proof of a continued existence for Yiddish would ignore the content of her poem, an oversight enabled by the very fact of the discontinuity of Yiddish. To understand the poem is to feel with the poet the pain of the not-here, which the doctor refuses. And it is this shared pain that undermines the disavowal that the untranslated words allow.

I heard this poem recited by the poet at a meeting of the Association of Yiddish Writers and Journalists in Israel, of which Basman is an active member, part of the dwindling milieu of Yiddish writers still living in Israel. I was there as part of an international group of graduate students who assembled at Tel-Aviv University in Summer 2008 for a Yiddish research seminar. Students and poets—what we had in common was a passion not shared by our respective generations, who had either turned away from Yiddish (in the case of the older cohort) or who had never turned to it (in the case of the younger one). In an uncanny embodiment of this shared marginalization, I was dressed exactly like two of the old men in the group, in my short-sleeved buttoned-down shirt and suspenders. Embodying anachronism, in dress and in speech, I enacted what Elizabeth Freeman calls “temporal drag,” with all the connotations that the word “drag” carries with it, not just of cross-gendered performance, but also of “retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present.”¹⁷² Being pulled by the past and pulling it forwards, the old men and I, together with Basman and her poetry, were suspended outside of normative time,

170 *Nito*, etymologically a contraction of *nit do*, not here, is also code for “gone,” as in “deceased.” Significantly, the word only functions in this sense in the present tense, marking absence as only present. In the past and future the compound is broken down: *es is nisht geven do* (it was not here) or *es vet nisht zayn do* (it will not be here); Only in the present tense can something (or someone) simply be *nito*.

171 Molodowsky dedicated one of the journalistic portraits in the series of notable Jewish women to Basman. YIVO Archive Folder 703/4/62. See my third chapter for more information on this series, and on Molodowsky’s backwards gaze more broadly.

172 Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History*, 31:4 (Autumn 2000): 729.

transgressing the borders between our disparate generations and defying the progress of dominant Jewish history, through Yiddish, and through poetry.

Beyond the psychoanalytic fetish, Marxist theories of commodity fetishism and anthropological notions of cross-cultural exchange can also contribute to understanding the state of Yiddish and its moment of crisis. The crisis in value and failure of translation originate in Karl Marx's definition of commodity fetishism, in the transition from use value to exchange value, for value "does not stalk about with a label describing what it is."¹⁷³ To stamp an object of utility as a value, writes Marx, "is just as much a social product as language." Reversing this definition, we can ask what happens to a social product, such as language, when it is taken out of exchange circulation *and* denied its use value, as we have seen in the case of Yiddish? If the fetish is a problem of over-valuation, or a discrepancy in definitions of value, in the fetishization of Yiddish, language itself is stamped as the overvalued object, taken out of the realm of utility, while failing to bear equal value in the intercultural exchange of translation. Cultural anthropologist William Pietz, specifically defining the fetish as the product of cross-cultural exchange, shows how value itself comes into question when something held sacred to one culture has no value or meaning in another culture. Yiddish fetish is indeed generated in such a cross-cultural site, for it was only as the twentieth century progressed and Yiddish ceased being a primary vehicle of communication for most Jews that it could be fetishized at all, usually within the newly dominant Jewish vernaculars of English or Hebrew. The exchange of Yiddish for vernacular can no longer be a successful one; instead, it is an unequal exchange Pietz refers to as a "discourse of failed translation" leading to the reduction of another culture's beliefs to fetishism.¹⁷⁴ What Pietz deems metaphorically a failure of translation here becomes a literal one, where Yiddish cannot stand on its own in the process of exchange. This is precisely what Klepfisz puts into play in her mock translations; *di kartofel* in the poem by Klepfisz is not understood simply as potatoes, but rather as "the material counterpart of *yidishkayt*" (which itself is understood, by turning back in the poem itself, as "a way of being Jewish always arguable," a definition refusing determinacy and opening itself to questioning). In this mock definition Klepfisz calls attention to the burden of signification placed on the Yiddish word itself, which serves to erase the material reality it references. In her poem, Klepfisz slowly works to restore this materiality, allowing the *tsibeles* (onions) not just to move us symbolically, but also to bring tears to our eyes, because that is what onions do regardless of language.

Using the bilingual poem as a cross-cultural site, Klepfisz's subversive translations between Yiddish and English expose an impossible exchange, a gap that cannot be bridged. There is "no point in simply getting meaning right" if one hopes to "read

173 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977), 48.

174 William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring, 1985): 6.

desire,” writes Doris Sommer, for “people desire and language abstracts.”¹⁷⁵ If this “unrequitable desire” to bridge the gap and “get it right” is a problem, it is “not one to wish away, any more than we should seek ‘solutions’ for the split nature of language that abstracts meaning from means.” Bilinguals know this best, writes Sommer, and thus do not call for seamless translation as a destination of monolingual cultural assimilation, but rather offer through the often uncomfortable bilingual position a mode of “feeling good about feeling bad” (57). And fetishism as a sexual practice certainly fits in with other tendencies of “feeling good about feeling bad”—a paradox perhaps, but paradox is of course the very logic of the fetish. As Anne McClintock suggests, the fetish “can be seen as the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot resolve at a personal level.”¹⁷⁶ This is the moment where the child both asserts and denies the mother’s castration: “we see that the perception [of the mother’s lack of a phallus] has persisted and that a very energetic action has been exerted to keep up the denial of it... He retains this belief but he also gives it up.”¹⁷⁷ In this the fetish itself is both the displacement and the embodiment of an “impossible irresolution,” the epitome of paradox.

The particular paradoxical marriage of pleasure and pain invoked by Sommer is one long celebrated in the practice of BDSM (the compound acronym for bondage, discipline, dominance/submission, and sado-masochism). Here pleasure is derived from receiving and/or inflicting pain, converting what seems like a contradiction into an applicable practice, with its own set of rules and tools. Even language itself is reimagined in the space of BDSM play, undermining normative discursive conventions. For example, the word “no,” valiantly fought for by second wave feminists (as in “just what part of ‘no’ don’t you understand?!”), comes, by way of communication and consent, to be a potential expression of pleasure, signaling “more” rather than “stop.” To actually stop playing, mutually agreed upon “safe words” are chosen and activated. “Don’t bite me,” *nisht bays mikh*, begs young Adam in Celia Dropkin’s Yiddish poem “*Odem*,” while no other words in the poem indicate that this apparently pleasurable violence should stop. *Nisht bays mikh* thus becomes an invitation, indeed an instruction to do just the opposite, to bite, to cause pain, and to take pleasure, as I will go on to show in my reading. But even at this early point, it should be evident I am referring to fetishism on a different level, shifting from fetish theory to the sexual practice of fetishism and other transgressive sexuality, following Gayle Rubin’s 1980 essay “Thinking Sex” and her 1990 “Sexual Traffic” interview with Judith Butler. Rubin turns to sexology as “an empirical grounding for a radical theory of sexuality,” a source of data or evidence to encounter what she calls “living, breathing, speaking inverts and pervers.”¹⁷⁸ This method, she argues,

175 Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 70.

176 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 187.

177 Freud, *Fetishism*, 199.

178 Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

is a “more useful” alternative to the “combination of psychoanalysis and feminist first principles to which so many texts resort.”¹⁷⁹ I argue for the usefulness of psychoanalysis simply for the fact that historically, it drove many to compile the stories of “living breathing perverts.” But I want to follow feminist critics in recognizing the limits of psychoanalysis, for indeed Freud foreclosed the possibility of a female fetishist, and to perform a queer feminist reading of his models might too often demand that we disavow what is actually there in the maternal “nothing to be seen” while we choke on the paternal “too much there.”¹⁸⁰ Going beyond Freud, I use Rubin as a model for considering what happens to both theory and history (and the theory of history) when we consider practice, and even more so, embodied sexual practice. The practice I take on is narrated through Yiddish poetry written by women. The readings that follow face a range of challenges—the unlikelihood of Jewish women coming to writing; the transgressiveness of women writing erotic poetry, especially poetry celebrating fetishistic practice in which women were meant to have no part; and finally, the incredulous (and even disparaging) responses to the existence of erotic life and text in Yiddish.

Di Libe, Meaning Sex in Yiddish

If we want to encounter the perverts of Yiddish, a good place to start is Yiddish sexology itself. For Yiddish has its own story of the fetish, both in original work and in translations. One of the most interesting Yiddish engagements with sexology is the work of Max Weinreich, the central figure in establishing Yiddish studies as a field, who translated Freud and formulated his own theory of Jewish sexuality in Yiddish.¹⁸¹ Weinreich was one of the founders of YIVO, the Jewish Scientific Institute, in 1925 in Vilna (currently Lithuania, then part of the Polish Commonwealth). In 1935 Weinreich used primary materials gathered by YIVO alongside scientific sexology to write his own account of Jewish coming of age, *Der veg tsu unzere yugnt* [*The Way to Our Youth*].¹⁸² This work pairs readings of Freud and his contemporaries with autobiographies of youth who entered a contest held by YIVO, which called for life stories of young Jews.¹⁸³ In this unusual work Weinreich tries to lay out some fundamental characteristics of Jewish young adult

179 Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin, “Sexual Traffic” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6:2-3 (1994): 80.

180 For two examples of these feminist and specifically lesbian negotiations see Elizabeth Grosz “Lesbian Fetishism?” *Differences* 3:2 (1991): 39–54, and Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

181 Weinreich translated Freud’s *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* into Yiddish, and Freud himself wrote the introduction; the translation appeared in three volumes from 1936 to 1938. He also published a monograph in Yiddish, *Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud and His Method, Psikhoanaliz : Zigmond Froyd un zayn shite* (Vilnius: D. Krejnesa, 1937). For further reading on Weinreich’s project cf. Marcus Moseley, “Life, Literature: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Interwar Poland,” in *Jewish Social Studies* 7:3 (2001): 1-51.

182 Max Weinreich, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt yesoydessa, metodn, problemen fun Yidisher yugnt-forshung* (Vilna: YIVO 1935).

183 The response was tremendous, and YIVO collected hundreds of autobiographies, mainly in Yiddish but also in Russian, Polish and Hebrew. For today’s readers they are an invaluable source of first person accounts of pre-*khurbn* life.

sexuality, while acknowledging the limited access he has not only to original materials, but also to language itself. In his Introduction he asks readers to write and let him know if their experience confirms or contradicts that described in the book, reinforcing their partnership with him in this documentation process. But they are partners not just in the narration, but also in the creation of the language of the book, the language of Yiddish sexology. Indeed, Weinreich opens with “an apology for the language of the book.” Many of the terms, he writes, will sound somewhat foreign [*fremdlekh*]. But, he adds, “I see no way around this. Yiddish does not have the adequate expression for everything; one must become a partner in the process of creation [*mayse-bereshis*, the term for the biblical genesis] to a greater degree than is desirable” (4). It is not then a choice, but an almost holy task of (pro)creation, implied in the *loshn-koydesh* term *mayse-breshis*. The word he uses for “apology,” *hisnasles*, is also *loshn-koydesh*, rather than the more common Germanic term *antshuldikung*. Demanding that we turn to Jewish linguistic sources instead of simply transcribing German words and “fooling ourselves [*zikh opnarn*] into thinking they are Yiddish” (4), Weinreich is critiquing popular Yiddish scientific style. The fact that Yiddish—like modern German—has its roots in Middle High German certainly enabled easy travel of the language of early German sexology, which itself drew from Greek and Latin. This is most striking in the sexology books, some of which appeared in extremely Germanized Yiddish. Notably, this usage of Germanized Yiddish was common for much of early Yiddish science, as well as other genres of literature, which attempted to gain respectability by “sounding German,” a style derogatorily described as *daytshmerish*. Instead, Weinreich offers a new model for a Jewish scientific language. German is not sufficient, he writes, because many terms he needs have not yet been named in German, marking his scientific contribution not just to the Yiddish language, but also to the language of sexology at large. In this the work itself becomes a process of maturation, parallel to the one it is describing, after which Yiddish should reach the phase of mature sexual activity, or rather, be able to tell the scientific version of sexual activity.¹⁸⁴

Although there are not many works of Yiddish sexology, the array I found in my archival research offers a representative sampling for the particular transnational and intercultural positioning of Yiddish: a 1916 translation from English of Margaret Sanger’s *What Every Girl Should Know*, *Vos yede meyd l zol visn*, published in New York;¹⁸⁵ a translation of Max Hodann’s German *Bub und Mädcl Bub und Mädcl. Gespräche unter Kameraden über die Geschlechterfrage*, published in Yiddish in Riga in 1929 as *Yingl un meyd: khavershe shmuesn vegn der geshlekhtfrage* [Boy and Girl:

184 Of course, while Yiddish was the language of much of Jewish sexual activity, it was not the language of its scientific discourse. This is a mirror image of the development of the emerging modern Hebrew language, which had a long history of textuality, but was at this point trying to make its way into the Jewish bedroom, reviving itself as a spoken language. Cf. Naomi Seidman’s rewriting of how this revival played out through the drama of the family life of Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, national hero of the Hebrew language, in her *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

185 Margaret Sanger, *Vos yede meyd l zol visn*, trans. K. Tepper (New York: Max N. Mayzl, 1916).

friendly conversations about the question of sex];¹⁸⁶ a translation from Russian of Anton Nemilov's *Biologicheskaiia tragediia zhenshchiny*, published in Yiddish in Warsaw in 1929 as *Biologishe tragedye fun der froy* [The biological tragedy of the woman];¹⁸⁷ and original Yiddish works from Jerusalem, Buenos Aires, New York and Los Angeles, starting as early as 1900. This map reflects the dispersion of Yiddish-speaking Jews and their interaction with local cultures. Overall, the motivation of both the translations and the original works is one: to bring the emergent scientific discourse on sex into the world of Yiddish, aiding the Yiddish reader in the process of becoming a modern subject.¹⁸⁸ This impetus goes against some strands of Jewish political thought that would have the modernized Jew abandon Yiddish entirely.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, as we have seen through Weinreich's specifically Jewish scientific sexology and the linguistic project he linked it to, Yiddish speakers as sexual beings would be able to make their own contribution to the study of sexology itself. In its goal and content, Yiddish sexology proved to be more than merely a source of (and for) perverts; it was also a resource for encountering language in its becoming, while today's readers encounter it as the bodies of Yiddish speakers and the language itself face decline.

Admiring the sexology books, which I found in archives in New York, Warsaw, Paris and Jerusalem, I get to touch a piece of history from within my own particular moment in time. I am acutely aware that this privilege may be a fleeting one, as the materials are all in various stages of decay. This is so often the case with primary materials in Yiddish, which are strikingly poorly kept (despite being generally well catalogued). How many hands will hold them before they finally fall to pieces? And even if the digitizing project of National Yiddish Book Center eventually makes many of these works easily available online,¹⁹⁰ how many future Yiddish readers await these works? Who will know to look for them and who will learn the language to decipher them? For when I mention in conversation that I am interested in the erotics of Yiddish, I am usually met with incredulous responses, doubting whether such a thing ever existed. Older Yiddishists, on the other hand, know better than that, and they all have a secret; they lower their voice and whisper, oh, X (a respected scholar and teacher of Yiddish) was known for his Yiddish porn collection. Whether or not such a collection exists I have yet to find out. I did, however, discover that X was working on an actual lexicon on "*di libe*," meaning "love," which turned out, as I had hoped, to mean primarily sex. Luckily, the value of this material has not gone unrecognized (though for lack of resources it remains largely

186 Max Hodann, Yingl un meyd: *khavershe shmuesn vegn der geshlekhfrage*, trans. Yudel Mark (Riga: Undzer Tsukunft, 1929).

187 Anton Nemilov, *Biologishe tragedye fun der froy*, trans. G Yashunski (Warsaw: Kultur Lige, 1929).

188 This stands in contradistinction to more recent works, all of which are geared towards the Orthodox population, offering "sex help" reflecting the concerns of this particular community. Cf. Yoel Finkelman, *Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011).

189 Making Yiddish perhaps something of a Freudian transitional object, to be used in order to be ready to do without it.

190 See <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/books/search>.

unmined) and was carefully stored not in X's main archive, but in his son's Manhattan apartment, where Yiddish is actually the language spoken. X's son—like his father and siblings—is dedicated to raising his children in Yiddish. Indeed, there is a small movement of scholars and activists who are trying to build lives in Yiddish, organized mainly around the movement *Yugentruf*, [literally “the Call of the Young”]. Once a year they meet for *Yidishvokh*, a weeklong summer camp which they call “a genuine community of Yiddish speakers,” where using any language but Yiddish is strictly forbidden.¹⁹¹ The fact that the archive in question was actually passed down to future generations of Yiddish-speakers within a biological family proves unusual for the state of Yiddish. Fascinated as I am by the mode of Yiddish survival or revival offered by X's family and by movements like *Yugentruf*, my goal is not to promote Yiddish as a “genuine” mother tongue but rather to embrace late learned Yiddish as a queer choice, and thereby a source for an alternative model of cultural transmission outside of biological lineage and reproductive heteronormativity. Whereas the archive is a documentation of the past, giving someone like myself access to a history I would not otherwise have access to, the apartment offers a glimpse of a parallel universe of possibility, where Yiddish continued to exist within a multilingual Jewish society. While my queer research intersects here with a biologically based Yiddish lineage, I am interested in Yiddish sex not for the sake of (re)producing a feasible future, but as reclamation of a future that did not come to pass.

The archive itself is a closed but unfinished monument. Closed, for its creator belonged to a disappearing generation of people who could undertake such a project and it must thus remain unfinished. But its current state freezes a moment that was dynamic and multi-temporal in a way that a truly finished product could not be. The boxes contain mostly handwritten, alphabetically organized, flashcards of words and phrases, representing thirty years of work, spanning ca. 1960-1990. The entries come from Yiddish literature, English and Yiddish press, scientific articles, advice books and columns, personal ads and popular culture, to name just a few of the sources. Some words reflect the past and present of Yiddish, searching for English parallels for Yiddish terms. This is the case for words coming from literary texts, the earliest being the Yiddish *mayse bukh*, published in Amsterdam in 1701, and the latest coming from Nobel prize laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose works were still being serialized in the American Yiddish press in the 1970s.¹⁹² The literary vocabulary thus moves from Yiddish words familiar to the Yiddish reader into English words X offers as translation. Other words try to bring contemporary English terminology into Yiddish. This is most evident in *New York Times* clippings, reflecting current events all the way up to the 1990s (a striking number of which, incidentally, involve the singer Madonna) with words like “top” and “supine” underlined, without any proposed Yiddish parallels. He suggests, however,

191 [<http://yugntruf.org/yiddish-vokh/yidish-vokh-2010/?lang=en>]

192 IB Singer's work was sensational not just in Yiddish. Indeed, translations of his work were featured in *Playboy* magazine between 1968 and 1977. At the time many other world famous authors published there as well, for example Borges and Nabokov.

numerous options for “bottoming:” *untergebn, untermarfn, zikh lozn*. In another example he clipped an article referring to a trial regarding forced homosexual sodomy, which he translates as *me’anes zayn mayse sodom*, forced rape in the style of Sodom, a translation highlighting the non-consensual aspect of the particular context he is drawing from, going beyond what the English term “sodomy” holds on its own.¹⁹³ The American press also gives him access to vernacular expressions such as the “urge to merge,” for which he offers multiple translations: *kheshek tsu tashmish, benken tsu bet*. These translations are not literal; rather, they replace the rich sound pattern of the American expression with a Yiddish parallel. Some words do not have quoted sources, but seem to be drawn from popular lowbrow plot lines starring characters like the *debutantke* (debutant) and the *dzhetseter* (jetsetter), or words that would come in handy to an active participant in a local American sexual culture that includes *kukeray* (that he offers as a translation of “peep shows” and *emesdike sekseray* (his Yiddish term for “live sex shows”).

Bringing the Yiddish language into encounter with American life, and bringing English terms into the Yiddish life, while also using the Hebraic, Slavic and of course (since we are talking about sex), the Germanic components of Yiddish, X offers striking compounds and novel inventions; for oral sex he suggests *mekhabed zayn mit filatsyo*, “to honor with oral sex,” using the Hebraic term for “honor” (as in the biblical “honor thy father and thy mother,” which also means “to offer food”) together with the technical Latin term for “fellatio.” A one-night-stand is an *eynnakhtl*, using a Germanic word but creating a Yiddish compound diminutive. A quickie is a *chap-lapl*, playing on Slavic sounds and the verb *khapn* [to grab].¹⁹⁴ In an attempt to describe what he calls *lesbish* sex acts he offers *moyleven di genitaln* [mouthing the genitals] and *porn zikh mit di avorim* [coupling with the genitals, using the *loshn koydesh* word for genitals]. These amalgamations, I argue, can be seen as counter examples of the fetishizing mixture of sprinkling English with vacant Yiddish expressions and generating mock-Yiddish, which often obscures their original meaning and the literal acts they reference. Much like Spanish words are used in mock-Spanish/English as a euphemism for parallel English expressions by virtue of being not in English, as in Hill’s second strategy, we also find Yiddish words used in an English setting within which they would actually be considered inappropriate, were they understood and treated as equally referential as the English terms. The fact that people do use dirty Yiddish words in “inappropriate” settings, I argue, attests to the process of detaching Yiddish words from their original context and meaning. Putting words back into their sexual context, as X’s archive (and my reading of it) attempt to do, gives them back their power and generates new positions (literally) for them to work in. If Weinreich was trying to create a new scientific language, X was trying to consolidate Yiddish as a complete

¹⁹³The case he draws the word from is that of an encounter between two women, one of whom was forced to retire from the military because of these accusations (NYT 10/13/96: 24).

