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Jewish Belonging and Mourning: Separating Spaces of the Living from Places of the Dead in Myriam Moscona's Tela de sevoya

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Abstract: When a family member dies, the loss is of a person. But in cases where that person embodies the last living link to an exilic homeland – a not uncommon occurrence for Jews in the Americas – the death of a parent can also mean the loss of a home. Mexican writer and daughter of Sephardic immigrants, Myriam Moscona chronicles the experience of her unmooring grief after the generations before her die in her novel *Tela de sevoya* (2012). Compounded losses cause Moscona and her house to become haunted, and the journey seeking roots that that her mourning compels her to is as much about a search for spaces of identity as it is about combatting haunting. Moscona goes to the Balkans to record the last native speakers of Ladino and to see the places her parents once called home. While the trip does not give her new spaces of Jewish belonging in the form of these recovered homelands, it does allow her to divide the past from the present, to separate the places of the dead from the spaces of the living. Her process reveals a complex vector where haunting, belonging and Jewishness meet for children of Diaspora living in the Americas and ultimately proposes an alternative territory where an anchoring Jewish identity might inhere.

Keywords: Haunting, Myriam Moscona, Tela de sevoya, Ladino, Jewish identity

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Jewish Belonging and Mourning: Separating Spaces of the Living from Places of the Dead in Myriam Moscona's *Tela de sevoya*

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When a family member dies, generally, the loss is of a person. The major work of mourning centers on learning to make a life after that person is gone, learning who you are without them, structuring or recognizing your world now that they are not in it. Such a loss can be devastating, bearing all the perils and pains of grief. But for descendants of exile, or Jews in Diaspora for whom an instance of uprooting is temporally close, the death of the last of the emigrating generation implies the loss not just of people but of a place: the place, or rather space of home.[1] This deeply identifying site shelters its dwellers in a real and abstract sense. In the context of exile and certainly for children of Jewish immigrants to the Americas, the meaning of home transcends the rooms that define it. It is a metonymic stand-in for a homeland, and it is through family that this complex and tenuous construction is fashioned. Such a sense of home combines a distant referent – or many, particularly for Sephardic Jews, for whom Spain, Israel and other countries all figure as former homelands – and a daily space forged by people through memory and practice. Family is the key element to these components.

When the grandparents, father and finally the mother of Mexican journalist Myriam Moscona all die, she, by proxy, loses a home as well. In her autofictional novel, *Tela de sevoya* (Premio Xavier Villarrutia, 2012), Myriam chronicles dealing with this grief, its dangerous dips into melancholia and haunting, and her processes of accepting loss and restructuring a space of Jewish belonging for herself that is not mired in the places of the dead.[2]

A first generation Mexican, Moscona descends from Sephardic Jews who once called the Balkans home but were forced to leave by the Holocaust. As is considered within the novel, this provenance, with its layers of exile, complicates Myriam's sense of belonging, a feeling of

[1] This distinction between space as a site where living happens and place as something more associated with that which is fixed and immobile is central to my thinking about how we ground identities in sites and to how haunting takes hold and might be eventually dispelled. I base my understanding on Michel de Certeau's work in *The Practice of Everyday Life* and will go into detail later in this article.

[2] In my estimation, *Tela de sevoya* is a work of autofiction, though Lockhart has a more intricate evaluation of where to situate this work generically, see Lockhart (2018: 114). Autofiction erases the distinction between author and narrator / protagonist. Since unraveling this is not the goal of this article, I will generally refer to the writer as Moscona and the narrator / protagonist as Myriam, but, as the woman and her narrator are often blended, the line here will also not be scrupulously maintained.

identifying plenitude frequently anchored in a particular land and / or reinforced by genealogy. The death of her mother – her last living link to a theoretical space where her Jewish family belonged – has a deterritorializing effect. It unmoors Myriam and leaves her sense of Jewishness homeless. Her resulting inability to deal with her compounded losses causes Myriam, and more specifically her home in Mexico, to become haunted. Handling grief then becomes a question not simply of accepting a world and a self in which her loved ones are no longer living, but of resolving haunting. If she allows the space of living to remain a place of the dead, it may keep their spirits alive and the connections they maintained close, but it will also spell her own death. Myriam / Moscona therefore journeys to the Balkans ostensibly to search for the spaces and voices of her Jewish ancestors, but the trip can be read as specifically aimed at putting an end to her haunting. Seeing these places of her family and her people's past helps her to situate them in the past. Ultimately, the trip allows her to return to Mexico with a new foundation for her sense of Jewish belonging, one that is not inhabited exclusively by the dead nor situated in a far off or imaginary Bulgaria, Spain or Greece.[3] By addressing her haunting, Myriam makes a certain peace with her losses and is able to recognize a different space of Jewishness rooted both in ancestry and – though not physical – territory.

