

Jewish 230: Migration in Film and Literature: The American Jewish Experience

Meets with: English 176: Topics in Film and Literature

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Office Hours: TR 11-12
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Course:

This course meets T/Th 9:30-10:45 in Education L150. Additional movie screenings will be held four times during the semester (time and place announced below and/or in class).

Course Description:

Between 1881 and 1924, more than two million Jews arrived in the United States from across central and eastern Europe. In subsequent decades, smaller waves of Jewish migrants disembarked in America, arriving in the wake of World War II, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and recent political unrest in the Middle East. Examining a series of popular films as well as a variety of texts, including novels, short stories, and modernist poetry, this course explores how Jewish arrivals made sense of the American cultural landscape—from New York to Minnesota to California. We will ask how Jewish migrants negotiated their American identities between languages, in new urban and rural environments, in conversation with neighboring ethnic communities, and between generations. Through a combination of lectures and in-class discussions, this course will also examine the critical language of migration, tracing how such terms as diaspora, exile, homeland, and (im)migrant have evolved over time. We will conclude the class by exploring contemporary narratives in which America features not only as a destination but also as a port of departure.

Learning Objectives

- To explore the major themes of American Jewish migration narratives from the late-nineteenth century to the present day. These themes include: the politics of language use; the negotiation of a minority status; regional vs. national American Jewish identity; and inter-generational conflict
- To acquire a critical vocabulary to speak about historical and present-day issues concerning migration, national identity, and competing visions of homeland
- To develop close-readings skills with which to analyze textual and filmic representations of Jewish identity and American ethnicity
- To engage in reflective writing practices, respond critically to feedback, and assess one's own communicative strengths

Academic Honesty and Student Accommodation

I hope that you'll meet with your fellow students to discuss course readings and to continue class discussions. All submitted work, however, must be your own. If you choose to bring in outside sources, such as internet sources, please be sure to cite your references. Please use the MLA style for all citations. For guidance, please see writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QuotingSources.html. I also highly recommend that you check out or buy the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Please also refer to the University of Wisconsin—Madison's policies regarding Academic Honesty and Plagiarism: <https://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/academic-integrity/>. Please note that you may not submit the same work in more than one class. Plagiarism or cheating may result in a failing grade for the assignment.

For information on the university's policies regarding Student Accommodations, please see the resources of the [McBurney Disability Resource Center](#). The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that

students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. I will work either directly with the student or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

Computers and Phones

This course will be a **computer-free** and **cell phone-free** environment. The use of cell phones during class will result in the lowering of the class participation grade by a full grade. If possible, please also come to class with a physical copy of the text. You may avail yourself of the various services (e.g. UBorrow, Interlibrary Loan) offered by the library to procure copies of the longer texts. All novels will also be on reserve at the College Library. If you have trouble procuring a copy of the texts, please do not hesitate to contact me. I also highly recommend that you make an appointment with one of the many knowledgeable and generous librarians to learn about the variety of resources that the library has to offer students.

Office Hours and Emailing Protocol

I hope that you will all come and meet with me during office hours if you have questions about texts, concerns about assignments, or would just like to speak more about an issue raised in class. Please sign up for office hours by adding your name to the sheet hanging on my office door (Van Hise 1352). Meetings are scheduled in 15-minute blocks. If you email me, I would be happy to schedule a longer appointment.

When you email me, you can expect a reply within 36 hours (during the week) and 48 hours (over the weekend). Be sure to give yourself plenty of time for assignments if you anticipate having questions!

Required Texts (available at the University Bookstore, though prices may differ; also will be on reserve at the College Library)

Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1970). ~\$11

Philip Roth, *The Prague Orgy* (New York: Vintage, 1995). ~\$11

Yelena Akhtiorskaya, *Panic in a Suitcase* (New York: Riverhead Press, 2015). ~\$13

Liana Finck, *A Bintel Brief: Love and Longing in Old New York* (New York: Ecco, 2015). ~\$14

Grade breakdown

Class Presence and Participation	10%
Weekly Posting	10%
Paper #1	15% (includes additional pre-writing assignments)
Mid-Term	25%
Paper #2	20%
Take-Home Final	20%

Grades will be calculated on a 100-point scale:

A = 93-100

AB = 88-92

B = 83-87

BC = 78-82

C = 71-77

D = 65-70

F = 0-64

Course Requirements (descriptions at end of syllabus)

Course Schedule

* = pdf on Learn@UW (Canvas)
Some texts below are also hyperlinked.

