Indeed, even though the desires that prompt them might never be completely fulfilled, postvernacular Yiddish performances prove to be an especially productive mode of cultural creativity. These performances can flourish independent of a vernacular base and can be highly contingent, existing in a limited time, place, and scope; they rely more on a sharing of affect or sensibility than on a common fluency or ideology. Most important, in these performances one witnesses the powerful act of cultural transformation enacted live—a factor especially important in the case of Yiddish, which is so often characterized as dying or otherwise linked with Jewish cultural demise. Implicit in every contemporary Yiddish performance, therefore, is a test of linguistic viability.

The ground of loss against which all recent Yiddish performances are figured, albeit often implicitly, demonstrates the “value of absence” that Jacques Derrida argues is inherent in communication, which he links with mimesis and remembrance: “The sign is born at the same time as imagination and memory, at the moment when it is demanded by the absence of the object for present perception.” An awareness of this disparity between creativity and loss, retrospection and innovation, somehow both haunts and animates every Yiddish festival, concert, lecture, and, perhaps, even every Yiddish conversation.

On a shelf in my office I’ve accumulated an assortment of objects—coffee mugs, refrigerator magnets, lapel buttons, knickknacks, board games, toys, snack canisters, cocktail napkins, greeting cards, and other items—all bearing one or more Yiddish words. Nearby sits a stack of comic Yiddish-English dictionaries; in a drawer is a growing collection of T-shirts also featuring one or more Yiddishisms. Friends and relatives have given me some of these objects; I’ve come across others in stores, catalogs, and online, and I’ve encountered more such items in the homes and offices of colleagues and acquaintances.

One might easily dismiss these objects as frivolous or in questionable taste, but I’ve come to appreciate their value as artifacts that embody some of the transmigrations of Yiddish language and culture that have taken place since World War II. Indeed, their lowbrow silliness belies the complexity of their value as artifacts. These objects, all mass-produced items made or sold in the United States at some time since the late 1940s, prompt a provocatively rich array of insights on several counts: as materializations of spoken language, as works of Americana and Judaica, as artifacts of a Yiddish culture strikingly different from that of the prewar era. Their analysis reveals a fundamental transformation of Jewish notions of vernacularity in response to signal shifts in language use and, moreover, in the symbolic value invested in language. By fixing the meta-value of the language in objects that
are themselves part of a new, postwar American Jewish vernacular material culture, my collection of Yiddish realia epitomizes postvernacularity.

SEMIOTIC SOUVENIRS

Objects inscribed with Jewish words or even with individual letters of the alefbeyt comprise an important component of traditional Jewish material culture. In addition to ritual objects (ifrim, for example), items such as goblets, dishes, utensils, boxes, cloth bags and covers are thus marked as Judaica—as are articles of clothing, furniture, even buildings—not by dint of their form or of any other symbol or ornament but by the presence of Jewish letters. The items in my collection of Yiddish realia, which comprises but a small part of this larger inventory of Judaica, are distinguished by the particular semiotics of their use of the language, which is characteristically postvernacular in nature—invoking, yet apart from, Yiddish as a language of daily life.

Thus, the semiotic feature of these items that one most likely notices first is the fact that typically the Yiddish is rendered in the Roman alphabet rather than in the alefbeyt. This extensive use of romanization might be understood as a symptom of or concession to diminished Yiddish literacy (and to Jewish cultural literacy more generally), but it can also be seen as a proactive transformation of the written language. Romanization makes the language more widely accessible, at least phonetically, to the many Jews and non-Jews who have some familiarity with Yiddish but don't know how to read it in its original alphabet. The use of Latin letters also facilitates the integration of Yiddishisms into English or other languages written in the Roman alphabet. At the same time, romanized Yiddish terms frequently appear on the items in my collection in typefaces that imitate the calligraphic curves and large serifs of the traditional alefbeyt. This device marks the words as distinctively Jewish while integrating them into a more widely familiar communicative code. The use of these fonts thus resembles "kosher-style" cuisine, preserving manner while altering, even subverting, substance.

But the most telling semiotic feature of my collection of Yiddish realia is their atomization of Yiddish. Whether offering one or more isolated terms or presenting Yiddishisms embedded in English-language texts, these artifacts consistently present Yiddish as something less than a whole language. Indeed, a key implication of these objects is that Yiddish cannot be thought of as a complete semiotic system but rather, as a postvernacular language, as inherently fragmentary.

The atomization of Yiddish can occur even when its fullness is invoked, as is the case of the Yiddish version of Magnetic Poetry, one of a series of languages other than English in the "World Series" of these popular refrigerator magnet sets (other languages include French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Sign Language). The "Mini Dictionary" accompanying CHUTZPA (impertinence), a set of poetry magnets that supplements the basic Yiddish edition of Magnetic Poetry, states, "Yiddish is a complete language full of dramatic expressions." Yet while the six-hundred or so words that appear in these two sets include such colorful terms as "ongepotshiket" (made a mess of it), "bashert" (destined), and "gotenyu" (Dear God), one has to struggle to write simple, ordinary sentences with them; they don't, for example, provide such basic elements of the language as all pronouns or prepositions or most modal verbs. A comparison with word lists of similar length—proposed vocabularies for beginning students in American secular Yiddish schools during the 1940s—is instructive. Whereas the lexical inventories prepared for the schools focus on basic, denotative terms for common, quotidian phenomena, the words in the Magnetic Poetry sets dwell on the extreme, the particularistic, and the richly connotative.

