American Yiddish poetry's encounter with Black America

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From the turn of the twentieth century into the years following World War II, Jewish immigrant writers in the U.S. produced many poems in Yiddish that address and attempt to represent African-American experience. These "Yiddish Black" poems fall loosely into three categories: poems that make direct or indirect reference to lynchings; narrative poems or poem-sequences that depict Black characters within the framework of their daily lives; and poems that depict the Yiddish "encounter" with the Black person and set up varying degrees of identification and alienation between the writer and his or her subject. Yiddish Black poems do not exploit the Black image as much as use it to project the sympathies and sense of shared displacement felt by their audience of Yiddish readers.

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Yiddish-speaking Jews, like many other immigrants who came to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, lived through the assault of enormous cultural changes. For Jews, who had continually experienced the threat of antisemitism in the "Old Country," a unique change occurred: in America, Black people--not Jews--were the most oppressed population. From the 1880s through the outbreak of World War I--the years of greatest Jewish immigration to the U.S.--lynchings were rapidly becoming public ritual in the South. (1) The horrified response of the Jewish immigrant community to lynchings and to the general plight of African Americans filled the Yiddish press. (2) While the outsized Jewish role in political and (in the case of German Jews) financial advocacy for the Black community is documented in Hasia Diner's book, In the Almost Promised Land, American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935, and other sources, there has been little attention to the literary response on the part of the immigrant community: that is, the production of many poems, in Yiddish, that address and attempt to represent Black experience. The purpose of this essay is to present and discuss just a handful of these poems, while raising questions having to do with the peculiarities of Jewish "others" representing African "others," and the cultural work that these poems were meant to do, in a Yiddish-speaking context.

I have identified three main types of "Yiddish Black" poems: poems that make direct or indirect reference to lynchings; narrative poems or poem-sequences that depict Black characters within the framework of their daily lives; and poems that depict the Yiddish "encounter" with the Black person and set up varying degrees of identification and alienation between the writer and his or her subject. In this essay, I present only poems of "encounter," and I focus on poems drawn from Nakhman Mayzel's massive literary anthology, Amerike in Yidishn Vort, (3) which, to my knowledge, have never before appeared in English. (4)

In his 1945 essay, "Der Neger in Undzer Literatur" (The Negro in Our Literature), the Yiddish critic Yitskhok Rontsh notes, "[No other group] occupies as relatively conspicuous a place in Yiddish literature as the Negro....In nearly every poetry collection from poets old and young there's a poem

about the Negro and his lot...." (5) For Yiddish writers, Rontsh goes on to say, the so-called Negro calls forth sympathy and close attention:

It's...the brothers-in-trouble closeness, the persecution that the Jew has for generations withstood, the discrimination that he [the Negro] suffers everywhere in free and democratic America from certain sectors of the population--all this and ... [that] brings the Negro to the side of the Yiddish book. (6)

This unproblematized view of the "natural" sympathies that would propel a Yiddish immigrant poet to write about African-Americans is in accord with the early discourse of "Black-Jewish relations"--which Jeffrey Melnick refers to as a "Jewish discourse" that narrates a special relationship between Blacks and Jews. The situation is, of course, more complex than "natural sympathies," for as both Matthew Frye Jacobson and Karen Brodkin discuss, for many years Jews and other European immigrants were not perceived as being fully white. Although admitted to the U.S. as "free white people," they were marked as both white and "other" in political, scientific, and public discourses. (7) Only in relation to the African American were various sub-races ofwhites seen as one, and the idea of whiteness shored up, defined against its perceived opposite. (8) It's no surprise then (although it is ironic), when Diner points out that by advocating for Blacks, Jews could stabilize their own social and political status, demonstrati ng how truly "American" (and potentially assimilable) they themselves were. (9) Jews observed, commented on, and actively countered racism against Black people in the context of constructing their own American and white identities in the U.S. (10)

Jews also drew on forms of Black popular expression in creating a place for themselves in American culture. In his work on "The Jazz Singer," Michael Rogin points out that Al Jolson, "by painting himself black ... washes himself white." (11) Blackface becomes "the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American" (12)--while remaining a fixed sign of blackness, reinforcing Black exclusion from the "melting pot." (13) Jeffrey Melnick discusses the musical equivalents of Jewish blackface performance in his study, A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song. (14) He argues that musicians as different as Irving Berlin and George Gershwin used Black music to help position themselves as "authentic" American composers (and concomitantly as white Jewish Americans), with great success. Their "musical miscegenation" could be read as consummate cultural hybridity--or callous cultural exploitation.

It's clear that the Jewish relationship to Black experience, in its political and popular cultural expressions, produced complex, ambivalent effects--and these resonate when one reads Yiddish Black poems. (15) Yiddish poems that represent and make use of Black images are a previously unexamined part of Black-Jewish discourse that also mark a fascinating departure from it. In these poems, blackness does not remain opaque, to be used as a mask or a fixed sign; it gets translated into Yiddish, and it moves in that direction only. In Yiddish poetry, a different encounter takes place, one without ambivalent power effects in the "real world" (e.g., no Black artist was deprived of material or cultural "rights" because a Yiddish writer sang a Black song in Yiddish)--but with cultural effects within the Yiddish sphere. Encountered in a specially constructed context-that is, in Nakhman Mayzel's anthology, Amerike in Yidishn Vort--the poems become witnesses to Yiddish culture in America, And, simultaneously: to American culture as it gets drawn into Yiddish.

The forty or so poems about Black Americans in Mayzel's anthology appear as simply another "American" topic, alongside the many representing American cityscapes and landscapes, from Manhattan to the Arizona desert, or historical, mythicized figures like Abraham Lincoln, or just the immigrants' feelings as new residents, who both embraced and felt estranged from their American surroundings. But reading the Yiddish Black poems now, it's possible to see that they illustrate, in a language other than English, that American "experience" is, in part, Black experience, as Ralph Ellison asserts: "You cannot have an American experience without having a black [one.]" (16) Yiddish writers' poetry-their contribution to American literary culture--is marked by their recognition of Black experience as integral to Americanness and to claiming their own status as Americans.

Two Yiddish Black poems from Mayzel's anthology claim this status very differently. In the first poem, "A Negerl," (17) by Avrom Reyzen, the image of a Black child aids the poet in asserting (however indirectly) a privileged racial status. In the second poem, "Negershe Kinderlekh," by RozaNevadovska, images of Black children point to a very different and more intimate relationship between poet and subject. (All transliterations and translations are mine. For information on the pronunciation of the transliteration, see Appendix.) (18)

A Little Negro	A Negerl
A little Negro, a tiny one, as black as soot	A negerel, a kleyns, vi saszhe shvarts,
that I saw playing by a house	hob ikh gezen zikh shpiln bay a hoyz,
saddened and terrified my heart:	es hot getroyert un geshrokn zikh mayn harts:
My God! how black your creature looks!	mayn Gott! vi shvarts dayn bashefenish zet oys!
And suddenly the black child burst out laughing,	Un plutzling hot dos kind dos shvartse zikh tselakht,
rolling and playing on the ground:	zikh koyklendik un shpilndik af dr'erd:
My God! What's happening to me? I thought,	mayn got! vos iz mit mir azoyns? hob ikh getrakht,
Where have I heard such laughter before?	vu hob ikh ergetz aza lakhn shoyn gehert?
I remembered that once my little brother,	Ikh hob dermont zikh, az mayn bruderl amol,
my little white brother, when he was small,	mayn vays bruderl, ven s'iz geverzen kleyn,
also laughed just like this, in the same voice--	hot oykh gelakht azoy, es iz dos zelbe kol--
and right away the child became beautiful and dear ...	un glaykh iz mir dos kind gevorn lib un sheyn...

What happens in this poem is deceptively simple: the speaker sees a Negro child playing and describes his reactions. His reactions, however, are complex indeed, beginning with "es hot getroyert un geshrokn zikh mayn harts," literally, "my heart was saddened and dismayed" ("geshrokn zikh" can also mean "frightened" as well). The line ends with a colon, leading straight to the speaker's exclamation, directed at God, the creator of the little Negro: "how black your creature looks!" In the speaker's eyes, the child's "dirty" color (literally, "like sooty black") is startling, and grounds for sadness, fear, dismay.

