



Beyond Diaspora: The Off Home in Jewish Literature from Latin America and Israel

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Beyond Diaspora:
The Off Home in Jewish Literature from Latin America and Israel

A dissertation presented
by
Lana Jaffe Neufeld
to
The Department of Comparative Literature

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Comparative Literature

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Abstract

“Beyond Diaspora: The Off Home in Jewish Literature from Latin America and Israel” fills a gap in scholarship regarding our understanding of and language to articulate identity construction. It attempts to decenter the structures of belonging, especially in the context of displacement. This historical moment has witnessed increasing global migration stemming from religious or political persecution, poverty, genocide, war, climate change and related environmental catastrophes, among other forces beyond one’s control, not to mention the pursuit of opportunity of one’s own volition. The off home, inspired by Svetlana Boym’s “off-modern,” attempts to articulate the estrangement from and of one’s home and one’s place, personally and collectively. Current scholarship tends to position subjectivity as *either* completely “at home” in the *homeland*, or otherwise wholly exilic or diasporic, bearing a deeply-rooted desire to *return home*. The off home positions *home* and *diaspora* (and others forms of displacement) on a more nuanced spectrum.

The chapters intentionally chart the off home first in terms of the psychological experience, then the linguistic or interpersonal one, and finally the physical one. The first chapter explores the off home through the depiction of psychological disruption of order. The characters experience “off” modes of thinking, such as amnesia, obsessions, delusions, and even possible schizophrenia, which pose a challenge to the concept of order itself. This resistance to

order allows the characters to find release from imposed markers of identity, leading them to reevaluate their sense of belonging in relation to ideas of home and homeland. The second chapter works through the “off” use of language, portraying strategic uses of languages (Ladino and Spanish, Hebrew, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic), in order to (de)construct paradigms of belonging and identity. The characters resist the hegemony of a dominant language, even while at the same time acknowledging that there is one. The third chapter portrays the off home in its most concrete or physical manifestation, with emphasis on the characters’ interactions with physical structures of home and nationality—houses, passports, visas, diaries, and homelands themselves—that are “off.” The off home proves these physical structures to be the most unstable, and the characters ultimately reject the dependance on physical modes of representation to interpret or recognize their identities that cannot be adequately encapsulated by romanticized categories of subjectivity. This chapter thus also thematizes nonresolution as key to the off home. The coda, rather than “conclude” the dissertation, presents future avenues of exploration and other frameworks in which the off home is a useful and necessary concept. It features Indian anthropologist Amitav Ghosh’s novel *Gun Island*, which portrays many levels and layers of displacement related to climate change, an understudied but increasingly relevant cause of migration and loss of home.

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Introduction: Beyond Homeland and Diaspora: Introduction to the Off Home

The Off Home

In this dissertation, I propose the concept of the *off home*, which challenges the concept of “home” and the displaced subject’s presupposed attachment to it by demythologizing its romanticization as a center and foundation for identity construction. The concept of the *off home* intervenes in the space between diaspora and homeland, which create false dichotomies of uprootedness and instability in relation to comfort, security, and belonging. The off home proposes an alternative to the demand for a center—cultural, religious, national, historical. Nevertheless, it does not advocate a marginal or diasporic positioning. Instead, the off home embraces the fluidity of those undefined spaces not in between but beyond these polarities. The off home recognizes that after displacement from or loss of “home,” contemporary or historical, personal or collective, “home”—if it ever truly existed—can never be recovered or reconciled. The off home framework for identity construction and the politics of belonging bypasses the supremacy of the often-glorified concept of “home,” real or imagined, allowing for a subjectivity untethered from the often inexistent but assumed relationship to, from, within, or against a center.

I use the prefix “off” in the spirit of Svetlana Boym’s theorization of the “off-modern.”

Boym explains:

[t]he preposition “off” is a product of linguistic error, popular etymology and fuzzy logic. It developed from the preposition “of,” signifying belonging as in “being part of,” with the addition of the extra “f,” an emphatic marker of distancing. The “off” in “off-modern” designates both the belonging to the critical project of modernity and its edgy excess. “Off” suggests a dimension of time and human action that is unusual or potentially off-putting. . . . [I]t describes something too spontaneous (off-the-cuff, off-handed, off the record) or too edgy (off the wall), verging on the obscene (off-color) or not in sync with the pace (off-

beat). . . . Most importantly, “off” is not a marker of margins but a delimitation of a broad space for a new choreography of future possibilities. (Boym 3-4)

The off-modern is daring approach to a conventionalized perspective, signaling a new way of interpreting the world and its processes beyond modernity and postmodernity. In this same way, the off home, too, advances and is itself an innovative way of thinking. The off home is part of but at the same time achieves a critical distance from the concepts of homeland and diaspora, center and margin, and other dichotomic and controlling markers of identity. The off home proposes to estrange these concepts and resist their hegemony, changing the way we understand them and offering an alternate path that does not reject them but conceives beyond them.

In their approach to literature, the authors I discuss are often, like the terms Boym lists, off-putting, off-color, off the wall, and off beat in the name of sociopolitical and cultural freedom and self-determination. Unlike Boym, however, I choose not to write the off home as one term made up of two words separated by a hyphen; instead, I include unfilled space between “off” and “home,” like a blank canvas. One word, “offhome,” does not leave space for the unexplored potential that the term demands. For the same reason, punctuation is equally restrictive. For example, while Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the diasporic writer to be “in the no-man’s land of the hyphen” (Rollins 234), I argue that the hyphen suggests a concrete, limited, and limiting space between “home” and not-“home” against which the off home writer, as opposed to the conventionally diasporic one, stands in contrast. An ellipsis would likewise fail, suggesting a negative, a lack, which is similarly inappropriate to express the spirit of the off home. Any attempt to punctuate the off home negates the very adventure¹ it proposes. The off home is

¹ I use adventure in the way the Boym uses it in *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (2010). From the Latin *ad venire*, an event about to happen, “Adventure opens up porous spaces of border zones, thresholds, bridges, and doors. It is not about experiences of the sublime but of the liminal that expand our potentialities” (Boym, *Another* 6). See Chapter 1 for more on Boym’s use of “adventure.”

about that space to veer off course, to estrange the standard, and to discover a constantly evolving space whose meaning is yet to be revealed.

Diaspora and displacement themselves are not exclusively modern phenomena. It is true, nevertheless, that the world is an increasingly mobile space. It could even be argued that global society invents “diasporas” that in turn activate a relationship with a “homeland” for the displaced subjects, who then live henceforward perpetually out-of-place. In our ever-mobile world, according to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, this mobility is even more attributable to the postmodern than the modern: “[d]iaspora becomes associated with a thoroughly postmodern state of mind arising from the circumstances of rootlessness, nomadism, and dispersal” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Karp 7). Thus, we might conclude that, in addition to diasporas emerging from persecution and violence, as was that traditional schemata activated with the mention of diasporas, we also might view diaspora as a symptom of global modernity or postmodernity. To that end, the conventional binary framework of diaspora-homeland is no longer entirely applicable or relevant to the transnational flow of people and cultures across space and place that is more nuanced and elaborate than scholarship has developed the language to convey.

These migratory trends and the resultant surge in such fields as diaspora and migration studies have given rise to the academization of the politics of belonging and of home and the need to name that sense of liminality regarding identity and belonging. If we are referring to this liminality particularly in the context of displacement (especially diaspora), then this phenomenon has existed at least as long as displacement has, which is to say, for thousands of years. The contemporary application of this dissertation, then, is its intervention in this articulation, arguing that the current language we have to conceptualize identity is inadequate, especially when

framed in such binary terms as *diasporic* or *in the homeland*. Through a series of close readings from Jewish literature from Latin America and Israel, I elaborate the off home as a concept that addresses this gap in our understanding and our language vis-à-vis migration, belonging, home, and yearning to “return,” consequently responding to global and local processes of dislocation, dispersal, transculturation, and adaptation.

Methodology

This dissertation works principally with fiction—mostly prose, some semi-autobiographical—from Israel and Latin America, from the 1980s and forward. The texts this dissertation studies are by Jewish Latin American and Israeli authors, which raises the questions of what it means to be a Jewish, Latin American, or Israeli writer: that is to ask, for example, regarding Jewish literature, if all literature written by Jewish authors is Jewish literature. In the reverse formulation, is Jewish literature only written by Jewish authors?

As Saul Zaritt observes regarding the indeterminate and imprecise cataloguing of “Jewish” authors and their works, “[w]hen readers, publishers, critics, or writers label a text ‘Jewish,’ either by dint of linguistic choice or by some other identitarian marker, they invite a host of overlapping discourses” (Zaritt, *Jewish* 26). For example, there are scholars who believe that “Jewish” can be a theme as much as an ethnoreligious delineation. Thematically, thus, Jewish has come, for some, to symbolize prototypical otherness. In analyzing non-Jewish Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva’s words from 1924 that “[i]n this Christian world, all poets are Jews,” Clémence Boulouque concludes, “Tsvetaeva’s verses turn the Jew into a metaphor of the absolute other” (Boulouque 7). By contrast, Yuri Slezkine, in *The Jewish Century*, concludes

that “Jewish” means “urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible” (Slezkine 1). He expounds:

[t]he principal religion of the Modern Age is nationalism, a faith that represents the new society as the old community and allows newly urbanized princes and peasants to feel at home abroad. Every state must be a tribe; every tribe must have a state. Every land is promised, every language Adamic, every capital Jerusalem, and every people chosen (and ancient). The Age of Nationalism, in other words, is about every nation becoming Jewish. (Slezkine 1)

Unlike Tsvetaeva’s claim that “Jewish” connotes “other,” for Slezkine, “Jewish” becomes all-encompassingly modern, adaptable, and successful. Speaking to both of these attitudes and the positive and negative possibilities of thematizing “Jewish” identity, Zaritt writes:

“Jewish” can connote the stereotype of the spectral other, particularly of Europe—the wandering Jew or a cabal of Jewish financiers; in both antisemitic and philosemitic terms, the Jew can figure as *the* modern, cosmopolitan subject. (Zaritt, *Jewish* 26)

In this sense, the Jewish “otherness” can be seen in both advantageous and more sinister contexts, but, in both scenarios, it evokes a particular boundary between “Jewish” characteristics, whatever they might be, on the social periphery and those of the majority with its own institutions of norms and values.

To offer another opinion, Adam Kirsch, in *Who Wants to Be a Jewish Writer*, addresses Jewish author Cynthia Ozick’s desire to be considered a Jewish author despite her claim that:

“[t]here have been no Jewish literary giants in Diaspora. There are no major works of Jewish imaginative genius written in any Gentile language, sprung out of any Gentile culture.” By this, Ozick does not mean that there have been no great Jewish writers in non-Jewish languages: she knows Kafka and Bellow as well as anyone. Rather, she meant that when Jews write in non-Jewish languages, they no longer possess a specifically Jewish imagination. (Kirsch 11)

For Ozick, Jewish content is inextricably tied to a Jewish language—an idea with which Kirsch explicitly disagrees (Kirsch 12) and which becomes a problematic assumption in its own right.²

Representing yet another viewpoint, Kirsch also points to the case of Rosa Luxemburg, who, despite being Jewish, was “hostile to Jewishness” (Kirsch 147). At the opposite end of the spectrum lies Argentine non-Jewish author Jorge Luis Borges, who identified with Judaism and even in many ways considered himself a Jewish writer. Borges appreciated the liminal status of Jewish writers as both inside and outside the culture(s) from which they wrote, in the same way that he believed that Latin American writers wrote from a marginal position in relation to the Western European tradition. Borges cited sociologist Thorstein Veblen as placing Jews in a unique position to “‘innovar en la cultura occidental’” (“‘innovate in Western culture’”) precisely because of this liminal status (Borges 137).³ Borges extended this idea to his own circumstances, believing that “los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general, estamos en una situación análoga” (“we Argentines, South Americans in general, are in an analogous situation”) (Borges 137). All of this is to say that there is no simple definition of a Jewish author.

Kirsch writes, regarding what it means to be a Jewish writer in America, “It is because American Jewishness is no longer a simple fact of language, community, or belief that it has become a matter of feeling” (Kirsch 18). I argue that this extends beyond the American community or American writers to the global Jewish (or “Jewish”) community; the way in which Jews identify with their Jewishness is not monolithic, so identifying Jewish literature is similarly

² In “A *Taytsh* Manifesto: Yiddish, Translation, and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture,” Zaritt argues against labeling languages as “Jewish” without considering the full range of implications included in such an etiquette. Zaritt claims, “The act of naming a language practice as ‘Jewish’ erases the complexity of the moment of cultural contact” (Zaritt, “Taytsh” 187). Regarding hyphenated “Jewish” languages such as “Judeo-Spanish,” Zaritt argues that the hyphen in such language names enforces the status of Jews as outsiders while ignoring “the never fully commensurate yet overlapping communities that surround the modern Jewish speaking subject (Zaritt, “*Taytsh*” 190).

³ Throughout the dissertation, all translations, unless indicated otherwise, are my own.

oblique. The authors about whom I write in this dissertation are authors who are culturally or religiously Jewish and who explicitly identify Jewish themes in and influences on their writing, whether or not they categorize themselves by the somewhat arbitrary moniker of a “Jewish” author or writer.

Just as “Jewish” is a loose or arbitrary modifier, “Latin American” also comes under debate as a fixed or finite characterization. I have chosen texts from four countries of the Spanish-speaking region known as Latin America—from Argentina, Guatemala, Mexico, and Uruguay—that I believe represent a trend in Jewish literature produced across the region and portray the off home approach to the construction of identity. Israeli literature, though also diverse and indeterminate as a category, is somewhat more contained as a classification—in part due to the country’s size and to its more recent establishment, but also for many of the same reasons listed above. I have incorporated texts from authors across an array of cultures within Israeli society, including both those of Ashkenazi (of European descent) and Mizrahi (of Middle Eastern and North African descent) heritages, and from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Significantly, the authors, texts, and characters that this dissertation analyzes, their “categories” notwithstanding, reveal another integral off home characteristic: regardless of their categorizations, these writers’ literary and personal identities are also “off” in that they do not accommodate essentializations of “Jewish,” “Latin American,” “Israeli,” or other national, regional, religious, gendered, or generic classifications and ethnicizations. Furthermore, placing Latin American and Israeli Jewish literature, two corpuses not conventionally paired in comparative context, in conversation with each other has proven particularly illuminating because of the similar and yet contrasting status of Jews and Judaism within and between these societies. As a point of divergence, it is worth considering institutions of power and their effect

on and reflection through the literature written within and against them. In Latin America, Jews are a minority; in Israel, Jews are the majority. Both in Israel and Latin America, Ashkenazi Jews tend to enjoy a higher power status than Sephardic or Mizrahi Jews, a tension that plays out both in Latin American and Israeli literature.

As points of convergence, Latin America and Israel exist amid a backdrop of recent and ongoing political violence that influences the current sociopolitical climate and, by consequence, its emergent literature. Moreover, Latin America and Israel have provided in the last century and a half a new “home” for hundreds of thousands of Jews fleeing the antisemitic violence that spread across Europe in the late nineteenth century and especially surrounding World War II in the twentieth. Against this backdrop, Jews from Europe fled to Latin America *en masse* at various points beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century (though there is much documented Jewish immigration taking place considerably earlier, such as from Imperial Spain and Portugal, as Jews, many of them *conversos*, fled the antisemitic Inquisition). Jews immigrated to Latin America from Eastern Europe fleeing pogroms and later the Holocaust, joined by Jews from throughout Europe as well as Asia and North Africa. Sephardic Jews, many coming from areas of the Ottoman Empire to which they scattered after the Spanish expulsion, faced a similar increase in antisemitic threats, and, as Teresa Porzecanski notes, among other attractions, for many Ottoman Jews, “una afinidad idiomática para los ladino-parlantes[] propulsó la intensa inmigración a este continente” (“a linguistic affinity for Ladino speakers propelled the intense immigration to this continent”) (Porzecanski, *Jewish Immigrants*, “Anthropological Perspective”).

Israel (formerly Palestine) was also an anticipated haven for Jewish refugees and immigrants. Some came for religious ideological reasons while others chased Zionist principles,

but especially in the twentieth century, Palestine/Israel became a destination for those Jews fleeing antisemitic persecution—once again, from pogroms and the Holocaust. Moreover, after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, many Jews living contentedly in Arab countries of the Middle East found themselves unwelcome in their home countries and forced to leave, often suddenly. Many of these Jews relocated to Israel (as well as to other regions, such as the U.S. and Latin America). In Israel, these Mizraḥi Jews faced discrimination, especially as their story challenged the Ashkenazi-centered narrative of Statehood and appeared to align too closely with the declared Arab “enemy” of Zionism.

Immigrants to Palestine/Israel and to Latin America, hoping to establish peaceful lives free of persecution, found themselves facing much of the same violence that they thought they had left behind—but now in a different form. In Latin America, antisemitism was rampant, and, at various points and depending on the country, Jews were wrapped up in and persecuted by the repressive regimes that they encountered in their new “home.” The Jewish collective experience in Latin America has been profoundly affected by a cascade of lived violence and trauma, largely in the form of dictatorships (for example, the 1976-1983 dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina and the 1973-1990 dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile) or bloody civil wars (for example, the Guatemalan Civil War from 1960-1996 or the Salvadoran Civil War from 1979-1992). Additionally, much of the instability in the region stemmed from foreign influence, such as U.S. intervention in regional politics. Soviet-born immigrant to Argentina and later to Israel, Jacobo Timerman published *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número* (*Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, 1981), which details the author’s experience as a detainee in Argentina during the Videla regime. In Israel, Mizraḥi Jews, as mentioned previously, were often viewed as enemies in the context of the ever-present Arab-Israeli conflict that affected and continues to

affect all aspects of Israeli life. In both the Latin American and Israeli sociopolitical contexts, the new “home” often replicated, in various forms, the very conditions that those fleeing had hoped to leave behind them in their “homelands.”

Globally and historically, Jews who have been fleeing persecution, a theme rampant throughout Jewish history, jumped from diaspora to diaspora, and were constantly forced to reevaluate the conditions of “center,” “home,” and “homeland.” Such mobility does not even consider those who moved around for opportunity or simply seeking new experiences. Regardless, the Jewish experience as reflected through the Latin American and Israeli literature examined in this dissertation exemplifies an urgent call to reapproach these concepts. As a theoretical frame, a fluid, adaptable perspective to the question of categorization proves much closer to the reality of such displaced subjects after leaving or losing “home.” Jewish life itself has been historically mobile. The tethering to an often-imaginary center is less and less tenable, and this trend extends well beyond the Jewish world. The off home is a profoundly Jewish concept, but also a global one, rooted in a diasporic consciousness but at the same time a yearning to move away from the shackles of such a mindset that places the displaced subject (often metaphorized as “Jewish”) as always-already uprooted and striving to reach an unattainable “homeland,” whether in geospatial, messianic, religious, or figurative terms. This dissertation offers the Jewish experience in Israel and Latin America, two seemingly disparate contexts that yet converge in illustrative ways, as a model for reimagining the displaced subject’s relationship to place, space, and the idea of home.

Chapter Structure

The first of its three chapters—“Thinking Beyond: The Off Home as Dis-order in Zeruya Shalev, Angelina Muñiz-Huberman, and Ricardo Feierstein”—works through the off home in terms of the psychological effects of displacement. It approaches such a concept by analyzing the depictions of characters whose unconventional mental states serve as resources that lead them to work through new ways to understand their identities as separated from their formerly accepted “centers,” with personal, historical, and collective implications. The main characters presented in these texts display mental dis-orders; I use the term “dis-order” as opposed to “disorder” to de-pathologize my discussion of these characters’ mentalities. The dis-orders are a means of resisting order—that is, conventional perspectives regarding identity, belonging, and home. The dis-orders that are experimentally developed in the texts in question allow for freer and more creative conceptualizations of “mentality” as an oppositional texture within both personal and collective iterations of de-centering.

The principal works included in this chapter are Zeruya Shalev’s *אהבה חיה* (*Love Life*, Israel 1997), Ricardo Feierstein’s *Mestizo* (Argentina 1988), and Angelina Muñiz-Huberman’s *Dulcinea encantada* (*Enchanted Dulcinea*, Mexico 1992). These atypical presentations that I have called dis-orders include amnesia (*Mestizo*), paranoia (*Mestizo*, *Enchanted Dulcinea*, *Love Life*), schizophrenia (*Enchanted Dulcinea*), and obsession (*Enchanted Dulcinea*, *Love Life*), among others. These dis-orders are unique in their effective ability to create for the characters *tabulae rasae* from which emerge new identity constructions that both challenge the standard binary homeland or diasporic positioning and that interrogate and form new relationships that are constructed beyond the constraints of that dynamic.

In *Mestizo*, after witnessing a murder, the protagonist suffers a bout of amnesia, and through the process of piecing together his memory, he hopes to reconcile his place in Argentine

society as both a native Argentine and a second-generation descendant of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from Poland. While *Mestizo* is traditionally read as a novel with an optimistic ending in which Jews successfully integrate into greater Argentine society, I read the conclusion through a different lens, making the case for Argentina as the narrator's off home of irreconcilable identities, rather than as the integrated society that his naïve reveries project.

In a second text, *Love Life*, the protagonist Ya'ara develops obsessions and delusions regarding her lover, who is her mother's former lover. These mental processes serve as an impetus for her realization that the myths and relationships that she has "inherited" from her mother are not the only frameworks through which to interpret her world. She reckons with disrupting her home and academic life as well as intruding on the privacy of her parents' relationship with each other and their world before she existed. The content, styles, and implications of the legends with which Ya'ara contends and that form the basis of her dissertation research extend to the casting of Jews as a diasporic people whose perpetual and singular objective is the reconstruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. At the level of the national imaginary, then, Ya'ara's obsession extends to the role of Israel as the Jewish homeland underpinned by marked myths of redemption. Ultimately, the narrator finds a freedom from the relationships that had been handed down to her through culture and history; however, notably, she does not reject them altogether.

Finally, *Enchanted Dulcinea* depicts fourteen-year-old Dulcinea, a refugee of the Spanish Civil War and then of the Holocaust, as she navigates life as an immigrant to Mexico. Dulcinea decenters her subjectivity from the conventional yet authoritarian "I" and instead lives inside the various "books" that she mentally transcribes. This multiplicity of personality and dis-location of identity mirror the decentralization of the idea of "home," writ large. At the same time,

Dulcinea's "book" intertexts with other books that make similar plays against objective and unyielding reality; such books include, among others, *Don Quixote* and the Biblical book of *Revelation*. The characters in this chapter, mirroring much of the experiences of their authors, divest "home" from its place at the center of identity construction. In turn, they challenge the politics of belonging and display a more malleable perspective regarding identity and the demand to feel "at home" or to recover a home that was lost or may have never existed at all.

The second chapter—"En tierras ajenas, me voy a morir": Strategies of Multilingual Identity in Rosa Nissán, Juan Gelman, Orly Castel-Bloom, and Almog Behar"—focuses on the off home as a linguistic swerve in the use of Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) in Rosa Nissán's *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* (*Like a Bride* and *Like a Mother*, Mexico 1992 and 2006) and Juan Gelman's *Dibaxu* (*Underneath*, 1994). I compare and contrast the use of Ladino within and against the (modern) Spanish language in these texts with the use of Arabic and Judeo-Arabic in and against the dominant Hebrew language in Orly Castel-Bloom's "אמי פה שורל" ("Ummi fi Shurl"/"My Mother is At Work," Israel 1993) and Almog Behar's "אנא מן אל-יהוד" ("Ana Min al-Yahud"/"I Am One of the Jews," Israel 2005). These texts use contextually marginalized or unseen languages to create sites of resistance and to highlight the sociopolitical muteness of the identities that these languages themselves come to signify. Such representations of linguistic decentering serve to dehegemonize linguistic authoritarianism as a means of identity construction, or, by extension, its erasure.

Although the interplay between Spanish and Ladino in Nissán's novels *Like a Bride* and *Like a Mother* is often read to depict the ways in which Oshinica bridges her Mexican and Sephardic cultures, I argue the opposite. Oshinica strategically showcases Ladino or Spanish, or often both at the same time wrapped inside each other, as contextually relevant to the identity

that she wishes to perform, embracing her Sephardic and Mexican identities while simultaneously activating and subverting the linguistic relationship between her two heritages. In *Dibaxu*, Gelman, writing in exile, plays with the idea of translation as well, using Ladino as the “exilic” root of modern Spanish, the language of the contemporary Argentine dictatorship that has landed him in political exile in Europe. Like Nissán, he experiments with the phonetic, syntactic, and historical relationships between the languages so as to call into question such seemingly obvious binary oppositions as homeland and exile, center and margin, and original and translation. Ultimately, such linguistic deterritorializing metaphorically redefines the perceived authenticity of the politically, culturally, and linguistically hegemonic center.

In the Israeli context, Behar and Castel-Bloom use Judeo-Arabic and Arabic, written in Hebrew letters, to highlight Arabic’s erasure in modern Israeli society that has been shaped by Zionist goals that censured non-Hebrew languages and accents. Moreover, Arabic became analogous to the perceived Arab “enemy” of Zionism and Israeli statehood, and its speakers became even further ostracized, forced to eliminate their accents and hide their heritages. Castel-Bloom depicts bodily representations of Arabic as a mother tongue that “bites” both the Hebrew-speaking Mizrahi narrator, who rejects Arabic and the dominant narrative, which favors Ashkenazi Jews. This symbolic use of language to represent its very loss does not insist on its recovery or reconciliation but rather showcases the complicity of the reader. The insertion of Arabic in Hebrew characters further plays on the ideas of mother-daughter relationships by highlighting the linguistic relationship of the two Semitic languages. Behar also represents corporally the fate of Arabic in Israel, feeling suffocated, as his grandfather’s accent (but not language) rises up from his throat and takes over his own. This “disease” ultimately affects the whole country except for his parents, whose erasure of the language and heritage, the narrator

claims, perpetuates the very exile that Zionism sought to negate and points to the inhospitable nature of this supposed homeland. The narrator writes stories in Arabic-“accented” Hebrew, removing language from its center as well as reinforcing the idea that there is one.

The third and final chapter—“Demythologizing Home in Eduardo Halfon, Gabriela Avigur-Rotem, and Teresa Porzecanski”—builds on the previous two chapters, which began with the mental conceptualization of home, then moved to its linguistic and bodily conceptualization. This final chapter addresses the lack of physicality and locality of a homeland, which I distinguish from the institutionalism of a “homeland” that indicates the particular ancestral, cultural, or national relationship of a specific geospatial area to a group of people determined collectively either by history or by birth. The texts discussed in this chapter thematize the absence of conclusion or reconciliation to underscore the claim of the off home that there is no resolution to displacement and no reterritorialization of “home.” The primary texts discussed in this chapter are Eduardo Halfon’s *El boxeador polaco* and *La pirueta* (*The Polish Boxer*, *The Pirouette* Guatemala/US 2008, 2010), Gabriela Avigur-Rotem’s *חמסין וציפורים* (*Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, Israel 2001), and Teresa Porzecanski’s *Perfumes de Cartago* (*Perfumes of Carthage*, Uruguay 1994).

Halfon plays with the authoritarian nature of reality and with the essentialization of identities—Guatemalan, Jewish, and Romani, among others—in order to diminish the centrality of these extreme classifications as epistemological foundations of “home” and, therefore, identity. In so doing, Halfon demythologizes the concept of home itself as a paradise. In *The Polish Boxer*, the protagonist, who shares his name with the author himself, works through the story of his Polish Jewish grandfather who survived Auschwitz with the help of a boxer, another prisoner, who “trained” him with words, telling him what to say and what to omit in order to

survive. *The Pirouette* recycles much of the content of *The Polish Boxer* as well as continuing the narrator's quest for identity, this time pursuing in Serbia Milan Rakić, a Romani musician whom he met in a bar in Antigua Guatemala. Recognizing himself in Milan as well as distancing himself from him allows Halfon to conceive of the role that the various facets of his identity play in his life and self-conceptualization.

Avigur-Rotem and Porzecanski, by comparison, metaphorize the physicality of the structure of home and its destruction in order to propose a move beyond both home and exile and, like Halfon, to question the concept of home as a place of safety, security, and comfort to which one, *a priori*, longs to return. In *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, Loya returns "home" to Israel after a fifteen-year absence. Symbolically, during her time abroad, she has worked as a flight attendant, emphasizing her lack of desire to stay grounded or rooted in one "home." After the death of her father's friend, Loya inherits his house, and while exploring its various locked rooms, which hold clues to her parents' experiences as survivors of Thereisenstadt, Loya contends with the physical house as an inheritance. Notably, the narrative depicts its gradual destruction by the roots of the ficus tree from its garden—a poignant parallel for Loya's own metaphorical roots as she considers the meaning and even existence of home and homeland between the shifting planes of imagination and reality.

Finally, the physicality of "home" is also at play in *Perfumes of Carthage*. The novel's characters immigrate to Uruguay from Syria but import with them many of the same social and patriarchal customs that keep them on the margins of the new country that they hoped would provide them with paradisaical comfort. At the same time, they continue to recreate nostalgic images, tastes, and smells of the false paradise they remember as "home." In *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, Loya's inheritance of the house propels the novel from the very beginning; in

Perfumes of Carthage, Lunita's inheritance of the familial house bookends the novel. This house is prefigured as the "center" of the family's life in Uruguay, and at the end of the novel, Lunita hurls the key of the now-abandoned house into the same sea by which her family traveled to the new "homeland" (Uruguay). The novel thus resists "home" as a paradigm of identity construction and portrays Lunita's shift away from situating the house and the past at the center of her identity as she continues to shape her life as a native-born Uruguayan Jewish woman.

Finally, the coda, rather than "conclude" the dissertation, presents some future avenues of exploration. It features Indian anthropologist Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island*, which portrays many levels and layers of displacement resulting from climate change. This novel conceptualizes the off home in its approach to decentered identity construction. The coda also discusses the expansion of the corpus from which this dissertation principally draws in order to address broader relevance of the off home, including the introduction of diachronic and cross-cultural elements, as depicted in and by *Gun Island*.

Some Notes on Terminology

This dissertation extensively addresses displacement, focusing largely on contemporary and historical exile and diaspora. As terms, "exile" and "diaspora" are often misused interchangeably but denote two distinct kinds of displacement. In practice, the two concepts overlap in more confounded ways than scholars might classify, and the texts elucidated in this dissertation portray that. In general, however, I follow Claudio Bolzman's distinction between exile and diaspora from his discussion of these terms in the Chilean context. Bolzman refers to exile as a "diaspora embryonnaire" ("embryonic diaspora") (Bolzman 106). Exile can (but does

not necessarily) become diaspora, and above all, the exilic subjects cannot return to the land from which they were expelled until the conditions that led to such expulsion have changed. Members of a diaspora often can but choose not to return. Exiles are often political and ideological in nature.

Robin Cohen, a leading scholar of diaspora, characterizes diasporas, based on the model established by William Safran, one of the founders of diaspora studies, as inclusive of, among others, some of the following traits: the diasporic people must have dispersed to more than one new country; time has to pass before a community can be considered diasporic; members of the diaspora have a transnational relationship with other members of that diaspora; and the diasporic community maintains a relationship to a homeland or ancestral land and is committed to either establishing or restoring it (Cohen 25). The Jewish diaspora serves as the original case study for the inauguration of diaspora studies, but in recent decades, diaspora studies has expanded to include the varying experiences of many other groups whose displacement shares features with the Jewish diaspora while also displaying unique attributes of their own. Furthermore, as Cohen emphasizes, the Jewish diasporic experience itself is hardly as monolithic as it is often portrayed. For this reason, the field of diaspora studies is expansive, varied, and flexible.

In the case of Jewish history, one of the earliest moments of Jewish historical exile, leading to diaspora, was the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, which was then rebuilt and destroyed again. The Holy Temple that stood in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II in 587 BCE, and with that destruction came the expulsion of the Jews. Hence, recorded in Psalms: “[b]y the rivers of Babylon, [t]here we sat down, yea, we wept, [w]hen we remembered Zion” (Ps. 137.1). The Jewish exiles, according to this account, which became the paradigm for the exilic and diasporic state of mind, tasked

themselves with uncovering “[h]ow shall we sing the LORD’S song [i]n a foreign land?” (Ps. 137.4), vowing not to forget Jerusalem, their homeland, valuing its place even “[a]bove [their] chiefest joy” (Ps. 137.6). In 538 BCE, the Jewish exiles returned under the Persian emperor Cyrus II, and construction of a Second Temple began. In 20 BCE renovation of the Second Temple began under the Roman king Herod the Great, only to be destroyed for the last time by the Romans in 70 CE, leaving among the ruins the Western Wall, which still stands in Jerusalem today. The Jewish people who were living in Jerusalem scattered, no longer tied to a physical Temple in Jerusalem.

Before the Roman destruction of the Temple, however, the Jewish population had already scattered significantly, to the extent that, in reality, according to Erich S. Gruen, “[b]y the time that the Roman commander Titus leveled the Temple, Jews abroad far outnumbered those dwelling in Palestine—and had done so for many generations” (Gruen 3). In fact, Jews often lived in the diaspora by choice, especially after Alexander the Great established far-spread Greek colonies and had created thriving communities in many ancient regions (Gruen 233). To this end, the word “diaspora” comes from the Greek verb “to sow over” and, as Cohen explains, “essentially had a positive connotation” (Cohen 2). The difference, however, after the destruction of the Second Temple, was the finitude of the destruction of a physical center. Gruen describes this shift:

[t]he elimination of the center, source of spiritual nourishment and preeminent symbol of the nation’s identity, compelled Jews to reinvent themselves, to find other means of religious sustenance, and to adjust their lives to an indefinite period of displacement. (Gruen 233)

In other words, especially in the time between the two Temples, although Jewish communities existed throughout the diaspora voluntarily, the impossibility of return following the destruction of the Second Temple sparked fear and uneasiness over the loss of the physical center of their

religion and culture, if not of their everyday lives (Gruen 233). Nevertheless, Babylon remained at the center of Jewish life in the absence of the Temples (Cohen 5-6).

Thus, Gruen argues, “The whole idea of privileging homeland over diaspora, or diaspora over homeland, derives from a modern rather than an ancient obsession” (Gruen 234). That is to say, in Gruen’s estimation, theories of diaspora did not emerge until much later. This “modern obsession” might stem from increasing bouts of antisemitism, which meant that as comfortable as Jews felt in their diasporic communities, they still always remained conspicuously “other.” Violence and discrimination increased, coming to a head in the eleventh century with the Crusades and then the Inquisition that began in the 1400s, as Jews fled rampant persecution, massacres, violence, and forced conversions (Cohen 8-9). Jews were even expelled from many countries in which they had long thrived, such as from England in 1290, from Spain in 1492, and from Portugal in 1496. The impossibility of a center of unconditional acceptance became increasingly traumatic, culminating in the pogroms of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the spread of Nazism that sparked the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s, one among many factors contributing to the Zionist establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The modern “Return to Zion,” based on the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity, did not, however, eliminate the homeland-diaspora dichotomy, even for those living within Israel’s borders. Zali Gurevitch writes that the tension between the Jewish people as “people of the book” versus “people of the land” remains very much intact and that “*Galut* (diaspora) remains a viable counterpart of Jewish life side by side with Israel” (Gurevitch, “Double” 207). He cites Baruch Kurzweil, “an eminent critic of Israeli society,” as declaring that “Zionism is startled by the realization of its own dream” (Gurevitch, “Double” 207). Furthermore, the

Zionist ambition has not carried over to all of the diasporic communities living throughout the world who are not disposed to give up their lives in the “diaspora” to participate in the “Return.” In fact, for many Jews, the Return to Zion does not figure at all in their lives, or figures only culturally. And for others still, the real Return to Zion is a messianic, rather than physical concept, and the Jewish messianic era remains as yet unrealized.

Therefore, it is necessary to reconceive of and look beyond the homeland-diaspora relationship by imagining a new approach to what it means to live in a diaspora, or beyond diaspora. In this context, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, in their 2002 *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture*, posit the diaspora as a “positive resource” (Boyarin and Boyarin 5, emphasis in the original), arguing that the diaspora has provided a creative space of cultural exchange:

[f]or if a lost Jerusalem imagined through a lost Córdoba imagined through a lost Suriname is a diaspora to the third power, so is a stolen Africa sung as a lost Zion in Jamaican rhythms on the sidewalks of Eastern Parkway. To say as much as that is, we hope, to catch a lucid glimpse of how creative powers of diaspora could be. (Boyarin and Boyarin ix)

Boyarin and Boyarin view the diaspora as allowing for cultural enrichment that could not exist for cultures in isolation, for example, in the “homeland.” These connections and networks have the potential to forge what Mary Louise Pratt terms a contact zone: a “social space[] where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 4). There is also an equalizing element that applies to members of a diaspora who find themselves meeting, clashing, and grappling with each other in a way that in their “homelands” might have been impossible, or, with people across diasporas in ways that geography would have limited.

Karen Thornber, inspired by Pratt's "contact zone," conceives of "contact nebulae," as similarly creative spaces that bypass a reliance on a center of power and cultural hierarchy. Thornber describes contact nebulae in the context of the transculturation of Japanese literature within other East Asian (Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean) literatures and the multidirectional relationships generated through processes of intra-East Asian artistic and literary transculturation between 1895-1945 (Thornber 2). In claiming that contact nebulae held the potential to dissolve some of the social asymmetry that prevented such circulation prior to these spaces, she concludes that "artistic contact nebulae are characterized by atmospheres of greater reciprocity and diminished claims of authority than those of many other (post)imperial spaces" (Thornber 3). Artistic contact nebulae, therefore, as Thornber analyzes, could serve as semi-equalizing spaces for the circulation of texts and ideas. These contact nebulae existed, by definition, in motion, as they facilitated the movement of ideas throughout East Asia. In addition, however, to creating a diasporic site of creativity and exchange, I propose that contact nebulae also encourage a willingness to reject the idea of one center in favor of multiple, moving nebulae, interrogating and challenging the subject's relationship to the concept of "home." Diasporic spaces, correspondingly, can serve as contact nebulae, as sites that have more fruitful relationships to each other and to the process of circulation than to one central place, real or imagined, called "home."

Taking into consideration the many creative webs of interaction that emerge from forgoing a center, and heeding Cohen's call to expand diaspora studies beyond the Jewish model, this project conceives of the reverse scenario, expanding the Jewish model beyond diaspora and beyond a center, but not implying that the ideas of diaspora and home have lost their relevance entirely. Instead, this dissertation proposes an alternative that estranges both concepts: what if

the trajectory from homeland to diaspora, with the goal of a *return* to the homeland, were not as logically linear or vertical? The off home framework disrupts this diaspora-homeland scenario that forces a dynamic of here or not-here and that privileges “home” as a sacred space of security and comfort. The off home neither reinforces nor negates the state of diaspora but repositions how we, as readers, and as scholars, may idealize “home” and force a “home”-ward trajectory upon the displaced subject without taking into consideration other dynamics at play. The off home, thus, shifts the conversation beyond this inflexible and unyielding relationship. As opposed to diaspora, which has been extensively theorized and which positions itself in relation to a homeland, and against the romanticization of the idea of home itself, the off home hovers in a decentered, motion-driven liminality that endorses, requires, and depends on both the impossibility of arrival and deferral of resolution.

Implications Within and Beyond the Field

The works discussed in this dissertation are political, and the off home is by nature a political designation. Therefore, the stakes of the theories that this dissertation proposes are also political as they redefine how individuals—historical or fictional—understand and adapt to displacements, whether physical or figurative. Exile and diaspora—as the voluntary or involuntary distancing from a “homeland”—are prevalent in contemporary global society, and the idea of a singular home base, or a home that exists as home is imagined, can no longer be assumed. While the trauma of leaving or losing home is not reparable, and that home (or its idea) is itself irreplaceable, the rest of one’s existence need not be determined by one’s attempt to *return* to the lost homeland, a Sisyphean absurdity of struggling to arrive at a place that no longer exists as such. Instead, I propose that another approach in play is the off home, the

creativity of which supersedes even that of the diaspora that Boyarin and Boyarin so aptly describe. This is not to romanticize or glorify life after loss; indeed, the trauma is real and unrelenting, and it figures undeniably in these writings. Nevertheless, I suggest that the literature presented here, written in the wake of such cataclysmic events, offers an alternate path that embraces the ambiguity, the fluidity, the unresolved, the unknown, and the constantly changing. The implications of the off home strategy, one thus far unarticulated, extend beyond the field of literature, to sociology, anthropology, ethnography, migration studies, trauma studies, and translation studies, among other areas. The off home proposes to reimagine how we perceive of home and homeland, particularly apt in the context of rampant global migration and displacements for such varied reasons as education and employment opportunities, climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic or other health crises, war and violence, genocide, poverty, and famine.

Viktor Shklovsky distinguishes the knight from the other players in the game of chess because of the lateral, zigzag trajectory of its movements. For Shklovsky, this freer movement epitomizes the power of estrangement, of wielding a change in perspective, which, in turn, has the potential to effect social change and begin new conversations. He asserts:

. . . don't think that the knight's move is the coward's move.

I'm no coward.

Our tortuous road is the road of the brave, but what are we to do if we see with our own two eyes more than honest pawns and dutiful knights. (Shklovsky 4)

The off home demands the courage to veer off course, abandoning the predictability of pawns and kings but, even more radically, also refusing the limitations of the knight's "road of the brave." The adventure of the off home traveler is the as-yet undefined, uncharted, and unconcluded precisely because this traveler sees "more than honest pawns and dutiful knights." The off home thus challenges the pressure and expectation "to belong" and to feel "at home,"

especially after the home is lost or when facing the (im)possibility of return. Instead, the off home advances a new approach. As Salman Rushdie writes of the *Wizard of Oz*, “the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that ‘there’s no place like home’ but rather that there is no longer any such place *as* home” (Rushdie 29-30). Building upon that line, but carrying the semantic revision one step further, unlike Rushdie, who contends that home then becomes the new places or spaces we choose or imagine, I propose that there is no longer the option of home but rather the off home, which abandons the fallacy of the fantasy that the home can be recouped or recreated, or, in some cases, even exists at all.

This dissertation, though focusing on Jewish writers from Latin America and Israel, extends beyond the texts, groups, and communities analyzed here. Loss is a universal concept, and loss of home is increasingly a global one as well. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports, at the end of 2021, 89.3 million forcibly displaced persons in the world “as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order” (UNHCR 2). The UNHCR further claims, regarding the effect of climate change on internal displacement, “[t]he Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that in 2021 alone, there were around 23.7 million displacements of people within their own countries by extreme weather events like floods, storms and droughts” (UNHCR 10). The hope of this dissertation is not to universalize loss or essentialize the experience of displacement. Rather, it insists on the actualization of the conventional framework for understanding these phenomena. This dissertation thus iterates the off home as an unsung approach to them, or, as Feierstein writes in *Mestizo*, “una dentro de las posibles” (“one among the possible”) (Feierstein 318).

Chapter 1: Thinking Beyond: The Off Home as Dis-order in Zeruya Shalev, Angelina Muñiz-Huberman, and Ricardo Feierstein

Introduction

In this chapter, I read the off home within the context of mental dis-order as thematized in Zeruya Shalev's *אהבה חיה* (*Love Life*, Israel 1997), Angelina Muñiz-Huberman's *Dulcinea encantada* (*Enchanted Dulcinea*, Mexico 1992), and Ricardo Feierstein's *Mestizo* (Argentina 1988). The off home in this case centers around a dis-ordering of the mind wherein the mind symbolizes a center, or "home," of subjective worldviews. From this figurative association, then, a deconstruction of the center emerges. Likewise, demythologizing "home" as the paradigmatic representation of security, stability, and comfort constitutes a psychic process as much as it does a geospatial one.

My use of the term "dis-order" extends from Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Susana Niiranen's discussion of mental (dis)order in late medieval Europe; they point to (dis)order as the disruption of perceived social balance and harmony, as reflected in different classifications of mental health that are not necessarily clinical mental disorders:

[t]he emphasis . . . is not on the actual physical or mental illnesses or disabilities, like madness, or their pathology, but rather on states or more short-term dispositions of disorder, like melancholy, "diseases of the head," insomnia, stress or anxiety and demonic influence. The abovementioned states were in a sort of grey area, in that balance and order were either lost or threatened, but one cannot label them outright as mental illnesses or disabilities. (Katajala-Peltomaa and Niiranen 5)

I adopt the hyphenated compound "dis-order," rather than "disorder," "disease," or "illness," thus, in order to indicate a disruption of order but one that is not inherently pathological. Instead, such disruptions occur in a manner comparable to that by which Johanna X.K. Garvey describes

the depiction of madness in Black women's literature. Within certain characterizations of sociohistorical disenfranchisement, such as in literature authored by Black women, Garvey observes a tendency for madness to represent the creative potential of undefined categories. In order to depict this kind of resistance, Black women's fiction often includes, according to Garvey:

characters who are positioned as liminal, or who occupy what [Sylvia] Wynter terms "society's space of otherness," which has creative potential. We can see madness in that light, as a borderline, a threshold space of not (yet) belonging or an (un)belonging that undoes categories of oppression. (Garvey 294)

Writing from marginal spaces, and even considered by many to form part of a larger African diasporic community, Black women authors, as Garvey describes, often thematize madness as a space of potential to challenge "categories of oppression." I consider Jewish authors' resistance to order in a similar vein, even though significant cultural, racial, and socioeconomic differences amass between these two bodies of literature, either in the context of national literatures or in the broader but more nebulous academization of "world" literature.

The Jewish Latin American and Israeli authors discussed in this chapter likewise thematize madness as resistance to social, historical, or political order; however, I extend Garvey's argument to resistance to the center-margin binary itself. Building off of Garvey's theory of madness in Black women's literature as a resistance to institutions of oppression, I argue that in the Latin American and Jewish Israeli works I discuss in this chapter (and in the broader corpora), the invocation of madness in fact moves beyond the recognition of power from within the margins in such a way that the represented mental dis-order destabilizes the center-margins dichotomy. Such a dis-ordering of this dichotomy that the off home embraces presents a challenge to conventional frameworks of identity construction that have labelled marginalized groups as categorically exilic or diasporic and positioned them inherently vis-à-vis a center of

culture and power. The off home situates identity in a more fluid space that does not obligate identification with only the center or, by contrast, its peripheral space(s).

Obsession, compulsion, and delusions (*Love Life*, *Enchanted Dulcinea*); schizophrenia, paranoia, and mutism (*Enchanted Dulcinea*); amnesia (*Mestizo*); and post-traumatic stress (*Mestizo*, *Enchanted Dulcinea*), are among the primary dis-orders that feature in this chapter. In *Love Life*, Ya'ara's obsessions with legends of the destruction of the Holy Temple as well her romantic obsession with her mother's former lover point to the potentially injurious trajectory of unconditional allegiance to inherited cycles and myths of diaspora and redemption. In *Mestizo*, David Schnaiderman's amnesia serves to produce a *tabula rasa* for his (re)conception of his Argentine and Jewish identities. The last name "Schnaiderman," from the Yiddish for "tailor," plays on the protagonist's sewing together of his heritage, his community, his friends, and himself, while, contrasting with his ultimate inability to achieve a cohesive, whole tapestry. Finally, in *Enchanted Dulcinea*, a fourteen-year-old immigrant to Mexico fleeing both the Spanish Civil War and World War II mentally travels through time and space, creating an imagined "book" featuring multiple "Dulcinea"s as she grapples with the trauma of war and displacement. Through this replication of her professed name, the eponymous protagonist crafts a method of identity construction and self-expression untethered from the constraints of objective and unyielding reality.

Such mental dis-orders that the characters in this chapter's texts experience result in the estrangement of the characters from themselves and their worlds. This estrangement encourages them to question and challenge everything they have known, including the very foundation of order itself and the implications such a concept entails, both in terms of self-determination and sociocultural consciousness and advancement. In the same way that Jonathan and Daniel

Boyarin consider diaspora to be “a positive *resource*” (see Introduction), the characters in this chapter think “off”; they reject order in literal and figurative terms by unraveling the authority of hegemonic institutions of power. In the same spirit, dis-order in these works destabilizes “home” as a paradigm of order to which the displaced subject desires to “return.”

Beyond Myth, Recasting Inheritance: Collapse in Zeruya Shalev’s *Love Life*

Shalev’s *Love Life* is a transgressive novel that confronts the privileging of “home” by destabilizing its several iterations of throughout the narrative. The question of “home” extends beyond domestic intimacy, and disruptions to the home and marriage of both Ya’ara and her parents reflect broader deconstructions of the idea of Israel (both the historical Land of Israel and the modern State of Israel) as a historical Jewish home. I argue that Shalev achieves this intervention through the novel’s repositioning of inheritance. Regarding Ya’ara’s personal life, this questioning comes in the form of the literary paradigm of the inherited lover, in this case, the quasi-incestuous relationship between Ya’ara and Aryeh, Ya’ara’s lover, who is also Ya’ara’s mother’s former lover and her father’s best friend. On a cultural-national level, the inherited myths refer principally to the Binding of Isaac (the *Akedah*) as told in Genesis 22 and the legends of the destruction (and movement toward an ultimate rebuilding) of the Holy Temple. Ya’ara’s mental dis-order, resulting in her dis-ordering of these literal and figurative relationships that she has inherited, lead her to reimagine her identity as off—that is, as inclusive of a more fluid subjectivity based not solely on paradigms of inheritance but on a reconfiguration of their role in her own life and work and self-conceptualization as a Jewish Israeli woman.

The opening paragraph sets in motion Ya’ara’s interrogation of the literal and figurative structure of home. Upon arriving at her parents’ front door, she is greeted by the figure of

Aryeh, a man she does not recognize. Because she does not see either of her parents, Ya'ara wonders:

הוא לא אבא שלי ולא אמא שלי, אז למה הוא פותח לי את דלת ביתם, ממלא בגופו את הפתח הצר, צובט את ידית הדלת, ואני מתחילה לסגת, . . . אני שואלת, מה קרה להורים שלי, והוא פותח לרווחה את פיו הגדול, האפור, שום דבר לא קרה להם, יערה, . . . ואני מתפרצת פנימה, זרועי מתחככות בזרועו הקרירה, החלקה, חולפת על פני הסלון הריק, פותחת את הדלת הסגורה של חדר השינה שלהם.

[h]e is not my father and not my mother, so why is he opening the door of their house for me, filling the narrow entrance with his body, squeezing the handle of the door, and I begin to retreat. . . . I ask, what happened to my parents, and he opens wide his big, grey mouth, nothing happened to them, Ya'ara, . . . and I burst inside, my arm rubbing up against his cold, smooth arm, pass through the empty living room, open the closed door of their bedroom. (Shalev 5)

This scene derives much of its meaning from Ya'ara recounting of how she *burst through an open door*, a Hebrew expression that means to ask for something, often forcefully, upon which the involved parties have already agreed. For Ya'ara to insert her own body into the interior of her parents' home symbolically conveys her entrance into the established romance that, as the narrator and the reader later discover, Aryeh had had with Ya'ara's mother. Ya'ara becomes increasingly compelled, especially after making this discovery, to reenact this inherited love triangle, feeling as if she had no choice but to be drawn into it. The narrative use of the present tense in this scene and throughout the novel reflects the continued influence of the past on the present; even as Ya'ara contends with this obsession, she constantly searches for new ways to move beyond these underlying mental processes that trace back to an order in which she, only subconsciously at first, feels trapped.

Ya'ara's description of this initial encounter with Aryeh reads as frenzied, erotic foreplay, suggestive of the romance about to ensue. As the scene approaches its climax, Ya'ara rubs up against Aryeh and "bursts" through the home to the closed, private space of the parents' bedroom, foreboding the intimate triangle between herself, Aryeh, and her parents. This

entrance simultaneously ignores that which is accepted socially by intruding into her parents' intimate space, while passing on the mother's relationship with Aryeh to the next generation, to Ya'ara. Ya'ara's parents, their history, and their house represent the foundation of inheritance, and this encounter marks the beginning of Ya'ara's dis-order of her life, which collapses all of her routines and relationships and seemingly overtakes her free will. Ya'ara learns about aspects of her parents' personalities and private pasts that they had never revealed to her as she both consciously and subconsciously reprises her mother's role as Aryeh's lover in her own romantic relationship with Aryeh.

