

“On account of you I have no translator!” Michael Chabon
and Cynthia Ozick’s Literary Conceptions of Intergenerational Yiddishlands

By

Ethan Calof

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

December 12, 2020

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Dr. Jennifer Fay

Dr. Anthony Reed

To my ancestors, and the rest of my Yiddish *mishpocheh*

Your sacrifice is my courage

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I. Introduction

In Jeffrey Shandler's seminal text *Adventures in Yiddishland*, he reports on the "widespread notion that [Yiddish] is moribund" (177). Yiddish has been seen as a dying or diminished language for hundreds of years, as inevitably about to go extinct, with even thinkers during the early twentieth century's golden age of Yiddish predicting its demise (178). Yet despite a common rhetoric of Yiddish as a dying language, it is not in imminent danger of disappearing. Ultra-orthodox Haredi Jewish communities use Yiddish as their everyday language, and many of them are growing in population (Soldat-Jaffe 55). A 2014 estimate from Netta Avineri says that between 200,000 and 500,000 people speak Yiddish worldwide (18). It has many organizations dedicated to its preservation and perpetuation, including well-funded initiatives in Israel, a nation historically hostile to Yiddish's existence (Kuznitz 197). It is in no danger of "no one [speaking] it any more" (11), which is how David Crystal defines language death in his seminal book of the same name. The idea of a fully extinct language is a language where nobody has any level of ability to communicate in it, a language with no archive. Yet despite all of this, the specter of Yiddish's imminent extinction has persisted throughout Jewish cultural production. In her 1969 novella "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," Cynthia Ozick's poet narrator Hersh Edelshtein writes, "To speak of Yiddish was to preside over a funeral. He was a rabbi who had survived his whole congregation. Those for whom his tongue was no riddle were specters" (34). Michael Chabon's 2007 counterfactual novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* takes a similar tone. The novel tells the story of the Yiddish-speaking residents of an alternate world Sitka, Alaska, a temporary Jewish settlement doomed to imminent dismantlement at the hands of the American government.

The task force responsible for this change is called the “Burial Society”; as Chabon narrates, they have “come to watch over and prepare the corpse for interment in the grave of history” (55). Nearly forty years apart, the two novels wrestle with a similar idea: that Yiddish is on the verge of its own demise, more relevant for corpses than for living beings, and threatened by external and internal forces. Both Chabon and Ozick showcase the Yiddish language as in a state that could be best described as always-almost-dead. Both texts treat Yiddish death, as Avineri has termed it, as a “phenomenological reality” (21-22). This state is highlighted by the fact that both *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* and “Envy” are written by American Jews in the language of their home country: English.

While reflection on a potential evaporation of Yiddish is well-worn territory, it cannot exist independently of broader discourses on language and extinction. In the late twentieth and twenty-first century, various ways of life are being dismantled: linguistic cultures are being lost, animal species are being herded out of their original homelands by industrialization, massive state-building projects such as America are putting vulnerable populations in danger of disappearing. One key concept in extinction studies, the “dull edge of extinction,” comes from Thom van Dooren’s 2014 *Flight Ways*. He defines it as “a slow unraveling of intimately entangled ways of life that begins long before the death of the last individual and continues to ripple forward long afterward, drawing in living beings in a range of different ways” (12). He uses *khurbn* testimony to tell the stories of various bird species which are threatened in various ways by accelerationist practices, whether albatrosses whose babies are born deformed due to plastic ingestion or cranes whose migration patterns are threatened by power lines. His core concept: extinction is a process rather than a single event. An animal is on the edge of extinction far before the

death of the final member of the species. By paying testimony to this extinction process and presenting them as narratives, van Dooren argues, one can “participate in [the world’s] becoming” (10), helping to shape a newly connected, newly collaborative world and impact the preservation of a species or elongation of its existence. A potential Yiddishist preservationist response or way around this dull edge of extinction comes from *Adventures in Yiddishland*, which posits the Yiddish postvernacular. In Shandler’s estimation, Yiddish is no longer the familial language of most Ashkenazi Jews, yet it still bears immense symbolic value as a heritage language and symbol of a struggle for survival (14). He sees the postvernacular of Yiddish as residing within the tradition of other post- movements, building on the history of Yiddish as a less valued vernacular language and manifest in all sorts of cultural possibilities, whether translations or *tchotchkes* (20, 28-29). This is an inherently preservationist response to the diminishing number of secular Yiddish-speakers: it shifts the locus of Yiddish from discrete diasporic communities to an imagined space where Yiddish is used as a signifier of meaning.

“Envy” and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* are both texts that comment on Shandler’s concept of the Yiddish postvernacular. Both imagine a world about to squander its connection to Yiddish, and depict the anxiety of the Yiddish-speakers who will be forced to survive in its wake. “Envy” tells the story of Edelshtein, an aging Yiddish poet without an audience. He believes that the sole reason behind his lack of audience is his inability to find a translator for his work. As the title suggests, Edelshtein lives in a state of jealousy, particularly toward his contemporary Yankel Ostrover, a Yiddish fiction writer who enjoys both audience and translators, and a man who Edelshtein believes has less talent than him and speaks a less pure version of Yiddish.

Through the course of the novella, Edelshtein grows more and more toxically desperate for a translator who never comes, as external and internal forces demonstrating the insufficiency of him, his art, and his language increasingly besiege him. He becomes obsessed with Hannah, a young woman able to translate his work, yet she soundly rejects him. He ends the story broken, bitter, abused and abusive, and screaming in a telephone booth. There is no place for him in New York, 1969, whether within the Jewish community or outside of it. He, and his language, are homeless. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* combines science fiction, alternate history, and noir to discuss the conclusion of the Sitka colony as a Yiddish space. In Chabon's imagination, the state of Israel collapsed in 1948, leading to the nascent Alaskan space as the centre of global Jewry and home of Yiddish. The protagonist, Meyer Landsman, is a cop who is weeks away from no longer being a cop. He, his partner Berko Shemets, and the entire department will be made redundant upon Alaska's reclamation of Sitka, which the novel calls the "Reversion." His final case connects his personal sense of hopelessness to a broader Jewish existential anxiety: the mysterious death of Mendel Shpilman, a member of the Verbover crime family who had once been heralded as a potential Messiah.¹ While attempting to solve Shpilman's death, he uncovers a vast conspiracy between Jewish religious extremists and the evangelical Christian American government to destroy the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and install a new Temple in its stead. The endgame would have been the dawning of a new Messiah; Shpilman's death is found out to be an act of mercy preventing him from being forced into that role. The novel ends on an ambiguous and uncertain note, with Landsman unsure of his role in the fall of Sitka and the reader unsure

¹ The Hebrew term for this, which is used in-text, is the Tzaddik ha-Dor.

on whether or not he exposes the Messianic conspiracy. Like Edelshtein, Landsman is facing the homelessness of his language and his culture.

