

Introduction Apples and Oranges

On Comparing Yiddish and African Literatures

“ . . . [A]s a Jew, I was acquainted, as perhaps a Negro might be, with the alien and the divided aspect of life that passed from sight at the open approach, but lingered, available to thought, ready to reveal itself to anyone who would inquire softly. I had come to know a certain homelessness in the world. . . . The world is not entirely yours; and our reply is: very well then, not entirely. There were moments, however, when this minor world was more than universe enough.”

—Isaac Rosenfeld, *Passage from Home* (1946)

Just as Eleazar ben Azaryah declares in the Passover Haggadah that “I am likened to a man of seventy years but lacked the merit to claim that one recalls the exodus at night until I heard the explanation of Ben Zoma,” so too had I been at work on a comparison of Yiddish literature with Anglophone and Francophone African literature for what felt like seventy years without being able to articulate my motivations, until I attended my teacher Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s lecture at the 2001 Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, entitled “Out of Africa: Language, Knowledge, and Empowerment.” As always, Ngugi gave an inspiring presentation, defending the right and necessity of Africans to preserve their native languages against the hegemony of globalization, American popular culture, and the English language. These comments offered a rejoinder to the often-implicit assumptions that intellectual work in Africa necessitates writing in a colonial language; that an African culture ceases to exist when it is not perceived by the colonizer; and that the processes of globalization are inevitable, irresistible, and irreversible. Yet the highlight of Ngugi’s address occurred at the end of his remarks, when the Native American poet Simon Ortiz¹ addressed Ngugi in his native Acoma Pueblo language. The audience reacted ecstatically, and more so when Ngugi re-

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sponded to Ortiz in *his* native language, Gikuyu. Here two languages provided a paradoxical community, founded on the pleasure of mutual incomprehensibility. For the moment of their exchange, English, *the* global language, became a dispossessed language, spoken by everyone, belonging to no one.

Dispossession, the means by which peripheral cultures are confronted with their own marginality, is what originally brought Ngugi and Ortiz together. If this phenomenon is the consequence of commercial and political empires, then perhaps utopian moments such as the one that transpired between these two champions of peripheral languages, moments that in fact *constitute* globalization as much as they resist it, offer an antidote to the homogeneity of both global and national cultures that insist on speaking in a single voice. Although the embrace of unintelligibility can only take place with the safety net of a common language when communication becomes necessary, the commitment to a peripheral language or culture, the insistence on its centrality in a personal space within a public one, can be an expression of dissent not only in the context of political or commercial institutions but even in the supposedly liberal and inclusive enclave of academic institutions such as the MLA. Indeed, one feature of academic life that impresses the student of peripheral literatures is how consistently most academic culture mirrors the larger forces of the social order. Just as the nation-state is the means by which global capitalism is regulated, the study of national literatures regulates the concept of world literature. By contrast, peripheral cultures—cultures neither defined nor limited by national boundaries—experience difficulty in gaining access to resources or even obtaining recognition of their legitimacy as modes of being and fields of study.

This book thus proposes to affirm the paradoxical *centrality* of peripheral literatures to a theory of global modernism. As such it offers strategies whereby these literatures can be studied comparatively—where authors such as Ngugi and Ortiz can be rendered intelligible to one another without the difference of their respective languages being translated away. The specific literatures under consideration in this study are narratives written in Yiddish during the nineteenth century and those written in English and French in mid-twentieth-century Af-

