Teaching Jewish American Literature

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Introduction

In the January 2003 special issue of *PMLA*, *America: The Idea, the Literature*, Paul Giles calls for a "critical transnationalism" that would reveal the "cultural jagged edges, structural paradoxes, or other forms of apparent incoherence" that add to our cultural understanding of America's position in the global community (65). Indeed, the "transnational turn" in American studies, Donald E. Pease writes, "has effected the most significant reimagining of the field since its inception" (40). Jewish American literature, however, has not been fully recognized as fundamental to these conversations, despite the groundbreaking work of a growing cadre of scholars. Jewish literatures in the Americas—Canada, the Caribbean, and Latin America, in addition to the United States—offer an opportunity to think transnationally and hemispherically in a way that responds to and exemplifies the call for a critical transnationalism in the teaching of American literatures.

As we reassert the importance of Jewish American literature in the context of the new American studies (among other fields), the development of Jewish studies as an academic discipline suggests additional contexts for reevaluating this diverse body of work. Jewish studies developed in nineteenth-century western Europe, pioneered by reformist Jewish

Part III

Multilingual and Transnational Approaches

Justin Cammy

Unsettling the Linguistic and Geographical Borders of Jewish American Literature: Régine Robin's *La Québécoite*

The editors of *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* suggest that Canada's literary history "has always been a fractured discourse, notoriously difficult to define . . . [given] the conceptual challenges posed by changing meanings of 'Canadian' as an identity category and by periodic reformulations of Canada as an imagined community" (Howells and Kröller 2). As was the case in the United States, by the end of the twentieth century Canadian literary history broadened significantly "as formerly marginalized voices and suppressed histories assum[ed] their proper place within a restructured and increasingly diversified literary tradition" (4). Such observations reinforce the importance of examining how border crossings, cross-cultural exchange, literary multilingualism, translation, debates about indigenousness, and transnational identities have simultaneously challenged and expanded our understanding of national literary traditions.

The field of Jewish American literature should no longer be limited geographically to the political borders of the United States and dominated by English-language texts. My undergraduate survey course on Jewish American literature therefore includes several weeks on Yiddish and Hebrew writers.[1] The exploration of their overlapping and competing global literary networks broadens the field's conceptual, linguistic, and geographic

limits. Further, I incorporate a transcontinental approach that is inclusive of works originally published in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese beyond the United States.[2] This approach prompted my inclusion on the syllabus of Régine Robin's French language, postmodern novel *La Québécoite* (*The Wanderer*). Robin's experimental novel proves pedagogically valuable because it offers students an alternative model for thinking through the tangled relations between local, national, and transnational identities and the literary traditions that inform them.

The question of Canadianness has long vexed interpreters of Canadian identity. Though Canadians are eager to define themselves in the negative—as definitively not American—they have had more difficulty forging a coherent national identity. Those who attempt to craft a metanarrative of Canadianness often point to Canada as the product of two founding nations, French-speaking Catholics and English-speaking Protestants. However, Hugh MacLennan's classic novel *Two Solitudes* suggests Canada is better understood through the irreconcilable divide between these two groups. Multiculturalism and a greater sensitivity to Canadian diversity further complicated the founding myth of Canadian binationalism by prompting a belated acknowledgment of the rights of Canada's First Nations in the Constitution Act of 1982. The limitations of the American melting-pot model also informed attempts to define Canada alternatively as a mosaic, in which cultural communities retain their distinctiveness but when pieced together form a colorful portrait. Though the model of the cultural mosaic is theoretically less coercive toward minority cultures than that of the melting pot, neither paradigm has gone uncontested.[3]