There has been ample critical conversation on “Envy” and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, though none placing the two books side by side. Yet I find pairing the two texts to be deeply intuitive, as both offer commentary on the responsibilities of diasporic Jewish people under the auspices of an over-encroaching America. Many critiques of “Envy” centre around its depiction of Jewish identity in the American diaspora, and the responsibilities of present and future generations to Jewish futurity. An example is Janet Cooper, who writes on the triangular relationship between Ozick’s three primary characters: Edelshtein the anti-assimilationist who strives to protect Yiddish at all costs, Hannah who rejects the history of the language and seeks to divorce herself from the Jewish history of trauma, and Ostrover, who uses the language of Ashkenazi history to “dance” between the roles of Jew and Gentile. A core tension at play in scholarship of “Envy” is whether Yiddish is a liberatory force and touchstone of Jewish uniqueness or a hallmark of Jewish demise. Kathryn Hellerstein writes, “While in prewar Europe the vernacular of the Jewish Diaspora spread Herzl’s ideas for building a Jewish homeland, in postwar America, Yiddish silences the last of its poets” (40). Hana Wirth-Nesher takes a different tone, describing Yiddish in “Envy” as an act of possibility and statement in favour of particularity. She argues, “It invites readers to acquire words from an unfamiliar culture, rather than serving up the illusion of an equivalent” (142).

Analysis of *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* has been more voluminous, despite the novel being published decades later. Like with “Envy,” many articles discuss Jewishness in America, with particularly emphasis paid on what the rise and fall of the

Sitka colony represents. Several of these pieces focus on the *eruv*, a ritual wire or string boundary used to establish precisely which part of an urban area is Jewish that features heavily in the worldbuilding of *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*. Barbara Mann discusses the ability of a Jewish community to arise even in a place as historically inaccessible to Jewish people as Alaska, writing, "Just as "you can tie a circle around pretty much any place and call it an eruv," it turns out a similar principle applies to the creation of Jewish collective space" (137). Daniel Anderson goes a step further, using the eruv to highlight the complicated relationship between physical space and Jewish diasporic identity. He writes, "The eruv is simultaneously imaginary and real. While occupying real physical space, it divides that same social space along ideological lines and, subsequently, it becomes a space of multiple meanings" (87). Sarah Phillips Casteel focuses on the contested claims to the space from the Yiddish-speaking residents and the Sitka colony's initial inhabitants, the Tlingit. By creating a Jewish space in Alaska, Chabon's Jews are dispossessing an Indigenous group, "emphasizing that for the most part, his characters have not learned the lesson of diaspora²" (797). For all three of these scholars, Sitka is a chance to examine whether Jewishness in America "works," and how the unfamiliar space changes how Jewish people conceive of diaspora. Like with "Envy," Jewish identity and Jewish futurity in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* are a negotiation.

What strikes me about both the commentary on the two works and the works themselves is their conflation of "the Jewish" and "the Yiddish." It's a natural move.

² The "lesson of diaspora" is outlined earlier in Casteel's article, and is taken from scholars Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin. To quote the Boyarins via Casteel: "Diaspora can teach us that it is possible for a people to maintain its distinctive culture, its difference, without controlling land, a fortiori without controlling other people or developing a need to dispossess them of their lands" (796).

Yiddish translates in Yiddish to Jewish, and within the Yiddish language there's very little differentiation between the two blocs. It can be hard to deliberately distinguish between the two. To these writers and scholars, Yiddish's demise says something about broader Jewishness in these stories. Hannah not speaking Yiddish indicates a disconnection from her identity. The Yiddish-speaking colony in Sitka collapsing will result in Jewish global uncertainty. The erasure of Yiddish in America says something about Jewish precarity, though the positioning of Yiddish as the first and foremost identity marker for diasporic Jewry ignores the linguistic diversity among Jewish populations. It reinforces what writer Jonathan Katz calls "Ashke-normativity," or the assumption that Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews represent the universal Jewish experience.³ It's a relationship that Bennett Kravitz highlights in his analysis of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*; as he writes, "every Jew not of Ashkenazi or Eastern European origins--along with the [Tlingits]--is effectively present only by her absence" (98). Eastern European-origin Jews, many of whom have Yiddish as a heritage language, are both most numerous among global and American Judaism and occupy the most privileged position within North American conceptions of white normativity. I'd like to decouple Jewish and Yiddish and focus on what "the Yiddish" specifically means in these two works: how the American project impacts the future of Yiddish, how these two

³ Ashkenazim make up the vast majority of North American Jews, and synagogues and popular media often reflect the Ashkenazi majority. This includes but is not limited to depictions of "Jewish food" being primarily Ashkenazi food, Yiddish being far more perceptible as a "Jewish language" than Ladino or Judeo-Arabic, and Ashkenazi ritual practices seen as a default. To quote Katz, "Some point out, rightly, that most American Jews are Ashkenazi. (So are most English Jews.) Others fall prey to racist ideas, claiming that Ashkenazim were somehow more egalitarian, or that Ashkenazi practice is the basis of Jewish achievement. Neither is true – and the self-congratulation allows us to forget that non-Ashkenazi practice has just as much of a place in Jewish worship today."

decades-apart texts create a specifically Yiddish understanding of the “dull edge of extinction,” and whether or not these works have faith in the postvernacular as a way to escape the prophesied doom of Yiddish. Many of the factors contributing to the decline of Yiddish are far more pronounced and dire in other Jewish diasporic languages. A 2019 study of Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, speakers in Seattle emphasized that all participants in a local language enthusiast group were between the ages of 74 and 96 (FitzMorris 19). Yiddish’s experiences are not unique in the Jewish diaspora, nor are they unique among the many heritage languages disappearing in global diasporas, but they do not present a universal vision of Jewishness. It may seem obvious, considering the works’ titles, but I’d like to read “Envy; or, Yiddish in America” and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* as stories about Yiddish, Yiddish space, Yiddish anxiety, and Yiddish futurity. By putting these two decades-apart novels together, I’m hoping to capture the breadth of both the meta-narrative of contemporary Yiddish death, and the similar responses to preservation and Yiddish futurity that have arisen. It places both texts in a larger tradition of worrying about Yiddish while charting its future in a “hostile” environment.

