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My Mom Drank Ink: The “Little Negro” and the Performance of Race in *Yente Telebende*’s Stage Productions

by Gil Ribak

Abstract: This article examines the representation of Black people in *Yente Telebende*. She was one of the most successful characters in early twentieth-century American Yiddish culture, appearing in comic columns by humorist B. Kovner (pen name of Yankev Adler) in the socialist *Forverts* (1910s-1920s) and in several popular theater productions that the *Forverts* promoted. A recurring character was the friend of Yente’s son, called the “Little Negro/Niger” (ניגער'ל), the only nameless character in Kovner’s sketches. The article revises the historiographical convention, according to which Yiddish culture viewed African Americans as “America’s Jews” and demonstrates how the Yiddish press and theater were immersed in contemporary American racial imagery and vocabulary. Furthermore, the written and performed character of the “little Negro” shows that we should not take at face value much of the ideological line of Yiddish newspapers and their hierarchy between *shund* and “proper” culture, as the same authors commonly produced both.

In the first production of *Yente Telebende* on the Yiddish stage (1917), the character of the “little Negro/Niger” (ניגער'ל) performs a duet with Yente’s son, Pine, in the beginning of the second act, titled, “Washington, Lincoln, and Moshe Rabeiny.” Yiddish lyricist and actor Louis Gilrod wrote the lyrics, where the Black character sings, “I have a good heart just like you/even though I’m a Niger.” Later he sings, “Why am I a Niger child? I’ll tell you now/my mom drank ink/when she was pregnant with me.”¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Yiddish and Hebrew are mine, and I follow the original spelling of Yiddish sources rather than YIVO’s standardized spelling. Y. Adler/B. Kovner, “*Yente telebende: a komedy in 4 akten*” (undated), 21-22, Papers of Jacob Adler (B. Kovner), RG 473, (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), folder 72. In that copy, the names of Joseph Rumshinsky (composer) and Louis Gilrod (lyricist) are not mentioned. See also, Joseph Rumshinsky, Louis Gilrod, and Isidore Lillian, *Yente telebende: vashington, lincoln un moyshe rabeiny and arayn geganen sich aus gedreit* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1916), retrieved from the Library of Congress,

Yente Telebende was one of the most successful characters in early twentieth-century American Yiddish culture. She appeared for two decades in comical sketches by Yiddish humorist B. Kovner (pseudonym of Yankev Adler²) in the *Forverts* (Jewish Daily Forward), portraying the overbearing and nosy Yente, her subdued husband Mendel, and their son Pine. In a milieu where Yiddish papers hurled the term *shund* (trash/pulp/schlock) at their commercial and ideological rivals, critics deplored *Yente* as yet another example of the *Forverts*'s corrupt Yiddish and vulgar pandering to its readers, and blamed Boris Thomashefsky, who adopted the play and produced it in his National Theater in 1917, for exploiting such "dreck."³ Still, the socialist daily — as its longtime editor, Abraham Cahan, a leading figure in the Jewish labor movement and Yiddish culture, wrote — saw *Yente* as a model of healthy proletarian entertainment, and certainly considered the "little Negro" as a way to humanize and endear Black people to Jewish audiences. Indeed, historian Hasia Diner has seen *Yente* as an example of how Yiddish culture "sensed that a special relationship existed between blacks and Jews," and Eric Goldstein has argued, "the Yiddish theater remained free of plays and musical productions lampooning blacks."⁴

This article revisits that view and demonstrates that *shund* (trash/pulp/schlock) culture, which was often much more popular than both official editorials and what contemporary critics viewed as "higher" culture, conveyed different attitudes toward Black people than those presented by the current scholarship. Studies have claimed that Yiddish culture, especially in radical circles but also beyond them, abounded with expressions of sympathy for the plight of Black people. Looking at the representation of Black people in a highly popular comic

<https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200182298/> (Accessed on July 17, 2020), Music Division, Heskes Collection, box 10 – 708. The text is Latinized in this sheet. I am grateful to Gary P. Zola, who sent me a copy of that sheet. On that song, see Gary Phillip Zola (ed.), *We Called Him Rabbi Abraham: Lincoln and American Jewry, A Documentary History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014), 294-296. On the orthography of the term *גיגער*, see below, and in Eli Bromberg, "We Need to Talk about Shmuel Charney," *In Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, October 2, 2019, <https://ingeveb.org/articles/we-need-to-talk-about-shmuel-charney> (accessed on July 17, 2020). On Gilrod's career, see the article by Zalmen Zilbertsvayg, *Forverts*, March 14, 1930: 3, 8.

² One version for Adler's pen name is that the *Forverts*'s longtime editor, Abraham Cahan, joked by giving a Galitsyaner such as Adler the name of a Litvak (Kovno/Kaunas). According to another version, Cahan wanted to erase Adler's real name, under which he previously ridiculed the *Forverts* when working at satirical Yiddish newspapers. Henry D. Spalding (ed.), *A Treasure-Trove of American Jewish Humor* (1976, rev. edition New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1978), 82; Y. Khaykin, *Yidishe bleter in amerike* (New York: Published by the author, 1946), 192. See also, Zalmen Reyzin, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literature, prese un filologye* (Vilna: Kletzkin, 1929), 1: 42-43.

³ On *Yente*'s success among Jewish audiences, see the letters and memoirs in Papers of Jacob Adler (B. Kovner), folders 23 and 27. An example of criticism of Thomashefsky is in *Groyser kundes*, Nov. 23, 1917: 5 (the "dreck" quote appears there); *Tog*, April 27, 1918: 3. In his memoir, composer Joseph Rumshinsky claims that Thomashefsky was only interested in amusing the audience. *Klangen fun mayn lebn* (New York: Biderman, 1944), 503. See also, Henry Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to Our World* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 1999), 84-85.

⁴ See what Cahan wrote about the show in *Forverts*, November 16, 1917: 4; January 20, 1922: 3. Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (1977, reprinted Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 28-88, here especially 67-68. Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 79. Goldstein based his assertion on the findings of Fred Somkin, "Zion's Harp by the East River: Jewish-American Popular Songs in Columbus's Golden Land, 1890-1914," *Perspectives in American History* 2 (1985): 189n18. Cf. Mark Slobin, "From Vilna to Vaudeville: Minikes and *Among the Indians* (1895)," *The Drama Review: TDR* 24 (Sep. 1980): 17-26.

column in the socialist *Forverts* and in theater productions that the *Forverts* proactively promoted shows how absorbed they were in contemporary American racial imagery and vocabulary. Furthermore, the written and performed image of the “little Negro” reveals that one should not take at face value much of the ideological line of Yiddish newspapers and their hierarchy between *shund* and “proper” culture, since the same authors commonly produced both. Recent scholarship has expounded how Yiddish newspapers, including left-leaning papers like the *Forverts*, frequently blurred the lines between ideology and entertainment, making their overall message more complex.⁵

As with its non-radical rivals, a chief concern for the *Forverts* — as well as for the theater productions it promoted — was to entertain its audience and make a profit. The portrayal of the “little Negro” serves as a case study which reflects the dual source of influence on the depiction of Black people in popular Yiddish culture: one was prevalent American culture, with its vaudeville acts, “coon shouting,” “Negro dialect” characters, and minstrelsy.⁶ The other was the representation of Black people as a reincarnation of Eastern European Slavic peasants, the *poyerim/muzhikes*, as they appear in Yiddish folklore with many of their accompanying traits: volatility, coarseness, and mindlessness, together with directness and simplicity. Those influences enabled Yiddish writers to mix the familiar and the exotic, American and Old-Country idioms, in a way that tapped into

⁵ Ellen Kellman, “Entertaining New Americans: Serialized Fiction in the *Forverts* (1910-1930)”, in Paul Buhle (ed.), *Jews and American Popular Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 2: 199-211; Ellen Kemman, “Aiding Immigrant Readers or Entertaining Them? The *Jewish Daily Forward* and its ‘Gallery of Missing Husbands’ (ca. 1909),” in Fruma Mohrer and Ettie Goldwasser (eds.), *New York and the American Jewish Communal Experience* (New York: YIVO, 2013), 1-25; Nina Warnke, “Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization, 1900-1910,” *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996): 321-335. See also, Justin Cammy, “Judging *The Judgment of Shomer*: Jewish Literature versus Jewish Reading,” in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: Essays on Literature and Culture in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 85-127. As late as the 1990s, Yiddish poet and academic, Irena Klepfisz, has argued that mid-19th-century Yiddish works were “still ‘low brow,’ as evidenced by their popularity among the ignorant masses, especially women.” Irena Klepfisz, “Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers,” in Frieda Forman (ed.), *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994), 31.

⁶ One can mention only a fraction of the literature about the portrayal of Black people in American popular culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “Working in the ‘Kingdom of Culture’: African Americans and American Popular Culture, 1890-1930,” in W. Fitzhugh Brundage (ed.), *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-42. Dale Cockrell, “On Soundscapes and Blackface: From Fools to Foster,” in Stephen Johnson (ed.), *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 55-59. M. Alison Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule: Irish, Jewish, and African American Struggles over Race and Representation, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 23, 28, 131-133. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993, 2nd edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 53-58, 102-128, 275-291. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). On the role of Jews in the reproduction of such images as performers and managers, see Pamela Brown Lavitt, “First of the Red Hot Mamas: ‘Coon Shouting’ and the Jewish Ziegfeld Girl,” *American Jewish History* 87 (1999): 253-290. Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 103-114. Michael Rogin, *Blackface/White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 5-6, 16-17, 67-70.

archetypes known to their viewers/readers, while satisfying their appetite for the bizarre and the intriguing.