Underlying tensions between Protestant and Catholic, English and French, and colonial and native populations produced a dilemma for immigrants, especially Jews, whose language and religion did not fit into the dominant paradigms of Canadian identity. Jews learned that, in the Canadian context, language contains an array of ethnonational assumptions. Nowhere was this more complicated than in Montreal, a multilingual island within North America's only majority French-speaking province. The wave of Yiddish-speaking, eastern European Jewish immigrants who began arriving in the late nineteenth century found themselves a double minority, alienated from both the French-speaking majority and the city's Anglo-Protestant establishment. When they gravitated to English as part of their acculturation rather than to French, their position as Montreal's "third solitude" (see Greenstein, *Third Solitudes*) was solidified, reflected first in the liminal location of immigrant Jewish neighborhoods between English-speaking West and French-speaking East Montreal, and then in their move to suburban, majority-Jewish areas on the periphery of more established, non-Jewish neighborhoods. In Mordecai Richler's *The Street*, a fictional treatment of the author's childhood in Montreal's downtown Jewish ghetto, Richler goes so far as to suggest that for his family "Canada was not a choice, but an accident," while "the real America" was across the border (17). In my course, students are prompted to consider what Richler was trying to suggest with this phrase, and what its implications are for appreciating the gravitational force of the American mythos.

I begin the class discussion of *La Québécoite* by noting that the classical English-French binary of Canadian literature operates in tension with the multilingual and transnational fluidity of Jewish literature. In Montreal, writers worked in Yiddish, English, and French and found themselves on the periphery of not one but two non-Jewish national literatures.[4] Although Jewish Montreal writers like A. M. Klein, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, and Richler broadened the ethnic borders of Canadian literature, they were excluded from the emerging countercanon of Quebecois literature because they wrote in English, despite the fact that each writer published significant works that interpreted the cultural landscape of Quebec, and especially of Montreal, its largest city.[5] The city's Yiddish writers, whose literary networks extended abroad, were also excluded.[6] Here I draw students into a comparative discussion of Yiddish literary history, observing that Yiddish writers in interwar Poland faced similar challenges when they were excluded from consideration as Polish writers, because their decision to write in Yiddish marked them as other, even though Poland was at the imaginative center of their writing.

Next the class analyzes Robin's afterword to the English translation of *La Québécoite*, in which she observes that nationalist guardians of Quebecois literature invented a new term, *neo-Quebecois*, to designate French writing by immigrant writers, thus marking it (and the writers) as a "problem" ("Writing" 175). We pause on Robin's insistence that as a Jewish novelist in Quebec who writes in French (the language of the local majority but of still a minority of Canadian Jews) she occupies a threshold position, "neither fully within nor fully without" (182). Students come to recognize that as Robin's protagonist wanders through different neighborhoods and communities, she moves between multiple, even competing, identities that challenge narrow, exclusionary nationalist paradigms: "What exactly do you feel you are—American, Canadian, Québécois, Jewish,

French? . . . WE WOULD NEVER BECOME TRULY QUÉBÉCOIS. On the other side of the linguistic barrier. . . . A Yiddishophone imagination . . ." (*Wanderer* 23–24).[7] Disentangling overlapping identities that challenge how literary canons are formed and refashioned provides students an opportunity to adjust their earlier thinking about what constitutes "American" in Jewish American literature.

Régine Robin (born Rivka Ajzersztejn in Paris in 1939 to Polish Jewish parents) arrived in Montreal in 1977, a moment of nationalist hope and unrest due to the recent election of the first government in Quebec committed to independence from Canada. Robin emerged as one of the leading figures of *écritures migrantes* ("migrant writings"; see Berrouët-Oriol and Fournier), a transcultural mode of writing that calls attention to the experience of living within and between overlapping worlds through challenging and deconstructing established ethnonational literary canons. One of her techniques involves the reproduction in fiction of vernacular texts. I ask my students to bring examples of such texts in the novel to class, and then I challenge them to discuss how the inclusion of lists of local store and bank names, the previous night's hockey scores, a page from the newspaper television guide, and local menus is not only an experiment in postmodern play but also a way to appreciate the narratives of belonging or exclusion these texts contain. For instance, I call to their attention the novel's reading of a subway map that shows Lionel Groulx as a major downtown Montreal metro station. The novel reflects on the fact that the Catholic priest and historian after whom the stop is named was sympathetic to a variant of Quebecois nativism that included anti-Semitism. In this way, the novel teaches readers that relations of power and marginalization are inscribed in everyday texts and landscapes.

