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## Jewish Ancestral Languages and Communicating the Sephardic Experience: The Judeo-Spanish of *Tela de sevoya*

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### Abstract

Judeo-Spanish, the ancestral language of Sephardic Jews, enjoys fewer speakers, literature, and less scholarly attention compared to Yiddish, its counterpart spoken by Ashkenazi Jews. Nonetheless, Judeo-Spanish captures the rich experiences of its speakers through exile, persecution, and perseverance, embodying unique Jewish-Spanish culture and religious practice. It has received fresh recognition in the last two centuries from scholars and Sephardim themselves, and the quincentennial of the 1492 Jewish expulsion from Spain inspired a new Sephardic autobiographical genre, where Sephardic authors grapple with their heritages and language, dimming from assimilation and the Shoa. Myriam Moscona is one such author whose unique descent spans Spain, the Balkans, and Mexico. In her memoir, *Tela de sevoya*, Moscona struggles to reassemble her scattered ancestry. She uses Judeo-Spanish to thread disparate histories from around the world, reanimate the voices of deceased ancestors, reexamine modern Sephardic identity many centuries removed from Iberia, and preserve her family story.

### I. Introduction

More than 500 years after its founding in 1478 by Spanish Catholic monarchs Fernando and Isabel, the Spanish Inquisition has persisted in the minds of many for generations. Perhaps its most famous connotation in 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture comes from Monty Python, the British surreal comedy troupe, and its sketch comedy television show. In a series of sketches satirizing the Spanish Inquisition — which remain popular to this day and perhaps require no introduction — three troupe members would dress up in the evocative red costumes of the Spanish Inquisitors, interrupt ongoing sketches upon mention of the Spanish Inquisition, and famously declare, “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!” (“The Spanish Inquisition”). The juxtaposed subsequent scenes transport the characters into

inquisition jails or courts, where the Inquisitors would try their modern-day counterparts for silly crimes.

Thus, the meaning of the Spanish Inquisition has strayed from its original somber significance. It has transformed into a lighthearted concept, cited to provoke a smile or laugh. However, for thousands of people, the Spanish Inquisition is not a punchline buried in the past, but their very own history and the impetus for their present realities. These people are the Jews who trace their ancestry to Spain, where their forebearers maintained a strong presence for centuries until the Catholic monarchs decreed the expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492. This is a year and an event that remain etched in the consciousness of the Jewish people who trace their roots to medieval Spain. In the very fabric of their culture, methods of communication, memories, daily life, and religious practice, their Spanish heritage still forms an essential part of their identities as Jews of Spanish origin.

The common experience of expulsion from their Spanish homeland and the subsequent Diaspora has inundated the cultural productions of those who call themselves both Spanish and Jewish: songs, poetry, and in particular, literature produced since the quincentennial of the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1992. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one woman with a particularly intricate identity wrote such a work: *Tela de sevoya* by Myriam Moscona, a Jewish-Spanish-Bulgarian-Mexican author and poet. Her dual-language memoir written uniquely in both Spanish and Judeo-Spanish — the ancestral language of Spanish Jews — spans generations and explores a Jewish identity and ancestral history that sprawls across different eras and borders, bringing Moscona around the world and back in time

## II. Triple Diaspora: Palestine, Spain, Bulgaria & Latin America

Moscona was born in 1955 in Mexico City to Bulgarian parents who had emigrated to Mexico in the early 1950s after the end of World War II, later bringing their mothers overseas (Vallín). How a Jewish woman of Bulgarian and Spanish origin found herself in Mexico can be attributed to a triple Diaspora: a series of migrations her ancestors navigated from the Middle East to Spain, to Eastern Europe, and finally to Latin America. Moscona's distant ancestors were among the Jews who first migrated from Palestine to Iberia during the first centuries CE (Ben-Ur 1, 12). Jews living in Iberia became known as "Sephardim" from the biblical verse, "The captives of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad," the Hebrew word for Spain (*21st Century King James Version*, Ob. 1:20). "Sephardic" also distinguishes

Jews of Iberian origin from those of Central and Western European origin, the "Ashkenazim" (Ben-Ur 11-12).

However or whenever Jews arrived in Iberia, they

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found prosperity in the peninsula. Intermittently, they coexisted peacefully with Moors and Christians under Muslim dynasties and Catholic monarchies that generally allowed the Jewish minority many civil and religious rights (Ben-Ur 12; Donath and Andrade 19). Yet in the 14<sup>th</sup> century during the Reconquista — the Christian reconquest of Muslim Iberia — social, economic, and political upheaval, war, and plague

led to disarray in the Christian kingdoms, and Catholics found a scapegoat in their Jewish neighbors (Pérez 3-5). Beginning in 1391, severe anti-Jewish violence across the peninsula destroyed Jewish neighborhoods, and tens of thousands of Sephardim converted to Christianity either out of terror, to secure their safety, or out of force, while others fled Spain entirely. Not 25 years later, half of Iberian Sephardim had been baptized (8-9, 12; Ben-Ur 12). Spanish monarchs Fernando and Isabel doubted the piety of recent Jewish converts to Catholicism and suspected that some new Catholics were "judaizing:" furtively practicing Judaism. Fearing that unconverted Sephardim would tempt these so-called "New Christians" to revert to their old religion and threaten societal piety, the monarchy established the Spanish Inquisition in 1478 to identify and punish heretics (Ben-Ur 12-13; Pérez 17, 21). The year 1492 marks a turning point in Sephardic history when Fernando and Isabel expelled all Sephardim from Spain and its provinces, ending Jewish life in Spain.

An estimated 200,000 Jews left Spain in 1492, launching the Sephardic Diaspora, in which Iberian Jews

culturally and religiously distinguished themselves from their non-Iberian coreligionists (Ben-Ur 13). As did Moscona's ancestors, many Spanish Jews fled to the Ottoman Empire, spread across North Africa, the Balkans, and the Anatolian Peninsula (14; Benbassa and Rodrigue xvii). There Sephardim thrived once again. They enjoyed considerable autonomy thanks to their status as *dhimmi*, a legal categorization for certain religious minorities that permitted them to settle in Ottoman lands, to self-govern, and to continue to practice their faiths so long as they recognized the predominance of Islam, pay an extra tax, and dress differently from Muslims, with whom they were to abstain from mixing to demonstrate their submission and second-class status (Benbassa and Rodrigue 3; Lewis 14, 21). In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ottoman Jewry formed the largest Jewish community in the world, in which Sephardim preserved their religious practice, culture, customs, and unique identities as Jews of Iberian origin (Benbassa and Rodrigue 4, 16). Yet later that century, Ottoman decline due to costly territorial conquests and European political and economic competition began a tumultuous period for Sephardim (Ben-Ur 15-16). The Ottoman Empire began to fracture as internal nationalist separatists carved out regions to establish various sovereign nation-states. As new borders were being drawn around and between them, Sephardic communities were forced to again reconcile their social statuses as small minorities, recalibrate relationships with neighbors, weigh religious versus national loyalties, and ponder how to maintain their identities as Spanish Jews (Benbassa and Rodrigue xxi, 65).

In 1878, the modern nation of Bulgaria was founded on previously-Ottoman lands, and Sephardim constituted approximately 0.9 percent of the Bulgarian population (Benbassa and Rodrigue 93). The new country recognized the autonomy of minority communities, which allowed Jews like Moscona's ancestors to elect their own leaders to direct social and religious organizations and to establish businesses, leading them to eventually identify as Bulgarian as well as Sephardic

(93-95; Haskell 35-37; Shealtiel 219-20). Tracing Jewish Diasporic trajectories often converges at the Shoa, which mostly spared Bulgarian Jewry while otherwise decimating the Sephardic world. Anti-Jewish sentiment in Bulgaria was rare thanks to its small Jewish population unconcerned with separation or irredentism, yet antisemitism intensified during the 1930s and 1940s as the country allied itself politically and economically with Germany (Benbassa and Rodrigue 160; Shealtiel 221; Vassileva 239). In 1940, the Bulgarian government declared Jews to be second-class citizens, established ghettos, and dissolved Jews' legal rights. The following year, Bulgaria formally joined the Axis Powers and negotiated with Germany to deport Bulgarian Jews to extermination camps (Shealtiel 221, 235; Vassileva 239-40). However, the Nazis could only enforce Jewish deportations within their allies' countries through foreign diplomacy and not through government occupation, as they did with their enemies, which proved difficult in nations such as Bulgaria, whose government was not overtly antisemitic (Chary 194). Many Bulgarians from all sectors of society opposed the anti-Jewish legislation imposed by the Nazis and successfully pressured the monarchy to protect the Jewish minority, saving the majority of Jews in Bulgaria proper (185, 191-93, 199; Vassileva 240).

After World War II, Bulgarian Jews had sustained considerable economic ruin and restitution was slow. Facing impoverishment, more than 70 percent of Bulgarian Jewry emigrated to Palestine (Chary 178; Vassileva 244). Others emigrated to Europe, the United States, and like Moscona's parents, to Latin America, which has become a center of the Sephardic Diaspora and home to the third largest Sephardic population in the world since World War II (Bejarano 267-68; Benbassa and Rodrigue 190; Haskell 220; Tomashevich 354; Vassileva 243).

### III. Sephardic Ancestral Language

Moscona grapples with this labyrinthine ancestry in her 2012 memoir, *Tela de sevoya*. The book began as a poetic project in 2006 when Moscona received a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation to create a literary project that explored her ancestry and to visit the places of her family's origin: Spain, Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Bulgaria (Vallín). "El libro es producto de un viaje y es un viaje en sí mismo,"<sup>1</sup> Moscona says of *Tela de sevoya* and of the inspiration she felt while writing and visiting the lands of her ancestors, which sometimes contained hardly any evidence of a Sephardic presence or past (qtd. in Vallín). Yet *Tela de sevoya* is a singular memoir not only because it explores a multifaceted Jewish identity, but because it is written in two distinct languages: Spanish and Judeo-Spanish, which Moscona heard spoken in her childhood home, similar to other Sephardic households where Sephardim, "al interior de las casas, hablaban este castellano arcaico como una forma de mantenerse unidos en su amor de España"<sup>2</sup> (Càceres).

