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A Dance: Fradel Shtok Reconsidered

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A DANCE: FRADEL SHTOK RECONSIDERED

Sonia Gollance

Abstract: *Born in Galicia in 1890, Fradel Shtok immigrated to America in 1907. She became connected with the modernist group Di yunge and won acclaim for her poems. Despite this success, her 1919 collection of short stories received mixed reviews. For years it was believed she angrily left Yiddish publishing and later died in a mental institution. Recent archival discoveries challenge the accepted biography, revealing that she wrote a play manuscript (copyrighted 1923) and published a story in the Forverts in 1942.*

Translations of Shtok's stories about young women coming of age in Eastern Europe feature prominently in collections of Yiddish women's writing. Such scholarly endeavors bring attention to Shtok's life and work but generally pass over stories concerning male protagonists or an American setting—parts of her corpus acknowledged by her contemporaries. As a result, most English-language scholarship presents only a limited view of Shtok's nuanced depictions of the secret desires of socially marginal figures.

This article reconsiders Shtok's oeuvre and literary reception in the context of my translation of her short story "A tants" (A dance). Using the experience of a male sweatshop worker in New York who attends a family wedding, the story explores the dance floor as a space of nostalgia, escape, and danger for immigrant Jews in New York. As I will demonstrate, Shtok's use of dance complicates the reception of her literary oeuvre and illuminates her complex intertwining of dreams and reality.

Introduction

Dance is a sign of joy in Jewish culture. From the biblical account of Miriam's dance with the Israelite women after the parting of the Red Sea to twentieth century Zionist pageantry in the *yishuv*, dance is both a form of celebration and a means of

bringing a community together.¹ For this reason, dance plays an important role in Jewish wedding ritual.² The commandment of “mesameyekh khosn v’kale” (bringing joy to the bride and groom) motivated the *mitsve tants*, in which men (including Hasidic rebbes) danced before a bride, separated from her by the length of a handkerchief.³ In her memoirs, Pauline Wengeroff (1833-1916) describes gladdening a bride and groom as the highest *mitsve* (commandment).⁴ Not surprisingly, one name for the circular Eastern European Jewish wedding dance is the *freylekhs*, a name that literally means joy.⁵

Where the words of “mesameyekh khosn v’kale” focus on what the community should do for the bridal couple, this essay explores the emotional consequences of wedding dancing for individual dancers and the community in a work of literary fiction. More specifically, I examine American Yiddish writer Fradel Shtok’s short story “A tants” (A Dance) and explore her construction of the dance floor as a space of nostalgia, escape, and danger for immigrant Jews in New York. As I will demonstrate, her use of dance complicates our understanding of her literary reception and reveals her to be a more narratively complex and morally ambiguous writer than has previously been

¹ See Dvora Lapson et al., “Dance,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 5 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 409-16; Walter Zev Feldman, “An Overview,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Gershon Hundert, ed., vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 387-88; Walter Zev Feldman, “Traditional Dance,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Gershon Hundert, ed., vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 388-90. For biblical dance, see Benjamin Zemach, “The Beginning of Jewish Dancing” in *The Jewish Dance: An Anthology of Articles*, ed. Fred Berk (New York: Expedition Press, [1960]), 11-19; see also Feigue Berman, “Hasidic Dance: An Historical and Theological Analysis” (PhD diss., New York University, 1999), 86-93; Dvora Lapson, “Jewish Dances of Eastern and Central Europe,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 15 (1963): 58-61. For dancing in Mandate Palestine, see Nina S. Spiegel, *Embodying Hebrew Culture: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Dance in the Jewish Community of Mandate Palestine* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 97-173.

² For more about Ashkenazi weddings and wedding dances, see LeeEllen Friedland, “‘Tantsn Is Leben’: Dancing in Eastern European Jewish Culture,” *Dance Research Journal* 17, no. 2 (October 1985): 76-80.; Martha Seid, “Wedding Dances,” in *The Chasidic Dance*, ed. Fred Berk (Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1975), 13-15; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Weddings,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon Hundert, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2007-09.

³ For historical context, see Zvi Friedhaber, “The Bride and Her Guests: The Dance with the Separating Kerchief,” in *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, ed. Judith Brin Ingber (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 225-33. For Laban analysis of a late twentieth century Hasidic *mitsve tants*, including a description of the choreography, see Jill Gellerman, *Hasidic Dances in Ritual and Celebration* (New York, NY: Dance Notation Bureau, 1978), 133-39. For an Israeli perspective, see Yaakov Mazor and Moshe Taube, “A Hassidic Ritual Dance: The Mitsve Tants in Jerusalemite Weddings,” *Yuval* 6 (1994): 164-224. For the mystical connotations of the *mitsve tants* in Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s sermons, see Wojciech Tworek, “Time in the Teachings of Schneur Zalman of Liady” (PhD diss., University College London, 2014), 229-31.

⁴ Pauline Wengeroff, *Memoiren einer Grossmutter: Bilder aus der Kulturgeschichte der Juden Russlands im 19. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1. (Berlin: Verlag von M. Poppelauer, 1908), 180. For English, see Pauline Wengeroff, *Memoirs of a Grandmother: Scenes from the Cultural History of the Jews of Russia in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Shulamit S. Magnus, vol. 2 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 71. Wengeroff’s memoirs portray the transformation of Jewish life in Russia in the period following the Haskalah and offer a unique perspective on the impact of these social changes on women and families.

⁵ For a description of *freylekhs* forms and variations see Walter Zev Feldman, *Klezmer: Music, History, & Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 74-75.

acknowledged. Crucially, “A tants” exemplifies Shtok’s frequent and brutal contrasts between dreams and reality, a recurring element in her work that was acknowledged by contemporaries such as literary critic Shmuel Niger but overlooked in more recent scholarship.

My analysis of “A tants” draws upon literary dance studies scholarship. More than simply noting the presence of dance scenes in literary texts, literary dance studies grapples with the problem of recording the visual and ephemeral medium of dance in the written word,⁶ and considers the ways dance scenes contribute to the texture of literary plots, character development, and social commentary.⁷ Even though dance played an important role in traditional Jewish culture, Jewish dance practice has received very little notice in literary dance studies scholarship. Scholars of Yiddish dance sometimes refer to descriptions of dance in literary fiction, yet they typically use dance scenes to show the prevalence of specific dance forms in Ashkenazi culture, rather than to address the role of dance in Yiddish literature.⁸ Until very recently, the literary dance studies research that came closest to addressing traditional Jewish dance primarily focused on dance in the context of assimilation or acculturation.⁹ Unlike “A tants,” other literary works discussed in the scholarship do not address the dreams, desires, and dance choreography of ordinary Ashkenazi Jews or the role of dance in traditional Jewish communities. Indeed, “A tants” stands out as a modernist text that celebrates the importance of the community for the individual. Shtok’s treatment of dance at a communal celebration is especially striking when one considers how, as Sally

⁶ Lucia Ruprecht notes the “fundamental remoteness between dance as one of the most physical and literature as one of the most abstracted of arts.” See: Lucia Ruprecht, *Dances of the Self in Heinrich von Kleist, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Heinrich Heine* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), xiii.

⁷ Molly Engelhardt explores the metaphor of being “out of line” in both nineteenth century English novels and dance to show how dance was an ambivalent practice that risked moments of danger, including transgression of boundaries, falling, or the ripping of clothing, see: Molly Engelhardt, *Dancing Out of Line: Ballrooms, Ballets, and Mobility in Victorian Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 5, 11, 13. Cheryl A. Wilson’s study of dance and nineteenth century English literature argues that authors explore physical bodies and movement through descriptions of characters and narrative structures that resemble dance choreography, see: Cheryl A. Wilson, *Literature and Dance in Nineteenth-Century Britain: From Jane Austen to the New Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

⁸ For instance, see: Feldman, *Klezmer*, 186-87; Friedhaber, “The Bride and Her Guests,” 231; Walter Salmen, “...denn die Fiedel macht das Fest:” *Jüdische Musikanten und Tänzer vom 13. bis 20. Jahrhundert* (Innsbruck: Edition Helbing, 1991), 97. For a discussion of the dancing academy in Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* as a reflection of American youth culture, see Sarah E. Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 107-13.