I then contrast the novel's fascination with the minutiae of daily life in Montreal with its incorporation of Yiddish and Russian Jewish stories set in eastern Europe. Robin not only quotes these stories directly, bringing the French Canadian reader into the heart of Yiddish literary culture, but also meditates on Yiddish itself, as when she visually reproduces it on the page. My students appreciate how this stylistic decision aggressively and visually incorporates the migrant writer's languages and memories into French Canadian literature, thereby broadening its imaginative scope: "On the slopes of Galicia the moon still traces א, ב, ג, and ד; in the gardens of Ukraine, the stems of the sunflowers still form ש, ק and ר; but no longer is there anyone to decode them, to grasp their meaning, their savour" (70–71). This passage allows us to discuss theoretical questions of Yiddish postvernacularity and the way Robin appropriates it as a kind of "graphic image that is a whole landscape" (113).[8] In the same vein, I invite students to ponder how the novel seems to simultaneously advocate for inhabiting language as a homeland while feeling "in exile in one's own language" (76). Such an approach allows us to engage conceptual issues raised earlier in the semester regarding "Yiddishland," the fantasy of a transnational, diasporic homeland experienced in language and culture (Shandler).

By turning our attention to the novel's extensive quotations from Jewish literary sources,[9] I invite students to think about how such texts embedded in a French novel set in Montreal must prove as strange and destabilizing to the Quebecois reader as the novel's aforementioned examples of local vernacular texts are for new immigrants to the city. Robin's strategy here is to ensure that no reader is ever in control of the entire narrative. Nonetheless, this compulsive exercise in citation and translation from Jewish sources self-consciously Judaizes Montreal as a cultural space. I here suggest to students that Robin may be less interested in becoming Quebecois than in creating her own experience of Quebec that redefines and expands its potential meaning to be more inclusive of all its inhabitants and their varied histories.

Students come to appreciate how the novel's division into three sections allows Robin to imagine three potential lives for her protagonist that are conditioned by the character's lived experience and relationships in distinct urban neighborhoods, suggesting that national or civic identities are both formed and disrupted at the more granular level of the local street. Each neighborhood has its own subculture: the Anglo- and Jewish-inflected suburb of Snowdon; Outremont, home to Montreal's Quebecois political elite; and the downtown area around Atwater market, where the protagonist hangs out with activists who remind her of the communists she knew in her youth back in Paris. As we follow her from one neighborhood to the next, the text also plays with the archetype of the wandering Jew in empowering new ways, here as cosmopolitan flaneur. We discuss how the meaning of the novel inevitably shifts in translation when its original title, *La Québécoite* (an ironic neologism that suggests one who is in Quebec but culturally silenced by it), is rendered in English as *The Wanderer*. In each neighborhood the novel demonstrates the challenge of decoding the semiotics of language, space, and belonging. These journeys suggest that the only way to write an authentic novel of Montreal is to make it interlingual and intercultural.

I also invite my students to think of *La Québécoite* as a text interested in challenging the formation of national canons by constructing its own postnational and transnational countercanons. My students are then better able to appreciate how the same literary texts may serve multiple, even competing readerships in radically different ways. By way of example, I point out that the professor in the novel teaches the same early Soviet Yiddish writers to students at Montreal's English-language McGill University and to their French Canadian peers across town at L'Université de Montréal. At McGill, the many Jewish students in the class resist the Soviet Yiddish writers' articulation of a revolutionary Jewishness because it does not easily map onto their own experience of Montreal Jewry as a double minority, one with a strong sense of Jewish tradition, ethnic solidarity and commitment to Zionism's realization of a Jewish nation-state. By contrast, the French Canadian students in the novel are fascinated by Soviet Yiddish writers' attempts to liberate themselves from religious tradition and reconstruct themselves through language, a process that mirrors the students' efforts to free themselves from the shadow of the church and to negotiate the tension between nationalist yearnings for independence and a more cosmopolitan sense of themselves as part of a transnational *Francophonie*, or French-speaking community. Robin's abundant borrowings from other texts open up an entire canon of Yiddish writers in French translation and reveal the ways in which they claimed eastern European space as their own, despite their minority status. The translation of Soviet Yiddish texts for a Quebecois readership thus introduces Yiddish literature as a model for minority cultures interested in thinking about cultural self-assertion beyond the parameters of the nation-state.