Judeo-Spanish, as a Jewish language and the ancestral and rapidly disappearing tongue of Sephardim, is an inseparable element of Sephardic history and identity. A Jewish language is one spoken within Jewish communities, which have always been multilingual due to their global dispersion (Kirschen 3; Norich and Miller 1). In Diaspora, Jews adopted the foreign languages of their new homelands and synthesized them with Hebrew, the primary Jewish language essential for religious terminology and identity (Bunis, "Judezmo: The Jewish Language" 26-27; Norich and Miller 1). The inclusion and incorporation of Hebrew connects all Jewish Diasporic languages linguistically and psychologically through the ethnoreligious identities shared amongst their speakers, whose varied global experiences of displacement have resulted in many uniquely Jewish vernaculars (Kirschen 3-5; Norich and Miller 1-2).

Judeo-Spanish is a linguistic palimpsest that spans the Sephardic Diaspora back to medieval Spain, yet scholars disagree precisely when Sephardim began speaking the language. Before 1492, Spanish Jews spoke the Iberian tongues of their neighbors but infused them with Jewish words and expressions in Hebrew and Aramaic that reflected their unique beliefs and customs to distinguish themselves from other Spaniards. They rejected Latin words, which they considered to be the language of the Church, and replaced them with Hebraisms (Attig 835; Bunis, "Judezmo" 27-28, 30; Kirschen 14; Pomeroy 171; Zucker 7). For example, the plural Castilian word for God, *Dios*, was replaced with the singular *Dio* or *Dyo* in accordance with the Jewish belief that God is One (Bunis "Judezmo" 30; Zucker 7). Sephardim transcribed quotidian Iberian vernaculars meant for Jewish readers with *letras judías*, "Jewish letters:" a Hebrew lettering system with special characters to express Castilian sounds absent from Hebrew, a process called *aljamiado* (Bunis, "Judezmo" 24).

After 1492, Sephardim brought their regional Iberian languages to the communities they founded in Diaspora along these linguistic distinctions. Communities and languages eventually merged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to form a more united Sephardic front, with Castilian dominating because it was considered the most prestigious (Attig 832; Pomeroy 171-72). Because it was not used for daily communication, many Spanish Jews slowly became illiterate in Hebrew, and rabbis began to convey Jewish ethics and religion to the masses through didactic literature, known as *musar*: calque translations of Hebrew works into the more widely-spoken non-Latin Castilian-Hebrew tongue that would soon become Judeo-Spanish. *Musar* retained its original Hebrew syntax, but was written with *letras judías*, which became known as Rashi Script in print and *solitreo* in handwritten cursive (Attig 833-34; Pomeroy 173-74).

Among its Diasporic speakers, Judeo-Spanish developed independently from Castilian Spanish and experienced its own linguistic innovations and incorporations of

additional Jewish-Hebrew elements to its medieval Spanish base (Attig 836; Pomeroy 172-73). Thus, in the ears of today's Hispanophones, the Sephardic language sounds medieval and antiquated (Attig 832; Kirschen 9-10; Pomeroy 172). Unlike present-day Castilian, Judeo-Spanish still distinguishes *b* from *v* sounds, pronounces a harder *j* sound, and retains the medieval definitions of certain words (Bunis "Judezmo" 30). Furthermore, as generations passed, Sephardim incorporated new languages into Judeo-Spanish to create distinct regional dialects (Zucker 9). The language itself known as Judeo-Spanish — as it is commonly called in academic circles — has acquired more than 20 different names: Djudezmo, Ladino, Spanyolit, Djudyo, Kasteyano Muestro, Spanyol, Haketía (the language of Moroccan Sephardim), and more (Attig 832-33; Kirschen 11; Zucker 6-7). Although Judeo-Spanish dialects varied, the language still unified Iberian Jews, becoming an international Sephardic language of sorts. Its speakers used it to communicate with other Sephardim across the world, which facilitated multiregional economic networks amongst Sephardic merchants and entrepreneurs (Bunis, "Judezmo" 31; Pomeroy 173-74, 176).

Judeo-Spanish also informed the ethnoreligious identity of its speakers. Initially, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century *converso* refugees from Iberia — Jews who had publicly converted to Catholicism — who reintegrated themselves into Diasporic Sephardic communities denigrated what their new neighbors spoke (Bunis, "Judezmo" 32-33). However, many Judeo-Spanish speakers expressed pride in their language. The Chief Rabbinate of Istanbul wrote in 1911 in *Las eleksyones para el Medjlís Umumí (Elections for the Ottoman General Council of the Jewish Community)*: "Son aptos a ser kandidatos [...] los mas notavles del lugar [...] ke saven avlar i eskrevir el djudezmo" 'Worthy of consideration as candidates [...] are the most notable members of the community [...] who know how to speak and write Judezmo' (qtd. in Bunis, "Judezmo" 33). Just before World War II, one Sephardic journalist in Salonica wrote:

"Halvá ke koman los ke dizen ke mwestra lingwa es prove!" 'Let those who say our language is poor eat garbage!' (qtd. in Bunis, "Judezmo" 33).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, war, immigration, and political, social, and economic upheaval threatened the existence of Judeo-Spanish (Bunis, "Judezmo" 34). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western European languages arrived in the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans as countries such as France aspired to spread their political and economic influence to the East, shaping Judeo-Spanish and adding foreign vocabularies (Pomeroy 176). Judeo-Spanish experienced further changes after the modernizing 1908 Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire that prohibited non-Roman alphabets. Weathering these linguistic reforms, Sephardim transliterated Judeo-Spanish and abandoned Rashi Script (176; Zucker 13). The creation of new Balkan nation-states also encouraged the rise of regional languages, such as Greek, Bulgarian, Rumanian, Serbo-Croatian, and modern Turkish, all of which affected Judeo-Spanish. New nationalist ideologies and official languages left Sephardim no choice but to assimilate, adapt, and learn the dominant languages, prompting the decline of Judeo-Spanish (Pomeroy 176).

Beyond the Ottoman Empire, Jewish communities in Western Europe — who considered Eastern Jewry to be backwards and provincial — became concerned about Sephardim amidst rising political instability, economic crises, and natural catastrophes. They introduced Western-style education systems to Ottoman lands and the Balkans that painted Judeo-Spanish as an inferior language, an opinion many Sephardim internalized (Pomeroy 177; Zucker 5). French Jews established Alliance israélite universelle schools in 1865 in the East to modernize and secularize Sephardim. Professors taught mostly in French, whose worldwide linguistic prestige facilitated the social advancement of Sephardic students and their slow abandonment of Judeo-Spanish (Pomeroy 176-77). In addition to the influence and appeal of foreign languages and

education, the Shoa caused the near-total annihilation of Sephardic communities that primarily spoke Judeo-Spanish. Today, the language mostly survives in Israel, Turkey, and the Americas and exists in a state of serious decline, as the majority of its principal speakers are over 70 years old and only use it to communicate amongst themselves, as a secret language, to pass on stories and folklore, or to sing Sephardic *romanzas*, or ballads (Attig 832; Balbuena 161; Harris 51-53, 58; Pomeroy 178; Stavans 368; Zucker 13). Parents often no longer teach it to their children because they prefer to educate them in French, Hebrew, Spanish, English, or Turkish to facilitate assimilation (Harris 53; Pomeroy 177). Furthermore, many Sephardim do not consider the maintenance of Judeo-Spanish worthwhile because it has all but lost its utility in today's world. Yet even as the language declines, Sephardic culture lives on. Many Sephardim still consider Judeo-Spanish to be part of their heritage, not solely a method of communication (Harris 53, 59). However, with every loss of a Judeo-Spanish speaker, a small piece of Sephardic history and culture is lost as well.

#### IV. *Tela de sevoya* & Modern Sephardic Autobiographical Works

Moscona's awareness of her Sephardic identity and the fragile state of her ancestral language manifests in *Tela de sevoya*, its title a Judeo-Spanish phrase that translates to *Onioncloth* or *Onion Skin*. By writing in and about Judeo-Spanish, Moscona establishes herself as an author of the modern Sephardic autobiographical genre. Up until the late 18th century, the majority of written Judeo-Spanish literature had been religious in nature, but at the beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, works by Sephardic authors in the Balkans, Ottoman domains, and Eastern Mediterranean began to explore more secular themes due to Western European influence and education (Bunis, "The Changing Faces of Sephardic Identity" 56; Sefamí 146). In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sephardic pupils of the Alliance israélite

universelle wielded their education to reexamine their own cultures and histories. From the 1860s to the 1920s, they began writing a corpus of Sephardic literary and journalistic works in their mother tongue for their Judeo-Spanish-speaking communities (Alpert 52-54). Perhaps the earliest surviving secular Sephardic work is *La gwerta de oro* (*The Garden of Gold*) by David Atías, published in 1778 in Livorno, Italy. In its preface, the author expresses the desire to create a secular work in Judeo-Spanish:

*Esta mi fatiga... loke la fize fwe... por el...gran selo ke tomí en ver ke todo modo de umá estampa de muchos modos de livros i ver ke entre nos otros non se aya ninguno ke estampe en nwesa lingwa espanyola levantina ningún modo de livro, ni de estoryas ni antigas ni modernas, ni ningún libro de ġeografía o de otras sensyas, ni tanpoko afillú algún libro ke trate sobre la merkadería...ama nada de nada, ke todo lo ke ay es de Ley i en lašón akódeš, ke son pokos los ke lo entyenden [...]. Kyeren i yevan gosto de ver livros nwevos en lingwa i en eskritura ke entyenden, kon lakirdís i avlas espiritozas gostozas* 'The effort...I made [in writing this book]...was a result of the great envy I felt on seeing that every sort of nation is publishing all types of books, and among us there is no one who has published any kind of book in our Levantine Spanish language, neither stories, old or new, nor any book of geography or of other sciences, not even a book dealing with commerce...absolutely nothing, because all there is is about the Torah, and in the language of holiness [Hebrew], which few understand. [...] They [today's youth] want, and enjoy, seeing new books, in a language and alphabet they understand, with spirited and tasty expressions and language' (qtd. in Bunis, "Changing" 56-57).