¹⁹⁴ This expression (only without the diminutive ending) is widely used in Yiddish and in Modern Hebrew slang to suggest something done quickly rather than well. It is possible that the sexual use of the term is X’s own innovation.

and self-sufficient language in the face of American assimilation, no doubt with an awareness of its precarious future, as if having Yiddish words for this contemporary *lebens shtil* (his term for “life style”) would ensure the continued use of Yiddish. Accessing these projects, sexological, linguistic, and in what follows, poetic, my work seeks pleasure in the Yiddish words in and beyond the living Yiddish speaking context.

Poetry: Pain in Practice

The lyric poem was both the spanked body, my own body or another one like it for me to watch or punish, and at the same time the very spanking, the rhythmic hand whether hard or subtle of authority itself (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick)¹⁹⁵

Finding pleasurable pain in Yiddish poetry, in its form and its content, will bring us to the implementation of my theoretical exercise. While poetry itself offers a narration of particular acts, I will define it as “practice” not just for the sexuality it might describe, but for the sexual interaction it can invite the reader to participate in. In order to put this into practice, I offer an experiment in reading erotic Yiddish poetry written when Yiddish was still a vernacular used in a secular sexual context. I will focus in particular on the work of Celia Dropkin, as an example of an unapologetic female poetic sexual subject who “acknowledges her passions,” to return to the subversive definition Klepfisz offered for *di kurve*, showing how any woman veering from patriarchal sexual repression earns the derogatory term “whore” (alternatively, though I do not think this was Klepfisz’s intention, we can read it as part of a discourse of empowering agency for women engaged in prostitution). When searching for sexual content in Yiddish poetry, Dropkin’s poems stand out, though they by no means stand alone. The poems I will read here were chosen for their transgression; they transgress normative sexuality and thematize power-play and the explicit violence embedded in it. At the same time, they transgress temporality in their lasting erotic charge, generated by the complex poetic strategies the poet deploys, allowing readers to be touched by them long after they were written.

Dropkin, born in Bobruisk, White Russia in 1887, was involved in Jewish literary circles in Odessa, where she began writing poetry in Russian, first as a child and again, after a long break, as an adult. According to her own account, her return to poetry was sparked by her relationship with the famous Hebrew writer Uri Nissan Gnessin, with whom she shared her Russian poems.¹⁹⁶ She continued to write in Russian after arriving in New York in 1912, and moved into the world of Yiddish letters at first by publishing translations of her own work in 1917, only to discover that Gnessin had already published a version/translation of her Russian poem “*a kush*” [A Kiss] in his Hebrew novel *Etsel*. Dropkin herself never wrote in Hebrew, but

¹⁹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick “A Poem Is Being Written,” *Representations* 17 (Winter, 1987): 115.

¹⁹⁶ *Gnazim* Archive, Folder #40778.

her archives at YIVO do contain drafts of original works and translations of her poetry into English, which she gradually learned. She participated in both of the major Yiddish modernist groups, *di yunge* and *in zikh*, throughout the 1920s, publishing in their various (at times competing) journals. Her only book of poetry, *In heysn vint* [In the Hot Wind] was self published in New York in 1935, followed by an expanded edition including her short stories and paintings, published posthumously by her children.¹⁹⁷ Though she is held up as an example of a poet who led a “more conventional life”¹⁹⁸ than other Yiddish women poets, staying with her (only) husband, with whom she had five children, her affairs have become notorious,¹⁹⁹ and her poetry reveals not only daring agency and desire, but also non-normative S/M fantasies and practice, as I will proceed to explore by focusing on the poem “*Odem*” as it stands in relation to her entire poetic oeuvre. I will bring this poem, as well as “*di tsirkus dame*” in Yiddish and in English transliteration, alongside multiple versions of translation. The transliteration is significant to this reading because I explore the deployment of sound patterns in the construction of the erotic charge of the poems. I bring the variation in translation as I end by discussing the particular relations of translation to eroticism.²⁰⁰

Odem

Celia Dropkin

*A tselozenem,
An oysgetsertltn fun file froyen-hent,
Hob ikh dikh oyf mayn veg getrofn,
Yunger odem.
Un eyder ikh hob tsugeleygt tsu dir mayne lipn,
Hostu mikh gebetn
Mit a ponim, blaser un tsarter
Fun der tsartse lilye:
--nit bays mikh, nit bays mikh.
Ikh hob derzen, az dayn layb
Iz in gantsn badekt mit tseykhns fun tseyner,
A fartsiterte hob ikh zikh in dir ayngelbisen.
Du host funandergeblosn iber mir
Dayne dine nozlekher,
Un host zikh tsugerukt tsu mir,
Vi a heyser horizont tsum feld.*

אָדֶם

א צעלאָזענעם,
אן אויסגעצערטלטן פֿון פֿילע פֿרויען־הענט,
האָב איך דיר אויף מיין וועג געטראָפֿן,
יונגער אָדֶם.
און איידער איך האָב צוגעלייגט צו דיר מינע ליפֿן,
האַסטו מיך געבעטן
מיט אַ פֿנים, בלאַסער און צאַרטער
פֿון דער צאַרטסטער ליליע:
— ניט בייס מיך, ניט בייס מיך.
איך האָב דערזען, אַז דיין ליב
איז אין גאַנצן באַדעקט מיט צייכנס פֿון ציינער,
אַ פֿאַרציטערטע האָב איך זיך אין דיר איינגעביסן.
דו האָסט פֿונאַנדערגעבלאַזן איבער מיר
דיינע דינע נאָזלעכער,
און האָסט זיך צוגערוקט צו מיר,
ווי אַ הייסער האַריזאָנט צום פֿעלד.

197 Celia Dropkin *In Heysn Vint* (New York: C. Dropkin, 1935), and *In Heysn Vint: Poems, Stories, and Pictures* (New York: J. J. Dropkin, 1959).

198 Norma Fain Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers, 1890-1940," in *American Jewish History* 70 (1980): 83-4.

199 Perhaps most strikingly documented in an English-Yiddish bilingual version of an unpublished poem I found in the YIVO archives, addressed, it would seem, to one of her lovers' wife.

200 Celia Dropkin, *In heysn vint*, 51. Whitman's translation from *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* (New York: October House, 1966), 33; Hellerstein's translation from *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzky (New York: Norton, 2001), 261.

Adam

Translated by Ruth Whitman

You, Spoiled,
 fondled by the hands of many women,
 I came upon you by chance,
 young Adam.
 And before I could lay my mouth on
 yours,
 you begged me
 with the pale tender face
 of the tenderest lily:
 -- Don't bite me, don't bite me.
 I saw that your body
 was completely covered with teeth marks.
 Trembling, I bit into you.
 You flared your thin nostrils,
 Over me
 and edged close to me
 Like a burning horizon against a field.

Adam

Translated by Kathryn Hellerstein

Spoiled,
 Stroked by many women's hands,
 You were the one I met on my way,
 Young Adam.
 And before I had placed my lips on you,
 You begged me
 With a face more pale and tender
 Than the tenderest lily:
 --don't bite me , don't bite me
 I saw that your body
 Was entirely covered with teeth marks,
 So tremblingly, I bit into you.
 Above me you flared
 your narrow nostrils,
 And drew nearer to me
 Like a hot horizon to the field.

In this poem a female speaker narrates an encounter with "*Odem*"—which we can read either as the biblical Adam, or as proper name. Additionally, moving through *loshn-koydesh* to Hebrew, *odem* can stand for *adam*, "human being," an unmarked person. Even though the speaker does not appear until the third line, it is clearly her agency and her point of view that structure this poem. Referring to the one she meets on *her way* as "*yunger odem*" sets up an unequal power-dynamic, as does the acknowledgement of his handling by not one, but many other women. Adam is thus from the start passive and objectified--"spoiled," "stroked" (or "fondled," as Whitman has it above) by many women's-hands. But because he is the one who gives the speaker the idea of biting him (where she only describes bringing her lips towards him, rather than her teeth), I want to characterize this "passivity" as active participation in the role of a BDSM submissive. When he begs, "don't bite me," he is both signaling his desire, and disavowing it, indeed the tactic of a good S/M "bottom." This also means that we can rest assured that while we do not have an explicit negotiation, his plea itself can be read as a form of consent, if not instruction. This reading is validated by his positive response, subtle as it may be: the movement of his nostrils, his breath, and his drawing near to the speaker. His lack of voice and agency is striking, but both his one request and the two movements position him as an active participant, willingly fulfilling the role of submissive.

This does not have to be classified as a sadomasochistic love scene, for indeed "*Baysn dem gelibtn oder vern gebisn fun im iz natirlekh bay gants gezunte mentshn*" [biting the lover or being bitten by him is natural amongst many entirely healthy people] as Dr. Leonard Landes tell us in his 1910 Yiddish sexology book, *di libe* ("Love," the same working title used by X for his lexicon). But, he continues, there

are cases when the feelings of love and pain become “unnatural,” become a very particular disease he describes in his marked “*daytshmerish*” [Germanized Yiddish] as “*a rekht zonderbare krankhayt*” (55). We cannot begin to speculate how Dr. Landes would diagnose the speaker of the poem *Odem*, or its subject, Adam, or Celia Dropkin for that matter. Interestingly, he states that the “particular disease” he is discussing is called “sadism” in women and “masochism” in men, implying perversion in the very possibility of women taking power and men relinquishing it. In this poem the gender roles play out according to this pathologizing division. However, in Dropkin’s famous poem *Di tsirkus dame* [The Circus Lady] we can read a reversed version of the S/M power dynamic, where the female speaker erotically expresses her desire for pain, submission, and even annihilation:²⁰¹

Di Tsirkus-dame

*Ikh bin a tsirkus-dame
Un tants tsvishn kinzhaln,
Vos zaynen oyfgeshtelt oyf der arene
Mit di shpitzn aroyf.
Mayn beygzam laykhter guf
Maydt oys dem toyt fun faln,
Barirndik koym, koym dem sharf fun
di kinzhaln.*

*Mit a farkhaptn otem kukt men oyf
mayn tantsn,
Un emets bet dort far mir got.
Far mayne oygn glantsn
Di shpitsn in a fayerdikn rod,--
Un keyner veys nit, vi mir vilt zikh faln.*

*Mid bin ikh fun tantsn tsvishn aykh,
Kalte shtolene kinzhaln.
Ikh vil mayn blut zol aykh derhitsn,
Oyf ayere antbloyzte shpitsn
Vil ikh faln.*

די צירקוס-דאָמע

איך בין אַ צירקוס-דאָמע
און טאַנץ צווישן קינזשאַלן,
וואָס זײַנען אויפֿגעשטעלט אויף דער אַרענע
מיט די שפיצן אַרויף.
מיין בייגזאַם לײַכטער גוף
מײַדט אויס דעם טױט פֿון פֿאַלן,
באַרירנדיק קוים, קוים דעם שאַרף פֿון די קינזשאַלן.

מיט אַ פֿאַרכאַפטן אָטעם קוקט מען אויף מיין טאַנצן,
און עמעץ בעט דאָרט פֿאַר מיר גאָט.
פֿאַר מינע אויגן גלאַנצן
די שפיצן אין אַ פֿײַערדיקן ראָד, —
און קיינער ווייס ניט, ווי מיר ווילט זיך פֿאַלן.

מיד בין איך פֿון טאַנצן צווישן אייך,
קאַלטע שטאַלענע קינזשאַלן.
איך וויל מיין בלוט זאָל אייך דערהיצן,
אויף אייערע אַנטבלויזטע שפיצן
וויל איך פֿאַלן.

201Celia Dropkin, *In heysn vint*, 49. Grace Schulman translation from *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, Irving Howe, Ruth Wisse and Khone Shmeruk eds. (New York: Viking, 1987), 242. Hellerstein’s translation from *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, 260.

The Circus Lady

(Translated by Kathryn Hellertsein)

I am a circus lady
 And dance among the daggers
 Set in the arena
 With their points erect.
 My swaying lissome body
 Avoids a death-by-falling,
 Touching, barely touching the dagger blades.

Holding their breaths, people are staring at my
 dancing,
 And someone sends a prayer to God for me.
 Before my eyes, the points gleam
 Fiery, in a circle,
 And no one knows how the falling calls to me.

I grow tired, dancing among you,
 Dagger of cold steal.
 I want my blood to heat you through and through.
 You, unsheathed points,
 I want to fall upon you.

The Circus Dancer

(Translated by Grace Schulman)

I am a circus dancer.
 I whirl around daggers
 Stuck in the ring,
 Blades high.
 My agile body
 Just grazes the knives;
 I never fall to death.

Gasping, they watch my steps.
 Someone out there prays for me.
 I see spikes gleam
 In a flaming circle;
 Nobody knows I want to
 stumble.

I'm tired of gliding around you,
 Cold steal daggers.
 I want my blood to heat you.
 I want to fall
 On your naked spears.

In this poem, the speaker's hidden desire to fall upon the cold steel daggers surrounding her could be read as a masochistic desire for, and pleasure in, pain. The poem builds its erotic charge on the tension of "touching, barely touching," "*barirendik koym, koym,*" near-but-not-quite-consummation. The dancer/speaker is objectified by the gaze of the viewers, possibly but not necessarily literally an audience, to whose gaze she is subjected. But her narrative voice reveals an entirely different story. They are unaware of her desire: "no one knows how the falling calls to me." This desire is legible only to the speaker. Moreover, the language of desire describing the daggers throughout the poem positions the daggers as fetish objects, an extension of the speaker's destructive fantasies, where "the significance of fetishes is not known to the world at large,"²⁰² as Freud writes. The object looks commonplace to the outside world, while the fetishist secretly knows its "true" value. This level of hidden desire, transposed onto a relation with the as daggers potentially dangerous phallic objects, renders the daggers an "impassioned object" that, according to Anne McClintock's, explain "the apparent power of the fetish to enchant the fetishist. By displacing power onto the fetish, then manipulating the fetish, the individual gains symbolic control over what might otherwise be terrifying ambiguities."²⁰³ As the dancer walks the precarious line between object and subject, the fetish itself, and the desire of utter submission, become part of her empowerment, a position from within which she can utter the wish to relinquish her control.

202 Freud, *Fetishism*, 207.

203 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 184.

Much like my own attempt to create flesh and blood interactions with Yiddish poets of the past, Dropkin can be read as constructing similar cross-temporal affective relations, erotically activating the past of the biblical narrative. Reading *Odem* as *odem ha-rishn*, the biblical Adam, constitutes the speaker as both Eve (known for her forbidden biting, into the fruit, that is) and Lilith (even more notorious for her insubordination). Comparing *Odem*'s face to a “*lilye*,” a lily, establishes Lilith presence phonetically, and renders *Odem* the inverse mirror to her fierceness. He is the effeminate, weak and pale, indeed, stereotypical Jewish man.²⁰⁴ Reading Lilith into this poem activates the Jewish folk tradition of the argument between Adam and Lilith as to who will be on top, enriching the erotics of the power play already central to the poem. As the apocryphal *Alphabet of Ben-Sira* has it,

Lilith said, 'I will not lie below,' and Adam said, 'I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be the superior one.' Lilith responded, 'We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.' But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and flew away into the air²⁰⁵

This is a failed negotiation of a power dynamic, ending in Lilith's relegation to the world of demons. Much as with speaker of *di tsirkus dame*, female power and transgression, we are reminded, have their price. Reading Eve into the poem also evokes the dangers of feminine power and sin, for Eve is the one blamed for heeding the snake and eating the forbidden fruit. Instead of biting into the fruit of the tree of knowledge, in the poem “*Odem*” the speaker bites into the willing *Odem* himself. In another (untranslated) poem from the same collection, *vi zaftik royte epl* [Like Juicy Red Apples] Dropkin casts her speaker explicitly as the forbidden fruit, “barely, barely” holding herself on the tree [“*Nor ikh halt zikh koym, koym oyfn boym*”],²⁰⁶ echoing the “barely touching” of the circus poem, creating a charged moment of desire and anticipation. Comparing her cheeks to rosy apples, the speaker here is tied to the *agune*/abandoned wife of Molodwsky's *froyen lider*, whose was left when her cheeks, “two rosy apples/still hung on the tree.”²⁰⁷ Cast as the fruit of the tree of knowledge, Dropkin's speaker is also relegated to passive receptiveness, being consumed by worms, as the “fatter worm- passion” threatens to “devour” her “juicy body” “to death.” Of course, these threatening desires are her own, recasting both the passivity and the threat it allows. Rather than being a temptation to passersby

204 He is further feminized when we consider the lily as a recurring image for the female lover in the *Song of Songs*.

205 *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, an anonymous medieval text, dated as early as the beginning of the 8th century. The English translation here comes from David Stern and Mark Mirsky. *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990).

206 *In Heysn Vint*, 69.

207 In Adrienne Rich's translation, see my discussion in Chapter Three.

(potential Adams), she is an object of their disgust, tying her passion to her condemnation and annihilation.

Whether we read the speaker as Lilith or Eve, the poem “*Odem*” evokes the historical female figure as one who took a powerful and transgressive stand, with a great price to follow, for both Lilith and Eve lose their place in *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden, with or without taking Adam with them. Recognizing the literary contexts these figures are drawn from places this poem in dialogue with Biblical texts and Jewish history. The historical moment thus becomes one that Kathryn Hellerstein calls “archetypal.”²⁰⁸ However, the poem’s invocation of the presence of the many other women who came before the speaker and have left the marks of their hands and teeth on *Odem* recasts the historical referent, offering instead a repetitive scene rather than a primal scene, not an origin, but already a copy-producing-copy.²⁰⁹ As a scene of repetition that continues to reference a historical (or pseudo-historical) moment, we might even read *Odem* as a fetishistic ritual re-enactment based on the biblical model. The fetishistic endeavor of repeating history through bodily practice offers a meeting point between the practice of an individual (or multiple individuals) and the way it relates to the history it draws, thereby, according to McClintock, combining the personal with the historical, structured by recurrence (184). Fetishistic role-play can reshape the terms of the historical encounter and its recurrence, as Elizabeth Freeman suggests. By relentlessly physicalizing the encounter with history, Freeman writes, S/M “contributes to a ‘reparative’ criticism that takes up the materials of a traumatic past and remixes them in the interests of new possibilities for being and knowing.”²¹⁰ Following McClintock and Freeman together can enable us to read Dropkin’s poem “*Odem*” as a recasting of a potentially painful moment in history (whether we see the biblical story as historical or not, it shaped much of Western History, acting as a foundational narrative), one that was detrimental for women’s use of their power and agency, translating it into a new source of power. Pain remains central, but it is not pain as punishment through banishment or birth.²¹¹ Playing out this history, women can ritualistically and consensually inflict and receive a new kind of pain. Freeman terms this “pain we must laboriously rework into pleasure if we are to have any pleasure at all,” and deems it “the proper ticket into historical consciousness.”²¹² Reading this poem either as biblically based erotic role play, or as a fetishistic-erotic recasting of the biblical story, it might thereby offer a kind of corrective to the biblical narrative.

208 Kathryn Hellerstein, “From “Ikh” to “Zikh”: A Journey from “I” to “Self” in Yiddish Poems by Women,” *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, ed. Anita Norich, Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner (New York: Harvard University Press, 1992), 130.

209 This echoes Judith Butler’s notion of gender being established through repetitious performance, producing a copy of a copy, when in fact that copy has no original, explained in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (London: Routledge, 1993).

210 Elizabeth Freeman, “Turn the Beat Around: Sodomasochism, Temporality, History,” *Differences* 19:1 (2008): 41.

211 Eve was not only banished, but also received the punishment of the pain that comes with childbirth. Lilith too is linked to infants, not suffering pain, but causing it.

212 Freeman, “Time Binds,” 59.

Even if there is to be a future price for the transgression (of the poem or of our own reading), in the time of the poem, the female point of view constructs a suspended moment, where all that exists is the painful pleasure and the reclaiming of power and history that comes with it.

In the range of Dropkin's poetry presented here and represented in her entire oeuvre, her female speakers embody a complicated position vis-à-vis desire and sexuality, vacillating between fantasies of extreme submission ("beat my hands/nail my feet to a cross/.../leave me deeply shamed")²¹³ and those of extreme domination ("my hands like snakes/that will choke you," or "I've never seen you sleeping/I've never seen you dead").²¹⁴ Even within the use of a single image, Dropkin offers contradictory impulses; In the poem *A kush* [a kiss],²¹⁵ she describes her speaker opening her lover's blankets, kissing his chest submissively and thirstily drinking his blood, whereas in another untitled poem, she takes a knife to her own chest, and her lover lays his lips on her "wounded heart/drinks and drinks..." (notably, even in the latter case she is the one who gives the order, again covertly instructing how pain should be inflicted, as in the case of *Odem*). Whether as sadist or masochist, top or bottom, Dropkin is expressing sexuality and power play that transgress normative roles and practices, casting both her dominance and her submission extreme not just in her time, but in ours as well. Unabashedly expressing her agency and desire, Dropkin's poems certainly had their own shock value when they were originally published in New York in 1935. As Janet Hadda writes, Dropkin's poetry's "searing immediacy and unveiled erotics had caused considerable discomfort [to the world of Yiddish letters]."²¹⁶ For example, her contemporary poet Arn Glants-Leyeles referred to her as "the young woman, who lived and fevered only with feelings and the thirsts of her body." And it is not only critics of the distant past who might have felt uncomfortable with these materials, for Hadda also attributes a "shying away" from Dropkin's work by feminist critics from the 1990s to the "nature of her subject matter." According to Hadda, it was specifically "her utter openness about her extramarital liaisons" that contained the "essence of her daring."²¹⁷ Today

213 *In heysn vint*, 37. This poem, like all those quoted here only part, deserves in depth reading my chapter will not be able to undertake.