Introduction

- Tuesday
Sept 6: Introduction: The New Colossus
Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus” (1883)*; Ben Shahn’s “Jersey Homestead Mural” (1936-1938); J.L. Teller, “New York in a Jewish Mood” (published, 1972).
- Thursday
Sept 8: The Journey
Mary Antin, *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899):
<https://archive.org/details/fromplotzktobost00anti>
- What assumptions are made about the narrator and her fellow migrants by the authorities in different places?
 - A version of *From Plotzk to Boston* later appeared in Antin’s bestselling memoir *The Promised Land* as the central chapter entitled “Exodus.” What type of exodus narrative is this story?

Among Immigrants

- Tuesday
Sept 13: Low on the Latter
Abe Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896, p.1-38); Selected Letters from *A Bintel Brief* (various)*
- According to the text, what is the relationship between language and community?
 - Is communication between the Yiddish-speaking immigrants and English-speakers possible? If so, through what rhetorical devices?
- Thursday
Sept 15: Moving Up
Abe Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896, until end); Horace M. Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot: A Study of American Nationality” (1915)*
PROMPTS FOR PAPER #1 DISTRIBUTED
- What, according to *Yekl*, does it mean to become an American?
 - Using Kallen’s definition of “Americanization” (72-73), has Jake been Americanized? Has Gitl? Why or why not?
- Tuesday
Sept 20: From Novel to Film
Film: *Hester Street* (89 min., 1975) [Screening on Monday 9/19 night at 6:00pm, Hillel, Dining Room A, second floor]
PRE-WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR ESSAY #1 DUE: THESIS AND OUTLINE
- “There is nothing very original about *Hester Street* except its loveliness,” wrote Richard Eder in his [review](#) of the film in 1975. Might the same be said about *Yekl*? Why or why not? What about the medium of film and/or the adaptation of the story allows Eder to open his review with such a claim?

Among African-Americans

Thursday
Sept 22: In America
Joseph Roth, "A Jew Emigrates to America" from *The Wandering Jews* (1927)*; Matthew Jacobson, "Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews" (1998)*

- Does the story Roth tells of the Jewish emigrant accord to the narratives we have seen in other texts and where does it diverge? How so?
- How would you describe the tone of Roth's text? Is he advocating for a certain migration paradigm?

ROUGH DRAFT OF PAPER #1 DUE ON FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 23RD BY NOON (CT) BY EMAIL. NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED.

Tuesday
Sept 27: In the South:
Yosef Opatoshu, "[Lynching](#)" (1923)
ROUGH DRAFTS RETURNED

- How does Opatoshu relate the Jewish and Black experiences of exclusion and violence? Which does he privilege and to what rhetorical end?
- What, according to Opatoshu, defines Americanization?

Thursday
Sept 29: In the North
A.G. Leyeles, "Manhattan Bridge," "Madison Square," and "In the Subway: I, II, III" (1926)*

- How might Opatoshu have reacted to Leyeles' urban racial landscape?
- Explore the poetic space of the subway. What connotations does the subway elicit? What are the sights, sounds, and smells of the subway?

Among Cowboys

Tuesday
Oct 4: No Class
No Canvas posting this Wednesday (10/5)!

Thursday
Oct 6: Out West
Students will be divided into groups. Each group will explore the work of one Yiddish cultural figure, such as: Lune Mattes, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Rosa Nevadovska, Henry Rosenblatt, Lune Mattes, Shiya Miller, Chaver Paver, and H. Goldovsky; material accessible at <http://scalar.usc.edu/hc/recovering-yiddish-culture-in-los-angeles/index>

Explore the links related to your assigned Yiddish cultural figure. Read their work and biography. Then, come prepared to class to present answers to the following questions:

- What does the American West mean literarily, physically, and/or politically to the chosen writer?
- What myths about the American West does she put forth?
- Where does he locate the place of Jewish migrants and Jewish Americans in the West?