In a parallel inversion, as her affair with Aryeh builds, Ya'ara's marriage unravels, and just as she violated her parents' house, she begins to reject her own: "מוזר כמה מעט נקשרתי אל" "מזור כמה מעט נקשרתי אל" ("[i]t's strange how little attached I became to this place, for years this has been my address, but it's not my home") (Shalev 7). Her obsession with Aryeh even leads her to abandon her dissertation about myths of the destruction of the Holy Temple. As detailed in the Introduction to this dissertation, the first Temple (of the two Temples, both of which were destroyed) was built in the 10th century B.C.E. under King Solomon's reign and was destroyed in 586 BCE by Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, after which the Jews were exiled to present-day Iraq. After the fall of Babylon, Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem under Persian emperor Cyrus. The Second Temple, remodeled and expanded by Herod and dedicated in 515 BCE, was destroyed in 70 CE (Green). The site on which both Temples stood is said to be the Biblical Mount Moriah, where the *Akedah* took place. This site has also been known as "Zion" and today is commonly known as "הר הבית", literally "The Mountain of the House," or in English, "Temple Mount" (Loewenberg 3). The destruction of the Second Temple resulted in the Jews' exile from Jerusalem for the subsequent two millennia. The

first Temple was built by King Solomon; it is no coincidence that Ya'ara's father's name is also Solomon (Shlomo). It is also telling that Ya'ara describes the Temple as looking like a lion (Shalev 270), the meaning of Aryeh's name. This semantic intermixing of patriarchy that in part drives Ya'ara's mental dis-order characterizes the off home's questioning of and challenge to hegemonic myth.

The use of the word "מקום" (*makom*), "place," in Hebrew, as used in the above quotation, is also a strategic turn of phrase that suggests Ya'ara's growing detachment from inherited myth. "מקום" can denote more than "place." It is also one of the Hebrew names of God, implying a connection between divinity and physical space, and in Ya'ara's case, a growing disconnection to the ideals of national redemption and the restoration of the Temple that she studies and the development of her familial identity within a collective "home." At stake in the novel, therefore, is the very idea of home, the belief that the creation of the State of Israel under the direction of Zionism should have eliminated the diaspora, a concept known as "שלילת הגלות" (*Shlilat ha-Galut*), or "Negation of the Diaspora," as Jews filtered back to their "true" homeland.

Instead, poet and sociologist Zali Gurevitch describes a reality that revealed the opposite trend, the perception within Israeli society that "זרות עקרונית זו של המקום היהודי לא נעלמה עם שיבת ציון החדשה" ("this fundamental foreignness of the Jewish place [*makom*] did not disappear with the new Return to Zion") (Gurevitch 25). The Return to Zion refers to "the ancient (i.e., 6th century BCE) return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon authorized by the Persian Emperor, Cyrus" (Klar 88). The new Return to Zion refers to a modern, secular rather than messianic based mass return to Palestine, and later Israel, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries for political reasons, especially to escape persecution in Eastern Europe (Klar 88). However, as Eric Gartman explains, "the idealized version of what their lives would be like was quickly dashed.

The biblical land ‘flowing with milk and honey’ was, in fact, no paradise. Quite to the contrary—the privations they suffered in the new land were innumerable” (Gartman 15). In Shalev’s novel, Ya’ara likewise does not feel at home anywhere. Her transgressive relationship with Aryeh and her parents, her increasing alienation from her husband, and her rejection of their physical and metaphorical houses underwrite Ya’ara’s search for a strategy to engage constructively with that sense of estrangement.

The process by which Ya’ara becomes drawn into the dedication to these “houses” and then progressively divests herself from such an uncritical tethering is portrayed in Ya’ara’s probing of her own relationship with Aryeh. Ya’ara’s compulsion with respect to Aryeh is akin to her obsession over the destruction of the Temple and the historical mission of the Jewish people to strive toward redemption. In the scene below, Ya’ara is riding a bus on her way to the university to meet with her thesis advisor when she feels irrationally compelled to exit the bus and visit Aryeh’s wife, Josephine, in the hospital where Josephine is dying of an unidentifiable disease:

הסתכלתי דרך החלון. . . , וראיתי את השמים מתכסים עשן, וחשבתי, לא יאומן, עשן בית המקדש עוד עולה, ורק אני רואה, עד שהבנתי שזו הארובה של בית-חולים, ואמרתי לעצמי, הפעם את ממשיכה, את לא יורדת, אבל הרגשתי איתותים של סכנה, כאילו אני חייבת להציל משהו, קוראים לי ואסור לי לסרב, ובמקום להמשיך לאוניברסיטה ירדתי מהר, כשהאוטובוס כמעט סגור עלי את הדלת, ומצאתי את עצמי בכניסה לבית-החולים.

I looked out the window. . . , and I saw that the sky covered with smoke, and I thought, it’s unbelievable, the smoke of the Holy Temple [lit. “house of the sanctified”] is still rising, and only I see it, until I understood that that was the chimney of the hospital [lit. “house of the sick”], and I said to myself, this time you are continuing on, you are not getting off, but I felt signs of danger calling me, as if I were obligated to save someone, and it was forbidden for me to refuse, and in place of continuing on to the university I got off quickly, as the bus was nearly closing the door on me, and I found myself at the entrance to the hospital. (Shalev 97-8)

The hospital and the Temple have the same linguistic structure in Hebrew; the former translates literally as “house of the sanctified,” the latter as “house of the sick”—further underscoring Ya’ara’s interrogation of the “house” in regard to her changing conceptualizations and deconstructions of “home”⁴ during this period of psychic dis-order. Dismantling “home” as an *a priori* space of comfort and security, these houses instead represent suffering and, more aptly, sacrifice, particularly given how the marked historical image of “the smoke of the Holy Temple . . . still rising”⁵ is superimposed on the present-day image of the hospital and Josephine, who sacrificed herself to please her unfaithful husband, Aryeh. This overlap of present and ancient “houses” of sacrifice suggests a connection between Josephine’s dogmatic loyalty and the national or cultural blind devotion to the idea of the redemption of the Jewish nation in the homeland.

Ya’ara senses “signs of danger” emanating from this “house,” specifically the hospital, as if she were destined “to save someone.” Thus, once again, she finds herself at “the entrance to” a “house” just as she did at her parents’ house at the start of the novel. In this case, however, the passivity of the language, “found myself,” as well as her inability to “continue on” to the university, in contrast to the agency of her “burst[ing]” through the door of her parents’ house, suggests Ya’ara’s inability, or lack of desire, to control her destiny and accentuates her powerlessness against these perceived obligations. Translated into the context of the Holy

⁴ Hebrew does not distinguish linguistically between “house” and “home.”

⁵ Although it is possible that the smoke rising could refer to the Temple itself burning in destruction, the language Shalev uses for “the smoke of the Temple is still rising,” “עשן בית המקדש עוד עולה” (“*ashan beit ha-mikdash od oleh*”) is reminiscent of the language in Biblical and Rabbinic literature used to discuss sacrifice. For example, Isaac’s abortive offering in the *Akedah* (Gen. 22), which is said to have taken place on the site where the Temples were later built, is termed an “עולה” (*olah*). The event is alluded to extensively in Hebrew literature, including in *Love Life*. Additionally, the prototypical sacrifice at the beginning of Leviticus is termed an “עולה” (*olah*) (Lev. 1-3). Shalev’s pairing of “עולה” (*oleh*, “is rising”) and “עשן” (*ashan*, “smoke”), moreover, is particularly suggestive: the term “מעלה עשן” (*ma’aleh ashan*), meaning “a smoke-raising herb,” is an integral component of the incense offering (*Ketoret*) (see Keritot 6a, b).

Temple, the cultural dedication to the ethos of diaspora also operates as such an obligation. Once in Josephine's room, Ya'ara perceives further signs of danger as well. In the bed next to Josephine lies Ya'ara's mother's sister, Tirzah. As Ya'ara approaches Tirzah, she notices that "הראי הקטן נצנץ מעל הכרית כמו סכין" ("the small mirror is gleaming on top of the pillow like a knife") (Shalev 98). The mirror represents self-reflection as well as the reflection of reality, but, at the same time, the illusion of the knife represents the false sense danger. The morphological roots of "סכין" (*sakin*, "knife") and "סכנה" (*sakanah*, "danger") are the same; neither the knife nor the danger is real, betraying, once again, the potentially false warnings of hegemonic myths that foretell the "danger" of disruption to order represented by "home."

Beyond this reading, the knife symbolically harkens back to the theme of sacrifice and the *Akedah* when Abraham nearly sacrifices Isaac with a knife. According to the Biblical legend, God calls upon Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Before Abraham is able to carry out the sacrifice, an angel from God stops him. Instead of sacrificing Isaac, Abraham sacrifices a ram. As a reward for his loyalty, God blesses Abraham and his descendants. Israeli poet Chaim Guri's "ירושה" ("Inheritance") poeticizes the cultural legacy of the *Akedah* in modern Jewish society, specifically in terms of the history of the State of Israel:

יצחק, כמסופר, לא הועלה קורבן.
הוא חי ימים רבים,
ראה בטוב, עד אור עיניו כהה.

אבל את השעה ההיא הוא הוריש לצאצאיו.
הם נולדים
ומאכלת בליבם.

Isaac, as it is told, was not sacrificed.
He lived many years,
Saw the good, until the light of his eyes dimmed.

But that hour he bequeathed unto his descendants.

They are born
With the slaughtering knife in their hearts. (Guri 3)

Guri's poem emphasizes the enduring legacy of the *Akedah* that seems to be handed down from generation to generation like an "inheritance." To return to this pivotal scene in *Love Life*, Ya'ara attempts to assess the ways in which such "inheritances" might prove to be productive and constructive to social constructions of identity, such as the more fluid off home approach that I have suggested, in contrast to those more rigid forecasts of "danger" that might have hindered the Jewish and, by extension, Israeli psyche by enforcing dogmatic "order."

More specifically, the danger that Ya'ara senses is represented by the uninhibited acceptance of inherited stories and roles that she feels compelled to enact, even feeling drawn to a site of sacrifice. Josephine and Ya'ara both take up the figure of Isaac here: Josephine is cast aside because Aryeh could never love her in the way that he loves Ya'ara's mother. Ya'ara learns that Josephine went so far as to abort a pregnancy, another kind of sacrificial offering, to please Aryeh, who did not want a family with her. Furthermore, the same day of the abortion, Aryeh discovered that Rachel, Ya'ara's mother, was pregnant with Ya'ara. Ya'ara, at the same time that she is romantically and sexually involved with Josephine's husband, is in a way the child that Josephine never had.⁶

Ya'ara herself also steps into an Isaacian role, renouncing her free will in favor of these compulsions, to the extent that part of the attraction of Aryeh is precisely this: "כל-כך אהבתי את הוויתור על הרצון. . . ואני צעקתי, כי הוא אמר, ורציתי לעשות כל מה שהוא אומר, זה אפילו לא היה רצון, אלא מין". . . ("I so loved the renunciation of will. . . And I screamed, because he said so, and I wanted to do everything he said, this wasn't even want, but rather a

⁶ Underlying the relationship between these names is the fact that the Biblical Rachel is the mother of Joseph, the derivation of Josephine's name, joining Shalev's fictional Rachel and Josephine in a relationship built on shared cultural ancestry and alluding to inverted and distorted parent-child relationships, particularly involving the mother.

type of knowledge that everything he says I do. . . .”) (Shalev 160). Ya’ara gradually comes to oppose this feeling as well as another kind of inherited “order,” ironically borne from the obsession of her dis-order itself: that her life is in subservience to Aryeh and what she has inherited from her mother’s relationship with him. Therefore, by the end of the novel, unlike Josephine, who will die of an unidentified disease as a passive victim who never demanded more from Aryeh, Ya’ara overcomes her own passivity, moving beyond the need for either a male companion or even her husband, himself all too submissive and who remains willing to “rebuild” their marriage, echoing the commitment to rebuild the Temple.

This process of Ya’ara’s disillusionment from obsession is key in this regard. At first, like Josephine, she “abuse[s] her soul in the bed” of Aryeh:

ואני, יש לי את הטירוף הזה להשיג את אריה. . . . ואולי בעצם זה לא ממש להשיג אותו אלא לפתור אותו, אותו ודרכו אותי, את כולנו, . . . התחלתי לחשוב ברבים, כאילו עם רב עומד מאחרי, ואני לא לבד במשימה מיותרת, אלא נציגה מוסמכת של קבוצה גדולה שהולכת וגדלה מרגע לרגע, שמחרפת את נפשה במיטתו של החשוד כדי להביא מידע שיוכל לשפוך אור, לא ברור על מה בדיוק, אבל גם אם נקרא לזה סוד החיים זה יכול להיות נכון.

[a]nd I, I have this insanity to obtain Aryeh. . . . And maybe, actually, it is not exactly an insanity to obtain him but rather to solve him, him, and by way of him, me, all of us, . . . I began to think in plural, as if a large nation is standing behind me, and I am not alone on an unnecessary mission, but rather an authorized representative of a large group growing increasingly large from moment to moment, who is abusing her soul in the bed of the suspect to bring information that could shed light, it is unclear on what exactly, but even if we were to call this the secret of life it possibly would be correct. (Shalev 185-6)

Here, Ya’ara sets herself up again in a role akin to that of Isaac, who makes no protest upon discovering himself as the intended sacrifice. Ya’ara, likewise, “abus[es] her soul” for the sake of the nation, offering herself mentally and offering up her body “in the bed of the suspect.”

Film studies scholar Anat Zanger claims, “The story of the binding of Isaac has been identified as one of the central codes through which Israeli society communicates with itself” (Zanger 96).

In this case, this “central code” is being used to communicate the need to dispense with what

philosopher Avi Sagi terms society's "historic mission—to continue to live out the *Akedah* in various ways, including mandatory military service, for example" (Sagi 51). In the above passage, Ya'ara enters the bed of the suspect, but, unlike in the Biblical narrative, no angel intervenes to save her. It is up to her to save herself, and by extension her nation, through a release from those myths and missions presumed "central" to her layered identity. While Abraham and Isaac pass the test of loyalty by their willingness to participate, Ya'ara shows a different kind of loyalty by ultimately rejecting the obligation of the myth and discarding the necessity of a constant move toward redemption. Indeed, at the end of the novel, she chooses to release herself from all patriarchal figures, no longer waiting for a redeemer.

Returning to the passage in which Ya'ara visits Josephine and Tirzah in the hospital, novelistic depiction relies heavily on what Yael Halevi-Wise refers to as the paradigm of the shared lover, which has a long history in Hebrew literature. The shared lover, as Halevi-Wise explains, "represents elements discarded by one generation only to resurface as a troublesome inheritance for the next" (Halevi-Wise, "Double" 310). The use of this literary paradigm is amplified by the presence of Ya'ara's aunt Tirzah in the bed next to Josephine's. Tirzah is an allusion to the protagonist of a principal text of the shared lover paradigm, Shai Agnon's 1923 novella *בגדי ימיה* (*In the Prime of Her Life*). Halevi-Wise argues that the bi-generational shared lover paradigm in modern Hebrew literature:

reflects the foundational trajectory of modern Zionism from its practical redefinition of messianic redemption through its continuing adjustments to the ideals and pressures of statehood. In Hebrew fiction, these redemptive adjustments take the form of an "inherited" lover who draws two or more generations into a review of their expectations and disappointments. (Halevi-Wise, "Double" 313)

The shared lover paradigm allows the next generation to redefine, through reenacting the relationship, its role in accepting these inherited myths. Ya'ara symbolically inherits Aryeh from

her mother. After discovering a photograph of her mother with Aryeh from when they were lovers themselves, Ya'ara arranges her hair to look like her mother's did and tries to reprise her mother's role in that relationship. Freud's theory of the *unheimlich*—the unhomely or uncanny—is a useful framework for interpreting this moment. According to this concept, the uncanny suggests something that is frightening in its familiarity. In this scene, which, significantly, takes place in Aryeh's home, Aryeh reacts to this uncanny familiarity by rejecting Ya'ara in the guise of her mother; Aryeh "תולש" ("uproots") Ya'ara's braids של מיתולוגי "כמו טקס הוצאת שדים" ("like a mythological ceremony to exorcise demons") (Shalev 222). The recognition of the process of acting out the past so literally causes Aryeh to "exorcise" Ya'ara's obsession, and from this moment, Ya'ara's compulsions begin to weaken, and she leaves his home for the last time. Her mother's and her own relationship with Aryeh have played out, and Ya'ara ultimately took an active role and was able to end the cycle and revise the outcome.

In a final instance of "bursting" beyond the historical weight of the *Akedah*, the destruction of the Temple, and the inherited lover of intergenerational redemption, Ya'ara flees not to a home, or to a lover, or to her parents, but to the university library where she becomes trapped overnight after ignoring the closing call. Finally alone, she studies once again the legends of the destruction of the Temple. Drawing on the epithet for the Jewish people as "the People of the Book," Ya'ara takes solace in a book, but she reads against the grain. The novel concludes with a legend that she invents in the style of midrashic⁷ legend and that Halevi-Wise argues, is "a climactic gathering of the novel's concerns" (Halevi-Wise, "Double" 342). More importantly, I argue, this legend both destabilizes the genre of midrashic legend while, at the

⁷ Midrash is commentary on Biblical scripture.

same time, maintaining its importance, consequently epitomizing Ya'ara's overarching strategy of destabilizing binaries. For instance, she recounts with relief and with slight irony:

ואני יודעת שמצאתי בדיוק את מה שהייתי צריכה, האגדה על בת הכוהן שהשתמדה ערב החורבן, ואביה ישב עליה שבעה. . . ואמרה לו, אבי, לא עשיתי כן אלא כדי להציל את נפשו, אבל הוא סירב לקום מאבלו ועניו זלגו דמעות עת שמתה, ועז הוא קם והחליף את בגדיו וביקש לאכול לחם, ואני בטוחה שפעם כבר שמעתי את האגדה הזאת, לפני הרבה שנים, שאימא הקריאה לי, . . . ואבא אמר, מה את מספרת לה, את לא רואה שזה עצוב מדי.

[a]nd I know I've found exactly what I had needed, the legend about the priest's daughter who converted [from Judaism] on the eve of the destruction [of the Temple], and her father sat shiva for her. . . and she said to him, my father, I only did this in order to save your soul, but he refused to get up from his mourning and his eyes poured tears until she died, and then he arose and changed his clothes and requested to eat bread, and I am sure that I've heard this legend before, many years ago, that mother read it to me, . . . and father said, what are you telling her, don't you see that it's too sad. (Shalev 278-9)

Shalev's inclusion of such a legend is clever because its presence breaks the dependance on binaries such as home-diaspora and past-present, but at the same time it does not reject myth altogether, which would produce yet another binary relationship.

Rather, the dynamic for which Ya'ara advocates is best described by the concept that I have termed the off home, which, like her realization of "למה אני צריכה לבחור" ("why do I need to choose") (Shalev 262), demands neither allegiance to one side nor the other but instead decenters and dis-orders the expectations of each. Ya'ara pushes back against myth, but she does not eschew it altogether. For example, at a previous meeting with her thesis advisor, she had declared that she wanted to study legends that purposely mislead readers (Shalev 267). She implicates "אותך, אותי, את כל השומעים והקוראים בכל הדורות שהתפתו להיגרר אחרי המסר הפשטני סוחט" ("you, me, all the listeners and readers in all the generations who let themselves be drawn into the superficial, tear-jerking message and disregarded the true development of things") (Shalev 267). In this way, Shalev metatextually

urges the reader of her novel likewise not to fall for the simple interpretation of *Love Life* that fails to capture nuance and not to be drawn into historical patterns as if they were destiny.

In this concluding legend, the priest's daughter converts from Judaism in order to save the soul of her father, but her actions fail. The behavior of the priest's daughter can be likened to Ya'ara "abusing her soul in the bed of the suspect." In the case of the priest's daughter, it remains unclear whether the Temple was destroyed because she left her faith, or whether, despite her selfless actions, it still would have been destroyed nonetheless. Regardless of the cause, I read the true tragedy as the needless sacrifice of the daughter on behalf of the father, which intriguingly offers a feminist alternative to Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. Interestingly, in the legend, the mother is absent, which suggests the daughter attempting to step into the role of the mother in a way that mirrors Ya'ara's relationship to Aryeh—with him filling in for her father and her attempting to reprise the role of her mother. This is also suggestive of Ya'ara's and the priest's daughter's attempts at, and failure to achieve, redemption through their sacrifices. In addition to the absence of the mother in the legend of the priest's daughter is the absence of logic to explain why the father's soul was in peril and why the daughter's conversion could have saved it. This suggests the absurdity of playing out the same myths over and again that do not serve either the present or the previous generation. Therefore, this legend serves as a metacritique of legends, paradoxically valuing the content of myth but only to certain extent. As such, not only do the actions of the priest's daughter lack logic, but the legend itself lacks logic as well. Acting in inflexible devotion to myths of sacrifice, destruction, and return proves untenable when it comes to familial and cultural foundations of identity.

This conclusion does not mean that myths do not have their place. On the one hand, Yigal Schwartz interprets the legend and the conclusion that Ya'ara draws as "the total surrender

of the attempt to rebel,” which “is to say, to give up on the attempt to restore the First Temple (the lost love affair of Ya’ara’s mother and Aryeh) by means of building improved temples” (Schwartz 487). On the other hand, however, I argue that this is not the case. Ya’ara explicitly asks “why do I have to choose” between her husband and her (mother’s former) lover, which gives way to the question of why she herself must choose between conformity and rebellion. Furthermore, I assert that Ya’ara is not “giving up” on anything, including the restoration of the Temple. Although we do not know what ensues after the novel’s conclusion, there is no basis to the assumption that Ya’ara abandons her “rebellion” completely. Returning to the idea of reading the Temple legends that trick the reader, I suggest that, as a scholar, Schwartz, not unlike the fictional character of Ya’ara’s father, who believes the legend to be too sad to be retold, has fallen into this trap of the simple explanation—in this case, believing that at the end of the novel Ya’ara chooses one path or the other. By contrast, I argue that Ya’ara opts for the critical reading of history and of myth alike—the off home that hovers in and beyond the in-between—but not the total abandonment of them. Otherwise, the climactic message of the novel would not be written in the form of a myth. The idea that the Temple might be restored is not anathema to Ya’ara’s new identity as a scholar; rather, it is the obsessive dedication to this moment as a historical mission that must be realigned, even if through the subsequent rebellion of dis-order itself.

The reader does not know what Ya’ara does after the novel concludes. What she gives up, releases from her inherited possession, is not the myths themselves, but, as Hebrew literature scholar Elisa Carandina claims of another of Shalev’s novels, *תרה* (*Thera*, 2005), “l’idée d’avoir un destin prédéterminé” (“the idea of having a predetermined destiny”) (Carandina 67). Freeing herself from the weight of a historical mission driven by the predetermined destiny of myth

transforms this inheritance from something dangerous into something invested with cautious potential, perhaps even “the secret to life” that Ya’ara hopes to uncover.

Amnesia and Adventure in Ricardo Feierstein’s *Mestizo*

In *Love Life*, Shalev’s portrayal of Ya’ara’s psychological dis-order serves as a point of departure for questioning and ultimately reconceiving of identity politics and belonging, especially as framed in the binary terms of homeland and exile/diaspora. Amnesia serves as a similar point of departure in Ricardo Feierstein’s 1988 novel *Mestizo*, written as Argentina was exiting a painful period of dictatorship and sociopolitical repression (discussed in more detail later). Thematising amnesia to examine the protagonist’s place, and thereby, the position of Jews in general, within greater (non-Jewish) Argentine society, the novel expresses a seemingly optimistic perspective, one that, as I discuss further on, I read to be less optimistic than it appears. After the protagonist, David Schnaiderman, witnesses a murder and subsequently develops amnesia, David embarks on a quest through his memory and heritage; upon recovering pieces of his memory and discovering new ones, David comes to hope for a cultural *mestizaje* in Argentina in which Jews integrate into the general society and form a unified “we.” Unlike other readers, I read *Mestizo* as a fantasy and not as a reflection of reality as Feierstein or his protagonist truly see it. For this reason, I read his later novel, *La logia del umbral* (*The Threshold Lodge*, 2002), which is much less optimistic, as an alternate conclusion to *Mestizo* that expresses this more solemn reality. Written in the aftermath of the 1994 terrorist bombing of the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* (Argentine Israelite Mutual Association), known as AMIA, Feierstein determines that such a “we” as he espouses in *Mestizo* will never exist for Jews in Argentina. While Argentina cannot be considered “home” in an ideal sense, neither is Jewish life there to be considered wholly diasporic. Argentina, as Feierstein describes it,

provides for its Jewish population what can be best characterized as an off home that pushes beyond designations of center and margin.

In *Mestizo*, Feierstein proposes the concept of “cultural *mestizaje*,” which, unlike racial *mestizaje* (*mestizaje* is a term borne from the colonization of the Americas and refers originally to the blending of European and indigenous races), produces a new, hybrid product that nevertheless retains the individual cultural components as part of a *mestizo*, integrated whole. In analyzing his own identities in his later book *Contraexilio y mestizaje: ser judío en la Argentina* (*Counterexile and Mestizaje: Being Jewish in Argentina*, 1996), Feierstein writes, “Esta mezcla se encuentra, aún, en estado de hibridez, sin haber dado lugar a un nuevo producto” (“This blend is found, still, in a state of hybridity, without having given rise to a new product”) (Feierstein, *Contraexilio* 218). Within this framework, the individual elements do not become erased, but rather, they are superimposed on and work in harmony with one another. For the protagonist David in *Mestizo*, as Feierstein affirms in *Counterexile and Mestizaje*, his European identity (Polish heritage), his Israeli one (he lived briefly on a kibbutz in Israel), and his Argentine identity coexist as they influence each other. The biography of the fictional David represents much of Feierstein’s own experiences. David, along with his two friends Ignacio and León, represents this splitting of identity. On the one hand, Ignacio represents the European Jewish identity that remains too paranoid to integrate into Argentine society, and León represents the desire to bypass Argentina and instead invest in an integrated society of Arabs and Jews within the idealized homeland, Israel (a plan that likewise does not come to fruition).

Ignacio represents a rejection of Argentina and a wariness of people of other races and religions in a way that would impede any kind of cultural *mestizaje*. Ignacio’s stepmother, a Jewish immigrant from Poland who, at least linguistically, never “integrated,” suggested by her

fragmented, Yiddish-accented and inflected Spanish, summarizes Ignacio's constant fear and failure to participate in a multicultural Argentine society. Sara, aware of her own limitations but unable to supersede them, is ironically uniquely qualified to recognize Ignacio's limitations in integrating into Argentina society. Symbolic of Ignacio's ultimate failure, Ignacio is not only revealed to be Sra. Abud's murderer, but he also kills himself. Sara recounts to David in hindsight:

. . . . Ignacio desde chico siempre con problemas. . . . El mucho sufrir, tener vergüenza. . . . Vergüenza, ¿nu?

Ignacio con miedo. Por eso compra revólver. Árabes y nazis, siempre seguían, él decía todos en contra en barrio. Cuchilla no, temía cortarse, por eso él asustó de muchacho árabe, hijo de señora de tienda que mataron. Ahmed andaba con chilla para matar él. El no gustar árabes, usted entiende. Tampoco sabía ídish, era judío como los de acá, más o menos. No sabía qué quería ser. . . . El cansó y dijo chau, chau, me voy. Ya había muerto por dentro, ahora otra vez.

. . . . Ignacio since he was a boy always with problems. He suffer a lot, be embarrassed. . . . Embarrassed, *nu*?⁸ . . .

Ignacio with fear. That's why he buy revolver. Arabs and Nazis, were always following, he would say all against in neighborhood. Not blade, he was afraid to cut himself, that's why he frightened of Arab boy, son of store woman who was killed. Ahmed went with blade to kill he. He no like Arabs, you understand. He also didn't know Yiddish, he was Jewish like those from here, more or less. He didn't know what he wanted to be. . . . He tired and said bye, bye, I'm leaving. He had already died inside, now again. (Feierstein 302)⁹

Sara's insight into Ignacio's state of mind reveals Ignacio's total inability to be a member of any part of his own layered identity: as Sara words it—"[h]e didn't know what he wanted to be." Ignacio did not know Yiddish, indicating a disconnect from his ancestral language, and was, according to Sara, like other Argentine Jews of this generation who grew up in Argentina. On the other hand, however, Ignacio was unable to embrace the diversity that Argentina offered,

⁸ *Nu* is a Yiddish interjection that has a range of possible translation, common among them "so" or "well." In this case, Sara's *nu* is equivalent to an expression such as "you know?"

⁹ All translations from Feierstein are taken from *Mestizo* unless otherwise indicated.

even to his own benefit. He is paranoid and imagines constant, irrational persecution, represented by his ongoing feud with Ahmed, an Argentine boy of Arab descent. While it is true that in the neighborhood Ignacio, León, and David experienced frequent antisemitic incidents, often propagated by Ahmed and his friends, Ignacio, rather than process these events in a constructive manner, carries this fear and rejection of others with him throughout his life, adopting a fanatical approach to conflict and imagining the whole world against him, culminating in Ignacio's murder of Sra. Abud.

Ignacio's total rejection of integration contrasts with León's interest to a fault in social cohesion, as represented by his love affair with the same Sra. Abud. While Ignacio is compelled to obliterate the "other," León experiences an overwhelming desire to know the "other." In the way that Ignacio is afraid of Arab-Jewish tensions and recreates them, even where they might not be present, León moves to Israel for some time and establishes foundations for the unification of Israeli Jews and Arabs (Palestinians) through the common working of the land. León's plan, C.O.S.A.S. (Células Orgánico-Sociales Asentadas Sistemáticamente, or Organic-Social Cells Systematically Settled), proposes:

[e]n cincuenta años, las C.O.S.A.S. transformarían esta "tierra de nadie" en piedra angular para la cohesión entre los países de la zona, pues llevan en sí un mensaje estético y científico. Cada una de las C.O.S.A.S. es célula y organismo a la vez, pero su accionar no es marginal".

[i]n fifty years, the C.O.S.A.S.¹⁰ would transform this "no man's land" into a cornerstone for the cohesion between the countries in the zone, since they carry in themselves an aesthetic and scientific message. Each one of the C.O.S.A.S. is cell and organism at the same time, but its operation isn't marginal. (Feierstein 142)

This plan for the networking of independent cells into a cohesive whole with components is in many ways what Feierstein, through David, envisions for Argentina, particularly in the

¹⁰ "Cosas" is the Spanish word for "things," which thematically points to León's desire to integrate "things" while maintaining them simultaneously singular and multiple.

representation of each cell's operations, as, even if not central, likewise not "marginal," with each cell's work as essential for the operation of the organism as a whole. However, problematically, León turns his back on his own country to implement his plan in another. To this end, León's ex-wife describes, "Redimió a la sociedad y se saltó su propia vida" ("He redeemed society and robbed himself of his own life") (Feierstein 270). Ironically, the failure of León's plan to "redeem" society foreshadows the parallel impossibility of such cohesiveness in Argentina, an ideal for which David yearns but that generally remains unrealized.

David's amnesia has created a *tabula rasa* from which he begins to (re)define his place in what he calls this "[e]xtraño país, mi Argentina" ("[s]trange country, my Argentina") (Feierstein 260), which for him includes Argentine and Jewish identities in which he claims a personal stake—"my Argentina," in contrast to the attitudes of Ignacio and León to own their place in Argentina. Toward the conclusion of the novel, David participates in what he believes to be successful moments of cultural *mestizaje*. Such moments build upon what the Argentine non-Jews and the Argentine Jews have in common, both groups sharing a love for soccer and, more significantly, having endured "el genocidio de la última dictadura militar en estas latitudes" ("the genocide of the latest military dictatorship in these parts") (Feierstein, *Contraexilio* 7). *Mestizo* was written in the context of the recent military dictatorship headed by Jorge Rafael Videla beginning on March 24, 1976 and lasting until the December 10, 1983 democratic election of Raúl Alfonsín. The military dictatorship was a period of state-sponsored terrorism, concentration camps, death squads, and torture in which the dictatorship faced the problem of "subversion" by "disappearing" any perceived opposition to the regime. Pilar Calveiro writes that between 1976 and 1982 in Argentina there were 340 concentration-extinction camps. Moreover, she writes that between 15,000-20,000 people passed through those camps, and

approximately 90% of those people were murdered. In addition, although it is impossible to know precisely how many *desaparecidos* (disappeared persons) there were during that time, entities such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo cite a number as high as 30,000 people (Calveiro 29). In *Mestizo*, with society transitioning away from this dictatorship, David and his son, Eduardo, join with the greater Argentine majority at a pro-democracy rally.

Edna Aizenberg expounds on the unity this moment has an opportunity to produce, though, as I argue, this unity exists as David's fantasy rather than as a portrayal of Jewish integration into mainstream Argentine society. Aizenberg writes:

[w]ithin the context of Argentina's renewed democracy, beginning in 1983 with the election of Raúl Alfonsín after the years of the Dirty War,¹¹ survival and pluralism can create an identity because they forge a common ground between Jew and Latin American, both survivors of oppression, both mestizos—the hybrid products of wandering and immigration. (Aizenberg 36)

In other words, in a context such as this pro-democracy rally, David, Eduardo, and all the attendees are portrayed as part of a transcendent and cultural *mestizo* “we”: surviving this same dark period of history provides a common foundation, and ushering in democracy lays the groundwork for a better, more united future for the whole country.

This rally unites disparate races and creeds, and David considers all those present to be connected in a common goal: “[m]ayoría para siempre a favor de la vida, codo con codo, dándonos valor con empujones, abrazos y palmadas que resuenan, frescas, en espaldas y corazones. . . . Somos la multitud que asusta a los golpistas, identidad una y múltiple a la vez” (“[f]orever the majority in favor of life, elbow to elbow, encouraging each other with shoves, hugs, slaps that resound, fresh, on the backs and hearts of the survivors. . . . We are the multitude that frightens away the members of a coup, a simultaneously single and multiple

¹¹ 1974-1983

identity”) (Feierstein 319). The use of italics in the novel signals shifts in narrative perspective between “I,” “you,” and “he.” The integration of the narrative voice at the end of the novel (narrated by “we”) symbolically depicts the idealized prospect of social integration at the same time that the narration recognizes its realistic impossibility. To return to David’s optimistic statement, surviving the same trauma and joining “the multitude in favor of life” adds to the thematic claim that cultural *mestizaje* moves beyond race, and this “multitude” is like one body—“shoves, hugs, slaps,” “backs,” and “hearts” are corporeal images that evoke a body that functions, as in León’s vision for C.O.S.A.S., as a whole but is also made up of individual cells and organs. This is suggestive of Feierstein’s idealized cultural *mestizaje* that preserves the integrity of its individual components and that produces, hence, an identity that is “simultaneously single and multiple.”

Representative of this idea, Feierstein explains that *Mestizo* “propone hacer del ‘margen’ un centro” (“proposes to make from the ‘margin’ a center”) (Feierstein, *Contraexilio* 217). According to Feierstein in his analysis of *Mestizo*: “el narrador/protagonista se desdobra en tres personajes: dos ubicados en los ‘extremos’ y uno ideal, en el ‘centro’, que hace equilibrio entre ambos” (“the narrator protagonist unfolds into three characters: two located at the ‘extremes’ and one ideal one, in the ‘center,’ that makes an equilibrium between them both”) (Feierstein, *Contraexilio* 205). The use of “we” is indicative of this idealized center. Dawn Fulton has observed a similar usage geared toward unity in the application of the pronoun “we” in the literature of Martinique. She writes, “The first person plural pronoun is a discursive tool that has proven highly effective in the formation of political solidarity. . . . Repeated use of the pronoun . . . suggests common thought and common action” (Fulton 1106). Fulton thus argues that the use of “we” joins together the individual subjectivities to create the illusion of a common

interest and perspective. Feierstein's use of "we" indicates, from his point of view, the possibility of *imagining* Jewish and Argentine cultures negotiating with each other and contributing equally to a cultural *mestizaje*, mediating each one through the other but not destroying either. On a formal level, the text also reflects Feierstein's hopeful vision of multiple forms contributing to a cohesive whole. The text includes, in addition to standard novelistic prose, poetry, newspaper clippings (including advertisements), medical reports, comic strips, family photos, drawings, and an interplay between italics and standard fonts.

Despite the grand conclusion, however, *Mestizo* is rife with instances that disprove the reality of cultural *mestizaje*, portraying David's failure to integrate into Argentine society, try as he might, precisely because of his Jewish heritage. Even though David identifies with his Argentine childhood and his *porteño* (Buenos Aires) neighborhood of Villa Pueyrredón, David acknowledges "el desarraigo que transmiten las raíces. Ningún lugar de la tierra es seguro para nosotros, inmune al antisemitismo y las persecuciones" ("the uprootedness that the roots transmit. No place on earth is safe for us, immune to antisemitism and persecutions") (Feierstein 265-6). Like Ya'ara in Shalev's *Love Life*, David attempts to move beyond an inherited state of exile, in David's case, in favor of cultural *mestizaje* in Argentina. Nevertheless, he comes to recognize that, to some extent, that inheritance is always-already there for "us"—an exclusive reference to the global Jewish community, in contrast to the idealized mestizo "us." David's discovery, even at a subconscious level, is akin to Ya'ara's recognition that there is no path to eliminate entirely such a cultural history and memory.

As an example of such a moment in which David's identification with Argentina is rejected by external, rather than internal, forces in play, David recounts an exchange between himself and a government clerk in which the clerk, whose last name is García, a common

Hispanic surname, attempts to explain to David why Schnaiderman is not an Argentine last name. The clerk refuses to accept Schnaiderman as an Argentine surname, saying, “A mí me cuesta mucho copiar nombres extranjeros” (“It is very difficult for me to copy foreign names”), whereupon David intends to prove how “Schnaiderman” is no more foreign than “García” (Feierstein 125). David interrogates the clerk:

- ¿[y] su apellido no es “extranjero”, sino “argentino”?
- Sí... Sí, señor.
- Es decir, usted descende de una tribu de indios matacos. O tobas. O de los García querandíes. ¿Quizá Calfucurá García, un cacique araucano? ¿Lautaro García, de los diaguitas?
- Le sube el color a las mejillas. Está algo tense.
- No, señor. Quise decir que soy “argentino” porque nací aquí. En esta tierra.
- También yo nací aquí.
- En Buenos Aires. En un barrio.
- En buenos Aires. En un barrio.
- “[a]nd your last name is not ‘foreign’ but rather ‘Argentine’?”
- “Yes. . . Yes, Sir.”
- “That is to say, you are a descendent of a tribe of Mataco Indians. Or the Tobas. Or of the Querandí Garcías. Maybe Calfucurá García, an Araucanian chief? Lautaro García, of the Diaguita people?”
- Color rises to his cheeks. He’s a bit tense.
- “No, Sir. I’m saying that I’m ‘Argentine’ because I was born here. In this land.”
- “I was also born here.”
- “In Buenos Aires. In a neighborhood.”
- “In Buenos Aires. In a neighborhood.” (Feierstein 126)

David continues to hassle the clerk about what makes “García” more Argentine than “Schnaiderman.” However, after this exchange, David realizes that no matter how Argentine he feels, he is still “judío, el minoritario, el marginal para muchos” (“Jewish, the minority, the marginal for many people”) (Feierstein 128), even if it he does not actively see himself as exclusively part of the minority.

Ultimately, David's amnesia dis-orders his sense of self, bringing about a "situación de extrañamiento consigo mismo" ("situation of estrangement from himself") and a "[d]esorientación global de sí mismo y en tiempo y espacio" ("global disorientation of self both in time and space") (Feierstein 10). This dis-order allows for a reorientation toward an off home conceptualization of identity, one that moves away from binary tensions and seeks a constructive repositioning of these elements. On the surface, it appears as if *Mestizo* rejects the idea of the off home—after all, Feierstein advocates for an integrated "we" in which Jewish and non-Jewish Argentines come together to make common cause. Within the principle of cultural *mestizaje*, Feierstein does not propose to eliminate the Jewish element of identity but believes that that identity should be merely "una dentro de las posibles" (one among the possible ones") (Feierstein 318). Feierstein claims that he seeks to make a center from the margins—that is, to have the central integrate with and swallow up the marginal. However, the entire novel leading up to the ending belies the optimism that the end evokes. For this reason, I read the ending as a fantasy, an ideal, a manner of writing integration without living it; furthermore, I read the publication of the novel as a meta-strategy that represents the off home. Feierstein understands *mestizaje* as "mi característica personal" ("my personal characteristic") (Sadow and Feierstein 03:10-03:12). The pro-democracy rally, like the soccer game, where David's son is so proud to be part of the majority and on the side of the winning team, is not everyday reality.

Instead, the reality is the off home, in which the focus shifts from the all-important center to forging connections between the so-called margins and in this way bypassing that limited center-margin dynamic. The novel's plot focuses on solving Sra. Abud's murder, and in so doing, David finally remembers that it was Ignacio who pulled the trigger. As previously discussed, Ignacio had become insane and paranoid, in essence recreating Arab-Israeli tensions

in Argentina. Ignacio murdered Sra. Abud, who had been having an affair with David's other best friend, León. Feierstein claims that David has come to terms with all the layers of his identity by the end of the novel, suggested by the balancing of the extreme ideas on the part of David's character that are represented by the characters of León and Ignacio. Despite what Feierstein indicates, however, I argue that the end of the novel does not reach a resolution or integration. David does solve the murder, but he does not resolve the issue that sparked the murder. His character does not merge with those of Ignacio and León. Moreover, the events of the novel serve as evidence that the optimistic end of the novel is nothing more than an isolated moment.

Therefore, I argue that Feierstein's novel itself conceptualizes the off home. Although Feierstein brings much attention to the center-margin dichotomy in his reading of his own novel in *Counterexile and Mestizaje*, I read the novel against the grain in which it is typically interpreted. I maintain that the novel is an off home representation of identity because the narrator (and the author) believes simultaneously in what *is* and what *if*. According to this reading, the ending of *Mestizo* is a fantasy, and true integration has not been achieved. Although Feierstein writes that cultural *mestizaje* will erase neither the Argentine nor the Jewish identities and will instead create an integrated whole, I reason that Feierstein's idealized "integration" is more along the lines of a fluid fragmentation in which Jewish Argentine subjectivity is in constant flux without the final product ever reaching total integration, or resolution. Such a resolution would be impossible because even this idealized whole would exist in constant mediation, inviting the simultaneously single and multiple identities that David recognizes near the end of the novel to continue to influence and shift each other.

Continuing this line of thought, *The Threshold Lodge* could be treated as *Mestizo*'s true conclusion. This novel, too, is representative of the off home. Feierstein continues to wrestle with this idea of a simultaneously single and multiple Jewish and Argentine identity in *The Threshold Lodge*, which traces several generations of the Schvel family's presence in Argentina since the founding of Moisesville, the first Jewish community in Argentina. The premise of the novel is the Schvel family's pilgrimage, with significant symbolic implications, to mix the soil of Moisesville with the soil of Buenos Aires. The AMIA bombing bookends the novel. The difference in the titles of *Mestizo* and *The Threshold Lodge* is suggestive of their distinguishing visions: while *Mestizo* advocates a kind of (unattainable) hybridity, or *mestizaje*, *The Threshold Lodge* focuses on precisely this, the threshold. Deferring the concept of arrival or resolution is an off home strategy, and, though it is tempered and less idealistic, it is by no means a strictly negative point of view. Despite scholars such as Lourdes Barranco-Cortés maintaining that the threshold is "an uncomfortable place" (Barranco-Cortés 199), I argue that Feierstein posits it as a productive and resourceful place, in the way that Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin describe diaspora (see Introduction).

Martina Stemberger reflects on the importance of the protagonists' last names in *Mestizo* and *The Threshold Lodge* as further suggestive of their distinctive representations. *Mestizo*'s Schnaiderman means "tailor" in Yiddish, representative of his grandfather's profession and David's actions as he sews together details of his heritage and pieces of his memory. *The Threshold Lodge*'s Schvel means "threshold" in Yiddish, representative of the position of the Jews in Argentine society, from Feierstein's perspective. Stemberger likewise affirms:

[l]a logia del umbral éponyme n'est rien moins que le concept utopique d'une communauté des hommes et des femmes du seuil, de l'entre-deux ; d'une union de tous les minoritaires qui, enfin réunis, seraient capables de réclamer leurs droits de majorité paradoxale.

[t]he eponymous threshold lodge is nothing less than the utopian concept of a community of men and women of the threshold, the in-between; of a union of all those in the minority who, gathered at last, would be able to reclaim their rights of a paradoxical majority. (Stemberger 77)

In other words, the center-margins dichotomy would no longer be in play, and the former marginal status itself would instead be a source of power while at the same time challenging the idea of cultural hegemony. I contend that the Yiddish meanings behind the last names augment my reading of the off home in the novel because they represent a space that circumvents the hegemony of the center: the Yiddish meanings behind the names is likely a symbol inaccessible to the non-Jewish Argentine majority and maintains at least a little of the novels as a secret to a semi-exclusive audience. Both novels keep themselves at the threshold in a somewhat secretive and even playful way that gestures toward the flexibility of the off home and welcomes the discerning and deciphering reader into a real-world threshold lodge.

To return to *Mestizo* and David's dis-ordered world, then, I argue that David never re-orders his world. The fragmentation that ensues as a result of the trauma of witnessing Sra. Abud's murder propels David to examine the various components that contribute to his multifaceted subjectivity as a Jewish Argentine with roots also extending to Poland and Israel. By the end of the novel, in contrast to Ignacio and León, whose disillusionment stems from chasing an ideal of "home" that will never exist, David embraces this alternate strategy, the decentralization that is part of the off home, which allows David to recognize and adapt to the overlapping facets of his identity without privileging one "order"—in other words, against "lo estéril de la pureza" ("the sterility of purity") (Feierstein 331).

Intertext and Ambiguity: Exile in Angelina Muñiz-Huberman's *Dulcinea encantada*

Comparable to how Shalev reimagines the inheritance of collective sacrifice and redemption among Israeli society, and Feierstein explores the inherited exilic roots with the Argentine Jewish community, Angelina Muñiz-Huberman introduces nuance to the concept of exile as both a lived and inherited experience. Her novel *Dulcinea encantada* (*Enchanted Dulcinea*, 1992) both normalizes and estranges what it means to live without a home by depicting the protagonist's unrelenting trauma as a refugee coping with the profound and repeated loss of home, identity, and her sense of self. The eponymous Dulcinea is a fourteen-year-old refugee to Mexico fleeing first the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) in Spain and then World War II (1939-1945) and the Nazis in Russia, where her parents had sent her to escape the Spanish Civil War. Muñiz-Huberman herself was intimately acquainted with lived exile and reflects much of this experience in the fictional figure of Dulcinea. Born in Hyères, France in 1936 to refugees of the Spanish Civil War, Muñiz-Huberman lived in Cuba from 1939-1942, after which her family relocated to Mexico (Godoy 101). The movements and relocations of Dulcinea are the same as those of Muñiz-Huberman and her family: “[d]e España a Francia. De Francia a Cuba. De Cuba a México” (“[f]rom Spain to France. From France to Cuba. From Cuba to Mexico”) (Muñiz-Huberman 77).¹² Muñiz-Huberman is considered part of the generation of writers known as *hispanomexicanos*, writers who fled to Mexico from Spain during the Spanish Civil War—the term *hispanomexicano* itself connotes an in-betweenness, suggesting neither fully Spanish nor fully Mexican (nor French, in her case, either).

After arriving in Mexico, Muñiz-Huberman's mother revealed to her their Sephardic Jewish origins; in addition to Muñiz-Huberman's personal experience of exile that eventually landed her family in Mexico, she took an interest in her Crypto-Jewish ancestral exile, which

¹² All quotations from Muñiz-Huberman will be taken from *Enchanted Dulcinea* unless otherwise indicated.

traces to the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Imperial Spain. *Marranos* (“pigs”), or *conversos* (“converts”), were Jews who were forced by the Inquisition to convert to Catholicism in order to remain in Spain, and many of these, Crypto-Jews, secretly maintained their Jewish identity and practices. This heritage informs much of Muñiz-Huberman’s writing in hidden ways, mirroring the presence of this concealed Judaism in her own heritage. As Rebecca Marquis observes, “Muñiz-Huberman’s work, and this novel, help to uncover layers of knowledge that have traditionally been hidden, prohibited, or haven’t entered into mainstream culture” (Marquis 4). In addition to the Crypto-Jewish element to her writing, *Enchanted Dulcinea* is a text of intertexts.¹³ Its primary intertextual references are from Miguel Cervantes’s *Don Quijote* (*Don Quixote*, 1605 and 1615),¹⁴ which, according to some arguments, could also be considered a Crypto-Jewish text, and the New Testament’s Book of Revelation.¹⁵ The picaresque (from *Don Quixote*) and the apocalyptic (from Revelation) genres tellingly inform the structure of *Enchanted Dulcinea*, inheriting (Crypto-)Jewish literature in this formalistic sense. Finally, Jewish mysticism also enigmatically figures in the novel, in self-referential keeping with its own thematics. These influencers prefigure the ambiguity of exile, authorship, and identity, which will come to the fore in Dulcinea’s “book” in the story itself—a work that she “authors” but never commits to physical form.

Exile, authorship, and identity play out not only in the intertextuality interwoven throughout the novel but also in Dulcinea’s mental dis-order: though never made explicit, Dulcinea is likely schizophrenic, possibly delusional, selectively mute, and somewhat paranoid.

¹³ I use the terms “intertext” and “intertextuality” based on Julia Kristeva’s elaboration.

¹⁴ *Don Quixote* was originally published as two parts: the first, in 1605, as *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha*, and the second, in 1615, as *El ingenioso caballero Don Quijote de La Mancha*. Both can be translated as *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*.

¹⁵ Timothy Beal dates the *Book of Revelation* as “[p]robably [written by John] sometime between the beginning of the Jewish wars with Rome, which culminate in the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, and the end of the first century CE” (Beal 1).

She suffers from post-traumatic stress as a result of her many uprootings from war-torn countries. I read the off home in the novel's questioning of everything stable and static—from the concept of “home” to the idea of “reality” itself. As a thematic representation of this destabilization, the entirety of the novel even takes place in motion—Dulcinea narrates as she moves as a passenger (suggestive of a lack of control) throughout Mexico's Periférico, a circular highway that forms a band around the city. Muñiz-Huberman confirms the role that exile plays in her writing, remarking that “all my characters are a product of exile: they are all in search of undiscovered worlds” (Muñiz-Huberman, qtd. in Glickman 9). What is critical for the off home is that Muñiz-Huberman's characters “are all in search of undiscovered worlds” but not in search of the worlds they have lost. In other words, they seek not a new homeland but a formation of home that they have not yet experienced and may never fully possess—as I have called it, the off home.

The precedent of undiscovered world as literary quest in *Don Quixote* proves seminal for Muñiz-Huberman. Don Quixote's erratic behavior is sparked by his incessant immersion in the genre of chivalric romances: “del poco dormir y del mucho leer, se le secó el cerebro de manera que vino a perder el juicio. Llenósele la fantasía de todo aquello que leía en los libros” (“from little sleep and a lot of reading, his brain dried up in such a way that he came to lose his judgment. He became filled with the fantasy of everything that he read in the books”) (Cervantes 23). Dulcinea also invents her own worlds and turns them into a “book.” Dulcinea creates versions of herself across time and space, including one who narrates in the present tense of 20th century Mexico, one who consorts with Marquess Calderón de la Barca in 19th century Mexico, and one from medieval Europe who is in love with Amadís of Gaul, a key medieval figure of chivalric romance and Don Quixote's role model (Marquis 5). In an instance of near-

schizophrenic “dialogue,” Dulcinea argues with herself about the role of imagination in identity and belonging:

Dulcinea, Dulcinea, busca tus recuerdos y no inventes. No invento. Es así. Todo lo que leí lo llevo por dentro. Luego es mío. Los castillos. Esos castillos que nunca he visto ni veré. Pero que me conozco muy bien. Porque yo he estado allí.