Crystal writes, “Identity and history combine to ensure that each language reflects a unique encapsulation and interpretation of human existence, and this gives us yet another reason for caring when languages die” (44). In Crystal’s and many others’ estimations, languages serve to codify and encase an entire series of cultural relations. The existence under threat is not Yiddish in totality but a secular diasporic Yiddish culture. It is this culture that was largely wiped out in the *khurbn*;⁴ the preponderance of

⁴ Khurbn (meaning “destruction”) is the Yiddish term for what is most commonly known as the Holocaust or the Shoah (van Dooren uses the term Shoah, meaning “calamity” in Hebrew). I am choosing intentionally to use the term Khurbn in this essay for two

victims of the Nazi regime were Yiddish speakers, and they almost unilaterally eliminated the language's presence on continental Europe. It is this clear sense of language loss that Ozick has commented on in her own analyses of "Envy," referring to her text as an "elegy, a lamentation, a celebration, because six million Yiddish tongues were under the earth of Europe, and because here under American liberty and spaciousness my own generation, in its foolishness, stupidity, and self-disregard had, in an act tantamount to autolobotomy, disposed of the literature of its fathers" (Garrett 60). Ozick and Chabon are two tentpoles in a decades-long process of Yiddish engagement with the concept of its own death. Both of them are post-*khurbn* texts, with enough time having passed since the attempted eradication of Yiddish to assess its secular community's position in America. They assess this slow unravelling of "the Yiddish," and the continued consumption of the uniquely Diasporan, hegemonically destabilizing Yiddish by an American totality. For Ozick, the Yiddish is a community that needs to be sustained via translation, sacrificing the meaning and feeling of the old for a possibility of postvernacular survival. Thirty eight years later, Chabon argues both that the Yiddish can only thrive in a counterfactual world, and even *that* world is in an impending state of doom. By centering the plight of Yiddish in their narratives and structures, they are engaging in the sort of postvernacularity that Shandler sees as the current state of the language. As they write in English, they champion the Yiddish. Yet the novels themselves are deeply pessimistic about the language they champion, proving the limits to postvernacularity of Yiddish and casting doubt on their own attempts to synthesize

reasons: because "destruction" is the best way to fully capture the magnitude of the devastation visited on the European Jewish communities between 1933 and 1945, and because in a paper on Yiddish life and loss, it's best to use the Yiddish term for its own life-altering effect.

Yiddish with a broader Americanism. They paint an America which has Yiddish on the dull edge.

II. Yiddish in America

Yiddish is a language familiar with territorial drift, space-making, and minority status. This is a relationship inherent to diasporic Jewish languages, including Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and many others. Monique Balbuena writes, “Such languages appeared in contact with non-Jewish languages, in addition and in opposition to them. It is [...] crucial to highlight the multilingual situation of Jews in the Diaspora, observing the productive, creative tensions between a Jewish minority and a non-Jewish majority, with its dominant language” (16). The various non-Jewish majorities coming in contact with Yiddish have imbued the language with various linguistic components. In Max Weinreich’s immense *History of the Yiddish Language*, he charts the gradual spreading out of Yiddish and Jewish culture from Ashkenaz I (a more western European, Rhineland-centric, German-speaking territory) to Ashkenaz II (larger, more eastward, with its “center of gravity” based around Poland), starting in the mid thirteenth century (3-4). Yiddish, the language of these migrating Jews, kept its central Germanic vocabulary and syntax while gradually incorporating more and more Slavic terms and components into their vocabulary and grammar. Among many examples, Weinreich cites the Yiddish term “זיידע,”⁵ meaning grandfather, which is an originally Slavic term featuring Germanic vowel clusters (31). Yiddish is a product of entanglements upon entanglements, as the Jewish minority communities moved into different majoritarian linguistic and cultural spheres. It is a testament to the intercultural connectedness of

⁵ This term is transliterated as “zeyde.”

Yiddish that historians are unable to fully disentangle the path of Yiddish's origins. Ashkenaz I and Ashkenaz II served as the original and successive breeding grounds of Yiddish, yet due to the Jewish communities' minority status they were never able to fully make a claim on the space, creating a sort of deterritorialized territorialization.

"Envy" and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* are very clear-eyed about their majority cultures and dominant languages. Ozick's protagonist Edelshtein excoriates the Yiddish diaspora in America from the very first paragraph of the novella, while at the same time Ozick implicates him as a member of this verboten nation. The novella begins:

Edelshtein, an American for forty years, was a ravenous reader of novels by writers "of"—he said this with a snarl—"Jewish extraction." He found them puerile, vicious, pitiable, ignorant, contemptible, above all stupid. In judging them he dug for his deepest vituperation—they were, he said, "*Amerikaner-geboren*." Spawned in America, pogroms a rumor, *mamaloshen* a stranger, history a vacuum. (Ozick 33)

Edelshtein is defined as an American before he is even defined as a Yiddish poet. Likewise, the American writers condemned by Edelshtein for insufficient fealty to the history of Yiddish are described with a Yiddish term: *Amerikaner-geboren*, or American-born. Edelshtein sees himself not as "of America" but as "in America," someone who is untainted by his presence in the country and independent of what he sees as Americanism. Yet Ozick both shows that not only is Edelshtein as independent of America as he so desires, the younger generations are not as distant from Yiddishism as he perceives. Edelshtein sets up a binary of American versus non-American, but Ozick complicates it with her phrasing. She exhibits the creative tensions that Balbuena shows

as essential to Jewish heritage languages. One cannot be American without being drawn into the Yiddish lineage or marker of distinction; one cannot be Yiddish without understanding that they are under the broader American umbrella. If Yiddish has always been a minority language existing in the shadow of majority languages, what makes America uniquely ominous and worthy of disdain? What makes it the precondition for extinction and the source of this unravelling? Ozick plays with ideas of America-as-destination and America-as-enemy throughout her novella, framing it as inescapable and uncertain.

If America is inescapable in “Envy,” it is totalizing in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*. While Edelshtein “[mourns] in English the death of Yiddish” (Ozick 33), the American majority language is called not English but American. Inspector Bina Gelbfish, Landsman’s ex-wife, speaks “flawless American” (57) rather than any competency level of English. America is positioned as the default to which the Yiddish colony is meant to return. Chabon’s term for the returning of the Sitka colony to American control is “the Reversion,” carrying the implication that America was always meant to have control over the Jewish land while erasing the reality that the land belonging to the Sitka territory was the historical territory of the Tlingit. Chabon’s America is openly antisemitic, preserving “all the normal quotas on Jewish immigration to the United States” (28), and its unnamed president is an evangelical Christian Zionist who aims to instrumentalize Sitka’s Yiddish-speakers to bring about a Christian rapture. The slogan upon which he ran: “Alaska and Alaskans, wild and clean” (77). By leaving him nameless, the book makes the point that it doesn’t particularly matter who is president: America’s fundamental state is one incompatible with Yiddish, and America is the fundamental that is unable to be

displaced. The first American character to speak in the novel, journalist Dennis Brennan, uses “swift and preposterous Yiddish” (64), another show of mutual incompatibility between the American and the Yiddish: even if the American were to try to understand, they couldn’t. It is notable that a vast array of Yiddish-speaking characters are able to speak American, yet the same cannot be said in reverse. Chabon is more pessimistic than Ozick: while Ozick depicts a creative, necessary tension between Yiddish-speakers and English-speakers in America, Chabon just depicts tension. He is blunt about the contingency of Jewish inclusion in America, and unable to envision a future where America can be displaced, budged, or made to engage equally with Yiddish-speaking Jews.

