

# FROM JEWISH JESUS TO BLACK CHRIST: RACE VIOLENCE IN LEFTIST YIDDISH POETRY

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines shared metaphors in Yiddish poems about lynchings and pogroms in the 1930s. Leftist Yiddish poets in particular often equated lynching victims, as well as pogrom victims, with Jesus. The poet Berish Weinstein serves as a case study, for he used strikingly similar motifs in his poems about anti-Semitic and anti-Black violence. It is no coincidence that a rise in poems about race violence occurred during the most heated years of the Scottsboro trial, an event that became a symbol of American racism for the Communist Party. Yiddish writing about violence against African Americans reveals the commitment of many Jews in the 1930s to move from ethnic particularism toward leftist universalism. However, this examination of shared poetic motifs shows that in writing about racism in America, many Jews were also implicitly responding to the rise of Nazism in Europe.

In 1938 an East-European-born American Yiddish writer described a bloody landscape reflected in a killing knife:

*A Negro, in the middle of the field, bleeds beneath a bright blade.  
Killed, one Tammuz day, by a hot slaughtering knife.  
Every blade of grass, every branch glints spear-like off the sharp metal.*

*[A neger in mitn feld blutikt untern heln meser;  
shtarbt in a tamuz-tog fun a heysn khalef.  
In der sharfshpizn-op ale grozn, ale tsvaygn.]<sup>1</sup>*

Berish Weinstein's poem "A Negro Dies" (A neger shtarbt) ends with an image of the victim's mother holding the corpse and longing to "die along with him on a Negro cross" (Mit-tsushtarbn oyfn krayts fun a neger).<sup>2</sup> This haunting image was not Weinstein's first description of a grisly act of race violence. His "Executioners" (Henkers), dated "Germany, 1933," is part of a cycle about pogrom violence titled "Crosses" (Tslomim). This poem too begins with an image of bloody slaughter.

*The ax cools and bleeds, the ax gushes and drips.  
Necks split open and spring from the blade.  
The steamy gleam anticipates the warm gash,  
The blood drains fast and hot from the cool steel.*

*[Di hak kilt un blutikt, di hak roysht un trift.  
Oyf der sharfshpaltn zikh heldzer un shpringen op.  
Fun varemen shnit farloyft der blend mit pare,  
S'blut tsit op shnel un heys fun kiln shtol.]*<sup>3</sup>

Both poems present blades as, simultaneously, agents of death and gleaming reflective devices. Both poems compare the torture of humans to the slaughter of livestock. "Executioners" appears immediately after a piece titled "Nuns" and another titled "Apostles." This placement links the murder at the center of the poem, like the murder in "A Negro Dies," to the martyrdom of Christ. By the 1930s, the crucifixion was a common trope in Yiddish poetry that dealt with anti-Jewish pogroms, but it merits further consideration for its recirculation, often by the same writers, as a metaphor for American race violence.<sup>4</sup> A close examination of these themes of martyrdom and sacrifice helps us to better understand the connection Jewish immigrants in general, and Yiddish writers in particular, made between American racism and European anti-Semitism during the 1930s—a decade that saw a rise in race-related violence on both sides of the Atlantic. As we shall see, throughout the 1930s, poetry by leftist Yiddish American writers about race violence would move from an inward focus on Jews to a multicultural poetics that accessed similar poetic tropes to highlight injustices against America's racial minorities, in particular African Americans.

"A Negro Dies" appeared at the apex of the Scottsboro trial, in which nine young African American men were framed for what was later proven to have been a false accusation of rape and attempted murder. The case began in 1931, dragged on for over a decade, and the last pardon was granted only in the 1970s. The years that coincided with the height of the Scottsboro trial saw an increase in Yiddish art and literature about violence against African Americans, and Weinstein is one of many Yiddish American poets in the 1930s who employed imagery commonly found in pogrom poetry of the interwar period to describe race violence in America. Weinstein, in creating such similar images of Jewish and Black martyrdom, was engaged in the kind of borderline cultural project

that, according to Homi Bhabha, “creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation.”<sup>5</sup> Although the language (Yiddish) remains the same, the poet is translating East European anti-Semitism into American racism, allowing his East European past to alter his understanding of American intercommunal relations and concurrently allowing the race violence he witnessed in the United States to shed light on recent experiences of Jews in Europe.

The expansion of the modernist Yiddish poetry of violence to include violence against African Americans reveals the similarity that many American Jewish émigrés perceived between racist acts in America and anti-Semitic acts in Europe. Focusing on this similarity allows us to better understand two seemingly enigmatic motifs in Yiddish writing—the poetic theme of Christianity and fascination with African Americans. Several scholars, including Hasia Diner, Milly Heyd, Merle Bachman, and Marc Caplan, have discussed the latter, and have noted the complexities of Jews’ feeling of kinship to African Americans and the simultaneous exoticism of the racial other.<sup>6</sup> Although many of the poems from the 1930s betray the Jewish émigré’s own racial stereotypes, the similarity between the lynching poems of this period and the poems about the rise in European anti-Semitism betray a political and aesthetic attempt to universalize what might anachronistically be called hate crimes. Scholars have long discussed the importance of the Christian motif to showing the irony of European anti-Semitism. However, as I shall demonstrate below, this motif became an even stronger political symbol when Yiddish writers transferred it from a metaphor about Jews to a metaphor about African Americans striving for liberation and equality.<sup>7</sup> Yiddish writers’ use of the crucifixion during the politically charged 1930s to conflate anti-Semitic and anti-Black violence was a means of drawing attention to the universality of Christian hypocrisy. The transition from a Jewish to a Black Jesus figure reflects a transition, for many Jewish writers, from a nationally to an internationally oriented poetics.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1930s, we see a proliferation of Jewish art on the theme of American racism, particularly on the far political left. This was, after all, the decade that yielded Abel Meeropol’s famous poetic indictment of lynchings, “Strange Fruit,” which Billie Holiday immortalized in her sound recording.<sup>9</sup> In Yiddish poetry, the period saw a consistent effort to link lynchings to pogroms. The confluence of two devastating political events—the Scottsboro trial and Hitler’s ascent to power—help to explain the connection many made between anti-Semitic and racist violence. Moreover, with the spread of a left-wing movement internationally, connections between oppressed peoples were of prime political concern.

#### **BETWEEN EUROPEAN ANTI-SEMITISM AND AMERICAN RACISM**

The Scottsboro trial, beginning in March of 1931, absorbed the American social consciousness, particularly on the left.<sup>10</sup> The Communist Party offered

resources to support the defense, and heavily publicized the trial abroad as evidence of white racism in America. Left-wing advocates for the Scottsboro prisoners included prominent African American Communists, as well as white Party members, inside and outside the United States.<sup>11</sup> *Scottsboro* became a buzzword for racial inequality in the United States throughout the 1930s.<sup>12</sup>

The African American poet Countee Cullen chided white America for its ignorance of the case in his poem “Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song”:

*Surely, I said,  
Now will the poets sing.  
But they have raised no cry.  
I wonder why.*<sup>13</sup>

There were, however, prominent white Americans on the left who wrote about Scottsboro. Helen Marcy, an editor of the Communist Party’s *Southern Worker*, described the pretrial hearings and “the National Guardsmen with drawn bayonets who stood between the ‘surly and threatening’ ‘lynch-hungry mob’ and the ‘terrified youngsters.’”<sup>14</sup> *Workers Theatre* offered “group recitations on the Scottsboro case” titled *Scottsboro*, available in German, Yiddish, and South Slavic.<sup>15</sup> The young Jewish American poet Muriel Rukeyser drove south to observe the trial.<sup>16</sup> Her 1935 book *Theory of Flight* includes the cycle “The Lynchings of Jesus,” in which she juxtaposes the crucifixion of Jesus (“this latest effort to revolution stabbed/against a bitter crucifical tree”) with descriptions of known and unknown martyrs throughout history: “what numbers of lynched Jesuses have not been deified.”<sup>17</sup> In a section devoted to the Scottsboro trial Rukeyser paraphrases letters from the defendants, some of which had been published:

*Mother: one writes: they treat us bad. If they send us  
back to Kilby jail, I think I shall kill myself.  
I think I must hang myself by my overalls.*<sup>18</sup>

Yiddish writers would have constituted another important exception to Cullen’s claim if their collective outcry had been in the language of mainstream America. Like Rukeyser, Betsalel Friedman, in his 1931 poem “Scottsboro,” evokes the Scottsboro mothers’ pleas for their sons, suggesting that salvation would come in the form of the Party:

*We read your letter, Mama Powell,  
Written with your gushing blood.  
Keep strong, desperate mother,  
Every comrade works for Scottsboro’s good.*

*[Geleyent dayn briv, Mame Powell,  
Geshribn mit fleyts fun dayn blut.  
Shtark zikh, fartsveyfste mame,  
Yeder khaver far Skotsboro tut.]*<sup>19</sup>

Party politics are as palpable in the Yiddish poems about Scottsboro as they are in their English-language counterparts. The Scottsboro case, an important opportunity for Party solidarity and cross-racial collaboration, also presented an opportunity for Yiddish writers to call attention to the victimization of a nation other than their own. Y. A. Rontsh, in an article on leftist Yiddish literature and the American South, explains the far left's interest in African American themes by asking, "If the Black is being lynched today, why shouldn't the Jew come tomorrow?"<sup>20</sup> And indeed, writers on the left were increasingly applying to African American protagonists a metaphor that had often been used in Yiddish poetry, however ironically, for suffering Jews: the crucifixion.

#### THE CRUCIFIXION IN YIDDISH

Berish Weinstein ends the aforementioned "A Negro Dies" by directly equating the murder of the Black protagonist with the crucifixion.

*The sunset devours the day in scarlet blazes.  
Birds swoop low with the evening for leftover meat.  
The Negro mother, her hand full of grass, is talking to the dead man,  
Wiping the blood from his mouth and from his neck.  
And all her fingers cling tight to the corpse's hair,  
To die along with him on a Negro cross.*

*[Di shkiye fartsert dem tog mit sharlekhn brand.  
Feygl nidern farnakhtik tsum neger nokh fartsikung arop.  
Di negerishe mame mit a zhmenye groz redt tsum mes;  
Visht dos blut fun zayn moyl, fun zayn haldz.  
Ale ire finger klamern zikh inem toytus hor  
Mitsushtarbn oyfn krayts fun a neger.]*<sup>21</sup>

This closing image is a pietà scene. An African American mother cradles her son in her arms. The grass, which, at the beginning of the poem, is compared to the blade of the knife, has become a sponge to wipe away the corpse's blood. Weinstein, by casting an African American man in the role of Jesus and his mother as the mourning Virgin Mary, combines an important concern of the American left in the 1930s, racial injustice, with a recurrent motif in Jewish modernism: the crucifixion as an ironic symbol for the murder of an innocent victim.

The use of Christian imagery to shock readers was widespread in Yiddish modernism. For Jewish readers, the image of a crucified Jesus was not only violent; it flouted Jewish tradition, and the shock value was an added benefit to the modernists' project. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s Yiddish writers, including Lamed Shapiro, Uri Tsvi Grinberg, and Peretz Markish, presented the image of Jesus, particularly, but not exclusively, in works confronting anti-Semitism. Sholem Asch's "On a Carnival Night" (In a Karnival Nakht) and Lamed Shapiro's "The Cross" (Der Tseylem), both appearing in 1909, point to the irony of Christians who would murder Jews in the name of a crucified Christ.<sup>22</sup> For Jewish writers and artists, modernism provided the tools for animating the violence that threatened Jews in Eastern Europe at this time.<sup>23</sup> Marc Chagall painted his first crucifix portrait, a markedly ironic depiction of Jewish martyrdom, in 1908.<sup>24</sup> In a similar gesture, the Yiddish and Hebrew poet Uri Tsvi Grinberg's 1922 "Uri Tsvi Before the Cross" (Uri Tsvi Farn Tseylem) was graphically arranged in the shape of a cross.<sup>25</sup>

The émigré American Yiddish poet Moyshe Leyb Halpern, in his 1916 poem "A Night" (A Nakht), depicts nightmares about pogroms that haunt the poetic persona from across the Atlantic. Recollections of Christian animosity toward Jews merge with images of a cross.

*. . . The blood that drips from the cross  
Will drip and drip and weep in you,  
Just like a thousand years ago.*

*[. . . Dos blut funem tselem vos rint,  
Vet rinen un rinen un veynen in dir,  
Azoy vi mit toyznt yor fri'r.]*<sup>26</sup>

Yiddish writers in the 1910s and '20s on both sides of the Atlantic viewed the cross as an uncomfortable synecdoche for Jewish-Christian relations in Europe. For the most part, scholars of Jewish literature have focused on either how this image has figured into the Jewish literary and liturgical tradition, or how the motif belongs to the category of modernism.<sup>27</sup> The crucifixion motif simultaneously universalizes and particularizes the Jewish experience of suffering. It was a theme that expressed all of the narcissism of the avant-garde, while serving as a call to action in response to violence in the Pale of Settlement.

The motif of a martyred African American also appeared in Yiddish American poetry in the years leading up to the Scottsboro case. These poems sometimes conflate Jesus's crucified body, already an exotic image for the Yiddish writer, with the exoticized Black body, defamiliarizing the all too common occurrence of race violence. As early as 1919, the modernist poet Yehoash (Yehoash-Solomon Bloomgarden) in his poem "Lynching" likens

the African American victim of a lynching to Jesus crying out to a god who has forsaken him:

*He who calls You, tears You, extols You—  
Has become flesh,  
Has become a black body  
With thick lips and with natty curls,  
And You dug Your nails  
Into his ribs . . .*<sup>28</sup>

*[Der vos ruft dikh, reyst dikh, greyst dikh—  
iz fleysh gevoren,  
iz a shvartser layb gevoren  
mit grobe lipen un mit kroyze koltens,  
un dayne negel hostu  
in zayne rip gegroben . . .]*<sup>29</sup>

Here we find a poetic reverse transubstantiation, where the body of Christ becomes the body of Christ's worshiper.<sup>30</sup> Ruven Ludvig wrote poems about a number of ethnic others—Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans. His 1923 "Who Shot the Leprous Nigger" (Ver hot tsheshosn dem krekhtikn niger) is a gruesome indictment of American racism: "Who crumbled/Little bits of bone marrow/Into a river of blood?" (Ver hot tsebreklt/pitslekh tsrisenem markh/oyfn blutikn taykhl?).<sup>31</sup> Ludvig's use of the most marked English-language term of white supremacy in his Yiddish language title confronts his Yiddish readers with a racist American vernacular. Leyeles's 1926 "In the Subway" moves from a description of an encounter between an African American and a white woman on a crowded New York City subway to a description of the violence always at stake in such an encounter:

*(Lynch-fire—blazing, blazing.  
Noose of the gallows—stiffer, stiffer.)  
The Negro presses tighter  
To the girl.*

*[(Lintsh-fayern—flaker, flaker.  
Shleyf fun tliye—shteyfer, shteyfer).  
Der neger drikt zikh shtarker  
Tsu dem meyd.]*<sup>33</sup>

For Yiddish émigré writers, the theme of lynching was an increasingly important way of identifying with what they viewed as the American other. In these early examples, lynching poems primarily constitute their own genre and do not yet

bear the stamp of a political imperative of internationalist politics that would become prevalent at the height of the Scottsboro case.

