The Promised Land

Jewish American Literature & Culture

Reed College
Spring 2004
Prof. Laura Leibman

English 303
Tuesdays & Thursdays
10:30-11:50
ETC 205

Course Description

This class studies the development of ethnicity in 20th century American through a representative ethnic group—American Jews. This course answers the question of how Jewish American literature and culture have evolved in the past century by reading some of the century’s major authors in the context of the Jewish American religion, art, music, politics, and history. We will trace the transformation of Jewish identity from early Yiddish immigrant, through the assimilationist period of the 1950s, to the cultural and religious revival of the 1980s and 1990s. The course serves as an introduction to American Studies methodologies and will focus on the reading of cultural artifacts as well as literature. Students should have sophomore standing and at least one class in literature, American history, or Jewish Studies.

Webpage: http://academic.reed.edu/english/Courses/English303PL

Required Readings

• JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE: A NORTON ANTHOLOGY (ED. JULES CHAMETZKY)
• THE CHOSEN (CHAIM POTOK)
• KAATERSKILL FALLS (ALLEGRA GOODMAN)
• HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES: STUDIES AMONG THE TENEMENTS OF NEW YORK (JACOB A. REIS)
• THE CHANGELINGS (JO SINCLAIR)
• IN SEARCH OF JEWISH AMERICAN CULTURE (STEPHEN WHITFIELD)
• HOW JEWS BECAME WHITE FOLKS AND WHAT THAT SAYS ABOUT RACE IN AMERICA (KAREN BRODKIN)

RECOMMENDED:

• THE JEWISH BOOK OF WHY (ALFRED KOTLACH)
• THE NEW JOYS OF YIDDISH (LAWRENCE BUSH ET. AL.)
Schedule of Readings

Weeks 1-3: INTRODUCTION & METHODS
Problem 1: WHAT IS AN (AMERICAN) JEW?
What are the defining characteristics of American Jews? What makes them different from other Jews? What is distinctive about their literature and lives?


R 1.29 REQUIRED WEB SEMINAR (Regular Room)
Bring with you: one paragraph of text and URL of one website. Readings: Overviews for the following sections in Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology: The Great Tide, 1881-1924 (109-121); From Margin to Mainstream in Difficult Times, 1924-1945 (327-333); Achievement and Ambivalence, 1945-1973 (575-585); Wandering and Return: Since 1973 (979-985)

T 2.3 WHAT IS JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE?
Wirth-Nesher, "Defining the Undefinable: What is Jewish Literature" (What is Jewish Literature? 3-12)
Stephen J. Whitfield, "Definitions," In Search of American Jewish Culture (1-31)

R 2.5 Testing the Norton's Narrative: Family history presentations. Refining the Question and Addressing Commonalities. Please bring an electronic version of your history to class with you as we will have a short workshop to help you create a webpage out of the history.

T 2.10 Case Study: Chaim Potok, The Chosen

T 2.10 Optional Movie Night: The Producers (7-9 pm MRC)

R 2.12 The Chosen, cont.

T 2.17 The Chosen, cont.
Family Histories must be posted online by Monday 2.16.04.

Weeks 4-7: MELTING POT: THE GREAT TIDE (1881-1924)
R 2.19 The Problem: You have been hired to be a consultant for a museum exhibit that combines literature and material culture about the Great Tide period, focusing on immigrants from one particular country (e.g. Russia, Poland, Greece, etc.) You will need to supply answers to the following questions: What qualities distinguish the literature and culture of American Jewry from this era? When does an immigrant become an "America"?

The Problem Staged:
Jacob Reis, How the Other Half Lives (1-16, 82-102)
Moyse-Leyb Halpern, "In the Golden Land" (248)
Anzia Yezierska, "Children of Loneliness" (234-244)

T 2.24 REQUIRED LIBRARY SEMINAR & WORKSHOP (Meet in Library 17)
Groups will meet to discuss their strategies for this section of the syllabus. The librarians will review researching strategies and tools and provide time to assist each group in finding their resources. By the end of the library session each group must post the readings they will be using for the next week and a half.

