

Jelen, Sheila E. *Salvage Poetics: Post-Holocaust American Jewish Folk Ethnographies*. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2020. Notes. Bibliography. Index. xxii+379. (cloth). \$69.99. ISBN 978-0-8143-4318-0

There is a certain kind of book about Eastern European Jewish culture that academics tend to dismiss as a bit too pop. Printed in large runs and many editions, these books provide what most North American Jews and non-Jews know about Jewish life in Russia and Poland before World War II. Maurice Samuel's 1943 *The World of Sholem Aleichem*, with its summaries of the Yiddish author's dark, hilarious stories, denuded of their irony and wordplay and told as if they were true, and Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog's 1952 *Life Is with People*, an ethnography that shrinks the geographic variety of Jewish settlement to "the shtetl" and relies on informants who themselves retold Yiddish stories by Sholem Aleichem and others as though they were fact, were the sources of the 1964 *Fiddler on the Roof*, the most sentimental, reductive, and popular Sholem Aleichem derivative of all. An adjacent category of books gets more respect, but scholars still sometimes worry they may idealize the Ashkenazic Jewish experience: Abraham Joshua Heschel's 1945-1950 *The Earth Is the Lord's*, a characterization of Judaism that relies on Hasidic stories; Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg's 1954 anthology, *Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, and Lucy Dawidowicz's 1967 essay anthology, *The Golden Tradition*; albums of photographs and paintings, including Roman Vishniac's 1983 *A Vanished World*, Alter Kacyzne's 1999 *Poyln: Jewish Life in the Old Country*, and even, perhaps, the 2007 *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust*, by Meyer Kirschenblatt and his daughter, the prominent scholar of folklore and performance, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (whose work inspires the book reviewed here). Jewish studies scholars all own these books, we read them, we use the images in our presentations, and we assign sections to our students, and at the same time we want to make sure people know that we know they do not give us the whole picture. We know that pre-Holocaust Jewish life in the Old Country was not some bastion of merry fiddle tunes, fresh-baked challah, rituals affirming an unbroken connection to an ancient religion, populated exclusively by warm multi-generational families; we know about class divisions, oppressive gender norms, murderous tensions between religion and revolution, violence in which Jews were not only the innocent victims of pogroms. We are all skeptical about "salvage ethnography," with its impulse to romanticize and fetishize select elements of the past and ignore the rest.

These too-pop books about Jewish culture are the object of study of Sheila Jelen's book. Instead of reiterating the familiar complaints about them, Jelen takes these books on their own terms. She does not hold them to the standard of scholarly ethnography based on fieldwork, but understands them as examples of what Jack Kugelmass calls "folk ethnography," meant to "focus group understanding of the self and thereby reinforce the cohesiveness of the population that sponsors it and consumes it" (26). These books are, in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's terms, "hybrid," in that they combine artistic and ethnographic impulses (19).

They use “salvage poetics,” meaning devices that mediate texts or images “in an effort to create an accessible description of a lost culture” (1). Jelen sees all these texts as worthy of analysis in their own right for someone who wants to understand post-war American Jews. She argues that the creators of these books were drawn to the pre-war materials that they exhibited (Sholem Aleichem stories, Hasidic stories, photographs taken in the 1930s; Kirshenblatt’s paintings, though, are more recent) because these too were salvage operations, highly mediated and already conscious of loss. That loss – the rapid cultural shifts that began well before the Holocaust – was real, and nostalgia was a healthy response to it. Jelen understands that these books rely on fiction and visual images to represent Jewish culture, rather than the rabbinic texts that have traditionally constituted the Jewish canon, because American Jews for the most part lack the literacy they would need to read rabbinics, and she scorns neither the authors she studies nor the readers they address for this undeniable fact.

Jelen’s book is a powerful reevaluation and reclaiming of the popular American Jewish bookshelf. In historicizing the authors of some books that scholars do not always take seriously, she should prompt us to inquire into the roots of our own dismissiveness. What emerges most powerfully here is the stories, and passions, of the compilers of the folk ethnographies, understood not only as representatives of the American Jewish post-war but as idiosyncratic and creative individuals. The final two chapters, on Vishniac’s multiple reuses of his photographs and then on the ways that Kirshenblatt’s and Kacyzne’s images were curated by their daughters, are especially insightful (and could easily be assigned to undergraduates). The book concludes with a bracing self-reflection about how the author as a scholar evolved away from the graduate school imperative to reject nationalism and the folkloric and focus instead on modernist literary experimentation, toward a willingness to see nostalgia and popular ethnography as also worthy of analysis.

This book grows ever more persuasive and the writing stronger and stronger. The introduction and the early chapters are less self-confident and wordier than the later sections, over-loaded with references to other scholars. The introduction argues for the importance of visual sources for salvage poetics, as though the primary story here is about the move from textual to visual literacy, but the first chapters address books that are still about texts (granted, fiction rather than rabbinics); only in the final two is the visual truly at the center. I urge readers to keep going; this book will grow on you, as it did on me. To Jewish studies scholars, Jelen offers a helpful corrective to our reflexive rejection of the nostalgic, and to scholars of folklore, she offers serviceable concepts – folk ethnography, salvage poetics, ways to understand the use of photography in those endeavors – that we can use to think about other groups. Readers of *Folklorica* who work on the history of folkloristics and ethnography or the memory projects of other immigrant communities will find Jelen’s book particularly helpful.

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