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YIDDISHIST IN THE MAYREV: YIDDISH POETRY AND JEWISH WOMEN IN LOS ANGELES, 1920-1950s.

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YIDDISHIST IN THE MAYREV: YIDDISH POETRY AND JEWISH WOMEN IN LOS ANGELES, 1920-1950s.

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Abstract

“Yiddishist in the Mayrev: Yiddish Poetry and Jewish Women in Los Angeles 1920-1950s,” examines how Jewish women in the mid-twentieth century made Los Angeles a Yiddish-speaking place, and reshaped American *yidische kultur* in the process. These poets employed western environmental motifs in their poetry, including natural landscapes and urban structures, to grapple with changing racial demographics in their L.A. neighborhood, Boyle Heights, the interracial partnerships that emerged particularly between Jewish and Mexican residents there, and the physical urban changes that occurred in the neighborhood during the postwar years. Their commitment to *yidische kultur*—an ideology of an autonomous culture that tethered Jewish immigrants together through the Yiddish language and Ashkenazi culture—and their focus on western motifs, symbols, and archetypes created a Yiddish literary style distinctive to the American West. Through analyzing Yiddish poetic works that utilize western themes this thesis demonstrates how these women writers responded to international and domestic events in Los Angeles. This further illustrates how Yiddish culture transformed in the American West but did not disappear after the 1920s, when Jewish immigration from Europe drastically decreased due to the passage of two national origin bills in 1921 and 1924.

This analysis also highlights how Jewish women crafted Yiddish culture in the American West. While both Jewish men and women contributed to this place-making process in Los Angeles, I focus on three prolific Jewish women poets who were all part of a communal group of Yiddish writers associated with the Yiddish Cultural Club in Los Angeles, founded in 1926: Shifra Weiss, Brokhe Kudli, and Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein. By analyzing these three women’s work the thesis adds new Yiddish source materials into a historical discussion

predominantly focused on English source materials and male perspectives. All three of these women emigrated from Europe. Weiss and Kudli made their way through New York City and Shumaitcher moved to New York City from Calgary, Canada in 1918 with her husband Peretz Hirschbein. While these three women moved to Los Angeles at different points in their lives it was California and Los Angeles, not the Yiddishkeit centers of New York and to a lesser degree Chicago that influenced their works and style. This study will illuminate how their poetry reimagined *yidishe kultur* as a part of the American West and how they navigated international events in the mid-twentieth century, including the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, shifting racial demographics in Boyle Heights, and the construction of new urban landscapes to create their own distinct style. This style of western Yiddish writing combines motifs and themes of Jewish experiences and the American West to address the lived experiences of Yiddish culture in the West. I focus in particular on three substantial poems written by these women between 1953 and 1958: Shifra Weiss' *Kalifornie* (California, 1953), Brokhe Kudli's *Fri-vayz* (Freeways 1958), and Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein's *Kalifornye* (California 1956).

In addition to providing new non-English source materials, analyzing these Jewish women's poems expands the American Yiddish literary canon, both in terms of gender and geography. Yiddish writing in California falls outside the period between 1890 and the 1920s that historians usually identify as the hightide of *yidishe kultur* in the United States. Scholars have also tended to focus on male writers as Jewish men assumed authority over Yiddish writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and as New York established itself as the hub for the male-centered Yiddish publishing world.

It was precisely postwar Los Angeles's limited number of Yiddish institutions that contributed to the inclusion of Jewish women writers. The L.A. Yiddish Cultural Club with its

focus on creating a nonpartisan environment for all writers regardless of political and religious ideologies or gender and its emphasis on local publishing created an environment where women writers could flourish. Through this cultural institution women writers could continue to choose *yidishe kultur* as a cultural identity, while also reimagining and redefining what it meant. Yiddish cultural productions in the American West indicates that Yiddish did not “die” after the passage of comprehensive immigration restrictions in 1924, the accompanying decline of the Yiddish press, or the suburbanization and acculturation of Jews during the 1940s and 50s. Examining these women and their poetry shows how Yiddish culture did not disappear but was rather transformed as Jewish women travelled to the western United States and recontextualized the culture they carried.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	viii
Translation Note.....	x
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: “Land of Oil, Grapes, and Oranges”: Creating Yiddish L.A.....	18
Chapter 2: Choosing Yiddish: Jewish Women’s Poetry in 1950s L.A.	45
Conclusion.....	81
Bibliography.....	84

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Author's Translation Note

I have written all Yiddish words used in this thesis in accordance with the New York based Yiddish Scientific Institute, the Yidisher Visnshftlekher Institut (YIVO 1925) and their standards for Yiddish orthography. However, the spelling of the titles of poems maintains the authors' preferred spelling, i.e. -ye and -ie. I have noted all translation authors in cited materials. The spelling of authors' names is in accordance with their preferred English spellings.



Figure 1. A group photo of the Morris Kopiloff Banquet at the Yiddish Cultural Club, 1951 (Los Angeles Public Library).¹

In 1951 the Los Angeles Yiddish Cultural Club (YCC) celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. This banquet honored one of the groups' executive board members, Morris Kopiloff, as well as celebrated the second publication of its Yiddish-language literary journal, *Kheshbn* (the Reckoning), first published in 1946. *Kheshbn* continued until 2007, making it one of the longest running Yiddish literary journals in the western United States. A snapshot from the 1951 L.A. YCC banquet (pictured above), depicts a lively scene: members smiled at the camera while others appeared mid-laugh or conversation. In the early 1950s, a resurgence in Jewish-Yiddish

¹ Shades of L.A. Jewish Community, *Banquet at the Yiddish Cultural Club*, 1951, photograph, TESSA Digital Collections of the Los Angeles Public Library, <https://tessa2.lapl.org/digital/collection/photos/id/75011/rec/1>.

culture occurred in the United States. For the growing Yiddish community of L.A., the future looked bright.

After World War II and the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust, the United States became the global center not only of world Jewry but for Yiddish culture and language. Since at least the 1880s, a vibrant Yiddish culture had taken root in the United States, centered in New York City but also in other eastern and Midwestern cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. But in the postwar years, this Yiddish culture migrated and was most vibrant in the American West. In the northeast, political and religious in-fighting divided Yiddish organizations. This in-fighting resulted in schisms between Yiddish organizations and less unified groups that catered only to specific political and religious ideologies. With the passage of immigration restrictions in 1921 and 1924, the Yiddish press declined along with its influence on immigrants' households. Scholars have also argued that middle-class aspirations among second generation Jews contributed to the decline of the Yiddish language and culture by the postwar period.² While this was true in the Northeast, it was not the case out West.

In fact, Yiddish culture blossomed in California between 1930 and the 1950s because of a vibrant publishing scene that rejected the schisms of the northeast by catering to all Yiddish writers in the local area. Through the efforts of local cultural clubs, especially the Yiddish Cultural Club founded in 1926, its literary journal *Kheshbn*, and local publishing committees

² For more information about postwar migration patterns and suburbanization see Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (Harvard University Press, 1996). For more information about the evolution of the American Yiddish press, see Ayelet Brinn, *A Revolution in Type: Gender and the Making of the Modern Yiddish press* (NYU Press, 2023). For more information about American Jewish consumption patterns and how they facilitated acculturation, see Andrew R Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (Columbia University Press, 1990); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Vintage Books, 2004).

established to help support well known authors, including the Henry Rosenblatt committee, the Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein committee, and the Shifra Weiss committee, the Los Angeles Yiddish community provided poets like Shifra Weiss, Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, and Brokhe Kudli the resources and an egalitarian environment necessary to publish their works. They in turn, helped construct a new western Yiddish literary style defined by the natural landscapes and motifs of the American West and Jewish experiences.

Social clubs like the Yiddish Cultural Club were popular, providing an avenue for Jewish immigrants in the American West—secular and religious—who shared common cultural traditions to meet and support one another. Other Jewish philanthropic organizations in the area, including the Hebrew Benevolent Society, established in 1857 by Jews from Central Europe, provided financial and social resources to help acculturate and settle Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Los Angeles during the early twentieth century. However, unlike charity organizations like the Hebrew Benevolent Society, social groups like the YCC focused exclusively on members' cultural needs and were vital in the creation of a vibrant Yiddish culture. Writing in the 1951 issue of *Kheshbn*, the then Secretary of the Yiddish Cultural Club, Aaron Ayeroff explained, "Our activities may be summed up in making our Yiddish language a living link in the life of our Jewish community."³ For Ayer and members of the Yiddish Cultural Club, preserving the use of the Yiddish language in cultural productions was central to maintaining their collective Yiddish culture. The YCC avoided the political and religious schisms that affected many Jewish social groups during the twentieth century by providing a nonpartisan environment to enjoy multiple enriching activities: Yiddish reading circles, guest lectures from local and international Yiddish writers and speakers, numerous literary journals throughout its

³ Aaron Ayeroff, "25th Anniversary of the Los Angeles Yiddish Cultural Club," *Kheshbn*, 2, October 1951, 114.

life, theatrical performances and more. Due to the limited availability of material and the small numbers of Yiddish cultural organizations in Los Angeles, the YCC emerged as an important organization for both male and female writers.

This study has two goals: first, to highlight the importance of Jewish place-making in the American West. Scholars have focused extensively on Jewish life in the eastern United States, especially New York. While New York undoubtedly played an outsized role in the making of American Jewish life, the American Jewish experience has been diverse and extends beyond the eastern and midwestern United States. Second, this work highlights the central role Jewish women writers played in the creation of a *yidishe kultur* in the West, particularly Los Angeles. The Yiddish Cultural Club in L.A. provided a uniquely open and egalitarian environment that enabled and encouraged Jewish women to write and publish their work. In contrast to the development of Yiddish in NYC, which resulted in larger Yiddish publishing spaces and many influential male editors, literary critics, and intellectuals, this thesis instead, focuses on the role the Yiddish Cultural Club played in facilitating this environment as well as three individual women and their works. By focusing on communal-level publishing and marketing, supporting both men and women, the YCC in L.A. focus contrasted with the male-centered Yiddish publishing hub of New York City.

In New York City, Eastern European Jewish immigrants had a diverse selection of social, religious, and philanthropic organizations to choose from. Organizations like the Education Alliance (1889), the Hebrew Technical Institute (1884), the United Hebrew Charities and their sponsored Hebrew Free Trade Association (1874) as well as other smaller Jewish settlement houses acted as places of assimilation for Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the northeast. Central European Jewish immigrants created many of these societies in the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. Organizers of these groups demarcated the clubs by political and religious affiliations. For Eastern European Jews these organizations were laboratories of acculturation into American culture.⁴

As a more diverse population of Jewish immigrants settled in NYC, tensions rose between the acculturated Central European Jews and Eastern European Jews, who wanted the latter to assimilate quickly. The older and more well-established Jews of Central Europe worried that the Eastern European Jews and their religious, political, and cultural differences would cause antisemitism to rise in the United States. Most Central European Jews, were German-born, practiced Reform Judaism, readily adapted to the English language, assimilated into American culture, and politically aligned themselves with the Republican or Democratic parties. In contrast, most Eastern European Jews practiced Orthodox Judaism or Hasidism, clung to the Yiddish language, and aligned themselves with leftist, labor focused political movements, such as socialism and communism after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.⁵ These new Jewish immigrants, the visible differences between the two groups, and the rising nativism of this period “made certain members of the original American Jewish community more than ever anxious to present the proper appearance,” according to historian Henry Feingold.⁶

However, not all Jews wanted entirely to fully assimilate into American culture. *Yidishe kultur* or choosing Yiddish culture resisted acculturation and maintained an autonomous Jewish cultural identity. Organizations like the socialist *Arbeter Ring* and individual *landsmanshaftn* mutual aid groups provided spaces for Eastern European immigrants to organize together and

⁴ See Henry L Feingold, “The Old and New Immigrants: Conflict and Philanthropy,” *Zion in America: The Jewish Experience from Colonial Times to the Present* (Dover Publications, 2002).

⁵ Hasia R. Diner, “Chapter 5. A Century Of Jewish Politics: 1820–1920,” *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (University of California Press, 2004), 155-202.

⁶ Feingold, “The Old and New Immigrants: Conflict and Philanthropy,” 147.

reject Central European Jews' attempts at acculturation. While both the *Arbeter Ring* and *landsmanshaftn* branches formed across the United States, these groups primarily courted members who shared a similar political ideology or regional identity in Europe.

The Yiddish Cultural Club functioned similarly to these other Eastern European Jewish organizations by providing a space to resist acculturation. And the Jewish women poets in Los Angeles continuously reaffirmed their Yiddish culture by writing Yiddish poetry, publishing in Yiddish-language literary journals, and their participation in the Yiddish Cultural Club, which situated them closer to the other minorities in Boyle Heights and oppositional to the assimilated Central European Jews of L.A.'s westside.

One of the distinctive developments in America was the emergence of a vibrant Yiddish press. More than 150 newspapers, dailies, and journals were founded in New York City between 1880 and the 1910s. These papers, each with their own political and religious ideologies, grew in circulation and by the late 1910s and early 1920s they exerted profound influence over Jewish immigrants' lives. The Yiddish press functioned as a way to introduce Jewish immigrants to American culture and norms. Through including advertisements for American products, advice columns, and human interest stories, the Yiddish press acted as a bridge between Jewish immigrants and their new American home. Although the Yiddish press introduced immigrants to American norms, the Yiddish press had to navigate a paradoxical situation; complete assimilation of their readers into an Anglo-American society and a materializing Jewish-American identity. As the United States established restrictive immigration policies in 1921 and 1924 the number of Yiddish speakers in the United States diminished and so did the Yiddish press' influence. The

once numerous independent Yiddish dailies, newspapers, and journals coalesced into larger publishing houses.⁷

The Yiddish press operated as both an agent of acculturation and a mechanism to further support an autonomous culture, *yidishe kultur*. European Jewish intellectuals, like Chaim Zhitlovsky found New York City and the United States more broadly to be an environment ripe for a Yiddish cultural movement rooted due to its diverse populations of Jews. Born in 1865 in a small town in the Russian empire, Zhitlovsky was one of the first to promote this *yidishe kultur* movement on both sides of the Atlantic. He argued Jewish immigrants were united not by religious practices, which differed widely, but through a shared language.⁸ He and other like-minded intellectuals saw the Yiddish press as central to that project, as well as Yiddish schools (*folkshuls*), political organizations such as the *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen's Circle), and social clubs based on this cultural movement of *yidishe kultur*—all of which flourished in the Jewish immigrant communities across the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Jewish immigrants experienced this cultural movement of *yidishe kultur* differently depending on in which region they lived. In New York City, which by 1927 had 1,765,000 Jews, the *yidishe kultur* movement was both expansive and diverse. In NYC, Yiddishist could select groups based on a wide range of ideologies including Zionist, anti-Zionist, Marxist, anti-Marxist, socialist, or communist. However, in Los Angeles, which had approximately 65,000 Jews in 1927, social organizations like the Yiddish Cultural Club functioned differently.⁹ Due to the

⁷ Ayelet Brinn, "Introduction," *A Revolution in Type: Gender and the Making of the Modern Yiddish press* (NYU Press, 2023).

⁸ For further information about Chaim Zhitlovsky, see Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Harvard University Press, 2009) and David Weinberg, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Haim Zhitloski, Simon Dubnow, and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identity* (Holmes & Meier, 1996).

⁹ H.S. Linfield, "Jewish population in the United States, 1927," *The American Jewish Year Book, September 15, 1928, to October 5, 1929*, vol 30, (American Jewish Committee, 1928-1929), 101-198.

relatively small size of the L.A. community the Yiddish Cultural Club took on added importance as it was one of the few Yiddish organizations in the area. Moreover, it staunchly supported a nonpartisan approach that was inclusive for writers across the political and religious spectrum and even gender. Thus, for its members, the club, with its making and promotion of *yidishe kultur* in L.A., was vital to their Jewish identity. By choosing *yidishe kultur*, Jews in Los Angeles found a way to continue to culturally identify as Jewish when many of the social markers of Jewishness fell in the face of acculturation into American society by the mid-twentieth century.

While *yidishe kultur* first took root in Europe and the eastern United States, the regional experiences of Jews in the American West resulted in a different expression of this cultural movement.¹⁰ During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the West presented unique opportunities for Jewish migrants. In particular, the lack of pre-established religious and social structures allowed Western Jews more freedom to establish their own Jewish institutions outside traditional religious authority and expectations. They also found that they could access many economic opportunities open to white migrants in the region. Though whiteness was always an unstable and shifting category, Jewish migrants in the American West used other cultural groups to negotiate their own place within the United States Anglo-American imposed racial categories. Jews of the American West were viewed as white and maintained the political and social privileges of whiteness. However, Jewish residents who subscribed to and promoted *yidishe kultur* situated themselves outside of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture.

¹⁰ For more information about the European roots of modern Yiddish culture, see David E Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005). For more information on Yiddish during the postwar period in Europe, see Nick Underwood, *Yiddish Paris: Staging Nation and Community in Interwar France* (Indiana University Press, 2022).