- What other peoples, sights, and geographies does the writer include in her work? And how does she depict her own identity in contrast to other American ethnic minority or majority cultures?
- What stereotypes does he traffic in and what literary allusions does he make?

FINAL DRAFT OF PAPER #1 DUE ON FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7TH BY NOON (CT) BY EMAIL. NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED.

Tuesday Moving West

Oct 11: Film: *The Frisco Kid* (1979) [Screening on Monday, 10/10, at 6:00pm, room TBD]

- What is the central gimmick of *The Frisco Kid*?
- How might we interpret the film in light of Kallen and Jacobsen's work? What commentary does the film make about inter-ethnic relations and the regional affiliations of Jewish migrants?

Among English-Speakers

Thursday Other Tongues

Oct 13: Cynthia Ozick, "Envy, or Yiddish in America" (1969)*; Giles Harvey, "[Cynthia Ozick's Long Crusade](#)," *The New York Times* (2016)*

- Compare the world of Edelshtein and Ostrover to that of Yekl/Jake and Gitl. What has changed? What has stayed the same?
- What is the power of translation? How do translation and Americanization work together?

Tuesday Mother Tongues

Oct 18: Irena Klepfisz, "Eteklehe verter oyf mame-loshn/A Few Words in the Mother Tongue" (c.1990)*

- Read the poems to yourself two times and then out loud two times. What language are the poems written in?
- How do the texts perform linguistic migration?

No Canvas posting this Wednesday (10/19)!

Thursday **In-Class Midterm**

Oct 20:

Among Survivors

Tuesday Among Survivors (I)

Oct 25: Chava Rosenfarb, "Edgia's Revenge" (English, 1994)*

- Why does the narrator choose to migrate to Canada? Why does she find it difficult to associate with the Jews in Montreal who are not survivors?
- What sustains her relationship with Edgia? What sense of belonging does the relationship support?

Thursday
Oct 27: Among Survivors (II)
Isaac Bashevis Singer, “The Cafeteria” (English, 1968)*

- How does the narrator of “The Cafeteria” remind you of Ostrover from “Envy, or Yiddish in America”?
- What sustains the relationship between the narrator and Esther? Why does Esther continue to call on the narrator?

Among Students

Tuesday
Nov 1: Text
Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” (English, 1962)*
PAPER #2 PROMPTS DISTRIBUTED

- What does it mean, according to the text, to behave like a woman? To read like a woman? Be sure to read the text closely!
- What attracts Yentl/Anshel to Avigdor? What vision of idealized masculinity does Avigdor project?

Posting this week—on “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy”

Thursday
Nov 3: Film
Film: *Yentl* (183min., 1983), [Screening on Wednesday, 11/2 night at 6:00pm, Hillel, Third floor auditorium A and B]
[“I.B. Singer Talks to I.B. Singer About the Movie ‘Yentl’”](#) (1984)*

- What liberties does the director take with the short story in adapting it into a film?
- Compare and contrast the final scenes of the short story and the film. What lessons does the latter put forth about the promise of America? About Americanization? In light of the migrant narratives we have read, how might Yentl have succeeded in New York?

Among Visitors

Tuesday
Nov 8: New York
Philip Roth, *The Prague Orgy*, pp. 1-45 (1985)
PRE-WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR ESSAY #2 DUE: THESIS AND OUTLINE

- On pp. 9-10, Sissofsky tells Zuckerman about his predicament. He is finally able to become a writer because he is no longer in Czechoslovakia, but what he writes is only relevant to those in Czechoslovakia. Consider this paradox with respect to at least two other texts that we’ve read.
- How does Sissofsky learn about his Jewish heritage? What is the role of literature as put forth by the text?

Thursday
Nov 10 Prague
Philip Roth, *The Prague Orgy*, pp.45-end (1985)

- On p.59, Olga accuses Zuckerman of being gullible and exoticizing the eastern European. What moments in the text make Olga's accusation ring true? How does Zuckerman-as-American-Jew relate to Sissofsky as a representative of an "authentic" Jewish experience?

