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קרן פולברייט קרן חינוך ארצות הברית ישראל - 21490					

FEATURE

RACHEL RUBINSTEIN holds a PhD from Harvard and is currently in the country on a Fulbright Fellowship at Tel Aviv University. (Courtesy)



NATIVE AMERICAN members of the Cowboys and Indian Alliance – ranchers, farmers and indigenous leaders – protest against the Keystone XL pipeline, in Washington last month. (Reuters)

Changing the conversation

A Fulbright scholar, author of a book on Native Americans, plans to bring a more nuanced approach to Israel back to the US

• RIVKAH GINAT

Prof. Rachel Rubinstein has always been fascinated by identity. Her 2010 book, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Literary Imagination*, began as an offshoot of her doctoral dissertation.

"I had initially been interested in exploring Yiddish translations of classic American texts, such as Walt Whitman, but over the course of my research I came upon Yiddish translations of Native American chants. This ended up redirecting my entire project," says Rubinstein, whose book looks at the way American Jewish immigrant identity was influenced by Native American literary works.

Rubinstein, who earned her PhD in American Literature from Harvard in 2003, is currently in Israel on a Fulbright Fellowship. She is spending the year teaching and conducting research

at Tel Aviv University.

Fulbright fellowships give funding for qualified candidates to participate in an international academic exchange program, and are made possible through the US government. The United States-Israel Education Foundation manages Israel's participation in the Fulbright program, which has thus far seen 1,700 Israelis and 1,350 Americans participating in various student and academic staff exchanges.

As a scholar of Jewish literary and cultural production in the Americas, Rubinstein says she became fascinated with the interplay between Jews' feelings of nationalism and indigenism when viewed through a prism of Native American texts. "Immigrants – and Jewish immigrants in particular – often engage in nationalism through translated works," she says.

As both Jews and Native Americans "have been yoked in the Euro-American cultural imagination from the 16th cen-

tury on," Rubinstein feels that Jewish immigrants often connected with views expressed in Native American prose. Such identification extends to other texts as well, such as the popular Yiddish stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

"It's a way to explore nativeness in an entirely different context."

And this unique exploration of the concept of nativism and identity is precisely what Rubinstein seeks to accomplish through her role as an educator. She has been teaching in the departments of American Literature and Jewish Studies at Hampshire College in Massachusetts since 2008, and has served as the dean of academic support and advising since 2011. She describes wanting to "push the boundaries of what we conceptualize as 'native,'" when she began teaching at Tel Aviv University.

"We spent a lot of time [in my courses] reading pieces that were written in the United States, but weren't written in

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THE PATRIARCH Abraham fathered two sons, both of whose descendants claim indigenous status in Israel. Painting by Jozsef Molnar (Hungarian National Gallery)



English, and I argued that they still fit into the category of American literature," Rubinstein says. "My students took for granted that all American literature had to be written in English, and it was interesting to see how breaking this assumption challenged them. For what are the boundaries? What is American literature? What is American identity?"

These questions are salient as they relate to Rubinstein's own research on identity, particularly in regard to immigrant identity. For to which national body of work does an immigrant's work – be it literary or otherwise – belong?

One of the classes Rubinstein taught last semester was titled "Beyond the Melting Pot," which focused on debates about immigration and American identity between immigrants and other ethno-racial communities.

"In the class I had Russian Israelis, American Israelis and a Palestinian student," she says. One of her students stated that she was "a seventh-generation Israeli," but the student had actually grown up in England and came from a transnational and cross-cultural background.

"Even if the students themselves had not immigrated to Israel, many of them were the children of immigrants," says Rubinstein, noting this caused students to develop complex relationships with their own nationality and the concept of what it means to "be Israeli."

Part of Rubinstein's course looked at work written by early 20th-century theorists, who made the argument that "immigrants should not be made to conform or assimilate, so as to be able to maintain their own identity. This proposed vision for America is one that is multilingual, with citizens who had multiple national ties while at the same time having a strong national identity."

