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## Going Native, Becoming Modern

To bump into a wooden Indian was to bump into good luck, a hundred times a week.

—Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*

The palefaces dominated literature throughout the nineteenth century, but in the twentieth they were overthrown by the redskins.

—Philip Rahv, “Paleface and Redskin”

The imaginary Indian offered a convenient and infinitely flexible figure upon which to work out questions of American identity, from the seventeenth century up through the fledgling twenty-first. In the twentieth century in particular, Indians, as well as other so-called primitive peoples, would additionally come to serve as a site through which Americans could define what it meant to be modern.<sup>1</sup> The kind of modernness embodied by Indians, as we shall see, served specific nationalist incentives. These moments of imaginative encounter, representation, and masquerade, as we have come to see, had particular resonance for Jewish writers in America, for many of whom the memory of immigration was fresh and the process of acculturation unfinished.

Mary Antin, in her 1912 autobiography *The Promised Land*, articulated the feeling, often echoed, that the eastern European Jewish immigrant experienced in the passage to America not only a journey in space but a journey in time. “I began

life in the Middle Ages,” Antin wrote in her introduction, “and here am I still, your contemporary in the twentieth century, thrilling with your latest thought.”<sup>2</sup> After all, it was not only the unassimilable foreignness of Jewish immigrants that caused widespread popular anxiety; it was also their perceived primitiveness.<sup>3</sup> Antin both participates in and assuages this anxiety, as she describes her “medieval” origins and at the same time assures her readers of her speedy and thorough modernization. To come to America was to enter the modern age; to Americanize was to become and to remain essentially modern. “To be alive in America,” wrote Antin, “I found out long ago, is to ride on the central current of the river of modern life” (278). Calling herself the “youngest of America’s children” (286), this self-designated universal immigrant and American claims not only the nation’s “shining future” but its “whole majestic past” (286).

When, in *The Promised Land*, the young Antin bumps into her wooden Indian (250) and drops her medicine, the accident’s immediate effect is the solidification of Antin’s friendship with the pharmacist, Mr. Pastor, whose symbolic name communicates his status as another idealized “native” American. The wooden Indian represents a moment of encounter between immigrant and native, during which conflict resolves into friendship (“Of course we were great friends after that, and this is the way my troubles often ended on Dover Street” [250]); each friendship brings Antin closer to triumphant Americanization.

Susan Hegeman has argued that both modern anthropologists (led by German-Jewish immigrants Franz Boas and Edward Sapir) and modern literary intellectuals (such as Van Wyck Brooks and Waldo Frank, another German Jew) were engaged in the project of redefining modern American “culture,” a term that has come to absorb both the social-scientific and the aesthetic. For those engaged in the defining and refining of an American “culture,” the Indian would serve both as the subject of ethnological study, affirming Boas’s program of “cultural relativism,” and as the model for an indigenous art. As Hegeman has said, the context of both projects was “complexly modernist.”<sup>4</sup> A focus on primitive societies, through their difference, could serve to reinforce American modernity. On the other hand, in the work of many moderns, such as Mary Austin, Georgia O’Keeffe, Jean Toomer, and William Faulkner, Indians, the Southwest, and the rural South loomed large and served not as foils for modern experience and expression but as vehicles for modern experience and expression. Indians, that is to say, were, in the words of writer, ethnographer, and activist Oliver La Farge, *both* “primitive” and “modern.”<sup>5</sup> Indian chants, art, and rituals thus served a multitude of useful purposes for a creative culture both influenced by and anxious to distance itself from recent artistic trends in Europe, which itself was beginning to turn to “primitive” cultures for modernist inspiration.

Although it is more accurate, in light of the recent scholarship expanding our notions of aesthetic modernism, to speak of multiple and diverse modernisms in a variety of geographical centers, I would venture to say that American modernism in its most ascendant form was particularly committed to the idea of nationhood, as opposed to the internationalism or cosmopolitanism generally attributed to Anglo-European modernism, perceived to have arisen out of the rootlessness of modern life.<sup>6</sup> Persistent historical debates about a national language, racial and ethnic identity, and the relationship between American citizenship (a naturalized status) and Americanness (a natural, or native, status) were reenergized and recontextualized in the early twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> As Alan Trachtenberg writes, “The fundamental shift in the representation of Indians, from ‘savage’ foe to ‘first American’ and ancestor to the nation, was conditioned by the perceived crisis in national identity triggered by the ‘new immigrants’ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”<sup>8</sup>

The year 1924 saw the passage of both the Reed-Johnson Act, which established restrictive quotas on immigration, and the Indian Citizenship Act, which declared “all non-citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States . . . to be citizens of the United States.” Walter Benn Michaels argues that both acts participated in a recasting of American citizenship, changing it from a status that could be achieved through one’s actions (immigrating and becoming “civilized” or naturalized) to a status that could be better understood as inherited.<sup>9</sup> Naturalized immigrants were perhaps American citizens, but they were not American; the Indian’s Americanness antedated his citizenship—he had been an American long before becoming an American citizen.

Michaels thus pinpoints the 1920s as the moment in which “culture” replaced “race” as a way of thinking about national identity. He too focuses on the Indian as the contested site of culture, specifically modernity, aesthetic modernism, and American identity: “the emergence of nativist modernism involved . . . the transformation of the opposition between black and white into an opposition between Indian and Jew.”<sup>10</sup> Jewish responses to this opposition, however, are not discussed by Michaels and are precisely what I seek to recover in this discussion.

Indianness thus functions in this context as a category, used to focus and legitimize literary and aesthetic tastes and trends. When Philip Rahv wrote his 1939 essay about the “split personality” of American literature, he chose to describe the two poles not as patrician and plebeian but as “paleface” and “redskin.”<sup>11</sup> This is the cult of Henry James, Rahv writes, versus the cult of Walt Whitman: theory versus experience, sensibility versus energy, refinement versus “gross, riotous naturalism.” That criticism is “chronically forced to

choose between them” has resulted in “truncated works of art”: what is at stake for Rahv is nothing less than the possibility of a fully realized national literature. The mode of twentieth-century literature, Rahv writes, belongs to the redskin, who is a “purely indigenous phenomenon,” a “juvenile,” on the one hand a “crass materialist, a greedy consumer of experience” and on the other a “sentimentalist, a half-baked mystic listening to inward voices and watching for signs and portents.” Rahv considers writers Dreiser, Lewis, Anderson, Wolfe, Sandburg, Caldwell, Steinbeck, Farrell, and Saroyan all redskins; the Jewish writer is, he insinuates, a paleface: “As for the paleface, in compensation for backward cultural conditions and a lost religious ethic, he has developed a supreme talent for refinement, just as the Jew, in compensation for adverse social conditions and a lost national independence, has developed a supreme talent for cleverness.”<sup>12</sup> Rahv, that is to say, participates in an early-twentieth-century critical discourse about a national literature that casts the Jew against the Indian. That Rahv seems to prefer the paleface to the redskin (“at present the redskins are in command of the situation, and the literary life in America has seldom been so deficient in intellectual power”) is beside the point.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Rahv’s arguments indicate the terms with which, or against which, the writers in this study wrestled.

I concentrate in this chapter upon modernist poetry, and upon Yiddish literary modernism’s engagement with American modernism and modernist intertexts, performed not on the vaudeville stage but in the rarefied pages of a literary journal. Identification with Native Americans made it possible for the Yiddish writer to imaginatively inhabit the bodies both of Indians and aspirers to Indianness, natives and aliens, primitives and moderns, and in the process to both imitate and critique the racism and elitism of Anglo-American modernist literary practices. Through the binding together, against the grain, of Indian and Jew, the Yiddish writers I discuss here participated in a conversation that resolutely excluded them, a conversation about the possibilities for a modern, national literature.

