Haunted Stories, Haunted Selves: Ghosts in Latin American Jewish Literature

Charlotte Gartenberg

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2767

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
HAUNTED STORIES, HAUNTED SELVES

GHOSTS IN LATIN AMERICAN JEWISH LITERATURE

by

Charlotte H. Gartenberg

Graduate Center, City University of New York

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Latin American, Latino and Iberian Cultures
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
University of New York.

2018
Haunted Stories, Haunted Selves: Ghosts in Latin American Jewish Literature

by

Charlotte H. Gartenberg

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Latin American, Latino and Iberian Cultures in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

Date

Magdalena Perkowska
Chair of Examining Committee

Date

Fernando DeGiovanni
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:
Magdalena Perkowska
Silvia Dapia
Fernando DeGiovanni
Alejandro Meter

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Haunted Stories, Haunted Selves: Ghosts in Latin American Jewish Literature

by

Charlotte H. Gartenberg

Advisor: Magdalena Perkowska

This study approaches haunting in Latin American Jewish Literature from the 1990s through the 2010s as it appears in works by and featuring the descendants of Jewish immigrants. In these decades, this trope is frequently invoked as both a literary metaphor and a critical lens. It arises from and activates a number of themes common in trauma studies and in postmodernism, such as loss, the transmission of memory, our relationships to the past, the rupturing of traditional realities and questions of what can be known and represented. It is particularly prevalent amongst those who pen and protagonize the works which I examine due both to their historical and identitary positions. They are the children and grandchildren of Jewish immigrants to Latin America, inheritors of traumatic memory, and, as Jews and as thinkers in the era of postmodernism, people with particular relationships to time, history and identity. This study separates haunting by modes of encounter, looking at its figuration into ghosts, its power in haunted places and its embodiment in ghostly objects. By parsing this trope from numerous perspectives, this study examines how the motifs conjured in and by the ghostly link to the construction of identities, how these are inscribed within a larger context of group and nation, and how haunting creates ground for new modes of encountering and relating realities.
# Contents

Abstract......................................................................................................................................................... iv

Contents ............................................................................................................................................................. v

Acknowledgements................................................................................................................................................ vii

Introduction: Lessons of Haunting.................................................................................................................. 2

1. Introduction and Scope.................................................................................................................................. 2

2. What is Haunting?........................................................................................................................................ 4

3. Why Haunting?............................................................................................................................................ 8

4. To Haunt or not to Haunt?.......................................................................................................................... 11

5. Organization of this Study.......................................................................................................................... 16

Chapter 1: The Ghost takes Shape: Interpreting 20th and 21st Century Haunting................................. 23

1.1. Introduction.............................................................................................................................................. 23

1.2. The Ghost on the Couch: Psychoanalytic and Trauma-Based Approaches to Haunting ... 24

1.3. Citizen Ghost or the Role of Haunting in Approaches to History......................................................... 32

1.4. The Jewish Ghost: On Haunting in Jewish Identity and Experience...................................................... 42

Chapter 2: Inheriting Ghosts: Forging Stories and Selves out of an Unknown Past .............................. 53

2.1. Introduction.............................................................................................................................................. 53

2.2. Isaac Goldemberg’s *La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner*: Ghosts as a Failure of Inheritance......................................................................................................................................................... 63

2.3. Sergio Chejfec’s *Lenta biografía*: The Subtle Revelations of Ghosts That Do Not Speak 79

2.4. Eduardo Halfon’s *El boxeador polaco* and *Signor Hoffman*: The Gift of the Ghost or Stories that Haunt......................................................................................................................................................... 90

2.5. Conclusions or “Endings That Are Not Over”....................................................................................... 100

Chapter 3: Rites of Return: Claiming Haunted and Haunting Spaces ................................................. 102

3.1. Introduction.............................................................................................................................................. 102

3.2. *Tela de sevoya*: A Journey to Locate Places of the Dead and Spaces of the Living.............. 115

3.3. “Volver a Berlín”: Ghost Guides in a City of Specters........................................................................ 131

3.4. Codas and Conclusions.......................................................................................................................... 143

Chapter 4: Objects of Memory: Embodied Absences, Haunted Bridges and Ghostly Albums .... 149

4.1. Introduction.............................................................................................................................................. 149

4.3. “Objetos personales”: Guests in a Home Museum ......................................................... 165
4.4. Photographs as Memory Objects, Photographs as Imprints of the Past ......................... 172
4.5. Las cartas que no llegaron: Album of a Ghost Family .................................................. 181
4.6. Poste restante: Ghost Album of a Family ................................................................. 191
4.7. Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 202

Conclusions without Endings ............................................................................................ 203
Works Cited ....................................................................................................................... 214
Acknowledgements

Thoughts are not made alone in a vacuum, and the ones in this dissertation are the result of the countless conversations and contributions of many people to whom I owe my thanks. First to my committee members for providing feedback and acting as intellectual and professional examples to which I can aspire. Professors Silvia Dapia, Fernando DeGiovanni, Alejandro Meter, and, in particular, my director, Magdalena Perkowska were essential to this process. Magdalena, I consider it an incredible stroke of good fortune to have had such a generous, attentive and rigorous mind guiding both my dissertation and my navigation of the academic world. I also owe a great debt to Graduate Center, CUNY, its Center for Jewish Studies, and the doctoral program of Latin American, Latino and Iberian Cultures. In this place and from the people who make it a home, I gained life lessons which exceeded what one expects to find at a school or in a classroom.