What’s interesting about the two of these texts’ engagements with the concept of America is how they portray America as not only hostile and totalizing but uniquely profane. Edelshtein’s depiction of the American synagogues shows a region and a people fundamentally disconnected from any sort of pure, honest faith. He is “scared” by the new Temples where he is “afraid to use the word shul,” the Yiddish term for the prayer hall (34). There he sees “Tetragrammatons in transparent plastic like chandeliers”—the holiest word in Judaism, the name of God, encased in plastic, a highly artificial and manufactured substance. Even the Torah scrolls are not immune, being described as “fashioned from 14-karat gold molds” (34). America has distorted anything sacred of Yiddishism into something profane, creating a climate hostile to any sort of broader faith and precipitating a cultural decline. The lewdness is far more direct in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*: English is the language of choice for the characters’ swearing, rather than Yiddish. The text makes this code switch explicit from the very first chapter.

Chabon writes, ““A curse on your head, Meyer,” Berko says, and then, in American, “God damn it”” (6). The text suggests an internalized diglossia: American is only used to express things far too impure to be expressed in Yiddish. Yiddish and other heritage Jewish languages have typically occupied the “low” or vernacular position in a local diglossia, where it was seen as less valuable socially than the local majority language and less spiritually resonant. As a result of this, Yiddish speakers have assigned Yiddish the label of “zhargon,” or secondary language (Steinmetz 81-82). Chabon is suggesting the inverse: American is the inessential, informal language, while Yiddish is the one used for official business. He troubles the binaries inherently posited by the role of Yiddish as a minority language in a local diglossia.

The Yiddish Policemen’s Union engages with America on a fundamental, formal level as well. In her essay on the book, Casteel writes that Chabon is “[laying] claim to Americanness by telling his story through the language of a distinctively American genre: hard-boiled detective fiction” (797). Indeed, as Chabon outlines his depiction of America as incompatible with Yiddish, he draws his book closer to broader perceptions of America. His main character, Landsman, is a policeman, a preeminent figure of American white supremacy. By casting a Yiddish-speaking man in that role, it at the very least signifies a desire to be accepted and embraced in the realms of privilege and supremacy in America. It fits into a broader trope of police laundering, a technique of making law enforcement “relatable” and central to American narratives in a way that diminishes the violent impact of policing on Black and other marginalized communities. A 2020 study from civil rights nonprofit Color Of Change and the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center found that “[t]he great majority of [American television] series that

represented Criminal Justice Professionals (CJPs) committing wrongful actions did so in a way that normalized them—making bad actors seem good and wrongful actions seem right” (30). They also found that non-white characters were often used as “validators of wrongful behavior” (30), while the perpetrators of wrongful behaviour were often white. In essence, the dominant figure receives cover for injustice from the tacit acceptance of minority figures. Chabon is contributing to this mythos: he is both positing the Yiddish-speaking figure as an ostracized minority in America via the plot, while also inhabiting American literary forms and figures of white supremacy. *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* aspires to American incorporation in a way that “Envy” never does. If Ozick’s heroes are forcibly entangled with the American project, Chabon’s desire to be a part of it. Over the forty years spanning the two works, an increased unravelling of active Yiddish communities has led to greater affinity for those still holding onto the language to be incorporated into the American project. If Yiddish cannot exist independently of the American state, the text establishes that it may as well demonstrate the greatest possible affiliation with existent power structures.

An unfortunate core component of both of these works’ engagements with broader concepts of America is that both illustrate a tension and distaste with members of other non-Jewish marginalized communities. While Chabon and Ozick showcase Yiddish as a marker of difference and a lack of ability to conform with a hegemonic America, they do not see it as a way to build solidarity with other groups victimized and ostracized by the same forces. Many scholars have discussed the territorial tensions between the Yiddish-speaking and Tlingit communities in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, following Casteel’s 2009 article. Rachel Rubinstein argues, “For Chabon, American Jews feel “at

home” in America only at the expense of those who have been dispossessed; Native assertions of territorial belonging and struggles for sovereignty are thus fundamentally incompatible, in the logic of the novel, with those of Jews” (177-178). Just as the Jewish members of Sitka are about to be displaced by the United States, so too did their colony displace the Tlingit from the very same land. In the book, Yiddish and Tlingit lands are rigidly separated, and there are frequent conflicts between the two groups, including riots over the construction of synagogues in Tlingit territory. There are overlaps between the two, as exemplified by the mixed Yiddish-Tlingit parentage of Berko Shemets, but the novel establishes a binary conflict from the outset. Several critics have noted the book attempts to analogize the Yiddish-Tlingit conflict with the real world tension in Israel/Palestine. Conservative writers such as Ruth Wisse have decried this analogy as “abusive” due to its insufficient fealty to and forced alienation from the state of Israel (Kravitz 96). The book both recognizes the competing territorial interests and lays the blame at the feet of American state interests: at a pivotal point in the novel, Hertz Shemets, Landsman’s uncle, admits to instigating the synagogue riots on behalf of the FBI and COINTELPRO. Yet this acknowledgement of state-encouraged anti-solidarity does not lead to a renewed sense of solidarity, nor does it erase the text’s attempts to include the Yiddish experience within privileged American forms of whiteness. The closest gesture to Yiddish-Tlingit solidarity comes in the incorporation of formline art, a Northwestern Coastal Indigenous style of creating curved design units, into the cover art and chapter headings.⁶ This appropriation of artistic form can very easily read as hollow when, as Kravitz has noted, Tlingit characters are notable through their absence.

