Hebrew and Yiddish literary relations pose an interesting case study for discussions of national and nonnational literary cultures. These modern literatures arose in the declining Russian, Hapsburg, and Ottoman empires in the nineteenth century and amidst the newly emerging nationalist movements of the same periods. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries neither Hebrew nor Yiddish could claim a national home or a single center, divided by crumbling empires and newly forming nation-states. Their representatives strove for various forms of national identities and international legitimacy. In Eastern Europe and among the literary diaspora, both Hebrew and Yiddish literatures shared overlapping authors, centers, and literary institutions. However, by the middle of the twentieth century both came to be identified with very different histories, intellectual traditions, and literary cultures.

The story of Hebrew and Yiddish literatures’ connection with International PEN captures the evolving historical relations of these diasporic literatures to a changing international political landscape. PEN International was founded in 1921 as an international organization of writers along national lines, a “League of Nations for Men and Women of Letters.” When Jewish-language writers sought to establish a bilingual Jewish PEN club in Warsaw in 1927, they posed a challenge to this post-World War I national model. Their petition prompted great confusion by PEN International London, whose representatives posed questions such as what country did well-known Jewish writers, like Sholem Asch, represent? The writers responded with a fifteen-page history of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature defined in extraterritorial and diasporic terms. This diasporic multilingual model of Jewish literature rapidly frayed. Hebrew writers later petitioned from Palestine for a Hebrew PEN club. A few years later separate Hebrew and Yiddish centers would be formed.¹ At the 1936 PEN conference in Buenos Aries, H. Leyvik, the pre-eminent, Russian-born, New York Yiddish poet articulated the complex place of Yiddish in the world in his speech to fellow PEN delegates, proclaiming: “The essential problem of our literature in the present century consists in finding a way to synthesize national and universal values (vi azoy gefinen a sintez fun nationaln and universa ln). The Jew and the Universe: here lies the main drama of our life and our literature.” (Leyvik 1963, 124)

¹ See my discussion of this history in Schachter 2012, 3–5.
Jewish writers sought to imagine a multilingual and diasporic Jewish literature in Eastern Europe. By the 1930s the problem for Yiddish, according to Leyvik, is not how it might transcend its national particularity and speak to the universal, but conversely, how its idiosyncratic worldliness – a worldliness indicated both by its global reach and by its internationalist ethos – might speak to a world composed of territorial nation-states.

By the post-war era, the massive destruction of European Jewry and the rise of the new Israeli nation completely transformed Jewish literary life. Hebrew now had a national home and no longer justified itself in diasporic terms, erasing its multilingual diasporic origins. The emerging Israeli state enforced Hebrew as the national language, at the expense of Jewish multilingualisms. According to the new national narrative, Hebrew became a national literature when its writers emigrated to Palestine, transforming the transnational and diasporic Hebrew past into a monolingual Israeli literature. This nationalist Hebrew literary history obscured and erased the fertile intersections of both languages (as well as others including Arabic) in their shared diasporic contexts.

Much of the comparative work on Hebrew and Yiddish literature in the past two decades has sought to illuminate the rich intersections between Hebrew and Yiddish in post-statehood Israeli culture and to challenge the monolingual and national Hebrew literary historical narrative in the pre-statehood period, tracing for example the continued relations of these literatures, and locating their rich overlap and dialogue. Interesting questions remain: how to assimilate this broader multilingual and multinational history beyond Israeli literary studies? To what literary culture for example did the London-based Yosef Chaim Brenner’s work belong? What of Dovid Bergelson’s modernist stories written and set in Berlin? How might his literary work be integrated into the study of a multilingual German literary culture? How might Hebrew and Yiddish literary relations serve as a paradigm for a new Jewish literary studies, attentive to peripheral circuits, translingual encounters, and multiple forms of identification?

