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On Integrating Jewish Literatures into Teaching and Research

The question that has been posed for us is both operational and strategic; beyond its immediacy, it goes to the core of how academic disciplines are organized and structured. Not too subtly, it also underlies a more substantive issue: how are those who produce such texts visualized and evaluated within a socio-political system that ultimately decides on their inclusion or exclusion.

The following are some of the questions that mandate consideration while pondering a strategy to integrate Jewish literatures in core programs. To begin with, what are “Jewish literatures”: Those written by Jews and/or by anyone on a Jewish topic? Written in one of two specific Jewish languages, namely Yiddish and Judeo-español / Judezmo? Is Hebrew literature by definition Jewish literature?¹ While too broad a topic for this venue, I would like to share several points that, I believe, will motivate a discussion and lead to the requested strategy for including Jewish literatures in German academia. I draft these pages as an Argentine-Jew (a unified version of multiple identities), a faculty member in a U.S. public university who has been teaching undergraduate and graduate courses on Latin-American Jewish literature, and has included Latin American-Jewish texts in mainstream Latin American courses, as well as in seminars on Argentine literature. Such courses are not unusual in the U.S. academy, as a sample list of Latin American-Jewish courses taught by colleagues and listed on the LAJSA website illustrates.² They are part of established and sustained research interests that can also be seen in the broader context of multi-ethnic and diversity agendas. Courses, minors and majors in Hebrew literature, taught in Hebrew and in English, as well as multidisciplinary Jewish studies programs are a regular feature in the U.S. From this perspective, the anomaly is the absence of such offerings elsewhere.

In order to focus centrally on Jewish literatures, I shall leave out Hebrew literature, as it has been for decades a *national* literature, much as any other literature that folds territory and language into a definition of self and nation. Hebrew literature is a product of Israel, whether written in that language by Jews

1 Cf. Hanna Wirth-Nesher's introduction (“Defining the Indefinable: What is Jewish Literature?”) to her edited volume, *What is Jewish Literature?* Philadelphia/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994. 3–12.

2 <http://www.lajsa.org/resources/syllabi-and-course-descriptions/> (24 November 2019).

or by non-Jews (Israeli literature encompasses other languages as well). For their part, Jewish literatures exist in any number of languages spoken by Jews. Moreover, Judaism / Jewishness / Jewish cultures are at the same time local and portable; they possess roots but these roots can be and oftentimes are taken on the road, whether due to persecutions, forced or desirable migrations, or less dramatic causes. The Jewish component – even when seen linked through tradition to Israel as the original site – is perennially in transit. Nevertheless, as history continues to demonstrate, being Jewish is integral to an individual and a community in search of place; it can and does anchor itself in varying landscapes, subject, as all newcomers are, to welcoming cultures, religious adscriptions and rulers that allow for its settlement, survival, and further development. A development that then acquires the very taste of that land without necessarily relinquishing what it brings forth from prior beliefs and cultural tenets, as well as from other sites. Life in a shifting diaspora leads to multi-layered textured experiences. Without in any way disregarding the negativity of expulsions, exile, and migration, we know that wondering across the earth's surface yields the benefits and richness of cross-pollination, of adaptation, and of varying degrees of acculturation that, in turn, leads to richer, nuanced, identities. 1492, for instance, transformed Spanish Jews into carriers of the culture from which they were expelled. Nuanced identities, rooted as they are in a borderless view of the world, call into question any platform that repulses difference while entrenching itself in its nationalist uniqueness. Literature and the arts are responsive to a similar dynamic process.

At first, Jewish literatures, when seen as a Diaspora by-product, are by their very nature, transnational. They may be read as such even after being incorporated into the respective national canons. What determines their place is, as always, who their readers are and how they are read. An ideological compass affixes their place in the literary system. What is transnational cannot be pigeonholed in a single category. Being multiple, and this is a defining feature of Jewish letters, is to cultivate difference and heterodoxy.