Dulcinea, Dulcinea, search your memories and don't make things up. I'm not making things up. It's like this. Everything I've read I carry inside. Then it's mine. The castles. Those castles that I have never seen nor will I see. But I know them well. Because I have been there. (Muñiz-Huberman 13)

Dulcinea, like Don Quixote, is absorbed in books to the extent that she allows them to take over her imagination, if not her reality, seemingly placing her sanity in question, just as Don Quixote's eccentric actions call into question his own, an issue that remains ambiguous throughout *Don Quixote*. Moreover, both Dulcinea and Don Quixote rename themselves as they embark on their wanderings. Dulcinea is also an obvious allusion to Don Quixote's invented love interest for whose sake he performs all feats of knight errantry.¹⁶ The origin of Don Quixote's name is more questionable, as the real names of the “author” and protagonist are never revealed.¹⁷ A similar ambiguity holds true, in fact, for *Revelation*, the other major intertext of *Enchanted Dulcinea*. The author calls himself John, but there is much speculation as to the book's authorship.

¹⁶ In *Don Quixote*, Dulcinea del Toboso is Don Quixote's self-invented soul mate, and he spends most of his adventures in pursuit of her. When Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (his scribe) arrive at Dulcinea's supposed city, Toboso, Don Quixote allows himself to believe in Dulcinea's “enchantment” as the reason she does not appear as he had imagined her (Cervantes 536-545). Don Quixote's goal then becomes “volverla a su ser primero” (“to return her to her first self”) as she was before the alleged enchantment (Cervantes 939). However, when he succeeds in “disenchancing” her—that is, when he ceases to believe altogether in the existence of Dulcinea del Toboso—he effectively disenchant himself, and “Don Quixote” as such also ceases to exist. Upon this recognition on Don Quixote's part, corresponding to his own grave physical illness, the attending priest announces, using Don Quixote's real name (or one of his possible real names), “Verdaderamente se muere, y verdaderamente está cuerdo Alonso Quijano el Bueno” (“Truly he is dying, and truly Alonso Quijano the Good is sane”) (Cervantes 940).

¹⁷ Dominique Aubier posits Crypto-Jewish origins of the name in her 1966 *Don Quichotte, prophète d'Israël* (*Don Quixote, Prophet of Israel*).

Dulcinea not only clearly eschews sanity, which I interpret as “center” or “order,” as a lived state, but also questions the concept of sanity itself. She declares in frustration: “[l]a enajenante cordura. Los malos buenos modales. . . . ¿Qué Dulcinea eres. . . ?” (“[t]he maddening sanity. The bad good manners. . . . What Dulcinea are you. . . ?”) (Muñiz-Huberman 79). This rejection of binary categorizations, including blurring the line between sanity and insanity and “good” and “bad” rejects the necessity of claiming only one *central* Dulcinea, further conceptualizing my concept of the off home. Dulcinea’s use of “qué” (“what”) over the more grammatically correct “cuál” (“which”) further amplifies the space for possible Dulcineas, rather than limiting Dulcinea’s choice to those forms of her self that already exist and of which she is previously aware. If *Don Quixote* leaves ambiguous whether the protagonist is sane, then *Enchanted Dulcinea* contends that there is no such thing as sanity or insanity, but rather some liminal space inclusive of both.

Enchanted Dulcinea thus embraces ambiguity on all fronts as resistance to hegemony, and its intertextual relationship with the anonymity of the author of *Don Quixote* augments this ambiguity by questioning the authority of authorship itself. Historically, some scholars (for example, Dominique Aubier) have suggested that Cervantes himself was a *converso* Jew and that Don Quixote’s travails symbolize the *converso* Jewish experience in Inquisitorial Spain.¹⁸ For Aubier, the epithet of Jews as the “People of the Book” figures in the premise. As Michael McGaha summarizes, “What could be more Jewish than Don Quixote’s attempt to live a life based on his reading—to become, as it were, a living book? (67)” (McGaha 174-5). Aubier concludes that Don Quixote is almost entirely based on the Zohar, a Kabbalistic text, and that Don Quixote’s originating from the region of La Mancha, which means “the stain,” is a reference

¹⁸ For an excellent summary of many such scholars’ work and the evidence pointing to Cervantes and his fictional Don Quixote as *conversos*, see Michael McGaha’s “Is there a Hidden Jewish Meaning in *Don Quixote*?” (2004).

to his impure—that is, Jewish—lineage. Further, as Aubier claims, while Sancho Panza (Don Quixote’s scribe) makes many references to his status a *cristiano viejo*, “old Christian” (as opposed to “new Christian,” meaning a *converso*), Don Quijote never directly responds to these veiled allusions to lineage and instead even pointedly ridicules the church at many moments throughout the text (Aubier 84-5).

Although Muñiz-Huberman’s Dulcinea’s possible Jewish lineage is never mentioned explicitly, and Muñiz-Huberman does not write *Enchanted Dulcinea* as a “Jewish” book, the thematic centrality of books could be another among many allusions to Crypto-Jewish ancestry, both regarding Jews as the “People of the Book” and the burning of people and books. To this end, based on Aubier’s argument, McGaha continues:

[e]ven though the famous scene of the burning of Don Quixote’s library is often discussed as if it were no more than a self-referential literary conceit, can we really forget it was written at a moment when not only books . . . but also people were being burned? . . . Echoing the tragedy that had befallen Spain’s Jews and Muslims, Don Quixote is insulted, scorned, misunderstood, tormented, ridiculed, often beaten within an inch of his life, and his books are burned. (McGaha 176)

Enchanted Dulcinea is likewise contextualized “at a moment when not only books . . . but also people were being burned”: when Dulcinea asks what “Dulcinea” she is, and questions the foundation of sanity, she references another such moment of trauma and displacement in modern history—not the Inquisition but the Holocaust. She asks of one of her Dulcineas:

¿[c]rees en la cordura y en los buenos modales? ¿Qué Dulcinea eres, la de ayer o la de hoy? Porque hoy no se cree en nada. Quince mil niños judíos asesinados por los soldados alemanes en el campo de concentración de Theresienstadt. Cordura y buenos modales.

[d]o you believe in sanity and good manners? What Dulcinea are you, the one from yesterday or today. Because today there’s no believing in anything. Fifteen thousand Jewish children murdered by German soldiers in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt. Sanity and good manners. (Muñiz-Huberman 79)

Although it is inexplicit, it is possible that Dulcinea, who had fled to Russia as a child because of the Spanish Civil War, needed to flee Russia not only because of the war generally, but specifically because she is Jewish and might have ended up as one of those children. It is also worth noting that Dulcinea's younger brother died in Russia by a German sniper while they were there together, and Dulcinea carries with her tremendous survivor's guilt as she struggles with that memory and her parents' reaction that seemingly, in Dulcinea's young eyes, faulted her, in turn, for her survival.

These layers of trauma in part explain Dulcinea's failure to integrate into Mexican society and Dulcinea's subsequent dis-orders that react to the lack of stability in her life. Dulcinea laments that she can only experience happiness in these imaginary adventures because in real life, "[s]ufro. Tengo pesadillas. No recuerdo los sueños y sin embargo estoy agobiada" ("I suffer. I have nightmares. I don't remember the dreams and nevertheless I'm overwhelmed") (Muñiz-Huberman 161). Dulcinea "está en un país tan diferente del suyo" ("is in a country so different from her own") and "no tiene a qué aferrarse" ("has nothing to hold on to") (Muñiz-Huberman 161). She does not even recognize her own parents and is angry because they seem to be moving on in a way that does not include her or help her work through her own trauma: her mother is wearing makeup, but, Dulcinea says, "No creo que sea mi madre. Sólo veo colores y cremas. En la guerra no se pintaba. No es ella" ("I don't think that she's my mother. I only see colors and creams. In the war she didn't wear makeup. It's not her") (Muñiz-Huberman 147). Dulcinea's mother's use of makeup reveals her mother's adapting to life beyond the war and beyond her own trauma and displacement, contrasting with Dulcinea's inability to do so herself.

Dulcinea's dis-order is furthermore a response to the lack of agency she perceives in her life as a result of such displacement and trauma over which she was unable to exert any control. Now, in Mexico, even after the traumatic moments themselves have passed, Dulcinea still finds herself lacking control in much the same way. Thus, Dulcinea identifies with the apocalyptic, lamenting, "Mi mundo se destruyó el día que me pusieron en el barco" ("My world was destroyed the day they put me on the boat" (Muñiz-Huberman 85). As a defense mechanism, then, for a lack of "order," Dulcinea has abandoned speech, leaving it to those whose experiences are more readily rendered verbally—"[q]ue hablen los que no saben" ("[l]et those who don't know talk") (Muñiz-Huberman 34). That is to say, Dulcinea equates speech with a psychic process and emotionally separates herself from those who have not experienced the pain that she has witnessed and felt, in isolation from the rest of her family members. To speak out loud would play into the "order" of the world that Dulcinea's traumatic experiences have taught her not to trust or value.

Dulcinea, thus, identifies with and in fact has memorized the entire apocalyptic text of Revelation (Muñiz-Huberman 117), perhaps because it, too, was written at a time of great turmoil as Jews and Jewish Christians endured Roman persecution. Revelation, and apocalypse as a genre, existed to provide comfort to those marginalized by persecution (Blackwell et al 21, 33)—in the context of Revelation, the Christians were persecuted by the Romans. In *El canto del peregrino* (*The Migrant's Song*, 1999), Muñiz-Huberman explains the stakes of the apocalyptic for her in terms of exile, affirming:

[t]odo escritor que pierde su tierra de origen penetra en el campo apocalíptico: el paraíso ha sido sellado: las fuerzas del mal han dado lugar a la destrucción, la monstruosidad, lo grotesco, lo incongruente, lo desorbitado y lo anómalo. Su obsesión será hallar un rincón de orden en el caos circundante.

[e]very writer who loses their homeland penetrates the realm of the apocalypse: paradise has been sealed: the forces of evil have given way to destruction, monstrosity, the grotesque, the incongruent, the disproportionate, and the anomalous. Their obsession will be to find a corner of order in the surrounding chaos. (Muñiz-Huberman, *Migrant's* 70-1)

In other words, the dis-order of Revelation and the apocalyptic visions represent destruction for the sake of construction. This is reflected in the etymology of “apocalypse,” which, though it has come to denote a complete destruction, comes from the Greek for “revelation.” For Don Quixote and Muñiz-Huberman’s Dulcinea alike, the apocalyptic and exilic also hold the key to revelation. Aubier argues that *Don Quixote*’s “Dulcinea représente la Schekhina, celle qui accompagne le Juif en Exil et qui protège du bout de son aile les convertis” (“Dulcinea represents the *Shekhina*,¹⁹ who accompanies the Jew in Exile and who protects under her wing the *conversos*”) (Aubier 102). Don Quixote has nothing left to live for after he gives up on the idea of Dulcinea, and this “sanity” leads directly to his death. Don Quixote, in other words, abandons this aspect of the divine; Muñiz-Huberman’s Dulcinea, on the other hand, identifies with the dual aspect of concealment-revelation that is inherent to the *Shekhina*. Importantly, revelation does not equate with “order” or lead to the discovery of a “paradise” that ends the exile. The themes of revelation in the novel contend with possibilities beyond the perceived ideal, wherein lies much of the creative potential of the off home.

The role of exile for Dulcinea and for Muñiz-Huberman, by extension, while taking on similar characteristics, end in different ways that speak to the nature of an off home revelation. Dulcinea, in contrast to Don Quixote, likely does not die, though Muñiz-Huberman, unlike Cervantes in this respect, ends her work ambiguously. At the end of *Enchanted Dulcinea*, the

¹⁹ The *Shekhina* is traditionally understood according to Jewish lore as the feminine presence of God.

car in which Dulcinea is traveling exits the Periférico. “Tal vez hayan chocado” (“Maybe they have crashed”) (Muñiz-Huberman 189), though it remains unresolved.

El Periférico se acaba. El automóvil entra por un camino lateral. . . .
 Hay árboles: pájaros que están recogiendo y que cantan su último canto. Ramas inclinadas por el peso de los frutos. Agradable silencio. Chiaroscuro.
 Este lugar sí me gusta, piensa Dulcinea.
 Al fondo un castillo. Abruptas rocas hasta llegar a él. La luz en las nubes. El almendrado ojo de Dios.
 Se abren las puertas (del cielo).

The Periférico ends. The car enters a side street. . . .
 There are trees: birds that are going home and that are singing their last song.
 Branches bending from the weight of the fruits. Pleasant silence. Chiaroscuro.
 This place I do like, thinks Dulcinea.
 At the end a castle. Steep rocks until arriving to it. The light in the clouds. The almond-shaped eye of God.
 The doors (of heaven) open. (Muñiz-Huberman 189-190)

The parentheses included in the final line of the novel formally depict the almond-shaped eye of God, an open orifice that then becomes associated with the doors of heaven, echoed by the literal opening of the car door. The end of the novel represents either physical death or a kind of spiritual transcendence.

A possible interpretation is that at the end, Dulcinea physically dies (the eye of God, the doors of heaven). I argue against such a reading because, if Dulcinea dies at the end, then who is narrating the story? In the beginning of the book the narrator reveals, “Dulcinea soy yo” (“I am Dulcinea”) (Muñiz-Huberman 13). Another interpretation is that Dulcinea reaches a kind of spiritual transcendence. To this end, Judith Payne reads Dulcinea’s ultimate spiritual transcendence in the context of Christian mysticism and the ascension toward the *via unitiva*, which can be understood as unity with God. Payne’s reading is based on her interpretation of Muñiz-Huberman’s novel *Morada interior* (*Interior Dwelling*) about the life of St. Teresa of Ávila, a crypto-Jewish 16th Century Spanish nun and mystic. I argue that Payne’s idea that the

journey ends upon reaching the *via unitiva* does not fit with Muñiz-Huberman's off home-like journeys that continually change form without ending.

Dulcinea's cyclical internal "book" represents this kind of circular journey, rather than one heading always toward one direction, the *via unitiva*. Dulcinea describes her "book" as existing "en constante quehacer. Un libro que se repite o retoma por cualquier parte. Que se reforma y que nunca es igual. Que existe y no existe. Que vivirá en ella y que será tan largo como su vida" ("constantly in the making. A book that repeats and resumes at any point. That gets revised and that is never the same. That exists and does not exist. That will live in her and that will be as long as her life") (Muñiz-Huberman 14). The characters in Dulcinea's "book" adapt to repeated physical and psychic displacement. They seek unexplored inner worlds as much as they journey through the world around them, hence the thematization of the two-pronged nature of exile/apocalypse and revelation, and therefore also the reason Dulcinea's "book" can never end.

Marquis offers a reading of mystical transcendence that focuses on this circularity so integral to *Enchanted Dulcinea* and that is even represented in the circularity of Mexico's Periférico. Marquis traces these thematic circles to the Kabbalistic idea of the *sefirot*, which are realms through which one spiritually ascends until ultimately reaching the *or ein sof*, the light of the infinite—that is, the light of God, or spiritual transcendence. Marquis' interpretation reads *Enchanted Dulcinea* in the context of *Merkavah* literature, Jewish mystical literature that is based on the chariot in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 1.1-28). Within this framework, Marquis considers Dulcinea's car as akin to the divine chariot, and, as such, Dulcinea ascends spiritually, as in Ezekiel's vision. This symbolism alludes, in turn, to Muñiz-Huberman's Crypto-Jewish heritage in the emphasis on concealment in Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and in the prominence

of Kabbalah in Jewish medieval Europe, one of the settings of Dulcinea's "book."

Appropriately, Gershom Scholem believed the Kabbalah to be tied to the concept and period of diaspora (Huss 143-4).

Building on Marquis' reading of the novel in terms of Merkavah literature, to which Ezekiel's vision is central, I read the ending in terms of the other main intertext for *Enchanted Dulcinea*, Revelation, which serves as an intertextual, metatextual, and paratextual reference for the novel and which is also based in large part on Ezekiel's vision.²⁰ Given the intertextual similarities of Revelation²¹ to, first, *Don Quixote* and, then, to *Enchanted Dulcinea*, all three works can be said to be books about books. Second, *Enchanted Dulcinea* is divided into seven seals, modeled after the structure of the Book of Revelation and the seven seals that John discusses that are opened in the course of Revelation. Finally, Revelation is a book of exile, both internal and external, as are *Don Quixote* and *Enchanted Dulcinea*. Like Cervantes, who held a marginalized social status, and Muñiz-Huberman, who was repeatedly displaced, the author of Revelation was likely an exile himself. Coogan explains that "the John of Revelation may have been a Palestinian Jewish Christian who fled to the Diaspora as a consequence of the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans (66–73 ce)" (Coogan 2153). As it progressed, the apocalyptic genre, especially in early Jewish literature, has provided comfort to its readers in times of great distress (Blackwell et al 33).

The first paragraph of *Enchanted Dulcinea* positions Dulcinea herself as akin to the professed authorial John to whom the revelation comes. Thus the novel opens: "[u]n día, yendo

²⁰ Regarding the connection between *Merkavah* literature and Revelation, Marquis writes:

Cameron Afzal uses the same exact citation we find in *Enchanted Dulcinea* to make a case for reading the Book of Revelation within the Merkavah tradition, arguing for "an emerging Jewish *Merkabah* mysticism" in which Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings overlap, and in the case of the Book of Revelation, show evidence of Merkavah exegesis" (Marquis 29).

²¹ Revelation itself contains numerous Biblical allusions. For a detailed account of some of these sources, see Loren T. Stuckenbruck's "Forward" in *Reading Revelation in Context John's Apocalypse and Second Temple Judaism*.

en automóvil por el Periférico, . . . te llega la revelación” (“[o]ne day, going by car on the Periférico, . . . the revelation comes to you”) (Muñiz-Huberman 11). When Dulcinea channels Revelation and says, “He aquí que viene con las nubes y todo ojo lo verá. Yo soy alfa y omega. Principio y fin” (“Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending”²²)²³ (Muñiz-Huberman 15), metatextually, the idea of revelation is the beginning and the ending of the novel. In the above passage, Dulcinea says that the revelation comes to her one day while in the car on the Periférico, which corresponds to the novelistic present. The novel, therefore, is the book, which encapsulates her memories, both real and imagined. As such, the concluding presentation of the eye of God suggests the ultimate revelation—salvation, in Dulcinea’s case, an inner salvation (an idea that Marquis, Payne, and others have discussed).

I add that this circular structure of the novel mirrors the circularity of the Periférico. Dulcinea’s internal never-ending book likewise mirrors this arrangement as well. She even cites passages from Revelation throughout, including the verse from Revelation 10:10, “*Y tomé el librito de la mano del ángel, y lo devoré; y era dulce*”²⁴ (“And I took the little book out of the angel’s hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet [*dulce*] like honey”) (Muñiz-Huberman 117), which connects linguistically the book and Dulcinea herself and is symbolic of Dulcinea having replaced spoken words with the words of her inner “book.” This passage is also a direct reference to Ezekiel’s own consumption (and therefore acceptance) of the scrolls that contained the prophecies of divine decree of lamentations and exile:

²² All New Testament translations are taken from *The King James Bible* unless noted otherwise. Because this quotation from Muñiz-Huberman contains text taken directly from Revelation, I have used *The King James Bible* for its translation as well.

²³ The verses from the Bible Dulcinea cites here are from Revelation 1.7 and 1.8.

²⁴ Cited passages from Revelation are usually in italics in the novel.

[a]nd he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.” ² So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. ³ Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth. (*NIV*, Rev.3.1-3)

Ezekiel’s acceptance of the seemingly harsh decrees, coupled with the vision of redemption, like the off home itself, challenges exile and redemption as inherently opposite and thematically relates to Revelation, and in turn, *Enchanted Dulcinea*, in the same spirit.

Revelation consequently ties into the themes of madness and mental dis-order in *Enchanted Dulcinea*. In their Introduction to *Reading Revelation in Context: John’s Apocalypse and Second Temple Judaism*, Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, Jason Maston, and Mark Matthews write that “reading this work is a disorienting, multisensory experience that terrifies as much as it clarifies” (Blackwell et al 20). Similar to the way in which Dulcinea’s mental dis-order makes way for her “unexplored worlds,” with different interpretations, the same is true of Revelation and the apocalyptic genre. As previously discussed, the end of *Enchanted Dulcinea* bears several possible interpretations; Revelation likewise has been interpreted as a history, a prophecy, or a symbol relevant to readers of all times (Coogan 2154).

In addition to borrowing from the apocalyptic genre, *Enchanted Dulcinea* could also be considered a picaresque novel, which interplays generically with *Don Quixote* as well and conceptualizes the off home in its approach. Similarly, Catherine Caufield interprets what she perceives as the picaresque genre in Muñiz-Huberman’s *Tierra adentro* (translated as *A Mystical Journey*, 1977) as “una mimesis del exilio espiritual” (“a mimesis of the spiritual exile”) that the character faces (Caufield 196). To comprehend the relevance of the picaresque genre to the historical contexts of modern Jewish literature, the claims of two scholars prove key. First, Edward H. Friedman defines as characteristic to the picaresque “a first-person

narrator/protagonist, an outsider in the social hierarchy, and rites of passage, as well as a series of episodes in diverse locales and including figures from all strata of society” (Freidman 180-81). Secondly, Miriam Udel, in applying the theories of the picaresque to modern Jewish literature, explains that the picaresque can function as a rejection of convention regarding both form and content because “the picaresque intervenes against plot *structure*” (Udel 13, emphasis in the original).

In the case of *Enchanted Dulcinea*, the subplots move forward and backward in time, as opposed to the typical linear configuration of historical tales that move forward in time, against the circular structure of the *Periférico*, where Dulcinea physically exists. Udel cites Paul West’s argument that the aim of the picaresque novel is to “‘repudiate the organized mind’ by providing ‘an ideal medium’ to ‘the iconoclast, as well as the man who can connect nothing with nothing’” (Udel 13).²⁵ Both Don Quixote and Muñiz-Huberman’s Dulcinea challenge social conformity, reflected in their “madness” and refusal to bend to social expectations; they “connect nothing with nothing” in their elevation of worlds, scenarios, and personas to the level of reality. Dulcinea recognizes that her memories are “encantados” (“enchanted”) (Muñiz-Huberman 40), but, at the same time, just as Don Quixote says, “[y]o sé quién soy. . . y sé que puedo ser, no solo los que he dicho, sino todos los doce Pares de Francia, y aun todos los Nueve de la Fama” (“I know who I am . . . and I know that I can be, not only the ones I’ve said, but also all of the Twelve Peers of France, and even all of the Nine Worthies” (Cervantes 50), Muñiz-Huberman’s Dulcinea, echoing Don Quixote, proclaims that she can be whomever she wants to be by immersing in a book, real or imagined:

[y]o soy yo. Yo soy yo. Yo soy yo. Y si no, me pongo a leer. Que es lo mismo. Mejor dicho, lo opuesto. Yo no soy yo. Yo soy Penélope. Yo soy Orlando. Yo soy Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (no doña Jimena, muy aburrida dama), soy Dulcinea, soy

²⁵ Udel takes these citations from Paul West’s *The Modern Novel*. See Works Cited for bibliographic information.

Santa Teresa, soy una de las hermanas Brontë, probablemente, Emily. Ah, también soy Elizabeth Browning, por intermedio de Virginia Woolf. Pero podría ser también algún cabalista hispanohebreo del siglo XIII; algún marino famoso del siglo XVI. O algún personaje de Walter Scott (creo que Rob Roy), o de Joseph Conrad (¿Lord Jim?).

I am me. I am me. I am me. And if not, I start to read. Which is the same. Better said, the opposite. I am not me. I am Penelope. I am Roland. I am Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (not Lady Jimena, a very boring woman), I am Dulcinea, I am Saint Teresa,²⁶ I am one of the Brontë sisters, probably Emily. Oh, I am also Elizabeth Browning, by way of Virginia Woolf. But I could also be some Judeo-Spanish Kabbalist from the 16th century. Or a character from Walter Scott (I think Rob Roy), or from Joseph Conrad (Lord Jim?). (Muñiz-Huberman 22)

In this manic list, in the same way that in *Don Quixote* offers up a rather detailed glimpse into his library, here, Dulcinea's wandering catalogue provides a similar reference for analyzing her state of mind.

To begin with, Dulcinea casts herself not as Odysseus, the quintessential traveler looking to make his way home, but as his wife already at home and waiting for his return. This role is an impossibility for the exiled Dulcinea; however, Dulcinea relates to Penelope's weaving and unweaving of a shroud, in a Sheherezadian attempt to buy time from her many suitors, in the way that she herself weaves and unweaves her tales at will as a way to survive. Jumping forward in time, Dulcinea's list next names the medieval European knight Roland (from the 16th century Italian epic poem *Orlando furioso*, often translated as *Raging Roland*), a subject of Chivalric romance, like Don Quixote, and Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (also known as El Cid), the subject of the oldest Spanish epic poem. These literary figures evoke quixotic journeys in literature and in time.

Dulcinea then says that she is many writers, like Virginia Woolf and the Brontë sisters—both literary pioneers, as well as many different characters, real and fictional. Buried within this

²⁶ As mentioned previously, St. Teresa of Ávila was a crypto-Jewish Spanish mystic and nun from the 16th century, the subject of Muñiz-Huberman's *Morada interior*.

long list of Christian European writers and characters are the Spanish Kabbalists, highlighting Dulcinea's knowledge, at the very least, of Jewish mysticism. Dulcinea's mental impersonation of these authors and characters reflects at once an attempt to gain some control over her life as well as a rejection of order or a center of mental focus or command. In the way that the picaresque wandering intervenes against plot structure, Dulcinea's "library" intervenes against thematic or realistic structure or control.

As discussed, Don Quixote's invention of Dulcinea—that is, his "madness," real or feigned—sustains him, and her "disenchantment" and his "sanity" lead directly to his illness and death. Muñiz-Huberman's Dulcinea likewise depends on the suspension of reality so that she can live on her terms. For this reason, Dulcinea refuses to write down any of her "book" in which she plays, or *is*, these characters on real, physical paper because the suspension of these worlds is what sustains them. Friedman writes that picaresque narrators rarely retain full control over their narratives in which events happen to them by fate. This lack of control is mirrored in the frantic catalogue of Dulcinea's literary figures. Such a lack of agency is also reflected in the events that have constituted Dulcinea's life, in which she has been twice exiled physically and is now an involuntary passenger on the *Periférico*. In the worlds that she creates, adopts, and adapts, this lack of control of her own destiny that has been a detriment up until now translates into flexible creativity—not in search of home but living in the off home. She is author, narrator, and protagonist, but, to some extent, she lets the stories go where they will, without demanding authorial control or intervention. Though Rodríguez-Peláez argues that madness affords a certain element of controllability that convention does not allow (Rodríguez-Peláez 40), the mental dis-order in Dulcinea's life allows her to control parts of the lives that she invents but

at the same time resists the idea of total control, signaling the impossibility, and even the undesirability, of achieving an ordered center.

For Dulcinea, then, her mental dis-order, represented by her “book,” is a kind of refuge that challenges the need for control; this off home functions in a similar way that for Muñiz-Huberman writing has become a haven as well. Muñiz-Huberman, explaining her relationship to writing in “El juego de escribir” (“The Game of Writing”), declares, “Habiendo perdido la tierra propia me aferré a la tierra de las palabras. Que se me convirtió en sagrada (“Having lost my own land, I grabbed hold of the land of words. Which became sacred for me”) (Muñiz-Huberman, “Game” 62). Importantly, writing does not become her “home” but instead a sanctified space of fragmentation. Dulcinea in part adopts this approach as well, represented by the overflowing intertextuality coursing through her mind; unlike Muñiz-Huberman, however, Dulcinea keeps her “book” to herself. Reading this “book” in the context of Revelation, Dulcinea keeps the seals closed, unlike in Revelation itself, when the unsealing of the scrolls is the harbinger of the apocalypse, which is the revelation. In a play on words signaling this ironic thematic connection and distinction, Dulcinea contends, regarding the absence of potential future readers of her “book”: “no revelarían el libro que está ahí” (“this book that is here would not be revealed”) (Muñiz-Huberman 63).

Ultimately, Dulcinea’s “book” that will never be released into the world introduces an element of irony in the text. Dulcinea’s story is in part autobiographical for Muñiz-Huberman,²⁷ and writing is a way for Muñiz-Huberman to approach her own exile, personally from Spain in 1939 and historically from there in 1492. Therefore, in this way, Dulcinea presents as somewhat

²⁷ For more analysis of the experiences that influenced Muñiz-Huberman’s writing of *Enchanted Dulcinea*, see Godoy’s article “Niños de la guerra en México: la desterritorialización como consecuencia del exilio a través de Carlos Blanco Aguinaga y Angelina Muñiz-Huberman” (2019) and Marquis’ Introduction to her translation of *Enchanted Dulcinea* (2022).

of an antihero rather than a heroine, as her rejection of the physical book stands in stark contrast to the presence of so many intertextual references within her “book” and especially in contrast to the physical book that Muñiz-Huberman has created that offers, in concrete, immutable writing, Dulcinea’s story, as well as parts of Muñiz-Huberman’s own. Moreover, Muñiz-Huberman introduces irony in the fact that all of Dulcinea’s “private” thoughts are exposed and at the mercy of the author as much as they are open to the interpretation of the reader. Even though in *The Migrant’s Song* Muñiz-Huberman claims that *Enchanted Dulcinea* contains “una confesión interna que nadie escuchó” (“an internal confession that no one heard”) (Muñiz-Huberman, *Migrant’s* 184), the existence of the novel proves that this is not exactly true. No one *within* the novel hears the confession. Unsealing the scrolls (publication) holds one prisoner to the realm of reality once such creative energy is rendered physical and permanent, but it also clears space for a freedom that Dulcinea’s mental book can never offer: Dulcinea is not able to exist in reality. Muñiz-Huberman copes with her own crisis of belonging, writing in the off home, precisely in the paradoxical play of committing her worlds and imaginations to the physicality of reality.

This off home is found in not only Muñiz-Huberman’s use of language but also in her discussion of the grammar of reality versus that of imagination in the novel. Dulcinea writes that she cannot tolerate the grammatical subjunctive mood such as in the phrase “if there were” because it is a tense of unfulfilled desires (Muñiz-Huberman 95).²⁸ It is also irrevocably tied to reality in negating its possibility. At first, her rejection of this tense seems counterintuitive: Dulcinea, in ignoring reality, should feel at home in the tense of the impossible hypothesis.

²⁸ In the text, Dulcinea claims that she cannot tolerate the “preterit subjunctive”; however, the examples she offers, are in fact imperfect subjunctive (“Si no viajara, en este momento, por el Periférico” [If I were not traveling, in this moment, on the Periférico]) and pluperfect subjunctive (“Si no hubiera estallado la Guerra Civil. Si mis padres no me hubieran embarcado a Rusia. Si no hubiera llegado a México. . . . Si no hubiera nacido. Si ya me hubiera muerto” [If the Civil War had not broken out. If my parents had not shipped me to Russia. If I had not arrived in Mexico. . . . If I had not been born. If I had already died]) (Muñiz-Huberman 95).

After all, she believes in and even invents multiple Dulcineas across space and time. However, Dulcinea cannot believe in “what if” because it is inherently tied to “what is”—that is, reality.

Muñiz-Huberman, on the other hand, deviates from Dulcinea with respect to this actualizing of creative possibility. Muñiz-Huberman writes that bringing her writing to fruition represents an ecstatic achievement for her: “[s]i escribir es la reunión de todos esos elementos tan preciosos y tan preciados, el acto de llevarlo a cabo es una unidad inseparable que se da de un solo latido: a la manera del éxtasis místico, o del éxtasis erótico” (“[i]f writing is the uniting of all of those elements that are so precious and treasured, the act of carrying through with it is an inseparable unity stemming from a single beat: just like mystical ecstasy, or erotic ecstasy”) (Muñiz-Huberman, “Game” 78). On the other hand, Dulcinea does not bring about any of her works, supposing that “[c]ualquier obra terminada es la muerte” “[a]ny finished work is death” (Muñiz-Huberman 57). Muñiz-Huberman, unlike Dulcinea, believes that a defining feature of exile, especially of the exiled author, is resilience, a willingness and ability to adapt to new and constantly-evolving circumstances—“[q]uien quiera sobrevivir deberá cambiar y seguir el curso de la vida. Después de todo, el exiliado es un experto en sobrevivencia, en adaptación, en ingenio, en duplicidad. Lo mismo el poeta, que es quien señala la novedad de los tiempos” (“[w]hoever wants to survive will have to change and follow the course of life. After all, the exile is an expert in survival, in adaptation, in ingenuity, in duplicity. The same goes for the poet, who is the one to gesture towards the novelty of the times”) (Muñiz-Huberman, *Migrant’s* 180). Therefore, finishing a work for Muñiz-Huberman indicates another chance at renewal, at the creation of new worlds.

Regarding lost worlds, Muñiz-Huberman writes, “La pérdida del paraíso sólo puede sustituirse por un rigor y un hallazgo de palabras eslabonadas en un nuevo mundo naciente”

(“The loss of paradise can only be substituted by a rigor and a discovery of words connected in a nascent new world” (Muñiz-Huberman, *Migrant’s* 175-6). She continues that this “nuevo mundo naciente repite el orden de la creación divina” (“nascent new world repeats the order of the divine creation”) (Muñiz-Huberman, *Migrant’s* 175-6). Adapting to and creating new worlds represents a positive flow of energy allowed by the state of exile, of not being tied to a particular place or time. Although Muñiz-Huberman does not exalt exile, she maintains that it can offer a chance at a powerful opportunity otherwise unattainable, to live in “espacios abiertos, sin fronteras, sin límites. O bien, mundo interno, no restringido, de heridas abiertas” (“open spaces, without borders, without limits. Or rather, an internal world, not restrained, of open wounds”) (Muñiz-Huberman, *Migrant’s* 177). This is precisely the off home, an adaptable, fluid open wound that gives space to new a new poetics, akin to the process and potentialities of divine creation. Such a relationship between exile, writing, and freedom still raises the question of why the character of Dulcinea is mad, suffering from multiple personalities, selective mutism, loss of appetite, nightmares, and general apathy toward the world. As discussed, one explanation is that this thematic exploration of madness provides a way to challenge established patterns and ways of thinking, particularly within the context of historical literary forms and genres of exile.

Writing also allows Muñiz-Huberman to create something akin to a “transnation” in the way that Celeste Henery uses it to discuss Black diasporic women and the community that they form in writing. In asking, “[w]hat if black women’s diaspora were a love story?” Henery proposes that Black women translate themselves into their writing and thereby create a place without a space (Henery 437). Muñiz-Huberman, by comparison, leans into the pain of exile to harness its unrestrained, limitless, creative energy, however notably her layered exiles differ in terms of mutually shared “community.” For this reason, Muñiz-Huberman’s novels portray not

just dis-order but an “open wound.” Incidentally, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa, a queer Chicana writer, uses the same phrase, “una herida abierta,” to describe a similar experience as an inhabitant of physical and metaphysical borderlands (Anzaldúa 25); Anzaldúa, like Muñiz-Huberman, recognizes the “open”-ness, the freedom of the space it created, while at the same time acknowledging the “wound,” the pain that underlies it.

The title of *Enchanted Dulcinea* is particularly revealing, taking into consideration Dulcinea’s exile as an open wound. Marquis analyzes the multiple possibilities that Muñiz-Huberman evokes that remain as ambiguous as the personalities of Dulcinea herself throughout the novel:

[i]t’s also worth noting that “enchanted” (“encantado”) in Spanish has several possible meanings. It can refer to someone under a spell, someone who is not herself while under the enchantment. In this way, Dulcinea can be seen as under someone else’s spell. Perhaps under that of her parents who insist that she define herself through their Spanish eyes. Perhaps under that of a society who cannot see her for who she is. “Los Encantados” can also refer to a popular Spanish game, like freeze tag, where individuals are frozen by a wizard who enchants them until they can break the enchantment. Similarly, it implies that Dulcinea is trapped. But in Spanish, the verb can also be used to express delight or love, thus “Dulcinea encantada” can refer to a Dulcinea who is delighted, who is loved or loves. Instead of being trapped, this version of “enchanted” can refer to her search for unconditional love, for herself, for and from Amadis, or for and from God. (Marquis 13)

Marquis represents Dulcinea, as reflected in her name, a seemingly conflicting binary. On the one hand, her name suggests being trapped or under a spell, in Dulcinea’s case likely the result of the war and violence from which she fled and her traumatic immigration and failure to adjust to Mexican society. On the other hand, Dulcinea is in love and loved, within her stories and in the mystical way in which she searches for and embraces divine love. In this way, without romanticizing exile, the trauma of which is present throughout the novel both implicitly and explicitly, the dis-order and the open wound can be understood as a palimpsest from which to

embark on new adventures. As such, Dulcinea uses the state of exile to discover new worlds and, in one interpretation, to ascend closer and closer to divine enlightenment. In *Another Freedom*, Boym writes:

[a]dventure is described by [Georg] Simmel as “a third something,” neither an external incident nor an internal system. Similarly, the experience of freedom can be understood as “a third something,” which calls for an adventure in thinking. (Boym, *Another* 6)

However, I hesitate to refer to Muñiz-Huberman’s depiction of the off home that I read in the figure of Dulcinea and in the act of her own writing (and publishing) of *Enchanted Dulcinea*, as “a third something.” While “third” breaks the binary of the dual, there is a limiting factor in the nomenclature that proposes only one option beyond the first and the second. If the *first* and *second* are “homeland” and “exile,” then, rather than *third*, I propose that this adventure, beyond what Boym likens to the “third,” and beyond this space that Boym recognizes as the Shklovskian knight’s move in *The Off-Modern*, is infinitely and unrestrictedly *off*.

Returning to Dulcinea’s dislike of the pluperfect subjunctive, the impossible tense, from the Latin meaning “more complete (perfect) than perfect,” it is telling that her narrative assessment continues that: “[e]l imperfecto sí me gusta. Tan imperfecto. Tan habitual. Tan cotidiano. . . . Hacía. Escribía. . . . Caminaba” (“[t]he imperfect I do like. So imperfect. So habitual. So ordinary. . . . I was doing. I was writing. . . . I was walking” (Muñiz-Huberman 96). In other words, the imperfect tense, from the Latin for “incomplete,” is that of nonresolution, and as I argue, another key aspect of the off home, which is in a state of constant evolution, adaptation, and fluidity. The readiness to adventure, maintaining at least some sense of imperfection, is a necessary condition of what it means to go off and to challenge and resist what is. The figure of the migrant in this instance, as one who lives on the margins and at the thresholds, one who “camina de tierra en tierra” (“walks from land to land”) and therefore

“[a]dquiere el hábito de no parar” (“[a]cquires the habit of not stopping”) (Muñiz-Huberman, *Migrant’s* 178), embracing imperfect adventure as a means of self-definition in indefinition.

Conclusion

In comparing these three novels from Israel, Argentina, and Mexico, respectively, this chapter claims that their depiction of mental dis-order, rather than acting as a simple reflection of or metaphor for social disorder, challenges the very concept of order itself. Michel Foucault theorizes about the concept and evolution of order and modernity:

[w]hat historical *a priori* provided the starting-point from which it was possible to define the great checkerboard of distinct identities established against the confused, undefined, faceless, and, as it were, indifferent background of differences? The history of madness would be the history of the Other—of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcize the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness); whereas the history of the order imposed on things would be the history of the Same—of that which, for a given culture, is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities. (Foucault 23)

Foucault argues that order is systemically and culturally inherited; as such, adherents to that order are sane, meaning “Same,” and those who stand outside that order pose a danger to society and are deemed insane, meaning “Other.” The works compared in this chapter all depict characters and scenarios that challenge order. Their “madness” is what allows them to dare to veer off center, ignore the center, and establish altogether new nexuses of identity. From a Foucauldian perspective, this process involves disintegrating the reliance on firm boundaries that divide social categorization by binaries: insane-sane, margin-center, exile-homeland, diaspora-redemption.

In *Love Life*, Ya’ara must redefine her relationship to myths and behaviors that she has “inherited” from previous generations. At the epicenter of these myths is the foundation of a

home(land) based on restoring the destruction of the Temple. Ya'ara repudiates the need to choose a new home after the loss of a previous one, or to be “tricked” into not analyzing critically the world around her and the information passed down to her by national, cultural, or even academic myth. Dis-ordering this order, and its broader (dis)associations, allows for release from this obsession and the integration of a new cultural and national framework.

In *Mestizo*, by contrast, David's amnesia leads him to forget the patterns ingrained in him by personal and collective memory and to reposition himself as a Jewish man in Argentina vis-à-vis the non-Jewish Argentine majority. The protagonist, reflecting the ideals of Feierstein himself, fantasizes about a unity, an Argentine “we,” that in reality is unattainable as it consequently plays out in *Mestizo*. *The Threshold Lodge* tempers the vision of *Mestizo*, but identity is presented here as a game in which the characters, along with the author and the readers, engage. The positioning of the Schvel family at the threshold becomes the primary metaphor through which Jewish identity in Argentina can be expressed.

Enchanted Dulcinea, the final of the three novels in this chapter, is arguably the most complex. Layer after layer of intertext meta-exiles the text from itself in a way that echoes both Dulcinea's and Muñiz-Huberman's lived and inherited exile, from 20th century Spain and 15th century Spain, respectively. Madness dis-orders Dulcinea's world, leading her to invent worlds that interrogate order and its authority in her real world. As a character, Dulcinea, and as the author of Dulcinea, Muñiz-Huberman, express the off home in different ways, both offering alternatives to the order that neither experiences. In this way, apocalypse and writing apocalypse, conflating the processes of destruction and construction and mirroring the path of divine creation, speak to the suspension of arrival or resolution, holding open the wound of exile and inviting its creativity. As Dulcinea says, as an exile, and as someone who rejects social

conformity, her mission, whether or not she achieves it, is “[n]o ser parte de la masa amorfa, pero tampoco poder gritar hasta romper la garganta y hacer sangrar el silencio” (“[n]ot to be part of the amorphous mass, but neither to be able to scream until making the silence bleed”) (Muñiz-Huberman 39). In between those extremes is the dynamism of the off home.

The three texts discussed in this chapter present dis-order as a means of destabilizing binaries in terms of home-exile, center-margin, and other classifications that do not leave space for an undefined and unexplored option. I read their visions as the off home in which the characters adapt to a liminal position that is neither one part of the binary nor the other but instead bypasses these limited and limiting options altogether. These texts themselves are also written in and as the off home, rather than merely portraying it, and have more meanings than those they profess to espouse. Just as Ya’ara in *Love Life* advocates reading against the grain, the reader of these works also greatly decenters their interpretations.

Love Life on the surface seems by the conclusion to reject legends, myth, inheritance, and home. On the contrary, the work suggests a reconsideration of these themes and an openness to reimagine the potential these terms hold. For this reason, at the end of a novel, Ya’ara tells us a legend she inherited from her mother while reading a book about the Temple. Ya’ara is interested in books that trick the reader who reads from the Center, urging the reader to resist the trap of reading this novel from inside hegemony as well. *Mestizo* claims to reveal an order in the integration of Jews within Argentine society. Feierstein even publishes an analysis of *Mestizo* in which he discusses the numerous ways he has presented unity—in the merging of genres, fonts, characters, narrators, and pronouns. However, by the end of the novel, rather than dissolve the extremes and binaries, as Feierstein alleges to have done, we see that that dissolution would also be an extreme that Feierstein, by his own admission, should reject as well. Instead, the careful

reader will detect a privilege to the dis-order that constantly shifts to allow for redefinition and reimagination. Finally, Muñiz-Huberman's work casts layer upon layer of exile, refusing the finality of a clear conclusion to her work. Dulcinea claims to reject life and refuses to "unseal" her mental "book" and *publicize* it; Muñiz-Huberman, ironically, does this for her, ultimately depicting exile as an open wound and also a source of vitality and creativity. Dulcinea's "book" serves as such an open wound.

While this chapter has focused on the off home from a mental or psychic perspective, the next chapter analyzes the off home in works that decenter the politics of language and call into question language that speaks from within the hegemony. Chapter 2 addresses the politicization of language to speak against the Center—Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) against Spanish and Arabic and Judeo-Arabic against Hebrew. The heteroglossia of these texts, accomplished by hiding the "minor" languages within the "major" ones (as explored by Deleuze and Guattari in their discussion of "minor literature") and estranging the major ones from themselves, treats language as malleable and indeed playful and renders inconceivable even seemingly monolingual language.

Chapter 2: “En tierras ajenas, me vo a murir”: Strategies of Multilingual Identity in Rosa Nissán,
 Juan Gelman, Orly Castel-Bloom, and Almog Behar

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the off home was found in the authors’ thematization of mental dis-order to decentralize “home” as a singular and static concept. The representation of mental dis-order showed the characters’ desire, if not necessity, to depart from myths, traditions, behaviors, and preconceptions that they had inherited from previous generations’ experiences and that had developed as a result of their own lived stories and traumas. This chapter is about the literary use of minor or minoritized languages folded into the dominant languages, often in subtle or cryptic ways, in a manner that challenge the sociopolitical hegemony of the speakers of those dominant languages. The chapter discusses bi- and multilingualism but theorizes beyond those concepts that have been studied extensively in previous scholarship.²⁹

The authors considered in this chapter use language in a way that is “off”—that positions them neither within nor outside of but adjacent to the linguistic and therefore political center. The characters’ activation of non-dominant languages allows them simultaneously to participate in and distance themselves from exclusive identities and communities. In turn, the characters unravel the linguistic center in protest of the marginalization of languages and the cultures their speakers represent. At stake in this chapter, in addition to an interrogation of how “home” is understood and continually (re)structured, is how we understand languages in relation to each

²⁹ Examples of such scholarship include Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Francoise Lionnet’s *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1991), Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons* (1993), Ilan Stavans’ *Spanglish, The Making of a New American Language* (2003), Doris Sommer’s *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (2004), Sylvia Molloy’s *Vivir entre lenguas (Living Between Languages)*, 2013), Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In altre parole (In Other Words)*, 2015), and innumerable others.

other (which languages are considered “minor” or “major,” for example), in relation to their speakers (native speakers, second generation speakers, or speakers with no inherited claim to them), and in relation to their perceived centers of power (“official” languages, for example).

A minor literature, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is a literature written in a politically dominant language expressing a political and deterritorialized reality. The term “describes the revolutionary conditions of any literature within what we call the great (or established)” (Deleuze and Guattari 19). Deleuze and Guattari discuss the concept of “minor” literature in terms of the Jewish Czech Kafka’s manipulation of the German language, becoming a “stranger in [his] own language” (Deleuze and Guattari 27). They write:

Kafka . . . converts German into a unique and solitary writing. Because the German of Prague is deterritorialized, intensify it, but in the sense of a new sobriety, a new, unheard-of correction, a ruthless rectification. . . . Make a syntax of desiccated German. Push it to the point where no culture or myth can compensate for deterritorialization--absolute deterritorialization even if it is slow, viscous, coagulated. Slowly, progressively, carry the tongue away into the desert. Use syntax to cry out; give syntax to the outcry. (Deleuze and Guattari 27)

Here Deleuze and Guattari describe what it means to write “minor” literature but in a “major” language—to estrange language itself as a form of political resistance but in a way that likewise resists reterritorialization of that language. Critiques of Deleuze and Guattari’s designations of “great” or “major” and “minor” have been suggested. For example, Chana Kronfeld rejects Deleuze and Guattari’s tenet that minor literature is necessarily written in a major language and questions whether minor should even be a category at all. Marc Caplan similarly argues that minor languages and their literatures can and should circulate without being translated into a major (colonial) language. My argument differs from other scholarship regarding Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the “minor” in that it reimagines the relationship between “minor” and “major” languages as necessarily binary and separable from one another. I use Deleuze and

Guattari's concept of "minor literature" to examine multilingual text as a site of resistance not only to linguistic hegemony but to the binary itself. This untethering of "major" and "minor" from their assumed opposing dynamic mirrors the way in which the off home intervenes in the similarly perceived dichotomy between homeland and exile or diaspora.

The "minor" languages in this chapter are written within and against the "major" language and, significantly, are not any of the speakers' native languages. This means that each of these characters has made a conscious and strategic decision to represent a particular linguistic heritage by juxtaposing it with, and folding it within, but not by privileging it over, the "major" language. None of these characters, however, would be entirely capable of constructing their work solely in that "minor" language, nor, I argue, would they intend to. The authors discussed in this chapter align neither with the marginal nor with the hegemonic; instead, they transform the elements of their identities that set them apart into a strategic means of asserting both personal and political power.

Within this framework, this chapter comparatively reads the use of Ladino³⁰ as a recognizably Jewish language in Rosa Nissán's Ladino-titled Spanish-language novels *Novia que*

³⁰ Linguistically, Ladino traces to medieval Spain. George K. Zucker explains that this language "has over twenty names, among them Ladino, Judezmo, Spanyolit, el Kasteyano Muestro, but it is generally called Judeo-Spanish in academia" (Zucker 6-7). Ora Schwarzwald documents even more ways that language might be called:

Several names refer to the language used by the expelled Jews from Spain, e.g., *Spanyolit* or *Espanyolit* (especially in Israel), *Espanyol*, *Ladino*, *Romance*, *Franco Espanyol*, *Judeo Espanyol*, *Jidyo* or *Judyo*, *Judezmo*, *Zhargon*, etc., in the Ottoman Empire communities, and either *Hakitia* or just *Espanyol* in North Africa (Bunis 1999a: 17–18). Each community used a different name for the language. Three names, however, are commonly used today to denote the language of the Ottoman Empire Jewish communities: *Judezmo* (meaning both Judaism and the language name, parallel to Yiddish), *Ladino*, and *Judeo-Espanyol* (Judeo-Spanish). Many scholars use the name *Ladino* to specifically denote the JS calque type language of liturgical translations from Hebrew, while JS or *Judezmo* refers to the vernacular used for all other purposes. (Schwarzwald 145)

Although many scholars argue that Ladino emerged as a language born in exile as the Jews continued to speak medieval Spanish after the 1492 expulsion from Spain, Zucker contends that Ladino most likely existed before the expulsion, especially given the unique linguistic markers that Ladino shares throughout the countries of the former Ottoman Empire where the Jewish exiles mostly fled (Zucker 7-8, 12). One possible reason for such shared linguistic features might be the *aljamiado* writing system that used the Hebrew instead of Castilian alphabet. If Ladino existed in Spain before the expulsion, it is probably that the language functioned as a kind of code among Jews, possibly influenced by Judeo-Latin as well as by Hebrew and Arabic (Zucker 7-8).

te vea and its sequel *Hisho que te nazca* (*May I See You as a Bride* and *May a Child Be Born to You*,³¹ 1992 and 1996) against Orly Castel-Bloom's Almog Behar's and use of Arabic as an *unrecognizably* Jewish language in their respective Arabic-titled Hebrew-language stories "Ummi fi Shurl" ("My Mother is at Work," 1993) and "Ana Min al-Yahud" ("I Am One of the Jews," 2005). The "minor" languages, contextualized (Arabic, for example, is not globally or necessarily a minor language, but it is peripheral in the context of Israeli literature and dominant Ashkenazi Jewish culture), represent the potential to destabilize, even if not eliminate, the center-margin binary and redefine how language and literature reflect and construct sociopolitical identity.