⁶ For more on formline art, I’d recommend Bill Holm’s *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An*

“Envy” is largely an intercommunal story until the very final paragraph of the novella, where both Edelshtein’s relation to broader Christian hegemony and other marginalized groups becomes clear. After his rejection by Hannah, Edelshtein chooses to call the number on an evangelical Christian pamphlet in order to harangue the voice on the other end. Ozick writes:

At the other end of the wire it was either Rose or Lou. Edelshtein told the eunuch's voice, “I believe with you about some should drop dead. Pharoah, Queen Isabella, Haman, that pogromchik King Louis they call in history Saint, Hitler, Stalin, Nasser—” The voice said, “You're a Jew?” It sounded Southern but somehow not Negro—maybe because schooled, polished: “Accept Jesus as your Saviour and you shall have Jerusalem restored.” “We already got it,” Edelshtein said. *Meshiachtseiten!* “The terrestrial Jerusalem has no significance. Earth is dust. The Kingdom of God is within. Christ released man from Judaic exclusivism.” (Ozick 53)

This passage bears three key implications: that Edelshtein disbelieves in Black people’s ability to “sound educated,” that he believes Black non-Jews are potential agents of the Christian hegemony aiming to dismantle his Yiddish identity, and that this paternalistic Christian hegemony does not allow any room for Jewish particularity. The anti-Blackness is both explicit and implicit in this passage, and precludes any sense of solidarity among marginalized groups. It also tacitly erases the existence of Black Jews. Edelshtein’s perception of Black non-Jews as agents of Christian supremacy bears echoes of James Baldwin’s seminal essay, “The Harlem Ghetto.” He argues that “the Jew is

Analysis of Form (1965). In that book, he outlines the various design elements typical to the art of the Tlingit, Haida, and other Indigenous populations of the Pacific Northwest.

caught in the American crossfire” as a symbol of white supremacy to Black communities, writing, “The Negro, facing a Jew hates, at bottom, not his Jewishness but the color of his skin” (Baldwin 53). This distrust is not destabilized but rather reinforced by Ozick’s novella, and is positioned as a precursor to the complete demolition of Yiddish in America. This final scene inexorably separates Edelshtein from any chance at American acceptance. The alien, disembodied voice of American hegemony takes on several characteristics: male, Southern, Christian, polished, prizing physical and militaristic strength. He invokes extinction as the precondition of Yiddish and Jewishness as a whole, saying, “Our God is the God of Love, your God is the God of Wrath. Look how He abandoned you in Auschwitz” (53). He also cites Edelshtein as lesser for either refusing or being unable to fully assimilate within the American fabric, insulting his “kike accent” (53). Of note, Edelshtein does not have any retort or refutation for the voice, only able to shout insults back and accuse this hegemonic voice of ruining not only his world but the world as a whole.

III. Preservation and Survival

One of the core concepts of van Dooren’s concept of the dull edge of extinction is how aggressively the shifting of one’s surroundings can affect the possibility for a bird species’ survival, along with how an aggressively curated environment can affect the interiority of the at-risk species who inhabit it. In a new environment, historical ways of life have given way to a new sense of self. A key example comes from his parable of the Whooping Cranes, an endangered bird in the Americas with a hefty conservation effort. While the conservation efforts have managed to prevent the death of the final individuals of the species, the birds’ biological instincts have been overridden and transformed to

prevent their demise as fragile generations in a potentially fatal Anthropocene. Rather than allowing the cranes to imprint on members of their own species naturally, several of these birds are imprinted on and reared by humans wearing costumes to prevent them from accidentally imprinting on non-costumed humans (99), and other bird species are deliberately imprinted on humans to increase reproductive output (107). The cranes are trained to follow ultra-light aircraft for migration by the sounds of propellers and engines fed to them in incubation (101). Most violently, a population of about 150 cranes lives in perpetual captivity for reproductive purposes, artificially inseminated via a process called “abdominal massage,” or restraining a male to encourage him to generate semen (109-110). These birds are being retrained in a manner counter to their inborn instincts in order to fit into a human-generated process for their own preservation.

It would be naive to suggest that there’s anything inauthentic or violent about Yiddish and Yiddish preservation, yet it would be equally naive to suggest that Yiddish’s presence in America has not fundamentally refracted the output of a secular or non-Orthodox Yiddish culture. These two works are responding to a very clear crisis in Yiddish culture’s perpetuation, and are setting up barricades against the onrush of American-branded homogenization. Despite being separated by nearly forty years, the Americas in both of these works have a lot of common threats. Both present an America dominated by evangelical Christians, who contribute a sense of homelessness for its Yiddish-speakers. Both see America as something lewd, or irreconcilable with their identity, yet both still yearn for inclusion in the broader American project. Both see an America trying to actively blunt intercommunal solidarity, and both see an America that demands assimilation at all costs. Essentially, thirty eight years apart, these two books

have identified the same existential threat to Yiddishland, and have the same pessimism about destabilizing it. Ideals of territorial purity and localized space inherently threaten the survival prospects of Yiddishism; while geographic instability has always been a part of the language, America demands the abandonment of Yiddish. If extinction is a process as opposed to an event, these two writers show that the process has been ongoing, long-term, and clearly dire. If anything has changed about America and American Yiddish between the two texts, it is that Ozick can still set her paean to Yiddish in contemporary New York, whereas Chabon creates a counterfactual in distant Alaska. Secular Yiddish culture preservation is moving further and further from the realms of observable community, forcing writers to grapple with the Yiddish postvernacular and assess its viability.

The preservation and future of Yiddish is somewhere between a touchy subject and robust industry for scholars, writers, and Yiddishists. Chabon has written extensively on his perception of Yiddish as moribund, and his grief over its demise. In his 1997 essay “The Language of Lost History,” he uses the 1958 paperback *Say It In Yiddish* to cast the idea of a robust future Yiddishland as “heartbreakingly implausible,” writing, “At what time in the history of the world was there a place [...] where not only the doctors and waiters and trolley conductors spoke Yiddish but also the airline clerks, travel agents, and casino employees?” (32) Shandler’s 2006 book excoriates Chabon’s essay for dismissing both the publication history of the novel and the discursive possibilities of Yiddish in the contemporary era. Almost presaging the alternate universe setting of *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Shandler writes, “Chabon envisions a post-Holocaust milieu saturated with spoken Yiddish not simply as a counterfactual but as untenable” (33). The

2007 novel does not significantly challenge Shandler's assertion on his earlier work; after all, he has created a post-*khurban* milieu saturated with spoken Yiddish that is both counterfactual and untenable. Chabon, like Ozick many years before, sees Yiddish as something in need of an elegy in the absence of a healthy home. Shandler situates their angst as coming from Yiddish's lack of territoriality, and he posits the virtual "Yiddishland" as a response. He quotes a former student, saying, "Yiddishland [is] a place that comes into existence whenever two or more people speak Yiddish" (33). Shandler's vision of the Yiddish postvernacular destabilizes the link between Yiddish and territoriality: the departure from Ashkenaz II into hegemonic America does not erase the language, nor does it portend any linguistic doom. A space can be virtual, a culture can be portable. Unlike Shandler, though, the Yiddish-speaking characters for Chabon and Ozick treat a loss of language as a loss of self.