The image of the Black child (19) as it continues to be built in the poem's second stanza--laughing, playing, rolling on the ground--summons up Topsy,. "the blackest of her race," a "thing" who sings wildly and turns somersaults. (20) In the first stanza, the speaker's use of the word "creature" prepares the reader to see the child's playful movements in the stanza following as animal-like. In the second stanza, the speaker's repetition of "My God!" seems not so much directed to God as an ejaculation to himself, as it's followed by "what's happening to me?" ("vos iz mit mir azoyns," literally, "what's with me?") In this line, it's as if the speaker is rousing himself from the spell of the child's blackness, or even chastising himself for his reaction to the child. However, the next line cues us to his groping to remember where he had "heard such laughter before"--a memory that suddenly breaks through in the third and final stanza.

In the third stanza, the speaker moves from the past tense of the poem to a further "past"--his memory of a little brother who laughed just like the little Negro child, when he was small. In fact, the speaker

notes: "es iz dos zelbe kol," literally, "it is the same voice"--reverting for an instant to a present-tense point of identification. After this, the poem resolves in a significant shift: the speaker views and refers to the child differently, not as Black (that feature falls away), but just as "the child." The aspect of the Black child changes to "lib un sheyn," loveable and beautiful (reinforcing the sense that blackness is quite opposite to these qualities)--and the poem leaves it at that. It's as if the poet resolves the problem of the troubling black image through sound, through laughter--doing away with the problem of looking entirely, since blackness disappears at the poem's end.

Something has appeared however, by the end of the poem: the whiteness of the poet, a Yiddish-speaking Jew. The speaker, after all, has mentioned his brother twice: "my little brother,/ my little white brother," making casual yet definite reference to his brother's color. The "dismay" aroused by encountering the little Negro child has caused a shift in awareness--a memory of a white brother, a sort of puncture--"My God, what's happening to me?"--through which the blackness of the little Negro child has been, in a sense, replaced by the whiteness of the little brother and (by extension) of the speaker himself.

In "Negershe Kinderlekh," Roza Nevadovska creates Black children as beautiful creatures, sensuously vivid yet chimerical, not quite real. The poem, which appears in Mayzel's anthology on p. 755, is undated:

Little Negro Children	Negershe Kinderlekh
In their eyes--tropical stars.	In di oygn--tropishe shtern.
Their little heads--sheep's wool.	Zeyere kepeklekh-shepsene voln.
Deep mystery-chimeras	Di tife misterie-khimerin
have welled up in their forms.	in zeyere geshtaltn ongekvoln.
Little bodies cast in bronze,	Gufimlkeh fun bronz oysgegosn,
the tinkle of bracelets' tiny voices.	Kelkhelekh-geklang fun bronzeletn.
Dark-moist, humid drops of dew	Tunkl-toyike, faykhtike roses
through glances, like velvet caresses.	Durkh blikn, vi sametn gletn.
Little feet drum out on the New York streets	Fislekh poykn-oys oyf di gasn New Yorker
the rhythms of Africa's plains.	Di ritmen fun Afrikes pleynen.
Their grandfathers, enslaved, burdened	Zeyere zeydes farshklafte, farzorgte
still weep bitter tears.	Mit bitere trem nokh veynen.
I look into their tropical eyes,	Ikh kuk in di tropishe oygn,
into sun-filled, bronze-brown stars	in gezuniktn, bronz-broynem shtern
Melodies have darted out at me--	Nigunim af mir ongefloygn--
Africa's voice I do hear.	Afrikes kol tu ikh hem.
The voices of African nights--	Di shtimen fun nekht Afrikaner--
Black tribes in passage through the	shvartse shvatim in gang durkh di gasn,
I go in amazement. In my mind's eye	ikh gey in fargaf. In mayn anen--
I see America's folks and races.	ze ikh Amerikes felker un rasn.

Nevadovska's poem involves the senses, but especially seeing and hearing, beginning with its opening words "in di oygn," literally "in the eyes." (This could be translated as "in my eyes," but because the rest of the stanza describes the children, I've chosen to translate it as "in their eyes.") Certainly, in the eyes of this poet, there is nothing stereotypical about these children. The poem's images of them are striking in their movement between the palpable--such as the "sheep's wool" on the children's heads, or their bodies, cast in bronze--and the ungraspable, such as the lines in the second stanza which repeat images of moistness--literally, "dark-dewy, humid drops of dew." There is

also something special about the speaker's relationship to the children. The poem is set apart by the use of the Yiddish diminutive plural -lekh: kepelekh, little heads, gufimlekh, little bodies, fislekh, little feet, even kelkhlekh, little voices, (21) which is how a Jewish mother "inventories" her own children's bodies; it implies the speaker's tender, motherly attitude toward the subjects of her poem.

In the third stanza, the speaker does revert to primitive stereotype: "Little feet drum out on the New York streets! the rhythms of Africa's plains." She also nods to historical context: "Their grandfathers, enslaved, burdened! still weep bitter tears." In comparison with the preceding descriptions of the children, this stanza feels awkward, like a less-than successful attempt to turn the poem from sensuous particulars to a larger context-- where the children came from and where they are now. The poet, however, does give the children agency here; it's their feet that call up the image of Africa.

Having established the children's context (Africa, slavery), the speaker returns to the "eyes" she began with--only this time, herown "I" comes into the poem: "I look into their tropical eyes.,, (22) The children themselves are not shown as actively seeing, but the poet is able to "look in": and this act springs free "melodies . . . / Africa's voice," which the speaker hears. The close interweaving of seeing and hearing in these lines reinforces the speaker's intense, multi-sensory involvement with these children.

In the last stanza, "the voices of African nights" are linked to "black tribes in passage through the streets"--the New York streets, as was established earlier in the poem. (The children are gone, as if melted into the mass of the "tribes" that their own feet have summoned.) The primitive, stereotypical image of tribes seems far from urban America. Yet the poem does not end with this stereotype--because the speaker is no longer just an onlooker.

The voices of African nights--
Black tribes in passage through the streets,
I go in amazement In my mind's eye--
I see America's folk and races.

She has been drawn into the action of the poem, in two ways: she "goes," as if following them at a distance (the Yiddish is very unspecific here; "Ikh gey," I go or I walk); and, she looks inside herself. "Looking" in the poem moves from passive description to a productive act: she sees "America's folks and races." (23) Her encounter with the Black children has unlocked not only Africa but America for Nevadovska. The "Black tribes" mirror an America in which, perhaps, the poet will be able to see herself.

I say perhaps because, to see "America," even in her mind's eye, suggests that Nevadovska stands somehow apart from it, outside of its "folks and races"; the poet uses stereotyped images of Africa (and fresh images of American "Negro" children) with a difference rooted in her Yiddish immigrant status. She is aware that she herself is still an other to America, whereas Black people (despite their connection to Africa) already belong.

In discussing Yiddish poetry in an American context, one must confront the issue of Black representation in American literature. Toni Morrison has analyzed what she calls "American Africanism": the consciously constructed or unconsciously coded presence of an African-like figure, in writing by white Americans. The lived experiences of Black people are converted into "a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force." (24) Morrison argues, in relation to traditional, canonical American writers, that "a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness." (25) Certainly a poem like Avrom Reyzen's, published in 1911 at a time when Jews' own racial status was uncertain, suggests a "Yiddish Africanism"--an attempt by the writer (very likely unconscious) to solidify his own white status.