Dos Pintele unter der Yud: Between נײַגער and נעגער

Before discussing the characterization of the “Little Negro,” it is necessary to examine the terminology at hand, and explain its meaning. Since the early twentieth century, the hateful term “nigger” has become all the more vile as the ultimate anti-Black slur. As writer and Nobel Laureate in literature Toni Morrison commented, the second English word after “okay” that European immigrants uttered was often “nigger.”⁷ Yiddish-language sources used both the terms נעגער, which corresponds to the German *Neger*, or the English “Negro,” and נײַגער, which corresponds to the racial insult. In English, the term Negro was not considered offensive by either Black or white people in the timeframe covered here (1910s-1920s). While the German *Neger* was more offensive than the English-language “Negro,” it was also acceptable until the late twentieth century.⁸

An indication of the level of sensitivity and shame surrounding the use of the “nun-word” involves the literary critic Shmuel Niger (pseudonym of Shmuel Charney). Many scholars have interpreted that pen name as a sign of Charney/Niger’s alleged identification and solidarity with African Americans. The fact that the pseudonym of a single Yiddish intellectual – as important as Shmuel Niger is – has received such scholarly attention demonstrates those scholars’ pressing need to prove the critic’s anti-racist credentials.⁹ The reality seems to be more prosaic. Writing in his diary in 1933, Niger recalled that shortly after his arrival in America (1919), sweatshop poet Morris Rosenfeld paid him a visit. The first question Rosenfeld posed to him was, “What name will I adopt here in the [new] country, since Niger sounds so bad.” In that diary entry, Niger did not refer to the meaning of *Niger*, nor to the reason for changing his last name or any relation to Black people; he just commented on how bad Rosenfeld looked, and speculated that the poet had syphilis, which made him paranoid, megalomaniacal, and insane.

⁷ Morrison is quoted in Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 363.

⁸ On the development of the term “nigger” in English, see Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002); and Jabari Asim, *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 9-11, 77-82. Keith Allan has argued, “Until the late eighteenth century nig(g)er was synonymous with Negro... thereafter and until the second half of the twentieth century the term nigger was essentially a colloquial synonym for Negro.” Keith Allan, “When Is a Slur Not a Slur? The Use of Nigger in ‘Pulp Fiction,’” *Language Sciences* 52 (2015): 188. See also, Johnnetta B. Cole, “Culture: Negro, Black and Nigger,” *Black Scholar* 1 (June 1970): 40-44. On the term *Neger* in German, see Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9-10. Timothy L. Schroer, *Recasting Race after World War II: Germans and African Americans in American-Occupied Germany* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2007), 92.

⁹ The most extensive discussion of this question is in Eli Bromberg, “We Need to Talk about Shmuel Charney,” *In geveb* (October 2019). See also Melnick, *Right to Sing the Blues*, 98-102, 235n15; Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times: A Documentary Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 327. Other sources are mentioned in Bromberg’s article.

Apparently, Niger heeded Rosenfeld's advice, as his letterhead in the 1920s featured the name "S. Niger" in Yiddish and "S. Charney" in English.¹⁰

To a certain extent, it seems that Yiddish sources used נעגער and ניגער interchangeably, since at times both spellings appeared in the same text, and even referred to the same person. Thus, the moderate and mild-tempered *Yidishe velt* (Jewish World), which was established by cautious established Jews, had a frontpage headline on September 2, 1902 that read "14 shot by a Niger," while the subtitle read, "A murderous Neger besieged by 20 policemen." The *Forverts* had a 1912 front-page headline, "Niger beats to death an old woman," yet the news item featured the spelling "Neger" more than "Niger." When the *Forverts* eulogized in 1922 the death of the Black comedian Bert Williams, it still mostly used the spelling "Niger" when lamenting "the tragedy of many comedians, and especially of Niger actors who play on Broadway." The reason is that "the vulgar audience in America is used to watch on the stage only comic Nigers." The Orthodox daily *Morgen zhurnal* (Morning Journal) reported on the 1912 convention of the Republican Party, describing a "Niger delegate from Kentucky," but when quoting his statement, it mentioned "the Neger delegates."¹¹

Nevertheless, the terms "Neger" and "Niger" were not completely interchangeable. It is noteworthy that in Eastern Europe, Yiddish writers and periodicals hardly used "Niger" and opted for "Neger" or "Shvartse." Eli Rosenblatt has shown that Ayzik Meir Dik, a popular Yiddish author and translator of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Yiddish, never used "Niger." In my search of the Historical Jewish Press website, I did not find a single "Niger" in Eastern European Yiddish periodicals from the 1860s through 1929, with the exception of Yiddish critic Shmuel Charney's pen name.¹² Moreover, the use of "Niger" was often utilized for sensationalist, comic, or crime-related news items, while "Neger" was reserved for more serious discussions, such as the "Negro question" or the "Negro problem." Therefore, Yiddish

¹⁰ Niger's diary entry, August 27, 1933, 224-225, in Papers of Shmuel Niger, RG 360 (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), box 113, folder 3057. His letterhead in the 1920s appears in many collections of correspondence. See for instance, in the Papers of Yisroel-Yankev (I. J.) Schwartz, RG 649 (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), folder "Letters from S. Niger."

¹¹ There are many examples of both נעגער and ניגער used in the same news item, at times describing the same person: "A shrekens nakht," *Forverts*, Aug. 24, 1900: 1; "Villen nit varten oyfen gezets," *Forverts*, Nov. 1, 1901: 1; "A Niger gelyntsht," *Forverts*, March 11, 1902: 1; "Niger dershlogt alte froy tsum toyt," *Forverts*, Oct. 20, 1912: 1; "A Niger vet zingen yidish in bronzvil," *Forverts*, Feb. 14, 1918: 2; "In di amerikaner teyater," *Forverts*, March 17, 1922: 3 (Williams). On Williams, see Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last 'Darky': Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). "14 geshosen fun a Niger," *Yidishe velt*, Sep. 2, 1902: 1. On that paper, see Lucy S. Dawidowicz, "Louis Marshall's Yiddish Newspaper, *The Jewish World*: A Study in Contrasts," *Jewish Social Studies* 25 (1963): 102-132. See also, "A vilder Neger," *Yidishe velt*, Aug. 19, 1903: 1. "Vayse un Negers halten milkhome," *Morgen zhurnal* (hereafter *MZ*), Aug. 8, 1907: 8; "Root elektet tsherman fun der konvenshon," *MZ*, June 19, 1912: 1; "Meshugener Neger toytet fier menshen in shikago," *MZ*, July 19, 1916: 5. "Ermordet fun a Niger," *Yidishes tageblat* (hereafter *YT*), Jan. 19, 1906: 1; "Dr. Theodor Herzl's filozofishe felitonen, skitsen, un noveleten: Fun vin biz budapest," *YT*, June 15, 1919: 8. "Zeks froyen patshen a Niger," *Varhayt*, Oct. 14, 1907: 2; "Niger befalt a maydel," *Varhayt*, Oct. 20, 1908: 5; "Yid ermordet fun a Niger," *Varhayt*, March 4, 1912. "Regirung shikt militer eyntsushтелен rasen-rayots in omaha," *Tog*, Sep. 29, 1919: 1. See also, Gil Ribak, "Negroes Must Not Be Likened to Jews': The Attitudes of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants toward African Americans in a Transnational Perspective," *Modern Judaism* 37 (October 2017): 271-296.

¹² The Historical Jewish Press website is a joint project of the National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University, <https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/newspapers/jpress>.

newspapers featured headlines such as “A 19-year-old Niger shoots his young wife in cold blood,” “A rabbi stabbed by a Niger,” “Crazy Niger shoots 2 people,” “Crazy Niger stabs 2 men,” “A Niger stabs a white girl,” “A Niger kisses also the white bride,” or “A Niger bandit stabs three Jews.” On the other hand, while there were several articles with the headline “The Niger question,” a more common pattern was “the Neger question.”¹³

The important question is whether Yiddish writers knew about and understood the difference between “Negro” and “Nigger,” or if they remained oblivious to it. It would be quite difficult to determine to what extent the Yiddish *readership* was aware of such a difference; in respect to Yiddish writers and intelligentsia, nonetheless, there is much evidence to demonstrate they knew well what each term signified, and the social-cultural differences between them. As early as 1890, a Lower East Side Jew by the name of Shmuel Nehemia Liebowitz complained in a letter to the New York Hebrew periodical *Ha-Pisgah* (“The Summit”) about Jews who frequented a vaudeville showplace called Grand Museum. There they watched a regular skit that presented an anti-Jewish stereotype of a Jewish storeowner on Baxter Street, who flatters a Black customer, yet after the customer leaves, the Jew pokes his tongue and calls out after him “nigger!” In 1906, the daily *Varhayt* (Truth), established by Louis E. Miller a year earlier as an independent socialist paper, emphasized the dissimilarities between Jews in Russia and Black people in the American South; it put “Niger” in quotes as an offensive term used by Southern whites. In 1909, the weekly *Yidishe bine* (Jewish Stage) reported on “Negroes” (Negers), who protested against the Broadway show *The Nigger* by Edward Sheldon. The report mentioned that “the play itself is just friendly toward the Negroes,” but the protesters came out “against the title of the play, ‘the Niger’, which is offensive to them.”¹⁴