⁹ My dissertation was, to my knowledge, the first work of literary dance studies scholarship to address traditional Eastern European Jewish dance, see: Sonia Gollance, “Harmonious Instability: (Mixed) Dancing and Partner Choice in German-Jewish and Yiddish Literature” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2017). The article which has the most similar approach uses ballroom dancing as a metaphor for assimilation, see Sonia Gollance, “Spaß mit der schönen Jüdin’: Mixed Space and Dancing in Karl Emil Franzos’s *Judith Trachtenberg*,” *Austrian Studies* 24 (2016): 65-78. For a discussion of Heinrich Heine’s writings on dance, see Ruprecht, *Dances of the Self*, 97-136; for an analysis of dance in *Daniel Deronda*, see Engelhardt, *Dancing Out Of Line*, 108 and Wilson, *Literature and Dance*, 71; for an examination of orientalist dance in a German-Jewish journal, see Sonia Gollance, “Delilah’s Dance: Salomania and German-Jewish Orientalism,” in Rita Rieger, *Bewegungsfreiheit: Tanz als kulturelle Manifestation (1900-1950)* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017): 159-77.

Banes argues, female modern dance pioneers favored solo dances as a way of rejecting the “marriage plot” and compulsory heterosexuality in ballet—a tendency that Rebecca Rossen also observes in Pauline Koner’s 1932 solo piece, *Chassidic Song and Dance*.¹⁰ Shtok’s male contemporaries tended to write dance scenes that depicted heterosexual eroticism and courtship, whereas, in her short stories, Shtok used the dance floor to articulate the fantasy worlds of marginal figures and the relationship between an individual and the community, rather than emphasize the marriage plot.

Shtok’s Biography and Critical Reception

Born in Skala, Galicia (today Skala-Podilska, Ukraine), in 1890, Shtok immigrated to New York in 1907 and began participating in the literary circle of *Di yunge* (the Young Ones), a modernist movement known for valuing individual aesthetic expression over the political concerns of the Jewish masses.¹¹ She was acclaimed for her poetry, which she published in Abraham Reisen’s *Dos naye land* (The New Land, 1911-12), and publications of *Di yunge* including *Di naye heym* (The New Home, 1914) and *Inzl* (Island), as well as in the literary journal *Tsukunft* (Future), and in the anarchist *Fraye arbeter shtime* (Free Voice of Labor).¹² She was one of the first poets to write a sonnet or sonnet cycle in Yiddish.¹³ Kathryn Hellerstein notes her innovative “diction and quality of imagination” as well as the way her poetry “adopted the concept of *reyner dikhtung* (pure poetry) developed by the Yunge poets [...]”¹⁴ As Norma Fain Pratt details: “she wrote sonnets and lyric poems that explored the institution of marriage and the relationships between men and women. Erotic, exotic, turbulent, and audacious, her poetry challenged the passivity of women in love relationships.”¹⁵ While Hellerstein’s comparison of the writing of women and men who used female

¹⁰ Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998), 5-6, 66; Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 41.

¹¹ Jules Chametzky et al., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 290. Ruth R. Wisse takes a different approach to most other scholars in assessing Shtok’s literary reception and relationship to her male colleagues. In her monograph on *Di yunge*, she acknowledges how “their many references to themselves as a new kind of minyan evokes a vigorous masculine world” but claims they “did not seem to have been aware of their maleness as a stimulus to cohesion.” In writing about Shtok, Wisse reports: “Her work was featured in many publications of the *yunge*, as were her theoretical discussions of art. Nevertheless, respectfully as her contributions were received, she is not mentioned socially as one of the group, which may be part of the reason she later turned from Yiddish to English.” Ruth R. Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 16.

¹² Chametzky et al., *Jewish American Literature*, 290.

¹³ Avrom Tabachnik disputes the claim that Shtok was the first poet to write a sonnet in Yiddish. He attempts to create a longer (male) lineage for Yiddish sonnets by calling Morris Winchevsky the “zeyde” (grandfather) of Yiddish sonnets, and claims Shtok was the first female poet to write at the same level as male contemporaries. Avrom Tabachnik, “Fradl shtok un der sonet,” *Dikhter un dikhtung* (1965): 505-08.

¹⁴ Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 2014), 27.

¹⁵ Norma Fain Pratt, “Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers in America, 1890-1940,” in *Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 122.

pseudonyms suggests that the male literary establishment expected women writers to present a softer, more passive perspective on sex and romance, Shtok's poetry was well-regarded.¹⁶ As Hellerstein observes, Shtok was the only poet to be equally represented in both the Ezra Korman and the Moyshe Bassin Yiddish poetry anthologies, with twelve and eleven poems respectively, which is especially significant in light of the fact that Korman's anthology was only of women but Bassin included writers of both genders.¹⁷

In addition to her poetry, Shtok wrote a theoretical essay entitled "Vos iz poezie" (What is poetry?) in *Fun mentsh tsu mentsh: a zamlbukh far poezye* (From one to another: a collected volume for poetry), which was edited by Moyshe Leyb Halpern and contained contributions by luminaries of *Di yunge*.¹⁸ Shtok's definition of poetry is noteworthy for its emphasis on physicality and the body, saying it should have an effect "oyf di organische teylen fun kerper, un farurzakhn an unmitlbarn oysgus fun energie, bavegung"¹⁹ (on the organic parts of the body, and induce an immediate outpouring of energy, of movement). While there is no archive of Shtok's papers to contextualize her creative process, this theoretical work suggests she perceived a continuity between the physicality of her literary themes and the impact on her reader. Shtok's poems make great use of physical and corporeal imagery. For example, an untitled 1914 sonnet combines carnal themes with a Salome dance motif. Although Shtok does not describe the choreography of the speaker's "tants fun zind" (sinful dance), the poem compares the addressee's face, hair, and heart to that of John the Baptist, while declaring the hate-filled speaker's sinful desire, not for her lover's head, but for his tongue.²⁰

According to Pratt, Shtok began publishing short stories in the *Forverts* (Jewish Daily Forward) and *Der tog* (The Day) in 1916.²¹ In 1919, Shtok published her one book in Yiddish, a collection of thirty-eight short stories, and received mixed reviews. Shtok was particularly angered by a condescending review in *Der tog* by Aaron Glanz-Leyeles.²² Glanz-Leyeles noted that Shtok's use of movement was a sign of her talent, but

¹⁶ Hellerstein, "The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems," 189-212.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Shtok's poetry and Yiddish canon formation, see Kathryn Hellerstein, "Canon and Gender: Women Poets in Two Modern Yiddish Anthologies," in *Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 146-48. Hellerstein also notes (138) that Shtok was the only woman writer to be represented by more than three poems in the Bassin anthology. For more about the poetics of Shtok's poetry, including the musicality of her love song "Serenade" (Serenade), see Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition*, 38-39.

¹⁸ Fradel Shtok, "Vos iz poezye?" in *Fun mentsh tsu mentsh: a zamlbukh far poezye*, ed. M[oyshe] L[eyb] Halpern ([New York]: Farlag Nyu-York, [1915]), 22-26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰ For Hellerstein's translation, see Chametzky et al., *Jewish American Literature*, 294. For Hellerstein's discussion of this motif, as well as the text in both Yiddish and her English translation, see: Hellerstein, "The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems," 196-99. The quoted line is on p. 197. See also Fradel Shtok, "Sonet 8," in *Dos naye hem: ershtes zamlbukh 1* (1914): 7 in the sixth section; Fradel Shtok, "Sonet 1," in *Yidishe dikhterins: antologye*, E. Korman, ed. (Chicago: Farlag L. M. Shteyn, 1928), 98.

