

# Centering the Marginal? Yiddish Avant-Garde as a Paradigm for Modernism

A CONVERSATION WITH CHANA KRONFELD

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**ABSTRACT:** A conversation with Chana Kronfeld in 2021 on the concept of the periphery, the margin, and the marginal foregrounds the unique literary and linguistic networks of Yiddish modernism. Explaining the linguistic, historical, and sociopolitical realities that inform modern/modernist Yiddish literature, Kronfeld demonstrates that “Yiddish poets didn’t see themselves as peripheral to anything. They saw their literature as central and they developed an option that was progressive and new in its resistance to the nation-state.”

*There isn't a periphery within modernist Yiddish literature. The Yiddish poets didn't see themselves as peripheral to anything. They saw their literature as central and they developed an option that was progressive and new in its resistance to the nation-state.*

—Chana Kronfeld

## THE YIDDISH AVANT-GARDES AS MODERNIST MOVEMENTS

**F**OR CHANA KRONFELD, the term “peripheral” is problematic.<sup>1</sup> It assumes a certain directionality, and a relationship founded on action and reaction. Kronfeld says:

Discussions in the field have shifted terms but stayed basically the same. The terms changed from “major” and “minor” to “core” and “periphery,” but even when we add the modifications that Moretti made, which include

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<sup>1</sup> The following conversation with Chana Kronfeld took place via Zoom on February 5, 2021.

the “semiperiphery,” or the idea that peripheral literatures are both the site of revolution and the source of evolutionary change, it still does not solve the problem. Moretti’s, like Pascale Casanova’s, formulations are not just Eurocentric but profoundly hierarchical.<sup>2</sup> Underneath it all we still find the old conflictual model that so many of us have written against, with literary circulation always described as ineluctably flowing from West to East, or from the North to the peripheral South, and the periphery rebelling against the center. But that is only part of the problem. At stake for me is also what paradigm examples we theorize from. I am thinking, for example, of your [Shemtov] work on the lyric and on what happens when you include Hebrew models of the lyric in defining the form. Hebrew biblical poetry was hardly “peripheral” in informing lyric tradition in the West—and the same goes for classical Arabic poetry—yet their historic centrality often goes unacknowledged, in ways that seriously hamper lyric theory. For example, literatures like Yiddish and Hebrew do not distinguish, necessarily, as you write, between the “lyrical I” and the “lyrical We.” And since the communal is always already inscribed in the first person, we can let go of the idea that has generated so much controversy in recent years: that the lyric is apolitical because lyric’s address is solipsistic, what Jonathan Culler famously described as the “scandal of the lyric,” a reader eavesdropping on a speaker talking to himself (and in this Western construction, it is typically *himself*). For us, the whole debate becomes moot.<sup>3</sup>

Yiddish literature, Kronfeld argues, in particular Yiddish avant-garde poetry, is a good example of the problematic nature of the distinction between the cosmopolitan center and the colonial periphery:

Yiddish literature between the two world wars calls into question what scholars like Frederic Jameson have assumed to be a necessary connection between the literary circulation of modernist experimentation and the formation of the nation-state or, in the periphery, the struggle towards national reterritorialization.<sup>4</sup> I have an ongoing friendly debate on that issue with my dear colleague Harsha Ram, a Slavicist who works on Georgian modernism. In “Decadent Nationalism, ‘Peripheral’ Modernism,” Ram argues that “[w]hat appears to typify peripheral modernism is . . . a reterritorialization, and reimagining of the nation.” He concludes that the case of Georgian

<sup>2</sup> See Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: Verso, 1996), esp. 40–75. And see Immanuel Wallerstein, “World System Analysis: Theoretical and Interpretative Issues,” in *World-System Analysis: Theory and Methodology*, ed. Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1982), 91–93; Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. Malcolm DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), chap. 7. His recent studies of the lyric modify this view only slightly. See *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Frederic Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65–88.

modernism appears “to confirm the controversial model of world literature delineated by Pascale Casanova . . . [who] describes the world literary system as an unequal hierarchy obtaining between at least two poles: a cosmopolitan *center*, most readily identified with Paris, . . . and a *periphery*, that rejects the center politically in the name of a resurgent nationalism.”<sup>5</sup> This is indeed the case for Georgian modernism, as Ram shows in a brilliant analysis, for example, of the adoption of Italian futurism by the Georgian Blue Horn poets to rebuff both Russian futurism and Russian imperial control. But Ram also concedes that even within the Georgian case, future study will have to account for the complex interaction of multiple centers—in addition to Russia and Western Europe, also the long-standing historical influence of Iran. But ultimately, Ram gestures towards the need for a local, nonperipheral model “of cultural flows that escape the binarism of nation and empire, of dependent national elites and their cosmopolitan counterparts.”<sup>6</sup>