In the case at hand, let us remember that to be born Jewish in the Diaspora does not grant citizenship nor nationality – an attribute and a right given by the State. This in itself may be one of the stumbling blocks for those who crave to organize literature according to national boundaries. Jewish literatures are, in a sense, 'marginal': they are not part and parcel of a sole territory, nor do they possess a single language; they are integral to *all* national literatures. The key linguistic exception is, of course, Yiddish, a supra language-literature-culture that hovered over Eastern and Central Europe and whose origins go back to the time where elsewhere Spanish was emerging as a separate language. The continuity of Yiddish was decimated along with its speakers during World War II,

and now finds a haven in small clusters and in academia, where Sholem Aleichem and Peretz are read along Isaac Bashevis Singer, notably a regular staple in American literature courses. Still, its tones, traditions and the cultures Yiddish intimately carries are recognizable among writers who possess a limited knowledge and fluency in the language: a cognate whose echoes are found in Kafka, for instance, in Woody Allen and Philip Roth, in Germán Rozenmacher and Mario Szichman. Though not spoken by German Jews, Yiddish, that in time developed its own linguistic peculiarities, tones, variations and personalities, was initially forged out of a high dosage of the German language – a fact that may serve to elicit curiosity within German academia. After all, in many ways, including its almost total demise, the Yiddish world is part of this region's history, and to generate curiosity about it is, in itself, a viable strategy to achieve what we now seek.

Thematically, Jewish literatures have a varying repertoire depending on when and where they are produced; on the patterns of integration and the threat of antisemitism; on how multiple identities could be publicly exercised or shunned. Jews, like any other minority, but at times more than others, are 'the other', those who need to shed identifiable markers (starting oftentimes with the names) in order to become acclimatized or learn to live as one who shares citizenship and nationality but is still quite-not-the-same as members of the dominant culture.

Jewish literatures, by virtue of their multiplicity, may embody a response to monolithic power. At the very least – and clearly this is *not* applicable to all such practices – they are (fortunately and appropriately) bothersome, irritating, probing, questioning, accusatory of a status quo (Kafka is probably the loftiest example, having written, moreover, in a language into which he was not born but out of a tradition that cut across his very utterance). To be an 'other' cognizant of difference does not mean not to be part of a nation, its traditions, history, lore and expectations; it means to be able to see, understand, and analyze things from across the same street we share with all others. From within, then, but from a different angle. As for the majority, it is up to it to learn how to live with the different, particularly in a century that, as expected, is defined by mass migrations. There is no purity in nations, no pure cultures, no essential, immutable identities. All are in perpetual transition and transformation, constantly subject to change. A singular national literature is an imposed fiction that obliterates pre-existing difference, an ideological construct that defies and negates the composition of its parts. For those who focus exclusively on national literatures, the multilingual diversity of Jewish letters has to be made known and interest in alternate views of the world brought to the fore. Desire for the unknown and the unexplored has to trace a recognizable signature. Without equating literary phe-

nomena but bearing in mind possible strategies to achieve recognition and acceptance, weren't 'the real marvelous' and 'magical realism', in their variations – beginning with Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) and incrementally through García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and beyond – responsible for the West's attention on Latin America? (Of course, couched also in addition to the Cuban revolution and other political developments).

Cultural diversity and plurality – as diverse as the sites where these letters are written – are some of the major aspects to which Jewish literatures call attention. Contrary to a literary melting pot that obliterates the richness of diversity, difference accentuates the ability to identify a culture's density, it enriches what is seen as a national culture. It also facilitates recognizing the constituent layers that forged it, a recognition that, in turn, promotes acceptance of texts and, more significantly, of those who find themselves in those texts.

A literary text worth its salt is disquieting as it also carries the inscribed memories of its mother tongue, of a personal history – a tongue and a history that may or may not be fully translatable into another language. It can be shared, nevertheless, as an ongoing gift that stems from Babel: a dialogue across millennia and through cultural differences.

As for those who insist on monolingual national literatures, it may be useful to recall that in order to reach such an organizational canonical state, it is necessary to identify that the point of arrival began elsewhere, that no one is ever in, or from, a single place. In addressing 'national literature,' that which does not fit that rarefied and censored category must be known and incorporated. Jewish literatures from across the globe offer such an access. They can be read as spokes of the wheel that we view as a literary system, a system whose center is everywhere.

To foster doubt and cultivate uncertainty is a healthy practice to confront authoritarian models – be they in academic circles or in world politics. So is mining the multiple and the diverse, as Jewish letters continue to practice. While the coast may be in sight – a common motif for the persecuted –, there is no guarantee that the landing is assured, nor is permanence in a new found land guaranteed. Settled and also in transit, inquisitive and forever questioning: a useful recipe to craft letters and learn from the ingredients that continue to shape Jewish literatures –the ingredients that constitute renewed and enriched versions of the *Literature* we call home; another name, perhaps, for the library that Borges called the Universe.

Bibliography

Wirth-Nesher, Hanna. "Defining the Indefinable: What is Jewish Literature?", *What is Jewish Literature?* Philadelphia/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994. 3–12.