### **The Primitive, the Modern, and the Jews**

Bay dem breg fun Gitchee-Gumee,  
 Bay dem yam-vaser dem heln,  
 Dort geshtanen iz Nokomis,  
 Mit ihr finger kegn mahriv,

Ibern vaser kegn mahriv  
Tsu di purpur abend-volken.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha*,  
Yiddish translation by Yehoash

But from the dust and sand, if you stop anywhere,  
The breath of the Indian follows you there.

—Mani Leyb, “The Bit of Land,” translated by Jehiel and Sarah Cooperman

Yehoash’s (Solomon Bloomgarten’s) translation of Longfellow’s 1855 poem *Hiawatha* in 1910 asserted the rich capacities of the Yiddish language as well as the Yiddish poet’s cosmopolitanism. So argued critic Khaym Zhitlovski, who wrote an introduction to the Yiddish translation of the epic poem. “In our opinion,” he writes, “we are the most cosmopolitan people in the world.” Translation helps the Jewish cosmopolite to “understand the soul of the non-Jew,” Zhitlovski writes, and in the case of Yehoash and Longfellow, to cultivate sympathy with a people who live in harmony with nature.<sup>14</sup>

When Zhitlovski wrote his introductory essay, he could hardly have anticipated Ezra Pound’s mandate, published three years later, to translate foreign texts so as to “train” oneself as a modernist poet. Zhitlovski’s introduction not only rehearses Pound’s feeling that “translation is good training” but also anticipates American modernism’s linking of cosmopolitanism and a romantic, pseudoethnographic American primitivism. Longfellow, in *Hiawatha*, had adapted both the meter of the Finnish *Kalevala* and the substance of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft’s research in Indian legend. Zhitlovski, however, for all his sympathetic participation in Longfellow’s project, momentarily indulges in a bit of irreverence. How is it that Yehoash fastened upon this particular poem to translate? asks Zhitlovski rhetorically. Surely, he answers himself, the poet is not obligated to answer that question. Rather, “it’s Longfellow’s good luck!” to be translated into Yiddish. This moment, a cheerful pronouncement of Yiddish’s status as a major language, read against Yiddish poet Mani Leyb’s portrait of an American landscape haunted by a vanished Indian, together represent the competing tensions of early American-Yiddish modernist writing as it fashioned itself against and around the early-twentieth-century American literary scene.<sup>15</sup>

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the handfuls of artists, intellectuals, poets, and writers who had arrived along with the millions of eastern European Jewish immigrants had managed to create a flourishing literary and artistic marketplace in New York.<sup>16</sup> American influence on immigrant

literary production expressed itself at first through energetic and voluminous translation: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jack London, and Walt Whitman were all translated into Yiddish. *Hiawatha* was translated not only into Yiddish but into Hebrew as well, by Shaul Tshernikhovski in 1913. Most relevant to my discussion here, the years 1920 and 1925–26 saw renderings of Native American chants into Yiddish in the journal *Shriftn*, the first preeminent venue for Yiddish modernist writers, primarily members of the group Di Yunge (the young ones), the first self-proclaimed Yiddish aestheticist and modernist group to emerge in New York.

Di Yunge included poets like Y. Y. Shvarts, whose 1925 epic *Kentucky* was hailed by his colleagues as establishing the right of Yiddish to be regarded as a part of American literature. Prose fiction writer Isaac Raboy became well known for writing novels about farming (*Herr Goldenbarg*, 1913) and the American prairie (*Der Yidisher Cowboy*, 1942). In contrast with their politicized, activist predecessors at the turn of the century, the labor or “sweatshop” poets, the Yunge emphasized their disengagement from political didacticism, their concern with beauty and transcendence, their ability to assimilate and represent a range of poetic personae, and their intimacy with the geographic reaches of America. The Yunge’s insistence upon their “Americanness” has been read both as evidence of their anxious and incomplete acculturation and as a gesture to an urban immigrant as well as an overseas eastern European Yiddish readership hungry for the exotic and unfamiliar.<sup>17</sup> I want to suggest in addition that their turn to typically “American” subject matter was crafted in great part by the emergent discourse in U.S. literary circles about the possibilities for a modern, national literature.<sup>18</sup>

The Yunge’s assertion of both modernness and Americanness via Indianness emerged through its imaginary dialogue with a nascent American modernist movement that was itself involved in an ongoing and unresolved negotiation concerning native identity, language, and literature. Although the members of the Yunge published several other journals, I focus here on the group’s journal *Shriftn* (Writings, 1912–26), which, I argue, self-consciously engaged, through translation, imitation, and subtle critique, with *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, begun by Harriet Monroe in Chicago in the same year. Monroe and Ezra Pound, her “foreign correspondent,” struggled to define the borders and languages of American modernism. Imagism and free verse, and Walt Whitman and American Indians as the American antecedents of both, were promoted in the pages of *Poetry* alongside Pound’s cosmopolitan, international offerings. Neither Monroe’s Americanism nor Pound’s globalism would include the Yiddish poet. *Shriftn*’s modernism, as a result, gestured in specific ways toward

this anti-Semitic, Anglo-American modernist movement and at the same time attempted to suggest its own difference.

Monroe's proposed journal was the first of its kind—devoted exclusively to poetry and to publishing the poets whose experimental verse was rejected by established publications. The groundbreaking work of *Poetry* was later eclipsed by later comers—the *Little Review*, *Seven Arts*, *Others*, and the new *Dial*. And Monroe's successes as an editor were later passed over in favor of tales of her mistakes—her distaste for T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and E. E. Cummings, for example. In 1912, however, the state of poetry in America was by all accounts lamentable; within several years of *Poetry*'s initiation the nation was in the grip of a “poetry renaissance,” attributable in great part to the efforts of *Poetry*.<sup>19</sup>

Modernist interest in the Indian, both as subject and as new artist/poet, was consolidated in part by the magazine, as well as by Ezra Pound's launching, in its pages, of the imagist movement in 1912 when he named Richard Aldington's and H.D.'s poetry *imagiste*. Monroe had hired Ezra Pound, then a young poet and critic with a developing reputation in England, as her foreign correspondent. *Poetry* became the outlet, briefly, for his imagist movement, publishing, in 1913, his essay “A Few Don't by an Imagist,” and Monroe continued to support experiments in *vers libre*. Pound's discovery of Rhabindranath Tagore and his encounter with Ernest Fenollosa's interpretations of Chinese poetry enabled an analogous American turn to Native American song, reconstituting the Indian, in the process, as imagist poet.<sup>20</sup> Pound himself was not specifically interested in the Indian question, but he paved the way by encouraging translation, particularly translation from poetry that lacked stanzaic form and therefore was identified, often mistakenly, as *vers libre*.<sup>21</sup>

Pound, however ambivalently, also saw explicit connections between Whitman, imagism, and modernism: Whitman's “crudeness” could be understood to be reaching into the same primitivist strain that Pound sought, for instance, in Chinese poetry. Pound's poem “A Pact,” which appeared in *Poetry* in 1913, addresses Whitman in true Whitmanesque fashion: “We have one sap and one root / Let there be commerce between us.”<sup>22</sup> Just as *Shriftn* announced its first issue in 1912 with a translation of Whitman's internationalist poem “Salut au Monde,” *Poetry* featured in its first issue an essay by Alice Corbin Henderson titled “A Perfect Return,” which chronicled Whitman influence first on French poets, then on English poets, and foresaw the return of Whitman to America, by way of this international circle of interest, because of the new emphasis on *vers libre*.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Whitman, as a continual presence in and justification for the magazine, was featured prominently in every issue of *Poetry*, which featured on every title page an epigram by Whitman: “To have great poets there must

be great audiences, too.” This, Monroe’s motto, stood in direct contrast to Margaret Anderson’s intention (and Pound’s) in the *Little Review* to make “no compromise with the public taste.”<sup>24</sup>

