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"[H]e told me," writes Benito Pérez Galdós, "that the Jews either had no country or had two, their current home or their traditional one, Spain"¹ (224).

[Vocal rendition of "Hevenu Shalom Aleichem / La paz esté con vosotros" in Hebrew and Spanish.]

"Hevenu Shalom Aleichem," a melody I recall from as long as I have memories. "Hevenu shalom Aleichem. Hevenu shalom Aleichem. Hevenu shalom Aleichem. Hevenu shalom, shalom, shalom Aleichem." I also remember it this way: "La paz esté con vosotros. La paz esté con vosotros. La paz esté con vosotros y con vosotros siempre, siempre esté en paz." A cosmopolitan song for wandering people. The apogee of this cosmopolitan took place under Islamic rule of a Peninsula that created the conditions for what we now call modern Jewish culture. Today, I consider how cosmopolitanism led Jews to become Spanish, then survive and sometimes flourish as Spaniards in America, and finally infect Spanish Americans with cosmopolitanism.

In the twenty-first century, traces of Islamic Spain continue to be seen in novels, short stories, and other narrative works by Jewish authors in America. Focusing for the moment on works from the Southern Cone, we see how protagonists created by Spanish-language Jewish authors function nationally as Argentinians, Chileans, Paraguayans, and Uruguayans and more generally as Latin Americans while simultaneously standing out as members of a not-entirely-assimilated group. These works include *No tan distinto* by Marcelo Birnbaum, *Para siempre en mi memoria* by Sonia Guralnik Fliman, *Barrio Palestina* by Susana Gertopan, and *Perfumes de Cartago* by Teresa Porzecanski.

"Spanish," writes Birnbaum in *Tres hombres elegantes*, "this language that the ancestors of my Sephardic grandmother began to speak on the eve of time, that my Ashkenazi grandfather did not know until arriving in Argentina, and that came to me from centurial depths and the precarious situation of the recently disembarked, this language that continued to challenge me—became a key, a code to decipher secrets, as a way to relieve my

¹ "Luego, respondiendo a mis exhortaciones para mantener la fidelidad al Mogreb y la confianza en su fuerza," escribe Benito Pérez Galdós, "me dijo que los judíos, o no tienen ninguna patria, o tienen dos, la que ahora les alberga y la tradicional: esta es España." (This and all subsequent translations my own unless otherwise noted.)

memories”² (20). As seen in this excerpt, Birmajer’s writings simultaneously mark him as Jewish and Latin American, a condition that exists throughout the hemisphere even as those living it feel a need to constantly explain their situation. Quietly, for the most part, Jewish culture has flourished throughout the places now known as Latin America even as Jews have assimilated in various ways in these American places. *María*, by Jorge Isaacs Ferrer, has been called “the most read novel in Spanish-speaking America”³ (McGrady 13), a classic of Colombian literature, yet few critics have paid much attention to the Jewish-Catholic mestizaje that permeates its pages. As *María* demonstrates, literature in Spanish has not ignored the Jewish people, even when so many of its readers have.

Work on these authors continues my focus on American connections. By America, of course, I mean the entire continent, distinct from Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and Antarctica in the sense that, over the past five hundred years, this hemisphere has been host to a splendid mixture of humans and their cultures that have created many differences between and within individual American nations. Along with these differences, there are striking similarities. Some groups spread across diverse countries highlight these similarities by maintaining separate communal practices even as they assimilate into specific national systems. I have seen this while studying Nikkei literature in Canada, the United States, and Peru, where people who have settled in disparate places retain similarities while speaking distinct languages, eating different foods, and educating their children in varied pedagogical systems. Reading American Jewish literature, I see this as well; although geographically and linguistically, Mordechai Richler and Sonia Guralnik remain as far apart as a continent allows, both of their oeuvres read as “Jewish” in ways that do not completely correspond their respectively Canadian and Chilean peers.

Among the first Spaniards to tread on this American soil were Muslims and Jews. We can only view them as Spaniards retroactively, of course, given their status as refugees from centuries of civil wars on the Peninsula. They did not come from Spain, but instead from Al-Andaluz and other parts of Islamic Iberia. Catholic Spain had just come into existence as these first exiles departed and, as historians and other interested scholars increasingly report, Spain never became quite as Catholic, in the sense of its part in European Christianity, as the world thought. Currently in a governmental deadlock that revolves in large part around

² “Entonces, el castellano –ese idioma que los ancestros de mi abuela sefardí comenzaron a hablar en la noche de los tiempos, que mi abuelo askenazí desconocía al llegar a la Argentina, y que me alcanzó con la profundidad de las centurias y la precariedad del recién desembarcado, ese idioma que seguía para mí un desafío– se convirtió en una clave, en un código para descifrar secretos, en un calmante para mi memoria.”

³ “...la novela más leída en Hispanoamérica.”

Catalán independence, Spain may not even have ever been as Spanish, in the sense of a unified nation with a predominate culture, as the world thought.