## BETWEEN LYNCHINGS AND POGROMS

Leftist writers, Jewish and African American alike, were quick to connect racism and anti-Semitism. The years of the Scottsboro trials also witnessed the rise of Nazism in Germany, and many found it natural to equate the two forms of injustice. As Goodman has put it, “Though some denied that anything fruitful could be made of the connection, most found in it a powerful mixture of metaphors, in which Scottsboro was Hitlerism come to America, and Hitlerism was racism and anti-Semitism in Germany.”<sup>34</sup> Langston Hughes evoked this relationship during and after World War II. Writing in the wake of Hitler’s suicide, Hughes would recall, “Hitler, the man who wrote in *Mein Kampf* that you had just as well try to educate an ape as to educate a Negro! Hitler, the man who lynched thousands of Jews!”<sup>35</sup> According to Glenda Gilmore, “As non-Communist African Americans marshaled to fight Fascism, Communists drove home its similarities to the Scottsboro injustice.”<sup>36</sup> Milly Heyd has observed that combined images of the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi party became prominent in both African American and Yiddish journals in the 1930s. For example, a cartoon in *The Crisis* shows a Klansman bearing a swastika, with the caption “Nazi persecution of Jews and Negroes.”<sup>37</sup>

With some important exceptions, before 1930 most Modernist Yiddish poems about Jesus present Jews coming to terms with a Christian majority. But Yiddish poems that feature Christianity in the context of the struggle of African Americans in the United States represent a broadening of the canvas to include another struggling minority. Many of these suggest borrowings not only from earlier Yiddish poetry about violence and martyrdom, but from African American poetry as well. Leftist Yiddish writers would have been aware of African American poets, many of whom also employed the language of crucifixion to discuss racial inequality, particularly those published in leftist venues like *Opportunity*, *New Masses*, and *Contempo*.<sup>38</sup>

The Harlem Renaissance poet Frank Horne, in his 1925 “On Seeing Two Brown Boys in a Catholic Church,” foresees a crucifixion in the form of race violence in the future of the two protagonists, who are, as African American Christians, learning its meaning from both the inside of a church and the outside of white American culture.<sup>39</sup>

*Look you on yonder crucifix  
Where He hangs nailed and pierced [. . .]  
Look you well,  
You shall know this thing.*<sup>40</sup>



Like the Jewish victims of pogroms in the Russian leftist media at the turn of the century, the African American victim of lynching was likened to the crucified Christ.

The December 1931 issue of *Opportunity* featured Langston Hughes's poem "Scottsboro," with its direct comparison of the Scottsboro defendants to Christ:

*Who comes?*

*Christ,  
Who fought alone.*

*John Brown. . . .*<sup>41</sup>

In his 1931 "Christ in Alabama," Hughes presents the mixed-race lineage of an African American Christ—"Most holy bastard":

*Mary is His Mother  
Mammy of the South,  
Silence your mouth.*

We then learn:

*God's His Father—  
White Master above,  
Grant us your love.*<sup>42</sup>

Hughes likens the miracle of an immaculate conception to the rape of a Black woman by a white slave master, ironizing the Christ story while exposing the violent lineage of many African Americans. According to Shulman, "The white master below, the model for the sanctioning 'White Master above,' has granted us the cruel realities Hughes has brought to imaginative life."<sup>43</sup>

Frank Marshall Davis's "Christ Is a Dixie Nigger" appeared in 1937. Davis's Christ, like Hughes's, is the child of what we can presume is a rape.

*My Christ is a black bastard . . . maybe Joe did tell the neighbors God bigged  
Mary . . . but he fooled nobody . . . they all knew Christ's father was Mr. Jim  
who owns the big plantation . . . and when Christ started bawling out back  
in the cabins Mr. Jim made all three git.*<sup>44</sup>

Davis's poem mocks piety, thus aligning him, significantly, with the left. His Christ, like the Jewish Jesuses of pogrom poetry, also points to the hypocrisy of mainstream Christianity.<sup>45</sup> Davis goes on to explicitly link his alternative Christ to the Communist Party:

*They called him a Communist and a menace to the Existing Relationship  
Between Black and White in the South  
Sheriff and judge debated whether to open the hoosegow and tell reporters the  
mob stormed the jail or let the state lynch him on the gallows.<sup>46</sup>*

In the space of a few lines, Davis connects race politics to left-right politics, and a court-ordained death sentence to an illegal lynching.

Hughes similarly links the death penalty to “lawful lynching” in “August 19th: A Poem for Clarence Norris,” which he wrote on behalf of one of the Scottsboro boys who was to be executed by electric chair on August 19, 1938 (Norris was eventually pardoned):<sup>47</sup> “For if you let the ‘law’ kill me,/Are you free?”<sup>48</sup> Hughes makes clear that the Scottsboro trial should be seen as a publicly sanctioned display of the race violence that had manifested itself through lynchings or mob actions against African Americans. Not unlike Hitler’s anti-Jewish legislation, which institutionalized a pogrom mentality, the death sentence of Clarence Norris inextricably connected the trial itself to the mob murder of African Americans.

For writers on the left, whatever their religious and ethnic background, the crucifixion became a symbol of Christian, and often more specifically white, American, and Protestant, hypocrisy. The fact that the African American subjects were, typically, Christian, lends a different irony to the image of the crucified African American than it does to the poetry featuring crucified Jews. African Americans were more intimately familiar with the Christ story, and the murky facts of Jesus’s birth are easily transferred into the actual common occurrence of rape by southern landowners of Black women. The anti-clerical nature of the left made it possible for its poets to embrace the image of a suffering Jesus in reference to past forms of art and universalism, while rejecting, in keeping with Orthodox Marxism, all of the tenets of organized religion.

Descriptions of Black Christians often led leftist Yiddish poets to a carefully phrased conclusion: African Americans must abandon their religious beliefs in order to overcome the white supremacy inherent in Christianity. Y. A. Rontsh begins his 1936 poem “Scottsboro” with an image of African American devotion:

*I’ve seen black masses on their knees,  
Ecstatic for Jesus the savior,  
And glowing eyes’ eternal gaze,  
And calloused hands stretched out in prayer.*

*[Ikh hob gezen di shvartse mase kniyen  
In ekstaz far yezusn dem reter;  
Un oygn glotsike nit oyfgebert tsu gliyen,  
Un hent mazoliste geshtrekt zikh un gebetn.]<sup>49</sup>*

The poem goes on to describe the exploitation of Black workers, and ends with a rejection of organized religion in favor of political activism. Rontsh appears to be drawing directly from a poem by Richard Wright, “I have seen black hands,” published in the *New Masses* two years earlier, in 1934.<sup>50</sup> Both poems juxtapose Black bodies engaged in a variety of activities, from work to protest. Years later Wright would recall writing his poem after his first visit to a John Reed Club, “coining images of black hands playing, working, holding bayonets, stiffening finally in death.”<sup>51</sup> Wright begins by positioning himself, the observer, among those observed:

*I am black and I have seen black hands, millions and millions of them—  
Reaching hesitantly out of days of slow death for the goods they had made, but  
the bosses warned that the goods were private and did not belong to them.*

Wright’s conclusion evokes the possibility of solidarity across cultures:<sup>52</sup>

*I am Black and I have seen Black hands  
Raised in fists of revolt side by side  
With the fists of white workers.*<sup>53</sup>

Rontsh also ends his poem with African American subjects standing up to fight. What matters is “Not Jesus-Lord, not spirituals, not genuflection” (Nit yezus-lord, nit ‘spiritshuels’, nit koyrim faln), but only Scottsboro and the “fight against the enemies” (kamf mit sonim).<sup>54</sup> However, whereas Wright focuses on work and politics, Rontsh makes the church his poem’s centerpiece, allowing it to function as the rejected place of salvation for African American Christians.