There are obvious, immense links between linguistic deterritorialization and linguistic loss. Crystal showcases the aftereffects of natural disaster on Indigenous communities, and the subsequent ramifications to their Indigenous languages. One of his case studies is desertification, which made wide swaths of the Sahel uninhabitable in the 1970s and 1980s and drove Indigenous populations to larger cities, where their more decentralized communities made it more difficult to facilitate linguistic exchange (74). When taken out of an environment encouraging communal discourse, the language suffers; when displaced from a majority position to a diffuse minority position, the cultural context encoded by the language withers away. Similar colonial forces have marginalized languages such as Tlingit, with scholars estimating that about 90% of Tlingit living in Alaska do not speak the language (120). As mentioned throughout this

paper, Yiddish does not have the same social stressors as these endangered languages. It has an active, growing, and concrete native-speaking community, and a robust financial organization of Ashkenazim dedicated to its perpetuation. But the dull edge of extinction proposes that extinction is a process rather than an event, and if Yiddish extinction is perceived as a phenomenological reality, then the question turns to preservation and futurity. The unravelling is inescapable. Do these novels have any hope for an American future, and what does their existence say about the potential for new directions to Yiddishland? Do the novels believe that any aspects of Yiddishland are lost through their preservation processes?

One way the novels reflect pessimism over the future of Yiddish is their respective protagonists' inability to have a child. Edelshtein's wife, Mireleh, has passed away at some point before the start of the narrative of a "cancerous uterus," after seven miscarriages and an affair with Ostrover (36). Not only is Yiddish expressed as dead through the body of Mireleh, but she also spurns Edelshtein, the erstwhile preserver of Yiddish, for Ostrover the assimilationist. All hopes of a genetic transmission are gone, driving Edelshtein's pursuit of Hannah. The rhetoric of infection, corruption, and impotence is clear throughout the novella. In Edelshtein's final monologue, he accuses the antisemitic man on the phone of infecting the whole world (53). He bemoans the state of Yiddish among Jewish children by saying, "They know ten words for, excuse me, penis, and when it comes to a word for learning they're impotent!" (46) It isn't only Edelshtein who uses the language of corruption: Ostrover refers to Edelshtein using similar terms, calling him "plague," "poisoner," and "cholera" in a contentious phone call (46). The infection has been internalized by Edelshtein, who is repeatedly shown that not

only will he forever be unable to extend this generational knowledge, his stubbornness is also preventing the recapture of any sort of Yiddish futurity. He is not surviving his entanglement with a dominant, overly homogenizing, pressuring environment, and his Yiddish will die along with it. It bears echoes of van Dooren's narrative of Laysan Albatrosses and their ingestion of heavy amounts of plastic in the Pacific Ocean, which they confuse for their food. This confusion is fatal to the futurity of their species, as they increase the likelihood of albatross infertility and poorly developed chicks (30-31).

Nearly four decades later, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* tells a story of a Yiddish protagonist who doesn't have children. In Landsman's case, he has an aborted son named Django with his ex-wife Bina. The abortion precipitates the end of Landsman's marriage, and the end of his hopes for a genealogical descendant to carry on his Yiddish. Chabon writes:

At seventeen weeks and a day—the day Landsman bought his first package of Broadways in ten years—they got a bad result. Some but not all of the cells that made up the fetus, code-named Django, had an extra chromosome on the twentieth pair. A mosaicism, it was called. It might cause grave abnormalities. It might have no effect at all. In the available literature, a faithful person could find encouragement, and a faithless one ample reason to despond. (Chabon 14-15)

Alan Gibbs argues that Django's aborted birth "[comes] to represent the homeless condition of the Jews in the book, in which the state of Israel is stillborn" (215). He uses this to argue for *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* as a trauma text, aimed at understanding the effects of global pain on individuals and communities. Gibbs situates it within the specific counterfactual narrative, but I believe it can speak more broadly to anxiety over

the future of Yiddish. Bina chooses abortion specifically because of the child's extra chromosome, yet Chabon is explicit that the extra chromosome may not necessarily be harmful. It also reinforces harmful rhetoric of children with disabilities as being "less worthy" of survival. There is a deep, abiding ambivalence in this passage. The possibility for hope in the form of Django exists, just as the possibility for hope in Yiddish exists, yet hopelessness and non-existence are deliberately chosen. Django bears similarities with the doomed Laysan Albatross chicks from van Dooren's text, with his own non-birth a symptom of Yiddish's entanglement with hegemonic American forests. Chabon both sees the possibility of hope for Yiddish and the futility of it, as even the saving of a secular Yiddish can be potentially troublesome and carry with it an inevitable doom. He is casting himself as the faithless person. Not only does this echo Ozick's rhetoric of physical impotence, it echoes the rhetoric of Yiddish as a "zhargon," as lesser or corrupted. It is incredibly pessimistic, and incredibly unwilling to imagine a virtual Yiddishland as a viable home for a Yiddish-speaking population.

Not only do both novels have infected, "abnormal" childbirth to symbolize the halting of Yiddish genealogy, they both also have failed Messiahs, symbolizing that a grand metaphysical hope for the future of language will not arrive. The novels themselves are packed with profanity, violence, and anti-religiosity, making the presence of a sacred Messiah seem futile. Chabon's is Mendel Shpilman, the Tzaddik Ha-Dor, a literal heralded Messiah within a besieged Jewish community who is used, abused, and rendered destitute. The novel begins with his murder, which we later come to see as an act of mercy to prevent his further exploitation by ultra-Zionist forces. While still alive, Mendel rejected the label of Tzaddik Ha-Dor along with the rigid ritualism of the ultraorthodox

Verbover sect in which he grew up, in part due to him being gay. Chabon writes, “Mendel’s flight was not a refusal to surrender; it was a surrender. The Tzaddik Ha-Dor was tendering his resignation. He could not be what the world and its Jews, in the rain with their heartaches and their umbrellas, wanted him to be, what his mother and father wanted him to be” (226). Messianic revival of Yiddishism is an impossibility for Chabon, with broader visions of Messianism a false hope and one associated with immense violence by the end of the novel. The grand hope of Messianism and Jewish liberation leads to Jewish compounds being established on Tlingit territory, the murder of Landsman’s sister, Naomi, the killing of Mendel, and the bombing of Palestinian Jerusalem. Mendel’s failure is not due to him being an improper Messiah, but due to the whole idea of Messianic salvation being imprudent for Yiddish. Divine intervention cannot un-lose what has been lost. Of note, Chabon explicitly says that Mendel’s departure from the Verbover community and abdication of the role is due to “the sin of being what God had pleased to make him” (221). Mendel, the Messiah to be, is not at fault for the Messiah not being. The Messiah never could have been, and in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, never should have been. An aborted Messiah means an aborted Yiddishland.