¹³ Rosenblatt is quoted in Bromberg, “We Need to Talk about Shmuel Charney,” n.40. See also, the annotated translation of Dik’s introduction by Eli Rosenblatt, “Slavery or Serfdom,” *In geveb* (November 2015), <https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/slavery-or-serfdom>. Emily Miller Budick has claimed, “schwartzter is the Yiddish word Jewish Americans use to refer, usually condescendingly, to blacks.” *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14. The headline “A 19-year-old Niger shoots his young wife in cold blood” is in *Forverts*, Sep. 29, 1897: 1; “A rabbi stabbed by a Niger,” *Forverts*, July 5, 1899:1; “Crazy Niger shoots 2 people,” *Forverts*, Oct. 11, 1911: 8; “East-Side Jew murdered by a Niger in the west,” *Forverts*, Aug. 9, 1915: 1; “Crazy Niger stabs 2 men,” *YT*, Sep. 15, 1921: 7. See also news reports that included, “A wild Niger jumps from a corner with a revolver in his hand,” *YT*, March 20, 1907: 10; another “wild Niger” who shot people at a church in Tampa, Florida, *MZ*, July 17, 1910: 4. See also headlines such as “Wild Niger holds up in forest,” *MZ*, June 3, 1913: 1; “A Niger stabs a white girl,” *Morgen tsaytung*, March 12, 1906: 8; “A Niger kisses also the white bride,” *Varhayt*, Sep. 22, 1907: 1; “Jew murdered by Niger,” *Varhayt*, March 4, 1912: 1; “A Niger bandit stabs three Jews,” *MZ*, Nov. 26, 1909: 7. Examples of discussions of the “Negro question” (either in the headline or the text) are in *MZ*, Nov. 1, 1906: 5; *Forverts*, July 7, 1914: 2; *Varhayt*, Nov. 20, 1916: 3; *Tog*, July 19, 1917: 5.

¹⁴ *Ha-Pisgah*, April 4, 1890: 2. *Varhayt*, Sep. 24, 1906: 4 (the editorial was probably written by Miller). *Di yidishe bine*, Dec. 10, 1909: 2. Other examples are in Bromberg, “We Need to Talk about Shmuel Charney,” On Grand Museum, see Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61-62. On Miller and *Varhayt*, see Khaykin, *Yidishe bleter in amerike*, 175-195, 218-231; and Ehud Manor, *Louis Miller and Di Warheit (“The Truth”): Yiddishism, Zionism and Socialism in New York, 1905-1915* (Brighton, UK: Sussex University Press, 2012). On Sheldon’s play and subsequent movie, see Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 215-222. On the concept of intelligentsia in the context of Yiddish culture, see Delphine Bechtel, “The Russian Jewish Intelligentsia and Modern Yiddish Culture,” in Michael Berkowitz (ed.), *Nationalism, Zionism, and Ethnic Mobilization of the*

More telling in the context of *Yente Telebende* and the *Forverts* is what Abraham Cahan wrote in his notes when covering the Leo Frank trial in Atlanta (1914). Frank, a Jewish pencil factory supervisor, was arrested and found guilty of the murder of his employee, a teenage white girl. As he was analyzing the letters sent by the initial prime suspect, a Black janitor named Jim Conley, Cahan noted that Conley referred to a Black man as “a ‘Negro’, a word used by intelligent people. The common Black says ‘Niger,’ not ‘Negro.’” In his serialized novel, “Where Is Your Child,” published by the *Forverts* in 1923, Yiddish playwright and poet Zisl Kornblit remarked parenthetically, “In the South people always call the Black man ‘Niger’, both to his face and behind his back. But when they want to flatter him a little, instead of ‘Niger’ they say ‘the colored man’, or the ‘colored race.’”¹⁵ The spelling ניגער (“Nigger”), however, remained quite rare, and might suggest awareness of its offensiveness. In this article, ניגער is transliterated as “Niger” in order to stay as close as possible to the Yiddish source and is capitalized since it denotes a racial/ethnic group.¹⁶

The First Stage Production, 1917

Yente became a regular feature in the *Forverts* from 1914 through the mid-1930s, even though its frequency declined after the mid-1920s. Whereas Kovner used an existing Yiddish term “Yente” for an old-fashioned woman, he cleverly played with the verb “telebenden zikh,” which literally means to dangle/wobble, yet figuratively, “telebenden zikh in kop” suggests someone who is clueless. With her opinionated tongue-lashing and crude behavior, the name Yente soon became an everyday term in American Yiddish, denoting a busybody, old-fashioned, loud-mouthed woman, and superseded the similar term “Yakhne.” Since the Yiddish used by Yente and her family was heavily laced with English words, critics attacked Cahan and Kovner for bastardizing Yiddish, and the term “yentish Yiddish” came to depict a vulgar type of anglicized Yiddish. A 1925 cartoon in the left-leaning satirical Yiddish weekly *Der*

Jews in 1900 and Beyond (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 213-226; and Irving Howe, with the assistance of Kenneth Libo, *World of Our Fathers* (1976, reprinted New York: Schocken, 1989), 15-20.

¹⁵ Cahan’s quote appears in his autobiography, *Bleter fun mayn lebn* (New York, Forward Association, 1931), 5: 569 (quotes in the original). Cahan explained that he had many notes remaining from 1914 (when he covered the trial), which he used for his autobiography. Zisl Kornblit’s novel is in *Forverts*, May 16, 1923: 6 (parentheses and quotes in the original). On Frank’s innocence and Jim Conley’s letters in the context of the trial, see Steve Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 390-400, 414-417, 430-437, 612-613, 644-649; and Leonard Dinnerstein, “The Fate of Leo Frank,” *American Heritage* 46 (1996): 98-107. See also, Eugene Levy, “‘Is the Jew a White Man?’: Press Reactions to the Leo Frank Case, 1913-1915,” *Phylon* 35 (1974): 212-222. On another piece by Kornblit, see Gil Ribak, “‘Beaten to Death by Irish Murderers’: The Death of Sadie Dellon (1918) and Jewish Images of the Irish,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32 (Summer 2013): 52. See the spelling “Nigers” in B. Vladeck’s short sketch about Cincinnati, “Tsum tayvl,” in Yephim Yeshurun (ed.), *B. Vladeck in leben un shafen* (New York: Forverts Association, 1936), 227.

¹⁶ For the spelling “nigger,” see *Der vorshteher* (“The Representative”) of St. Louis, which prided itself “The greatest Jewish daily west of New York City,” Nov. 16, 1908: 1; Dec. 14, 1908: 1. In “We Need to Talk about Shmuel Charney,” Bromberg argues that “the one gimel spelling of ניגער [might have] influenced some Yiddish speakers to spell the English slur with one ‘g.’” Amelia Glaser transcribed ניגער as “Nigger” in “From Jewish Jesus to Black Christ: Race Violence in Leftist Yiddish Poetry,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 34 (2015): 49-50. On the capitalization of Black and Negro, see Nancy Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>.

groyser kundes (The Big Stick) showed a caricature by Saul Raskin, where Yente, who looks like a female Abraham Cahan, is holding a “yentish spelling” rolling pin, and threatens the Yiddish language (a young woman) with it. The detractors’ rebuke notwithstanding, *Yente* became a household character among Yiddish audiences. Author and musician Henry Sapoznik found that between 1916 and 1929, Yiddish vaudeville teams wrote, recorded, and performed almost one hundred records, which put Yente in various situations: “Yente Telebende Runs for Mayor,” “Yente Telebende Hates the Men,” etc.¹⁷

With *Yente*’s huge success, it was only a question of time until it would be performed on the Yiddish stage. In October 1917, Boris Thomashefsky’s National Theater (on Second Avenue and Houston Street) announced that it would produce a show based on Yente and her family. Some of the reports mentioned that Kovner sold Thomashefsky a “four-act comedy,” and by November 1917, the Yiddish press published advertisements for the new theater show, naming Kovner as author and Thomashefsky as the one who adapted it for the stage. Several ads also mentioned Joseph Rumshinsky as the composer. Bine Abramovitsh played Yente, while Lili Kestin played Yente’s son, Pine. As for the always-nameless “little Niger,” who is among Pine’s best friends, one “Miss Winters” was mentioned, though often her name did not appear in the advertisements. The show premiered on November 16, 1917, and ran for about five weeks.¹⁸

Most of the Black kid’s role takes place in the first two acts. At the start of the first act, he teaches Pine how to play the drums. At the beginning of the second act, the audience watched Pine and the “little Niger” perform the duet “Washington, Lincoln, and Moshe Rabeiny.” Before the duet, the Black kid comes to Yente’s home to call for Pine. As Pine is still asleep, Yente wakes him up, and soon he and his friend start a duet. Pine and the Black kid sing together the first four lines in English: “Eeny-meeny-miney-mo/catch a Niger by the toe/if he hollers let him go/eeny-meeny-miney-mo.” Then the song continues as follows:

Niger [in Yiddish]: Forget that my skin is black/and don’t be too clever/I have a good heart just like you/even though I’m a Niger.

