An Overview of Materials I Used in My Class, with some Discussion Questions

(sessions were 90 minutes)

Session 1:

For my session on Kadya Molodowsky, I offered biographical and critical background information with help from the following sources:

- The Jewish Women's Archive's encyclopedia entry on Kadya Molodowsky (by Kathryn Hellerstein) offers an excellent overview, as does Kathryn Hellerstein's introduction to *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*, translated by Kathryn Hellerstein (Wayne State University Press, 1999) and Aaron Rubenstein's entry on Molodowsky from the Yiddish Book Center website.
- I also relied on Hellerstein's chapter "Prayer-Poems Against History: Kadya Molodowsky and Malka Heifetz Tussman" in her recent work *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (Stanford University Press, 2014)
- I found the following article very helpful as well: Hellerstein, Kathryn. "'A Word for My Blood:' A Reading of Kadya Molodowsky's 'Froyen-Lider'" (Vilna, 1927)." *AJS Review* 13, No. ½ (Spring-Autumn, 1988), pp. 47-79.
- You may also find the following resource helpful: a teaching guide from the Yiddish Book Center for teaching Molodowsky's El Khanun.

For our close readings, I used a selection of poetry from the collection *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*, translated by Kathryn Hellerstein (Wayne State University Press, 1999). We read the following poems: "Women Poems," "A Street in the Year 1930," "My Paper Bridge," "Alphabet Letters," "Merciful God," and "A Prayer."

Here are some discussion questions for these poems:

"Women Poems":

1. Who is "our family"? Why does she include the reader here?
2. In what ways does she respect or revere these women? How do you know?
3. In what ways does she reject them?
4. Where do you see guilt in this poem? What other emotions characterize the poem?
5. Does the poet mock the idea of blood without blemish? If so, why and how?
6. Consider the image of a "silken thread bound upon my brain"—what Jewish cultural references does this bring up for you? Why do you think she chooses this image?

7. Consider the image of the poet's life as a page torn from a holy book. How is this different from the life as a blank page to be written upon? How is it different from a page still attached to the book? How would you characterize the poet's connection to tradition based on this image?
8. Why is the first line torn?

"A Street in the Year 1930"

1. What is "above" and "below" in this poem? Is she talking about the city, or more than just the city?
2. Why does she describe hats rather than people?
3. How does the Charlie Chaplin-like figure differ from the others encountered in the poem? level of detail in the description? The fact that he is aimless and others seem busy? Anything else?)
4. Who are "all" of the people, and are you surprised that they hear?
5. Why is death only a postscript?
6. What do you think the poem is trying to describe about urban, cosmopolitan life? What is it trying to describe about poverty? Are the two inevitably linked?

"My Paper Bridge"

1. What is the paper bridge and why did the poet construct it?
2. From where does the paper bridge go, and what is its destination?
3. What do its aims tell us about the poet?
4. What did the poet fail to consider in creating the paper bridge, and how does the old woman disrupt her vision or show her the ways in which she was shortsighted?
5. What does it mean, according to the poet, to write poetry while old ladies are in need of shoes?

"Alphabet Letters"

1. Why are the stores "like commandments"?

2. What is the poet is having trouble understanding? The contrast between the dismal market (everyone is bankrupt) and apparent prosperity? The contrast between the foreignness of Hebrew characters and an American context? Her own role in this scene? Something else?
3. Why is her family name "wild and foreign" to her?
4. Which letters (which alphabets) assert belonging, and to whom?

"Merciful God"

1. This poem is in the tradition of Jewish lamentations to God upon destruction. How does it differ from what you know about those lamentations?
2. What is the poet asking for?
3. What Biblical texts does the poet call to mind?
4. In the poem, what does the poet seem to think of God?
5. What is the tone of the poem?
6. What is your emotional reaction to the poem?

"A Prayer"

1. Why does the poet want the Deluge to come again? How is the current situation (the poem is written in 1945) similar to the Biblical situation that provoked the Flood?
2. What does the poet mean by "disgrace"? Why is she feeling this emotion?
3. What do you make of the contrast between the fire imagery (ashes) and the water imagery (Deluge)?
4. Where is God in this poem, and what does the poet think of God?

We also listened to this clip of Molodowsky reciting her poem "El khanun."