In the spirit of these remarks, Kronfeld notes that the connection between avant-garde experimentation and nationalism is neither necessary nor universal. On the one hand, she points to the example of Alterman and Shlonsky’s Hebrew *moderna*, which could be described at least in part as hyphenating modernist experimentation with the struggle for Zionist reterritorialization. In what she has called “the dual motivation” thesis, Kronfeld has shown how Shlonsky’s neologisms, which fill an entire dictionary, were both his way to contribute to the “revival” of Hebrew in the Zionist context of nation building and a rhetorical innovation that was part of his affinity for and participation in Russian futurism, from the Palestinian “periphery.” But the Hebrew and Yiddish works of a great “peripheral” modernist like David Fogel, which can definitely be discussed in their affiliation with the modernist centers of Vienna and Paris, resist in her view the very terms of an association with national territorialism, despite being written in minoritarian languages.<sup>7</sup>

Both nationalist ideologies and the notion of a modernist retaliatory realization of the nation by peripheral modernisms are countered by the profoundly transterritorial nature of Yiddish literature. Kronfeld wryly points out that there has never been a national territory associated with Yiddish. The interwar period witnessed a proliferation of Yiddish modernist and avant-garde groupings in the cosmopolitan metropolises of Europe and the United States. New York, Berlin, Warsaw, Kiev, and Moscow were all centers for their extraordinary literary experimentation. The poets and writers moved between them, publishing in journals across Eastern and Central Europe, as well as Palestine and North and South America. They saw themselves as members of a transnational multilingual modernism, and the only territory that they had in common was something totally imaginary, totally textual, which they called “Yiddishland.” Kronfeld muses ruefully:

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<sup>5</sup> Harsha Ram, “Decadent Nationalism, ‘Peripheral’ Modernism: The Georgian Literary Manifesto between Symbolism and the Avant-Garde,” *Modernism/Modernity* 21, no. 1 (2014): 345, 355.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>7</sup> See Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 92–113.

Sometimes I like to think about what would happen to theorizing modernism, and especially the experimental avant-garde, if we did it through its limit case: a literature where language, culture, literary traditions, and linguistic multiplicity have always been the unifying “core,” and where the nation-state has never been a home (except perhaps for the funny attempt of the Soviet Union to establish Birobidzhan as some kind of national territorial basis for Yiddish-speaking Jews).

This does not mean, however, she hastens to add, that place and space did not play an important role in Yiddish literature. In recent years, several scholars have begun exploring the literary articulations of “Do’ikayt” —roughly, “hereness” —not only in its bundist and anarcho-syndicalist formations, as an alternative to the nationalist and Zionist “thereness,” but also as chronotopes of the here and now of the Yiddish literary imagination.<sup>8</sup>

Kronfeld’s work questions not only the directionality but also the asymmetries in the center-periphery models. In our conversation, we discussed modernisms as spaces of junctions and movements between places and the tendency to see these movements as shifts from and to a nation, a language, or a metropolis. Kronfeld referred to Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the “contact zones” as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”<sup>9</sup> There’s always asymmetry, Kronfeld says, “but contacts do not always have to be circulating through a center. The concept of periphery needs to be critiqued if it’s part of a presupposed binary dynamic.”

## YIDDISH AND THE DIFFERENT -ISMS OF MODERNISM

According to Kronfeld:

Anglo-American imagism becomes very important for the New York Yiddish modernists like Aaron Glantz-Leyeles and Anna Margolin, but for the ones writing in Eastern Europe, like Peretz Markish, Dovid Hofshsteyn, Leyb Kvitko, and others, it is primarily Russian symbolism and futurism, as well as German expressionism, that become important. And for the women poets —in both Yiddish and Hebrew! —it is Russian acmeism, somewhat analogous to imagism, that serves as a major affiliation.<sup>10</sup> You have the same poets actually participating in different groupings of various -isms, which argue with each other. The poets move from one city to another, like Peretz Markish, who went from Kiev to Moscow, to Warsaw and Berlin, and back to the Soviet Union. In the process, manifestos and essays sometimes have the avant-garde Yiddish poets arguing against themselves, or the -isms they participated in a month or a city ago. At the same time, each poet’s affiliation

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Madeline Cohen, “Here and Now: The Modernist Poetics of *Do’ikayt*” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2016); Mikhail Krutikov, “Raysn: The Belarusian Frontier of Yiddish Modernism,” *In geveb*, June 23, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* 91 (1991): 36.