In the United States, race is determined by a larger national narrative that is contingent on a white/black binary. However, the history and regional experiences of the American West, particularly Southern California, has resulted in racialization, an ideological and historically specific process different from the northern and southern United States.¹¹ In the northern and southern United States and through employing twentieth-century racial science, race was seen as biological fact associated with the color of one's skin.¹² In the American West, racial categories evolved throughout the history of colonization based on cultural markers.¹³ Two colonial powers controlled the Southern California: first the Spanish and then the United States. Through colonial conquest, each empire categorized diverse groups of people in different ways. After California became a part of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, the US began the process of creating Anglo-American racial superiority. White supremacy depended on the subordination of these ethnic groups in Southern California such as, Mexicans, Native Americans, and Asian immigrants. This subordination occurred through the removal of previously established economic practices and the introduction of a pro-capitalist and "free-labor" sentiments.¹⁴ In California, race and class were deeply intertwined and depended on another.¹⁵

Jews migrating to the American West thus experienced a racial environment unlike the northeast or south from which they came. Scholars like Shari Rabin, David Koffman, and Rachel Rubinstein have analyzed how Jewish migrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

¹¹ Tomas Almaguer, "Introduction" *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*, (University of California Press, 2023), 1-16. Here Almaguer uses the term "racialization" to describe the ideological process of creating racial meaning in California.

¹² For more information about Jewish racial relations, particularly in the North and South, see Eric L Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹³ Richard White, "Race Relations in the American West," *American Quarterly* 38, 3 (1986): 396–416.

¹⁴ Almaguer, "Chapter 1. We Desire," 17-44.

¹⁵ See George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles 1900-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

negotiated racial belonging and constructed new social and religious structures to adapt to the American West.¹⁶ These scholars argue that Jewish immigrants used their interactions with white Anglo settlers and other minority groups, especially Native Americans to understand their place in the American West. They emphasize that this process was non-linear, and whiteness was not necessarily the destination. In the context of Southern California, Jews place within the racial hierarchy depended on their class, which further correlated with acculturation into American society. Jewish residents who had access to economic opportunities and more adaptive to American cultural values often resided in the westside of Los Angeles, often in residential communities primarily composed of WASP residents. This contrast with Jewish residents on the eastside who were primarily working-class. Thus, the creation of a Californian Jewish identity in relation to race flowed back and forth, with Jews sometimes situating themselves closer to white residents and sometimes situating themselves with other minority groups depending on their class status.

This study centers the multi-racial, polyglot neighborhood of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, where many Jews settled in the early twentieth century, as another example of this process, whereby western Jews negotiated their whiteness and chose to identify with *yidische kultur*. In Boyle Heights, Jewish residents allied themselves with the other racial minorities of

¹⁶ Shari Rabin in, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (NYU Press, 2019) demonstrates the necessary cultural changes Jews in the American West made during the nineteenth century; David S Koffman in, *The Jews' Indian: Colonialism, Pluralism, and Belonging in America* (Rutgers University Press, 2019) illustrates how Jewish migrants in the American West negotiated their racial classification through white Anglo settlers and Indigenous peoples ; Rachel Rubinstein in, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination* (Wayne State University Press, 2010), argues that literary conceptions of Indigenous peoples played an important role in Yiddish (broadly Jewish) literature in the twentieth century; Deborah Dash Moore in, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (Harvard University Press, 1996). Shows how post-World War II economic opportunities and experiences affected Jewish residential patterns in these cities of Los Angeles and Miami.

the neighborhood finding commonalities between their shared working-class ideals.¹⁷ Even into the mid-twentieth century when Jewish residents accessed more socioeconomic opportunities, the Jewish residents who stayed emphasized their working-class, Yiddish cultural values. This neighborhood directly contrasted with the L.A. neighborhoods of the westside including Hollywood and Beverly Hills. In these westside neighborhoods, although controlled by racial housing covenants, Jewish residents (primarily Central European Jews) who had economic means assimilated easily into the predominate white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture.

This thesis shows how writing and literature was central to the construction of Jewish American culture in the West. Literary scholar Julian Levinson places the Jewish American writer as a central actor in constructing Jewish American culture.¹⁸ Levinson argues that the exposure to American literary culture, particularly the traditions of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman which emphasized American nature, equipped Jews with new methods of cultural construction during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. American literary traditions provided Jewish Americans, across several moments in time with new frameworks for understanding Jewishness not just American culture. However, this did not immediately result in the adoption of English to describe this new Jewish American experience. Yiddish still played a prominent role in Jewish culture, and we can see the weaving of an American literary style with Yiddish in the writings of western Yiddish poets. Yiddish poets in the American West intertwined nature and

¹⁷ See Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (University of New Mexico Press, 1987). Ruiz discusses the relationships formed between Mexican and Russian Jewish women in the food processing industry in Southern California. While positive relationships and alliances formed between these two groups, race and whiteness became points of fracture.

¹⁸ See also, Sanford Sternlicht, *The Tenement Saga: The Lower East Side and Early Jewish American Writers* (Terrace Books, 2004), Sanford also centers Jewish writers as the primary producers of Jewish culture in the United States. This work focusses on New York City and working-class Jewish experiences.

“frontier” symbolism with Jewish themes of wandering and the shtetl to create a distinctly western Yiddish literary style.¹⁹

Like Levinson, Michael Hoberman in, *A Hundred Acres of America: The Geography of Jewish American Literary History* (2018), argues that American geography was vital in the construction of Jewish and Yiddish culture. This process required the rejection of both Jewish and American assumptions to create a new culture that valued both Jewish and American cultural experiences. Significantly, Hoberman analyzes distinct regions—the rural, urban, southern, and western—and how Jewish conceptions of place played a larger role in constructing cultural identity. This methodology, with its emphasis on region, undergirds this thesis, too, demonstrating the importance of the western Yiddish experience in Los Angeles during the early to mid-twentieth century.

Together these works emphasize the importance of Jewish American writers in the construction of culture across the geographical regions of the United States. However, these scholars do not solely focus on the western Yiddish style, nor do they center Jewish women’s writings in the mid-twentieth century. This research expands the scope of this methodology by centering the American West and Jewish women writers. By doing so, this work emphasizes the regionality of Jewish American experiences and the agency of Jewish women to construct this Yiddish culture in Los Angeles.

Beginning in the 1980s, scholars have reevaluated the roles women and gender have played in the construction of the American West. By analyzing women poets and the roles they

¹⁹ See Caroline E. Luce, “Yiddish Writers in Los Angeles and the Jewish Fantasy Past,” *American Jewish History* 102, 4 (2018): 481–509. In this work she analyzes two foundational western Yiddish poets, Henry Roseblatt and Gershon Einbinder (Chava Paver) and their use of western motifs in their Yiddish writings.

played in constructing *yidische kultur* in the California this thesis contributes to this body of scholarship. Twentieth-century literary historians of the American West have conceptualized the West as a place where rugged individuality was prioritized in contrast to the genteel masculinity of the east.²⁰ Literary and social historians during the late twentieth and the early twentieth-first centuries have illustrated how important analyzing women and gender is to crafting a more nuanced understanding of the American West. However, by including Yiddish source materials, and materials from Jewish women, this research incorporates perspectives that are missing from this body of scholarship.

The works of these women decenter Jewish men and their ways of constructing the American West which produces gender specific experiences of Yiddish writing in Los Angeles. However, these Jewish women still operated within Jewish American gender norms. In the United States, Jewish women had to balance two oppositional roles: the keepers of Jewish tradition but also the facilitator of their family's acculturation. Jewish women's participation in social clubs and religious organizations were normalized because they facilitated a space where Jewish women could further learn about Jewish cultural norms and disseminate that information to their families. Reading circles that discussed Jewish authors, themes, and identity were became popular avenues throughout North America for Jewish women to engage with this role.²¹ Simultaneously, Jewish men viewed Jewish mothers and wives as agents of acculturation; learning English and buying American products was essential to creating an American home.²²

²⁰ See Daniel Worden, *Masculine Style: The American West and Literary Modernism* (Springer, 2011). Worden does not focus on Jewish American writers but argues that the construction of a western masculinity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was central to the emergence of American modernism.

²¹ Hagit Cohen, "The Demands of Integration—the Challenges of Ethnicization: Jewish Women's Yiddish Reading Circles in North America between the Two World Wars," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 16 (2008): 98.

²² Andrew R Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (Columbia University Press, 1990).

This paradoxical role, in addition to the general anxiety from assimilating into American culture, as Riv-Ellen Prell states, “turned Jews against one another.”²³ These gender anxieties contributed to the exclusion of Jewish women from important leadership roles. This was true even at the L.A. Yiddish Cultural Club. Although the club afforded women more freedom to write and publish their works, it would not be until 1991 that a woman would lead the organization. That year Lilke Majzner (1921-2009) became the final president of the YCC.

Scholars including Judith Baskin, Naomi Sokoloff, Anne Lerner, and Anita Norich, have all analyzed the gendered assumptions undergirding writing in Yiddish and Hebrew. In the realm of literature during the nineteenth century, Jewish men sought to redefine the gendered assumptions of Hebrew and Yiddish. While Hebrew remained a masculine language due to its associations with traditional rabbinical learning (which provided the reasoning to exclude Jewish women from learning the language), the Yiddish language underwent a rapid transformation in the nineteenth century. Elite Jewish men—rabbis and religious scholars—had long viewed Yiddish as a feminine secular language, but by the end of the nineteenth century Jewish men were the primary shapers of Yiddish literature. This transformation involved Yiddish authors producing high-brow literature, such as the works of early-twentieth century playwright and authors Sholem Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz. Collectively these works demonstrate how Jewish gender norms informed Jewish Americans’ literature, their desires to acculturate and their resistance.²⁴

²³ Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Beacon Press, 1999), 52.

²⁴ In addition to these works on gender and literature, there has been a more concentrated effort in Yiddish studies to translate and present Jewish women writers. For more information see works such as Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, and Sarah Silberstein Swartz, *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (Second Story Press, 1994); Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (University of Chicago Press, 2006); Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (Stanford University Press, 2014); Miriam Karpilove, *Diary of a Lonely Girl, or the Battle against Free Love* (Syracuse

Gender has been central to both the production of Yiddish as well as who maintained authority over the language. Scholars like Ayelet Brinn, Judith Baskin, Naomi Sokoloff, Anne Lerner, and Anita Norich have demonstrated the multivalent ways gender has affected Jewish literature and media production. Brinn demonstrates that the inclusion of Jewish women as consumers was central to the growth of the American Yiddish press and its influence over immigrant lives. Male press editors in New York used the introduction of human interest stories, serialized fiction, women's advice columns, and marketing adverts that targeted women to modernize the Yiddish press and expand its consumer base. She notes that although the Yiddish press presented women's context as periphery, Yiddish readers, regardless of sex read these sections. "Editors and publishers," Brinn argues, "often used these articles as testing grounds for what type of content or formatting their newspapers should encompass."²⁵ While male editors viewed women readers as central to this process, they systematically excluded Jewish women from participating in this process—that is, producing content. Most "female" content in Yiddish newspaper was written by men using female pseudonyms. While some Jewish women did publish, overall Jewish women faced disadvantages based on their gender in this male-centered publishing world. In contrast, in Los Angeles the YCC focused more on local-communal publishing and thus afford Jewish women writers a more open space to publish their work and to receive credit.

Finally, the use of the Yiddish language is central to understanding *yidishe kultur* in Los Angeles during the early to mid-twentieth century. In the early-twentieth century, Yiddish was the primary language of Jewish immigrants in the United States. In Europe, Hebrew was used in

University Press, 2020); Annie Atura Bushnell, Author Lori Harrison-Kahan, and Ashley Walters, *Matrilineal Dissent: Women Writers and Jewish American Literary History* (Wayne State University Press, 2024).

²⁵ Ayelet Brinn, *A Revolution in Type: Gender and the Making of the Modern Yiddish press* (NYU Press, 2023), 7.

the religious environment but not elsewhere; thus, most Jews conducted their secular activities in Yiddish. Tony Michels argues, in his pioneering study *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (2009), that the early-twentieth century political culture of New York Jewish socialists was transnational due to the role the Yiddish language played in connecting Jewish communities globally.²⁶ Yiddish intellectuals like Chaim Zhitlovksy, political groups, and the Yiddish press played central roles in creating an autonomous cultural identity, *yidishe kultur*. In *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (2007), Anita Norich argues that the Holocaust fundamentally altered the Yiddish language and culture in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. She shows that the Holocaust and the immense changes that it generated did not result in a clear-cut succession of English as the predominant language for American Jews, but instead these events provided the needed conditions in which the paths of cultural exchange were more fluid.²⁷ These two scholars and their works are central to understanding how *yidishe kultur* emerged in the twentieth century in the United States and how it was fundamentally altered by the mid-twentieth century.²⁸ Both works are important cornerstones of modern American Yiddish history. The scope of each book is more expansive as both authors look at the national and transnational conversations about the Yiddish language. In contrast, this thesis highlights a smaller Yiddish community, their social club, and their emphasis on local literature.

²⁶ Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Harvard University Press, 2009). See Chapter 3, “Speaking to Moishe,” for more information about the process of this cultural movement, *yidishe kultur*.

²⁷ Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 12.

²⁸ For more information about changes the Yiddish language has underwent in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century in the United States see Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (University of California Press, 2008).

“Yiddishist in the Mayrev: Yiddish Poetry and Jewish Women in Los Angeles 1920-1950s” utilizes multiple genres of scholarship, historical and literary, to analyze the place-making process of Yiddish culture in Southern California. Through writing in Yiddish, Jewish women explored the racial realities of the West and interrogated what it meant to choose a culture. By shifting from New York as the template for Jewish identity and Jewish men as the primary producers of Yiddish literature, this thesis adds to the scholarship of Yiddish identity and to the American Jewish experience. It highlights those on the periphery—Jewish communities in the American West and the Jewish women writers—but places and people who nonetheless played an important role in defining American Jewish identity. Focusing on the neighborhood of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles during the 1920s through the 1950s, the Yiddish poetry produced there, I illustrate how Jewish women writers contributed to *yidishe kultur* in the American West.

Chapter 1: “Land of Oil, Grapes, and Oranges:” Creating Yiddish L.A

After a year of traveling across North America, Yiddish writer Henry Rosenblatt and his new wife Mollie settled into an apartment on Cincinnati Street in Boyle Heights, an eastside neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1921. Historian George Sánchez describes the neighborhood as Los Angeles’ “lower eastside.”²⁹ Rosenblatt had first met Mollie while he was the editor for the Detroit Yiddish weekly newspaper (*Detroyter vokhenblat*), and for their honeymoon the two decided to take a tour of Jewish communities throughout the United States. When they arrived in Los Angeles, they met a small Yiddish cohort of writers, intellectuals, and activists in the city. Their time in Los Angeles and the people they met made a huge impact on the Rosenblatts. Henry and his wife moved to L.A. as soon as their honeymoon tour ended. Aside from perhaps the sunny weather and clean and dry air, what drew this couple to the west coast, far from the more established Jewish communities of the East and Midwest? What did the couple see in the small Yiddish community—roughly ten percent of the cities’ 20,000 Jews—of Los Angeles?³⁰ In 1920, Rosenblatt and his wife had traveled across the United States, stopping in many Jewish communities across where Yiddish was spoken. Yet something about Los Angeles captured their attention. They both lived in L.A. until his death in 1956.

In 1892, at the age of fourteen, Henry Rosenblatt, with his parents sailed across the Atlantic and landed in Ellis Island in a pursuit for a better life than the ones they had in Ukraine. His family settled into an apartment in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Henry, with his family, worked in

²⁹ George J. Sánchez, “From Global Movements to Urban Apartheid,” in *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*, (University of California Press, 2021), 41. Due to the many different immigrant populations in this neighborhood, Sánchez calls Boyle Heights the “lower eastside” of Los Angeles.

³⁰ Luce, “Yiddish Writers in Los Angeles,” 486.

the garment industry before studying to become a teacher at the Jamaica Normal College.

Rosenblatt and his family were part of the larger story of Eastern European Jewish immigration to the United States during the late nineteenth century. But unlike most Eastern European Jews, Henry and his wife would travel to Los Angeles during the 1920s, joining a small but thriving Jewish Yiddish-speaking community.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Boyle Heights was home to a small group of Jewish activists, writers, and intellectuals who were part of a thriving multi-ethnic working-class community. However, in the 1920s the neighborhood rapidly became the center for Yiddish culture in Los Angeles. In 1910 there were 2,000 Jewish households in Boyle Heights; by 1920 the number had expanded to 10,000 households.³¹ Central European Jews first settled in the city in the nineteenth century, with more joining from Eastern Europe in the early-twentieth century.

But Los Angeles's immigration patterns contrasted with those of east coast cities like New York City. Most Eastern European Jews did not begin to migrate to L.A. until the late 1920s and 30s, a period when the total number of immigrants to the United States drastically decreased after the passage of draconian immigration restriction laws. Jewish migrants to Los Angeles, like the Rosenblatts, often lived in other American cities before making their way to Los Angeles. The development of a Yiddish culture in L.A. thus occurred later than in places like New York City and Chicago. In Los Angeles, Yiddish culture thrived between the 1920s and 1950s, a period that saw the influence of Yiddish culture decline on the east coast. Yiddish thrived in Los Angeles in these years because the local community provided open public cultural spaces to

³¹ Max Vorspan and Lloyd P Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles* (The Huntington Library, 1970), 118.

explore Yiddish culture and its meaning in the context of the geographical region and the multi-ethnic realities of Boyle Heights.

Henry Rosenblatt and his wife immigrated to Los Angeles three years before the National Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which severely limited the amount of Eastern European immigrants flowing into the country. Due to the drastic cutoff of immigrant Yiddish speakers, the prominence of the Yiddish language began to decline. As more immigrants adopted English to acculturate into American society, and as the children of immigrants abandoned the language, Yiddish as a vernacular language and Yiddishkeit as a cultural group began to fade among many Jewish immigrants. This decline was especially evident in the weakening of the Yiddish press, its circulation, and influence on immigrants' lives by the late 1920s.³² Scholars usually date this moment as the beginning of the end for Yiddish in America. But in Los Angeles, in surprising ways, Yiddish culture and the language flourished.