Monroe was particularly interested in furthering the cause of American poetry, intending to pass over William Butler Yeats, for instance, in favor of Vachel Lindsay as the recipient of a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar Guarantor’s Prize for the most distinguished publication of *Poetry*’s first year. The prize went to Yeats at Pound’s furious insistence, when he wrote: “Either it must be respectfully offered to Mr. Yeats, or the americans [*sic*] must admit that they are afraid of foreign competition. . . . You CAN not divide the arts by a political line. . . . You ought either to have specified the award as local, or you ought not to have accepted [Yeats’s] stuff.”<sup>25</sup> Monroe acceded to Pound, and a one-hundred-dollar second prize, limited to American contributors, was hastily raised for Lindsay. Her reply to Pound’s infuriated harangue read, in part:

In a more general way I would say, however, that it is easy for you, living in what one of our papers calls “the world’s metropolis” to charge with imbecility us “in the provinces.” If we are provincial, we shall always be so until we cease to take our art and art opinions ready-made from abroad, and begin to respect ourselves. This magazine is an effort to encourage the art, to work up a public for it *in America*.<sup>26</sup>

This spat provoked the first of Pound’s several resignations from the magazine, until he fully and explicitly transferred his allegiance to the *Little Review* in 1919 or so.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout his association with Monroe’s magazine, the tension between Pound’s cosmopolitan project and her nativist one engendered an ambivalent journal, the product of two competing modernist agendas. Monroe’s intense interest in creating an indigenous brand of modernism, at odds with Pound’s determination to “print one French poem a month” continually provoked Pound’s disgust, as when, writing to William Carlos Williams in 1920, he sniffed: “Amy Lowell’s perfumed—would be putrid even if it had been done by a pueblo Indian, or written on the highest pinnacle of Harriet’s buggerin rocky mts.”<sup>28</sup>

Alice Corbin Henderson, Monroe’s associate editor, agreed with Monroe in determining the cultural orientation of the magazine. Henderson introduced the verse of Sherwood Anderson to the magazine in 1917 and advocated the publication of cowboy ballads; Monroe, as it happens, did not share either enthusiasm.<sup>29</sup> Henderson’s June 1914 editorial, “Too Far from Paris,” argued



that the American poet must realize himself in “direct relation” to the American “experience” and held up Lindsay as an ideal. She wrote:

It may be that the spirit of Whitman is still, in any large sense, to capture. It will be captured and transmuted into expressions varying widely in outward form if the American poets realize their birthright and heritage of individual genius. . . . We cannot forecast Mr. Lindsay’s future. He is already, as Mr. Yeats said, assured for the anthologies. But his example is valuable. He is realizing himself in relation to direct experience, and he is not adapting to his work a twilight tone which is quite foreign to him, as it is, generally, to the nation.<sup>30</sup>

*Poetry* continued to foster the experimental verse of such American writers as Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Wallace Stevens, and Carl Sandburg. A special Indian issue of *Poetry* appeared in February 1917. It included a number of “interpretations” of Indian song and dance, a list of anthropological texts in which readers would find more poems and myths (which indeed served as the basis of later collections, most prominently George Cronyn’s *Path on the Rainbow*), a plea by Monroe calling for further exploration and preservation of this literature, and a protest against the government policy of suppressing Indian culture: “the danger is that the tribes, in the process of so-called civilization will lose all trace of . . . their beautiful primitive poetry.”<sup>31</sup>

In her apparent hunger for “primitive” material, Monroe, it seems, wrote to the editors of the Yiddish modernist journal *In zikh* (1919–40), inquiring: “Unfortunately we cannot read your journal. We would like to know what language it is printed. Is it Chinese?” The Inzikhistn, the generation of Yiddish modernists who followed the Yunge and “rebelled” against their aestheticism, indignantly wrote in their 1923 issue:

*Poetry* is published in Chicago. Several Yiddish daily newspapers are printed in Chicago. Yiddish periodicals, collections, books are published there. There are certainly also Chinese laundries in Chicago, and the lady-editors of *Poetry* have probably seen a ticket from a Chinese laundry in their lifetime. And, after all that—not to mention that an intelligent person may know the difference between the way Chinese and Yiddish look—to ask whether a Yiddish journal is Chinese does not reflect very positively on the intelligence of the *Poetry* people. . . . How long will Yiddish literature be unknown among the Gentiles? How long will they think of us—in literature—as Hotentots?<sup>32</sup>

Implying a feminized and privileged modernist establishment (the “lady-editors of *Poetry*” have “probably seen a ticket from a Chinese laundry”), the *In zikh* editors lash out at the indiscriminate romanticism of the primitivist modernism celebrated by *Poetry*. The Inzikhistn reject the perceived label of primitive. Not only is Yiddish *not* Chinese, Yiddish poets are also *not* “Hotentots” (that is, Africans). Monroe, however, was not entirely uninterested in the untapped potential market signaled by *In zikh*; the two journals had a brief but unfruitful correspondence. Monroe writes in the notes to *Poetry*’s February 1924 issue:

The exchange editor’s curiosity was aroused by *In Sich* [*sic*], a magazine of modern Yiddish verse. This information concerning its contents was acquired only through correspondence, in English, with the magazine’s editor, A. Leyeless. In Gentilian ignorance we rashly offered to find a Jewish poet who would read the magazine and briefly evaluate it for readers of *POETRY*, and we were promptly honored with what seems to be a complete file. But we have not yet happened upon any one sufficiently versed in both Yiddish and poetry to have an appreciative comprehension of the magazine. (287)

A translator was never found, and the *In zikh* file still languishes, presumably, in the *Poetry* archives. Indeed, this aborted exchange is symptomatic of *Poetry*’s relationship with Jewish writers in general. *Poetry* published the work of Edward Sapir, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Louis Untermeyer, whose 1922 poem about Heine, “Monologue from a Mattress,” most likely featured in its final lines the only Hebrew words to appear in *Poetry* during its first ten years: “Wait . . . I still can sing—*Sh’ma Yisroel Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echod . . . / Mouche—Mathilde . . .*”<sup>33</sup> But the journal rarely addressed, in its reviews or its editorials, the issue of the Jewish, or immigrant, writer. One exception, however, occurs in a July 1923 editorial by Florence Kiper Frank (herself, evidently, a writer on Jewish subjects), titled “The Jew as Jewish Artist,” the primary argument of which is that the Jew will not produce great works of American literature until he ceases to be a Jew. Frank writes:

The Jew in modern American poetry has nothing to say as a Jew. This assertion in spite of my friends Mr. Louis Untermeyer and Mr. Maxwell Bodenheim, who have both written recently on the subject!—and of certain ingenious attempts in these pages to classify the lengthy rhythms of Mr. James Oppenheim and of others of his group as Hebraic. The lengthy rhythms of Mr. James Oppenheim are the rhythms of Whitman, who of course derived from the flow and parallelism of the lyric and dramatic passages of the Old

Testament. But certainly the Whitmans of modern poetry are not pre-eminently Jews . . . the Jew has not, with perhaps the exception of Heine, produced an outstanding genius in modern literature. . . .

