
‘A Woman Can’t Write like That:’ Anna Margolin and the Beginnings of Yiddish Poetry in America

Cristina Stanciu*¹

¹Virginia Commonwealth University – United States

Abstract

Along with Celia Dropkin, the Yiddish poet who brought eroticism into Yiddish poetry, Anna Margolin (1887-1952) was a pioneer of US women’s poetry in Yiddish. Chaim N. Bialik, the famous modern Hebrew poet who reviewed her only book of poems favorably, wrote to her: “Dear Madame, Thank you for your book of poems. Who are you?” Before the relatively recent monumental work of translation undertaken by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, Kathryn Hellerstein, Shirley Kumove, Ruth Whitman, Brian McHale, and Anita Norich-among others-women Yiddish poets have been marginal to the Yiddish American poetry canon. The recent attention to her work positions her as one of the most influential women Yiddish poets in the first decades of the twentieth century. Yiddish women writers in America were the first generation of immigrant women, an incipient female intelligentsia (Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska, among others), who shaped the beginnings of Jewish American literature. In this paper I examine Margolin’s Yiddish poetry in New York, influenced by the multiple dislocations created by New York landscape, whether real or imagined. I will argue that the trans-national life of the imagination afforded her by her early cosmopolitanism-she was an avid reader of French, German, Hebrew, Russian, and English poetry-grounded her Yiddish work in several geographies of being and belonging as she transgressed linguistic, religious, and gender expectations. I will show how, unlike her male peers’ poetry, Margolin reluctantly rejects conventional “feminine” voices (religious humility, modesty etc.) and explores romantic love and failed relationships, lost or unrequited love, homosocial desire, and the surveillance of forbidden love in her poetry.

*Speaker