T 2.24 Optional Movie Night: *Hester Street* (7-9 pm MRC)

R 2.26 PRIMARY TEXT: GROUP 1
Readings: To be chosen by Group 1 from *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*
Due date: all members of Group 1 post assignment 2a 24 hours before class:

T 3.2 CRITICAL ARTICLES: GROUP 2
Readings: Article to be chosen by Group 2.
Due date: all members of Group 2 post assignment 2b 24 hours before class

R 3.4 CULTURAL ARTIFACTS: GROUP 3
Readings: Cultural Artifacts posted on-line by Group 3 and articles & primary texts from previous two days
Due date: all members of Group 3 post assignment 2c 24 hours before class

Sunday 3.7 PURIM!


T 3.19 The Problem: World War II has often been seen as a watershed moment in American and world culture and is used as the starting point for "postmodern" literature. For American Jews the holocaust would have deeper ramifications and would mark a paradoxical moment in time: at the same time that Germans were bent upon eliminating Jews, Americans were slowly come to accept Jews as "white folks." For many American Jews, this newfound status meant an obligation to help eliminate other forms of racism in America; indeed, many young liberal Jews were involved in the civil rights movement. For others, the newfound status was precarious at best and to be well guarded, lest prejudice and oppression return. Your job is to formulate a response to the anti-semitic poem, "Hey, Jew boy..." from the perspective of two of the characters in Sinclair's *the Changlings* or from the view of two other literary characters from this era. What did it mean for Jews at this time to be "white" and Jewish? How does Sinclair's vision of being white and Jewish differ from that of other writers and thinkers of this era?

The Problem Staged:
"Hey, Jew boy..." (*Strangers & Neighbors, 657; Handout)  
Jo Sinclair, Chapters 1-7 *THE CHANGLINGS* (1-127)

R 3.11 *The Changlings*, cont.  
"Blacks and Jews: An Interview with Julius Lester" (*Strangers & Neighbors, 669-680); "Hey, Jew boy..."  
(*Strangers & Neighbors, 657)

3.13-3.21 **SPRING BREAK!**

T 3.23 MANDATORY WEB SEMINAR  
Get more Web Page Making Skills, Meet with Group to Map Out Upcoming Readings. By the end of the session each group must post the readings they will be using for the next week and a half.

T 3.23 Optional Movie Night: *Blacks and Jews: A Documentary* (7-9 pm MRC)  
Online transcript of film: http://www.newsreel.org/transcripts/blacksan.htm
R 3.25 PRIMARY TEXTS: GROUP 2
Readings: To be chosen by Group 2 from *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*
Due date: all members of Group 2 post assignment 2a 24 hours before class

T 3.30 CRITICAL ARTICLES: GROUP 3
Readings: Article to be chosen by Group 3
Due date: all members of Group 3 post assignment 2b 24 hours before class

R 4.1 CULTURAL ARTIFACTS: GROUP 1
Readings: Cultural Artifacts posted on-line by Group 1
Due date: all members of Group 1 post assignment 2c 24 hours before class

**Weeks 10-12: TESHUVA: WANDERING AND RETURN (Since 1973)**

T 4.6 NO CLASS--PASSOVER

W 4.7 Optional Movie Night: *The Jew in the Lotus* (7-9 pm MRC)

R 4.8 The Problem:
Poet Rodger Kamentz recounts how in 1989 the Dalai Lama compared the plight of the Tibetans to that of the Jews and "turned for the first time to the Jewish people for help. 'Tell me your secret,' he said, 'the secret of the Jewish spiritual survival'" (*The Jew in the Lotus* 2). Kamentz has his own answer to this, but other writers have suggested that the "strength of American Judaism is that American Jews are constantly testing, trying, experimenting, and innovating." (Max Dimont, *The Jews in America* 1978: 188). Conversely, secular writer Robert Eisenberg suggests that strictness of observance is the future of American Judaism. Eisenberg proposes, "Imagine: It is the year 2075, and the only Jews left in the United States, aside from a few old-timers, are Hasidim and other Orthodox Jews. Impossible you say? Actually, it's quite likely" (1). Your job is to formulate a response to the Dalai Lama's query, with an American bent. What is the secret of Jewish spiritual and literary survival in the 1970s to the present?