"Sweet Like Honey": Strategic Language in Rosa Nissán's *Like a Bride* and *Like a Mother*

I will begin by discussing Nissán's novels and their inclusion of Ladino, the version of medieval Spanish that Sephardic Jews spoke before the 1492 expulsion from Spain (see Footnote 30). The narrator, Oshinica, a Mexican native Spanish speaker with a Ladino-speaking Turkish mother, intermingles her Spanish with often-untranslated Ladino. In analyzing Oshinica's attitude toward Ladino, scholars tend to focus on Oshinica's attempt to keep Ladino at arm's length, associating it with repressive religious and gender roles, as Tabea Alexa Linhard argues; therefore, according to Linhard, "since childhood Oshinica exiled herself from her 'mother tongue' and the gendered meanings it bears within" (Linhart 462). If not interpreting Oshinica's goal as distancing herself from Ladino, scholars tend to see Oshinica's task as "bridging" her Mexican and Sephardic identities. Representative of this point of view, Yael Halevi-Wise refers

³¹ *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca* have been translated by Dick Gerdes as *Like a Bride* and *Like a Mother* and published as a single translated volume in 2002. I will use these titles henceforward when referring to these novels in English.

to Ladino as an obstacle for Oshinica—“una barrera que debe cruzarse conscientemente” (“a barrier that must be crossed consciously”) (Halevi-Wise 271). Additionally, even the title of Halevi-Wise’s article, “Puente entre naciones: idioma e identidad sefardí en Novia que te vea e Hisho que te nazca de Rosa Nissán” (“Bridge Between Nations: Sephardic Language and Identity in Novia que te vea and Hisho que te nazca by Rosa Nissán”), suggests that Oshinica’s ultimate task is to “bridge” her identities.

Departing from previous scholarship regarding Oshinica’s role as a social mediator, I read Oshinica’s relationship with Ladino as more radical than a mere negotiation, a task fairly typical of bilingual subjectivities. Regarding the multilingual experience, Sylvia Molloy describes in *Vivir entre lenguas (Living Between Languages)*, “Cada idioma tiene su territorio, su hora, su jerarquía” (“Each language has its territory, its hour, its hierarchy”) (Molloy, “Territorio”), and therefore, there is always present, “between languages,” “ese vaivén lingüístico del que es presa el escritor bilingüe” (“that linguistic sway to which the bilingual writer is prey”) (Molloy, “Para no perder el hilo”). Oshinica’s experience goes beyond this default of one who lives “between languages” as she activates Ladino and its contextually specific implications. Oshinica does not “bridge” her identities, represented by their languages, but rather plays these identities and languages off of each other in increasingly nuanced ways as she matures. She teaches herself to perform them as they are relevant to how she wishes or needs to present herself. She deliberately distances herself from Mexican society by her use of Ladino, and with her family she purposefully Mexicanizes herself, responding in Spanish to their Ladino.

Oshinica learns to craft language with intention: we later discover that Oshinica herself is in fact the author of both *Like a Bride* and *Like a Mother*. As the below passage—a conversation

between herself and a new non-Jewish Mexican acquaintance—demonstrates, Oshinica develops a strategic manipulation of language to represent and construct her identity:

- ¿Cómo dijiste que te llamas?
- Eugenia, algunos me dicen Oshi, de Oshinica.
- ¿Eres mexicana?
- Sí, claro.
- Es que el nombre ...
- Mis papás no son, yo sí. Aquí nací.

- “What did you say your name is?”
- “Eugenia, some call me Oshi, from Oshinica.”
- “Are you Mexican?”
- “Yes, of course.”
- “It’s just that the name...”
- “My parents are not, I am. I was born here.” (Nissán, *Bride* 97)

When asked her name, Oshinica first says “Eugenia,” the Mexicanized version of her name that would not mark her as culturally distinct: in fact, at another moment, reflecting on the cultural implications of her name when wishing to fit in with her Catholic friends, she half-jokes, “Saint Oshinica for sure does not exist” (Nissán, *Bride* 9). But then, instead of hiding behind “Eugenia,” she offers the Ladino-derived “Oshi” and “Oshinica.” At the same time as she presents herself Jewishly, she defends her Mexican-ness.

A similar exchange takes place in Ricardo Feierstein’s *Mestizo*, in which a non-Jewish clerk questions the Argentine-ness of the narrator’s last name, Schnaiderman (see Chapter 1). However, there is a critical difference in the purpose of these two scenes. When the clerk says to David in *Mestizo*, “A mí me cuesta mucho copiar nombres extranjeros” (“It’s very difficult for me to copy down foreign names”), the narrator does not assert that Schnaiderman is as Argentine as García, the clerk’s last name, but that in fact Schnaiderman is as *foreign* as García since neither name is indigenous to the country (Feierstein 126). Although David claims to be Argentine because he was born in Argentina, as Oshinica claims to be Mexican because she was

born in Mexico, Oshinica asserts herself further than David, claiming that her family's language still has a place in Mexico, even though it is an *other* Spanish language. Oshinica makes this assertion not only in the words she uses but in the way that she constructs them and inflects her Spanish with Ladino: instead of using the standard word order for "I was born here," "Nací aquí," she says it in reverse order, "Aquí nací." This word order can be used for emphasis, as in, I was born *here*. But it also mirrors the word order as it would be constructed in Ladino.

Oshinica explicates this linguistic pattern in *Like a Mother*. While participating in a writing workshop led by a fictionalized Elena Poniatowska, a Mexican author who was a mentor for Nissán in real life, Oshinica realizes how much Ladino has influenced her Spanish, and therefore, how much her culture and heritage osmotically seep into her daily life:

[p]or fin entendí por qué construyo al revés las oraciones. ¿Se dice al revés las oraciones o las oraciones al revés? ¡Qué difícil! Por ahí escribo que mi madre me dice: "¿Sabía vas a ser?" Elena, al corregirme, invierte la frase. Y no, no va a ser así, me definiendo. Revisamos otras frases y me doy cuenta de que así lo escribo porque así lo he oído en mi casa. Digo: "¿Atavanada estás? ¿Turista eres?" Así es el ladino, "*ansina* tiene que ser", dice mi madre, por eso escribo así, qué lata y qué difícil cambiar. "Todo, todo lo escribes al revés volteado", diría mi madre.

I finally understood why I construct backwards the sentences. Does one say backwards the sentences or the sentences backwards? How difficult! In one place I write that my mother says to me: "Wise you think you are?" Elena, when correcting me, inverts the phrase. And no, that won't do, I defend myself. We go over other phrases and I realize that I write it like that because I've heard it like that at home. I say: "*Atavanada* [crazy] are you?" "A tourist are you?" That's how Ladino is, "*ansina* [that's how] it needs to be," my mother says, which is why I write like this, such a drag and so difficult to change. "Everything, everything you write flipped backwards," my mother would say. (Nissán, *Mother* 234)

Oshinica is the only person in her workshop with this cultural background, making her differences even more visible to herself and her peers and instructor. She describes that while constructing her novel, an exercise in self-determination and discovery through language, she notices the influence of hearing her mother speak Ladino at home. This passive process on

Oshinica's part has led Oshinica consciously or subconsciously to Ladinize her Spanish, such that Ladino is simultaneously visible and invisible. *Like a Bride* is the text Oshinica revises in the workshop and can be seen as Nissán metatextually acknowledging her own *conscious* writing strategy. Nissán performs the Spanish of the novel in the same way as Oshinica does so in this exchange and throughout the novels, such that the Spanish is never truly monolingual, even in the moments when it appears to be.

In this way, Oshinica and Nissán intermittently deterritorialize their Spanish using Ladino and Spanish both as simultaneously “minor” and “major”: in many cases, such as when using Ladino syntax or grammar but with Spanish words, as if hiding one in the other—the two languages are nearly indistinguishable from each other. Furthermore, in this way, as Deleuze and Guattari describe Kafka's German, the “minor” language, Ladino, resists any form of (re)territorialization and also succeeds in deterritorializing Spanish as well. Manipulating Spanish in a similar way as Kafka uses German and interweaving Spanish with(in) an(other) language is one way in which Oshinica and Nissán estrange both Spanish and Ladino. Behar (discussed further on) treats (Judeo-)Arabic and Hebrew in a similar way as well.

Nissán's use of Spanish and Ladino mirrors the strategies that Oshinica develops regarding language as a tool for self-representation. Discussing Nissán's linguistic approaches, Yolanda A. Doub notes “three separate glossaries at the end to aid readers interested in accessing some of the Ladino, Hebrew, and Arabic words used by characters in the novel” but that these words that are found within the glossary are unmarked within the text of the novels (Doub 146).³² This approach, according to Doub, underscores how natural the “linguistic heterogeneity” feels to Oshinica, contrasting with the reader's potential inability to understand all the languages

³² Some later editions do italicize the non-Spanish words, such as the edition I use here. However, the original text, as Doub mentions, does not italicize to mark foreign words.

at play (Doub 146). I would modify Doub's observation that the linguistic heterogeneity feels natural to Oshinica. I argue that the persistent and at times disruptive psychic presence of multiple overlapping linguistic and cultural spheres lead her to navigate strategically this ontological linguistic heterogeneity of her world, often in performative ways, as previously illustrated.

Nissán, through Oshinica, slides between languages as well, sometimes seamlessly in ways that might go unnoticed to the reader, and at other times, jarringly, potentially excluding even the most astute reader from her world. I also note that the glossary to which Doub refers does not include every Ladino word or phrase that Nissán deploys. In this way, just as the apparently monolingual Spanish is in fact, at minimum, bilingual, I suggest that the text itself similarly bifurcates at the same time as it melds. Within the same text, Nissán and Oshinica address at least two separate audiences—one readership who participates with her in the linguistic nuance (possibly other Sephardic Jewish readers) and a separate readership who is excluded by it (possibly a broader Spanish-speaking audience). This expands the stakes of the novels, for both the author and the character, elevating their status as Sephardic Jews and as women. This strategy also elevates the status of their Sephardic Jewish heritage both within and exterior to the communities to which Oshinica and Nissán, at least in part, belong, at the same time as questioning that belonging. The decentering of language points to a manner of living and speaking off—superseding belonging and nonbelonging within and beyond cultural communities and linguistic “homes.”

Oshinica's evolving linguistic register in *Like a Bride* and *Like a Mother* serves as an increasingly complex record of the maturation of Oshinica's approach to her identity. As we read in *Like a Bride*, Oshinica spends her childhood running from her Jewish heritage: for

example, before transferring to a Jewish school, Oshinica is the only Jewish student in a Catholic school, tormented by constant accusations that the Jews killed Jesus. She attends Catechism and performs Catholic prayers without her parents' knowledge, concealing her Jewish identity when possible (Nissán, *Bride* 12). Oshinica recalls an incident when Catholic children teased her for being Jewish, reporting that “les grité ‘¡Mentira!, no soy judía, digo mis oraciones y me confieso como ustedes’” (“I yelled to them, ‘Lie! I’m not Jewish, I say my prayers and confess like you’”) (Nissán, *Bride* 7). Fittingly, as she hides her own Jewish identity, she develops an affinity for Saint Teresa, a Crypto-Jewish nun from 16th century Spain (Nissán, *Novia* 6), invoking the fear and stigma of Jews living in Inquisitorial Spain, from where Mexico’s colonizers arrived.³³ Oshinica’s identifying with Saint Teresa also serves as a symbol of Oshinica’s attempt to pass as a Catholic. Using Ladino in public shows Oshinica’s shifting perspective regarding this sensed stigma as she grows increasingly comfortable with and then proud of her heritages.

This evolving pride leads Oshinica to display publicly Ladino, as *Like a Bride* makes Ladino visible to a non-Ladino-speaking audience, within and exterior to the novel. Within the novelistic world of Oshinica, the reader discovers in *Like a Mother* that Oshinica writes *Like a Bride* as part of a writing workshop in which Oshinica collaborates and exchanges work with her non-Jewish writing peers; boldly, Oshinica inserts Ladino words, purportedly because her classmates find them funny (Nissán, *Mother* 138). Once she realizes how her classmates react to the different sound of this language, she writes that she will continue to include Ladino “para que

³³ There are numerous studies that argue that many *conversos* arrived in Mexico and other parts of the New World to escape the Catholic Inquisition. The Jewish expulsion from Spain took place in 1492, the same year as Christopher Columbus’ voyage. Some scholarly articles and books that engage with this topic include: Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merkx’s edited volume *The Jewish Presence in Latin America* (1987), Judith Laikin Elkin’s *The Jews of Latin America* (1998), Richard G. Santos’s “Silent Heritage: The Sephardim and the Colonization of the Spanish North American Frontier” (1999), Michael D. Warshawsky’s “‘The Whole Air of Exile Is Yours’: Modern Inquisitorial Fiction and the Facts of the Early (Latin) American Jewish Experience” (2018), and Juan Marcos Bejarano Gutierrez’s “Jewish Conquistadors in the New World: The Early Years” (2020).

se diviertan” (“so that they’re entertained”) (Nissán, *Mother* 139). This moment reveals a level of confidence that did not exist in the conversation about her name in which she hesitatingly offered up increasingly more information about herself and her culture. More importantly, it is a far cry from the little girl who was so embarrassed by her heritage that she would routinely lie about it in an attempt to fit in with her non-Jewish peers.

Most significantly, this maneuver on Oshinica’s part shows her ability to target language for specific purposes to achieve specific goals, in this way forging her identity in an off home cultural and linguistic space. While she claims that she is entertaining her classmates and that perhaps they are laughing at the expense of her heritage, she in fact shows more skill than she claims in making present a devalued language and estranging their own language to them. Oshinica’s “strategic use of essentialism” (Grosz 5, qtd. in Chakraborty 640), as Gayatri Spivak describes such a tool in a 1990 interview with Elizabeth Grosz, plays into the stereotype of Jews as agents of humor, one of the myriad strategies Oshinica develops to present herself, filtered linguistically and contextually, on her terms. She invokes Ladino or Spanish (colloquial or more formal registers) when they distinguish her and mobilize her sense of agency and even pride as a Mexican and Sephardic Jewish woman.

Linhard notes two key moments in *Like a Mother* that mark Oshinica’s growing pride vis-à-vis her Sephardic Jewish heritage. In the first instance, when a waitress at a restaurant overhears some recent Jewish immigrants from Turkey speaking Ladino, the waitress remarks condescendingly, “Hablan como inditos” (“They speak like little Indians”) (Nissán, *Mother* 169). Upon hearing this, Oshinica senses a cultural bond with this other marginalized group of people who have been minoritized and invisibilized through colonization by the same Spanish empire that expelled her own ancestors, even though the political and cultural results diverged and the

effects took different paths. Oshinica then reflects, “Y sí, así es pues es el español que les enseñaron los conquistadores. El descubrimiento de América y la expulsión de los judíos fue el mismo año” (“And yes, that is how the Spanish that the conquerors taught them is. The discovery of America and the expulsion of the Jews was the same year”) (Nissán, *Mother* 169). Linhard remarks that “both the indigenous communities and Sephardic immigrants speak a marginal vernacular, often considered folkloric, even charming, but which also bears the marks of coloniality, ethnocentrism and xenophobia” (Linhard 456). Linhard further cites Leo Spitzer’s claim that reinforces Oshinica’s comment—that the Jews expelled from Spain would have spoken the same language that the colonizers brought to America.³⁴ I add that Oshinica’s comment also implies that some of those conquistadors likely were Jews and Crypto Jews as well. Beyond the implications of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and oppression, I argue that the link Oshinica draws between the two marginalized Spanish dialects functions in a more direct way: Oshinica confirms her language, her *mother’s* tongue to be a Spanish that has existed in Mexico longer than its spoken Mexicanized and contemporized form. In drawing this connection, Oshinica stakes a linguistic claim to authenticity and to place, harkening back to her almost indignant claim, “I was born here.”

This statement is also another reflection of Oshinica’s interweaving of the major and minor, the central and peripheral, because in sounding like the “inditos” and the European colonizers, she inscribes herself linguistically in both groups and neither group simultaneously. I argue, therefore, that for Oshinica, this is another moment in which she destabilizes binary relationships of exclusion regarding her own subjectivity. This is also a moment in which

³⁴ As pointed out in Footnote 30 and the discussion of George K. Zucker’s claim that Ladino functioned as a specifically Jewish language in Spain before the expulsion, not all scholars agree that, as Spitzer believes, Ladino came to be a Jewish language only in exile. For a detailed discussion of scholarship on when Ladino became a Jewish language, see Chapter 4 of Tracy Harris’ *Death of a Language: The History of Judeo-Spanish*, pp.53-65.

Oshinica acknowledges language in relation to privilege and power, but instead of relegating herself to minor roles and limited status, she shows that these boundaries are less solidly constructed than they are often perceived to be.

The second key moment for Oshinica that Linhard describes occurs near the end of *Like a Mother* where Oshinica's Ladino moves beyond its gendered nature. Linhard notes, drawing on Tracy Harris' research on Ladino, that Ladino was considered a women's language because often it was the only language to which women, who tended to be less educated than their husbands, were granted access. Linhard accordingly asks rhetorically, under these circumstances, "where would a Jewish mother have learned Turkish or another Balkan language, well enough to pass it on to her children?" (Linhart 461). After Oshinica and her Jewish female friends marry, they performatively inject Ladino into their everyday Spanish speech, mimicking their mothers' dialects to discuss domestic life (Linhart 461). For example, Oshinica uses Ladino to chastise her daughter for not appropriately packing the suitcase for Lalo, Oshinica's husband (Nissán, *Mother* 75). She imitates the voice of her own mother when talking to her daughter, specifically about minding her chores for the male head of household. Regressing to Ladino reinforces the subservience and even fear the gender roles reflect and continue to instill.

This holds even for Oshinica's father and husband, neither of whom is a native or heritage Ladino speaker. They speak Persian and Arabic, respectively, and these languages do figure in the text to represent other non-Ashkenazi Jewish languages present in Mexico; but Ladino is the only one of these languages that within the text is so gendered that at particular moments of demanding female subservience, the characters use Ladino by choice, not necessarily by heritage. Thus, when Oshinica's father switches to Ladino, a language he learned

“por contagio de su *musher*” (“by contagion from his *wife*”)³⁵ (Nissán, *Mother* 276), a bizarrely pathological description, as if such a chauvinistic attitude might in turn be viewed as a kind of disease, he uses the language to take up a condescending, patriarchal tone:

[*h*]isha, ¿para *cuálo* se quería tanta *belantina*?, no sé para *cuálo* te divorciaste, malo no era tu marido, lo quitaste loco. ¿Quién quiere una *musher* que vaya a la *escola*? Si mi *musher* me hubiera salido con esas *babashadas*, la mando al diablo.”

[*d*]aughter, *why* do you want so many *problems*. I don’t know *why* you got divorced, your husband wasn’t bad, it’s *crazy* that you left him. Who wants a *wife* who goes to *school*? If my *wife* had come up with *silly things* like that, I’d send her to the devil.”) (Nissán, *Mother* 253).

Her father switches to Ladino and Ladino-style syntax, as if communicating these gender roles in his own language would have been less effective and as if simply the use of this language itself communicated these gendered expectations, irrespective of the words. Furthermore, not all of the words her father uses here are Ladino; he intermingles Ladino words with Spanish, peppering the Spanish with just enough Ladino to communicate the patriarchal sentiment. *Hisha* (daughter), *cuálo* (what), *belantina* (problems), *musher* (woman/wife), *escola* (school), *babashadas* (silly things): the most gendered words in the father’s statement are the ones he codifies by performing them in Ladino. The Spanish words in this passage add context and contrast but do not contribute to the overall sentiment, one that is marked by the gendered code of Ladino.

However, by the end of the novel, Ladino comes to represent something else for Oshinica, too: a language that is “dulce como la miel” (“sweet like honey”) and signifies community and a particular—yet open—place in history that is hers. More importantly, she resists the gendered role Ladino prescribes in *publicly* writing in Ladino, using its gendered

³⁵ In my translations of quotations from Nissán’s novels, I use italics in the English words to indicate the words used in Ladino in the original.

history against it and to her advantage—as Spivak would say, strategically using its essence in a way that promotes her own power. Thus, although Linhard argues that Oshinica’s accomplishment is the acceptance “that languages cannot be owned” (Linhard 459) in the same way that Jacques Derrida, in *Monolingualism of the Other*, claims the same, I argue that Oshinica’s attitudes reveal the opposite: that in repositioning her identity, Oshinica does in fact take ownership of Ladino as *her* Ladino, a Ladino that is off and has been estranged from itself. She approaches Spanish in the same way through her performative use of Mexican slang and Spanish with nonstandard syntax, distancing herself from Mexico at the same time as she claims “I was born here.” Oshinica essentializes both languages strategically as she shapes her own unique subjectivity, and she uses *her* Ladino to connect to her mother and her culture but on her own terms. Part of this process has been the development of her own method of self-expression, developed over the course of two novels that she herself proudly and publicly authored, in contrast to the role of the subservient wife and mother who stays out of the public eye.

This maturation of her relationship to Ladino culminates at a Ladino concert that takes place near the end of *Like a Mother*. At the concert, Oshinica reflects on the sense of connection to her mother, her heritage, and her community that she feels when she hears Ladino. As she begins to cry, she wonders what is provoking such a strong emotional reaction to these familiar sounds. “¿Por qué se me salen las lágrimas?” (“Why am I tearing up?”), she asks, and realizes, “Por mi madre es que yo amo esta *lingua*” (Because of/through my mother, I love this language”) (Nissán, *Mother* 175). The fact that the preposition “por” can mean both “because of” and “through” establishes a multilayered connection that emphasizes Oshinica’s lineage and her historical relationship to the language as well as highlighting her emotional attachment to it. Ladino is a tangible, bodily inheritance: referring to those forced to leave Spain in 1492,

Oshinica remarks that Ladino has served as “el cordón umbilical que los unía a España” (“the umbilical cord that joined them to Spain”) (Nissán, *Mother* 276). The reference to the umbilical cord further accentuates the relationship to the mother, the mother tongue, and hidden modes of female agency, as the Sephardic culture and language are predicated upon their transmission through the women.

Lacing her Spanish words with Ladino words, Oshinica observes those around her, particularly the other women in the audience, and reflects on Ladino as part of her cultural inheritance:

[l]os padres de mis amigas del taller vivieron la Revolución. . . .
El abuelo de Angie. . . era villista o carrancista. Mientras ellas vivían en haciendas o iban solamente los fines de semana y preparaban chiles en nogada, esos que apenas acabo de probar, yo aprendí a *bodrar* al estilo *Estambul*, a bailar la *Hora* en vez del mambo, a hacer *borrecas* y la berenjena; cuando ellas platican de aquellos días no puedo intervenir. Pero esta noche espléndida, oigo cantar en *yudeo* español al *ladico* de mi madre, a quien abrazo y beso. . . .

[t]he fathers of my friends from the workshop lived the Revolution³⁶
Angie’s grandfather. . . was a Villista or Carrancista.³⁷ While they lived on country estates or would go only on weekends and would prepare chiles en nogada [Mexican stuffed chili peppers], which I only just tried, I learned to *embroider* using the Istanbul style, to dance the *Hora*³⁸ instead of the mambo, to make *bourekas* [Sephardi stuffed pastries] and eggplant; when they talk of those days, I can’t participate. But this splendid night, I hear people singing in *Judeo-Spanish* beside my mother, whom I hug and kiss. . . . (Nissán, *Mother* 275-6)

In this passage, Oshinica celebrates and even romanticizes her heritage, as represented by the Ladino. Even though she is narrating in Spanish, she admits that she cannot fully claim it—that, as Mexican as she feels, and as much as it is her “home,” she simply does not come from

³⁶ The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920)

³⁷ These are two groups who fought during the Mexican Revolution, supporters of Pancho Villa and Venustiano Carranza, respectively. It is significant that Oshinica is so removed from this history that she is not even sure alongside which leader the referenced grandfather fought.

³⁸ The *Hora* is a Jewish dance adapted from a Balkan dance form that became associated with Ashkenazi music and culture and with Israeli folkdance (Assis 1044). Oshinica spends a great deal of time at a Zionist cultural center, which is likely where she learned the dance.

Mexican lineage. This interplay between the two is her off home. She thus actively fragments her Spanish with the Ladino words, indicating that neither of her identities forms a complete whole.

In considering Oshinica's linguistic strategies such as in the above passage, it is useful to distinguish conceptually between "mother tongue" and "native language." Analyzing the role of language for the American English-speaking protagonist of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, whose mother speaks Yiddish, Hana Wirth-Nesher describes, Yiddish as the "*mame-loshn* [mother tongue], the language of nurture but not literacy for him," as opposed to "English, his genuine native language, which is at the same time the language of the 'other,' the language of Christianity" (Wirth-Nesher 310). Oshinica, likewise, feels an emotional connection to Ladino that she does not sense toward Spanish, and it is worth pointing out that because of Spain's history in which Catholics, Jews, and Muslims lived together, to speak "en cristiano" ("in Christian") came to mean to speak "[e]n términos llanos y fácilmente comprensibles, o en la lengua que todos entienden" ("in plain and easily-understood terms, or in the language that everyone understands") or simply, "[e]n castellano" (in Castilian [Spanish]) (Real Academia Española). Oshinica does not deny her Mexican-ness or reject the manner of speech of the majority "en cristiano": unlike for Roth's protagonist, for Oshinica, Spanish is not substantially the language of the "other" because at the heart of Oshinica's matured style is the recognition that neither language is fully "self" nor "other." Oshinica's strength is her learned strategy to communicate herself through the strategic and polyphonous activation of these languages within each other.

For this reason, although in the above passage Oshinica claims a straightforward "umbilical cord" relationship to her Ladino heritage, almost pitting the Sephardic one against the

Mexican one in opposing her traditions to the upbringing of her peers, her language is more broken than the unified identity she seems to present. This is another moment where Oshinica's spoken intent differs from her written one, revealing, to the discerning reader, her strategic manipulation of language. Oshinica's use of Ladino is fragmented, including only select words in Ladino interwoven with Spanish. It is possible to ascribe this brokenness to the linguistic limitations of Nissán herself, or to Nissán's practical intentions to write for a larger Spanish-language readership (the novel was made into a film in 1993 that won multiple awards in Mexico, the US, and Argentina). Thematically, however, this linguistic fragmentation speaks to Oshinica's unwillingness to embrace the all-or-nothing approach to identity. The way that Oshinica uses language strategically allows her constantly to shift her subjectivity within the identity continuum that she bespeaks in expressing her place within her heritage in this way. Thus, when she laments the exclusion that she feels when unable to participate in conversations about Mexican heritage, in reality, she does not entirely fit into the culture of the Ladino speakers either because, as she declared proudly, "I was born here."

Ferdinand de Saussure's understanding of language use presents a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing Oshinica's unique linguistic intervention. He proposed to understand language in terms of *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is a "language system" that is broken down as signs that signify meaning. It represents a system of thought that controls meaning within those conventions (Saussure 13). *Parole*, on the other hand, is the "execution" of language (oral or written)—that is, the use of the "language system" to convey meaning, filtered through the speaker (Saussure 13). Although Oshinica uses both *langues* (Ladino and Spanish), at times in indistinguishable or diglossic ways, the *parole* she carries out is uniquely expressive and complex and reimagines the parameters of the *langues*, the language systems. Oshinica

publishes her book, *Novia que te vea*, in a Spanish that internalizes Ladino without swallowing it up—the expression “novia que te vea” does not exist in modern Spanish and is grammatically and syntactically strange, even though all of the words do exist in modern Spanish. This estrangement of Spanish advertises Ladino in its title as much as it hides it, and in presenting her work as such, Oshinica represents herself at the threshold even at those moments when she claims more singular allegiance. Despite the uncertainty of how it might be received, Oshinica publishes her novel as part of her decision to “hacer lo que me mandan mis ansias” (“do what my yearnings command”) and “ser la vieja que quiero ser” (“be the old woman that I want to be”) (Nissán, *Mother* 290).

The Jews who left Spain did so because they refused to convert to Catholicism. Oshinica recognizes that even though she never wants to embroider again or perform other gendered or socially imposed tasks that she has rebelled against all her life, within the Ladino language itself, which is part of her cultural inheritance, lies the spirit of nonconformity that draws her so deeply into it. By publishing her story and immortalizing Ladino as part of it, and herself as the *Sephardic Jewish woman* who authored it, she makes this identity visible and undeniable but also personal, inviting Ladino into her world as a partner in creation and as a powerful, active character in her story. She also resists the gendered expectations of Ladino and breaks down the rigid barrier that at the beginning of the novel existed for her in her Sephardic and Mexican identities. Oshinica uses language strategically to reimagine herself in the context of all of her intersecting subjectivities.

The Exile of Language and the Language of Exile: Ladino in Juan Gelman’s *Dibaxu*

As in Rosa Nissán's novels, Juan Gelman strategically incorporates Ladino into his Ladino-Spanish poetry collection *Dibaxu*. Visually, the poem collection presents the poem in Ladino italicized on the left-hand page and in modern Spanish³⁹ on the right-hand page. *Dibaxu* is about language, and the poet's relationship to the languages is as much at the heart of the work as these languages' histories and their relationships to and within each other. According to Gelman's prologue, *Dibaxu* is a continuation of the exploration of language put forth in his previous collection *Citas y comentarios* (*Quotations and Commentaries*), which, like *Dibaxu*, are "dos libros que compuse en pleno exilio, en 1978 y 1979, y cuyos textos dialogan con el castellano del siglo XVI" ("two books I composed in total exile, in 1978 and 1979, and whose texts dialogue with the Spanish of the 16th century") (Gelman 7). In 1975, Gelman, politically active in leftist Peronist politics, was threatened by the Triple A (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina, Argentine Anticommunist Alliance), a far-right terrorist organization associated with Isabel Perón's government. Gelman was forced into political exile, relocating first to Rome and working for the Inter Press Service. The following year, his children were kidnapped by death squads. Gelman, throughout his exile, lived in several other foreign cities, including, Madrid, Managua, Paris, New York, and Mexico City, all the while remaining politically active. In 1983, the dictatorship that had taken power in 1976 ended, but he was still prohibited from returning to Argentina (Dalmaroni 3). In 1988, he returned to Argentina before relocating again, this time voluntarily, to Mexico. In 1990 he identified the remains of his son, Marcelo (Dalmaroni 4). He published *Dibaxu* in 1994. Gelman's exilic history is very much a part of the story *Dibaxu* tells because it drives Gelman's estrangement from modern Argentine Spanish and his exploration of exile both external to and within his language.

³⁹ In this section about Juan Gelman and *Dibaxu*, for clarity, I will refer to Spanish, or Castilian, as "modern Spanish," since, as Gelman elaborates, Ladino is an "other" Castilian/Spanish.

Ladino, for Gelman, is the exilic root of modern Spanish. In the preface to *Dibaxu*, Gelman notes his own roots as well, that he is “de origen judío, pero no sefardí” (“of Jewish origin, but not Sephardic”). He explains his linguistic choices and the decision to include both the Ladino (he uses the term “sefardí,” “Sephardic”) and the modern Spanish (which he refers to as “castellano,” “Castilian”):

no por desconfianza en la inteligencia del lector. A quien ruego que los lea en voz alta en un castellano y en el otro para escuchar, tal vez, entre los dos sonidos, algo del tiempo que tiembla y que nos da pasado desde el Cid.

not because of a lack of confidence in the intelligence of the reader. Whom I beg to read them aloud in one Spanish and in the other one to hear, maybe, between the two sounds, something of the time that trembles and a past that traces us to the Cid. (Gelman 7).

Here, instead of calling the two languages “Castilian” and “Sephardic,” as he does previously, Gelman “begs” that these poems be read in “one Castilian” and in “the other one.” The appellation of more than one “Castilian” suggests part of Gelman’s larger project: to create distance from the modern language used by the dictatorship that has exiled him from his country and taken away his children and grandchildren, as he explains: “[c]omo si la soledad extrema del exilio me empujara a buscar raíces en la lengua, las más profundas y exiliadas de la lengua” (“as if the extreme solitude of exile pushed me to search for roots in language, the most profound and exilic roots of language”) (Gelman 7). Ladino can be framed as a language of exile, expelled from Spain with the Jews in 1492, who were themselves were already a branch of the larger diasporic Jewish population. Ladino, therefore, is a language (one that could even be considered a dialect of his own language) with which Gelman identifies politically if not religiously or ancestrally. For this reason, Gelman adopts Ladino as a poetic language, basing his poetic Ladino and style on those of the Sephardic Franco-Bosnian poet Clarisse Nicoïdski. Gelman is drawn to the interplay between Ladino and modern Spanish in part because he considers both

“Castilians” to be languages of exile but contextualized differently; for this reason, he does not explicate which “Castilian” is “the other one.” It is likewise ambiguous which poem (the left side Ladino or the right side modern Spanish) is the original or translation. This reflexive linguistic portrait dissolves binary conceptualization to the extent that the homeland-exile, original-translation, and self-other dichotomies disintegrate, giving passage to the concept I call the off home, which depends on the elimination of these rigid distinctions.

The Cid Gelman references is *El cantar de mio Cid*, *The Poem of the Cid*, the oldest surviving (Castilian) Spanish epic poem, dating to the 12th Century. According to Gelman, Ladino would have been the Spanish that the eponymous Cid spoke and whose “candor, los diminutivos, cierto tipo de construcción sintáctica que no se conservó” (“candor, diminutives, a certain type of syntactic construction that was not preserved”) represent “la zona más exiliada de la lengua” (“the most exiled zone of the language” (qtd. in Posadas, par. 24). Invoking the Cid serves a thematic purpose as well as a linguistic one, harkening nostalgically to a period in Spain known as the “Convivencia,” a term coined by Américo Castro in 1948 denoting the period when Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together in peace throughout the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule, 711-1492. Also thematically relevant is the fact that the concept of the Convivencia itself is steeped in ambiguity and greatly debated, with many scholars refuting the harmony Castro describes. Maya Soifer summarizes in her 2009 study reevaluating the Convivencia’s usefulness as a historical framework: “many scholars today treat it like a once sought after guest who has overstayed her welcome” (Soifer 20). Considering both the nostalgia for this idealized era in which the three cultures interacted harmoniously, and the possibility that such harmony never existed, Gelman’s assertion that Ladino returns us to the Cid both idealizes

the language and at the same time removes the possibility of reading Gelman's linguistic maneuver as trite naïveté.

Gelman's diction in *Dibaxu* likewise tends toward words and concepts that have multiple and ambiguous meanings or interpretations. For example, in this same statement about linguistic exile, the word Gelman uses for "language" is "lengua," which also means "tongue" (he could have used the synonymous "idioma"). Therefore, we could also translate this phrase as "to search for roots in my tongue, the most profound and exilic roots of my tongue"—a principal organ responsible for speaking "en voz alta" ("aloud," lit. "in loud voice"), as the Prologue announces that the poems are meant to be read. The imagery of the mouth and the allusions to the voice are unmistakable in these poems as a path to (and from) these roots of exile, but also contained within them is freedom, even as a conclusion to the exile remains unattainable. Here Gelman leans into an off home mentality, based on the balancing of these seemingly opposing concepts, exile and freedom, as part of the same liminal poetics that he embraces.

The first poem in the collection brings in the imagery of the mouth in the form of the kiss, as not only a kind of love language, but also as the opening and closing of time with the release and capture of the voice. It is noteworthy that while Gelman uses only one word in Ladino—"bezus," he uses two different words—"besos" ("kisses") and "labios" ("lips") in the modern Spanish. Throughout the collection, Gelman consistently translates "bezus" as "besos" ("kisses") except for in the first line of the opening poem:

*il batideru di mis bezus/
quero dizer: il batideru di mis bezus
si sentirá in tu pasadu
cun mí in tu vinu/*

el temblor de mis labios
quiero decir: el temblor de mis besos
se oirá en tu pasado
conmigo en tu vino/

the tremble of my lips/
I mean to say: the tremble of my kisses
will be heard in your past

with me in your wine
(Gelman 8-9)

The phrase “quero dizer” (“quiero decir”), “I mean to say,” can also mean “I want to say,” suggestive of Gelman reaching back in time to this language, to something aged and sacred like “your wine,” to access what he “want[s] to say.” The vibrations of the voice—recalling as well the initial instructions to read the poems “en voz alta”—cause the kisses to tremble, just as Gelman has expressed that his writing objective has been to use language to “producir un temblor poético” (“to produce a poetic tremble”) (qtd. in Posadas, par.17) and to the previously-discussed statement in his Prologue that “between the two sounds” exists “something of the time that trembles and a past that traces us to the Cid.”

In this manner, the poet draws attention not to the resultant speech but speaks as if his voice could travel back in time to the origins of his own voice, Ladino. The poet continues in the second stanza of this introductory poem that such vibrations are:

*avriendo la puarta dil tempu/
tu sueniu
dexa cayer yuvia durmida/
dámila tu yuvia/*

*abriendo la puerta del tiempo/
tu sueño
deja caer lluvia dormida/
dame tu lluvia*

opening the door of time/
your slumber
drops sleeping rain/
give me your rain/
(Gelman 8-9)

In this second stanza, in contrast to the aged wine of the first stanza, the poet evokes the freshness of water, rejuvenating a sleeping language—or reviving a lost time—by writing it and especially by speaking it aloud. The rain likewise evokes the imagery of saliva, the liquid from the mouth that one senses in the kiss and that is essential to the generation of speech. In the third stanza:

*mi quedari/ quietu
in tu lluvia di sueniu/
londji nil pinser/
sin spantu/ sin sulvidu/*

I will remain/ still
in your rain of slumber/
far away in thought/
without fear/ without forgetting/
(Gelman 8-9)

*me detendré/ quieto
en tu lluvia de sueño/
lejos en el pensar/
sin temor/ sin olvido/*

I will pause/ still
in the rain of your slumber/
far away in thought
without fear/ without forgetting/

The poet claims that this space, in your rain of slumber, is a place where he can remain “without fear/ without forgetting.” This contrasts sharply with Gelman’s political situation that is filled with fear and the tension between memory and forgetting. In the modern Spanish, instead of choosing for the Ladino “*mi quedari*” the modern Spanish “*me quedaré*,” the poet uses instead “*me detendré*,” I will pause, also linguistically alluding to the severe political repression in Argentina because the verb “*detener*” also means “to detain” or “to arrest.”

Finally, the poet concludes:

*nila caza dil tiempu
sta il pasadu/
dibaxu di tu piede/
qui baila/*

in the house of time
is the past/
underneath your foot/
that dances/
(Gelman 8-9)

*en la casa del tiempo
está el pasado/
debajo de tu pie/
que baila/*

In the same way that Ladino, in Gelman’s estimation, is the language of exile *par excellence*, at the same time, the past has a home in time, intangible and fleeting but nevertheless perceptible. More importantly, once again addressing the interlocutor, Ladino, the poet locates this home “underneath your foot/ that dances”), suggesting that the exilic roots of language, perhaps some

of the idealized peacefulness of the Convivencia, even if only partly true, are beginning to wake up from the slumber of time and distance (Gelman 8-9).

Much of the imagery of *Dibaxu* follows Franco-Bosnian novelist and poet Clarisse Nicoïdski's *Lus ojus las manus la boca/Los ojos las manos la boca* (*Eyes Hands Mouth*, 1978), the primary intertext for Gelman's work, as he notes in the Prologue. Monique R. Balbuena describes the importance of Clarisse Nicoïdski's bilingual poetry volume, not just to Gelman but to the revival of Ladino. She writes:

[a]llusions to modern poets, chief among them Federico García Lorca, announced that a new kind of poetry was making its way into Sephardic writing. The publication of this small volume . . . announced the presence of Judeo-Spanish in contemporary world literature. . . . [T]his bilingual volume of poetry can be seen as the founding moment of a literary revitalization of Ladino: it led both speakers and non-speakers to recognize the potential locked in the Sephardic language for a serious and important poetic contribution to the literary world. (Balbuena 1)

As Balbuena explains, Nicoïdski's use of Ladino represented a significant moment in the use of Ladino in contemporary literature and was marked by Ladino's specific revival, rather than its use by a native speaker. Gelman borrows Nicoïdski's use of Ladino as a theme, and in alluding to Nicoïdski's work, Gelman legitimizes his own work and writes himself into a revival cannon. Additionally, though Nicoïdski's mother was a native Ladino speaker, Nicoïdski was largely self-taught, like Gelman, who likewise does not *speak* Ladino, but who was also attracted to, as Balbuena describes above, "the potential locked in the Sephardic language." In part as an homage to Nicoïdski, and in part using Nicoïdski's poetry to validate the use of Ladino in his own, Gelman draws on much of the same imagery that Nicoïdski employs: opening and closing, rain and water, and parts of the body used to speak—eyes, hands, and mouth, the title of Nicoïdski's collection.

Eyes and hands are especially interesting for Gelman because they speak silently, and yet, are intensely revealing. They figure centrally, for example, in *Dibaxu*'s Poem V:

*qui lindus tus ojos/
il mirar di tus ojus más/
y más il airi di tu mirar londji/*

nil airi stuvi buscandu:

*la lampa di tu sangri/
sangri di tu solombra/
tu solombra
sovri mi curasón/*

how lovely your eyes/
the gaze of your eyes more/
and more the air of your faraway gaze/

in the air I was searching for:

the lamp of your blood/
blood of your shadow/
your shadow
upon my heart
(Gelman 16-17)

qué lindos tus ojos/
y más la mirada de tus ojos/
y más el aire de tus ojos cuando lejos
miras/
en el aire estuve buscando:

la lámpara de tu sangre/
sangre de tu sombra/
tu sombra
sobre mi corazón/

how lovely your eyes/
and more the gaze of your eyes/
and more the air of your eyes when
you look far/

in the air I was searching for:

the lamp of your blood/
blood of your shadow/
your shadow/
upon my heart

Structurally, the poem engages multiple rhetorical strategies to liaise the words with one another and infuse them with layers of meaning in the same way that the words of the poem produce a layering effect, with extensive repetition the theme of doubling, with the poems in the two “Castilians.” The first two verses introduce the eyes, the gaze, and the air. The Ladino and Spanish are slightly divergent here. The first paragraph of the Ladino, for example, repeats words and phrases (“your eyes,” “more,” “the air,” “gaze”) but in no discernible pattern. The modern Spanish slightly rearranges the words into more formally recognizable rhetorical patterns, such as the end of verse repetition of “your eyes” (epistrophe) and the beginning of verse repetition of “and more” (anaphora), among others. The looser formal structure of the Ladino suggests more freedom for the poet to express himself outside of convention; upon

composing the poem into modern Spanish, the poet seems beholden to rhetorical strategies that did not compel him in this “other” expression. In both cases, the final verse of the first stanza contains the principal information—“I was searching for,” which explains the poet’s position in relation to the eyes and the gaze that he described in the first three verses. The gaze is in the air in the same way that the mouth can be found in the breath.

The second stanza, which moves beyond the eyes, hands, and mouth into the core of the body, again uses poetic repletion, in this case, repeating the first phrase of one verse the phrase that terminated the previous verse (anadiplosis), to create successive layers of katabasis, effecting a downward climax, “the lamp of your blood// blood of your shadow// your shadow// upon my heart/”) (Gelman 16-17). The downward trajectory through the poet’s body exposes the layers of the poet’s exiled self through language. Moreover, “the lamp of your blood” suggests that language is vitality but not without pain. The use of “lámpara” in Spanish provides a double entendre that I have not found to exist in the Ladino. In Ladino, the word Gelman uses, “lampa,” means “light.” In Spanish, Gelman uses “lámpara,” which can mean “lamp” or other source of light as well, but it can also mean “stain.” The interplay between the “light” and the “stain” “of your blood” delves deeply into exile not just as a historical moment but also as a traumatic historical process. Blood, then, becomes not just a symbol of life but also a symbol of persecution and death. This stain, however, is not associated with the language that was forced out of Spain because of Jewish lineage, the stain of its bloodline—Gelman’s own history does not converge there—but rather, with modern Argentine Spanish, with Gelman as a stain expelled from his country, represented by the modern Spanish language.

This downward climax is also present in Poem IX. Such downward orientation recalls the imagery of the dancing foot from Poem I and is another instance of reaching both toward and away from the exilic body. In Poem IX, the poet writes:

<i>tu piede</i>	<i>tu pie</i>
<i>pisa la nochi/ suavi/</i>	<i>pisa la noche/ leve/</i>
<i>avri la yuvia/</i>	<i>abre la lluvia/</i>
<i>avri il día/</i>	<i>abre el día</i>
<i>la muerte no savi nada di vos/</i>	<i>la muerte no sabe nada de vos/</i>
<i>tu piede teni yerva dibaxu</i>	<i>tu pie tiene hierba debajo</i>
<i>y una solombra ondi scrivi</i>	<i>y una sombra donde escribe</i>
<i>il mar del vazío/</i>	<i>el mar del vacío/</i>
<i>your foot</i>	
<i>steps on the night/ lightly/</i>	
<i>it opens the rain/</i>	
<i>it opens the day/</i>	
<i>death knows nothing of you/</i>	
<i>your foot has grass underneath</i>	
<i>and a shadow where writes</i>	
<i>the sea of emptiness/</i>	
<i>(Gelman 24-25)</i>	

Like the motions of the dancing foot, the poetry “steps on the night”—the dormant voice of the past, revealing grass—life—beneath it and in this sense reviving it—metapoetically. To this point, Susana Romano Sued observes the interaction between “la materia prima del poema con los mundos” (“the raw material of the poem with the worlds”) that Gelman evokes, especially the arrangement of the two languages on the page and the duality evoked by punctuating the verses with a slash (Romano Sued 88). Furthermore, as Romano Sued points out, the constant use of “you” and “your” serves to “repon[er] la conversación con la poesía misma” (“reviv[e] the conversation with the poetry itself”), with “poetry itself” as the interlocutor, not just the agent of expression (Romano Sued 88).

In the prologue to *Dibaxu*, Gelman describes poetry as the “lugar más calcinado” (“the most calcined place”) of language (Gelman 7). This recalls the second stanza of Poem X:

<i>tu silenziu</i>	tu silencio
<i>disparta</i>	despierta
<i>lus gritus</i>	los gritos
<i>dil mundu/</i>	del mundo/
your silence	
awakens	
the screams	
of the world/	
(Gelman 26-7)	

Poetry refines and reduces language to its very essence. As when in the Prologue Gelman “begs” the reader to read the poems out loud, this is another moment in which Gelman, if the reader complies, forces the silence to be spoken and visible and obligates elements that seem to be in opposition to each other to coexist within the same plane.

In this respect, it is important to note, though, that Gelman’s poetry not only alludes to but also is in dialogue with that of Nicoïdski. Gelman even enters her conversation to the point of imitating her “vernacular Balkan Judeo-Spanish” (Balbuena 139).⁴⁰ Their projects, nevertheless, are not identical, and in *Dibaxu*, Gelman simultaneously invokes and resists the contemporary world of Nicoïdski. While both Gelman and Nicoïdski have deeply personal reasons for composing their poetry, for Nicoïdski, Ladino provided not only an intellectual avenue through which to explore exile and its implications through language and history; Nicoïdski’s mother was a native Ladino speaker, and after her mother’s death, Nicoïdski took up the study of Ladino in earnest and began learning it and writing in it as a tribute to her mother.

⁴⁰ Balbuena explains that Nicoïdski’s Balkan dialect of Ladino is “a dialect of Ladino the sounds and spelling patterns of which do not correspond to those laid out by *Aki Yerushalaim*—one of the few contemporary publications written exclusively in Ladino” and the standard for Ladino transliteration (Balbuena 139).

In the introduction to her collection, she writes in a combination of modern Spanish and Ladino:

[e]n esta lingua se hallaban el amor de mi madre, nuestra complicidad y nuestras risas.

Así me atreví a escribir estos poemas para que quede la empresa de su voz. . . .
No se nada de religión, o cerca nada, ma quisiera que estas palabras en la lingua perdida sean para ella, mi madre, como un kadish repetido a menudo.

[i]n this language my mother's love, our complicity, and our laughs were found.
Thus I dared to write these poems so the imprint of her voice remains. . . .

I know nothing of religion, or next to nothing, but I would like these words in the lost language to be for her, my mother, like a Kaddish [Jewish memorial prayer] repeated often. (Nicoïdski 13)

In this passage, Nicoïdski reveals her very personal impetus for reviving this language for herself: for Nicoïdski, Ladino is a way to connect with her mother, in the same way that for Nissán's Oshinica Ladino comes to represent a tenderness that is "sweet like honey." Nicoïdski also introduces an interesting intermingling of the public and the private, in the same way that Gelman's poetry is intensely personal at the same time as serving as a political voice. The recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish straddles that boundary as well: it is a personal prayer that is said on behalf of a departed parent, sibling, child, or spouse, but, paradoxically, is meant to be recited in public in the presence of a quorum of ten. Nicoïdski began writing Ladino as a tribute to her mother, but the publication of her Ladino poetry—its circulation within her mother's linguistic community and its presence as part of the revival effort of Ladino literature, renders the work public, and in this way, political as well.

Gelman's project is not necessarily to revive the lost language in tribute to the Sephardic community (though such a result is also not anathema to it); however, unlike for Nicoïdski, there is no underlying Sephardic ancestral relationship driving him. Gelman identifies with the distance from the language of contemporary Argentine politics and with the conceptually exilic

roots of Ladino. By expressing himself in and entering himself into a language that skirts the linguistic hegemony of modern Spanish and the political hegemony of a brutal dictatorship, Gelman places himself in another iteration of an exilic linguistic space, something a contemporary language could do less effectively. Choosing Ladino as this peripheral language adds a layer of exile *dibaxu* (*underneath*) the exile that already exists, casting Ladino as doubly diasporic and therefore doubly appropriate. As Balbuena argues, Gelman:

is fighting against the limits of language and trying to expand it by searching for the memory of the word. Ladino becomes another way to create a counterlanguage. . . . It breaks the monoglossia of the Argentine national idiom and begins a heteroglossic poetics in Ladino and Castellano, while stressing the essential ambiguity of the exilic poetic discourse that is out of place. (Balbuena 155)

Balbuena's idea of a "counterlanguage" aids in my analysis of Gelman's intervention with Ladino. Gelman places Ladino in vertical dialogue with modern Argentine Spanish, achieving, linguistically, history *underneath* history. As another point of linguistic convergence, Balbuena observes that both "Castilians" utilize the pronoun "vos" ("you"), which in modern Spanish is almost exclusively used in the Southern Cone (where Argentina is) and parts of Central America.

Building on Balbuena's claim that Ladino serves as a "counterlanguage," I contend that beyond "countering" the language of the dictatorship in terms of its political ideology, Gelman wrote in Ladino as a means of "countering" the documented antisemitism of the Argentine dictatorship. The modern Argentine Spanish in the contemporary context is mirrored in the medieval Spanish that would have been spoken during the Inquisition, which was marked by a ferocious antisemitism. The contextual allusion to the Inquisition converges Gelman's and Nicoïdski's linguistic intentions and contexts once again. The contemporary rendition of the Inquisition in Europe was the Holocaust, which annihilated most of the world's native Ladino

speakers who had not already immigrated to other countries, such as Israel, and adopted the local languages there (Bunis 189).

In summarizing Gelman's achievement in writing *Dibaxu*, Balbuena argues that Gelman abandons a language that has a center of power in order to "claim a diasporic positioning, as a means to reject a limited and oppressive national identity—that of an Argentina controlled by a military dictatorship" (Balbuena 156). She further claims that Gelman's use of Ladino creates a space "where the notions of 'inside' and 'outside,' and 'homeland' and 'diaspora' are called into question, and where it no longer matters which is the 'original language' and which is the 'translation'" (Balbuena 155). Balbuena is partly correct, but she, in fact, contradicts her own argument: if, indeed, Gelman "call[s] into question" the boundary between homeland and diaspora, how, then, does he "claim[] a diasporic positioning" as a means of resistance? Therefore, I argue that these dichotomies are entirely relevant as a framework against which Gelman places himself, not to "claim[] a diasporic positioning" but instead an off home positioning that is inclusive of both spaces and limits him to neither. The use of Ladino creates distance from modern Spanish, but is also related to the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and also, then, to Jewish history as a history of diaspora, and these latter relationships cannot be ignored. I argue that Gelman's use of Ladino is an off home approach to diasporic subjectivity: by writing in Ladino, Gelman accesses diasporic schemata and positions himself against the hegemony of the center or homeland and against contemporary Argentine politics. At the same time, it is clear that Gelman does not represent himself as wholly marginal or diasporic, nor does he disavow Argentina. I will return to this idea further on.