Defining Home

Belonging characterizes the space or place of home and is important not only for its implications of safety, but also because it is from here that identity emanates. For exiles and their children, forging such a home can present a particular challenge, and exile – whether distant, imagined, repeated or internal – is a defining characteristic for many Jews. Nostalgic longing for a lost homeland is part and parcel of Jewish identity, especially in Diaspora. Family thus becomes important in matters of belonging and home particularly in cases where group identity does not have the luxury of an enduring space in which to inhere. According to Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin's article 'Diaspora and Jewish Identity', physical territory is not its only potential founding site. They explain the two traditional modes of constructing group identity: "It has been figured on the one hand as the product of a common genealogical origin and, on the other, as produced by a common geographical origin" (Boyarin / Boyarin 1993: 693).[4] They differentiate between what they call a diasporic identity, maintained through a lineage of culture

[3] Moscona's family comes primarily from Bulgaria, but, as her journey shows, she can also trace her immediate family to Greece and her ancestors to Spain and Israel.

[4] Their analysis is also an ethical proposal involving Zionism. They advocate for a Jewish identity founded in genealogical origins over geographic ones, calling the first a diasporic identity because it "affords the possibility of a flexible and nonhermetic critical Jewish identity", while the second "merely reproduces the exclusivist syndromes of European nationalism" (Boyarin / Boyarin 1993: 701).

covetously preserved, and autochthonous identity, which binds a community by tying it to the land. Diasporic Jewish identity is passed down in the genealogical way the Boyarins describe. Legitimated by blood, it is a heritage by which customs, histories and modes of conceiving the world are passed from one generation to the next. Foods, rituals and language sustain the notion of generations stretching back to an essential, identifying past and also carve portable Jewish spaces into any place of exile. These active cultural artifacts facilitate a practice of memory and transform the spaces in which they are realized into homes, but blood, that is family, constitutes the validating site. Myriam experiences this type of home in her childhood. Her family maintains Jewish customs in their new, Mexican space and speaks the languages they carried with them for generations – namely, Bulgarian and Ladino. These practices, particularly Ladino, form the adult Myriam's memory of her childhood; she cannot recall the physical spaces and "los cuerpos que rodean mi *chikez*" without invoking her family's Jewish-Spanish language, for in this first reference to her childhood or *chikez*, she speaks of it in Ladino (Moscona 2012: 18). When the last of the preceding generations dies however, Myriam experiences an abrupt ending of the genealogical line. To maintain a feeling that a genealogically produced space of belonging is one that can be inhabited, a sense of life must be preserved; otherwise, it risks turning into a mausoleum, a gravesite of dead rituals.

Despite the distinction referred to here between genealogically and territorially produced homes and the attention given to the identifying living space forged by Myriam's family in exile, when her family dies, the author / protagonist actually momentarily loses both types of homes. Taken strictly, the idea that "a common genealogical origin" and "a common geographical origin" remain separate in the identity supporting mechanisms outlined by the Boyarins is naïve.[5] Site-specific Jewish customs, like making matzo ball soup and speaking Yiddish or making chreime[6] and speaking Ladino, maintain the idea of a precise location for that community, and people imagine these practices as taking place in these countries. Therefore, children and grandchildren of exile do not just reach back through their genealogical line for their sense of Jewish identity, inheriting or pulling its practices to them to create a sense of home, but can reach back through generations to a particular place where they feel that identity to inhere. The Balkan home still exists as a referent for Myriam even though she has never been there. With the generations physically connected to the family's Jewish Balkans now gone, her link with even an imagined Jewish space of belonging – the one carried on in

[5] I would add that I do not see this as the goal of the Boyarins' emphasis on this differentiation, nor would I call them naïve.
[6]This is a spicy fish stew from Tunisia often served on *Shabbat*.

Mexico through familial memory and cultural practice and the one existing only in a far-off place and time – is severed as well.

Haunted House, Haunted History

The deaths in her family, culminating in that of her mother, cause Myriam and her home to become haunted. It is this fact, rather than a rejection by Mexican society, which pushes her out of the comfort of her home in Mexico.[7] Myriam's haunted house is a particularly telling symbol as a home is the living touchstone of the self. For Bachelard, the house is a space of intimacy and security; it is where the psyche is made and the metaphor through which it may be read.[8] In the first house in which she lives without her family, Myriam experiences many of the marks of haunting: the presence of ghosts, the overlapping of multiple times and places, and the feeling of *Unheimlich*, or the uncanny. Freud gives his original definition of *Unheimlich* by first establishing its opposite.[9] *Heimlich*, literally homelike, can be variously translated as "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar" or "[i]ntimate, friendly, comfortable […] arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house" (Freud 2001b: 932f.). *Unheimlich* arises where these feelings have been unexpectedly eroded, when we find the strange and unfamiliar precisely where we anticipated feeling most at home, when things defy the parameters we have unquestioningly accepted as defining their existence.

Myriam's unhomely home changes shape and dimension at night. She is convinced that "[p]or las noches la casa crece por dentro, la descubro siempre con asombro y temor" (Moscona 2012: 148). The house's modifications permeate her dreams. In one, she is struggling with her sight and stumbling through her house to find her glasses, when she encounters a hole in her bathroom wall. Upon walking through it, she wonders why she did not know about this "especie de casa adentro de mi casa" (Moscona 2012: 154). This house within a house assaults Myriam with the uncanny and rips from her a sense that her home is a simple space that waits to welcome her. Additionally, this haunting bears the threat of rewriting previous time; she notes that it seems that this haunted space was always there.[10] Her only now discovering it places a

[7] Though feeling rejection from the new, 'native' land is a common consternation in Latin American Jewish literature produced by this generation, it is not present in this work. It does appear in a number of narrative works, even when it is not the main theme. Examples are too numerous to generate a comprehensive list in this space, but to name a few: Kleinburg (2004), Nissán (1996; 1992), Scliar (1980) and Fingueret (1999). A number of critical works also touch on this topic, obliquely or more directly, in addressing Latin American Jewish works in general. Examples include: Friedman (1996), Feierstein (2011) and Goldberg (2011).