Ozick does not have a literal Messiah, but Hannah is positioned as a Messianic figure, or a light in the darkness. In Hellerstein’s analysis of “Envy,” she details how Edelshtein uses salvation rhetoric in order to persuade Hannah to translate his poetry. She writes, “Ozick makes Edelshtein switch back and forth between Yiddish and English in the dialogue that leads to the word Messiah in order to emphasize how desperately the poet pins his hopes of salvation on the reluctant Hannah. Edelshtein’s shift between

languages in his attempt to persuade Hannah to translate his Yiddish poems demonstrates how alive Yiddish is for this character” (41-42). Yiddish is both the object that needs salvation, and the tool that he uses to attempt to bring Hannah into the fold. He is placing all of the hopes of a very much living language on the youngest Yiddish speaker in the story, in hopes of creating some sense of life. Yet in reality, Hannah is a false spark of organic futurity who roundly rejects Edelshtein’s desire to translate his work and refuses to conform to his vision of Jewishness. Hannah is introduced to the narrative as someone who can quote Edelshtein’s work in Yiddish from memory; she ends it telling Edelshtein, “You don’t interest me” (53). In between the two, Edelshtein enacts violence upon her in his attempts to transform her into his, and Yiddish’s, saviour. He stalks her, sending her lengthy letter upon lengthy letter, none of which are responded to. He first attempts to persuade her by citing the vulnerability of Yiddish in their environment, citing Yiddish as “a language that never had a territory except Jewish mouths, and half the Jewish mouths on earth already stopped up with German worms” (44). He then states that he never cared about Hannah, followed by a letter arguing for a preservation of the Jewish legacy of struggle. When they meet, Hannah dismisses Edelshtein as an “old man from the ghetto” (51), or locked in his past and the loss of the Khurbn and unable to adapt to the newer American environment. In retaliation, Edelshtein hits her in the mouth and disavows her, despite never being in a position to do so in the first place.

“Forget Yiddish!” he screamed at her. “Wipe it out of your brain! Extirpate it! Go get a memory operation! You have no right to it, you have no right to an uncle a grandfather! No one ever came before you, you were never born! A vacuum!”
(52)

Edelshtein has fashioned himself a steward of the Yiddish language, an egoistic turn borne out of his jealousy and desire for fame. He has been drawn into entanglements with an American environment with which he both refuses and is unable to engage. He is less interested in a superficial expression of Yiddish, or words on a page, than the preservation of a Yiddish interiority with himself at the centre. It can only exist on his terms, yet as Hannah reminds him, he is no longer in the ghettos of Eastern Europe. Edelshtein sees Yiddishland as both a pure space and one which cannot be deterritorialized. Hannah reminds him that he is in America, that hope for his Yiddish is foolish, and that she will not be his salvation. If Yiddish is to continue, it will not be Edelshtein's Yiddish. He is the Yiddishist who wants a Messiah, completely unwilling to accept Ostrover's brand of Yiddish as a potential future for the language. It's a self-preservation, not a linguistic preservation. Yet all the same, Ozick's text has the inherent tension that comes with watching an ignoble character (Edelshtein) pursue a noble goal (Yiddish preservation) through deeply immoral means.

IV. Conclusions

If we put these two works' visions of a Yiddish extinction unravelling together, we get an incredibly dire portrait. In both works, Yiddish genealogy has failed and non-genealogical Yiddish transmission is waning. Ozick's "Envy" is an obituary for a living language. Her and Edelshtein's salvation for Yiddish is overwhelmed by Americanism, uninterested by Edelshtein's self-serving linguistic concern. Edelshtein's marriage and future dissolve, yet Mireleh does not abandon him for the secular; rather, she has her affair with Ostrover, someone who is just as invested in Yiddish literature as Edelshtein. Edelshtein is the one who alienates his great Yiddish future with his violence and

harassment. For as much as he can blame a totalizing America for the diminishment of Yiddish, he is the agent of his own unraveling. His unwillingness to adapt or accept an imperfect Yiddish. This could also be seen as a rejection of or skepticism of Shandler's concept of the postvernacular as an honest Yiddish future or way out of the extinction dialectic. Shandler defines postvernacular Yiddish as "cultural salvage" with an emphasis on its powers of orality and vernacularity (128-130), whereas Edelshtein sees Yiddish as unworthy of being saved in a possibly impure state. Yiddish faces a series of rejections in the process of establishing its symbolic value "Envy," but in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* it does not even get the chance to be rejected. The failure of a Yiddish future is cemented by global factors that any individual character could not have perceptibly affected: the intervention of the American Department of the Interior, Mendel's lived reality as a gay man clashing with the oppressive social norms of the Verbover family, Django's chromosomal abnormality. If the two texts show Yiddish in the process of extinction, neither of them on the face of it seem particularly invested in an American-oriented preservation or particularly hopeful for the possibility of a "pure" Yiddishist approach to conjuring Yiddishland. "Envy" asks us to be skeptical of preservationist approaches for Yiddish. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* asks us to embrace its inevitable loss. All of these characters will still be Jews, yet none will have Yiddish as a part of it.

The plot of these novels may be telling a story of an overwhelming America, an abandoned Yiddish culture, and a doomed preservation culture, but do the texts themselves agree? I'd argue that just as much as the texts dismiss the prospect of postvernacular Yiddish preservation, their existence and format is inherently a preservationist impulse for Yiddish. To state the obvious, while both of these texts are

written in English, their titles frame them explicitly as novels about Yiddish. If a language is culture encoded, these English texts serve as a pseudo-encoding of a threatened Yiddish culture. Just as van Dooren's crane preservationists are attempting to retrain cranes by adapting their biological imperatives to a changing world, so too are Ozick and Chabon adapting their Yiddishism for a changing Yiddishland. The question of authenticity in the language is irrelevant. In her book on queer Jewish women's poetry, Zohar Weiman-Kelman argues for queer genealogy, or non-linear cultural and literary transmission across space and time, as a way of understanding the common bonds and themes of Jewish women writers. She writes, "Anachronistically moving between disparate historical groundings, queer time undermines binary separation between past and present, undoing linear, teleological and progressive notions of history" (Weiman-Kelman xx). This creates possibility and futurity for women who don't have immediate descendants, and who trouble normative ideas of generationality and family-rearing. Ozick and Chabon have conclusively ruled out the genealogical transmission of Yiddish, yet they are still reifying and transmitting the vernacularity of the language. Their Yiddishism is bringing Yiddishland to the present, using the language to comment on modern anxieties and the century of Yiddish doom. Yiddish's value is being transported into English, imbuing a possibly "hollow" seeming literature with preservational value and keeping it alive for future generations. After all, why write a eulogy for a language in any language other than the one being eulogized?