rica. The first part of the book considers two pioneering figures in these respective cultures, Reb Nakhman of Breslov and Amos Tutuola. This discussion culminates with a comparison of Reb Nakhman's first story, "The Story of a Lost Princess," and the "Complete Gentleman" episode from Tutuola's first novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Part 2 considers the first consciously modern ideologies in Jewish Eastern Europe and Francophone Africa, *baskole* (the "Jewish Enlightenment") and negritude. This comparison will focus primarily on the first edition of the didactic tale *Dos Vintshfingerl* ("The Magic Ring") by Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (Mendele Moykher-Sforim) and the novel *L'aventure ambiguë* ("Ambiguous Adventure") by Cheikh Hamidou Kane. Part 3 discusses the breakdown of *baskole* and nation-state nationalism by analyzing two later Abramovitch novels, *Di Klyatshe* ("The Mare") and *Masoes Ben-yomin hashlishi* ("The Travels of Benjamin the Third"), in comparison with the novels *The Interpreters* by Wole Soyinka and *Les Soleils des indépendances* ("The Suns of Independence") by Ahmadou Kourouma. The book as a whole concludes with a consideration of Jewish literature after the Holocaust, when Yiddish no longer serves as an intrinsically Jewish, international, peripheral language, and a discussion of the linguistic options available to African writers at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The theoretical point of departure for this comparison is the "minor" literary theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.² In addition to incorporating the main principles of this theory, the discussion that follows will also propose a reexamination of the historical prerequisites for the creation of a "minor" or peripheral literature. To the three essential characteristics with which Deleuze and Guattari define "minor" literature—deterritorialization of language, political immediacy, and the assemblage structure—the comparison of Yiddish with African literature compels a focus on orality and its relationship with literacy, as well as a more complete understanding of the linguistic tensions that "minor," peripheral authors exploit. These emendations to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor" literature require a greatly expanded theoretical field that encompasses an understanding of modernization and nationalism, the development of novelistic prose, and

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the linguistics of languages in contact and conflict—as well as a focused contemplation of the historical, ideological, and aesthetic development of Yiddish and African literature, respectively.

Through a consideration of these concerns, this book poses a question, prompted by Ngugi's encounter with Ortiz: What do two cultures have to teach one another, even when speaking in different languages? I would contend that they teach each other how to communicate in the *absence* of a common language. The significance of this question is all the more acute when considering the current generation of Yiddish scholarship, typically undertaken by students first acquiring knowledge of Yiddish as adults. To the question of what Yiddish can teach other cultures comes an additional set of problems at once philosophical and psychological—how, and why, does one choose a *mame-loshn* (“mother-tongue”) not one's own?

I come to these questions by a perhaps representatively circuitous route. As an ill-fed and poorly socialized high-school student from rural Louisiana, I arrived at Yale with the solitary ambition to understand literary modernism—a task I continue to set myself today. In my first two years as an English major, I took every seminar in modernism my department offered, however improvident the course of study I set for myself may have been; is a nineteen-year-old really prepared to make sense, for example, of W. B. Yeats or Wallace Stevens? (I wasn't.) Nonetheless, by my junior year, I was in need of additional courses in order to complete my major, when I stumbled—I was expecting a seminar on Algernon Swinburne, but had misread the room assignment—into a class offered by the late Michael Cooke on the African novel in English.

The African novel of the 1950s and 60s, I discovered, narrated the same problems of modernity and modernism I had come to college to study in the first place. The defining characteristic of this literature is its temporal *belatedness* in assimilating the techniques of modernist narrative, while at the same time struggling against the social and epistemological demands, as well as the typically frustrated political promises, of modernity that had been assimilated in the colonial nations of Great Britain and France over the course of centuries. This belatedness, paradoxically enough, empowered the African novel to speak with greater urgency about the grand themes of modern literature—the relation-

ship of the individual to society, the conflict between generations in demonstrating the transition from traditional culture to modernity, the limiting power and limitations of the nation-state as a mode of social organization, the recognition of philosophical subjectivity as a mode of historical agency (formulations that are in fact synonyms for one another)—than much of the contemporaneous fiction of the United States and Europe, for which these questions had already been too long embedded in everyday life to allow the dramatization of recognition.