214 *In heysn vint*, 41, 55.

215 *Ibid*, 47.

216 Janet Hadda, "The Eyes Have it: Celia Dropkin's Love Poetry," in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*. Ed. Anita Norich, Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner (New York: Harvard University Press, 1992), 95.

217 *Ibid*, 96. Hadda uses Dropkin's poetry to formulate something of a psychological biography of the poet, very much representing a particular moment in 1980-1990s feminist criticism and its application of psychoanalysis; Hadda writes not just as a literary scholar, but also as a practicing psychoanalyst. The type of feminist criticism Hadda both participates in and critiques is a phenomenon that arose in American academia in the 1990s, following second wave feminist and lesbian projects that emerged starting with the late 1970s, like that of Irena Klepfisz. If the earlier projects collected names and stories, and began the important work of translation as part of a cultural process of radical identity politics, the later projects attempted to incorporate women's work into the discourse of feminist literary criticism, bringing this particular tool set into Jewish studies. These feminist projects remained marginalized and even came under fire by more traditional scholars, who still dominate the field. Avraham Novershtern, for example, recently published a

Dropkin's "openness" draws many to her poetry, but few are the readers who take on a close reading of the eroticism portrayed and deployed in her poems.²¹⁸ Whereas the discomfort Hadda describes regarding non-monogamy may seem quaint, the interplay of sex and violence is still considered transgressive, and S/M practices remain marginalized if not delegitimized in mainstream discourse, and have also been hotly contested in some feminist and lesbian circles from the 1970s to date. But even if S/M sexuality were to be widely embraced (*mirtseshem*, God willing), these poems would remain shocking simply because they are so very far from the image of *shtetl*-Yiddish that dominates the popular imagination. Ironically, the particular setting of "*Odem*" is more likely to lead us to the rural backdrop of the Eastern European small town than to the streets of Manhattan, through its literal and metaphorical evocations of paths and fields.²¹⁹ Thus, instead of erasing the *image of the shtetl* by way of contemporary methodology, activating the erotic in this poem allows us to (re)encounter it, to feel a moment of this past. This is one way the erotic can serve to highlight material realities past and to connect us to them, removing the "veil of nostalgia" Klepfisz described. The veil itself is tied to fetishism, as the enabler of unknowing disavowal, and its removal is meant to expose reality and cure the fetishist. This is also the veil Yiddish writer Melech Ravitch wants *yidische dikhterins*, Yiddish women poets, to remove in order to be cured of their "tenderness, sweetness and stillness and the modesty and the goodness, most of all the modesty,"²²⁰ which he is utterly "sick of." He condescendingly pleads with them to remove this veil and fight his words "tooth and nail," saying he would even be grateful for such a reaction. Kinky as this might sound, he is not actually consenting to pain, for he clarifies in brackets that he means "spiritual teeth and spiritual nails..."; but invoking teeth that really bite, Dropkin's poem "*Odem*" takes on

seminal article on the Yiddish women poets, discounting most prior scholarly endeavors in the field on the grounds that their anachronistic feminist politics de-legitimate their readings as a whole. Cf. Avraham Novershtern, "The Voices and the Choir: Yiddish Women's Poetry in the Interwar Period," *Criticism and Interpretation* 40 (2008): 61-146. I will engage with his work more fully in the following Chapter. For the current discussion I wish to stress that my own work treats queer and feminist anachronism as valuable method and subject matter. My aim is to use theories (literary, feminist, psychoanalytic and others) and their histories as a means of illuminating poems past, and the past itself, in new ways. This process of reading is not meant to use poetry as evidence for "theory," but rather to use theories to closely or even intimately encounter the poems, both in form and in content, and to explore the role that particular content can play for today's readers.

218 For more recent readings of Dropkin's poetry see article in Polish by Agnieszka Legutko "Cyrkowa dama'- poezja Celi Dropkin czytana z perspektywy genderowej," in *Nieme dusze* (2010), 207-42, as well as a recent book chapter by Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems: Celia Dropkin and her Contemporaries," in: *Modern Jewish literature: Intersections and Boundaries*, ed. L. Scott Lerner, Michael P. Kramer and Sheila E. Jelen (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 189-212.

219 In this it joins a wider tradition of women writing Yiddish literature that reframes the content of the *shtetl* in modernist form, for example, the Polish Yiddish poet Rajzl Zychlinski, or the Hebrew-Yiddish fiction writer, Dvora Baron.

220 Melech Ravitch, "*meydlekh, froyen, vayber - Yidische dikhterins*" [Girls, Women, Wives - Yiddish Poetesses] *Literarische Bleter* 4:21 (May 27, 1927): 395-96.

Ravitch's challenge, and than some.²²¹ My reading of "Odem" continues the challenge, using the fetishistic sexual practice of biting and the S/M power dynamic not to nostalgically veil history, but to feel it, teeth in flesh.

Through the lens of the fetish both the transgression and the erotic charge of the poem "Odem" hold up across time, themselves crossing time, bringing us, the readers, into the power-play between the two characters in it and creating an sexually charged dynamic between the poem and the reader. The reader is drawn into this interaction in intricate ways, first by the direct address, "*hob ikh dikh oyf mayn veg getrofn*," "I met you on my way," which opens the poem and does not name an addressee until the fourth line. Later throughout the poem, patterns of enjambment lure the reader into participation by way of expectation, protracted revelation, and delayed gratification.²²² For example, in the fourth line from the bottom, *Odem* opens himself up, flares or widens—and it is not until the next line that we are told what exactly he opens—his nostrils. In this image he is positioned above her, [above me, you flared/... in Hellerstein's translation] – but this does not position him as topping her. Though Hellerstein names this moment a reversal of the relationship of power, where "in the sexual act the young and powerless Adam acquires only an apparent power, an ambiguous dominance,"²²³ I argue that this is not even an ambiguous dominance, for even if he is physically "over her," he remains utterly sexually subservient to her. The readers spend the entire moment of enjambment with *Odem* opening himself up before the speaker; with him we await her imminent penetration, responding, in fact, to the penetration of her teeth in his flesh. It is the words of the speaker's mouth that create the opening of the enjambment, her physical mouth that seizes the opening for penetration. In this moment the reader's body too becomes susceptible to the erotic interaction, allowing Dinshaw's "touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact" (128). If Dinshaw invites a metaphorical touch, a pleasure activated by her theoretical intervention of surprising juxtaposition (between queer methodology, medieval literature and contemporary culture), my own use of texts directly narrating pleasure (and complex fetishistic pleasure in particular) is meant to materialize the erotic touch. Inviting readers to be touched by the sexual content of the texts, I want, put bluntly, to encourage imaginary readers to touch themselves.

221 Yiddish poet Kadya Molodowsky wrote her own response to Ravitch's piece, "*Meydlekh, froyen, vayber un... nevue*" [Girls, Women, Wives and... Prophecy] *Literarische Bleter* 4:22 (June 3, 1927): 416. I must also mention here Anna Fishman Gonshor's phenomenal annotated bibliography, "Kadya Molodowsky in *Literarische Bleter* 1925-1935," M.A. thesis (Montreal: McGill University, 1997), which Kathryn Hellerstein rightly referred to as "an unsung treasure" of Yiddish literary scholarship (private communication).

222 In "A Poem Is Being Written" (quoted in the epigraph to this section) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes how she fell in love with enjambment: "In terms of the beat(ing) of the poem, enjambment was, in this fantasy that shaped my poetic, the thrusting up out of the picture plane in protest by the poem's body of a syntactic thigh or shank that would intercept, would retard the numbered blow: would momentarily wedge apart with sense the hammering iteration of rhythm. Would say no" (117).

223 Hellerstein, 131.

Touching Translation

One of the hardest things to translate is the link between language and the body that the original has made, in part through the linguistic resources of the original. In translation, the body is never in exactly the same place. (Barbara Johnson)²²⁴

“There are some things that translation cannot hope to convey,” writes Anita Norich: “in the case of the movement from Yiddish to English, one of those things that inevitably gets lost is—literally—perception.”²²⁵ Though Norich is referring here to the “physical and spatial relations of text on the page” that are different in Yiddish and English, I want to extend this perceptual loss to additional sensory aspects of language, namely the auditory resonance of each language. The same words always do sound different (sound better?) in Yiddish. For as Juana Maria Rodriguez warns, “The erotic power of intonation and rhythm fails under the pressure of translation. To move sexually from language to another transforms all of the other non-linguistic elements of the erotic exchange. Ayyyyy papi is never equivalent to Ohhhhh daddy [or to, I add, *Oyoyoy tatenyu*]; they register differently in the body, they require different forms of vocal expression.”²²⁶ For this reason, the possibility of reading erotic poetry aloud in the original Yiddish is extremely significant in the reframing of Yiddish my project is attempting. Performed out loud in Yiddish (*oyf a kol, oyf yidish*), the poem “Odem” offers a charged erotic experience created by form and content alike, and all the more so by their interaction. The sound pattern—namely the repetition—*nisht bays mikh, nisht bays mikh*—at the center of the poem, and the strategic line-breaks and enjambments throughout the poem, systematically thematized the erotic content of the address, as they draw the reader into the erotic interaction. While understanding the Yiddish content is crucial to the reader’s performance of this erotic charge, I sense that like foreign pornography, it can be sexy to the listeners/viewers even without understanding the words (whether the reliance is on the auditory or the visual).²²⁷ I want to argue that this erotic interaction is not the fetishist “I know very well (that I don’t understand) but all the same (I will get turned on),” that erasure of content in favor of form discussed above. For as contra those untranslated fragments of Yiddish turned Yinglish, Yiddish devoid of referent and addressee alike, here it is the mutual construction of form and content, by way of poetic device, that allows the untranslated language to

224 Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 22.

225 Anita Norich “A Response from Anita Norich” *Prooftexts*, 20:1-2 (Winter/Spring 2000): 217. Responding to Kathryn Hellerstein, “Translating as a Feminist: Reconceiving Anna Margolin,” *ibid.*

226 Juana María Rodríguez “Gesture and Utterance Fragments from a Butch-Femme Archive” in: *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*. Ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2007), 289.

227 Indeed, pornography might be the only genre of film frequently circulated without translation. Might we compare the statement “it doesn’t matter what they’re saying, it’s the sex that counts” to the fetishization of Yiddish we’ve been discussing, where “it doesn’t matter what they’re saying, what’s important is that it’s in Yiddish?”

transmit some of its content through its form, in its prosodic oral rendition. Most importantly, I hope that hearing the poem incites desire, not just sexual desire, but the desire to understand the Yiddish words themselves. Read silently or out loud, using translation or transliteration, the Yiddish words materialize in the flesh of the sexual subject, whether that of the speaker or that of the reader, crossing time and language, queering the very divisions between them all.

Sexual activation can itself be understood as translation, as Linda Williams writes: “our entire sensorium is activated in a synesthetic manner with one bodily sense translated into another.”²²⁸ When we see, or hear, or read sexual images, our bodies “make sense” out of them. And it is that bodily sense, I argue, that might surpass the bind between the need for translation and the impossibility of translation, by reshaping the hierarchy between original and translation,²²⁹ in making the body a meeting space between the two. For today, neither the Yiddish nor the English stand alone, and while the English may to some extent “work” without the Yiddish, it is, like the fetish, not the thing itself. Maybe giving Yiddish poetry an existence in English translation is also a form of fetishism, always deferring a loss, a monument to lack and existence at once. But I offer this as a reversal of the postvernacular fetish, which makes Yiddish form or words present without their content. The erotic mode of reading poetry, even (or maybe especially) poetry in translation, makes the flesh and blood of the world of the Yiddish past present, physically or sexually, while at the same time marking the absence of that flesh and blood. “This loving gesture that translation is said to be is one that does not seek to repair what is broken,” writes Barbara Johnson, continuing Walter Benjamin’s metaphor of touch, so fitting for this chapter as well, where translation “touches upon the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense.”²³⁰ While this might suggest a gentle touch (very different from that of BDSM) “one that does not disturb or dent the surface on which it lands,” Johnson points out that “there is a movement in the other direction as well, one that heightens the fragmentation, its rough edges, one that might be said to further fragment and break that vessel.” As a result, Johnson writes, “every effort to patch the vessel together only breaks it further.” Instead of the impossible attempt to “patch the vessel together,” as a figure holding both absence and presence, the fetish “heightens the fragmentation,” bringing into view an absence that is part of the history of Yiddish and certainly characterizes its present state, thus allowing an interaction with Yiddish content as a way of feeling lack rather than disavowing it.

“So much translation theory gets caught up with the problem of loss and inadequacy, with the inadequacy of translation, its failure to recapture, reconstitute, and repair what is prior, what is lost. It does not always see that the figure of the

228 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 290.

229 I continue to explore the undoing of the hierarchy between translation and original as part of a queer mode of intergenerationality in my third chapter.

230 Johnson, *Mother Tongues*, 64.

past that feeds this nostalgia is one that is induced by the process of translation itself," writes Butler in response to Barbara Johnson. Butler gives the example of a poem appearing in another language, "there we find guilt over its capture and remaking."²³¹ In this chapter I have looked at translations of poetry and translations of sexology into Yiddish and out of it; at translations of value and their failure; as well as at the translation of sensation into verbal representation, and back again, transforming the guilty pleasure of romantic nostalgia for the past into an illicit sexual awakening in the present. Engaging the erotic through poetry, history and theory, I attempted to structure a cross-temporal bond between the Yiddish past and our reading present. As a transgressive form of bond(age), my focus on BDSM opens for me a new sense of the Yiddish past, and evokes new sensations in the process of my own reading. Recognizing rather than disavowing the losses entailed in the story of Yiddish, losses in the past, and the already, supposedly foreseeable, loss in the future makes the "pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times" that Freeman's erotohistoriography offers so valuable, allowing us to "imagine ourselves haunted by ecstasy and not just by loss."²³² Opening up to this touch, linking absence, pain and pleasure, might just engender a new practice of history, a practice of *touching time*, as in Basman's "*Onrirn di tsayt*." As the erotic touch restores power to language and content to history, the language of poetry itself becomes a way to engage in time's tactility, allowing us to take part in erotic poetics and practices across time, generating alternative histories and taking pleasure in Yiddish.

231 Judith Butler, "Betrayal's Felicity," *Diacritics* 34:1 (Spring 2004): 84.

232 Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds," 66.

Jewish Girls, the first Jewish lesbian anthology came out.²³⁷ Twenty-eight years later, I came together with the editor of and many contributors to the anthology at the conference “In Amerika they call us Dykes: 1970s Lesbian Lives,” and presented my work on Jewish lesbians and the Yiddish women’s poetry they helped introduce to me. This chapter will tell the story of these multiple encounters as a complication of the *keyt*/continuum of Jewish women’s literature. These are queer encounters across time as well as real-time encounters, between Jewish women, lesbians, and queers. I read this encounters through the cross-temporal erotic methodology I purposed in the previous chapter, combined with the future-resistant backwards gaze proposed described in my first chapter; taken together these encounters generate a genealogy built on subjects reaching for other times, forwards and backwards, creating what Christopher Nealon has termed a queer tribe, a collectivity formed across time.²³⁸

Try telling yourself
you are not accountable
to the life of your tribe
the breath of your planet

writes Adrienne Rich in her 1983 poem “North American Time.”²³⁹ The tribe she invokes has no definition besides the accountability it demands, the responsibility of the words that she deems “verbal privilege:”

It doesn’t matter what you think.
Words are found responsible
all you can do is choose them
or choose
to remain silent. Or, you never had a choice,
which is why the words that do stand
are responsible

This responsibility must extend “beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead,” as Derrida writes, opening this cross-temporal responsibility to potentially undo progressive linear time.²⁴⁰ For this is a moment where the living present is non-contemporaneous with itself, a moment that secretly unhinges the living present; it is a spectral moment, “a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: “now,” future present).”²⁴¹ This is indeed the time of the queer

237 *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1982).

238 Christopher S. Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 67.

239 Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe* (New York: Norton, 2002), 198.

240 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge 1994), xviii.

241 *Ibid*, xix.

genealogy, but as Heather Love reminds us, we must “recognize the extent to which such genealogies are not vital, but rather, ghostly, impossible, interrupted.”²⁴²

The readings in this current chapter explore what this genealogy might mean in terms of both Yiddish and lesbian writing based on their shared complicated relations to the past and the future, as two necessarily interrupted and therefore queer traditions. Dealing with lesbian-identified writers highlights many of the queer theoretical concerns that I have explored throughout the dissertation, but does not generate a reading “queerer” than the reading of presumably heterosexual Yiddish writers. In fact, the opposite might be true, as I will suggest that it is the distance, the mark of difference along and across the *keyt* that enables connection, the construction of an imagined and therefore uninhibited dialogue.²⁴³ But because not all of the encounters I will explore here exist purely in the realm of utopian cross-temporality,²⁴⁴ this distance afforded by time is not always an option. As a result, this chapter also confronts moments of queer contiguity and contemporaneity (non-contemporaneous or otherwise, as discussed in my Introduction) serving to simultaneously constitute and trouble the tribe. Embracing the challenges lesbian legacy and Yiddish literature pose to models of intergenerational transmission, this chapter will link moments spectral and real, lived, written and read, enacting the non-linear model it is in search of and complicating straight lines of lineage.

In her poem *mayn shtam redt* [My Ancestors Speak]²⁴⁵ Anna Margolin stages an encounter with her own tribe, her *shtam*.²⁴⁶ This tribe, “blood of her blood” and “flame of her flame,” mixes past and present, the living and the dead:

242 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 98.

243 Simply put, just as the Yiddish women writers are probably turning in their graves at the outspoken lesbianism of the 1970s, so would (and indeed have) the 1970s lesbians rejected my use of the label “queer.” I therefore take refuge in the distance separating me from the 1970s as well as the 1920s, even as I aim to transcend that distance and reach across it.

244 I mean utopian both in the sense of out of place (parallel to the a-temporal/cross temporal), and in the sense of the ideal, imagined, desired.

245 Anna Margolin, *lider* (New York: Oriom Press, 1929), 10.

246 According to Harkavi’s dictionary *shtam* means either race, family or tribe.

They are all my ancestors	זיי אַלע, מיין שטאַם,
Blood of my blood	בלוט פֿון מיין בלוט
And flame of my flame	
Dead and living come together	און פֿלאַם פֿון מיין פֿלאַם,
Sorrowful grotesque and big	טויט און לעבעדיק אויסגעמישט,
They go through me as through a darkened house.	טרויעריק, גראַטעסק און גרויס
Go with prayers and curses and moans,	
Shake my heart like a copper bell	טראַמפלען דורך מיר ווי דורך אַ טונקל הויז.
My tongue beats in my mouth	טראַמפלען מיט תפֿילות און קללות און קלאַג,
I don't know my own voice	טרייסלען מיין האַרץ ווי אַ קופּערנעם גלאַק,
My ancestors speak. ²⁴⁷	עס וואַרפֿט זיך מיין צונג,
	איך דערקען גיט מיין קול —
	מיין שטאַם רעדט.

If the poem begins by describing a silent tribe, in which “no one in the gallery of ‘My Ancestors’ is able to utter a word,” as Novershtern writes,²⁴⁸ by the poem’s culmination (represented in the segment included here) the speaker is flooded by the voices of her predecessors. This encounter with the tribe does not open a dialogue between the speaker and her tribe, as Margolin’s invoked ancestors do not leave her the option of speech. Novershtern writes: “Her forebears do not appear before the poet when she wishes to illuminate her identity; on the contrary. They almost suffocate her from within. There cannot, on the whole, be any dialogue between generations” (456). What is revealed instead is a scene of possession, even of a *dibuk*: “my tongue quivers/I do not recognize my voice—/my ancestors speak.”²⁴⁹ But the actual words of these ancestors are not narrated; instead the poem narrates their mark on the speaker, who is haunted by them.

In “*froyen lider*” [women’s songs/poems], the poem that opened my dissertation, Kadya Molodowsky offers her own version of an ancestral encounter, also in the form of haunting, in nocturnal visitations by the women in her family. In contrast to Margolin’s foreclosure of dialogue, Novershtern observes that Molodowsky “sketched her forebears in traditional terms, thus laying the grounds for an intergenerational debate. The definitions here are quite clear, and the identity of the poet specific” (456). But as we saw in the Introduction, and will continue to see in the reading that follows, the nature of the encounter is far from straightforward, and

247 Translated by Adrienne Cooper, in *The Tribe of Dina*, ed. Melaine Kaye Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 148-49.

248 Avraham Novershtern, “‘Who Would Have Believed That a Bronze Statue Can Weep’: The Poetry of Anna Margolin,” *Prooftexts* 10:3 (1990): 456.

249 I quote here from Kumove’s translation, which better illustrates the visceral aspects of the vocal possession. Shirley Kumove in: Anna Margolin, and Shirley Kumove. *Drunk From the Bitter Truth: The Poems of Anna Margolin* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 12.

casting her forbearers in “traditional” terms might in fact serve the opposite goal from that which Novershtern suggests. As William Abrams writes as early as 1935 in *Signal*—the “*goldene keyt of tsniesdike froyen-doyres*” that the poet dreamt up “stand in her way today,” weighing upon her.²⁵⁰ Speaking from his own ideological bent, Abrams is referring to the women of the past as deterring Molodowsky from “placing her feet safely in step with millions of armies” and keeping her from fully joining the communist movement (for which *Signal* is an organ). Whether or not that is where Molodowsky would have gone were she detached from the chain of women, it is clear (in contrast with Novershtern’s claim) that her speaker is not free from the *keyt*, and the dialogue staged between the women seems neither invited nor consensual. Indeed, in both published versions of the poem (which I will account for later) the speaker is chased or even hunted [*nokhyogn*], as by “autumn winds” [*harbstike vintn*]; in the first version these winds are the women’s lives’ “withered melodies” [*farvelkte nigunim*] and in the second version it is their “whimpering” [*shtile farshtikte geveynen*, the adjectives “silent” and “suffocated” are not included in the translation] leaving no more of an escape than Margolin’s speaker had from her own ancestral voices. Over and against Abrams’ ideological critique (chastising Molodowsky for her ties to the women of the past), as well as Novershtern’s neat categorical division (which perceives Molodowsky at a safe distance from her ancestors), my reading joins the ambivalence emanating from both Molodowsky and Margolin, exploring the haunting past/past haunting as a mode of queer intergenerational encounter.