[8] See Bachelard (1969: 15, 72)

[9] This defining of *Unheimlich* by its opposite is particularly significant to Vidler in his analysis of "uncanny homes". He places great importance on seeing the two as so intimately connected as to occasionally bleed into one another, see Vidler (1992: 25-27).

[10] See Moscona (2012: 155).

fundamental strangeness in her dwelling space, for it has perhaps contained this unknown space at its core all along. Her nighttime experiences of the house expose Myriam to some of the most disquieting components of haunting. The ghostly destabilizes space and time and her perceptions of them; it injects doubt into the fundamental components of reality; it causes her to suddenly question how she understands the building blocks of her existence in her world.

In addition to the invasion of the uncanny and the modifications of space and time which already point to a situation of haunting, Myriam's house has become a home to specters, specifically, the specters of her family. The ghost of her mother visits her there, and though the protagonist misses her, "[n]o logro entender qué hace mi madre metida en mi casa. Verla a los ojos, oír su voz, me produce escalofríos. Quiero decirle cuánto la extraño, lo feliz que soy de volverla a ver, lo difícil que ha sido llevar el duelo" (Moscona 2012: 149). Though welcome, the presence of the mother wandering her halls is eerie, producing confusion and fear. She is, after all, a ghost. In the dream in which she finds the room beyond her bathroom wall, the protagonist sees her grandmother Victoria sitting calmly in a rocking chair. Victoria tells her where to find her glasses – rankling her briefly for always losing them – and Myriam leaves, kissing her grandmother on the head, albeit with a feeling of confusion and slight disgust. While the protagonist does not comprehend why this space is there nor what exactly it has told her, after seeing her grandmother, she notes, "comienzo a entender todo lo que vi atrás del muro: una extensión de mi casa del otro lado de la pared, un espacio habitado por una muerta, siempre cerca de mí" (Moscona 2012: 157). Here, she connects the issues of her space to the population 'living' there. She begins to understand that her home is a space inhabited by a dead person, a dead person who is always with her. In reality, her home is the dwelling of a number of dead: her father, her grandmother, her grandfather Ezra whom she never met, and her mother. In the same dream that revealed Victoria persistently remaining inside her home, Myriam sees the family photographs that line her house's walls. Within, her other family members move, uncannily animated inside their pictorial memorials.

This haunting shows a family that is dead but not dead. In a sense, they continue to live and affect Myriam's home, so it might be reasonable to assume that they do not fill her living space with death precisely, but rather, transform the quality of the life within it. Perhaps we can read them as continuing the work of establishing a Jewish home and genealogical connection as they were able to do while still alive. But here, they seem to do so in the extreme, literally modifying the space into physics-defying shapes and keeping the past, more specifically its people, from truly dying. They are memory and movement. They provide constant reminders of the past that are necessary to founding a space of belonging that connects to a larger people. For Derrida,

this touches on one of the positive, or at least most ethical, components of haunting in general. He sees haunting as a mode of inheritance by which we are forced to accept the responsibility of honoring the past, the task of keeping it present. For Derrida, our ghosts watch us and make demands, as Hamlet's father's ghost does when he delivers to his son the injunction to avenge him, to undertake the actions to deal with the "time out of joint" produced by his death and to "set it right" (Shakespeare 2016: 190f.). Such ghosts bequeath a sort of binding inheritance, threatening always to return and verify that their mandates are being met. This has a few very daunting qualities, for, as Derrida explains "the specter is not simply someone we see coming back, it is someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed, as if by the law" (Derrida / Stiegler 2013: 40). But, it is also a method of enforcing a genealogical connection. In *Escribir hacia atrás: Herencia, lengua, memoria*, Saraceni describes "la idea de herencia como deuda que el heredero contrae con sus antecesores, es decir, como una forma de convivencia con los espectros del pasado que sobreviven en el presente" (Saraceni 2008: 14). This type of inheritance is contracted, like a disease; it afflicts the next generation with a condition that impinges on living unburdened in the here and now, in a simple trajectory of past, present and future that, though potentially productive, also promotes forgetting. But, to accept such haunting heritage is also to be a party in a contract, to participate in a binding promise. This is the ghost that bears an injunction, that demands responsibility, but in exchange it offers a sense of identity, inscribing the inheritor in a genealogy, connecting him or her to a personal, familial and collective history. All of Myriam's ghosts seem to do this, but Victoria is the most astringent voice in this collection of demanding ancestors. A disembodied memory of the grandmother accuses the author / protagonist of forgetting their language and, in Ladino, exhorts her to continue speaking it.[11]

Haunting's power surpasses that of a typical contract for a number of reasons but does so, in particular, through its ability to produce sensations that defy explanation, like the uncanny. It binds its subjects into a history not just by becoming an ever-present responsibility we owe to the dead but by being a responsibility that we feel, a responsibility that persists affectively, a responsibility that exceeds the tidy boxes of reason and language. Gordon's summary casts these disturbing affective powers in a different light:

> [H]aunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition (Gordon 2008: 8).