<sup>10</sup> See Kronfeld’s discussion of the affiliations common to Hebrew and Yiddish women modernists in “The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish,” in *The Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Joshua L. Miller and Anita Norich (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 15–35.

typically has more than one -ism associated with it: typically, you see expressionism and surrealism coexisting, as well as impressionism, postimpressionism, decadence, and symbolism. We also have poets combining futurism and imagism, and acmeism with imaginism (known primarily through the Russian poetry of Sergei Yesenin, which supposedly was at odds with acmeism). But these multiple and partial affiliations and affinities exist outside the realm of Yiddish and Hebrew modernism as well, though this is not often explored. The similarities between Russian acmeism and Anglo-American imagism are quite clear, but because of the bias of (an imaginary) national monolingualism in modernist studies, Anna Akhmatova and H.D. [Hilda Doolittle] are rarely studied together.<sup>11</sup> When you look at Hebrew or Yiddish modernist women poets like Rachel [Bluwstein] or Anna Margolin, the connections become obvious.

We talked with Kronfeld about how the mixed or new -isms were born sometimes with the help of key figures who played liminal roles between places, movements, and languages:

Writers were bi- or even trilingual. In addition, there were people that served as mediators. Benjamin Harshav, for example, was the mediator between at least two -isms of Yiddish modernism: the New York In-zikh Introspectivists and the Israeli Yung-Yisroel group, on the one hand, and the Statehood Generation Hebrew poets of the Likrat group, on the other. The role of these literary midwives, who are sometimes men, is really important, and it's now increasingly being explored.

As the conversation continued, Kronfeld explained that one thing that all the different -isms of Yiddish modernism had in common was that they were all invested in

avant-garde poetry and were extremely adventurous; experimental in form, genre, and prosody. And despite their differences and often heated disagreements, they shared a commitment to various forms of political activism, the vast majority on the left: from anarchism to socialism to communism. Uri Z. Greenberg, who moved from Yiddish to Hebrew and to right-wing revisionist Zionism, is a glaring exception. Like their Russian counterparts, Yiddish modernists saw experimentation in form as correlated with revolution in content. Even those who were not activists wrote for newspapers or journals that were very much on the left. Their poetry was avant-garde also in its focus on language, a focus theorized in essays and manifestos, as well as programmatic, metapoetic poems: on the word, on syntax and phonology, on multilingualism and the pragmatics of language use. The poets were

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<sup>11</sup> But Elaine Rusinko studied the connections early on: "Russian Acmeism and Anglo-American Imagism," *Urbandus Review* 1, no. 2 (1978): 37–49. And see an important if short recent study that explores H.D. alongside Akhmatova: Dina Nabil, "Rhetoric in Women's War Poetry," *Spring Magazine on English Literature* (E-ISSN: 2455-4715) 4, no. 1 (2018): 18–25.

often scholars, like Aaron Glantz-Leyeles, who was one of the leaders of the In-zikh Introspectivists, or Benjamin Harshav of the Yung-Yisroel group. Finally, when it comes to the different -isms, it is important to note that Yiddish modernists questioned the linguistic and poetic medium which they were so in love with and the ability of signs to fulfill a referential function in a reality fragmented by Jewish and world history. Each group differed from the other in the specific ways in which they sought to articulate this crisis of signification, just as impressionists, expressionists, futurists, surrealists, and dadaists in other languages differed from each other.

Yiddish poetry, according to Kronfeld,

constantly redefined the kind of language that needs to be used within the space of the poem and reflected on the possibility of language to give expression to experience. We see some of the same issues in other modernisms as well, but the powerfully metalinguistic focus is very much inflected by the culture of commentary that Jewish literature comes out of, a culture where exploring the meaning of the text via translation and exegesis is the very definition of learning. Many of the poets started out as Yeshiva students, but even the women, who obviously did not, often wrote about language by invoking the intertextual echo chamber of the Jewish bookcase.