I continue here my use of “queer” not exclusively to refer to a particular sexual practice or orientation, but rather as a theoretical mode of reading that challenges binary divisions of past and present, allowing us to divert the linear direction of reproductive heteronormative history. Haunting aptly enacts this temporal transgression, and recent queer theory has therefore touched widely upon it, as we saw in Chapter One.²⁵¹ Carla Freccero reads “queer spectrality” as “a phantasmatic relation to historicity that could account for the affective force of the past in the present, of a desire issuing from another time and placing a demand on the present.”²⁵² Such a queer mode of haunting combines both the “seeming objectivity of events and the subjectivity of their affective afterlife,”²⁵³ writes Freccero. Following Wendy Brown Freccero proposes haunting as a mode of cross-historical relations, in which “past generations and events occupy the force fields of the present.” According to Brown, what we inherit is how these generations and events “claim us, and how they haunt, plague and inspirit our imaginations and visions for the future.”²⁵⁴ That is, “not ‘what really happened’ to the dead but what lives on

250 William Abrams, “*Kadye molodovski: a rede gehaltn tsum kaboles ponim far kadye molodovski*,” *Signal* (November 1935): 3-4.

251 See discussions of Carla Freccero, Heather Love, Elizabeth Freeman and Dana Luciano.

252 Freccero quoted in Elizabeth Freeman, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ* 13:2 (2007): 184.

253 Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 76.

254 Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 150.

from that happening, what is conjured from it.”²⁵⁵ In this mode of inheritance, “an heir is not only someone who receives, he or she is someone who chooses, and who takes the risk of deciding.”²⁵⁶ This poses history and genealogy as “a politics of memory, of inheritance and of generations,” a “being with specters”²⁵⁷ that entails reciprocity, “a willingness both to be haunted and to become ghostly.”²⁵⁸ Accordingly, Margolin and Molodowsky’s poetically generated spectral encounters with the past open them not just to the past ghosts they invoke, but also to future ghosts in the form of readers will turn to the past to haunt their texts, readers to whom Molodowsky and Margolin will themselves become ghosts to reckon with.

Re-membering Women

If Margolin and Molodowsky were haunted by their own recent and distant ancestry (as they chose to take on these women past), they themselves haunted (or alternatively, were chosen by) later women of the Jewish feminist and lesbian projects starting in the 1970s²⁵⁹ by writers such as Adrienne Rich, who opens this chapter, and Irena Klepfisz, whose work was discussed in the previous chapter. The lesbian turn to the past was part of a strategic intervention within their present, derived specifically from the emergence of identity politics. These politics, like those Christopher Nealon writes about, “are an attempt to understand, through an identification with an ancestor, how history works, what it looks like, what possibilities it has offered in the past, and what those possibilities suggest about our ineffable present tense.”²⁶⁰ The past is thus recruited to rethink and indeed reconfigure the present: “having the resources and the evidence to name and analyze our world, feminists may begin to change its very contours.”²⁶¹ When Rich and other women writers of her generation emerged upon the scene, they were very much pioneers on a new journey of visibility and voice. While the past must have been replete with cases of lesbian love and struggle, these women and their stories “have until so recently been forced out of history, ripped from our collective memory,” Cook writes.²⁶² Her foundational essay, already quoted above, “Women Alone Stir My Imagination: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition,” is based on the premise that “like the historical denial of women’s history generally, the historical denial of the vast range of women-loving women has not been an accident” (719) and sets out to discover some of these histories. It is here that Rich anchors her argument in *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*:

255 Ibid.

256 Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 8.

257 Derrida, *Specters*, xviii.

258 Freccero, “Queer Times” *After Sex: On Writing Since Queer Theory*, eds. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 21.

259 While “haunting” and “choice” might appear to be very different, if not oppositional actions, especially in terms of the agency they assume, in my queer reading I conceive of both as modes of cross-temporal connection, blurring the boundary between them.

260 Nealon, *Foundlings*, 96.

261 Cook, “Women Alone Stir My Imagination,” 736.

262 Ibid, 735.

The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain.²⁶³

Or phrased poetically in “Transcendental Etude,” the final poem of Rich’s 1978 *Dream of a Common Language*:

Birth stripped our birthright from us,
tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves
so early on
and the whole chorus throbbing at our ears
like midges, told us nothing, nothing
of origins, nothing we needed
to know, nothing that could re-member us.²⁶⁴

Both pieces connect the erasure of female and lesbian knowledge and/of history to the dominance of particular identities (enforcing heterosexuality) and to the foreclosure of community. Rich’s poem ties this historical erasure to the fundamental psychoanalytic notions of female lack, only to discount the power of both; “but in fact we were always like this,” writes Rich right before the lines quoted above, “rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference.” “Like this” is a state of lack, being “rootless, dismembered,” echoing a psychoanalytic notion of the female condition. Teresa De Lauretis cites Rich’s poem as a site “where the fantasy of dispossession is most explicitly linked to the subject’s loss of the female body in the mother, in herself and in the other woman.”²⁶⁵ Over and against the fantasy of dispossession, I read the recognition that “we were always like this” as a way of denying not the female body (“lack” of penis included) but castration itself; this didn’t “happen” to us, “we were always like this.” Castration is then no threat, and Rich counters the phallogentric understanding of females as “dismembered.” Rather than reading “this” (lack) in relation to the biology or psychoanalytic models of an individual, Rich invites us to read her text as part of the very struggle against denial and erasure, a reclaiming of history, recasting the Oedipal drama as a collective call. Following this reading, the later wish to “re-member” (in the final line quoted) is not the near literal reparation of an original castration, focusing on a male “member,” but instead a way of connecting as members to a female collectivity, repairing the rupture created when birth “tore us from women.” It is a return to a lost collectivity. The model of community that emerges is, therefore, one that exists both across time and within time, making memory and history necessarily communally based and community generating projects.

263 Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” *Signs* 5:4 (Summer, 1980): 649.

264 Adrienne Rich, *Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), 76.

265 Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 249.

To this end, the feminist and lesbian movements of the 1970s placed significant emphasis on women's history. In the Jewish case, this is particularly evident in projects like *The Tribe of Dina* that "revealed Jewish women's participation in Jewish life,"²⁶⁶ offering a diverse portrait of contemporary Jewish feminist reality, while dedicating significant weight to historical writing. While the *Tribe* was not titled a lesbian anthology, it was originally published as a special issue of the journal *Sinister Wisdom*, "A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal." This is the oldest surviving lesbian literary journal, launched in 1976 and edited in the early 1980s by Rich and her long-term partner, Michelle Cliff. Irena Klepfisz and Melanie Kaye Kantrowitz, the editors of the *Tribe*, explicitly connect the beginning of their project to *Nice Jewish Girls*, the first Jewish lesbian anthology, published just a few years earlier.²⁶⁷ *Nice Jewish Girls* broke barriers of silence and erasure, and served as an important platform for articulating the challenges entailed in Jewish lesbian identities. In its footsteps, the *Tribe* was able to follow with more contemporary breadth while giving voice to women of the past, thus becoming one of the first resources for translations of primary texts by Yiddish women writers, containing translations of Kadya Molodowsky, Anna Margolin, and Fradel Shtok.²⁶⁸ Certainly there were by the 1980s a number of other English language anthologies of Yiddish writing, some of which included women, but as Hellerstein bemoans, the number of women included was by no means representative of their actual participation, leaving English readers unaware of how rich women's cultural production has been.²⁶⁹ And though for Yiddish readers the treasures of women's writing were available through diverse publications, first and foremost Ezra Korman's 1928 anthology *yidische dikhterins* (Yiddish Women Poets), to which I will return, they were not widely known or accessible. In order to become *Found Treasures*, as one recent translation anthology is titled, most women's texts have had to wait many years, and many are still waiting. Even once she was already a graduate student of Yiddish literature, Hellerstein describes having no knowledge of women's writing, and details her process of discovering this history. Twenty-some years later my experience was not dissimilar, illuminating the combination of hurdles faced projects like mine; the challenge of discovering women's history; those obstacles women faced when entering Jewish history; the way women and Yiddish were and are both still marginalized in Jewish and Israeli culture (together with so many others, for example, *Mizrachi* writing, not to mention works by *Mizrachi* women writers).²⁷⁰

266 Irena Klepfisz and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, "Introduction," *The Tribe of Dina*, eds. Melaine Kaye Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 9.

267 *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1982). [N/JG from here on]

268 Followed by the anthologies *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994) and *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories* (New York: Time Warner Publishing, 2003).

269 Kathryn Hellerstein, "Canon and Gender: Women Poets in Two Modern Yiddish Anthologies," in *Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 136–152.

270 *Mizrachi* is the term used to describe Jews from North Africa and the Middle East and their descendants.

Contrasting lesbian history and Jewish history, Rich writes that “lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning.”²⁷¹ True as this may be for (some) Jewish men, Jewish women had to struggle for inclusion in Jewish tradition and history, as I suggested earlier in this study. And continuing this dynamic, Rich’s turn to the Jewish past entailed a complex coming to terms with her own history and identity. As she reveals in her famous 1982 essay “Split at the Root”²⁷² and in numerous other works, Rich’s own access to Jewish tradition was more interrupted than continuous. What she inherited from both her father, whom she describes as an assimilated Jew, and her mother, a southern Protestant, was a sense of shame about her Jewishness. The essay makes clear how fraught her path to Jewish identity was: writing it feels like a “dangerous act filled with guilt and shame” (67). Besides societal shame over being Jewish and/or gay, Rich and many of the women writing in *Nice Jewish Girls* (where the essay first appeared) describe not having access to all of the resources of Jewish culture as a source of shame, frustration and anger. Despite this frustration Rich and other Jewish lesbians’ of the 1970s felt at being cut off from Jewish texts past and present, we might see this shared marginalization as an experience connecting them directly to their Jewish foremothers, who were in general equally and more directly marginalized from Jewish history and Jewish learning.

When Irena Klepfisz, the writer, activist and lesbian Yiddishist, who participated in much of the Jewish lesbian movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, went “searching for *di bikher un sform* from which Molodowsky’s page might have been torn,” she discovered that “the Yiddish cultural legacy, *di goldene keyt*, which had been passed on to me was strictly male.” But Klepfisz desperately wanted to find out “*vos di froyen hobn getrakht un geshribn*, what the women had thought and written.”²⁷³ Klepfisz explains that feminist identity politics “with its implicit multiculturalism pushed many of us to strengthen our ties to our cultural origin and to search for our specific women’s history, our cultural foremothers and role models.”²⁷⁴ For Klepfisz this is a meeting of feminism and a Jewish perspective, and is part of her “beginning to think from a Jewish feminist perspective, helping make visible a woman’s link in the chain of Jewish history.”²⁷⁵ Similarly trying to reclaim and then contain both the Jewish and the lesbian/feminist histories, Rich “redefines her view of her own past and the history of women: the two cannot be separated,”

271 Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality*, 649.

272 Originally Published in *Nice Jewish Girls*, 67-88.

273 Irena Klepfisz, “Forging a Woman’s Link in *Di Goldene Keyt*: Some Possibilities for Jewish American Poetry” in *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes* (Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990), 172.

274 Irena Klepfisz, “*Di feder fun harts*/The Pen of the Heart: *Tsveyshprakhikayt*/Bilingualism in Jewish American Poetry” in *Jewish American Poetry: Reflections, Poems, Commentary*, eds. Jonathan Barron and Eric Murphy Selinger (New England: University Press of New England, 2000), 322.

275 Ibid, 324.

as Kathy Rugoff writes.²⁷⁶ Focusing on the familial drama, she explores how Rich positions herself in relation to the legacy of her father, both as a representative of Jewish patriarchy and as a victim of internalized anti-Semitism. Rugoff goes on to note how, “ironically, after rejecting the language of her father, she enters into a dialogue with the poetry of the Jewish fathers”(19). However, through Yiddish Rich engages not with the poetry of the fathers, but with women’s poetry, written in a tongue that has long been identified with feminine creation. “If Hebrew presents itself as the ‘Name of the Father’ within the family drama of language acquisition,” writes Naomi Seidman in her pioneering work on the sexual politics of Yiddish and Hebrew, *A Marriage Made in Heaven*, “Yiddish is even more strongly linked to maternity or grandmaternity.”²⁷⁷ Seidman quotes famous Yiddish literary critic Sh. Niger: “Yiddish literature may well be unique among the literatures of the world in its having, until very recently, addressed itself to a female rather than male audience [...] Jewish women were not only the readers and consumers of Yiddish books, they were also often the ones who encouraged the writers to write in Yiddish—to write, in fact, especially for them”(15). Thus, “while both men and women spoke and read Yiddish,” Seidman writes, “the ‘femininity’ of Yiddish is a widely acknowledged cultural myth” (27) as suggested by Niger’ statement. Naturally, however, behind this myth lies a complex reality, within which mostly men could thematized and mobilize the trope of knowing or not knowing Yiddish, whereas women were often actively kept away from Hebrew. The history of marginalization of women in Hebrew letters, starting with the rabbinic literature, through the early *maskilim* (practitioners of the Hebrew Enlightenment), extends all the way to early Zionists. On the other hand, women’s marginalization from Jewish learning also meant that they inadvertently had far more freedom to access local vernaculars than did men, making Yiddish just one amongst their available languages.²⁷⁸ Ashkenazi men, on the other hand, were likely to be limited to Hebrew and Yiddish for the purposes of cultural production and consumption, at least until the Jewish Enlightenment, often having only partial command of the local vernacular.²⁷⁹ Consequently, I want to argue for the denaturalization of Yiddish as a women’s language, and realign it as a strategic literary choice, working against the assumption that Hebrew was a political Zionist choice and Yiddish was a natural default tongue for women. If many modern Yiddish women writers began to write in a non-Jewish vernacular and later had to choose Yiddish (or Hebrew), following the radical shifts in the linguistic map of Jewish culture, the need to *choose* Yiddish has dramatically increased as the likelihood of receiving it as a secular mother-tongue has diminished. Tracing the

276 Kathy Rugoff, “Sappho on Mount Sinai: Adrienne Rich’s Dialogue with Her Father,” in *Multicultural Literatures through Feminist/ Poststructuralist Lenses*, ed. Barbara Frey Waxman (Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press 1993), 9.

277 Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 9.

278 Cf. my introduction and first chapter, as well as Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*. (Waltham: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2004).

279 Cf. Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).

politics and poetics of choosing Yiddish today, as well as in the 1920s and in the 1970s, while recognizing the historical myth of feminization and the reality of marginalization, casts Yiddish as a pertinent tool in reclaiming Jewish women's history and complicating the terms of Jewish women's identities across history.

Bagegenishn/Encounters

"It would be presumptuous of any of us to act as if nothing came before us,"²⁸⁰ writes Klepfisz, calling for Jewish writing in English that looks back to the Yiddish texts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, making Yiddish women writers a "significant reference point in our writing,"²⁸¹ as Klepfisz herself does. And looking back, we see that even Molodowsky, one of the pioneers of Yiddish women's literature who wrote contemporaneously with many other women, herself made women of the past "a significant point of reference." Molodowsky's turn to the past and her special interest in the notable women who came before her is manifested in the extensive series of women's biographies she wrote under the name Rivke Zilberg, published in the New York Yiddish newspaper the *Forverts*. There she writes about world-famous women, such as Sappho and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jewish women such as Glikl of Hameln and Emma Lazarus, as well as wives and mothers of famous Jewish men.²⁸² At the same time, one of Molodowsky's earliest essayistic publications, *Bagegenish* [encounter],²⁸³ describes the challenges, possibly insurmountable, of building a contemporary community of Yiddish women writers. By contrast with Klepfisz and Rich's desire and search for such a community, Molodowsky is responding to disparaging literary critiques that categorically lump "women's poetry" in a community. Molodowsky insists the poets themselves do not respect [*halt nisht fun*] such a community, nor do their poems. "They," the poems, "stand with their backs to one another and often don't even meet/bump into each other, they want to avoid each other." Molodowsky brilliantly continues by way of parody, bringing to life the encounters poets have when their poems share a single page, "*eyn zaytl*," being quite literally lumped together in various journals under the "characterless rubric of *froyen dikhtung*." Weaving images and quotes from their poems she brings each poet to life, just to show how little they have in common with one another. While Miriam Ulinover (1890-1944) speaks of God and Jerusalem, Esther Shumiatcher (1899-1985) invokes Allah and crucifixes. Rokhl Korn (1898-1982) walks barefoot and Anna Margolin wears a mask. Molodowsky herself meets Chana Levin (1899-?) who is holding a "Lenin in one hand and a revolver [*biks*] in the other," whereas Molodowsky stands surrounded by names from an old prayer book [*an alter sider*]. When Levin notices this "enemy relic" [*fayntlikhe relikvye*] as she terms the prayer book which Molodowsky is holding, she points the revolver at

280 Klepfisz, "Forging a Woman's Link," 172.

281 Klepfisz, "*Di feder fun harts*/The Pen of the Heart," 335.

282 For a wider reading and contextualization of Molodowsky's essayistic work see Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2011).

283 Kadya Molodowsky, "*Bagegenish*," *literarishe bleter* 7 (1930), 95.

her, causing the cloud of names floating around her to disperse “and a white paper trail” to stretch between them.²⁸⁴

Melech Ravitch (1893–1976), Yiddish writer and critic, similarly animates women’s poems in his review of Ezra Korman’s monumental anthology *yidische dikhterins*, presenting them as a chorus of women, each speaking louder than the next, trying to “out-sing” [*iber-zingn*] the others.²⁸⁵ Ravitch deems Molodowsky the actual *firstin* [princess] of the entire anthology, saying Korman could easily have tripled the space (already 9 pages!) he gave her, letting her speak longer in this *froyen-aseyfe* [women’s gathering]. This “women’s gathering” holds poems from more than seventy Yiddish women poets ranging from 1586 to 1928. Korman roots his anthologizing strategy in his own historical time—since the new modernist *froyen dichtung* is only at its beginning stages and not at its “zenith” yet, he explains, he will refrain from judgments and generalizations, though these will certainly come.²⁸⁶ As it turned out, this was at once the starting point, the high point, and in a sense the culmination of Yiddish women’s poetry as a major literary phenomenon, a fact which makes Korman’s contribution all the more vital. The sheer weight of the book is astounding, declaring defiantly *mir zaynen do*, here we are. Perhaps the most touching aspect of the work is the inclusion of small photographed portraits of writers pasted within the hundreds of pages that lend this large volume a feel of a handmade scrapbook or family album, making it all the more precious, fragile, and ultimately fleeting.²⁸⁷ Be it intentionally or coincidentally, the *Tribe of Dina* also includes portraits of its contributors, from Anna Margolin to Irena Klepfisz. Some are photographed in context, like a very young Sarah Schulman posing in front of the New York City sky scape, which precedes her historical tour of the women of the Lower East Side, or the family style portraits included under the rubric “The Women in Our Family” (spread out, incidentally between Kadya Molodowsky and Yiddish translator Ruth Whitman). These photographs serve, like those in Korman’s anthology, to build a sense of familiarity and even familial kinship with the writers, while visually marking a temporal difference between the writers and today’s reader. Even if the authors themselves were to return to the book, certainly their own distance from the time in which they were portrayed must be one of the first things they encounter. For of course 1970s lesbians developed into 1980s and 1990s lesbians etc., even while adhering to many of the fashion markers and political dress codes they established back in the day. The photos thus mark the passage of time as much as they bring the images closer to the reader. Placing the anthology very much in its/his time, Korman highlights the legacy that his contemporary women writers transmit, and explains the juxtaposition of old and

284 The two had in fact recently shared a page in *literarische bleter* on June 15th, 1928 (Vol. 5. No. 24), 465.

285 *Literarische bleter* 42 (1928), p. 830-31

286 Korman, *Yidische Dikhterins: Antologye*, LXV.

287 Korman’s anthology is one of the thousands of titles available online through the National Yiddish Book Center—but the tactile experience lost in downloading it makes very clear the distance between the shelf life and digital versions of the same book. In this transitional moment I feel extremely lucky to have access to both.

new as a way to see, in his words, both the *yerushedikayt*, what “our modern women-poets” have inherited, as well as *di vayte nesiye* [the far journey] they have gone on the path divined and traveled by those before them (vii). Indeed, the anthology is an attempt to provide a historical perspective, but as Korman explains, he is not only excavating materials of the past, but also making available a wide range of contemporary (or recently past) materials that Jewish dispersion made inaccessible, for example works separated by the geographical distance of South Africa or Australia, or by the political distance of the Soviet Union. Both aspects of the encounter offered by the anthology, the encounter across time and the encounter across space, create a community based on distance and discontinuity. In fact, they become possible as a community through these very modes of distance, as I have shown through Irena Klepfisz and Kadya Molodowsky, and as I will continue to argue in this chapter.