Rubinstein shares that this concept was very powerful for her Israeli students, many of whom expressed identifying as "transnational, hybrids, or not fully one thing or another." This is in contrast to her American classes, which she says "are very diverse, many of the students there have never felt 'other' or marginalized. Almost all the students in my Israeli classes had, at one time or another."

The concept of a "melting pot," a metaphor used in America for decades, took on a unique meaning for Rubinstein's Israeli students.

"They talked a lot about the army being Israel's melting pot mechanism. It was described as being

made up of all races, and housing immigrants from all backgrounds. However, viewing the army as a leveling and democratizing experience of inclusion raises the question of exclusion. What of those who don't serve in the army?

"Here we have something that is similar to what is occurring in the United States. In a country where everyone is melted, what of those who don't melt? It's a very, very interesting question."

When asked what surprised her about her Israeli teaching experience, Rubinstein cites the example of beginning one of her courses with a discussion of the seminal diary of a young girl. "Every American schoolchild has read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and in America Anne Frank herself has become an icon of the Holocaust," she says.

Therefore, "as everyone has already read the book," when Rubinstein teaches it, she usually discusses the play or the movie, or other fiction writers who invoked the book in their own writing. However, in Israel, Rubinstein expressed her surprise when "some of my students had never heard of Anne Frank, and none of them had read her diary."

This led Rubinstein to ask what was interesting about the book for Americans, and concurrently, why *The Diary of Anne Frank* is not interesting in an Israeli context.

The above question can be extended to an overarching question of national identity and its expression in popular culture. Rubinstein feels that her TAU students' views on Jewish identity were also very different than that of their American counterparts. "In Israel, Judaism is a state matter, but in America, Jewishness is entirely a matter of self-identity, choice and self-fashioning."

The latter makes the question of choice paramount, and Rubinstein says that if one looks at the recent Pew survey, American Jews are definitely looking for meaning and ritual, though not necessarily in a "traditional way." Young Jewish Americans, she says "are more likely to light candles every Friday night and keep kosher at home than older American Jews. However, this is in tension with other parts of the survey, where you see more and more Jews saying they have no religious affiliation and are becoming more secular."

These modern questions of affiliation and identity are part of what drives Rubinstein forward in her work today, with the inherent tension such questions often involve making her work all the more intriguing. For example, in the last chapter of Rubinstein's book, she

addresses the question of indigenes among Native Americans, which she directly parallels to political discourse regarding Palestinian versus Israeli claims to the Land of Israel.

"Indigenes has become this crucial term. Who is more indigenous? In a certain sense, I looked at the way Native Americans have become this kind of authenticating audience to provide an answer to this question," she says.

And answer they did. In December of last year the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) issued a statement formally supporting the American Studies Association's (ASA) boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions. However, NAISA wrote its own separate statement to that of the ASA, explaining that it joined the boycott due to the "infringement of the academic freedom of Indigenous Palestinian academics and intellectuals... who are denied fundamental freedoms of movement, expression, and assembly, which we uphold."

Rubinstein points out that NAISA expressed its support of the boycott "on the basis of solidarity around indigenes, but also – unlike ASA – stressed that they encourage respectful disagreement and debate."

However, this marks one of the first times that Native American scholars have come together to make an organized statement about the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The relevance of nationalism and indigenes in Israeli politics makes Rubinstein's work all the more compelling.

She and her family will be returning to America – and Hampshire College – in July. She says that she has "never felt empowered to teach Israeli literature or culture," but that she feels that she'll be able to return to America and say: "Here is what's happening in Israel, and here are some really interesting texts."

Rubinstein hopes to be able to develop courses about Israeli literature, culture and film, and also to be able to enhance the dialogue regarding Israel on American college campuses. "The discourse [in college campuses] about Israel seems to harden into predictable positions, which are neither particularly nuanced nor well-informed. I'd like to try to change the conversation, and make it both more complex and more thoughtful."

And with the attention to detail that Rubinstein puts into both her research and teaching, there is no doubt that she will be able to add immeasurably to these conversations.