Pine [in a wordplay on the verb *farshvartsn*, which means both “blacken” and “suffer/miserable”]: In America, my friend/you’ve been already for many years/therefore you seem to me/so blackened (miserable).

¹⁷ On the meaning of Yente’s name, see Alexander Harkavy, *Yidish-english-hebreyisher verterbukh* (1928, reprinted Amherst, MA: National Yiddish Book Center, 1999), 106, 255, 528; cf. Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary* (1968, first Schocken ed., New York: Schocken, 1977), 585. Sapoznik, *Klezmer!*, 84-85. After Adler’s death, the *New York Times* translated Yente Telebende as “loquacious battle-ax.” Jan. 1, 1975: 15. The caricature and others that lambasted Cahan’s Americanized, “plain” Yiddish are in Joshua A. Fishman (ed.), *Never Say Die! A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1981), 444, 519, 670. On Saul Raskin’s art and politics, see Matthew Baigell, *Social Concerns and Left Politics in Jewish American Art, 1880-1940* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 54-56, 62, 69-73, 213. See also, Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 529-533; and Seth Lipsky, *The Rise of Abraham Cahan* (New York: Nextbook/Schocken, 2013), 35-38, 100-101.

¹⁸ The announcements on the upcoming stage production and ads are in *Forverts*, Oct. 12, 1917: 3; *Forverts*, Oct. 26, 1917: 3; *Forverts*, Nov. 16, 1917: 3-4; *Tog*, Nov. 3, 1917: 4; *MZ*, Nov. 7, 1917: 7; *MZ*, Nov. 22, 1917: 7; *Varhayt*, Nov. 13, 1917: 6; *YT*, Nov. 14, 1917: 6.

Niger: Why am I a Niger child? I'll tell you now/my mom drank ink/when she was pregnant with me.

Pine: You are Black and I am white/we whites are alright/the white man can be everything/he can even become a policeman.

Niger: The Niger can dance and make fun/the Niger can gobble up watermelon/the Niger can shoot crap with dice/the Niger can make goo-goo eyes.

Pine: We whites are at the helm/we take pride in George Washington.

Niger: The greatest man of all great people/is Abraham Lincoln who liberated us from slavery.

Pine: Definitely, definitely, it's not bad/you're really so right/but tell me Black fella, is there among you such a noble man as Moshe Rabeiny?

Together: Washington, Lincoln and Moshe Rabeiny/these are the honorable, beautiful names/the names will forever, forever live/because freedom they have given/and the whole Jewish people ought to appreciate and love endlessly/always and all the time/a teaching they gave us in a red, white and blue.¹⁹

It is highly likely that none of the viewers contemplated the lyrics or tried to read between the lines. After all, the stage production of *Yente* was meant to provide light, popular entertainment, and for seasoned theater figures such as Louis Gilrod, who wrote the lyrics, Joseph Rumshinsky, who wrote the music, and Boris Thomashefsky, who incorporated the song into the show, the main goal was to entertain the viewers and sell as many tickets as possible. The racial stereotypes in *Yente* were milder in comparison to contemporary American popular culture, with its racist depiction of Black youths as “pickaninnies,” the imagined tattered Black juveniles who are mostly outdoors, ready for any kind of fight or mischief while gorging on watermelons. *Yente* does not stumble into all of those racist pitfalls, as it celebrates the friendship of Pine and the Black kid, the abolition of slavery, and America's freedom.²⁰ It is

¹⁹ Y. Adler/B. Kovner, “Yente telebende: a komedy in 4 akten,” 21-22; Joseph Rumshinsky, Louis Gilrod, and Isidore Lillian, *Yente telebende: vashington, lincoln un moyshe rabeiny and arayn geganen sich aus gedreit*. Randall Kennedy has mentioned the pervasiveness of the “Eeny-meeny-miney-mo” as a children’s rhyme in *Nigger*, 15-16. See also Ribak, “Negroes Must Not Be Likened to Jews,” 279-280.

²⁰ On the characterization of Blacks in American popular entertainment in those years, see Ribak, “Negroes Must Not Be Likened to Jews,” n.6. On Pickaninnies, see Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 34-35, 49-55. On the commercialization and lowbrow character of the Yiddish theater in America, see Bernard Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishen teyater* (New York: Max N. Mayzel, 1918), 2: 9-10, 203ff; Joel Berkowitz, “This Is Not Europe, You Know: The Counter-Maskilic Impulse of American Yiddish Drama,” in Edward S. Shapiro (ed.), *Yiddish in America: Essays on Yiddish Culture in the Golden Land* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 135-165; Nina Warnke, “The Child Who Wouldn’t Grow Up: Yiddish Theater and Its Critics,” Joel Berkowitz (ed.), *Yiddish Theater: New Approaches* (Oxford, UK: Littman, 2003), 201-216. Faina Burko, “The American Yiddish Theater and Its Audience Before World War I,” in David Berger (ed.), *The Legacy of*

unquestionable that Cahan, who championed an idiosyncratic blend of Americanism, rudimentary socialism, and traditional Jewish motifs, viewed the characterization of the “little Niger” as positive. In promoting the show, Cahan praised Kovner’s comedic talent as “a great treasure. It is surely important for readers, who toil hard and barely enjoy life.” Cahan mentioned different characters, including the “little Niger,” who entertain “hundreds of thousands of people [who] get down to Yente’s skit every Shabes with a big smile.”²¹

All the same, the lyrics reveal deeply-embedded racist attitudes that correspond with the stereotypical pickaninny, and situate Jews and Blacks as diametrically opposed. Even as the song acknowledges Black people’s centuries-long suffering, applauds the abolition of slavery, and mentions they could be good-hearted, it jokes about Black physical traits. More importantly, on one level the song parades many of the common racist tropes of the time, such as watermelon eating, black skin and ink drinking, and hints at Black people’s alleged oversexed attributes (“goo-goo eyes”).²² On another level, the song affirms the purported superiority of white people, stresses Jews’ whiteness, and sets them and Black people apart as mutually exclusive categories. The rhetorical question of whether there is a Moshe Rabeiny among Blacks cements the idea of Jewish cultural superiority. All that occurs in a show where the Black kid is the only nameless character, where effacement strengthens the racial stereotype.

Apart from the reference to the biblical Moses and its idolization of Jewish history and pride, the song also alludes to a biblical verse that deals with skin color. The Black kid sings, “forget that my skin is black,” which corresponds with the verse “I am dark, but comely...Don’t stare at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has gazed upon me” (Song of Songs, 1: 5-6). Even though those verses are not about

Jewish Migration: 1881 and Its Impact (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1983), 85-96; David S. Lifson, *The Yiddish Theater in America* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965), 44-51; Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); and Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902, reprinted New York: Schocken, 1965), 118-135.

²¹ Cahan’s review is in *Forverts*, Nov. 16, 1917: 4. On Cahan’s own ambivalence toward Blacks, see Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn lebn*, 5: 356-357, 384-385, 389, 428; and Ribak, “Negroes Must Not Be Likened to Jews,” 277-278. On Cahan’s mixture of Americanism and socialism, see Moses Rischin (ed.), *Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), xvii-xlii; Gil Ribak, *Gentile New York: The Images of Non-Jews among Jewish Immigrants* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 62, 82-83; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 537-543; Gennady Estraiikh, *Transatlantic Russian Jewishness: Ideological Voyages of the Yiddish Daily Forverts in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 8-10, 98-105, 113-116; Ronald Sanders, *The Lower East Side Jews: An Immigrant Generation* (formerly titled *The Downtown Jews* in 1969, corrected edition published in 1987, reprinted Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999). Historian Maxine Schwartz Seller has claimed the *Forverts* was “nominally socialist” in her article, “The Uprising of the Twenty Thousand: Sex, Class and Ethnicity in the Shirtwaist Makers’ Strike of 1909,” in Dirk Hoerder (ed.), *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 268. See also, Ehud Manor, *Forward – The Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts) Newspaper: Immigrants, Socialism and Jewish Politics in New York, 1890-1917* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

²² On “goo-goo eyes,” minstrelsy, and racial hatred, see Bill Doggett, “#Black Lives Matter: The Intersections of Early Recorded Sound 1900-1901, Race and Racial Terror,” *bdoggett55: Blog at Wordpress.com* (June 4, 2020), <https://bdoggett55.wordpress.com/2020/06/04/black-lives-matter-the-intersections-of-early-record-ed-sound-1900-1901race-and-racial-terrorin-memory-of-tulsa-1921-to-george-floyd-2020-by-bill-doggett/> (accessed on Jan. 26, 2021). On Jewish adoption of white, mainstream vocabulary, see Andrew R. Heinze, “‘Is It ‘Cos I’s Black?’ Jews and the Whiteness Problem,” *David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs* (2007), <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/jm214q935>.