²¹ Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics," 122.

²² For more about Glanz-Leyeles's 1915 article "Kultur un di froy" (Culture and the Woman) which professes the need for women to inspire male creativity, see Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition*, 30-31.

claimed that the collection was monotonous and she needed to mature as a writer.²³ It was rumored that Shtok publicly slapped Glanz-Leyeles in the office of *Der tog* in response to his review.²⁴ Shtok published a novel in English, *Musicians Only* (1927), which recounts a married Jewish woman's love affair with an Italian vaudeville musician. It was neither critically nor commercially successful. For decades it was believed that Shtok died around 1930 in a mental institution.²⁵

The story of Shtok's beauty, brief career, and tragic fate inspired romantic portrayals, anger, and hagiographic depiction on the part of literary scholars. Irena Klepfisz uses Shtok's voice to poignantly represent the experience of an immigrant trapped between languages and worlds in her poem "Fradel Shtok."²⁶ Pratt fictionalizes Shtok's tragic narrative in the short story "What Remains Is Random."²⁷ Jacob Glatstein's biographical essay "Tsu der biografye fun a dikhterin" (Towards the Biography of a Woman Poet) represents the most comprehensive account of Shtok's life, although certain elements (including the frequent use of a childhood nickname to refer to Shtok) are problematic. The following paragraph, full of pathos and tragedy, is representative of how many scholars and critics discuss Shtok's life:

אין 1910 האָט בײַ אונדז אויפֿגעשײַנט דאָס פּאָעטישע געשטאַלט פֿון אַ יונג מיידל, וואָס איז געקומען פֿון גאַליציע. זי איז געווען שײַן, פּיקאַנט אין אויסזען. אירע לידער זײַנען געווען עלעגאַנט און אַריגינאַל. זי האָט, ווי די מײַסטע שרײַבערס אונדזערע פֿון גאַליציע, נישט מורא געהאַט צו זאָגן אַ דירעקט און שאַרף וואָרט אין אירע לידער, דערבײַ איז איר ליד געווען באַמײַסטערט און דיסציפּלינירט. אָבער ווי פּלוצים זי איז געקומען, אַזוי אומגעריכט איז זי פֿאַרשוונדן. ווען איר בין אין 1919 געקומען צווישן ייִדישע שרײַבערס, איז זי שוין געווען אַ לעגענדע. מען האָט דערצײלט, אַז זי האָט זיך אָנגעברגזט און אַוועק צו די גוים. געוואָרן אַן ענגלישע שרײַבערין, אָבער אַן דערפֿאַלג. ערשט מיט עטלעכע יאָר צוריק זײַנען מיר געווייר געוואָרן, אַז זי איז געשטאַרבן אין אַ סאַנאַטאָריע פֿאַר גײַסטיק־קראַנקע.²⁸

In 1910 the poetic form of a young girl from Galicia appeared to us. She was beautiful, with a piquant look. Her poems were elegant and original. Like most of our writers from Galicia, she wasn't afraid to speak directly and sharply in her poetry, at the same time her poetry was masterful and disciplined. Yet as suddenly as she came, she unfairly disappeared. When I entered the Yiddish literary scene in 1919, she was already a legend. People

²³ Glanz-Leyeles identifies Shtok with movement [*bavegung*], however it is an internal, emotional movement rather than physical movement. He contrasts this movement with depictions [*shilderungen*], which are not Shtok's main concern. Aaron Glanz-Leyeles, "Temperament," *Der tog* (December 7, 1919), 9.

²⁴ Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics," 122.

²⁵ Chametzky et al., *Jewish American Literature*, 291.

²⁶ Irena Klepfisz, "Fradel Shtok," in *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*, eds. Melanie Kaye-Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 160-61.

²⁷ Norma Fain Pratt, "What Remains is Random," *Lilith: The Jewish Women's Magazine* (Fall 1987): 26-30.

²⁸ Jacob Glatstein, "Tsu der biografye fun a dikhterin," *Tog-morgn-zhurnal* Sunday supplement (September 19, 1965), 7.

spoke of how she angrily left Yiddish publishing [lit. went off to the goyim]. She became an English writer, but without success. Several years later we learned that she died in an institution for the mentally ill.

Glatstein's romantic description arguably makes Shtok appear more like a fairy tale princess than a human woman or talented writer. In fact, Glatstein claims that Shtok was treated like a princess by her father, an industrialist with underworld connections who died in prison for murder when she was ten.²⁹ Shtok's mother, a quiet woman who was rumored to have married to cover up a pregnancy, had died when her daughter was two. After her father's death, Shtok was raised by an aunt. According to a childhood friend, Shtok coped with her aunt's cold treatment by playing her violin.³⁰ She also committed Goethe and Schiller to memory in German. Glatstein suggests that Shtok's psychic illness may have had something to do with her tumultuous childhood.

Writing in *Bikher velt* (Book World) in 1923, Melech Ravitch acknowledges Shtok's anger at the Yiddish literary establishment. He condescendingly notes that it keeps her away from fulfilling her potential to rehabilitate her gender in Yiddish literature.³¹ He declares: "Aza dikhterin, aza kinstlerin vi fradl shtok darf vayter shraybn, muz vayter shraybn, vet vayter shraybn!"³² (such a woman poet, such a woman artist as Fradel Shtok needs to write again, must write again, will write again!) While Ravitch's prediction that Shtok would write again (presumably he means in Yiddish) represents a rather audacious demand of a colleague, his words were ultimately prophetic. More recent scholarship challenges the martyrology narrative of Shtok's life. In 2002, in his introduction to his translation of Shtok's short story "*Der arts-bishof*" (The Archbishop), Joachim Neugroschel writes that: "the Abe Cahan Archive at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, contains a letter she sent [*Forverts* editor Abraham] Cahan on October 20, 1942, along with a new story, which was then published in the *Jewish Daily Forward* on November 19, 1942."³³ Helene Kenvin's posting on the genealogy website JewishGen provides further analysis of Shtok's letter to Cahan, since it elaborates on Shtok's new contact name, Frances Zinn (which Kenvin speculates could have been a married name), and California address.³⁴ Kenvin notes that

²⁹ Glatstein, "Tsu der biografye," 14.

³⁰ Norma Fain Pratt, "Fradel Shtok: Memory and Storytelling in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Di Froyen: Women and Yiddish, Tribute to the Past, Directions for the Future* (New York: National Council of Jewish Women, 1997), 86.

³¹ Melech Ravitch, "Gezamlte ertseylungen' fun fradl shtok," *Bikher velt* (1923): 65-66.

³² *Ibid.*, 66.

³³ Joachim Neugroschel, ed. and trans., *No Star Too Beautiful: An Anthology of Yiddish Stories from 1382 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 463. It is unclear from the introduction whether Neugroschel discovered Shtok's letter himself or from a different source. I have thus far been unable to confirm reports that Pratt may have first located the letter. For the letter, see "Fradl Stock to Abraham Cahan," October 20, 1942, Box 12, Folder 278, RG 1130: Papers of Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

³⁴ Helene Kenvin, "Fradel Shtok: Author and Poet," under "Skala Luminaries," on the Skala ShtetLinks page from JewishGen, updated April 23 2008, available from <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/SkalaPodol/FradelShtok.html>, accessed January 25, 2013. See also Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition*, 433. Thanks to Kathryn Hellerstein for making me aware of this source.

a Frances Zinn died in California in 1952. Rather than die in a sanatorium, it appears Shtok moved to California and published at least one short story in Yiddish, “*A soykher fun fels*” (A Fur Merchant). Although she published the story under her own name, Shtok’s continued writing career did not catch the attention of the Yiddish literary community.