Birmajer, Guralnik, Gertopan, and Porzecanski thrive in communities started by those first Jews to step off of Spanish vessels in a world, that if not new, was at least substantially further away than they had been from the still peripatetic court of the Catholic Monarchs. Eventually, these Jews and the ones who followed them would become Argentinian, Canadian, Chilean, Colombian, Cuban, Mexican, Uruguayan, and *estadounidense* (sorry, we don't have a scan for that word in English) while remaining identifiably Jewish in all of those places.

Remaining identifiably Jewish was quite an achievement considering the fact that there are not really any authentic Jews anywhere. Judaism itself is a literary fiction; as evidence, I ask you to consider a piece of literature known as The Talmud, the body of laws that governs observant Jews, which was written in the local Aramaic as well as the sacred Hebrew language and was developed almost 600 years before the Common Era in order to maintain a national identity for a group of people without any realistic hope of having an actual nation. Many groups end up in Diaspora. How many plan for it so meticulously?

Some will argue that such planning places Jews among the cosmopolitans, people who survive, even flourish, among the world's diverse cultures and thus not entitled to a national identity of their own. In order to come to terms with this concept, I turn to Timothy Brennan's *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, which provides a refreshing antidote to idealized folklore, perennial back to nature movements, and other manifestations of New Ageism. Disconcertingly, these manifestations of what seems "natural" also reinforce endogamous tendencies by perpetuating a cultural consciousness exclusively available to originary communities. "How 'cosmopolitan' has been used negatively in the past adds to the built-in stigma of so using it today," writes Brennan, who recalls its derogatory "meanings as earlier applied to 'Christians, aristocrats, merchants, Jews, homosexuals, and intellectuals'" (20). Brennan goes on to relate a history of Jewish associations with cosmopolitanism, pointing to the employment of cosmopolitan as "a code word in Eastern Europe for the Jew, where rootlessness was a condemnation and a proof of nonbelonging precisely *here*" with the same term later employed by Stalin in order to whip up populist frenzy (21 emphasis in Brennan's text). The "sixteenth-century paranoid German Christian legend of the 'Wandering Jew' Ahasuerus—condemned by Jesus for his part in the crucifixion," adds Brennan, "is one expression of anti-Semitism that stretches from Luther's diatribes on the 'lies of the Jews' through the Russian pogroms to the Warsaw Ghetto, and may originally have been connected

to the migration of Sephardim from Spain following the infamous fifteenth-century expulsion” (21).

That infamous expulsion led to what we now call Latin America. “What does it mean to be Latin American?” asks Néstor García Canclini in *Latinoamericanos buscando lugar en este siglo*. “Voices relying on history continue this debate, but different ones have chimed in as well, sometimes with new rationalizations. Moreover, they have expanded its scale, as the current condition of Latin America overflows its territory. Those Latin Americans who leave their countries and now extend our cultures beyond the region reveal both a painful disengagement and the opportunities offered by global exchange”⁴ (12). In *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados: Mapas de la interculturalidad*, García Canclini continues this theme. “The most productive studies do not attempt to respond to questions about Latin American identity,” he concludes, “but instead understand intercultural alliances that we call Caribbean or the Andean area or the economic areas denominated North America or Mercosur, how we confront obstacles at borders and cross them, with what narrative strategies and media do we configure stories of the Latin American experience”⁵ (138).

Bringing Brennan’s cosmopolitanism and García Canclini’s intercultural alliances to bear on the history of Spanish Jews in America, I turn to Henry Kamen’s *The Disinherited: The Exiles Who Created Spanish Culture*. By the time a millennium had passed in the Common Era, the world’s largest community of Jewish people lived in those warring provinces that came to be known as Spain. Dissolution of the world’s largest Jewish community did not wipe out the desire of those people to live on in Iberia. For Jews, dreams of Spain were “not merely a question of looking backwards,” writes Kamen. “In a sense, the land they had lost was also the promised land of the future.”

Kamen’s history also demonstrates how movements of Jews, whether to new or old worlds, have been difficult to track. Following the proclamation of the Alhambra Decree on March 31, 1492, Jews dispersed in America, Northern Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and other European countries. In many places, “there is little to identify them with the exiles of 1492,” he writes. “Overall, it is impossible to trace the movements of the exiles” (10). Anecdotally,

⁴ “¿Qué significa ser latinoamericano? ... Sigue habiendo voces históricas en este debate, pero se suman otras distintas, a veces con nuevos argumentos. Además, se expandió la escala: la condición actual de América latina desborda su territorio. Quienes dejaron sus países, y ahora extienden nuestras culturas más allá de la región, muestran el desencaje doloroso de los latinoamericanos y también las oportunidades que ofrecen los intercambios globales.”

