Diversity and the Jews

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Dr. Jane Mushabac, Professor of English at City University of New York, has received a 2014 CUNY Diversity Projects Development Fund grant. She's co-author of A Short and Remarkable History of New York City (Fordham University Press and the Museum of the City of New York), and her writing has been translated into Russian, German, Bulgarian, and Turkish. Her fiction has won awards from the Mellon Foundation and Leapfrog Press. This article appears in issue 20 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Book tours are common—authors travel from one place to another to do readings and talks to promote their new books. But story tours? I realize that's what I've been doing, giving readings of a story which I wrote in Ladino and translated into English, "Pasha: Ruminations of David Aroughetti." The story, published in Midstream in English in 2005, and in Sephardic Horizons in Ladino in 2011, is about a Turkish Jew in the early 1900s in the fast-deteriorating Ottoman Empire and then in New York. When we meet him, this character has virtually nothing. Yet ironically he's adopted the mindset of a harsh arrogant pasha—the Turkish word means a high-ranking public official, or someone who acts like one. In the spring of 2014, I did eight readings of the story in six weeks on a variety of CUNY campuses; before that, over the years, I'd done ten similar events in California, Massachusetts, and New York.

My CUNY readings were part of my project, "Spanish, Mizrahi, and Black Jews: Diversity and the Jews," supported by a Diversity Fund grant that allowed me time away from an intensive teaching schedule. I went to Brooklyn, Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens, and it was exhilarating being welcomed on campuses in New York all nicely reachable by subway or bus. At Brooklyn College, for instance, I read at a symposium co-sponsored by fourteen departments including Judaic Studies, Puerto Rican and Latino Studies, Modern Languages and Literatures,

Women and Gender Studies, and the office of the President.

At City College I performed for a theatre history course; at Baruch for a course on the Ottoman Empire; at Queensborough for the Liberal Arts Academy and Creative Writing Club; at Bronx Community at the CUNY Language Immersion Program; at City Tech (my campus) for two writing courses; and at the Americas Society for the Latin American Jewish Studies Association /CUNY Academy of the Humanities conference, where I read in Ladino.

The goal of my project was to counter the assumption that ethnic or racial groups are monolithic. People forget that a group with a particular label is actually highly diverse. Asians, for instance, may be Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese; or Hispanics, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian, Dominican or Filipino. Similarly, Jews are not always white, nor do they all have names like Bloomberg or Goldstein; individuals named Rodquigue, Aghassi, Aroughetti, Sulieman, Gourgey, Papo and Abravaya may also be Jews.

One might ask, however, why encourage a multi-ethnic awareness through the lens of Judaism? For one thing, Jewish diversity is a metaphor for diversity at large. But also, CUNY students today don't know much about Jews, yet are curious about them. Although, for instance, Jewish students were once a large majority at City College, today Jews are a small minority of the nearly half million students at CUNY, and reading a short story about a Spanish-Turkish-American Jew opens students to fresh experience they haven't encountered before. The Sephardic experience happens to be one with a wide demographic reference. In this case, it's Turkish, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, Jewish, immigrant and thoroughly American, a mix of the old country and the modern world with juxtapositions of the cosmopolitan and the provincial, the underdog and the power-monger. And in that mix, as everywhere, a good story is about being desperate for dignity.

CUNY students themselves represent so many ethnicities and are from so many countries all over the world that they are eager for new ways of viewing their own histories. In general, I find, people are eager for breaking down the doors of cultural boundaries. I should add that as a teacher of writing and literature, I'm interested in the way awareness of ethnicity crossing unexpected cultural boundaries encourages readers to think in new ways about family dynamics, identity, gender patterns, and even music. Hearing my story, students of diverse backgrounds see their own families in a larger context and model the power of such discovery for their own thinking and writing.

The Hispanic elements of my fiction, especially the fact of my writing this story originally in Judeo-Spanish, has made my project particularly attractive to a category of colleges such as City Tech and Bronx Community College that are known as Hispanic-Serving Institutions because of their high percentage of Latino/a students. For Hispanic students in general, the story of the Spanish Jews, who kept speaking Spanish in Turkey and elsewhere for five hundred years after their expulsion from Spain, opens new doors for listeners to understand their own Spanish backgrounds. Most of my readings have been in English, but I generally read excerpts in Ladino for the shock of recognition students have when they understand it.