The act of conjuring lost Jewish spaces within a novel about Quebec also becomes a form of dialogic exchange in which immigrant writer and native reader meditate on each other's condition. Here, Robin suggests that the Jews and the Quebecois have more in common than they might realize, given the degree to which their fear of being swallowed up by larger cultures is a defining condition of their collective identities. My students and I pause to theorize together about what Robin might mean when she writes about "immigrant words in suspense between two HISTORIES." We discuss how liminality here exists as an alternative to linguistic assimilation, which she reads as the betrayal of "go[ing] over to the other side" (*Wanderer* 124). For instance, when the novel's protagonist translates the prose of modernist Yiddish master Dovid Bergelson for her students, she is especially moved by one of his stories about a man's return to

his native village after World War I. When the man speaks to a young girl in Yiddish about his wartime experiences, she immediately translates his words into Russian. In response to her inquiry regarding the accuracy of her translation, he counters: "What can I say? The suffering was in Yiddish" (123). This passage reveals that the element of collective memory contained in language is not easily translatable, and that the stakes of translation are high, especially when the power dynamics of the exchange are between a minority and majority language and culture.

If the successful Jewish immigrant depicted in early-twentieth-century American literature readily gives himself over to the social and economic opportunities that come with linguistic assimilation, then Robin's *La Québécoite* offers a countermodel of cultural and linguistic exchange and mutual respect.[10] This model is a product of both Robin's alienation from Quebec society, which keeps reminding Robin that she can never really share in Quebecois history or identity because she is an immigrant and a Jew, and her sense of exclusion from Montreal's English-speaking, conservative Jewish establishment, which sees her as a French writer with unreliable political sympathies. I suggest that Robin's inclusion of quotations from Yiddish and other Jewish texts in a French novel of Quebec emphasizes in-betweenness, translation, multilingualism and border crossing as a way to challenge the cultural and linguistic borders of ethnonationalism. Students come to appreciate how and why the novel celebrates the syncretic possibilities of urban encounters where different groups and languages intermingle.

The class's analysis of *La Québécoite* concludes with consideration of three intertexts that appear in the heart of the novel, each of which highlights the complications and dangers of the nativist discourse that informed the political context of the novel's composition. The first is a section from a schoolbook about early French colonial history, which presents Catholic missionaries as the first martyrs for the cause of Quebec, murdered by the Iroquois they attempted to convert. My students appreciate how Robin's analysis of this schoolbook exposes the writing of colonial history as a fictional enterprise in which indigenousness is at first an object of curiosity and opportunity, then something to be feared and eradicated, and only later something to be appropriated. The next text we consider is decidedly less heady: a menu Robin reproduces from Ben's delicatessen, which includes the story of the business's growth from a pushcart where a Jewish immigrant sold sandwiches to workers to a restaurant that exports the unique flavors of Montreal cuisine to Hollywood. We discuss

how the menu is itself a classic immigrant story, depicting Ben's success as a model for the ways in which the immigrant presence enhances the flavor of the host community rather than threatens it. Finally, we consider the novel's inclusion of the full manifesto of the Front de libération du Québéc ("Quebec Liberation Front"), with its call to "Make Your Revolution" (*Wanderer* 101). If the narrator's husband (who is Quebecois) is inspired by "the intense emotion that had gripped him when he heard [the manifesto] read" (96), then to the narrator's immigrant ear its jingoism is an ominous sign of the subsequent violence that would be perpetrated by the FLQ in the name of nationalism:

> The fear of homogeneity
> of unanimity
> of the Us that excludes all others
> of the pure. (107)

Our reading of these three texts allows me to demonstrate how the novel sets up a conversation between colonial history, vernacular texts, and political literature that collectively performs Robin's fictional mantra to "note all the differences" (86, 91).

By discussing how *La Québécoite* navigates the tensions between languages and home to problematize and complicate identity, students appreciate how Robin's immigrant counternarratives serve as conspicuous interventions into exclusivist master narratives. In this way, memories of Jewish eastern Europe are not only recovered for the novel's Jewish readers but also form the genesis of a more dialogic and transcultural literature of Canada and Quebec, one that requires "no literary passports or visas" ("Writing" 178).