On the other hand, both Reyzen's and Nevadovska's poems remind us that, for Yiddish immigrants, the encounter with Black people was something new in their own lived experience. A romantic curiosity about Black people may have accompanied them on their journeys from Europe. Even before

a Yiddish writer immigrated to America, she might have read the Yiddish translation of Uncle Tom's Cabin; might have "read about [Blacks] in story books; profound, black eyes, abroad nose, white teeth gleaming between full lips...and soft, caressing voices"; might have "pictured them to [her]self as a race of big, sturdy children," or imagined "a copper, glowing sun and burnished, brown bodies...bodies that would scatter sun- and ray-dust as they ran." (26) However, it is only living in the U.S. that Yiddish immigrants actually saw, and had the chance to interact with, Black people; and only in an American context that immigrants were systematically exposed to American "systems of speech" (27) and began to intertangle stereotype s with their own, Yiddish notions of "blackness" (e.g., shvarts-khenevdik, "black-charming," which is how Eastern European Jews described the darkest among their own "race.") (28)

א נעגערל

א נעגערל, א קליינס, ווי סאַמעט שוואַרץ,
האָב איך געזען זיך שפּילן ביי א הויז,
עס האָט געטרילערט און געשראָקן זיך מיין האַרץ:
מיין גאָט! ווי שוואַרץ דיין באַשאַפֿעניש קוקט אויס!

און פּלוצלינג האָט דאָס קינד דאָס שוואַרצע זיך צעלאַכט,
זיך קייקלענדיק און שפּילנדיק אויף דר'ערד:
מיין גאָט! וואָס איז מיט מיר אַצינד? האָב איך געטראַכט,
וואו האָב איך ערגעץ אַזאַ לאַכן שוין געהערט?!

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

Yet the Black image does not function as a "trope" in Yiddish poetry, the way it does in poems by other (white) poets writing in the U.S. at about the same time.29 In his book Reading Race, White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century, Aldon Nielsen is overtly critical of white modernist writers' use of exotic and primitivist Black elements, which he characterizes as "a type of aesthetic slumming" not all that different from the "romantic racism" of the modernists' poetic predecessors. (30) He argues that racial dynamics are inherent in "white discourse," the very discourse of American language and national self-definition, and that the modernists were simply more self-conscious in deploying them. (31) Nielsen points to poems such as William Carlos Williams' "A Negro Woman" as examples of writing in which Black people lack agency, and in which they function as "a colorful but mute background." (32) In Williams' poem, the Black woman is seen:

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carrying a bunch of marigolds
     wrapped
      in an old newspaper:
She carries them upright,
           bareheaded,
            the bulk
of her thighs
     causing her to waddle
      as she walks
looking into
     the store window which she passes
           on her way... (33)
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A Little Negro

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

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

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

A Negerl

A negerl, a kleyns, vi sazhe shvarts,
hob ikh gezen zikh shpiln bay a hoyz,
es hot getroyert un geshrokn zikh mayn harts:
mayn Gott! vi shvarts dayn bashefenish zet oys!

Un plutsling hot dos kind dos shvartse zikh
tselakht,
zikh koyklendik un shpilndik af dr'erd:
mayn got! vos iz mit mir azoyns? hob ikh
getrakht,
vu hob ikh ergets aza lakhn shoyn gehert?

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

Nielsen's analysis of the racism in "white discourse" has sharp relevance for understanding Yiddish poetry's "difference" in its encounter with Black America. In Yiddish poetry, Black images tend to function very differently--the key difference being a felt connection to a lived Black experience. For example, unlike Williams' and other modernists' poems, Alter Eselin's "Geburt" (Birth) (34) gives agency, even a sense of heroism, to the Black woman who is its subject.

Birth

At the end of a day, toiling over
 the wash--
the young Negress felt of her hips
 and belly a last time.
Noticed her feet are bursting from
 their skin:
her black flesh swells like a
 pomegranate, tight
as if a slaughtering knife were
 scraping under her

     thigh.
She thought to herself:--Is it
 already time?
So she went to her husband, the
 broad-shouldered
     athlete:
--Hey man, take care of the
 laundry.
I'm going!--
And she took herself alone to the
 city hospital.
They numbered her with a figure
 into a book of
     numbers
and laid her, with her mountainous
 belly, in a
     white bed.
Invalids and madonnas lie still,
but not a simple Negro wife, in
 labor.
She bent over and spun like a
 whirlwind.
And one time a terrible shriek
like a crow that sees death.

When the child's first fluting
 made itself heard
in the white void of the hospital,
the old doctor with a sharp voice

Geburt

Tsum sof fun tog, bay der pratse
fun gevesh--
hot zikh di yunge negerin a letstn
mol di hiftn un dem boykh batapt.
Derzen, az di fis ire platsn fun
der hoyt;
dos shvartse layb iz milgroymik un
shtayf
un vi a khalef volt geshobn untern
dikh,

 hot zi zikh fartrakht: --shoyn
  tsayt?
 Iz zi tsu tsum man, dem
  breytpleytsikn atlet:
 --Hey, man, gib akhtung af di gret.
 Ikh gey!--
 Un hot zikh aleyn in shtot-shpitol
  gefirt.
 Hot men ir in bukh mit a tsifer
  numerirt
 un mitn startshendikn boykh in
  vaysn bet geleygt.
 Invalidn un madones lign shtil,
 nor nit a proste neger-vayb, vos
  geyt tsu-kind.
 Hot zi zikh geton a boyg un a drey
  vi a
      vikhervint.
 Un eyn mol a gevaldikn geshrey
 vi a kro, vos zet dem toyt.

 Az der ershter fleyt fun kind hot
  zikh derhert
 in vaysn khalal fun shpitol,
 hot der alter doktor mit a harbn
  kol
 tsu di arumike vays-bamantlte layt
  gezogt:
 kukt agnostiker, un zet--gots

said to the white-coated people
 around him:
Look, agnostics, and see--God's
 abundant gift;
the poor give birth easily,
 scattering babies
 everywhere,
the haughty and fine rich lady
often needs to have her belly
 sliced open
and little Caesars die under the
 knife ... *

At the end of the week she went
 home,
brought her night-like velvet child
to a lonesome house,
laid the child on the broad bed
with her new, light hands
and to her gaping husband spoke
 like this:
--Hey, nigger, just look how it
 smacks its lips,
the young one takes after you,
inclined to gorge itself and sleep
 hard.
He lies there in the meantime like
 a sick mole,
but on his head thin copper wire is
 already curling
 up,
and he has eyes full of black
 diamond-shine.
When he gets big, he'll follow in
 your footsteps
and hang on the hot-shouldered
 hussies of his
 race,
waste his days in a bar, his
 nights--in fighting.
But I will acquaint him with God
 and with
 gentleness!--
With this she turned her moist
 glance to the

 corner lamp
and, in her heart, love for her
 child baked
like molten brass--
and tender as the nightingale.

* "Cesarean section," through which
 Julius
Caesar was born.

 shefedike gob;
di oreme kindlen gring, shitn vi
 mit bob,
der feshnobeler un raykher eydlfroy
badarf men oft dem boykh
 fanandershnaydn *
un kleyne tsezars shtarbn untern
 meser...

Tsu der vokh hot zi aheym, in
 elnt-shtub
ir nakhtik sametenem kind gebrakht,
mit ire naye gringe hent
dos kind afn breytn bet geleygt
un tsum gafndikn man hot zi azoy
 gezogt:
--Hey, nigger, ze nor, vi dos
 smotshert mit di
 lipn,
der yung iz in dir gerotn,
mit naygungen tsum fres un shvem
 sholf.
Er ligt dervayl nokh vi a kranker
 krot,
nor oyfn kop kroyzt zikh im shoyn
 diner
 kuperdrot,
un oygn hot er ful mit shvartsn
 dimentshayn.
Az er vet groys vern, vet er in
 dayne vegn geyn
un hengen af di heyspleytsike
 moydn fun zayn
 shtam,
in shenk farshvendn zayne teg un in
 gefekht--di
 nekht.
Nor ikh vel im bakenen mit got un
 eydlkayt!--
Un in hartsn hot gebakt di libe tsu
 ir kind
vi heyser mesh--
un tsart vi der nakhtigal.
1925 (Mayzel 488)

* "Siserian shnit," durkh velkn
yulius tsezar iz geboym.