The Problem Staged:
Rodger Kamentz, "Introduction," *The Jew in the Lotus* (1-4)
Allegra Goodman, *Kaaterksill Falls* (Parts 1 & 2, pp. 3-133)

T 4.13 NO CLASS--PASSOVER

R 4.15 *Kaaterksill Falls*, cont.

T 4.20 LIBRARY/WEB DAY (Meet in Library 17)
(No readings). By the end of the library session each group must post the readings they will be using for the next week and a half.

R 4.22 PRIMARY TEXT(S): GROUP 3
Readings: To be chosen by Group 3 from *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*
Due date: all members of Group 3 post assignment 2a 24 hours before class

T 4.27 CRITICAL ARTICLES: GROUP 1
Readings: Article to be chosen by Group 1
Due date: all members of Group 1 post assignment 2b 24 hours before class

T 4.27 Optional Movie Night: *Annie Hall* or *Fires in the Mirror* (7-9 pm MRC)

R .29 CULTURAL ARTIFACTS: GROUP 2
Readings: Cultural Artifacts posted on-line by Group 2
Due date: all members of Group 2 post assignment 2c 24 hours before class

FINAL PROJECTS
5.10 Final Projects need to be posted on your WebPages.

**Assignments**

**E-PORTFOLIO**

All of your work for this semester will be posted online in an electronic portfolio. You will be responsible for creating and maintaining your personal pages as well as a group webpage. On Wednesday Jan. 29th we will meet in our usual room to learn how to use the technology you will need to complete the course assignments, and to create your homepage. If you already know how to make a WebPages, we still need you in class to help others, to share tips on what makes a good page, and to begin to make your portfolio and Group page.

Three items need to be posted on your WebPage Portfolio throughout the semester: (1) your family history (2) your portion of the three assignments from the "Melting Pot," "Assimilation Woes," and "Teshuva" sections of the syllabus (one each of a textual annotation, a bibliography entry, and an annotated cultural artifact); and (3) your final project. There are no other papers or exams in this course.

Please note: web projects must be posted by the dates listed below. You may, however, continue to update them throughout the semester.

**1. FAMILY HISTORY**

Write a family history outlining when your family came to the United States and what they have done since the arrived. Your goal is to test the standard narrative given for Jewish American History in the 20th century as provided by *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (JALNA) using at least three of the four eras:

A. The Great Tide, 1881-1924.
B. From Margin to Mainstream in Difficult Times, 1924-1945.

If your family was not Jewish, explain what ethnicity (ethnicities) they are and compare their trajectory to the one given in JALNA. For many ethnic groups, the trajectory will look similar, but will vary depending on when that group arrived in the United States, how they arrived, and the extent that group was perceived to be "white."

For this project please use at least three of the following sources:

1. Interview with a Family Member of a different generation than your own

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1 Interview at least one member of your family from another generation to ask them about their views on what it means to be an American Jew (or an American if they are not Jewish). If your family is not Jewish, you may want to ask them
2. Documents from Family (Birth Certificates, Marriage Certificates, Immigration Papers, etc)
3. Family Photos
4. Family Tree
For each of the three eras you cover, you should answer what it meant to be a(n American) Jew" (or an American of a different ethnic group) for your family.

Expected Length: one paragraph to page per era. Three eras required. Date Due: Electronic (non web) Draft 2.5.04; Web Version Posted 2.16.04

2. "MELTING POT," "ASSIMILATION WOES," "TESHUVA"

ASSIGNMENTS

A. PRIMARY TEXTS: ANNOTATION
Overview: Compose a hypertext to explain one of the primary documents and to connect it to the other readings, theory, discussions, and classmates presentations. Your audience is other members of the class as well as friends who are interested in the class but were unable to take it this semester. (I.e. do not assume prior knowledge when you build the page.)

