

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIONS AND CULTURES:  
GRADUATED GRAD STUDENTS CELEBRATION/ SYMPOSIUM 2018-2019

Wednesday December 4, 2019  
LB 361 from 4:00 to 6:30 pm

A symposium/ reception to learn about and honour the research accomplishments of our students who have received their M.A. or Ph.D. degrees in calendar years 2018 and 2019.

**Azadeh Ehsani Chombeli, PhD fall 2018**

*“Historical, Mythical and Religious Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud in their Middle Persian Context”*.

This dissertation offers a comparative study between a number of Talmudic and Middle Persian narratives. The present work seeks first and foremost to examine Talmudic narratives in their Iranian context, and secondly to examine the Talmudic background of Iranian narratives where applicable. We suggest that a Talmudic narrative may have encouraged Zoroastrian priests to compose an extensive work of religious literature, namely the *Ardā-Virāz Nāmag*. The relationship between Iranian and Jewish materials in the Talmudic era is merely a piece of a larger puzzle, a piece that a number of scholars—such as Elman, Secunda, Mokhtarian, Herman, Kiel, Kalmin etc.—have recently begun to focus on. By focusing on Talmudic narratives that have not yet been sufficiently examined for Iranian themes and ideas, this dissertation represents a contribution towards piecing this puzzle together.

**Idikó Glaser-Hille, PhD spring 2019**

*“The Demonic Book Club: Demonology, Social Discourses, and the Creation of Identity in German Demonic Ritual Magic Between 1350-1580”*.

My thesis looks at Christian-authored works of demonic ritual magic (c1350-c1580) as narratives that offer us a window into the individual and collective identity-formation of Christians in German-speaking premodern Europe. By looking at how demonic ritual magic reflects Jewish-Christian relations in this period through diminishing the power of the Jewish magicians, we can see how a space was created for validating the social, spiritual, and magical centrality of Christians in the magical world which echoes the creation of the hegemonic Christian identity in the non-magical German-speaking premodern Europe.

**Esti Mayer, PhD spring 2019**

**“Yosse Ben Yosse’s Avodah Liturgy A Political Reading”**.

My research into Yosse ben Yosse, a 5th century Jewish liturgical poet, explored the socio-political and religious contest between the rising rabbinic movement and the remnants of the priestly caste. I maintain that Yosse ben Yosse represented a Zaddokite priestly effort to get a seat at the table, along side the rabbis, in shaping and leading Jewish worship after the destruction of the Second Temple. I presented a detailed comparison between Yosse ben Yosse’s oeuvre and Mishnah Yoma, noting the different perspectives and re-imagining of the Yom Kippur service at the Temple. Textual differences between the narratives of past events belie religious-political aspirations of each group, regarding leadership of Jewish practice into

the future. My chief contribution however, is a complete annotated translation of all Known Yosse ben Yosse's poems, from classical Hebrew to English. I am currently engaged in an effort to transform some of my dissertation into a publishable manuscript in book form.

**Nina Mazhjo, PhD fall 2019**

*"Persia in the Roman Imagination: A New Approach to the Roman Cult of Mithras"*

Scholars of Mithraic studies disagree on the origins of the Roman mystery cult of Mithras. Recent scholarship has addressed how Greco-Roman appropriation of the god Miθra, included a process of selection and instrumentalisation of Persian tradition which informed how the Roman Mithraists developed a novel religious expression. Building on this recent approach that attends to the complex dynamics of cultural transmission, this dissertation argues that the Hellenistic reception of the god Miθra coupled with Roman ideals of Persia can be traced in Mithraic art and its ritual language. This thesis suggests a new model for the development of Roman Mithraic imagery and visual language, and its complex relationship to Persian antecedents.