The encounter with Yiddish that these magnet sets proffer marks it as both less than and more of a language—limited and fragmentary on one hand, aestheticized and charged with affect on the other hand. "Di kunst fun an anderer shpakh lernen it: aleyn poeic," reads a sentence in not quite grammatically correct Yiddish on the box of the basic Yiddish set of Magnetic Poetry: "The art of learning another language
is itself poetry." But these magnets don't come with instructions in basic Yiddish usage; they invite improvisational play rather than methodical learning. Each word has a concentrated value understood as inherently artful, which will become further intensified in the creation of poetry—a specialized form of language that thrives on density, affect, word play, and the flouting of formal conventions of narrative prose or conversation. Thus, a mock warning label on the Yiddish Magnetic Poetry package (which appears on other sets as well) cautions that within are "loaded words: This box contains highly unstable language, which may accidentally result in powerful imagery. Users are warned that breaking the seal of this container will trigger an expansion of perception and creativity, and could result in permanent life change."5

As this "warning" suggests, the individual Yiddish words in these sets are like charged subatomic particles, endowed with a new energy by having broken free from the stable structures of a full vernacular code. Being magnetic, they are at liberty to attach themselves anywhere, in any fashion. And their endlessly recombinant, artful play ultimately promises to enliven and transform another language—English—whose vernacular primacy is implicit as the language of the packaging and in the use of romanization on the magnets themselves.

Many of the other objects in my collection reinforce this notion of Yiddish words as highly charged linguistic fragments by offering isolated Yiddish terms within an English-language text. For example, I have acquired a number of greeting cards for birthdays and other occasions, such as the following:

[Front of card:] It's a simcha [happy occasion]!
Can there be a better date to rummel [revel] and to celebrate?
[Inside of card:] Mazel [luck] and glick [happiness] on your Birthday!6

In these cards, Yiddish is offered as an implicitly vestigial code, whose semiotic completion is now dependent on other, full, vernacular languages. There is, then, an inherent retrospection to these objects; even items in current production might be seen as mementos evoking a time and place when Yiddish functioned as a self-sufficient language of daily life.

A Yiddish word, then, is like a curio—or, as a 1998 vodka ad suggests, an "Absolut Tchotchke"—a decorative piece (with some kind of retro, perhaps kitschy, appeal) that is suited to collection, display, contemplation, and discussion rather than any utilitarian purpose. Indeed, the Yiddish realm I've been collecting epitomize what literary scholar Susan Stewart characterizes as a key aspect of souvenirs in general, which are "by definition always incomplete." Stewart argues that the souvenir "must remain . . . partial so that it can be supplemented by a narrative discourse . . . which articulates the play of desire."7 Here, the metonymic nature of the material object reinforces the fragmentary quality ascribed to Yiddish. The narratives that complete these isolated Yiddishisms situate them in discourses that are often deceptively simple, given their modest form. But by their very nature, they can offer powerfully, if tacitly, ambivalent statements about Jewish culture through language play and the play between language and materiality.
YIDDISH AS FETISH

The inscribing of Yiddish onto objects displayed, used, and especially worn can endow them with the power of a fetish, characterized by anthropologist William Pietz as a "composite fabrication," consisting not only of "material elements" but also of "desires and beliefs and narrative structures establishing a practice." The fetish is invested with "the power to repeat its originating act of forging an identity of articulating relations between certain otherwise heterogeneous things." The symbolic power of the fetish as it relates to the "embodied status of the individual" is exemplified by T-shirts imprinted with Yiddish words—including one bearing the word yidish itself (in the alefbeyts), which has been available for years from Yungtruf, as well as another T-shirt, recently sold by the Workmen's Circle, which features the text of a Yiddish dictionary (actually, of course, a fragment of one). The wearer of these and other similar T-shirts embodies the language, taking on whatever symbolic value he or she has invested in Yiddish and, by extension, in its speakers.

Significantly, the wearer does so without necessarily uttering a word of Yiddish him- or herself. Vernacularity is replaced here by the putting on (and taking off) of a symbolic second skin—a behavior that invokes, and yet is quite different from, a polyglot's code-switching. Rather, these T-shirts are an example of ethnic branding, transforming the Yiddish word into a logo for folkhood. Historian Marilyn Halter suggests that this has become a widespread practice in the "new ethnicity" of the late twentieth century, in which people "construct their [ethnic] identities through purchase." In this sense, some of these Yiddish items are also totemic artifacts—that is, they situate Yiddish (or Jewishness more generally) within a parallel array of identities similarly materialized: caps emblazoned with "Kiss me, I'm Italian," T-shirts that say "Black is Beautiful," bumper stickers reading "It's exciting to be Estonian," and so forth. Others, however—such as lapel buttons that read "Marcel Proust Is a Yenta [here: gossip]" or "St. Patrick Spoke Yiddish" playfully trouble the distinct and parallel linguistic and ethnic categories that they invoke.

While sporting these items is generally a voluntary, celebratory gesture on the part of the wearer, the various T-shirts, caps, and lapel buttons with Yiddish on them have a distinctive resonance with the history of stigmatizing Jews through dress, especially their enforced racial branding in Nazi-occupied Europe, where many were required to wear yellow, six-pointed stars, usually inscribed with the word Jew in German, Dutch, or French. In light of this recent history, a Jew wearing Yungtruf's yidish T-shirt embodies an implicit act of defiance—flouting both anti-Semites out to stigmatize Jews and those Jews who prefer not to wear their ethnicity on their sleeves (or chests). Conversely, a T-shirt bearing the word shleppers (haulers) has very different implications when worn by the many non-Jewish employees of the eponymous New York City moving company—suggesting, perhaps, the embrace of Yiddish as a code shared by New Yorkers of all ethnic backgrounds.