[11] See Moscona (2012: 215)

Haunting maintains the link with the past not simply as an act of will and not merely as the passage of facts from one generation to the next. Haunting allows for a much more visceral experience of connection and knowledge, one that is closer than words and more emotional than responsibilities. By continuing to inhabit her home, Myriam's familial ghosts offer this 'transformative' connection, as is evidenced in the scenes that feature the simultaneously welcome and disturbing appearances of the mother and grandmother. In these ways, haunting figures a deeply binding identification with the past, its people, their memories and their practices.

We might see the presence of familial ghosts in Myriam's home, as well as their ability to modify the space, as both a continuation of what helped her family find a sense of belonging in exile and as an example of a particularly Jewish mode of connecting to and carrying on an identifying past. Her haunted house combines the mourning of lost loved ones – whether they be people or places – taking on the responsibility of memory and carrying on a visceral association with the story of one's people. The emphasis on memory, especially as a non-passive act, is couched as mandatory in religious texts. Yerushalmi opens his *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* by enumerating the number of times the Bible exhorts practicants to "remember" or "not forget" (Yerushalmi 1982: 5). But this memory moves beyond a simple act of recall of an event or something told; memory is meant to be embodied and the past is supposed to be taken personally. It is meant to acquire the affective or contaminating qualities we noted in haunting in general. During Passover, the story of the Exodus is to be told to children as though it happened to the teller, and sons who do not take on this story as something that happened to 'us', who respond to parents that religious mandates are directed at them and not at him, are considered wicked.[12] Read in this way, haunting takes on a positive valence and may be read as helping Myriam maintain a Jewish home both in how it links her to her familial past and in how it governs her approach to memory generally. The haunting of her house allows her to keep her loved ones close even in death and aids her in her duties as a daughter and a Jew. It helps her to conserve the space of Jewish belonging so onerously forged by her exiled family in Mexico.

The problem is that haunting is dangerous and not conducive to living. Ghosts disrupt life with their constant reminder of death. They threaten to drag us into their world, to contaminate us with their condition. We might die, or worse, we might always be looking backward, permanently stuck in between, or condemned to our own living death. From the psychoanalytic

[12] I am referring here to the *Haggadah*, the text used in the Passover Seder, and its explanation of how to answer children's questions regarding the Exodus story and the Passover holiday.

point of view, haunting is essentially melancholia, a failure of mourning. In a normal process of grieving, an object – whether concrete such as a person or a home or something more conceptual like an ideal or one's liberty – is lost,[13] and the mourner, able to recognize that the entity that is now gone is separate from him or herself, eventually moves on. The melancholic, on the other hand, has trouble maintaining this division. She will continue to carry the lost thing with her; she cannot leave it behind. Abraham and Torok point to these reactions to loss in their own appraisal of mourning and melancholia, which they associate with introjection versus incorporation. Incorporation figuratively takes the lost thing in, and by refusing to see the lost object as distinct, "exempts the subject from the painful process of reorganization" of the self whereby he confronts the loss and reclaims the part of himself that he placed in what is now gone (Abraham / Torok 1987: 126). Unable to distinguish between herself and what is gone, this person is dragged down by it and, as a result, is distanced from life and plunged into a deep, inescapable depression.[14] Such a person becomes psychologically stuck, unable to move forward, because she refuses to separate herself from what has been lost.

In Myriam's case, her figurative taking in of the dead not only bogs her down with their pasts and desires – which, admittedly, as we discussed, is also helpful and ethical – but actually begins to contaminate her with their condition. She begins to wonder, especially during encounters with her various ghosts, if she too is dead. In one dream, she asks the elusive shade of her mother "si estamos muertos" (Moscona 2012: 25), and in another, in which a child version of her loses track of her father at the circus, the master of ceremonies announces in Ladino, "*todos estamos moertos*" (Moscona 2012: 59). The ghost presences of her family infect her with their deaths, a sign of severe haunting in the psychoanalytic paradigm that sets mourning against melancholia. The dream of her father ends with Myriam's brief possession by a voice of terror that she names a "*dibuk*, esos espíritus que son el alma de alguien muerto encajada en el cuerpo de un vivo, obligando a la persona a comportarse como 'otro' y hablando a través suyo con distintas voces" (Moscona 2012: 59). Once she figures out in this dream scene that she is not dead, she is invaded by a Jewish ghost; when proximity to ghosts is unable to kill Myriam, their presence instead takes over her entirely. From a psychological standpoint, sharing her home with ghosts bears the potential to either render her dead or blot out her will and replace it with that of the deceased.

[13] Freud himself gives these examples: "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud 2001a: 243).
[14] See Freud (2001a: 245) and Abraham / Torok (1987: 125).

The here toxic blurring of boundaries forms part of the poststructuralist understanding of haunting as well. While in the psychoanalytic appraisal, the collapse of distinctions is between self and other, the enduring and the lost, the blurring of boundaries in this mode of understanding haunting results from the contradictory and liminal ontology of ghosts. Derrida insists on the specter's status as "this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one" (Derrida 2006: 5). The ghost is interstitial, ambivalent; it incarnates a seemingly impossible ontological status, one of being and not being at once. Derrida explains the consequences of this:

> If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality (Derrida 2006: 48).