“Pasha” essentially is a story about manhood in the face of harsh prohibitions. How does a young man in Turkey survive—with basically nothing, no money or education—when he’s a second son prohibited from even touching the violin his older brother will inherit along with the prospect of becoming a musician? David Aroughetti’s prospects in Turkey are especially bad because his own father can barely scrape together a living, and his whole community is struggling with poverty. Then too, after he emigrates, as he asserts himself and assimilates to early twentieth-century New York City, selling cigarettes on the streets, for instance, what are the personal and emotional costs and losses? People from all countries face similar pressures, continually calculating the costs of moving ahead, and the strains in relationships between men and women, and parents and children, that accompany a reordering of the past and a dash to the future. Perhaps nowhere are these questions muddled through, avoided, or confronted more than on the campuses of City University, where students from over two hundred different countries study together to promote their future. The questions remain for all immigrants and migrants trying to make their peace with traditional backgrounds and the open question of the future; they need to find not only an identity, but the relationships and community that allow them the dignity that every human being craves.

My CUNY readings were exhilarating because of the array of differences in the way the audiences of students and faculty responded, and the pleasure of the unexpected. A common reaction was, “I’ve never heard of Jews that speak Spanish.” An unusual one was when a young woman, having listened, wanted to talk about her family’s life in Sarayevo. A Latino student in a white button down shirt thoughtfully asked, “Did you notice that despite who this character is, and what we expect from him, he finds a way to rebel in America”? A handsome tall dark-skinned student said “I have to tell you that the Pasha story describes exactly how things are today in Ivory Coast.”

A stylish young Jamaican woman, who grew up in a poor Kingston neighborhood in a zinc hut right where a gully flooded regularly during storms, wrote, “I think you hit it dead on. All we are searching for is ‘identity’ to find who we are in the world and what we are meant to do. It really is a journey. There’s a huge misconception that you are born knowing who you are and what you want to do and that is completely false. Life is about discovering who you are in this chaos of a world.” A student named Remy said about the tense and aggressive main character, “I wished he could smile, enjoy life a little.” Another student said her father is Russian, her mother Chinese, and the story reminded her of how she likes to listen to Chinese music with her mother. In the course on Ottoman history a student asked if the main character’s arrogant pasha personality was an emblem of the whole problem of the Ottoman Empire at that time. A student in a writing class brought up Venezuela to say, “Some political leaders adopt pasha approaches to governing.”

Kimberly La Force, a former student of mine from St. Lucia, currently in a philosophy course for her graduate program at Columbia University, brought up an illuminating point after the reading she attended. She wrote me that the main character’s aggressive assumption that he is superior to others should be considered with an eye to the error of “dichotomous thinking.” Quoting the contemporary feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, Kimberly said the problem with thinking in dichotomies like male/female, or mind/body, is that it “hierarchizes polarized terms” making one “the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart.” Indeed, by the end, the story restores the subordinated essence to its proper value, in a way our pasha does not expect.

I’m reminded of how students in Professor Carole Harris’s literature course last year talked about the dynamics of power in the way individuals treat each other. After reading the story, students considered “Pasha” characters in the short stories of the Southern American writer Flannery O’Connor, the Dominican writer Junot Díaz, and the Irish writer James Joyce, and noted the way literature written “inside a community” encourages discussion of difficulties in the very cultural groups that set up harsh dichotomies as social codes.

I’m a writer, a person who likes to stand to tell a story. We live in a world where the sight of text has often prompted the rejoinder “tl;dr”— too long, didn’t read. Perhaps the oral telling of a story can slow us down in the right way, and as we agree to be there for that thirty minutes or hour, we re-orient our sense of time. In the classroom at the top of the stairs in the Bronx, when I handed a copy of my

story to a student who wanted to read along, I heard a groan because it looked long. When I said it will take me just thirty minutes to read it aloud, we were suddenly okay. Oh, half an hour. Literature builds bridges, takes down walls.

Listening to stories is worth something. The very sound of a story being told takes hold in the body. Peter Elbow, a well-known inspiring writing teacher whom I met at a recent Modern Language Association national convention, has said that language resides in the mouth and the ear, and meaning resides in the body. We need stories, music—that violin that the second son was not allowed to touch. I think the Diversity Fund should sponsor fiction-readings all over CUNY for writers of all backgrounds.

In May I began the second part of my Diversity project; I'm doing oral history interviews of Jews from different countries and neighborhoods of the world, for instance, Tunisia, Morocco, African-American Harlem, Bulgaria, Iraq, Israel, Turkey, India, China, Yemen. After that, to be continued.

Notes:

Jane Mushabac's short story appeared in her English translation, "Pasha: Ruminations of David Aroughetti," under the pen name S. Manot in Midstream LI.4 Yiddish/Ladino issue (July/Aug. 2005): 41-44; and in her original Ladino, "Pasha: Pensamientos de David Aroughetti," under the pen name Shalach Manot in Sephardic Horizons online journal 1.4 [http://www.sephardichorizons.org/Volume1/Issue4/Pasha.html] (Fall, 2011).

City Tech is New York City College of Technology, a college of the City University of New York located in Downtown Brooklyn.