I cannot become convinced that what the Jew has to say in the modern world he will say as a Jew. . . . And here it seems to me he becomes significant as symbol. For if genius can only grow out of the deep ground, then perhaps genius—in the sense of the great, outstanding figure—will be no more. . . . This de-nationalized Jew, this de-religionized expatriate of spiritual solidity—looking back perhaps with nostalgia, perhaps feeling about into this new world with a curious, rising excitement, is—it seems to me—the modern intellectual.<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary accounts of literary modernism tend to emphasize and valorize its connection with the exiled or dislocated artist, exemplified by Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and later, the Lost Generation, and in this way implicitly celebrate the Jew as modernist subject or “symbol” (for instance, Leopold Bloom). The earliest American accounts, however, of “modern poetry,” as in Frank’s editorial, or, for instance, Mary Austin’s introductory essay to *The American Rhythm* (1923), sought to define it as growing organically out of the poet’s experience of the environment, emphasizing its connection to place. In this valorization of indigenoussness and autochthony, the “denationalized” Jew had nothing to say in modern art “as a Jew,” nor as an American.

If Di Yunge, the first Yiddish American modernists, were intently following the first manifestations of an indigenous American modernism in the pages of *Poetry*, as I argue they were, Frank’s editorial would have deflated the very heart of their project. Even more stingingly, by 1923, when her editorial was published, the number of Yiddish modernist journals was at an unprecedented high; just as *Poetry* had paved the way for the *Little Review*, *Others*, *Seven Arts*, and the new *Dial*, so had *Shriftn* ushered in *Der inzl*, *In zikh*, and a revised *Tsukunft*. All were implicitly invested in the legitimacy of the modernist, and American, Jewish artist.

### ***Shriftn*, Modernism, and America**

There were, clearly, differences between *Poetry* and *Shriftn* in terms of content and appearance. *Shriftn* published prose fiction as well as poetry, and the volumes came out annually as thick collections as opposed to monthly; this was due to the exigencies of the market for elite Yiddish literature, in which

both money and readers were scarce. Despite its differences, however, *Shriftn* can be fruitfully compared in many ways to *Poetry* in the duality of its project and in its importance as a forum for emerging poets and writers, mostly members of the Yunge. Conceived of and published by David Ignatov, *Shriftn* was a cosmopolitan and internationalist publication but at the same time was self-consciously “American,” though the only native American poetry translated and transformed in the pages of *Shriftn* were Whitman and Indian chants. In this way, Whitman, Philip Rahv’s archetypal “redskin,” centrally links *Poetry* and *Shriftn*. *Poetry* displayed Whitman’s epigram in every issue, and, in its early years, mentioned Whitman in some capacity in nearly every issue. Whitman and Indians served as early indigenous examples of *vers librists* and imagists and in this way made an argument for the natural affinity of America and American artists for modern poetry. Yiddish poets in America had very early on engaged with Whitman; the turn-of-the-century “sweatshop poets” celebrated Whitman as a protosocialist.<sup>35</sup> For *Shriftn*, however, as for *Poetry*, Whitman was both a native American and a cosmopolitan modern.<sup>36</sup> *Shriftn* thus announced its first issue, also published in 1912, with a Yiddish translation of Whitman’s global poem “Salut Au Monde.”

The negotiation in this poem between the local and the global was continually reflected in *Shriftn*. A typical issue in 1914 featured Mani Leyb’s poem “Shtiler, shtiler” (“Hush, hush”), which quickly assumed the importance of a manifesto as the representative piece of the Yunge’s apolitical aestheticist program; David Ignatov’s novella “Phoebe,” in which the protagonist accepts a position on a Vermont farm and finds himself embroiled in a pathological and dangerous affair with an American girl who is the product of an intermarriage between Jew and Gentile; and Isaac Raboy’s *Herr Goldenbarg*, in which a Jewish immigrant stakes a land claim in the “vayter vest” (distant west). The 1914 issue, in its translation section, featured excerpts from the *Iliad*, Friedrich Nietzsche, Hermann Hesse, and Robert Louis Stevenson—although this last was not as odd a choice when one considers that his circle, for a time, had included a young Harriet Monroe. The journal regularly showcased art, reviews, and essays in addition to poetry and translation. Aware of the trends at work in English journals, it published translations of Whitman and the Zohar, the *Rubayyat*, Aesop’s *Fables*, and Tagore, inspired in great part by Pound and *Poetry*. At the same time, the Yunge’s programmatic statement, published in their first, short-lived journal, *Di yugend* (1907–8), aimed to “create for Yiddish literature in America its own, independent home”:

Yiddish literature here in America has been boarding out with the Yiddish press that treats it as a stranger, a stepchild. The purpose of the press is either

to turn a profit or to spread certain social or nationalistic ideals. It has never had any pure or authentic interests in literature. . . . As professionals, the young Yiddish writers in America are in love with literature, and it hurts us to see Yiddish *belles-lettres* in exile here, being treated with cynical abandon. We have united . . . to create for Yiddish literature its own, independent home to free it from its bruising, battering exile.<sup>37</sup>

Ignatov claimed authorship of this unsigned editorial.<sup>38</sup> In 1912, when Ignatov published the first issue of *Shriftn*, Reuben Eisland would write in its pages, in the first definitive essay on the Yunge, that the group, different as each of its members were, constituted a real, legitimate movement that had brought Yiddish literature out of its provincial, “almost primitive” state into a national artistic flowering.<sup>39</sup> Ignatov, described by Wisse as the leader and most fervent promoter of the group, was a writer of symbolist prose fiction but perhaps was more effective, like Harriet Monroe, as an editor. Ignatov also wrote in English and submitted his English-language stories and novellas to American publishing houses and to the *Dial*, although none were accepted.<sup>40</sup> He also, apparently, was in brief correspondence with John Gould Fletcher, whose imagist verse Pound had introduced to *Poetry* in 1913. The illegible, damaged 1919 letter that remains among Ignatov’s papers seems to suggest that he had intended to translate Fletcher, possibly for appearance in *Shriftn*: “I look forward with pleasure to seeing my own work in translation, also [this section is illegible] . . . some of your work.” Ignatov, Eisland, Mani Leyb, and Zishe Landau constituted the core of the group, and others associated with it included Y. Y. Shvarts, Joseph Rolnik, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, M. J. Haimovitch, Isaac Raboy, and Joseph Opatoshu.<sup>41</sup>

Eisland’s private papers reveal an explicit and sophisticated engagement with the American literary modernist scene, particularly as it was crafted in the pages of *Poetry*. Featured among his letters and manuscripts are poems, copied out by hand, by Pound in English (“The Altar,” “The Flame”); a Pound poem translated into Yiddish (“Dance Figure”); an undated photograph of a young Pound; lists of poets’ names—apparently reading suggestions—that include Bodenheim, Padraic Colum, John Gould Fletcher, and Conrad Aiken; Chinese poems by Po-Chui, Wu-Li, Lu Yun, all translated into Yiddish, and, finally, elaborate copies of what are labeled “Indian” symbols, with handwritten notes in Yiddish at the bottom noting the similarities between the Indian and Hebrew terms for God.

The connections with *Poetry* are profound. Pound’s “Dance Figure” was one of the group of poems “Contemporaria” that marked his debut in the

pages of *Poetry* (the other two were published in *Personae* in 1926). The poets Eisland had jotted down all had made prominent appearances in *Poetry*, many for the first time. *Poetry* continually featured translations of Chinese poems, albeit not the ones in Eisland's papers, and *Poetry*'s consistent preoccupation with the Indian, and with the similarity of Indian verse with modern imagism, underscores Iceland's musings on the similarities between Indian and Hebrew religions in antiquity.