⁵ “Los estudios más productivos no pretenden responder a preguntas sobre la identidad latinoamericana, sino comprender las alianzas interculturales que llamamos Caribe o área andina, las áreas económicas que denominan Norteamérica o Mercosur. Cómo tropezamos en las fronteras y las cruzamos, con qué estrategias narrativas y mediáticas se configuran los relatos de lo latinoamericano.”

members of my family still talk about our ancestral connection to centers of power in pre-Catholic Iberia, a place where Jewish people, in large part due to their participation in the early eighth-century fight against an oppressive Visigoth tyranny, flourished under Muslim rule. In a world determined to affix simple labels, we view ourselves as complicated beings that include Jewish, Hispanic, and American elements. Jewish relationships with varied peoples gave rise to another precarious *convivencia* and, as seen in the fiction of Jorge Isaacs, to their participation in *mestizaje*.

Of course, Catholic-Jewish relationships, like other examples of *mestizaje* in America, operate unequally. The declaration made by the Catholic Monarchs not only uprooted openly non-Christian people from Iberia; it also separated Jewish people from Spanish culture in the minds of many who settled in the Spanish colonies. In a rupture that affected the history of the Americas forever after, a new Diaspora separated Spanish Jews from all others who, from either force or election, departed from that homeland. As a result, Hispanics who practiced Islam or Judaism were not considered an integral part of New Spain, the Viceroy of Peru, or, later on, the emergent Latin American nations. “Spain of the Golden Age became permeated with a subtle and corrosive anti-Semitism that turned into one of the most typical components of Hispanic culture, long after Jews ceased to play any part in peninsular life,” reports Kamen. “At the same time, ironically, Jewish and converso attitudes remained deeply ingrained in Hispanic culture. [...] The invisible Jewish presence penetrated into Spanish folklore, literature, music and even into daily food” (19). In addition to feeding Spanish culture, these excluded Hispanics contributed a great deal to Latin America.

Although lengthy, Jewish history in Latin America, “remains largely unwritten, filled with secrets, with forgotten memories, with stories yet to be told,”⁶ observes Marjorie Agosin in *The House of Memory: Stories by Jewish Women Writers of Latin America* (2). Edna Aizenberg discusses suppositions of Spanish ancestry among Jews with Hispanic or even Middle Eastern names and then turn to claims of similar ancestry made by Ashkenazic Jews eager to thrive in their new Latin American communities. Given Kamen’s information on the size and dispersal of the Spanish Jewish community, it is unlikely that any Jew is completely free of Spanish ancestry. Going further, some contemporary geneticists would argue that hardly anyone on Earth could be completely free of Spanish descent; as Steve Olson points out in *Mapping Human History: Discovering the Past through Our Genes*, geneticists have not generally taken a position on the existence of Old Testament figures, but if they did in

⁶ (Translation by Roberta Gordonstein)

fact live, “everyone on Earth is by now a descendant of Abraham, Moses, and Aaron” (114). You, yes all of you here, are Spanish Jews.

“What relevance does the metaphor of Sepharad have in contemporary Latin America?” asks Aizenberg in her chapter of *Sephardism: Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination*. “I say ‘metaphor,’” she explains, “because more than a real place, Sepharad is an imaginary construct that recalls villainies and dreams. The Sephardic metaphor has nurtured Latin American Jewish literary discourse from its very beginnings, and like all archetypes it has related past and present in an incessant process of recreation” (129). This, I argue, leads to the metaphor of Sepharad America, where Guralnik, for example, evokes a strikingly Chilean setting in a Santiago boarding house populated by Jews and Porzecanski relates a narrative of twentieth-century Uruguay with Jewish protagonists. Whether these Sepharad American communities are synecdochic or metonymic remains an issue as pressing and difficult to resolve as does the similarly metaphorical relationship between Iberia America and Spain.

Living under Islamic rule in Iberia, Jews developed a cosmopolitanism needed for dealing with people from the behemoths of Abrahamic religions, Muslims and Christians. *Desterrados*, banished from Sepharad, recognized as their homeland, they continued to maintain a cosmopolitan view that made them part of each *rinconcito*, each little corner of America without, however, subsuming them as assimilated subjects. Now, as people from the various American countries move into and back out of Diasporas in Europe as well as the Americas, an entire continent has become, in a sense, wandering Jews, infected by a cosmopolitanism now needed for survival in an expanding Latin America.

As we continue to read these stories through the eyes of Jewish authors, we might have glimpses of things to come. García Canclini observes how those who are different and consequently silenced, “are not important as a magical resource to modify the reigning order but rather as an excluded voice that reveals something about the excluding order”⁷ (*Diferentes* 143). Looking back, we see how Jewish writing indeed offered “‘Other’ Narratives of Islamic Spain,” excluded voices that spoke about life under empire. Looking at our present moment, those “Other” narratives by authors such as Birmajer, Guralnik, Gertopan, and Porzecanski can tell us not only about Jews, but about the American places empire created. Looking forward, these writers can pull back the curtain a bit on the next scenes of Spain and what will become of Spanish America.

⁷ “[...] no importa tanto como recurso mágico para modificar el orden imperante sino como voz excluida que puede revelar algo sobre el orden excluyente.”

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