This chapter argues that this framework for Jewish culture rooted in the Yiddish language and drawing from aspects of Ashkenazi culture, also known as *yidishe kultur*, traveled with Jewish immigrants, like Henry Rosenblatt, as they traveled to Los Angeles during the early twentieth century.³³ These migrants bolstered the previous number of secular Jews in Los Angeles and established multiple Yiddish organizations, including the local branch of the international socialist organization, the *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen's Circle), established in 1908, secular Yiddish day schools or *folkshuls*, and most importantly for this work the Yiddish Cultural

³² For the evolution of the Yiddish press in the United States see Ayelet Brinn, *A Revolution in Type: Gender and the Making of the Modern Yiddish press* (NYU Press, 2023), 12. For more information on the transformation of Yiddish as a vernacular, see Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (University of California Press, 2008).

³³ Michels, "Chapter 3: Speaking to Moishe" 120-126. In this chapter Michels defines the term *yidishe kultur* as a Jewish cultural movement defined by its use of the Yiddish language.

Club, founded in 1926. These organizations worked together and sponsored a wide array of activities that cultivated Yiddish identity in Los Angeles. They provided activities like lectures, Yiddish concerts, art and book exhibits, reading circles, and Yiddish-language literary journals, which enabled members to maintain and further cultivate a Yiddish identity in the United States.

The Yiddish Cultural Club emerged as the central organization of Yiddish life in Los Angeles because of its non-partisan approach. Partly because political in-fighting caused schisms in other Yiddish organizations, the YCC sought to unify Yiddish Los Angeles and transcend political differences in the community. Yiddish organizations in the eastern United States were largely defined by their political affiliations and their journals reflected their political commitments. Other communities in California like San Francisco also created their own Yiddish club, the SF Yiddish *Folkshul*, however this organization did not have their own Yiddish-language journal. Thus, the YCC provided an unique environment that enabled twentieth-century writers like Henry Rosenblatt to cultivate a new western Yiddish literary style with ties to *yidishe kultur*. In Los Angeles, Yiddishists (those who subscribed to the framework of *yidishe kultur*) rejected complete assimilation and crafted a Jewish identity defined by a fusion between the region in which they lived, the American West, and *yidishe kultur*.

The establishment of Yiddish identity in Los Angeles differed from New York City in two major ways. Many of the Eastern European Jews who migrated to Los Angeles during the 1920s through the 1950s settled in other American cities before moving to Los Angeles. These Jews were more familiar with the English language and American culture than the stereotypical “greenhorn” immigrants. Their experiences in other American cities and migration patterns demonstrate that the Yiddish community in Los Angeles deliberately chose to continue claiming Yiddish culture, even when other avenues of Jewish American culture were available. Secondly,

due to these immigration patterns, Yiddish culture did not see its full expression in Los Angeles until the late 1920s and into the 1950s, further illustrating that the timeline of Yiddish expression in the United States extended well into the post-WWII period. While Boyle Heights was the center of L.A.'s Yiddish cultural expression during this time, it was not contained to the neighborhood; through organizations like the Yiddish Cultural Club and the local *Arbeter Ring*, Yiddish life in Los Angeles extended beyond the border of Boyle Heights.

Western Travels: Jewish Migration to Los Angeles, 1850s-1950s

Scholars have broadly categorized Jewish migration to Los Angeles in three distinct waves of migration: the Gold Rush period (1850 – 1900), the Pre/Post World War I period (1900-1920s), and Pre/Post World War II period (1930s-1950s). Central European Jewish immigrants in fact began to arrive before the Gold Rush. They established trading companies, invested in Los Angeles' infrastructure, resource management and in general contributed to the development of the city under Mexican rule (1821-1846). In the early independent period, Mexico employed an open economic policy to promote commerce. However, Jews were less numerous than other minorities and their movement depended on their trade, thus they constituted an extremely small and mobile group within the city.

After the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo led to California becoming a state of the United States in 1850. That same year, census recorded eight unmarried Jewish men as the first Jewish residents of Los Angeles at least in terms of American bureaucratic accounting. Six out of the eight men were German-born Jews while the other two were from Poland.³⁴ All were merchants who assimilated relatively easily into new Anglo-

³⁴ This distinction between German-born Jews and Polish indicates the divide between Central and Eastern European Jews.

American society in Los Angeles. These early settlers and their eventual families encountered little antisemitism in Los Angeles because of the economic opportunities they accessed and their whiteness. However, Jews in this period rejected intermarriage and focused on creating social spaces for themselves. As historians Max Vorspan and Lloyd Gartner argued, “there was a line of social assimilation beyond which the Jews voluntarily did not go.”³⁵ Throughout the next fifty years Central European Jews migrated to California, settling primarily in cities such as San Diego and San Francisco. Los Angeles, however, experienced a small increase in Jewish residents as well. By the 1870s these Jewish families established the Hebrew Benevolent Society (1857), the Ladies’ Hebrew Benevolent Society (1870), the Los Angeles Social Club (1874), and the B’nai B’rith branch (1874). These social institutions built needed religious infrastructure like cemeteries, but most importantly connected religious and non-religious L.A. Jews. In short, these Jewish immigrants from Central Europe faced little resistance in integrating themselves into the civic and economic spheres of Los Angeles. In this early period before 1920, scholars estimate that the Jewish population of Los Angeles was eighty percent Central of Northern European.³⁶ Once Eastern European Jews began to arrive in large numbers at the turn of the century, these established Jews focused their efforts on assimilating these new Jews to calm fears of rising antisemitism.³⁷

Between 1900 and 1924, a massive wave of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, escaping increasing antisemitic violence, forced conscription, and economic oppression, arrived in the United States. Most landed in Ellis Island, which opened in 1892, though some immigrants

³⁵ Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews*, 67.

³⁶ Wendy Elliott-Scheinberg, “Boyle Heights: Jewish Ambiance in a Multicultural Neighborhood,” (PhD dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2001), 102.

³⁷ Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews*, 110.

arrived through Galveston, Texas, a port opened in 1845 to immigrants in search of more opportunities in the American West. This period saw an increase in antisemitism and nativism in the United States, which ultimately culminated in the Immigration Act of 1924. To mitigate fears about these newcomers, the established Central European (often German-born) Jews in the United States sought to assimilate Eastern European Jews. These incoming Jews, often poor, religious, and thought to be the source of overcrowding in urban spaces caused anxiety for the Jews assimilated into American culture. Visible markers of religiosity, such as clothing like “beaver head coverings,” also known as streimels which function similarly to yarmulkes, and the need for financial assistance or charity marked these Eastern European Jews as a group who needed to be assimilated into American culture.³⁸

Jews who migrated to L.A. in these years, as well as those who came in the next two decades, had first lived in other cities in the United States. A major source of Jewish migration westwards came from the Industrial Removal Office (1900) in New York City. The IRO, a branch of the Jewish Agricultural Society, was established to help mitigate overcrowding of ethnic enclaves in NYC and promoted Jewish acculturation into communities westward. The overcrowding of NYC’s Lower East Side led to the establishment of the office, which sought to relocate over 76,000 Jewish immigrants from New York City’s urban interior to smaller western cities. Out of the 76,000 immigrants approximately 5,000 Jews moved to California and around 2,200 to 2,300 of those settled in Los Angeles.³⁹ This office duplicated Los Angeles’s own booster narratives. These western cities were supposedly places filled with adventure, dry air, social, and economic opportunities. Health concerns were also a prominent reason Jews migrated

³⁸ Los Angeles *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, March 31, 1905.

³⁹ Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews*, 111. Also see Mae M. Ngai, “Part 1: Introduction,” in *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 15-20.

westward, out of overcrowded eastern cities into the interior of the United States. Tuberculosis raged in the early twentieth century and the dry air of the West was thought to alleviate its symptoms. In 1906 the Jews of Los Angeles founded the Hebrew Consumptive Relief Association and soon after the association founded the tuberculosis sanitarium in the city of Duarte. The Jewish Consumptive Relief Society (JCRS) bought ten acres on the outskirts of Duarte and hoped to create an institution to help the incoming sick migrants. According to Vorspan and Gartner, “‘The City of Hope’ [Duarte sanitarium] was in fact the only nationwide Jewish institution based in Los Angeles, drawing most of its leadership from southern California.”⁴⁰ In this period, Los Angeles’ Jews created the needed infrastructure to further support their communities. However, it would not be until the late 1920s when cultural organizations concerned about maintaining Jewish-Yiddish culture would emerge.

Tensions flared between the newcomers and Los Angeles’s established Jewish community, as was the case in other cities. Los Angeles’s upper-class Jews lived in the neighborhoods north and west of L.A.’s urban interior. These western neighborhoods included many people tied to the motion picture industry, founded in Hollywood in the 1910s, including studio chiefs, actors, producers, and writers. In contrast, working-class Jewish immigrants lived in the eastern neighborhood of Boyle Heights between the 1910s and 1940s. Differences in class mapped by these neighborhoods affected how Jews created identity in Los Angeles. “The two poles of Jewish ethnic identity – the separate world of working-class ethnicity and the middle-class ideal of assimilation – were mapped onto the very geography of the city of Los Angeles,” writes historian George Sánchez.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 173–6.

⁴¹ George J. Sánchez, “‘What’s Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews’: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 633–61.

This neighborhood was one of the few in Los Angeles where the Los Angeles Realty Board did not enforce racial segregation through housing covenants in this period. Due to the neighborhood's proximity to the cities' industrial district, it was home to large communities of working-class Mexican, Japanese, Armenian, African American, and Eastern European Jewish groups. In the early twentieth century, Boyle Heights became home to at least one-third of Los Angeles's total population of Jewish residents. These immigrants came from Poland, Russian, and central Europe. By the end of the 1930s, historians estimated that 50,000 Jews lived in Boyle Heights.⁴² At the neighborhood's peak in 1940, over 130,000 Jews resided in the area.⁴³ Due to its concentration of Eastern European Jews, Boyle Heights became the epicenter of Yiddish cultural development in the city. After World War II, an estimated 2,000 Jews a week traveled to Los Angeles. This exodus to Los Angeles was due in part because many enlisted Jews from east coast cities were stationed on military bases in Sunbelt cities and the GI Bill provided access to homeownership. Through the GI Bill, banks prioritized loans to buy new homes instead of old, which further promoted the buying of homes in Sunbelt cities. In the minds of many young Jews, cities like L.A and Miami represented a direct contrast to their homes of the east and viewed the cities as an "earthly paradise." These cities' Jewish communities were disconnected from "long-established hierarchies and institutions that characterized their previous homes" writes historian Debra Dash Moore.⁴⁴ However, with the declining of antisemitism after the war and a postwar economic boom, many settled in middle-class suburbs around L.A.⁴⁵ These young Jewish Americans moved into suburban neighborhoods, following the patterns of their Anglo-Protestant

⁴² Neil C. Sandberg, *Jewish Life in Los Angeles: A Window to Tomorrow* (University Press of America, 1986), 28.

⁴³ Bruce A. Phillips, "Not Quite White: The Emergence of Jewish 'Ethnoburbs' in Los Angeles, 1920-2010," *American Jewish History* 100, no. 2 (Jan. 2016): 10.

⁴⁴ Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

neighbors. Like the parents and grandparents who migrated and settled in Los Angeles during the early twentieth century, fair weather and economic opportunities lured them. The Jewish Americans who moved to Los Angeles in this period, however, found themselves disconnected from previous generational expectations of family and kin.⁴⁶ In addition, changes in urban spaces, like the construction of freeways, resulted in a form of “Jewish Flight” from the neighborhood.⁴⁷

By the mid and late-twentieth century, Boyle Heights became a neighborhood defined by an “ethnic fantasy past,” writes historian Caroline Luce, that constructed it as an inherently “Jewish space.”⁴⁸ While previous Jewish resident and their descendants remembered it as a distinctly Jewish space—the “shtetl” of Los Angeles-- other immigrant populations, specifically Mexican Americans, resided in the throughout the twenty-first century. During the 1960s and 70s, Boyle Heights became the center for their ethnic identity movements, such as Mexican American activism and the Chicano movement in the 1960s.⁴⁹

The Jewish Question and Yiddish Culture

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, antisemitism rose dramatically on both sides of the Atlantic. The “Jewish Question,” that is the question of Jewish emancipation and integration into the dominant culture, was an ever looming specter for Jews across Europe and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁷ Phillips, “Not Quite White,” 96. Phillips categorizes this exodus from Boyle Heights as a form of “Jewish Flight.” However, he states this spatial pattern resembles Asian American spatial patterns after the war in Los Angeles, in contrast to “White Flight” experienced by WASPs in the north and south.

⁴⁸ Luce, “Yiddish Writers in Los Angeles,” 482-3.

⁴⁹ For more information about Mexican American history in Los Angeles, their political activism, and identity see David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (University of California Press, 1995); George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles 1900-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1995); George Sánchez, *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy* (University of California Press, 2021).

the United States. While other cultures debated whether Jews could fully integrate into a given society, Jews debated among themselves offering multiple potential solutions ranging from complete assimilation, the use of racialized language to describe their identity and their proximity to whiteness, and the embrace of strands of nationalism. In contrast to their European counterparts, Jewish Americans “had no royal family, no established church, no landed aristocracy; [and] its national culture was more fluid, diverse, and open to new influences,” according to historian Eric Goldstein.⁵⁰

In the United States the larger historical narrative of race has been defined by a black/white binary. However, each region of the United States experienced a different racialization process that resulted in different historical understandings of race. During this period of the early twentieth century Jews used racial language to emphasize their proximity to whiteness and situated their religion as the main difference between them and their WASP neighbors. This process stressed that Jews were another white race with a different religion. The claim of whiteness was especially prevalent during the interwar period of the 1920s, as antisemitic sentiments heightened as social anxieties ranging from the first World War, communism after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and the economy continued to plague “white” Americans.

While some Jews claimed whiteness to unify Jews in the United States, it was not the only framework used to express identity. Zionism and leftist movements like socialism and communism in the early twentieth century became influential movements. But this spectrum of ideology included multiple movements that fell in between internationalists and nationalistic

⁵⁰ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*,” 12.

movements, like *yidishe kultur*. This secular Jewish identity emphasized the Yiddish language and Ashkenazi culture as the unifying force. In addition to the emphasis on a shared language, political tenets of socialism and Zionism influenced *yidishe kultur*. Ultimately *yidishe kultur* in the early to mid- twentieth century rejected complete acculturation and emphasized the Yiddish language and Ashkenazi culture to express a wide array of political and social opinions.

For this framework to gain influence among Jewish immigrants in the United States many individuals, social organizations, and institutions like the Yiddish press, and all contributed to *yidishe kultur* in the early twentieth century. Yiddish intellectuals, artists, editors, writers, and activists would play an important role in creating and spreading this cultural movement.

The development of *yidishe kultur* in the United States owes much to the writer and intellectual Chaim Zhitlovsky. Zhitlovsky began writing about *yidishe kultur* during a transformational time in Jewish history. The Kishinev pogrom of April 1903 and the pogroms of 1905-06 deeply troubled Russian Jews in the United States and abroad. The rise of antisemitism and intensification of violence towards Jews across Europe amplified the “Jewish Question.” Zionism, a political ideology that advocated for a Jewish state in mandatory Palestine, gained traction among many Jews in the diaspora. An equally powerful ideology was socialism promoted by the Jewish Labor Bund.⁵¹ Zhitlovsky was affiliated with the Russian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries and through a fundraising tour in 1904, he came to New York City. On this trip to America, Zhitlovsky saw the potential for a new Yiddish movement. He moved to the U.S in 1908 to promote his idea of a “Yiddish cultural renaissance...*yidishe kultur*.”⁵²

⁵¹ See Henry J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia from Its Origins to 1905* (Stanford University Press, 1972).

⁵² Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*,” 126. Also see David Weinberg, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Haim Zhitloski, Simon Dubnow, and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identity* (Holmes & Meier, 1996).

For Zhitlovsky this cultural renaissance required Jews to rethink what constituted them as people. His vision for Yiddish life rejected the melting pot theory, a term coined by the Anglo playwright Israel Zangwill in 1908, which argued that individual minority groups within a given nation melded together into one uniformed group, no longer defined by cultural differences. Instead, Zhitlovsky's vision leaned closer to a form of internationalism that promoted the cultural development of individual minority groups within the larger nation-state. "The true meaning of internationalism, Zhitlovsky argues, is not the denial of national difference in the name of an abstract universalism," writes historian Tony Michels "but the cultural development of individual nations in cooperation with others."⁵³ Here the distinction lies in the term "individual nations," Jews constituted a distinct ethnic identity, a nation, but a nation without a physical land. For Zhitlovsky, *yidishe kultur* meant Jews should culturally tie themselves together not just through religious observances (which varied among denominations) or through overt racial terminologies, but through a shared language: Yiddish. Through this shared language, argues historian Caroline Luce, Jews could "establish national cultural autonomy based in Yiddish, they could achieve true self-determination and quality without establishing their own state."⁵⁴

This cultural movement required more than just Jewish immigrants retaining the Yiddish language and Ashkenazi culture in the home, but a public cultural apparatus to support it. Zhitlovsky argued that Yiddish, the *folkshprakh* (people's language), needed to be a part of all facets of Jewish society. For him, a thriving and diverse Yiddish press, secular Yiddish schools (*folkshuls*), fiction and nonfiction literature, and even Yiddish entertainment, were all critical to unifying Jews across the diaspora. Yiddish need to thrive in both low and highbrow venues.

