New York and the Metropolitan Imagination in Twentieth-Century Jewish American Culture

NO PREREQUISITES

Jewish Studies 21/ENG 53.46 01
T-Th 1:00-2:15 PM, XXX, Rm xxx
Marc Caplan, Visiting Professor 2020-21
Office Hours, XXX, Rm xxx: T 11:00-12:00; Th 3:00-4:00, or by appointment
a.marc.caplan@gmail.com

New York City was the place in which Jewish culture, and specifically the immigrant culture of primarily Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews, became a global culture. Although the seeds of a modern literature, a modern press, a modern labor movement, and modern theater had already been planted in Eastern Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, it was in New York where these seeds took root and remade the culture of Jewish immigrants into a cosmopolitan civilization. This new modern metropolis would not only shape the character of subsequent Jewish American generations, but would also influence important developments among Jews still in Eastern Europe, as well as other Jewish communities around the world. New York is a city that has been home to countless immigrant and diasporic communities—but only among Eastern European Jews did the diasporic culture that took root in New York City move from a marginal outpost to the center of how Jews have defined themselves around the world. At the same time that these Jewish immigrants and their children were establishing New York as a capital city for Jewish civilization, they were also remaking American literature, popular culture, and politics in part in their own image. As much as New York has become a unique site in the re-centering of Jewish civilization, Jews in New York have exerted a distinctive influence on the language and character of the American culture into which they were integrating.

This course will offer an introduction to American Jewish culture by focusing on the perception of New York City among successive generations of Jewish writers, performers, and cultural activists. Although our focus will be primarily on literary sources, in English and translated from Yiddish, we will also consider memoirs, political documents, journalism, music, and film. The topics we will consider include:

- How are the ambivalences of immigration expressed among Jewish immigrants writing, alternately, in English or in Yiddish?
- How does the city provide new modes of expression for Yiddish writers?
- How does music offer a venue for Jewish performers to enter an American “mainstream” while preserving an audible sense of Jewish difference?
- How do Yiddish writers address the Holocaust, and what challenges emerge when translating Yiddish into English after the Holocaust?
- How do post-War Jewish intellectuals, the children of immigrants, critique their society and influence the development, and denouement, of American liberalism?
- How does the “sexual revolution” challenge notions of a distinct Jewish ethnicity and ethos, and what strategies do Jewish authors develop to critique changing mores and morals from a specifically Jewish perspective?
• How does an avant-garde Jewish theatre contribute to a contemporary understanding of American culture as multi-cultural, hybrid, and hyphenated?

**Course Requirements**

In-Class Presentation: 10%
Formal Essays (2): 60% Total
Take Home Final Exam: 20%
Class Attendance and Participation: 10%

This will be a reading-and-writing intensive course providing an introduction to American Jewish culture of the twentieth century, together with an examination of diaspora as a cultural concept that has informed Jewish cultures as well as global literary modernism. Everything I will assign in this course will be worth reading, I am certain; much of it will be fun, I hope; some of it will be unfamiliar to you, I expect. In order for the classroom experience to be successful for all involved, attendance, preparation, and participation of all students is essential. Each student must come to class at each session prepared to discuss the readings, respond to the questions I pose, and discuss the reactions of other students in an informed and respectful manner.

Students should expect to read about 150-175 pages a week for this course. When we will be considering longer works, we will focus primarily on selected passages within these books, although the expectation will be that by the end of the semester students will have read these narratives in their entirety. The most important component of your grade will be based on the two papers you will submit. Essays are of course to be submitted on the date due, in person—not in my mailbox; not by e-mail; not by proxy—in 12-point, double-space format, Times New Roman font, with normal margins. Outside research is not expected, but if undertaken must be appropriately acknowledged. Remember that the difference between an “A” for initiative and an “F” for plagiarism lies in a footnote!

In addition to the essays and exam that will constitute the bulk of your grade, a major emphasis in this class will be placed on participation, including a formal presentation at a date of your choosing. For this presentation—about 15-20 minutes—you will be required to meet with me ahead of time and prepare a formal introduction of the material to be presented on the date you select. The objective of this presentation will be to present material or aspects of the assigned readings not automatically apparent from an attentive first reading. The specifics of this assignment will become clearer in consultation with me, but one objective, within the limits of scholarly decorum, is to have fun with the material and to achieve insight by means of the unconventional!

**Note on Computers and Classroom Decorum:** For a long time I’ve struggled with the realization that students sometimes use electronic devices during class in ways that no instructor would consider appropriate: checking e-mail, texting friends, consulting social media, shopping on-line. In a way, such distractions are inevitable given the degree to which these technologies have embedded themselves in everyday life; many of them certainly figure in my day-to-day life more than I would wish. They really have no place in our class, though, and whatever message, app, or update calling out to you from the electronic ether can wait until our class is over. Moreover, as a very wise graduate
student once explained to me, beyond the consumerist or technological dimensions of wireless time vacuums, these devices introduce a hazard from the simple standpoint of perspective. Laptops, tablets, and mobile phones draw the level of vision downward and keep the line of vision static; your perspective in our class should be up, out, and around, making eye contact with the real friends surrounding you in class, rather than iContact® with the virtual friends and corporate people of Cyberspace. For all of these reasons, students will be instructed herewith to refrain from using any and all electronic devices in our class for the duration of the semester.