Given the historical burden that these novels assume for themselves, it is perhaps not surprising that the literary genres they often inhabit tend to be associated with the early history of the novel—the satiric parody, the picaresque, the pseudo-autobiography, the *Bildungsroman*—though while enacting these genres, African novelists typically demonstrate corresponding familiarity with the technological and aesthetic characteristics of contemporary twentieth-century culture.³ When at the end of my senior year I found myself in need of an additional course in order to graduate, I settled on Benjamin Harshav's "Transformation of Jewish Literature in the Modern Era." There I discovered, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Yiddish writers such as Mendele Moykher-Sforim and Sholem Aleichem, whom I was reading in translation for the first time, were in an attenuated sense also "postcolonial" writers, coming of age in the Czarist Pale of Settlement during the last half-century of the Russian Empire's existence, and often used similar genres, rhetorical gestures, and thematic dilemmas as the African writers I had been studying over the previous two years. This picaresque itinerary through world literature is how I discovered my subsequent course of study; at the same time, it was only through such an itinerary that I could come to focus on Yiddish, and thereby use the choice of Yiddish to understand my own picaresque path from the rural South to the metropolis of academia.

My comparative scholarship on Yiddish literature can thus be considered a continual process of translation: from the American South, by way of New Haven, then vicariously through literature to Africa and Eastern Europe; from English (and French) to Yiddish and back again; from the "minor" perspective of underexamined literatures to the "major" perspective of overdetermined literary theory; and from

the periphery to the center (and back again). I come to Yiddish via this textual itinerary as much of an outsider as when I came previously to African literature—though with the added difficulty that by virtue of my status as an Ashkenazic Jew, there is an expectation that I am not an outsider, but a native informant. I am frequently asked as a student of Yiddish literature if my parents speak Yiddish (they do not), whereas I have never been asked if my parents are Nigerian (they are not). My use of Yiddish as a vehicle for scholarly self-expression is thus predicated on the fact that as much as I am a Johnny-come-lately or outsider to Yiddish culture, I am equally belated and dislocated from the world of academia, much like Yiddish, or African, literature itself.

The exchange between location and dislocation, of identifying with a mother-tongue not spoken by my mother (or either of my grandmothers, or even two of my great-grandmothers), is the characteristic position of Yiddish scholars in my generation. The challenge of working with and in Yiddish today is the problem of locating oneself between languages, affiliating oneself with Yiddish while functioning, professionally, in another language. This may be a problem every scholar working in a “foreign” language experiences when employed in the United States, but with Yiddish the dilemma is compounded by the fact that unlike *national* languages—Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, and so forth—Yiddish does not dwell somewhere else. There is no Budapest, Bucharest, or even Bamako to which Yiddish scholars can travel to connect with “their” language and culture; at best there is a Boro Park or Bnei Brak, where the Yiddish scholar’s status as *scholar* (modern, typically secular—a secularity perhaps felt most deeply when the scholar is to whatever degree religious) further removes him or her as observer rather than participant. Unlike ancient (“dead”) languages, such as Latin or Sumerian, Yiddish not only retains an animated, oral character, but in spite of its written legacy remains, *except* for the precincts of contemporary scholarship, primarily a spoken language, even if it is a language increasingly misheard, misused, or misunderstood. This fact also connects Yiddish with other postcolonial vernaculars, as well as the peculiar phenomenon of imperial languages filtered through postcolonial consciousness: English in Nigeria, India, or Trinidad is as resourcefully, mutably positioned

between standard English and oral vernacularity as Yiddish is among the linguistic components from which it derives.

By contrast, I would argue, these questions seldom arise in the study of, for example, German, Italian, or Russian because the language already possesses a specifically national and territorial identity, even as this identity can also be deterritorialized via diaspora, colonization, tourism, and similar means of distension. Yiddish by contrast implicates its scholars and speakers in larger problems of identity and identification precisely because of its historical deterritorialization and its contemporary invisibility or inaudibility. In the negative space of contemporary Yiddish silence, modern Yiddish scholarship inherits a series of unstated negations: not-Hebrew, not-Hasidic, no longer the language immigrants use to keep secrets from children, no longer the language of the Jewish-socialist Bund or the *beys-medresh*,⁴ but instead the language of the dead, the spectral, the thwarted possibility.