⁵³ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁴ Caroline E. Luce, "Jewish Socialists in the Land of Sunshine: Freedom, Springtime and the Pesakh Spirit of the Future," *Shofar* 35, no. 4 (2017): 30.

Thus, the Yiddish press and social organizations, like the Yiddish Cultural Club in Los Angeles, were imperative to creating and maintaining *yidishe kultur* in the United States. However regional differences affected how this process played out across the United States in the twentieth century.

Yiddish Publications and yidishe kultur: NYC vs. Los Angeles

An important mechanism to further spread this ideology of Yiddish cultural autonomy in the United States—while simultaneously promoting acculturation into American society—was the development of the American Yiddish press between 1880 and the 1920s. During these years New York City became the center of the Yiddish press on both sides of the Atlantic. During the 1880s, Yiddish dailies first emerged in the U.S., but they were initially short-lived because they lacked funding. While some reappeared months later, circulation and funding were inconsistent. Publishers of these Yiddish dailies initially struggled to attract a wide readership base because of the negative connotations Yiddish had among the elite. Elite Jewish men saw Yiddish in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an effeminate language used by Jewish women and uneducated Jewish men in contrast to Hebrew. However, these connotations about the Yiddish language shifted once Jewish male writers and intellectuals began to write secular literature, beginning the Haskalah movement (1770s-1880s), which would culminate in the late nineteenth century.

While the Yiddish language was previously thought as effeminate, the writings of Jewish men shifted how Yiddish was viewed. Jewish men became the authority on Yiddish literature and thus over-represented in the Yiddish press. But during this period between the late 1880s throughout the 1920s the Anglo-newspaper market was reinventing how newspapers could appeal to a larger audience. Gender played a critical role. The mainstream American press began

to market their papers to both genders, capitalizing on the emerging role of women as consumers. The Yiddish press in the United States, following the trends of the American press, began to market their papers towards women. To increase readership and “modernize” the periodicals, and to keep pace with the Anglo-American press, the editors and publishers of Yiddish dailies including Abraham Cahan, who edited *The Forverts* between 1903-1951, introduced women’s columns, human-interest stories and adverts geared towards women. But as historian Ayelet Brinn argues, these initiatives that targeted women readers were not written by women but men. These assumptions that linked Yiddish with women, as Brinn states, “became a powerful rhetorical strategy through which to debate the present and future of the Yiddish press.”⁵⁵ While women were central to the Yiddish press, women writers would struggle with publishing their works due to their gender.

In contrast to New York City, the Los Angeles Yiddish press paid considerable attention to communal publishing for its residents. This approach provided an environment where Jewish women could publish their works more easily. Los Angeles was still connected to the larger Yiddish publishing houses like *Forverts* and *Jewish Daily News*, however the city was on the periphery of the publishing world. Thus, Los Angeles writers were too on the periphery in the Yiddish publishing world, which altered how they approached publishing their works. While many Yiddish writers sought to reach audiences across the United States and internationally—and many did—they spent considerable effort focusing on the local.

This open environment in Los Angeles also resulted in more opportunities for Jewish women writers. Ayelet Brinn has argued that while women played a key rhetorical role in

⁵⁵Ayelet Brinn, *A Revolution in Type*,” 24-5.

modernizing the press in New York City, male publishers often excluded women from writing for and publishing their own work in the press. Jewish women authored and published thirteen books out of the total ninety-two books published in Los Angeles from 1920 and 1959.⁵⁶ While this number is certainly smaller than New York City, in the context of L.A.'s smaller Jewish population and even smaller group of Yiddishists this number is impressive. Women writers published not just poetry, which editors deemed a more suitable form of writing for women, but also their short stories and novels.⁵⁷ Furthermore, local book committees organized by the local Yiddish organizations and comprised of other Yiddishists, functioned as fundraising groups and as places to market their work.

The Rise of Yiddish Writers and a Western Yiddish Literary Style

Between 1900 and 1950, Los Angeles saw the growth of a Yiddish writing scene. Some Yiddish writers migrated to the West to heal their tuberculosis.⁵⁸ Others Jewish writers came to be part of the film industry or theater scene.⁵⁹ This new milieu of Yiddish writers who first settled in Boyle Heights established two important themes of Yiddish L.A. First, they melded the “pioneer” motifs of the American West with Jewish immigrant consciousness, “which casts[ed] Los Angeles as a virgin territory for Eastern European Jews where, through their hard work and determination, they remade themselves as prosperous Americans” according to historian

⁵⁶ For a full list of Yiddish books published in Los Angeles please see the University of California Los Angeles library guide. These works range from the early twentieth century to the twenty-first century. For the purposes for this study have employed them time range from 1920 to 1959.

https://guides.library.ucla.edu/ld.php?content_id=6780041

⁵⁷ Ibid., Out of the ninety-two books, women wrote and published thirteen books. That number grows to nineteen between the 1960s through the 2000s.

⁵⁸ For more information on the intersection between tuberculosis and Yiddish Writers see Yudkoff, “Let It Be Consumption!.” Particularly Chapter 3, “The Kingdom of Fever: Yiddish Writing of the Denver Sanatorium,” illustrates the experience of Yiddish Writers in the Dever Sanatorium.

⁵⁹ For more information about Jews in Hollywood, see Neil Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (Crown Publishers, 1988); For more information about Yiddish theater in America see, Nahma Sandrow, “Yiddish Theater in America,” *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher, (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 224-41.

Caroline Luce. Second, during the postwar period the neighborhood and its imagined “fantasy past” stood as a direct contrast to the Jewish upper-class elite of Los Angeles. However, as a result of this imagined past, the Jews of Boyle Heights in the postwar years had a paradoxical understanding of their place within Los Angeles. This fantasy would contradict many Jewish residents’ experiences, especially in the postwar period when many did move out of the neighborhood. But this imagined past became a definitive feature of the neighborhood as Jewish residents understood “Boyle Heights was site of otherness, a time and place where Jews were not white folks but rather ethnic, immigrant outsiders, in direct contrast to their postwar integration into the white middle-class,” writes historian Caroline Luce.⁶⁰

Writers like Henry Rosenblatt and Gershon Einbinder (also known as Chaver Paver) contributed to the Yiddish literary production in L.A. in the postwar period by publishing poems, short stories, and novels that documented the Western environment, Jewish travels to the West, and how the West shaped Jewish immigrant consciousness. Titles like Chaver-Paver’s *Zalmen der shuster* (*Zalmen the Cobbler*, 1955) and Rosenblatt’s “*Tsum vildn mayrev zing ikh*” (“I sing to the Wild West,” 1925), “*Tsum Vindn Mayrev Zing Ikh*” (“Westerly I Sing,” 1946), reflect the importance that the West and ultimately Los Angeles played in their construction of Yiddish culture. These examples “offered literary rendering of Los Angeles’s past that incorporated the forms, themes, and archetypes traditional to the literature of the American West and reinterpreted them through the lens of Jewish collective history.” Luce further argues that these Yiddish cultural productions are evidence of “Jewish immigrants’ negotiation of their ethno-racial identities in the complex racial landscape of Southern California.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Caroline, Elizabeth Luce. “Visions of a Jewish Future: The Jewish Bakers Union and Yiddish Culture in East Los Angeles, 1908–1942,” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2013), 39, 68-71.

⁶¹ Luce. “Yiddish Writers in Los Angeles,” 484.

Boyle Height's multi-ethnic neighborhood provided an environment for Jews to define their own secular Yiddish identity. However, the neighborhood also tested their assumptions about race and class. Those who resided in Boyle Heights during the early twentieth century were different than the assimilated Jews who lived in neighborhoods north and west of them in Los Angeles. Jewish residents of Boyle Heights often worked and unionized with other minorities in Los Angeles. While many Jewish owned businesses opened within the neighborhood such as bakeries and maintained their own unions, many Eastern European Jewish women worked in the garment and canning industries. While Jewish women worked and organized with other women of differing ethnicities in the garment and canning industries, their places of work also stratified them by race. Even though Jewish women organized and advocated for others, employers often paid Eastern European Jewish women more than other minorities like Mexican women.⁶² This reality reaffirmed the contradictory reality of race for Jewish residents of Boyle Heights.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Jewish residents in Boyle Heights found that their education, skills, and skin color gave them access to socioeconomic opportunities other minorities in the neighborhood were denied. As the postwar period emerged with its many economic opportunities, Jewish residents left their previous jobs in factory industries. Because of their trade skills and their knowledge of the English language many of the Jews in Boyle Heights found job in high skills trades. These differences in socioeconomic opportunities resulted in a mass exodus of the many Jewish residents in Boyle Heights by the 1960s. Many of these Jewish residents who left the neighborhood in this period often recounted the imagined past of Boyle

⁶² Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (University of New Mexico, 1987), 30-31.

Heights. However, many of those who subscribed to Yiddish culture stayed within Boyle Heights and continuously emphasized the class differences between the Jewish elites in the north and west and their working-class ideals.

Yiddish Cultural Expression in Los Angeles

Writers like Henry Rosenblatt and Chaver Paver needed cultural institutions to support their work. During the 1920s and 30s, Jews in Los Angeles utilized and created several social organizations to support their needs. Mutual aid societies, religious organizations, and secular cultural clubs, such as the Yiddish Cultural Club, were all located within the six and half square miles of Boyle Heights. Yiddish institutions played an important part of communal culture in Los Angeles, and they were vital for Yiddish writers like Rosenblatt and Paver. “Distinctly Jewish cultural expression in Los Angeles reached its highest development in Yiddish, which flourished from the second decade of the twentieth century,” according to historians Lloyd Gartner and Max Vorspan.⁶³ They argue that “for thousands of Jewish immigrants, it was a native tongue, but to many Yiddish also represented a Jewish cultural ideal associated with the varieties of Jewish socialism and secularism.”⁶⁴ In combination with the local *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen’s Circle), the Cultural Club provided cultural activities, resources for members, and a physical and literary environment where individual could engage with the Yiddish language and culture.

The first organization that promoted a secular, politicized Yiddish identity in Los Angeles was the *Arbeter Ring*. Originally founded in New York City in 1900, this socialist mutual-aid organization provided an alternative to religious organizations. In Los Angeles, a small group of Jewish activists affiliated with the local “National-Radical Club,” founded the local branch (248)

⁶³ Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews*, 92.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

of the *Arbeter Ring* in 1908. Based on socialist ideals, *Arbeter Ring* focused on providing needed resources for working-class Jewish immigrants. The organization established schools and camps, published books, provided needed medical insurance and medical care through their sanitariums, and even bought tracts of land to build needed Jewish cemeteries. The *Arbeter Ring* also established multiple unions for garment workers and bakers, including the Los Angeles branch of the Tailor Union in 1909 and the Jewish Bakers Union Local 453 in 1924.⁶⁵ They established the Jewish Consumptive Relief Association of California and eventually the City of Hope Sanitarium to help those afflicted with tuberculosis. They also established a cooperative printing house as well, publishing their own Yiddish-language newspaper, *Pasifishe folks-tsaytung* (*Pacific People's Paper*).⁶⁶ The L.A.'s *Arbeter Ring* provided needed social and medical resources for the new Jewish migrants in this early period.

The local National-Radical Club also established a secular *folkshul* (school) for Jewish children in 1911. Located in a private home near Breed and Michigan street, this *folkshul* presented secular educational topics such as reading, arithmetic, and Jewish cultural traditions in Yiddish. In 1920, through fundraising efforts, the school moved to 420 N. Soto in Boyle Heights. Within the next year Yiddish writers Henry Rosenblatt and Shia Miller, a Yiddish poet who first moved to Los Angeles in 1922 seeking relief from tuberculosis, were the first principals of this school. Rosenblatt and Miller's involvement illustrates the interconnectedness of the Los Angeles Yiddish community and the small community's reliance on Yiddish members performing several different functions.

⁶⁵ Luce, "Visions of a Jewish Future," 63-4.

⁶⁶ Julius Levitt (Y. Levit), "The Communal and Cultural Role of the *Arbeter Ring* [Workmen's Circle] in Los Angeles," part 2, trans. Mark L. Smith, *Kheshbn* (The Reckoning), 1 (1946): 99-106.

The *folkshul* reflected many Jewish parents' commitments to *yidishe kultur*—especially for their children. Despite this, this organization also received pushback from parents who preferred an assimilationism approach. Those parents rejected the school because they believed a Jewish school would prevent their children from fully integrating into American society. Religious officials also protested the school because of its secular approach to Jewish cultural traditions. Reflecting on the *folkshul*'s history, former teacher Sh. Shulman recalled the strife between differing Jewish factions: He wrote, "The course of study depended mostly on the caprices of the teaching personnel: If the teachers were *Poele-tsien* Yiddishists, the emphasis was placed on Yiddish with a Labor Zionist interpretation...For example, if the teachers were former *Talmud-Torah* [Hebrew religious school] teachers, then the emphasis was placed on Hebrew studies and ordinary nationalism."⁶⁷ Because of these differences in pedagogy, the local *Arbeter Ring* established its own school separate from the National-Radical Club's *folkshul* in 1921.

Although the attendance of this *folkshul* on N. Soto Street declined as parents sent their children to other schools (Yiddish and non-Yiddish), the building retained an important position in the community. In the 1930s it served as a community center for aid drives, hosted Zionist, Socialist, and Communist meetings, and in 1938 served as the "launchpad for the largest public protest in the neighborhood to date: a march of some 10-15,000 neighborhood residents, Jews and non-Jews alike, honoring the victims of *Kristallnacht*," according to Luce.⁶⁸ While the

⁶⁷ Sh. Shulman, "Notes from a Former Teacher in the *Folk-shul* [Yiddishist, Labor Zionist elementary school]," part 2, Trans. Mark L. Smith, *Khesbn (The Reckoning)* 1 (1946): 84-88.

⁶⁸ "The 'National-Radical Club' and Yiddish Education in Boyle Heights," Caroline Luce, accessed April 7, 2025, at <https://scalar.usc.edu/hc/jewish-histories-boyle-heights/folkshul-420-n-soto>.

purpose of the center changed, the Yiddish community of Boyle Heights still used the building to promote social activities that brought Jews together.

The early years of Yiddish institutions in Los Angeles faced challenges as political and religious in-fighting resulted in the division of the group. However, those challenges did not diminish the role the local *Arbeter Ring* played in the lives of L.A. Yiddishists. In recalling the efforts of the *Arbeter Ring*, journalist and editor of the L.A. branch of the *Forverts* (1936-1942) Leyzer Meltser stated, “The founders and leaders of the *Arbeter ring* schools already understood a quarter century ago that, in order to create a healthy Jewish life, it is necessary that the youth, who are the future of the people, be educated as self-aware Jews...The school was intended to be the bridge that would unite the Jewish child with his parents and, at the same time, be the foundation that would unite the Jewish child with the whole Jewish people.”⁶⁹ Although the Yiddish *folkshul* movement suffered from division within the community in Los Angeles, the emergence of Yiddish schools was vital to the sustainment of Yiddish culture during this period between the early to mid-twentieth century.

The Yiddish Cultural Club and Yiddish Culture

The Yiddish Cultural Club founded in 1926 was the most significant organization that emerged from this period. But a year before the Cultural Club was officially founded, many of the writers of the local writers group known as the “Group West” organized together to discuss and produce Yiddish culture. The “Group West” included Yiddish writers such as Henry Roseblatt, Jacob Ginsberg, Y.L. Malamut, and Isaac Friedland. This group published the first Yiddish-language literary journal in Los Angeles in 1925, aptly titled *Mayrev* (West). Like many other

⁶⁹ Leyzer Meltser, “Twenty-Five Years of *Arbeter Ring* [Workmen's Circle] Schools in Los Angeles,” part 1, trans. Mark L. Smith, *Kheshbn* (The Reckoning), 1 (1946): 89-93.

small publications, *Mayrev* was dependent on local finances and once the group disbanded to form the Cultural Club publication of the journal ceased.

Once the Yiddish Cultural Club opened in 1926, Yiddish writers, artists, activists, and intellectuals now had access to a reliable, open environment to discuss Yiddish culture in Los Angeles. The Cultural Club was founded by important members of the Los Angeles Jewish community including: Isaac Friedland, Eliahu Tenenholts, B. Viner, A. Vohlman, Dr. N. Zaltsman, L. Hamburger, and I. Malamud. This secular Yiddish club attracted writers like Henry Rosenblatt and Chaver Paver. Influenced by Zhitlovsky's radical secular Yiddish ideology, the founding members created the club to unify Jews of differing political and religious beliefs. Because it was not officially affiliated with a political ideology, like Communism, Zionism, or Socialism, the club developed in an independent fashion. Isaac Friedland, co-founder and longtime editor of the club (1946-66) believed that the non-partisan nature of the club set it apart from other and contributed to its longevity. "Yet our answer to everyone always was and now also is the same," he said in 1946. "The L.A. Yiddish Cultural Club was, and I hope will continue to be—not 'right' socialist and Zionist and not 'left' communist; as it has until now, the culture club will conduct its nonpartisan cultural activity, helping and supporting all that is Yiddish, national, and cultural, holding high Yiddish cultural aspirations, helping raise the level of Yiddish culture, and being loyal to the interests of the Jewish folk masses, in whatever country they may be."⁷⁰

Due to its non-partisan reputation, the Los Angeles Yiddish Cultural Club was known around the United States and even connected with the international *Yidisher Kultur Farband*

⁷⁰ Isaac Friedland, "Los Angeles Yiddish Culture Club (on its 20-year anniversary and on the opening of the new culture building)," trans. Mark L. Smith, *Kheshbn* (The Reckoning), 1 (1946): 13-20.