This study has four main objectives: The first objective is to establish a visual and textual inventory of the Persian Miθra. The second account is to explore the Greek depictions of the Zoroastrian Miθra that transmitted the Persian figure of the god to Rome as the result of Rome's interest in the Orient. The third objective is to demonstrate how the Mithraic Mystagogues embraced the Greek imagination of "handsome Oriental" as well as Greek depictions of Zoroastrian Miθra to invent an esoteric iconography and visual language for their novel religiosity in the Roman cultural milieu. The last objective is to examine the appearance of Mithras cult in the broader context of Rome's imperial ideology and the attendant idea that Rome is defined by its openness to others and outsiders, particularly in terms of cultic life.

**Jean-Michel Boudreault, MA spring 2018**

*"Taylor and Secularism: A Genealogical Critique"*

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, despite his earlier criticism of Michel Foucault in "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," still relies on Foucauldian genealogy to account for the rise of secularism in the modern Western world. While Taylor does not deny the existence of power structures and their role in the production of knowledge, he does not agree with the genealogical precept that all truth is formed in this way and therefore comprises a sort of illusion. Taylor objects to the nihilism at the root of Foucault's thought and struggles with the implication that truth and freedom cannot ultimately exist. Despite these objections from Taylor, it is my contention in this paper that Taylor's analysis of secularism still comprises an application of Foucauldian genealogy and that the modern secular identity itself comprises a regime of truth sustained by, among other things, science and its actors and institutions.

**Chloé Corriveau Collier, MA spring 2018**

*"Jewish Pilgrimage to the Temple Mount: Shaping Collective Memory Through Sacred Landscape"*

**Neil Matthews, MA spring 2018**

*“Arthur Cohen and Emil Fackenheim on Holocaust Uniqueness”.*

My graduate research project investigates the theme of holocaust “uniqueness” in Jewish philosopher-theologians Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003) and Arthur Cohen (1928-86). Both argue that the event was an *historical caesura*, that the holocaust ruptures history to the extent that world history “begins anew.” Both characterize the genocide as a “celebration of death”. Inspired by Fackenheim’s characterization of Third Reich Nazism as a “modern idolatry”, I have since pursued research into the religious aspect of National Socialism.

**Amanda Mormina, MA spring 2018**

*“Tikkun Olam: Sponsoring Syrian Refugees as One Jewish Community's Approach to healing the World”*

My project is an ethnographic study of the sponsorship of Syrian refugees by a Reconstructionist synagogue in Montreal at the height of the refugee crisis. I argue that Jewish values were upheld by this community and that the shared refugee experience between these communities brought them together despite the lack of a common cultural, religious or ethnic background. This was illustrated mainly through a discussion of four interviews that I conducted with practitioners of the community who graciously agreed to work with me. The information provided in the interviews was organized into four sections. The first discussed Jewish values as motivation to sponsor refugees. The second section looked at both the present political climate and that of pre and post World War Two. Perceived shared experiences were discussed in the third section. Finally, the fourth section looked at various perceptions regarding the sponsorship of refugees by this particular community.

**Andy Rajnak, MA spring 2018**

*“An Analysis of Contemporary Discourse on Methodological Naturalism: Gregory Dawes and Theistic Explanations”*

**Yosef Robinson, MA spring 2018**

**“The Geography of Interwar Jewish Montreal: A Demographic and Cartographic Survey”.**

My guided research paper examines several geospatial aspects of Jewish Montreal between the two World Wars - more specifically, the distribution of the Montreal Jewish population and of Jewish institutions and certain businesses in Montreal at that time, including through maps. The bulk of the Jewish population moved ever further up along St. Laurent Blvd. and surrounding streets; Jewish institutional and cultural activity, along with businesses serving the Jewish community, moved in that direction almost at the same time, but it lagged Jewish population movement by a number of years. Jewish-owned businesses serving the general community, however, were distributed quite differently than the other characteristics examined here.