Pietz notes that fetishes are of particular interest since they articulate cultural relations forged "in singular moments of 'crisis' in which the identity of the self is called into question [or] put at risk." In light of this notion, we should consider what sense of crisis in identity might engender the attraction to Yiddish realia, and how these objects facilitate responses to these definitional moments. To do so requires scrutinizing not merely the objects themselves but also the contexts of their acquisition, display, and use, their involvement in people's lives. Especially important, given that these are items of mass production, are instances of their use that demonstrate a shared sensibility. As an acquirer of these items, I enter into a tacit relationship—however attenuated, ironized, or contrarian it may be—with a (largely unknown) community of fellow collectors.

OBJECTS OF RITUAL

Most of the items I have been collecting have no explicit ritual use in the conventional sense, especially as it is understood in traditional Jewish life. Yet many of them do have
an oblique connection to ritual through the modes of play, transgression, mockery, and inversion. Yiddish words seldom appear on Jewish ritual objects, which are much more likely to bear inscriptions in Hebrew. The most popular Jewish ritual object inscribed in Yiddish, albeit implicitly, is doubtless the dreidel, a small, four-sided top used by Ashkenazic children to play games of chance during Hanukkah. Each side of the dreidel bears a different letter of the alef-beys. These letters stand for Yiddish words, which determine the fortune of the players as they ante up coins, nuts, buttons, or candies and take turns spinning the dreidel. For example, if the dreidel lands with the letter gimp (G) face up, this indicates the word ganz (all), and the player takes the entire ante; if hay (H) turns up, the player takes halb (half), and so on. Significantly, this most widely familiar materialization of Yiddish in traditional Jewish culture is associated with a ritual rooted in Ashkenazic custom rather than rabbinic law, with play, and with behavior that is transgressive, though sanctioned (games of chance are traditionally permitted only during Hanukkah). And it is also telling that formal explanations of the dreidel in modern sources usually state that the letters stand for a Hebrew sentence—Nes gadol haya shan (A great miracle happened there)—thereby obscuring their Yiddish origins while elevating the status of this gambling toy to a token of piety.

Conversely, the mock-r ritual role of some of the items that I have been collecting emerges when they are juxtaposed with traditional ritual objects, which are usually inscribed with one or more words in Hebrew. Thus, one might regard the “mah jongg mavin [expert]” mug—these words, printed in red on the side of a white coffee cup in Roman letters, appear below a drawing of a Chinese dragon—as a kind of mock kidesh (ritual wine) cup, which “sanctifies” the Chinese gambling game within American Jewish ritual life. Or consider the implications of the “Mr. Mahzel” figurine, created by comedian Morey Amsterdam in 1962. Even without its inscription, this comical statuette of an Orthodox Jewish man is a transgressive figure, flouting the traditional ban on making idols and verging on Jewish caricature. The Yiddish/English name on the figure’s base consolidates and extends the provocative playfulness of this object, inscribing it as a talisman of Jewish luck.

The parodic link between the legitimate and the mock in these objects is hardly an innovation of contemporary American Jewish culture. It recalls what Dan Miron has identified as the “antifolklore” of East European maskilic Yiddish writers of the nineteenth century. Here, too, is what Miron calls a “cultural paradox,” rooted in “contradictory attitudes” toward the language and an “equivocal attitude” toward folkways. By making the ritual and material culture of traditional East European Jewry the subject of their satire, maskilim preserved folkways even as they mocked and sought to eradicate them. These texts also derive “extraordinary vivacity from the counterpoint of the most heavily destructive caricaturist satire, on one hand, and an almost childlike delight in artistic play on the other.” One might, therefore, see these mocking Yiddish artifacts as works created within a Yiddish “tradition” of satirical preservation and destruction that by the end of World War II was more than a century in the making.

MATERIALIZING LANGUAGE PLAY

Just as nineteenth-century maskilim often articulated their satirical associations with Yiddish by juxtaposing it against the other languages in their milieu, the objects in my collection generally express mockery through language play that takes place not within Yiddish but in the movement back and forth between Yiddish and English. This can be seen most simply and directly in a gift that the National Yiddish Book
Center gave to donors in the late 1990s. This item—a wooden yo-yo inscribed with oy oy in the alefhei on one side and oy oy in Latin letters on the other side—concretizes language play rooted in the inverse relationship of reading Yiddish from right to left as opposed to reading English from left to right. (Note, however, that the mirror-play of oy oy and "yo-yo" works in its romanized form but not in the alefhei.) Imprinting these words on an actual yo-yo deftly materializes the interlinguistic playfulness; as a premium from the NYBC, this item celebrates a delight in the notion that Yiddish and English can have reciprocal semantic value. At the same time, it obliquely acknowledges the primacy of English as the facilitator of Yiddish culture for most supporters of the organization—even with regard to the language's quintessential diphthong.

A similar visualization of English/Yiddish interlingual play can be seen in the logo of the Forward, an English-language weekly Jewish newspaper inaugurated in 1990 by the publishers of the Forverts, a Yiddish daily from 1897 until 1966, when it became a weekly. Printed on tote bags, coffee mugs, and refrigerator magnets, the logo shows the word Forverts, written in the alefhei, gradually morphing into the English word Forward. Emblematic of this transformation of this venerable secular Jewish newspaper, this logo evokes the double-edged implications of translating Yiddish into English more generally, simultaneously connoting language loss and cultural transformation read as continuity.