Detailed Instructions: First, your group will need to agree on which primary text you would like to use (feel free to consult with me). Once you have determined the primary text, each person should choose a paragraph, illustration, or stanza to annotate as a hypertext. You may break this text down into sections, illustrate it with relevant visual images, or connect it to whatever other materials you deem useful. One goal of this hypertext is to provide other members of the class with information they would need to know in order to understand the primary text. You may want to include links to relevant allusions, other parts of the text, other primary texts we have studied, critical articles, prior postings by your classmates, or ideas covered in class discussion. Since your goal is to unpack these connections, you will need to explain your links so that outsiders will know why they are relevant and important. Your links should include two connections to other postings by your classmates (either from this section of the course, or from earlier ones). You may also include a brief introduction to the passage if you find that helpful. Your annotation should be posted on your WebPages and should be linked to on your group’s WebPages at least 24 hours before you are schedule to lead discussion.

Deadlines: This assignment is to be posted the night before your group is scheduled to lead discussion on the primary text for the "Melting Pot," "Assimilation Woes," or "Teshuva" sections of the syllabus. Note that this means that you will only do one of these annotations per semester. The purpose of this assignment is to provide the rest of the class with a close reading of an excerpt of the primary text.

Evaluation: I will be asking both your groupmates and yourself to evaluate the pages based on (1) how well your page accomplish the assignment and (2) how well your page works as a webpage. You should feel free to make changes to your page and update it as you learn new tricks or think of new connections.

B. CRITICAL ARTICLES: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY ENTRIES
The night before your group is scheduled to lead discussion on the critical articles for the "Melting Pot," "Assimilation Woes," or "Teshuva" sections of the syllabus, you will be responsible for posting an annotated bibliography entry on a relevant critical article. See the "sample annotated bibliography" in the class reader for examples. At the top of the abstract should be the title of the article and the citation in MLA format. This abstract should be emailed to the class and posted on your WebPages at least 24 hours prior to the day to relate any experiences they have had with Jews or what they think makes an (American) Jew a "Jew." You may want to compare your interviewees ideas with your own views.
you have signed up for on the syllabus. Your abstract should be posted on your WebPages and should be linked to on your group’s WebPages at least 24 hours before you are schedule to lead discussion.

C. CULTURAL ARTIFACTS
This assignment is to be posted the night before your group is scheduled to lead discussion on the cultural artifact for the "Melting Pot," "Assimilation Woes," OR "Teshuva" sections of the syllabus. Each member of the group should identify one cultural artifact on the web that relates to the discussion from the preceding days. Provide a brief (one paragraph) analysis of that artifact that links it to (1) the questions raised on the first day of the unit; (2) the primary texts; and (3) the critical articles. Your may find Stephen Whitefield’s *In Search of Jewish American Culture* to be a useful starting point for analyzing your object. Your artifact and analysis should be posted on your WebPages and should be linked to on your group’s WebPages at least 24 hours before you are schedule to lead discussion.

3. FINAL PROJECT: CRITICAL EDITION
The final assignment for this course is to write an on-line critical edition for one of the primary texts for this semester. Your edition should include

1. A critical introduction that positions the work in the context of the historical era, Jewish American literature, and critical readings on the period.

2. A sample page from the text that is annotated with links that help the reader understand the text as a whole and its relationship to the ideas covered in this course.

3. A Cultural Contexts section that includes at least 5 related cultural artifacts and a brief explanation of the relevance of each to the primary text

4. A bibliography both of works used in preparing your project and of works that the reader might turn to if (s)he wanted to learn more about the subjects you have discussed.

5. A connection to at least one of the Family Histories (either yours or your classmates’).

Your final project is intended to build off of the work you and your classmates have been doing all semester. You should feel free to use some of the materials you have written in your earlier assignments and you should link your page to the work of at least three other students in the course (e.g. prior assignments, course discussion, annotations).

Due date: All final projects must be posted by Monday of Finals week (5/10/04).
Tuesday 2.10 **The Producers** (7-9 pm MRC) (1968)  
Starring: Zero Mostel, Gene Wilder. Director: Mel Brooks. Mel Brooks's directorial debut remains both a career highpoint and a classic show business farce. Mostel is Max Bialystock, a gone-to-seed Broadway producer who spends his days wheedling checks from his “investors,” elderly women for whom Bialystock is only too willing to provide company. When wide-eyed auditor Leo Bloom (Wilder) comes to check the books, he unwittingly inspires the wild-eyed Max to hatch a sure-fire plan: sell 25,000% of his next show, produce a deliberate flop, and then abscond with the proceeds. Unfortunately for the producers (but fortunately for us), their candidate for failure is the musical *Springtime for Hitler*, a Brooksian conceit that envisions what Nazi Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels might have accomplished with a little help from choreographer Busby Berkeley. Runtime: 90 Minutes.