In another poem, “A gut dzhob gemakht” (Done a Good Job), Rontsh casts the church as a civic space where the white lynch mob plans to gather the following day. In both poems, the seemingly sacred church is haunted by hypocrisy and trivialization, as is evident in the final stanza of “Done a Good Job”:

*It’s late. The flames are dying down.  
“Good night, we’ll meet again in church.”  
“Tomorrow I’m going to buy new shoes.”  
“My regards to the family.”*

*[S’shpet. Di flamen tsukn shoyt.  
—A gute nakht, mir trefn zikh in kirkh.  
—Ikh koyf zikh morgn a por shikh.  
—Loz grishn ale heymishe.]*<sup>55</sup>

The transformation of Jesus from a Jew to an African American in Yiddish poetry accompanied this kind of attempt to expose white Christian hypocrisy. It also represents an important paradigm shift for Jewish Americans. This was a time, we must remember, when Jews were transforming from the persecuted minority

in Europe to members of a majority as white Americans. For left-wing poets, Jesus soon embodied the violence and hypocrisy of the 1930s in the United States, thanks in part to his modernist appearance in Eastern Europe and in part to his appearance in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. The motif of the crucifixion in Yiddish passed into an American multicultural poetics that centered not on East-European, but on cross-ethnic encounters.

### FROM RZESZOW TO CAROLINA

Let us return to Berish Weinstein, whose 1938 “A Neger Shtarbt” begins with linguistic connections between the African American subject of the poem and Jewish realia:

*A Negro, in the middle of the field, bleeds beneath a bright blade.  
Killed, one Tammuz day, by a hot slaughtering knife.*

*[A neger in mitn feld blutikt untern heln meser;  
Shtarbt in a tamuz-tog fun a heysn khalef.]*

Weinstein places the poem not in July, but in the (concurrent) month of Tammuz, the period leading up to Tisha B’Av, the day of mourning commemorating the destruction of the Temple. By placing the African American subject into a uniquely Jewish linguistic and temporal context, Weinstein draws an implicit connection between the two ethnic groups. As Marc Caplan has recently suggested, Yiddish depictions of racism presented unique linguistic challenges because of the specificity of the language to the Jewish context: “Does the perspective of the description assume that [African Americans] are identical to Jews, or inversely Other?”<sup>56</sup> In Weinstein’s case, the attempt to liken the two groups, albeit simplistic, has important poetic and political implications.

The “bright knife” (*heln meser*) introduced in the first line of the poem serves a dual function: it is the mirror that reflects the faces of the offenders, the dying man, and the spectators—an instrument of optical illusion visual fragmentation, and it is the ritual slaughtering knife (*khalef*) used to butcher meat in keeping with Jewish dietary law:

*Dismissed by a white man’s impudent knife,  
a Negro neck is taken in a calf’s slaughter.*<sup>57</sup>

*[Fun a meser a frekhs fun a vayser hant,  
Fargeyt a negerisher haldz in a kelberne shkhite.]*

The poem subsequently alternates between human emotion and animal imagery. In a poem about a racial other, this animal imagery is, at first glance,

quite problematic. The Black body is likened to the body of a calf, and the prominently displayed body parts openly exoticize the African American body.

*Tongue, clamped between broad lips,  
Makes the drained corpse look stranger still.*

*[Di tsung tsvishn zayne braeyt lipn farhakt,  
Makht vilder oyszen dos tsegosene shvartse mis.]*

As Merle Bachman has observed, in Weinstein's poems, as in Yehoash's 1919 "Lynching," such "details are stereotypical: tar face, shiny teeth, thick lips."<sup>58</sup> However, in Weinstein's case, the imagery is in keeping with a broader oeuvre, in which violence, animal slaughter, and the crucifixion are often strategically juxtaposed.

Born in Rzeszow (Reyshe), a shtetl in Galicia between Lvov and Cracow, Weinstein immigrated to the United States in 1925, at the age of twenty. Much of his earlier verse focuses on violence wrought on Europe's Jewish communities, and we can read his shift to the African American theme in the 1930s to be a broadening of his earlier poetics. Weinstein's 1936 collection, *Broken Pieces* (Brukhvarg), places his major poetic tropes side by side: a section titled "Crosses" (Tslomim) focuses on anti-Jewish pogroms. However, a later section in the same book, "Negroes" (Negers), features similar motifs in their portrayal of violence while focusing on African Americans. "Executioners" (Henkers) is included in the section "Crosses," and is dated "Germany, 1933." This poem commemorates the 1927 anti-Communist massacre that took place under the leadership of Nazi official Goebbels in the Wedding district of Berlin. A large number of the victims were Jewish.<sup>59</sup> Weinstein details the branding and unclothing of bodies in prison cells. The wounds inflicted are compared once again, as they are at the end of "A Negro Dies," to meat: "Wounds drain and congeal to raw meat" (Vundn klepn un rinen oys in vild fleysh).<sup>60</sup>

Just as the glint of the knife in "A Negro Dies" starts out as the eye of the poem, a mirror that witnesses and reflects the crime, in "Executioners," the shining ax is witness to the rising violence of the Nazi regime:

*To keep its fine edge, the ax is thrust in the ground.  
So it will shine when it's held to the spurting sun.*

*[In der erd shtekt di hak, zi zol nisht shtumpikn,  
Un zol kenen bliasken in di hent, mit tsheshpritster zun]<sup>61</sup>*

In both poems the blade, capable of reflection, is radiant as well as culpable. It is an attractive object in its own right and the agent of a gruesome massacre.

Moreover, as “A Negro Dies” portrays the teeth and lips of the murdered African American, “Executioners” reveals the hideous transformation of a dying victim:

*The wound of decapitation's extinguished in sand;  
Teeth clench the lips; the still living temples throb.  
Through its covering cloth, the body continues to breathe.  
Sometimes, a foot or a hand tries to live; the fingers, watching, die.*

*[In zamd lesht zikh s'roy-fleysh fun opgehaktn kop.  
Tseyen klamern di lipn un lebedik shlogn nokh di shleyfn.  
Durkh ibergedektn tukh otemt nokh der guf.  
Itleke mol muntert oyf a hant, a fus: tsuzeendik shtarbn di finger.]*

We see here that Weinstein's objectification of the dead body is not specific to the African American. The murderers, in Weinstein's “Executioners,” have separated what was human from the body, in effect turning fingers, feet, and lips into inanimate objects. In both poems, the violence wrought is the harsher for the animal metaphors applied to

The themes of slaughter that connect Weinstein's European and American motifs appear in more overt terms in another section included in Weinstein's *Bruckhvarg*. “Youths from the Crops” (Yungen fun der Volye) features several poems explicitly about animal slaughter.<sup>62</sup> In “The Slaughter,” Weinstein depicts the inside of a slaughterhouse in sharp detail, including “calves with throats cut open” (kelber mit ibergeshnitene heldzer) on meathooks and “eyes [that] look out as though still alive” (kukn di oygn nokh afir vi lebedik). Here, however, the metaphor is reversed: the animals are compared to humans.

*In the slaughterhouse the cattle cry like people:  
And the one who slaughters—stills the cry with a knife.*

*[In shekhtoyz veynen di beheymes azoy vi mentshn:  
Un der vos shekht—shtilt dos geveyn mit a khalef.]<sup>63</sup>*

The slaughtering knife is the source of Weinstein's metaphors for murder. The quickly draining blood and the meat hooks of the slaughterhouse repeat themselves time and again in Weinstein's many depictions of race violence.