Primary Texts

1) Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York*, Dover Publications 0486224279
2) Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor’s Son*, Penguin Classics 0143105604
5) George Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Blue” (Audio Recording)
6) *From Avenue A to the Great White Way: Yiddish & American Popular Songs from 1914-1950* (Audio Recordings)
7) Ilan Stavans and Josh Lambert (editors) *How Yiddish Changed America and How America Changed Yiddish*, Restless Books 1632062623
8) Cynthia Ozick, *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories*, Syracuse University Press 0815603517
9) Wallace Markfield, *To an Early Grave*, Dalkey Archives Press 1564782611
10) Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Vintage 0679756450

Contextual and Background Readings and Screenings (Available online through library services)

Paul Berman (Editor), *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*
Joseph Dorman (Director), *Sholem Aleichem: Laughter in the Darkness*
Joseph Dorman (Director), *Arguing the World*
Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity*
Irving Howe, *A Voice Still Heard: Selected Essays*
Sidney Lumet (Director), *The Pawnbroker*
Anita Norich, *Writing in Tongues: Translating Yiddish in the Twentieth Century*
Eddy Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi and Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press* (selected chapters)
David Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (Cambridge Music Handbook Series)
Jeff Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture*
Georg Simmel, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*
Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature*
Hana Wirth-Nesher (Editor), *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* (selected articles)

**Class Calendar**

**Week 1**
Course Introduction: Why Are Cities “Modern”? How has the urban experience defined and determined modernity?

**Contextual Readings:** Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” *Simmel on Culture*, 174-186
Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*, Chapter 2, “From Scarcity to Abundance: The Immigrant as Consumer,” 33-50
Introduction to *Bad Rabbi*, 1-24

**Week 2**
Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* in *Yekl, the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York*, 1-91
**Contextual Reading:** Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, Chapter 2, 32-52
Selected chapters from *Bad Rabbi*

**Week 3**
Sholem Aleichem, *Motl the Cantor’s Son*, Part II: “In America,” in *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor’s Son*, 281-374
**Contextual Reading:** Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*, Chapters VIII-XI
Selected chapters from *Bad Rabbi*

**Screening:** *Sholem Aleichem: Laughter in the Darkness*

⇒ End of Class: Students receive paper topics for Essay #1 (10 pp)

**Week 4**
Moyshe-Leyb Halpern’s poetry, anthologized in *American Yiddish Poetry*
**Contextual Reading:** Avraham Novershtern, “Yiddish American Poetry,” in *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, 202-222
Selected chapters from *Bad Rabbi*

**Week 5**
Miriam Karpilove, *Diary of a Lonely Girl* (selections)
**Contextual Reading:** “Community Across Discontinuity,” Zohar Weiman-Kelman, *Queer Expectations*: 89-106
Ending of Class: Essay # 1 Due

Week 6
George Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Blue,” Audio Recordings; From Avenue A to the Great White Way: Yiddish & American Popular Songs from 1914-1950, Audio Recordings
Contextual Reading: David Schiff, Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue (Cambridge Music Handbook Series)

Week 7
Jacob Glatstein, A Gite nakht, velt (in American Yiddish Poetry)
I.B. Singer, “The Cafeteria,” How Yiddish Changed America and How America Changed Yiddish, 159-174
Cynthia Ozick, “Envy, or Yiddish in America,” The Pagan Rabbi
Contextual Reading: Anita Norich, Writing in Tongues, Chapter 4: “Returning to and from the Ghetto: Yankev Glatshteyn,” 66-96
Screening: The Pawnbroker
(Students receive paper topics for Essay # 2 (10 pp)

Week 8
Wallace Markfield, To an Early Grave (selections)
Contextual Reading:
Irving Howe, “This Age of Conformity,” “New Styles in Leftism,” “The New York Intellectuals,” A Voice Still Heard, 3-25; 46-72; 83-125
Norman Podhoretz, “My Negro Problem—and Ours,” Blacks and Jews anthology
James Baldwin, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They Are Anti-White,” Blacks and Jews anthology
Screening: Arguing the World

Week 9
Philip Roth, Portnoy’s Complaint (selections)
Contextual Reading: Jeffrey Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland, “Introduction: Postvernacularity, or Speaking of Yiddish,” 1-30
Beginning of Class: Essay #2 Due

Week 10
Tony Kushner, Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes
Contextual Reading: Edna Nahson, “Jewish American Drama,” The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature, 242-258
Issac Butler and Dan Kois, “Angels in America: The Complete Oral History”

Take-Home Final Exam: TBA (But it will happen!)