In recent years, I have collaborated with Lital Levy to theorize the multilingual relations of Jewish-language literatures across continents and cultural contexts. In our article for the PMLA entitled: “Jewish Literature / World Literature: Between the Local and the Transnational” we argued that Jewish literary studies needs to move beyond the parochial and national borders that divide its subjects (Levy and Schachter 2015, 92–109). Despite Jewish language literature’s inherent multilingualism and transnationalism, until recently, scholarship has focused on single languages or regions. While at the same time, we argue scholarship on world and transnational literary cultures has largely focused on the languages of the metropolitan center. In our PMLA essay, we set out to theorize world and Jewish literary studies in relationship to each other and develop new meth-
odologies for a transnational Jewish literary studies. We furthered this methodology in the special issue of *ProofTexts* on *Jewish Literature/World Literature* that we co-edited.

Arguing that world literary studies should focus its attention on non-metropolitan circuits and on minor languages, we contend that the study of Jewish-language literature provides a compelling case for the centrality of minor languages to discussions of transnational literary culture. Multilingual, transnational, and mobile, modern Jewish-language literatures – including the case of Hebrew and Yiddish – move lucidly between local and transnational contexts, negotiating literary influences from non-Jewish contexts while circulating texts among Jewish languages.

As a network that traverses multiple geographic regions, political systems, and linguistic frameworks, modern Jewish writing exposes the limits of a model that subsumes the “minor” to the nation and that does not allow for the many linguistic and spatial dimensions of diasporic communities, as well as the many meanings of “the world”. (Levy and Schachter 2017, 4)

The story of Eugene Sue’s 1843 novel French novel *Les Mystères de Paris* (*The Mysteries of Paris*) offered an instructive case for rethinking Jewish language literary relations.²

The Hebrew version of the novel appeared in Vilna (1857–1860) and was one of the first works of European literature translated into Hebrew. It was published in Yiddish in New York 1865, where it was a work of popular fiction; then in Ladino in the Constantinople Journal *EL Tiempo* in 1891. The novel was also meant as popular literature but held its French prestige; and in Judeo-Arabic in Calcutta in 1893 as part of a Haskalah project. Although it is generally (if erroneously) thought that European Jews modernized before their non-European brethren, the *The Mysteries* served moderately different ends for Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic readers in similar historical circumstances, linking these reading communities to larger and overlapping forces of literary and cultural transformation. A reading of the reception of this novel, shows its global Jewish reach, and pushes us to conceptualize its centrality to Jewish cultural modernity in translational and multilingual terms.

As we look at these broader more flexible models of literary historical thinking, I want to raise another set of issues that haunts both the nationalist global models of literary studies: the unreflective masculinist paradigms that so often guide literary study and the study of Jewish culture modernity. The predomi-

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² We discuss this at length in our PMLA essay (Levy and Schachter 2015).
nance of a nationalist model of literary history not only marginalizes Jewish writers, but also separates the transnational work of women writers from each other and magnifies their marginalization. Men serve as paragons of national literature, and are internationally recognized as such in global literary frameworks. I posit that a world/transnational and transcultural model must look carefully at women writers, who contribute to the creation of world literary networks and challenge the national literary frameworks that have dominated. Without their contributions, we would have a fundamentally one-sided, flawed understanding of transnational and world literary cultures. In my current work on Hebrew and Yiddish modernism, I bridge these two traditions to locate a shared, but obscured, transnational and diasporic modernist aesthetic among women writers. Whereas in Yiddish women have been written out of the prose canon, in Hebrew they have been marginalized or read as isolated exceptions. Separated by languages and national homes, these women’s prose innovations have been largely invisible to literary scholars, and viewed as isolated developments in minor languages. Read together across languages in multiple territorial centers, New York, Moscow, Tel Aviv, and Poland, makes their internationalist, modernist aesthetic visible.