A more elaborate form of language play is inscribed on another materialized bilingual pun: the Yiddish Cup—a coffee mug that plays on the Yiddish idiom a yidisher kop (literally, "a Jewish head," referring to Jewish cultural literacy or sensibility). There are several versions of this item; one that I own, given to me in the 1980s, translates "a yidisher cup" as "a smart person." It also features nine other Yiddish terms with English glosses. These range from straightforward definitions—"maven" = "expert"; "nudnick" = "pest"—to translations that are deliberately playful: "naches" (joy) = "grandchildren"; "gishmack" (tasty) = "Jewish cooking"; "mechitnista" (female co-in-law) = "opposition"; "mishpoocha" (family) = "cousins club."

These objects require knowledge of both Yiddish and English (as well as the American Jewish culture they signify) for appreciating their humor. They exemplify the bilingual humor of immigrant cultures, in which the alternation from one language to another is "not the result of incompetence or illiteracy" but rather constitutes a celebration "of considerable skill in the manipulation of the available linguistic resources." Some of the mock glosses that appear on the Yiddish Cup are also typical of postvernacular Yiddish culture, in which ordinary Yiddish words acquire new meaning as markers of Jewish ethnicity. Thus, in full, vernacular Yiddish, Italian or Chinese food can be just as geshmak as Jewish cooking, but such is not the case here. Rather, in the supervalued Jewishness of postvernacular Yiddish, what the language evokes is yidisher taim (Jewish flavor). At the same time that the Yiddish Cup celebrates immigrant Jewish culture, another less felicitous meaning is suggested by its materiality, though I doubt that this is intentional: by implicitly reducing Yiddish cultural literacy to a handful of words, has a yidisher kop become, in the postvernacular culture, an empty vessel?

THE MOCK MODE

The limited number of words on it notwithstanding, the Yiddish Cup is part of a genre of Yiddish mock dictionaries, such as the "Dictionary of Basic Yiddish," printed on a folded souvenir card given to diners at Sammy's Roumanian Steak House on New York's Lower East Side. This dictionary includes the following among its thirty-eight definitions:
Though this and similar comic texts are formatted like dictionaries, rather than giving equivalent glosses of Yiddish terms into English, they offer comically bogus definitions. Knowing the disparity between the proper meanings of these terms and the mock glosses is the basis of their humor. These faux glosses indicate the divergent meta-values that Yiddish has acquired, especially in a postimmigrant American context, as both a comic “marker of social immobility” and an “affirmation of ethnic origin.”

These mock definitions skew one set of meanings as they reveal others, thereby probing the ambiguous affective responses generated by linguistic upheaval and breakdown of cultural barriers. Yiddish mock dictionaries appear in print, on sound recordings, and online. Mock dictionaries can also be found on such ephemera as cocktail napkins and business cards, a further flouting of the notion of the language as substantial. Indeed, the full inventory of Yiddish mock dictionaries produced in America since World War II well outnumbers that of legitimate Yiddish-English dictionaries.

At the same time that they defy the idea of Yiddish as a fully viable and expressive vernacular, Yiddish mock dictionaries also transgress traditional cultural boundaries, with titles such as *Yiddish for Yankees and Every Gay’s Guide to Common Jewish Expressions.* Or consider *The Chinese-Kosher Cookbook,* *The Italian-Kosher Cookbook,* and *The French-Kosher Cookbook,* first published in 1963, which link mock definitions of Yiddish (e.g., “*gans* Eden [paradise]: A Miami Beach retirement community”) with the cross-cultural culinary travesty of recipe names such as “Matzoh Brei Foo Yong,” “*Flakon* Pizzaola Alla Shmendrick,” and “*Knish* Lorraine.”

Such works presume Yiddish as a code of Jewish exclusivity, its use not only limited essentially to Ashkenazim but also serving as an instrument and a signifier of Jewish difference. In exposing the Jews’ “secret language” to the public, the authors of these comic dictionaries focus on key areas of the lexicon. Besides culturally specific terminology (words associated with Jewish belief, ritual, and custom, especially foodways), they emphasize the immoderate—in particular terms dealing with emotional extremes—and the unmentionable, notably words related to sex and elimination. This shift in language usage and semantic value was observed by Urie Weinreich in the early 1950s. As a language such as Yiddish in postwar America “loses[y] its main communicative role,” he wrote, it seems “destined to acquire peculiar connotations and be applied to special functions,” especially “comic associations.” One also sees a selective “borrowing of its lexical elements,” in particular,”

“colorful idiomatic expressions . . . with strong affective overtones, whether endearing, pejorative, or . . . obscene.”

The focus on these terms in one comic Yiddish dictionary after another suggests shared understandings of the meta-value of the language as an index of divergent modes of sentiment and, at the same time, of the carnivalesque, that is, the inherently subversive, transgressive, emotive, and appetitive, centered on the lower half of the body.

CONSUMING THE CARNIVALESQUE

While quite a few materializations of Yiddish reflect this particular meta-meaning of the language, the phenomenon is epitomized by two objects in my collection that link snacking with Yiddish as a signifier of excess and vulgarity—enabling one, literally, to consume Yiddish as carnivalesque: Mashuga [crazy] Nuts, produced in San Francisco, and the Alter Caulker, distributed by Herman Nut Company of Omaha, Nebraska. What makes Mashuga Nuts a material Yiddish artifact is not the contents—pecans coated with a cinnamon-flavored meringue—but the container, which is covered with Jewish-English idioms and Yiddish terms, from the “Gonif [thief] proof seal” on the top to its manufacturer’s label: “Delivered by Schlemiel[s] [bumblers] on Wheels for Mashuga Nuts, Inc.,” which was “founded in 1922 (but for you, 1889).” Indeed, the Yiddishisms and comic Jewish banter on the Mashuga Nuts canister mark the enclosed delicacies both as faux-ethnic (there is a bogus fam-
OBJECT LESSONS