By putting the opposition upon which linear chronology rests into question, the ghost not only undoes time as we imagine it, but in so doing, undermines a number of other binaries as well as the assured definitions which rest on them. This way of framing reality is more ethical and more accurate, and, as we have discussed, extremely helpful in maintaining the presence of the past with a certain fullness of detail and feeling. The problem is that since ghosts are "unstable interstitial figures that problematize dichotomous thinking" (Weinstock 2013: 62), they can erode certainty to a degree that no reality becomes habitable. The defining borders and binaries which sustain our existence become so damaged that conceiving of the four-walls of one's house, situating one's living space in a particular frame and with particular attributes of inside and outside, is impossible.

Myriam suffers just such a collapse of personal, psychological, physical and temporal boundaries, and it manifests in her home. This is why the shape of her house changes. This is why the dead remain there and do not depart. To some degree, she admits she has courted this situation. As she stares at a line of cypresses and ponders why her house undergoes strange mutations at night, someone tells her that the trees outside her window belong to the Panteón Jardín. Just as Myriam was contaminated by the ghosts of her parents in the dreams we spoke of above, here, her living space is affected by the contiguity of the cemetery, the place of the dead. Furthermore, it is the place of 'her' dead, turning the revelation into an almost obvious explanation for the protagonist:

> Allí, tras los cipreses, habían enterrado a mi madre hacía once meses y, sin percatarme, elegí esa casa, justo frente a esos árboles, para estar más cerca de ella, sin el menor diálogo conmigo, como un hechizado que sigue una orden, quizá la de mi madre interna, que a partir de entonces apreció en la casa crecida (Moscona 2012: 149).

Foucault would immediately spot something awry in living in proximity to a cemetery in the modern age. In 'Of Other Spaces', he touches briefly on the history of the cemetery especially as it relates to his concept of heterotopias, of which the cemetery is a prime example. Most relevant for Myriam's choice here is Foucault's observation that after the 19th century, cemeteries were moved away from the rest of the living population as the space was associated both practically and theoretically with illness, and proximity bore the possibility of contamination. That a woman living near a cemetery was having trouble maintaining a traditional relationship with time would also come as no shock to the philosopher:

> [T]he heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of break with their traditional time. This situation shows us that the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance (Foucault 1986: 25).

There is ample evidence of the confusion, "dissolution and disappearance" Myriam experiences by living in proximity with the dead. The problem for Myriam, however, is not just one of time but of space. She has conflated the place that her mother occupies with the space of her familial and Jewish belonging. Haunting has caused her to conflate the spaces of the living with the places of the dead.

Michel de Certeau's explanation of space versus place helps to clarify the distinction between these two types of locations and the dangers of allowing one to supplant the other. In his analysis, a place indicates stability;[15] he calls it "a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the *being-there* of something dead" (De Certeau 1988: 118). Places are made up of things that do not move; they are reliable and inert. Space, on the other hand, has to do with movement, vectors and the passage of time.[16] By this distinction, places have the quality of monuments and tombs[17] – they are locations of fixed time and static memory – while spaces are inhabited, full of life. The former aid in creating a discourse of identity that inheres in a homeland. Consider the investment of nations in things like memorials, those immoveable touchstones which feed the narrative of the places in which they are found and shape the people who live there. But memorials, like cemeteries, are literally places of the dead and cannot facilitate the dynamism necessary for living. Still, these places are essential to preserving memory. Nora's understanding of *lieux de mémoire*, though not exactly the same as De Certeau's "places", illuminates the special power of these types of sites, particularly ones whose purpose is to sustain memory:

[15] See De Certeau (1988: 117).
[16] See De Certeau (1988: 117).
[17] See De Certeau (1988: 118).

> [T]hey are lieux in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional [...] [They are] created by a play of memory and history [...] mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual [...] the immutable and the mobile [...] the most fundamental purpose of the lieu de mémoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial [...] (Nora 1989: 18f.).

These *lieux* are constituted by a concrete as well as an imaginative existence. They consolidate around actual places, and their purpose is to fight forgetting, to give a sense of reassuring ontology to the past that fosters productive and affirming memory. Nora's *lieux* are more of a platform for practice, but they share with De Certeau's idea of places a static quality. Sites that "stop time" and solidify a "state of things" make poor homes, for the entirely immobile trends towards death rather than life. The key to unfettered belonging lies in having access to these type of *lieux* while inhabiting spaces. One must have contact with both, but the two must remain separate. When they combine, become blurry or muddled, then haunting occurs. In Myriam Moscona's case, such haunting is particularly detrimental to maintaining a home.