For this reason, Balbuena's conclusion is also partially correct but too romantic an interpretation. Balbuena writes that by using Ladino in *Dibaxu*, Gelman "fight[s] back," and as

he “forges a new poetic voice in Ladino, it is through Ladino that, amid all the horror, he can sing again” (Balbuena 156). I contend that this conclusion is too idealistic for Gelman’s project: by the end of the poem, Gelman’s off home space manifests an unresolved dynamic that resists the too-complete notion of “home.” In the final poem of *Dibaxu*, Gelman writes:

<i>no stan muridos lus páxarus</i>	no están muertos los pájaros
<i>di nuestrus bezus/</i>	de nuestros besos/
<i>stan muridos lus bezus/</i>	están muertos los besos/
<i>lus páxarus volan nil verdi sulvidar/</i>	los pájaros vuelan en el verde
	olvidar/
 <i>pondrí mi spantu londji/</i>	 pondré mi espanto lejos/
<i>dibaxu dil pasadu</i>	debajo del pasado/
<i>qui arde</i>	que arde
<i>cayadu com 'il sol/</i>	callado como el sol/

The birds of our kisses are
not dead/
the kisses are dead/
the birds fly in the green forgetting /

I will put my fear far away/
under the past/
that burns
silent like the sun/
(Gelman 64-65)

The kisses that opened *Dibaxu* are a love language delivered to both the exilic nature of Ladino as a lost language and to the loss of his homeland, Argentina, represented by modern Spanish. In this sense, “the birds of our kisses,” the product of his native language, are not dead, even if the kisses themselves are dead, representing the broken connection to his homeland. “Green” and “forgetting” (or “oblivion”) are, like so many of Gelman’s images, in tension with each other—the former representing youth and life and the latter aging and death. In this construction they inhabit the same space. “The past” that “burns silent like the sun” can be understood as either

modern Spanish or as Ladino, both of which are equally present in their own ways and illuminate each other.

Gelman does not indicate at the culmination of his poem collection that he has abandoned his feelings of fear or sadness, but rather that dialoguing with these languages, both “Castilians,” and placing them in conversation with each other, allowed him to position that fear *dibaxu*, in another layer, just as in the prologue he writes of the poems “en ese castellano” (“in that Castilian”) as a “sustrato” (“substrate”), a layer *underneath*, “el otro” (“the other”) Castilian (Gelman 7). Meanwhile, the poet, in placing his fear “far away” and *under*, rises upward, like the poetic bird, in contrast to the downward trajectory of the imagery throughout most of *Dibaxu*, embracing seemingly contrasting gestures, such as burning “silent like the sun” and flying “in the green forgetting.” The off home can be read in the lack of reconciliation and resolution. This poem, therefore, displays not unmitigated triumph, as Balbuena suggests, but the cautious optimism and incompleteness of an off home journey.

Within this liminal framework, Gelman rejects the Argentine dictatorship but not Argentina, and he rejects the pain of exile and the reasons that drove it, but not exile itself. Were the former the case, he would have included only the Ladino and forsaken his Argentine Spanish altogether. Were the latter true, he would not have chosen Ladino at all. Gelman uses both languages against the standard, othering both languages through each other at the same time as he recontextualizes these languages and remakes them in a new image, translating himself through them and them through each other. Lucie Taïeb argues that Gelman’s self-translation is a return to self through the inclusion of the modern Spanish, his native language:

le “retour”, impossible dans l’espace, puisque l’accès à la terre bien aimée est interdit au poète, se joue ici comme retour à l’origine, transposé dans le temps, suivi d’un retour à soi: dans l’acte d’autotraduction, le poète revient vers sa propre langue, et pour ainsi dire, la “retrouve”.

the “return,” impossible in space, since access to the so beloved land is prohibited to the poet, is played out here as a return to the origin, transposed in time, followed by a return to self: in the act of self-translation, the poet turns back toward his own language, and, so to speak, “recovers” it. (Taïeb 59-60)

I extend Taïeb’s argument, pausing on the terms “return” and “recover” and challenging the idea that the poet has “his own language.” True to the off home, Gelman challenges the assumption as to which language of his poems is the “original” and which is “translation,” to the extent that we might say his most authentic language lies in the interplay of these languages with each other. Rather than the existence of an “original” and its “translation,” the poems mirror and exist within each other. That is to say, both are translations of each other.

Additionally, I have shown that Gelman’s Ladino and modern Spanish texts are not always identical in meaning. I argue that, even if the meanings did appear to be the same, these languages and the poet transform each other, such that neither language exists in a “pure,” uncontextualized state. To say as much is to argue that Gelman does not—indeed cannot—“return to” or “recover” a language and a self that never existed in the first place as the version he writes now, which is always-already different than the one before, because both of these identities exist in a constant process of revolution and revision. Gelman expresses this in Poem XXIV:

*amarti es istu:
un avla qui va a dizer/
un arvulico sin folyas
qui da solombra/*

*amarte es esto:
una palabra que está por decir/
un arbolito sin hojas
que da sombra/*

loving you is this:
a word that is about to be said/
a little tree without leaves
that gives shade/
(Gelman 54-5)

In this short four-verse poem, and throughout *Dibaxu*, Gelman depicts paradoxical potential, the space in between the two Castilians, as a palimpsest for creating and recreating through words. The poem is once again directed to the undefined “you,” which takes on various meanings throughout the poem collection. The poet describes the relationship between the poet and the interlocutor as one of undefined possibilities: a word—which could be any word—that exists and does not exist simultaneously.

He also echoes this sentiment in Poem XII:

<i>eris</i>	<i>eres</i>
<i>mi única avla/</i>	<i>mi única palabra/</i>
<i>no sé</i>	<i>no sé</i>
<i>tu nombri/</i>	<i>tu nombre/</i>
you are	
my only word/	
I do not know	
your name/	
(Gelman 32-3)	

This short poem similarly depicts language and this undefined interlocutor as a blank slate of freedom, much like the off home that unties diaspora from its hegemonic center. Returning to Poem XXIV and the palimpsest it proposes as in the poem above, this relationship expressed in Poem XXIV is like a small tree with no leaves, which should be unable to provide any shade, and yet does. This shade is similarly ambiguous and could be interpreted in many ways, including positively, as in relief from the burning sun, or negatively, as in frigid loneliness.

The off home embraces the paradoxical relationship and the space between the possible and the impossible; in the off home, “reality” is a concept meant to be distorted and reframed. In the final stanza of Poem IV, the poet declares:

<i>durmi todú/</i>	<i>todo duerme/</i>
<i>il páxaru/ la boz/</i>	<i>el pájaro/ la voz/</i>
<i>il caminu/ la yerva</i>	<i>el camino/ la hierba</i>

qui amaniana viniera

que mañana vino

everything sleeps/
the bird/ the voice/
the path/ the grass/
that tomorrow came
(Gelman 14-15)

The first verse of this stanza provides an interesting audiovisual effect in that the word order in Ladino and modern Spanish are palindromically constructed—“*durmi todú*” and *todo duerme*.” This reflexive construction invites the reader to consider the space between—between the languages, between the words, and even the crease or crack in the physical book where the left (Ladino) and right (modern Spanish) pages meet. The visual effect is the opposite of what the words convey, implying the vitality that awakes the senses within, or underneath, what appears to lie dormant. The poet then lists several of the symbols that circulate throughout the text, creating a conceptual contrast between above—the bird that flies, the voice that is created at the top of the body—and below or underneath (*dibaxu*)—the path (or road) and the grass. Finally, Gelman depicts the future, which is temporally above, contrasted conceptually and yet present in, the past, which lies temporally below.

The words for “came” in this poem are also revealing and encapsulate the off home in Gelman’s writing. The Ladino word for came, “*viniera*,” is the modern Spanish imperfect subjunctive tense, implying something that might not or did not happen. The modern Spanish word for “came,” “*vino*,” is the same as the word for “wine,” harkening back to the first poem’s first stanza, that the vibrations of the voice/kiss “will be heard in your past/ with me in your wine [*vino*],” intermingling past, present, and future in the imagery of the wine, something that “came” and also has not come yet, like fermented time—the wine as a product in constant creation and regeneration as its origin grows increasingly far away, another symbol

intermingling the imagery of above and below and suggesting the luxury and creativity of that space that plays the two within and against each other.

Gelman's use of Ladino as a tool to both explore the roots of exile culturally and to thematize them linguistically proves an exercise in challenging hegemony. He questions dichotomies, as Balbuena also observes, such as exile-homeland, original-translation, native-foreigner, and center-margin, and, I note, even breaks down the intracultural barrier of Sephardic/Ashkenazi language and history. Importantly, he does not refute these tensions altogether. As I argue previously, these themes are contextually indispensable. However, Gelman embraces the paradox, the ambiguity, and the undefined space created between and within them to forge an off home identity that thrives in the mystery *underneath* the surface and outside the dominant paradigm.

Arabic and the Mother Tongue in Orly Castel-Bloom's "Umami fi Shuri"

The previous two sections have shown that for Gelman and Nissán (and Nissán's character Oshinica), Ladino served as a strategic instrument of self-representation as well as a challenge to political and linguistic hegemony. In addition, Nissán also uses Ladino to oppose gender roles traditionally associated with Ladino and the Sephardic Jewish woman, taking Ladino in a new, public direction, while Gelman places Ladino, (a medieval Castilian) Spanish, and modern (Castilian) Spanish in conversation with each other to probe the depths of exilic experience. Nissán and Gelman count on Ladino, marginalized in the present and exiled itself since 1492, to stand out as a recognizably Jewish language, the use of which automatically situates the authors in the margins vis-à-vis its linguistically and contextually related dominant language, Spanish, and minorizes that dominant language, at times hiding one language in the

other to resist the acceptance of an apparent center. This off home consideration of linguistic decentering opens up possibilities that would have been restrained by either their separation or their “bridging.”

In contrast to Gelman and Nissán’s use of Ladino that indicates an obvious Jewish element, the status of Arabic and even Judeo-Arabic within Hebrew-language literature tends to perform the opposite role: even though there are many Jewish Arabic speakers, Arabic is often not recognized as a Jewish language anymore. In fact, the majority of Arabic speakers today are not Jewish, and Jewish speakers of Arabic within Israel are often obligated to erase, prove, or perform their Jewish identities because of this linguistic mark. This has not always been the case. Lital Levy notes that “[i]n the 1950s, about half of Israel’s Jewish population would have spoken Arabic as a first language” (Levy 5). That number has dropped to about twenty percent of Israel’s population today, even though Arabic, alongside Hebrew, is considered an official language of Israel (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, par. 2-3). Furthermore, that twenty percent is not in line with the percentage of the population that descends from Arabic speakers.

The reason for the marginalization of Arabic arose from Zionist objectives that sought to homogenize Israeli culture, especially amid immigration trends that were perceived to threaten the national agenda of cultural unity. Yochai Oppenheimer explains the erasure of non-Hebrew languages as part of the Zionist mission of *Shlilat ha-Galut*, the Negation of the Diaspora, viewing:

the Land of Israel as a first and last place, a point of origin from which the Jews went into exile, as well as their only possible ultimate destination. Zionist ideology observes the Jewish existence in Europe (and accordingly in Muslim countries) as totally distinct and incongruous with the existence in Israel, while Mizrahi literature suggests a continuity and contiguity between Jewish homelands in Muslim countries and in Israel. (Oppenheimer 107)

It is important to note that Oppenheimer's view expressed here is not the only perspective on language and homeland in Mizraḥi (from the Middle East and North Africa) versus Ashkenazi (from Central, Western, and Eastern Europe) literature, nor is that binary as divisive as it might seem on the surface. Omri Ben-Yehuda, for example, explicitly rejects such a dichotomy drawn between Mizraḥi and Ashkenazi trends, arguing that many Ashkenazi writers were likewise torn between the Land of Israel and their countries of origin. Ben Yehuda writes:

[i]ndeed, any writer, however Zionist, is always aware of the tensions between exile and homeland and present in Israeli existence. While national writing had to strive for a unified narrative, Mizrahi literature exhibited different tendencies, but shared them with many other writers, some of whom were completely immersed in Zionism. (Ben-Yehuda 116)

Whether or not it is exclusive to Mizraḥi Israeli literature, or whether it is also present in Israeli literature from other ethnic groups, Mizraḥi literature, according to Ben-Yehuda, expresses a deep interest in language and seeks to bring back erased accents and countries of origin, which, in their turn, are not necessarily seen as the Diaspora but in fact a lost homeland in a parallel way.

Although the dominant narrative has been to assume that Israeli literature is Ashkenazi literature and that Mizrahi literature is a recent phenomenon, Adia Mendelson-Maoz shows that this is not the case. She writes of Mizraḥi Jewish authors writing in Palestine in Ladino and Arabic in the early twentieth century, displaying in their writing influence from their own cultures as well as from the First and Second Aliyah⁴¹ (immigration to Palestine) authors whose

⁴¹ The First Aliyah took place between 1881-1903 and was comprised mostly of immigrants from Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe fleeing pogroms, with some immigration from Yemen as well. About 35,000 Jews immigrated during this period. (Jewish Virtual Library, "Immigration to Israel: The First Aliyah"). The Second Aliyah took place between 1904-1914, once again largely stemming from Russian pogroms and ending because of World War I. About 40,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine during this wave. The Second Aliyah saw the establishment of the first kibbutz (Degania) and of the first Jewish defense organization (Ha-Shomer) and the beginning of the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language (Jewish Virtual Library, "Immigration to Israel: The Second Aliyah").

works they had read as well (Mendelson-Maoz 71). Mendelson-Maoz thus argues that Mizrahi literature predates “Israeli” literature, rather than the Eurocentric perspective that all Hebrew literature “made Aliyah” (immigrated to Palestine/Israel), as Mendelson-Maoz words it, with the European Jews, who wrote in various languages in addition to in Hebrew.

The 1948 establishment of the State of Israel led to a massive influx of Jews from Arab countries. As Mendelson-Maoz explains, since “the surrounding Arab countries had become enemy states to Israel, the Jews of the East could not remain in their homelands, and were forced to emigrate. The vast majority had to leave immediately, leaving all their assets behind” (Mendelson-Maoz 73). In 1949, Israel brought 38,000 Jews from Yemen under operation “Magic Carpet,” followed by almost all the Libyan Jews, and then under operation “Ezra and Nehemiah” between 1950-51, 21,000 Jews from Iran and 120,000 from Iraq (Mendelson-Maoz 74). An additional 114,000 Jews immigrated from North Africa following:

the process of decolonization from French and British powers. In most places, the Jews were perceived as partners of the colonialist rulers, and Zionism was portrayed as an extension of the colonial regime; when the colonizers decamped, the Jews were soon forced out of these nations as well. (Mendelson-Maoz 74)

When the Jews from the Arab countries and North Africa arrived in Israel, because of the sheer number of them, there were housing and relocation issues; additionally, they were generally met with hostility, as their cultures tended to be considered inferior and, more importantly, as a threat to the monoculture that Zionism strove to create. In schools, children were forced to learn Hebrew and to adopt “Israeli” accents. In particular, Arabic was associated with enemy states, and, as Ella Shohat writes, “Distinguishing between the ‘bad’ East (Arab-Muslim) and the ‘good’ East (Jewish-Arab), Israel assumed the mission of cleansing the Mizrahim from their Mizrahiness and redeeming them from their original sin of belonging to the Orient” (qtd. in Mendelson-Maoz 75). In terms of literary production, a readership receptive to literature written

in Arabic by Jewish authors gradually disappeared, as the Jews who spoke and wrote in Arabic fit into neither the Hebrew literary world of Jewish Israelis nor that of the Palestinian Arabs. The children born to those Mizrahim who immigrated to Israel during this time period might have heard Arabic in the home but never learned it themselves.

Within this context, Castel-Bloom and Behar use Arabic and Judeo-Arabic in their writings to highlight this linguistic and cultural erasure and bring Arabic back into the dominant narrative as a current and spoken Jewish language. In this sense, within Castel-Bloom's and Behar's works, Arabic in part functions as synecdoche: Arabic for both authors also refers to other non-Hebrew languages in Israel that existed as part of the sociolinguistic fabric of the population and that have been systematically erased because of the homogenous Zionist sociopolitical and cultural mission. For example, Behar's multicultural background includes many languages in addition to Arabic. He attests, "Many mute languages inhabit me," (qtd. in Mendelson-Maoz 115), including Arabic, German, Danish, and Ladino. Mendelson-Maoz explains why Behar privileged Arabic among all the other "mute" languages:

[t]wo of the languages his grandparents spoke—German and Arabic—attracted particular attention, as "two languages that you had to feel ashamed of, outside home." And yet, as an adult, Behar found out that "the bridge with Germany had been quickly reconstructed, perhaps too quickly. When it came to Arabic, the bridge was never rebuilt, because time after time politics demolished it." (Mendelson-Maoz 115)

Arabic, in addition to its role as representative of erased languages in Israel, feeds a particular political niche, depicting a palpable, present linguistic enemy to match the sociopolitical one. Castel-Bloom likewise could have chosen to work with languages other than Arabic (and has done so in some of her texts not discussed here)—her Egyptian Jewish parents spoke mostly French in the home. Furthermore, unlike Behar who is considered a Mizrahi writer and also considers himself as such, despite the fact that only part of his heritage is Mizrahi (Mendelson-

Maoz 115), Castel-Bloom is typically not considered a Mizraḥi writer despite her Mizraḥi heritage and despite the fact that “her liberal use of English and French, even interpolating foreign words in Latinate script into her Hebrew[,] explodes Hebrew monolingualism” (Levy 260). This is curious because Castel-Bloom herself, like Behar, consciously considers Mizraḥi themes in her writing and has done so long before the Mizraḥi challenge to the ethnocentrism of Zionism in literature came to be more openly discussed as it is today. In a 1995 interview, Castel-Bloom admitted the importance of Mizraḥi characters to her work. Deborah A. Starr recounts Castel-Bloom’s response on this topic:

[w]e are descendants of *adot ha-mizrah* [Mizraḥi ethnic groups]. Therefore, I make sure that most of my main characters are *Mizrahim*, or *Samekh-Tetim* (*sefardim tehorim* [“pure” Sephardic—descendants of the Jews who inhabited Spain and Portugal before the expulsion in the late fifteenth century]) like my father. It is very important to me to connect people from *adot ha-mizrah* in a non-folkloristic or stereotypical way (Negev 1995). (Starr 224)

Representing non-Hebrew language is important for Castel-Bloom to push back against the ethnocentric Israeli narrative, and for Castel-Bloom, this means questioning geopolitical borders and gender roles as well as sociocultural expectations, as she does in “Um̄mi fi Shurl.”

The premise of “Um̄mi fi Shurl,” is relatively simple and at the same time exceedingly complex. The narrator, feeling suffocated in her home, walks to a park, sits on a bench, and encounters an old woman underneath the bench. The old woman bites her and then, speaking to her in Arabic, claims first to be the narrator’s mother, and then when the narrator (understanding the Arabic but responding in Hebrew) rejects that relationship, claims to be her sister, which the narrator also denies. The old woman then asserts again that she is the narrator’s mother, which the narrator again does not accept. The old woman asks the narrator to take her home and care for her, but the narrator refuses to host her and walks away, leaving the old woman alone underneath the park bench.

The opening of the story indicates that the home suffocates the narrator. This thematized suffocation interrogates the idea of borders and national homeland, contrasted with the open space to which the narrator flees, but that likewise offers no sense of freedom or security. The narrator exposes her home as hostile: "בוקר אחד לא יכולתי יותר להישאר בבית והלכתי. הקירות סגרו עלי, שהות מרובה בבית, ואני נחנקת" ("One morning I could not stay in the house any longer and I left. The walls closed in on me, the room was overbearing to me. . . . Look, I'm paranoid, that's for sure. Too much time at home and I suffocate") (Castel-Bloom 9). The narrator's voice—her authenticity—is also in question from the very beginning with the symbol of suffocation, and the narrator rejects traditional gender roles that confine the woman to the home, as she confesses that she "could not stay in the house any longer," at the same time as she expresses that the home is not performing the traditional role of the home in making her feel safe and secure.

The allusion to the Israeli national anthem speaks directly to this challenge: to the narrator's lament that "[]היבטתי קדימה בשיעמום אין-קץ" ("[] I looked forward in never-ending boredom"), Zvia Ben-Yoseph Ginor proposes that "looking forward" "allud[es] to the optimistic first stanza of the national anthem, 'Hatikvah'" (Ginor 242), which includes the verses "ולפאתי" ("And forwards to the edges of the East/ an eye gazes toward Zion"). The boredom, coupled with the hostility of the surroundings, presents the possibility that the rigid mission of Zionism has failed and has excluded a large but ignored segment of the population. Thus, the narrator looks "forward" *from* Zion, where she already is, instead of *to* it.

When the narrator feels a sting or bite on her leg, the main "action" of the story, she wonders if at first it is a snake, or a black widow spider, or a scorpion,⁴² but instead she finds a

⁴² For a detailed analysis of the implications of each of these biting or stinging agents, see Ginor's article "Involuntary Myths: Mania, Mother, and Zion in Orly Castel-Bloom's 'Ummi fi shurl'" (2005).

woman around 60-years old who claims to be her mother. The eastward gaze factors in once again: the old woman smells of urine, to the extent that the narrator turns her nose away from the old woman, blending high and low registers of Hebrew that both engage and estrange the Hebrew language: "היא היתה מסריחה משתן, ואני הפניתי את חוטמי לכיוון הרוח וריחמתי על מי שעומד עכשיו מזרח ממנה" ("[s]he stunk of urine, and I turned my nose [*hotmi*] in the direction of the wind and I took pity on whomever was standing east of her") (Castel-Bloom 10). The word the narrator uses for nose, *hotem*, is a literary register, as opposed to the colloquial word *af*. By contrast, the previous phrase, "stunk of urine," is anything but highbrow. Therefore, turning her *hotem* indicates a feeling of superiority or even impatience with regard to the various symbols this old Arabic-speaking woman represents.

Such a sentiment is also implied in the attitude of the narrator stating that she "took pity on" anyone to the east of the old woman. The allusions here are twofold: one, the East could refer to the Land of Israel, as in the famous verse of medieval Spanish poet Yehuda Halevi (c. 1075-1171), "לבי במזרח ואנוכי בסוף מערב" ("My heart is in the East, and I am in the utmost [part of the] West") (Halevi). Halevi left Spain for the Land of Israel (Crusader-ruled Palestine) in 1140 to escape persecution under Christian and Muslim rule (Cole 144). Before his death, Halevi "spent some eight months in Alexandria and Fustat (Old Cairo), as he prepared for the second leg of his trip. . . . to Jerusalem. He was last heard from in a poem written aboard ship just outside Alexandria's port in mid-May of 1141" (Cole 144). Here, it is worth keeping in mind that the narrator's parents, as she later points out, as well as Castel-Bloom's parents, hail from Egypt. Furthermore, another allusion to the East, in this case, is immigration to the Land of Israel (Palestine or Israel, depending on the time period) with the promise of a more secure life.

Many Mizrahim, literally *Easterners*, found discrimination and poverty in Israel, while those native to the Land—the Palestinian Arabs—were displaced from their homes.

The stigma of the Arabic language and its association with Arabs as political enemies is a central theme in the story. After biting or stinging the narrator and claiming to be her mother, the old woman asks the narrator her ethnic group, which, though a bizarre question, highlights the issue of ethnicity at the forefront of Israeli society. To this question, the narrator answers in what seems like a non-sequitur: "אנני ניצולת שואה, עניתי, 'אבל בזמן האחרון אני חולמת שאני כן. הורי'" ("I am not a Holocaust survivor," I answered, "but recently I've dreamt that I am. My parents are indeed from Cairo") (Castel-Bloom 10). By saying that she is not a Holocaust survivor, she indicates that she is not Ashkenazi and also gestures toward the privileging of the Ashkenazi narrative as the national narrative. As Oppenheimer points out:

[y]oung Mizrahim reject the Shoah [Holocaust] as an Israeli narrative (both national and Ashkenazi) that overshadows their own history and forces them to be integrated into a national hegemonic representation. (Oppenheimer 109)

Mizrahi literature rejected the tendency toward hegemonic "emotional identification with the stories of European Jewry" that, in their view, came "at the expense of their unique Mizrahi perspective" and replaced the diversity of Mizrahi histories and experiences with a monolithic version that favored the experiences of those coming from Europe (Oppenheimer 109). The narrator is ashamed not to be part of that narrative because her parents, she reports, are from Cairo. On the other hand, the exclusion that this narrative produces positions the narrator, in some ways, as a victim of the Holocaust as well.

As the old woman looks forward again, another allusion to the forward, hopeful, and ostensibly unifying gaze of the national anthem, the narrator asks if the old woman is about to die. The old woman replies, "אם לא מתתי עד עכשיו—לא אמות אף פעם" ("If I haven't died by now—

I will never die''') (Castel-Bloom 10). This begins to impart the sense that the old woman is not just an old woman, as the narrator also asks her if she is a ghost, at which point the old woman switches to Arabic. This is also the point at which the reader also becomes a character in the story because the narrator includes vowels for the benefit of the reader. Unless to avoid ambiguity, Hebrew prose is generally unvocalized. The conversation in Arabic, written in Hebrew letters, includes vowel diacritics to aid the reader unfamiliar with Arabic in pronunciation. The narrator and the old woman both speak Arabic, so the vowels are only to benefit a third party. At the same time, the fact that it is not written in Arabic further underscores the reader's likely unfamiliarity with the alphabet and language as well as possibly the narrator's own inability to write it, having herself matriculated through the Israeli school system. It is possible that she is only able to carry on this basic conversation from having picked up some Arabic in the home but is not actually a fluent speaker. The footnoted translations of the Arabic text are another paratextual curiosity, likewise suggesting a majority non-Arabic speaking Hebrew readership. Ginor argues that in the presence of the footnotes, "the author's awareness of the mainstream reader's ignorance of the 'foreign' tongue is indicated. The glossary, therefore, acts as an authorial intrusion in the cross-cultural text" (Ginor 246). The reader is assumed to be either Ashkenazi or part of the Mizrahi Israeli world complicit in this erasure, thus requiring both vowels to pronounce and footnotes to understand the text of this ghostly figure. I propose another possibility as well: that the translation represents the narrator translating the woman's words for herself into the more familiar Hebrew, such that even the use of Arabic is mediated by the Hebrew.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the dialogue is the erasure of the Arabic alphabet—nowhere in the text, in the body or endnotes, do we encounter Arabic letters. Furthermore, while

the Hebrew and Arabic estrange each other (in the Shklovskian sense), as Ranen Omer-Sherman points out, Castel-Bloom “boldly experiment[s] with the ways that bilingual narrative stimulate [sic] the reader’s understanding of the limits of homogenous or tribal identity” (Omer-Sherman 259), which not only signals a de-homogenizing strategy but also a move to de-essentialize the cultures of the Arabic-speaking Jews. One way she does this is by highlighting the linguistic relationship between Arabic and Hebrew; Omer-Sherman cites Gil Z. Hochberg’s observation in *In Spite of Partition* that:

accentuat[ing] the phonetic similarity between Hebrew and Arabic, call[s] attention to the “familial” (Semitic) relationship of the two languages, and further impl[ies] . . . that the two Semitic people might in fact be closer to each other than they realize, or wish to realize. (Omer-Sherman 255, Hochberg 6)

Based on this observation, I contend, then, that the possibility of the old woman as mother or sister highlights the linguistic relationship of Arabic as Hebrew’s “mother” or at least “sister” and also brings in the Judeo-Arabic language as well as a Jewish offshoot of the language, to which “Arabic” could also be considered “mother” or “sister.”

The bilingual dialogue in “Ummi fi Shurl” proceeds and is written as follows:

"אמרתי לך מי אני—אנא אִמָּךְ."
 "אִמִּי? אִמִּי מוֹשֶׁה הֵנָּה, אִמִּי פֶה שְׁרָל."
 "אנא אוֹחֶתְךָ."
 "אִנִּי מוֹשֶׁה אוֹחֶתִי. אוֹחֶתִי פֶה שְׁרָל."
 "אנא אִמָּךְ."
 "אִנִּי מוֹשֶׁה אִמִּי, אִמִּי פֶה שְׁרָל."

“I told you who I am—I’m your mother.”
 “My mother? My mother is not here, my mother is at work.”
 “I’m your sister.”
 “You’re not my sister. My sister is at work.”
 “I’m your mother.”
 “You’re not mother. My mother is at work.”⁴³ (Castel-Bloom 10)

⁴³ I’ve indicated in the English translation the text that is in Arabic by the use of italics. Castel-Bloom includes a Hebrew translation of the Arabic words in footnotes to the text, indicative of the fact that many of her readers will not be able to understand the Arabic original.

The conversation concludes by the old woman asking the narrator in Hebrew to take her home and care for her. The narrator refuses with a curt “no,” to which the old woman replies, switching to Arabic again, "יִסְתָּר יְרֵב" (“God protect us”), and then returns to underneath the bench (Castel-Bloom 11).

The switch between Hebrew and Arabic, like the switch between high and low registers in Hebrew, provides additional information. The narrator understands the old woman’s Arabic, and the old woman uses Arabic to claim an intimate relationship with her. The narrator, in Arabic, refuses this relationship, at the same time that her reciprocity of Arabic endears her to the old woman and admits the relationship. But then the old woman switches to Hebrew, instead of continuing in their intimate, shared Arabic, to ask that the narrator take her home and care for her, even though the narrator clearly would understand the request in Arabic too. The narrator’s refusal is a rejection of and shame toward Mizrahi identity. For this reason, the old woman cannot refer to the narrator’s “home” in Arabic but instead has to switch languages; socially, the narrator *cannot* allow into her home this heritage and this language. It becomes clear that the old woman, a widow in mourning for her husband, is above all in mourning for herself and her culture that have been squeezed out of the Zionist vision.

Moreover, as the narrator is a writer, this is also a comment on the hegemony of Ashkenazi discourse and dialect in Israeli literature. The narrator acknowledges her guilt at abandoning the old woman and thus leaving a part of herself behind under the bench, where the old woman returns. But she proceeds anyway, admitting that her main concern is to not be “bitten” again—“הרגשתי לא נוח, וגם קצת פחדתי ששוב תחיש אותי. מצד שני לא היה לי נעים לקום וללכת” (“I felt uncomfortable, and also a little afraid that she would bite me again. On the other hand, it was not pleasant for me to get up and leave”) (Castel-Bloom 11). The narrator feels guilty, but

not enough to allow herself to be “bitten” again by the ghost of her heritage, or by the language, that she leaves behind under the bench.

The simultaneous presence and absence of Arabic, and the suggestion that the old woman is a ghost, represents a profound loss expressible by the *presence of absence*, which, as Levy explains, is “a shared trope of Palestinian and Israeli writing both in Arabic and Hebrew. . . . [that] connotes reality and unreality, memory and forgetting, recognition and denial, and the permeable border between them” (Levy 260). Regarding the term “presence of absence,” Levy writes:

the phrase can be traced back to Israel’s Absentee Property Law of 1950, which created the absurd category of ‘present absentees’ (*nifkadim nokhehim*): Palestinians who left their property during the 1948 war but remained within the borders of Israel, becoming internal refugees with no legal claim to their lands. (Levy 260).

The term, and the use of the concept, is inherently political and polemic, arguing against an institutional system of erasure and artificial designations. Levy further explains that awareness of this term made it into popular Israeli knowledge via literary production, “largely through David Grossman’s 1992 book *Nokhehim nifkadim* (*Absent Presentees*), a collection of interviews with Palestinians in Israel also published in English as *Sleeping on a Wire*” (Levy 260). It is significant to note that Grossman reverses the order of term’s words in the title, playing on the absurdity and underscoring that these “absentees” are not, in fact, “absent” at all, even if politics has attempted to erase them. “Ummi fi Shurl’s” narrator’s words and actions, though they are minimal, destabilize the homogenous representation of Israeli society as well as the ethnocentricity of Zionism. Arabic and the ghost, who may or may not be the mother, are both present and absent and are treated as intruders, particularly unwelcome in the home, which likewise suffocates the narrator, who simultaneously dismisses and by default participates in

these unwanted cultures and traditions by virtue of her stigmatized heritage coupled with her Israeli upbringing.

In addition to her multiple linguistic identities, the narrator similarly participates in and rejects gender roles that are represented by the languages, as indicated by the mention of the “mother” and “sister,” and the conspicuous absence of men in the story. The phrase "אין איש" (“there is no one,” lit. “there is no man”) is used twice in the story. For Ginor, the importance of the gendered phrase (literally, “there is no man”) is a reference to Genesis 19:31, when Lot’s daughters procreate with him, seeing the absence of other men in their land with whom to carry on the next generation. Ginor asserts, “The absent father and the absent man are thus imported into the story through this intertextual reference” (Ginor n.37). I argue that this absence that Ginor points out is more significant because it implies a lack of children, meaning, a rejection of the role of motherhood, a salient theme in Castel-Bloom’s famous 1992 dystopian novel *לולי סיטי* (*Dolly City*), another foreign-language-titled work. Smadar Shiffman notes that motherhood plays a unique role in the Zionist imagination:

[t]he Israeli Jewish Mother is an especially intriguing case. Formed under a condition of permanent military and existential tension, Israeli Jewish Mothers and the cultural institution of Motherhood tend to combine two contradictory aspects: Mother as the familiar, well known Jewish Mother, nurturing, caring, self-effacing and adoring and Israeli Jewish Mother as (until not so long ago) harnessed to the national effort. Like other mothers in nations during their birth throes, they heroically raise their adored sons to be sacrificed for the needs of the nation. (Shiffman 141)

Whether the narrator of “Ummi fi Shurl” is a mother herself is unknown; however, the fact that she exists in this story independent of a child is already a rejection of that stereotype. Moreover, the narrator’s own mother, if indeed she is her mother, is hardly portrayed as a maternal figure—she bites her own child and is unkempt and unable to care for herself or her family to the extent that her child does not recognize her and to the extent that she does not even have a home. The

narrator's mother and sister are "at work," suggesting that they likewise reject the role of the woman who stays at and cares for the home. At the same time, it suggests a working class socioeconomic status. The narrator rejects the old woman's claim to motherhood and the sense of responsibility she should bear toward that relationship. This circles back to the theme of the *mother* tongue and the narrator's lack of tenderness with regard to that linguistic connection and lack of interest in the further transmission of her heritage, through herself, to the next generation.

Castel-Bloom's text does not on the surface propose an off home strategy; rather, the absence and erasure that the text presents and represents suggests the perils of not adopting such a vision as the off home offers. At the same time, the off home sneaks in precisely in Castel-Bloom's insistence on visibility through the aggression of the bite—toward the narrator and the real-life readers—and making permanent and visible this erasure by writing down the narrative of linguistic exclusion—as opposed to the way the writer-narrator behaves in the story. The narrator implicates the readers in this erasure and confronts the readers assertively and aggressively. The Hebrew-only readers are confronted with their own collusion in leaving the old woman under a park bench because this confrontation happened to them too. In this way, the story itself provokes the readers with their own complicity in the monolingualism and monoculturalism of Zionism, where "אין איש" ("there is no one") to take care of the old woman, be she a mother, a sister, a ghost, or the personification of language itself, and give her a home. The text also forms a relationship with the reader wherein, even without the reader's consent, this erased language begins a sly process of transmission using Hebrew, the hegemonic language, itself, guaranteeing that, despite the narrator's fear, the language will surely bite again.

Mute Arabic and Deaf Hebrew in Almog Behar's "Ana Min al-Yahud"

Behar, like Castel-Bloom, indicates Israeli society's complicity in making space for Mizraḥi languages and heritages. Behar's story is also titled in untranslated Arabic, though later in the story the reader does encounter the title phrase footnoted with a Hebrew translation—emphasizing the reader's likely inability to translate it without help. Behar's Arabic title centers Arabic as a fundamental element in the story, but at the same time, a largely silent one. Behar's Arabic in his prize-winning 2005 "אנא מן אל-יהוד" ("Ana Min al-Yahud") is present only through its absence and through the one line Arabic plea from the narrator "Ana Min al-Yahud"—"I am one of the Jews."

Behar's story can be seen as a continuation of the conversation Castel-Bloom enters in "Umami fi Shur" regarding the place of Arabic in Hebrew-speaking society. Equally important is the intertextual reference to Algerian-born Israeli Mizraḥi poet Erez Biton's 1979 poem "תקציר שיחה" ("Conversation Summary"). Regarding the importance of Biton for Mizraḥi literature, in particular, poetry, Mendelson-Maoz writes:

Biton's poetry was . . . greatly admired by Mizrahim. The fact that it was written by a blind Moroccan poet piqued the media's curiosity. . . . Sami Shalom Chetrit⁴⁴ remarked that "whoever wants to understand the source of the spark that lit the fire, the source of Mizrahi poetry's voice," must first read Biton, who is a "giant poet precisely because he invented the voice of an entire generation." (Mendelson-Maoz 86)

Biton is a founding father of Mizraḥi poetry and of representing Mizraḥi culture in its diversity⁴⁵ and from a perspective that challenges the hegemonic one. In dialoguing with Biton, Behar

⁴⁴ Sami Shalom Chetrit is a contemporary Mizrahi Israeli poet and activist from Morocco.

⁴⁵ Israeli culture tends to view Mizraḥi culture as monolithic, categorizing all Jews from the Middle East and North Africa under the same culture moniker. This misconception does not prevail everywhere, however. For example, in her study of the role of Judeo-Arabic in France and Israel, Yehudit Henshke describes the cultural distinctions among Mizrahim in France. Henshke elaborates that while in Israel, "Jews from Islamic lands have come to be regarded as a single homogeneous unit" (Henshke 184),

[t] situation in France. . . differs. Here we find a hierarchical distinction between Jews with different North African origins. . . . Algerian Jews, who were French citizens in their homeland, are differentiated from Tunisian and Moroccan Jews, which were French protectorates, and all of the former are differentiated from the Djerban Jews (southern Tunisia). (Henshke 185)

brings in an already-established “voice of an entire generation.” In the first stanza of Biton’s poem, the poet asks:

מה זה להיות אותנטי,
לרוץ באמצע דיזנגוף ולצעוק ביהודית מרוקאית.
"אנא מן אלמגרב אנא מן אלמגרב"
(אני מהרי האטלס אני מהרי האטלס).

What does it mean to be authentic,
To run in the middle of Dizengoff [Street] and to yell in Moroccan Jewish.
I am from the Magreb I am from the Magreb [*Ana min almagreb ana min al
Magreb*]
(I am from the Atlas Mountains I am from the Atlas Mountains). (Biton 17)

Biton’s poem reflects the poet’s sense of alienation on a major street (Dizengoff) in Tel Aviv where he does not have a place as a Mizrahi Jew. His desire to call out in his language that he is from the Maghreb in “the middle of Dizengoff,” using the word "באמצע", which also means “in the center,” displaces his Moroccan Jewish heritage from “the center.” The poet, furthermore, refuses incorporation by the center and yearns to express himself “authentically,” not in Hebrew but in his language, and reveal, without shame, that he is not Ashkenazi but in fact from the Maghreb. The poet explains (to the unfamiliar majority) that the Maghreb is where the Atlas Mountains are located, though this clarification is hardly clarifying or geographically inclusive of all of the Maghreb. The Atlas Mountains represent a symbolic and geophysical barrier—the Atlas mountains separate the Mediterranean Basin from sub-Saharan Africa (Miksell and Isnard). It is also curious that the speaker needs to identify his origins. As Nancy Berg points out, Mizrahi identities, and “ethnic” writing generally, are marked categories. At the same time that Biton’s poet is striving for authenticity and yearning to call out in his language, he calls out an

At play in France regarding immigration from North Africa is the question of French citizenship prior to immigration, in addition to the status of French versus Arabic in each of these societies (Henshke 185-186). These distinctions tend not to exist in Israel, a kind of racism that Biton and other attempt to point out and rectify.

explanation of who he is and where he is from (and where that is), albeit reductive and in a way that reinforces the dominance of the center as much as it resists it.

Behar's character's awkwardly-phrased plea, "Ana min al-yahud," mirrors Biton's poet's repressed cry, "Ana min al-Magreb." Unlike Biton, however, Behar, born in Israel and never having acquired native Arabic, uses ungrammatical Arabic ("I am from the Jews," structurally the same as "I am from the Maghreb") and includes no parenthetical explanation of where "the Jews" are located. This construction shows both the speaker's unfamiliarity with his heritage language and an attempt to disengage "the Jews" from being bound to a particular language or region.

When asked in an interview, "What is it like to write from that liminal space between distinct cultures, languages, and identities?" (Olidort par.10), Behar responded:

I don't perceive of Jewish-Arab identity as in-between; its Jewishness is Arab and its Arabness is Jewish. Today, after 100 years of nationalism, it is a hybridity, but that wasn't always the case. For Jews in Arabic-speaking countries, Arabic was a Jewish language and Hebrew was part of the Arabic cultural landscape. You could write poetry in the Hebrew language using Arabic genres, meters, and rhymes, and it would make perfect sense. (Olidort par. 11)

In claiming that "Arabic was a Jewish language and Hebrew was part of the Arabic cultural landscape," Behar addresses the fundamental question of what registers as a Jewish language. In the case of Ladino, as discussed previously in this chapter, only Jews, and mostly only Sephardim, communicate in Ladino. For Behar, there is no question that Hebrew is a Jewish language, despite the fact that there are many native speakers of Hebrew in present-day Israel who are not Jewish; however, for Arabic, this is not the case, as indicated by Behar's use of the past tense: "Arabic *was* a Jewish language and Hebrew *was* part of the Arabic cultural landscape" (emphasis mine). In contrast to the projects of Nissán and Gelman to introduce the *presence* of Ladino in Latin American Jewish communities, and to Gelman's attention to the

presence of Ladino as the historical-linguistic root of Spanish that is still present in the modern use of the language, Behar, like Castel-Bloom, represents Arabic through the presence of absence. In addition to this strategy, they also use Judeo-Arabic structures to estrange normative Hebrew. In Behar's story, the only spoken Arabic is the title phrase. Thus, the absence or hiding of Judeo-Arabic culture is rendered even more evident as the Arabic language is also conspicuously missing, leaving only a trace of it, the Arabic accent.

Behar was born in 1978 in Jerusalem, and, as discussed previously, even though his heritage includes Iraqi, Turkish, and German origins, he was raised in a monolingual Hebrew-speaking home. After the death of his Arabic-speaking grandfather Behar turned to Arabic as a part of his culture that was denied to him. He affirms in an interview published by *Y-net*, a major Israeli online news publication, that his Arabic origins, as well as all his linguistic origins, which he senses through the use or disuse of language, define fundamentally who he is and the way he perceives his identity:

אני לא יכול להבין את עצמי בלי הערבית, כמו שאני לא יכול להבין את עצמי בלי הסידור והפיוט, ובלי הספניולית והגרמנית ובלי הגולה. התחלתי ללמוד ערבית בין השאר מתוך תחושה שרק היא תאפשר לי להשתחרר מאיזו תקיעות, שבלעדיה אכתוב שוב ושוב את אותו סיפור, . . . ומתוך תחושה שדווקא הערבית יכולה להעניק מקום אחר, אלטרנטיבי ובטוח. . . וזיכרון של . . . הזמן שלפני המעברות והמלחמות.

I cannot understand myself without the Arabic, just as I cannot understand myself without the *siddur* [prayer book] and the *piyyut* [liturgical poems], and without the Ladino and the German and without the Exile. I began to learn Arabic, among other things, from a sense that only it would allow me to free myself from being stuck, that without it I would write again and again the same story. . . and from a sense that precisely Arabic could provide another space, alternative and secure . . . and a memory of . . . the time before . . . the transit camps and the wars. (A. Shalev, par. 7)

In this quotation, Behar registers several key viewpoints: he places Arabic on par with Jewish religious texts—the *siddur* and the *piyyut*—thereby addressing the implicit stigma against Arabic as a Jewish language. This maneuver, in turn, elevates the language. Next, he brings in three

other languages from his heritage that represent specific moments in Jewish history. He draws on Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) referencing exile, which could refer to the Babylonian Exile after the destruction of the Temple, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492,⁴⁶ the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, or to all of them, by using the same word. As discussed previously in this chapter, German has also faced stigmatization because of its association with the Holocaust, though such stigma has largely dissipated. The inclusion of German here points to this tension and also alludes to the German-Jewish Kafka, whose legacy is strongly featured in the style of Behar's "אנא מן אל-יהוד" ("Ana Min al-Yahud").

This monolingual multilingualism is part of what contributes to the striking condemnation of erasure in "Ana Min al-Yahud" as well as the question of the appropriation or depropriation (to borrow Yasemin Yildiz's term) of language for political and, especially, national gains (Yildiz 40). The premise of the story, which first appeared as a poem, is as follows: with the approach of the month of Tamuz, which is a month in both the Arabic calendar (July) and the Jewish one,⁴⁷ the unnamed Jewish Hebrew-speaking Israeli narrator discovers that his voice has turned into the voice and accent of his native-Arabic speaking Iraqi Jewish grandfather, Anwar. The unnamed narrator represents another way in which Behar marks the erasure of the narrator's heritage. As the story unfolds, the plague goes on to infect first others with Mizrahi accents, then some with Ashkenazi accents, each person reverting to their ancestral accents but, importantly, without losing their contemporary (native) language (Hebrew). In other

⁴⁶ It is worth noting that Muslims were also expelled from Spain but later, in 1609.

⁴⁷ Tamuz is the ninth month in the Jewish calendar counting from the Jewish New Year or the fourth month in the Jewish calendar counting from the month of Nisan, the Biblically-established first month. It corresponds roughly to parts of June and July in the Gregorian calendar. Tamuz is often considered one of the saddest months in the Jewish calendar because it marks the beginning of the destruction of both the First and Second Holy Temple and, therefore, the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora. Both Temples were destroyed during the following month, on 9 Av—the first in 586 BCE by the Babylonians and the second in 70 CE by the Romans.

words, all of the speakers continue to speak Hebrew but in “foreign” or “alien” (*zar*) accents. Even street names revert to their “Palestinian” names from before the 1948 war. The only people spared from the plague are the narrator’s parents, who continue to speak “clean,” unaccented Hebrew.

In this way, the narrator implicates the parents, representative of the ideology of their generation, in what I call the *pathology of erasure*. In the story, the narrator claims explicitly that his mother erased her Arabic accent when she was a young immigrant to Israel. The narrator repeats the words, and thus emphasizes, “I tried” and “to soften the *ayin*” to increase the affective import of the torment and anguish behind hiding the non-Ashkenazi register: ניסיתי ("I tried I tried to soften the *ayin* to soften the *ayin* like my mother who did so in her childhood due to the teachers and the gazes of the other students") (Behar 55).⁴⁸ He experiences a similar challenge to “soften” the *het*, *khaf*, and *kuf* and to distinguish the *tsadi* from the *samekh*⁴⁹ (Behar 55). Likewise, a similar phenomenon takes place in Behar’s story "איכה יושבה בגדאד" ("How Baghdad Sat," translated by Lisa Katz as "Alas, Baghdad Sits Solitary"). The title word איכה (*eikhah*, “how” or “where”) is a Biblical Hebrew word. It is significant that the biblical book *Lamentations* in Hebrew is the book of איכה (*Eikhah*), thus imparting a contour of lamentation and exile to the title that does not come through in translation. In this story, the narrator describes how his mother was forced to erase her Arabic-sounding accent when she learned Hebrew and how this “lighter” accent was then transmitted to the narrator—the narrator and his

⁴⁸ Citations from Behar will be from “Ana Min al-Yahud” unless otherwise indicated.

⁴⁹ These letters, especially the guttural ones, including *ayin*, *het*, and *khaf*, function as shibboleths that distinguish traditional Ashkenazi (Ashkenormative) and Mizrahi Hebrew accents. As the narrator mentions, the guttural letters are pronounced more “softly” in the Ashkenazi Hebrew accent. Additionally, as the narrator indicates, the Mizrahi accent distinguishes between *kuf* and *kaf*, unlike the Ashkenazi accent, but not between *tsadi* and *samekh*, which are distinct in the Ashkenazi pronunciation. The narrator, like his mother was forced to do, attempts to prove his Jewish identity by eliminating the elements of the Mizrahi accent that mark him as “Arab.”

"חמישים שנה של ישיבה הרחק מבגדאד כבר נתנו בי את אותותיהם, ואמי כבר שכחה או בחרה לשכוח את שפתה, שפתינו, כשהוכנסה אל בית-הספר העברי ונדרשה להקל מכובדן של הע'ן והח'ת" ("Fifty years of dwelling far away from Baghdad already left their mark on me, and my mother already forgot or chose to forget her language, our language, when she was entered into the Hebrew school was required to ease up the heaviness of the *ayin* and the *het*") (Behar, "Baghdad 197). This aggression on the part of the language toward the narrator, perpetuated by Israeli culture that favors the Ashkenazi experience, and the contrast between the mother's successful efforts to suppress it and the narrator's fruitless attempts to commit the same violence, incorporate the historical trajectory that is at stake in the story: because of the actions of the previous generation to destroy history and patrimony, this generation must redouble their efforts to resist the ethnocentricity that has been imposed on their generation.

For this reason, the narrator's grandfather plays a central role in the story, and the narrator interacts with the memory of his grandfather to the extent that the grandfather even speaks to him. Mendelson-Maoz points to a "double movement" in Mizrahi writing of Behar's generation as they struggle with the disconnect that they feel to their heritage that was silenced:

they point back to the generation of their parents and grandparents, and forward to contemporary Israel. Behar, like many second-generation Mizrahi authors, addresses previous generations of his family, especially his grandparents, since his parents' generation is silenced. In his poems, Behar returns to his grandparents, their lives and experiences; he mourns their death and tries to reconstruct their languages. (Mendelson-Maoz 118)

This tension between the generations and the various roles they played is evident in the narrative, as the narrator's accent becomes that of his grandfather, not of either of his parents, and he interfaces with his grandfather's language, perceived to be the authentic point of return. The narrator's grandfather is the only named character in the story, the last moment of identity. The narrator fuses his parents to "אמא אבא" ("mother father"), and he is utterly unable to relate to

them. He therefore also bypasses the trope of the “mother tongue,” in Hebrew שפת אם (*sefat em*) and Arabic اللغة الأم (*al-lugha al-umm*), both of which literally translate to “the mother’s language,” an interesting genitive construction that English does not share here.⁵⁰ This concept refers to the sense that language is inherited through the mother, but in his case, as the narrator silently accuses his parents, he thinks, “מרוּב בושה לא הורשתם לי דבר” (“out of so much shame you did not bequeath me anything [*davar*]”) (Behar 64), with the root of *davar* (*d.v.r.*) being the same for “thing” and “speech.”

Similarly, his parents remain unaffected by the accent plague and unable to identify with their son’s turn toward his heritage; while his father remarks, “זה לא בננו” (“this is not our son”), it is his mother who first explicitly denies his heritage and accent: “לנו אין מבטא הזה” (“we don’t have this accent”) (Behar 64). Together, his parents claim, “לא היה מאין לרשת מבטא זה, לא מן” (“there was nowhere for him to inherit this accent from, not from the immediate family, his grandfather Anwar died before his birth, we did [do] not have a son”) (Behar 64). The idea of linguistic-cultural (dis)inheritance and the loss of the mother’s tongue as the mother tongue, that utopian visions wherein, as Yildiz describes, the one “unique ‘mother’ insists on one predetermined and socially sanctioned language as the single locus of affect and attachment” (Yildiz 13), effectively leaves the narrator culturally orphaned in the way he is able to express his identity.

The narrator’s connection, which exists and does not exist simultaneously, to his grandfather whom he has never met depends on the narrator’s relationship to the grandfather’s language; the grandfather wonders if speaking only in his accent, not in his language, will be

⁵⁰In Hebrew, the language from which other close languages are derived is known by the similar term שפה אם (*safah em*), which literally translates to “mother language” (as opposed to “mother’s language”) and is another concept that expresses the passage of language as a matrilineal process. In English, this is called “mother language.”

enough to end the silence that befell his heritage. The grandfather's voice challenges the narrator:

והיה סבי מדבר אלי, שואל אותי בקולי האם יש סוף לסיפור הזה, ומה היסטוריה זו שלי מתערבת בשלך, . . . אני דור מדבר. . . , אתה הדור חיכינו אותו, . . . ונשארתי במדבר למאכל אופות דורסים בשבילך, כדי שלא תזכור אותי, שלא תהיה כואב כמונו, ואיך שיניך נוגסות שוב את מילותי, . . . לא מצאתי את מותי בירושלים, גם לא בעיר הולדתי, אני מת במדבר שביניהן, הרבה מדבר שתיקה.