The spectrality of Yiddish resonates for students of postcolonial African literature insofar as this writing is typically conducted in a language distinct from what its subjects speak—a condition bemoaned by Ngugi and the few writers who have followed his lead back to their mother language.⁵ For scholars of both literatures there is a fundamental disconnection between spoken language and written language, between the language of experience and the language of analysis. Indeed, Jacques Derrida articulates an analogous dilemma that, although not considering Yiddish directly, nonetheless engages the historical and philosophical questions that Yiddish and African literatures respectively confront. In his essay *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida, writing explicitly as a North African Jew, declares, “I only have one language, yet it is not mine.”⁶ For the contemporary Yiddish scholar, in ways similar to what Derrida refers to as his own “Franco-Maghrebian passion” (19), the study of Yiddish becomes a means of claiming—inhabiting—an identity signified by absence, dislocation, and loss. In contrast to Derrida’s assertion of Algerian Jews in his generation, “as for language in the strict sense, we could not even resort to some familiar substitute, to some idiom internal to the Jewish community, to any sort of language of refuge that, like *Yiddish*, would have ensured an element of intimacy, the protection of a ‘home-of-one’s-own’ against the language of offi-

cial culture” (54, emphasis added), Yiddish for contemporary scholars typically functions less as a *chez-soi* than a borrowed address, halfway between a guest house and a ghost house.

If, as Derrida writes, “language is for the other, coming from the other, *the coming of the other*” (*Monolingualism of the Other*, 68), then for whom does the contemporary Yiddishist speak? Who is this other with whom he or she can speak, and in what language? These dilemmas center equally on the status of Yiddish in contemporary Jewish culture and the anxiety of the scholar confronting them; as Derrida writes, “in a grievance like this, one takes on lastingly a mourning for what one never had” (33). In committing to Yiddish, how do contemporary scholars represent themselves, and how does this representation at the same time figure as a displacement of self? These are questions that contemporary postcolonial theory has already begun to address, for encoded in both the term “postcolonial” and the field of study the concept signifies is a relationship at once psychological and political between the self and the other. The field of postcolonial studies offers a politicized consideration of the ways in which one establishes subjectivity both in relation to, and at the expense of, the object-position of other subjects. Postcolonial theory, and more fundamentally the literature that this theory *belatedly* and almost inevitably from the perspective of the metropolis tries to explicate⁷—theory, using the discourse of rationalist analysis, is always several steps behind literature, using the more compressed and propulsive discourse of metaphor—demonstrates that for both colonizers and the colonized, the moment of self-recognition confronts the subject with his or her essential *doubleness*, particularly with respect to language.

Thus, despite Derrida’s consciously ironic assertion that the Other possesses no language, bilingualism or multilingualism is ultimately a precondition for all peripheral writing. Reacting against the limits of more than one language simultaneously signifies the dislocation of language commensurate with the necessary *defamiliarization* of ordinary life that calls writing into being. To find a literary voice, the peripheral writer must first lose his or her (native) language—even in the case of Ngugi, where creating a literary voice is a process of *return* to Gikuyu, via English.

This process, so painstakingly traced in various articulations of postcolonial theory, is inherent to Yiddish as both a language and a culture—so that the study of Yiddish in tandem with postcolonial theory reformulates this theory as much as it reconceptualizes Yiddish—and therefore the study of Yiddish is a crucial means of making apparent the doubleness of Jewish identity otherwise effaced in contemporary, monolingual Jewish cultures conducted in English or Hebrew.⁸ In linguistic terms every student of Yiddish knows that it is a fusion language, in which the components that constitute it (Middle High German, Hebrew-Aramaic, and Slavic, to list only its most recognizable elements) remain discernable and for the most part unhomogenized. As Benjamin Harshav writes of modernist Yiddish poetry, contrasting it with High Modernism in national literatures: “Like the ideal of ‘pure poetry,’ pure art to the avant-garde meant the acceptance of one language that dominated each work. . . . For them, at any given moment, the poetics of their art was like a spoken language: one speaks either French or English or Russian, but not all in the same sentence. In Yiddish, however, one *can* speak several languages in the same sentence.”⁹ The cultural, rhetorical, and even linguistic multiplicity of Yiddish derives from its social origins as a language of translation and mediation, simultaneously, between the sanctified rabbinic tradition and everyday life, as well as between the coterritorial, non-Jewish world and the porous domain of Jewish values and tradition.