(YKUF 1937) group, a Communist organization that promoted developing Yiddish culture across Europe and the globe. Throughout the Cultural Club's lifetime, it published four literary journals which facilitated Yiddish cultural expression: *Mayrev* (1925), *Pasifik* (1929), *Undzer vort* (1939), and *Kheshbn* (1946). These journals were extremely important to the creation and sustainment of Yiddish culture in Los Angeles because they provided a forum where Yiddishist defined their cultural expression in context with their specific experiences in L.A through various mediums.

Particularly the Yiddish-language literary journals supported by the Yiddish Cultural Club played an important role for Yiddish cultural expression in Los Angeles. While there were a few Yiddish newspapers in Los Angeles—and broadly California—there were no Yiddish-language literary journals before *Mayrev* in 1925. The second major Yiddish journal in Los Angeles and the first official journal associated with the Yiddish Cultural Club was *Pasifik*, founded in 1929. The names of these journals were important ways to express regional identity and belonging; *Mayrev* (West) and *Pasifik* (Pacific) demonstrate how important regional Yiddish identity was for these L.A. Yiddishists. The goal of *Pasifik* was to provide a non-partisan journal for the Los Angeles Yiddish community. At this time many members of the L.A. Yiddish community were divided between the political- right and left, and the Cultural Club wanted to bridge this divide. Within weeks almost every Yiddish writer in the city joined. Henry Rosenblatt, who helped found the now defunct *Mayrev*, served as the editor for *Pasifik*. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints and the economic depression of the late 1920s that would last through the 30s, *Pasifik* failed and ceased publication.⁷¹ The Yiddish Cultural Club attempted for a third time to create a

⁷¹ “Recovering Yiddish Culture in Los Angeles: Pasifik (Pacific),” Caroline Luce, accessed April 7, 2025, at <https://scalar.usc.edu/hc/recovering-yiddish-culture-in-los-angeles/pasifik-pacific>.

new journal titled *Undzer vort* (Our World) in 1939. However, due to WWII, the L.A. Jewish community concentrated on fundraising for the war effort and *Undzer vort* failed as well.

It was finally in the postwar period where the Yiddish Cultural Club was able to produce a lasting literary journal for the community. *Kheshbn* (The Reckoning) was first published in 1946 and lasted until 2007.⁷² The title of the journal, just like the last three, was an important way to express Yiddish identity. *Kheshbn* gestured to the larger concerns of

Yiddishists in America after WWII. Understanding both the historical and cultural context of the title indicates that the L.A. Yiddish community was reckoning with the destruction of Jewish life—subsequently Yiddish life—in Europe and with future possibilities of Yiddish culture. In the postwar period, the Yiddish Cultural Club expanded and relocated twice to a new building at 3039 Sunset Boulevard in Silverlake and then on Monroe Street in Hollywood. Henry Rosenblatt, Isaac Friedland, and Elia Tenenholtz, founding members of the club, served as editors of the journal. Unlike the other three journals the Cultural Club published, *Kheshbn* had both a domestic and international audience, and it included multiple international contributors. *Kheshbn*

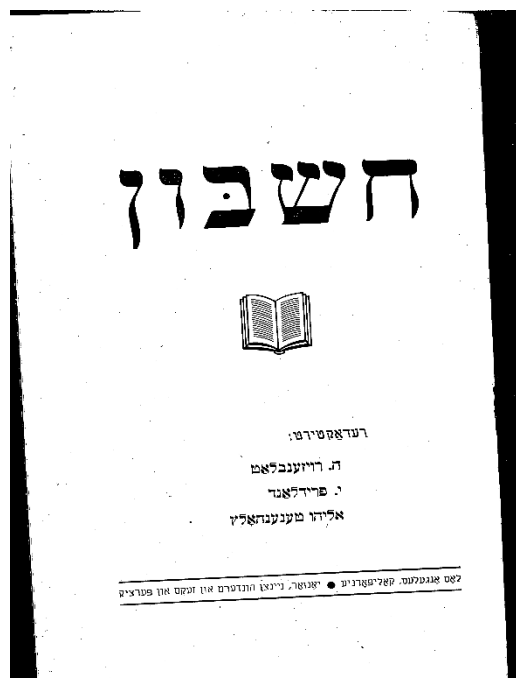


Figure 1. 2. Title page of the first issue of *Kheshbn*, Yiddish Cultural Club, ca. 1946.

⁷² See figure 1.2., *Title Page of Kheshbn*, no. 1, ca 1946, The Los Angeles Yiddish Cultural Club, 1, January 1946, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9zc7p5qg>.

was one of the most enduring Yiddish literary journals in the United States and published a total of 150 issues between 1946 and 2007.⁷³

Due to different migration patterns and the Los Angeles Yiddish community's emphasis on local publishing, community members' expression of *yidishe kultur* differed from centers like New York City. In NYC, religious and intellectual elites associated with the Yiddish press used Jewish women as rhetorical devices to shape the future marketability of the Yiddish press, but these elites often excluded women writers from this process. Male writers used female pseudonyms in this process to publish more of their work and to give the illusion that Jewish women were contributing. In Los Angeles, women writers were active in the early twenties and published in the founding Yiddish literary journals within the community. As we will see in the second chapter, the Yiddish community of Los Angeles further supported women writers through local publishing committees sponsored by the Yiddish Cultural Club. In Los Angeles, the Yiddish publishing environment proved to be more open for women writers, in part because the community was smaller and needed materials, but also because these institutions focused on a ground-up approach for publishing their works.

These two community organizations, the *Arbeter Ring*, and the Yiddish Cultural Club, were by far the most influential to Yiddish culture in Los Angeles. These organizations and the multiple communal activities they supported and provided, like the secular *folkshuls*, lectures from prominent Yiddishists, reading circles, literary journals, and book committees were instrumental to maintaining a Yiddish culture during this period in Los Angeles. The YCC rose to prominence due to its commitment to a nonpartisan environment. Their emphasis on creating an

⁷³ "Recovering Yiddish Culture in Los Angeles: Khesbn (Reckoning)," Caroline Luce, accessed April 7, 2025, at <https://scalar.usc.edu/hc/recovering-yiddish-culture-in-los-angeles/khesbn-the-reckoning>.

environment free from political and religious in-fighting prevented the dissolution of the club and contributed to its longevity in the post-war period.

As we will see in the next chapter, Jewish women wrote Yiddish poetry chronicling and responding to the many changes that occurred in the city from 1920 throughout the 1950s. Due to the visible economic differences between eastern and western Los Angeles Jewish residents, race and class became prominent topics throughout the three decades. In the 1950s tensions rose between middle-class assimilation into American culture and Yiddishists' efforts to maintain their culture. Similarly, these Jewish women also wrote about disruptions to their physical neighborhood of Boyle Heights and the relationship between neighborhood and cultural become important topics.

Chapter 2: Choosing Yiddish: Jewish Women's Poetry in 1950s L.A.

The Yiddish Idealist is a Woman

“The Yiddishist is an idealist. He believes that Yiddish is as important instrument of creativity as is English, French or any other language. True, the number of Yiddishist in America is not very large, but it is a group of devoted and loyal adherents.”

Max Rothenstein, *B'nai B'rith Messenger*; September 6th, 1946.⁷⁴

In 1946 Max Rothenstein, the current events editor for *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, a Los Angeles English-language newspaper, described “The Yiddishist” as unambiguously male. In an article about an upcoming visit from prominent Yiddish writer, Jacob Glatstein, Rothenstein referred to all Yiddish writers as “he.” “The Yiddishist is an idealist,” Rothenstein wrote. “He believes that Yiddish is as important instrument of creativity as is English, French or any other language.” While Rothenstein’s use of “he” might seem innocuous, it highlighted a long standing assumption about Yiddish literature: that Jewish men had authority over its production. But Rothenstein was wrong. In fact, there were many important Jewish women writers in Los Angeles in the mid-twentieth century who contributed to a specific vision of an American Western *yidishe kultur* that was distinct from *yidishe kultur* on the east coast and centered in New York City.

This chapter explores how the Yiddish Cultural Club in Los Angeles—with its emphasis on local community—provided accessible spaces for Jewish women to read, write, and publish

⁷⁴ Max Rothenstein, “Current Events, Jacob Glatstein,” *B'nai B'rith Messenger*; September 6, 1946. Through the National Library of Israel copies of the Los Angeles *B'nai B'rith Messenger* are available at, <https://www.nli.org.il/en>.

their Yiddish works. In particular, a number of important Jewish women wrote poetry in Yiddish, including Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein (1899), Shifra Weiss (1889), and Brokhe Kudli (1892). These women were not the entire cohort of Jewish women writers in Los Angeles during the early and mid-twentieth century. Other writers such as Rosa Nevadovska (1890-1971) and Malka Heifetz Tussman (1890s-1977) have received more attention as scholars have translated their books.⁷⁵ However, scholars have yet to fully translate any books of Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, Weiss, and Kudli.⁷⁶ Translation of Yiddish literature is important as it becomes more accessible to an English-speaking audience. However, translating Jewish women writers' work is not enough. Although scholars have translated some of their writings of these women, they have not analyzed or contextualized these works. By examining their writings in context with their historical environment, this thesis not only shifts authority from Jewish men but shows how these women reflected three important themes of postwar American Jewish life: the ramifications of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel (1948) for American Jews; Yiddish continuity in the United States after WWII, particularly in the American West; and interracial partnerships that emerged between Jewish and Mexican American residents in Boyle Heights during the 1950s.

By examining and historically contextualizing Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein's poem *Kalifornye* (1956), Shifra Weiss' *Kalifornia* (1953), and Brokhe Kudli's *Free-vays* (1958), this chapter shows that even while Jewish women may have occupied the periphery—that is geographically on the edge in the American West and as Jewish women—they were important

⁷⁵ For other Los Angeles Yiddish writers, see Rosa Nevadovska, *So Many Warm Words: Selections from the Poetry of Rosa Nevadovska*, trans. Merle L. Bachman (Ben Yehuda Press, 2024); Malka Heifetz Tussman, *With Teeth in the Earth: Selected Poems of Malka Heifetz Tussman*, trans. Marcia Falk (Wayne State University Press, 1992).

⁷⁶ Katherin Hellerstein in *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 398, acknowledges Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein and Shifra Weiss in her conclusion.

Yiddish cultural producers. While male Yiddishists saw poetry as an appropriate feminine avenue for women writers and emphasized their intimate themes, poetry also provided the space to experiment with new forms and modern literary trends. These women's writings highlighted how local needs for Yiddish material, the size of the Yiddish community and the Yiddish Cultural Club's emphasis on a nonpartisan environment allowed for Jewish women to access opportunities to publish their work more easily than in the eastern United States.

Boyle Heights and Postwar Changes: 1950s

In the last chapter we saw the establishment of important Yiddish cultural institutions in early twentieth-century Los Angeles, including the L.A. branch of the socialist *Arbeter Ring* and the Yiddish Cultural Club (YCC). These institutions supported Yiddish writers, artists, and intellectuals out in the American West. Because the Los Angeles Yiddish-speaking population was small, the YCC could not afford to turn down material from Jewish women. In addition, their emphasis on a nonpartisan environment meant they did not discriminate based on political leaning, religious affiliations, or gender. By allowing and encouraging local women writers to produce and publish their work through the club, the YCC was able to expand its membership base, which helped with funding and the continuation of the club. Thus, the environment at the YCC was open and inclusive, providing a venue where Jewish women could write and publish.

While the Yiddish Cultural Club actually expanded in the 1940s and 50s, the neighborhood of Boyle Heights, where many Yiddishists lived and was the epicenter of Yiddish culture in Los Angeles before World War II, began to change. Jews increasingly moved away from the neighborhood and new migrants moved in, particularly from Mexico. In the postwar years, Boyle Heights no longer was the center of Jewish or Yiddish culture in L.A. and in response the Yiddish Cultural Club emerged as the central place for L.A. Yiddishists.

In addition to changing racial demographics, urban structural changes to Boyle Heights also contributed to Jewish residents shifting their residential patterns. On April 19th, 1939, a residential survey completed by Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) surveyors and L.A. city planning officials provided the framework for the city to construct five major freeways that dissected Boyle Heights (see Figure 2.1): the I-5, I-10, US 101, SR 60, and the East L.A. Interchange.⁷⁷ In this survey the HOLC commented on the racial makeup of the neighborhood and labeled forty-one areas as potential "slum clearance projects" (see Figure 2.2).⁷⁸ They further commented that, "It is seriously doubted whether there is a single block in the areas which does not contain detrimental racial elements and there are very few districts which are not hopelessly heterogenous."⁷⁹ This assessment marked Boyle Heights as risky; it further devalued homes, persuaded private investors to look elsewhere, and most importantly provided the framework to remove people (primarily minorities) from their homes for urban construction projects. In combination with the restrictive housing covenants applied to wealthy westside neighborhoods, and these aggressive "improvement projects," ethnic minorities in Los Angeles were forced into poorer eastside neighborhoods. It would not be until after WWII, when Jewish residents of Los Angeles began moving out of eastside neighborhoods like Boyle Heights for more suburban westside neighborhoods. Between 1943 and 1960, the city of Los Angeles constructed five

⁷⁷ Home Owners' Loan Corporation, *HOLC Map of central Los Angeles*, ca 1939, Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America, University of Richmond's Digital Scholarship Lab https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/map/CA/LosAngeles/area_descriptions/D53#loc=14/34.0382/-118.19&adview=full&scan=2/64.2446/-150.1172.

⁷⁸ A copy of the Residential Area Survey of Boyle Heights conducted in 1939 by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation. Accessed at T-RACES (Testbed for the Redlining Archives of California's Exclusionary Spaces), a collaborative digital space developed by scholars at UC Irvine, UC Davis, UC Santa Barbara, and the University of Maryland funded by the University of California's Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI). <https://scalar.usc.edu/hc/jewish-histories-boyle-heights/media/HOLCformforBoyleHeights.pdf>

⁷⁹ Ibid., 401.

freeways around and in Boyle Heights, (see Figure 2.3).⁸⁰ This resulted in the removal of 3,000 dwellings and the displacement of around 10,000 residents. This process of dislocation by freeways in Los Angeles was part of a larger nationwide experience for many ethnic communities in urban centers.

At the same time government officials approved these urban construction projects, the already large ethnic Mexican population of Los Angeles grew further. Through the *Bracero* program (1942-1964), which the US government introduced to help fill labor shortages during WWII, L.A.'s ethnic Mexican population grew. This program was an agreement between the United States and Mexico during WWII and it promoted seasonal labor migration to the United States to help alleviate war-time labor shortages. These workers experienced deplorable working conditions, multiple national labor tragedies, racial prejudice and faced deportation after the war.⁸¹ In Los Angeles, Mexican immigrants and their families settled in Boyle Heights right as American Jews experienced postwar socioeconomic opportunities and started moving out of ethnic enclaves and into more suburban areas of Los Angeles.⁸²

While Boyle Heights in the 1920s through the 30s provided an environment that reinforced Yiddish identity, in the 1940s and 50s racial demographics shifted and Jewish residential patterns changed. Although many Jewish residents started moving out of the neighborhood beginning in the 1940s, the Jewish residents that did remain in the neighborhood

⁸⁰ Thomas Bros. Maps, *South Area Council District: 14, Boyle Heights*, October 2018, Boyle Heights Neighborhood Council, <https://www.bhnc.net/boundaries>.

⁸¹ Lori A. Flores, "A Town Full of Dead Mexicans: The Salinas Valley Bracero Tragedy of 1963, the End of the Bracero Program, and the Evolution of California's Chicano Movement," *Western Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2013): 124–43.

⁸² For western Jewish migration patterns, see Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (Harvard University Press, 1996). For Los Angeles Jewish residential patterns, see Bruce A. Phillips, "Not Quite White: The Emergence of Jewish 'Ethnoburbs' in Los Angeles 1920–2010," *American Jewish History* 100, no. 1 (2016): 73–104.

emphasized their secular, working-class, Yiddish identity. According to historian George Sánchez, “Jews who were committed leftists—be they socialist, communist, or embedded in secular Yiddish culture—received less cultural benefit from leaving the Eastside and chose to remain in Boyle Heights.”⁸³

In the 1950s, during the height of the second red scare, anti-communist politicians and pundits targeted Yiddishists and other foreign-born nationals who supported multiracial partnerships in Boyle Heights and advocated for civil liberties for all minorities. As Yiddishists aligned themselves with the political left, anti-communists targeted their interracial partnerships with other minorities and argued their actions threatened national security. By using the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the McCarran-Walter Act (1952), which ended the racial restrictions for Asian immigrants, maintained the quota system established in the 1924 Immigration Act, the United States government began to deport residents if they participated in actions that subverted national security. Boyle Heights thus became a target for deportation due to its concentration of foreign-born residents.