### NOTES ON HISTORIOGRAPHY

In her book *On the Margins of Modernism*, Kronfeld questioned the two main metaphorical models for literary historiography: the graph and the map. She suggested the rope as an alternative model for literary historiography. The idea of the rope appears in Wittgenstein's work: "In spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the fibre does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres."<sup>12</sup> Kronfeld argues that "through this figurative reorientation of literary historiography, the pre-modernist, modernist and neo- or postmodernist trends need no longer be construed as synonymous with the production of single great poets or major group codes. For in the Wittgensteinian configuration, both short and long, both thin and thick strands wind and overlap and make equally crucial contributions to the formation of an open-ended, twisted, yet rather strong whole, a whole whose strength derives precisely from being formed out of many uneven, twisted strands."<sup>13</sup>

Kronfeld today still calls into question the necessity of the very definitional drive and the categories it generates, which continue to underlie discussions of modernism:

Categories mustn't be reified; we have to constantly question whether they are making us miss phenomena that don't fit the categorization. So, clearly, for example, in order to describe power relations within the nation-state, within the metropolitan context, we may have to work with binary

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pt. 1, sec. 67, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 63.

categories, yet we need to do so with an understanding that they are contingent and context dependent. But when we encounter a poet or a group that doesn't work that way, sometimes what helps, me at least, is to go up to the metatheoretical level and see whether this exception doesn't in fact signal towards a need to reevaluate the system of categorization itself.

Literatures like Hebrew and Yiddish, in their very different formations, emphasize what is actually very much there but tends to be hidden from sight in discussions of Anglo-American, German, or Russian modernisms. You cannot come up with any definition of the kind that philosophers of science have called "intensional," a definition that lists necessary and sufficient conditions for modernism. The period model doesn't work either when you look at the chronological diversity of modernisms across the globe. And you also cannot reduce modernism to a school, because some of the most important modernists have not been members of any grouping, of any school. So I think we really have to go back to Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" and the model of the rope, where for any subgrouping, you can talk about what they have in common, as seen through a particular set of questions or a particular constellation of place and time; but there is not one feature, not one thread, that goes through all modernist texts or that all writers share. I think this model of family resemblance can help us stop trying to apply positivistic criteria or—at the other extreme—throw out the baby with the bathwater and say that we can't theorize modernism at all. The most important feature that Yiddish and Hebrew modernisms highlight in transnational modernism in other languages is that trend affiliation is always *multiple* and *partial*: no one, not even the poets who wrote the -isms' manifestos, is only or wholly expressionist, futurist, imagist, etc. Mani Leib, the lead poet of Di Yunge in New York, combined symbolism, aestheticism, and impressionism; Yankev Glatshteyn, the lead poet of the Introspectivists, who rejected the Yunge, combined expressionism, surrealism, and Anglo-American high modernism. But Mani Leib and Glatshteyn each changed styles and affiliations and developed idiosyncratic, dynamic poetic signatures that cannot be reduced to any of these affiliations or affinities.

When it comes to the historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish, Kronfeld emphasizes the importance of thinking outside the one-to-one mapping of language and literature. In the opening chapter to *Languages of Modern Hebrew Cultures: A Comparative Perspective*, Kronfeld goes against the tendency to tell a monolingual historiography of Yiddish and Hebrew literatures.<sup>14</sup> She claims that the "narrow lenses of monolingualism" marginalize the many strong contacts, affiliations, and affinities between trends in Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, and other relevant languages, as well as between these languages and international literary trends. "These contacts," she writes, "were, in fact, often manifested in the same person, whether writer or reader."<sup>15</sup> Much of Kronfeld's work and that of the Hebrew-Yiddish Berkeley School has been dedicated to

<sup>14</sup> Kronfeld, "Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish."

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

collaborative projects that tell the story of a “postdialectical” historiography of these literatures. In these projects, Kronfeld and her students take a dialogical rather than a dialectical approach that helps reconfigure the way we look at historiographies and at affiliations.

The exclusion of Yiddish from the historiography of Hebrew literature was not an ineluctable consequence of early Zionism, according to Kronfeld:

it just happened to be the strand within Zionism that won out. Unfortunately, it was the one that was least informed about the philosophy of language and the benefits of bilingualism or multilingualism not only for an individual’s IQ but also for the formation of a vibrant, inclusive collectivity. If a different strand had won out, who knows where we would have been today. Teleological historiography, theorizing back from the present, makes those other options invisible, turning the road not taken into one that never existed. But it did [exist] for the poets, at least up until 1948! I think the same is true about the relationship between Hebrew, Arabic, Ladino, and other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Jewish languages, where clearly suppression and power inequities have occluded their historic cooperation; but if their mutual multilingual past is acknowledged and explored, it doesn’t have to be reduced to the binary of periphery and center. The contemporary use of “periphery” in Israel to refer indiscriminately to all geographically decentered and socioeconomically disadvantaged Mizrahim is a poignant reminder of the pitfalls of this label.