Lands of the Dead and Lands of the Living: Fighting Haunting

Giving ghosts the qualities of *lieux* is in fact one of the main modes of dispelling haunting. The spectral, the missing, the lost but persisting must be given a certain material existence. Saddled with this fixity, this knowable shape, the ghost is rendered fully dead. Investing a present absence with a sense of real existence is, for Derrida, part of what keeps mourning from becoming melancholia; it "consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present" (Derrida 2006: 9). What continues to exist now must be the remains, the sign of definitive death. The journey which compels the author / protagonist away from Mexico ultimately seeks this type of clarity. She initially goes with the aim of recovering a homeland she always felt to be hers, to make real a space of belonging that, until this point, was known only by proxy and in an imaginative sense. As she goes to Bulgaria, she has mixed feelings about her trip, admitting "[m]e inquieta conocer la casa de mi madre en Sofía y después Plovdiv, la ciudad de mi padre, del que perdí toda posibilidad de rastreo. No conservo mayores datos del lugar donde creció" (Moscona 2012: 40). She goes in order to fill in details that, due to deaths like her father's, she has lost the 'trail' or 'trace' of. She continues: "Eso voy a buscar, sabiendo que la imagen se fijará" (Moscona 2012: 40). The "fixing" of the idea of these spaces is key, and both the journey and the book that chronicles it make this possible. For this reason the novel is a "tela de sevoya", which, as one of the epigraphs explains is a home remedy for closing wounds, for lessening pain: "Una telita de cebolla sobre la herida ayudará a cicatrizarla y a

calmar el dolor. Remedio casero". It is a physical metaphor for the psychological process of mourning.

The novel chronicles Moscona's visiting several sites to which she felt herself linked through familial and cultural connections – graveyards and defunct synagogues among them – but the visit to her mother's former home in Sofia perhaps best showcases how seeing these places and 'fixing' their image helps her move forward. Though the scene itself is not without some bittersweet irony. She goes to what she believes to be her mother's old address – Iskar 46 – takes pictures, cries and has a cathartic experience. She does not find her family place as she expects it, but its reality works well enough to give Myriam some of what she needed: the chance to document, the chance to connect. As if fate were making fun of her attempts at control, knowledge and fixity, it turns out that the protagonist has gone to the wrong address. Her mother's house was at Iskar 33, and after her brother reminds her of this fact, she goes to this second address and repeats the whole experience, tears, photographs and all. The mistake and the fact that the catharsis can take place at either site add a certain arbitrariness to the act, robbing the place of its specificity and placing its sacredness and its power almost entirely in the mind of the protagonist. Adding to the ridiculous quality of the moment, to the "tragicómica" sense of the scene (Moscona 2012: 173), in the protagonist's words, Myriam's mother's home has been demolished and turned into a pizzeria, a detail that prevents her from ever having full knowledge of the place nor really picturing her mother there. In a sense, Myriam tries to force the perception of a trace of the past in this space; the space resists her desire to invest it with the qualities of a personal place. There is only the flat, banal presence of a pizzeria. But it still does the trick to some degree; after seeing and standing in this space, in its quotidian reality, Myriam is able to begin to move on, is able to begin to separate her parents' place and time from her own. Perhaps it is the utter indifference of this site that makes her realize that the space she seeks truly is gone. All that remains is the will to remember a place, the place she creates with her thoughts and actions.

We can see the fruits of this mixed experience in the valuable insight she gains from it, what she calls "la revelación de un molino de viento" (Moscona 2012: 178). In the dream that follows, she is in her house (the haunted one in Mexico) and comes upon her mother who tells her "[e]stamos aquí, reunidos, con las manos mordidas" (Moscona 2012: 179). When the narrator asks where her father is, the mother answers "vengo a decirte que no dejes que estas dentelladas también entren en ti" (Moscona 2012: 179). She comes upon the wounded ghost of her mother who in response to her search for her father's phantom, warns her against allowing herself to be wounded as they were. She does not want her daughter to share their condition. After

assuring her mother that she has not been bitten nor had her hands compromised by damage – a significant change from dreams in which she wonders if she is dead like her parents – Myriam continues to try to help her mother, to which she replies "[e]scúchame, tú no hagas nada, hija. Todo se está haciendo en nuestro lugar y en nuestra hora" (Moscona 2012: 180). She tells her to separate their time-spaces, to distinguish her parents' past from her own present and the accompanying spaces / places in which those occur. The ghost appearances of her parents after this scene are goodbyes, assurances that this is the last she will see of them.

Ladino: A New Ground for Identity

At this point, it seems that the Jewish sites of belonging have been limited to the dead, far-off place of the Balkans, an anchoring which frees Myriam Moscona's Mexican home of haunting but also leaves it without the Jewish connection it embodied before. Such an ending might project the moral that separating the places of the dead from the spaces of the living necessitates letting go of having a Jewish space at all. But, this is far from the case, and just as the journey helps the author / protagonist to discover which things belong to the past, its process feeds a construction of the present and future. A desire to record Ladino sparked Moscona's journey. Both it and the novel were made with the sponsorship of a Guggenheim grant to find some of the last native speakers of the language. Ultimately, Myriam Moscona's trip and her working with Ladino help to frame this language as a territory in its own right, turning Judeo-Spanish into a site of belonging by combining a space of life – personal, present and potential – with the traces of a history stretching far back in time.