Authors like Atías who participated in the secular tradition of writing in Judeo-Spanish frequently chose to do so to demonstrate their pride in their Sephardic heritage.

Through newspapers, periodicals, novels, and novelettes, these new Sephardic secular works painted stories of adventures, family life and conflict, violence, murder, confrontations, vampires, unrequited love, and familial and personal relationships rather than solely Jewish life (Alpert 51, 57). The rise of the Ladino press and novel peaked during the relaxation of censorship after the Young Turk Revolution and the publication surge during the 1920s after World War I, coinciding with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of new separatist nation-states. Judeo-Spanish works flourished for just over 50 years until the advent of World War II and the extirpation of Judeo-Spanish speakers. The language faded during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the Shoa, the popularity of nationalist languages, such as French, Turkish, Greek, and Bulgarian, and the expansion of the Sephardic Diaspora (53-54). After World War II, there was a greater surge in Ashkenazi rather than Sephardic literary production, especially considering the Ashkenazi global majority and the greater proportional loss of life experienced by Sephardim after the Shoa. Nonetheless, a handful of Sephardic writers rose to prominence during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Nobel Prize winner Elías Canetti and the French-Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès. Yet little scholarship exists about the merits of Sephardic authors themselves and their works during this period due to a lack academic interest or a complete literary anthology (Sefamí 154).

Despite the postwar literary lull, the 1992 quincentennial of the Jewish expulsion from Spain inspired a fresh wave of Sephardic literature and the rise of Sephardic autobiographies and memoirs published in various languages (Ritschel 195; Schorsch 82). This new genre follows the postwar Ashkenazi autobiographical tradition and was inspired by new attention to and interest in the history and identity of Sephardim, as well as the desire to document Sephardic life and heritage by Sephardic Jews themselves (Cohen and Stein 352; Schorsch 87). The growth of the publishing industry,

multiculturalism, and popularity of the memoir genre — in which authors wish to produce palpable memories of other eras and faraway places — also encouraged the rise of Sephardic autobiography (Güde, “Recording Remnants of Judeo-Spanish” 144; Schorsch 87).

Many of today’s prominent Sephardic authors claim intellectual backgrounds as professors, writers, artists, and translators. They represent the modern Sephardic experience of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries but are always conscious of the lives and past experiences of their ancestors (Schorsch 83-84). Jonathan Schorsch describes these authors as a “generation born and raised after the dimming of their predecessors’ world, in the shadows of increasing poverty and nationalism, World War II, the Holocaust, [and] the destruction of the Jewish world of Muslim lands” (85). Compared to their Ashkenazi contemporaries and predecessors, Sephardic writers focus less on preserving their communities by recounting past trauma, nor do they feel obligated to write, study, and conserve the practices of a Jewish people after the Shoa to add to “collective memory and knowledge” (87). Instead, they focus not on “the internal transmission of the community, but on the external,” beyond their immediate circles (qtd. in Schorsch 87). These authors “redress history” by considering the gaps in their own heritage, as if “atoning for oblivion as one atones for a sin” (87). Sephardic autobiography reexamines the centuries-old Sephardic Diaspora in a new light and grapples with family, tradition, and modernity (87; Ritschel 195). While some works of this genre are straightforward historical narratives, others are more imaginative, but all include biographical elements (Sefamí 149). Sephardic memoirists do not always regard the country in which they currently reside as a site of rebirth or new beginnings, as do their Ashkenazi equivalents, but oftentimes remember in these places another older world, one “loved but destroyed by” unimaginable forces (Matza 35). Schorsch highlights the modern and postmodern themes of Sephardic memoir, the latter of which manifests in shared elements of self-



reflexivity, interdisciplinarity, heterogeneity, and a tendency towards autobiographic reflection (114). He postulates that in their “gnawing realization of the exile that begins within, the inherent primordial alienation in the heart of the family, the split of self, the self-doubt and self-hatred,” a somber modernism emerges (116).

An important theme of this genre is Sephardic identity itself: the author’s place in the Sephardic world and its inhabitants’ shared history. But because Sephardim form a scattered Diaspora, authors must oftentimes imagine their participation in the greater Sephardic community, of which the political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson notes, “It is imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their community” (qtd. in Schorsch 85). In contemplating their Sephardic identities, authors write about their ancestors’ expulsion from Spain, exile, Diaspora, about being Jewish but not Ashkenazi, migration, adaption, assimilation, tradition, custom, conflict, and how to reaffirm their collective consciousness as a religious and cultural minority (Ritschel 195; Schorsch 85; Sefamí 150).

Another theme of Sephardic autobiography is the presence and participation of its writers in the “Sephardic Mystique,” a distorted idealization of medieval Sephardic history in Spain. In this rosy interpretation, Spanish Jews embodied the epoch of medieval Jewish cultural production during the *convivencia*: the romanticized, sunny “coexistence” of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in Spain and Portugal marked by peaceful cultural and intellectual exchange, a theory that “continued to shine long after that community’s tragic end” (Marcus 35-36). The Sephardic Mystique situates Sephardim in

a “place of honor” as “the most beautiful Jews,” whose “culture was aesthetically superior to that of Ashkenazim” (Efron 1, 4). Modern Sephardic authors often incorporate their Iberian ancestry and heritage to reimagine this “Golden Age,” which Jacobo Sefamí considers a cultural prestige that at the same time expresses “la nostalgia de un origen maravilloso y la amargura del exilio y la persecución a través de los siglos”<sup>3</sup> (150). Thus many Sephardic memoirists are fascinated by origins that are “lost, discovered [...and] romanticized” (Schorsch 86).

In *Tela de sevoya*, Moscona returns to her ancestral spaces as a method of self-rediscovery within the Sephardic Diaspora. Schorsch states that many authors of the modern Sephardic autobiographical genre do something similar: they try to return to the past to remember and recover their heritage as Jews of Spanish origin, which often exists only as memory (113). Sometimes these authors physically return to past Sephardic homelands, as Moscona does, in an “attempt to return to the space(s) and experiences made sacred through memory, to reconnect with the material as well as the spiritual sources of individual and collective selfhood” (113). This fascination with their past appears often in this genre because of the loss of elder figures who had preserved and guarded Jewish-Spanish identity against assimilation in the postwar world. Now in varying degrees of Diaspora, Sephardic memoirists write about the

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distance they feel from their past and search for memories to root themselves in their histories, though often referencing a distant “past that was not experienced immediately but continues to figure in the family’s consciousness and self-image, and myth takes on personal existential importance for self-

formation” (122). *Sepharad* — that romanticized, idealized place of golden Sephardic origin in medieval Iberia — lives on through these memoirists’ memories and identities as a way to

“re-member” themselves and the long trajectories of Sephardic history, what Schorsch calls “a castle in the distant haze” (122). In the very act of writing, Sephardic memoirists grasp at and celebrate their personal histories, which fade with every passing year.

Echoing this anxiety of loss, the title of *Tela de sevoya* comes from a Judeo-Spanish refrain that compares human fragility, essence, and memory to the delicate, silky, vulnerable skin of an onion: “*El meoyo del ombre es tela de sevoya*” ‘*The human mind is an onion cloth*’ (Moscona, *Tela de sevoya* 173; 127). Even before its first page, the theme of faded memory and heritage manifests. However, while *Tela de sevoya* is a modern Sephardic memoir in which authors are “tourists to their own pasts [...] in search of their own identities” it bends its own genre (Schorsch 119). By blending childhood anecdotes, history, travel diary entries, and reimaged stories of her ancestors, Moscona mixes fiction and nonfiction while wrestling with her Sephardic-Bulgarian-Mexican identity, peppered by gaps carved by Diaspora, time, conflict, and death. Moscona says of her work, “Traje una información y la usé completándola con ficción. A lo único a lo que he sido fiel es a la eficacia del libro, no a la realidad. No quiero decir que no haya memoria en el libro, pero en qué grado toda memoria no es también una invención una vez que pasa por el tamiz de tiempo”<sup>4</sup> (qtd. in Vallín). This intention emerges in the pages of *Tela de sevoya* when she writes, “Recuperar el sentido es una forma de reconciliación. La memoria: nuestro inquilino incómodo” ‘To recover meaning is a form of reconciliation. Memory: our uncomfortable and uninvited guest’ (Moscona, *Tela* 255; 190).

## V. Judeo-Spanish & *Tela de sevoya*

Within the genre of modern Sephardic autobiography, *Tela de sevoya* is an unusual memoir because Moscona heavily incorporates Judeo-Spanish. She weaves the language

throughout her book, not only in simple words or phrases, but in considerable paragraphs, long dialogues, and entire consecutive chapters. What makes *Tela de sevoya* even more singular is that Judeo-Spanish sits completely untranslated alongside the Spanish, without a glossary or a single footnote. Moscona did not consider translation to be necessary: “Recuerdo cuántas vueltas le di a si poner un glosario en *Tela de sevoya*,” she states. “Al final confié en el lector y decidí no ponerlo, pensé que la mayoría de las palabras se entenderían por contexto”<sup>5</sup> (qtd. in Vallín). Because most of the memoir is written in Spanish, Judeo-Spanish remains unique yet intelligible to Hispanophone readers thanks to their linguistic similarities (Lockhart 116).

Yet despite these similarities, the inclusion of Spanish and Judeo-Spanish greatly impacts readers’ experiences, particularly those who have never been exposed to the latter. Because of its resemblance to medieval Castilian, encountering Judeo-Spanish words, phrases, paragraphs, and chapters transports the modern-day reader back in time, as Shakespeare would for a 21<sup>st</sup> century English speaker. For example, readers might encounter an anecdote in one chapter written in two languages without translation: “*Tenesh soerte* — nos dice el rabino” ‘*You are in luck* — the rabbi tells us’ (Moscona, *Tela* 82; 54). This imbues Moscona’s memoir with a historic multidimensionality. Because Spanish speakers are certainly able to at least recognize and understand the mere basics of Judeo-Spanish, they are able to witness its linguistic evolution and experience a temporal weightlessness in a single page.