Whereas in Weinstein's 1938 “A Negro Dies,” which leaves us with the image of an African American mother longing to die along with her son on a “Negro Cross,” Weinstein's 1933 “Executioners” ends with the cry of a Jewish girl:

*Executioners scrub off the spots and neatly adjust their clothes.  
Through the nailed-shut doors the Wedding night shrieks with a Jewish girl.<sup>64</sup>*

*[Henkers shayern op di flekn, farrikhtn zikh laytish dem kneytsh fun kleyd.  
Durkh tsugenoghte tirn shrayt di nakht fun Veding mit a yidisher tokhter.]*<sup>65</sup>

The Jewish girl in *Wedding* enters the poem to mourn for the sacrificed protagonist, whom we can assume is also Jewish. Although Weinstein's American Yiddish-speaking readers would have most likely been aware of the Nazi-led massacres in *Wedding*, these readers would also have caught the bilingual double entendre of the "Wedding night" (*nakht fun Veding*) for its overtones of nuptials interrupted by violence. Thus, both poems superimpose murder onto a sacred, familial setting. The similarity of the images in "Executioners" and "A Negro Dies" suggests that Weinstein localized a poem centered on anti-Jewish and anti-Communist violence to fit a context where the victims of violence were African American. This act of cultural translation shifts Weinstein's poetic focus from one of national concern to internationalism.<sup>66</sup>

In "Swastika" (*Haknkreyts*), another poem about Germany from 1933, Weinstein employs the same words we see in all of his poems about slaughter, including his poems about American race violence: *shkie* (sunset), *vundn* (wounds), *halef* (slaughtering knife), *sharf* (sharp), and *shkhite* (ritual slaughter).

*Someone carries in his fingers the lightweight flash of a knife,  
and rests the sharp part on a human neck.  
Wounds open under his fingernails  
and necks die under his tongue.*

*[Oyf di finger trogt emitser dem gringn blend fun meser,  
Un shtilt di sharf on haldz fun mentsh.  
Unter zayne negl sheyln zikh vundn  
Un unter zayn tsung shtarbn heldzer.]*<sup>67</sup>

Once again, Weinstein constructs a violent scene, beginning with a dangerous, shining blade, and following this blade as it transforms human bodies into slaughtered animals. Another poem from the series, "Jews" (*Idn*), begins with a description of the Sabbath that is not unlike the description of a grassy summer day in "A Negro Dies":

*City trees trembled, young with fresh leaves  
And as always on the Sabbath, the sunlight drips onto the earth.*

*[Shtotishe beymer hobn ying getsitert mit a frische bleter  
Un vi alemol shabes, hot oyf der erd getrift s'likht fun der zun.]*<sup>68</sup>

The poem describes the desecration of the Sabbath by a pogrom. "Gentiles have ruined this day with stones and sticks" (*Goyim hobn kalie gemakht aza tog*

mit shteyner un mit shtekns).<sup>69</sup> And like the crucifixion at the end of “A Negro Dies,” crosses symbolize cruel hypocrisy in “Jews”:

*Seven priests in robes with silver crosses, sing in the woeful smoke.  
And four strong hands carry Jesus in bronze, like a living human  
in the street,  
Behind Jesus stride priests, peasants, over the Sabbath gutters  
And in those silver crosses Jews suffer in their last confessions to God.*

*[Zibn galokhim in kitlen mit zilberne tslomim, zingen in veyroykh.  
Un fir shtarke hent trogn yezusn in brondz, vi a lebedikn iber der gas,  
Hinter yezusn shprayzn galokhim, poyerim, iber shabesdike rinshtokn  
Un in di zilberne tslomim paynikn zikh yidn mit vedoy tsu got.]*<sup>70</sup>

If it is not already clear that the Jews in this poem, sacrificed in the name of Jesus, are mirror images of the crucified Christ, the priest’s silver crosses are mirrors reflecting the image of the Jewish victims, making anti-Semitic violence into a crucifixion scene. As he does elsewhere, Weinstein reclaims the image of a suffering Jesus for the victims of violence, in this case Jews.

Weinstein’s transference of the ultimate image of suffering from Jews to African Americans is nowhere more apparent than in the 1936 poem “Lynching,” which opens with the crucifixion of a Black man:

*White wild hands snare you with a stray rope,  
And a July tree crucifies your Negro neck,  
In your heavy ripeness, in its full bloom.*<sup>71</sup>

*[S’fartsikn dikh vayse vilde bent mit a gefunenem shtrik,  
Un es kreytsigt a yuli-boym dayn negerishn haldz;  
In dayn shverer nayfkayt, in zayn fuler bliung.]*<sup>72</sup>

The crucifixion, far from sanctifying the victim, likens him to an ineffectual god.

*God, before whom your singing prayer wept so mournfully,  
Won’t appear before you now, his feet split, his hands nailed,  
He cannot even open an eye with a tear for you  
Or accept your last word as a confession—He Himself is crucified.*<sup>73</sup>

*[Got, far vemen s’hot getrert dayn zingendik gebet azoy troyerik,  
Ken zikh far dir atsind nisht vayzn, s’shparn im di fis, di  
tsugenoghte bent,  
Er ken afilu nisht zayns an oyg efenen mit a trer nokh dir;  
Onnemen s’letste vort dayns far a vidoy—r’iz aleyk gekreytsikt.]*<sup>74</sup>



Although the poem addresses American racism, Weinstein ends with an explicit connection between lynching and the rising threat of Hitler's anti-Semitic campaign:

*Negro, the fate of destruction has befallen not only you.  
Many, many die like you. Such a death is now in fashion,  
And so, still dying, they now die everywhere—  
In Wedding, in Leopoldstadt and in Carolina.*<sup>75</sup>

*[Neger, nit oyf dir bloyz iz gefaln der goyrl fun farlendung.  
A sakh, a sakh, shtarbn azoy vi du. Aza toyt iz itst a mode aza,  
Azoy nokh shtarbn—shtarbt men haynt umetum—  
In Veding, in der Leopolz-shtot un in Karolayna.]*<sup>76</sup>

Weinstein's social concern, like his poetry, is filled with mirror images. The crucifixion of Jesus reflects race violence both in the United States, with its heightened threat to African Americans around the Scottsboro case, and in Europe, with the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Nazi party in Germany. The comparison itself suggests both humanitarian empathy and a collective outrage that could transcend race, faith, and geography. Weinstein would continue to write poems about African Americans through the 1940s. His 1949 *Poems* includes a section on Harlem, where he compares African Americans to Jews in Rzeszow, as well as to the history of the Jewish experience of exile and diaspora. "In the Harlem ghetto, in such Exile, Even God becomes a Negro" (In Harlemer geto, in aza goles,/vert afilu fun got a neger).<sup>77</sup>

Despite the continued presence of race in his poetry, Weinstein appears to have moved away from the direct comparisons he made between Jewish and Black victimhood in the 1930s. In his later edition of "Lynching," published in his 1949 edition of collected poems, Weinstein removes the last line of the poem, in which he had previously likened Wedding, Leopoldstadt, and Carolina.<sup>78</sup> In the new version, the poem ends with "Like this they now die everywhere—." The shortened version may simply reflect the changing reference points around events in Europe: whereas during the rise of Nazism the massacres in Wedding and Leopoldstad were in the public eye, by the end of World War II these events paled in comparison to the death camps. Moreover, the early Nazi massacres targeted not only Jews, but also communists, and by 1949, certainly for America's Jewish population, the most egregious Nazi atrocities were racial rather than anti-leftist. But there is another possible interpretation of the omission: by eliminating his direct analogy between race violence in the American South and anti-Semitic violence in Germany, Weinstein deemphasizes the simultaneous outcry against Nazi anti-Semitism and American racism, which had become an important leftist shibboleth in the 1930s. By 1949, the political solidarity

around the suffering of African Americans and Jews that the Communist Party had promoted appears to have been waning. Those Jewish communists who did not leave the party following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939 were gradually loosening their ties with the Party after the war. Moreover, the collective shock of the Holocaust turned Jews' focus inward to the Jewish community. As Hasia Diner has explained, "An American Jewish culture, shaped, in part, by this Jewish tragedy and current political concerns, emerged in the immediate years after World War II, especially in the 1950s."<sup>79</sup> With the rise of post-World War II Jewish culture, the era of universalism would yield to an era of renewed particularism.