De Certeau provides precedent for conceiving of language as a type of space. This is in fact one of the main ways in which he explains his distinction between the stable, inert "place" and the dynamic, evolving "space". "Space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, caught in the ambiguity of actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts" (De Certeau 1988: 117). Thought of in this way, it is easy to imagine how language might become a territory of belonging. It exhibits life's dynamism in a certain context. The association of language and belonging also has a long (and admittedly problematic) history,[18] one that wrestles with the coexistence of space and place. Modern

[18] One of the problematic parts arises in the extreme linking of language and peoplehood taken to an extreme. Anthropologists of the first half of the 20th century still operated under the notion that language was part of national identity and that such an identity had an essential character. Combining this concept of identitary essences with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which can be used to justify the idea that a people cannot express ideas for which they do not already have language, the belief in the supremacy of one race or people over another gains a scientific backing in sociocultural anthropology and linguistics. Pereltsvaig and Lewis comment on the persistence of these beliefs in the scientific realm into the mid-twentieth century: "Despite his staunch opposition to scientific racism,

discussions of the association of community identity and language tend to cite this theme as beginning in the 18th century German context, frequently turning to Johann Gottfried Herder as a father of the modern notion linking everyday language with national or group identity.[19] Such thinking was used as grounds for advocating for a German state, tying the legitimacy of homeland to unifying speakers of a common language. For Jews, this issue is more complex.[20] Jewish languages can be linked to Jewish spaces (as an abstract notion of where living happens) without necessarily being physically confined nor reduced to places (i.e.: sites of reliable and supposedly unchanging symbolism). The ideological grounding of a space of language in a place of its speaking is part of what Myriam Moscona grapples with in her return to the Balkans. Her attempt to find its last speakers seems to be a mode of combating a rootless exile by forcing a tangible association of space and place.

Ultimately, she realizes Ladino's true symbolic potential as a diaspora language by coming to define it as a sort of portable 'patria' to which she has and always will belong. Judeo-Spanish is a theme throughout the text and carries personal associations for the author/protagonist that draw together her childhood, her family, the pre-war Balkans, Spain and all Sephardim in general. This is apparent from the first "Del diario del viaje" chapter – all of which are dedicated to her journaling of her trip – in which the protagonist makes reference to the language of her *chikez* and describes it as being amongst the bodies that surrounded her growing up.[21] Her grandmothers spoke it to her as a child, and her parents spoke it to each other. This language formed the fiber of her Jewish home in Mexico and a theoretical Jewish home in the Balkans. But Ladino also extends back and outwards. In her mind, it is the language of many generations

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[Franz] Boas, like [V. Gordon] Childe, remained wedded to the idea that language embodies the worldview of the group that speaks it, revealing its *volksgeist*, or ethnic essence. This idea would be further elaborated by his student Edward Sapir and Sapir's student Benjamin Whorf into eponymous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativism, which claims that language determines thought" (Pereltsvaig / Lewis 2015: 28).

[19] Myhill discusses this briefly, mentioning "the development of what I am calling the ideology of everyday/native language-and-identity, whose first great exponent was Herder (1744-1803)" and elaborating on other thinkers who advocated for similar positions (Myhill 2004: 45). Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) used a similar notion to argue for the racial superiority of the German people based on their language, see Perelstvaig / Lewis (2015: 27).

[20] The use of a common language to justify the creation of a nation state has a certain amount of history in Germany, as we already saw with W. Humboldt and Herder, but it appears as a rallying point – rather than simply a justification of supremacy – in the German Idealist's 'Address to the German Nation in 1806'. See Joseph for a brief discussion (Joseph 2004: 110). In the case of Jews, the linking of language and nation is trickier, due in part to the number of 'Jewish languages' and the acquisition of languages in diaspora. It is not uncommon for Jews (and immigrants) to feel multiple group allegiances manifest especially through the vehicle of language. Arguments for national unity and identity basing themselves on shared language tend to work in the singular, but the history of this is knotty for Jews, Jewish languages and the languages of the countries they called home. It is important to keep in mind that historically for Jews these arguments could ring true while still being complicated by identification with multiple languages. Several theses could be written on this matter, but Myhill's *Language, Religion and National Identity in Europe and the Middle East: A Historical Study* gives a fairly thorough look at this matter with specific attention to histories of national belonging and my article 'Ideologías e identidades en el Léxico Judío Latinoamericano' discusses it as well, see Gartenberg (2017: 110-114).

[21] See Moscona (2012: 18).

in Bulgaria. Surrounded by Bulgarian "pasajeros del avión" that "se parecen a mi familia maternal", she considers "las decenas de generaciones que vivieron en este país y hablaron el judezmo" (Moscona 2012: 17). In this musing, Ladino is the common link among her trip, her family, the current Bulgaria and the historical one. In fact, the novel reveals that this language is the thread of a vast network. When Myriam prepares for her trip, she is contacted by a woman in Israel named Rina who is researching the language.[22] Rina puts her in contact with someone else doing similar research in Bulgaria, a León Karmona who guides her trip and provides her with an archive of Ladino proverbs.[23] The network of people linked to Ladino grows throughout the novel, from researchers to editors of newspapers to speakers and writers in different places. In another "Del diario de viaje" chapter, she quotes several authors and famous thinkers on and in Ladino, from countries as far and wide as Mexico, Bulgaria, France and Syria.[24] Thus, the language represents a past and present network constantly marked by the various environments in which it has developed. It invokes places without necessarily being moored to them. Myriam indicates the traces of the multiple contexts of actualization – as De Certeau might call them – in the numerous denominations for Ladino. It has been called "sefardí, judeo-español, *djudescmo, djudió, djidyó, spanyoliko,* o *spanyolit* y *yahudice* ('judío', en turco)" due to its having existed and developed in so many different regions (Moscona 2012: 47).