In "Geburt, "the images of the Black woman's ripeness for labor, in the first stanza, are complex. They begin with the mundane, her feet "bursting" from the weight that they carry--especially at the end of a hard work day. (It's apparent that the woman's "labor" at the wash extends right up to her own moment of labor.) The images then shift: "her black flesh is pomengranate-like and tight! as if a khalef (slaughtering knife) were scraping under her thigh." In shkhite, the kosher butchering process, the khalef a razor-sharp knife, is used not only to halakbically kill an animal, but to remove veins that Jews are not permitted to consume--e.g., in the hollow of the thigh. In the poem, the woman at the point of

giving birth is, in a way, similar to the animal during shkhite; it's as if she herself is about to be purified through pain, made kosher through the needle-sharp pains of labor. The effect is to link the woman with animals-but also bestows a strange kind of holiness. Comparing the sound of the woman, as she gives birth, to a crow strengthens the link to an animal realm and the sense of natural forces, almost beyond control--as she "spun like a whirlwind." The forces she embodies enlarge her, as if she herself comes to possess a kind of brute force.

In this first section of the poem, the woman's blackness, which is mentioned directly-her "black flesh"--is indirectly contrasted with the hospital's "white bed." In the middle section, images of the hospital's whiteness multiply, its "white void" and "white-coated people" standing in stark contrast to the woman's blackness (which is not even mentioned here). By identifying "white" so clearly in this stanza, through images of a cold place where the doctor's voice is "sharp" (in contrast with the baby's fluting cry), the poet is revealing a racist superstructure: a white institution, with figures of authority who gather to talk about "the poor." The doctor considers the woman's facility with birth a gift from God--but it's sarcastic, because he compares it to shitn mit bub, literally "pouring with beans." "Bub" are chickpeas, among the cheapest kind of food a Jew could eat-suggesting that babies are worth nothing to the poor.

In the poem's last section, the woman is presented with the strongest sympathy, but in the context of a harsh critique of Black manhood. The woman's interaction with her husband begins with her calling him "nigger." Even if this term turned out to be common slang inside the Black community during the 1920s, it still stings as a racist epithet. But here the presumption of the poet--a Yiddish immigrant man--is exposed. The poet now seems to be speaking through this woman, using her to reveal his own judgments about Black men, which include (stereotypically) laziness, hypersexuality, and drunkenness. It's not enough that the woman has given birth to the child under harsh, "white" conditions -- but she must overcome her own husband's dissoluteness (and, by extension, that of all men in her community) as well. The woman emerges as the heroine of this poem, but finally in contrast to Black men's weakness.

What is the significance of Yiddish poets' interest in the (at times intimate) details of Black life? When Yiddish immigrant poets write about Black life, what do they really see -- and how distantly or closely do they position themselves, vis-a-vis their subjects? Two more poems from Mayzel's anthology offer different perspectives. In Levy Goldberg's "In a Neger-Kvartal," (35) the poet functions as a documentarian, casting a sympathetic but relatively distanced eye on the scene he witnesses. Roza Nevadovska takes a more intimate stance in relation to the subjects of her poem, "Tsu di Shvartse Froyen." (36)

```
In A Negro Quarter                  In a Neger-Kvartal

Sun melted copper --                Zun hot tseshmoltsenem kuper--
poured it out on faces and bodies.  aroyfgegosn af pneymer un layber.
Negro men                           Iz gevorn
came into being,                    neger mener,
Negro Women,                        neger vayber,
and Negro Children.                 un neger kinder.
Blind chance                        Blinder tsufal
drove them into old houses,         hot zay arayngetribn in alte
                                     hayzer,
crooked, filthy.                    krumer, opgelozene.
They stand before the city like     Shteyen zey far der shtot, vi
 beggars.                            betler.
Clinging,                           Getulyete,
with blind windows.                 mit blinde fentster.

Like stains                         Vi pliyames
on the bright outdoors              afn likhtikn droysn
Negro mothers sit on the doorsteps  zitsn bay di shveln, negerins mames
with babies on their laps.          mit ufelekh af di shoysn.
```

(Open jackets reveal breasts	(Ofenem yaklekh vayzen brist,
that bake in the sun	vos bakn zikh af der zun,
like little rye breads).	vi korene broytlekh).
Negro grandmothers sit	S'zitsn negerins bobes,
next to baby cradles worn with use.	bay opgenitzevete kinder-vigelekh.
They rock, and rock themselves to sleep,	Vign, un farvign zikh,
with a screechy, chatty pleasure.	mit a kvitshendikn, plaplendikn fargenign
Negro boys	Neger yinglekh,
with their crooked little feet	mit di krume flslekh,
dangle from fences,	hengen zikh af ploytn,
jumping from their skins, they're so impatient,	shpringen fun di hoytn,
shooting arrows from the dark pupil of their eyes.	shvartse aplen varfn faylnboygns.
By the doors	Bay di tirn
of the dusty hallways	fun di shoybike koridorn,
only the Negro girls, still in their childhoods,	shvaygn nor
are silent.	di neger-meydlekh in di kinder-yorn
Thinness,--	Dinkayt,--
extends from their shoulders.	tsit zikh fun di akslen.
Longing,--	Benkshaft,--
bloodies the whites of their eyes.	
On a corner	Bay a rog,
or by a little shop	tsi bay a kreml
Negro youths stand, empty ones--	neger-yungn shteyen laydike--
forming a noisy crowd.	bildn a gezeml.
Laziness, hatched	Foylkayt,
on the nakedness	oysgezest oyf hoylkayt
of their manly strength,	fun zeyer gevure,
all the faces--one face,	ale pneymer--eyn tsure,
all the lips	ale lipn
sip	zipn
here, laughter, there a shout	do gelekhter, do geshrey,
until the day	biz der tog,
rolls like a wheel away from them.	rolt zikh vi a rod avek fun zey.

Goldberg's poem, like a Walker Evans photograph, functions as a kind of "witness" to the people it describes. It focuses on details of daily life--mothers sitting on doorsteps, boys dangling from fences. Of course, like a Walker Evans photograph, it raises questions about representation, about the kinds of details selected: for example, the mothers sit and "bake"; the grandmothers chat and doze; the girls "long"; the boys are impatient--and there are no grown men in the poem. The "nakedness" of the Negro youth's "gvure"--a word that Weinreich translates as "might, prowess, strength; valor, heroism, fortitude" (37)--produces "laziness." The use of the word "gvure" seems ironic, since the poem does not grant the youth "power" over anything; the day itself "rolls... away from them," and they lose their individuality to the crowd. Yet even though the Black people described appear passive in this poem, they still "read" as vivid figures with a life "outside" the poem; they don't exist simply for the poet's use.

נעגערשע קינדערלעך

אין די אויגן — טראָפּישע שטערן
זייערע קעפּעלעך — שעפּסענע וואָל.
די טיפע מיסטעריע־כימערן
אין זייער געשטאַלט אָנגעקוואָלן.

גופימלעך פון בראָנדז אויסגעגאָסן,
קולכעלעך־געקלאַנג פון בראָנזלעטן
טונקל־טויאיקע, פייכטיקע ראָסעס
דורך בליקן, ווי סאַמעטן גלעטן.

פיסלעך פּויקן־אויס אויף די גאַסן ניו־יאָרקער
די ריטמען פון אַפריקעס פּליינען
זייערע ייִדעס פאַרשקלאַפטע, פאַרוואָרגנטע
מיט ביטערע טרערן נאָך ווייַנען.

איך קוק אין די טראָפּישע אויגן,
אין גוטמיקסן, בראָנדזנדיקעס שטערן
ניגונים אויף מיר אָנגעפלויגן —
אַפריקעס קול טו איך הערן.

די שטימען פון נעכטן אַפריקאַנער —
שוואַרצע שבטים אין גאַנג דורך די גאַסן.
איך גיי אין פּאַראַד, אין מיין אייגן —
זע איך אַמעריקעס פעלקער און ראַסן.