In the inventory of Yiddish realia there are, of course, plenty of items that are not in mock mode. Some are tokens of secular Yiddish culture at its most earnest, including busts, lapel buttons, and even a card game, all of which commemorate Yiddish literati of the past as cultural heroes. Other items, especially mugs, aprons, magnets, or food products (e.g., "Bubbe's Grandmother's Pure Kosher Dills"), employ the language as a sign of sentimentality that pay tribute to a Jewish grandparent as the progenitor of Ashkenazic heritage. Still others, which can be found especially among kfareydim, use Yiddish as a signifier of traditional Ashkenazic piety. These range from pot holders and other kitchenware marked fleyshik (containing meat), milkhik (containing dairy products), and pareve (food that contains neither meat nor dairy products) to adhesive stickers given as rewards to children in ultra-Orthodox day schools. One of these says “I Davened geishmak!” (a hybrid of English and Yiddish meaning “I prayed well!”), printed against a colorful, op-art spiral; another, depicting a young hasidic boy and inscribed "Ikh bin dey yor alt!" (I am three years old.), is used to mark the celebration of a boy’s opshern (first haircut), after which he is obligated to wear a yarmulke, poyes (sidelocks), and arba-kanses (undergarment with ritual fringes).

The full range of Yiddish realia demonstrates the language’s various subcultures, distinguished by how they use the language and the value they assign to it, responsive to their respective desires. Therefore, the extensive inventory of material Yiddish culture in the mock mode is especially compelling. While the impetus for sentiment and piety in post-Holocaust Yiddish culture is readily apparent, what motivates fixing the language as an emblem of the mock and the carnivalesque? What cultural desires does this practice reflect, and what does it reveal about the nature of postvernacular Yiddish among some American Jews of the immigrant and postimmigrant generations?

Consider two of the more elaborate artifacts in my collection, box games produced in the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. Each game comprises a self-contained culture in miniature, through rules that define players’ roles and govern their interactions, as well as through the games’ cards, tokens, and so on, which materialize virtual environments. Their reliance on mockery and humor notwithstanding, these items are, as historian Johan Huizinga observed more generally about such games, a form of play marked by “an element of seriousness.” Even as they appear to flout the idea, these games aspire to what anthropologist Clifford Geertz identifies as “deep play,” symbolically charged activity that "provides a metasocial commen-
tary" and through which people "tell themselves about themselves." "More than a game," such activities "tell us less what happens than... would happen if, as is not the case, life were art and could be as freely shaped by styles of feeling." 26

The earlier of the two games, called Chutzpah, was created by What-Cha-Ma-Call-It, Inc., of Mount Vernon, New York, and produced by Hobbit Toys and Games of Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1967. Modeled on Monopoly, Chutzpah requires its players to work their way around a game board that situates them in a contemporary American Jewish milieu of middle-class comfort (on its box Chutzpah is subtitled "the game of the good life"). The game is marked as such by references to geographic settings (the Canskills and Miami), activities (getting one's nose fixed, joining a country club), and acquisitions (a mink stole, wall-to-wall carpeting). Although these are by no means exclusively the provenance of postwar American Jewish bourgeoisie, invoking this wide array of phenomena as markers of this community occurs repeatedly in mock Yiddish dictionaries and in satiric American Jewish fiction of the era. Chutzpah also indexes American Jewish life by its liberal use of Yiddishisms, which appear on the game board and instruction cards and are glossed in a mock dictionary inside the box. Some of these vaunt a comically Judeocentric view of America, for example: "Nachtes [joy]: a little town in Tennessee [i.e., Natchez] where they have Halavah [sesame candy] Plantations." Read against Monopoly, Chutzpah is true to its name, constituting a celebration of brazen American Jewish self-assertion. (The box also boasts, "If you got Chutzpah—you can do anything!") The game embodies a postimmigrant, post-Holocaust sensibility that also pervades American Jewish comic performances of the period, such as the stand-up routines of Lenny Bruce and the "Jewish new-age" films of Mel Brooks, Sidney Lumet, and Carl Reiner, which often rely similarly on Yiddish words as signposts of an economic, geographic, social, and cultural journey, and in doing so offer a sense of attachment as well as a sense of distance. 27

A generation later, Yiddish likewise appears as a sign of both the carnivalesque and the mock mode in a 1995 box game called Look at the Schmuck on That Camel, designed by Wilbur Pierce of Philadelphia and produced by the Avalon Hill Game Company, based in Baltimore. 28 The game's provocative name, which provides a visual icon as well as thematic focus for the game, is derived from a joke that appears in Leo Rosten's 1968 book, The Joys of Yiddish. (The most widely familiar of comic Yiddish dictionaries, it has also become the most "authoritative," frequently cited as a legitimate source of Yiddish philology.) In the joke in question, a lonely Jewish widower in Miami Beach asks for advice on making friends. Someone suggests he get a camel and ride it up and down the street, since this would be a sure way to

![Look at the Schmuck on That Camel, board game created by Wilbur Pierce, 1995. Courtesy of Wilbur Pierce.](https://example.com/schmuck.png)

attract attention. The man does so, creating quite a stir. Then, one day his camel is gone. The man calls the police to report his loss and is asked to describe the animal, which he can do only in the vaguest of terms. When asked the sex of the camel, however, he is positive that it was a male. He reassures the police, "Every time and every place I was riding on that camel, I could hear people yelling: 'Hey, look at the shmuck [slang for "penis" and for "boor"; cf. English "prick"] on that camel!'" 29

A comparison of these two games provides one measure of American Yiddish cultural literacy over the course of a generation. Chutzpah employs Yiddishisms
become the implied prooftexts for the next generation's elaborations on a mock Yiddish heritage that is understood as inherently fragmentary, parodic, and carnivalesque. For the children of immigrants, this bilingual humor emerged from their parents' experience of negotiating between the languages of the Old and New Worlds and demonstrates a mastery of the linguistic and cultural challenges of immigration. For subsequent generations, however, the hybridized, comic language that emerged in immigrant humor is received as the code of ethnicity itself and therefore needs to be learned as such. Thus, the rules for Look at the Schmuck on That Camel describe it as a "game to teach initiates, or the uninitiated" Yiddish language and culture. In the course of this transmission of a mock heritage, the meta-value of Yiddish acquires new properties—such as attaining the magical power of an amulet—even as it is further displaced from vernacular literacy.