As one of the few Sephardic memoirists that deliberately incorporates huge swaths of Judeo-Spanish in her multilingual book, Moscona participates in what Alice Kaplan calls the genre of “language memoir:” autobiographical works with an emphasis on rarely-spoken personal and ancestral languages (Güde, “Recording” 143). Brian Lennon adds to this description by positing that language memoirs and autobiographies are *Bildungsroman* that contain multiple

tongues, and therefore “the ‘language’ in ‘language memoir’ is the mediation of that lived experience, is language as the mediation of experience” (131). For *Tela de sevoya*, with its rich and lengthy passages of Judeo-Spanish alongside Spanish, the former language adds complexity and sophistication to the memoir, communicating the personal, historical, and multifaceted experience that it encapsulates.

Compared with *Tela de sevoya*, modern Sephardic autobiographies generally include very little Judeo-Spanish. While many Sephardic memoirists grapple with their multilingual pasts in mostly monolingual memoirs, Judeo-Spanish is “remembered but not actively involved in this remembrance” (Güde, “Writing the Grandparent Tongue” 83-84). For this reason, *Tela de sevoya* is exceptional within its genre and is what Elisabeth Güde would call a memoir of “radical plurilingualism” (“Recording” 150). She notes that Judeo-Spanish is rarely chosen as the primary language of expression in modern Sephardic memoirs, which recalls its perception in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a language reduced to informal communication, considered inadequate for sophisticated literature (“Writing” 92). Many Sephardic autobiographers limit Judeo-Spanish elements in their books, thus the immense majority of Sephardic memoirs exhibit only “echoes of ancestral tongues” (83, 91). Judeo-Spanish only appears through individual words, saying, songs, or other idiomatic elements, oftentimes marked by italicized lettering or posterior footnote or glossary translations (83). However, in a memoir written mostly in Spanish, generously embellished with Judeo-Spanish, and intended for publication and wide dissemination to readers — the majority of whom are not Sephardic nor speak the Sephardic ancestral language — why include Judeo-Spanish in *Tela de sevoya* at all?

For one, Judeo-Spanish envelopes Sephardic culture, belief, tradition, expression, and life. In *Ansina*, one of her later works — a book of Judeo-Spanish poetry inspired by the same travels that kindled *Tela de sevoya* — Moscona writes, “La

connotación lúdica del asombro coloquial perdería su huella o, dicho con más precisión, hay expresiones que sólo me brotan en ladino: el habla que me permite entrar en otra dimension del tiempo, en una más familiar y primitiva”<sup>6</sup> (11). Certain linguistic elements exist only in the Sephardic realm, their meanings lost in translation; the purest definitions reside and remain in the ancestral language spoken by those who claim Sephardic identity. Furthermore, in *Ansina*, Moscona echoes what Sephardic-Mexican-American essayist and lexicographer Ilan Stavans postulates, “Language, it is fair to say, is more than a depository of words; it is also a prism through which identity, individual and collective, is formed” (365).

The Sephardic language is a primary key that unlocks the Jewish-Spanish world and the purest understanding of the Sephardic experience. Güde affirms that in the context of the crucial connection between Judeo-Spanish and Sephardic memory, it is “impossible to speak about the past without speaking about languages” (“Recording” 145). Additionally, Schorsch asserts that Jewish literature is best written in a Jewish language, otherwise the “conveyance of Jewish experience” becomes “difficult, if not impossible” (88). Judeo-Spanish encapsulates Sephardic memory and legacy. Moscona adds, “Las lenguas a veces conservan una memoria que la gente ha olvidado, pero la lengua no la ha olvidado”<sup>7</sup> (Càceres). Because the language forms a large part of Sephardic ancestral heritage, it functions as the most precious, beloved way for its speakers to express themselves to one another. In *Tela de sevoya*, Moscona writes, “Sólo el [lenguaje] materno nos da la entrada a ese valle nativo y único en el que decimos mejor aquello que pensamos” ‘Only our mother tongue allows us to enter that native and unique valley in which we can best say what we are thinking’ (90; 61).

Oftentimes, modern Sephardic memoirists express a quiet anxiety surrounding Judeo-Spanish because of its disappearance in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, hinting at the greater destabilization of their Jewish-Spanish identities and their

precarious connection to the greater Sephardic community. Beyond the characterization of these works as language memoirs, Lennon suggests that this genre also deals with what he calls “language death [...] a kind of living *in* dying” (123). He writes that the language memoirist is “the ‘last persona,’ so to speak, one who inherits previous languages, but no longer speaks them” (127). The author creates a living, immortal archive of these languages and the worlds they animate to guarantee the “living on” of the history, people, and stories that reside within them (123; Güde, “Recording” 152). Paradoxically, the creation of these kinds of works helps to sustain disappearing languages by imbuing inanimate letters with the living essence of these tongues (Güde, “Recording” 152).

Modern Sephardic language memoirs that contain traces of Judeo-Spanish seem intent on recording the dying language. They desire to produce “paper memoirs of ‘another time (and sometimes another place),’” often mixed with tremendous nostalgia and yearning that provoke anxieties about the loss of inherited Sephardic traditions (qtd. in Güde, “Recording” 144; Güde, “Writing” 82). These authors are haunted by what Schorsch calls a “family ghost” that prompts them to lament and try to repair a fractured, imperfect history (86). Sephardic memoirists aspire to create a “textual repatriation:” the attempt to excavate and refashion a Sephardic past and origin for themselves, enthralled by the mystique of their own ancestry (119). In this way, publications in Judeo-Spanish raise considerations about its preservation, linguistic loss, and the Jewish imperative of *zakhor*: remembering and preserving the memory of the Jewish people, oftentimes buried within Jewish language (Güde, “Writing” 88). Moscona writes in *Tela de sevoya*, “La única forma de traducción que la memoria tiene a su alcance es el lenguaje” ‘The only form of translation to which memory has access is language,’ expressing her own imperative to remember her ancestry through Judeo-Spanish (90; 61). Moscona’s fluency in the language allows her to explore the

fading Sephardic world, its presence essential to how she “paints a picture of these plurilingual realities” (Güde, “Writing” 83). For instance, in one chapter Moscona illustrates an everyday scene from her childhood, a conversation shared with one of her grandmothers just before bedtime:

- *De ke no durmes, ijika.*
- No tengo sueño.
- *De ke no kontas ovejikas.*
- Ya conté del uno al cien.
- ‘*Why don’t you go to sleep, ijika?*
- I’m not sleepy.
- *Why don’t you count sheep?*
- I already counted from one to a hundred’ (*Tela* 188; 138).

In response to the aforementioned question of why write a published work in a dying language, eliminating Judeo-Spanish from *Tela de sevoya* would be akin to omitting a main character. The Sephardic language possesses its own life and plotline within Moscona’s memoir. Judeo-Spanish is an inseparable part of *Tela de sevoya*, constructing an “everlasting [...] cemetery of printed words” (Güde, “Recording” 152). Moscona uses the language as a thread with which she stitches together past and present, peeling back every palimpsestic layer of Judeo-Spanish — as one might peel an onion — to reconstruct a continuous, unbroken Sephardic identity that is so often incongruent, inconsistent, and fractured by exile, migration, and Diaspora. Its constant presence in *Tela de sevoya* allows Moscona to reanimate and rescue the memories, traditions, culture, and language of her family and ancestors from oblivion, vivifying a past almost completely smothered by loss and the passage of time.

And as Sephardic history and identity are fractured, muddled, and tumultuous, so too is the structure of *Tela de sevoya*. It is divided into six different chapter types of additional genres: nonfiction, fiction, travel literature, and dreamscape-fantasy. Sequenced in an almost hectic, capricious order, the

chapter types are titled: “Distancia de foco,” “Molino de viento,” “Del diario de viaje,” “Pisapapeles,” “La cuarta pared,” and “Kantikas.”<sup>8</sup> Moscona calls them “un mueblecito con distintos cajones”<sup>9</sup> because the memoir bridges many places, ages, and protagonists within every chapter, yet all represent the greater Sephardic experience (qtd. in Vallín). They span centuries, geographies, and reality, and feature different narrators apart from the author. Reading *Tela de sevoya* is a slow descent into the nonlinear fantastical, where memoir and history are interspersed between conversations with the deceased and memoryscapes, where its readers experience temporal whiplash as they are whisked through different eras and memories strung together by Judeo-Spanish.

## VI. The Realistic Chapters: “Pisapapeles” & “Del diario de viaje”

Before the memoir delves into dreamscapes, *Tela de sevoya* begins with its two most realistic chapter types: “Pisapapeles” and “Del diario de viaje.” Together, the “Pisapapeles” chapters are slices of the linguistic history, origin, development, and loss of Judeo-Spanish over the centuries. In one specific chapter, Moscona describes the difficulties of codifying the language and creating a unified history of its evolution and speakers: “En mis ires y venires tomo nota sobre las dificultades de normar un criterio en cuanto a la ortografía del judeo-español” ‘In my comings and goings, I take note of how difficult it is to establish rules for writing Judeo-Spanish’ (*Tela* 130; 93). Because Judeo-Spanish is a Diasporic language that no country claims as its own, the uncertainty of its survival is tangible in the “Pisapapeles” chapters. When Sephardim migrate to Latin American countries in particular, Judeo-Spanish becomes diluted by Spanish by the first children born in America, and thus Moscona — as a Sephardic-Bulgarian-Mexican author — is extremely conscious of this reality (Sefamí 152). She recalls

one instance when one of her grandmothers reprimands her in Judeo-Spanish:

— *Avla* — me decía mi abuela — *de las kozas como las sientes de mi. No solo avles este espanyol tuyo de djente moderna. Ansina te vas a ambezar a dezir las kozas prenyadas kon su gueso de orijin. Me estas entendiendo kualo digo, hanum?* — *Speak* — my grandmother would tell me — *of things as you hear them from me. Don’t just speak this Spanish of yours, of modern people. This way you can begin to learn how to say things with the bones of their origin. Are you understanding what I’m saying to you, hanum [sweetie]?*

urging her to remember her ancestors’ language instead of resorting to the Spanish of her Latin American contemporaries (Moscona, *Tela* 215; 158).