Jewish and Mexican residents worked together to resist these deportations by establishing the Eastside branch of the Los Angeles Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born (LACFPB) in 1950.⁸⁴ This organization and the partnerships forged from it was built on the rejection of the “melting pot” theory and instead promoted policies that advocated for autonomous cultural identities in partnership with one another. We have many English primary source materials like newspapers and secondary historical works that analyze and describe these partnerships between Jews and ethnic Mexicans in this period. However, this thesis highlights

⁸³ Sánchez, ““What’s Good for Boyle Heights,” 645.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 649-50.

particularly the works of Weiss and Kudli, and adds a valuable contribution of diverse non-English source materials to the pre-existing analysis of Boyle Heights in the mid-twentieth century.

The Gender Dynamics of Writing in Yiddish

Examining Jewish women writers in Los Angeles shifts the focus from New York City as the focal point of Jewish-Yiddish life in the United States and Jewish men as the primary producers of Yiddish literature. As this chapter will show, Jewish women in Los Angeles had room to flourish as Yiddish writers due to the regional needs of the L.A. Yiddish community. As Ayelet Brinn has demonstrated, New York City, while the central hub for Yiddish publishing in the United States, routinely used Jewish women rhetorically. Jewish women were important to modernizing the Yiddish press, but Jewish male editors often denied women writers the space to publish their work and receive credit. In contrast, in L.A., the Yiddish Cultural Club provided a nonpartisan environment that united the small community of Yiddishists. The size of the Yiddish community and the amount of work available also contributed to how Jewish women writers accessed these publishing spaces. Ultimately due to these regional differences, Jewish women in Los Angeles accessed these publishing spaces more easily than their New York City counterparts.

Jewish women had been writing in Yiddish since the sixteenth century. Their works took the form of *tkhines*, religious literature that supplemented the religious prayers of Hebrew, which was reserved for educated Jewish men. Jewish women translated Hebrew prayers into Yiddish for both Jewish women and uneducated Jewish men to read.⁸⁵ In this period, the two primary

⁸⁵ Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 61.

Jewish languages of Europe, Yiddish and Hebrew, played important roles in establishing gender roles for Jewish men and women. Yiddish was associated with femininity and the secular economic roles Jewish women played within the household, while Hebrew was reserved for educated men and religious spaces. During the Jewish Enlightenment movement (Haskalah) that occurred throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish men began to write secular literature in Hebrew. Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, Jewish men like Shmuel Charney (1883-1955) questioned the gendered association of Yiddish with femininity. To reclaim Yiddish as a masculine and a modern secular language, Jewish men began to write secular literature in Yiddish and by the early twentieth century became the authority on Yiddish literature. Thus, writing and subsequently publishing in Yiddish, has historically been a gendered experience for Jewish women that has resulted in exclusion.

But Jewish women have always been central to Yiddish, like the process historian Ayelet Brinn has analyzed in her work about the Yiddish press. However, Jewish men have emphasized Jewish women's importance only rhetorically. In addition to Brinn, scholars like Naomi Sokoloff, Anita Norich, Katheryn Hellerstein, and Allison Schachter have all analyzed how the gendered assumptions about writing in Yiddish and Hebrew have constrained Jewish women, but also how "their writing," as Schachter argues, "served as a laboratory for thinking about alternative modes of community and possible futures that embraced Jewish difference without hewing to ethnonationalist divisions."⁸⁶

In the United States during the early twentieth century, Jewish men who began writing in Yiddish in Europe held influential roles in the Yiddish press and exercised control over the

⁸⁶ Allison Schachter, *Women Writing Jewish Modernity, 1919–1939* (Northwestern University Press, 2021), 82.

publishing sphere. Some male authors in the 1920s did attempt to rectify the exclusion of Jewish women by creating their own female only Yiddish anthologies. These anthologies contained biographies of women writers, selections of their works and their contributions to Yiddish literature. Yiddish literary critic and author Ezra Korman (1888-1959) published his own anthology, *Yidishe dikhterins: Antologye* (Yiddish Women Poets: Anthology) in 1929.⁸⁷ Although this anthology was Korman's way of connecting Jewish women to a longer Yiddish literary tradition, this project was oppositional to the "trend among his contemporaries to contain or diminish writings by women."⁸⁸ Even in the process of trying to elevate the place of Jewish women writers, who they chose to include and exclude, was built on Jewish men's assumptions about Jewish women writers and their works.

Although Jewish men exerted control in major Yiddish centers like New York City, in Los Angeles regional needs altered this process. In L.A., the Yiddish Cultural Club, with its reliance on local writers, provided an inclusive environment for Jewish women to publish their works. The experiences of Jews in the American West resulted in smaller, tight-knit communities. The Yiddish community of Los Angeles faced the reality of a lack of material and the YCC could not afford to exclude women. Although only Jewish men held executive and editorial roles for the Cultural Club and its journal, these regional pressures resulted in the Yiddish Cultural Club and its literary journals to be less exclusive.

As stated previously, several other Jewish women writers were active in Los Angeles during the early to mid-twentieth century. Thus, the three women highlighted, Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, Shifra Weiss, and Brokhe Kudli are individual representatives of the

⁸⁷ Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Idea of a Literary Tradition," in *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 15-42.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

unique environmental factors seen in Los Angeles that affected other Jewish women writers. In contrast to the others, these three women have received less attention from scholars and so their works provide new source materials to analyze how regional needs affected *yidishe kultur* in this period. However, the works of Weiss and Kudli most importantly provide new Yiddish source materials for the understudied partnerships between Jewish and Mexican Americans in Southern California during the mid-twentieth century. Due to these unique regional experiences, the topics, and relationships they chose to write about, I argue, these three women reflected the environmental conditions of Yiddish culture in the American West.

The Yiddish Cultural Club and Women Writers

The Los Angeles Yiddish Cultural Club afforded spaces for Jewish women writers to read and write because of regional factors like the size of the L.A. Yiddish community and their commitment to a nonpartisan environment. The Yiddish community of Los Angeles was smaller than the central hub of New York City and thus could not afford to prevent Jewish women writers from publishing their work in the Cultural Club's literary journals. To attract writers of all ideologies, the Cultural Club reaffirmed that they were a space not determined by religious denomination, political affiliations, or gender. Women writers published their works in the earliest literary journals published by the Cultural Club, such as *Mayrev* in 1925, *Pasifik* (1929), *Undzer vort* (1939), and *Kheshbn* (1946). However, during the postwar years, the most reliable journal in Los Angeles was *Kheshbn* (1946-2007). Previous journals funded by the Yiddish Cultural Club experienced the unstable economic trends of the 1920s through the Depression in the 1930s and subsequently failed when the YCC could no longer fund them. But by the postwar period L.A. Jews experienced economic stability and thus able to fully support *Kheshbn* until the twenty-first century.

Founded in 1946, *Kheshbn*, which translates to reckoning or a careful accounting of actions or situations, became the central platform for L.A. Yiddishists to reckon with postwar changes to Jewish-Yiddish identity. *Kheshbn*, spurred by the realization of the destruction of European Jewry, became an outlet to express Yiddish culture. The journal published poems, short stories, historical articles about Jewish life in Los Angeles, and artwork. Themes and topics ranged from local Jewish life and experiences in Los Angeles to international topics like Soviet Jewish experiences and how the State of Israel affected American Jews. Like the Cultural Club, *Kheshbn* and its lack of constraints emerged as a central place for L.A. Yiddishists to publish their works. Jewish women also wrote books that they were able to publish through small book committees comprised of local Yiddishists. These book committees helped organize fundraisers to pay publishing costs. L.A. also had several Yiddish reading groups, which advertised and marketed local Yiddish authors. These various avenues resulted in a more accessible environment for women writers precisely because they emphasized local writers.

Yiddish reading groups maintained this collective local identity by venerating local Yiddishists through naming conventions for their groups. In L.A., the YCC named the first women's reading circle the "Henry Rosenblatt Reading Circle." Rosenblatt had migrated to L.A. roughly a decade before and became a central pillar of the Yiddish community through his editorial roles at the Cultural Club. Sima Goldberg, who established the first women's reading circle with the Cultural Club in 1931, explained that "the sole purpose (was to) enhance the dignity of the Yiddish language." According to Goldberg, "it is the impulse to preserve our language and our spiritual cultural treasures, to acquaint ourselves with Jewish history and to

spin further the thread of the prophetic strivings for the socially correct foundation that makes possible a better order—in all ways, to enhance the dignity of the Yiddish book.”⁸⁹

Women associated with the Yiddish Cultural Club and the international group, *Yidisher Kultur Farband* (YKUF), which established a Los Angeles branch in 1937, organized several reading groups and dedicated themselves to learning the Yiddish language and discussing writers who contributed to its cultural production. These clubs provided Jewish women writers with opportunities to not only publish their own work but to promote their work through local reading groups. Nadya Nun, the chairwomen of the Council of Reading Circles at the L.A branch of YKUF, explained the importance of these reading circles in a 1951 article in *Kheshbn*. “Women should also concern themselves with serious matters, with self-education,” Nun argued, “in order to understand better their own environment and to enrich themselves intellectually.”⁹⁰ By 1946 there were nine reading circles affiliated with the YCC and twelve associated with the YKUF in the Los Angeles area.

These reading groups facilitated language learning opportunities, enabling many members to improve their Yiddish reading, writing, and speaking skills. In Los Angeles these clubs often met monthly at individual members’ residences, and women heard lectures from authors, discussed books and practiced their language skills. These groups played a critical role in continuing the Yiddish language and cultural productions in L.A. in the postwar years. “The women who dedicated themselves to Yiddish culture,” in these groups, according to historian Hagit Cohen, “were in effect fighting against assimilation, and for the preservation of their ethnic

⁸⁹ Sima Goldberg, “Twelve Years of the [Women’s] Reading Circles in Los Angeles,” trans. Mark L. Smith, *Kheshbn* (The Reckoning), 1 (1946): 94-98.

⁹⁰ Nadya Lun, “Reading Circle in Los Angeles (Council of Reading Circles at YKUF),” trans. Nina Warnke, *Kheshbn* (The Reckoning), 2 (1951): 68.

language, by adopting American gender perception regarding women's special duty to maintain tradition."⁹¹ While Jewish women held conflicting roles of being responsible for both the preservation of their traditions and the assimilation of their families, reading circles emerged during the early to mid-twentieth century as way to reject assimilation while still subscribing to Jewish American gender roles.

Another important avenue for Yiddish authors in Los Angeles were small book committees. Comprised of other Yiddishists (members of the Yiddish Cultural Club), these local book committees acted as fundraisers and provided a needed space to market Yiddish books at the local level. For example, in the March 7, 1958, issue of the *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, an anonymous advertisement was placed for a literary event held for Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein. "The L.A. Council of Reading groups announces a literary afternoon, Wednesday, March 12, 1 p.m., at the L.A. Yiddish Cultural Club...honoring the well-known poet, Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein." Such communal events provided the space for other Jewish women poets of the area to celebrate one another, and often other poets would read each other's work for promotion, "The program will include the noted poet and educator Malka C. Tussman..."⁹² These book committees and their literary meetings supported local writers, their works, and acted as spaces for intercommunal celebration. Ultimately, these reading circles, in collaboration with the local fundraising committees, and the Yiddish-language journal *Kheshbn* provided by the Yiddish Cultural Club, were essential to cultivating Yiddish culture in Los Angeles during the mid-twentieth century. These spaces gave authors like Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, Shifra

⁹¹ Hagit Cohen, "The Demands of Integration—The Challenges of Ethnicization: Jewish Women's Yiddish Reading Circles in North America Between the Two World Wars," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 16 (2008): 102.

⁹² "Literary Afternoon Scheduled at Yiddish Culture Club," *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, March 7, 1958.

Weiss, and Brokhe Kudli an environment to promote, publish, and discuss their works with their peers.

Shifra Weiss, Brokhe Kudli, and Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein immigrated to North America in the early twentieth century, part of the massive wave of Eastern European immigrants who came to North America between the 1880s and 1920s. Weiss and Kudli immigrated roughly a decade before the passage of the Immigration Restrictive Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, while Shumaitcher-Hirschbein immigrated from Calgary, Canada to New York City in 1918. All three women lived in the eastern United States during the period when the cultural movement of *yidishe kultur* rose in influence among Yiddish writers, activist, and intellectuals. By being exposed to this cultural movement at its peak, these women who traveled to the American West reproduced this movement even after the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 caused the decline of Yiddish speakers in the United States.

Shifra Weiss was born in Kelm, Lithuania in September of 1889. Throughout her adolescence she was active in the Jewish Labor Bund. The Bund was a socialist political organization that advocated for a Jewish cultural identity but rejected a nationalistic identity that relied on land. Due to her political affiliations and radical activism, she fled persecution from Russian authorities and immigrated to the United States alone at the age of fifteen in 1905. After landing in Ellis Island, she lived in Chicago and Pittsburgh before moving to Los Angeles in 1917. In L.A. she continued her political activism. She was active in the local branch of the socialist organization the *Arbeter Ring* which focused on mutual aid and advocated for the use of Yiddish in Jewish cultural expression, helped establish a *folkshul* in Hollywood and was involved with the Communist International Workers Order. Weiss first published in several Yiddish journals in New York including *Fraye arbeter shtime* (*Free voice of labor*), *Idishe arbeter*

velt (*World of Jewish labor*), *Frayhayt* (*Freedom*), *Dos vort* (*The word*), *Ineynem* (*Altogether*), and *Yidishe kultur* (*Jewish culture*).⁹³

While Weiss was able to publish articles and poems in New York based literary journals, particularly communist journals, credit for her work was irregular. She sometimes wrote under the pseudonym, “A heymisher mentsh” (which roughly translate to a “homey” person or a warm, friendly, and honest person).⁹⁴ Importantly she was able to publish all three of her book-length works, *In gang* (1932), *Tsu der velt, lider* (*To the world, poetry* 1943) and *Tsum morgndikn tog, geklibene lider* (*To Tomorrow’s tomorrow, selected poems* 1953), in Los Angeles due to the Yiddish Cultural Clubs publishing committees. While Jewish women’s access to publication was not entirely determined by their place of residence, journal’s political affiliations and their openness to women writers did influence where women writers could publish. Books, which required funding to publish multiple copies, did rely on the poet’s influence and thus the local Yiddish publishing committees through the Yiddish Cultural Club became important avenues for L.A. writers to publish their works.

Brokhe Kudli was born July 20th, 1892, in Podolia, now Ukraine. She immigrated to the United States in 1913, when she was eleven years old. There is little source information about this time in her life and it is unknown if she immigrated with family members or others. There is little information about her residential history before moving to Los Angeles. However, we can make two assumptions: in the early twentieth century, the United States provided opportunities

⁹³ “Vays, Shifre (Weiss) (September 1889–December 12, 1955) — the Congress for Jewish Culture,” Congress for Jewish Culture, accessed April 7, 2025, at <https://congressforjewishculture.org/people/4606/Vays-Shifre-Weiss-September-1889-December-12-1955>.

⁹⁴ For more information on Shifra Weiss’ involvement with communist organizations and their literary journals, see Norma Fain Pratt, “Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers, 1890–1940,” *American Jewish History* 70, no. 1 (1980): 68–90.

for a better life during a period of heightened antisemitism and economic dislocation which occurred in Europe before the first World War. Second, she likely settled in Los Angeles in 1924 or 1925. She began her career as a writer when she published a poem in the New York based journal *Fraye arbeter shtime* (*Free voice of labor*) in 1924.⁹⁵ But in 1925, she contributed two works to the L.A. based Yiddish literary journal, *Mayrev* (1925). While the *Free voice of labor* was already an internationally known journal, *Mayrev* was a short-lived, local journal for L.A. Yiddishists. Thus, it is unlikely that she published in *Mayrev* before residing in Los Angeles.

Finally, Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein immigrated to the United States later than Weiss and Kudli. Born in December of 1899 in Gomel, Byelorussia, now Belarus, Esther, her parents, and her eleven siblings immigrated to Calgary, Canada in 1911, where there was a small Jewish community. In Canada, her family Anglicized her name to Ethel Smith. She attended English-language schools.⁹⁶ In 1918, Esther met famous Yiddish playwright Peretz Hirschbein who had stopped in Calgary during his North American tour. They married that same year. Esther credited Peretz as the person who encouraged her to write. She first began writing in English but after moving to New York with Peretz, and then touring with him across North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, she published her first Yiddish piece in the Warsaw Yiddish literary journal, *Albatros* (*Albatross*) in 1920. In 1934, the two returned to New York City. Six years later they moved to Los Angeles after Peretz received an offer to write film scripts. In L.A., the couple

⁹⁵ “Kudli, Brokhe (Broche Coodley) (July 20, 1892–February 29, 1980) — the Congress for Jewish Culture,” Congress for Jewish Culture, accessed April 7, 2025, at <https://congressforjewishculture.org/people/1150/Kudli-Brokhe-Broche-Coodley-July-20-1892-February-29-1980>.

⁹⁶ “Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein | Jewish Women’s Archive,” Jewish Women’s Archive, accessed April 7, 2025, at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/Shumaitcher-hirschbein-esther>.

lived in Beachwood Canyon, a neighborhood of Hollywood Hills, and Esther became heavily involved in the Yiddish Cultural Club and their programs.⁹⁷

These three women all came to Los Angeles at different points in their lives, subscribed to different politics beliefs, and resided in different areas of Los Angeles (Boyle Heights for Weiss and Kuldi, while Shumaitcher-Hirschbein lived on the westside). They all previously had published several poems in important Yiddish journals, however most in not all of their books were funded and published in Los Angeles by the YCC. Each woman emphasized different aspects of Yiddish culture in their writing but all three were connected through the Yiddish Cultural Club. Their experiences and their relationship with the club indicate a symbiotic relationship with the Yiddish Cultural Club and L.A. Yiddish cultural doers. This relationship contributed to the continuity of the Los Angeles Yiddish community.