Black Africans, they do convey an esthetic judgment of skin color, namely preference for light-colored skin. Whereas the biblical text is ambivalent, and could possibly suggest that black skin and beauty are not oppositional, later Jewish commentators, such as the authoritative interpretation by eleventh-century rabbi and scholar Rashi (acronym of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) were more damning. The towering rabbinical authority of Ashkenazi Jewry, Rashi read the above verses as the story of a woman whose husband neglected her since she became too suntanned, and therefore black and ugly. Building on Rashi's contemporary, Rabbi Joseph Kara (who also lived in modern-day France) asked, "if she is black, how can she be comely?" answering it, "Even though I'm black – I'm comely, since I can adorn and spruce myself up." By 1917, many, if not most, Jewish viewers knew little about those interpretations, though the biblical verses were fairly known. The song in *Yente* played on such associations – despite the color of his skin, the Black kid has a good heart; yet that skin color puts him at an inferior starting point, especially when compared to Jews like Pine, who are white.²³

By the end of 1917, *Yente's* regular shows at Thomashefsky's National Theater were over. To be sure, the show's commercial success did not ensure critical acclaim. Critics from the *Forverts's* competitors, such as *Di varhayt* and the nonpartisan and liberal daily *Der Tog* (the Day) denigrated the show as *shund* to belittle a production that was promoted by their commercial and ideological rival. Labor Zionist educator and journalist Yoel Entin attacked the show, and advised that if there were still "real intelligent and idealistic people" at the *Forverts*, they should "go to the National Theater and beam with joy at the kind of audience their newspaper draws." While acknowledging the show's great success, Entin wrote that although *Yente's* "curses and ideas" were funny and may be suitable for vaudeville, watching them for four acts "is simply unbearable." A few weeks later, Entin was happy that the "worthless 'Yente Telebende'" was off the stage. Writing in *Der Tog*, Yekhezkl Vortsman attacked the show as poorly written and unfunny, and especially focused on Kovner: if the latter had any respect for Yiddish literature and theater, "he would have been ashamed to show his face on stage." Vortsman claimed that even as a vaudeville act, the show was a failure. Still, Vortsman praised Miss Winters's performance as the Black kid as "excellent."²⁴

Critical scorn notwithstanding, *Yente's* success and popularity brought about piratic Yiddish stage productions with the title *Yente Telebende* in Baltimore and

²³ The biblical translation is in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1567. The rabbinical references to the verses from *Song of Songs* are in the editions of the bible called *Mikra'ot gedolot*, which included Aramaic translations and biblical commentaries by prominent medieval rabbis. See text and commentary available on *Mikrot Gedolot HaKeter*: <https://www.mgketer.org/tanach/30/1/5> (accessed on October 21, 2021). For a discussion of those verses from *Song of Songs*, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 79-82. Cf. Abraham Melamed (who quotes Rashi), *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 43-47. See also, Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 37-38, 76.

²⁴ Entin wrote in *Varhayt*, Dec. 5, 1917: 5; *Varhayt*, Dec. 30, 1917: 7. Vortsman wrote in *Tog*, Dec. 1, 1917: 4; *Tog*, April 27, 1918: 3. Deeply hurt, Kovner replied to Vortsman, claiming that he saw how Vortsman kept laughing throughout the show with the whole audience, and lying like that was "dishonorable." *Tog*, Dec. 6, 1917: 5. On Entin's attitude toward African Americans, see Ribak, "Negroes Must Not Be Likened to Jews", 283. On the establishment of the *Tog*, see Khaykin, *Yidishe bleter*, 231-240; and Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 545-549.

Toledo, Ohio. While Boris Thomashefsky took legal action (January 1918) against the Toledo production, one of the actors there was none other than Louis Gilrod, the original lyricist of “Washington, Lincoln, and Moshe Rabeiny.” *Yente’s* success led Thomashefsky to show it also at various cities in Massachusetts in June 1918.²⁵

Whereas Kovner kept the character of the “little Niger” as fairly marginal in the gallery of characters which populated the written skits in the *Forverts*, it seems that the first stage production increased the Black kid’s visibility. In January 1920, Kovner published a humoristic column dedicated to the Black kid, which discloses how he conceptualized not only that particular character, but also Black people in general. Kovner claimed that he received many letters from readers asking him why he refrained recently from mentioning the Black kid. Kovner replied, “the little Niger is no small matter! With what didn’t he assist Pine? He helped him in all his ventures: when Pine wanted to break window panes, tug at the beards of Jews, pelt Jewish women with ‘snowballs’, prevent Jewish girls from walking through the street... in all those various ventures the little Niger was Pine’s partner.” Kovner teased his readers about the whereabouts of the Black kid: “Is he alive? Is he dead? Or maybe he has grown up and a ‘mob’ of white Americans lynched him?” Kovner then proceeded to tell what really happened to the kid: his family pulled him out of school and he went to look for a job. He managed to find a job at a large printing factory, but within days, a machine chopped off three of his fingertips.²⁶

Despite such a grim development, Kovner assured his readers that the Black kid is now doing better than ever. One day, Pine brought home a handbill that advertised “a real Negro who sings in plain Yiddish both folksongs and cantorial things” in a Brownsville hall, where the revenues were dedicated to Jewish victims of war and pogroms. That ad left the whole family in shock, and Kovner complains, “A strange thing! Our own children can’t speak any Yiddish, and a Negro child sings Yiddish tunes.” When the family went to see the Black kid on stage, the hall “was packed with mostly old Jews” and the kid really showed “he’s skillful in Jewish things.” He started out by singing Yiddish favorites “Oyf’n pripetshik” and “A brivele der mamen,” and ended with the cantorial classic “Eli, Eli.”²⁷ When Kovner penned this text, African American singer Thomas La Rue (who was also known as Thomas La Rue Jones) had already become an attraction among Jewish audiences, especially in Brooklyn, where he appeared as “Tevye der shvartser khazn” (Tevye the Black Cantor), or just “Der shvartser khazn.” Just like the Black kid in Kovner’s skit, La Rue sang before booked concert halls an assortment of Yiddish classics, both secular and cantorial, ending with “Eli, Eli.” By early 1920, La Rue appeared at the Liberty

²⁵ On the Baltimore production, see *Forverts*, Dec. 14, 1917: 3. On the show in Toledo, see *Varhayt*, Jan. 12, 1918: 8; *MZ*, Jan. 25, 1918: 2. The advertisement for the Massachusetts shows is in *Tog*, June 2, 1918.

²⁶ Kovner’s piece is in *Forverts*, Jan. 17, 1920: 10 (quotes in the original).

²⁷ *Forverts*, Jan. 17, 1920: 10. On the relief efforts in New York for Jewish sufferers in the aftermath of the Great War, see Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York 1880-1939* (1997, reprinted Detroit: Wayne State University, 2001), 161-189. On the popularity of the above Yiddish songs, see Victor R. Greene, *A Singing Ambivalence: American Immigrants between Old World and New, 1830-1930* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2004), 68-71; Ruth Rubin, *Voices of a People: Yiddish Folk Song* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1963), 273-274, 347; and Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (1982, reprinted Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

Theater (Brownsville) as a “great attraction,” and later he would become a regular feature in the second stage production of *Yente Telebende*.²⁸

Kovner’s characterization of the Black kid is quite revealing. More than just signaling a different race and culture, the “little Niger” symbolizes the American environment, the crude American street with its pranks, vulgar behavior, and even violence. More than a pickaninny, the Black kid is the quintessential *sheygets*, a term that means not just a rascal Gentile boy, but also a misbehaved Jewish kid. In an earlier skit, Yente complains that she expected Pine to become better, and stop socializing with the Black kid. Yet Pine has become even worse: “the street has more influence over the local kids than the parents. A word from the little Niger is for him, Pine that is, much holier than my word.” Even when the Black kid is “Judaized” by his Yiddish singing and knowledge of prayers and cantorial canon, the narrative serves as a comic ploy of contrast, in a “man bites dog” manner; though his Yiddish is better than most Jewish kids, a key premise behind the logic of the story is how amusing it is to witness a Black person using Yiddish.²⁹

Puzzlingly, in a socialist daily which was committed to racial equality and devoted much space to condemning lynchings and white racism in the strongest terms, Kovner’s jokes seem odd, if not callous. His questions about the disappearance of the Black kid, whether he was dead, or lynched by a white mob, were published only a few months after the “Red Summer” of 1919, when lynchings peaked and race riots broke out in over thirty cities across the country. The gap between the *Forverts*’s ideological commitment against racism and Kovner’s jokes appears jarring; it is important to bear in mind, however, that *Yente Telebende* sketches normally carried the subheading “*shtiferay*” (mischief/pranks). As entertainment, they constituted a separate genre, with much more artistic license (for commercial purposes). That attitude was to continue in the second stage production of *Yente*.³⁰

²⁸ On La Rue’s career, see Henry Sapoznik, “Thomas La Rue Jones: The Black Cantor” (July 21, 2020), <https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/thomas-la-rue-jones-the-black-cantor> (accessed on Jan. 17, 2021). Nahma Sandrow has written that LaRue “began his Yiddish career in the successful musical comedy *Yente Telebende*, produced in 1917 at Boris Thomashefsky’s National Theater” in her article, “Popular Yiddish Theater: Music, Melodrama, and Operetta,” in Edna Nahshon (ed.), *New York’s Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 73. I found no mention of him in the 1917 production, and it seems that Sandrow has conflated the first (1917) and the second (1921-1922) theater productions of *Yente Telebende*. Advertisements for the “great attraction,” the Black Cantor at Liberty Theater are in *MZ*, March 19, 1920: 13; *Forverts*, Feb. 14, 1918: 2; *Forverts*, March 21, 1920: 17; *YT*, March 26, 1920: 14. See a feuilletton by S. Rubinson (Shimshen Erdberg) that spoofed the Black cantor. *YT*, June 28, 1920: 4.