Even more enigmatically, in the course of my own work for the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project, I recently located a play manuscript by Shtok dated from 1923 (four years after she was believed to have stopped writing in Yiddish) in the Lawrence Marwick Collection at the Library of Congress.³⁵ Entitled *Der amerikaner* (The American), this four-act tragicomedy comprises the longest known text in Shtok’s own handwriting, nearly 180 pages. Like her short story, “A tants,” *Der amerikaner* depicts the impossible dreams of ordinary people. The titular character, Shloyme, is a watchmaker’s son who returns home after fourteen years in America, claiming to be a factory owner. He becomes engaged to a wealthy young woman, yet when her family begins inquiring into his finances, it becomes apparent that Shloyme only pretended to have money. The engagement is called off, and Shloyme returns to America, hoping to make a fortune. I am not aware that the play was ever published or performed, although it was deposited in the Marwick Collection as part of copyright registration. To my knowledge, none of the current scholarship notes that Shtok wrote a play, which is even more interesting in light of the fact that Yiddish playwriting is overwhelmingly dominated by male writers.³⁶ The discovery that Shtok did, in fact, write again raises as many questions as it answers, including the question of how Shtok was able to slip into obscurity unnoticed, despite having published a story under her own name. Was madness simply viewed as the inevitable path for such a passionate woman?

While Shtok is known today for her evocative tales of young women experiencing a sexual awakening in traditional communities, her story in the *Forverts* centers on a male protagonist in America. In fact, Shtok’s 1942 story represents a continuity in her work which has been elided by the texts available in English until now.³⁷ I do not mean to suggest that most translators agree with Ravitch that Shtok’s New World stories are “*khumrne*” (dreary).³⁸ Instead, the emphasis on Shtok’s European fiction speaks to scholarly efforts in the 1980s and 90s to foster greater recognition of the voices of Jewish women and their experience, especially as depicted by Yiddish women writers. This important scholarly project has raised awareness of Shtok’s literary contributions at the same time that it has skewed our knowledge about the full extent of her literary oeuvre. Where most extant scholarship and translations present Shtok largely as a

³⁵ Zachary M. Baker, *Copyrighted Yiddish Plays at The Library of Congress: An Annotated Bibliography* (Washington, D.C., Library of Congress: 2004), 152.

³⁶ For context, see: Debra Caplan, “Forgotten Playwright: Kadya Molodowsky and the Yiddish Theater,” in *The Legacy of Yiddish Women Writers: Critical Essays*, ed. Rosemary Horowitz (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 181-2.

³⁷ Independent of my project, Allison Schachter has also recently completed a translation of “A tants,” one of the rare occasions in which a Yiddish short story (especially by a woman writer) has been translated more than once. This translation has not yet been published. Along with Jordan Finkin, she is a recipient of a Yiddish Book Center Translation Fellowship to translate a collection of Shtok’s stories into English.

³⁸ Ravitch, “*Gezamlte ertseylungen’ fun fradl shtok*,” 65.

woman writing about women (and thus, implicitly, for women),³⁹ Shtok's contemporaries acknowledged her male characters in their reviews, sometimes before or with greater frequency than their references to female characters.⁴⁰ In stories such as "A tants," Shtok subtly depicts the feelings of working-class men, while nonetheless acknowledging the ways in which they enjoy a relative freedom.

"A tants"

"A tants" is the second story in Shtok's 1919 short story collection *Gezamlte ertseylungen* (Collected Stories).⁴¹ Unlike her better-known stories about young women coming of age in Eastern European *shtetlekh*, "A tants" centers around a male protagonist who lives in America. Meyer, known in America as Max (pronounced Meks by his fellow immigrants), is a twenty-eight-year-old sweatshop worker who has been married four years and looks forty. Although he is exhausted by work and family responsibilities, he momentarily recovers his lost youth when he attends a family wedding without his wife or their infant. In this festive setting, Meyer remembers his youthful desires, which seem far removed from his ordinary existence and economic burdens. His appearance and behavior are transformed, he acts more sentimentally towards wedding guests from his hometown, and he begins to dance. Indeed, Meyer experiences the chaotic and forceful energy of the dance floor as a dangerous temptation, since he fears such boisterous dancing might threaten his health, even as he feels compelled to participate. Yet this moment of exuberant dancing is fleeting, and fades away with the last notes of the klezmer tune. Meyer slowly and reluctantly returns to reality, with the inevitability of a natural process. As he walks up the stairs to his apartment, he bitterly recalls the refrain of the wedding music, even as his thoughts of monetary concerns gradually overpower the echoes of the musical refrain.

"A tants" is typical for Shtok's fiction in that it depicts the secret desires of socially marginal figures. She captures the conflicted drives of characters who engage in

³⁹ Ellen Kellman's encyclopedia entry begins, "Fradel Shtok holds a place among the pioneers of modern Yiddish literature for her treatment of the inner sensual lives of Jewish women." See Ellen Kellman, "Fradel Shtok," in *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, vol. 2: M-Z (Routledge, 1997), 1249. Another biographical entry characterizes the thematic content of her short stories as "treatment of the erotic desires and frustrations of women rebelling against the structures of traditional Judaism." Chametzky et al., *Jewish American Literature*, 290. While these descriptions are certainly true, they do not reflect all of her stories. One reason for Shtok's particular identification with the inner world of women is the way her work has been anthologized in English. Although Shtok's work is included in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* and *No Star Too Beautiful*, most other translations of her work and articles that mention her appear in the context of feminist literature, such as anthologized translations of women's writing or scholarly works which discuss female authorship. For instance, the only biographical article about Shtok in English was published as part of the proceedings of a conference on women and Yiddish entitled "Di froyen" (The women). See Pratt, "Fradel Shtok: Memory and Storytelling in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Di Froyen: Women and Yiddish, Tribute to the Past, Directions for the Future* (New York: National Council of Jewish Women, 1997).

⁴⁰ See Moissaye Olgin, "Pesimizm," *Di naye velt* (January 9, 1920), 16 and Glanz-Leyeles, "Temperament," 9.

⁴¹ Fradel Shtok, *Gezamlte ertseylungen* (New York: Farlag "Nay tsayt," 1919).

momentary escapism, even as she doubts their ability to free themselves more permanently from social constraints. In his review of Shtok's short story collection in *Di naye velt* (The New World), critic Moissaye Olgin characterizes Shtok's portrayal of the options available to her characters as pessimistic, an attribute which he views as both distinctive and a strength of her work.⁴² In contrast to reviewers who compared her artistic creation to embroidery and porcelain painting (Zalman Reyzn),⁴³ an album of discretely-colored etchings containing variations on the theme of brides (Ravitch),⁴⁴ or girl's flirtations (Dovid Zaydnfeld),⁴⁵ Olgin largely refrains from characterizing Shtok's work with explicit reference to her gender. Instead, he compares her distant, objective style of narration to the work of a scientist peering into a microscope, using the masculine form of the word "forsher" (researcher).⁴⁶

According to Olgin, Shtok's works are uniquely thought-provoking, due to their portrayals of simple people trapped by a social system. Olgin provides his own ironically detached metaphors to describe Shtok's characterizations, which are particularly relevant for a discussion of "A tants" due to their physicality.