This anthology, then, is another version of a cross-temporal “queer tribe.” Rather than discovering a “tradition” of Yiddish women’s poetry, it creates, as Novershtern has suggested, the *illusion* of such a “tradition.”²⁸⁸ This, according to Novershtern, is the anthology’s most concrete influences [*hashpa’ot mukhashiyot*], deeming the scope it offers merely imaginary [*prisa meduma*], for in practice only four of the seventy poets actually belong to the category “old Yiddish literature” (ending in the eighteenth century), and only two are from the nineteenth century.²⁸⁹ He goes on to argue that there was no attempt on behalf of Yiddish women poets to create their own a literary tradition; because “it is hard to point out a woman’s poem in Yiddish that has an explicit dialogue with another woman’s poem in Yiddish” (82); because they generally turn to a male addressee (overturning the convention of Yiddish literature’s female audience) (83); because they do not refer to the tradition of the *tkhines*, but rather to the *taytsh-khumesh*, written for women but not by them (as he shows through the example of the unusually traditional poet Miriam Ulinover)(85); because they do not take up women’s voices through Yiddish folklore (though here Ulinover is invoked as the exception to the rule).²⁹⁰ Novershtern is particularly concerned with Korman’s focus on numbers of women writers (suggesting the criterion for selection favore quantity over quality), which not only skews the image of women’s writing, but also misleads later readers and enables the feminist projects of recovery Novershtern criticizes (naming, among others, Norma Fain Pratt, Kathryn Hellerstein and Anita Norich). Indeed, such feminist scholars are not just the objects of Novershtern’s critique, but also presumably, his target audience, since his study appeared in a special issue of the Israeli journal *bikoret u-parshanut* (Criticism & Interpretation) dedicated to women’s writing. Speaking to the political and academic concerns of feminist scholars, Novershtern writes that the category of “women writing” is the product of a literary criticism controlled entirely by men (145) and connects these later projects’ focus on “the feminine essence” [*ha-havaya*

288 The quotations marks are his.

289 . Cf. Avraham Novershtern, “The Voices and the Choir: Yiddish Women’s Poetry in the Interwar Period,” *Criticism and Interpretation* 40 (2008): 80.

290 Ibid, 86.

ha-nashit] to the early ghettoizing of Yiddish women's writing (99), recruiting Molodowsky and other Yiddish women's own rejection of their grouping (98). Overall, it would seem that what Novershtern is most disturbed by is the very desire that there be a tradition of women writing, whether expressed in the 1920s or in the 1970s. That said, his essay is not only one of the most comprehensive pieces of scholarship on women's poetry, it is also one of the only works to offer an overview of literary criticism written about women's writing, and of the feminist criticism done in the field. Therefore, Novershtern is making an invaluable contribution to the legacy of Yiddish women writers and the writing on them, inadvertently producing another version of this queer tribe's "imagined tradition,"²⁹¹ on the very basis of his difference from it and conflict with it.

The desire for a cross-temporal community of women has certainly fueled much of the work on Yiddish women's writing, and as we shall see, the investment in an "imagined tradition" reflects both the desire for tradition and the fact that it can only be constituted by the imagination. It is this investment that drives Irena Klepfisz to repeatedly wish for a context within which her poems would grow "*tsuzamen mit di lider fun andere froyen* [together with the poems of other women]" (172). Klepfisz's desire for contact and community offers an opposite vision to that of Molodowsky's *Bagegenish*. Molodowsky has the "context," on the page and to a certain extent in her life, and can thus resent it, and rebel against it by depicting women's poems turning their backs on each other, even as they share a single page. For Klepfisz it is the lack of community that generates the vision of community in her writing. In creating a similar image that detaches poems from their poets, both Molodowsky and Klepfisz position dialogue as impossible. In Molodowsky's case we understand this as a product of actual differences between the poets, differences even more pronounced than their texts reveal, so that while the poems may be printed on one page, the poets have good reason to resist being grouped together. In Klepfisz's case we are led to believe that there are no poets with whom she can share a context, and the most that could even be desired is the company of other poems. For as much as Klepfisz yearns to establish "a dialogue *mit der yiddisher fargangenhayt*, with the Yiddish/Jewish past, a dialogue that would have to include women,"²⁹² she consistently positions herself alone in the present, relegating Yiddish poets to the past. And while it is true that the heyday of Yiddish poetry passed long before she started writing, true that the *khurbn* serves as an unbridgeable rupture on all counts, true that since then Yiddish has been on the decline, it is also a fact that there were women writing Yiddish contemporaneously with Klepfisz's beginning as an English poet, and even when she began writing bilingual Yiddish-English poetry in the 1980.²⁹³ Klepfisz bears no witness to any interaction with these poets, nor does she even make note of their existence, though

291 Ibid.

292 Klepfisz, "Forging a Woman's Link," 172.

293 Consider, for example, Malka Heifetz-Tussman (1893 - 1987), Rejzl Zychlinski (1910 - 2001), Chava Rozenfarb (1923-2011) and Rivka Bassman (born 1923)— to name but a few.

many of them were living and working in the very same city as Klepfisz, in effect turning her back on them as she looks backs for them.²⁹⁴

This simultaneity is startlingly enacted in a photographic image included in an essay about Molodowsky (amongst others), by none-other than Klepfisz herself.²⁹⁵ The snapshot, taken by Arnold Chekow, portrays what I believe to be a rare flesh-and-blood encounter between Adrienne Rich and Kadya Molodowsky, revealing “the mutually disruptive energy of moments that are not yet past and yet are not entirely present either,”²⁹⁶ to quote Elizabeth Freeman. Indeed, it is not just energy that lingers and disrupts neat temporal divisions, but bodies and lives that continue to exist in time, showing the very division of women’s writing into the 1920s, 1970s and today to be wholly artificial, inevitably slipping from the historicist to the ahistorical.

294 We might compare this to Virginia Woolf’s historical account of women’s writing in *A Room of One’s Own*, where none of her contemporary women writers are acknowledged, as Elizabeth Abel pointed out to me (in a private communication). Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*. (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005). Abel was also the one who suggested that the lesbian literature I was reading “on the side” (of my “real work”) did not have to be my illicit mistress, thus helping me forge my way back through lesbian literature to a new relationship with Yiddish.

295 Irena Klepfisz, “*Di mames, dos loshn*/The mothers, the language: Feminism, Yidishkayt, and the Politics of Memory,” *Bridges* 4:1 (Winter/Spring 1994): 36.

296 Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations.” *New Literary History* 31:4 (Autumn 2000): 729.



Molodowsky seated on stage between the poet-translators Adrienne Rich and John Hollander, at the 92nd Street YMHA on November 2, 1969. They were participants in the reading to celebrate the publication of A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg. Photo © Arnold Chekow (used with permission).

The photograph was taken on November 2nd, 1969,²⁹⁷ and the occasion for sharing the stage is the publication of Rich's translations of Molodowsky's *Froyen lider* (which I read in my introduction and below in this chapter) in the anthology *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*.²⁹⁸ It tells a different story than the one Klepfisz is telling about the gap between Yiddish and English poetry and its poets, between the past and the present. The two women mirror each other, both sitting cross-legged, each clasping her hands. Molodowsky's white hair radiates around her face under her dark hat, and Rich's long dark hair (perhaps the most blatant mark of her then still heterosexual lifestyle, alongside the mini-skirt) shines down her shoulders, reaching below her chest. Molodowsky's light dress is finally *tsiensdik* in the manner her foremothers demanded, covering her elbows and knees, while Rich's dress, barely covering her thighs, marks the height of fashion of the moment. Both women turn sideways, gazing at a source absent from the image, presumably the person reading at the front of the stage, while the third person, John Hollander, stares blankly

297 The image reproduced here is taken not from Klepfisz's essay, but from Kathryn Hellerstein's introduction to *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*, translated, introduced and edited by Kathryn Hellerstein (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999).

298 *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

forward.²⁹⁹ Hollander was another one of the contributors to the anthology. Like Rich, Hollander was a recipient of the Yale Series of Younger Poets award (he in 1958 and she in 1951). This award distinguishes them both as notable English language poets, celebrating the beginning of their careers, and though this photo comes long after they received this recognition for their poetic promise, for the fleeting moment of this photo, they still both represent the “Younger Poets” in comparison with the aging Yiddish poetess. Neither of them spoke Yiddish fluently,³⁰⁰ and neither continued publishing Yiddish translations beyond that point. In the moment we glimpse here, Yiddish and the English, as read by Molodowsky and Rich, coexisted even if they could not talk to each other. Their encounter thus materializes the dream encounter of Molodowsky’s poem, if not Rich’s *Dream of a Common Language*. But even if Rich and Molodowsky do not share a language, these two very different women can share a page and the stage, creating a community of Jewish women’s poetry that transcends the rushing currents of history, even as, or precisely by, diving into them. The simultaneity exposed here does not open a dialogue; rather, it exposes the opposite trajectories of English and Yiddish poetry, embodied in the poets—Molodowsky appears to continue to shrink before our very eyes, as she nears her imminent death in 1975; a year later, in 1976, Rich came out as a lesbian, becoming a radical voice who would no longer be invited to share the spotlight of mainstream Jewish literature (at least not until recently, and then too with a set of strings attached),³⁰¹ a marginalization Klepfisz has described experiencing as an out lesbian working in the field of Yiddish.³⁰²

Sharing the position of Jewish lesbian writers and activists, Klepfisz and Rich have also shared many a page—in *Conditions*, *Nice Jewish Girls* and perhaps my favorite,

299 Hollander is absent from the version of the picture in Klepfisz’s essay, which evidently underwent separatist cropping.

300 We know this from Rich’s biographical writings, and Hollander states as much explicitly in a 1985 interview with Edwin Honig, *The Poet’s Other Voice* (Cambridge: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985).

301 I am referring to recent controversy on the limits of free speech regarding Israel/Palestine in the Bay Area Jewish community, which resulted in Rich being invited to read at the SF JCC in 2006, right after the JCC canceled an event connected to *Jewish Voice for Peace*, an organization Rich was on the board of. She bravely spoke to this at her reading: “since the birth of Israel as a Jewish state, a narrow orthodoxy regarding Jews and Israel has claimed itself as the official Jewish position in America. Any monologue, marginalizing dissent, is like a kind of intellectual house arrest, and there is a kind of hopelessness in that condition.” I am grateful to my dear friend, colleague and comrade Sarah Anne Minkin for sharing with me Rich’s remarks (which she received in advance from Rich so that she could capture them on tape, for the use of JVP).

302 Indeed, this explains why Klepfisz is absent from this stage, and why her contemporary Yiddish poets are absent from her text, revealing how sexuality and politics shape the limits of community. Understanding the internal politics of their (past) present offers yet another explanation for the early Jewish lesbian turn to the past, allowing them to identify with a foremother who could not reject them, while avoiding their contemporaries who might reject them, given the chance. The 1970s lesbian ideal of “sisterhood” also plays into this analysis as a site of contestation, as history has indeed shown it to be. For the desire that “all women” be grouped in a “common cause,” not only rhetorically but also politically proved to elide important differences between women, problematizing politics of collaboration and representation. Cross-temporal community is then a way to avoid challenges faced by the lesbian movement both internally and externally.

as *di vilde chayes* [the wild animals], the radical Jewish lesbian group that in 1982 spoke up against Israel's actions in Lebanon and lesbian anti-Semitism at once.³⁰³ Yet they still wound up in very different positions, certainly in terms of literary fame and the material security that can come with it. They each offer a very different story about Jewish lesbian life and literature in terms of their disparate Jewish backgrounds and the different roles they ultimately took in the women's movement and in the sphere of American poetry. Adrienne Rich published continually from the 1950s to date,³⁰⁴ and she has always been a widely known and highly appreciated English language poet. Irena Klepfisz is known in much narrower circles, and the focus has too often been on her *Khurbn* poetry and her role as the daughter of Michał Klepfisz, regarded as a hero of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (who died protecting his comrade Marek Edelman).³⁰⁵ Adrienne Rich, on the other hand, had to struggle to access her Jewish heritage, alongside her struggle to reclaim the stories of women's history. Klepfisz studied Yiddish with Max Weinreich, and though she was an active researcher and translator, the Yiddish institutions of the 1960s and 1970s were inhospitable to her lesbianism.³⁰⁶ Rich gained literary fame in English and translated Yiddish poetry before coming out as a lesbian. Whereas working with Yiddish stands out as an exception in Rich's English language career, Klepfisz's career drew closer and closer to Yiddish, culminating (for now) in a series of bilingual Yiddish-English poems, after which her collected poetry is titled, *Etlekhe verter oyf mame loshn/A Few Words in the Mother Tongue* (1990). Since then she has fallen silent in the field of poetry, in effect joining the Yiddish women writers she translates and writes about. One can only hope this silence is temporary, for many of the issues Klepfisz has spoken out about are now more relevant than ever. For example, both Klepfisz and Rich have been vocal on the topic of Israel/Palestine, and their poetic and political call for justice can continue to stand as a beacon for contemporary readers and liberation movements, especially as LGBT organizing must now contend with the issue of "pinkwashing" the Israeli occupation (using the celebration of Israeli Jewish gay rights to mask and even justify the oppression of

303 "An Open Letter to the Women's Movement," signed "in sisterhood and struggle," by Evelyn T. Beck, Nancy K. Bereano, Gloria Z. Greenfield, Melanie Kaye, Irena Klepfisz, Bernice Mennis and Adrienne Rich. April 22, 1982, "Jewish Lesbian" folder, The Lesbian Herstory Archives.

304 The precarious marker "to date" became out of date just weeks after I originally wrote it. It thus brings to the fore the existence of poetry in time, for as Rich wrote "poetry never stood a chance of standing outside history," and neither do its poets.

305 Klepfisz used this measure of acceptance to voice her own radical politics. For example, at a 2006 talk she gave at Mills College, she described how, invited to read poetry at the 50th anniversary of the uprising, she chose to read "*der soyne/the enemy*," a poem about the Israeli occupation of Palestine, using a Palestinian child's point of view to compare the Israeli soldier to a Nazi soldier (a poem I will discuss in detail in my coda). She also describes causing great discomfort at the National Yiddish Book Center, repeating the word *lezbianke* as she read her poem *etlekhe verter*. This of course before the now prevalent celebration of the intersections of "queer" and Yiddish, as Jeffrey Shandler describes in "Queer Yiddishkeit: Practice and Theory," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25:1 (2006): 90-113.

306 As she herself describes (private communication). While homophobia has not disappeared from Jewish circles, we can certainly note a radical shift in visibility and prominence of LGBT Jewish topics. A fascinating twist on this relatively recent shift is the role LGBT rights in Israel play in American Jewish political discourse.

Palestinians, gay and straight alike).³⁰⁷ The Jewish lesbian model of political engagement should continue to remind us how interconnected these liberation struggles are. Furthermore, in the context of my current reading, I want to suggest that it was the very frustration with the Zionist focus of American Jewish politics that has led to the poets' backwards turn towards Yiddish, positioning it again over and against Hebrew (past or present).³⁰⁸ Similarly, my own turn to the Yiddish past reflects a frustration with contemporary politics. Aiming to intervene in my present, I am in search of alternative pasts offered to me by Jewish women's poetry and politics. Understanding the lesbian mediation as similarly founded on political discontent adds another vital link on the backwards facing *keyt/continuum* this dissertation hopes to establish.

The Drive to Connect

Leaning on the past to generate present possibilities not only structures my work, but has stood at the center of the lesbian search for the past:

We are searching the past because there are to be found there a great variety of models to alter, enhance, intensify our own visions, our own options, as we move from the male dominance of patriarchy to more equalitarian relations and the full range of choices available to women and to women and men in a fully creative and unconfined society.³⁰⁹

Beyond the projects of translation, recovery and discovery which this chapter has already mentioned, a central (a)historical practice of Jewish lesbian "identity poetics"³¹⁰ is creating imaginary and fictional versions of the lives of both famous and anonymous Jewish women. As Bonnie Zimmerman notes, this was typical of lesbian authors in general, "whether the image is created by Stephen Gordon, Beebo Brinker, or mythic Amazons, the reconstruction of past history [by lesbian authors] is constant."³¹¹ Because archival research and translation projects offered only partial access to the past, leaving many narratives lost and inaccessible, many women chose to imagine and recreate images of that past that was not passed down

307 Cf. Sarah Schulman, *Salt on Green Almonds: Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming in 2012) and the recent issue of GLQ edited by Gil Hochberg, "Queer Politics and the Question of Palestine/Israel," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16:4 (2010).

308 The turn to Hebrew took place within the lesbian movement of the 1970s-1980s not as a turn backwards, but across, connecting to the story of the nascent lesbian movement in Israel rather than to historical Hebrew speaking figures. The connection with the Israeli women's movement is based not only in lesbianism and Judaism but also in a shared politics against the Occupation. Cf. *Lesbiyot: Israeli Lesbians Talk About Sexuality, Feminism, Judaism and Their Lives*, ed. Tracy Moore (London: Cassell, 1995). Even though this book was not published until the 1990s it's American and Israeli participants are the activists and writers of the 1970s-1980s.

309 Blanche W. Cook, "Women Alone Stir My Imagination," 736.

310 Linda Garber offers this fitting term to describe postmodern identity politics that strategically deploy or activate essentialism. Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

311 Bonnie Zimmerman, "The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives" *Signs* 9:4 (Summer, 1984): 677.

to them. “I looked around and saw that so many of my generation’s activists were Jewish dykes, and I felt like we couldn’t have sprung full-grown from our moment in time—we must have had some kind of origin,” writes Elana Dykewomon, who participated in the aforementioned lesbian Jewish anthologies and served as an editor of *Sinister Wisdom*.³¹² This has led her to write the novel *Beyond the Pale*, which recasts the classic Jewish tale of life in Eastern Europe and the immigration to America as a lesbian *Bildungsroman*.³¹³

When first conducting research at Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (ZIH), the Jewish Historical archives in Warsaw, I myself was seized by a similar impulse, trying to invent a lesbian Yiddish poet to stand in for the history I desired/the history of my desire. Imagine my surprise when I discovered one already existed as I found the work of Irena Klepfisz—not in an archive, but in an actual real life encounter at a Jewish feminist conference at Mills College in 2006, where Klepfisz read the bilingual poem “*der soyne/the enemy: an interview in Gaza*,” in which a Palestinian child’s encounter with an Israeli soldier is narrated in the first person in Yiddish and then in English.³¹⁴ This poem, to which I will return in the coda of this dissertation, offers a striking attempt to use Yiddish to “enfold within this language our contemporary lives and cries.”³¹⁵ At the same time, Klepfisz uses English and a bilingual English-Yiddish poetics to imagine and create voices from the Jewish past. In the poem “Fradel Shtok,” she takes on the voice of a specific Yiddish writer, the poet Shtok. Klepfisz then speaks for her as one would for a fictional character, at the same time insisting on her actual existence by supplying a biography grounding her as an historical figure:

Yiddish writer. B. 1890 in Skale, Galicia. Emigrated to New York in 1907. Became known when she introduced the sonnet form into Yiddish poetry, Author of *Erzeylungen* (Stories) in 1919, a collection in Yiddish. Switched to English and published *For Musicians Only* in 1927. Institutionalized and died in a sanitarium around 1930.³¹⁶

In this extremely condensed version of an entire life, Klepfisz gives us only the points that are important to an understanding of her poem, at the center of which stands the linguistic struggle between Yiddish and English. This struggle is present

312 Elana Dykewomon in conversation with Jyl Lynn Felman “Forward and Backward: Jewish Lesbian Writers,” *Bridges* 16:1 (Spring 2011): 228.

313 Elena Dykewomon, *Beyond the Pale* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1997). Though this novel was not published until 1997, it is very much a product of Dykewomon’s participation in the early lesbian separatist movement. Her adherence to that particular political moment marks her difference from contemporary queer politics, as she herself expressed in her piece with Jyl Lynn Felman, “Forward and Backward: Jewish Lesbian Writers.”

314 Not only did she exist, but she was able and willing to meet me. Just as I can only imagine what took place in the encounter between Rich and Molodowsky, I leave to the reader’s imagination to fill in what took place in my meetings with Klepfisz.

315 Klepfisz, “*Di feder fun harts/The Pen of the Heart*,” 334.

316 Klepfisz, *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New* with an introduction by Adrienne Rich (Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990), 228.

even in the simple description “emigrated to New York,” which focuses on the act of leaving (emigration) rather than on the arrival (immigration). Naming Shtok a “Yiddish writer” despite her eventual “switch” to English implies the failure of this transition, linking it to her subsequent insanity and hospitalization.³¹⁷ The additional epigraph, from Nobel Laureate Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, stating that “Language is the only homeland” further highlights the impossibility of the transition, and the depth of the loss it entails. However, the poem itself manages to narrate these losses in the new tongue. Just as Shtok brought the sonnet into Yiddish literature, Klepfisz uses Shtok to bring a Yiddish voice into English-language poetry, in an innovative form. For the poem not only narrates the struggle of transition between Yiddish and English, it embodies and expresses this struggle in a set of unique poetic devices, as we can see by looking at a few of its stanzas:

They make it sound easy: some disjointed
 Sentences a few allusions to
 Mankind. But for me it was not
 So simple more like trying
 to cover the distance from here
 to the corner or between two sounds.

Think of it: *hey*m and *home* the meaning
 the same of course exactly
 but the shift in vowel was the ocean
 in which I drowned.

I tried. I did try.
 First held with Yiddish but you
 know it's hard. You write *gas*
 and *street* echoes back
 No resonance. And—let's face it—
 memory falters.