Very briefly, I want to outline the connections among two of these writers in their surprising shared dialogue with Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Fradel Shtok and Dvora Baron were born within one year of each other, Shtok in Skala at the border with the Russian empire, and Baron in Uzda just outside of Minsk. The former educated in German classics, and the latter in Jewish tradition, one emigrated to the US and the other to Palestine. Both women retired from public view early in the careers: Baron continued to write after she retreated into her home, whereas Shtok went largely silent. Both have been mythologized for their retreat. According to the received narrative, Shtok was angered at Leyeles’ negative review of her 1919 collection of short stories, and stormed into the offices of *Der tog*, slapped him across the face, and then dramatically broke off ties with Yiddish (Pratt 2008, 67–68). The *Lexikon fun der yidisher literature* describes her end in the 1930s, “Over time she became melancholic and died in a sanitarium for the mentally ill.” News of her death was premature. She wrote a Yiddish play in the 1920s, that can be found in the library of con-

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3 This is the subject of my current book manuscript, *Experiments in Prose: Women Writing Jewish Modernity*.


5 “Fradel Shtok,” *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur*, vol. 8 (607).
Moreover, in a letter dated October 20, 1942, Shtok wrote to Abe Cahan, editor of the New York Yiddish daily, *Foverts*, sending along a story that Cahan published in November of that year (Neugroschel 2002, 463). My recent archival search has uncovered additional information about her life, including the tragic fact that she died in 1990 at Rockland State Hospital, where she was institutionalized in the 1960s.

Dvora Baron, immigrated to Palestine in 1910 and married Yosef Aharonovich, the editor of *Ha-Poel Ha-Tsair*. In 1922 she and her husband resigned from their editorial positions, and she famously secluded herself in her home. It was not until 1927 that she succeeded in publishing a collection of her short fiction in Hebrew. This was a source of enormous frustration for Baron, whose husband had twice raised the funds for the project and then chose to use them otherwise.⁶

In 1932, five years after the publication of her first collection of stories, her translation of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* appeared in print. Baron was not the only female, socialist translator of the novel, Eleanor Marx, a socialist, feminist political activist, and Karl Marx’s daughter, undertook her translation in 1885–1886, the same period that she put on the first performance of Ibsen’s *A Doll House* in London, and published one of the most important documents of socialist feminism: “The Woman Question: From a Socialist Point of View.”⁷ Baron, Shtok, and Marx all found in Flaubert’s work a sharp critique of capitalism and a feminist promise, even if one that was never realized in his novel.

Baron and Shtok’s prose engage in a rich dialogue with Flaubert’s novel, including his investment with breaking down the divide between art and life, and his innovative prose techniques, particularly *style indirecte libre*, while also critiquing his demonization of women’s desires. Baron’s story “Ketanot” or “Trifles” describes the fulfillment of a woman’s aesthetic desires, while also critiquing the violence that limits those desires. Shtok’s story, “Friedrich Schiller,” mobilizes her female protagonist’s material desires to disrupt the normative aesthetic hierarchies of European high culture. Separated by language and national home, these women’s prose innovations have been largely invisible to literary scholars. However, when we examine their shared aesthetic practices we see two women writers united by an investment in the subversive artistic potential of women’s desires. Shtok envisions the desiring woman as an artist, endowing her with the aesthetic authority to transgress the boundaries between art and life, and be-

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⁶ According to Nurith Govrin’s account, he raised the needed funds for the endeavor, but ultimately decided to use the money for “public good,” writing to Brenner in 1911 that “he received the credit but used it to publish ‘Ha-aretz ve-ha-avoda’” (Govrin 1988, 233).

tween Jewish and Gentile culture. Through her dialogue with Flaubert, Baron theorizes the writer as aesthetic laborer who narrates women’s engagement with material objects as both exploited producers and desirous consumers and transforms their creation of value into the substance of art. Viewed from this comparative perspective Baron no longer remains an outlier in Hebrew literary history who wrote modernist stories set in the restricted world of the shtetl, and Shtok enters Yiddish literary history as a compelling modernist writer of Jewish modernity. They are part of a larger transnational, modernist, and feminist critique of Jewish literary modernity.

These comparative and transnational approaches to literary studies are promising avenues for expanding the canon and moving past restrictive doxa that have limited women from our purview. Of course, institutions of higher education are driven by forces that promote national language and literatures tirelessly. We cannot escape these institutions, but in our teaching and scholarship we can promote the teaching of a rich body of literary works from a comparative angle. A comparative Jewish literary model, built on the tools of world literary studies could be a very useful paradigm for such a project.

Bibliography