²⁹ The earlier skit is in *Forverts*, Sep. 20, 1919: 3. On the imagery of the *sheygets* in Yiddish folklore, see Nakhum Stutchkov, *Der oytser fun der yidisher shprakh* (New York: YIVO, 1950), 168, 619-620, 668. Yudel Mark, “A zamlung volksfarglaykhen,” *Yidishe sprakh* 5 (1945): 99-140. Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 17. On the relationship with *shkotsim*, see I. J. Singer, *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer* (New York: Matones, 1946), 38, 48-50, 72, 179, 205-224; Shneyer Yafe, *Epizodn fun mayn lebn* (Boston: By the author, 1953), 24, 26-27; and Morris Rosenfeld, “Mayn shoten un ikh,” *Shriftn fun Morris Rosenfeld* (New York: Literarishn ferlag, 1908), 3: 70-76. In certain contexts, *sheygets* could also be a term of endearment.

³⁰ On the Yiddish press’s strong condemnations of lynching and race riots, see Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, especially 38-44. See also, Glaser, “From Jewish Jesus to Black Christ,” 44-69. On the social effects of lynching, see Amy Louise Wood, “The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77 (May-September, 2018): 757-788. On the “Red Summer” of 1919, see Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2011).

The Second Set of Stage Productions, 1921-1922

The earliest second stage production of *Yente* premiered in October 1921. The production showed on weekends at the Lyric Theater in Brownsville and featured the Black cantor (La Rue) who sang in Yiddish and Hebrew as a special feature. The historian of the Yiddish theater and critic B. Gorin (pen name of Yitskhok Goydo) commented in late October that the new production included “certain modifications” of the first production, and now it turned into a “musical comedy.” While he criticized the acting as “strongly exaggerated” and attacked the quality of the songs’ lyrics, he mentioned that the Black cantor caused the “biggest furor” in the show. After less than two months, the show moved to the Lenox Theater in Harlem, where most of the cast changed. Betty Jacobs played *Yente*, Simon Wolf played Mendel, and Diana (Dina) Goldberg played Pine. The actor who played the Black kid remained William Hughes, who had performed the same role in the Lyric Theater production. Jacob Jacobs was credited as lyricist, and Louis Cohen as composer of the show’s twenty songs. With advertisements that promised “20 singing numbers, 100 laughs per minute,” the show at the Lenox was the most successful and longest-running production of *Yente*. It premiered on December 23, 1921, and ran there until mid-March 1922, when the theater’s previous contractual commitments necessitated ending the show. While the Lenox Theater argued that its production was “brand new,” it seems that it mostly followed the production at the Lyric with a different cast. Afterward the show had short stints at the Liberty Theater in Brownsville (April 1922), and Thomashefsky’s theater (May 1922). A sequel titled, “*Yente Telebende in the Next World*,” penned by Kovner as well, opened at the Lenox in December 1922, but ended some two weeks later.³¹

On their part, all the theater managers and show promoters argued that their production was entirely new in reference not only to *Yente*’s first production (1917), but also to the one at the Lyric Theater (October-December 1921). A common and novel feature to all the productions in 1921-1922, including the sequel, was La Rue, who appeared in the third act, but advertisements and reviews usually described him as a special guest, or an “extra treat.” All reviewers favorably mentioned La Rue’s performance, and the audience’s enthusiasm about it. Abraham Cahan commented that the Black cantor came on during the last act, sang in Yiddish and Russian “exactly as it was at the Lyric Theater,” and that “you can really admire him.” Another important change was that the 1917 show included four acts, whereas all the 1921-1922 productions had three acts.³²

Did the performances of La Rue reveal that “a special relationship existed” between Black people and Jews? As Kovner joked in 1920, the spectacle of a Black man singing cantorial classics in Yiddish still seemed out of place to a degree that created amusement. As late as May 1920, the *Forverts* itself published a cartoon in

³¹ For announcements about the show, see in *MZ*, Oct. 7, 1921: 6; *MZ*, Oct. 21, 1921: 4. *YT*, Nov. 15, 1921: 7. Gorin wrote in *MZ*, Oct. 31, 1921: 7. See a feuilleton that ridiculed Abraham Cahan’s enthusiastic focus on the show while there were pogroms in Ukraine, Arab attacks in Palestine, strikes and hunger at home. *Tog*, Nov. 24, 1921: 5. Abraham Cahan mentioned that Hughes remained as the Black kid in *Forverts*, Jan. 20, 1922: 3. An example of an ad that promised many songs and laughs is in *YT*, Dec. 30, 1921: 13. The promise about a “brand new” show is in *Forverts*, Dec. 17, 1921: 7. On the unsuccessful sequel, see *Forverts*, Jan. 12, 1923: 3. Sporadic showings of *Yente* occurred in the 1920s; see for example in *Forverts*, June 29, 1923: 3.

³² The “extra treat” is in *MZ*, Dec. 21, 1922: 8. Reviews of La Rue are in *MZ*, Oct. 31, 1921: 7 (Gorin); *Tog*, Jan. 13, 1922: 3 (B. Y. Goldstein); and *Forverts*, Jan. 20, 1922: 3 (Cahan).

its satirical section titled, “Both are singing...” which juxtaposed a Jewish cantor who sings bareheaded from Verdi’s opera “Aida” and “the Negro wears a yarmulke and sings ‘Eli, Eli.’” Therefore, it was “a topsy-turvy world.” The Black man in the cartoon, with a gaping mouth and grossly caricatured Black features, was none other than Thomas La Rue; that description changed more than a year later, when the *Forverts* began promoting La Rue and became invested in his performance as part of *Yente Telebende*. In March 1922, the *Forverts* portrayed La Rue in a much more dignified and esthetically pleasing manner.³³

Furthermore, it is quite probable that many audience members believed La Rue was not Black, but actually a Jew in blackface. In April 1922, the manager of Liberty Theater in Brownsville, William Rolland, told that many people came to him, “willing to bet that the Negro cantor is no Negro but rather a disguised Litvak.” Rolland sought to assure the public that La Rue is “a real Negro, even though he sings and speaks with such a tasteful Lithuanian accent.” Rolland warned the public not to be “fooled into betting that the Negro is not a Negro at all.” In 1923, popular Yiddish humorist Tashrak (pen name of Yisroel-Yoysef Zevin) published a feuilleton that spoofed the Litvak-cantor-in-blackface story: he told of a friend of his from Kapule (Kapyl/Kopyl, the birthplace of S.Y. Abramovitsh, known after one of his literary creations as Mendele Mokher Sforim) who went to America, became a cantor, but later took the position of an opera singer. When the narrator and his family went to see him at the opera, they hardly recognized him, as he was “black as dirt.” One family member said he had to be in blackface, since he sang “Othello.” Still, the storyteller believed, “the goyim are those who blackened him/made him suffer in such a way.”³⁴

While La Rue’s singing took place at the end of the show, how did the 1921-1922 productions portray the “little Niger” (William Hughes)? It is clear that those shows included more songs than the 1917 production, even though the play was shortened to three acts. Whereas Jacob Jacobs was credited as lyricist, and Louis Cohen as composer of the show’s songs, the Yiddish theater was notorious for using lyrics and music without giving credit to the original authors. In his review of the show, Abraham Cahan mentioned a duet between Pine and the Black kid: each of them stands in his own box above the stage, and they “take turns singing” to Yente, who is dancing and singing below them on the main stage. That setup resembles “Washington, Lincoln, and Moshe Rabeiny” from the 1917 production.³⁵

The papers of B. Kovner (Jacob Adler) at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research shed some light on the content of the 1921-1922 shows. In addition to a

³³ The quote and reference to the cartoon are in Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 67-68. The cartoon on the left is in *Forverts*, May 16, 1920: 5. The cartoon on the right is *Forverts*, March 31, 1922: 3. The cantor (“Samson”) in the cartoon on the left was probably Meyer Kanewsky (Kanewsky), who did perform at the Manhattan Opera House. See *Musical Courier: Weekly Review of the World’s Music* 81 (July 1, 1920): 24, 31.

³⁴ Rolland is quoted in *MZ*, April 21, 1922: 8. On Rolland’s career in the Yiddish theater, see “William Rolland,” *Brooklyn Jewish Historical Initiative*, <https://brooklynjewish.org/william-rolland-and-his-million-dollar-theatre/> (accessed on Jan. 24, 2021). Tashrak’s feuilleton, “Naye tsayten – naye strashunkes” is in *Minikes peysekh blat* (1923), 19-20. On Tashrak’s career, see Gil Ribak, “Reportage from Blotetown: Yisroel-Yoysef Zevin (Tashrak) and the Shtetlization of New York City,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 50 (Fall 2020): 57-74.