Premodern Yiddish literature functioned exclusively in these mediating and translating capacities—there are essentially no fictional Yiddish narratives published before 1815 that cannot be traced either to a Hebrew/Aramaic source or an adaptation from a contemporaneous, often contiguous language—and until the end of the nineteenth century the primary motivation for writing in Yiddish was to neutralize the danger of foreign ideas by clothing them in traditional Jewish rhetoric, so that modernity was translated into the discourse of tradition, while the tradition was reconfigured for a readership that was increasingly urban, secular, and politicized.¹⁰ The doubleness of Yiddish therefore is at once linguistic and cultural, but also spatial and temporal; Yiddish idiom evokes the frame of reference, the sensibility, the memory of the shtetl marketplace and *beys-medresh*, even when it was spoken or

written in Shanghai, Buenos Aires, or Melbourne.¹¹ But with the profound disruptions occurring over the course of the twentieth century, Yiddish became transformed from the language of tradition, even when used unconventionally, to its current status as a language subsumed by scholarship except in the ultra-orthodox world, where it is employed as a means of insulation against modernity, changing from a language of translation into a language that must be translated.

In social as well as cognitive terms, this transformation is most profound in the reversal of Yiddish from a spoken to a written language. This reversal therefore upset the balance of Jewish discourse between a largely written *Loshn-koydesh* (the “language of holiness,” a fusion of Hebrew and Aramaic in which all sanctified literature, including rabbinical correspondence, traditionally was written) and a primarily, though of course never exclusively, spoken Yiddish. Out of this upheaval came not only the respective impulses for modern Yiddish literature and a modern, spoken Hebrew but also the competition between these languages that in part—together with the Holocaust, the Stalinist repression of Yiddish culture, and the monolingual demands of American civic culture—accounts for the eclipse of Yiddish as a modern vernacular today.

Where for modern scholars Yiddish is typically a language read, therefore written but not spoken, in the nineteenth century, this incomplete relationship was inverted—as language also was for African writers similarly negotiating between native vernaculars and colonial written languages. Whereas Jewish intellectuals turned Yiddish, often with great reluctance, from a vernacular language into a literary one, for nearly all African writers working with colonial languages, the task was to make a literary and administrative language into a vernacular, even if a vernacular typically used only by an educated elite. Linguistically, the aim of African writers to create a vernacular out of the colonial language is analogous to efforts of the *maskilim* (proponents of *haskole*) and their successors to create a modern Hebrew vernacular; the juxtaposition of Yiddish and African literatures thus allows the reader to see them not as repetitions but inversions of one another. This in turn empowers the recognition of a historical commonality between these cultures and among peripheral modernities (and modernisms) in general. Indeed, for both of these emerging literary cultures, writing as such was

an act of resistance against the hegemony of colonial culture and the hierarchies of traditional culture simultaneously: a means of speaking out of turn and trespassing borders, but also of effacing oral traditions. The transformation of language in these two cultures therefore serves an explicitly political purpose, at least for those few intellectuals using language in the self-conscious way of creating belletristic literature. Although this politicization of language reflects a broader phenomenon in the development of a peripheral modernity, the specific condition of literary language in African and Yiddish cultures serves to connect these two deterritorialized literatures as well as to distinguish them from the literatures created in tandem with a territorial nationalism.

For example, the best-known theorist of territorial nationalism, Benedict Anderson, offers an analysis of the first Latin American novel, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* ("The Itching Parrot," 1816):¹² "Here . . . we see the 'national imagination' at work in the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside. This picaresque *tour d'horizon* . . . is nonetheless not a *tour du monde*. The horizon is clearly bounded: it is that of colonial Mexico."¹³ By contrast, what distinguishes early modern Yiddish literature, as well as the first works of postcolonial African literature about a century later, is the typicality of their use of purely imaginary spaces: Reb Nakhman's wilderness, Tutuola's Bush of Ghosts, Yisroel Aksenfeld's Lohoyopoli ("a city that never was"), and the development by Mendele and Sholem Aleichem of prototypical *shtetlekh* (Glupsk, Kabtsansk, Kasrilevke, etc.). By design, the landscapes that dominate the early development of African and Yiddish fiction, respectively, could be anywhere, everywhere, or nowhere, at the same time. Their spectral character—most vividly invoked in Y. L. Peretz's 1895 short story *Di Toyte shtot* ("The Dead Town")—alerts the reader to their fundamentally conflicted temporality, perched uneasily between tradition and modernity, invoking both simultaneously, while inhabiting or affiliating themselves with neither fully.