פֿראַדל שטאַק גיט אײַך דעם אײַנדרוק פֿון אײַנעם וואָס אונטערזוכט מײַקראָבן אין אַ לעפֿל בלאַטע. צוגעגרייט דעם מײַקראָסקאָפּ, אַרויסגענומען אַ באַשעפֿעניש, אַוועקגעלייגט אויפֿן גלעזל. אַנגעשטעלט די לינזן: קוק! אַט איז אַ מײַקראָבעלע אַן הענט און אַן פֿיס, נאָר מיט מאַדנע הערלעך, ווי האַטשוקעס; אַט איז אַ מײַקראָבל מיט דרײַ הענט און צוויי פֿיס און מיט אַ געשלענגלט עקל; אַט איז אַ מײַקראָב ווי אַ שלשלת, אַ מײַקראָב ווי אַ שטערן, אַ מײַקראָב ווי אַ בלעטל גראַז. אײַניקע זײַנען לויפֿער, דרײַער, יאַגער, בלײַבן קיין רגע ניט אויף אַן אָרט; אַנדערע זײַנען מײַשבדיק, באַדאַכט, בעל־הבתיש; נאָך אַנדערע זײַנען אמתע טרוימער; איר קענט זען, ווי זיי ציען זיך צו אַנדערע ספֿערן; עס איז כמעט אַנגעשרײַבן אויף זײַערע פנימער, אַז זיי פֿאַראַכטן די בלאַטיקע סביבה, אָבער וואָס פֿאַר אַ ווערט האַט דער טרוים פֿון אַ מײַקראָב? אַט נעמט דער פֿאַרשער און גיסט אויס דעם לעפֿל בלאַטיקע וואָסער – און אויס מײַקראָבן, פֿאַרשוונדן דאָס גאַנצע וועלטל, מיט אַלע לויפֿער און טרוימער און בעל־הבתיים, מיט זײַער שײַנקײט און מײַאוסקײט, ערלעכקײט און פֿאַלשקײט, נידעריקײט און גדולות, אַלטקײט און יוגנט.

Fradel Shtok gives you the impression of a researcher examining microbes in a spoonful of mud. She prepares the microscope, takes out a culture, places it on a glass, sets the lenses: look! There is a little microbe without hands or feet, just strange little hairs like tiny hooks; there is a little

⁴² Moissaye (Moyshe) Olgin (1878-1939) was a prolific writer, Yiddish newspaper editor, and prominent Jewish communist.

⁴³ Zalman Reyzn, "Fradl Shtok," in *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye*, vol. 4 (Vilna: Kletskin, 1929), 572-74.

⁴⁴ Ravitch, "'Gezamlte ertseylungen,' fun fradl shtok" 65.

⁴⁵ Dovid Zaydnfeld, "A marionetin-malerin: vegn fradl shtoks bukh, *ertseylungen*," *Renesans II* (1920): 151.

⁴⁶ In an illustrative example of how a Yiddish writer resisted the use of a feminine ending for describing women writers, Hellerstein notes that her teacher, poet Malka Heifetz Tussman, described herself and her contemporaries as "poetn" (poets) rather than "dikhterins" (poetesses). See Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition*, 12.

⁴⁷ Olgin, "Pesimizm," 16.

microbe with three hands and two feet and with a winding little tail; there is a microbe like a music note [lit. Torah cantillation], a microbe like a star, a microbe like a blade of grass. Some are runners, twirlers, hunters, some don't sit still; others are sensible, prudent, bourgeois; still others are real dreamers; you can see how they are drawn to other spheres, it is almost inscribed on their faces that they despise the muddy environment, but who cares about a microbe's dream? Now the researcher takes the spoon and pours out the muddy water – and goodbye microbes! The entire little world disappears, with all the runners and dreamers and bourgeoisie, with their beauty and ugliness, honesty and perfidy, debasement and grandeur, age and youth.

Olgin's description is striking both for the reliance on scientific procedure and the damning portrayal of the powerless "microbes." The extended metaphor emphasizes physical features and movement. Olgin starts by describing their physical bodies, the presence or lack of limbs and the shapes of bodies, which in one case resembles the trope used for Torah cantillation (*shalsheles*). The microbe literally takes the form of a melody. Olgin then continues by describing the motions of these microbes, how they move, whether they seek something or stay in place. It is almost as if the microbes swimming in their mud are engaged in an eclectic dance.

"A tants" is the first example Olgin gives of Shtok's literary work in his review, and he uses the character of Meyer as an illustration of how Shtok depicts the ordinary Jews who populate her stories. Dance is a key component to this description, which makes sense given the story's title, and Olgin notes cynically: "[...] er tantst. a mikrobl tantst"⁴⁸ (. . .he dances. A little microbe dances). Olgin goes further when he compares Meyer, not simply to a microbe, but also to a worm. Attending a dance and wearing fine clothes is, for characters such as Meyer, like a worm wearing a butterfly's wings.⁴⁹ Olgin's unflinching characterization of Shtok's characters as microbes or worms is one reason why his review has been classified as unfairly negative.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Olgin hits upon a crucial point that English-language scholarship tends to overlook: Shtok focuses intensely upon both her characters' desire to escape from social strictures and the fleeting form this escape takes. Both of these elements are crucial to understanding how Shtok describes dance.

Shtok, Dance, and Narration

As Olgin implies, "A tants" is a particularly useful starting point for considering Shtok's typical practice of depicting how dreams, desire, and dance momentarily elevate characters before returning them to their mundane reality. Dance is a productive means for Shtok to engage in this form of narration. Moreover, the New World setting and male

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁰ Kellman states that "Olgin accused Shtok of taking a condescending attitude toward the characters in her stories and writing with a great deal of pessimism." See: Kellman, "Fradel Shtok," 1249.

protagonist provide a richer exploration of these emotional elements than would be possible simply by considering the few texts currently available in English translation.

Shtok frequently employs dance as a literary motif and plot element. Her stories typically introduce an ordinary character, put this character into a reality that facilitates dreams or fantasies of a different (often Viennese) reality, and reveal how a lasting escape from the mundane is impossible. Shtok's contemporaries acknowledged these elements of her work, yet the condescending tone they often took towards Shtok makes Yiddish-language reviews a complicated resource for Shtok scholarship. It is difficult to look past Ravitch's problematic description of Shtok's "album" of Galician girls to see that one of the elements he uses to characterize them is a love of waltzing.⁵¹ More recent scholarship tends to emphasize Shtok's biography and her sensitive portrayal of the emotional lives of young women, while paying less attention to Shtok's masterful use of dreams and the dance motif.

Shtok's interest in depicting physicality, the body, and dance was, at first glance, fairly typical for her American Yiddish literary milieu. Inspired by the exuberance and ostensible freedom of American life, as well as by literary movements such as social realism and naturalism, Yiddish writers used dance to convey shifting social norms and embody challenges to the traditional social order. Yet dance scenes also reveal a rift between Shtok's descriptive aims and those of her male contemporaries, since Shtok (like several of her later female contemporaries) tends to treat the dance floor as an aspirational site for individuals and communities in her short stories, rather than emphasize the sexual opportunities.⁵² In social realist Abraham Cahan's 1896 novella, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (first serialized in Yiddish as *Yankl der yanki*, Yankl the Yankee), participation in an immigrant dance academy reveals the irreconcilable differences between Jake, a skilled dancer, and his "greenhorn" wife, Gitl, since Jake delights in giving pleasure to other women by waltzing with them.⁵³ Dance is a metaphor for seizing opportunities (for flirtation) in Abraham Reisen's 1912 short story "*Di vos tantsn nit...*" (Those who don't dance).⁵⁴ Writing in a more naturalist style, Joseph Opatoshu deploys dance scenes to show tensions between Jews and other ethnic

⁵¹ Ravitch, "Gezamlte ertseylungen' fun fradl shtok," 65.

⁵² Writing several decades later, Kadya Molodowsky presents an annual *landsmanshaftn* (society for immigrants from the same community) ball as an opportunity for courtship in her short story "*A futerne mantl*" (A Fur Coat), but she places greater emphasis on community ties and the importance of a woman's financial independence than she does on the sexual implications of the dance floor. The female protagonist ends up divorcing the controlling man she met at the ball, and she happily returns to her single existence. Kadya Molodowsky, *A shtub mit zibn fenster* (New York: Matones, 1957), 29. Shtok and other female writers used sexual themes more frequently when they wrote poetry that employed the Salome dance motif, see Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems: Celia Dropkin and Her Contemporaries," in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*, eds. Sheila E. Jelen, Michael P. Kramer and L. Scott Lerner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 196.