**Tirza Harris, MA fall 2018**

*“Unraveling Our Truths: Remythologizing Christian Thought for a Way into the Future”*

**Liliana Cane, MA spring 2019**

*“Sexual Ritual for Enlightenment: In Search of Knowledge through what Ravishes the Heart”.*

My research focuses on Abhinavagupta's *Tantraloka*, Chapter 29, and specifically in the analysis of the "Ritual with a Sexual Partner" (TĀ ś196-ś1 166b). My aim is to understand why did this important 10<sup>th</sup> century CE Tantric exegete considered this sexual ritual as the highest form of celebration in a tradition that he reinterpreted as non-dual. By addressing four specific points – (1) the role and the reason of the sexual ritual in this Śaiva Kashmir tradition, (2) how is it that this sexual ritual is nondual, (3) what is the logic and prominence of this orgasmic ritual, and (4) what is the place and importance of women in the landscape of this tradition – I came to elucidate how Abhinavagupta correlated consciousness and sexual union, and how through the gratification of the senses for the sake of a heightened aesthetic experience, he affirms the non-dual Tantric cosmology. In his view, consciousness, knowledge and liberation can only be attained by direct experience in the flesh. Thus, the ritual sexual union constitutes a mystical experience, a direct access to ultimate consciousness, that cannot be cognized in any other way.

**Ana Mota de Souza, MA spring 2019**

*"Cow Protection Discourse: Categories and National Identity"*.

My research focused on some of the arguments that Hindu nationalists advance in support of cow protection, an Indian movement that promotes the importance of the cow. Their arguments utilise substantially different kinds of evidence, from scientific rhetoric to divinity, to create a broad and seemingly pervasive base of support for cow protection in contemporary India. Advocates then include support for cow protection as a marker of legitimate Indian/Hindu identity.

**Camellia Jahanshahi, MA spring 2019**

*"The Divine in Drag: Hold Each Other Close"*.

My GRP consisted of an ethnographic research project which used a combination of queer and feminist approaches to look at the social, artistic, and religious lives of queer drag and burlesque performers. It evolved beyond during my interviews to also look at the concept of vulnerable communities and how trauma and abuse situations are experienced by individuals in marginalized communities and the resulting effects that trauma can have on individual and community relationships. Since completion of my GRP and the MA program, it has grown again into a multimedia project including illustrations that I plan on continuing and evolving with more interviews over time.

**Gi Soo Kim, MA spring 2019**

*"End Game: Apocalypse and Post-apocalypse in Video Games."*

My guided research paper explored apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes found in video game lore, narrative, and symbolism. Through Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy's theory of popular culture, the selected video games reflect societal points of tension. Notably, reflecting Western culture's anxiety towards real-world apocalyptic scenarios such as unmitigated climate change, nuclear war, and religious extremism. Moreover, the popularity of these games indicates

a level of resonance among consumers, who may hold similar worldviews as the game's portrayal of apocalyptic events or post-apocalyptic societies.

**Keegan Lathe-LeBlanc, MA spring 2019**

*“Post-Modern Conversion: A Structural Analysis of the Discourse and Narrativization of Transsexual Transition and Christian Conversion”*

**Lori Noël, MA spring 2019**

*“Exhibition of Belief: The Museum Identity of Religious Objects”*.

This project aimed to prove that religious objects can obtain and maintain various identities simultaneously. Through a case study of objects in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and of temples in Montreal, this project argued that methods of display and environment, as well as history and beliefs shape the purpose and identities of the objects. The project concluded with a look at the importance of ethical curating going forward in Canadian museums and galleries.

**Stefanos Singelakis, MA spring 2019**

*“Masculine Identity in Weimar and Nazi Germany”*.

This GRP engaged in an analysis of the formation of Nazi masculinity and asked whether Nazi masculinity was informed by ideas of right and wrong, which were linked to notions of morality. This paper analyzed specific physical and personality traits that were believed to hold moral connotations and were connected to masculine identity. This essay also argued that the Nazi's male role model was drawn from a mythologized version of the WWI German front soldier, which had the effect of marginalizing German Jewish WWI veterans. Finally, it examined Nazi masculinity's complex relationship towards homosexuality and concluded that Nazi men were far from united in their views concerning homosexuals.