The lines of the poem hold the physical strain of the distance between English and Yiddish. Even though “they make it sound easy,” Klepfisz’s poem physically holds the struggle of language transition it narrates by way of mixing English and Yiddish, and creating a form that perfectly reflects the narrated content. This allows the speaker/poet (the real and the imagined) to prove “*she knew from trying.*” She goes on to describe what this attempt entailed, making her predicament explicit. Her *holding with Yiddish*—a calque translation for the Yiddish idiom “*haltn bay*”—is like an attempt to cling to driftwood to avoid drowning, though this might have worked against her, as “the shift in vowel was the ocean” in which she drowned. Turning to the addressee, she then tries to seek sympathy while justifying herself, though the enjambment after the turn “but you” resonates accusingly (implying “I tried, but you got in my way”). Still, the following line allows the addressee not to bear the blame

317 A narrative that bears comparison to Celia Dropkin’s short story *di tentserin* [the Dancer], which describes a woman’s descent into madness as linked to her failed dream of becoming a dancer.

but to join the struggle. The addressee is the one who “knows” it is hard, the one whose language later also slips: “and *you* start using/*alley* when you mean *gesele*.” Together with the speaker, the addressee is asked to “face it,” the faltering of memory. In this idiomatic English expression, speaker and addressee, as well as the two poets, Klepfisz and Shtok, admit not just the struggle to learn English, but the challenge of remembering Yiddish. This joint realization, or even confession, stands as a concise two-word line (as opposed to the longer, still struggling lines the precede it), itself threatening to falter, falling off the end of the stanza.

These formal devices—enjambments, calque translation, shifts in tone—alongside the mixed use of Yiddish and English, create a poem that is distinctly of Klepfisz’s time rather than the time of the poet who’s her subject. Simultaneously, this poem corresponds richly with the original time of Yiddish women’s poetry. For example, the visceral struggle Klepfisz attributes to the transition between languages strongly echoes Margolin’s depiction of the struggle between the ancestral voices and that of her speaker in the poem that opened this chapter. If Margolin’s speaker is likened to a “dark house being trampled through,” Klepfisz’s poem ends when the speaker/Shtok is lured into a house, only to hear “the lock snap behind” her. Klepfisz’s house has a “doorframe slightly familiar./Still you can’t place it/exactly,” which renders it foreign and familiar at once, and makes the home *unheimlich*, literally un-home-like. Besides invoking Rich’s famous *Fact of a Doorframe*, the uncanny moment echoes the Voice of Margolin’s speaker, which she herself cannot recognize [*ikh derken nit mayn kol*]. Speaking for Shtok, Klepfisz is in a sense also speaking back to Margolin and across to Rich, while thematizing the very difficulty of this speech and the interrupted and disjunctive connections it generates.

While Margolin and Shtok had very different literary personas and life stories,³¹⁸ we can see them both refracted through Klepfisz’s poem, as Klepfisz tells to and through them her own story, the reverse struggle she herself has with Yiddish. Using Shtok’s voice, Klepfisz is at once defining her own poetic self (of which linguistic struggles are but one aspect), as well as “rescuing” from “drowning” a Yiddish poet at risk of being forgotten. Yet she takes this still another step further, not just “discovering” Yiddish women writers, but becoming one, thereby placing herself in the very *keyt* she is creating. To this end she undertakes a double move in which she must discover and/or invent both of her female writing predecessors as well as herself in the figure of “Yiddish poetess,” as she would have been called in the 1920s. This is akin to the move male writers were undertaking earlier in the twentieth century, such as Sholem Aleichem’s self-fashioning as the grandson of Yiddish literature by naming S.Y. Abramowitz the *zeyde*/grandfather.³¹⁹ Anita Norich terms this “a stroke of mythmaking genius by Sholem Aleichem, who

318 On the construction of poetic personas in Yiddish and Hebrew poetry by women cf. Naomi Brenner, “Slippery Selves: Rachel Bluvstein and Anna Margolin in Poetry and in Public,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 19 (Spring 2010): 100-33.

319 Cf. Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

understood that a respectable literature must have a history and forefathers.”³²⁰ This “peculiar genealogy,” writes Norich, “obliterates not only the maternal line, but the authority of the father as well” (ibid). This genealogy is, then, identity affirming, according authority to the present by obliterating the authority of the direct past and favoring instead a more distant and thereby less threatening past (and I will address the implications of favoring the grandfather over the father below). Klepfisz’s genealogical project, on the other hand, illuminates the matrilineal line Norich cites Sholem Aleichem as obliterating. However, leading back to Shtok, this matrilineage does not tell a triumphant story of identity formation that can accord authority, even as it serves as part of identity politics. Instead, the story that emerges for both Klepfisz and the writers she recovers is one of struggle and the instability of language and of identity at once. The turn to the past, and the way that past is portrayed is, therefore, not identity affirming; rather, it comes to terms with the “complicated and meaningful ways that identity is continually compromised, imperiled, one might even say *embarrassed* by identification,” as Diana Fuss warns, any identity politics should.³²¹ For even if “identifications are the origin of some of our most powerful, enduring, and deeply felt pleasures. They are also the source of considerable emotional turmoil, capable of unsettling or unmooring the precarious grounding of our everyday identities” (ibid). The destabilizing power of identification with Yiddish women writers is epitomized in Klepfisz’s move to identify herself *as* a Yiddish woman writer, creating poetry that is not just about but in Yiddish, as we saw in the poem “*etlekhe verter oyf mame loshn/a few words in the mother tongue,*” discussed in the previous chapter. This poem uses the bilingual form to undermine dominant patriarchal discourse in English and Yiddish at once. Though the poem culminates in a Yiddish the poem itself has actually equipped the English reader to understand, at the same time, it instructs the reader just how much she has lost and stands to lose through language, not just on the front of the disappearance of Yiddish, but on the level of the daily struggle over meaning and naming so central to feminist politics:

a froy kholmt a woman
 dreams *ir ort oyf der velt*
 her place in this world
un zi hot moyre and she is afraid
 so afraid of the words

kurve
yidene
yenta
lezbianke
*vaybl*³²²

320 Anita Norich “A Response from Anita Norich” *Prooftexts*, 20:1-2 (Winter/Spring 2000): 215.

321 Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 10.

322 Klepfisz, *A Few Words*, 225. For the complete poem see Chapter Two.

In this bilingual dream, were we to translate it ourselves, “a woman dreams a woman.” But if we continue with the enjambment to the next line, the rest of the translation, as Klepfisz slowly supplies it, reveals that it is a woman dreaming “her place in this world.” This dream teeters on the brink of nightmare, bringing to life the words the woman most fears. Much as I want to translate them, I will refrain because Klepfisz is so careful not to. But as the poem moves into the realm of Yiddish and leaves the English behind, it allows the “other,” the Yiddish, the feminine, the lesbian, the past, to overtake the present, in a queer haunting that echoes Molodowsky’s nocturnal visits and Margolin’s possession. In Klepfisz’s essay “*Khaloymes/Dreams in Progress: Culture, Politics and Jewish Identity*”³²³ the unnamed dreaming woman of *etleke verter* becomes Kadya Molodowsky in her *froyen lider*: “still when Kadia dreamed, she knew and remembered what she dreamed of.” And Klepfisz dreams too, but her “dreams as a Jew and a poet are murkier and not easily remembered,” (209) she writes, for her distance from the women in her family is “more marked” (even than Kadya’s). But as I have been arguing, it is Klepfisz’s distance from the women in her family and from the poets she is in search of that enables her to use Yiddish to construct a conversation with and about them, in dreams and in writing.

Elizabeth Freeman suggests dreaming as a mode in which queer historians might work, often from outside the discipline of history, having “reclaimed some of the improvisatory methods for which “dreaming” is a placeholder, turning them into queered protocols of historical research, and even into queer historiography.”³²⁴ Rich’s dream is of a *common language*: “the true nature of poetry. The drive/to connect. The dream of a common language.”³²⁵ Klepfisz picks up this dream and constructs a poetic version of it in a language that is not “common” at all. If Yiddish was historically a “common language” because of being “subordinate to Hebrew, viewed traditionally as the language of ‘women, children, and ignorant men,’” belonging to the street, as Maeera Shreiber writes, we might connect it to Rich’s *Dream of a Common Language*.³²⁶ But by the time Klepfisz is writing in the 1980s, Yiddish is no longer common at all. It is certainly not common to the women of the lesbian movement, and is not even shared between Klepfisz and Rich; indeed, Yiddish is a central point of difference between Rich and Klepfisz, the former translating Yiddish into English early in her career, the latter transitioning from being an English writer to a bilingual poet as her career progressed. In both cases Yiddish was something that marked their difference from their lesbian comrades, while at the same time joining the particular trend of Chicana lesbians such as Gloria

323 Klepfisz, “*Khaloymes/Dreams in Progress: Culture, Politics and Jewish Identity*” in *Dreams of an insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes* (Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990).

324 Elizabeth Freeman “Introduction,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2 (2007): 162.

325 Rich, “Origins and History of Consciousness,” in *Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), 7.

326 Maeera Shreiber makes the connection between Yiddish as common and Rich’s *Dream of a Common Language* in “The End of Exile: Jewish Identity and Its Diasporic Poetics” *PMLA* 113:2 (March, 1998): 238. My interest here is in what it means to create something in common out of something that is not common or shared at all.

Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, who turn to Spanish to voice their particular identity politics. Whereas the bilingual poetics of Klepfisz and Anzaldúa are in dialogue with each other (at least in their shared use of English alongside Yiddish/Spanish),³²⁷ there is of course a significant difference in that Anzaldúa is using a language still widely spoken and growing (with its own set of contemporary political challenges, to be sure), whereas Klepfisz is using a language that speaks to the Jewish past. If Anzaldúa transgresses borders of space, Klepfisz transgresses borders of time. Mixing past and present, Yiddish and English, Klepfisz allows Yiddish to voice her poetic and political concerns, using the English/Yiddish encounter to undermine dominant norms in both languages, creating a new language, a new mode of conversation, a queer historiography, a dream of women's history.

Variations and Derivations

Returning to Molodowsky's dream in the poem cycle *Froyen lider* I find multiple versions of women's history, not only in the form of multiple translations, but also in the multiple versions of the original Yiddish poem, as well as of the cycle as a whole.³²⁸ The first version appeared in 1927, in Molodowsky's debut book of poems, *Kheshvendike nekht*, and the second followed closely, appearing in 1928, in Ezra Korman's *Yidishe dikhterins*. The proximity of these publication dates makes it hard to determine which was the first to be written (one would need to know when her manuscript was submitted to her Warsaw publisher, and when to Korman).³²⁹ Without knowing which came first, a brief comparison of the final stanzas of each version and of their translations will illuminate two markedly different modes of encounter set up by the poet. The Yiddish version on the right is from Kadya Molodowsky's *Kheshvendike nekht* and the one the left from Korman's *Yidishe dikhterins*. Adrienne Rich's translation is based on Korman's version whereas Kathryn Hellerstein's translation is based on the version from *Kheshvendike nekht*.³³⁰ Neither translation is extremely accurate, yet each highlights interesting aspects of Molodowsky's poetics while revealing the translators' position in the poetic politics of translation.

327 Klepfisz credits Anzaldúa with the inspiration to create bilingually, and Anzaldúa opens *Borderlands/La Frontera* quoting Klepfisz's work. On their connection cf. Jane Hedley "Nepantlist Poetics: Narrative and Cultural Identity in the Mixed-Language Writings of Irena Klepfisz and Gloria Anzaldúa," *Narrative* 4:1 (January, 1996): 36-54.

328 Cf. Sheva Zucker, "Kadye Molodowsky's 'Froyen Lider' ('Women's Songs') *Yiddish* 9:2 (1994): 44-51.

329 Though in Korman's anthology the cycle is dated 1918, Hellerstein, who has researched Molodowsky extensively, did not find earlier versions than the ones we are reading here [private communication].

330 Yiddish version on the right from Kadya Molodowsky's *Kheshvendike nekht* (Vilnius: B. Kletskin, 1927), 11, Yiddish version on the left from Korman's *Yidishe dikhterins*, 190, Adrienne Rich's translation appears in *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, 284 and Kathryn Hellerstein's translation appears in *Paper Bridges*, 69.

און איד וועל די באַבעס אַנטקעגן גיין זאָגן:
 אייערע זיפצן האָבן ווי פּאַכיקע בייטשן געאַטעמט
 און האָבן מיין לעבן מיין יונגן געטריבן פון שטוב צום אַרויסגאנג,
 פון אייערע כשרע בעטן אַנטלויפן.
 נאָר איד גייט מיר נאָך, וואו די גאַס איז נאָר טונקל,
 וואו ס'פּאַלט נאָר אַ שאַטן.
 און אייערע שטילע פּאַרשטיקטע געוויינען יאָגן נאָך מיר זיך ווי
 האַרבסטקע ווינטן,
 און אייערע רייד זיינען זיידענע פּעדים אויף מיין מוח פּאַרבונדן.
 איז מיין לעבן אַן אויסגעפּליקט בלאַט פון אַ ספר
 און די שורה די ערשטע פּאַרריסן.

און איד וועל די באַבעס אַנקעגן גיין זאָגן:
 ווי האַרבסטקע ווינטן יאָגן נאָך מיר זיך
 נייגונג פּאַרוועלקטע פּון אייערע לעבנס.
 און איר קומט מיר אַנקעגן,
 ווו די גאַס איז נאָר טונקל,
 און ווו ס'ליגט נאָר אַ שאַטן:
 און צו וואָס אַט דאָס בלוט אָן אַ טומאה
 ס'זאָל זיין מיין געוויסן, ווי אַ זיידענער פּאַדעם
 אויף מיין מוח פּאַרבונדן,
 און מיין לעבן אָן אויסגעפּליקט בלאַט פּון אַ ספר,
 און די שורה די ערשטע פּאַרריסן?

And I will go meet these grandmothers,
 saying:
 Like winds of autumn, your lives'
 Withered melodies chase after me.
 And you come to meet me
 Only where streets are in darkness.
 And where only shadows lie:
 And why should this blood without blemish
 be my conscience, like a silken thread
 Bound upon my brain,
 And my life, a page plucked from a holy
 book,
 The first line torn?

(Trans. Kathryn Hellerstein)

I will go meet the grandmothers, saying:
 Your sighs were the whips that lashed me
 and drove my young life to the threshold
 to escape from your kosher beds.
 But wherever the street grows dark you
 pursue me—
 wherever a shadow falls.

Your whimperings race like the autumns
 winds past me,
 and your words are the silken cord
 still binding my thoughts,
 My life is a page ripped out of a holy book
 and part of the first line is missing.
 (Trans. Adrienne Rich)

Both poems open with the *bobes*, the grandmothers, coming to the speaker, yet in each version the encounter and its implications play out differently: In the version from *Kheshvandike nekht* (on the top right, ending with a question mark, translated by Hellerstein on the bottom left) the speaker goes “to meet the grandmothers” and they come to meet her, repeating the verb *antkegen* [against/towards] for the speaker and foremothers alike, thereby creating a meeting space in the middle. In the Korman version (on the left), the speaker goes towards the women in an identical verse, “*ikh vel di bobes antkegen geyn*” [I will go meet the grandmothers], yet instead of coming to meet her they “pursue her” [*ir geyt mir nokh*]. Their “sighs like whips” [*ziftsn vi fokhike baytshn*] and their silent cries chase her, driving her from their (and her own) kosher beds, highlighting the un-kosherness of the speaker and marking the dark streets where they meet as sites for potential sexual impropriety. The image of the *koshere betn* is strikingly absent from the *Kheshvandike nekht* version, downplaying the centrality of sexuality in comparison to the Korman version. On the other hand, the Korman version does include the metaphor of “blood without blemish” [*blut on a tumeh*], limiting the centrality of the blood metaphor overall.

The *keshvendike nekht* version represents blood simultaneously as biological determinism and religious regulation, both of which the speaker can, and does, reject—the women may have toiled to keep their blood *kosher*, but neither *tumeh* (impurity) nor *tsnies* (modesty) will define the speaker's blood as it does theirs. Defiantly asking *far vos*- asking why this blood must define her actions, “why should this blood without blemish/be my conscience, like a silken thread.” Instead of blood, the Korman version offers speech, *reyd*, as that which is still binding: “and your words are the silken cord/still binding my thoughts.” Whether blood or words, both versions construct the bind through the image of a silken cord or thread. However, as opposed the singular *fodem* [thread] of the bloodline in the *kheshvendike nekht* version, Korman's version portrays the chain of words in the plural *fedim* [threads, which Rich then translates as the singular “cord”], serving as a multi-vocal chorus of ever-haunting cries and sighs. Instead of these sighs, cries, and most importantly, words, the version in *kheshvendike nekht*, represents the women's voices only as “withered melodies” [*farvelkte nigunim*]. While the *nign* (a traditional liturgical melody with no words) can be read as a possible image of women's continuous non-verbal tradition, the fact that it is withered implies not only that is ancient, but also a lack of tending, care and use—by the women, their *svive* (environment, also the title of Molodowsky's journal) and later their descendants. For the speaker, these *nigunim* no longer hold the power of prayer. Like the kosher blood, they are not enough to hold her.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two versions and the respective models of encounter they portray lies in the closing line, posed as a defiant question in the first version and a definitive affirmative statement in the second. If in one the speaker questions why the ancestors' pure blood should bind her, in the other she declares herself bound by their words. The two versions thus set up alternative modalities of genealogy, that of words and that of blood. When it comes to blood, the speaker can defy the tie, along with the religious injunctions it carries. It is because the bloodline is controlled by oppressive religious categories that the speaker can and must rebel against it. However, posing the final statement as a question, why, to what end [*tsu vos*] should her life be a “page plucked from a holy book/the first line torn” does not only undermine the ties that bind her, but also the necessity of a break from this line (as I suggested in the Introduction to the dissertation). Similarly, the version that declares that her “life is a page torn out of a holy book/the first line missing”³³¹ also works against its own definitiveness, opening a bond that is not biological, but textual. The women's words cannot be rebelled against like the bloodline, rendering the immutable bloodline more open to challenge than the constructed textual one. For indeed, the textual like needs the speaker to bring it into being before it can be rejected. The sighs and cries, as well as the *nigunim*, must become words, as they finally do through the poem, ventriloquized by the poet/speaker, making the bond one of narrative transmission. The foremothers will

331 Note that the difference between “missing” and “torn” is only a product of translating the same word: *farrisen*. In the two Yiddish versions the difference in the final word lies in the punctuation, in the difference between the full stop and the question mark.

haunt the speaker until she gives them voice, thus finding her own voice to take a stand against them.

If each version offers a different model of encounter, Rich's translation accentuated the distance and conflict even more extremely than Hellerstein's, not to mention both of the Yiddish versions. This is manifest from the first line, which is the same in both Yiddish versions: "*Es veln di froyen fun unzer mishpokhe/Beinhakht in khaloymes mir kumen,*" translated by Rich as "The faces of women long dead, of our family,/come back in the night, come in dreams to me" as opposed to Hellerstein's: "the women of my family will come to me in dreams at night." Metonymically replacing the women with their faces, and inserting the adjective "dead," doubly differentiates the specters from the speaker. This is not a happy family reunion but an external invasion, repeated as the women "come back in the night," as opposed to Hellerstein's "will come"—a singular, tentative, even hypothetical projected (future) encounter. Upon first encountering the text (in a seminar at Mills College with Chana Bloch) I was not aware of the multiple Yiddish originals, and ascribed the difference between Rich and Hellerstein's texts (which were presented to me on one page with only one of Molodowsky's versions) to their sensibilities as translators. My assumption was bolstered by how well the differences in translations seemed to correlate to the difference in the poetic politics of each of the translators. While Jewish literary scholar Kathryn Hellerstein pioneered the feminist study of Yiddish literature and the translation of Yiddish women's poetry, she is also a meticulously attentive translator, attempting to remain loyal to the different linguistic and poetic elements prioritized by the poet herself,³³² while theorizing the implications of feminist translation.³³³ And though it seemed jarring to think someone would add the image of whips driving women from kosher beds, the fact that the translator of this version was the radical lesbian poet Adrienne Rich certainly seemed to account for such an addition. It was not until I opened Korman's *yidische dikhterins* that I realized that the two translations actually reflected two separate original versions. Still, my sense that each translation reflected the priorities of its translator was not altogether mistaken. Indeed, the mark of Rich's poetics, as well as of her politics, is striking. For example, in the lines preceding the quoted verses, in the Yiddish line "*kh'hob mayne tseyner di vayse tsekritst in di eynzame nekht/fun dervartung,*" instead of the speaker clenching her "white teeth throughout the lonely nights," in Hellerstein's translation which closely mirrors the Yiddish, the speaker in Rich's translation "gritted away the long nights of waking between my white/teeth." Rich not only translates the Yiddish into English, but also converts the physical symptoms of frustration into poetic metaphor. Rich also makes changes to the layout of the poem, isolating the word "teeth" from the rest of the line and placing it in a line unto itself, thereby recasting the physicality she has poetically converts, opening it to implicit sexual innuendo, and making the space "between" not the

332 This is evident in the translations themselves, as well as in "A Note on the Translation" Hellerstein included in *Paper Bridges*.

333 Kathryn Hellerstein, "Translating as a Feminist: Reconceiving Anna Margolin" in *Prooftexts*, 20: 1-2 (2000): 191-208.

space between teeth but between white thighs or other body parts. The sexualizing aspect of the translation is also evident when Rich translates Molodowsky's metaphor in the previous line: "*s'zaynen di bakn—tsvey roytlekhe epl—/oyf boym nokh geshtanen.*" What Hellerstein's closely translates as "my cheeks/ were two ruddy apples still fixed on the tree," Rich translates as "my two rosy apples/ still hung on the tree," leaving just the apples hanging at the end of the line. Again using enjambment, and omitting the tenor of the metaphor (the cheeks), the rosy apples seem much more likely to be read as breasts than as cheeks. Reading the hint of breasts works with the Yiddish verb Molodowsky uses to describe the apples, which "stood" [*geshtanen*], much like young breasts would, rather than hung on the tree, a shift that could link Rich's interpretation back to the already not so *tsniedik*/modest original.