A Post-1945 World and Yiddish Culture – Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein

Scholars often mark the Immigration Act of 1924 as the moment the Yiddish language declined in the United States; while other maintained that the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel cemented the idea that Yiddish would vanish in a post-1945 world. Yet, scholars like Anita Norich and Jeffery Shandler have demonstrated that Yiddish culture did not in fact vanish after WWII but endured—even as it underwent changes in the mid-twentieth century.⁹⁸ These two events affected American Jews in many ways but for Yiddishist one question took precedent: What would the continuation of Yiddish culture in a post-1945 world look like?

⁹⁷ “Shumyatsher, Ester (December 1899–December 21, 1985) — the Congress for Jewish Culture,” Congress for Jewish Culture, accessed April 7, 2025, at <https://congressforjewishculture.org/people/331/Shumyatsher-Ester-December-1899-December-21-1985>.

⁹⁸ See Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (Stanford University Press, 2007); Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (University of California Press, 2008).

Through her poems and contributions to the Yiddish Cultural Club's journal, *Kheshbn*, founded in 1946, Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein sought to reckon with these events in the postwar years. She was not alone. Other Yiddishists in L.A. did so as well. But it is worth examining her 1946 and 1951 contributions to *Kheshbn*, and her 1956 poem, *Kaifornye*, in her book titled *Lider* (Poems) to highlight how she considered California as a solution to the question of Yiddish continuity (see Figure 2.4).⁹⁹ Taken together her two journal articles and poem show how important the unique environment of Los Angeles (California) was to adapting Yiddish culture in the postwar period. She characterized California as a space where the Yiddish language and culture could flourish because of the Yiddish Cultural Club, and even after the two most important events for American Jews: the Holocaust, and the creation of Israel.

Before the Holocaust, the Yiddish language and *yidishe kultur* on both sides of the Atlantic was an autonomous cultural movements determined to create new ways of Jewish expression. However, the Holocaust fundamentally altered this culture of innovation to a culture concerned about preservation. For American Yiddish writers an inescapable challenge appeared: should the continuation of their literature be productive in nature or should it focus on highlighting the past to solidify the memory of the Jews lost?¹⁰⁰ Certainly, there was no single answer to this problem and among the Yiddish Cultural Club responses varied. However, Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein's response in the first edition of *Kheshbn* in 1946 provides her perspective on the role Yiddish should play in a post-1945 world.

⁹⁹ Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, *Title page of in Lider*, ca 1956, in *Lider*, 7, 2009

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc201073/shumaitcher-hirschbein-lider>.

¹⁰⁰ Anita Norich, "Cultural Questions, Jewish Answers," *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 17-41.

Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein's congratulatory essay in *Kheshbn* (1946) illustrated the productive role Los Angeles and the Yiddish Cultural Club would play in the postwar period. Due to the Holocaust, a postwar resurgence in Jewish-Yiddish culture occurred in the United States. Noting this drive to reclaim identity and the steady stream of new Jewish migrants to Los Angeles, Shumaitcher-Hirschbein explained, "By all sign, it appears that life here is advancing so quickly that Los Angeles will become the second largest Jewish community for Yiddish creativity after New York." She maintained that the L.A. Yiddish Cultural Club would play an important unifying role, "The Pacific Coast will have the honor of building the bridge that ties the East with the West."¹⁰¹ While Shumaitcher-Hirschbein was correct in her assumption that Los Angeles became the second largest Jewish population center in postwar period, her emphasis on the role western Yiddish creativity would play has yet to be full analyzed by scholars. In this article, Shumaitcher-Hirschbein clearly saw Los Angeles as a place of productive creativity for the Yiddish language and culture.

While the Holocaust caused American Yiddishists to reckon with the destruction of Jewish life and subsequently Yiddish in Europe, the establishment of Israel also engendered conflicting anxieties among American Jews. As Israel established Hebrew as the national language, Hebrew took on a new level of importance to Jewish identity globally. Historian Anita Norich in her analysis about Yiddish authors' perspectives in these postwar years argues that, "[Isaac] Bashevis made the then-controversial but now incontrovertible observation that Yiddish and Hebrew had reversed roles in contemporary America: severed from the daily experience of American Jews, Yiddish was now relegated to the language of the old, with Hebrew rapidly

¹⁰¹ Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, "Congratulations," trans. Hershl Hartman, *Kheshbn*, 1, 1946.

emerging as the language of the Jewish streets of Tel Aviv if not New York.”¹⁰² Even with the resurgence of Jewish-Yiddish culture in the postwar years, Yiddish did decline. But Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein’s article in the 1951 issue of *Kheshbn* complicates that assumption. In the 1951 issue of *Kheshbn*, Shumaitcher-Hirschbein continued her hopes for the Yiddish Cultural Club and Yiddish culture in Los Angeles. In this issue she argued even after these events, Yiddish culture and identity should not disappear in the diaspora considering this shared “joy of Israel and Hebrew.”¹⁰³ For many Yiddishists, Israel was a complicated topic, many rejected the nationalism associated with the state. But for others like Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, who would later move to Israel for two years in 1960, did not see Yiddish culture and Israel at odds. For Shumaitcher-Hirschbein to continue to write and publish another book in Yiddish in 1956 reaffirmed her commitment to *yidishe kultur*.

In *Kalifornye* Shumaitcher-Hirschbein represented California as a fertile environment, figuratively and literally for the Yiddish language and culture. By describing the natural environment of California as fertile and productive through lines like, “Blossoms bloom here between stones and sand, full breasts are borne by the awed earth; Aromas of myrtles and date leaves abound,” she connects the abundant western natural environment with the abundance of Yiddish creativity in Los Angeles. But she also ties the environmental images of the American West with Israel. Through images like “Aromas of myrtles and date leaves,” she creates a distinctive Western Jewish understanding of the Southern Californian environment. Just as blossoms bloom under the constrictive conditions of stones and sand so do the Yiddish language

¹⁰² Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 108.

¹⁰³ Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, “The L.A. Yiddish Cultural Club – A Good Host,” trans. Nina Warnke, *Kheshbn*, 2, 1951.

and culture in Los Angeles. She ends the poem by constructing California as an ethereal place where dreams come true: “It’s all as though a fairy tale had given birth...In your hilly and your valleyed places your beauty shines and before God is flaunted. Eternal summer illuminates your graces, Californialand—only dreams can be more vaunted.”¹⁰⁴ While the work praises the aspirational contours of California on the surface, by tying her previous articles with this poem and connecting the Western environment with Israel, we can see how Shumaitcher-Hirschbein foreshadowed her arguments that Los Angeles (California) provided a unique environment for Yiddish to flourish in this postwar period. In combination with one another, her poetic work, and her articles are attempts at grappling with these events and ultimately, she argues through her comments and Yiddish works that Yiddishists should hold onto their culture.

Her writings illustrate that even though Yiddish cultural production declined nationally in the United States, Southern California and the L.A. Yiddish Cultural Club provided an environment where Yiddish culture and expression could flourish through the dedication of a small Yiddish community. California and Los Angeles played an important part in her Yiddish cultural expression. The western environment reflected in her poetry provided a fertile environment to experiment with Yiddish styles and her participation in the Yiddish Cultural Club reaffirmed her belief that she could use Yiddish to grapple with postwar changes in the world.

Interracial Partnerships: Mexican and Yiddish Experiences in Postwar L.A. – Shifra Weiss

Shifra Weiss, a longtime resident, and member of the L.A. branch of the socialist organization *Arbeter Ring*, the Yiddish Cultural Club, and communist circles, intertwined her Yiddish cultural expressions with working-class politics and the interracial partnerships that

¹⁰⁴ Esther Shumaitcher, “Kalifornia,” in *Lider*; trans. Hershl Hartman 2012, (Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein Book Committee, 1956), 120-121.

existed in Boyle Heights. As Boyle Heights changed between the 1930s and 50s, it transformed from a Jewish neighborhood—or at least a neighborhood that reinforced Jewish identity—to a neighborhood primarily composed of Mexican Americans and migrants. In the postwar period, this shift in the neighborhood’s racial demographics occurred because of several reasons; WWII veterans from all racial backgrounds returned to Los Angeles. After 1945, once released from internment camps, Japanese Americans returned to Boyle Heights. In addition, Braceros made their way into urban interiors to join an already large population of ethnic Mexicans in Los Angeles.¹⁰⁵ With these demographical changes Yiddishists and Jews who were committed to working-class politics began to collaborate with other minority activists and their causes. Due to these shared ideals the neighborhood of Boyle Heights became a focal point for Mexican and Jewish activism in Los Angeles. It was in this multiracial environment of 1950s Boyle Heights that Shifra Weiss published her poem *Kalifornie* in her final book titled *To Tomorrow’s Tomorrow* in 1953 (see figure 2.5).¹⁰⁶ In this work she expressed her commitment to and her sympathy for Mexican labors and the oppression they experienced in postwar California.

Ethnic Mexican social activism emerged throughout the United States but across the Southwest, beginning in the 1940s, Mexican Americans and ethnic Mexicans began to organize and advocated for a particular form of Mexican social activism; this early Mexican American activism focused on a “variety of social, political, and cultural actions waged primarily in the southwestern United States” that advocated for “Spanish-speaking, working-class, and

¹⁰⁵ Sánchez, “What’s Good for Boyle Heights,” 637.

¹⁰⁶ Shifra Weiss, *Title page of Tzum Morgendikn Morgn* (To Tomorrow's Tomorrow), 1953, *Tzum Morgendikn Morgn*, 3, 2009, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc207411/weiss-shifra-tsum-morgndikn-morgn-geklibene-lider>

indigenous people of the land who faced class and racial oppression” in the 1950s.¹⁰⁷ This period saw the establishment of several political organizations like the Communist Party (CP 1919), the Community Service Organization (1947), and the Mexican American Political Association (1960) who became foundational pillars for Mexican activism in Los Angeles throughout the 1940s and 60s. This early history of Mexican American activism in California was shaped by the social, geographic, and economic experiences of the American West, which resulted in unique partnerships with other immigrant communities, and in the case of Boyle Heights these alliances formed with leftist Jewish Americans.¹⁰⁸

In *Kalifornie*, published in 1953, Shifra Weiss focuses on the destitute experiences of migrants who came out to the American West because they suffered from tuberculosis. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, the American West and its cities like Denver, Colorado and Duarte, California became destinations for those suffering from tuberculosis. The clear and dry air was thought to cure pulmonary ailments, but specifically the clear and dry air and spacious landscaped also attracted many urban Jews who suffered from tuberculosis. These urban Jewish immigrants lived in overcrowded tenements and worked in deplorable conditions in sweatshops. In Yiddish circles, TB was considered the “proletariat disease” and those who suffered from it “victims of the capitalist system.”¹⁰⁹

Weiss in this poem also lamented the historical oppression faced by Native Americans, Japanese, and ethnic Mexicans by white Anglo-Saxon in Californian history. However, her

¹⁰⁷ Marisela R. Chávez, “Bridging Activism: Mexican American Women and Political Leadership from the Postwar Era to the Early Chicano Movement in Los Angeles,” in *Chicana Liberation: Women and Mexican American Politics in Los Angeles, 1945-1981* (University of Illinois Press, 2024), 39-40.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰⁹ Yudkoff, “*Let it be Consumption!*,” 150-151. Also in Shifra Weiss, “Kalifornie” (California) in, *Tzum Morgendikn Morgn* (To Tomorrow's Tomorrow), trans. Hershl Hartman, (Shifra Weiss Book Committee, 1953), 63-46. Weiss calls tuberculosis the “Proletariat disease.”

perspective is not without complications. Weiss's poem begins, "Land of oil, grapes, and oranges! At the rhythm of burning suns, the Indians would ignite the nights...to the rhythms of chains and stony hills, protecting their land with fiery eyes." Here, Weiss uses established "frontier" themes about Native Americans, referencing a time before colonialism. She continues, "But the whites conquered with guns and powder, driving them into the folds of the valleys; the palms, the flowers, the land and sun taken into their power." In these lines, Weiss recognizes the displacement of Native Americans from their lands by white immigrants, however Weiss does not seem to place herself along the "whites" she discusses. Even though nationally in the early twentieth century Jews were seen as racially different from white, Protestant immigrants, in Southern California Jewish immigrants experienced little antisemitism and even working-class Jews accessed more opportunities, based on their proximity to whiteness, than their non-white neighbors. To overcome this complicated position, Weiss emphasized her leftist politics and working-class ideals, which she pulled from her understanding of *yidische kultur*, to directly opposes the acculturated Jews of L.A.'s westside. Excerpts like, "palaces that bloom and grow by the toil of Japanese hands..." and "Through sobbing blood they spit out life. Stretching out, like slaughtered doves, and the open mouths of spilt-open deserts swallow them like grapes," further illustrate Weiss' sympathy for oppressed groups and their experiences in California.¹¹⁰ Her work contrasts the beauty expressed through natural western landscapes and the dark reality for those under oppressive conditions in California.

While Weiss included other oppressed minorities in this poem, she spends considerable time critiquing the labor conditions forced onto Mexicans in California. "I will bite the world in

¹¹⁰ Shifra Weiss, "Kalifornie" (California), *Tzum Morgendikn Morgn (To Tomorrow's Tomorrow)*, trans. Hershl Hartman, (Shifra Weiss Book Committee, 1953), 63-46.

its heart with Mexicans whom the earth here tears apart; Even before they swallow their first bite, they're trussed into cleaning streets, hauling refuse, tearing at the earth." She further links Jewish experiences with Mexicans by linking staple foods like tortillas and matzoh, "So they stuff themselves with raw matses [matzos i.e., tortillas] habituated to sucking out mamas' breasts." Further describing Mexican experiences she states, "They prepare for the deserts' open mouths, to be laid out in split-open fields. But in the melodies of their yearning guitars one feels their true pain, their sharp anger; their blue nights are torn from their flesh by whips of white overlords..."¹¹¹ Situating this poem in context with the oppressive labor conditions experienced by working-class ethnic Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Mexican labor migrants through the *Bracero* program indicates Weiss' awareness of oppressive labor conditions in Southern California. Similarly, Weiss' involvement and the prominence of the Communist Party and Community Service Organization in eastside L.A. illustrates Weiss' commitment to leftist politics and her commitment to express those thoughts through Yiddish. These organizations became important places of cultural exchanges for both Jewish and Mexican leftists and like the early Mexican American activism emerging in Los Angeles that prioritized Spanish to communicate these political ideologies, Shifra Weiss use of Yiddish here is indicative that she believed that the Yiddish language should be used to communicate these ideas as well.

Shifra Weiss's poem *Kalifornie* reflects the multiracial experiences and similarities between cultural movements like *yidishe kultur* and the early Mexican American activism experienced by Jewish and Mexican residents of Boyle Heights in the 1950s. We have English source materials describing the activism experienced by the two groups and their political victories such as the 1949 election of Boyle Heights resident Edward R. Roybal, the first

¹¹¹ Ibid., 63-46.

Mexican American politician, to the L.A. city council (1949-1962) and his eventual election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1963-1993. However, Weiss' poem provides a window into the perspective of a radical, working-class, western Yiddishist in this period, which further adds to our understanding of the interethnic alliances experienced in Boyle Heights.¹¹²

Boyle Heights: Urban Structural Changes and their effects on Yiddish Culture – Brokhe Kudli

Brokhe Kudli's 1958 poem, *Free-vays* (Freeways) published in the thirteenth issue of *Kheshbn*, grapples with the politically motivated and racial urban changes that transformed Boyle Heights in the 1940s and 50s (see Figure 2.6).¹¹³ Beginning in 1939, with the United States Home Owner's Loan Corporation, an office of FDR's New Deal government, redlined the neighborhood, effectively marking it for future urban improvement projects.

Kudli's *Free-vays* contrasts silence with deafening sounds to illustrate how the freeways have disrupted the natural order of Boyle Heights. She begins, "The pensive palms are no longer rustling on my street, and the birds won't be returning to the dawns to cheer..." and concludes with "The highway seethe, the cars are roaring, bridges spanning—my street is caught in chaos' grip. Perhaps it will rejoice in my recollecting it."¹¹⁴ In this work she reflects on the neighborhood's past and how it no longer functions like it use to due to these freeways. Kudli's poem represents one of the many ways residents of Boyle Heights resisted the construction of

¹¹² For more information about these partnerships in Boyle Heights, see George Sánchez, *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy* (University of California Press, 2021); George J. Sánchez, *Beyond Alliances: The Jewish Role in Reshaping the Racial Landscape of Southern California*, (Purdue University Press, 2011).

¹¹³ *Title page of Kheshbn*, no. 13, ca 1958, The Los Angeles Yiddish Cultural Club, 1, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9573b41h>.

¹¹⁴ Brokhe Kudli, "Freeways," trans. Miri Koral, *Kheshbn* 13, 1958.

these disruptive urban structures and how these changes challenged residents' cultural expressions.

While her poem was meant for a Yiddish audience, other forms of protest were occurring simultaneously. Jewish and Mexican community members and leaders organized petitions, community meetings, and written editorials to protest the construction of these freeways and the removal of homes and residents. However, these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful in contrast to the efforts by wealthier neighborhoods, like Beverly Hills. Residents of Beverly Hills, primarily WASPs and some Jewish residents, successfully prevented the construction of planned freeways that would cut through the neighborhood.¹¹⁵ Contrasting the success of these two protests indicates that the previous "redlining" of Boyle Heights by the HOLC and the economic advantage residents of Beverly Hills wielded that race and class intertwined with each other to create these outcomes.