There is of course a parallel tradition of explicit territoriality in both Yiddish and African fiction, exemplified first and foremost by Peretz's *Folkshtimlekh geshikhtn* ("stories in the manner of folklore") and *Kbsi-*

dish (“Hasidic-styled stories”) genres, which create a symbolic geography for Yiddish literature by frequently invoking specific place names in Czarist-controlled Poland. Similarly, the Lagos of Nigerian novelists such as Chinua Achebe, the late Cyprian Ekwensi, and Wole Soyinka is as historically specific and dramatically vivid as Charles Dickens’ London or Marcel Proust’s Paris. In all these counterexamples, territoriality signifies a later phase of modernization in the respective history of these literatures that nonetheless competes with radically deterritorialized writers who preceded them yet continue to write in a deterritorial mode. The coexistence of territorial and deterritorialized landscapes in these literatures—and in the instance of writers such as Peretz and Soyinka, among genres or phases of development within the work of a single author—signifies a choice between two modes of modernist critique, and develops for both African and Yiddish literature in historically parallel ways, despite the geographical and cultural boundaries that otherwise separate them, and despite the chronological affinities that might connect these two literatures with contemporaneous, fundamentally territorial nationalist literatures. As might be anticipated, the deterritorialized model for African and Yiddish fiction dominates my comparative research, and through it I am attempting to define a historically and formally grounded theory of peripheral literature as an integral component in global modernism. Indeed, the defining focus of Yiddish in this theory is the anticipatory role played by a *belated* modernity in creating an *anticipatory* modernism.

In purely chronological terms, this identification of the origins of Yiddish modernism might seem counterintuitive, since the first Yiddish writer this study considers, Reb Nakhman, died in 1810—at least three-quarters of a century before the commencement of any standard dating of the Modernist revolution in literature.¹⁴ Reb Nakhman’s stories for the purposes of this discussion are modernist even though he precedes the canon of metropolitan Modernism; to make this semantic distinction more precise, these narratives can be considered modernist, even if Reb Nakhman cannot be considered a Modernist. Modernism in this reformulation thus functions coincidentally with modernization. It is modernity becoming self-conscious of itself, which occurs in peripheral cultures through the remainder, the persistence and resistance, of a

traditional discourse in an era of crisis. Where a canonical literary Modernism develops in metropolitan culture at a moment of anxiety over a dying or lost tradition, in peripheral cultures this phenomenon anticipates the metropolitan canon because the tradition refuses to submit to a regime of forgetting necessary for the “business” of modernization to proceed.

Indeed, in the example of Reb Nakhman writing in Yiddish and Hebrew, and Tutuola in English, the modernist critique precedes the belletristic exposition of modernization, by the maskilim in Eastern European Jewish culture or among the first Anglophone realists in Nigeria such as Chinua Achebe or Cyprian Ekwensi. The anticipatory character of peripheral modernism responds with the production of narrative—stories—to historical developments such as the emergence of new political structures, urban industrialization, and the disruption of local traditions through linguistic, technological, territorial, and social dislocations and innovations. This anticipatory character, itself a consequence of modernity’s belatedness in the peripheral context, demonstrates the significance of the periphery to the center: one can never identify a center without recognizing how it differs from and relates to the margins. Because modernity must emanate from the center out, modernism must correspondingly migrate from the periphery in.