Both of these texts employ Yiddish liberally to make the point that Yiddish is on the verge of death, an act that imbues Yiddish with more life than it had before. They both exist within the realm of ambilingual literature. It is an extension of Steven G.

Kellman's concept of ambilingual writers, or writers who publish in more than one language; rather than just one language per work, Ozick and Chabon are writing one work with multiple languages within it. It is a style often used by writers from multilingual communities, including Gloria Anzaldúa, who uses English, Spanish, Nahuatl, and local Tex-Mex dialects in *Borderlands | La Frontera: The New Mestiza* to show readers the linguistic diversity of her home around the American-Mexican border.⁷ Ozick's novella is a story of translation which forces the reader to translate themselves, engaging them in Yiddishland via Ozick's Yiddish-redolent prose. As Hana Wirth-Nesher writes, "[H]er narrative reinforces particularity. It invites readers to acquire words from an unfamiliar culture, rather than serving up the illusion of an equivalent" (142). Ozick bounces around from language to language in her text; as demonstrated above, Edelshtein insults young Ashkenazim using Yiddish terms amidst his English language perspective. "Envy" was originally published in *Commentary*, an American Jewish magazine. Its pitch for Yiddish uniqueness as a fundamental part of Jewish identity is thus oriented towards a specifically Jewish audience. If Ozick is speaking Yiddish values in Yiddish to the readers, which they are reading, it conjures up the virtual Yiddishland that creates a home for the postvernacular language. While Edelshtein's demand for translation is parasitic, Ozick's publication of the story allows for a non-genealogical Yiddish. It is a collaborative act of translation, not a monodirectional reinforcement of a specific vision of the language. In Shandler's analysis, Ozick furthers this invitation to

⁷ Anzaldúa is using these languages to enforce her own particularity as a Chicana and force hegemonic American forced out of their anglocentric comfort zone. She writes, "But we Chicanos no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first overture - to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos, apology blurting out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway" (preface):

engage in the language by inviting Yiddish speakers to recreate Edelshtein's poetry in its "original" Yiddish, or "to imagine the preservation, in English, of "lost" Yiddish works that never existed and, moreover, to engage in a fictional act of cultural retrieval by "undoing" their translation" (116). The translation dialogue is both for Yiddish novices and experts, rousing a broader conversation in the process of writing her linguistic elegy.

Chabon's deployment of Yiddish is even more interesting. As referenced above, Yiddish-in-English is treated as the default language for dialogue, while the text makes explicit mention whenever the characters switch to America. What's most unique about his use of various Yiddish terms and Yiddishisms is his unwillingness to italicize them so as to indicate that they are from a foreign language. All of Chabon's Yiddishisms have equal stake with the hegemonic English narrative, creating space in the text for his minority status that his characters are denied. Beat cops are referred to as beat latkes, thieves are called ganefs, and guns are referred to as sholems, the Yiddish word for peace. At one point, a well known Yiddish proverb is translated into English verbatim and placed into the voice of an unnamed child: ""Man makes plans,"" the kid reads. ""And God laughs"" (95). The character's names are also symbolic in Yiddish, in particular Meyer Landsman, whose surname translates to "countryman." If Ozick is inviting readers to translate the Yiddish into English and engage in that practice for making meaning, Chabon is affirming the centrality and inescapability of Yiddish as part of a robust diasporic identity. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union's* America may not have any room for Yiddish in its hegemony, but Chabon's America does. The Yiddish flows seamlessly amongst the English. It's an exchange that Sol Steinmetz remarks on in *Yiddish & English*, tracing back on how Yiddish loanwords have become English slang,

including words such as glitch (61). Yiddish loanwords are already essential to English, and Chabon takes it a step further. He is creating new Yiddish worlds, like Ozick, and inviting readers to retrieve and embrace this lost Americanized Yiddish.

By looking at the two texts in conjunction, we can see an intergenerational exchange of Yiddish that subverts any in-text skepticism of postvernacularity as a survival mechanism. As mentioned multiple times, both novels tell a fundamentally similar story separated by forty years. An isolated Yiddish community is being besieged by evangelical Christian forces in America. The main characters, disgruntled and less than sympathetic men, have no genealogical way forward as they aim to propagate their language. They both portray Yiddish on the verge of disappearing, and its inheritors disinterested in being a Messiah of a lost culture. They also portray it nearly forty years apart. They both are signposts of Yiddish culture placed into the earth at least one full generation after the *khurbn*, encoding their language in the face of an existential threat. While there are fewer secular Yiddish speakers in 2007 as compared to 1969, the social situation is steady. If Yiddish is always-almost-dead, that means that it is not yet dead. These two works show a possible way forward for American Yiddishism: by employing distinctly American cultural forms and applying Yiddish directly to hegemonic America, these two texts are forcing Yiddish into the American cultural project and forcing their consideration alongside each other. Ozick acknowledges her novella's grudging presence in the American literary scene; Chabon directly challenges American establishments for their acceptance by relishing in noir and laying American colonialism bare. The texts condemn what they uphold, and mourn the language they propagate. Any literary response to a linguistic dull edge of extinction inherently prolongs the process of

linguistic extinction, building the Yiddish archive up and up until ultimate death or extinction become nigh-impossible.

In Shandler's conclusion to *Adventures in Yiddishland*, he argues, "As a postvernacular language, whose meta-meaning supercedes its value as a system for quotidian communications, *Yiddish has shifted from a cultural means to a cultural end*. Yiddish has become a topic of discussion more than an instrument of discussion" (197). "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* are both participants in the tradition of the postvernacular as a response to extinction anxiety. Both are equally interested in the symbolic value of Yiddish and the debate over which sort of Yiddish ought to be preserved in which way. By using the language so heavily both as a formal innovation and a plot innovation, Ozick and Chabon are postponing the ultimate death-event of Yiddish. To put it another way, they are inviting readers fluent and non-fluent alike into Yiddishland through the act of mourning a vanishing culture. Any metalinguistic dialogue over Yiddish extinction means that the extinction will not come. The near forty-year gap only serves to illustrate how entrenched Yiddish is as a heritage object, and how much potential there is to engage meta-narratives about Yiddish as a way to further its perpetuation. The future of Yiddish in America is to accept the challenges and opportunities inherent with anxiety over its death, and prevent the false hope and emotional violence that accompanies Messianism. The postvernacular will never revive the Yiddish of old, but it very well may stabilize the Yiddish of new.

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