What we see in the Yiddish poetry of 1930s, then, is an attempt at a poetic universalism as befit the era of social universalism. Émigré Yiddish writers like Weinstein, by expanding their ironic use of Christian imagery, required the Jewish reader to reposition his or her perspective from that of a perennial other to that of a privileged white American. This shift in perspective in Yiddish poems like "Lynching" constitutes a moment of cultural translation. When a Yiddish poem depicts a Black Christian as the victim of race violence, the poem transforms its implied collective speaker, *mir* (we), from the persecuted to the empowered. This new collective *mir* belongs to an American Jewish community that, if not the perpetrator of such heinous acts, is nonetheless implicated in the lynching.

Moyshe Leyb Halpern captures this sense of culpability in his "Salute" (Salut), in which he suggests that all white Americans, including Jews, bear guilt for the murder of young African Americans. This guilt includes the poetic persona:

*And the sky is blue—all the same to him—  
And the wind celebrates with the flag,  
And I—a beaten dog—not a word.  
I did nothing—an accomplice to murder.*

*[Un der himl iz bloy—im geyt on—  
Un bam vint iz a simkhe mit der fon,  
Un ikh—a geshlogener hunt—nit a vort.  
Nit arayngeleygt gornisht—a shotef tsum mord.]*<sup>80</sup>

In Halpern's poem we can compare the lynch mob, whose gestures of patriotism belie the frightening potential for mass violence, to the European perpetrators of pogroms.<sup>81</sup> The guilt of the individual who does nothing is magnified by the realization that the Jewish poet (a "beaten dog" in Halpern's self-effacing depiction) must necessarily identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. This doubled nature of the American Jewish subject—as both potential victim and potential

oppressor—certainly contributed to many Yiddish poets' conflation of pogrom and lynching motifs.

In the 1930s, the leftist Yiddish poets found themselves between two worlds. In Eastern Europe, Jews had been the clear victims of both racial and religious oppression, and the anti-Semitism that had manifested itself in the pogroms of the early twentieth century was returning with the mounting anti-Semitism of the Nazi party. However, in the United States, as Europeans, Jews recognized their newfound privilege, and sought to adapt their poetry to address the actual victims of American race violence. Through this simultaneous awareness of victimhood and privilege, the Yiddish writers faced a similar dilemma to Kenneth Patchen's metaphorical mixed-race subject in "Nice Day for a Lynching":

*I know that one of my hands  
Is black, and one white. I know that  
One part of me is being strangled,  
While another part horribly laughs.*

*Until it changes,  
I shall be forever killing; and be killed.<sup>82</sup>*

The Yiddish writers of the 1930s, privileged in a way they had never been in Eastern Europe, came to occupy a similar space as that of Patchen's protagonist, who could identify with the victims and perpetrators of the worst forms of injustice. According to Karen Brodtkin, Jews would enter a privileged majority by "becoming white" in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1930s, their still alienated status from white America may account for the number of Jewish writers who identified with the victims of racism in their poetry.<sup>83</sup> It is important to note that most of the Yiddish poems I have discussed were not translated into English at the time they were written. Rather than demonstrating solidarity directly to their African American comrades, these poets were advocating for empathy with other American subcultures within the Yiddish-speaking community. The shift in viewing the Jew as a Christ figure to viewing the African American as a Christ figure represents a shift from highlighting the weak position of the East European Jew to highlighting the relative power of the Jew in the United States. Nonetheless, the similar poetics that appear in pogrom poems and lynching poems meant that even while focusing on race violence in the United States, a Yiddish writer could evoke solidarity in the continued plight of European Jewry. The experience of immigration could demonstrate to readers and writers alike that race violence and the oppression of minorities should be of broad, international concern.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Professors Steven Lee and Dennis Childs, as well as two anonymous readers, for their invaluable comments on early drafts of this article.

1. Berish Weinstein, "A Neger Shtarbt," *Yidishe Kultur* (1938): 167–68.
2. Berish Weinstein, "A Negro Dies," in *Proletpen: America's Rebel Yiddish Poets*, ed. David Weintraub and Amelia Glaser, trans. Amelia Glaser (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 167–68.
3. Berish Weinstein, "Executioners" (Henkers), *Bruckhvarg*, 1936, 30.
4. For discussions of Christian imagery in Jewish literature as it relates to anti-Jewish violence, see David Roskies, "Jews on the Cross," in *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 1984), 258–312; Efraim Sicher, "Modernist Responses to War and Revolution: The Jewish Jesus," in *Jews in Russian Literature After the October Revolution: Writers and Artists Between Hope and Apostasy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 40–70; Matthew B. Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Janet Hadda, "Christian Imagery and Dramatic Impulse in the Poetry of Itzik Manger," *Michigan Germanic Studies* no. 3 (1977); Neta Stahl, *Other and Brother: Jesus in the 20th-Century Jewish Literary Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Abraham Nowersztern, *Kesem Ha Dimdumim: Apokalipsah Umeshihuyut Besifrut Yidish* (Jerusalem: Hotsaat sefarim a. sh. Y.L. Magnes ha-Universitah ha-Ivrit, 2003).
5. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 10.
6. Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Merle Bachman, *Recovering "Yiddishland": Threshold Moments in American Literature* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008); Milly Heyd, "Jews Mirroring African Americans: On Lynching," in *Mutual Reflections: Jews and Blacks in American Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 86–116; Marc Caplan, "Yiddish Exceptionalism: Lynching, Race, and Racism in Opatoshu's Lintshera," in *Joseph Opatoshu: A Yiddish Writer Between Europe and America*, *Studies in Yiddish* 11 (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), 173–187.
7. David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 1984); Matthew B. Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Janet Hadda, "Christian Imagery and Dramatic Impulse in the Poetry of Itzik Manger," *Michigan Germanic Studies* no. 3 (1977); Amelia Glaser, "The End of the Bazaar: Revolutionary Eschatology in the Works of Isaac Babel' and Peretz Markish," *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Winter 2004).
8. African Americans also wrote about the general connection between American racism and European anti-Semitism. In 1903, following the Kishinev pogrom in the Russian Empire, Booker T. Washington wrote, "Not only as a citizen of the American Republic, but as a member of a race which has, itself, been the victim of much wrong and oppression . . . my heart goes out to our Hebrew fellow-sufferers across the sea." See Louis R. Harlan, "Booker T. Washington's Discovery of Jews," in *Strangers & Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks & Jews in the United States*, ed. John H. Bracey