Eisland, the theorist of the group, in his essay "Di Yunge" in *Shriftn*'s first issue, profiles Rolnik, Mani Leyb, Landau, and Shvarts and, in conclusion, marvels at the aesthetic accomplishments of the Yunge given the "grey, monotonous life in the American Jewish streets where all the members of the Yunge live; where all is harsh, coarse, and materialistic, where there is no vestige of tradition and where the exaggerated yellow press deadens the flavor of all that it publishes, which is of the most banal sort."<sup>42</sup> In this way Eisland establishes a rather different relationship between the American poet and his environment than that forwarded by Austin, Henderson, and Frank: one in which nativeness and modernity could be achieved as a matter of will.

### Translating America

Valt Vitman bin ikh, a kosmos, der zun fun mekhtigen manhaten,  
 Shturemdik, gufik, zindik, un ikh es, un trink un frukhper zikh,  
 Kin sentimentaler,  
 Kin muster iber man un froy, kin muster bazunder fun zey,  
 Azoy fil basheydn vi umbasheydn.

—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

Hi-ihya naiho-o! Lomir zikh nemen zingen.  
 Lomir zikh nemen freyen. Hitciya yahina-a.  
 Lomir zikh nemen zingen, lomir zikh nemen freyen.  
 Dos gezang fun der groyser kokuruze. Hitciya yahina-a  
 Dos gezang fun der kleyner kokuruze. Hitciya yahina-a.

—Indian Rain Song

Yiddish interest in the Indian and in Whitman would become an act of interpretation and transformation designed to assert the simultaneous modernism and Americanness of the Yiddish immigrant poet. These intersected in *Shriftn* in great part through acts of translation, thus reconstituting the Indian and

Walt Whitman as, paradoxically, quintessentially American and alien: that is, as both Americans and Jews. Engagement with the Indian and with Whitman could serve as a gesture of, at once, a desire to participate in a rapidly developing culture of modernism and a resistance to the subsuming power of that culture. By concentrating here on the question of translation in the pages of *Shriftn*, I hope to situate Whitman and the Indian in a particular matrix of Yiddish-American modernism, one that sought to fuse the cosmopolitan and the local, the international and the American, the cultural and countercultural, thus both echoing and reconfiguring *Poetry's* brand of primitivist, "nativist modernism."

Andre Lefevere asserts that translations, or rewritings, are always produced under either ideological or poetological motivations or constraints, depending on whether the rewriters "find themselves in agreement with the dominant ideology of their time."<sup>43</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana adds: "Translation thus produces strategies of containment. By employing certain modes of representing the other—which it thereby also brings into being—translation reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonized, helping them acquire the status of what Edward Said calls representations, or objects without history."<sup>44</sup> Many theorists of translation assume that the direction of translation is always either between major cultures or from the minor to the major culture and not vice versa. In the case of Yiddish literature, we must adjust the power differential inherent in the project of translation and consider the reverberations of a possibly subversive translator from a minor language and culture, translating a major literature's "re-expression" (to use Mary Austin's phrase) of yet another minor language and culture.

Pound, notes Lawrence Venuti, saw translation as a means of "cultivating modernist poetic values like linguistic precision."<sup>45</sup> In 1918 Pound wrote that "Translation is good training, if you find that your original matter 'wobbles' when you try to rewrite it. The meaning of the poem to be translated can not 'wobble.'"<sup>46</sup> Venuti argues that Pound's self-fashioning as modernist poet-translator, confronting and competing against Victorian translators whose poems he chose to revisit, is an example of the ways in which translation practices could be instrumental in the fashioning of an authorial identity and that this construction "is at once discursive and psychological, worked out in writing practices open to psychoanalytic interpretation" (76). If the translator fashions an authorial identity through the selective translation of certain texts, then cultural, collective identities are likewise crafted through translation of the foreign:

Translation forms domestic subjects by enabling a process of "mirroring" or self-recognition: the foreign text becomes intelligible when the reader recognizes himself or herself in the translation by identifying the domestic

values that motivated the selection of that particular foreign text, and that are inscribed in it through a particular discursive strategy. . . . Sometimes, however, the values may be currently marginal yet ascendant, mobilized in a challenge to the dominant. (77)

This particular dynamic accurately describes the modernist immigrant Yiddish translator: through an effective transformation of Whitman and of American Indians into “Yiddish” poets, the translators I discuss in this section, in modernist fashion, meant to “modernize” the Indian and Whitman, and at the same time to “naturalize”—in the sense of both make *natural* and make *American*—the Yiddish poet.

Y. Y. Shvarts, author of the 1925 epic poem *Kentucky*, cited Whitman as a direct inspiration and translated “Salut Au Monde” for the first edition of *Shriftn* in 1912. Whitman meant this particular poem to express a “world vision” that would “temper and balance his nationalism.”<sup>47</sup> The poem is a breathtaking geographical and cultural catalog, which includes glances at the Jew: “You Chinaman and Chinawoman of China! you Tartar of Tartary! / You women of the earth subordinated at your tasks! / You Jew journeying in your old age through every risk, to stand once again on Syrian ground! / You other Jews, waiting in all lands for your Messiah.” Whitman, a famous tinkerer, revised the poem definitively in 1881, removing a number of lines that were descriptive of the United States, thus “limiting his point of view outward from America to other lands.”<sup>48</sup> Shvarts, however, uses an older version of the poem, retaining all of the American references. The title of the poem is preserved in French in its roman letters in the Yiddish journal, thus crafting an even more emphatically multilingual poem than Whitman himself would have been capable of. Whitman revised the poem so that it would be even more cosmopolitan, as evidenced by the excising of the “American” lines. That Shvarts would leave those lines in seems to reflect the cultural binaries that *Shriftn* announced itself as negotiating from its very inception.

L. Miller’s translations of sections 6 and 24 of *Song of Myself*, “A Woman Waits for Me,” and “O Captain! My Captain!” appeared in 1919. Section 6 of *Song of Myself* is a discourse on the nature of grass; section 24 begins famously: “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, breeding.” Miller inserts “A Woman Waits for Me” between these sections, then concludes with “O Captain! My Captain!” Whitman’s most “widely known and least characteristic poem” with its regular metrical scheme, and a poem that Whitman later confessed he felt uncomfortable with.<sup>49</sup> Miller, in “anthologizing” Whitman, means to translate him in all his incarnations:



transcendental, crude, sensual, and finally, nation-making, political poet. However, he also engages in quite a bit of editing and subtle rewriting. The entire second half of section 24 is cut. Miller also uses a pre-1881 edition, as evidenced by his preservation of the line “Valt Vitman bin ikh, a kosmos, der zun fun mekhtiken manhaten” (“Walt Whitman am I, a kosmos, of mighty Manhattan the son”), rather than Whitman’s final version: “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son.”

Indeed, it is this line that encapsulates the dual possibilities that both Whitman and the Indian as poet could represent for the Yiddish immigrant poet: both a “kosmos,” cosmopolitan, international, and a son of Manhattan—native, local, American. Consider, in addition, the difference between “Walt Whitman, a kosmos,” and “Walt Whitman *am I—Valt Vitman bin ikh.*” The Yiddish poet becomes Whitman, through a kind of translatorly ventriloquism, at the same time that Whitman, through this emphatic utterance, becomes a Yiddish poet.

Ignatov used George Cronyn’s 1918 anthology *Path on the Rainbow* as his unattributed source for his translations of Native American chants in the 1920 issue of *Shriftn*, which itself was inspired, Cronyn writes, by *Poetry*’s 1917 Indian issue.<sup>50</sup> Cronyn’s dedication reads, in part: “None [of the songs and chants herein translated] exhibit the slightest traces of European influence; they are genuine American Classics.” By dispensing with all of the prefatory framing material of Cronyn’s collection, Ignatov engages in his own form of rewriting, one that removes American Indian lyric from the ethnographic context of Cronyn’s collection and reconstitutes the Indian poetry as Yiddish in both spirit and context. At the same time Ignatov claims for the Yiddish journal its own status as “American classic.”