The name of the “Pisapapeles” chapters is appropriate because of their focus on the characteristics and use of Judeo-Spanish, weighing down and grounding its tangled history like a paperweight on a stack of loose papers. Moscona tries to mold and organize this history into a linear, tangible trajectory to prevent the loss of the Sephardic world that only the language can animate. In another “Pisapapeles” chapter, the author traces the history of Judeo-Spanish from “una zona del oído a un lugar primitivo donde se dice que el tiempo puede escucharse” ‘an aural zone to a primitive place where it is said that time itself can be heard’ (Moscona, *Tela* 50; 30). Moscona presents herself as a detective in the field of her own ancestry. She somberly compares herself to an “espeleólogo que ha perdido a sus compañeros en la oscuridad” ‘speleologist whose colleagues are lost in the darkness,’ isolated from those who share her history (50; 30). Searching for a solution, she ponders, “¿Qué hace sino gritar sus nombres? Sabe que el sonido es la única linterna para iluminar su desamparo” ‘What is there to do besides shout out their names? It is clear that sound is the only lantern capable of illuminating this utter abandonment’ (50; 30). What else to do but speak and write? Judeo-Spanish becomes a tool with which

Moscona locates and saves her scattered heritage, uniting herself with the figures of her past, immediate and distant.

In an attempt to pinpoint all Judeo-Spanish dialects of the Sephardic Diaspora, Moscona provides early in *Tela de sevoyá* a “Pisapapeles” chapter that contains an informal dictionary of the language’s unique vocabulary. Emphasizing the traces of other languages interwoven within Judeo-Spanish — Turkish, Hebrew, Italian, Arabic, French, Balkan tongues, and beyond — she notes the many different dialects that developed throughout the Diaspora and compares them to modern Spanish (*Tela* 46-48). She highlights the varied, localized nature of the language: “Infinidad de estudios sobre palabras de distintas lenguas filtradas al ladino dan cuenta de las lenguas contenidas en el judeo-español” ‘An infinite number of studies about words from different languages that have filtered into Ladino provide evidence of the languages contained within Judeo-Spanish,’ inserting herself into a dialogue that focuses on the challenge of total comprehension, and thus, translation (48; 27). Whether this chapter is for educating its readers or for posterior linguistic preservation, it nonetheless underlines the language barrier against which *Tela de sevoyá* chafes.

Therefore, by including long, untranslated swaths of text written in a rarely spoken language, a linguistic and interpretive distance divides Moscona from her readers who do not speak Judeo-Spanish.

This language, writes Moscona, as all others, contains “palabras que sólo existen en un idioma porque pertenecen a esa visión del mundo y a ninguna otra” ‘words that only exist in one language because they belong to that vision of the world and no

other’ (*Tela* 84; 56). Thus, the paradox of *Tela de sevoyá* emerges: while the inclusion of Judeo-Spanish widens the memoir’s readership and expands the exposure to Moscona’s personal story and to the greater Sephardic experience, it simultaneously limits such exposure and transference of meaning. Darrell B. Lockhart posits that memory and the key to the past are preserved through ancestral language, yet “translation always falls short in its attempt to convey original meaning” (117). How to span the distance between Judeo-Spanish and the meaning lost on non-Sephardic readers?

Perhaps the chasm between language and the conveyance of meaning is purposeful. Perhaps in recognition that the majority of readers can only be observers, Judeo-Spanish exists in *Tela de sevoyá* to demonstrate and animate the close-knit, small yet effervescent nature of the Sephardic experience, made universally and exclusively accessible by the

“Perhaps in recognition that the majority of readers can only be observers, Judeo-Spanish exists in *Tela de sevoyá* to demonstrate the close-knit, small yet effervescent nature of the Sephardic experience, made universally and exclusively accessible by the language itself.”

language itself. Through Judeo-Spanish, Moscona is able to unlock worlds otherwise completely impregnable by non-Sephardic readers, a venture most evident in the “Del diario de viaje” chapters, as realistic as those of “Pisapapeles.” The former chapters chronicle the author’s travels from Mexico City in search of the homes of her family and ancestors abroad, ironically leaving one home to find another elsewhere. She writes, “[A]sí llego a esta tierra: para reunirme” ‘I arrive in this land with the same end: to join myself together’ (Moscona, *Tela* 24;

10). The “Del diario del viaje” chapters are filled with travel anecdotes from the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, Spain, and Israel. In one instance, Moscona arrives in Sofia, Bulgaria, for the first time and visits a synagogue. While there, she reflects on “las

decenas de generaciones que vivieron en este país y hablaron el judezmo” ‘the dozens of generations who lived in this country and spoke Judezmo’ (17; 5). Overwhelmed by the disorganized historical weight of her Sephardic past, Moscona feels the need to recreate this very history for herself and for her family. She writes,

Yo, en cambio, en mi herencia desnuda, más allá de la lengua, en los cuerpos que rodean mi *chikez*, papá y mamá, traigo, digo, la necesidad de inventarles biografías porque los perdí de vista; por eso vine, porque me dijeron que aquí podría descubrir la forma de atar los cabos sueltos ‘I, on the other hand, in my naked inheritance, beyond language, in the bodies that surrounded my *chikez* [childhood], papá and mamá, I carry, I speak, the need to invent biographies for them, because I lost sight of them; that’s why I’ve come, because they told me that here I could discover a way to tie up the loose ends’ (18; 5).

Moscona’s wish to preserve her family and ancestry through writing, to use her memoir to fill the absences in her identity pillaged by time and oblivion, drives *Tela de sevoya*, with Judeo-Spanish as her guide.

Moscona uses the language to unlock a common Sephardic identity shared amongst the Sephardim that she meets abroad, defying the geographic distance between them elongated by the five-century Diaspora. In the “Del diario de viaje” chapters, Judeo-Spanish links Moscona to these other Sephardim and provides a medium through which she can enter their worlds and explore their common past. In Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Judeo-Spanish helps her arrange an overnight stay with a Sephardic couple, dissipating any initial shyness. “*Seash bienvenidas*” ‘*May you be welcome*,’ they say to her, each party pleasantly surprised by the other’s fluency (Moscona, *Tela* 80; 53). In conversation, when it surprises Moscona that the only Jewish ceremony observed by the 300 Plovdiv Sephardim is Shabbat, the husband responds, “*Aki no ai djente. Nadien se*

*kaza, no ay matrimonyos nuevos, nadien tiene ijos. Todos somos aedados. No kedó mas nadien aki*” ‘*There are no people here. No one gets married, there aren’t new matrimonyes, no one has children. We are all elderly. No one else is left here*’ (82; 54). Through Judeo-Spanish, the couple imparts upon Moscona the region’s rich Sephardic history and its present waning reality.

Later, the author travels to Thessaloniki, where she is approached by an elderly Greek woman who asks a question in what Moscona thinks is Spanish. She responds in Spanish, but starts when the woman, who was actually speaking Judeo-Spanish, replies, “*Ama, avlash spanyolit*” ‘*But you speak Ladino*’ (Moscona, *Tela* 100; 68). Like an apparition from a different time, this woman is a survivor of the Shoa. She tells Moscona about her childhood before World War II, her internment, and how she heard other Sephardim en route to concentration camps singing *kantikas*, Sephardic melodies that lament the loss of their faraway Spanish homeland. The liquidation of Salonica’s Sephardic population was one of the largest individual exterminations of Sephardic people and culture during the Shoa, perhaps even since their expulsion from Spain in 1492. The elderly lady sings a *romanza* for Moscona:

*Blanka sos, blanco vistes*  
*blanka la tu figura*  
*blankas flores kaen de ti*  
*de la tu ermozura*  
 [...] *Torno y digo ke va a ser de mi*  
*en tierras ajenas yo me vo morir*  
 ‘*You are white, dressed in white*  
*white your face*  
*white flowers fall from you*  
*from this your beauty*  
 (...) *I return and say what will become of me*  
*In alien lands I must die,*  
 her voice breaking (102; 70).

The few verses that Moscona includes in *Tela de sevoya* come from a longer medieval Sephardic song called “Árboles lloran por lluvias”<sup>10</sup> (Lechkova 52). The complete song compares the longing of parched trees for rain, as one would long for a lover or a woman dressed in white, as the Greek woman sings (Sargon). In Sephardic music, the appearance of a woman in white clothing usually represents the theme of Spain as a lost homeland and the distance between Iberia and the Sephardic people (Càceres). Dorótea Lechkova writes of this particular *kantika*, “Las palabras del judeo-español [...] registran los matices de la experiencia sefardí: el exilio, la separación, el dolor y la nostalgia”<sup>11</sup> (52). Because this particular *romanza* mourns the separation of Sephardim from their Iberian homeland, it is disturbingly fitting that Greek Jews sung it as they climbed the trains that would carry them to their deaths in the “*terras ajenas*” ‘alien lands’ of Eastern Europe (Moscona, *Tela* 102; 70). The haunting melody and lyrics are remnants of Diaspora, longing, and the smothered history that accompanies the loss of language. Moscona cites an acquaintance in Mexico City when she writes, “Cuando una lengua se pierde, no sólo desaparecen sus palabras” ‘When a language is lost, it is not just the words that disappear’ (134; 95). Ancestral language is much more than a method of communication, and its loss reverberates far beyond its immediate community of speakers.

## VII. The Middle Chapters: “Distancia de foco” & “Kantikas”

While the “Pisapapeles” and “Del diario de viaje” chapters thread Moscona’s Sephardic history through events, people, and places, the “Distancia de foco” chapters contain more Judeo-Spanish than any other. The chapter name comes from a cinematographic term: the longer a camera’s focal length, the narrower the view and greater the magnification, and the shorter the focal length, the wider the view and lesser the magnification (Lockhart 114). Like a camera or video recorder, Moscona

zooms in on her childhood and adolescence, focusing on specific scenes, periods, and moments to revive her past and redress unresolved gaps, a common theme of modern Sephardic memoir.