Although the residents of Boyle Heights were unsuccessful in preventing the construction of these freeways, this activism laid important groundwork for the interracial Jewish and Mexican activism in Los Angeles during the 1950s. L.A. emerged as a center for the ethnic Mexican activism by the mid-twentieth century. Again in 1949, Jewish residents collaborated with Mexican residents to help elect Edward Roybal against one of their own, Jewish candidate Joe Kovner. Roybal, who became the first Mexican American L.A. city council leader and U.S. House Representative, was supported by Boyle Heights Yiddishists because he appealed and courted the working-class. In addition, the Asociación Nacional México Americana (ANMA), an organization founded in 1949 to promote access to social, economic, education and cultural

¹¹⁵ Eric Avila, "L.A.'s Invisible Freeway Revolt: The Cultural Politics of Fighting Freeways," in *Journal of Urban History*, 40 (5), 831-842.

rights for Mexican Americans, established its national headquarters in Boyle Heights in 1951. This organization maintained that “Mexicans in the Southwest had been deprived of an autonomous cultural development; nonetheless, they still possess a distinct culture that needed protection and encouragement.” The ANMA advocated for Mexican Americans to “develop your own cultural forms... especially the use of the Spanish language.”¹¹⁶ Both the Mexican American and the *yidische kultur* cultural movements in Los Angeles advocated for an autonomous culture and the use of their preferred languages to express that identity and their political beliefs. Thus, for both western Yiddishists like Kudli and early Mexican American activists, cultural expression of these events through Spanish and Yiddish literature was central to their resistance.¹¹⁷

Individual regions and environments played an important role in Jewish experiences and expressions in the United States. Among Yiddishists, regional variance impacted the topics, themes, and archetypes they used in their writings. In addition, the size of Yiddish communities and the amount of material present influenced how these Yiddish communities functioned. In New York City the Jewish population was much larger than in Los Angeles and so their Yiddish communities were divided into groups according to political and religious ideologies. Jewish men dominated Yiddish media and though some women published their works, accessing those spaces was much harder. In contrast, the Los Angeles Yiddish community in the early to mid-twentieth century was smaller and less divided. The Yiddish Cultural Club emerged as a central unifying organization for L.A. Yiddish writers because the club was committed to a nonpartisan environment. Due to its size and its place on the periphery, the Yiddish Cultural Club could not

¹¹⁶ Ernesto Chávez, “‘A Movable Object Meeting an Irresistible Force’: Los Angeles’s Ethnic Mexican Community in the 1950s and Early 1960s,” “*¡Mi Raza Primero!*” (*My People First!*): *Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978*, (University of California Press, 2002), 16.

¹¹⁷ Avila, “L.A.’s Invisible Freeway Revolt,” 831-842.

afford to prevent Jewish women writers from publishing their work. Ultimately, by analyzing a smaller Yiddish community in the American West, this analysis demonstrates how *yidishe kultur* changed according to region and how Jewish women capitalized on these new opportunities.

These three women, Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, Shifra Weiss, and Brokhe Kudli in their distinct ways illustrate postwar changes to Yiddish identity. Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein's poem *Kalifornye* presents California as a fertile environment for the Yiddish language and culture. Her involvement with the Yiddish Cultural Club showed her commitment to Yiddish culture in the face of the two most impactful events for Jewish Americans: the Holocaust, and the establishment of the State of Israel. Her essays in the Yiddish Cultural Club's journal *Kheshbn* are hopeful in tone, they emphasize the important role the Cultural Club played in Yiddish life in Los Angeles and ultimately reaffirmed her commitment to Yiddish culture. In an era where Jews had more access to socioeconomic opportunities and were shifting their residential patterns in L.A. and important historical events that reshaped the contours of Jewish life in the United States, she reaffirms her position as a Yiddish cultural producer in the American West.

Both Shifra Weiss' *Kalifornie* and Brokhe Kudli's *Free-vays* demonstrate the connections between Jewish and Mexican residents in Boyle Heights. Although demographic changes caused by shifting Jewish residential patterns, postwar migration of all racial groups, and Bracero migrants joining the larger ethnic Mexican population resulted in Boyle Heights being constructed as a place of L.A.'s Jewish past. Shifra Weiss used Yiddish to sympathize with the plights of oppressed Mexican labors and Kudli used Yiddish to grapple with the effects of racial and class based urban structural changes to Boyle Heights. For these two poets their Yiddish-rooted values promoted ideas of interethnic connections based on working-class ideals and the

physical space they inhabited. And although we have English source materials describing Jewish-Mexican partnerships in Boyle Heights, these Yiddish source materials give a new perspective on the importance of interracial partnerships during this period.

Collectively these Yiddish poets responded to the major questions that drove the transformation of Yiddish culture in a post-1945 world and they emphasized Yiddish as an important way to understand these changes. Highlighting these women's work expands our understanding of the American Yiddish experience and literary canon. They also illustrate how regional environments resulted in new expressions of *yidishe kultur* and how Jewish women participated in the process.

Los Angeles: A Place of Yiddish Creativity

Significantly, Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, Shifra Weiss, and Brokhe Kudli were not the only Jewish women who wrote and published works in Yiddish in Los Angeles during the post-war period. Taken together, however, they reflect the major contributions women Yiddish writers made in the American West and the importance of *yidishe kultur* in the United States beyond New York City and the 1920s. In Los Angeles, Yiddish culture flourished in the 1940s and 50s because of the open literary environments provided by the Yiddish Cultural Club. Jewish women had more access to opportunities to publish their work and receive credit through the literary journals provided by the Cultural Club such as *Kheshbn* and local book committee groups facilitated by other Yiddishists in the community to finance their publications. This focus on local community publishing differed from the big cities like New York City, where the Yiddish media was primarily controlled by and for Jewish men.

Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein, Shifra Weiss, and Brokhe Kuldi are three representatives of the opportunities Jewish women writers accessed in Los Angeles. Due to the regional needs, the Yiddish Cultural Club's commitment to a nonpartisan environment and the size of the Yiddish community, Jewish women accessed more opportunities to write and publish their work. By doing so they also engaged with a new Yiddish literary style that employed motifs, archetypes, and themes of the American West to respond to larger post-1945 changes to Yiddish culture. This analysis illustrated how these women molded their understanding of *yidische kultur* to fit the needs of the Los Angeles Yiddish community.

Figures:

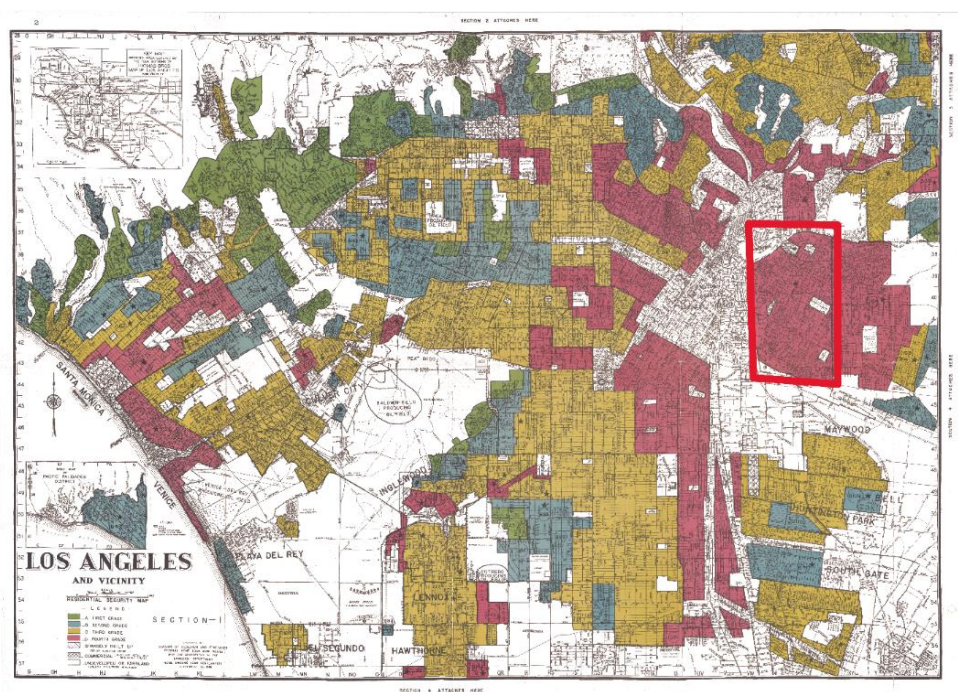


Figure 2.1. Home Owner's Loan Corporation Map of Los Angeles ca.1939. Red rectangle indicates the neighborhood of Boyle Heights.

AREA DESCRIPTION
Security Map of LOS ANGELES COUNTY

1. POPULATION: a. Increasing Slowly Decreasing Static

b. Class and Occupation Jewish professional & business men, Mexican laborers, WPA workers, etc. Income \$700 to \$2000 and up.

c. Foreign Families 50% Norwegian, Russian, Polish & Armenian Jews, d. Negro 1%
Slavs, Greeks, American Mexicans, Japanese and Italians

e. Shifting or Infiltration Subversive racial elements increasing.

2. BUILDINGS:

	PREDOMINATING	40%	OTHER TYPE	%
a. Type and Size	<u>4, 5 & 6 rooms</u>		<u>2, 3 and 4 room shacks</u>	<u>30%</u>
b. Construction	<u>Frame and stucco</u>		<u>Apils. & other multi-family</u>	<u>20%</u>
c. Average Age	<u>20 years</u>		<u>Old 7 rooms and up</u>	<u>10%</u>
d. Repairs	<u>Poor to fair</u>			
e. Occupancy	<u>97%</u>			
f. Owner-occupied	<u>20%</u>			
g. 1935 Price Bracket	<u>\$2000-\$2500</u>	<u>% change</u>	<u>\$</u>	<u>% change</u>
h. 1937 Price Bracket	<u>\$2250-2500</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>\$</u>	<u>%</u>
i. 1939 Price Bracket	<u>\$2250-2500</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>\$</u>	<u>%</u>
j. Sales Demand	<u>Poor</u>			
k. Predicted Price Trend (next 6-12 months)	<u>Static</u>			
l. 1935 Rent Bracket	<u>\$25.00-35.00</u>	<u>% change</u>	<u>\$</u>	<u>% change</u>
m. 1937 Rent Bracket	<u>\$25.00-40.00</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>\$</u>	<u>%</u>
n. 1939 Rent Bracket	<u>\$25.00-40.00</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>\$</u>	<u>%</u>
o. Rental Demand	<u>Fair</u>			
p. Predicted Rent Trend (next 6-12 months)	<u>Static</u>		<u>\$4000-\$5500</u>	

3. NEW CONSTRUCTION (past yr.) No. 25 Type & Price 5 and 6 room How Selling Owner built

4. OVERHANG OF HOME PROPERTIES: a. HOLC. 3 b. Institutions Many

5. SALE OF HOME PROPERTIES (3 yr.) a. HOLC. 33 b. Institutions Few

6. MORTGAGE FUNDS: Limited 7. TOTAL TAX RATE PER \$1000 (1937-8) 52.80

8. DESCRIPTION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF AREA:
Terrain: Level to hillside with generally favorable grades and comparatively few construction hazards. Land improved 90%. This is a "mating pot" area and is literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements. It is seriously doubted whether there is a single block in the area which does not contain detrimental racial elements, and there are very few districts which are not hopelessly heterogeneous in type of improvement and quality of maintenance. Schools, churches, trading centers, recreational areas and transportation are all conveniently available. Many of the thoroughfares are arterial in character and constitute traffic hazards. This area is wholly in the City of Los Angeles. It is hazardous residential territory and is recorded a general racial red area, although in many parts slum conditions prevail. The Federal Government, in conjunction with the city government are undertaking a slum clearance project covering 41 areas in the extreme northeast part of the area.

9. LOCATION: Boyle Heights SECURITY GRADE 4th AREA NO. D-53 DATE 6-19-39
CAUTION: This area is currently affected in whole or in part by an Act valoren Tax District. Individual properties should be checked for this hazard.
401

Figure 2.2. Home Owner's Loan Corporation Residential Survey for Boyle Heights, ca.1939.



Figure 2.3. Boyle Heights
Neighborhood Council Map. Red lines
indicate Freeways, ca. October 2018.

אסתר לעולם לא תלך
דור לב יין



אריסטונעבן פון
אסתר שומאיתער-הירשבעין בוך קאמפאניסט
לאס אנגעלעב. קאליסאריע
1956 — תשי"ז

Figure 2.4. Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein,
Lider, ca.1956

• צום •
מארגנדיקן
מארגן

געקליבענע לידער

/ו/

שפרה ווייס

אריסטונעבן פון
שפרה ווייס בוך-קאמפאניסט
וועגן - לאס אנגעלעב
קאליסאריע
1953

Figure 2.5. Shifra Weiss, *To Tomorrow's
Tomorrow*, ca.1953.

חֶשְׁבֵּן

פערטליכער שריפט פאר

ליטעראטור, קריטיק און קולטור־פראבלעמן

13

רעדאקטאר — י. פרידלאנד



ארויסגעגעבן פון

לאם אנגעלעסער יידישער קולטור קלוב

און

שרייבער קרייז „בנך און לעבן“

טבת, תשי"ח — יאנואר 1958

לאם אנגעלעסער, קאליסאריניע

Figure 2.6. Yiddish Cultural Club, *Kheshbn*, issue 13, front page, ca.1958.

Conclusion

In the last pages of the 1951 issue of *Kheshbn*, Secretary Aaron Ayeroff began a conversation seventy-four years in the making. Ayeroff had clear hopes for the “future historian,” stating, “When the future historian undertakes to describes the various Jewish groups, who have lived and participated actively in the Yiddish community life of Los Angeles, during the past quarter of a century, he will undoubtedly award the Yiddish Cultural Club a very deserving commendation.” Although Ayeroff envisioned a male historian, I felt drawn to communicate with him. He further emphasized the uniqueness of the small L.A. Yiddish community stating that, “Whenever the Los Angeles Yiddish Cultural Club’s activities have been presented to the non-Yiddish-speaking public, they often expressed wonder that it has been possible for such a comparatively small group of lovers of Yiddish culture to maintain the interest and devotion of its members.”¹¹⁸ This same curiosity about this small community drove this thesis.

Los Angeles emerged as a small but active Yiddish center in the American West during the early and mid-twentieth century. Early migrants like Henry Rosenblatt and his wife found a tight-knit community of leftist leaning, secular, working class Jews who used the Yiddish language to express their cultural movement of *yidishe kultur* in the eastside neighborhood of Boyle Heights. National organizations like the socialist *Arbeter Ring* provided a foundational space for these Jews of L.A. to connect with one another. However, the Yiddish Cultural Club and its emphasis on a nonpartisan environment proved to be the unifying space needed to create a sustaining Yiddish community in the postwar years. The YCC provided literary journals, book

¹¹⁸ Aaron Ayeroff, “25th Anniversary of the Los Angeles Yiddish Cultural Club,” *Kheshbn*, 2, October 1951, 113-114.

committees to fund and market Yiddish works, and reading circles to engage with the language and local authors.

Jewish women poets experienced a more inclusive and open environment to publish their works because of the Yiddish Cultural Club. The YCC nonpartisan space which did not separate individuals based on political ideologies, religious observance or even gender, catered to the local writers and emphasized their centrality to the club. Although in the mid-twentieth century, the eastside neighborhood of Boyle Heights underwent demographic changes that caused it to lose its ability to reinforce Yiddish culture, some Jewish women remained and asserted their commitments to *yidishe kultur*. For those who remained, Boyle Heights became a place to engage with a post-1945 world and important interracial partnerships emerged. These partnerships were built on shared ideas of an autonomous culture, *yidishe kultur* and Mexican American activism. Shifra Weiss, Brokhe Kudli, and Esther Shumaitcher-Hirschbein all participated in the YCC and used its resources to publish their own poetic perspectives about these post-1945 changes in their lives. Highlighting their works not only provide new Yiddish source materials for the history of Boyle Heights but they also give a glimpse into how Yiddish culture underwent changes but remained in the mid-twentieth century.

This thesis emphasizes the importance of analyzing Jewish experiences in relation to geography and calls into question the prevailing New York Jewish experience to provide a regional thread of the greater American Jewish experience. In addition, the unique advantage the Los Angeles Yiddish environment afforded Jewish women writers should be included in the national history of Jewish women writers of the United States. By shifting the focuses from Jewish men in this work, the efforts of Jewish women take precedent. Many Jewish men contributed to the L.A. Yiddish Cultural Club and its literary journals, however emphasizing the

contributions made by Jewish women provide needed perspectives to create a more nuanced understanding of the YCC's egalitarian environment.

Looking back at the first photograph in the introduction of this work and Aaron Ayeroff's hopes for the future historian, we can see how the Yiddish Cultural Club was a lively place of community and resident Yiddishists viewed it as the needed oasis for the Los Angeles Yiddish community. While the Yiddish language and culture underwent extreme changes by the mid-twentieth century and its influence declined nationally in United States, the Yiddishists of Los Angeles experienced their own renaissance of *yidishe kultur* within their small community and Jewish women writers played an important role in the facilitating that process.

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