The connection between these reconstituted Indian songs and modern imagism is explicitly and consistently outlined both by Harriet Monroe and by Mary Austin. Austin wrote in her introduction to Cronyn’s volume:

That there is such a relationship any one at all familiar with current verse of the past three or four years must immediately conclude on turning over a few pages. He will be struck at once with the extraordinary likeness between much of this native product and the recent work of the imagists, *vers libristes*, and other literary fashionables. He may, indeed, congratulate himself on the confirmation of his secret suspicion that imagism is a very primitive form; he may, if he happens to be of the Imagist’s party, suffer a check in the discovery that the first free movement of poetic originality in America finds us just about where the last Medicine Man left off. But what else could he have expected?<sup>51</sup>

Ignatov, author of “Phoebe,” itself an ambivalent morality tale about the seductions of America, mined Cronyn for his Native American sources, but in the process he took poems out of order, chopped them up, and spliced some together, without regard for the careful ethnography that determined their order. Thus, a Zuni corn-grinding song is merged with a Pima rain dance; a section that in Cronyn was a prologue appears at the end of a sequence, instead of at its beginning. Information about individual tribal ritual and region that frames each contribution in the English anthology is simply omitted in Ignatov’s version. Ignatov produces both a tribute to America’s indigenous poetry and at the same time an impish affront pitched against the white ethnological and literary institutions that oversaw its production and consumption.

*Shriftn’s* 1925–26 issue, its last, featured in its translation section a mini-“anthology” of international, non-Western verse: Japanese haiku, Chinese and Egyptian poetry, and more Indian chants. Ignatov was a collaborator, but Meyer Shtiker was the actual translator of the Indian verse. His unacknowledged source was Mary Austin’s *The American Rhythm*, published in 1923; in her introduction to *Path on the Rainbow* she had sketched out the ideas that were to form the principle argument of the essay that opens her 1923 collection of “re-expressions” of Indian poetry: that “American poetry must inevitably take, at some period of its history, the mold of Amerind verse, which is the mold of the American experience shaped by the American environment.”<sup>52</sup> Once again, Whitman and Indians are yoked: Austin “confesses” that her interest in Whitman “swelled perceptibly in the discovery of how like the Indian’s his method is.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, despite this radical declaration that spiritual, poetic, and national value was to be found embedded in long-neglected native forms, Austin’s privileging of the Indian involves some troubling characterizations of other groups. “In any group of jazz performers,” she writes, for example, “you can see the arm jerk, recalling the tortoise rattle, the whole torso quiver with the remembered rolling clash of shells.”<sup>54</sup> In a 1920 article for the *Nation* titled “New York: Dictator of American Criticism,” she wrote:

Recently in a London journal one of these critics had fun with the general movement of non-New York American writers to absorb into their work the aboriginal, top layer of literary humus through which characteristically national literature, if we are ever to have it, must take root. He succeeded in making it appear that it appeared to him ridiculous. . . . One wonders what part is played in this schism between literature and the process of nationalization by the preponderance of Jews among our critical writers. There is nothing un-American in being a Jew; it is part of our dearest

tradition that no derivation from any race or religion inhibits a contribution to our national whole. We could not without serious loss subtract the Jewish contribution from our science or our economics, or dispense with the services of the younger Jewish publishers. It is only when the Jew attempts the role of interpreter of our American expression that the validity of racial bias comes into question. Can the Jew, with his profound complex of election, his need of sensuous satisfaction qualifying his every expression of personal life, and his short pendulum-swing between mystical orthodoxy and a sterile ethical culture—can he become the arbiter, of American art and American thinking?<sup>55</sup>

Indian and Jew are sketched by Austin as precise cultural opposites: natural versus overcultivated, native versus naturalized American, spiritual versus ethical, instinctual versus hyperrefined, connected versus disconnected with American landscape and environment. One irony of Shtiker's *Sbriftn* translations is that they do not attempt to refute Austin's reading of the Jew as incapable of translating or interpreting American culture, or in this case American Indian culture. Notations as to which tribe each poem originated with are done away with, as is any sort of identifying terminology: for instance, Austin's "Sioux Song of Parting" is, in the Yiddish, simply a "Gezang baym tsesheydn zikh" (a "song of parting"). Like Ignatov, Shtiker engages in some editing of his source, cutting out pieces, for instance, of Austin's "Glyphs," and translating rather than transliterating the title, a term of her own invention, literally into *karbn* (a Yiddish word that means "score" or "notch").

Austin herself defined her methodology as not translation but "re-expression": "My method has been, by preference, to saturate myself in the poem, in the life that produced it and the environment that cradled that life, so that when the point of crystallization is reached, I myself give forth a poem which bears, I hope, a genetic resemblance to the Amerind song that was my point of contact."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Austin increasingly came under attack for what many ethnologists considered her sloppy methodology. She knew no Native languages or dialects, was dependent upon bilingual translators, and the authenticity of her translations was frequently attacked.<sup>57</sup> As she wrote in her introduction to *The American Rhythm*: "I have naturally a mimetic temperament that draws me toward the understanding of life by living it. . . . So that when I say I am not, have never been, or offered myself, as an authority in things Amerindian, I do not wish to have it understood that I may not, at times, have succeeded in *being* an Indian."<sup>58</sup>

Shtiker adopts Austin's own translational strategies to a somewhat lesser degree, and the effect is both mimetic and subversive; by approximating Austin's

own freewheeling methodology as cultural interpreter, by highlighting the compatibility of Yiddish and Native American lyric, and by decontextualizing Indian chants so that they are almost unidentifiable as such (if it were not for the header “Indianer gezungen”), Shtiker makes a plea for the “naturalness” of Yiddish and of the Jewish artist, in defiance of what he probably knew were Austin’s cultural biases.

### **Translation and Transnationalism**

Both *Path on the Rainbow* and *The American Rhythm* received mixed critical responses; most notably, Louis Untermeyer wrote a review of *Path on the Rainbow* in the *Dial* that prompted a months-long debate in the letters section. Untermeyer attacked the lack of critical apparatus in the volume (“many of these songs cry aloud for nothing so much as footnotes”) and the “pretentious typography” that dictates the “arbitrary arrangement” of poems in a way that is “foreign to our native—though it may be native to Ezra Pound, ‘H. D.,’ and Richard Adington [*sic*].”<sup>59</sup>

Mary Austin responded in an elaborate defense of the volume in a letter to the *Dial* in which, in a rehearsal of her *Nation* editorial published a year later, she wrote: “That all these things seem to have been missed by the reviewer raises again the question as to whether we can ever have anything which is American literature, *sui generis*, until literary judgement begins to be American and leaves off being thoroughly New Yorkish.”<sup>60</sup> The equation that Austin draws later in the *Nation* between New York criticism and Jewish critics, and the inability of either to appreciate authentic American poetic product, was, evidently, first suggested by Untermeyer’s review of *Path on the Rainbow*.