As per Schorsch, modern Sephardic memoirists “time travel” to observe their family mature, to witness “the past making the future that molded [them],” and to “watch unfoldings that translate historical explanation into personal justification” (123). The “Distancia de foco” chapters possess a fragile, delicate, and frangible quality that places them on the border of reality and fiction, playing with actuality and truth and relying on the unreliability of memory, specifically Moscona’s. Ever-present, Judeo-Spanish allows Moscona to counteract oblivion and recreate memory, as she writes, “En ella conservamos los fotogramas de toda la cinta vital que nuestro cerebro nos traduce en forma de recuerdos” ‘In that tongue, we preserve the still images from the filmstrip of our lives: all that our minds translate for us into the form of memories’ (*Tela* 90; 61). With memory, as with a photograph, she revisits snapshots of the past.

The essence of Moscona’s connection to her Sephardic-Bulgarian heritage rests with her two Bulgarian-born grandmothers, whose preferred language was Judeo-Spanish. Their frequent appearance in *Tela de sevoya* reflects the great presence of older generations in modern Sephardic memoir. In the genre, Güde observes that, “As bearers of a former family language about to disappear, the grandparents have an important role in Sephardic language memoirs” (“Recording” 147). And just as older characters in literature often represent the themes of weakness, loss, death, and dying, she asserts that in modern Sephardic literature, these same themes are attributed instead to Judeo-Spanish itself, which slowly disappears over the years alongside elderly generations (“Writing” 87). The grandparent figure in Sephardic memoir frequently “evokes mourning and remembering but also the will to hold onto genealogies and traditions,” and in many ways, is an impetus (84). Because their



older family members are the most intimate and tangible remaining connections to their greater ancestral heritage, memories of their grandparents are the stimulus for Sephardic authors to begin writing.

In contrast to other literary works, in which authors tie grandparent figures to scenes of death and frailty, grandparents in Sephardic memoirs are vibrant characters (Güde, “Writing” 89). In *Tela de sevoya*, Moscona’s grandmothers are spirited, lively, and emotional figures in both life and death. Recreating their conversations, recipes, anecdotes, lessons, and traditions, Moscona preserves and saves their lives with her memoir to fill the breaches in her ancestry and to reconstruct a more complete identity with what remains of memory: “Sólo me quedaron las palabras huecas, despedazadas; y en sus cáscaras vacías hice mi nido como el último pájaro” ‘I was left with only hollow words, ripped to pieces; and in their empty shells, I made my nest like the last bird’ (Moscona, *Tela* 266; 200). In one “Distancia de foco” chapter, Moscona notes the recipe for a cheese frittata while her grandmother urges her to write in Judeo-Spanish, “*Ayde, escribe*” ‘*Ayde* [Come on], *write*’ (30; 13). In Judeo-Spanish, she hears and records the tale of a treasured family heirloom: the key to a house in Toledo from which her ancestors fled in 1492. Such ancient keys are cherished keepsakes of Sephardic families fortunate enough to still possess them. Moscona’s grandmother tells her,

— *Mira ijika miya, esta yave viejezika ke tengo en mi mano es de la kaza ande moravan nuestros gran-gran papús. Los echaron de la Espanya, ama eyos pensavan ke poko dospues tornariyan. Esta yave me la dio mi vavá y kuando te agas ben adám yo te la vo dar para ke tu la kudies komo kudias tus ojos i se las guadres a tus inietos i a los ijos de tus inietos kuando venga tu ora* ‘*Look here, my ijika* [little one], *this old key that I have in my hand is from the house where the grandparents of our grandparents of our grandparents lived. They were expelled from Spain, but they thought that they’d*

*return after a little while. My grandmother gave me this key and when you become a grown person I will give it to you so you can protect it as you protect your own eyes and you can keep it for your grandchildren and the children of your grandchildren when your time comes*’ (120-21; 84).

Moscona’s grandmother’s medieval-sounding Judeo-Spanish animates this family story and imbues her ancestral history with the mystique of her past.

While her grandmothers speak to her exclusively in Judeo-Spanish, Moscona’s parents, both of whom had passed away before the publication of *Tela de sevoya*, mostly communicate with her in Spanish, a consequence of migration and assimilation in Mexico after World War II. However, Judeo-Spanish becomes an increasingly large part of her relationship with her mother as the latter becomes sick. In one “Distancia de foco” chapter, Moscona recalls the Sephardic version of a beloved Passover melody that the two sing together in Judeo-Spanish called “Had Gadya” — “Little Goat” or “Little Kid” in Hebrew or “*Un kavretiko*” or “*Un kavrito*” in Judeo-Spanish — a light-hearted tune sung at the end of the Passover Seder after four cups of wine. They sing,

*I vino el gato i se  
komió al Kavretiko  
ke lo merkó mi padre  
por dos levanim  
‘There came a cat that ate the goat  
which my father bought  
for two white coins,’*

its many verses ending with, “*I vino el Santo Bendicho / i degoyó el maláj amavet*” ‘*And the Holy One Blessed Be He came / and slew the Angel of Death*’ (Moscona, *Tela* 270, 272; 205-6).

The mother and daughter reanimate the old tune to find refuge in their history and later in the pages of Moscona’s memoir. Even though “Had Gadya” is often sung with a smile, its rather violent and graphic lyrics tell of the fate of a kid bought

by a child's father and a succession of killing and beating. The little goat is eaten by a cat, who is bitten by a dog, who is beaten by a stick that is burned by a fire, which is doused out by water, drunk by an ox, slaughtered by a man, killed by the Angel of Death, who is destroyed by God. Many debate the symbolism of "Had Gadya," whether it be a silly song to keep children awake until the Seder is complete, or whether the goat represents the Jewish people and their oppressors, with the arrival of redemption in the end (Naar). Whatever the meaning, Moscona's mother finds comfort in the Judeo-Spanish lyrics, a way to reconnect to her and her daughter's greater heritage. This poignant scene also introduces the paradox of finding comfort in the morbid, and, in the greater linguistic landscape of Judeo-Spanish, finding peace amidst a decaying heritage. Judeo-Spanish reminds Moscona and her mother that they are two links in a timeworn history that extends back and far beyond either of their lives. The language allows daughter and mother to remain together and grounded so that before death, neither are swept away by the crosswinds of the Diaspora.

Most notably in the "Distancia de foco" chapters, Moscona uses Judeo-Spanish to reconcile with her maternal grandmother, Victoria, decades after her death through dialogues and scenes that revive their tumultuous relationship. Within the first few pages of *Tela de sevoya*, Moscona remembers a moment when she and Victoria were bickering, which seemed to be their default relationship status. Victoria severely accuses her granddaughter, "*Me vas i a mi a matar. A todos matatesh tu [...] Lo matatesh a tu padre por mucho azerlo arraviar [...] Maldicha i tu*" 'You're going to kill me too. You killed everyone [...] You killed your father by making him angry so often [...] You're the evil one' (*Tela* 22-23; 8-9). Pages later that perhaps equate to years, Moscona approaches Victoria,

**"The language allows daughter and mother to remain together and grounded so that before death, neither are swept away by the crosswinds of the Diaspora."**

who is lying face up on her deathbed, and asks her, "Abuela, ¿me perdonas?" 'Abuela, do you forgive me?' to which Victoria responds in Judeo-Spanish, "*No. Para una preta kriatura komo sos, no ai pedron*" 'No. For an evil little girl like you there is no forgiveness' (28; 12). After pronouncing this, she "regresa la cara hasta hacer una recta con su cuerpo, vuelve a suspirar y se muere" 'turns her head back until it makes a straight line with her body, sighs again, and dies' (28; 12).

Schorsch writes that time travel and memory in Sephardic memoir enables authors' "understanding, sympathy, and forgiveness for those who suffered no less (or even more) than [them]" (123). Moscona finds this sympathy

later in *Tela de sevoya* when her grandmother Esther reveals to her that Victoria was a Red Cross nurse during the First World War, the trauma of which affected her for the rest of her life. Perhaps this discovery allows Moscona to then forgive Victoria through her writing years later. She writes,

Descansa, abuela, allá en los añiles de otros mundos y avísale a mi clan que estás perdonada. Si no fuera por ti ¿de dónde hubiera sacado los *biervos i las dichas*? Nadie las inyectó a mi corriente sanguínea como tú, durante esta infancia que sigo escuchando 'Rest, abuela, there in the indigos of other worlds, and tell my clan you are forgiven. If it wasn't for you, where would I have gotten my *biervos i las dichas* [words and sayings]?'

written in the same breath with which she recounts Victoria's death (*Tela* 29; 13).

In the same way that the "Distancia de foco" chapters zoom in and out of Moscona's childhood memories, so too do the sparsely-placed "Kantikas" chapters transport the reader into a different, parallel literary era through original poetry that

Moscona would publish later in *Ansina*. In many circles, mention of any poetry written by Sephardim generally evokes centuries-old works by the famous Golden Age poets of Spain, such as Yehuda HaLevi, Salomón ibn Gabirol, or Semuel HaNagid. Modern Sephardic poets, unlike their Ashkenazi contemporaries, rarely enjoy the fame of their predecessors. Therefore, in consciously electing to include poems entirely in Judeo-Spanish in her memoir — imitating the Sephardic tradition of singing and passing such *kantikas* from generation to generation — Moscona positions herself as the inheritor of the Golden Age literary tradition that she refreshes for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, she claims Judeo-Spanish to be worthy of prose and literature, a stance opposite from many 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Sephardim, who believed the language to be base and common, inadequate for erudition or refined writing.