⁵³ Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom: and other stories of the New York Ghetto* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), 16, 20-22, 44.

⁵⁴ The protagonist recalls bitterly how he was left at the sidelines because he could not dance, while "di shenste meydelekh hobn oysgekapt di mieste yunge layt..." (the prettiest girls were grabbed up by the ugliest young men). Much to his dismay, the only woman who does not dance is a "yente" who looks to be about twice his age. See: Abraham Reisen, "Di vos tantsn nit," *Di tsukunft* XVII, no. 10 (October 1912): 660.

groups in America in his panoramic 1926 novel *Di tentserin* (The Dancer) and 1922 short story “Shmelts-top” (Melting Pot).⁵⁵ In these two works, vulnerable Jewish women face the sexual threat of non-Jewish male dancers. Male American Yiddish writers tended to use dance to convey sexuality in sharply gendered terms, and depict new social freedoms in America. Shtok, in comparison, was more nuanced in creating a dance floor atmosphere that invoked momentary escape from daily responsibilities.

American Yiddish writers did not limit their dancing scenes to fiction and drama about life in America; in works set in Europe, Leon Kobrin,⁵⁶ David Pinski,⁵⁷ and Opatoshu⁵⁸ portray antihero protagonists whose physical robustness, dancing ability, and illiteracy mark a stark departure from the traditional Jewish scholarly male ideal. These works depict dance in the context of sexual topics and transgressive flirtation, rather than as a way of increasing Jewish community cohesion: Yankl Boyle dances with Belarusian peasants including his non-Jewish lover, Yankl the blacksmith drunkenly dances with his seductive female boarder, and Zanvil the horse thief dances with a married woman at his sister’s wedding. While such antiheroes are, often tragically, unable to stand up to communal pressures and the status quo, their unruly physicality marks an effort by the authors to inject male physicality into modern Jewish literature. Although Shtok develops themes of desire, longing, and sexual awakening in her works set in Europe, her aim is not to titillate her readers. Instead, her dance scenes explore the inner world of her characters, contrasting their dreams with lived reality.

In this respect, Shtok’s use of dance most closely resembles Celia Dropkin’s 1935 short story, “A tentserin” (A dancer), in which the protagonist Gysia is tragically unable to reconcile her fantasies of dancing with the realities of married life and motherhood.⁵⁹ Yet unlike Dropkin, Shtok is interested in the impact of dancing on both the individual and the community. The complex way in which she weaves these two concerns together is striking, especially since the American Yiddish texts that emphasize communal dancing are often more nostalgic in tone, such as the Torah dedication scene in Kadya Molodowsky’s post-war short story, “Hinde di gertnerke” (Hinde the Gardener, dated December 1954)⁶⁰ or Pinski’s account of Hasidim dancing with a Christian peasant in his 1938 short story “Der koyekh fun a nign” (The Power of a Melody).⁶¹ Shtok’s stories tend to be darker and more complex with regards to their presentation of individuals and a community, and the way both factor into her representations of dreams and desire. Considering the ways Shtok departed from (male) norms of depicting sexuality and the dance floor in her work, it is perhaps not surprising that she had an ambivalent relationship with Yiddish literary critics.

⁵⁵ Joseph Opatoshu, *Gezamlte verk*, vol. XI (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1930), 12-13; Joseph Opatoshu, *Gezamlte verk*, vol. VIII (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1929), 142.

⁵⁶ Leon Kobrin, *Gezamlte shriftn* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1910), 40. While this citation is for the novella *Yankl Boyle*, Kobrin also wrote a play with the same title.

⁵⁷ David Pinski, *Yankl der shmide*, in *Dramen* (Warsaw: J. Lidski, 1909), 80.

⁵⁸ Joseph Opatoshu, *Roman fun a ferd-ganef un andere ertseylungen* (New York: Literarisher farlag, 1917), 67.

⁵⁹ Celia Dropkin, *In heysn vint* (New York: [J. Dropkin], 1959), 203-13.

⁶⁰ Molodowsky, *A shtub mit zibn fenster*, 46.

⁶¹ David Pinski, *Oysgeklibene shriftn: dertseylungen, dramen, eseyen, memoren*, ed. Shmuel Rozshanski, 3rd ed. (Buenos Aires: Ateneo Literario en el Iwo, 1972), 261-63.

In Shtok's story "Kalines" (Winter Berries), the character Reyzl fantasizes about Austro-Hungarian court life and "tantsn mit a kavalier in dem vunderbaren samet-klayd" (dancing with a cavalier while wearing a wonderful velvet dress).⁶² She associates dance with foreignness, aristocracy, and individualism, all of which are outside of her personal experience as a daughter of a poor family. In order to cope, she retreats into a dream world where such luxuries are possible. In his review, Niger uses "Kalines" as an example of how dreamers are the essence of Shtok's entire literary corpus.⁶³ In almost every story, he claims, Shtok emphasizes "shtrebn aroptsuvarfn fun zikh di last fun der nikhterer, nishtiger virklekhkeyt—un tsuklepn zikh tsu epes a troym, a fantazye, a vaytenish, a shotn..."⁶⁴ (striving to throw off the burdens of sober, futile reality—and attach oneself to a dream, a fantasy, something distant, a shadow...)

Similarly, a musician in Shtok's story "Der shlayer" (The Veil) describes a flirtation on the dance floor as "liber unzin" (sweet madness).⁶⁵ His partner in flirtation, the protagonist Manye, has few opportunities to experience music, dance, or flirtation because her mother is an *agune* (deserted wife) who strictly limits the social engagements of her children. Manye receives a brief respite from her circumscribed social position when she attends her cousin's wedding and flirts with the German-speaking flutist. While dancing the Lancers quadrille, she makes eye contact with the musician, as if he were her dance partner, an act that heightens the intoxicating ambiance of the celebratory event. The wedding transports her away from her mundane existence into a heady environment full of community, dance, flirtation, and music. Yet as soon as the music stops, Manye's mother returns her to her sober reality.

In contrast to Reyzl and Manye, who are dependent on dreams or exceptional social situations, the barmaid Hinde in "*Mandeln*" (Almonds) does not repress her desires and, as Pratt recounts, "enjoys her seductive power over men, flirting outrageously in public with them and reveling in her own sexual feelings."⁶⁶ Dance helps Hinde negotiate space in relation to men and temper her brash forthrightness into playful flirtation. When a German-speaking inspector tries to place her on his lap, she waltzes out of his grasp (hot zikh geton a drey a valtser),⁶⁷ but accepts his offer to teach her violin. On her visit to the inspector for the violin lesson, she initially feels shy about approaching this man who is so different from the other men in her life, but "Hinde hot

⁶² Shtok, *Gezamlte ertseylungen*, 259. Translation is my own. For a complete English translation of this story, see Fradel Shtok, "Winter Berries," in *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories*, ed. Sandra Bark, trans. Irena Klepfisz (New York: Warner Books, 2003), 21-28.

⁶³ Sh[muel] Niger, "Di ertseylungen fun fradel shtok," *Tsukunft* (October 1920), 608. He says Shtok's oeuvre could be divided into two types, those that illuminate and those that extinguish the colors and joy of human dreams. But he does not want to claim that himself, since that would suggest the stories are all the same [eygnartig] and they are not, other than the fact that some of the young female figures tend to repeat themselves (609). The other characters and the milieus vary (609-10).

⁶⁴ Niger, "Di ertseylungen fun fradel shtok," 610.