Alice Corbin Henderson, unsurprisingly, gave *Path on the Rainbow* an enthusiastic review in *Poetry*, noting with pride the role the magazine had played in the volume’s genesis. She also wrote:

The appreciative interpretation of the poetry of another race is largely, one must believe, a gift. The whole art character of the Indian is of course more Oriental than European. Perhaps that is why we have so long failed to appreciate it. It is possible that Indian poetry may be more closely allied to Chinese poetry than to that of any other race; it has the same realism, the same concrete simplicity, and acceptance of the commonplace experience, as well as the exceptional, as the material of poetry. There are also many

points of similarity with Japanese verse, in spirit no less than in the brevity of many songs.<sup>61</sup>

By thus setting up the continuum between Chinese and Japanese verse, Indian verse, and American modernism, *Poetry* and the works it promoted in its pages set up the parameters of modern American poetry. As Monroe wrote in the introduction to the magazine's Southern issue, "Ever since *Poetry* began, it has believed in, and tried to encourage, a strongly localized indigenous art."<sup>62</sup> This indigenous art, however, took as its inspiration Indian—and by extension "Oriental"—song, as translated by modernist poets who saw their own imagist project reflected therein. Even *Poetry*'s indigenous art had an undeniably cosmopolitan undercurrent, one that, despite its frequent use of the term "Oriental," also resolutely excluded the Yiddish poet.

*Shriftn*'s American cosmopolitanism—cosmopolitanism that frequently took its cues from the international poetry fashionable in American literary circles—expressed itself, for instance, through translations of Tagore's 1914 play *Chitra* (in *Shriftn* 7 [1921]), the *Rubayyat* (*Shriftn* 4 [1919]), Aesop's *Fables* (*Shriftn* 6 [1920]), and more conventional German and Russian verse, in addition to the *Kalevala*, and Arabic and Egyptian poetry. The 1914 *Shriftn* featured an anthology of international verse, both "classical" and "modern."

The tension in *Shriftn* between American and transnational authorial identity manifested itself, however, not only through the journal's translation practices but also in its original verse, prose, and artwork. The first two issues recapitulated in extremely condensed form the history of the Jews up to the immigrant's passage to the United States: *Shriftn* 1 (1912) featured Ignatov's fictional retelling of the biblical story of Jephthah's daughter ("Der gibor"), the translation of Whitman's "Salut Au Monde," Eisland's essay introducing the Yunge, Zishe Landau's "Maiden-songs" ("Maidelshe-lider"), and Mani Leyb's "Evening and Night" ("Ovnt un Nacht") and concluded with Joseph Opatoshu's "Romance of a Horse Thief" ("Roman fun a ferd-ganef"), a novella that detailed the dark underworld of a Jewish horse thief in eastern Europe.

*Shriftn* 2 (1913) featured Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's "In a Strange Land" ("In der fremd"), a poem about the ship passage to America; Raboy's "The Lighthouse" ("Der licht-turem"), in which a Jewish immigrant farmer remembers his passage to America; Opatoshu's "Morris and His Son Philip" ("Moris un zayn zun Philip"), about the miseries of the New York ghetto; a photograph of Walt Whitman; and a poem by Peretz Hirshbein titled "Song of the Fool" ("Dos lid fun dem nar"). This last, following the photograph of Whitman, could be

read as a parody of Whitman's all-absorptive ego, in which the Whitmanesque singer is at once menacing and absurd.<sup>63</sup> *Shriftn*'s first two issues reenacted the move from Europe to America, Old World to New, antiquity to modernity. If the immigrant's journey seemed to dominate, as a narrative, *Shriftn*'s debut issue, then by its sophomore effort its poets had sufficiently engaged with America to be able to evoke and parody America's premier poet.

*Shriftn* 4 (1919), the first issue to emerge after the war, featured a picture, once again, of Walt Whitman on its frontispiece, cityscapes of New York by the modernist artist Abraham Walkowitz, imagistic poems by Al. Gurieh, an essay by H. Leyvik on the Yunge, Lamed Shapiro's story "White Hallah" ("Vayse Chale") about an eastern European pogrom, and, in the translation section, Miller's Whitman translations and the *Rubayyat*. If the tone of the writers had become more elegiac, Whitman's guardianship over the journal, and the American cosmopolitanism he signified, remained unchanged. Moreover, *Poetry*'s preoccupation with an "American rhythm" finds its counterpart in Leyvik's essay that appeared in this issue. Leyvik writes: "No one in all of Yiddish literature has in the Yiddish word has heard so many sounds, so many rhythms, seen so many colors and visions, as the Yunge. They have discovered within the Yiddish word a thrill, a new love, a flashing beauty, concealed and hidden from all ears."<sup>64</sup> In rhetoric this echoes Austin's introduction to Cronyn's anthology, in which she writes of Indian verse-makers: "The poetic faculty is, of all man's modes, the most responsive to natural environment, the most sensitive and the truest record of his reactions to its skyey influences, its floods, forests, morning colors . . . it is only by establishing some continuity with the earliest instances of such reaction that we can be at all sure that American poetic genius has struck its native note" (xvi–xvii).

The experiments in imagism and free verse featured in *Poetry*'s early years, and their acknowledged sources of inspiration—Native American and Eastern poetry—were echoed in *Shriftn* first through translation and references to Whitman and later found expression in the original work published in the journal. Y. Tofel's essay "Modernism" appeared in *Shriftn* 5, in the fall of 1919. In it, he writes of the revolt of the young modern artist against "form that lies on the canvas like a tomb burying the soul:"

He goes and searches . . . and sometimes he finds in the archives forgotten, neglected works of art. Sometimes he glimpses on old walls the pictures that he wishes to create. And what he learns was in him all along, before he began his search. The time has just revealed its own strength: just as the oak grows from the nut but the oak is present in the nut from the beginning.

The root of the tree is revolt. Revolt is also food from the earth: the atmosphere of modernism. (4)

The only thing “modern” about modern art, Tofel concludes, is its atmosphere of revolt—for its themes, even its forms, it reaches back into the distant (and not so distant) past and to different cultures, which offered the modern artist the Psalms, Chinese portraits, and French landscapes.

By this 1919 issue, the poetry featured included substantial contributions that experimented with free verse and Eastern imagery, some from poets who, like Tselia Dropkin, had begun to be associated with the Inzikhistn. Dropkin’s “The Hammock” transposes the poet’s own meaning onto the Chinese letters she cannot read:

I lie in the hammock  
Through branches the sun shines hot  
I close my eyes  
And see a blue Chinese script  
On a golden page.  
Light blue Chinese letters  
Sparkle up and down  
Like small fantastic windows,  
On a golden tower’s wall.  
I don’t understand the script  
Only something presses my heart,  
I recollect:  
“I love you, I love you,”  
Like that I read the blue  
Chinese script.<sup>65</sup>

Dropkin’s poem can be read as a comment upon the way in which cosmopolitan moderns (such as Amy Lowell and Pound) read their own poetic projects into the Chinese texts they translated. The poem reflects as well Yiddish poets’ own uncertain position vis-à-vis the Chinese texts they accessed only indirectly, mediated through English translators.

*Shriftn 6* (1920), which included Ignatov’s Indian chant translations, also included a collection of primitivist woodcuts, many of which resembled Pacific Northwest Native totem poles, by the artist Max Weber, who had studied with Matisse and introduced Cubism to American painting, along with some of the artist’s poetry, which was in turn reminiscent of some of Indian chants that

appeared in *Path on the Rainbow*.<sup>66</sup> “Rain” begins: “Tip, tep, in rhythm. / One drop, a million drops the rain” (13). Another, “Love,” begins:

My spirit plays  
My soul sings  
My heart gives thanks  
When she comes,  
She comes,  
She comes to me.<sup>67</sup>

And yet, lest the reader misunderstand these poems as merely imitative Indianesque chant, the group reinforces its Jewish theme with a concluding poem titled “Hannukkah Lights.”