The five poems of the “Kantikas” chapters, although illustrating different subjects, revolve around a similar theme: grasping at the inaccessible, intangible past that exists at the halfway point between dream and reality, which poetry so easily and wonderfully encapsulates. Moscona uses Judeo-Spanish to vivify and give voices to characters buried in time, recreating encounters with figures of her past as a way to situate herself more firmly within her own history. In one such poem, Moscona writes,

*Me topo con una sivdad  
me rekodro  
ke ayi moravan  
mis dos madres  
'I come upon a city  
I remember  
that there lived  
my two mothers' (Tela 36; 19).*

She listens to these two maternal figures: “*En distintas / kantikas / avlan las dos*” ‘*In different / kantikas / they both speak,*’ restoring their voices in their ancestral language (36; 19). She combs their dark hair, separating the “*kaveyos / blankos*” ‘*hair*

*that is / white*’ from the “*kaveyos / pretos*” ‘*hair that is / dark,*’ the aged from the new, as if methodically sorting through tangled Sephardic history itself (36-37; 19).

The next “Kantikas” poem begins with a passage from Marcel Proust’s 1918 *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, a work whose title aptly fits Moscona’s own search in *Tela de sevoya*. She chooses to include the passage translated into Judeo-Spanish: “*Muestros deseos van enmeleskándose unos kon otros i en esta konfusyon de la vida raro es ke una alegriya venga a toparse djusto anriva del deseo ke la yamava*” ‘*Our desires interweave with each other; and in the confusion of existence, it is seldom that a joy is promptly paired with the desire that longed for it*’ (*Tela* 49; 29). Through translation, Moscona appropriates Proust’s themes of memory and the loss of time to serve her own quest to recover her disappearing heritage. In the poem below the translated quote, Moscona reads Proust’s passage to the two mothers from the previous poem, who “*reyen / por todo kualo avlo kon eyas*” ‘*laugh / at all the things I say to them*’ (49; 29). The ladies also laughed at Moscona before — “*Las dos madres riyen / por todo kualo avlo con eyas*” ‘*My two mothers laugh / at everything I say to them*’ (37; 19) — which perhaps reinforces the futility she feels when encountering and uncovering scraps of her history throughout *Tela de sevoya*. Often, these vestiges appear incomplete and disappointing, and, as Proust might say, they rarely provide joyful fulfillment for the aching longing Moscona bears for a complete identity that merges her present reality with her muddled Sephardic past.

Other figures also emerge in the following “Kantikas” poems interspersed throughout *Tela de sevoya*. In one, Moscona finds herself sitting alongside a man drinking Turkish coffee, evoking the centuries of Ottoman influence on Sephardic life. Because she feels adrift in time, Moscona wonders whether this figure is a symbol of life, death, or family: “*En la machina del tiempo avrá sido mi padre? / mi partero? / mi entierrador?*” ‘*In the machine of time might he have been my father? / my*

*midwife? / my gravedigger?*” (Moscona, *Tela* 78; 51). She wants to connect with him, to link herself to a figure she has linguistically resurrected from the past. She expresses, “*Kero ke me tope afuera*” ‘*I want him to find me*’ (78; 51). However, this man is still a complete stranger to her, “*Ainda no lo konosko,*” ‘*I don’t yet know him,*’ unreachable through the layers of time that separates their lives (78; 51).

In the final “Kantikas” chapter, Moscona encounters two figures she recognizes: her deceased parents. This poem contains dialogue in which these familial figures speak to their daughter directly in Judeo-Spanish, identifying themselves:

“*despierta*  
*so tu padre*”  
 “*despierta*  
*so tu madre*”  
 “*wake up*  
*I’m your father*”  
 “*wake up*  
*I’m your mother,*”

again representing an intangible expanse of time, only accessible through memory (Moscona, *Tela* 222; 165). They reach out to Moscona from the past or the afterlife, whispering in the language in which she writes her poetry. The author describes their slow arrival like “*ierva / kresiendo*” ‘*grass / growing,*’ as slowly as “*ayer va*” ‘*the past goes,*’ coming and going as easily as one remembers and forgets (222; 165). Moscona observes that they are “*kresiendo / a dezirme: so*” ‘*growing / to tell me: I am,*’ arriving at this liminal space to simply tell her to be, to exist, to live, to embrace herself and her entire identity, however fractured (222; 165). They force her to use her voice, “*a fazerme avlar*” ‘*to make me speak,*’ imploring her to keep going and to live on as their legacy, which perhaps Moscona realizes in this final poem (222; 165). Yet as soon as she encounters them, they begin to fade away, as if they were not of this world. Just as the language and history disappear with time, their voices “*vinieron / y empues / tomaron ayre*”

‘*appeared / and then / fluttered away*’ (222; 165). They do not drink the “*kafe turki*” ‘*Turkish coffee*’ that Moscona prepared for them, nor do they stroke her “*kaveyos embuklados*” ‘*curly locks*’ (222; 165). Instead, they simply dissolve into

*vapores blankos*  
*i bafos de nieblina*  
*dejaron komo prueva*  
*i se fizieron sielo*  
 ‘*white steam*  
*and breaths of mist*  
*left behind as proof*  
*and they turned into sky*’ (223; 165).

They slowly return to an ethereal space Moscona cannot enter, retreating back into the fading past while she remains docked in the present.

## VIII. The Oneiric Chapters: “La cuarta pared” & “Molino de viento”

The final two chapters types of *Tela de sevoya* are titled “La cuarta pared” and “Molino de viento.” These are the two most dreamlike of Moscona’s memoir due to the presence of ghostly deceased characters that are as constant a presence as Judeo-Spanish itself. The author uses the language to reverse death and to bring her bygone ancestors out of oblivion — whether through actual memory or diaphanous fictionalization — to surface missing pieces of her history that have been buried by the loss of the language that animated them. By revitalizing Judeo-Spanish, the linguistic vessel containing Sephardic collective memory, Moscona reunites her present and past to create this complete, unbroken history for herself. It allows Moscona, in the fold of their shared language, to speak directly with her deceased parents and grandparents and to communicate with and to recreate the lives of ancestors whom she has never met. As Güde writes, literature “allows us to move beyond the question of life and death, and even to reverse them” (“Writing”

90). Moscona's characters share this sentiment, as an oneiric apparition of her father whispers to her, "Déjame morir, lo necesito. Por ahora, es la única forma en que podemos estar juntos" 'Let me die, I need to. For now, it's the only way we can be together' (*Tela* 189; 139).

Fittingly, "La cuarta pared" is a theater term that defines the invisible, conceptual barrier between performer and audience, or in literary circles, the distance between a work and its readers. In these chapters, the narrowing distance and eventual rupture of the metaphysical barrier between Moscona and her ancestors constitute a kind of fourth wall that the author shatters with her writing. She traverses the borders that separate her current reality from her ancestral past to access the worlds of her familial predecessors. Because these chapters recreate a kind of perdurable, timeless paper trail that winds through her family's Sephardic history, letters and correspondence written in Judeo-Spanish by different characters constitute the majority of the "La cuarta pared" chapters. Whether they are real or recreated by Moscona is not clear, but through Judeo-Spanish, their writers' lives and stories are revived, as if they were responding from within an otherworldly twilight. As per Moscona's own speleologist metaphor, she breaks the barrier that obscured the past from the present.

One letter of the many compiled in these chapters is written from a mother to her daughter. It preserves their love between generations, facilitated by their shared Judeo-Spanish, *Prime ke te estés en mi oyido, prime ke no me dejes, prime ke agora mos agamos el aver liviano, ke mos kedemos injuntas aki, avlando las dos entre la vida i la moerte* 'It's necessary for you to stay in my ear, it's necessary for you not to leave me, it's necessary now that we make levity in our lives, that we stay together here, the two of us speaking between life and death' (Moscona, *Tela* 45: 25).

The mother references this concept of a fourth wall falling between life and death, as well as the connection between the two states as something lingual or vocal, painting Judeo-Spanish

as the medium through which she is able to traverse family trees and time itself. Each of the letter-writers in *Tela de sevoya* break the fourth wall and, like Moscona, are hyper-aware of Judeo-Spanish's intergenerational importance within the Sephardic world. A female correspondent writes in another letter,

*Esta es la lingua de nuestros rikordos, a los mansevos, agora, no les dize komo mos dize a mozos. Avlar ansina es avlar kon la lingua de nuestros vavás i de muestras madres [...] Avlar djudezmo es despertar mis mansevés. Agora ke so una mujer aedada, ke las mis piernas no kaminan kon la presteza ke antes kaminaron, tengo este lugar: los biervos, las dichas, los rikordos [...] Me plaze avlar djudezmo porke esto atada kon estos rekordros. Los mansevos no. No tienen kuriosidá por esta lingua 'This is the language of our memories, it doesn't speak to young people now as much as it spoke to us. Speaking like this is speaking with the language of our grandmothers and our mothers [...] To speak Judezmo is to awaken my youth. Now that I am an older woman, now that these my legs don't move with the speed with which they once walked, I have this place: the words, the sayings, the memories'* (67; 44).

She laments the loss of memory and life, equating it with the loss of Judeo-Spanish and its absence in younger generations of Sephardim who are uninterested in maintaining it for everyday communication. She despondently foresees the death of older speakers, who are "enamorados sinseros" 'true lovers' of the language (67; 44).

Of all the chapters in *Tela de sevoya*, those of "Molino de viento" are the most surreal, animating scenes that border on subconscious dreamscapes. They are a "quijotesque allusion" to fading pasts, to the completion of full circles, and to the Sephardic world and history Moscona reimagines and recreates (Lockhart 115). Just as the windmills appear to be terrifying giants in the cloudy eyes of Don Quijote, distant memory, confused and blurry — sometimes seeming more like a dream

than a version of reality — is a disturbing weight on Moscona’s shoulders that cannot be relieved through force, even as our hidalgo may try. In the “Molino de viento” chapters, to repair the intimidating fragmentation of Sephardic history, Moscona fluidly weaves the past and present together with reality and fantasy, creating illusory and fantastic episodes.