[a]nd my grandfather would say to me, ask me in my voice if there is an end to this story, and what is this history of mine that's intervening [*mit'arevet*] in yours, . . . I am the generation of the desert [*midbar*], . . . you are the generation we waited for, . . . and I stayed in the desert to be food for birds of prey for your sake, so that you wouldn't remember me, so that you wouldn't have pain like we have, and how do your teeth again bit my words [*milotai*], . . . I didn't find my death in Jerusalem, nor in the city of my birth, I died in the desert that's between them, a great desert of silence. (Behar 62)

The grandfather is forced to speak to the narrator in the narrator's own voice—that is, in Hebrew—because the narrator's parents did not bequeath him Arabic. The passage, about words, is linguistically complex. The word the grandfather uses for his history “intervening,” “interfering,” or “mixing” in the narrator's history shares a morphological root (but not meaning) with the word “Arab(ic)” (*ha-Akademie le-Lashon ha-Ivrit*), suggesting the impossibility of a pure, unmediated Israeli identity. Additionally, the grandfather's death in the desert of silence is significant. In Biblical Hebrew, *midbar* can mean “desert” but also linguistically relates to “speech,” the reason for this relationship being that “the desert is where the divine word spoke to the multitude” (Newton 4). Finally, the “word” itself establishes a kind of covenant between grandfather and grandson. singular of word, *milah*, also means circumcision, as in *brit milah* (also called “bris”), a covenant of faith that unites fathers and sons within the culture of Judaism and this covenant related to the idea wherein the narrator states that the grandfather instructs him to show the story to his parents, “כמעט משביע אותי מן המתים” (“almost swearing me in from among the dead”) (Behar 62). These linguistic roots, symbolic as a concept on their own, interact with the themes of the story metatextually to symbolize the ways in which the narrator's generation

has been cut off from their heritage because of the perceived stigma attached to that heritage; it is up to the narrator and his generation to give speech back to those whose culture died in that desert of silence. As his grandfather says, using the present tense, "אתה קם לחדש אותי" ("you rise up to renew me") (Behar 62).

The grandfather's voice invades the narrator's body, thus, as a plague or infection.⁵¹ The narrator recounts, "נתקע לי בפה, עמוק" ("my tongue/language turned over")⁵² and "נתקע לי בפה, עמוק" ("the Arabic accent got stuck in my mouth, deep in my throat, deep from my throat. . . . [T]he Arabic accent of my grandfather Anwar, peace be upon him, returned to me") (Behar 55), which is a clear but ironic reference to the phrase "תדבק לשוני לחיכי" ("Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth") if Jerusalem, "home," is forgotten (Ps. 137.6). The process of the "return" of the grandfather's voice is paradoxical: if the accent is his grandfather's and not his, how can it return *to* him and *from* deep within his own body? Moreover, it is significant that this accent comes from the narrator's throat, the organ that allows one to speak and to breathe or, conversely, in the case of the narrator, silences and suffocating him from within. After the narrator realizes that he has no place in Hebrew with his Arabic accent and no place among the Arabic-speaking Palestinians with his only Arabic-accented Hebrew, the narrator stops talking out loud altogether. He reflects, "פתאום הערבית שלי אילמת, חנוקה מן הגרון, מקללת את עצמה בלי להוציא מילה, " ("suddenly⁵³ my

⁵¹ The idea of a plague is also tied into the concept of the desert (מדבר/*midbar*) because the word for "pestilence" (דבר/*dever*), one of the biblical ten plagues inflicted on the Egyptians before the exodus from Egypt and into the desert, comes from that same morphological root.

⁵² The phrase "נתקע לי בפה, עמוק" ("my tongue/language turned over") could also allude to the Biblical vow, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget her cunning. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, If I remember thee not; If I set not Jerusalem Above my chiefest joy (Ps. 137.5-7).

⁵³ The word "פתאום" ("suddenly") is repeated twelve times throughout the text, which suggests the efficiency with which Israeli society systematically erased the "מבטאים האסורים" ("forbidden accents") (Behar 60).

Arabic is mute, suffocated from the throat, cursing herself without letting out a word [*milah*], sleeping in the suffocating air of the shelters of my soul, hiding from the family members behind the shutters of Hebrew”) (Behar 58). This alludes to the shame that Arabic faces as a stigmatized language, in forced hiding inside the narrator’s body, and once again gestures to the political status of the Arabic speaker whose social value is diminished because of the arbitrarily stigmatized language.

These phrases also address the appropriation of language—in the case of Israeli politics, the casting of unaccented “clean” (as opposed to infected, thematized by this language plague) Hebrew as Jewish and the *pathological erasure* of other languages, cultures, and narratives. Perhaps the most contentious and politically fraught, the Arabic language is not viewed as compatible with the Jewish identity in the modern state of Israel. Here, as discussed previously as well, the use of the word "מילה" (*milah*, “word”) has a double meaning. The *brit milah* historically has served as a kind of corporal shibboleth, identifying Jewish males bodily. The narrator, however, because of his Arabic accent, cannot muster any bodily proof, either in the form of the “word” or the “circumcision,” of his Jewish identity. He recounts that as the soldiers search for proof of his identity and check him for explosive devices, treating him as a potential terrorist, the policemen take note and dismiss the narrator’s circumcision: "היה אחד אומר לשני תראה הוא נימול, הוא באמת יהודי הערבי הזה, ושני היה אומר, גם ערבי נימול, וחגורות הנפץ אינן מעניין המילה, והיו ממשיכים בחיפושים" (“One would say to the other, look he is circumcised, he really is a Jew this Arab, and the second would say, an Arab is also circumcised, and explosive belts are not interested in circumcision [*milah*], and they would continue their search”) (Behar 57). In this instance, the *milah* as “word” creates a bridge between the two seemingly unbridgeable cultures, in a similar way that the narrator marks the distinction between Arabs and Jews as attempting to

prove "שאני בן ישראל ולא בן ישמעאל" ("that I am an Israelite [lit. a son of Israel] and not an Ishmaelite [lit. a son of Ishmael]") (Behar 86), though the two biblically are cousins and descendants of the same Abraham. This also functions in a similar way to the Arabic-Hebrew dialogue in Castel-Bloom's "Ummi fi Shurl" that brings into focus the kinship between the Semitic languages. In "Ana Min al-Yahud," the reference to this shared ritual of circumcision (though not carried out in the same way) that is impressed on the body contrasts sharply with the linguistic *milah* that is suffocated in his throat and is unable to escape, "without letting out a word."

The story "Ana Min al-Yahud" began life as a poem, "הערבית שלי אילמת" ("My Arabic is Mute"). In the poem, the title is in Hebrew, representing the muteness of Arabic. The pathologizing of Arabic does not come until the story, where the Arabic accent is represented by the one-line Arabic plea written in Hebrew letters. Nevertheless, the story portrays the narrator as a more active character than the poet, whose Arabic does not protest and come through, even as an accent, the way it does in the story. The poem begins:

הערבית שלי אילמת
 חנוקה מן הגרון
 מקללת את עצמה
 בלי להוציא מלה
 ישנה באויר המחנוק של מקלטי נפשי
 מסתתרת
 מבני-המשפחה
 מאחורי תריסי העברית.

My Arabic is mute
 Suffocated from the throat
 Cursing herself
 Without letting out a word
 Sleeping in the suffocating air of the shelters of my soul
 Hiding
 From the family members
 Behind the shutters of Hebrew (Behar, "Ha-aravit")

In this manner, the voice of the poet is even more marginalized than the voice of the story's narrator, who fights for his language and channels the voice of his grandfather, even if his grandfather only "speaks" through the voice and language of the grandson. His task, and that of his generation, is to "renew" the grandfather's heritage. At the conclusion of the poem, not only is the poet's Arabic "mute," but, even more emphatically, his Hebrew is "deaf." This echoes a sentiment also expressed in the story in which, from the beginning of the plague when the narrator implores his Ashkenazi friends, who speak unaccented Hebrew, to identify him as a Jew, the Arabic accent renders his speech unhearable to his Ashkenazi friends: "החברים האשכנזים שלי פתאום לא היו עונים לי בכלל, לא היו שומעים לתחינת צלולי" ("my Ashkenazi friends suddenly didn't answer me at all, they didn't hear the pleas of my phone calls") (Behar 56). Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern, who "has no history and cannot speak" (Spivak, "Can" 83) cries out but is not heard since speaking involves "a transaction between speaker and listener" (Spivak, "Interview"). As Michael Kilburn summarizes, "Subaltern talk, in other words, does not achieve the dialogic level of utterance" (Kilburn par. 13). Behar's story clearly portrays the refusal of the speakers of "clean," unaccented Hebrew to recognize accented speech as language. This points to the hegemony of Ashkenormative language and the "othering" and stigmatization of other cultures as not only peripheral but inferior. Gradually, the narrator's voice is also replaced with the voice of his grandfather, but in accented Hebrew rather than in Arabic, and the only Arabic sentence in the whole story is the unanswered plea "Ana Min al-Yahud." This, in turn, leads to the narrator's silence, representing the silence of a generation.

The title of this story, however, forces Arabic to be liminally present, even if it, like Castel-Bloom's dialogue, is written in Hebrew letters. This raises the question of Behar's intended audience. Behar's story is powerful precisely because it applies to the Ashkenazi and

Mizrahi readers, implying that all of Israeli society, the “central” and “marginal,” is complicit—the Mizrahim in their participation in the silence, as the narrator’s mother “softened” her accent to accommodate her teachers and school peers, and the Ashkenormative Zionist institution that perpetrated this linguacultural violence.

Thus, the story’s narrator paradoxically writes silence, concretized as "שירי התנגדות" ("poems of resistance to Hebrew in Hebrew") but, as the narrator claims, written in an Arabic accent (Behar 65). The narrator’s task, as well as that of his generation, is to break down binaries, such as Arab and Jew, and form a more authentic Israeli society that discards ethnocentrism. This is where the off home is most present in Behar’s work. By the end of the story, the vocally silent narrator’s parents beg him, "דבר, דבר בכל מבטא" ("speak, speak in any accent/all accents") (Behar 63). The narrator silently hands over his Arabic-accented “book of poems of resistance to Hebrew in Hebrew”: "הנה עכשיו ניסיתי לכתוב את הסיפור במבטא הערבי, אך מה עלה מכך, תראו היכן אנחנו נפגשים. קחו, קראו את סיפורי, אמא אבא, קראו את כל סיפורי שכך הסתרתם מכם שנים רבות, הרי גם אתם אותה גלות, אותה שתיקה, אותה זרות בין לב לגוף ובין מחשבה לדיבור" ("Here I have tried to write the story in the Arabic accent, but what came from that, look where we are meeting. Take, read my story, Mother Father, read all my stories that I’ve thus hidden from you for many years, perhaps you too are the same exile, the same silence, the same alienation between heart and body and between thought and speech" (Behar 64). Here, Behar expresses the impossibility of his truly being able to write in Arabic since he never learned it as part of his heritage. The Arabic accent is a linguistic overtone that alludes to Arabic without actually bringing in the language, like a scent that lingers in the air long after the element that produced it has vanished. The accent can never equal the language and points more to its absence than its presence. This is what the narrator means when he accuses his parents of being “the same exile” that the creation

of Israel attempted to redeem; how can people call “home” a land that erases their “heart” and “thought”?

These supplications and accusations on the part of the narrator echo the words of Raja Rao in his preface to *Kanthapura* on the challenges of writing a story about India in English, the imposed language of the colonizer:⁵⁴

[t]he telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own; the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. . . . English . . . is the language of our intellectual make-up, like Sanskrit or Persian was before, but not of our emotional make-up. . . . We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. . . . Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. (Rao v)

Rao expresses the need to be able to recover one's heritage—here in the form of language—through the use of another one that is alien to them. When he says, “We cannot write like the English. We should not,” Rao denotes the impossibility of this task, and perhaps even the immorality of it, in the same way that I argue that “home” is an irrecoverable concept and its pursuit is often reductive and dismissive of lived experience. To this end I propose the off home. According to Rao, using this other language—English—prevents telling an Indian story the way it would be told in its corresponding language, so, as Rao writes, they are tasked with creating a “colorful” and “distinctive” “dialect” that will fill in some of that gap. In the same sense, in *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin write of the rift between English and english⁵⁵:

⁵⁴ I do not, however, wish to cast the modern State of Israel as a colonial empire in the same way that the British Empire colonized and governed India. There are arguments to that effect (some of which can be found in Part Three of *Colonialism and the Jews* edited by Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel), but that is not the argument or the focus here.

⁵⁵ Throughout the study, the authors distinguish between “English,” the standardized (and, therefore, colonially imposed) use of the language, and “english,” a non-standard use of the language that reflects local linguistic or cultural elements.

[s]uch alienation is shared by those whose possession of English is indisputably 'native' (in the sense of being possessed from birth) yet who begin to feel alienated within its practice once its vocabulary, categories, and codes are felt to be inadequate or inappropriate." (Ashcroft et al. 10)⁵⁶

The narrator of "Ana Min al-Yahud" is a native Hebrew speaker, but Hebrew is proving "inadequate or inappropriate" to express, as he puts it, his inheritance.

I read the off home in Behar's estrangement, or as Levy writes, "weirding," of Hebrew. Levy, referring to Yildiz's exploration of multilingualism in Kafka's seemingly monolingual works, writes that the "weirding of Hebrew" in Behar's work destabilizes Hebrew and generates an uncanny impression in the language. This is on the one hand portrayed in the narrator's claim to have written in Hebrew in an Arabic accent; on the other hand, the same gesture denotes its impossibility. It is important to note, once again, that Arabic is not the only language that was *pathologically erased*, and the narrator's own background includes multiple languages and cultures. If the Arabic accent is one way in which Behar "weirds" Hebrew to pay homage to that heritage and also underscore that Hebrew can also never truly be adequate to represent the spirit that Rao discusses, the undertones of Kafka are another grasp at a written linguistic off home. Yildiz explains that Kafka, too, hints at Yiddish and French, both present in their absence and "play[ing] a crucial identity- and affect-producing role, even if they never enter the [German] texts themselves" (qtd. in Levy 270), just as, as Levy points out, Arabic is present in its absence for Behar. Yildiz writes that Kafka "rearticulates the mother tongue as uncanny rather than familiar" (qtd. in Levy 270). I argue that producing this *unheimlich*, unhomely effect shows the off home in Behar's work because it blurs definitive boundaries. Levy writes:

⁵⁶ In this same way, in Nissán's *Like a Bride and Like a Mother*, Oshinica, who is a native Spanish speaker, finds monolingual Spanish to be inadequate to express the intersecting realms of her subjectivity.

[i]f Derrida dubs his own linguistic situation the ‘monolingualism of the other,’ Kafka’s might be the ‘multilingualism of the other,’ a multilingualism trapped in a monolingual case and yearning for escape. (Levy 240).⁵⁷

Since Behar’s text is performatively monolingual, I suggest that it be considered the multiaccentism of the self as other, and this accent is gestured to or performed in the othering of the Hebrew itself.

In this way, with an active, although nameless narrator, Behar reintroduces the Arabic speaker as a present political figure. The narrator speaks with his silence rather than uses it to hide. His “diseased,” accented Hebrew protests. If the narrator claims that his Arabic is mute and his Hebrew is deaf, these strategies flip the narrative of the erased, invisible, unheard, Mizrahi Israeli Jew. This is not to say that Behar has solved the political wrong or entirely recast Israeli politics, but intervening Arabic in Hebrew and showing the reader on either side of the cultural divide their complicity, Behar proposes a recognition of non-Ashkenazi languages and cultures in Israel. Because his generation did not learn the languages, however, there is no way to truly recover them. “Ana min al-yahud” is ironically the only Arabic that the narrator knows. Rather, the task of this generation, as the grandfather says, is not to recover, but to “renew,” or, as in Rao’s words, to establish a dialect that “weirds” Hebrew and brings back at least some of the heritages that were lost.

⁵⁷ Tsivia Frank-Wygoda writes that the most obvious intertext for Behar among Kafka’s works is *The Metamorphosis*, even though Behar’s narrator’s transformation is far less physically obvious than that of Kafka’s Gregor Samsa. She explains there are other intertexts of Kafka’s too, such as *The Trial* and “Josephine the Singer.” Intertexting with Kafka serves to destabilize various cultural binaries that have been artificially institutionalized. Frank-Wygoda argues, “En adoptant et en ‘déterritorialisant’ Kafka, Behar déconstruit les oppositions binaires qui structurent la culture israélienne, diaspora vs Sion, ashkénaze vs sépharade” (“In adopting and ‘deterritorializing’ Kafka, Behar deconstructs the binary oppositions that structure Israeli society, diaspora vs Zion, Ashkenazi vs Sephardi” (Frank-Wygoda 214). For more about the similarities and differences between Behar and Kafka and about Behar’s uses of Kafka, see her article “Almog Behar, un Franz Kafka ‘Mizrahi’?”

Conclusion

The comparative discussion shows seemingly opposing strategies on the part of Nissán and Gelman's present-ing of Ladino within and against Spanish as compared to Castel-Bloom and Behar's absenting of Arabic within and against the Hebrew text. In fact, although their methods seem to oppose one another, these authors write against the hegemonic language by using the minoritized ones to destabilize the concept of the Center. These authors slip the contextually "minor" languages within the "major" ones to disrupt the apparent monolingualism of the texts written predominantly in their major languages. At the same time, such a strategy serves to highlight the invisibilization of the "minor" languages and the authors' own inability, reinforced socially, to produce work solely in the "minor" language, despite their own determination to profess allegiance to it. This off home strategy shifts the center-margin dynamic to be less defined or predictable, more "off." The off home is visible in these authors' questioning of the viability of home as a stable concept, and they do this through the disruption of the hegemonic view of language within their respective cultures.

Nissán's *Like a Bride* and *Like a Mother* are the least overtly political of the selected works. Oshinica employs an interpersonal display of languages and consideration of what and whom they signify to represent and herself and craft her image in Mexican society. Studies of Nissán's work have focused on Oshinica's marginalization in society and on her failure to integrate into either the Sephardic Jewish community or Mexican non-Jewish society. For example, Nathaniel Gardner portrays Oshinica's behavior as increasingly scandalous and isolating to the point that everything she tried to accomplish was a failure—indeed, by the end of *Like a Mother*, Oshinica is divorced, estranged from her children, and no longer close with many

of her married Jewish friends, while at the same time having been unable to replace them with non-Jewish Mexican counterparts. Gardner writes:

[e]ven while the character attempted to reach the “center”, her rejection of precisely those factors she felt were subalternizing her - while they did aid her in becoming a published author – only appear to have pushed her further towards the margins of society. (Gardner 191)

Gardner is mistaken to assume that Oshinica’s goal is to fit in, to “reach the ‘center’ and be swallowed up by it. In fact, her strength is in the act of disassociating herself from being controlled by the Center, or even thinking in terms of there being a Center at all. For Oshinica, this means engaging in a series of activities that allow her to explore herself and her role in various communities on her terms. Evidence of this is her conscious choice between Spanish and Ladino, strategically privileging one, the other, or both, and often using changing Spanish by speaking or writing it with Ladino syntax.

When Gardner writes that “Oshinica. . . rarely uses Judeo-Spanish, and when she does it is most often in the form of isolated words or phrases and not in conversation” (Gardner 173), he misses the point of how her use of Ladino matures as a form of self-representation. He also misses the moments where the Ladino slips into the Spanish, almost as if it were hiding. It is true that at the beginning of *Like a Bride* Oshinica is embarrassed to be Jewish, but this is not true by the end of *Like a Mother*. Furthermore, Gardner claims that Oshinica does not get along with her mother, but in fact we see Oshinica’s love for her mother and love for Ladino play out toward the end of *Like a Mother* in an increasingly nuanced way. In other words, the key to Oshinica’s formation as an independent Mexican Jewish woman is her relationship to language, which matures gradually, and which she uses neither to integrate herself nor to marginalize her status but to decide her role and form interpersonal relationships on independent terms.

Publishing her novel *Like a Bride*, which uses both Spanish and Ladino, endears her to both

communities and is not a way of “say[ing] goodbye to her community,” as Gardner suggests (Gardner 187) but, as I argue, living in the off home that is defined neither wholly by one identity nor the other.

Gelman’s political usage of Ladino is, however, in part a way of disconnecting from a particular community—dictatorial Argentina, which he accomplishes by using a version of Spanish that comes from a time and place that circumvent contemporary Argentine politics. His use of Ladino, in contrast to Oshinica’s, bears no interpersonal element, unless, of course, Ladino can be considered his heritage in that modern Spanish is his native tongue. In fact, if Gelman’s poetry can be seen to include a conversational aspect, as discussed previously, the interlocutor can be understood as poetry itself, or, alternatively, as Ladino. Gelman’s poesis writes and translates himself against the idea of Center, as Oshinica does, as he delves into what he perceives to be the most exilic aspects of the Spanish language. He uses both languages to “other” each other such that he blurs the distinction between original and translation, self and other, and home and exile.

In this way, Gelman’s use of Ladino expresses a similar desire as Nissán’s—to bypass the limits of either language on their own. In *Dibaxu*, Ladino is presented as the ancestral language to modern Spanish, and the katabasis represented in the downward movement to uncover the layers *dibaxu* through time and space reveal Gelman’s gesture toward linguistic and political distance. However, were this distance the only goal, Gelman likely would not have then included a modern-Spanish translation of each of his poems. If the goal were to completely circumvent modern Argentine Spanish, it would not figure at all in the collection. On the contrary, the side-by-side presence of both Spanishes, and the contrast between the historical exiles (Talmudic and Sephardic) and his present one, is precisely where the imposition of a

Center dissolves and where the personal journey and the public one merge, and the downward move is an optimistic process that involves the whole body and spirit, represented by language and poetry themselves.

The downward movement and role of the body in Orly Castel-Bloom's story "Umami fi Shurl" are read much more allegorically in Castel-Bloom's "Umami fi Shurl." Like Nissán's *Like a Bride* and *Like a Mother*, Castel-Bloom's story involves a gendered aspect as the language is presented to be maternal and feminine. In "Umami fi Shurl," the narrator disinherits a ghost-like Arabic-speaking woman who is possibly her mother. This woman physically attacks the narrator through her leg, her foundation, in an upward move dissimilar to and certainly more physically violent than Gelman's downward imagery. A language plague, by contrast, attacks Behar's narrator through his throat, the breath, moving presumable downward to the pen, an extension of himself, which contrasts sharply both with the location of the "sting" or "bite" in "Umami fi Shurl" and with Gelman's incorporation of the mouth and breath as symbols of linguistic vitality and the strength of his own exilic but active voice that cannot be silenced.

Furthermore, the language plague that overcomes Behar's narrator comes from Behar's grandfather, not from a maternal figure, as is the case in Castel-Bloom and Nissán. This maneuver on Behar's part could be part of a larger trend of breaking free from the mother-son paradigm of Ashkenormative Zionist Israeli literature, which Castel-Bloom's story also rejects. While Nissán draws a clear inscription of heritage in language, and Gelman shows language's heritage as language itself, privileging the word, and the act of speaking it out loud, as a projection of power and self-determination, Behar and Castel-Bloom in fact represent presence through absence, as Levy describes, and privilege, by necessity if not by choice, the power of the written word. Their works include metaphors of strangulation and suffocation, and of plagues

and bites, that attack language at its very core, and implicate the previous generations in this very scheme of arresting the voice. Behar's and Castel-Bloom's works gesture to both an absent father and an absent mother, breaking with the literary tropes of both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi fiction to indicate the demand for linguistic visibility and recognition outside either pre-scribed sphere. This corresponds in some ways with Nissán's and Gelman's suggestion of Ladino as a point of origin for modern Spanish, but for Nissán and Gelman, recognition as such is less important than their current use of it. Behar and Castel-Bloom also make claims to origin, but theirs gesture toward original presence and present performed absence of the Arabic language (and other non-Hebraic languages) in what is now the State of Israel.

Nissán and Gelman use Spanish and Ladino often as indistinguishable from each other. By contrast, Castel-Bloom and Behar highlight the irony of the sharp boundary drawn between Arabic and Hebrew despite the fact that they both descend from the Semitic language family. Writing Arabic in Hebrew brings out the similarities as well as makes visible the conscious erasure this kinship within Israeli society. Behar takes this one step further by including the entire story in Arabic at the conclusion of the Hebrew version, underscoring the inability of most Israelis to even read this kindred language that is the heritage of such a large percentage of its population. Nissán and Gelman weave the languages inside each other to emphasize a vertical, rather than horizontal relationship, but to a similar end of disrupting the hegemonic relationship of one to the other.

As Chapter 1 discussed the theory of the off home as conceived psychologically, and Chapter 2 linguistically and interpersonally, Chapter 3 delves into the off home as represented physically. The works analyzed in Chapter 3 include Eduardo Halfon's *El boxeador polaco* and *La pirueta* (*The Polish Boxer* and *The Pirouette*, US/Guatemala 2008, 2010), Teresa

Porzecanski's *Perfumes de Cartago* (*Perfumes of Carthage*, Uruguay 1994), and Gabriela Avigur-Rotem's *חמסין וציפורים משוגעות* (*Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, Israel 2001). The texts in this chapter refuse bounded structure, whether in the form of physical home, language, familial relationships, or other limits set through time and space, as another way to disrupt binary hegemonic relationship of home as the ultimate destination.

Chapter 3: Demythologizing Home in Eduardo Halfon, Gabriela Avigur-Rotem, and Teresa Porzecanski

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I have presented my reading of what I have labeled the “off home” in terms of psychological dis-orders and linguistic strategies that decenter the homeland-diaspora dynamic and dominant narratives of identity. I conclude with this chapter in part because it is a chapter about conclusion, or rather, the deferral thereof: this chapter portrays the off home through unresolved stories that challenge the hegemonic conceptualization of identity as reliant and built upon a center or a home(land) that, once lost, can and *must* be recovered. The off home resists resolution and reterritorialization as objectives and as a possibilities. At the same time as challenging the traditionally accepted prospect of recovering a lost homeland, the off home calls into question that the only alternative to the homeland is diaspora. The works studied in this chapter—Eduardo Halfon’s *El boxeador polaco* and *La pirueta* (*The Polish Boxer*, *The Pirouette*, Guatemala/US 2008, 2010), Gabriela Avigur-Rotem’s *חמסין וציפורים משוגעות* (*Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, Israel 2001), and Teresa Porzecanski’s *Perfumes de Cartago* (*Perfumes of Carthage*, Uruguay 1994)—also argue against that perspective and seek to demythologize the concepts of home(land) and diaspora as reductively (un)desirable and as the only alternatives to each other, proposing a foundation of identity construction that circumvents the limitations of these extremes fundamentally attached to a nostalgic vision of a home that may never have existed as imagined.

I begin this chapter by analyzing two works by Guatemalan author Eduardo Halfon, *El boxeador polaco* (*The Polish Boxer*) and *La pirueta* (*The Pirouette*). Halfon’s narrator, also

Eduardo Halfon, juxtaposes the marginalization and diasporization of Jewish identity in Guatemala with the minoritized, stigmatized, and in many ways deterritorialized Roma⁵⁸ in Serbia. I read the off home in the deferral of a singular reality, achieved, in Halfon's case, in writing. Next, I will discuss Argentine-Israeli novelist Gabriela Avigur-Rotem's *חמסין וציפורים* (*Heatwave and Crazy Birds*) and her pursual and subsequent loss of her mother's language and her surrogate father's house. Memory and reality are shown to be as partial as the concept of "home," challenging the idea that either can be complete or singular. Finally, I will discuss Uruguayan anthropologist Teresa Porzecanski's *Perfumes de Cartago* (*Perfumes of Carthage*), which deconstructs the dependance on a physical and utopian homeland, as symbolized by, at the end of the novel, the granddaughter's disinheritance of the key to the family house, compared to and contrasted with Avigur-Rotem's protagonist's loss of a house despite her determination to hold onto it. The characters in these texts seek to define themselves in ways that conceive beyond the framework of "home" and "center," especially as represented thematically by authoritarian and concrete reality, concepts which these texts prove to be falsely considered singular and objectifiable.

The goal of this chapter is to offer a rereading of these texts that challenges the point of view of much previous scholarship that labels these authors and their literary production as "diasporic" while failing to account for other identities at play that do not necessarily stand in relationship to a homeland and a desire to return to it.⁵⁹ These authors do not entirely reject the paradigms of diaspora or of homeland, but they do question the dependance on a diaspora-

⁵⁸ In my analysis, I will use the terms "Roma" and "Romani," as the term "Gypsy" in English has pejorative connotations and usage. In Spanish, however, the language does not convey this offensive tone. In translating citations from Halfon's text, I will use "Gypsy" to maintain Halfon's language. The Spanish words "Roma" and "Romani" do exist but belong to a more formal register.

⁵⁹ Examples of such scholarship include articles by Edna Aizenberg (1999), Amalia Ran (2009), Julie Marchio (2019), and Karen Alkalay Gut (2002). See Works Cited for full bibliographic information.

homeland dynamic as a productive basis for constructing their identities and places in society and the world. Dedication to a myth of return to a homeland, in a geospatial sense, a figurative, or an eschatological one, proposes a definitive solution to a definitive homelessness, at the same time as it glorifies an imaginary home. Alternatively, the off home veers away from this delineated trajectory and looks to develop relationships beyond that imposed verticality.

Contained Intensity: Resolution and Reality in Eduardo Halfon's *The Polish Boxer* and *The Pirouette*

Eduardo Halfon's 2008 *El boxeador polaco* (*The Polish Boxer*) and its 2010 sequel *La pirueta* (*The Pirouette*), recently combined into one work in 2019 that included *The Polish Boxer* and three stories from *The Pirouette*,⁶⁰ challenge the concept of home as tied to a singular and objective reality. The characters in Halfon's texts interrogate their identities and heritages within the frameworks of idealized and essentialized centers of representation. The protagonist,⁶¹ carries out a series of journeys in which he identifies with and, literally, follows in the footsteps of, other characters who likewise negotiate the interplay between their individual, cultural, and national identities, real or romanticized. Ultimately, Eduardo's searches remain unresolved, and Eduardo discovers that the exaggeratedly whole and integrated identities he had sought do not exist as such. Instead, Eduardo is confronted with what I call the off home, which estranges both "self" and "other" in order to break down the binary that separates them so categorically. The off home recognizes the space in between where the perceived "self" and "other" overlap,

⁶⁰ Citations are from this combined edition. For the sake of clarity, henceforward I will refer to what was originally the separate work *The Pirouette* as "The Pirouette" to indicate its inclusion as a story, rather than a standalone work, in the combined version of *The Polish Boxer*, from where I have taken the citations.

⁶¹ Because both the author and the protagonist are named Eduardo Halfon, for the sake of clarity as well as expedience, I will refer to the author as "Halfon" and the character as "Eduardo."

evolve, and translate each other. In this conception, reality, too, does not exist as objective and authoritarian, leading Eduardo to declare that despite the impossibility of reaching a conclusion or determining a definitive answer to which stories are “true,” “[m]ejor así” (“[i]t is better this way”) (Halfon 143). For Eduardo, and Halfon, words represent this breakdown of limitations. Words save in their boundless possibilities to both construct and deconstruct reality and, by extension, the ideal of home.

Eduardo Halfon (1971-) was born in Guatemala City to a family of both Ashkenazi and Sephardic heritages, with grandparents from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Poland and great grandparents from Ukraine, Egypt, Palestine, and Spain (Gordo par. 2). At the age of ten, Halfon, along with his family, immigrated to the United States, where he learned English, and though as a result of that move he considers English to be his stronger language, he constructs his literary world exclusively in Spanish. After completing his engineering degree in the United States, Halfon returned to Guatemala for eight years as a literature instructor at the Francisco Marroquín University, as does his character (Kwei par. 5). He then returned to the United States and currently splits his time between Nebraska and Guatemala. One of Halfon’s principal subjects is himself, as “Eduardo Halfon” recurs in almost all of his works, along with a reworking of the story of his Polish Jewish grandfather who was saved in Auschwitz by a (non-Jewish) Polish boxer. Halfon brings his heritages and elements of his life story into the experiences of Eduardo’s biography as well, despite claiming that Eduardo “[l]leva mi nombre y mi biografía pero no soy yo” (“carries my name and my biography but is not me”) (Huergo par. 13). Halfon’s interplay between truth and fiction, manipulating “reality” both within the novel and at a metafictional level as well, further serve to destabilize the connection between a supposed reality and the construction of identity.

I will begin by discussing how Halfon's work conceptualizes the off home by analyzing Eduardo's friendship with two Israeli women and a half-Serbian, half-Romani musician, all of whom he meets in the liminally-described "bar escocés que no era un bar escosés" ("Scottish bar that was not a Scottish bar") (Halfon 32) in Antigua Guatemala and who serve as foils for aspects of Eduardo's identity that he avoids confronting directly. One of the Israelis,⁶² the bartender Yael Tenenbaum, shares a distant cultural connection with Eduardo—Tenenbaum is Eduardo's mother's maiden name.

The connected surnames serve to contrast Eduardo's and Yael's seemingly dissimilar perspectives on their respective Jewish identity and heritage. The Israelis are surprised to find a fellow Jew in their company in Guatemala, even though Eduardo, at first quick to perform his Jewish upbringing, emphatically disavows his Jewish identity:

[a]diviné por su acento que era israelí. Bevakashá, le dije, que significa de nada en hebreo. . . . Me dijo algo también en hebreo que no entendí y le aclaré que sólo recordaba tres o cuatro palabras y uno que otro rezo suelto y quizás contar hasta diez. Quince, si me esforzaba. Vivo en la capital, le dije en español para demostrarle que no era estadounidense y me confesó perpleja que jamás se imaginó que hubiesen judíos guatemaltecos. Ya no soy judío, le sonreí, me jubilé. Cómo que ya no, eso no es posible, gritó como suelen gritar los israelíes.

I guessed from her accent that she was Israeli. Bevakasha, I said to her, which means you're welcome in Hebrew. . . . She also said something to me in Hebrew that I didn't understand, and I clarified for her that I only remembered three or four words and the odd prayer and maybe to count to ten. Fifteen if I exerted myself. I live in the capital, I said to her in Spanish to demonstrate to her that I wasn't from the United States, and she confessed that she never imagined that there were Jews in Guatemala. I'm not Jewish anymore, I smiled to her, I retired. What do you mean not anymore, that's not possible, she yelled as Israelis tend to yell. (Halfon 31)

In this passage, Eduardo demonstrates his discomfort with identity and his questioning of how to define himself, for example, his tongue-in-cheek claim that he has "retired" from being Jewish.

⁶² Though the other Israeli woman, Tamara, does not figure much in this text, she is a main character in Halfon's 2014 *Monasterio* (*Monastery*).

Eduardo displays more confidence in defining what he is not than with what he is. Like the Scottish bar that is not a Scottish bar, he is a Guatemalan who is not necessarily seen by others as a Guatemalan and who tempers this Guatemalan-ness by performing some of his Jewish heritage as well. The fact that they might assume him to be from the United States is suggestive of Eduardo's physical appearance, that perhaps his lack of indigenous roots precludes him from looking stereotypically Guatemalan. It is not enough for Eduardo to simply assert his Guatemalan identity, though: despite no need for Eduardo to confess to the Israelis his Jewish heritage, he deliberately reveals this connection, even as he distances himself from it and bitterly essentializes to himself the Israelis in their particular style of "yelling." While he declares that if he makes an effort, he can recall more of their shared heritage, represented by the Hebrew he likely learned as a child,⁶³ he seems hesitant to want to do so, further representing the way in which Eduardo estranges his own heritage and considers it unfamiliar.

This unfamiliarity can be analyzed through and against Sigmund Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*, meaning *unhomely*, also known as "uncanny." This concept refers to "that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud 124), leading one to become frightened at the recognition of "something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (Freud 148). Within Freud's framework, Eduardo having repressed his heritage (his "home") feels compelled at once to endear himself to his fellow Jews at the same time as he becomes ill-at-ease and opposes this growing intimacy. I argue, however, that the "home" itself is not necessarily that monolithic, idealized, "familiar" place that Freud proposed it to be and on which he based his term. I thus redefine the concept of the *unheimlich*, then, to show an estrangement from identity, not because

⁶³ Indeed, in 2007, the year before he published *The Polish Boxer*, Halfon published a short called "Clases de hebreo" ("Hebrew Classes"), which in 2008 formed part of a story collection of the same name.

of repressed familiarity, because of the interplay between the supposed familiar and the performed or essentialized.

This simultaneous embracing and renouncing of identity likewise draws Eduardo to Milan, another *unheimlich* (as I have redefined it) presence for Eduardo: even though they have never met and do not share the same heritage or culture, Eduardo perceives in Milan an iteration of himself. From their first meeting, Eduardo notes Milan's hybrid identity and his personality as a master improviser in both life and music. He is Serbian but speaks "en un español impecable aunque con un timbre argentino" ("in an impeccable Spanish, though with an Argentine twang") because he adopted his Argentine girlfriend's accent (Halfon 71). As was the case when he met the Israelis, Eduardo is able to produce a few words of Serbian from having watched Serbian films (Halfon 49). Milan and Eduardo discuss the blurring of limits and boundaries in art and literature. Eduardo, for example, jokes that in a previous incarnation, he is sure he was a Black jazz artist (Halfon 50), another instance of essentialization on Eduardo's part.

In terms of music, Milan's style is characterized principally by improvisation, and for this reason he says, "vivo enamorado de [Thelonious] Monk" ("I live enamored of [Thelonious] Monk") (Halfon 51), a musician who was also known for his improvisational style. In particular, Milan feels drawn to Monk's *Epistrophe* because, despite all the potential meanings that have been proposed for its interpretation, including botanical and rhetorical subtexts, Milan believes that the piece means nothing, in accordance with his philosophy that, as he explains to Eduardo that "[e]xisten cosas que no tienen ningún significado y que igualmente son bellas" ("[t]here are things that exist that have no meaning and that just the same are beautiful" (Halfon 52). Milan's suggestion that sometimes there is no deeper meaning serves to dull the objective nature of

reality, but in the opposite direction that Eduardo takes; Milan sees no meaning, whereas Eduardo comes to see multiple often-contradictory meanings all possibly true simultaneously, as he begins to redefine “home.” More importantly, by the end of the text, Eduardo comes to believe that the “true” version of events is secondary to the interpretation of them. In the case of Monk, Eduardo believes the beauty of the piece to be in its potential rather than in its cynicism. This translates to how Eduardo will untether himself from a precise and objective identity that defines itself by one home; the off home allows for the suspension of resolution such that incompatibilities revolve within the same orbit without the need for, or perhaps possibility of, resolution.

In addition to their bonding over music, Eduardo sees Milan’s heritage as in some ways reminiscent of his own hybrid identity from which he, like Milan, feels excluded. Milan is half-Romani, half-Serbian, and, according to him, accepted in neither community. Because Milan is not fully Romani, his Romani father bans him from the world of Romani music, even though this connection is what Milan most desires—to be part of his father’s Romani music world: “[y]o soy hijo de un acordeonista gitano, dijo . . . Sólo mi padre es gitano (“I am the son of a Gypsy accordionist, he said. . . . Only [*sólo*] my father is Gypsy”) (Halfon 62). In saying that “[o]nly my father is Gypsy,” Milan excludes himself, despite the intrinsic connection he feels to the nomadic nature of Romani culture, which essentializes that heritage in the same way that Halfon points to the unique Israeli method of yelling or the jazz musician of Eduardo’s fantasy as Black.

Milan explains, referring to the Roma whose culture he has inherited but at the same time from whose culture he is barred: “igual que ellos, yo también soy un nómada, aunque mi padre no quiera aceptarlo” (“just like them, I’m also a nomad, even if my father does not want to accept it”) (Halfon 63). Milan continues sadly, “[S]ólo sueño con poder estar entre una caravana

de gitanos, tocando y bailando y sufriendo un poco de música gitana” (“I only [*sólo*] dream of being able to be among a caravan of Gypsies, playing music and dancing and suffering a bit from Gypsy music”) (Halfon 63). Eduardo, feeling a sharp contrast to Milan’s admission, compares:

y yo, . . . sólo podía pensar en cómo algunos huyen de sus antepasados mientras que otros los añoran de una forma casi visceral; en cómo unos salen corriendo del mundo del padre mientras que otros lo claman y piden a gritos; en cómo yo no podría situarme lo suficientemente lejos del judaísmo, mientras que Milan jamás estaría lo suficientemente cerca de los gitanos.

and I, all [*sólo*] I . . . could think of was how some people flee from their ancestors while others yearn for them in an almost visceral way; in how some people go running from the world of their father while others cry out for and beg for it; in how I could not situate myself far enough away from Judaism, while Milan would never be close enough to the Gypsies. (Halfon 63-64)

Up until now, Eduardo has seen in Milan only a reflection of himself—a penchant for blurring boundaries, for creativity, and for not fitting into a single identity. However, Eduardo, who claims that he yearns to escape the world of his ancestors, sees this world reflected everywhere in an *unheimlich* way that frightens him because he cannot identify with it. Although he rejects Milan’s way of clinging so pleadingly to his heritage—one actively denied to him—Eduardo’s words and his self-reflexive imitation of Milan’s speech pattern reveal his underlying desire to belong to a heritage and understand his identity, even with Milan’s romantic naiveté. Eduardo mimics Milan’s phrase *y yo sólo* (“and I only”), phonetically the same as *y yo solo* (“and I alone”), which Milan uses three times and points to his feeling of isolation. Although Eduardo claims that he cannot get far enough away from Judaism, he seems to be chasing this “almost visceral way” in which Milan “cries out and begs” to be part of his roots, which appear spectrally, in the Derridean sense, wherever he goes. He reveals this tension in language as he, like the words, seeks to find his place.

After this scene, this intimacy Eduardo feels towards Milan at the same time leaves him feeling isolated from him as well as from his own culture, as evidenced by the repetition again of the homonym *sólo*, “only” (meaning “just” or “simply”), phonetically identical to *solo*, “alone”: between them is a “prolongado silencio, agotados de tantas palabras o acaso sólo dejando que tantas palabras encontraran finalmente su sitio” (“prolonged silence, [with us] exhausted from so many words or perhaps just [*sólo*] allowing for so many words to finally find their place”) (Halfon 64). The two men both feel isolated from their heritages, including Eduardo, though he claims otherwise.

When Milan leaves Guatemala, he alleges that he has no permanent address, in the spirit of Romani nomadism. He keeps in touch with Eduardo through a series of postcards, each sent from a different location with no return address. Eduardo recalls Milan’s explanation for the postcards:

[d]ijo: Vivo en el lungo drom, que en gitano significa el largo camino, sin rumbo fijo y sin vuelta atrás. Dijo: Viajo en una caravana de uno. Dijo: Sobre el camino, para mis amigos, voy dejando patrin, que en gitano significa hojas pero que también significa señales en el camino Dijo: Las postales son mi patrin.

[h]e said: I live in lungo drom, which in Gypsy means the long road, with no fixed course and with no turning back. He said: I travel in a caravan of one. He said: On the road, for my friends, I go scattering patrin, which in Gypsy means leaves but which also means road signs He said: Postcards are my patrin. (Halfon 82)

Milan depicts a glorified vision of the wandering Romani caravans that travel aimlessly while making music together. He also inscribes himself into this vision of a world in which he cannot participate—Eduardo’s repetition of “[h]e said” for each element of Milan’s description hints at the fact that what Milan *says* and what *is* might not coincide. Milan’s postcard “patrin” perform this partially imagined identity that is forever outside of Milan’s reach.

The reified nomadism that Milan thus presents and exaggerates in many ways recalls the trope of the wandering Jew, another stereotypical portrayal of a group of deterritorialized outsiders. Carol Silverman writes, “Jews are. . . positioned as Europe’s historical ‘Other’ and Roma as Europe’s current ‘Other’ (Silverman 163). This plays out as the trope of Jews as quintessential wandering victims (as Halfon works through his Polish grandfather’s survival in Auschwitz) and Roma as quintessential wandering musicians (the culture in which Milan yearns to participate). Silverman writes:

Roma⁶⁴ are over-determined in the realm of music. The Gypsy musician is a very powerful historical stereotype; Gypsies are assumed to be genetically talented, to embody music and, with it, to draw out the souls of their patrons. But while Roma are revered for their music, they are reviled as people (Silverman 2012). As Europe’s largest minority (at 12 million) and one of its quintessential “Others”, Roma are socially, economically and politically marginalised in virtually all arenas of society but their music has found a secure place in the European market. (Silverman 162)

Although the European Union, where an estimated 6 million of the 10-12 million of the world’s Romani population live, are developing strategies to tackle the discrimination the Romani face, including dire poverty, unequal access to government services, housing, education, and most recently, medical care during the Covid-19 global pandemic, the centuries-old problem still poses a significant hurdle (European Commission). Silverman argues that the Roma are among the most socially marginalized in Europe, even as their music is embraced. In other words, non-Romani groups tend to be ignorant of Romani culture, and even the one aspect that society accepts and even embraces of them, their music, is also based on a stereotype. In Eduardo’s portrayal of Milan’s romanticization of Romani culture, Milan idealizes a “home” that, like the market obsession with ethnicized Romani music and the commercialized vision of the Romani

⁶⁴ Silverman professes to use “Gypsy as a marketing category and Roma to refer to the ethnic group” (Silverman 160 n.1).

musician, Milan might be fantasizing about a “home” that does not exist. In fact, in order to keep this “home” alive—one that likely does not exist as he imagines it—Milan must forever remain on the precipice of it. In pursuing Milan, Eduardo thus calls into question the perfection of the narrative of home, and in so doing, interrogates why he himself so seemingly adamantly rejects his own “home,” his Jewish identity, identifying outwardly as Guatemalan but no longer Jewish.

Halfon explained in an interview that in his own life, he views Judaism as a diasporic positioning that informs the perspective of his literature:

“[e]l judaísmo me interesa como narrativa, como búsqueda de una identidad, no como religión. . . . Siempre he escrito desde fuera. Siempre he sido el extranjero. El judío pertenece primero a la diáspora, y después al país en el que nace.”

“Judaism interests me as a narrative, as a search for an identity . . . I have always written from...the outside. I have always been the stranger. That’s where Judaism comes in. The Jew belongs first to the diaspora, and then to the country in which he is born.” (Gordo par. 17)

This tension that Halfon highlights—the position of the Jew as outsider and at the same time, Eduardo’s (and Halfon’s) elite status, is partially what intrigues Eduardo about Milan as he considers Milan’s desire to live as an outsider. At the same time, Eduardo in time registers that much of Milan’s identity is performative and that Milan likely is less marginalized than he claims to be. My reading of the off home in Halfon’s work shows that Halfon, rather than merely depicting a diasporic Jewish perspective as he says, in fact repositions the Jewish status that is considered always diasporic and offers a more nuanced qualification of identity construction that speaks out neither totally from within nor wholly from without. The off home identity bypasses this false binary.

Eduardo’s juxtaposition of Roma and Jewish subjectivities and their historically ostracized cultures addresses sociopolitical power dynamics. Milan actively seeks out a

marginal status, while Eduardo hides from that vulnerability. As a literature instructor, Eduardo teaches literature but from the American and Eurocentric canons—translated into Spanish—such as the works of James Joyce, Edgar Allen Poe, Guy de Maupassant, and Anton Chekhov. While at the university, Eduardo develops a similar, if somewhat condescending, affinity for one of his literature students, and indigenous student named Juan Kalel, that he does for Milan. When Juan stops attending classes suddenly and leaves no explanation or forwarding address, Juan travels from the capital city to the countryside city of Tecpán to find Juan and ask him why he withdrew.

He has no address for Juan and locates with the help of locals along the way. Eduardo is shocked by the poverty and need-driven lifestyle of the village. He learns that when Juan's father died of cancer, Juan could no longer attend classes because of familial responsibilities. Eduardo reflects, "la imagen de su padre muriendo en una parcela de hortalizas, sobre su propia tierra que tampoco era suya, se quedó conmigo" ("the image of his father dying in a vegetable patch, on his own land that also was not his, stayed with me") (Halfon 28). The contrast of Eduardo driving in from the capital in his own car unable to fathom education and medical care as often-inaccessible luxuries underscores the position of power in which Eduardo is situated. Juan, whose culture is suffering in the aftermath of European and American colonialism, is truly deterritorialized and deprived of political power, which contrasts both with Milan, who fantasizes about participating in a marginalized culture and performs his claim to it, and Eduardo, who, from his own position of power, runs from such a positioning while at the same time is afraid to wholly embrace the "center" as well. These attachments and detachments that Eduardo forms are prisms through which he sees his own identity projected or contradicted, often simultaneously.

After not receiving Milan's postcards for some time, Eduardo travels to Serbia in search of him, and, as in the case of Juan, with no indication of where to find him or even if Milan is in Serbia at all. He feels compelled beyond reason to make the journey, and when his girlfriend pressures him as to why, he offers no clarification: "[n]o tenía una respuesta. Aún no la tengo. Aún no sé por qué quería encontrar a Milan Rakić" ("I didn't have an answer. I still don't have one. I still don't know why I wanted to find Milan Rakić") (Halfon 77). When Eduardo arrives in Serbia, with no address or neighborhood for Milan, he tours Romani neighborhoods hoping to spot him or meet someone who knows Milan or Milan's father. As part of his quest, in attempting to solve this mystery of Milan, of Milan's physical place in the world, and of his own own gravitation toward him, Eduardo also tries to solve the puzzles Milan leaves for him in the one-way missives he had, until recently, been receiving. For example, Eduardo repeats to the Roma he meets, with the help of translators who speak English, a story that Milan wrote in one of his postcards, hoping that someone will be able to explain it to him. He communicates with them through a double translation of Spanish-English-Romani. Just as Spivak writes that "translation is necessary but impossible" (Spivak, "Translation" 13), the translated communications remain incomplete. Every translation remains unresolved, and, as many theorists, such as George Steiner and José Ortega y Gasset, argue, every communication, even a monolingual one, is always-already a translation. The impossibility of rendering exact translation and the filter of interpretation that always mediates it mirror the function of Milan's communiqués, at once full of meaning and at the same time, rejecting apprehension, in the fullest sense of the word.

This recalls Milan's playful anti-interpretation of Monk's *Epistrophe* that in reality "[n]o quiere decir nada" ("it does not mean anything") and that beautiful things can exist without

meaning (Halfon 51). The legend that captures Eduardo's attention, and which runs throughout "The Pirouette," thus also serves as a meta-commentary on writing and reality and, more importantly, injects Halfon's work with an anticlimax that the reader does not expect, emulating the way in which reality most often does not submit to neat conclusions and cannot always be resolved or explained.

The legend from the postcard reads as follows:

[u]na vez, querido Eduardito, había un niño mitad serbio y mitad gitano que quería ser un músico gitano y viajar en una caravana de músicos gitanos. . . . Caminando una mañana entre los bosques húmedos de Belgrado, de pronto se le apareció un hombre muy grande y de ojos purpúreos y vestido de rojo y con dos cuernitos en la cabeza y una pezuña en vez de un pie, y le dijo al niño, mientras lo acariciaba con una larga y afilada uña, que él podía convertirlo . . . en un gran músico gitano, pero con una condición. . . . El niño, entonces, feliz y triste, se despidió para siempre de su padre y . . . madre y, llorando en los bosques de Belgrado que ahora serían su hogar, hizo una sola pirueta.