Rich herself did not have direct access to the Yiddish originals, for, as we know from much of her writing, she had little contact with Jewish texts during her upbringing, and clearly had little exposure to Jewish languages such as Yiddish or Hebrew. According to Hellerstein, Rich arrived at Molodowsky's poems through Irving Howe and needed to work with more literal prose translations out of which she fashioned her own poetic (and political) rendition, linking *froyen lider* not just back to the *sforim*, the holy books, but forward, to the tradition of radical lesbian poetry and queer reading. But of course, these translations were done before Rich was out as a lesbian, on the front lines of the women's liberation movement, making this reading of mine anachronistically queer, as well as a queer anachronism. For what is anachronistic here is not just treating Rich as lesbian before she was out, but enacting the type of queer temporal transgression I perform throughout the dissertation, the same way I term the staging of Molodowsky's encounter as queer. I want to name Rich's translations as queer by undermining the two possible roles traditional male-centered (indeed misogynist) metaphors of "translation as woman" accord women/translations the status of mother or whore, choosing between "condemnation of *les belles infidèles* to the adulation accorded to the "mother tongue."³³⁴ Refusing to choose to be "either beautiful or faithful" (455), Rich's translation offer a third option; by not working with Yiddish as a mother tongue Rich allows us to undermine the ultimate value of blood-based native fluency,³³⁵ while creating beauty as she moves in and out of the Yiddish original.

Critiquing the sexual politics of translation metaphors, Lori Chamberlain summarizes George Steiner's four-part model: the translator begins with "initiative trust" in the text, moving towards an aggressive "penetrating" and "capturing" of the text, followed by making the text "naturalized" in the translator's language, literally incorporated or embodied in it, and finally, compensating for the "appropriative 'rapture,'" reciprocity and restitution, as the translator attempts to make amends for the act of aggression. According to Chamberlain, Steiner's model shows that the

334 Lori Chamberlain "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation, *Signs* 13:3 (Spring, 1988): 461.

335 And indeed in terms of traditional blood based genealogy Rich, who had a non-Jewish mother, would not be considered Jewish.

metaphorics of translation “is a symptom of larger issues of western culture: of the power relations as they divide in terms of gender” (465). However, as Chana Kronfeld notes, Chamberlain shows that “the power relation between source and target texts (and their attendant cultures) determines who is gendered female (‘marked,’ in linguistic terms) in the marriage/translation contract,”³³⁶ that is, there are no stable hierarchical relations between “original” and “translation,” for their disparate contexts play a crucial role in determining the power relations in each case. For “translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism,” writes Tejaswini Niranjana, and indeed we can apply this critical positioning to many other contexts within which power is unequally deployed.³³⁷ In the case of Yiddish we must consider the language’s position both historically and geographically, taking into account the ways it has been historically feminized even before coming to be (or not to be) translated, in relation to Hebrew and in relation to other “proper” languages. In today’s context, its near disappearance renders it doubly susceptible to annihilation by translation, for the status and the survival of the original itself are themselves in question. Accordingly, Anita Norich posits that the discourse on Yiddish translation “suggests that, in the original, these texts will no longer be read by anyone but will, like their intended audience, disappear.” At the same time, however, Norich rightly observes, “translation is also an act of resistance to history, an act of defiance that preserves a culture whose transformations should not be met with silence.”³³⁸ Setting up a tense dichotomy between source and target text, Norich reminds Yiddish translators, following Steiner, “of the etymological links among translation, transgression and aggression. Translators literally carry something over from one place (or language) to another. In doing so, they necessarily transgress—step beyond their point of origin. And the act of aggression—attack—thus performed is inevitable” (214). Hellerstein, on the other hand, formulates a notion of feminist translation of Yiddish “where each translation continually converses with its original, which does not vanish, but shimmers beneath the second language. A fluid interpretation, the translation talks. Rereading, answering, querying, it keeps the text in motion.”³³⁹ Let us not, she writes, “close off a Yiddish text in a ‘definitive’ translation. Let us not condemn translators as traitors. Rather, let us strengthen the fluid, reciprocal conversation between Yiddish poems and English poems.”³⁴⁰ I want to continue “the text in motion” as my model for reading across languages and historical moments, while questioning the inevitable attack Norich invokes by undermining the linearity of the movement from source to target text. As Barbara Johnson writes, it is by miming “the process of departing from an origin” that

336 Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, Forthcoming), 209.

337 Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2.

338 Anita Norich, “A Response from Anita Norich,” 215.

339 Kathryn Hellerstein, “Translating as a Feminist: Reconceiving Anna Margolin,” 192.

340 *Ibid.*, 197.

translation “enhances the belief that there *is* an origin.”³⁴¹ Or in Judith Butler’s framing of the same point from the opposite direction, “the origin requires its derivations in order to affirm itself as an origin, for origins only make sense to the extent that they are differentiated from that which they produce as derivatives.”³⁴² The entire framework of copy and origin thus “proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term” (ibid). While it might be easy to point to translation’s status as derivative of the original, through Butler and Johnson what is undermined is the power dynamic between original and translation, and specifically the need for the translation’s act of aggression against the original. For this aggression might be less inevitable outside of heteronormative metaphors. The notion of translation I am proposing here is in fact a manifestation of the queer intergenerational model I am in search of. Combining the motion of the text which Hellerstein has opened up with Johnson and Butler’s undermining of the linear trajectory between source and target texts, I argue for a queer intergenerational dialogue with the legacy of the 1920s and the 1970s; a model that is, as Jack/Judith Halberstam suggests, “outside the frameworks of conflict or mandatory continuity.”³⁴³ Instead of aggression, I embrace transgression, translational, temporal and otherwise. Molodowsky herself begins this transgression, in what I termed earlier queer spectrality, following Freccero. Translating Molodowsky, Rich queers translation itself, generating a new conversation between English and Yiddish poetry, much as Klepfisz does in the bilingual mode. Still, it is no coincidence that so far I have as exploring alternative queer conversations through imagination, recuperation and translation, no coincidence that these are the avenues Margolin and Molodowsky, Klepfisz and Rich, have chosen over actual encounter. Between Molodowsky’s image of poems turning their backs on each other and Klepfisz looking backwards while turning her back on her potential contemporaries, it becomes clear that contemporary “sisterhood” is indeed a challenge, as I learned from my own experience of flesh and blood intergenerational encounter with (some) 1970s lesbians, which brought out aggression (in myself and in others) I would never have imagined.

Talking Back

The 2010 CUNY Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies conference “In Amerika They Call Us Dykes: 1970s Lesbian Lives” was meant to recognize the “momentous decade,” calling upon “experience, memory, and scholarship to represent as fully as possible the broad and wide experience of lesbians during the 1970s,” as their website proclaimed. The 1970s, I quickly discovered, were not the past topic studied

341 Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 16.

342 Judith Butler “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 313.

343 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). Halberstam herself moves between identifying as lesbian and identifying as trans, while others have gone, and continue to move, in so many directions, placing “trans” not as a destination, but as a movement “between.”

by the conference, but rather they were indeed present. Experiencing the simultaneity of my own time and the time of 1970s lesbians, many of whom are alive (and kicking!), demanded a new mode for of understanding the very history of the movement, as well as the movement of history, exposing “what the language of feminist ‘waves’ and queer ‘generations’ sometimes effaces: mutually disruptive energy of moments that are not yet past and yet are not entirely present either,”³⁴⁴ as I described the encounter between Rich and Molodowsky. Sitting on a panel about Jewish lesbians, discussing Jewish lesbian literature with women who actually wrote it, such as Evelyn Torton Beck and Elana Dykewomon, instead of an imaginary “non-contemporaneous contemporaneity” I was faced with the fallacy of “horizontal political generations succeeding one another,” as Elizabeth Freeman diagnosed generational progression, complicating this model of succession with a “temporal transitivity that does not leave feminism, femininity, or other ‘anachronisms’ behind.”³⁴⁵ Freeman writes that “In many discussions of the relationship between [the lesbian and the queer], it often seems as if the lesbian feminist is cast as the big drag, drawing politics inexorably back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women's sexuality, and single-issue identity politics.” Refusing this generational rejection, Freeman opens a new possibility “for those of us for whom queer politics and theory involve not disavowing our relationship to particular (feminist) histories even as we move away from identity politics.” But much as I was eager to point out the lesbian genealogy of my queer present, those whom I was naming as “foremothers” had a thing or two to say about me, and it wasn’t always pretty. Some women criticized “my generation”³⁴⁶ for being apolitical, overlooking the fact that lesbian-feminist analysis of intersecting oppressions serves as the basis of so many queer-driven struggles for social justice. Some women spoke out harshly against trans men and women, instead of acknowledging how the older generations’ bold gender non-conforming lives and bodies enabled the undermining of the gender binary that is so crucial to the trans queer movement. Some women were extremely resistant to the academic language used by some of the younger queers. But it was the bravery of early dyke scholars like Ester Newton and Lillian Federman (both conference participants) that enabled the inclusion of queers in academia, and that has served as the basis for much queer thinking and writing. These connections configure an active evolution of 1970s lesbian politics into contemporary queer politics, a genealogical account that uses the past to explain the present (and vice versa). But seeing as the past is not quite gone, it should come as no surprise that the lesbians of the 1970s hold their own account of the present, resisting their very relegation to the past. Nor should it be surprising that I resist their legacy, for a past, Rich writes, is not something you inherit merely in order to continue; instead,

at very least, it shows you what you have to struggle with, as person and as artist, like a strong parent who both teaches and browbeats, can be learned from, stormed away from, forgiven, but whose influence can never be

344 Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” 729.

345 Ibid.

346 Born as I was in 1982, the year *Nice Jewish Girls* came out.

denied. Like a family from which, even in separation, you bring away certain gestures, tones, ways of looking: something taken for granted, perhaps felt as constriction, nonetheless a source, a point of departure.³⁴⁷

Chana Kronfeld, via Wittgenstein, uses a similar notion of “family resemblance,” echoing Rich’s “certain gestures, tones, ways of looking,” to think of literary historiography through intersections of difference and similarity.³⁴⁸ As a corrective to modeling literary lineage as a line of succession from one generation of early modernist fathers to late modernist sons (represented as a graph), Kronfeld looks for an alternative “somewhere along the conceptual continuum” between the murderous violence (offered by the Bloomian model) and the pleasurable transmission of a replicated textual tradition, which Kronfeld finds in Joseph Brodsky’s words; that “there is nothing more pleasant physically (even physiologically) than repeating someone else’s lines.”³⁴⁹ As an alternative Kronfeld proposes the model of the rope or thread,³⁵⁰ a trope which serves her “as a visual enticement to reconfigure the literary trend as an open-ended category that maintains a culturally structured family resemblance among its members rather than being defined by a series of necessary and sufficient conditions” (64). The combination of Kronfeld’s rewriting of literary historiography as well as of intertextuality can enable us to translate Halberstam’s thinking “outside the frameworks of conflict or mandatory continuity” into textual terms, allowing and even demanding that we “talk about hierarchies of context-dependent specific types and degrees of centrality or marginality, and about aunts and nieces and a variety of other family members.”³⁵¹ Michael Gluzman has pointed out that the very theories that use family models for the description of literary history still exclude women from the one place patriarchy has traditionally reserved for them: the family.³⁵² Gluzman shows how this literary metaphor (alongside others) denies women participation, and also leads to an inaccurate model for how literary changes take place. If Kronfeld asks us to complicate the interactions that define familial resemblance, Gluzman builds on her work to show how the very reliance on familial models has been detrimental to women’s writing. Perhaps, then, we might choose, like Eve Sedgwick, to follow Michael Lynch’s assertion that “family” is a “dangerous word”³⁵³ The worst danger about family, writes Sedgwick is “how much the word, the name, the *signifier* ‘family’ is already installed unbudgeably at the center of a cultural value system—so much so that a rearrangement of reassignment of its *signifieds* need have no effect whatever on its rhetorical or ideological effects” (72).

347 Adrienne Rich “Introduction to the poetry of Irena Klepfisz,” *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1971-1990)* (Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990), 13.

348 Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 62.

349 Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, 182.

350 Which is one of the metaphors Wittgenstein uses to illustrate his concept of familial resemblance (Kronfeld, *Margins*, 63).

351 Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 35.

352 Michael Gluzman, “The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History,” in *Prooftexts* 11:3 (1991): 264.

353 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 71.

Since “redeeming the family isn’t, finally, an option but a compulsion” Sedgwick reframes the question, asking how we might finally “*stop* redeeming the family.” Queering the family model, then, cannot offer an easy way out of the “generational trap”³⁵⁴ of aggression I am attempting to deconstruct, as I learned first hand, falling through the generational gap into the trap of *straight* up struggle.

What the 1970s generation granted me/us/contemporary queers is a history to build upon. And indeed, as Rich writes in her introduction to the poetry of Irena Klepfisz “[to] inherit an uninterrupted and recognized culture is a privilege,”³⁵⁵ one she herself did not have, either in Jewish or in lesbian terms. Yet as Rich admits in the poem “Granddaughter” it is “easier to invent a script for each of you,/myself still at the center,/than to write words in which you might have found/ yourselves.”³⁵⁶ I don’t have to dream or invent a past, even if I would have preferred to do so. Taking on dead Yiddish women poets is no doubt easier for the 1970s and for me alike, easier than opening up an intergenerational dialogue. If the first chapter of my dissertation was concerned with how women writers might overcome their exclusion from history, this current chapter has dealt with the challenge of having a history—especially a history persisting into the present. For my generation is in a unique position to have lesbian-identified forerunners, whose achievements we can learn and celebrate, as opposed to all of the earlier, repressed stories patriarchal history did not pass on. I want to acknowledge with gratitude the great privilege of having a lesbian history, and more than that, to recognize how my own way into the more distant past is itself mediated through these earlier lesbian projects. What Rich and her generation left behind then, was finally something I could, and must use:

Everything we write
will be used against us
or against those we love.
These are the terms,
take them or leave them.
Poetry never stood a chance
of standing outside history.³⁵⁷

In these lines, taken from one of the poems I opened this chapter with, “North American Time,” Rich sets up her own legacy, allowing for the fact that it must undergo changes. If these lines echo the Miranda Warning given by the police to their arrestees, “anything you say can and will be used against you,” Rich’s poem moves from the spoken to the written, from the second person singular to the first person plural, from “anything” to “everything.” Most importantly, Rich omits the conditional “can” and uses only the definite “will be used,” revealing the certainty of

354 Nishant Shahani, *Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2012), 2.

355 Adrienne Rich “Introduction to the poetry of Irena Klepfisz,” 13.

356 Adrienne Rich, “Granddaughter,” in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems, 1978-1981* (New York: Norton, 1981), 37.

357 Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe* (New York: Norton, 2002), 198.

change. She thereby removes the aspect of threat (to herself and to other writers), taking control at the same time as she relinquishes it and submits to being used. Linda Garber takes on this idea of Rich's poetry being "used," and even, "used against" her by "lesbian feminist supporters and queer detractors"³⁵⁸ and, I add, by lesbian detractors and queer supporters. A danger on all fronts indeed, but in Garber's sophisticated move, Rich is read out of her time, enabling her to stand not just as lesbian feminist poet, but as proto-queer theorist. Garber recognizes the queerness already inherent in concepts like the "lesbian continuum," in defining a fluid identity over and against heteropatriarchy. Equally important, she reads the development in Rich's own position, as she came to better understand difference amongst women (for example), showing the effects of living and changing within history. My own writing is similarly positioned in changing times, as was made painfully clear with Rich's recent passing. She was eighty two, three years older than Kadya Molodowsky was in the snapshot they shared not long before Molodowsky's own death.

The image in the snapshot recasts the encounter of the speaker in *froyen lider* and her grandmothers, for in it Molodowsky is the one who can be taken for a *bobe*. But she did not have children or grandchildren, not in a biological sense that would make her a "kosher grandmother," nor metaphorically, for she does not have a direct lineage of Yiddish readers who can follow her. Instead, she is made a *bobe* by the presence of the young Rich at her side. Rich too reached grandmaternity, through the biological children she so honestly wrote about in *Of Woman Born*. And even Klepfisz, who formulated her choice not to reproduce in one of her bravest essays, "Women Without Children,"³⁵⁹ later describes how she prepares to enter *bobe-hood*, joining her mother's generation, "transformed into a true *bobe*, the next generation's past,"³⁶⁰ thereby joining Molodowsky's generation as well. Klepfisz thus conceives herself as a *hemshekh*, a continuation, but not one focusing on what she will leave behind, but rather on what came before her. For Klepfisz, as for Molodowsky before her, children are clearly not the end of the line. After Molodowsky, Klepfisz's idea of continuity is created by turning to her foremothers, and not by looking forward to the future. Klepfisz thus defines herself as "a dependent Jew:"

dependent on Mama Lo's generation to provide me with a sense of *hemshekh*/continuity. They've been the visible *goldene keyt*/the golden chain to which I've wanted to hook the link I've been forging through my life and my work. With them gone, where am I supposed to hang myself?³⁶¹

358 Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics*, 138.

359 Written relatively early in her life, it was first published in *Conditions* in 1977. There she admits that "the emptiness of the past, the vagueness of the future, leave me fearful, hesitant about my decision not to have a child." Irena Klepfisz, "Women without Children/Women without Families/Women Alone," in *Dreams of an Insomniac*, 8.

360 Irena Klepfisz "Di yerushe /The Legacy: A Parable about History and Bobe-mayses, Barszcz and Borsht and the Future of the Jewish Past" *Prairie Schooner* 71:1 (Spring 1997): 8.

361 *Ibid*, 9.

Klepfisz's harrowing word choice, asking where she might "hang" herself, exposes the vulnerability of her position. But turning backward she finds a solution, not just to the potential finitude of lesbian lineage, but to the impending finitude of Yiddish. For indeed this backwards gaze is particularly pregnant when we consider the future of Yiddish—not just as a language ripe for *bobe-hood* from its early associations with "maternity or grandmaternity,"³⁶² but also as a language devoid of a (secular) reproductive heteronormative future. To continue the line of Yiddish or the lesbian line of lineage both demand a transgression of reproductive heteronormative transmission. This transmission is not uninterrupted; on the contrary, as Rich writes in "Transcendental Étude"—

No one who survives to speak
new language, has avoided this:
the cutting away of an old force that held her
rooted to an old ground³⁶³

Resisting "the cutting away," I root my own queer language in the "old ground" of 1970s lesbians, and in the older ground of Yiddish. By learning the language itself, I am no longer dependent on the translations of Rich and Klepfisz, for I have access directly to the words of the *bobes*. But arriving at the *bobes* through 1970s mediation continues the queer model I am in search of. If Tynyanov wrote that "in the struggle with his father, the grandson turns out to resemble his grandfather,"³⁶⁴ I continue the 1970s desire for grandmothers, as well as their struggle with them. Out of the two alternative modalities of genealogy that Molodowsky set up in the two versions of her poem, that of words and that of blood, I glean a genealogy constructed on the very tension between text and blood, continuity and distance. When Klepfisz references Molodowsky's poem, she replaces the image of the "missing line" torn from the book, with an "illegible line,"³⁶⁵ thereby implanting the possibility of reclamation that the missing line of the original poem forecloses. For what is illegible is nonetheless written and present, and what must change is our ability to read it. The 1970s made Yiddish women's past legible to me, made lesbian life legible to me. Defiantly talking back to the 1970s and to the 1920s, gratefully talking back through them, I want to make myself legible, even if I am not the future these women of the past expected. Allowing myself to make use of women('s) past, I must also account for the resistance this use might (no, will!) incur, a resistance to

362 Seidman, *Marriage Made in Heaven*, 9.

363 Adrienne Rich, *Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), 76.

364 Cited in Kronfeld's *The Full Severity of Compassion*, 172. She also references Eric Naiman's critique of Shklovsky's avuncular model. For more on the problematic gender politics of Shklovsky's literary historiographic metaphor, see Eric Naiman, "Shklovsky's Dog and Mulvey's Pleasure: The Secret Life of Defamiliarization," *Comparative Literature* 50:4 (Autumn, 1998): 333-52. Tillie Olson offers her own version of this in *Tell me a Riddle* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1961), as I was reminded by Evelyn Torton Beck on our Jewish lesbian panel at the 2010 CUNY conference.

365 Irena Klepfisz, "Forging a Woman's Link," 171.

being deemed “past.” For indeed, this resistance is the very basis of the non-linear anti-teleological mode this dissertation set forth to advocate for.

Coda:

Mir Zaynen Do/We're Here We're Queer: Interventions in the Present of Jewish History

"It is unwise during periods of stress/ or change to formulate new theories," writes Irena Klepfisz,³⁶⁶ and wise as her warning is, this dissertation grew from the conviction that the stressful period in which we find ourselves urgently demands new modes of reading Jewish culture and politics, a task I have taken on by rethinking literary lineage through Yiddish, through women's writing, and through queer theory. It is a similar impulse to respond to our current moment that led Dan Miron to move *Towards a New Jewish Literary Thinking*, as his recent magnum opus is sub-titled.³⁶⁷ Embracing Jewish literature not as a "normal" national literature, Miron argues for the advantages of the "total abnormalcy of the Jewish literary complex" (411). This *new thinking* demands a threefold effort: realigning Hebrew with Yiddish as *a*, rather than *the*, Jewish language; finding new ways of identifying literature in non-Jewish languages as "Jewish literature;" and making room in Hebrew for non-Jewish narratives.³⁶⁸ What Miron imagines is a "vast, disorderly, and somewhat diffuse" complex, "characterized by dualities, parallelisms, occasional intersections, marginal overlapping, hybrids, similarities within dissimilarities, mobility, changeability, occasional emergence of patterns and their eventual disappearance, randomness, and when approximating a semblance of significant order, by contiguities" (276). This "vast complex" reads strikingly like the beginnings of queer theory over twenty years ago. Compare it to Judith Butler's 1990 definition of gender in *Gender Trouble* (English for *gender tsores*, no doubt):³⁶⁹ "a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time," that calls for a coalition that "will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure."³⁷⁰ Both Miron and Butler (certainly not a phrase I ever imagined I'd write!) are arguing against a binary system, what Kronfeld diagnosed as "the entrenched critical practice of bipolar thinking."³⁷¹

366 Irena Klepfisz, "Periods of Stress," in her *Periods of Stress* (New York: Out & Out Books, 1975), 20.

367 Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 38.

