

Teaching Jewish Studies in the Framework of Latin American Studies: Questions of Mediality

By Naomi Lindstrom

My courses on Latin American Jewish cultural production attract very different constituencies. One is Latin Americanists, who favor human rights topics such as repressive regimes, disappearances, and discrimination; these students help the class grasp the larger social picture, but tend to view literature and film as testimony to social injustices and sometimes forget that the class is specifically on Jewish topics. Other students, often Jewish or partially Jewish, come to the course for its Jewish content; they tend to rivet their attention on Jewish personal and family identity and edit out Latin American social history. In selecting readings and media for the course, I try to keep students aware of both the Jewish and the Latin American dimensions of the course.

When selecting the media component of a course on Latin American Jewish culture, there's a temptation to choose items that are easy to obtain, which skews the coverage toward cultural products that circulate in a transnational space. In some cases, these items have been produced in the U.S., such as Ruth Behar's *Adiós kerida*, a documentary film about the Cuban Jewish community, but as perceived, visited, and commented on by a U.S.-based observer of some celebrity. The film's focus on the complicated identity of Behar, whose plaintive voice is heard asking "Who am I?" can pull the class toward an exaggeratedly individual outlook. Though Daniel Burman's often-noted trilogy (*Waiting for the Messiah*, 2000; *The Lost Embrace*, 2003; and *Family Law*, 2005) was filmed in Argentina, it also occupies a transnational space. The three films, which fared well in international distribution, follow closely a bewildered young protagonist whose confusion over his identity is the most prominent theme. Undergraduates enjoy these films partly because they can be understood without knowledge of Argentine Jewish social or cultural history. So works like these need to be counterbalanced with others that are not so individualistic and so globally circulated--something that takes more effort not only to locate but also to understand.

One thing I have found along these lines is the annual campaign to maintain awareness of the still officially unresolved 1994 AMIA bombing. These publicity campaigns, carried out in public

spaces in Buenos Aires and on social media, are, at their best, very imaginative. Some of the commemorative efforts have been odd, such as the 2012 el Pan de la Memoria, which encouraged people to “alimentar la memoria” by baking bread. Among the most successful, was the 2010 Siluetas por la Memoria project: life-sized silhouettes of the individuals who had been going about their business shortly before becoming fatalities were placed throughout Buenos Aires. Also in 2010, subway steps were painted with reminders of the specificity of those killed in the bombing: “9 estudiantes de la UBA,” “6 madres sostén de la familia”. These activities are documented online, but require more effort to find.