- (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 289fn 11. BTW to Mrs. AFD Grey, ca. June 5, 1903, in *The Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond Smock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972–), 7:169. See also Arnold Shankman, ‘Brothers Across the Sea: Afro-Americans on the Persecution of Russian Jews, 1881–1917,’ *JSS* 37 (1917), 114–21.
9. For more on the history of Meeropol’s poem see David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
  10. For an excellent discussion of this trial, see James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
  11. These African American activists include Angelo Herndon and William Patterson. The case of Angelo Herndon demonstrates the extent of this polarization. Herndon was an African American labor organizer arrested in 1932 for his labor organizing activities and for advocating on behalf of the Scottsboro prisoners. In 1931–32, Party organizers enlisted several of the defendants’ mothers, Ada Wright, Mamie Williams, Viola Montgomery, Ida Norris, and Janie Patterson to travel around the United States and Europe to raise awareness about the trial. See Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 172.
  12. The May Day celebration, which was the central celebratory platform for Party issues, became focused on Scottsboro. According to Carter, “Huge banners screamed denunciations of the ‘NAACP Bourgeois Reformists’ and ‘Murderers of Negro and White Workers’” (Carter, *Scottsboro*, 61).
  13. According to Stacy Morgan, “Notwithstanding the doubts expressed in Countee Cullen’s ‘Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song’ (1933), both black *and* white social realists produced a sizable volume of poetry dedicated to the Scottsboro case during the depression decade and extending into the early 1940s.” Morgan gives several examples of poems devoted to Scottsboro. Although Morgan focuses on Social Realism, my argument is that in Yiddish, many poems that appeared during the Scottsboro trial were written within Modernism traditions (such as Expressionism), with forms that predated Social Realism. See Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930–1953* (University of Georgia Press, 2004), 223; Arnold Adoff, *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the Twentieth Century* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 93–94.
  14. Marcy covered the arrest in detail together with James Allen, a co-editor of the Communist *Southern Worker*; see Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro*, 25.
  15. Joseph McLaren, *Langston Hughes, Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921–1943* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), 54; McLaren cites *Workers Theatre* June–July 1932, n.p.; (Aug. 1932), 18.
  16. Rukeyser (1913–1980) was the daughter of affluent Jewish parents. Her writings on Scottsboro included *The Book of the Dead*, “From Scottsboro to Decatur” (1933) and “The Trial” and “Theory of Flight” (1934). See Robert Shulman, *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 34; Shulman cites the *New Masses*, 1934.
  17. Muriel Rukeyser, “Theory of Flight,” in *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Janet E. Kaufman and Anne F. Herzog (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 25–26.
  18. Rukeyser, “Theory of Flight,” 30.

19. Betsalel Friedman, "Skotsboro (fragment)," in *Proletpen: America's Rebel Yiddish Poets*, ed. David Weintraub and Amelia Glaser, trans. Amelia Glaser (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 138–39.
20. Yitshak Elhanan Rontsh, "The African American in Yiddish Literature," in *Amerike in der Yidisher literatur: an interpretatsye* (New York: Y. A. Rontsh bukh komitet, 1945), 203–51.
21. Berish Weinstein, "A Negro Dies," in *Proletpen*, 167–68.
22. These stories prompted what became known as the "tseylem-frage" (cross question) a debate that played out on the pages of the American Yiddish journal *Dos Naye Lebn* in 1909. Matthew Hoffman contends that "these works, with their combination of cosmopolitan universalism, Jewish martyrology, symbolic syncretism, and occasional anti-Christian polemical stridency, reflect the paradoxical currents that informed Jewish modernism in general: a tension between old and new, Jewish and Christian, particular and universal, secular and religious, personal and national, resounds in these works." See Matthew B. Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 119. Asch would later go on to write a trilogy about Jesus, consisting of *Der man fun natsares* (The Nazarene) (1939, 1943), (The Apostle) (1943), and (Mary) (1949).
23. Recall that this is the same moment in which the Italian futurists were aestheticizing violence and the Russian futurists were "Slapping the face of public taste." For more on the engagement of Jewish artists in European modernist expressions of audacity, see Efraim Sicher, "Modernist Responses to War and Revolution: The Jewish Jesus," in *Jews in Russian Literature After the October Revolution: Writers and Artists Between Hope and Apostasy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14–15.
24. According to Sicher, "Chagall claimed, 'For me Christ has always symbolized the true type of the Jewish martyr. That is how I understood him in 1908 when I used this figure for the first time. . . . It was under the influence of the pogroms'" (Sicher, "Modernist Responses," 45); see also Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on The Visual Arts* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1993), 185.
25. Uri Tsvi Grinberg, "Uri Tsvi Farn Tseylem," *Albatros* 1, no. 3–4 (1922).
26. Moyshe Leyb Halpern, "A Nakht," in *In Nyu-York* (New York: Farlag matones, 1954), 188.
27. For the former, see David G Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); and Seth Wolitz, "A Yiddish Modernist Dirge: Di Kupe of Perets Markish," ed. Joseph C. Landis, *Yiddish: A Quarterly Journal Devoted to Yiddish and Yiddish Literature* 6, no. 4 (n.d.): 56–67; and for the latter, see Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi*.
28. Translation consults Harshavs, Yehoash, "Woven In," in *Sing, Stranger: A Century of American Yiddish Poetry, A Historical Anthology*, ed. Benjamin Harshav, trans. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 107.
29. Yehoash, "Lintshen," *In Geveb*, 2:66–67. Farlag "Oyfgang" (1921), 66–67.
30. Merle Bachman has noted that "as in Christian myth, [God] has 'become flesh,' the Christ-like figure of the black victim, who has been tortured, murdered, and abandoned by the one who prays" (Merle Bachman, *Recovering "Yiddishland,"* 153).
31. Translation consults the Harshavs' rendering: "Who Shot the Leprous Nigger" in *Sing, Stranger*, 547–48.

32. Ruven Ludvig, "Ver hot tseshosn dem kretikn niger," *Gezamelte lider* (New York: Grayzell Press, n.d.), 64.
33. A Leyeles, "In sobvey III" *Rondos, Un andere lider* (New York: Inzikh, 1926), 45
34. Goodman offers examples of attempts to equate the rise of Hitler and the Scottsboro trial. "Numerous others argued that whether or not Alabama 'faithfully represented' America, the verdict made it hard for Americans to be self-righteous in their criticism of Germany. 'How can we hope through our influence to help those unfortunates in Germany who are being hounded and destroyed,' wrote the editors of the New York Mirror, 'when right here in America such a prejudiced miscarriage of justice is permitted as in this Scottsboro case'" Goodman cites *New York Daily Mirror*, April 15, 1933 (Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro*, 151).
35. Langston Hughes and Christopher C. De Santis, *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942–62* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 18. In his article, "Suggestions to White Shopkeepers" of August 21, 1943, in the *Chicago Defender*, he urges Jewish shopkeepers to compare Jim Crow to Nazism.
36. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 173. For a discussion of the relationship between early Nazism and Jim Crow, see Gilmore's chapter, "The Nazis and Dixie," 157–200.
37. The cartoon appeared in *The Crisis* in June 1934; see Milly Heyd, "Jews Mirroring African Americans," 93–94. Heyd discusses the importance of the influence of African American art on Jewish art, and the confluence of political concerns in visual art during the Scottsboro trial and rise in Nazism. A noteworthy example is Peshka, whose illustrations for the Jewish journal *Der Tog* often mimic those created by Romare Bearden.
38. Carter calls *Contempo* "a journal of radical politics and modernist literature courageously published for a few years in Chapel Hill, North Carolina." According to Rice, "when the editors of *Contempo* . . . asked Hughes for a contribution to their December 1931 issue, he responded with a blistering essay on the Scottsboro case, which was featured on the front cover of the magazine. 'Christ in Alabama' appeared inside" (Carter, *Scottsboro*, 68); see also Anne P. Rice, *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 268.
39. Similar images appeared in art. Lorenzo Harris published his print, *Christmas in Georgia, A. D.*, in December 1916. The image shows an angry white lynch mob before a hanged Black man. Jesus stands with his arms around the corpse, with the text "Inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these, My brethren, ye did it unto Me." Heyd, in her discussion of this image, notes its similarity to Goya's 1814 *3 May, 1808* (Heyd, "Jews Mirroring African Americans," 88).
40. The poem was originally published in *Opportunity*, in December 1925 (Horne, "On Seeing Two Brown Boys in a Catholic Church," in *3000 Years of Black Poetry*, ed. Lomax and Abdul [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1984], 212).
41. Hughes's 1932 *Scottsboro Limited* was a collection of four poems, including "Scottsboro," and a play in verse dedicated to the defendants. See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: 1902–1941, I, Too, Sing America* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 218; and Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited* (New York: Golden Stair Press, 1932). A 1932 translation of Langston Hughes's poem was published in the USSR. Langston Hughes, A. Grevs, and A. Meier, *Scottsboro: odnoaktnaia piesa*