In contrast to the studied, objective tone of the speaker in Goldberg's poem, in Nevadovska's "Tsu di Shvartse Froyen," the speaker addresses her subjects empathically as "you":

Little Negro Children	Negershe Kinderlekh
In their eyes—tropical stars.	In di oygn—tropishe shtern.
Their little heads—sheep's wool.	Zeyere kepeklekh—shepsene voln.
Deep mystery-chimeras	Di tife misterie-khimerin
have welled up in their forms.	in zeyere geshtaltn ongekvoln.
Little bodies cast in bronze,	Gufimlekh fun bronz oysgegosn,
the tinkle of bracelets' tiny voices.	Kelkhelekh-geklang fun bronzletn.
Dark-moist, humid drops of dew	Tunkl-toyike, faykhtike roses
through glances, like velvet caresses.	Durkh blikn, vi sametn gletn.
Little feet drum out on the New York streets	Fislekh poykn-oys oyf di gasn New Yorker
the rhythms of Africa's plains.	Di ritmen fun Afrikes pleynen.

To the Black Women	Tsu di Shvartse Froyen
You leave your homes as from a ghetto--at dusk, in quiet exhaustion, you return to your sparse meal--from the rich tables that you prepared for satisfied mouth and gaze.	Fun ayere heymen geyt ir aroys, vi fun a geto--in shtiln midkayt kert ir zikh um farnakht tsurik tsu ayer darn moltsayt--fun di tishn fete, vos ir hot tsugegreyt far zatn moyl un blik.
You come back to your husband, you return to your children,	Ir kumt tsurik tsum man, ir kert zikh um tsu kinder,
and, heart-sore, speak quietly of a long, hard day.	dertseylt in shtiln tsar fun langn, shvern tog.
Then it seems, for a while: it will, perhaps, get easier,	Dan dukht zikh af a vayl: s'vet, efsher, vern gringer,
one need not be, perhaps, so consumed and driven.	men vet nit darfn, efsher, zayn azoy farnumen un faryogt.
Whole days and years--cleaning and washing--	Gantse teg un yorn--reynikn un vashn--
someone else's bright house, a stranger's dust and dirt.	yenems likhtik hoyz, fremdn shotyb un shmuts.
	Aleyn in oremkayt--mit tife oygn nashn
Alone in poverty--your deep eyes pick	fremde roykayt, fremdn hob un guts.

at another's peace, another's possessions.

Evening runs, night comes suddenly, weary,
to every little corner of your narrow home.
But a quiet sigh, or a word, like an enchanted fiddle
hangs in the air like an uncried-out cry.

Just as morning turns blue over your black ghetto,
the subway already swallows you and to the ends of the city.

Your sad eyes--like the eyes of poets...
why is your step so submissive and slavish?

Der ovnt loyft, di nakht falt-tsu a mide
tsu yedn vinkele fun ayer enger heym.
Nor a shtiler zifts, oder a vort, vi a tsoyber-fidl
blaybt hengen inderluft, vi nit oysgeveynt geveyn.

Vi nor frimorgn bloyt iber ayer shvartsn geto, di sobvey shlingt aykh shoyn un shlept tsu ekn shtot.
Ayere umetike oygn--vi oygn fun poetn...
Farvos iz azoy untertenik-shklafish ayer trot?

In this vision of Black women, displaced daily from their homes, traveling to the "ends of the city" to clean and care for a well-off stranger's home, yet unable to attain any peace of their own, there seems recorded the poet's own displacement, as an immigrant Jew. From the very first line, the poet establishes an identification: "From your homes, you go out, as from a ghetto." The word "ghetto" was associated with a Jewish quarter long before it signified a place of Black residence (e.g., Abraham Cahan's use of the word in Yekl, a Tale of the New York Ghetto, published in 1896). The speaker, whom we can assume knows what the "ghetto" is like, sees in these women something of her own experience.

The poem's gentle, weary tone is rooted in its images, which establish a ceaseless routine: the poem opens with the women leaving their homes, on their way to work, and closes with them leaving again. The poems' central images, however, have to do with evening, stillness, and the women being inside their own homes. The poem actually uses the verb "umkern zikh" (return) twice and "tsurikkumen" (come back) once in the opening two stanzas: the women return "in quiet exhaustion," "come back" to their husband, "return" to their children. Against this pull back into the home, the images of the "whole days and years" that the women spend, cleaning and washing strangers' houses, which appear in the third stanza, feel more stark. The poem sets up a tension between two kinds of domestic interiors: the women's personal interiors, where dusk reigns (because the only time they get to be at home is very early in the morning or in the evening) and the "likhtik hoyz," the light-filled house that they spend their days cleanin g. The women's "sparse meal[s]" are also contrasted to the "fat tables" that they prepare for others; and the hunger the women feel goes beyond the physical: "[their] deep eyes pick" at the "peace" as well as the material goods that belong to the houses they clean. That the women are indeed beings who contain much more than their physical labor is reinforced by the image in the fourth stanza: "But a quiet sigh, or a word, like an enchanted fiddle/hangs in the air like an uncried-out cry." The image of the fiddle that represents not-fully-shed tears is sad, yet it is also "enchanted"--a symbol of potential, however hindered from expression--which strikes a transcendent note in an otherwise dark poem.

In the last stanza, the comparison to "ghetto" falls away: this is a Black ghetto, the Black and the Yiddish immigrant senses are now joined together. When the poet-speaker looks into Black women's eyes, across the divisions of Black/white, immigrant/American, the speaker and the spoken for--she sees "the eyes of poets"; she sees herself. Perhaps this explains the poem's startling last line, which asks a question -- "why is your step so submissive and slavish?"--that the poem itself seems already to have answered: the women's lives are consumed with their labor. But perhaps the last line

reverberates back to the pent-up music of the fiddle, the possibility as well as the pain that it represents.

Nevadovska's poem projects (drawing on Homi Bhabha's words) "an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which... spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed." (38) In the poem's third stanza, which describes the women's servitude in "someone else's bright house," the word fremd is repeated three times: the "fremdn dust and dirt," "fremde peace" and "fremdn possessions"--all things that could strike a Yiddish immigrant as equally "strange," "foreign," or "belonging to someone else" (all possible meanings of "fremd"). (39) The "subway... swallows" the Black women and "drags [them] to the ends of the city," to ekn shtot; but the poet herself has been carried to "ekn velt," the ends of the earth, in her emigration from Russia. Nevadovska's poem, with its claims of intimacy, of knowing what the Black women's experience is like, has the effect of dismantling American racial difference, replacing it with the greater claim of a shared displacement.

Their grandfathers, enslaved, burdened, still weep bitter tears.	Zeyere zeydes farshklafte, farzorgte Mit bitere trern nokh veynen.
I look into their tropical eyes, into sun-filled, bronze-brown stars. Melodies have darted out at me— Africa's voice I do hear.	Ikh kuk in di tropishe oygn, in gezunikn, bronz-broyne shtern. Nigunim af mir ongefloygn— Afrikes kol tu ikh hern.
The voices of African nights— Black tribes in passage through the streets, I go in amazement. In my mind's eye— I see America's folks and races.	Di shtimen fun nekht Afrikaner— shvartse shvatim in gang durkh di gasn, ikh gey in fargaf. In mayn oyen— ze ikh Amerikes felker un rasn.

Yiddish Black poems are not immune to instances of objectification, stereotype, and even outright racism. The use of the Black image in Yiddish poetic discourse takes a more complicated turn when we come, for example, to Yiddish poems about lynchings. These poems, which convey the poets' anger on behalf of Black victims and the betrayal of religious and American ideals, often foreground the Black victim's body, as an object of horror and of stereotype, as well. (For example, see Vaynshteyn's

"Lyntshing" (40) and Yehoash's "Lyntshn." (41) Stereotyped images also appear in poems by H. Leyvik, Ruvn Ludvig, Sara Barkan, and A. Giants Leyeles (some of which appear in Mayzel's anthology; others, translated in Harshav), and in scattered places throughout Y. Y. Shvarts's epic Kentoki (Kentucky). I am inclined to read instances of stereotype and objectification in Yiddish poems as indicators of a creeping exposure to "white discourse"--although, of course, there is no way for me to measure this. Why did stereotypical details appear in some poets' work and not others? Was there a difference in the poets' commitment to a politically "left" Yiddish culture (which Brodkin insists was "bedrock" on the Lower East Side (42))? (How "pure" was Yiddish culture of such stereotypes?) These are just a few of the questions relating to Yiddish Black poetry that deserve further research and exploration.