Thus, members of the postimmigrant generations preserve this mock heritage by perpetuating a limited Yiddish vocabulary in its modes of ridicule and carnival. They elaborate this heritage not by expanding the repertoire of Yiddishisms or bilingual jokes but rather by inventing materializations of them. This change suggests that sites of cultural creativity and networks of distribution have shifted from language-based activities, such as code-switching and joke-telling, to new arenas of contact and expertise, including merchandising and consuming.

Or, in the case of the 1999 Off-Broadway comedy Qy/ by Rich Orloff, the task of learning the meanings of Yiddishisms as they figure in contemporary American Jewish life is rendered as a stage work. A series of comic sketches, Qy/ enacts the meanings of a highly selective inventory of Yiddish words: "kvell" ("take pride in"), "machy" ("big shot"), "nudge" ("pester"), "chutzpah" ("brazen nerve"), "oy" (a word with many meanings), "kibbitz" ("converse"), "yenta" ("busybody"), "kveech" ("complain"), "raif" ("unkosher"). As staged by the Melting Pot Theatre Company, each sketch began with actors displaying the letters spelling the key word in question (in romanization) on a clothesline strung across the stage, thereby materializing Yiddishisms as scenery. Here, too, Yiddish signals a Jewish sensibility that is both elusively connotative and widely accessible. Use of the language indicates ethnicity, in literary scholar Werner Selors's terms, both "by descent" and "by consent." Thus Qy/begins with "Word Play," a sketch in which a gentle secretary newly employed in an otherwise all-Jewish law firm struggles to master the Yiddishisms they use with one another—terms that, one character explains, "can't be learned from a dictionary.

Even so, the production's program includes a glossary, though noting that "some of the definitions describe the usage more than the literal meanings of the words" and reassuring audience members, "don't worry . . . there won't be a quiz."
The performance of this mock mastery of the language is also implicit in Yiddish realia in mock mode. Like many other novelty items, these are jokes incarnate, with Yiddish words and the language play that they engender functioning as punch lines. In addition, as is the case with spoken jokes generally, these items require a social context for performance and appreciation. A prime social context for the appearance of these objects is gift-giving, which links them to marking special occasions and articulating interpersonal relationships, especially, in the case of Yiddish realia, intergenerational ones. Such social occasions provide opportunities for giving voice to Yiddish (albeit in highly fragmented, mock form), whether reading aloud the bogy definitions and jokes in comic dictionaries, instruction cards for games, or bilingual puns on snack canisters. Indeed, these objects and texts often stimulate oral delivery or invite discussion (the instructions inside the lid of Chutzpah end thus: "In case you have any questions about how to play the game—argue! Don’t call us, we’ll be in Miami."). Oral engagement with these objects might well prompt elaborations on the participants’ own initiative, such as recalling other jokes, anecdotes, or Yiddish idioms.

The voicing of these objects will, of course, vary widely, according to the composition of those assembled—whether they comprise an all-Jewish group or a mix of Jews and non-Jews, a unigenerational group or an intergenerational one. The last example is of special interest, for as gag gifts—mock offerings of a mock heritage—passing between generations, these items intimate ambivalent feelings about inheriting Yiddish language and Jewish vernacularity. Giving one of these items might be understood as a gesture of cultural homage, on the one hand, and as a tacit acknowledgment of cultural breakdown on the other. At the same time, these lowbrow, sometimes salacious, materializations reinforce associations of Yiddish with the vulgar in its multiple meanings, especially when the vitality of Jewish vulgarity has appeared to be endangered and, at the same time, attractive. This was doubtless part of the appeal of these items in the first post-Holocaust decades, when, for many, living with questions about identity “in a state of useful discontent” was, according to Irving Howe, “perhaps what it . . . meant to be a Jew.”

More recent examples of materializing Yiddish often seem to celebrate the previous generation’s cultural anxieties about the language as a heritage to be adopted as well as spoofed, admired as well as derided. Jennifer and Victoria Traig’s 2002 book Judaikish: Tchotchkes, Schmattes, and Noshehni, offers an array of ludic crafts projects and recipes (including the “Borscht Belt,” the “Neil Tzedakah Box,” and the “Poi Vey Pineapple Mold”) as both a continuation of and a corrective to earlier Jewish material culture. Claiming that “ever since that unfortunate incident with the golden calf, Judaism has shied away from the plastic arts,” the authors demonstrate “what might happen if Martha Stewart was abducted by a tribe of trailer-park rabbis.” At the same time, the Traigs position “Jewish kitsch” within “a long and proud history.” Noting that “the word tchotchke is around 500 years old,” they explain that East European immigrant Jews “brought their kitschy tchotchkes with them” on their journeys to America, to the displeasure of “more established” German Jews. Lowbrow “tchotchkes”—and, by implication, the Yiddish language—are thus historicized as inimical to “kultur, or high art,” eventually giving way to the authors’ sensibility of camp (which, they explain, “can only be described as arched-brow”).