- (TsK. MOPR, USSR, 1932). Reference to a decision to send aid to the defendants can be found in Glavnoe arkhivnoe upravlenie, *Iz istorii mezhdunarodoi preletarskoi solidarnosti: dokumenty i materialy* (Izd-vo “Sovetskaia Rossiia,” 1933), 236.
42. Rice, *Witnessing Lynching*, 269.
  43. Shulman, *The Power of Political Art*, 251.
  44. Frank Marshall Davis, “Christ Is a Dixie Nigger,” in *Black Moods: Collected Poems*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 67.
  45. As Stacy Morgan puts it, “Adopting a mode of irreverent direct address that was in keeping with a prevalent leftist antagonism toward organized religion during the 1930s, Davis insists, ‘I’ve got a better Christ and a bigger Christ . . . one you can put your hands on today or tomorrow’” (Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism*, 222).
  46. Davis, “Christ Is a Dixie Nigger,” in *Black Moods*, 68.
  47. “Scottsboro Death Ruling Upheld,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1938. The sentence was later commuted. See “Scottsboro Negro Is Saved from Death; Gov. Graves Commutes Sentence to Life,” *New York Times* (1923–current file), July 6, 1938.
  48. Langston Hughes, “August 19th . . . (A Poem for Clarence Norris),” in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Knopf, 1994), 204.
  49. In *Proletpen*, 142; original publication: Yitshak Elhanan Rontsh, “Skotsboro,” in *Hungerike hent: lider un poemes* (New York: Farlag “Signal” bam “Proletpen,” 1936), 52.
  50. Wright’s “I Have Seen Black Hands” was anthologized in his *Uncle Tom’s Children* in 1936. Another leftist Yiddish poet, Betsalel Fridman, references “Uncle Tom’s Children” in his own poem “Scottsboro” (mentioned above). The National Negro Congress held its first meeting in 1936, an event that aimed to organize Black workers.
  51. Wright published this poem in the *New Masses* in June 1934. In his article “I Tried to be a Communist” (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1944), John Reilly demonstrates that Wright wrote this poem upon his return from his first John Reed Club meeting in 1933. John M. Reilly, *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception* (New York: B. Franklin, 1978), xi.
  52. For further analysis of this poem see John M. Reilly, “Richard Wright’s Apprenticeship,” *Journal of Black Studies* 2, no. 4 (June 1, 1972): 446.
  53. Richard Wright and Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright Reader* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 243–46.
  54. Translation revises Glaser, Weintraub, and Salant, *Proletpen*, 142; original publication: Rontsh, “Skotsboro.”
  55. Y. A. Rontsh, “Done a Good Job,” in *Proletpen*, 148–9; Yitshak Elhanan Rontsh, “In Alabama,” in *Hungerike hent : lider un poemes* (New York: Farlag “Signal” bam “Proletpen,” 1936), 53–57.
  56. Marc Caplan, “Yiddish Exceptionalism: Lynching, Race, and Racism in Opatoshu’s Lintshera,” in *Joseph Opatoshu: A Yiddish Writer Between Europe and America, Studies in Yiddish* 11 (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), 176.
  57. Translation revises Berish Weinstein, “A Negro Dies,” in *Proletpen*, 167–68.
  58. Bachman engages in an excellent reading of Weinstein’s poems about African Americans. However, she does not discuss how the language and imagery in these poems borrow from Weinstein’s earlier poems about violence in Europe (Bachman, *Recovering “Yiddishland,”* 153).
  59. The specific event that Weinstein is likely referencing took place in Pharos Hall, in the Wedding district in Berlin on February 11, 1927. This was a heavily



- communist-dominated region of Berlin. See Thomas Friedrich, *Hitler's Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 98.
60. "Executioners" (Harkers), Berish Weinstein, *Brukhvarg*, 1936, 30.
  61. Ibid.
  62. In *Brukhvarg* see, in particular, "The Slaughter" (Shkhite), 69; "The Butcher's Blocks" (Yatkes), 72; and "The Slaughterhouse" (Shekhthoyz), 75.
  63. Berish Weinstein, "Yungen fun der volye," in *Brukhvarg*, 69.
  64. Translation revises Berish Weinstein, "Executioners," in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, ed. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Chone Shmeruk (New York: Viking, 1987), 614.
  65. Berish Weinstein, "Tslomim," in *Brukhvarg*, 30.
  66. Weinstein also has a section called "Tregers un negers" in his 1955 book, *Amerike* (Berish Weinstein, "Tregers un Negers," in *Amerike: poeme* [New York: Tsiko, 1955], 71–82). The title literally means "Carriers/Porters and Negroes." The fortuitous rhyme allows Weinstein to merge race and class by drawing attention to the connection to a subjugated race and the low-paid service profession they were often expected to fill in New York City.
  67. Weinstein, "Haknkreyts," in *Brukhvarg*, 33.
  68. Weinstein, "Idn," in *Brukhvarg*, 35
  69. Ibid., 36
  70. Weinstein, "Tslomim," in *Brukhvarg*, 35.
  71. Translation consults Harshavs, "Lynching," in *Sing, Stranger*, 340.
  72. Weinstein, "Lintshing," in *Brukhvarg*, 66.
  73. Translation consults Harshavs, "Lynching," in *Sing, Stranger*, 340.
  74. Weinstein, "Lintshing," in *Brukhvarg* (New York: Khaveyrim Komitet, 1936), 66.
  75. Translation consults the Harshavs, "Lynching," in *Sing, Stranger*, 340.
  76. Weinstein, "Lintshing," in *Brukhvarg*, 66.
  77. Weinstein, "Negerish," in *Lider un poemes* (New York: Grenich Printing, 1949), 181. Translation: Harshavs, "Harlem—A Negro Ghetto," in *Sing Stranger*, 349. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav add the following note to their translation: "'Ghetto' was not yet a common term for black slums in American cities. Vaynshteyn uses a set of metaphors, projecting Jewish destiny onto the black experience."
  78. Weinstein, "Lintshing," in *Lider un poemes*, 56–57.
  79. Hasia R. Diner, "Before 'The Holocaust': American Jews Confront Catastrophe, 1945–62," in *American Jewish Identity Politics*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 85–86. This move away from internationalism would only grow more pronounced. Eric Sundquist suggests that "at key moments and in key arenas the post-civil rights era saw blacks and Jews become more deeply estranged than ever" (Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005], 84).
  80. Moshe Leib Halpern and Eliezer Greenberg, *Moysheh Leyb Halpern*, vol. 1 (Nyu-York: Moyshe Leyb Halpern Komitet, 1934), 49. The poem is undated in this posthumous collection, but would have been written before 1932, when Halpern passed away.
  81. Take, for example, Melekh Ravitsh's 1917 "The Tolstoyan Idyll," which presents a Christian peasant community where Jews are conspicuously absent. Melekh Ravitsh, "Tolstoishe idilie (satire)" *Nakate lider* (Vienna: Kval-farlag, 1921), 129.

82. Kenneth Patchen, "Nice Day for a Lynching," in *The Poetry of the Negro: 1746–1949, an Anthology Edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps*, ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (New York: Doubleday, 1949), 555; Kenneth Patchen, *The Selected Poems of Kenneth Patchen* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1939).
83. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).