³⁵ Cahan’s review is in *Forverts*, January 20, 1922: 3. See also the song by Jacob Jacobs and Louis Cohen, *Yente Telebende and Pine, the Candy Kid* (New York: Goldberg and Jacobs Amusement Co., 1922), <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200185609/> (accessed on Jan. 24, 2021).

copy of a play, “Yente Telebende: A Comedy in 4 Acts,” which corresponds to the 1917 production (including the duet “Washington, Lincoln, and Moshe Rabeiny”), the collection contains a play titled “Mendel Gets Rid of Yente,” copyrighted on February 18, 1922. That play seems to be the basis for the 1921-1922 shows, since it introduces Pine’s sister, Sadie, who is a main character only in the later productions. In addition, Pine and the rocks he throws (see below) are mentioned in another song from that production. In that play, the most substantial dialogue between Pine and the Black kid appears in the second act, in English (written as a Yiddish text, whereas Pine and Sadie speak Yiddish to each other) as follows:

Niger: Hello Pine! Where was you all the time?

Pine: I was busy, very busy.

Niger: Busy? You’re too much busy. I’m afraid you don’t care for me anymore.

Pine: Black fella, what are you talking about? You are still my best friend. Here, see what I’ve prepared for today [shows some rocks].

Niger: Gee, that’s good. We’ll make business, come on.

Sadie [Pine’s sister]: Tell me also what is it?

Pine: I have a new business. Mike, the Italian, who fixes broken panes, made a deal with us that I and my Black fella will go ahead and break windows. Afterward he’ll come around with his pushcart and panes and fix them.

Sadie: And what happens if they catch you?

Pine: Not me and not him. Come on Niger.³⁶

Just as in other writings by Kovner, the Black kid in this context represents the outside world’s intrusion into the immigrant Jewish family, and the vulgarizing and rough effect of the American street on Jewish children. It is hardly coincidental that Pine and the Black kid are in cahoots with “Mike, the Italian,” representing another low-status group in American society; despite growing cooperation in the labor movement, early twentieth-century Yiddish sources often associated Italians with violence and crime.³⁷ At the same time, the Black kid is a good and loyal friend, who

³⁶ The song that mentioned Pine as a rock thrower is Jacob Jacobs and Louis Cohen, “Yente Telebende and Pine, the Candy Kid.” The dialogue is in the Papers of Jacob Adler (B. Kovner) (YIVO), folder 72, typed copy of “Mendel vert poter fun yenten,” 6. Folder 73 contains another version of the 1917 play, but it is only three acts, and omits the duet about Washington, Lincoln, etc. In the same folder there is a typed copy of the play with the duet’s lyrics crossed out by a blue highlighter line (pp. 21-22). As the 1917 production ran as a four-act show, the song was included in it, and it is unclear whether the song was cut altogether, or moved elsewhere in the 1921-1922 productions.

³⁷ On Yiddish sources’ description of Italians, and later viewing Italians and Blacks as potential allies, see Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 83-86, 180-185. Cf. Rudolf Glanz, *Jew and Italian: Historical group Relations and the New Immigration* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971), 9-11. See also, the comments by Rudolf Glanz and Lawrence Fuchs in Jean A. Scarpaci (ed.), *The Interaction of Italians and Jews in America: Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Conference of the American Italian*

remains courteous toward other members of the Telebende family. In that respect, his character parallels American literature's trope of the Black friend, perhaps best known from Mark Twain's character of Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where a main theme is the clash between racial prejudice and individual judgment based on behavior.³⁸

The portrayal of the Black kid combines two sources of stereotypes that were well known to both Yiddish writers and their audience. One of them was a common feature of Yiddish folklore and culture in the Old World, while the other one was unmistakably American-bred. Old-World imagery facilitated the casting of Blacks (alongside other groups, such as the Irish³⁹) as America's embodiment of Eastern Europe's Slavic peasantry, the *poyerim/muzhikes*, whom Yiddish folklore often characterized as coarse, physical, dim-witted, and volatile. The Black kid's mischiefs, such as breaking window panes, tugging at the beards of elderly Jews, and harassment of Jewish pedestrians, are the trademarks of the prototypical *sheygets*, who, in blessed America, joined forces with a Jewish lad. Nonetheless, the characteristics associated with the peasantry in Yiddish folklore were not one-dimensional; the Peasant's simplicity, directness, and no-nonsense approach were sometimes more desirable traits than Jewish nervousness, talkativeness, and sophistry. The Black kid symbolizes negative influence over Pine, but he shows loyalty and directness when dealing with the Telebende family.⁴⁰

Beyond Yiddish folklore, adaptations into Yiddish of American and European literature that circulated in Eastern Europe, which dealt with Blacks, strengthened their similarity to the peasantry. When the first modern best-selling Yiddish author,

Historical Association (Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1975), 101, 107-108; and Richard Juliani and Mark Hutter, "Research Problems in the Study of Italian and Jewish Interaction in Community Setting," in Scarpaci (ed.), *The Interaction of Italians and Jews in America*, 43-52.

³⁸ On Twain and that motif, see Janet Holmgren McKay, "'An Art So High': Style in the Adventures of *Huckleberry Finn*," in Louis J. Budd (ed.), *New Essays on Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 61-81; and Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 225-270.

³⁹ The question of Jewish attitudes toward low-stratum/low-status Gentiles is beyond the scope of this article. On the Irish, see Ribak, "Beaten to Death by Irish Murderers," 41-74. Cf. James R. Barrett and David R. Roediger, "The Irish and the 'Americanization' of the 'New Immigrants' in the Streets and in the Churches of the Urban United States, 1900-1930," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24 (2005): 3-33. On Jewish attitudes toward lower-class non-Jews in general, see Ewa Morawska, "A Replica of the 'Old-Country' Relationship in the Ethnic Niche: East European Jews and Gentiles in Small-Town Western Pennsylvania, 1880s-1930s," *American Jewish History* 77 (1987): 27-86; David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophes in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 163-172; David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 45-46; and Israel Bartal, "Non-Jews and Gentile Society in East European Hebrew and Yiddish Literature 1856-1914," *Polin* 4 (1989): 53-69.

⁴⁰ Studies of Yiddish folklore and its relation to perceived peasant traits are by I. L. Cahan, *Der yid: vegn zikh un vegn andere in zayne shprikhverter un rednsortn* (New York: YIVO, 1933), 25-32. Nakhum Stutchkov, *Der oytser*, 167-168. Mark, "A zamlung volksfarglaykhen", 102-103, 113. See also B. Borokhov, "Di oyfgaben fun der yidisher filologye," in Sh. Niger [Shmuel Charney] (ed.), *Der pinkes* (Vilna: B.A. Kletskin, 1912-1913), 11. Dov Sadan, *Ka'arat tsimukim* (Tel Aviv: Mordecai Newman, 1952), 395-411. Chaim Schwartzboym, "Yisrael ve-'umot ha-'olam be-'aspaklariyat ha-folklor," *Yeda-'am* 15 (1971): 56-61. Israel Steinberg, *Mi-ma'ayan ha-khokhma shel 'am yisrael* (Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz, 1962), 80-81. See also, Amos Funkenstein, "The Dialectics of Assimilation," *Jewish Social Studies* 1 (1995): 1-13; and Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 12-18.

the Vilna maskil Ayzik Meir Dik, published in 1868 his reworking of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Black characters were cast as peasant-like. In a travel novel that Dik published in 1868, *Di vistenay zahara* (The Desolate Sahara), he showed the influence of European descriptions of Africans: the main character, a French Jew, ridicules a local African girl, "with your black faces you all look like apes versus us." When Jewish enlighteners in Eastern Europe translated texts that advocated the abolition of slavery, there are no indicators that those Jewish authors and translators viewed the situation of slaves, Black and others alike, as equivalent to the status of Jews in Europe; they usually shared the European and American writers' belief that Black people were inferior in their morals and intellect.⁴¹

The second source of stereotypes was unequivocally American. Black people did not look like Eastern European peasants nor the Irish. No less important, the Yiddish theater in America operated in a cultural environment that was saturated with imagery of Black physicality and alleged negative traits. The references to ink and skin color, gobbling up watermelons, and "goo-goo eyes" characterized many of the minstrelsy and vaudeville characters; Yiddish writers repackaged them, and rendered them suitable for the tastes and sensibilities of Jewish audiences. In that context, the Black kid could remain nameless, a racial stereotype in and of itself; Pine could sing about Jews as whites, who are superior; and Kovner could joke whether the Black kid grew up to be lynched.⁴²

It is important to note that such jokes and racial typecasting, whether by Gilrod and Kovner (writers), Thomashefsky (who adapted the play and produced it), or Cahan (who praised the character of the "little Negro"), did not reflect any systematic set of beliefs about race or Black-Jewish relations. *Yente's* columns and stage productions sought commercial success and popular approval, even though Kovner's response to a critic shows his conviction that he was writing high-quality satire. All of the above-mentioned figures assumed that such vocabulary and imagery would draw and entertain Yiddish-speaking audiences – and they certainly met that goal. Those racial characterizations and references demonstrate how Yiddish culture was deeply embedded in American mass culture rather than serving as a buffer against its pernicious effects.⁴³

Bearing in mind that they were products of their time, it is noteworthy that the performances of Blackness, especially in the later productions of *Yente*, were

⁴¹ Ayzik Meir Dik, *Di shklaveray oder di laybeygenshaft* (Vilna: Romm, 1868). Dik, *Di vistenay zahara* (Vilna: Romm, 1868), 21-24. See also, Eli Rosenblatt, "Enlightening the Skin: Travel, Racial Language, and Rabbinical Intertextuality in Modern Yiddish Literature" (Ph.D. Diss., Graduate Theological Union and the University of California-Berkeley, 2017), xviii-xix, 8; Rebecca Wolpe, "From Slavery to Freedom: Abolitionist Expressions in Maskilic Sea Adventures," *AJS Review* 36 (2012): 60-70; and Iris Idelson-Shein, *Difference of a Different Kind: Jewish Constructions of Race during the Long Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 85-89. An excellent overview of the genres of premodern Yiddish literature is in David G. Roskies, "The Genres of Popular Yiddish Literature, 1790-1860," *Working Papers in Yiddish and East European Jewish Studies* 8 (Feb. 1975): 1-30.