Poems by Melekh Ravitch, Mani Leyb, and David Ignatov, among others, that also appear in this issue are composed in a style that, seen alongside the translations of Indian song that followed them, can only be read as Yiddish “interpretations” of Indian poetry. Ignatov’s poem “Jews, Brothers” (“Yidelekh, briderlekh”) reads:

Jews, brothers, ha-ha-ha!  
We dance, we jump, ha-ha-ha!  
We raise hands, va-va-va!  
Clapping, clapping, pa-pa-pa!  
Jews, brothers, ha-ha-ha!  
Again, again, ha-ha-ha!<sup>68</sup>

The internal rhymes of the poem’s lines, the repetitive, rhyming use of the diminutive—yidelakh, bridelakh, hentelakh—and the nonwords that conclude each line, all contribute to the feeling of Indian song-mimicry at work in this poem, especially compared with Ignatov’s translation that appears later in the issue of the following Indian chant:

Hi-ihya naiho-o! Let us begin our song,  
Let us begin, rejoicing. Hitciya  
yahina-a.  
Let us begin our song, let us begin rejoicing  
Singing of the large corn. Hitciya  
yahina-a



Singing of the small corn. Hitciya  
yahina-a.<sup>69</sup>

Ignatov's 1920 issue, in his juxtaposition of translation and interpretation of Native verse, can be read as his answer to *Poetry's* 1917 Indian issue. Monroe's Indian issue had been comprised, in her words, of "not translations, but interpretations," and Cronyn's anthology had famously begun with a poem by Carl Sandburg titled "Early Moon," which purported to be a translation but was in actuality his own creation.<sup>70</sup> Monroe had herself written in her editorial: "Suspicion arises definitely that the Red Man and his children committed direct plagiarisms on the modern imagists and vorticists," and she offered examples by Carl Sandburg to illustrate her point.

Ignatov's Indian issue of 1920 meant to infiltrate Indian/imagist verse with a Jewish terminology and sensibility, producing an unresolved tension between native Americanness, modern cosmopolitanism, and Old World Jewishness. In similar fashion, the 1921 issue, which began with Zishe Landau's Strikover poems, dedicated to his grandparents and recollecting eastern Europe, also featured Y. Y. Shvarts's epic poem *Kentucky* and a translation of Tagore's *Chitra*. The counterpoint of Old World elegy, modernist poetry about the most American of subject matter, and Poundian translation resulted in a creative but precarious dynamic, one that would have difficulty sustaining itself. The next issue of *Shriftn* would not emerge until four years later, and that issue would be Ignatov's last.

*Shriftn* 8 (1925–26) contained an anthology of non-Western translated verse, which included Shtiker's Indian chants from *An American Rhythm*, a section of the Finnish epic the *Kalevala* (which, because it had served as inspiration for Longfellow's epic *Hiawatha* clearly held some American significance for the journal), Arabic, and Egyptian verse, as well as Japanese haiku and a selection of Chinese poems by the eighth-century poet Li Po. Much Chinese and Japanese verse had already appeared in *Poetry*; and one of Li Po's poems—one of the same that appeared in *Shriftn*—had been translated by Moon Kwan in *Poetry* in June 1921 under the title "Good Fellowship." Li Po's poems, through the translations of Ernest Fenollosa, had also formed the bulk of Pound's *Cathay* (1915), which featured one poem in common with the *Shriftn* translations, and Amy Lowell had published *Fir-Flower Tablets*, which featured eighty-five poems by Li Po. The source for the rest of Shtiker's translations of Li Po was a book of translations by Shigeyoshi Obata that had been reviewed in *Poetry* in September 1923. This issue, *Shriftn's* last, also featured an essay on the life of Buddha.<sup>71</sup>

*Shriftn* clearly continuously operated within the modern, transnational literary sphere delineated in and by *Poetry*.

### **Native Claims**

*Shriftn* was the first Yiddish journal to prolongedly explore the multiple and often ambivalent ways in which becoming modern(ist) could be argued to be synchronous with going native. Monroe's brand of modern American art adopted, as its defining, authenticating quality, its indigeneity. After World War I, this equivalence of the indigenous and the new would be elaborated upon further by such writers as Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, and Hart Crane. Ignatov, like Monroe, argued that "we here in America must free ourselves from the hegemony of European Yiddish literature. They should look towards us, rather than us towards them."<sup>72</sup> In this moment, the defining character of Yiddish American modernism was its insistent claim on native Americanness, where Yiddish poets, like Mary Austin, without being "expert" in things Indian, could nevertheless, through discursive and translatorly exercises in self-transformation, succeed in *being* Indian.

Indianness, in the climate of early American modernism, was a flexible and unfixed signifier that signaled, at once, nativeness and cosmopolitanism, and could interpolate Whitman, ancient Eastern and modern imagist poets as well as Native American verse-makers. *Shriftn's* (trans)nationalism adapted and transformed the poetry fashionable in U.S. literary circles, and specifically the poetry featured in Harriet Monroe's magazine. The inclusion of *Shriftn's* emergent modernism in a larger narrative of American literary modernisms not only troubles any clear demarcations between native and alien, East and West, Yiddish and "American," but also highlights the fragility, instability, and artificiality of these categories as they became increasingly central in consolidating a sense of a national literary culture.

*Shriftn* was not the only Yiddish publication to feature translations of Native American chants. In fact, the Yiddish Communist monthly *Der Hammer*, published by the Communist weekly *Frayhayt*, featured an entire Indian issue in July 1928. The cover portrait image features the caption "A true one-hundred percent American. An Indian from the Navajo tribe." The first feature was a cluster of "Indian songs" (*Indianishe gezangen*) translated by A. Prints. The editors write: "A. Prints is a young Yiddish writer who is strongly interested in the poetry of other languages, chiefly with Black and Indian poems. These poems published here, were taken from *The Path on the Rainbow* anthology



“A True One Hundred Percent American: An Indian from the Navaho Tribe.” *Der Hammer*, July 1928. Reproduced with permission by the New York Public Library.

of Indian literature and from other sources. The translations were rendered from English. We omit the name of the English translator. A. Prints is also the author of another article, ‘Indian song and culture,’ published elsewhere in the current number.”<sup>73</sup>

Later in the issue, sharing space with Isaac Raboy’s story “Somewhere in North Dakota,” is Hersh Rozenfeld’s translation of a modern poem: Alice Corbin Henderson’s “Parting: An Indian Song,” originally published as an “interpretation” in *Path on the Rainbow*. In addition, Sheen Dayksel contributed “Indianishe mayselekh” (“Indian tales”), which consisted of two pieces, “The Land of Lakes” (an origin story about the forming of Minnesota’s lakes, source

unacknowledged) and a retelling of the “The Lost Arrow,” identified by Dayksel as Ahwahneechee (Yosemite California region). And finally, A. Prints’s Mary Austin–inspired discussion of Native American poetry, “Indianer gezang un lebn,” draws on the work of “pioneers” like “Dr. Baker, Miss Fletcher, Miss Curtis, Burton, Gilman, Dr. Boas,” and others in describing the attitudes of Indians toward art, the “character” of their songs, and the influence of Indian song on modern American literature:

Indians—a fading, dying race. Great and immortal however is the Indian’s song, that has been passed down from generation to generation and cherished with great care. And great is the influence of the “Red Man’s” song on American literature. If we will understand the way of life, world-view, the thought, the emotion, and the primitive wildness in the blood of the Indian, we must turn to his song, for the Indian and the song are one. With his song the Indian walks the “path of the rainbow” to the land of the “rising-son” [*sic*].<sup>74</sup>

*Der Hammer*, despite its more explicit politically radical agenda, thus still shared *Shriftn*’s modernist literary and anthropological sources in its appraisal of Native poetics. *Der Hammer* also exemplifies the reengagement with Indian-ness in the context of political radicalism that is the focus of the next chapter.