⁶⁵ Shtok, *Gezamlte ertseylungen*, 111. For an English translation of this story, see Fradel Shtok, "The Veil," in *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, eds. Frieda Forman et al., trans. Brina Menachovsky Rose (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994), 99-104. The quote is taken from p. 103.

⁶⁶ Pratt, "Fradel Shtok," 88.

⁶⁷ Shtok, *Gezamlte ertseylungen*, 139.

gezen, az er iz a shemevdiker, nisht vi andere, un ongehoyn arumtantsn arum im”⁶⁸ (Hinde saw that he was shy, not like other men, and began dancing around him). Dancing is thus a way of controlling her position vis á vis men and engaging in flirtation. Hinde’s liberated attitude distinguishes her from Shtok’s more familiar characters, yet like them she views dance as a source of empowerment. In this essay, I focus more specifically on “A tants,” a story that expresses the power of communal dance and how it is experienced by Shtok’s immigrant working man.

Early on in “A tants,” Shtok introduces the special environment of the wedding in concrete, material ways. Meyer’s preparations for the event make him look and feel younger: “a masazh, a herkot, a shayn, der nayer gekestelter sut—dos aldings iz im arayn in di beyner un er hot derfilt, az er lebt oyf der velt.”⁶⁹ (A massage, a haircut, a shoeshine, the new checkered suit—everything seeped into his bones and he felt as if he had come to life.) Although these little luxuries are signs of participation in American culture, Meyer and the other wedding guests use this festive occasion to greet each other with an Old World “mazl tov” and enjoy the “heymishe klezmer” (familiar musicians).⁷⁰ The wedding takes place in a tenement on Suffolk Street, yet the sentimental attitude of the characters brings them back to the Europe of their youth. Even an American-born girl, who watches the European-style dancing, reveals a surprising amount of sympathy in her eyes.

The temporary nature of the wedding celebration and the way the characters momentarily alter their identities recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, a topsy-turvy utopian space that momentarily upsets the normal social order. Bakhtin writes: “one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”⁷¹ Writing about dancing during the Venetian carnival in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s 1821 German play *Prinzessin Brambilla* (Princess Brambilla), Lucia Ruprecht posits identity as performative: in this permissive environment, it is something which “has to be enacted, danced, and incorporated in countless costumes. The attempt to grasp a face behind the mask is a movement that spirals endlessly and peters out without ever reaching its target.”⁷² Even outside of a carnival environment, Molly Engelhardt notes similarly how the space of the dance floor enabled activities that would otherwise be forbidden: “Victorians could indulge in looking, being looked at, getting dizzy, and abandoning themselves to the realm of fantasy because the libidinous atmosphere occasioning it was, at least at that moment, contained by the rhythmic and spatial boundaries of the dance.”⁷³ While Engelhardt takes the specific example of nineteenth century English literature, dances and carnival masquerades are prime sites for boundary-crossing and mistaken identity throughout world literature. Shtok’s narrative questions the truth or, more precisely, offers several

⁶⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁶⁹ Shtok, *Gezamlte ertseylungen*, 16.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Shtok does not use the plural form of “klezmerim” when referring to the musicians.

⁷¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

⁷² Ruprecht, *Dances of the Self*, 91.

⁷³ Engelhardt, *Dancing Out of Line*, 55.

undefined versions of it. Ironically, since one major purpose of a wedding is to reaffirm social and familial relationships, Meyer experiences the wedding celebration as a moment that challenges strictly-delineated identities and allows participants to bask in fantasy. He can leave his burdens (including his wife and infant) at home, and does not need to wear the large, practical hat that identifies him as a married man. From his vantage point in New York, Meyer relishes this brief opportunity to recollect his European youth.

Meyer's nostalgia weaves in complex fashion between small-town religiosity, dreams of Vienna, and his radical beliefs as a free thinker. While these three elements do not map out neatly upon each other, and indeed frequently contradict one another, they are united by their sharp departure from his current lived reality as a husband and father who works in a sweatshop. Dance inspires Meyer, and those with whom he dances, to remember their varied past experiences. Shtok notes that: "hot men gekent zen oyf di penimer amolike natshkhones, besere tsaytn, yunge yorn . . ." ⁷⁴ (Visible on dancers' faces were past triumphs, better days, young years . . .). Shtok connects the individual mental universe of her protagonist with the enthusiasm of the entire community.

Shtok does not merely contrast the mundane and celebratory versions of the characters, but portrays the wedding as a space in which several temporal versions of the characters are present at once. A European identity can simultaneously exist in traditional and more modern versions. A New York persona takes the form of successful or bankrupt, married or single, and "green" or American permutations. These multiple perspectives of the same character appear throughout the story, such as when Meyer addresses a bankrupt real estate magnate as if he still has his money, a carnivalesque form of literary masking that heightens the redemptive headiness and utopian qualities of the dance floor itself. Characters address each other as if they were still in Europe or still observant; as if the disruption of life in the New World had not taken place.

Nowhere is this fantasy quality of the dance floor as clear as in Meyer's experience itself. From the beginning, Shtok clearly indicates the way he changes his physical appearance for the wedding, a change heightened by the way her narrator switches between his names—Meyer, Max, Meks, and Meyerl, each name evoking different contexts and expectations. Throughout the story, Meyer struggles to negotiate the conflicting elements of his desires and experience. Shtok portrays this quality most viscerally in his decision about whether or not to dance.

[...] האָט ער זיך געפֿלייסט, און אָנגעהויבן וואַרפֿן די פֿיס אין דער זײַט אַרײַן און דאָס האַרץ האָט געזונגען: ראַכטאַ, ראַכטאַ, ראַכטאַ-רײ-ראַם... דאָס פֿנים איז געוואָרן בלייך, די רעמלעך אַרום די אויגן פֿלאַם פֿײַער, און ער האָט אַלץ געאַרבעט מיט די זײַטן און געסאָפֿעט מיטן האַרץ: ראַכטאַ, ראַכטאַ, ראַכטאַ-רײ-ראַם.

⁷⁴ Shtok, 20.

האַט ער זיך געוואָרנט: „מאירל הער אויף... ביסט אַ טאַטע פֿון קינדער, וועסט די נשמה אויסהויכן“... האַט ער זיך צוריק געענטפֿערט מיט כּעס: „נו, נו, זאַל דיר נאַר נישט דאַרן דער מוח פֿאַר מיר“...⁷⁵

He pushed on, began thrusting his feet to the side, and his heart sang: rakhto, rakhto, rakhto-ri-ram . . . His face grew pale and his eyes burned. His sides heaved and his heart gasped: rakhto, rakhto, rakhto-ri-ram.

He warned himself: “Meyerl, stop . . . Think of your family, this will be the death of you . . . ” He answered himself angrily: “Don’t bother your head with all that.”

Even at his moment of greatest ecstasy and freedom, Meyer is unable to allow himself to feel fully unburdened from his ordinary cares. He remembers the physical limitations of his body, at the same time that the festive moment compels him to continue his frenzied dancing. Throughout the story, Meyer attempts to balance between his dreams and reality, with varying degrees of success. As Shtok portrays most wrenchingly in the last paragraph of “A tants,” Meyer’s greatest skill appears to be self-castigation when he feels unable to reconcile the pleasure he just allowed himself with his harsh return to his daily burdens.

At the story’s conclusion, Shtok lets Meyer’s celebratory mien dissolve away, as if it were smoke. When the wedding musicians abruptly stop their playing: “in hal iz gevorn vi a roykh nokh a sreyfe. der roykh hot zikh nisht ongezen nor gefilt, un es hot zikh gedakht, az er iz oyf di farshvitste penimer fun di mentshn tsegangen gevorn”⁷⁶ (The dancing faded like smoke after a fire, vanishing from the sweaty faces of the wedding guests). As Meyer steps towards home, he becomes weighed down with the burdens of his domestic responsibilities, until all that remains of the festive evening is the melody played by the wedding musicians, a refrain that still echoes in his head.