⁴² Unlike the common argument that minstrelsy declined after 1900, Susan Gubar has shown its continued and profound effect on vaudeville, musicals, and movies well into the twentieth century. *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴³ Kovner's angry reply to Vortsman is in *Tog*, Dec. 6, 1917: 5. For scholars who view Yiddish culture as such a buffer, see Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 153-154; and Merle L. Bachman, *Recovering "Yiddishland": Threshold Moments in American Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 126.

relatively moderate. After all, the *Forverts* was not just the largest-circulating Yiddish newspaper in those years, but also espoused a firm line against racism, and especially against racist violence. In addition, as most socialists, Cahan and his coeditors tended to view their readers as backward and in dire need of enlightenment. The dictum of “writing/speaking to ‘Moyshe’” — that is, writing in a folksy way to the average, lowbrow Yiddish reader — was one of Cahan’s main skills, and contributed much to the paper’s success. It also fed Cahan’s rivals — for whom labeling certain works as *shund* was often more motivated by dynamics of competition than by considerations of the actual literary or ideological merit of a work — who argued that much of his journalism was *shund*, which dumbed down the readers. A 1913 cartoon in *Der groyser kundes*, for example, shows “Moyshe” as a donkey who reads the popular *Bintl briv* (A Bundle of Letters) section.⁴⁴

If the *Forverts*’s socialist character did not prevent it from venturing into lowbrow entertainment, non-politically committed/affiliated Yiddish publications, theaters, and writers had even fewer ideological compunctions about the portrayal of Black people. In the same month that *Yente* premiered at the Lyric Theater in Brownsville (October 1921), the Second Avenue Theater in Manhattan opened its successful comedy titled *Hello Shmendrik*, written by William Siegel with music by Joseph Rumshinsky. It featured an unnamed “vaudeville Negro,” who had a small role as a bootblack. That Black actor, though, had a special talent — he could knock his head against the floor, and then spin on it. That scene turned out to be the show’s greatest attraction, and critics such as “Yisroel der yankee” (Yisroel Friedman), scoffed at the play, which “pushed in a Niger,” and even more so sneered at the “valued, praiseworthy, beloved Jewish public that goes mad over such ‘exalted art.’” Friedman noted sarcastically that “an overturned Niger” was “the highest level that the Yiddish theater lived to see in forty years!” The *Forverts*, which promoted *Yente* at the same time, was quick to lambast *Hello Shmendrik* and what it saw as that show’s racism. In a column signed by “A Theater Patriot” (playwright Berl Botvinik), the writer admitted the huge success of “the Niger who dances on his head.” He joked that as “the Niger is the bigshot of the play.” Rumshinsky and the theater manager, Joseph Edelstein, were “both anxious that the Niger would forget to show up for his performance.” But as they did not really know how he looks, and since to them “all Negroes...have the same face,” they go out to the street, “and when they spot a Niger, they run after him and shout, ‘hey, don’t forget to come to the show.’ In each Niger they see only one. It seems to them that this is their Niger, their precious treasure of ‘Shmendrik.’”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The cartoon is in *Groyser kundes*, April 25, 1913: 1. Similar cartoons ridiculing Cahan’s relationship to Yiddish and his readership appear in Fishman (ed.) *Never Say Die!*, 444, 519, 670. On the *Forverts*’s strong condemnation of racism, see Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 32-50. On speaking to “Moyshe,” see Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 69-124; and Lipsky, *Rise of Abraham Cahan*, 100-101. See also, Milton Doroshkin, “Yiddish Socialist Press in New York, 1880s-1920s,” in Dov-Ber Kerler (ed.), *The Politics of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Literature, and Society* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 80-81. Isaac Metzker (ed.), *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Schocken, 1971).

⁴⁵ The actor’s depiction as “vaudeville Negro” is in *Unzer teyater*, Oct. 1, 1921: 30. Friedman wrote in *YT*, Oct. 21, 1921: 7 (quotes in the original). The “Theater Patriot” wrote in *Forverts*, Nov. 11, 1921: 3 (quotes in the original). A feuilleton in *Tog* claimed there was a competing show, “Shmendrik in Brownsville,” which had three Black actors singing and looking more respectable than the original show’s Black actor. *Tog*, Nov. 29, 1921: 5. Interestingly, in 1929 William Siegel wrote (March 2, 1929) to Kovner, telling him that he saw *Yente* beforehand at the Lenox Theater, and asked Kovner about

Looking at *Yente* as well as other productions reveals a crucial lacuna in the existing scholarship about Yiddish culture and its treatment of Black people (not just African Americans). Within the vast scholarship about Black-Jewish relations, there seems to be a near consensus when examining the description of Black people in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Yiddish culture. Most scholars have argued that the Yiddish press repeatedly condemned discrimination and prejudice against African Americans and highlighted the similarities between the situation of Jews in Europe and Black people in America. News items and editorials applied the terms “pogrom” and “blood libel” when covering race riots and lynching, while the white assailants were often described as bloodthirsty pogromists. Therefore, those scholars, such as Hasia Diner, have claimed, “Blacks seemed, in the eyes of Yiddish writers, [like] America’s Jews.” Historian Michael Alexander has written about Jewish identification with Black people, since Jews purportedly identify “with people more marginalized than themselves.”⁴⁶

Yet those scholars have looked at an ideologically tilted facet of Yiddish culture. It is not coincidental that in his pioneering study, “The Negro in Our Literature” (1945), Yiddish poet and critic Yitskhok Rontsh did not include a single work of what was considered *shund*. Despite its popularity, critics and scholars have often treated such lowbrow culture as not worth exploring. Looking at the wider field of Yiddish culture, and especially its most popular works – however foolish, abysmal, and lewd critics believed them to be – would reveal an altogether different picture. There was a gap (at times a scathing gap) between the sincere condemnation of lynchings, white racism, and racial segregation on the one hand, and the ways in which Yiddish writers, newspapers, and the Yiddish theater represented Black people, on the other. When analyzing a lowbrow 1895 Yiddish play, ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin has aptly recognized not only “The brash language, racial stereotyping, and crass commercialism” of that piece, but also that it “is not an anomaly.”⁴⁷

The case study of *Yente* is merely one example of tremendously popular Yiddish culture – theater, pulp fiction, and newspapers – that strove for commercial success by appealing to the tastes of its audience. The dual source that affected the portrayal of Black people – Old-World Yiddish folklore about the peasantry and

turning it into a movie (“מופנינג פיקטשערס”), Papers of Jacob Adler (B. Kovner), folder 23. The term “Shmendrik” made its way into Yiddish via Avrom Goldfaden’s 1877 operetta by that name. See Alyssa Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 52, 99.
⁴⁶ Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 36-50, 74-76 (the quote is on p. 74); Diner, “Between Words and Deeds: Jews and Blacks in America, 1880-1935,” in Jack Salzman and Cornel West (eds.), *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 87-106. Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8, 181-182. A similar argument can be found in Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 17-30; Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 80-81; Steven Hertzberg, “Jews and Blacks,” in Maurianne Adams and John Bracey (eds.), *Strangers & Neighbors: Relations between Blacks & Jews in the United States* (Amherst, MA, 1999), 248; and George Bornstein, *The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews, and Irish From 1845 to 1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 71-72, 126-127. Philip S. Foner has claimed (inaccurately) that the Yiddish press paid “little attention” to African Americans. “Black-Jewish Relations in the Opening Years of the Twentieth Century,” *Phylon* 36 (1975): 362n18.

⁴⁷ Y. E. Rontsh, “Der Neger in unzer literatur,” *Amerike in der yidisher literatur* (New York: Rontsh bukh komitet, 1945), 203-255. Slobin, “From Vilna to Vaudeville,” 18. See also, Chone Shmeruk, “Le’toldot sifrut ha’shund be’yidish,” *Tarbitz* 52 (1983): 325-354.

American performance of Blacks in minstrelsy and vaudeville — suited well the purpose of Yiddish writers, editors, playwrights, and theater managers. Whereas scholars have romanticized Yiddish culture and viewed it as resistance to the cruder forms of Americanization, popular Yiddish culture proved to be part and parcel of American urban culture and was fully immersed in American vocabulary and imagery of race.⁴⁸ The performance of race in *Yente* illustrates how large areas of Yiddish culture remain understudied or unstudied altogether and offer promising directions for future research.

⁴⁸ See for example, Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 204, 495-496; Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 153-154; and Bachman, *Recovering "Yiddishland"*, 126.