Session 2:

For my session on Anna Margolin and Celia Dropkin, I offered biographical and critical background information with help from the following sources:

- The Jewish Women's Archive's encyclopedia entries on Anna Margolin (by Sarah Silberstein Swartz) and Celia Dropkin (by Kathryn Hellerstein)

- The chapter "The Art of Sex: Celia Dropkin and Anna Margolin" in Kathryn Hellerstein's recent work *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (Stanford University Press, 2014)
- Pratt, Norma Fain. "Anna Margolin's *Lider:* A Study in Women's History, Autobiography, and Poetry." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 3 (1983): 11–25
- Hayes, Paula. "The Iron Rod of Desire: Imagism and Modernism in Anna Margolin's *Drunk from the Bitter Truth."* *Women Writers of Yiddish Literature: Critical Essays. Rosemary Horowitz, ed. McFarland, 2015*: pp. 157-179
- Pratt, Norma Fain. "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers, 1890–1940." *American Jewish Histor*y 70, no. 1 (September 1980): 68–90
- Zucker, Sheva. "The Red Flower: Rebellion and Guilt in the Poetry of Celia Dropkin." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 5 (1999), pp. 99-117.

We read the following poems together:

by Anna Margolin:

- The following poems, found in *Drunk from the Bitter Truth: The Poems of Anna Margolin,* trans. Shirley Kumove. SUNY Press, 2005: "Once I Was a Youth," "In the Café (part II)," "On a Balcony," "My Ancestors Speak"
- "The Golden Peacock Has Flown Off, Flown Off" translated by Michael Wex. We also listened to this musical rendition of the poem by the Klezmatics and Chava Alberstein (same link).

by Celia Dropkin:

- "My Mother," translated by Seymour Levitan
- "To a Young Poet" and "The Acrobat," translated by Faith Jones, Jennifer Kronovet, and Samuel Solomon
- "The Red Flower" translated by Sheva Zucker
- For these poems, I included in my handout the original Yiddish from Dropkin's collection *In heysn vint*, available through the Yiddish Book Center website.

Here are some discussion questions for these poems:

"Once I Was a Youth":

1. Here, the persona is notable for what she is not: not female, not Jewish, not modern, not a poet. Why do you think the poet was interested in writing from this perspective?

2. Why/how do you think the poem makes use of homosexuality and incest?
3. The persona has only heard "wild stories" about the Jews, likewise the poet has only heard wild stories about the Greek, Roman, and early Christian past. What does this distance allow her to accomplish or to imagine?
4. Would you characterize the poem as funny? Imaginative? Defiant? What other words would you use to describe it?

"In the Café (Part II)":

1. Who, do you imagine, is the "we" in the café? Is she criticizing this group of people, and if so, why?
2. The idea of pretense in poetry is often associated with bourgeois middle class, and not with people who engage in artistic expression. But here, in the café setting, it seems that it is precisely poets and artists who are critiqued for pretense. What do you make of this reversal?
3. If you were a poet friend of Margolin's, would you be angry at this poem?
4. Is Margolin also criticizing herself? What does that tell you about Margolin's experiences, socially, as a poet?
5. Who does the refrain address, and why?

"On a Balcony":

1. Why is their laughter "hot"? Is it about the strength of their emotions, or is it meant to evoke something about the setting (summer)?
2. Does the women's action of reading a picture book (innocent) stand in contrast to the longing of their touch (taboo), or do you think that something about the picture book inspires this longing?
3. The innocence and tentativeness of the hands touching seems suddenly to be reversed in the passion of their "glowing bodies wildly press"—does the earlier part exist to soften the later part and make it seem more acceptable? Or are the delicate tentative actions In the beginning precipitators of the later passion?
4. Who is the man? A poet writing about them? Someone imposing order and patriarchy?
5. How does his presence change the poem?
6. Is the man funny in this setting? Or threatening? Or both?

"My Ancestors Speak":

1. Does the poet have the ability to speak, or is it only her ancestors that speak through her, silencing her?
2. What could or should the poet say, if she knew her own voice?
3. Each stanza explains a different part of the poet's background, each of which conspire together to silence her. Can you identify the different social/religious groups that she describes?
4. Does the poet respect or resent this past (or both)?
5. The poet gives a lot of attention to the physical details, especially the dress, of each group. Why? Is she suggesting that the groups are superficial because of their interest in the material? Is she suggesting that underneath their differing clothes the ancestors are actually quite similar? Is it about the value of conveying ideas through images?

"The Golden Peacock Has Flown, Flown Off":

1. This is a lullaby, but addressed to a lover rather than a child. How does this upset and surprise conventions? Can you think of any other examples of lullabies to lovers?
2. Margolin uses tropes of Yiddish folklore (The Golden Peacock is like a phoenix, endlessly regenerating and is a symbol for Yiddish culture; the fiddler with the bow is a symbol of Yiddish creativity) but repurposes them for the personal, to discuss the fortunes and loves she experienced with her partner, which have dissipated. Why would she choose these images?
3. What do you make of the progression as she addresses the lover: bright one, tense one, soft one, sad one—is this moving in a particular direction?
4. In the end, the lover appears not to have gone to sleep yet. What could be a next verse that might help him slumber?
5. Does the poet love the addressee? How would you characterize that love?
6. Do you think the poet feels a similar love toward Jewish tradition? (Is this about more than a lover?)