Moscona traverses dreamlike sequences and interprets visions and messages in Judeo-Spanish from long deceased relatives, many of whom she has never met and only knows through family anecdotes or her own imagination. “Percibo así que esas palabras vienen de otros mundos, de la lengua muerta de mis antepasados” ‘I realize that these words come from other worlds, from the dead language of my ancestors,’ she writes (Moscona, *Tela* 285; 216). Judeo-Spanish emerges in the “Molino de viento” chapters on the lips of anonymous family members that slowly guide Moscona towards the deaths that impacted her most: her father’s during her childhood and her mother’s later in her life. In an early chapter, the author observes her mother when the latter was a young woman. In the background of the vision, her grandmother Victoria, acting as a ghostly guide, watches her and says, “Agora tu sos la aedada” ‘Now you are the old lady’ (34; 17). In another ethereal chapter, Moscona finds herself at a circus sitting alongside her father. A ringleader announces in Judeo-Spanish, “*Senyoras, senyores. No podemos fuyir de nuestros destinos, todos estamos moertos, ninyas, ninyos, domadores, fiernas. Todos moertos*” ‘Ladies, gentlemen. We cannot escape our destinies, we are all dead, girls, boys, tamers, beasts. All dead,’ as if her life were over (59; 38). Her language tinges this morbid afterlife that she shares with her parents and transcends the limitations of time or life. Suddenly, as everyone but her and a tiger disappears, a voice within Moscona whispers in Judeo-Spanish, “*Sos la ultima kreatura*” ‘You are the last creature,’ the final bearer of family memories saturated with Judeo-Spanish and the last person who can resurrect them through the shared language that spans the generations before her (59; 39).

The most vivid and dreamy “Molino de viento” chapters come in a rapid, uninterrupted succession at the end of *Tela de sevoya*, which culminates in Moscona’s eventual reunion with two shadowy, compassionate figures, perhaps her parents. She first follows the earlier instructions of a character named “V,” possibly her grandmother Victoria in the afterlife (Moscona, *Tela* 71; 47). V instructs her in a note written in Judeo-Spanish, “*Podras topar a los tus padres empués de un riyó de aguas mui espezas*” ‘You’ll find your parents on the other side of a river whose waters are very dense’ (71; 47). Moscona answers a telephone and hears the voice of her father, who tells her in the Spanish they always spoke to one another,

[D]ile a todos que están equivocados. Lo que pensaban de esta vida es apenas un esbozo. No hay lugar, sólo el tiempo nos reúne. Y sí. La existencia pegada con saliva es y no es aquello que pensábamos. Estamos bien, no dejes morir las palabras, tráelas contigo al río ‘Tell everyone that they are wrong. What they thought about this life is the slightest of outlines. Place does not exist, only time joins us together. And yes. Existence stuck together with saliva is and is not all that we thought. We are fine, don’t let the words die, bring them with you to the river’ (282; 213).

As if he were comforting her, her father reveals the connection between generations to be not only nonphysical, but something oral, constituted of words patched together with saliva. In this regard, it is fitting that Moscona’s father would implore her, “no dejes morir las palabras, tráelas contigo” ‘don’t let the words die, bring them with you,’ because these very words are what lubricates their death-defying connection (282; 213). With them, Moscona preserves her parents’ existence in the scope of her own history so that they can stay together through life and death.

In the final chapter of *Tela de sevoya*, one of “Molino de viento,” Moscona depicts herself biking between a parental elderly man and woman who seem to be protecting her as she

speeds onwards. “Sé que ellos me cuidan” ‘I know that they are taking care of me,’ she writes (Moscona, *Tela* 291; 221). She finds herself biking alongside a train named “*Pecio*,” or “*Shipwreck*,” hinting at an imminent danger that, considering *Tela de sevoya* and its genre, could be the danger of oblivion (291; 221). Moscona is desperate to beat the train to their final destination, otherwise “nos veremos en una situación de riesgo” ‘we’ll be in a risky situation,’ perhaps one of lost memory (291; 221). She pedals harder. The two elderly figures open their mouths and speak to her in Judeo-Spanish: “*Pedalea, hanum, pedalea fin al fin del mundo. Mozotros somos aedados, a dezir vedrá mozos ya estamos moertos, ama anda tu kon todo tu prestor*” ‘*Pedal, hanum, pedal to the end of the world. We are old, the truth is we are already dead, but you go ahead with all your speed*’ (291; 221). They encourage her to continue onwards, to continue to live and to free herself from the weight of the past that she so consciously carries. These words invigorate her. While still on her bike, she retrieves a childhood drawing of a nautilus, one of the oldest living species in the world. “Lo toco con las yemas como si la representación de la especie más antigua de la Tierra pudiera conducirme en el viaje” ‘I touch it with my fingertips as if the sketch of the oldest living species on Earth could show me the way on my voyage,’ she writes (291; 221). It is as if this mollusk, which has survived for thousands of years, embodies her hope for her language, culture, and Sephardic way of life, as if the hardy little cephalopod could teach her how to be remembered and how to remember forever.

Moscona leaps over a murky river and faces the “dos sombras alargadas” ‘two elongated shadows,’ who tenderly extend their arms as she recognizes them with finality, “Son ellos” ‘It is them’ (*Tela* 291; 221). They arrived before her at

“Judeo-Spanish has guided her to a liminality that exists at the impalpable crossroads between the past and present, which allows Moscona to transcend life and death to reaffirm her heritage.”

this indeterminate space between life and death and embrace Moscona, speaking to her “*en la lingua i los biervos de ese país*” ‘*in the tongue and words of that country*,’ an empyrean land whose official language is Judeo-Spanish (292; 221). But as soon as she arrives, Moscona understands that this malleable and affective space exists beyond the power of words. It is a world full of the intangible, untranslatable, and incommunicable experience of her own history and Sephardic identity, unlocked and accessed through Judeo-Spanish. In the last lines of *Tela de sevoya*, Moscona writes, “Allí no hay palabras — sólo balbuceos — y así comprendemos, como comprenden los ciegos, que otra vez estamos reunidos” ‘There are no words here — just gibberish — and thus we comprehend, as the blind comprehend, that we are together once again’ (292; 221). Judeo-Spanish has guided her to a liminality that exists at the impalpable crossroads between the past and present, which allows Moscona to transcend life and death to reaffirm her heritage.

## IX. Conclusion

The frequency with which Judeo-Spanish appears in *Tela de sevoya*, whether through dialogue, linguistic encyclopedic entries, letters and correspondence, travel stories, or dreamlike scenes, is a testament to its inseparability from the Sephardic experience. Moscona cites an acquaintance in Paris who remarks so beautifully: “*El djudezmo es komo un iliko de seda ke mos ata injuntos*” ‘*Judezmo is like a thin strand of silk that ties us together*’ (*Tela* 133; 95). It is a link that connects the author not only to the history of her immediate family that winds its way from Bulgaria to Mexico over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century, but also from Bulgaria back through five centuries to their original homeland of Spain. Hers is one of countless unique histories of the Sephardic people, whose language, culture, practices, and identities remain alive and cherished by those who call themselves Sephardim. Judeo-Spanish bonds all Sephardic communities throughout Diaspora, reuniting the inheritors of this history with their ancestors and predecessors, creating a *tela*, as Moscona might say, with threads of rich heritage and tradition. To weave this language into writing is a way to remember the dead, to bring them to life with words. Moscona tenderly spins Judeo-Spanish into the fabric of *Tela de sevoya*, bending time and space to return to the eras and places that incarnate what Schorsch would call her “personal Sephardic past” (119).

And although parts of *Tela de sevoya* defy translation from Judeo-Spanish to Spanish and to other languages, perhaps it does not matter if bits of meaning are lost along the reader’s journey or whether each and every corner of the memoir is completely, universally, and totally understood. Even Moscona herself acknowledges the elusive shortcomings of attempted translations: “A menudo los traductores se quiebran la cabeza para desbarrar el significado de una palabra que no tiene correspondencia en ningún otro espacio lingüístico” ‘Often translators drive themselves crazy attempting to pick apart the meaning of a word that has no equivalent in any other linguistic space’ (*Tela* 84; 56). Except for a select few, the presence of Judeo-Spanish in Moscona’s memoir may remind its readers that *Tela de sevoya* is a story that they cannot entirely grasp. Much is lost in translation, and not all gaps between languages can be perfectly filled. But perhaps, with or without the connection to Judeo-Spanish, all readers can recognize an omnipresent fear of becoming unmoored in time and history and a desperation to grasp at the frayed threads of our origins. What is most important is that by infusing *Tela de sevoya* with her ancestral language, Moscona preserves and protects in the purest words the life, meaning, and tradition of the Sephardic

experience for posterity, so that the world brought to life by Judeo-Spanish can live forever on paper.

## Endnotes

1. “The book is the product of a journey and a journey in itself.” (Unless otherwise specified, all endnote translations are my own.)
2. “in the interior of the houses, [they] spoke this archaic Castilian as a way to remain united in their love of Spain.”
3. “the nostalgia of a marvelous origin and bitterness of exile and persecution thorough the centuries.”
4. “I brought some information and used it by complementing it with fiction. The only thing that I have been faithful to is the efficacy of the book, not to reality. I do not want to say that there is no memory in the book, but to what degree is not all memory also an invention once it passes through the sieve of time.”
5. “I remember how many times I considered putting a glossary in *Tela de sevoya*. In the end I confided in the reader and decided not to include one, I thought that they would understand the majority of the words through context.”
6. “The ludic connotation of colloquial amazement would miss its mark or, said more accurately, there are expressions that only come forth to me in Ladino: the speech that allows me to enter another dimension of time, one that is more familiar and primitive.”
7. “Languages sometimes preserve a memory that people have forgotten, but the language has not forgotten it.”
8. “Focal Length,” “Windmill,” “From the Travel Journal,” “Paperweight,” “The Fourth Wall,” and “Songs.” (Translated by Jen Hofer and John Pluecker. See Moscona, *Tela de sevoya*.)



9. “a small piece of furniture [chest] with distinct drawers.”
10. “The Trees Cry for Rain.”
11. “The words of Judeo-Spanish [...] record the nuances of the Sephardic experience: exile, separation, pain, and nostalgia.”

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