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 11TH: BE SURE TO HAVE MADE AN APPOINTMENT AT THE WRITING CENTER WITH YOUR ROUGH DRAFT BY TODAY! (NOTHING DUE IN CLASS)

**Note: Long reading this week **

Tuesday
Nov 15: To America
Yelena Akhtiorskaya, *Panic in a Suitcase* (2015), Part I (pp. 1-153)

- *Panic in a Suitcase* describes a family of migrants and visitors. What tensions exist between these two groups? What assumptions about America do each put forth?
- What type of neighborhood is Brighton Beach? How does it compare to the other immigrant enclaves and geographies that we've encountered?

Thursday
Nov 17: To Ukraine
Yelena Akhtiorskaya, *Panic in a Suitcase* (2015), Part II (until end)

- In what ways is the trip to Odessa a disappointment for Frida and in what ways does it surpass her expectations?
- What, according to the text, is the relationship between artistic production and language, between writing and place?

Tuesday
Nov 22: From Eastern Europe to the Upper Midwest
Film: *A Serious Man* (106 min., 2014) [Screening on Monday 11/21 at 6:00pm, Hillel, Dining Room A, second floor]; Jacob Glatstein, "Sunday Jews"*

- Look up the figure of the *dybbuk*. In light of your research, how does the opening Yiddish scene relate to the remainder of the film? How might we consider the dybbuk to be a migrant?
- What does Americanization mean for Larry Gopnik? How would he describe his own experiences to someone like Mary Antin? To Abe Cahan? To Jacob Glatstein?

PAPER #2 DUE ON WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 23RD BY 5PM (CT) BY EMAIL.
NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED.

No Canvas posting this Wednesday (11/23)!

Thursday
Nov 24: **No Class: Thanksgiving**

Among Israelis, Palestinians, and Arab Jews

Tuesday Alexandria, Egypt

Nov 29: André Aciman, “Shadow Cities” (1997)*

- Describe the geography of Strauss Park according to Aciman. How is it both a local space and a space of cosmopolitan possibilities?
- What does it mean for Aciman to live in exile? To remember Alexandria?

Thursday Toronto

Dec 1: Ayelet Tsabari, “Brit Milah” and “The Best Place on Earth” (2015)*

- How, according to Tsabari’s text, does one become comfortable in one’s place?
- What constitutes homeland for her characters? What constitutes exile?

Tuesday Washington, D.C.

Dec 6: Jonathan Safran Foer, “Maybe it was the Distance” (2016)*

- How, according to Safran Foer’s text, do American and Israeli Jewry differ?
- How are American-Israel relations plotted along generational lines? Gender lines?

Thursday Urbana-Champagne

Dec 8: Sayed Kashua, “[Why I Have to Leave Israel](#)” (July 19, 2014); “[Why Do I Feel Guilty About No Longer Missing Jerusalem, My Home?](#)” (June 11, 2016)*; Ruth Margalit, “[An Exile in the Corn Belt](#)” (September 7, 2015)*

- What does America mean for Sayed Kashua? How does his experience of migration compare with Antin’s? With that of Tsabari’s characters?
- How does living in America change the way Kashua experiences news from Jerusalem?

Among New Readers

Tuesday Migrating Tunes

Dec 13: Read: Lyrics to Daniel Kahn, “Avreml the Filcher,” “March of the Jobless Corps,” and “Inner Emigration” (2011)* ; Watch: March of the Jobless Corps music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KFVVKFxr60>

- What is the relationship between English and Yiddish in “March of the Jobless Corps”?
- Does Kahn advocate for or against “inner emigration”? Note down at least three proofs for and against.

No Canvas posting this Wednesday (12/14)!

Thursday Migrating Texts
Dec 15: Liana Finck, *A Bintl Brief: Loving and Longing in Old New York* (2014)
TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM DISTRIBUTED IN CLASS

- How does the experience of Jewish migrants from the early twentieth century inspire Finck's work? What liberties does she take with their stories?
- Think back at the letters from *A Bintel Brief* that we read earlier in the semester. How might these letter writers have reacted to Finck's interpretation?

TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM: DUE SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17TH AT 12:05PM BY EMAIL.
NO LATE EXAMS ACCEPTED!

Requirements

There are six main requirements for this course:

1. **Class Presence and Participation**

This class runs as both a lecture and discussion-based course. Students **are required** to attend all classes and to participate fully. Three absences or more will result in a failing grade. Two or more late arrivals will also result in the lowering of the participation grade by a full grade.

