

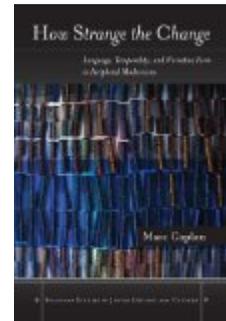


Marc Caplan. *How Strange the Change: Language, Temporality, and Narrative Form in Peripheral Modernisms*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. xiv + 342 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7476-5.

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On the Strangeness of Change in Yiddish and African Peripheral Modernisms

What does nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction in Eastern Europe have to do with African literature in the 1950s and 1960s? Marc Caplan's provocative new book *How Strange the Change* attempts to answer this unusual question. This highly theorized book uses contemporary postcolonial discourse selectively to discuss two types of peripheral responses to the modern condition: Jewish fiction written in Yiddish in the Russian Empire, on the one hand, and African fiction written in the languages of the colonizers, primarily French and English, on the other. This unorthodox approach opens exciting new possibilities for thinking about Eastern European Jews in relation to world modernism. In addition to postcolonial theory, Caplan uses Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of "minor literature" that involves the deterritorialization of language, political immediacy, and the assemblage of structure. He argues that one needs a more nuanced version of this theory that includes peripheral literatures that deconstruct the canon of Western literature from the outside. To do so, there is a need to ask questions about modernization and nationalism, the development of novelistic prose, and the relation between the periphery and the center. Or in other words, one needs to go from the minor perspective of underexamined literatures to the major perspective of overdetermined literary theory.

One of the most challenging intellectual endeavors of the book is its insistence on pairing Yiddish, its literature and culture, and above all its native speakers with the

postcolonial condition. In Africa as well as in other former European colonies, the native communities spoke a particular vernacular and were victims of colonizers erasing their authentic culture. Only literature in the colonizers' languages became possible. In the postcolonial era, a small cultural elite was engaged in retrieving its silenced oral tradition as part of its rebellion against the oppressor. This group of intellectuals created a body of literature combining the written traditions of the West with relics of the oral competence of Africa. This was and still is a subversive political act that questions the presumptions of the nation-state and the project of modernity. Such famous writers as Amos Tutuola (1920-97) and Wole Soyinka (1934) from Nigeria, Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1928) from Senegal, and Ahmadou Kourouma (1927-2003) from Côte d'Ivoire are discussed as prototypes of postcolonial fiction that Caplan suggests are the most suitable for comparison with Yiddish novelists of the nineteenth century.

Historians might dismiss this baseless analogy all together. Eastern European Jews kept their particular vernacular consisting of German, Hebrew and Aramaic, and some Slavic influences. They coexisted with their non-Jewish neighbors, successfully maintaining their separate religion and culture. They were not equal citizens, were not allowed to own land, and yet were permitted to live in a more or less autonomous fashion. This is certainly not colonialism as recognized in an African context. However, in the capable hands of an energetic

literary theorist, postcolonialism is transformed into a multifaceted metaphor that helps better explain Yiddish literary responses to modernity. This is a meditation on the most fundamental experience of Eastern European Jews who like their African counterparts felt colonized at home although the home was not entirely their own. Yiddish writers struggling unsuccessfully to train the ridiculed lingo of their tribe to speak the bureaucratic language of the Russian Empire makes them closer to African writers in the second half of the twentieth century.

Discussions of nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction often use the beaten path of continuity: the *Maskilim* (disciples of the Jewish enlightenment movement) favored the study of foreign languages and sciences in order to make Jews modern. Yiddish literature addressed uneducated Jews in their spoken tongue. Yiddish writers brought the literary traditions of Western literature into the provincial world of the shtetl expanding the horizons of their readership. Yiddish authors needed to bridge a cultural gap of hundreds of years until they managed to bring both their readers and personal style to the same level as literature of the time. Caplan's book rightfully goes beyond these narrow binaries of Jewish and European. By employing postcolonial theory, he shows that peripheral modernism growing on the outskirts of a major culture has the ability not only to reshape this culture but also to anticipate modern developments that only came into being much later. The use of outdated genres, such as the picaresque and the satire, in both Yiddish and African fiction is, according to Caplan, not a sign of inadequacy or lateness but rather an acute critique of modern civilization. These works of minor literature are modernist way before modernism came into being precisely because they are not modernist and therefore able to intuitively reflect on the forthcoming crisis of Western civilization.

Caplan discusses works by the Hasidic master R' Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810), and the *maskilic* writers Isaac Meyer Dick (1807-93), Ysroel Ak-

sendeld (1787-1866), and Sh. Y. Abramovitch known as Mendele Moykher Sforim (1835-1917). Caplan compares Abramovitch's novels to more recent works: *Dos Vintshfingerl* (The magic ring [1865]) is compared to Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961); *Di Klyatshe* (The mare [1873]) to Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965); and *Masoes Binyomin Hashlishi* (The travels of Benjamin the Third [1878]) to Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (1970). The close comparative readings of these dense works of fiction are a force majeure of literary competence. For Caplan, as opposed to previous readers, the greatness of these novels lies not at all in their *maskilic* comedy of errors exposing the mishaps of traditional Jewish society opposing modernity, but rather in the delightful discomfort and ambiguity these novels express addressing Russian oppression. The unheroic figures of Benjamin and his helper Sendrl (the Jewish Don Quixote and Sancho Panza) in *Masoes Binyomin Hashlishi* are not only dysfunctional Jewish men but also victims of modernization and its discontents. What starts out as an optimistic vision confident in its ability to bring change becomes a pessimistic acknowledgment of defeat. There are strong political and existential forces that shape Jewish history and Jews have very little control over them. This nihilistic dystopia is totally modernist.

To possible critics arguing that these Yiddish novels are not at all modernist, Caplan answers that world modernism, on the one hand, was conceived in the metropolis at a moment of anxiety over a dying or lost tradition. Peripheral modernism, on the other hand, is inherently modernist because of its peripherality and therefore not at all part of metropolitan culture. Putting aside this book's theoretical sophistication and use of current trendy discourse, it does seem to go in the right direction: the study of Yiddish literature should move from the Eurocentric study of Western civilization to the pluralistic field of postcolonial and minor discourse. From this perspective, the scholars of peripheral literary traditions can sit together and explain how fascinatingly strange the change is.

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