One might fairly ask in response to this description of an anticipatory, peripheral, or “minor” modernism, “If Reb Nakhman of Breslov is a modernist, who, then, is not?” This question can be answered decisively: modernism develops on the periphery in advance of the metropolis because modernism itself occupies a position of peripherality, a “grievance” that Derrida defines in the dual sense of mourning and protest. Reb Nakhman, Tutuola, and the other writers in this analysis are modernists because their work incorporates peripherality on a formal and structural level. Their many contemporaries who disguise or dismiss this peripherality either by writing in Russian or in a “Germanized” Yiddish (in Eastern Europe), or else by imitating the dominant modern aesthetic of literary realism (whether in Europe or Africa), signify less, except when their narrative structure betrays similar anxiety over language, form, and cultural capital; hence my discussion in the second part of this comparison of an unfinished manuscript by Isaac

Meyer Dik, perhaps the most popular representative of a “decorous” Yiddish literature during the nineteenth century, rather than his more polished, ultimately ephemeral, published works.

One essential yet complicating concept in the formation of Yiddish literature’s anticipatory modernism, a concept that distinguishes classic Yiddish fiction from contemporary (Hasidic) Yiddish culture, is that of secularization—as distinct from secularity. Though modern Yiddish literature is not secular insofar as it never loses contact with the rhetoric, symbol system, and cosmology of traditional Judaism, it plays an integral role in the social and intellectual modernization program of nearly every ideological movement available to Eastern European Jewry.¹⁵ Yiddish literature reconciles the paradox of a literary discourse communicating its secularizing intentions through the rhetoric of religious tradition by employing myth and satire, two premodern narrative discourses capable of reconciling logical contradictions beyond the limits of rationalism. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s discussion of Homer’s *Odyssey* in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* illustrates,¹⁶ the epic as a mode of enlightenment subordinates and domesticates myth to the same extent that “enlightened” civilization dominates and marginalizes the cultures it subordinates. Implicit in the epic struggle of man against nature, though explicit in later tragedies such as Euripides’ *Medea*, is the conflict between Greek and Barbarian; from a “mastery” of nature, Greek civilization moves inevitably to the domination of other groups of people, a process duplicated in every other imperial culture. As Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, enlightenment’s repression of myth creates a psychic wound, what Adorno refers to as “a damaged life,” that modernity inflicts on others as well as the self.

The resistance to this act of aggression, as well as to the expectation that enlightenment’s violence always be internalized, constitutes itself in Yiddish and African fiction as the return of the repressed mythical culture via satire and fantasy. Both fantasy and satire liberate myth from the straightjacket of purely rational thought, but they do so by rendering myth demotic; Yiddish literature, as well as most of the African examples chosen for this comparison, responds to the epic demands of rational subjectivity with a mock-epic sensibility. The creation of an autonomous Yiddish literature over the course of the nineteenth cen-

ture thus not only removes the language from its subordinate status to *Loshn-koydesh*, but also determines the focus of this literature away from the realm of sanctification, into the everyday. This strategy can be effectively contrasted with the other great deterritorialized literature of the nineteenth century, the writing of the African Diaspora, particularly African American narrative. The foundational trope for Black authors in the nineteenth century is predicated not on the bathetic contrast between the cosmic origins of a collective identity and the tragicomic fate of the individual confronting a modern society unwilling to acknowledge his or her subjectivity but, instead, on the elevation of an individual to the political, social, and metaphysical level of subjectivity through the divine agency of a literary device that Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes as the “Talking Book.”¹⁷ As this trope appears in several slave narratives of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the enslaved African acquires insight into his or her political condition, as well as mastery of the culture of the slave owners, by understanding and participating in the linguistic transaction whereby words on a printed page become human speech. The book that almost always empowers this process is the Bible—precisely because at stake in the slave’s elevation into literacy is his or her moral and spiritual status as a child of God, and thus he or she is the metaphysical equal of the slave owner.