368 This "is not necessarily a Post-Zionist endeavor," as Miron is careful to point out in the Hebrew version, making clear that is not a position he shares. For indeed his concern is not for the future of Jewish letters at large, but for the State of Israel. Spelling out the stakes of his project, it is made evident that the current political crisis (what we call in Hebrew "the situation") is what demands that Israeliness itself be reconfigured, in order to ensure its future.

369 As my friend and colleague Shaul Setter has observed.

370 Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 22.

371 Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 54.

Butler's impetus is to expose the binary regulation of sexuality, that which separates male from female and assumes continuity between sex/gender, sexual practice and desire, showing how this regulation "suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and medicojuridical hegemonies."³⁷² In Miron's complex, on the other hand, there seems to be simply no need for binaries: "Once we make the Jewish literary complex as a whole our subject of study," he writes, "we can safely put aside the major/minor, as well as many other binary oppositions; for what really counts is the dynamics of the complex as dictated by the movement of diverse entities within it, the brands of contiguity these entities formed when coming in touch with each other."³⁷³ What Miron does not account for are the different forces at play in deploying various binaries; if certain binaries might be perceived not just as equivalent but as equal (in value, power, etc.), this is certainly not the case for "major" and "minor," not to mention other binaries like "national" and "diasporic," "normal" and "abnormal," or even "continuity" and "discontinuity." Doing away with these binaries too easily allows Miron to erase the very power dynamics embedded in them, and those within which they are embedded.

Without accounting for the very material ways in which Jewish language (and) politics have played out,³⁷⁴ Miron runs the risk of hitting the same pitfall Butler herself had to vie with: what to do about the body and how to account for material reality. Butler rigorously grapples with this challenge, starting with her 1993 *Bodies That Matter*,³⁷⁵ finding new ways to account "for what bodies 'are,'" (ix) or are not, how they can, or cannot, be talked about. Miron, on the other hand, returns to the same theoretical foundations without accounting for the important developments the past twenty years have afforded. This is not only evident in Miron's discounting of material differences, but in his specific turn to corporeal metaphors. The title of the Hebrew version of Miron's *New Literary Thinking*— *harpya le-tsorekh negi'a*,³⁷⁶ which translates approximately as "releasing in order to touch"— sets up a theoretical mode of touch that both the Hebrew and English versions of his study rely on. Likening elements in the literary complex to bodies (and more specifically, to bodies involved in a sexual interaction), Miron fantasizes about "a touching, which does not involve overlapping or penetration," "a kind of light or diminished contact" (307). There is much to be said for this delicate mode of touch, which was

372 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 26.

373 Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 313.

374 I was reminded how problematic this move can be in a meeting organized by the group *eretz yoshveyha* ["the land of its inhabitants," cleverly echoing in Hebrew the biblical phrase "a land devouring its inhabitants"] that proposes a one-state solution for Israel/Palestine without relinquishing any of their Jewish privilege, explaining the support they have found not just amongst concerned liberals Zionist but also amongst settlers seizing the chance to maintain their own status quo. Radical as their ideas might sound, like Miron's, without abdicating power and privilege and reconfiguring their basic structure, these ideas serve only those already in power.

375 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

376 Dan Miron, *Harpya le-tsorekh negi'ah* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 2005). The Hebrew version contains a mere 171 pages, compared to the 519 pages in English. The differences between them are fascinating, but unfortunately I will not be able to attend to them here in full.

indeed embraced by the 1970s equation of penetration and patriarchy propagated by both lesbians and feminists. But whereas they politicized the most private touch, Miron's resistance to penetration can be read as depoliticizing, and—together with his anti-binary move—discounting the material realities through and within which languages and literatures, as well as their speakers, touch each other, often not lightly at all. And let us also not forget to ask who is touching whom, and how. Juxtaposing anti-binary queer theory and Miron's *New Jewish Literary Thinking* with the reality of the particular set of power relations they are entrenched in highlights the value of Miron's proclaimed goals and the dangers of their shortcomings. At the same time, this juxtaposition serves as a warning to queer theory to remain wary of detaching theory from embodied practice and historical/material contextualization. *Activating the erotics of Yiddish*, as I suggested in Chapter Two, is one way to bridge the gap between theory and practice (namely of the fetish), to account for (and repurpose) power, violence and loss, and to create an affective genealogy that touches past and present alike. This touch might be less delicate than that of Miron and the 1970s lesbians, but recognizing that "history is what hurts,"³⁷⁷ politically accountable thinking cannot leave us unscathed.

Politically putting theory to queer poetic practice, Irena Klepfisz offers an example of juxtaposition and undoing that activates bodies in context, combining Yiddish and English to write about the Hebrew/Arabic context of Palestine/Israel. Written at the end of the 1980s during the first *intifada*, the poem "*der soyne/the enemy: an interview in Gaza*" narrates an encounter between an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian youth, from the youth's perspective:³⁷⁸

i.

I live here with my family.
 The Jews come. I throw rocks.
 I yell out: *Heil Hitler!*
 My friend is shot with a rubber bullet.
 They take him to the hospital. He will
 live but he's a cripple.
 My Mother weeps: When will it end?
 Me? I'm happy school is closed.
 Who needs to study?
 I like to see them hide
 behind the walls. Down with the Jews!
 Long live Palestine!

ii.

377 To quote Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 88.

378 Irena Klepfisz, "*Di feder fun harts/The Pen of the Heart: Tsveyshprakhikayt/ Bilingualism in Jewish American Poetry*," in *Jewish American Poetry: Reflections, Poems, Commentary*, eds. Jonathan Barron and Eric Murphy Selinger (New England: University Press of New England, 2000), 333.

Ikh voyn do mit der mishpokhe.
Di yidn kumen. Ikh varf shteyner.
Ikh shray: Heil Hitler!
A fraynd vert geshosn mit a gumner koyl.
Men nemt im in shpitol. Er vet
lebn ober er vet zayn a kalike.
Di mame veynt: ven vet es zikh endikn?
Ikh? Ikh bin tsefridn az di shul iz farmakht.
Vos darf ikh lernen?
'Sgefelt mir ven zey bahalt'n zikh
unter di vent. Nider mit di yidn!
Zol lebn Palestine!

According to Klepfisz's own account, the poem was an experiment "to see how a language associated with Jewish powerlessness sounded in the mouth of someone who was oppressed by Jewish power."³⁷⁹ In its bilingual Yiddish/English form, this poem masks the two languages of its actual context, Hebrew and Arabic. The poem's title makes both absent languages present; Modern Hebrew is echoed in the use of the *loshn-koydesh* word *soyne* rather than *faynd* for "enemy," while calling the poem "an interview" invokes the Arabic in which the interview would most likely have been conducted, the language the Palestinian youth would actually be speaking. These multilingual echoes do not render the languages interchangeable (as I argue Miron's image of contiguity implies); on the contrary, they activate their intricately violent interactions, while subtly suggesting an analogy—not an identity—between Yiddish and Arabic in their historically specific position in relation to hegemonic language and power, and specifically in their relation to Hebrew. In order to make this clear, I want to continue the experiment Klepfisz begins by replacing her English verse with a Hebrew one.³⁸⁰ In both halves, the Hebrew and the Yiddish, the Palestinian would be speaking a Jewish language, but if the latter is what Klepfisz calls "the language associated with Jewish powerlessness," the former is the current language of Jewish power in the Israeli/Palestinian context.³⁸¹ If putting Yiddish in the mouth of a Palestinian is a mere thought experiment, it would surely be truer to reality to convey the Palestinian child's words in Hebrew, for at least when the poem was written there was still traffic between Gaza and Israel and Palestinians young and old had potential access to Israelis and to Hebrew, mostly by being

379 Ibid, 334.

380 Unlike other poems in which Klepfisz moves back and forth between English and Yiddish, this poem is constructed in two separate sections (numbered i. and ii.). Non-Yiddish speakers, presumably the majority of the readers, depend on the English section. If the poem were in Arabic and Yiddish, considering the only words an English speaker would understand would be "Heil Hitler" (left in German, following the existing Yiddish and English versions), the reader would most likely guess this to be an anti-Semitic poem. The same would no doubt be true of the English version, were it not portrayed as a translation of the Yiddish (made visible precisely by the repetition of the familiar phrase "Heil Hitler," for how else would the English reader know that the first and second part of the poem are one and the same?) It is only by way of the Yiddish that the Nazi salute can become Jewish self-critique (or non-Jewish critique anchored in the Jewish experience).

381 Though Jewish power is more than fluent in English, and indeed much of the politics ensuring the persistence of the Occupation takes place in English.

employed as a cheap labor force. In the current state of siege (imposed since Israel officially declared Gaza a “hostile entity” in September 2007, when Hamas was democratically elected as the ruling party) young Palestinians are far less likely to speak any Hebrew beyond basic military commands.³⁸² For the Palestinian youth to speak Hebrew in the poem would therefore invoke the very real conditions of current language politics and state violence. In this hypothetical translation experiment, the Yiddish that would follow the Hebrew would also become reinscribed in the language politics that have shaped it, as another victim of the Israeli state policies. Therefore, arming the Palestinian youth with Yiddish not only connects the Palestinians to a history of Jewish powerlessness, it also speaks to (or rather, speaks the) internally repressed sides of the Israeli past and the Israeli psyche,³⁸³ invoking the particular Zionist language politics that played an active role in the near demise of Yiddish.³⁸⁴ Klepfisz’s poem can thus serve to contextualize discussions of Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, their relation to each other, their place in history and their place today.

Miron’s *new thinking* ties back into today’s moment of crisis in Israeli politics, as he reveals not at the outset of his project, but in the final sentence of this massive work: “the continuation of the occupation and the conflict threaten Israel’s cultural health as much as it undermines its political, social, and ethical viability.” What is at stake, then, is not the Yiddish suppressed in the past or the Arabic speaking voices oppressed in the present, but what effect these (language) politics ultimately have on Israeli Hebrew culture. In the Hebrew version Miron does invoke “marginal influences”—“the underground world of cultural-literary-linguistic possibilities suppressed and kept out for reasons of ethnic, gender and political difference.”³⁸⁵ He recognizes how the work emerging from this “underground world” over the past fifty years continues to reshape major literatures. And indeed, it is the potential influence these marginal works hold that seems to be the impetus for his new theory, the sign of the “period of stress” he is writing in. But the fact that Miron’s new theoretical model does not actually give voice to any of the “others,” women,

382 Beyond the vocabulary learned through interactions with the Israeli military, the best way for Palestinian’s to become fluent was, and continues to be, incarceration in Israeli prisons. The Israeli human rights watch organization *Be’tselm* recently published testimonies of incarcerated Palestinian youth who admitted to throwing rocks in the hopes of receiving a high school education in an Israeli prison.

383 Certainly this may seem more obvious in an Ashkenazi context, but it is my contention that the massive “success” of Israeli *Sho’a* education, which has rendered the trauma a collective one, has also given Yiddish a newly sanctified cultural role that touches the wider Jewish population. In some ways it can thus be read also as a stand-in for other oppressed Jewish languages and cultures, including the Arab-Jewish culture, but of course only in a context careful not to use Yiddish to reproduce Ashkenazi hegemony.

384 Imagining a parallel poem narrating the role of the Israeli soldier in Arabic would bring forth a reality which is not imaginary at all, for many Jewish homes did in fact speak Arabic, and the shame associated with this mirrored and exceeded that associated with speaking Yiddish at home. Additionally, there are Israeli soldiers who are Arabic speaking Druze and Bedouin, further complicating divisions of identity and power as they play out in the Israeli context.

385 *Ibid*, 163.

queers, non-Jewish writers of literature and of literary history, exposes the inevitably conservative nature of his project, attempting to re-inscribe power rather than redistribute it.³⁸⁶ Preemptively defending the center from what is, according to Miron's own account, the inevitable rise of the margins, the "others" may be used to build a theory, but they are still refused a voice. Worthy as his goals may be, any new theory, even one that finally wishes the Arab voice into Hebrew, or repositions Yiddish and Hebrew comfortably side by side alongside other majoritarian European languages, is not enough to remedy the damages of history and the raging horrors of the present. What is called for, rather, is a theory that would account for the realities of marginalization, while undermining the reified divisions of "center" and "margins" instead of reaffirming them. And thus we might ask together, following Miron, Butler and Klepfisz, what would it take to truly destabilize the binary system, reimagine history and redistribute power?

This question is not rhetorical, and has been asked in the context of Jewish literature by scholars for over twenty years, notably through the work of Chana Kronfeld and many of her students,³⁸⁷ who offer an understanding of Jewish literature through its margins rather than through its centers, creating comparative projects that bring new histories to light, while problematizing any attempt to essentialize either "center" or "margins."³⁸⁸ It is Kronfeld's call to theorize from the margins that has led me to focus my own work on Jewish women writers, not as an "other" parallel story, but as a point of departure from which Jewish literature looks different, has different material challenges, relies on different sources and proceeds in its own historical trajectory. But I want to push this further, for it is my queer lens that leads me to undermine the binary division of margins and center, alongside that of past

386 Miron has in fact made invaluable contribution to the study of Jewish women writers in both Hebrew and Yiddish, namely through his study *Imahot meyasdot, achayot chorgot* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ha-me'uchad, 1991). However, none of the women writers discussed in this study are used in his new theorization, which relies on the same canonical male writers past theories have turned to (such as Sholem Aleichem, Franz Kafka and S.Y. Abramovitch).

387 Cf. especially Kronfeld's forthcoming article "The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish," *What and Where are Jewish Languages?* eds., Joshua L. Miller and Anita Norich (Ann Arbor: Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies, forthcoming) and her book *On the Margins of Modernism*; Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish*; Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Yael Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Jordan Finkin, *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature* (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2011); and Lital Levy "Reorienting Hebrew Literary History: The View from the East," *Prooftexts* 29:2 (2010), 127-72.

388 Miron himself has taken very critical note of such work, in what he termed "the Berkeley school of thought" [*Askolat Berkeley*], referring to the work Chana Kronfeld and her students (Dan Miron "Ahava ha-tluya ba-davar: Toldot hitkablutah shel shirat David Fogel" in *Aderet le-Binyamin*, vol. 1, ed. Ziva Ben-Porat [Tel Aviv: Porter Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999], 29-98). That said, when his own theories draw nearer to this "school," he barely recognizes their work, and entirely erases his own debt to it. This erasure itself serves as case in point, showing his reluctance to relinquish the dominance of Hebrew, and with it his own critical dominance in the field.

and present, in order to subvert a regulatory system, and not in order to protect it; I do this not by erasing lived realities, but by embracing them, exposing the stakes involved in doing this queer history of Jewish literature here and now.

If throughout the dissertation I used queerness as a strategy to undo divisions of past and present, to touch the past and to turn away from the future, here I am enlisting a queerness that brings about a different future into being. This mode of queerness, following José Esteban Muñoz, “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”³⁸⁹ I am particularly invested in Muñoz’s ideas of this queer connection to the future because it offers a theory that is “attentive to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present.”³⁹⁰ Similarly, Irena Klepfisz’s juxtaposition of Yiddish and English, past and present, asks how our conceptions of the past are serving us today. Her linguistic experiment (and my own) employs a queer method to recognize the way power shifts in specific moments, rendering us all the more interconnected, all the more accountable for how we use our power and our history, demonstrating the material differences that make both bodies and languages untranslatable. For it is the Yiddish in Klepfisz’s poem that exposes the interconnectedness of the Jew and Palestinian. It is the Yiddish that breaks down the binary of oppressed and oppressor. But because of the contested history of Yiddish, and even more so because of Yiddish’s precarious position today, using Yiddish does not erase difference; rather, it highlights it, while opening new avenues of identification and disidentification. Klepfisz anticipates the different resonance her poem will have for Yiddish-speaking readers, who actually expect any topic to be addressed in Yiddish, and non-Yiddish speakers, whose “nostalgic associations” with the language would make them all the more surprised to see it expressing contemporary content, not to mention used to mediate the voice of a Palestinian. Allowing Yiddish into this “contemporary” and “other” context, Klepfisz calls into question lingering perceptions of Jewish victimhood and powerlessness, whether imagined of the past, or clung to in the present. She does so not by undermining the realities of Jewish victimhood past, but precisely by mobilizing its reality to illuminate the contemporary context. Furthermore, through the contemporary context she complicates the glorification of Jewish powerlessness associated with the nostalgic image of the past.

Using Yiddish at a time of relative Jewish powerlessness to critique the male dominated centers of Western culture, Anna Margolin’s 1929 poem “*Ikh bin geven a mol a yingling*” [I Was Once a Boy], which I discussed in Chapter One, resonates deeply with Klepfisz’s “*der soyne*.” Both poems blur otherwise rigid distinction between victim and victor, insider and outsider, speaking the voice of a non-Jewish male youth. Instead of the Palestinian boy of Klepfisz’s “*der soyne*,” Margolin’s poem speaks the voice of a *yingling* [boy] in the context of Greco-Roman antiquity.

389 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

390 *Ibid*, 18.

Margolin's poem narrates the inevitable fall of certain powers (namely the Greek and Roman empires), while ironically foreshadowing the rise of Christianity and ominously hinting at the destructive powers yet to come. Klepfisz's poem echoes this understanding of the cyclical nature of history and the dangers it holds for victim and victor alike, in a context Margolin's poem could not have anticipated. In this context, following both the *Khurbn* and the establishment of the State of Israel, Klepfisz strategically returns to Yiddish to critique Jewish abuse of power. What Klepfisz's poem allows us to see is not pretty, and indeed, as she herself recounts, it caused at least one academic-poet to refuse to be on a panel with her. This same academic-poet was a fan of her *Khurbn*-related bilingual work, but drew a rigid line between what Yiddish could and couldn't do. According to Klepfisz, what he resisted was using Yiddish to embrace the present, aiming instead to use Yiddish as "fantasy, nostalgia, escapism, an attempt to turn back the clock. Yiddish as denial." Over and against this denial, Klepfisz aims to use Yiddish to "enfold within this language our contemporary lives and cries,"³⁹¹ much like it did when it was being used by Margolin and the other poets this dissertation has discussed.

What I want to offer is a third option, between Yiddish as denial (of present and past complexity) and the denial of the loss of Yiddish; realizing "that not everything of value that existed before a break was either salvaged or metamorphosed, but was lost,"³⁹² I turn to Yerushalmi's "retrieval," and to a queerness that names "alternative political imaginaries" that might, following Jack/Judith Halberstam, embody "the suite of 'other choices' that attend every political, economic and aesthetic crisis and their resolutions."³⁹³ For "often some of what fell by the wayside can become, through our retrieval, meaningful to us," as writes (101). This retrieval is a response to crisis and loss, losses in the past and already foreseeable losses in the future, such as those Margolin's poem hints at, those embedded in the history of Yiddish and in its precarious future. My project thus chooses to recognize rather than disavow the losses entailed in the story of Yiddish and all the other histories of loss it brings into view. These losses are what allows for my queer reading of Jewish literary history, embracing the "abnormality" which Miron also advocates, while undermining any *New Jewish Literary Thinking* that cannot see beyond a Hebrew-oriented Israeli heteronormative, national framework. By treating Yiddish as an alternative past and an alternative passed, one avenue of Jewish history that did not come to fruition, it becomes a queer tool for the present. The value of bringing it into our current conversation by going back to its time of potentiality lies in understanding the present we are living in as but one of the many futures that Jewish history could have had. And it is opening that past potentiality that can make room for complexities that the present would have us obscure. Here I find a past I

391 Klepfisz, "Di feder fun harts," 334.

392 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 100.

393 Jack/Judith Halberstam, "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5:2 (2008): 153. It is perhaps an ironic twist that this particular paper was given at the annual Israeli queer theory conference, *Sex Acher/Another Sex*, which is both a bastion of political resistance and a target of BDS as a beneficiary of Israeli government funds.

never knew existed, and through it alternative futures emerge—those futures that did not come to pass. This is not the past passed down to me through my Israeli education, which systematically marginalized both Yiddish and women (not to mention women writing Yiddish) and entirely erased the history and possibility of queerness. Turning to these alternative histories, and alternative, queer, approaches to history, I am in search of ways to actively enlist the past to alter the present. Whether focusing on Israel/Palestine, or on the Jewish diaspora, my study of Jewish literature aims to recover and to generate “other possibilities, the other potential outcomes, the non-linear and non-inevitable trajectories that fan out from any given event and lead to unpredictable futures.”³⁹⁴ Rather than fighting for a national heteronormative future viability that leaves much of the Jewish past and present behind at the expense of actively oppressing many others, I turn backwards in search of a queer history, in search of radical change now. In our current “period of stress,” in this time of huge frustration with the past’s outcome, as an Israeli-born native Hebrew speaker, as a member by choice of the Jewish diaspora and as a queer speaker of late-learned Yiddish, I insist on formulating new theories, whether it is wise or not, for “it is better to speak/remembering/we were never meant to survive.”³⁹⁵

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394 Ibid, 153.

395 Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival,” in *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 32.

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