The particular spatial-temporal existence of Ladino makes it an ideal territory of belonging for Myriam's sense of Jewish home, for it is widespread and dynamic while still being tied to strong symbolism and history. But as a diaspora language, it runs the risk of being mired in nostalgia and death, things which pull it back towards a problematic type of haunting. Born in exile, this language constitutes a territory not just through the space it makes by being and having been spoken but also by carrying memory. In an interview on the book, Moscona worries that Ladino is thought of primarily as a language used only to invoke lost homelands – particularly Spain – and the Shoah.[25] She comments on this explicitly in the novel, reprinting the comments of Serbian writer Eliezer Papo: "cuando alguien lee un texto en judezmo […] sólo espera encontrarse con el apartado nostálgico, o bien con el dolor de la *Shoá* y, si no encuentra ninguno de estos dos, lo más probable es que abandone la lectura" (Moscona 2012: 139). But, Moscona wants to liberate Ladino from an exclusive association with pain and loss, and what impresses her is its endurance. She comments on this within the novel, noting "durante alrededor de treinta generaciones el ladino se [ha] mantenido en efervescencia pese a que sus

[22] See Moscona (2012: 40).
[23] See Moscona (2012: 43f.).
[24] See Moscona (2012: 133f.).
[25] See Moscona (2014).

hablantes estaban ya integrados en distintos países" (Moscona 2012: 90), and in interviews, pointing at the perseverance of this language past the normal one or two generations of a language in exile.[26] Through her trip and this work that chronicles it, Moscona thus endeavors to make Ladino, particularly 'her' Ladino, a language of life. She uses the language to write original poems – both in this novel and in her poetry – and reprints dialogues and recipes. The language comes from her past and from her community's past, but it continues to form her present context.

The trip helps her separate the Ladino of the past, the Ladino of the dead, from the one that categorizes her abstract Jewish territory as it persists in her current and future plane of reality. This comes from seeing her parents' former homes, giving them a tangibility and identifying them as remains. It comes from choosing to maintain a living legacy through language not as a monument to the dead but as a context and a medium of communication, connection and life. Evidence of the success of her trip in separating the places of the dead from the spaces of the living, in turning Ladino into a territory of belonging informed by history but not dominated by it, comes towards the end of the novel in a realization that she has while standing in a cemetery in the Balkans. She visits the city where her father's maternal family once lived, the once Greek Esmirna (Smyrna in English) and currently Turkish Izmir. She goes to the cemetery and though she does not find her ancestors' names, "[v]arios apellidos me son familiares y sonrío al identificar homónimos de gente que conozco. Están vivos en México" (Moscona 2012: 236f.). In the process of locating her own dead in this place of the past, in seeing that the Balkans is a place of the before, Myriam is able to recognize Mexico as space of the present and the future, specifically for Ladino and Sephardism. Before the journey and after the multiple deaths in Myriam's family, the Mexican presence of Ladino was limited to childhood memories and the words of the dead. When she finally places her ancestors (that is, Sephardic Jews if not specifically her family) here – in a place that houses the dead and honors them as gone – Mexico becomes a space of Jewish life and ceases to be a haunted home. The sound of these Ladino last names lives on in Mexico, and though they bear the traces of the dead, in Mexico they continue not in a graveyard but in living people.

Conclusions: Jewish Belonging in Mexico and the Space-Place of Ladino

In reading Myriam Moscona's experience with mourning and home, it becomes clear that family is key to rooting a sense of belonging for Jews. Particularly in Diaspora, where the modes of imparting a community narrative are not supported by an autochthonous surrounding,

[26] See Vallín (2014).

familial connections are essential to making a Jewish space. For this reason, death can imply more than the loss of a person; it can mean the loss of a home; it can instigate an unmooring that threatens the bereaved with a loss of self. In *Tela de sevoya*, this unmooring manifests as haunting. Though haunting may seem a viable option in replacing the identifying link maintained by a living family, the cost proves too damaging. A haunted house is not a home; Myriam must find a way to separate the places of the dead from the spaces of living. She must physically situate her family's past, positioning it as a touchstone in her Jewish identity and letting go of those who once called it home. This process brings her to a new understanding of Ladino and both reveals an alternative site of Jewishness and allows Moscona to participate in its construction. This Diaspora language thus becomes a site of belonging. Imbued with life and history, movement and potential, this language-space, constitutes a Jewish territory of sorts, one whose linguistic network forms a space that is informed by the places where Jews once lived. Though disposed to haunting and shaped by successive memories, it is not necessarily mired in ghosts. Though it bears this danger – it is continually sought as a means to communicate longing and loss – Moscona's Ladino escapes a simply place-like existence classified only by successive deaths and exiles, for she insists on making it live, on continuing its legacy as a communal meeting space that transcends borders. In doing so, she is able to once more see her Mexican home as a physical site where Jewish belonging may flourish. The people and places of the past inform her space but no longer overwhelm her present.

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