

IMAGINING JEWISH MODERNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON A GRADUATE STUDENT CONFERENCE IN JEWISH STUDIES

Rachel Shulman and Jennifer Young

What is the difference between Jewish studies and studying Jews? This was one of the key questions that led us to initiate the first graduate colloquium in Jewish studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, held on April 10, 2005. As this event's organizers, one from Jewish studies and the other from postcolonial history, we became interested in further exploring different ways to approach similar theoretical and historical material. Our aim for the colloquium was to bring together students from a variety of disciplines and scholarly backgrounds in order to create a dialogue that would cross disciplinary boundaries and scholarly contexts. We were convinced that many graduate students, like us, are interested in understanding their work at the nexus between specifically Jewish studies questions and concerns, and the problems unique to different modes of history, literary theory, and modern national and linguistic studies. We wished to draw our colleagues into a wider discussion of the various modes of studying Jews in the modern era, and on the differing theoretical and methodological approaches in contemporary scholarship.

We also realized that many students, like us, work within departments where few other students share

similar interests in problematizing Jewish history and culture, and that in order to engage in critical discussions on issues unique to our field, we must create our own cohort. Thus, at least for one day, we were able to bring together a diverse group of young scholars from across North America, and to begin to create networks that we anticipate will expand as we progress in our professional lives.

The colloquium theme we chose as a pathway into this larger discussion was "Imagining Jewish Modernities," which to us represented a method of questioning the ways in which Jews in varying locations and contexts imagined themselves to be part of a larger European civilization. Many of us work with different definitions of Modernity, both European and Jewish, and we therefore concluded that it would be useful to discuss together how these contrasting modernities conflicted. We also discussed whether strategies for Jewish engagement in various European artistic movements, political programs, or cultural endeavors were related to each other.

In our call for papers we asked, "In what ways have Jews used European ideas as a way to articulate distinctively Jewish practices of Modernity?" This thematic question

was addressed in varying ways in our panels, which focused on, among other topics: strategies of Jewish nationalism in fin-de-siècle Russia and Poland; the literary creation of self and society in Yiddish and Russian Jewish literature; strategies of engagement with empire in nineteenth-century England; and tropes of Jewish identity from postwar Germany to American pop culture. Since our conference theme was directly related to the idea of Modernity, it was unsurprising that our participants came primarily from disciplines such as history or literature, where Modernity is theorized. What did surprise us was the distance they traveled to attend. Our presenters came from universities in Mainz, Southampton, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and Bloomington.

During the conference we discussed a situation common among many of us working on Jewish topics within such disciplines: the expectation that to succeed with a Jewish dissertation topic one must display fluency both in historical or literary theories and canons, as well as command a thorough knowledge of Jewish languages, religion, and history. Students who pursue Jewish topics outside of Jewish disciplines are taught to understand and appreciate the particular and unique elements of Jewish historical narratives, cultural and literary traditions, and languages. At the same time they are expected to frame their work contextually and comparatively, making it relevant on the broadest possible level. This is a challenge that may not be unique to Jewish studies, but it certainly merits discussion and analysis by those undertaking these kinds of complicated and nuanced projects.

We were fortunate to have Professor Naomi Seidman of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley as our keynote speaker. She gave a

moving lecture on the practice of Jewish translation entitled, "Every Free Man Has Two Homelands: A Parable on Yiddish and Translation." Dr. Seidman told a fascinating anecdote about an experience her father had in "creatively mistranslating" his own words from Yiddish to French, and used this story to outline her theory of translation as a strategy of cultural integrity and survival. She concluded that sometimes mistranslation serves as an act of cultural fidelity, a way of maintaining identity across shifting borders. Her talk was a perfect conclusion to our conference because it personalized our previous discussions on the kinds of strategies taken by European Jews, fluent in many different cultural and linguistic idioms, who strove to decipher their own ideologies and experiences in

order to place them into a coherently Jewish framework.

Fresh from the success of this event, we have embarked on our next project, which will be organized

...THE EXPECTATION THAT TO SUCCEED WITH A JEWISH DISSERTATION TOPIC ONE MUST DISPLAY FLUENCY BOTH IN HISTORICAL OR LITERARY THEORIES AND CANONS, AS WELL AS COMMAND A THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF JEWISH LANGUAGES, RELIGION, AND HISTORY.

around a more intimate workshop environment. This time, we will focus less on specific themes and questions in order to give even more opportunity to students to present their own works-in-progress. We want to devote significant time for discussion and study of each other's work, since we believe that it is especially crucial for those in the

beginning or middle stages of dissertation-writing to benefit from the perspectives and advice of their peers, and to receive feedback from professors outside of their own disciplines or universities. With the strong foundation of our colloquium, we hope to continue our commitment both to providing a collegial space in which emerging scholars can present their work and in which lively debates on the nature of Jewish studies scholarship can occur.

Rachel Shulman is a Ph.D. student in history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Jennifer Young is a Ph.D. student in anthropology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.



Visit

www.jtsa.edu/shop
a user-friendly site

JTS Press

Secure ordering of all JTS Press titles!

- Scholarly classics in English and Hebrew
- New titles in the Jewish Education Series
- Titles available through The Schocken Institute
- See our newest publications in our display ad in the AJS conference program

- > JTS Library materials
- > Scholarly classics in English and Hebrew

JTS Press

3080 Broadway, New York, NY 10027
T: (212) 678-8031 • F: (212) 749-9085
jtspress@jtsa.edu