The Darker Side of Dance

Shtok’s portrayal of the conflicting selves her characters experience suggests, provocatively, that the supposed *goldene medine* (golden country) is a more constricting environment than the Europe her characters left behind. In their nostalgic version of the Old Country, free thinkers take on the speech patterns of pious Jews without any sort of theological complication, and Meyer’s servile attitude towards a bankrupt real estate magnate is actually an act of magnanimity. Shtok provides a limited way for characters to resurrect their memories of Europe, yet only in the most illusory fashion. Her constant switching between conflicting notions of piety and free thinking, as well as her acknowledgement that Meyer’s memories are those of a young man without family responsibilities, show that the wedding dancing is only a temporary escape. Only on the dance floor, Shtok posits, can her characters experience this sense of freedom, enhanced

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 21.

by pleasant memories and a feeling of collective celebration. It is dangerous, not merely due to the risks of strenuous physical exertion, but also because of the consequences of living a fleeting fantasy.

As in stories such as “Kalines,” Shtok acknowledges a darker side to her protagonists’ desires, in which characters can only live out their desires at the expense of the other socially marginal figures in their lives. In “Kalines,” a girl who dreams of Habsburg court life, including dancing with a cavalier, retreats deeper and deeper into her daydreams to cope with her guilt at having frivolously bought winter berries with money she was supposed to spend on lamp oil. For the sake of her fleeting pleasure in the bright red berries, her family will, in a stereotypical Jewish mother’s lament made literal, sit in the dark and suffer. Yet Reyzl’s moment of extravagance can be seen as a moment of protest by the most powerless member of the family, a young woman acting out against a world that has consigned her to be poor, mocks her for her escapist dreams, and expects her only to obey.

Meyer’s engagement with his feelings of restriction is different and morally it is more complex. Meyer, unlike the protagonists of Shtok’s stories that have been previously available in English translation, has had the opportunity to make significant choices about his life. It is unclear why he did not go to Vienna to learn to dance, how he became a freethinker, what motivated him to immigrate to America, or in what context he met and married his wife—yet Shtok never suggests that any of these situations were forced on him. He feels overburdened by his lived reality, which has physically aged him, and yet he is, to a greater extent than more familiar Shtok characters, complicit in his modest circumstances. Meyer’s unnamed wife, who has been left behind at home with an infant and a toothache, has more in common with Shtok’s better-known protagonists than does Meyer. Shtok sympathizes with his plight and does not neglect to depict his inner world with the deft sympathy typical of her oeuvre, but she also does not shy away from reminding readers of the poor woman Meyer has left behind at home. Despite the fact that she has recently given birth to their child, Meyer barely considers her feelings, other than her bitterness that the wedding has made him look like a young man.⁷⁷ Much like the antihero Jake in Cahan’s *Yekl*, he rejoices in the opportunity to go out and dance as if he were a bachelor, unencumbered by life’s responsibilities (although unlike Jake, he does not use dancing as an opportunity for flirtation). It is in this kind of moral ambiguity, as in other examples of Shtok’s emotional and temporal texture, that “A tants” offers readers an additional insight into the complexity of Shtok’s work. Indeed, it is this darker element in Shtok’s dance descriptions—the danger, the impermanence, the guilt—that unites the story “A tants” with the emotional range of a Jewish wedding.

Jewish wedding dance is a festive cultural practice that celebrates a life-cycle ritual and brings a community together. Yet, like so many Jewish festive practices, the joy of a wedding is also tempered with sorrow and a sense of loss, either out of ritualized mourning or recognition that the celebratory moment cannot last forever. The Jewish wedding ceremony includes a reminder of the destruction of the Second Temple when

⁷⁷ For another Shtok story about a married man leaving his wife at home to participate in evening entertainment, which involves a different marital dynamic, see “A rede” (A talk). Shtok, *Gezamlte ertseylungen*, 47-51.

the groom breaks a glass.⁷⁸ Even though pious Jews took great care to please and delight brides, one task of the *badkhen* (wedding jester) was to bring a bride to cathartic tears.⁷⁹ Once the ritual lamentation was concluded, the wedding continued with the ceremony, dancing, and other forms of entertainment intended to delight the bride.

Shtok's complicated framing of her characters' socially marginal positions fits within the context of Jewish customs about joy and sorrow. She is aware of the transience of dreams or, as Olgin says, the worm wearing a butterfly's wings. Shtok's portrayal of complex and contradictory emotions, and the commingling of joy and sorrow, provides a model for balancing communal and individual celebration with existential and situational suffering. It is also a characteristic of Yiddish dance, here reflected in a work of literary fiction. Dancer and choreographer Felix Fibich, who incorporated elements of Jewish traditional gesture into his work, claims that an opposition between joyous and sorrowful moods is characteristic of Jewish life and dancing bodies.⁸⁰ Similarly, choreographer Nathan Vizonsky notes that tragedy is one of the defining emotional qualities of Jewish dance, like humor and satire.⁸¹ Shtok shows the complexity of a joyful occasion in her story about dance, using dance to impart her aesthetic interest in dreams and reality at the same time that she uses a principle of Jewish ritual life and dance to describe the experience of an immigrant community.

Shtok's writing about the fragility of dreams does not take the explicit goal of improving the material conditions of sweatshop workers. Instead, like her colleagues in *Di yunge*, the ordinary characters she describes fulfill an artistic purpose—one which, crucially, fits within the contexts of Jewish tradition in a way that is not typically acknowledged in the works of Shtok and her fellow twentieth century Yiddish women writers.⁸² Shtok's masterful combination of dreams and despair underscores the idea of balancing between joy and sorrow, which Fibich considers so important for Jewish life and Jewish dance. Indeed, not only does an analysis of Shtok's writing on dance deepen our understanding of Shtok's creative output, it also reveals the striking extent to which a Yiddish writer conveyed the emotional impact of Jewish dance—both for individuals and the community—on the printed page.

Like her characters at the wedding, Shtok's legacy consists of many complex parts. Literary critics in Yiddish and English offer differing perspectives on her work, which

⁷⁸ One of multiple explanations for the breaking of the glass, see: Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "[Weddings](#)," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. 2008. (accessed November 22, 2017).

⁷⁹ Feldman, *Klezmer*, 148.

⁸⁰ Judith Brin Ingber, "Interview with Felix Fibich (transcript)," New York Public Library Dance Oral History Project, New York, February 4, 1997, 24-26. Located in the Felix and Judith Fibich Papers (1946-1963) at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, RG 534, Folder 16.

⁸¹ N[athan] Vizonsky, "Vegn yidishn folks-tants," *Shikage* (1930): 29. Thanks to Karen Goodman for sharing her work on Vizonsky with me, including this article.

⁸² For instance, Pratt emphasizes the role of women writers in radical politics, noting how they published in the radical press. Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics," 112. David G. Roskies comments, "When Jewish women found a secular Yiddish voice, it was far removed from the home and hearth where mothers still sat, telling stories. They might compose naïve and playful children's verse, or acknowledge their pious grandmothers through a narrative veil, but they themselves seldom wrote *as if* they were salt of the earth, simple balladeers, artists of the folk." David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 10.

dance around each other in a complicated web of narratives and retellings: a disciplined and innovative lyricist, wounded orphan, dashing modernist, secret playwright, feminist icon, immature writer, the madwoman in the attic of Yiddish literature, German literary aficionado, and, above all, an enigma. Each of these versions reveals as much about Shtok's life as it does about the contexts of Yiddish literary criticism over the past century. In the absence of further biographical information, Shtok's life story balances between the dreams and realities of her prose, at the same time that her striking work speaks for itself.