[o]nce, my dear Eduardo, there was a boy who was half Serbian and half Gypsy and who wanted to be a Gypsy musician and travel in a caravan of Gypsy musicians. . . . Walking one morning between the humid forests of Belgrade, a big man with purple eyes dressed in red and with two horns on his head and a hoof instead of a foot appeared to him, and he said to the boy, while he caressed him with a large and sharp nail, that he could make him . . . into a great Gypsy musician, but with one condition. . . . The boy, then, happy and sad, bade farewell for forever to his father and . . . mother and, crying in the forests of Belgrade that would now be his home, he did a single pirouette. (Halfon 99-100)

This story seems quintessentially literary, rife with symbolism and autobiographical detail (forests of Belgrade, the devil, home, the eponymous pirouette), and throughout the work, the story keeps repeating and incorporates itself into Eduardo's mission as a question that needs to be answered. No one seems to have heard this story before, and a pirouette does not seem to have any special significance in Romani culture, according to Eduardo's interviews. Several people Eduardo asks offer possible explanations, none of which coincides with each other and none of which definitively explains Milan's legend.

This anticlimactic and unsolvable legend is representative of Halfon's literary style in general. Responding to why critics perceive a lack of drama in his works, Halfon argues that the fundamental element of a good short story is a "contained intensity" rather than a moment of explosion:

[e]n el cuento hay una intensidad contenida. Para que un cuento funcione ha de haber una bomba, pero esa bomba no puede llegar a explotar nunca. El cuentista ha de ser libre. Hace piruetas, te muestra un camino y después te lleva por otro. Así lo entiendo yo. Cuando me dicen que mis libros no terminan, o que tienen una estructura extraña, siento que no se han leído bien, o que se han leído con ojos de lector de novelas.

[i]n the short story there must be a contained intensity. For a short story to work there must be a bomb, but the bomb cannot come to explode ever. The short story writer must be free. He does pirouettes, he shows you a path and then leads you down another. That's how I understand it. When people tell me that my books don't finish, or that they have a strange structure, I feel that they haven't been read well, or that they have been read with the eyes of the reader of novels. (Gordo par. 34)

Milan's story, and Eduardo's quest for him, like *Epistrophe* for Milan, are like pirouettes that lead Eduardo, and the reader, on a series of adventures that never quite coalesce. They are, in turn, "bombs" that contain their intensity but never explode. The meaning of Milan's vignette can be partly elucidated: it is probable that Milan's story is semi-autobiographical in his desire to be a Romani musician despite neither fitting into the Romani (his father's) nor the Serbian (his mother's) worlds. Milan left his "home" and, according to him, lives where the music takes him, the "forest."⁶⁵ Milan's journeys are an attempt at once to overcome his past and his heritage and to reimagine his present and find a way to fit into the world he so admires.

Regarding the presence of the devil, Milan makes another reference to the devil earlier in the text when describing his Russian Jewish music teacher, Lázar Berman, a story that leads

⁶⁵ The Spanish word for "forest" is *bosque*, but the Spanish language associates the status of an "outsider" or "foreigner" (*forastero* in Spanish) with, through Catalan (*Real Academia Española*), the Latin root *foris*, meaning "outside" (*Enciclopèdia Catalana*) and from which the English "forest" also derives (*Merriam-Webster*).

Eduardo to think about his Polish Jewish grandfather. While teaching Milan how to play the same piece differently each time according to circumstance, Milan describes: “muy lento, caminó hacia mí, puso una mano sobre mi hombro y, con una sonrisa de diablo, me susurró: Es que no ves que hoy está lloviendo, muchacho” (“very slowly, he walked toward me, put a hand on my shoulder, and, with a devilish smile, whispered: The thing is, you aren’t seeing that today it’s raining, young man”) (Halfon 54). It is possible, if the story in his postcard is about himself, that the devil represents the music teacher who taught Milan to play and improvise with such talent. The fact that this teacher is Jewish is just unsettling enough that, while it might mean nothing at all, as Milan contends is possible of pieces of art and music, it is also possible that Milan is stereotyping the Jewish teacher as the devil in a way that subconsciously jabs at Eduardo as he works through the tension at play in his seemingly competing identities. There are many unanswered questions, and there is never a resolution to the meaning of the legend. As Halfon might say, this bomb never explodes despite the intensity that the story builds.

In addition to the postcard’s lack of definitive meaning, Eduardo’s trip to Serbia almost entirely lacks logic. Eduardo travels all over the Romani neighborhoods searching for Milan, which is curious considering Milan’s self-reported nomadic lifestyle and especially considering his quasi-disinheritance by his Romani musician father. There is no reason to believe that Milan is actually in Serbia. After days of fruitless searching, Eduardo convinces a Romani bar to allow him to enter, and, hearing a piano, he decides that the music is being played by Milan, explaining, again without much realistic logic, “[p]odía escuchar su melodía, pero no la encontraba. Una melodía invisible, pensé. Una melodía etérea, pensé. Tenía que ser Milan” (I could hear its/his melody, but I couldn’t find it. An invisible melody, I thought. An ethereal melody, I thought. It had to be Milan”) (Halfon 142). The repetition of “I thought” positions

“reality” inside Eduardo’s mind. Instead of finding Milan at the end of the music trail, however, Eduardo finds a young girl, with pale skin and blue eyes but, he stereotypes, with the “la sensualidad de una mujer gitana” (“the sensuality of a Gypsy woman”) and “pequeños pies de gitana” (“small feet of a Gypsy woman”) (Halfon 142). She took the bills out of Eduardo’s pocket, perhaps pointing to the stereotype of the Roma as thieves. He is sexually intimate with her while listening to the invisible music that he attributes to Milan.

At the climax, Eduardo thinks of his father and Milan’s father:

pensé en las piruetas, en tantas piruetas, y pensé que las líneas de mi vida habían sido trazadas para bifurcarse todas en ese momento, allí, en ese mismo punto, en ese mismo segundo, enfrente de aquel espectro tan gitano y tan turquesa, y de pronto, a través de la humareda, creí distinguir el rostro del padre de Milan que a la vez era el rostro de mi propio padre, invocándome en gitano o quizás en hebreo y tendiéndome una de sus manos para que yo la tomara y entonces poderme ayudar.

I thought about pirouettes, about so many pirouettes, and I thought that the lines of my life had been drawn so that they would all bifurcate in this moment, there, at this very point, at this very second, in front of that specter so Gypsy and so Turkish, and suddenly, through the cloud of smoke, I thought I made out the face of Milan’s father that was at the same time my own father’s face, calling upon me in Gypsy or maybe in Hebrew and stretching out one of his hands so that I would take it and then he could help me. (Halfon 142-3)

Eduardo, through the essentialization of the Romani girl, who bears features typical of both Romani and Serbian populations, evokes Milan’s genetically hybrid heritage as well as his own. The fathers represent a world where their children, Milan and Eduardo, do not find themselves. Recalling the moment when Eduardo explicitly rejected Hebrew and positioned it as a language of his heritage but not of his present, here, Eduardo is unable to understand or even distinguish Hebrew from Romani. The superimposition of these heritages on one another sets them up in a position to challenge each other and the dichotomies that Milan and Eduardo consciously or unconsciously enforce. Milan, for example, clearly distinguishes between “home” and “forest,”

an incompatibility that Eduardo likewise perceives in the way he defines himself as emphatically Guatemalan but *not* from the United States and *not* Jewish anymore.

This sexual intimacy from which arose Eduardo's epiphanic association and dissociation with the Romani culture connects directly to the themes of language and translation. Steiner writes:

[i]ntercourse and discourse, copula and copulation, . . . arise from the life-need of the ego to reach out and comprehend, in two vital senses of "understanding" and "containment", another human being. Sex is a profoundly semantic act. . . . The seminal and the semantic . . . construct the grammar of being. (Steiner 39-40)

While Eduardo never comes face to face with Milan and thus does not speak with him, this two-pronged *intercourse* allows Eduardo to confront his attraction to the idea of Milan and his professed and performed culture. The only spoken language in this scene is Eduardo's whisper, in Spanish, "El piano" ("The piano") (Halfon 143), which brings in his Guatemalan identity but in a liminal rather than concrete, voiced way, like Milan and his piano music that are simultaneously there and not there. Importantly, Eduardo's sexual climax contrasts sharply with the figure of Milan as yet another "unexploded bomb"—Eduardo does not manage to find Milan or to confirm that the musician is Milan. He perceives the melody to be one of Thelonious Monk, but "[i]mposible precisar cuál" ("[i]mpossible to specify which") (Halfon 143). Instead of "containing" Milan, however, this seminal/semantic act of "comprehension" serves to deconstruct the need to "specify" or contain the "other," and, by extension, himself.

This simultaneous integration and fragmentation conceptualizes in this way the off home. Eduardo leaves Serbia after this, suspending his quest and declaring, "[P]asé unos insólitos días persiguiendo a un fantasma" ("I spent some unusual/unbelievable days chasing a ghost") (Halfon 145). After referring to Milan as a "ghost," Eduardo addresses the idea of reality in general, which is to be the topic of a speech he will deliver in Póvoa, Portugal, asking, "¿Qué es la

realidad? No lo sé. ¿Cómo concibo la realidad? Aún menos” (“What is reality? I don’t know. How do I conceive of reality? Even less”) (Halfon 145). These questions indicate a distinction between what reality *is* and how one approaches, or even constructs, it. Eduardo’s referring to Milan as a ghost calls into question whether Milan was physically present, and thus raises the question of what about Milan is “real.” Indeed, the encounter with the Romani girl took place through a “cloud of smoke,” suggesting the unreliability of Eduardo’s narration to depict reality as it was. At the same time, Eduardo’s meditation on the nature of reality questions if what was matters as much as the telling of it.

As such, in Póvoa, Eduardo develops a theory of reality that calls the very concept of it into question. He tells the story of his Polish grandfather, as his grandfather told it to him, that continues to haunt him and manifest in various iterations through Eduardo’s life. In fact, even when Eduardo first met Milan, Eduardo mapped his grandfather’s story onto the story of Milan’s Russian music teacher: “y yo de inmediato desordené sus palabras y pensé en el boxeador polaco peleando cada noche, luego pensé en mi abuelo peleando con las palabras polacas” (“and I immediately jumbled up his words and thought of the Polish boxer fighting every night, and then I thought of my grandfather fighting with the Polish words”) (Halfon 53). The grandfather’s rendition, according to Eduardo, emphasizes the fact that the non-Jewish Polish boxer trains his Yiddish-speaking Polish grandfather, through words, *in Polish*, the language of the “other”:

[y] hablamos toda la noche *en polaco*. Más bien él me habló toda la noche *en polaco*. Me dijo *en polaco* que llevaba mucho tiempo allí, en el Bloque Once, y que los alemanes lo mantenían vivo porque les gustaba verlo boxear. Me dijo *en polaco* que al día siguiente me harían un juicio y me dijo *en polaco* qué cosas sí decir durante ese juicio y qué cosas no decir durante ese juicio. Y así pasó. . . . Usé sus palabras y sus palabras me salvaron la vida.

[a]nd we talked the whole night *in Polish*. Rather, he talked to me the whole night *in Polish*. He told me *in Polish* that he had been there a long time, in Block Eleven, and that the Germans kept him alive because they liked to watch him box.

He told me *in Polish* the next day that they would try me and he told me *in Polish* what things to say during that trial and what things not to say during that trial. And so it happened . . . I used his words and his words saved my life. (Halfon 74-5, emphasis mine)

According to Eduardo's grandfather, the words of the Polish boxer saved him. He told him what to say and what not to say, and this linguistic training session saved his life. This encounter, entirely made of words, demonstrates the way in which reality is constructed and deconstructed through language. Moreover, it contrasts with the lack of speech Eduardo describes in Serbia. Furthermore, the concreteness of spoken words here as reflective of reality is placed under suspicion. In the grandfather's telling of the story, he emphasizes "in Polish," indicating the importance that he was saved through the words of the "other." Eduardo most often refers to his grandfather as his "Polish grandfather," indicating the extent to which the boxer's words both saved and branded his grandfather and constructed his reality.

By contrast, however, when Eduardo tells the story from his own point of view, he emphasizes the fact that it was the *telling* that has saved the grandfather's life and made this story real, in the same way that Milan *said* all of the characteristics of the nomadic Romani lifestyle. Eduardo's version decentralizes the self-other binary that dominated the grandfather's account:

[v]iejo y experto residente del Bloque Once de Auschwitz, entonces, el boxeador polaco se pasa toda la noche *diciéndole* a mi abuelo qué *decir* y qué no *decir* durante su juicio al día siguiente. Entrenándolo, *digamos*, con palabras. Y al día siguiente, mi abuelo *dice* y no *dice* lo que el boxeador polaco le había *dicho* que *dijera* y no *dijera* y así, en efecto, se salva. Punto final. De inmediato me gustó esa historia, acaso por su simpleza o su aparente simpleza, acaso por sus implicaciones del uso de la palabra para salvar, para salvarnos.

[a]n old and expert resident of Block Eleven of Auschwitz, then, the Polish boxer spends the whole night *telling* [*diciéndole*] my grandfather what *to say* [*decir*] and what not *to say* [*decir*] during his trial the next day. Training him, *shall we say* [*digamos*], with words. And the next day, my grandfather *says* [*dice*] and does not *say* [*dice*] what the Polish boxer *had told* [*había dicho*] him to say [*dijera*]

and not *say* [*dijera*] and therefore, in effect, saving himself. Full stop. I immediately liked that story, perhaps because of its simplicity or its apparent simplicity, perhaps because of its implications of the use of the word to save, to save us. (Halfon 146, emphasis mine)

Eduardo uses inflections of the verb *decir* (“to say,” “to speak,” or “to tell”) nine times, as gerund, infinitive, present subjunctive, present indicative, past participle, and imperfect subjunctive—all in one paragraph. While the grandfather’s narration emphasizes the fact that the Polish boxer, training him with his Polish words, saved his life, Eduardo’s diegesis includes yet another layer to what the grandfather had said, that words and stories, in any language, save, not only the grandfather, but “save us.” Eduardo includes himself and the reader in this explication. Words save because, by nature, they both invent and defy reality by decentering its hegemony. Words have the power to circumvent both “home” and “forest.” They open up the singular reality to be multiple.

Eduardo asserts, thus, regarding words and reality:

[a]l escribir sabemos que hay algo muy importante que decir con respecto a la realidad, y que tenemos ese algo al alcance, allí nomás, muy cerca, en la punta de la lengua, y que no debemos olvidarlo. Pero siempre, sin falta, lo olvidamos.

[w]hen we write, we know that there is something very important to say with respect to reality, and we have it within reach, right there, very close, on the tip of the tongue, and that we should not forget it. But always, without fail, we forget it. (Halfon 148).

The phrase “at the tip of the tongue” could also be rendered as “at the tip of language,” which suggests that language is only an approximate translation of what one attempts to communicate, and which also resonates with Derrida’s theory of language as composed of “traces” of meaning that are always-already about to be communicated but on their own do not make meaning, and whose meaning never truly comes to fruition. Milan’s legend and Eduardo’s translated interpretations are likewise constantly at this threshold.

The story of Eduardo's grandfather is simultaneously real and unreal, like Milan as a ghost who is simultaneously present and absent, again pushing back against binaries. Even though Eduardo has been presented with photographic evidence of and has managed to turn into a literary project his grandfather's story, "años después de llevar esta historia conmigo" ("years after carrying this story around with me"), he reads an interview in a Guatemalan newspaper in which his grandfather claims to have been saved in Auschwitz, not by a Polish boxer who trained him with words, but because of his carpentry skills (Halfon 146). This places in doubt the reality that Eduardo has spent so many years working and reworking, whereupon Eduardo devalues the belief in an objective reality:

[y] allí está.

La literatura no es más que un buen truco, como el de un mago o un brujo, que hace a la realidad parecer entera, que crea la ilusión de que la realidad es una. O tal vez la literatura necesita construir una realidad destruyendo otra . . . , es decir, destruyéndose a sí misma y luego construyéndose de nuevo a partir de sus propios escombros.

[a]nd there it is.

Literature is nothing more than a good trick, like that of a magician or wizard, who makes reality seem whole, who creates the illusion that reality is one. Or maybe literature needs to create a reality by destroying another one. . . , that is to say, destroying itself and then rebuilding itself from its own wreckage. (Halfon 147)

Halfon undermines reality as a foundation; words save precisely because they are not bound by it—a key aspect of the off home. Eduardo and the reader never discover which of the grandfather's stories, if either, is the reality or which the "good trick." Likewise, Milan constructs his world in words and stories, projecting "the illusion that reality is one," but we never learn the "reality" behind what he *says*. The off home lies at this "tip of the tongue" or the edge of language, a space that pushes boundaries and a story that is unconcluded and multiple.

Eduardo's discovery is not the reality that Milan represents but instead the blurring of boundaries and the lack of specificity that he embodies, like the music of Thelonious Monk.

Eduardo, a literature instructor, teaches his students, "Un cuento siempre cuenta dos cuentos" ("A/One story always tells two stories") (Halfon 10). Halfon sees himself as a short story author; the stories he tells build in intensity but never reach resolution. Resolution can be understood as "home," which is an unattainable pursuit, deceptively juxtaposed against the "forests." The off home takes elements of both but in pursuit of neither. Likewise, Eduardo's Guatemalan, Jewish, and Polish identities do not countermand each other in the off home; Eduardo does not need to privilege or reify his heritages in order to claim them. This off home strategy serves to disentangle the concepts of identity, home, and reality as being singular and cohesive wholes. Instead, like the off home, multiple shifting elements comprise these concepts whose meanings are constantly being incompletely translated by circumstance and story.

Home, Homeland, and History in Gabriela Avigur-Rotem's *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*

Gabriela Avigur-Rotem (1946-) was born in Argentina and therefore is considered by some scholars to be an Argentine author as well as an Israeli author. She immigrated with her Zionist parents to Israel in 1950 at almost four years old. Avigur-Rotem's literature tends to center around the concept of home and its construction, deconstruction, and destruction. In her first novel, *מוצרט לא היה יהודי* (*Mozart Was Not a Jew*, 1992), she explored the plan of Baron Maurice de Hirsch to establish a Jewish homeland in Argentina in the beginning of the 20th century.⁶⁶ In *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, Avigur-Rotem again explores the idea of a homeland,

⁶⁶ In Chapter 1, I discuss Moisés Ville, an early such Jewish settlement in Argentina founded in 1889, in relation to Ricardo Feierstein's *La logia del umbral* (*The Threshold Lodge*). For more on the Jewish settlement of Argentina, see Alberto Gerchunoff's *Los gauchos judíos* (*Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*, 1910), often considered the founding work of Latin American Jewish Fiction, as well as Richard O'Mara's article "Palestine on the Pampas" (2001).

this time in Israel, and the natural connection the protagonist should feel to that *homeland*. The protagonist, Loya, who has spent the last twenty-five years living in Europe and working as a flight attendant, returns to Israel after the death of Davidi, her father's best friend, who bequeaths to her his house. As Loya goes through the house and the items and documents Davidi has left for her in it, she uncovers secrets about herself, her late father, and the mother she presumed dead since she was four.⁶⁷ At the same time, Loya contends with a house that is physically crumbling, leading Loya through a journey in which she questions physical and symbolic foundations of identity and home. The off home challenges the dichotomy between the home and diaspora/exile and gestures toward a more fluid dynamic that embraces the impossibility of total connection to one's roots, in layers both literal and metaphorical within *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*.

There are four primary "homes" that are explored in *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*: the first is Davidi's house and garden; the second is the *sukkah*, a temporary home constructed in honor of the holiday of Sukkot; the third is the Land of Israel as the historic home of the Jews and the State of Israel as home in partial response to the Holocaust; and the fourth the idea of a linguistic home, represented by a "mother" tongue. By the end of the novel, Loya "disconnects" from the hegemonic narratives whose pressure has driven her away from Israel for the one and a half decades and, in so doing, discovers a new way to understand her identity. I read the off home in her new approach to identity—in Loya's eventual acceptance of unresolved tensions as a part of

⁶⁷ Irish-Argentine author Sylvia Molloy's novel *El común olvido* (*The Common Forgetting*, 2002) offers an intriguing parallel to *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, both in terms of plot and theme. In Molloy's novel, the male protagonist, residing in New York, returns to Argentina to bury his recently-deceased Argentine mother's ashes. Once in Argentina, the protagonist discovers much new information about his mother as well as about the family and life of his father, whom he did not know well. This novel also thematizes the queering of identity, a productive idea for the concept of the off home.

her identity and the abandonment of the need to choose between a rooted (home) and rootless (exile) lifestyle.

The novel opens with Loya's rediscovery of the house as well as the realization that the physical foundation of the house is threatened by the invasive roots of the ficus tree growing from Davidi's orchard. As Davidi's lawyer and Loya enter the house together, Loya for the first time in many years, the lawyer is shocked by Loya's unfamiliarity with the neighborhood and all of the recent changes, as well as the dilapidated state of Davidi's house:

"הרי נולדת פה!" "לא" "לא גדלת פה מגיל אפס?" אבל הרסו, מכרו, בנו, הרחיבו, לא השאירו
אבן על מקומה חוץ מן הבית שלך שפתאום הוא פה. . . אבל לא – העצים האלה. . . הפיקוס
האדיר הזה לא היה, היה, אבל לא כזה, עץ אריה ירוק פוער לוע עלים לטרופ בית מתגבנן לתוך
האדמה, מוכן ומזומן להיות ארכיאולוגי. . . "השורשים שלו בטח הרימו לך חצי רצפה!" . . .
השורשים שלו רצים לתוך הבית.

“you were even born here!” “No.” “Didn’t you grow up here since the age of zero?” But here, they destroyed, sold, built, expanded, left not a single stone in its place [*mekomah*] besides your house that is suddenly here. . . but no, these trees, . . . this mighty ficus tree wasn’t here, it was here, but not like this, a green lion tree with its gaping, open mouth of leaves to devour a house that is hunchbacked into the land . . . “Its roots have surely raised half of your floor!” . . . [A]nd its roots run into the depths of the house. (Avigur-Rotem 7-8)

Even though she was raised in Israel “since the age of zero,” she emphatically was not born in this country. “The age of zero,” an odd turn of phrase, could be an exaggeration meaning living in the country since she was a baby, but it could also refer to the State of Israel’s “age of zero” in 1948 for which Loya was also present, having arrived with her Holocaust survivor parents only shortly before. This passage also raises the issue of “place.” As discussed in Chapter 1, the word for “place” in Hebrew, "מקום" (*makom*), not only signifies a physical “place” but is also one of the names of God. As Barbara E. Mann writes:

[t]his usage originates in a midrashic gloss on the book of Genesis: “Why is the Holy One, blessed be he, called Makom? Because he is the place of the world.” Perhaps the rabbis who produced this text felt themselves to be in some sort of

exile, and therefore invested space with transcendence, and God with the materiality of place. (Mann 11)

Loya is returning to this “place” after twenty-five years of effective self-exile, and the house is the only thing still in its “place,” interrogating the connection between the physicality of “place” and “home” and suggesting a more transcendent quality for both. The ficus tree with its “gaping, open mouth of leaves to devour a house that is hunchbacked into the land” recalls the biblical scouts’ inflammatory report of the Land of Israel as "ארץ אוכלת יושביה" (“a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof”) (Num. 13.32), once again indicating a possibly threatening quality to the physical emphasis on place. The ficus tree is also notable because of the aerial roots that grow upward, as opposed to the usual downward orientation. The aerial roots of the ficus tree “descend from the branches, touch the ground and take root, eventually forming numerous sturdy trunks which can clog a landscape. . . . Roots grow rapidly invading gardens, growing under and lifting sidewalks, patios, and driveways” (Gilman et al.). It is significant that *Makom* as a reference to God is invoked most often in times of distress, as in after a death, with the Ashkenazi custom of the recitation of "המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים" (“May God [*ha-Makom*, lit. “the Place”] comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem”). Loya has only returned after the death of Davidi; inheriting the house was predicated upon her physical return and her scattering of Davidi’s ashes, contained in a pyxis. Throughout the novel, Loya searches for the appropriate “place” to scatter his ashes. Finally, the image of the roots physically destroying the house foreshadows and mirrors the way in which Loya’s investigation into her “roots” and her parents’ survival of the Holocaust parallels the crumbling of the house’s foundation. The word used for “pyxis” in the Hebrew, "פיקסיס" (*piksis*) is, in fact, a Latin-derived rather than Hebrew word and resembles closely the word for “ficus,” "פיקוס" (*fikus*),⁶⁸

⁶⁸ In Hebrew, the same letter (פ) represents both the sounds “p” and “f.”

another Latin-derived word, further underscoring their relationship to each other and the questions these items symbolically raise with regard to home, homeland, and roots.

Loya gives herself a tour of the house to become reacquainted with it but refuses to enter any of the rooms, which are all locked. The house is *unhomely*, *unheimlich* for her, and again, I bring in my own redefinition of *unheimlich* here, questing the familiarity of home to begin with. Loya avoids the rooms and stays in the living room, even sleeping there, declaring,

... הנה אני פה. לא בגעגועים, לא בחלומות. אני יכולה לגעת, לחטט, לנבור –
אבל עוד לא. הלילה אישן פה, בסלון.

... here I am. Not in longings, not in dreams. I can touch, pick through,
rummage –
But not yet. Tonight I will sleep here, in the living room. (Avigur-Rotem
11)

Loya continues to sleep on the living room couch throughout the year she remains in Davidi's house on her journey of discovery. Loya characteristically avoids settling in and designating a home, living effectively in the air since she left Israel to become a flight attendant. Moreover, outside the house, she is equally ill-at-ease. The city has developed greatly since she left twenty-five years ago. The city center, which serves as a symbolic signpost for the way in which Loya's center has also dramatically shifted with this return "home," is unrecognizable to her. She wonders, surprised, "איפה המרכז. המרכז זז" ("Where is the center. The center moved") (Avigur-Rotem 12). The rhyming of "center" (*merkaz*) and "moved" (*zaz*) phonetically connects this idea of a shifting center and underscores Loya's feeling ungrounded and out of place.

Shortly after Loya's arrival, word gets around that she has returned to the neighborhood, and her childhood friends attempt to reconnect with her with varying degrees of success. One invites her to celebrate the holiday of *Sukkot* (The Feast of Booths) with her and her friends and

family. *Sukkot* is intimately tied to the idea of a home. After the Israelites fled Egypt into the desert, Leviticus 23:42-43 states:

[y]e shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are home-born in Israel shall dwell in booths; that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. (Lev. 23.42-43)

The holiday of Sukkot (*Hag ha-Sukkot*) is also referred to as “The Holiday of Ingathering” (*Hag ha-asif*), which is also thematically relevant as Loya gathers in the *sukkah* with people from her past and recent acquaintances who will help her interpret the puzzles left in Davidi’s house.

During Sukkot, the *sukkah*, a temporary structure that is built and disassembled every year, becomes the permanent dwelling and the residence the temporary one. Mimi Levy Lipis writes that because of their transitory nature and specific construction that requires three temporary walls and a partially open roof, *sukkahs* are hybrid spaces of belonging:

[a] sukkah can be fashioned in a local style but it is never part of the local architecture. . . . Even in Israel the sukkah retains its diaspora symbolism. . . . The point at which the axes of diaspora and of place of belonging intersect, and the kind of hybrid space that emerges depend on each individual sukkah and the person receiving it. (Lipis 204)

Lipis also contends that because a *sukkah* is a temporary extension or replacement of the home but with open architecture, the *sukkah* blurs the boundaries between outdoor and indoor and public and private (Lipis 195). It is inside this structure of hybridized meaning and flipped structural design that Loya meets up with her former best friend, Ora, with whom she has severed contact since she left.

In Ora, Loya sees a reflection of the traditional Israeli social narrative from which she fled, which emphasizes the way that Loya’s lifestyle not only challenges boundaries but, in an extreme way, rejects convention. Like Loya, Ora’s parents survived the Holocaust, and Ora continues to care for them in their old age—she and her husband symbolically built their home

on top of her parents' already-existing home. Ora's mother, upon immigration to Israel, adopted the name "מכורה" (*Mekhorah*), which is a literary word for "native land" or "homeland." Ora is thus the daughter of the homeland and has adopted the traditional roles of wife, mother, and guardian of the future. She has aged considerably in appearance and is always occupied with her husband, children, and job as a teacher.

By contrast, Loya never settles down "at home" anywhere, does not have or appear to want children (when she was younger, she had an abortion, and Ora never told Loya of her own pregnancy because she knew she would receive that same advice from Loya) (Avigur-Rotem 84). Additionally, she has no connection to a mother, and lives, as one of her former boyfriends deems, "unnaturally"—"זה לא טבעי, זה לא אנושי, זה לא נורמלי, לטוס" ("it isn't natural, it isn't human, it isn't normal, to fly") (Avigur-Rotem 12), pointing to the fact that "רוב הלילות את ישנה בבתי-מלון, לא בבית, לא על מיטה שלך. . . וחברות – יש לך חברות? לא! יש לך קולגות! כל שנה הן מתחלפות. . . . זקפתי אצבע" ("most nights you sleep in hotels, not in a house, not in your bed. . . . – and girlfriends – do you have girlfriends? No! You have colleagues! Every year they change over. . . . Where's your life – There – I lifted a finger") (Avigur-Rotem 48-49). Within the hybrid space of the *sukkah*, the two extremes, Loya and Ora, become ironically apparent in their polar contrast to each other. Loya indicates that she lives "there," potentially a call back to when in Psalm 137 the Jewish people, exiled from Jerusalem, sat "there" while weeping at the memory of Zion. At the same time, the phrase Loya uses to indicate that her home is up in the sky, "לא זקפתי אצבע" (*zakafti etsba*, "I lifted a finger"), is usually used in the negative, "לא זקפתי אצבע" (*lo zakafti etsba*), to signify a lack of effort or action. This turn of phrase indicates Loya's resignation to her circumstances, much in the same way as she portrays Ora as resigned to and trapped in her own.

When Loya's friend Adriana comes to visit her at Davidi's house, Adriana says to her, "את לא יכולה לברוח מזה, לוייה, יש פה עניין שאת צריכה לגמור, את צריכה לעשות תיקון" ("You cannot run from this, Loya, there is a matter here that you need to finish, you need to make amends") (Avigur-Rotem 105). Adriana then proceeds to push her further to explore the house, and upon sensing another presence, prompts, "תגידי, את ישנה בסלון? מה עם שאר החדרים? סגורים? בואי נפתח" ("Tell me, do you sleep in the living room? What about the rest of rooms? Closed? Let's open them, it's not good for doors to be closed, negative energies accumulate in them") (Avigur-Rotem 106). Adriana's prodding leads Loya to begin the process of opening up the rooms, literally and figuratively. The presence that Adriana senses symbolically refers to riddles to the past that Davidi left for Loya in his house. On a literal level, Loya's basement is secretly inhabited by an Arab terror suspect. When the police discover him, they estimate that he had been hiding out there for about three weeks without Loya realizing it. This scene brings into the novel the current political scene of 1990s Israel, the setting of the novel, juxtaposed against the backdrop of early statehood and the contentious nature of home and displacement in this context. This connection further emphasizes the assumed links between home, homeland, the Land of Israel, and the State of Israel, all of which Loya calls into question with her "exile" and "return."

In a drawer in the house, Loya discovers her father's diary, written on disordered scraps of paper from when he was in Terezin, in (awkward) Hebrew, probably so that the Nazis would be unable to read it if they discovered it, a chapter of his life that he has never discussed, as well as letters and fragments of documents detailing the stories of her father, Davidi, and Davidi's son, Nahum (who turns out to be her half-brother), all of whom are dead. Finally, the documents

reveal that her mother, whom she had believed to be dead since she was a baby, had left her husband and children in Israel and returned to Czechoslovakia, where she is likely still alive.

Opening the metaphorical doors of her father's past leads Loya to the realization of how much she never knew and will never be able to fully piece together. It also addresses the Holocaust as a closed door in Israeli society, a taboo subject. Speaking to the spirit of Davidi, who took her father's place on a transport to Treblinka from Terezin, she begins to understand the gravity and the silence of the survivors' trauma. She cannot believe, and is horrified to discover, that her own family members were survivors. Loya thus exclaims in dismay to Davidi's spirit, "היית בטריזין – אבל על זה אף מילה; נשלחת לטרבלינקא – איך ניצלת מתאי-הגזים? . . . כל- " ("You were in Terezin – but about that not even a word; you were sent to Treblinka – how were you saved from the gas chambers? And maybe – you were waiting for me to ask. And I didn't ask") (Avigur-Rotem 225). By contrast, whenever she had tried to ask her father about his past, he refused to talk about it. She thinks to her father, then, regarding the documents Davidi left for her to find, "תן לי לנחש; את הכרוניקה הזאת, לא היית נותן בידי לקרוא; לא היית רוצה שאדע – אבל דווידי רצה – דווידי החזיר אותי לכאן כדי לתת בידי את העדות " ("Let me guess; this chronicle you would not have put in my hands to read; you wouldn't have wanted me to know – but Davidi wanted it – Davidi brought me back here in order to put in my hands this testimony –") (Avigur-Rotem 281). Davidi, in bequeathing Loya the house conditioned upon her physical return, which in turn requires her to physically and metaphorically open the doors of the past, forces Loya to confront what she ran away from in the same way that, when indicating her home as the liminality of the airplane, she also emphasized her emotional inertia.

In having fled from roots, the roots of Davidi's garden invading the house provide a contrast to this idea and Loya's "home" as having been the airplane, which is totally unattached to the ground, that is, to reality. The confrontation that Davidi elicits leads Loya to discover what I have termed the off home, which is a freedom from either extreme, in this case, living totally in "exile" or totally at "home," and having (or even being able) to choose between them as extremes. After some time, in an attempt to save Davidi's house, though still unsure if she will keep or sell it, Loya is forced to have the ficus tree removed because of its overly invasive roots that are lifting up the floorboards of the house. The hole where the ficus was is like a "קבר" ("open grave") (Avigur Rotem 224), symbolic of the gap in Loya's information as well as her undead mother whom she does not know and Davidi's ashes in the pyxis waiting to be put to rest. Loya's next step, therefore, is to try to fill in some of this "open grave" in which her mother symbolically has remained all these years. As she develops an off home identity, she ultimately comes to view the idea of the open grave as less frightening and more constructive.

In addition to her father's diary, another of the documents in Davidi's house is a letter from Loya's mother, Milena, to Davidi from 1968 explaining having served a second term in prison. Loya learns, as she later reflects, "שאמא שלי נאסרה – היא היתה במאסר שנה וחצי – . . . היא" ("[t]hat my mother was incarcerated – she was imprisoned for a year and a half – . . . she left Israel because of too much Communism and was imprisoned in Czechoslovakia because of Zionism") (Avigur-Rotem 334). In the letter, Loya's mother asks after her children, referring to Naḥum by his birth name, Jan. But significantly, when writing about Loya, she calls her "the daughter," rather than "my daughter" or by her name: "לבת אוכל להציע בית, ואם לא אימהות – אנני משלה את עצמי – אז חברות קרובה – כך אני" ("To the daughter I will be able to offer a home, and if not motherhood – I do not

delude myself – then a close friendship – so I hope”) (Avigur-Rotem 241). While Milena “does not delude” herself about her role as a mother, Loya perhaps deludes herself, hoping to find in Milena the mother figure she feels her life has been lacking.

In the letter, Milena reveals that she has returned to Terezin, and after reading it, Loya, with no address, and not knowing if her mother is still in Terezin or even still alive, boards a plane to find her, similar to the way in which Halfon’s Eduardo pursues Juan and Milan. Loya reflects:

מה היית. מי היית. . . . אילו הייתי יודעת שאת אופציה, האם הייתי מוצאת לי דרך להגיע אלייך?
גידלו אותי כיתומה. לא נתנו לי לבחור – פשוט, העמידו אותי בפני עובדה – אבל מי יכול היה לבחור
בכל הסיפור הזה? – גם הם הועמדו בפני עובדה – רק את, את בחרת – בחרת להצטרף – להיפרד –
לנסוע – לחזור – היכן מולדתי, כך ההמנון הצ’כי, האם חזרו ואסרו אותך שם, העמידו אותך מול
כיתת יורים, ואת, מסרבת לכיסוי העיניים, הישרת מבט אל קני-הרובים ושרת את האינטרנציונלי?
לא, עוד לא.
כרגע הכרנו, אז עוד אל תמותי לי.

[w]hat were you. Who were you. . . . – if I’d known that you were an option, would I have found myself a way to get to you? They raised me as an orphan. They didn’t let me choose – simply, they presented me with a fact – but who had a choice in this story? – they too were presented with a fact – only you, you chose – you chose to join – to separate – to travel – to return – where is my motherland, so it says in the Czech national anthem, did they arrest you again there, stand you in front of a firing squad, and you, refusing the blindfold, directed your gaze at the barrels of the rifles and sang the Internationale?

No, not yet.

We’ve only just met, so don’t die on me yet. (Avigur-Rotem 337)

In this passage, Loya wonders what it would have been like for her if she knew her mother was alive, conceptually linking the centrality of the mother figure with another open question for her, the concept of the motherland. Her own mother chose her motherland over her children.

Because Milena fell into the category of a “Mischling,” denoting those who could not be fully classified as either Aryan or Jewish under the existing Nazi laws, she was in a position to save Loya’s father from transportation by marrying him, even though she was pregnant at the time with Jan, Davidi’s child. The liminality of Milena’s status—as prisoner, Jew, girlfriend, wife,

and mother—is juxtaposed against the decisive way in which she effectively orchestrated everyone else’s fate.

Realizing at this juncture that her mother might still be “an option,” Loya travels in search of her to Terezin, where she also hopes to gain answers to who she is and who her father and Davidi were before she knew them. Milner explains that the phenomenon of travel literature, especially to Eastern Europe, is fairly common in Israeli post-Holocaust literature as Second Generation authors (often descendants of Holocaust survivors)⁶⁹ attempt to recoup some of the stories that were lost to this socially-imposed silence (Milner 196). This cultural silence was instituted in part because of the portrayal of survivors both as passive victims⁷⁰ and, according to Milner, as “descendants of exilic Jewry (Milner 196). These perceptions began to change only in 1961 with the Eichmann trial, which heavily influenced public opinion and generated sympathy for and identity with the victims (Yablonka, “Eichmann,” par. 7). Such travel literature to fill in the many blanks in Holocaust survivor testimony tended to “demonstrate[] the testimonies to be forever partial and incomplete, and silence and void to remain a core existential experience of the literary protagonists, both Holocaust survivors and their children” (Milner 197). Avigur-Rotem portrays this incompleteness and impossibility of finding answers, but she does so not in a way that advocates suppression of the past but likewise

⁶⁹ The Holocaust is present in the Israeli national consciousness and in the history of the formation of the State of Israel. According to the research of Yechiel Klar, Noa Shori-Eyal, and Yonat Klar into the presence of Holocaust survivors in Israel:

[a]lmost immediately after its establishment in May 1948, the State of Israel . . . became the home for the largest community of Holocaust survivors. About 330,000 Jewish refugees from devastated Europe joined the 600,000 members of the Jewish community in Israel in a massive immigration influx. Thus, in 1949, almost every third person in the newborn country was a Holocaust survivor (Yablonka, 1999). (Klar et al. 125-6)

For this reason, the Holocaust has been perceived as inextricably tied to Israeli national identity, though Avigur-Rotem challenges the overwhelming influence as well as monolithic portrayal of this history, as do other writers, such as Orly Castel-Bloom, discussed in Chapter 2.

⁷⁰ Poet Chaim Guri wrote, “We often generalized categorically and arbitrarily that these poor souls [went to their deaths] ‘as sheep to the slaughter.’ Now we know better . . . ‘the shame was not with you, but for you’ and we sentenced them before first judging ourselves” (qtd. in Yablonka, “Development,” 17-18).

in a way that does not depend on filling in all the blanks, covering up all the “open graves.”

Likewise, neither Loya’s life in suspension, represented by flying above the world, nor Ora’s rooted life, symbolized by her family’s house that she built on top of her parents’ existing home, is the ideal outcome. Loya’s trip to the *motherland* and inability to communicate in her *mother* tongue are not representative of a failed journey but, rather, the beginning of the acceptance of the open grave, the fact that answers will only ever be partial, which in the off home, gives her permission to accept her past at the same time as allowing space to develop multiple overlapping identities, even if they seem incompatible or incomplete.

Loya arrives in Terezin, with Davidi’s pyxis in tow. Loya discovers in the material from Davidi’s house that her real name is Le’ah (Leah). However, even though the new name “Loya” was attributed to a mistake on the part of a clerk at the harbor when Loya and her father immigrated to Palestine, it is no coincidence that the letters of לֹיָהּ (Loya), differently vowelized, spell לֵוָיָהּ (*levaya*), meaning “funeral” or “escort.” When she arrives in Terezin with Davidi’s ashes, Loya does not know her mother or her mother’s language, despite being a polyglot and speaking many other European languages, such as Italian, French, and Latin. Previously, upon thinking about her mother, she says, "לא דיברנו, את ואני, מעולם" (“We have not spoken, you and I, ever”) (Avigur-Rotem 336). She then reflects on the reality that that she must have spoken in Czech at some point when she was little, before her mother left, and since then forgotten or repressed the language entirely: "מה יכולתי לומר לך עד גיל ארבע – מאטקה, תראי, מאטקה, כואב, מאטקה, רק לשתות? . . . את פניך אינני זוכרת. . . באיזו שפה דיברתי אליך – בצ'כית? היא נמחקה ממני עד המלה האחרונה. " ("[w]hat might I have said to you by age four – Matka,⁷¹ look, Matka, it hurts, Matka, to drink? . . . In what language did I talk to you? –

⁷¹ “Matka” is “mother” is Czech, not in Hebrew.

In Czech? It [*hi*, lit. she] has been erased within me to the last word. Only very occasionally something flutters, a word escapes from the continuous darkness”) (Avigur-Rotem 336-7). For instance, when Loya arrives in Terezin, a few phrases likewise escape, as she asks passers-by, if they can help her and if Mrs. Kaplan lives here (“Můžete mi pomoci” and “Bydlí tu Paní Kaplan?”), but, significantly, even though throughout the novel non-Hebrew script does appear when referencing phrases in other languages, these phrases are written in vowelized Hebrew letters, “מון'טה מי פומוצי” and “בידלי טו פאני קפלן” (which she then appropriately corrects to “Kaplanova” and even later corrects to “Hrozova,” her mother’s maiden name) (Avigur-Rotem 356-357), representing the way in which this *unheimlich* language is simultaneously familiar and strange to her: “נחשפת אצלי השפה הנשכחת בגושים קטנים, הכרחיים” (“the forgotten language is revealed to me in small necessary, chunks”) and surges from her memory from when she was a child (Avigur-Rotem 356). She has a visceral relationship with this language even though she is unable to engage with the language in an emotional or academic way.

Loya does find her mother, but their inability to relate to each other calls into question the centrality of the mother figure. Loya and her mother cannot directly communicate with one another without a translator because “אין לנו שפה משותפת” (“we don’t have a shared language”) (Avigur-Rotem 367). Loya realizes for the two of them “שיותר חשוב למדברת מאשר להיות מובנת” (“that it is more important for the speaker [to speak] than be understood” (Avigur-Rotem 361), and Loya thus unburdens herself effectively on deaf ears:

שתינו, זו מול זו. . . . “כל השנים חשבתי שאת מתה” אני אומרת לה, היא מהנהנת, . . . “איך העזת לקום ולעזוב שני ילדים קטנים – ” אני באה איתה חשבון “ובשביל מה – ” אני מספרת לה עלי ועל נחום באילת, הסיפור הזה צריך לעזוב לי פעם את הפה, ומי אשם בזה אם לא את, אני מסיימת והיא מהנהנת, מסכימה על כל מה שיש לי לדבר-לדבר-לדבר, אני מספרת לה על אבא, על דויד, על הצוואה, נהנית מסבלנותה השותקת עד שאני מבחינה שהיא מנקרת – פשוט נרדמה –

[t]he two of us, across from one another. . . . “All these years I thought you were dead,” I say to her, she nods, . . . “How dared you up and leave two small

children – ” I come at her for an accounting, “and for what – ” I tell her about myself and about Nahum in Eilat, this story must leave my mouth [at least] once, and who is guilty if not you, I conclude and she nods, agreeing with everything I have to say-to say-to say, I tell her about my father, about Davidi, about the will, enjoying her quite patience until I notice that she is dozing – she simply fell asleep – (Avigur Rotem 363)

Spatially, Loya and her mother are positioned opposite each other, symbolizing not only the physical distance between them but their emotional separation as well. This moment is arguably the climax of the novel—Loya comes face to face with her mother—her past and her identity, the potential answer to all her questions and doubts. In an outpouring of emotion, Loya reveals to her mother her deepest secret, the metaphorical room that she has kept most locked, and which she has revealed to nobody else: that she and Nahum had secretly been in love with each other and had even consummated their relationship, unaware that they were half-siblings. She blames her mother—if her mother had not disappeared, her true identity would not have disappeared, and she would not have spent her life searching to be reunited with herself, symbolized by Nahum. After finally having come face-to-face with her mother, she feels the need “to say-to say-to say” everything, but not only is her mother unable to understand, she actually falls asleep, recreating the moment when her mother left her when she was four. Loya’s impulse “to say-to say-to say” also symbolically reenacts the silence of the survivors of the Holocaust and the sociohistorical proscription to tell their stories, another reason Loya remains in search of her own story. The conversation, therefore, like the relationship, remains unrequited, and Loya spends physically and emotionally uncomfortably her "לילה ראשון ואחרון עם אמא" (“first and last night with [a] mother”) (Avigur-Rotem 364) during which, repeatedly, Loya laments, "אני לא מצליחה" (“I can’t manage to understand”) (Avigur-Rotem 365). In her mother’s home, instead of finding a haven, the mother’s home, like Czech, the mother’s tongue, is not *unheimlich*, frightening in its familiarity, but frightening in its unfamiliarity, what should be *heimlich* is

responds to me with ease, used to me, but the mouth of the faucet is not even damp, not even one drop is hiding within its palate, it is absolutely dry, arid iron, and its head turns on empty until it sticks and I hear the sound the pipes make at the end of the water Khkhkhhhhhhhhhhh – (Avigur Rotem 373)

The language she uses here to describe the boarded-up house and the arid iron faucet recalls a discovery Loya makes in her mother's home that augments the isolation from her she already feels. The scene takes place while Loya's mother attempts to explain to her who a man in a photo is, while Loya realizes that she and her mother have both lived so much of their lives that they'll never be able to recount to one another: "מנסה להסביר לי מיהו, אבל אני לא מצליחה להבין, מעל מיטתה צלב ברזל קטן. . . זה שלה? היא חזרה בתשובה? – היא . . . מחייכת, מהנהנת, אומרת משהו, אינני מבינה –" ("she tries to explain to me who he is, but I can't manage to understand, above her bed is a small iron cross. . . Is it hers? Did she become religious? – She. . . smiles, nods, says something, I don't understand –") (Avigur-Rotem 365). Loya's mother is like the arid iron and the boards on the house in the shape of a cross. Loya's mother speaks a different language, possibly follows a different religion, and is unable to provide her with the comfort and security typical of a mother-daughter relationship. Loya does not even know how to speak about her—the term she uses here for to "become religious," "לחזור בתשובה" (lahzor bitshuvah), is an odd turn of phrase because it is used to refer to Jews who become more observant. Her mother is half-Jewish (she is a "Mischling"), and if she has become more religious, it has been toward the Christian faith. The arid iron faucet thus connects the two physical houses and positions them as both unreceptive to Loya and unable to provide her with the ideal vision she has of "home." Back in Israel, Davidi's house, in what should be her homeland, if not her motherland, offers virtually the same relationship. In the manner that Loya actively leaves her mother's home and country, she also actively disconnects the hose from the garden of Davidi's house and hears the sound of "the end of the water."

This passage is also a direct reference to Psalm 137, referencing the Babylonian captivity. The lack of water from the faucet could allude to the rivers of Babylon and the tears wept in exile: "על נהרות בבל שם ישבנו גם בכינו בזכרנו את ציון" ("By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept, When we remembered Zion") (Ps 137.1). For Loya, this water is drying up at its very source. The "head" of the faucet is not even damp, and the pipe makes the sound of "the end of the water." The Jews in exile vow that if they do not remember Jerusalem, the Center of Jewish religious life and the site where the Temple stood, "תדבק לשוני לחכי" ("[I]et my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth [*le-khiki*"]") (Ps. 137.6). Loya operates the faucet with ease, but there is no water for her parched throat—her tongue is cleaving to her palate. Such is the sound "Khkhkhhhhhhhhhhh," as in the word *le-khiki*, and which also begins the title of the novel, "Heatwave" (*Hamsin*) and runs through the titles of all of the chapters.⁷² The references to the "head" of the faucet recall the continuation of the same vow, "אם לא אעלה את ירושלם על ראש שמחתי" ("*im lo a'aleh et Yerushalyim al rosh simḥati*, "If I set not Jerusalem Above my chiefest [*rosh*, lit. head of] joy") (Ps. 137.7), paralleling the structure of the beginning of Loya's declaration, "*im lo eshteh miyad amut*," "If I do not drink immediately I will die"). Such a vow forces the recognition of one home and one homeland above all else, the imposition of a binary relationship that this novel, and the off home, challenges and opposes.

Avigur-Rotem conceptualizes the off home in her rejection of the polarized extremes of homeland and exile, as well as the refutation of the glorification of home as always a place of refuge, security, and comfort, in other words, as home as *heimlich*, *homely*. Loya had spent her life in the air away from "home," physically and emotionally distanced from her friends, her

⁷² *Hamsin*, *Hasidut* (Heatwave, Hassidism); *Hevrah/Haverah*, *Humus*, *Heshvan ve-Hatsavim* (Peer Group/Girlfriend, Hummus, [month of] Heshvan, and Squills); *Harasim ve-Halomot* (Pottery and Dreams); *Hanukah* (Hanukkah); *Halon ba-Horef* (A Window in Winter); *Hasrah* (Cloudiness); *Ham*, *Ham Yoter*, *Ham Me'od* (Hot, Hotter, Very Hot); *Harikhah* (Scorching); *Humah Adumah* (Red Heat); *Hai* (Alive); *Hatimah* (Conclusion)

family, and her past. In this sense, her “unnatural” life is untenable. When she does return “home,” she is confronted by the realization that “home” is an elusive and incomplete concept. Davidi’s physical house is invaded by aerial roots, many of them undisclosed (the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Holocaust, both with overlays of discrimination and deterritorialization), and these roots are literally destroying the home. In searching for comfort and security at her mother’s home, she is even more estranged from these feelings there, and her “telling” of her story is likewise unreceived and unrequited by a mother with whom she shares no common language. When she returns again to Israel, she begins to free herself from what she “inherited”—Davidi’s ashes and Davidi’s house, though with respect to the latter, the choice was made for her. The roots destroyed the house to the extent that the house is condemned by the city council.

Loya returned to Israel in order to, as Adriana reminds her, make right some mistakes of the past or to conclude some unfinished business. In unlocking the doors to Davidi’s house, Loya learns that in real life, “home,” as a symbol of resolution, completion, and perfection is overly romanticized. As Jean-Christophe Attias and Esther Benbassa, in *Israël imaginaire* (*Imaginary Israel*, 1998), point out regarding this ontological longing for the “Promised Land,” that such a yearning continues to “haunt,” in the Derridean sense, even those Jews who live in Israel:

Israël, Terre promise, Terre sainte, consolation de l’exil. Le rêve s’est incarné, et . . . est devenue réalité. Une réalité qui, d’ailleurs, n’a nullement tué le rêve. . . . [l]e rêve continue pas moins de hanter l’esprit aussi bien des Juifs de diaspora que des Israéliens.

Israel, Promised Land, Holy land, consolation of the exile. . . . The dream has been fulfilled, and has become reality. A reality that, moreover, has in no way killed the dream. . . . [t]he dream no less continues to haunt the minds of diaspora Jews and Israelis alike. (Attias and Benbassa 10)

The “myth” of the homeland continues at the same time as it remains realistically unrealized. Loya, through Davidi’s haunting, comes to realize, however, that even though “home” is not attainable as she imagines it, that “flying” and running away from her “roots” (familial, historical, national) are likewise unsustainable. In bequeathing Loya his house and his remains, Davidi guides Loya to allow incompatibilities and imperfections to coexist. Davidi ordered Loya to put to rest his remains—to find a way not to reconcile the past but to live with its irreconcilability—and in leaving her with a dilapidated home, he led her down a path to the off home. It is only after Loya begins to uncover the buried truths and to tell her own secret story, even if it remains secret because of her mother’s incapacity to receive her language, that Loya begins to change tactics and embrace fragments and liminal spaces in a way that she was afraid to do before.