Please come to class having read the material in advance of the course meeting and be ready to engage the texts or films, to ask questions about the material, to have conversations with your peers about the major and subtle themes of the works, and to answer the who/what/where/when/why of each text. To prepare for class, take notes on your reading, mark down questions you have, jot down reoccurring images that you observe, and identify at least three passages that you would argue are key to understanding the text as a whole. We'll be drawing on your passages in class and the success of this class will be due in large measure to your work as committed participants and active readers. Students who tend not speak in class should make an appointment to talk with me during office hours. I also ask that all students make an appointment to meet with me in my office hours by the 5th week of the semester.

2. **Weekly Postings (total: 10 postings)**

A key element of reading a text closely is recognizing when you are left with questions or when you do not understand a term. A goal of this course is to practice asking questions and acquiring the tools necessary to conduct close readings. Beginning in Week 2, students will post to the Learn@UW website by Wednesday at 5pm. There will be a total of 10 postings. The postings should answer one of the following prompts:

a) Choose a passage (max. 2 sent.) from that week's reading that contains a term with which you are unfamiliar. The term can be a word, place, ritual, etc. Look up the term (some suggested resources are below). Then, explain in 100-200 words how your understanding of the term has changed the way you understand the passage. Be sure to include the passage and page number in your post.

b) Choose a passage (max. 2 sent.) from that week's reading. After quoting that passage in full as well as noting the page number (or, if a film, the time stamp), pose two questions based on the language of the passage. Your questions may concern issues of style or content. Alternatively, you may use these questions as opportunities to point to larger concerns that the sentence raises for the text. The questions should indicate that you are thinking about how language works in the chosen text. Keep in mind that the most probing questions do not elicit "yes/no" answers.

To post on Learn@UW: Visit the course Canvas website. Click on the “Discussions” button. Click on the appropriate posting. Paste your response. If you have any questions about this, please email me or consult the Student Manual on the Learn@UW homepage. Please note that late postings will not be accepted.

3. **Paper #1**

The first paper will ask you to produce an argument-driven close reading of one of the literary texts we have encountered. No paper prompts will require external research and no late papers will be accepted! All papers should be 3-4 pages (Times New Roman, 12-pt. font, double-spaced, 1” margins). Please also take note above of various due dates for pre-writing assignments, including a rough draft. A handout outlining the assignment in full will be distributed.

When deciding between prompts, I recommend choosing to write about a text that has left you with questions and that you want re-read. A goal of these writing assignments is to offer you the chance to return to a text that has captured your attention, frustrated you, or that has provoked an unexpected response in you. This may or may not be your favorite text! I am happy to meet with you at any point during the writing process to help you brainstorm, outline, revise, and polish your work. I also **highly** encourage you to visit the Writing Center (<http://www.writing.wisc.edu/>) before submitting all of your essays. (A visit will be part of your second essay pre-writing assignment, as well.)

4. **Mid-term**

The mid-term will consist of two parts. In the first, you will be asked to identify key passages from the texts and films as well as their significance. In the second, you’ll be asked to answer a series of questions from the perspectives of key characters that we have discussed. The goal of this exam is to bring the assigned course materials into conversation and to examine the material from a different viewpoint.

5. **Paper #2**

The second paper will ask you once again to produce an argument-driven close reading of one of the texts we’ve examined in class. No prompts will require external research and no late papers will be accepted! All papers should be 4-5 pages (Times New Roman, 12-pt. font, double-spaced, 1” margins). Please also take note above of various due dates for pre-writing assignments. For this paper, you’ll be required to make an appointment at the Writing Center so make sure to plan your writing accordingly. A fuller description of this assignment will be provided.

6. **Final**

The take-home exam (2hrs) will consist of three parts. In the first, you will be asked to identify key passages from the texts and films as well as their significance. In the second, you’ll be asked to answer a series of questions from the perspectives of major characters or writers that we have discussed. In the third section, you will be asked to complete a longer essay that focuses on the major themes of the course with respect to at least two texts. The exam will focus on material we encountered in class after the mid-term.

Resources

- YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe: <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/>
- Encyclopedia Judaica
- The Hebrew Bible (English translation, 1917): <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/e/et/et0.htm>
- Jewish Women’s Archive: <http://jwa.org/>