This essay began with an allusion to Jewish difference, the "off-white" or probationary whiteness of Yiddish immigrants during the period when

most of the Yiddish Black poems were written. But what produced these poems is not just an awareness of, or interest in, racial difference: it is an internal experience of difference, having to do with the writers' status as immigrants, coming to live in another language and culture. Yiddish Black poems rehearse a relationship between Yiddish immigrants (would-be Americans) and Black Americans, for a sympathetic Yiddish audience; they "witness" moments in an encounter between Jews and Blacks, which those writing the encounter (the Yiddish poets) view as significant. Further, the Yiddish poets take race--in its American construction as color, stigma, and division--and rewrite it,

instead, as a construction of displacement--a condition they understand as shared by Yiddish immigrants and Black Americans.

[LANGUAGE NOT REPRODUCIBLE IN ASCII]

APPENDIX

The phonetic transliterations in this article are based on a standardized system, promoted by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Consonants are read almost entirely as in English, but vowels and diphthongs are read as follows. (This information is taken from Shleyme Axelrod's description of "Romanization, YIVO-Style." For his complete description, please go to the electronic archives of the listserv, Mendele:

Yiddish literature and language, 4:170, 11/7/94; or see http://rintintin.coloradu.edu/~biasca/yivosys.txt.)

Diphthongs and Vowels (with sample transliterations):

ey ("neyn") = long a (as in the English "hay")

a ("far") = short a (as in the English "father")

ay ("fayn") = long i (as in the English "fire")

e ("entfer") = short e (as in the English "end")

i ("tish") = short i (as in the English "fit")

i ("zi") = long i (as in the English "feet")

o ("hob") = short u (as in the English "hut")

o ("yorn") = long o (as in the English "sort")

u ("un") = short u (as in the English "put")

u ("du") = long u (as in the English "food")

האָט מען איר אין בויך מיט אַ ציטער געמערקט
און מיטן סטאַרטשענדיקן בויך און ווייסן בעט געלייגט.
אינטערלידן און מאַראַנעס ליגן שטיל,
נאָר ניט אַ פּראָסטע געמערווייב, וואָס גייט צו קינד
האָט זי זיך געטאָן אַ בייג און אַ דריי ווי אַ וויכערווינט.
און איין מאָל אַ געוואַלדיקן געשריי
ווי אַ קראָ, וואָס זעט דעם טויט.

אַז דער ערשטער פּלייט פֿון קינד האָט זיך דערהערט
אין ווייסן חלל פֿון שפּיטאָל,
האָט דער אַלטער דאָקטער מיט אַ האַרבן קול
צו די אַרומיקע ווייס־באַמאַנטלטע לייט געזאָגט:
קוקט, אַגנאָסטיקער, און זעט — גאָטס שפּעדיקע גאָב:
די אָרעמע קינדלען גרינג, שיטן ווי מיט באָב.
דער פֿעשנאַבעלער און רייכער אידלפּרי
באַדאַרף מען אָפּט דעם בויך פֿאַנאַנדערשניידן *
און קליינע צעזאַרס שטאַרבן אונטערן מעסער . . .

צו דער וואָך האָט זי אַהיים, אין עלנט־שטוב
איר נאַכטיק סאַמעטענעם קינד געבראַכט,
מיט אירע נייע גרינגע הענט
דאָס קינד אויפֿן ברייטן בעט געלייגט
און צום גאָמלדיקן מאַן האָט זי אַזוי געזאָגט:
— הער, ניגער, זע נאָר, ווי דאָס סמאָטשעט מיט די ליפּן,
דער יונג איז אין דיר געראָטן,
מיט ניינגעבן צום פֿעס און שווערן שלאָף.
ער ליגט דערווייל נאָך ווי אַ קראַנקער קראָט,
נאָר אויבן קאָפּ קרײַזט זיך אים שוין דינער קופּערדראָט,
און אייגן האָט ער מיט שוואַרצן דימענטשטיין.
אַז ער וועט גרויס ווערן, וועט ער אין דיינע וועגן גיין
און הענגען אויף די הויספּלייציקע מיידן פֿון זיין שטאַם,
און שענק פֿאַרשווענדן זיינע טעג און אין נעפּעכט — די נעכט.
נאָר איך וועל אים באַקענען מיט גאָט און אידלקייט ! —
דערביי האָט זי איר פֿייבכן בליק צום ווינקל־לאָמפּ געווענדט,
און אין האַרצן האָט געבאָקט די ליבע צו איר קינד
ווי הייסער מעש —
און צאַרט ווי דער נאַכטיגאַל.

*"סיסעריאַן שניט", דורך וועלכן יוליוס צעזאַר איז געבוירן.

oy ("goy") = same sound as in "boy," in English

Birth

As the end of a day, toiling over the wash—
the young Negress felt of her hips and belly a last
time.
Noticed her feet are bursting from their skin:
her black flesh swells like a pomegranate, tight
as if a slaughtering knife were scraping under her

Geburt

Tsum sof fun tog, bay der pratse fun gevesh—
hot zikh di yunge negerin a letstn mol
di hiftn un dem boykh batapt.
Derzen, az di fis ire platsn fun der hoyt;
dos shvartse layb iz milgroymik un shtayf
un vi a khalef volt geshobn untern dikh,

Consonants/clusters (with sample transliterations):

r ("royt") = the French "r" (as in "rue," in the back of the throat)

kh ("ikh") = the German "ch" (as in "achtung")

tsh ("potsh") = the English "ch" (as in "chair")

thigh.
She thought to herself: —Is it already time?
So she went to her husband, the broad-shouldered athlete:
—Hey, man, take care of the laundry.
I'm going!—
And she took herself alone to the city hospital.
They numbered her with a figure into a book of numbers
and laid her, with her mountainous belly, in a white bed.
Invalids and madonnas lie still,
but not a simple Negro wife, in labor.
She bent over and spun like a whirlwind.
And one time a terrible shriek
like a crow that sees death.

When the child's first fluting made itself heard
in the white void of the hospital,
the old doctor with a sharp voice
said to the white-coated people around him:
Look, agnostics, and see—God's abundant gift;
the poor give birth easily, scattering babies everywhere,
the haughty and fine rich lady
often needs to have her belly sliced open
and little Caesars die under the knife . . . *

At the end of the week she went home,
brought her night-like velvet child
to a lonesome house,
laid the child on the broad bed
with her new, light hands
and to her gaping husband spoke like this:
—Hey, nigger, just look how it smacks its lips,
the young one takes after you,
inclined to gorge itself and sleep hard.
He lies there in the meantime like a sick mole,
but on his head thin copper wire is already curling up,
and he has eyes full of black diamond-shine.
When he gets big, he'll follow in your footsteps
and hang on the hot-shouldered hussies of his race,
waste his days in a bar, his nights—in fighting.
But I will acquaint him with God and with gentleness!—
With this she turned her moist glance to the

hot zi zikh fartrakht: —shoyn tsayt?
Iz zi tsu taum man, dem breytpleytsikn atlet:
—Hey, man, gib akhtung af di gret.
Ikh gey!—
Un hot zikh aleyn in shtot-shpitol gefirt.
Hot men ir in bukh mit a tsifer numerirt
un mitn startshendikn boykh in vaysn bet geleygt.
Invalidn un madones lign shtil,
nor nit a proste neger-vayb, vos geyt tsu-kind.
Hot zi zikh geton a boyg un a drey vi a vikhervint.
Un eyn mol a gevaldikn geshrey
vi a kro, vos zet dem toyt.

