Ethnography of Contemporary Jewish Life

American Studies: 050:337:01 / Jewish Studies: 563:346:01

Spring 2008 Tuesday/Thursday 4th period (1:10-2:30 PM)
Room: Scott 101

Prof. Jeffrey Shandler

Office: Room 102, Miller Hall
14 College Avenue
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Tel: 732-932-8681
Fax: 732-932-3052

Email: shandler@rci.rutgers.edu
Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 3-4 PM

Course description

This course is an introduction to the ethnography—that is, the close study of a cultural group through observation, participation, and analytic reflection—of contemporary Jewish life, especially in America, in local communities, institutions, rituals, personal histories, etc., through the approaches of writing, film, and field work. In addition to analyzing readings by anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, and other scholars, screening documentary films, and discussing research methodology, students will undertake two short fieldwork projects.

Learning goals

- Students will understand the nature of ethnographic approaches to studying contemporary culture, using Jewish communities as a case study.
- Students will consider the special implications of using ethnographic methods to study “one’s own” culture, using Jews as a case study.
- Students will learn about the internal diversity of contemporary Jewish life geographically and ideologically, as manifest in a variety of cultural practices.

Requirements

1. Regular attendance and preparation for active participation in class sessions (20% of grade). Regular attendance of class and active participation in class discussion is required, including individual preparation to lead discussion of readings or other assignments. Students are expected to come to class on time, having prepared the reading or reserve screening due that day, with comments, questions, etc., regarding the assigned material; to respect the protocols of classroom conduct (e.g., turning off cell phones, not eating during class, avoiding distracting chatter); to check their email regularly for class announcements (e.g., changes in assignments); and to turn in written work on the dates due. Students may not use their laptops during class without permission from the instructor. Students with three unexcused absences will have their course grade reduced by one full grade (e.g., from A to B). Students with six or more unexcused absences will receive an F for the course. Students should be prepared to provide the instructor with documentation of excusable absences, such as family emergencies, illness, religious observance; these must be submitted by the due date for the final exam. Students who are unable to attend class regularly for some pressing reason must notify their dean as well as the instructor.

2. Purim ethnography (20% of grade): a 1,000-1,200-word (ca. 4-5 double spaced pages) ethnographic report on some aspect of the celebration of the holiday of Purim. Ethnography
guidelines will be distributed at least one week before Purim (celebrated on 28 February, see below); paper will be due 9 March.

3. **Tourism ethnography** (20% of grade): a 1,000-1,200-word (ca. 4-5 double spaced pages) ethnographic report on a walking tour of the Jewish Lower East Side (21 or 28 March, see below). Ethnography guidelines will be distributed at least one week before walking tour, and paper will be due on 15 April.

4. **Midterm (15% of grade) and final examination (25% of grade):** essay exams (ca. 3-4 pages of writing each) based on course readings, film screenings, and class discussions.

All written work that a student submits must be his/her own independent effort. Students must cite properly all outside sources (readings, media works, websites, etc.) consulted in preparing written assignments. Students should review the university policy on Academic Integrity: [http://ctaar.rutgers.edu/integrity/policy.html](http://ctaar.rutgers.edu/integrity/policy.html). Failure to comply with this policy can result in failure of the course or more severe penalties.

**Class schedule**

**NOTE:** Class schedule is subject to change. Announcements of any changes will be made in class as well as by email; students should check their Rutgers email accounts regularly for these announcements. If students miss a class, they should be sure to check with the instructor about possible changes in assignments.

**Key to readings:**

[$] = in RU bookstore  [#] = online at Sakai.rutgers.edu [R] = on reserve in Alexander

**Books to buy:**


1/19) Session 1. Introduction to Jewish ethnography

1/21-2/2) Sessions 2-5. The work of Barbara Myerhoff

   Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (Touchstone, 1978) [$] [R]

   Barbara Myerhoff, “Surviving Stories: Reflections on *Number Our Days,*” in Kugelmass, *Between Two Worlds* [$] [R]

   Screening of films *Number Our Days* and *In Her Own Time.*

2/4-2/11) Sessions 6-8. Synagogues

   Goldberg, *The Life of Judaism* [$]; Chapters 4,5,6


   Goldberg, *The Life of Judaism*; Chapters 2,8,9
Ruth Cernea, “Flaming Prayers: Hillula in a New Home,” in Kugelmass, Between Two Worlds. [$] [R]

Screening of the film Mayor of the West Side

NOTE: Purim is celebrated on Sunday, 28 February (Fast of Esther is Thursday 25, February, and Shushan Purim is Monday, 1 March). Students are required to attend a Purim event as the basis for the assignment due 3/9. Details on possible events for this assignment TBA.

3/2) Session 13. Purim

“Between Two Worlds: Notes on the Celebration of Purim among New York Jews, Marck 1985,” in Kugelmass, Between Two Worlds. [$] [R]


3/4-3/9) Sessions 15-16. Language


SPRING BREAK

Big Onion Walking Tour of the Lower East Side

Students are required to attend one of these tours for the assignment due 4/15.

- Sunday March 21, 11:00 AM: Jewish Lower East Side
- Sunday March 21, 2:00 PM: The Multi-Ethnic Eating Tour
- Sunday March 28, 2:00 PM: Annual Pre-Passover Jewish Lower East Side Tour

Cost: $12 for students; additional $5 charge for Eating Tour. Details TBA.


Jerome R. Mintz, Hasidic People: A Place in the New World (Harvard University Press, 1992); chapters TBA. [$] [R]

Janet Belcove-Shalin, “Becoming More of an Eskimo: Fieldwork among the Hasidim of Boro Park,” in Kugelmass, Between Two Worlds. [$] [R]

Screening of film A Life Apart

NO CLASS ON PASSOVER, 3/30

4/1) Session 19. Passover
NO CLASS ON PASSOVER, 4/6

4/8-4/13) Sessions 20-21: Tourism


Seth Kamil, “Tripping Down Memory Lane: Walking Tours on the Jewish Lower East Side,” in Diner, et al., Remembering the Lower East Side, 226-240. [#] [R]

Discussion of ethnographies of Lower East Side walking tour. Papers due in class 4/15.


Goldberg, The Life of Judaism, pp. 156-171 (Jackie Feldman)


Screening of film Return to Oulad Moumen


Eve Jochnowitz, “‘Send a Salami to Your Boy in the Army’: Sites of Jewish Memory and Identity at Lower East Side Restaurants,” in Hasia Diner, et al., Remembering the Lower East Side, 212-225. [#] [R]


Screening of films Gefilte Fish, Makolet