Loya’s decision as to Davidi’s remains serves as evidence of this evolving attitude. Returning from the airport, quintessentially a *non-lieu* under Marc Augé’s terminology, a non-place devoid of history, Loya strategically chooses to release him among the ruins of Betar, destroyed in 135 CE, the last stronghold of the Jews, led by Bar Kokhba, against the Romans. Addressing Davidi and referencing his notebooks in which he had studied this historical event, Loya remarks:

כאן אשאיר אותך – בביתר של המפות העתיקות – בין שברי השיש – היית מאמין? – אחרי כל השנים האלה מבצבצים עוד מן החול, משויפים ומוחלקים בידי המים, . . . לידם שברי חרס, עדיין מחוספסים ליד, אבל אם היה עליהם פעם משהו – שם או חריטה או תבליט – הכול נשחק, נמחק, אבד, . . . כאן עגנו ספינותיו של אלעזר בן חרסם – בר-כוכבא הרג אותו (?) לא האמנת, גרסת חז"ל!! התרסת, כן, זה המקום – אני . . . מוציאה מן המזוודה את הפיקסים ושבה לרדת אל הים; . . . בעיניים עצומות אני פותחת את הפיקסים ומטה אותו ומפזרת את שאריתך לרוח –

[h]ere I will leave you – in the Betar of the ancient maps – among the fragments of marble – would you believe it? – after all these years they still poke out from the sand, polished and smoothed by the hands of the sea, . . . next to them fragments of earthenware, still rough to the touch, but if there was ever anything on them – a name or engraving or relief – everything has been eroded, erased,

lost, . . . here the ships of Eleazar ben Harsom anchored – . . . Bar Kokhba killed him (?) you never believed, the version of the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud!! You protested, yes, this is the place [*makom*] – I . . . bring out from my suitcase the pyxis and go back down to the sea; . . . with closed eyes I open the pyxis and tilt it and scatter [*mefazeret*] your remains to the wind. (Avigur-Rotem 371)

Loya's decision that this historical site of ruins and war "is the place" contrasts with the anonymous and ahistorical *non-lieu* of the airport, from where Loya just arrived, and where she used to spend so much of her life. This also recalls and contrasts with the association of "makom" with physical *place* and non-physical divinity, highlighting the similarly liminal way in which Loya buries Davidi without burying him, scattering him into the wind. It is no coincidence, moreover, that the Hebrew word for "diaspora," "פזורה" (*pezurah*), comes from the same root as "to scatter," "לפזר" (*lefazer*), which comes through in Loya's declaration that "this is the place." Loya effectively leaves Davidi in an "open grave," like the ficus tree that was uprooted in Davidi's garden, but now, this is constructed as potentially productive. Davidi's notes, symbolically composed in and haunting, in a Derridean sense, the margins, highlight the inability to grasp a complete, full picture of what happened at this site, and the remnants still present there are partial representations of what used to exist and, in some ways, still does. Like the Holocaust stories that will never be fully uncovered, this is another story that will forever remain partial, but Loya is not afraid of this partiality anymore. Loya releases Davidi precisely here, in a "place" but also into the wind. The destruction of Davidi's house will force Loya to embrace this off home, to break away from the sharp dichotomies of home and exile and to allow and even value partial stories. Davidi's house is destroyed, even as it still stands, and her mother's home is hardly a place of comfort and security for her. In effect, Davidi bequeaths her not a home but the off home, permission to allow the voices of a partial history to still speak without the only objective as for the story to be concluded or resolved, an impossible feat. In the

same way, freeing Israel from the myth of the *homeland* allows it to be an *off homeland*, untethered from a historical mission it cannot accomplish. The final sound of the novel, resonant throughout in the title of the book and of the chapters, is not only the sound of the “end of the water” but also a very Semitic sound, common to both Hebrew and Arabic and fairly uncommon in many European languages, although notably present as well in Germanic and Slavic languages. These languages represent the core tensions at stake in the off home in the context of this novel and represent a more melded society than it represents itself to be.

Derrida’s concept of *hauntologie* (hauntology), a play on *ontologie* (ontology), which he proposed in his 1993 *Spectres of Marx*, is a productive framework for conceptualizing the off home that Davidi, by bequeathing his house, passes down to Loya. Hauntology refers to the lingering nature of the past and the ways in which the present, temporally and spatially, is “haunted” by the past. However, unlike much previous scholarship that proposes it as a diasporic concept,⁷³ I challenge that approach—or rather, I open it up to the aspects of it that reach beyond the diasporic element. I read the way in which the Derridean specter, which is both present and absent and here and not-here, resists resolution or concretization as particularly fitting for the off home, which, in the same way, circumvents borders and boundaries. Importantly, and what distinguishes Derrida’s specter from similar spectral theories, hauntology proposes no ultimate resolution or exorcism of the haunting presence.⁷⁴ Instead, for Derrida, the specter is a part of being—of ontology—that just *is*. The specter, of and as a trace, continually changes form rather than representing a closed reality.

⁷³ See for example, articles by Zoé Whitley (2014), Anita Harris Satkunanathan (2018), Linda Revie (2018), and Polo B. Moji (2019) (bibliographic information can be found in Works Cited), among many others.

⁷⁴ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s “phantom” predated Derrida’s “specter” but emphasized an ultimate solution or revelation. By contrast, Derrida’s “specter” emphasizes the impossibility of resolution. Colin Davis explains that “[f]or Derrida, the ghost’s secret is not a puzzle to be solved The secret is not unspeakable because it is taboo, but because it cannot not (yet) be articulated in the languages available to us” (Davis 378-9).

Heatwave and Crazy Birds is a novel that argues against the possibility of true arrival or conclusion. Regarding Derrida's hauntology, John Wylie argues:

[t]he ghostly, or the spectral, . . . , is, always, *revenant*. ' . . . because *it begins by coming back*'. The spectral ushers in an endless process of returning, without ever arriving. In neither coming from somewhere nor going anywhere, the spectral constitutes an incessance that belies origins or ends: a haunting. (Wylie 171)

Loya's father continues (or perhaps begins) to speak only after he is corporally gone, through the diaries he left, and which Davidi, only in death, shares with Loya. Derrida, in fact, originated the concept of hauntology based on writing, which he theorized as composed of "traces" of meaning that are always-already present, constantly changing, and yet-to-be interpreted. Davidi's haunted house, the ficus tree and its roots, the Czech language, Loya's mother, and the survivors' stories all exist as specters whose meaning is ultimately unsolved and unconcluded; Loya never arrives at the end of these journeys. Loya recalls the way in which Israeli children's books used to end: "תם ולא נשלם היה כתוב בספרי הילדים בתחתית העמוד האחרון, תם, הייתי מסבירה לעצמי, כלומר, נגמר, הסתיים, "concluded but not completed would be written in children's books at the bottom of the last page, concluded, I would explain to myself, which is to say, finished, over, and not completed" (Avigur-Rotem 305). Loya continues to explain that stories always continue even after they end—for example, "המשיכו הגיבורים להתגבר, התחתנו, נולדו להם ילדים, התעשרו או יורדו, "the heroes continued to be heroic, they got married, they had children, they got rich or lost their assets or got sick or up and journeyed to another land, to Palestine, for instance – ") (Avigur-Rotem 305). With this, Loya indicates that all stories, even "concluded" ones, are at best, partial; such are the stories of those who were present founding the State of Israel, but are now clinging to the myth of a homeland of completeness that defies the very basis on which it was built. The off home releases the ghosts into the wind, giving them a "place," but an unfinished and unburied one. Instead, they are

suspended, like air, which is always present and at the same time, invisibly detectable; finally, they are scattered, but not “diasporic”—that is, not waiting to return to or arrive at completion. Like a gust of wind after it blows away, the air remains, concluded but not completed.

“Nothing Seemed to Have Occurred”: Histories of Homelessness in Teresa Porzecanski’s *Perfumes of Carthage*

The Jewish immigrant experience to Uruguay is one of Porzecanski’s principal personal and academic interests. An anthropologist by training, Porzecanski authored many ethnographies. Among those that depict the history of Jews in Uruguay are her *La vida empezó acá: inmigrantes judíos al Uruguay* (*Life began here: Jewish Immigrants to Uruguay*) and her *Historias de vida de inmigrantes judíos al Uruguay* (*Life stories of Jewish Immigrants to Uruguay*). She also written about other marginalized groups in Uruguay, such as in her *Historias de exclusión: afrodescendientes en el Uruguay* (*Stories of Exclusion: Afro-descendants in Uruguay*), coauthored with Beatriz Santos. *Perfumes of Carthage* reflects these interests and portrays social and political marginalization, emphasizing such themes as racism, sexism, and classicism.

In addition to the focus on these subjects, *Perfumes of Carthage*, like *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, thematizes home by placing the family house at the center of the novel. The novel traces the experiences of Nazira Mualdeb, immigrant to Uruguay and matriarch of the family, as well as the flourishing of several generations of her family as they mature in and adapt to life in the new country. At the end of the novel, Lunita, Nazira’s granddaughter who inherits the family house after the passing of the rest of the family, symbolically casts the key into the sea from which the family had arrived, in a gesture of disinheritance of the physical structure of the home.

Previous scholarship regarding Porzecanski's *Perfumes of Carthage* centers on the role of the recovery of memory and of female resilience in assimilating in diasporically-situated Uruguay. For example, Renée Scott focuses on the importance of recovering historical memory, concluding that the novel resolves with Lunita recovering the collective memory of her ancestors and essentially adopting Uruguay as the new homeland, "cuando Lunita, habiendo recuperado su pasado, abandona para siempre el ruinoso hogar de sus mayores" ("when Lunita, having recovered her past, abandons forever the ruinous home of her elders") (Scott 390). Debora Cordeiro Rosa similarly concludes that the novel resolves with Lunita's successful assimilation into Uruguayan society:

Lunita is the representation of the newly integrated generation. She works in an office, has more education than her mother and grandmother, is a native speaker of Spanish, and is a native born Uruguayan. . . . The circle is closed. The dead can find peace, the ones who remain can start a new circle. (Cordeiro Rosa 3)

Miriam Rocío Montoya likewise describes the novel's resolution in terms of the recovery of cultural identity and assimilation into Uruguayan society: "a través de la memoria y de los sueños . . . , las mujeres aspiran a recuperar su identidad judío-sefardí, a la vez que se adaptan a una nueva vida en el Uruguay e intentan integrarse a esta nación" ("through memory and dreams, the women aspire to recover Judeo-Sephardic identity, at the same time as they adapt to a new life in Uruguay and attempt to integrate into this nation") (Rocío Montoya 71).

Based on my theory of the off home, I read Porzecanski's novel differently and argue against the idea that the novel comes to any resolution; instead, the concept of resolution is replaced by a continuum of past, present, and future that interact with rather than attempt to dominate each other. Furthermore, in addition to the dissolution of the idea of resolution, the novel in turn dismantles binary relationships in which a choice is forced between one extreme or the other. To this end, the novel presents three principal relationships that represent this

dynamic: male-female, center-margin, and homeland-exile/diaspora. The novel associates patriarchal dominance and situating men at the center of society with the idea of a homeland and the nostalgia it evokes, even as women largely are confined to the physical home; meanwhile, at the margins of society are the women, socially and culturally repressed and largely isolated or disregarded by their male counterparts, indicative of exilic or diasporic positioning. The power of *Perfumes of Carthage* lies not in the privileging of diaspora (assimilation) nor in the favoring of the marginal; rather, by the end of the novel, the polarized concepts are nuanced and neutralized such that the opposing ideas themselves are dissolved. I argue, then, that at the end of the novel when Lunita tosses the key into the sea, she sends back the ideas of both homeland and diaspora as well as those of center and margin, and in so doing, she embraces the off home in her radically divergent approach.

The Mualdeb family immigrates to Uruguay in the 1920s from Syria. The voyage across the ocean connects this journey to other historic diasporic movements of the Jewish people, for example, the Biblical exodus from slavery in Egypt and the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Notably, Nazira's husband, José Sus, likens the waters that carry them to Uruguay to the flood of Genesis that marked that beginning of a new world:

José Sus tuvo una idea clara respecto del mar: se trataba de aguas del diluvio primigenio las que. . . traían consigo memorias de aquel primer fin del mundo. El buque se desplazaba en la inmensidad con sus trescientos peregrinos arracimados sobre el piso de la bodega para tercera clase semejante a un nuevo arca que intentara salvar con último gran gesto una escueta humanidad.

José Sus had a clear idea regarding the sea: it was the waters of the original sea that brought with them memories of that first end of the world. The ship moved in the immensity with its three hundred pilgrims bunched together on the floor of the third class hold similar to a new ark attempting to save with a last great gesture a simple humanity. (Porzecanski 37)⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Citations from Porzecanski will be from *Perfumes de Cartago* (*Perfumes of Carthage*) unless otherwise noted.

José Sus likens these waters to the primordial waters of the flood, imbuing them with a diachronic connection from almost the dawn of humanity to the current ship of poor, third class refugees of an unstable world hoping to (re)create a paradise in Uruguay, which they were expecting would prove “una tierra que no conocía el odio ni el estigma. Una tierra sin mal” (“a land that didn’t know hate or stigma. A land without evil”) (Porzecanski 37). José Sus and his fellow travelers seek a utopia, which, as they will later discover, does not exist, either in the past or in the future. At the same time as likening the voyage to the waters of the flood, José Sus also thinks about another journey on sea “hacia una melancólica tierra prometida” (“toward a melancholic promised land”), already raising subtle suspicion regarding an Edenic promised land that will provide a haven or paradise once and for all, especially based on past Jewish historical experiences:

[n]ada parecía haber ocurrido entre el viaje de Abram Neftalí Sus, el padre del padre de su abuelo, escapado del Reino de León hacia poco más de cuatro siglos, y este viaje suyo ahora. ¿Acaso no era el mismo mar, el mismo oleaje, y hasta podía jurarse que se trataba de la misma, inasible, inmensidad?

[n]othing seemed to have occurred between the voyage of Abram Neftalí Sus, the father of the father of his grandfather, who escaped from the Kingdom of León a little more than four centuries ago, and this voyage of his now. Was it perhaps not the same sea, the same surge of waves, and he could even swear that it was the same, inconceivable, immensity? (Porzecanski 38)

At the heart of José Sus’s contemplation is the emphasis on the idea that “nothing seemed to have occurred” across time and these various voyages of travelers attempting to save themselves from destruction—calling attention to the false hope of the paradisiacal myth of “home” as much as the historical inhospitality of the new land. This migration is yet another in a series of lateral moves that does not change the course of history. Symbolic of this historical and patriarchally translated trajectory are the names of the men invoked. The name José (Joseph) alludes to the

Biblical exodus when Moses carried Joseph's bones out of Egypt (Exod. 13.19).⁷⁶ The Talmud further interprets that the Red Sea split upon "seeing" Joseph's bones (Bereishit Raba 87.1).⁷⁷ José Sus is connected to the sea, possibly the same sea of the Biblical flood, the Biblical exodus, the Spanish expulsion, and the current "exodus." José Sus' ancestor is symbolically named Abram, the original name of the Biblical patriarch Abraham, who leaves Ur (located in modern-day Iraq and where the ailing Nazira fantasizes herself to be near the end of her life) and travels with his family to the land of Canaan (which encompassed many regions of the Levant, including Syria, José Sus and Nazira's native land). In this passage, we discover that Abram was expelled from Spain and forced to travel on "this same sea" to another land that hopefully "did not know hate or stigma," a dream unrealized as his descendant, four hundred years later, embarks on a similar voyage with the same goal, another indication that these are the same waters in which nothing occurred in between. Further symbolic of this is the fact that this voyage culminates in José Sus repeating the Mosaic pattern of a patriarch who leads his people only up to, but himself not meriting to enter, the Promised Land, as José Sus prophecies accurately, "No llegaré a pisar la tierra nueva sino sólo a contemplarla como hiciera el patriarca en Canaan" ("I will not come to set foot on the new land but only contemplate it as the patriarch in Canaan might have done") (Porzecanski 38). José Sus dies before having the chance to enter Uruguay.

By contrast, Nazira's mission is somewhat more pointed, as she attempts to reach a new land that not only "does not know hate or stigma" in a religious sense but also in terms of social values and education for women, especially for her four daughters, three of whom are aboard the ship, while the fourth awaits them in Uruguay. Reflecting on the women in her own family,

⁷⁶ "And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for he had surely sworn the children of Israel, saying: 'God will surely remember you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you'" (Exod. 13.19).

⁷⁷ Psalm 114 states: "[w]hen Israel went out of Egypt. . . [t]he sea saw [] and fled" (Psalms 114.1, 3). Accordingly, the sea saw Joseph's bones and fled (Bereishit Raba 87.1).

herself included, she contemplates the gendered reality that the tablecloths she brought with her have experienced more of life than the women who embroidered them; Nazira considers that the cloths:

cruzarían el mar como nunca lo habían hecho su madre ni la madre de su madre, viejas gitanas de peregrinajes terrestres, bordadoras de manteles, trapos que vivieron más que ellas mismas, para ver esas tierras de beatitud donde una hija suya y la hijita de su hija comían en digna paz todos los santos días del Señor.

would cross the sea as neither her mother nor the mother of her mother had ever done, old gypsy women of wanderings across land, embroiderers of tablecloths, cloths that had lived more than they themselves, to see these new lands of bliss where a daughter of hers and the little daughter of her daughter ate in dignified peace all the blessed days of the Lord. (Porzecanski 26)

These garments represent Nazira's dreams for herself and, more importantly, for her daughters and granddaughters. Nazira was propelled into a loveless arranged marriage and had been disallowed an education or proper profession. She, like José Sus, sees Uruguay as a land of promise, but for her, the principal issue is gender equality, and on her deathbed, Nazira conjures up the image of the faces of each of her four daughters, which appear as if:

esculpidos en las escalinatas de la ciudad de Ur: cada una de las figuras parecía ilustrar lo que había sido un destino particular, despegado de las trazas de ascendencia, y a la vez que liberado de esa marca, condenado por los tiempos infaustos, cada uno a una clase distinta de desventura. Viudeces, solterías, pesados lazos conyugales, desvíos, se adivinaban en cada uno de sus retratos.

sculpted in the stairways of the city of Ur: each one of the figures appeared to illustrate what had been a particular destiny, unstuck from the traces of ancestry, and at the same time as being liberated from that mark, condemned by ill-fated times, each belonging to a distinct class of misfortune. Widowhoods, spinsterhoods, tiresome conjugal ties, strayings, were discernible in each of their portraits. (Porzecanski 10-11)

The hopes that Nazira has for her daughters are foiled for each daughter in a different way.

Nazira's overarching prayer that her daughters and their children would be liberated from their culture of chauvinism, instead of equalizing in Uruguay, is simply rebranded in the same

patriarchal terms. For this reason, Nazira points to the figure of each of her daughters as having been sculpted in Ur, in Abrahamic times, from which, as José Sus has also determined, “nothing seemed to have occurred” between then and now.

Ironically, though Nazira hopes that her daughters in Uruguay will find themselves “liberated” from the “mark” of their lineage, the foundation of their voyage to Uruguay itself is tied fundamentally to a patriarchal relationship. It is by physically subjugating herself to men that Esterina, the oldest daughter, earns enough money to bring the rest of her family over as well as to leave her abusive husband and to support her daughter independent of a husband. While Esterina is not wholly proud of her work, leaving her mother in the dark about her job, she appreciates the freedom she has found in this lifestyle in which she is no longer tied down to a man in marriage: “Esterina pensaba que, a pesar de todo, su trabajo era una suerte de protección contra el infierno que había sido su matrimonio” (“Esterina thought that, despite everything, her job was a sort of protection against the hell that had been her marriage”) (Porzecanski 48). In this way, while the text recognizes and details the horrors of prostitution, especially for those forced into it unwittingly, Esterina displays resourcefulness as an independent woman as well as an emotional freedom from domineering men—“los hombres le inspiraban una piadosa indiferencia. Eran seres parciales, incompletos” (“men inspired in her a pious indifference. They were partial, incomplete beings”)—even as she is tied to them physically. Nevertheless, despite this gesture toward independence, at the heart of this independence are, after all, the demands of men. Furthermore, she works under the direction of a Syrian male compatriot and friend of her father, Don (Mr.) Zaquim Salam, who, speaking “en un castellano pleno de pes y de bes invertidas” (“in a Spanish rife with inverted p’s and b’s”) (Porzecanski 35), injects Esterina’s

lifestyle in Uruguay with an inescapable Syrian paternal dominance that even comes through while speaking in the Spanish language of the new country.⁷⁸

Jasibe, Esterina's sister, like Esterina, suffers from an unhappy (though not physically abusive) marriage. While Jasibe cannot control the actions of Jeremías Berro, her husband, while he is outside of the home, particularly as he seeks affair after affair, Jasibe takes control within the home, for example, by physically blocking her husband's romantic advances, donning "ropas que la envolvían con lazos y pasacintas" ("clothes that wrapped her with ties and a garter belt") to make herself literally impenetrable (Porzecanski 42). Jasibe's body, the only thing that she can truly control, begins to get fat as her body becomes a means of asserting her own reality. Jasibe uses her kitchen to create worlds, listening to songs and stories from other lands while she cooks. When she eats, she savors her food:

Jasibe comía lentamente como cumpliendo con un deber anterior, y sentía cada bocado descender dentro de su cuerpo y producir el placer de los placeres, ese momento único de saciedad iniciado en la urgencia descrita de Edén. Comía como quien devora lentamente la experiencia del mundo, y transforma su propio cuerpo en ese mundo.

Jasibe would eat slowly as if fulfilling an a priori duty, and she would feel each bite descend within her body and produce the pleasure of pleasures, that unique moment of satiety initiated in the urgency described in Eden. She would eat like one who devours slowly the experience of the world, and transforms their own body in that world. (Porzecanski 77)

⁷⁸ Porzecanski does not mention directly but makes multiple implicit references to the infamous, abusive, and exploitative Jewish prostitution ring known as the Zwi Migdal (1880s-1930s), which brought young women from Eastern Europe, mainly Poland, to South America, primarily Argentina, with the promise of better lives and then forced them into prostitution. For more about the Zwi Migdal, see Nora Glickman's *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman* (2012). This is not the case for Esterina, though she meets many young girls who suffered such an experience. Near the end of the novel, Don Zaquim kills himself, and near the body is a newspaper article from 1925 announcing, "Arribo de nueve traficantes polacos de prostitutas gringas y de treinta y cinco mujeres al Puerto de Montivideo" ("Arrival of nine Polish traffickers of foreign prostitutes and of thirty-five women at the Port of Montivideo" (Porzecanski 146), perhaps suggesting his involvement in the ring. Esterina, by contrast, becomes a prostitute somewhat by choice, though her options were limited, as a means to escape her abusive husband and earn a living that did not require having received a formal education.

Jasibe adapts her body to serve her in a way that her “home” and her reality do not provide. Jasibe initiates an affair with a foreign contraband fig dealer, the Edenic and yonic fruit symbolizing both perfection and transgression. The fig broker teaches her to savor her body and “a saborear los higos y las pasas desde su cuerpo malhecho” (“to savor the figs and prunes from within her misshapen body”) (Porzecanski 78). In this way, Jasibe in fact learns to challenge the image of perfection and to allow her body to serve in a way that the supposed Paradise itself, which in reality is far from it, cannot. Furthermore, upon serving the food she creates, even as her chauvinistic husband partakes first, Jasibe and the other women who help her in the kitchen feel powerful and in control of Jeremías’s body in that moment. For example, while Jeremías delivers a condescending speech, Jasibe and the other women who cook the meals reflect on the space of the kitchen that they shared together as “un mundo entero no perturbado por los hombres” (“an entire world undisturbed by men”) (Porzecanski 94). However, even though they manage subtly to subvert the patriarchal dominance in controlling the kitchen and the food, they still only operate from within that home and that limited sphere of control that is still tied to the physical space interior to the home and the man who is at its center. Furthermore, the only pleasure Jasibe derives is in transporting herself to another world and another time.

The same is true of Jeremías, her husband and the quintessence of the patriarchal presence in the novel. “Perfumes of Carthage,” Jeremías’ titular perfumery, is firmly rooted in destruction, as “Carthage” symbolizes. In his estimation:

Perfumes de Cartago no era sólo un nombre para recordarle a la clientela trozos de mundos olvidados por el ajeteo febril de las personas en sus rancios sudores montevidianos. Más que eso, Jeremías Berro había querido invitar a la gente a soñar con travesías y lugares distantes, ya por mucho tiempo, desaparecidos. . . .

Perfumes of Carthage was not just a name to remind the clientele of slices of worlds forgotten by the febrile hustle and bustle of the people’s rank Montividean sweat. More than that, Jeremías Berro had wanted to invite people to dream of

journeys and distant places, already for a long time, disappeared. . . . (Porzecanski 27-28)

Jeremías Berro symbolizes the patriarchal culture that Nazira had hoped to leave behind.

Emblematic of this is the fact that even though the novel is mainly a story of women, the title of the entire novel represents the arc of a male character. He represents the past in his alchemical invocation of lost worlds rather than in bringing into his art the world in which he lives now, which for him is simply rank and sweaty. He does not “invite” his clients even into his own culture but rather into worlds that have been forgotten or destroyed, preferring to converse with his perfumes rather than human beings (Porzecanski 101). Furthermore, he uses this talent to manipulate women: “ese mismo aprendizaje le había predisposto para calibrar nuevas fórmulas cuyas resonancias en el olfato de las mujeres provocaban drásticos cambios de conducta” (“this very training had predisposed him to calibrate new formulas whose resonances in women’s sense of smell provoked drastic changes in behavior”) (Porzecanski 100). Jeremías Berro, by virtue of his perfume, intervenes in the lives of the women who buy his potions, influencing indirectly even the intimacy of other couples and their homes (Porzecanski 102), and thus placing himself, invisibly, at the center of their lives.⁷⁹

The chauvinistic portrait of “home” that Jeremías Berro represents comes to a head in his relationship with his rival of thirteen years, Don Alegre Carmona, another Syrian Jewish expatriate living in Uruguay who had wanted to marry the mentally challenged Camila, one of Nazira’s daughters, but whom Jeremías Berro had refused (Porzecanski 121). Jeremías Berro had also taken all of Alegre’s savings to open his perfumery and never repaid him. When the

⁷⁹ Partaking somewhat of the public affairs of the country, Jeremías fabricates “un artefacto explosivo” (“an explosive artefact”) on behalf of rebel guerilla soldiers. The device is “una mixtura de alta combustion pero fuertemente aromatizada” (“a high combustion mixture but strongly perfumed”) (Porzecanski 143). Jeremías’ explosive device leaves one person dead, but beyond this, he provides no significant contributions.

pregnant Camila enters Alegre's textile shop, now thirteen years later, Alegre irrationally concludes that Jeremías had taken advantage of her, and in an attempt to defend her honor, looks to the Almighty, Alegre's "center," but, perceiving no reply, develops a "deseo infausto de corregir a Dios" ("an ill-fated desire to correct God") and kills Jeremías Berro at the wedding of Alcira, Nazira's granddaughter (Porzecanski 171). Alegre's dependence on prayer to dictate his every action, juxtaposed with the irrational feud over Camila, underscores the destructive rather than constructive trajectory of patriarchal control on the family and continues to further demythologize the concepts of "home" and "center" as representative of the ideal.

Alcira's wedding likewise serves the same role, as it is a continuation of the life that Nazira hoped to leave behind in Syria. Alcira's wedding represents at once a culmination and a perpetuation of the repressive traditions against women whose role, after marriage, was to reproduce and maintain the house. Imagining the only future possible for herself within this cultural structure, Alcira resigns herself to the marriage arranged by Lidia, her mother:

[e]l novio no importaba mayormente. Ella tendría la mesa puesta en los mediodías y la cena pronta en las noches. Ella escucharía los relatos de entusiasmo y hastío alternados, del inminente esposo. Ella sería aquel lugar de la casa al cual se regresa de todos los peregrinajes. Nada menos. Y luego, también, esa suerte de centro del cual desarraigaban los hijos, empujados al futuro por misteriosas fuerzas nefastas.

[t]he groom didn't matter for the most part. She would have the table set at noon and the dinner ready at night. She would listen to the stories of alternating enthusiasm or boredom, of the imminent husband. She would be that place of the home to which one returns from all of the wanderings. Nothing less. And then, also, that sort of center from which the children uprooted themselves, pushed toward the future by mysterious terrible forces. (Porzecanski 112)

Two generations later in Uruguay, Alcira is still playing out the dynamic that Nazira did not want her descendants to inherit, as she was also forced into an arranged marriage. However, the irony of Alcira's situation is that in Uruguay, part of "una América que se burlaba de los ritos"

(“an America that mocked rituals”), the sociocultural conditions were not even such that an arranged marriage made sense or was easily facilitated. Lidia “había insistido” (“had insisted”), searching for two years with the help of an old-fashioned matchmaker to bypass the majority of the eligible bachelors of Judeo-Syrian descent who now blended in with Uruguayan society at large and “sonreían con cierto desdén por el camino de sus padres. Ya no hablaban el árabe y del hebreo, solamente lo que habían memorizado durante sus infancias” (“smiled with a certain disdain for the path of their fathers. They no longer spoke Arabic or of Hebrew, only what they had memorized during their childhoods”) (Porzecanski 88). Lidia resists Uruguayan culture and refuses to allow her daughter to become part of the Uruguayan cultural fabric. On her wedding day, looking in the mirror, Alcira sees her own reflection superimposed on the images of three of her female ancestors, described nostalgically but at the same time, in antiquated terms, with clearly delineated and gendered roles for women and men. At the same time, she is doused in a perfume created by her uncle, Jeremías, reminding her of these ancient and patriarchal worlds that, paradoxically, her mother insists on maintaining.

Lunita, the other granddaughter, provides a sharp contrast to Alcira. Both granddaughters were raised in Uruguay, but only Alcira is prohibited from leaving the gendered confines of Syrian culture. Lunita is the character who most depicts the off home. Thirty years after the plot of the novel takes place, Lunita inherits Nazira’s house, and walking through it alone, she senses “una presencia humana fantasmal” (“a ghostly human presence”). The Judeo-Syrian culture that had been lived in the house is perceptible but in a redefined *unheimlich* and even stifling way, like the suffocating, parched pipes that end Avigur-Rotem’s *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*. Unlike the nostalgic tastes and smells that Jasibe and Jeremías conjure up, or even Nazira, who “en su agonía de muerte” (“in her death agony”) fantasizes that she is back in Ur

(Porzecanski 8), for Lunita, as she walks through the family house, the same “nostalgic” sensations of a “home” that never existed as imagined are off-putting and even sickening:

[v]ino a su mente una imagen de uvas Un cúmulo de uvas encerradas ahora en la cavidad de su propio paladar Todo anunciaba ese sabor que pronto explotaría en su mente inundado de jugo los intersticios de su insoportable nostalgia, hollejos quebrados nadando a la deriva. Caliente calor descendía lentamente dibujando el esófago, quemando con excesiva dulzura las entrañas. Y reventaban ahora las uvas contra el paladar, las molares triturando la pulpa azucarada, gelatinosa y latiente como la de una larva.

Los promontorios de restos susurraban frases en un lenguaje desconocido. Supo que estaban vivos y que murmuraban de ella.

[a]n image came to her mind of . . . grapes A pile of grapes imprisoned now in the cavity of her own palate Everything announced that taste that soon would explode in her mind flooded with the juice of the interstices of their insufferable nostalgia, broken skins swimming adrift. Warm heat descended slowly drawing the esophagus, burning with excessive sweetness the entrails. And the grapes now burst against the palate, the molars grinding the sugared, gelatinous, and beating pulp like that of a larva.

The mounds of remains whispered phrases in an unknown language. She knew then that they were alive and that they were murmuring about her.
(Porzecanski 183-184)

Lunita’s pained consumption of the imagined grapes that bring on a bitter nostalgia contrasts conspicuously with Jasibe’s savoring of the fruits that brought about the imagined images of nostalgic perfection. Lunita breaks through this nostalgia, and the physical structure of the house with its phantasmal voices, memories, and tastes indicates for her a social structure imported from Syria and many generations before that that has remained virtually intact. The sea voyages were meant to take her ancestors to a series of lands of promise that existed in a constant state of desire—once they arrived in Uruguay, for example, Nazira, Jasibe, Jeremías, and Lidia spent their lives recreating tastes, smells, and social dynamics of worlds only physically left behind. Esterina, the first to arrive, subjugates herself to men at the same time as she considers them only partial, taking steps to embrace the opportunity of a new country even as she participates in the system of oppression of women that her mother hoped she would escape. Esterina’s name comes

from the Persian for “star,” an already dead entity, representative of the past, that takes its light from the moon. By contrast, Lunita’s name comes from the Spanish (and Ladino/Judeo-Spanish) for “moon,” indicating at once a continuity of that lineage (further marked by the fact that both mother and daughter use their names in diminutive form) but at the same time a reverse of that dynamic, with the descendant giving rather than taking light.

Lunita’s name is also symbolic of the rupture of patriarchal dominance in the association of the sun with the patriarchy and the moon with a more feminine presence. As Sara Read and Catie Gill write, “[W]omen have long been associated with the moon – with its tidal pull, and the binary thinking that places it secondary in majesty to the sun” (Read and Gill, par. 4). Likewise, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in *The Newly Born Woman* highlight the dichotomy that values men over women (represented formally in the poem below) and therefore celebrates the sun, associated with the active, patriarchal figure, over the moon, the passive, feminine counterpart.

Where is she? Activity/passivity
 Sun/Moon
 Culture/Nature
 Day/Night

 Father/Mother
 Head/Heart
 Intelligible/Palpable
 Logos/Pathos.
 Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.
 Matter, concave, ground—where steps are taken, holding- and dumping-ground.
 Man

 Woman
 (Cixous and Clément 37)

Lunita, the feminine moon, subverts this passive role by taking a firm stance and decisive action with regard to the status of the house. She concludes, “Los lugares son prisiones perversas”

(“Places are perverse prisons”) (Porzecanski 184) and, “Los lugares, antes que en su sitio, están dentro de uno mismo” (“Places, rather than at their location, are within oneself”) (Porzecanski 181). Therefore, Lunita:

arrojó la llave con el gesto heleno que enviaba un disco a los confines de la tierra. La llave flotó por un segundo en los remolinos del viento turbulento, luego giró sobre sí misma como un trompo, con cierto garbo o elegancia, para caer finalmente en vertical, en medio del mar que gritó cual alma hendida.

hurled the key with the Hellenic gesture that sent a discus to the ends of the earth. The key floated for a second in the whirl of turbulent wind, then spun on itself like a top, with a certain grace or elegance, to fall finally upright, in the middle of the sea that screamed like a soul slit open. (Porzecanski 184)

Lunita believes that the physicality of “home” as well of the myth of home as perfection and paradise is a detriment. While her ancestors in Uruguay brought in lost worlds, like the eponymous Perfumes of Carthage, to Uruguay, Lunita uses a gesture from a lost world and “hurls” the key to the house back to the sea from whence her family arrived and that represents the concept of a homeland-exile dynamic. Scott interprets the symbolism of the key as a call back to the 1492 expulsion from Spain:

[e]l texto está organizado en torno a la llave como signo metafórico, que los sefardíes asocian a las casas que sus antepasados debieron abandonar en España en 1492 y cuyas llaves dice la tradición que algunos de ellos incluso conservaron y fueron pasando orgullosamente de generación en generación.

[t]he text is organized around the key as a metaphorical sign, that the Sephardic people associate with the houses that their ancestors had to abandon in Spain in 1492 and whose keys, traditions says, some of them even conserved and went passing down proudly from generation to generation. (Scott 392)

Jeremías Berro’s is one mention of a key when he founds Perfumes of Carthage, and now, Lunita, in an opposite gesture, throws back the key. However, importantly, she does not lock the house. Rather, she rejects the all-important weight of the physicality of the house and the peregrination from intended home to intended home after the repeated loss of a home-land.

Moreover, this moment is also a violent call back to Moses parting the sea leaving Egypt in Exodus on the way to the Promised Land: “[a]nd Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided” (Exod. 14:21). After the Israelites pass through the sea, the sea closes up (“And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared” (Exod. 14:27). With Lunita’s gesture, Lunita opens up the sea again. This is not to diminish the trauma of slavery or persecution but rather to walk back the fundamental trajectory of historical desire, and many of the moments of historical oppression that Nazira attempts to escape in fact serve to destabilize the idea of home and its idealized and mythical singularity.

Nazira’s fantasies taking place in Ur serve to underscore that the dependance on a physical homeland has not generated a productive cultural dynamic. As Laura Febres observes, “[e]stas visiones permiten recordar que el pueblo judío ha estado en muchísimos lugares después de Ur en Mesopotamia y no sólo ha sufrido en ese peregrinar, sino que se ha enriquecido con el contacto humano que le han proporcionado otros pueblos” (“[t]hese visions allow for the reminder that the Jewish people have been in many places after Ur in Mesopotamia and not only have endured that wandering, but also have been enriched by the human contact that other peoples have provided them”) (Febres 974). That is to say, the historically physical “home”-lessness of the Jewish people has not been a wholly negative experience, but rather, that the Jewish people have thrived even scattered about various regions of the world by participating in the local culture while maintaining many of their own cultural practices. In *Perfumes of Carthage*, there is very little interaction with the local population until Lunita, and in those prior instances of local interaction, it is to bring in in the lost, broken worlds of the past rather than to

propel them into a richer future. It is highly symbolic that Lunita's name exists both as a Spanish and Jewish name, which reverses this trend, not by rejecting or privileging one "world" over the other but by pushing back against not just the concepts of patriarchy and center but also against the polarity of their binary counterparts. In this way, this final gesture on Lunita's part—discarding the key to the house while at the same time leaving the house unlocked—shows Porzecanski's novel not as a wholly diasporic work but as an off home one, without reaching resolution, with Lunita making space for the past without bowing down to it or recreating it, carrying "the places" of her family with her at the same time as she continues to forge an independent identity as a Uruguayan Sephardic Jewish woman.

Conclusion

The texts discussed in this chapter conceptually challenge "center" and "home" as contrasted with "margin" and "exile/diaspora." Additionally, the authors reposition homes and homelands as vectored sites of unwavering desire. In her preface to *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers From Iraq*, Nancy Berg writes:

[t]hese works explore the polar opposites of home and exile. . . . Home means family and friends, shared customs and affection. Exile is the alienation both from the past—the home left behind—and the present surroundings; it means discontinuity in time and space.

The literature of transition portrays the process by which exile becomes home, not by a return to the past but by reconciliation with the present. Complementary narratives reveal the process by which home became not-home and led to the mass exodus of the Iraqi Jewish community. (Berg xiv)

The texts studied in the chapter conceptualize the off home in the rupture of this long-standing but mistaken and unproductive belief that home and exile must be "polar opposites." The glorification of "home" as an inherent site of security, comfort, and peace is fundamentally flawed, as is the idea that the "alienation" found in exile is inherently present and the opposite of

the “home” that was left behind. Furthermore, I argue against the idea Berg puts forth that after exile, the comfort of the supposed “home” can be recovered, reconciled, or (re)created. Instead, I propose an alternative, which I have labeled the off home. I have illustrated this idea through an alternative to the understanding of home and exile as inevitable polar opposites, and the off home thus reconceptualizes the understanding of the life of the displaced subject as *only* in terms of home and diaspora. Finally, the “discontinuity in time and space” that Berg believes to be incompatible with home is not incompatible with the off home; rather, such discontinuity opens up a creative and collaborative space of fluid and adaptive identity construction.

In Halfon’s *The Polish Boxer* and *The Pirouette*, the idea of “home” and “center” are called into question in the various ways in which the narrator obsesses over-romanticized and over-ethnicized identities (Guatemalan Indians, Jews, Roma, Blacks), only to discover that the archetypes do not exist in reality. The concept itself of reality as a center of cognitive conclusion is destabilized, most notably through the story of the titular pirouette and that of Eduardo’s grandfather’s survival in Auschwitz, as the fictive narrator and the real author thematize the “story” as a bridge to construct and deconstruct the idealized reality through words into a concept that is even more evocative in its susceptibility to improvisation and its unique capacity not only to reflect but to create meaning.

In *Heatwave and Crazy Birds*, Avigur-Rotem does this by zeroing in on the concepts of the mother, motherland, and mother tongue, emphasizing the untenability of these concepts as centers of identity construction. The overwrought focus on “roots” is metaphorized by the literal destruction of the house that Loya inherits by invasive roots that grow upward rather than downward. Furthermore, like Halfon’s Eduardo, Loya discovers reality to be incomplete and partial at best, to the extent that even her name is a representation of a “reality” created at the

harbor when she immigrated to Israel. At the beginning of the novel, Loya believes that her choices are rootlessness (her life as a flight attendant living mostly out of hotels) and rootedness (the house and the roles of wife, mother, and daughter). As the novel progresses, she realizes that she will have to construct her identity out of portions of each of these extremes and in a way that reaches beyond these falsely dichotomic presentations.

Finally, in Porzecanski's *Perfumes of Carthage*, we see a similar thematization of the house as a center of identity, representing patriarchal dominance and a domineering past from which Lunita, the matriarch's Uruguayan-born granddaughter, disentangles herself as she inherits the house but actively disinherits the sense of "exile" that is contained in the phantasmal voices, images, and smells of the past trapped within the house. The women of the novel fight against these "centers" in their own ways, but, nevertheless, find themselves weighed down by customs and codes they cannot escape. Lunita, whose name is both Spanish and Judeo-Spanish, and is the first woman in the family to work outside the home and receive formal education, begins to reverse the trend by throwing the key to the house back into the sea that represents the series of peregrinations her ancestors have faced in search of "home." In disinheriting both the home and the exile, Lunita achieves a different way to identify as Jewish, Syrian, Uruguayan, and female independent of the nostalgia for a "home" that never existed as the Eden it was reimagined in hindsight to be.

In his work on "multidirectional memory," the idea that collective memory need not function competitively and that memory is "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing" (Rothberg 3), Michael Rothberg argues against the paradigm that memory is singular—that there is one objective version of it. Among other objectives, his argument promotes "the need both to acknowledge the conflicts that subtend memory and work toward a

rearticulation of historical relatedness beyond paradigms of uniqueness” (Rothberg 14). In many ways, this chapter and the authors studied here treat the concept of “home” in this “multidirectional” way as well, disallowing the reduction of “home” into a moment of resolution. For this reason, these works, rather than working up to a climax after which the thematic tensions resolve, function more in terms of Halfon’s unexploded bomb. The terms “home,” “exile,” “diaspora,” “center,” “margin,” and similarly binary concepts lose their paradigmatic uniqueness. Instead, the off home offers, as Rothberg might say, a more multidirectional relationship between and among these extreme and seemingly opposed models; within the off home’s liberated framework, the choice is no longer *between* them, but rather *beyond* them.

Coda: In Non-Conclusion—Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

The concept this dissertation proposes, the off home, responds to a reality of diaspora, displacement, and migration studies that historically has been overlooked: the misconception that once lost, “home,” if it ever existed as such, can ever be recovered, restored, or recreated. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym has explicated that nostalgia is a longing against the progression of time:

[a]t first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time. . . . The nostalgic desires . . . to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.

. . . . The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. (Boym, *Future* xv)

Boym, basing her observations and her own lived experience of leaving her home country, the Soviet Union, under the expectation that she “would never be able to return” (Boym, *Future* xv), interrogates what it is that one longs for in imagining and yearning for a return. She argues that it is not in actuality a return to a place that nostalgia entreats but rather an intense desire to return to an earlier, ostensibly happier or simpler, time. Boym then warns that the actual home that was left is often not the home that nostalgia embellishes it to have been.

In this dissertation, I argue that diaspora studies as a field engages in this same embellishment of home and homeland, nominating diaspora, standing in binary opposition, as a state of being, of living the pain of having left (*algia*) and the presumptive desire to return home (*nostos*), to the physical one that was most immediately lost or to one borne of more figurative or symbolic representation. Through this dissertation, I decenter the conversation around diaspora, home, and the politics of belonging away from this a priori romanticization of home and

homeland and a focal point of departure in terms of identity politics at the personal and national levels.

In nuancing the homeland/diaspora binary relationship, I propose an alternative—the off home, which at the same time disrupts the dichotomic center-margins relationship, elaborating a spectrum of multiple, shifting vantage points, each at the threshold of transforming and adapting to constantly-shifting and subjective realities. The off home is multidirectional and fluid and affords the displaced subject a different way of understanding their place in the world, not in terms of lack, but in terms of possibility. To be sure, displacement can be and usually is traumatic, but the assumption that the “home” that was lost was necessarily a source of comfort, security, and belonging is reductive and belittles lived experience. Instead of insisting on a “return” to a “home” or “homeland,” as the field of diaspora studies tends to do, the off home bypasses the authoritarianism of these concepts for the sake of identity construction on new terms.

I take the Jewish diaspora as the point of departure and a case study for reconceiving of the relationship of the displaced subject to the lost “home.” The Jewish diaspora is also interesting because the Land of Israel exists religiously and symbolically as well as in concrete form as the modern State of Israel; that said, not every Jewish person conceives of a relationship to each of these manifestations of the ethnonational or religious homeland. The Jewish diasporic community is diverse both within Israel and outside of it. This dissertation puts forth the concept of the off home and works through the ways it is conceptualized in texts written from within Israel, the “homeland,” and from Latin America, an equally diverse region whose Jewish populations are also often doubly and triply displaced and who, in contrast to the Jewish majority in Israel, form an ethnic minority in Latin America. Moreover, Jewish immigration to Latin

America in the twentieth century was motivated largely by the same reasons—notably, the pogroms in Eastern Europe and Nazism in most of Europe—as Jewish immigration to Palestine and later Israel. The incompatibility of the idea of home with the reality of building one gives way to what I label the off home.

Although I use Jewish literature from Israel and Latin America as the focus of the dissertation and my discussion of the off home, the off home is relevant to any discussion of displacement. As previously mentioned, global migration and refugee crises affect many people who are then confronted with what they lost, what home means, and how to adapt to life and “belong” in a new place. One of the instances of displacement that is becoming increasingly and strikingly relevant is migration caused by climate change. Justin Locke explains the impact of climate change on human populations:

[t]he Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identifies the most adverse primary impacts of climate change as rising sea levels, influx of drought, greater propensity of flooding and an increased intensity and frequency of violent storms (IPCC 2001). . . . However, the secondary impacts of climate change, specifically general health decline and more unreliable food and water supplies that influence population movements, may prove to have the most adverse effects on vulnerable populations at risk. As the IPCC noted as early as 1990, the greatest single impact of climate change on the human population could be on human migration (IPCC 1990). (Locke 171)

In other words, Locke points out that the more obvious (primary) effects of climate change, such as the natural disasters that ensue from the temperature rise, cause human displacement as people are forced to relocate. Discussing the impact of Hurricane Mitch (1998) and Hurricane María (2017) on the populations of Puerto Rico and Honduras, David Griffith writes:

[a]s a result of the storms, migration became more fully incorporated into the livelihoods of Hondurans and further enhanced the livelihoods of Puerto Ricans, exposing both groups to the growing nationalism and racism of anti-immigration campaigns of the 21st century. (Griffith 399)

Griffith continues to explain the many ways in which environmental crises affected internal politics and the socioeconomic life of the inhabitants, leading many to leave and also forming a migration industry (Griffith 409). For example, Griffin writes, “In Puerto Rico and Honduras, migration has become a way that households add to their livelihood constellations, . . . and facilitate the continued provision of ecosystem services” (Griffith 413). In other cases, such as the small Pacific islands Locke discusses, including the Republic of Kiribati, inhabitants have no choice but to relocate because of crises such as rising sea levels. This in turn “result[s] in high population densities, straining the provision of services such as sewerage and water supplies, which has overwhelmed local mechanisms and capacities to cope” (Locke 172). Whether the migration is internal or international, those who are forced or choose to relocate due to primary or secondary environmental crises must then adapt to their new surroundings in the wake of having lost their “home.”

There is a great deal of literary production that address the issue of migration stemming from climate change and the ensuing environmental disasters that have followed. The off home can be conceptualized in this way in Indian anthropologist Amitav Ghosh’s 2019 novel *Gun Island*. The novel tracks environmental crises beginning as far back as medieval Europe and Asia (a true event known as the Little Ice Age) and repeating in the contemporary world, leading to widespread migratory events, affecting both people (and their languages) and wildlife (snakes, spiders, whales, and dolphins, in particular). The portrayed migrations are impermanent and continue to be upended by further crises, including progressing climate change, leading in turn to additional migrations. The novel’s protagonist, Dinanath Datta, an Indian immigrant to New York, returns “home” to India and Bangladesh in pursuit of the real and fictitious roots of the legend of the Gun Merchant, forced to flee to Gun Island to escape the wrath Manasa Devi, the

goddess of snakes. With help from his friends Rafi and Cinta, he traces the legend to medieval times—to an Indian man fleeing Manasa Devi accompanied by a Portuguese Jewish merchant expelled from the Iberian peninsula. Together they face multiple displacements, ending up in Venice’s Jewish Ghetto, which serves in the contemporary story as a new “home” to many Bangladeshi migrants, as well as Cinta’s home’s home where Dinnath is staying while working as a translator for a documentary about migration. The novel culminates as Dinath and his friends, in the midst of a hailstorm and a tornado, both uncharacteristic of the season or region, succeed in convincing the Italian government to grant passage to a boat carrying refugees, one of whom is their Indian friend Tipu, who had worked as a smuggler of migrants across India and Bangladesh before himself fleeing, in part due to climate concerns and in part due to human rights ones. Many of the refugees on the boat have been displaced because of climate events, such as earthquakes, cyclones, famine, and flood.

The novel also addresses human agency regarding climate changing and its inevitability. Cinta compares human reliance on technology and convenience that uses up the earth’s resources to a kind of demonic possession. She tells Dinnath:

“[e]veryone knows what must be done if the world is to continue to be a livable place, if our homes are not to be invaded by the sea, or by creatures [. . .] Everyone knows. . . and yet we are powerless, even the most powerful among us. We go about our daily business through habit, as though we were in the grip of forces that have overwhelmed our will; we see shocking and monstrous things happening all around us and we avert our eyes; we surrender ourselves to whatever it is that has us in its power.” (Ghosh 237)

Cinta thus tells Dinnath that part of the responsibility for addressing the refugee crisis caused directly by climate change lies with humans, who are contributing to it so unrelentingly. Dinnath and his friends’ lobbying of the Italian government on the part of the refugees to admit them to the country and shelter them is likewise a call to take responsibility for these changes and the

people who are losing their livelihoods and their homes, often themselves mired in various forms of ecological and political turmoil, because of it. It may not be possible to halt climate change and the ensuing refugee crisis, but people can play a role in slowing it down or mitigating the resulting traumas.

The off home responds to this crisis, as well as to increasing rates of displacement in general, in its call to reassess how we conceive of home—both in terms of what is left behind and what lies ahead. This dissertation’s recasting of diaspora studies responds to the global historical moment in which we find ourselves: in the midst of migrant crises for such varied reasons as famine, war, genocide, gangs, poverty, disease, climate change, environmental disasters, persecution, regime change, and countless others, how we think about the aftermath of displacement—whether in the context of our own experiences or in wielding empathy and compassion for the experience of others—has become more relevant than ever to the extent that the current language we have has become, in many instances, outdated. I do not mean to claim that the concepts of diaspora or homeland are no longer relevant, either in the world or in the academy. Svetlana Boym was fond of quoting Vladimir Nabokov in saying, “[I]f parallel lines do not meet, it is not because meet they cannot, but because they have other things to do” (qtd. in Boym, *Off-Modern* 4). I suggest the off home as a case of parallel lines not meeting—as another lens through which the displaced subject might view their world and another way in which the global community might advocate for those who do not or cannot imagine a return “home.”

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