"My Mother":

1. How does the daughter judge her mother's decision not to remarry? Is she sympathetic? Admiring? Critical?
2. What do you think of the image of the "begrudging wax candle"? What relationship does the poet have to Jewish tradition, based on this image?
3. What do you think of the phrase "my mother was never anyone's wife again"—does it make the mother sound independent? Lonely?

4. What is the daughter's inheritance? Is she grateful for it?

"To a Young Poet":

1. The poem is addressed to a female poet. Would the advice be any different for a male poet?
2. What does the poet suggest her protégée do, rather than analyzing things deeply?
3. Why do you think the poet describes love as hell?
4. What does it mean to "acknowledge the death in love"?
5. What sort of love poems do you anticipate will come of such an experience of love?

"The Acrobat":

1. What does the poem tell us about what it means to be a woman? What are the dangers she faces, and what are the pleasures?
2. What do you make of her performance? Do you think she chose to be a performer? Who is her audience?
3. Is the narrator young and beautiful? How would her experience be different if she were not?
4. Why does she want to fall, and why doesn't she?

"Red Flower":

1. Why would a maidenly garden have flowers and a matronly garden have potatoes? What does it mean to go from maiden to matron status?
2. Why is the red flower weeping?
3. Why does the red flower emerge even when it has been ploughed up?
4. What do you make of the contrast between the "tiny slipper" and its boldness?

Session 3:

For my session on Esther Singer Kreitman, I offered biographical and critical background information with help from the following sources:

- The Jewish Women's Archive's encyclopedia entry on Esther Kreitman by Faith Jones
- Norich, Anita. "The family Singer and the autobiographical imagination."*Prooftexts* 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1990): 97–107.

- Sinclair, Clive. Introduction to *Deborah*, by Esther Kreitman. Trans. by Maurice Carr. London: 1983.
- Wisse, Ruth R. *The Modern Jewish Canon: a Journey Through Language and Culture*. New York: 2000.

For our close readings, we read the following:

- "The New World" trans. Barbara Harshav in the anthology *Found Treasures,* Frieda Forman, Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Ethel Raicus, ed. Second Story Press, 1994., pp. 77-83
- Select passages from *Deborah*, by Esther Kreitman. Trans. by Maurice Carr. London: 1983.

Here are some discussion questions we used to guide our reading:

For "The New World":

1. If we see the story of birth as symbolic of Kreitman's view of her entire life, what do you think the story has to say about what Kreitman longs for, and what she receives instead?
2. How would you characterize her relationship with her mother?
3. Is the story funny? Tragic? How else would you characterize it?
4. What does the disappointment in having a baby girl tell you about women's relationships to one another in this context?
5. When is the first time you see a man in the story? What does this tell you about Kreitman's experience of men?

For excerpts from *Deborah*:

Questions for p. 1-2:

1. What major themes does the passage introduce?
    - Resentment
    - Sibling rivalry
    - Longing for learning
    - Gender discrepancy
    - Thwarting tradition
    - Differences between her parents
    - Intellectual loneliness

- Beginnings of depression

2) What do you think of the tone of the story, and how do you anticipate the character will or won't be able to cope in her position?

Questions for p. 8:

3) How would you characterize the relationship between Esther's parents?
4) Why does Raizel resort to feebleness (is it a symptom/symbol of disempowerment? Is it laziness/resignation? Something else?)
5) Why does Reb Avram Ber blame Raizel's father, rather than Raizel herself? Does he bear any blame for the way their relationship functions?

Questions for p. 77:

1. What does it mean for Deborah to resolve to do something she clearly has no power to do?
2. What options do you think could be available to her and why doesn't she avail herself of them?
3. How is her lack of resolve similar or different from her mother's?

Questions for p. 154-155:

1. Do you think Deborah can ever be satisfied? What does she desire?
2. Do you think Deborah is fair to blame her family for her mental anguish?
3. This comes much later in the autobiography—do you see any evidence that Deborah has changed or grown?
4. What do you make of her representation of Michael? Is she jealous, dismissive, both?

Questions for p. 221-222:

1. What kind of control do her parental figures have over her, and what do they lack?
2. Why does she want to make her father-in-law pay? Why not, for instance, her own parents?
3. Is she childish in her attitude toward her parents? Does it feel like teen angst, or something else?

Questions for p. 297-298:

1. What do you think of this as an ending? Why end with war, and with not caring (what do the two have to do with each other)?
2. How, if at all, has Deborah's life changed? What options are left for her?
3. Do you feel sorry for her? Frustrated at her?