## **YIDDISH MODERNISM AND THE NEW WORLD LITERATURE**

We talked about different ways of thinking about modernism in a comparative way, and more specifically, we discussed the New World Literature approach:

There are so many ways in which the so-called New World Literature movement is successful or is doing things that were not able to be done before, but it’s the mediation of English as the central tool, the necessary tool, not just of the actual practice, for the theoretical modeling of world literature that perpetuates the very problem that the Yiddish avant-garde was so determined to circumvent. What happens once imperial American English becomes the vehicle for all that is “world” literature? As a translator (from Hebrew into English, and from Yiddish into Hebrew), I am keenly aware of my own implication in this problematic process. The linguistic specificity of a Yiddish modernism as providing a nonterritorialist home for literary experimentation is what gets occluded from view.

The new film *Yiddish* by Nurith Aviv, which is about Yiddish avant-garde poetry, describes it well. Each segment is about a different poet and highlights a different poem. The film is multilingual: the poems are always spoken in Yiddish, and they’re spoken about in Yiddish but also in Hebrew, French, and English. For me, this way of exemplifying the destabilization of a one-to-one relationship between source and target text is really important.

What that film also shows is the great impact Yiddish avant-garde poetry is having on young people, many of whom are not Jewish, who are devoting their lives to study it because it's such an amazing part of transnational modernism, or because it's such an important part of the non-Yiddish cultures where they were raised. These are young Lithuanians and French and Belgian people, as well as Israelis who were raised on the rejection of Yiddish. I was a consultant on the film, so I'm a little biased, but I think Nurith Aviv has taken a very interesting theoretical and ethical stance here that expresses an ambivalence about, and yet the necessity of, the World Literature model.

### **YIDDISH AND THE PERIPHERY**

Finally, Kronfeld argues, Yiddish poetry provides good examples of the need not only to critique the concept of periphery but also to reclaim it to describe not just a geographical or a linguistic category but also—and profoundly—an economic one.

There is a very famous article by Dovid Bergelson, who really is the founding father of Yiddish modernism in the interwar years, where he talks about various Yiddish literary centers and gives priority to the Soviet Union, not in the least because that's the only place on earth where Yiddish writers in the 1920s got a salary and could for a while make a living—of course, all before Stalinism became ruthlessly murderous, making him one of its many victims.<sup>16</sup> One of the major problems that turns Yiddish modernist poetry into the “true periphery” resonates with the problematic way I mentioned that “periphery” is used in contemporary Hebrew: that is, the financial, economic, and social deprivation that Yiddish writers, some of the greatest ones, suffered throughout the world, and especially in New York. Moyshe Leyb Halpern, one of the greatest modernists in any language, died most likely of hunger.

But, she explains,

there wasn't really a sense of periphery in the *literary* sense within Yiddish literature itself. The poets didn't see themselves as peripheral to anything. They saw their literature as central. Even the Zionist Yiddish writers were associated with a form of transnationalism that placed language and literature above nationalism. All the more so [for] the majority of the avant-gardists, who were not Zionists, at least not before the Holocaust. In the founding manifesto of the Introspectivists, the poets declared: “We are Jewish because we write Yiddish.” “Yiddish” here is both the noun, the name of the language, and the adjective, describing their ethnicity. This is a kind of stripping away of the territorial, of the religious, and also of the national.

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<sup>16</sup> Dovid Bergelson, “Dray tsestern” [Three centers], *In shpan* 1 (1926): 94. For a cogent discussion, see Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 112–13, 116–17, 129.

But again, Yiddish poets were not of one voice, just like the literature of the so-called periphery in Israel is not one undifferentiated entity.

The Yiddish avant-garde had so many groupings and subgroupings, -isms and sub-isms. So this multiplicity of voices, this polyphony in the Bakhtinian sense (where the tension is not something to resolve but to hold), of—as the joke goes—two Jews, three opinions, is just magnified a million times over in the extraordinary transnational achievements of Yiddish modernism. A