Along with the insights that Yiddish realia prompt regarding their symbolic value—their linguistic and cultural playfulness, their sociohistorical timeliness—we must also consider the attraction of their materiality. Materializing language offers the promise of concretizing the most evanescent of cultural enterprises. In the case of Yiddish in post–World War II America, these objects ostensibly stabilize the language during a state of manifold upheaval. The nature of its speech community, its lexicon, its semiotics, its relationship to other languages, are all in flux. In doing so, these items fix the language as a sign of linguistic and cultural tenacity.

In this respect, the inventory of Yiddish artifacts should be considered alongside two of the most ambitious of recent material efforts to preserve Yiddish culture: erecting the new headquarters of the National Yiddish Book Center on the campus of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and the NYBC’s project to create digital scans of the full inventory of Yiddish literature, enabling customers to order new copies of thousands of titles, printed and bound on demand. These two undertakings, equally impressive in scale, offer complementary responses to the challenge of saving old Yiddish books by separating their contents from their materiality.

The NYBC’s new headquarters, which opened in 1997, are built around large, open stacks, with row upon row of shelves holding thousands of vintage volumes. According to the building’s architect, Allen Moore, this was planned so that there would be nothing separating the books from the visitor, who would “be able to smell them!” As a result, “the books are going to come across as being real and alive, and the mustiness will suggest that Yiddishkeit has been forgotten for a long time but now it’s coming into the light and being taken care of by young people.” In contrast, the NYBC’s digital scanning of Yiddish books, begun in 1998, preserves their literary content while removing it from its original material form. Reproduced on acid-free paper, the NYBC’s reprints are bound in covers of uniform design, thereby encompassing what may eventually be the full inventory of modern Yid-
lish literature within a single imprint: the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library. (The project’s major funder is Spielberg’s Righteous Persons Fund, thereby linking the preservation of Yiddish books and Holocaust remembrance.)

Vintage Yiddish books, while generally in poorer physical condition than new reprints, nonetheless have their original covers and often bear the signs of prior use—inscriptions, book plates, marginalia, even stains and tears—that endow them with the aura of a bygone way of life. The open stacks at the heart of the NYBC’s headquarters capitalize on this aura, transforming literary volumes from a wide array of publishing venues into a massive gathering of votive objects, to be encountered with the nose as much as the eye. These Yiddish books remain powerful cultural catalysts, though their mode of engagement has shifted radically—away from informational or aesthetic encounters with individual books (and away from the cultural specificity of Yiddish as well, since old books tend to smell much the same regardless of the language in which they are written) and toward an affective, visceral experience of books en masse. Drawing on the powerful association of smell with memory, inhaling the aroma of abandoned Yiddish books is meant to evoke a lost culture as well as its retrieval. Indeed, the books’ very presence on shelves in the NYBC, surrounded by its young staff, transforms them into symbols of resurrection.

Powerful cultural desires are embodied in all these materializations of Yiddish language. This is not only the case in the NYBC’s devotion to Yiddish as a form of Jewish high culture, however populist and even sentimental that might at times be; it also holds for the lowbrow Yiddish realia in mock mode that I have been collecting. All these materializations concretize the semiotic transformation of Yiddish inherent in postvernacularity, privileging the language’s symbolic meanings over its vernacular value. The significance of these artifacts is therefore in flux, even as they strive to secure meaning. As with any artifact, their meaning relies on the cultural literacy of those who own them and engage with them, posing a special challenge for younger generations who are further removed from the vernacular culture that engendered these items. For through them, these generations encounter Yiddish as a curio—a fragment of a whole with which they are unfamiliar, a souvenir of experiences that they have never had.

CHAPTER SIX

WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE?

“Some say Yiddish is dead, it hardly lives outside the classroom or archives. We don’t know if we are part of a revival or are assisting at a slow death.”

—S. L. WISENBERG, Holocaust Girls, 2000

“Y2K = Yiddish: The Second Millennium.”

—DAVID BRAUN, 2000

Hovering around postvernacular Yiddish in all its manifestations are questions regarding the language’s viability. More often than not, contemporary Yiddish culture is assessed—even by some of its champions—according to the widespread notion that the language is moribund. So pervasive is this notion that at the turn of the twenty-first century it also haunts those, such as S. L. Wisenberg—a young American author studying Yiddish in continuing-education classes—who are seeking ways to engage with the language and make it part of their lives. In response, some Yiddishists—among them David Braun, who taught Yiddish language at Harvard University in 2000—vigorously, and at times provocatively, insist in its viability.

HAVING THE LAST WORD

The trope of Yiddish as a dead or dying language is not new, of course. It has not only been reiterated in the wake of the Holocaust; it has been voiced since the turn of the previous century. In 1899 Leo Wiener questioned the viability of Yiddish in his pioneering study of modern Yiddish literature. While characterizing the language as “not an anomaly, but a natural development,” Wiener also saw its imminent passing as inevitable, especially in the United States: “In America [Yiddish] is certainly doomed to
truf has also extended its devotion to Yiddish to a commitment to mineg-Ashkenaz (the traditional religious customs of Ashkenazim) by conducting a workshop on how to conduct a Passover seder in the Ashkenazic pronunciation. Yungtruf, email announcement, 12 March 2001.


5. ABSOLUT TCHOTCHKE

1. Several examples of this can be seen in Norman Kleeblatt and Vivian Mann, Treasures of the Jewish Museum (New York: Universe Books, 1986), in which works of Judaica are contrasted with similar non-Jewish items, the primary distinction of the former being their inscription with words or letters in the alef bys; see 38–39, 44–45, 55–57, 62–63, 132–33, 146–47.