The slave narrative as a foundational genre of African Diaspora literature therefore does not domesticate myth as part of a secularizing project; it creates new myths to fill and dramatize the void created by the unique trauma of slavery. Distinctive in the production of these new myths are the roles played by the book as a technology of modernization and English as a language of global modernity. It is therefore not coincidental that the Bible by which the slave-narrator establishes his or her humanity, a narrative act that only gains in moral and dramatic force with its reiteration in successive formulations, is the King James Version, the translation used at the time throughout the Anglophone world. Subjectivity is not only constructed in this context through reading a sacred text, it is explicitly revealed to the narrator by a sacred text *in English*. The trope of a Talking Book could not exist in either Yiddish or postcolonial African literature. In traditional Ashkenazic culture, not only does the Bible speak *constantly*—via the public reading of the

Torah—but at all levels of religious instruction, it speaks through oral translation and commentary in Yiddish. Indeed, the origins of bathetic comedy in modern Yiddish fiction derive from the disconnection between the Torah as the sacred Truth and the mundane, inadequate uses to which its rhetoric is put in the fallen world of the everyday.

In the multiplicity of contexts out of which postcolonial African literature emerged, missionary Christianity through which colonial languages were taught is only one textual and spiritual system in which the writer's consciousness develops. In Francophone Africa, for example, which in the colonial era lacked a vernacular tradition of biblical translation and where missionary activity alternately competed and collaborated with an ostensibly secular administrative authority, the primary sacred book for most people was the Koran, which for most Francophone writers was read and recited, but *not* translated or understood;¹⁸ Islam in this context counts as much as Christianity for an earlier imperial presence and modernizing strategy. In Anglophone Africa, as well, the Bible and missionary Protestantism¹⁹ compete both with Islam, particularly in northern Nigeria, and with native religious traditions that, although not transcribed alphabetically, nonetheless constitute themselves textually.²⁰ Thus Michael Thelwell writes in his introduction to Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the first internationally recognized Anglophone novel in Africa, "[Tutuola] was born into a powerfully traditional household—to Christian parents. . . . Though nearly all of his children adopted the new faith, the *Odafin* [Tutuola's grandfather] never did. While he lived, he was master of a traditional household in which all the *Orishas'* festivals were celebrated. . . . Every Thursday the household awakened to the sound of ritual drumming. . . . On Sundays the Christians went to church" (182). Where the early African American trope of the Talking Book emphasizes the singularity not only of the reading subject but also of the language of literacy, in both the Yiddish and perhaps more crucially the African context, subjectivity is paradoxically predicated on multiplicity and proliferation—of languages, temporalities, and modes of identification.

The two literatures out of which I attempt to construct a theory of peripheral writing therefore affirm not only Derrida's paradoxical formulation "We only ever speak one language," but also his corollary, "We

never speak only one language” (*Monolingualism of the Other*, 7). The linguistic precondition for understanding these two literatures in turn suggests both a metaphor and a methodology for comparative literature in general. I would propose as well that it offers a mode of expression for life lived on the margins, a location possibly most comfortable for anyone attempting to engage in critical thinking. This mode of expression presents its own paradoxes, particularly with respect to temporality; how, for example, can life even on the margins be articulated in a spectral language? This question refers back to the status of Yiddish literature as a secularizing phenomenon, never a secular one: it is a literature of becoming modern. Once the modernization process has concluded, almost inevitably with the assimilation of a national language (English, Russian, Hebrew, etc.), it becomes defunct or, in linguistic terms, obsolescent.²¹ By studying, and in turn speaking, an obsolescent language, the speaking student enters into a critical relationship with his or her own modernity. This, then, is the perspective I had sought to acquire for my own precarious modernity, traveling from Louisiana to college in order to understand the aesthetic and political potential of modernist literature. It is also the reason that I have chosen Yiddish not only as a scholarly affiliation but also as the language I now speak to my four-year-old daughter and eight-month-old son (who nevertheless speaks Yiddish at a nine-month-old level!). For them, Yiddish is not a language of use-value—to speak with an extended family, to foster identification with a homeland, or to use in order to make a way in the world—in any sense other than the abstract affirmation that all knowledge is useful. Ultimately for them Yiddish will someday soon be a choice and a challenge, but one that I present to them with the hope that they will choose the possibilities created beyond the boundaries of identity that are constructed when one is confined to speaking, thinking, and dreaming in only one language.