Notes

1. I include Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav's *American Yiddish Poetry*, an essay by Isaac Bashevis Singer ("Problems of Yiddish Prose in America"), and selections about the Hebrew literary encounter with Native America from Mintz's *Sanctuary in the Wilderness*, pp. 367–89. I have recently included Israeli novels that imagine America as an alternative Jewish homeland, such as Nava Semel's *Isra Isle*, about Mordecai Manuel Noah's nineteenth-century effort to establish a refuge for Jews on Grand Island in New York, and contemporary American works that are interested in Yiddish not only as a bridge to the past but also as a means of exploring the pleasures of Jewish interlingualism, such as Dara Horn's *The World to Come* and Peter Manseau's *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*.

2. These include, from Canada, A. M. Klein's *The Second Scroll*, Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, and Chava Rosenfarb's *Survivors*; from Brazil, Moacyr Scliar's *The Centaur in the Garden*; from Argentina, Alberto Gerchunoff's *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*; and Achy Obejas's interlingual and transnational Cuban-American novel *Days of Awe*.

3. Quebecois nationalists have criticized Canadian multicultural policy as a neocolonial strategy to contain their aspirations for independence, and Canada's First Nations have viewed it as a distraction from the historical mistreatment of native peoples.

4. Montreal's Yiddish literary community included such voices as J. I. Segal, Sholem Shtern, and Ida Maze, joined after the Holocaust by Melekh Ravitsh, Rokhl Korn, Chava Rosenfarb, and Yehuda Elberg. Other Jewish writers working in French, like Robin, include Monique Bosco, Naïm Kattan, and Michel Solomon.

5. For overviews of Canadian Jewish writing, see Brenner, "Canadian Jews"; Greenstein, "Introduction"; and Margolis, "Across the Border."

6. For more on Yiddish Montreal, see Margolis, *Jewish Roots*. For more on Montreal as a multilingual literary center, see Simon, *Translating Montreal*.

7. Robin's word "Yiddishophone" is a pun on the term *allophone*, used in Quebec to refer to someone whose mother tongue is neither English nor French, and who therefore complicates Canada's established binational and bilingual dualities.

8. Yiddish postvernacularity refers to the phenomenon in which Yiddish as a means of spoken communication becomes secondary to Yiddish as part of a symbolic system of representation, cultural performance, and metasignification. See Shandler 4.

9. The list is too long to cite fully but includes excerpts from the Russian Jewish writer Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*; work by Soviet Yiddish poets Moyshe Kulbak, Peretz Markish, and Dovid Hofshteyn; poems by the American Yiddish modernist poet Yankev Glatshteyn; retellings of Jewish folklore; and work by the German Israeli philosopher Gershom Scholem, as well as references to the medieval mystical tract *The Zohar*.

10. For a theoretical statement of Robin's approach to mediating ethnic particularism and assimilation, see her essay "Sortir de l'ethnicité."

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Ilan Stavans

Jews beyond America: The One and the Many

The classroom is a place where curiosity must prevail and where we should imagine ourselves in alternative ways. In classrooms narrowness must collapse of its own accord, and language and culture must be pushed to their limits in their interaction with the environment. In short, nothing in the classroom should be considered sacred, immobile, or settled. I write all of this in reaction to the frequent parochialism of the Jewish American studies classroom. In English, the proper noun *America* is taken as a synonym for *the United States*. Yet in other tongues it describes a vast continent that goes from Alaska to Patagonia. Similarly, the word *Jewish* denotes an individual who belongs not to a specific country but to a religious, political, and cultural tradition with multiple homes across space and time.

For too long, the teaching of Jewish American culture in the classroom has been centered on the United States and narrowly defined. While the United States may be where the class meets, it should not be taken as its destination. The Jewish American studies classroom should be the place where immigration is studied not only nationally but panoramically. After all, Jewish life is shaped first and foremost by change. Change is the one constant, and it requires adaptability and renewal. And immigration is always about change: to travel from one context to another is to become someone else.