Az der ershter fleyt fun kind hot zikh derhert
in vaysn khalal fun shpitol,
hot der alter doktor mit a harbn kol
tsu di arumike vays-bamantlte layt gezogt:
kukt agnostiker, un zet—gots shefedike gob;
di oreme kindlen gring, shitn vi mit bob,
der feshnobeler un raykher eydlfroy
badarf men oft dem boykh funandershnaydn*
un kleyne tsezars shtarbn untern meser...

Tsu der vokh hot zi aheym, in elnt-shtub
ir nakhtik sametenem kind gebrakht,
mit ire naye gringe hent
dos kind afn breytn bet geleygt
un tsum gafndikn man hot zi azoy gezogt:
—Hey, nigger, ze nor, vi dos smotshert mit di lipn,
der yung iz in dir gerotn,
mit naygungen tsum fresn un shvern shlof.
Er ligt dervayl nokh vi a kranker krot,
nor oyfn kop kroyzt zikh im shoyn diner kuperdrot,
un oygn hot er ful mit shvartsn dimentshayn.
Az er vet groys vern, vet er in dayne vegn geyn
un hengen af di heyspleytsike moydn fun zayn shtam,
in shenk farshvendn zayne teg un in gefekht—di nekht.
Nor ikh vet im bakenen mit got un eydlkayt!—
Un in hartsn hot gebakt di libe tsu ir kind
vi heyser mesh—
un zart vi der nakhtigal.

1925 (Mayzel 488)

zh ("zhuk") = thick "s" (as in the English "measure")

sh ("shande") = "sh" (as in the English "show")

ts ("nayntsik") = "ts" (as in the English "fruits")

(1.) James Allen, Als Hilton, John Lewis, Leon F. Litwack, Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000), p. 13.

(2.) See Hasia Diner, In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-193S (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 35-50.

corner lamp
and, in her heart, love for her child baked
like molten brass—
and tender as the nightingale.

* "Cesarean section," through which Julius Caesar was born.

* "Siserian shnit," durkh velkn yulius tsezar iz geboyrn.

(3.) (America in the Yiddish Word) (New York: Yidisher Kultur Farband, 1955).

(4.) A significant number of Yiddish Black poems are available in English translation. I encourage the reader to read Berish Vaynshteyn's sequence of six poems, "Negers" (Negroes), which appear in Barbara Harshav and Benjamin Harshav, eds., American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 636-649, and include a poem called "Lynching"; and Y. Y. Shvarts's book of narrative poems, Kentoki (Kentucky), trans. Gertrude Dubrovsky (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1925; 1990), which focuses on the lives of Jews and Blacks in the South.

(5.) Yitskhok Rontsh (Rontsch, Y.E.), "Der Neger in Undzer Literatur," in Amerike in der Yidisher Literatur (New York: I. E. Rontsch Book Committee, 1945), P. 203 (my translation).

(6.) Rontsh, "Der Neger," p. 203.

(7.) Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 41.

אין אַ נעגער־קוואַרטאַל

זון האָט צעשמאָלצענעם קופּער —
אַרויפֿגעגאָסן אויף פּנימער און לײַבער.
איז געוואָרן
נעגער מענער,
נעגער ווײַבער,
און נעגער קינדער.
בלינדער צופֿאַל
האָט זיי אַרײַנגעטריבן אין אַלטע הײַזער,
קרומע, אָפּגעלאָזענע,
שטייען זיי פֿאַר דער שטאָט, ווי בעטלער
געמוטשעטע,
מיט בלינדע פֿענצטער.

ווי פּליאַמעס
אויפֿן ליכטיקן דרויסן
זיצן בײַ די שוועלן, נעגערינס מאַמעס
מיט ומפּהלען אויף די שויסן
(אַמאָליקע יאַקלען נוויזן בריסט,
וואָס באַקן זיך אויף דער זון,
ווי קאַרענע ברייטלעך)
ס'זיצן נעגערינס באָבעס,
בײַ אָפּגעציטערטע קינדער־ווי־געלעך
וויגן, און פֿאַרוויגן זיך,
מיט אַ קוויטשענדיקן, פּלאַפּלענדיקן פֿאַרגעניגן
נעגער ייִנגלעך
מיט די קרומע פֿיסלעך.

(8.) Jacobson, Whiteness, p. 76.

(9.) Diner, In the Almost Promised Land, pp. 236-237.

(10.) The perception that Jews and other European immigrants were "not quite white" did not fully shift until after World War II, according to Karen Brodkin in How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), pp. 41-42. Jacobson notes that passage of the Johnson Act in 1924, which severely restricted immigration, coupled with new migrations of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North and West, were two factors in altering the "racial alchemy" in the U.S. (Jacobson, Whiteness, p. 95). Jacobson also provides a detailed analysis of the slow melding of European immigrant groups into a "Caucasian" race, marked with vestiges of ethnicity but seen as white (see pp. 91-135).

(11.) Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," in Critical Inquiry 18 (Spring 1992): 440.

הענגען זיך אויף פלויטן,
שפרינגען פון די הויטן,
שווארצע אפלען ווארפן פיילנבויגנס.
ביי די טירן
פון די שטויביקע קארידארן,
שווייגן נאר
די נעגער־מיידלעך אין די קינדערוואגן
דינקיס, —
ציט זיך פון די אקסלען
בענקשאפט, —
בלוטיקט אין די הייזלעך.

ביי א דאג,
צי ביי א קרעמל
נעגער־יונגען שטייען ליידיקע —
בילדן א געזעמל.
פיילקייט,
אויסגעוועבט אויף הוילקייט
פון זייער גבורה,
אלע פניכער — איין צורה,
אלע ליפן
זיפן
דא מעלעכטער, דא געשריי,
ביז דער טאג
ראלט זיך ווי א ראד אוועק פון זיי.

(12.) Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise": 434.

(13.) Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise": 434.

In A Negro Quarter

Sun melted copper —
poured it out on faces and bodies.
Negro men
came into being,
Negro women,
and Negro children.
Blind chance
drove them into old houses,
crooked, filthy.
They stand before the city like beggars.
Clinging,
with blind windows.

Like stains
on the bright outdoors
Negro mothers sit on the doorsteps
with babies on their laps.
(Open jackets reveal breasts
that bake in the sun
like little rye breads).

In a Neger-Kvartal

Zun hot tseshmolisenem kuper—
aroyfgegosn af pneymer un layber.
Iz gevorn
neger mener,
neger vayber,
un neger kinder.
Blinder tsufal
hot zay arayngetribn in alte hayzer,
krumer, opgelozene.
Shteyen zey far der shtot, vi betler.
Getulyete,
mit blinde fenster.

Vi pliyames
afn likhtikn droysn
zitsn bay di shveln, negerins mames
mit ufelekh af di shoysn.
(Ofenem yaklekh vayzen brist,
vos bakn zikh af der zun,
vi korene broytlekh).

(14.) Melnick, Jeffrey, A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

(15.) In my discussion of these poems I will use the term "Black" rather than "African American" because, for Yiddish poets, the latter term did not exist. African Americans are, by and large, referred to as "negers" (Negroes) or "blacks" in Yiddish poetry. "Nigger" is found rarely, as if the typical Yiddish poem understands and respects the charged boundaries that fence in this word in white discourse (although the sense of "Nigger" may come through the word "Negro," depending on how it's used in a poem). Some poems refer to shvartse men or women--that is, the color black. But any reference (which I have yet to find in Yiddish poems) to Black people as the collective noun "shvartses" would, I have been told, be highly derogatory--the equivalent, in Yiddish, of saying "niggers."

(16.) Ralph Ellison, The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison, ed. and with introduction by John F. Callahan (New York: The Modem Library, 1995), p. 442.

(17.) Negerl, diminuitive for "neger" (Negro), signifies smallness and also indicates Reyzen's warmth towards his subject. The poem is dated 1911 and appears on p. 212 of Mayzel's anthology.