Tuesday 2.24 **Hester Street** (7-9 pm MRC) (1975)  
Starring: Steven Keats, Carol Kane. Director: Joan Micklin Silver. *Hester Street* depicts the assimilation of Jewish immigrants in America in the late 1800s. Steven Keats is Jake, a self-made Yankee who shaves off his beard and side curls in favor of an updated look. An émigré from Russia, Jake’s been living in New York’s Lower East Side for five years, taking up with a new woman and earning enough money to support his dance hall ways. To his dismay, his wife, Gitl (played charmingly by Carol Kane), and son, Yossele, join him from the Old World. Jake is embarrassed by his wife, who retains her religious ways, wearing the wigs and scarves that tradition dictates. In turn, Gitl is distraught over the changes in Jake, who insists on calling their son Joey and trying to modernize them both. Runtime: 92 Minutes.

Tuesday 3.23 **Blacks and Jews: A Documentary** (7-9 pm MRC) (1997)  
Producers: Alan Snitow, Deborah Kaufman and Bari Scott. Directors: Alan Snitow, Deborah Kaufman. The faultline between Blacks and Jews is one of the most visible symbols of America’s racial divide. This film, made collaboratively by Jewish and Black filmmakers, goes behind the headlines and the rhetoric to try to heal the misunderstanding and mistrust. This documentary covers key events such as “blockbusting” in 1960s Chicago, a controversial Oakland screening of *Schindler’s List*, the Crown Heights Riots in New York. Mayor Willie Brown, Jr. (San Francisco) remarked, "Blacks & Jews will help make it possible for African Americans to understand Jewish sensitivities - and help make Jewish Americans more attentive to the challenges facing the black community. Members of both communities - indeed, ALL communities in America - need to see and discuss this important film.” Runtime: 85 minutes.

Wednesday 4.4 **The Jew in the Lotus** (7-9 pm MRC) (1998)  
In 1990, eight Jewish delegates traveled to Dharamsala, India, to meet with the XIV Dalai Lama of Tibet and share “the secret of Jewish spiritual survival in exile.” When writer Rodger Kamenetz was invited to go along to chronicle the event, unexpectedly, his whole life changed. Kamenetz begins an intense personal journey that leads him back to his Jewish roots. As he discovers, sometimes you have to go far away to find your way home. Inspired by Kamenetz’s best selling book, *The Jew in the Lotus*, award winning filmmaker Laurel Chiten’s documentary fills in what the book left out. Focusing on the author’s particular odyssey of suffering and the role of spirituality as a universal theme, this film touches audiences on deep emotional levels. It does not put itself forth as a definitive look at Judaism or Buddhism but is a complete portrait of a man who is still in the process of formation. Runtime: 59 minutes.

Tuesday 4.27 **Annie Hall** OR **Fires in the Mirror** (Selection TBA)  
*Annie Hall* (1977). Starring: Woody Allen, Diane Keaton. Director: Woody Allen. This is Allen at his best. (For those who may only have seen Allen’s recent films, it will come as a surprise that his early films are incredibly funny.) The film traces the romantic adventures of neurotic New York comedian Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) and his equally neurotic “shiksha” girlfriend Annie Hall (Diane Keaton). The film covers the course of their relationship from their first meeting, and serves as an interesting historical document about love in the 1970s. Runtime: 94 Minutes.

*Fires in the Mirror* (1991) is Anna Deavere Smith’s mesmerizing one-woman performance piece in which she plays over 30 characters—young and old, black and white, male and female—all embroiled in the racial conflict that erupted in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in the summer of 1991. Drawn from interviews with residents and national figures, this collection of true voices laced with humor, pathos and anger depict the compelling and challenging American debate on race. Runtime: 87 minutes.