2. The use of romanization on these objects, and in related items (especially comic dictionaries, which use it exclusively), ought to be considered in light of other examples of printing Yiddish in Latin letters—for example, Yiddish newspapers published in Displaced Persons camps in the immediate post–World War II years, when there was no alef bys type available in Europe—and arguments made to render Yiddish in Latin letters as a matter of language policy, whether by Chaim Zhitlow in America in the 1920s, or by Soviet Yiddishists during the 1920s and 1930s.

3. CHUTZPE: Magnetic Poetry Supplemental Kit: Yiddish (Minneapolis: Magnetic Poetry, 1997). In addition, some words included in these two magnet sets are (at least arguably) not Yiddish, for example, safta (modern Hebrew for “grandmother”) kibbutz, and deli. Their inclusion suggests various notions of what might “belong” within the lexicon of a Jewish vernacular, irrespective of their appearance in Yiddish dictionaries. By comparison, the other foreign-language sets in this series offer a more conventional, quotidian vocabulary, akin to the basic set of magnetic poetry in English.

4. See Yisroel Sheynboym, Dovid Broidhe, and Yudel Mark (Israel Steinbaum, David Bridger, and Yudel Mark), Der vocabular farn onkeyer-klisz der amerikener yidarsh school (The Vocabulary for the Beginners’ Class in the American Yiddish School) (New York: YIVO, 1944).


12. There are alternate versions of terms for playing kridel. For example, whereas gimp is most frequently understood as standing for gans (take all), others report that it stands for ghan (give, i.e., add to the ante). See Marvin Herzog et al., The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jews, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1992), question 193:20.

13. See, for example, Isidor Margolis and Sidney L. Markowitz, Jewish Holidays and Festivals (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1962), 55.


19. Martin Marcus, _Yiddish for Yankees: Or, Fanny, You Don't Look Gentile_ (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1968); Arthur Naiman, _Every Guy's Guide to Common Jewish Expressions_ (New York: Ballantine, 1981). The front cover of the latter reads, under the title, "Also recommended for Jews who don't know their punim [face] from their pukim [navel]." Here, the non-Jewish reader serves as the "kind of permission" for the mock dictionary, not dissimilar to the role of women as model readers of early Yiddish literature that was, in fact, for women and men who were like women in their lack of Jewish literacy, as discussed in chapter 3 of this book.

20. These books have been reprinted numerous times, including in one volume: see Ruth and Bob Grossman, _The New Kosher Cookbook Trilogy_ (Secaucus, N.J.: Castle Books, 1985).


24. Closer inspection also reveals that the gefilte fish is dead: its eye is filled with an "X" and its tongue hangs out. Given the agenda of the creators of the gefilte fish, this, too, appears to mock the original referent as a Christian symbol of life. However, F.I.S.H. also sells a variant of the gefilte fish that is not "dead" and sports a six-pointed Star of David as its eye.

25. Leyzer Ran, _Fan Elpey Bekeher be' Hirsh Glik: korn leksikon_ (From Elpey Bekker [Elijah Levita] to Hirsh Glik: Card Lexicon) (New York: Vilner farlag, 1963). This "learn and play" card game features one hundred cards commemorating four hundred years of Yiddish literature; an instruction booklet explains rules for various games that can be played with the deck. Both cards and booklet are entirely in Yiddish.


28. According to Halter, "Longings and Belongings," this game was also distributed in the mid-1930s by Pierce, then the proprietor of Einstein's, an unusual "museum with price tags" in downtown Philadelphia, specializing in "ethnic merchandise of all kinds," including Yiddish artifacts and other Judaica. Halter reported at the time that "there is such a great demand" for the game and its accompanying cassette "that they can't keep enough on the shelf" (1925).


30. Most of the items listed on the brochure of "Carmelite" products are given the Yiddish diminutive prefix "shn-"; for example, "schmug," "see schmit," "schmarins," etc. Golf balls bearing the "Schmuck on That Camel" logo are named "putts," a pun on another Yiddish vulgarism for penis. Typical of other highly selective comic Yiddish lexicons, the one hundred or so Yiddish words included in the game consist mostly of culturally specific terms (e.g., mikveh [ritual bath], payess [sidekicks], kinship terms [libba [grandmother], schwiger [mother-in-law], food terms [khrone [horseradish], laste [pancakes], insults [feller [idler], schleper [slowpoke]], and obscenities. This last category focuses mostly on male genitalia (including three vulgarisms for penis), while insults often single out females (yeshneh, yente [both of which connote a coarse or vulgar woman], shiksa [a derogatory term for a non-Jewish woman], suggesting a gendered point of view for the game's creator and implied players.


32. See Werner Sollors, _Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Decent in American Culture_ (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

33. _Oy!: A New Comedy_ (program), n.p.


35. Jennifer Traig and Victoria Traig, _Judaikish: Tchotchkes, Schnattes, and Noshes_ (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 8, front jacket flap, 8, 10, 11. _Judaikish_ features a glossary of Yiddish and Hebrew terms, labeled "Helonics" (118), offering conventional, rather than mock, definitions. Play takes place in the craft projects and their names, more often involving non-Jewish cultural referents such as "Jewish" and "Spice Girls Spice Box."


37. NYBC reprints feature the logo of "the golden pave, or golden peacock, ... a traditional symbol of Yiddish creativity," on their spine and title page. The reprints were originally issued as paperback books. The illustration on the cover of all these reprints, designed by Paul Bacon, features a montage of images, including traditional shetel figures and architecture as well as images of immigrant life in America (a pushcart peddler, tenements, etc.). Beginning in 2003 the NYBC switched from paperback to plain cloth-cover reprints with library bindings.