Negro grandmothers sit	S'zitn negerins bobes,
next to baby cradles worn with use.	bay opgenitzevete kinder-vigelekh.
They rock, and rock themselves to sleep,	Vign, un farvign zikh,
with a screechy, chatty pleasure.	mit a kvitshendikn, plaplendikn fargenign.
Negro boys	Neger yinglekh,
with their crooked little feet	mit di krume fislekh,
dangle from fences,	hengen zikh af ploytn,
jumping from their skins, they're so impatient,	shpringen fun di hoytn,
shooting arrows from the dark pupils of their eyes.	shvartse aplen varfn fayinboygns.
By the doors	Bay di tirn
of the dusty hallways	fun di shoybike koridorn,
only the Negro girls, still in their childhoods,	shvaygn nor
are silent.	di neger-meydlekh in di kinder-yorn.
Thinness,—	Dinkayt,—
extends from their shoulders.	tsit zikh fun di akslen.
Longing,—	Benkshaft,—
bloodies the whites of their eyes.	blutikt in di vayslen.
On a corner	Bay a rog,
or by a little shop	tsi bay a kreml
Negro youths stand, empty ones—	neger-yungn shteyen laydike—
forming a noisy crowd,	bildn a gereml.
Laziness, hatched	Foylkayt,
on the nakedness	oysgezest oyf hoylkayt
of their manly strength,	fun zeyer gevure,
all the faces—one face,	ale pneymer—eyn tsure,
all the lips	ale lipn
sip	zipn
here, laughter, there, a shout	do gelekhter, do geshrey,
until the day	biz der tog,
rolls like a wheel away from them.	rolt zikh vi a rod avek fun zey.

(18.) The spelling of the Yiddish poems presented in this chapter reflects how the poems appear in Mayzel's anthology; the Yiddish reader will therefore find that the spelling doe not always reflect contemporary, standardized, Yiddish orthography.

(19.) The gender of the child is not specified in the Yiddish--but because the child reminds the speaker of his "brother," I would read the child as male.

(20.) Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), pp. 206-7. I don't know whether Reyzen was familiar with Uncle Tom's Cabin, but a translation of it into Yiddish did appear in the U.S. in 1911, the same year the poem was written.

(21.) If the diminutive were not used, the sounds would be quite different: kep for heads; gufim for bodies; and fis for feet.

צו די שוואַרצע פרויען

פון אייערע היימען גייט איר אַרויס, ווי פון אַ געטאָ, —
אין שטילער מידקייט קערט איר זיך אום פאַרנאַכט צוריק
צו אייער דאַרן מאָלצייט — פון די טישן פעטע
וואָס איר האָט צוגעגרייט פאַר זאַט מויל און בליק.

איר קומט צוריק צום מאַן, איר קערט זיך אום צו קינדער,
דערציילט אין שטילן צער פון לאַנגן, שווערן טאָג.
דאַן דוכט זיך אייך אַ וויל: ס'וועט, אפשר, ווערן גרינגער,
מען וועט ניט דאַרפן, אפשר, זיין אַזוי פאַרנומען און פאַריאָגט.

נאָכן טאָג און יאָרן — רייניקן און וואַשן —
יענעמס ליכטיק הויז, פרעמדן שטויב און שמוץ.
אַליין אין אָרעמקייט — מיט טריפן אויגן נאַשן
פרעמדע רייכקייט, פרעמדן האָב און גוטס.

דער אָוונט לויפט, די נאַכט פאַלט אַ מידע
צו יעדן ווינקעלע פון אייער ענגער היים.
נאָר אַ שטילער זיפץ, אָדער אַ וואָרט, ווי אַ צויבער־פידל
בלייבט הענגען אינדערלופטן, ווי ניט אויסגעוויינט געוויין.

ווי נאָר פרימאָרגן בלייט איבער אייער שוואַרצן געטאָ,
די סאַבוויי שלינגט אייך שוין און שלעפט צו עקן שטאָט.
אייערע אומעטיקע אויגן — ווי אויגן פון פאַעטן ...
פאַרוואָס איז אַזוי אונטערטעניק־שקלאַפיש אייער טראָט?

(22.) "The I/eye" pun works only in English, not in Yiddish, where "I" is "Ikh" and "eye/s" is "oyg/n."

(23.) I have translated the Yiddish, "in mayn enen," which means, roughly, "in my intuition," into "in my mind's eye."

To the Black Women
You leave your homes as from a ghetto—
at dusk, in quiet exhaustion, you return
to your sparse meal—from the rich tables
that you prepared for satisfied mouth and gaze.

You come back to your husband, you return to
your children,
and, heart-sore, speak quietly of a long, hard
day.
Then it seems, for a while: it will, perhaps, get
easier,
one need not be, perhaps, so consumed and
driven.

Tsu di Shvartse Froyen
Fun ayere heymen geyt ir aroys, vi fun a geto-
in shtiln midkayt kert ir zikh um farnakht tsurik
tsu ayer darn moltsayt—fun di tishn fete,
vos ir hot tsugegreyt far zatn moyl un blik.

Ir kumt tsurik tsum man, ir kert zikh um tsu
kinder,
dertseylt in shtiln tsar fun langn, shvern tog.
Dan dukht zikh af a vayl: s'vet, efsher, vern
gringer,
men vet nit darfn, efsher, zayn azoy farnumen
un faryogt.

(24.) Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 46.

(25.) Morrison, Playing in the Dark, p. 6.

(26.) U. Katzenelenbogen, "I See a Colored Man for the First Time," in Opportunity 6 (September 1928): 261. In this essay Yiddish immigrant Katzenelenbogen reflects back on how he learned about Black people. My source for this essay is Diner, In the Almost Promised Land, p. 21.

(27.) Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 36.

Whole days and years—cleaning and washing—
someone else's bright house, a stranger's dust
and dirt.
Alone in poverty—your deep eyes pick
at another's peace, another's possessions.

Evening runs, night comes suddenly, weary,
to every little corner of your narrow home.
But a quiet sigh, or a word, like an enchanted
fiddle
hangs in the air like an uncried-out cry.

Just as morning turns blue over your black
ghetto,
the subway already swallows you and drags you
to the ends of the city.
Your sad eyes—like the eyes of poets . . .
why is your step so submissive and slavish?

Gantse teg un yorn—reynikn un vashn—
yenems likhtik hoyz, fremdn shtoyb un shmuts.
Aleyn in oremkayt—mit tife oygn nashn
fremde roykayt, fremdn hob un guts.

Der ovnt loyft, di nakht falt-tsu a mide
tsu yedn vinkele fun ayer enger heym.
Nor a shtiler zifts, oder a vort, vi a tsoyber-fidl
blaybt hengen inderluft, vi nit oysgeveynt
geveyn.

Vi nor frimorgn bloyt iber ayer shvartsn geto,
di sobvey shlingt aykh shoyn un shlept tsu ekn
shtot.
Ayere umetike oygn—vi oygn fun poetn . . .
Farvos iz azoy untertenik-shklafish ayer trot?

(28.) For a discussion of the "blackness" of Jews in Eastern Europe, see Sander Gilman's "The Visibility of the Jew in the Diaspora: Body Image and Its Cultural Context," The B. G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies (Syracuse; Syracuse University Press, 1992).

(29.) Morrison, Playing in the Dark, p. 7.

(30.) Nielsen, Reading Race, p. 52.

(31.) Nielsen, Reading Race, pp. 49-52.

(32.) Nielsen, Reading Race, pp. 77-78.

(33.) Quoted in Nielsen, Reading Race, p. 76.

(34.) The title, when originally published in Eselin's 1927 book, Knoytn (Wicks), was "Tsart vi der nakhtigal" (Tender as the Nightingale).

(35.) In a Negro Quarter, undated, in Mayzel, p. 559.

(36.) To the Black Women, in Mayzel, pp. 755-756.

(37.) Uriel Weinreich, Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 111.

(38.) Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 13.

(39.) See Weinreich, Dictionary, p. 338. The "e" at the end of "fremde" is a gender ending and the "n" in "fremdn" is a case ending.

(40.) Harshav, American Yiddish Poetry, pp. 647-648.

(41.) Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, Kathryn Hellerstein, eds, Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), p. 142.

(42.) Brodkin, How Jews Became White Folks, p. 110.

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