My infinite gratitude to all of my colleagues, friends and family who listened to me repeatedly tangle and untangle the ideas for this dissertation and my endless opinions on the process of its creation. Luis Henao, Mariana Graciano, thank you for being a sounding board, thank you for laughing at me, thank you for making me part of your lives. The thoughts here also would not have been possible without Rikki Frenkel, my Jew guru, and my brothers and sisters in arms, José Chavarry, Kristina Jacobs, Pablo García Martínez, Isabel Domínguez Seoane, Soledad Marambio and many others in Mexico and New York.

Thanks seems insufficient to this last group of people that fill my life with joy and help me preserve my spark of madness (often keeping it from becoming a forest fire). Krista Durney and Susanna Makela, thank you for the work sessions and the not-work sessions and for being
my PhD ladies. To my parents, thank you for making my life possible in every way and continuing to find me amusing. And, above all, thank you to Ivan Himanen, my moon, my stars, my anchor. Through your love and in striving to match your curiosity and engagement with the world, I glimpse the very best versions of myself.
1. Introduction and Scope

The trope of haunting appears repeatedly in the corpus upon which the present analysis rests its focus. In Latin American Jewish narrative of the last 30 years, that is the 1990s through the 2010s, there are ghosts, haunted houses and cities, eerie objects, and uncanny photographs. Authors from places as disparate as Mexico, Guatemala, Chile, Argentina, Peru and Uruguay all invoke haunting as a major theme.¹ In these works, it is the overriding metaphor for portraying protagonists’ – and often authors’ – issues with memory, topics typically associated with it like identity, family and belonging, as well as questions of our conceptions of reality in general. This shared trope fuels our disposition to cluster works by and about Latin American Jews and encourages queries about what is specific to this population that haunting should so frequently recur as a metaphor of choice. What traits, experiences and questions bring together Isaac Goldemberg (Peru, 1945), Sergio Chejfeč (Argentina, 1956), Eduardo Halfon (Guatemala, 1971), Eliah Germani (Chile, 1956), Myriam Moscona (Mexico, 1955), Marcelo Birmajer (Argentina, 1966), Mauricio Rosencof (Uruguay, 1933), and Cynthia Rimsky (Chile, 1962)? Or at least the characters of La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner (1978), Lenta biografía (1990), El boxeador polaco (2008), Signor Hoffman (2015), Volver a Berlín (2010), Objetos personales (2015), Tela de sevoya (2012), El alma al diablo (1994), Las cartas que no llegaron (2002), and Poste Restante (2009)?

¹ This list names just the countries connected to the novels and short stories addressed here, but though not necessarily as a central theme, haunting appears in more recent works of Latin American Jewish literature than those which have found their way into this study.
A vague proximity in age – from 52 to 84 – and a relatively short span of publication – from 1990 to 2015 (Goldemberg’s novel presents more of a helpful counterpoint than an example of the conclusions with which the other works wrestle) – insert these narratives into a similar general arch of literary trends and recent historical experience. They participate in a milieu that asks about how, in the postmodern age and beyond, we cope with multiplicity, the irreparable fracturing of metanarratives, problems of ethics and representation. Writers and critics around them have already been asking how history is written, how identities are constructed, how we relate to realities we may have interrogated into non-existence. These writers’ work corresponds with a resurgence of the ghost trope, which condenses these questions into a single figure like the specter or the haunted town. But, the thing which most obviously brings together the people who pen and protagonize these works is Jewishness. While there are events and discourses with a strong influence in the environment of Latin American thought at this time – things stemming from nations’ wrestling with overcoming violent pasts of dictatorship and genocide or from ending generations of silencing those not in power like peasants and indigenous populations, for example –, the common religious, cultural and historical experience inherent to Jewishness represents an unignorable uniting connection and transcends possible regional differences in the Americas. The personalities within and creating these texts share a record of exile, both repeated throughout the history of the Jews and in recent memory. They are the children and grandchildren of immigrants. They share familial memories of trauma, of violence which sent them searching for new homes. These historical circumstances and cultural identity also contribute to a common status in Latin America, one in which exclusion, otherness, and hybrid or hyphenate senses of self are daily fare. There is a degree to which the plight of the ghost – suspect and undesired, neither one thing nor the other – is not wholly foreign to Jews, perennial
foreigners themselves. But, perhaps most relevantly, Judaism makes available, mandatory even, alternate models of history and time. Descendants of Jewish immigrants embody and occupy interstitial spaces and multiple times; they embody a temporal-spatial existence often sustained through reference to shared trauma. As in instances of haunting, questions of borders and binaries tend to break down under the weight of farraginous and hazy bases. Religiously devout or not, culturally invested or no, the authors and protagonists of these works share Jewishness in their roots, and we will come to see that their cultural-religious and historical positions contribute to the recurrence and construction of this trope and the larger questions it lays bare.

2. What is Haunting?

Haunting, in principle, is something we fear. Ghosts disrupt life with their constant reminder of death. They threaten to drag us into their world, to contaminate us with their condition. We might die, or worse, we might always be looking backward, permanently stuck in between, or condemned by melancholia to our own living death. Haunting inspires fear because it forces to mind things we would rather leave aside, things imperfectly drowned in the force of forgetting, responsibilities that refuse to remain in neglect. Haunting is scary because its very existence defies the logics which undergird our reality. The past persists in the present, and the places of before project hazily over now. Our linear conception of time in which past, present and future follow one another in a tidy, causal narrative is broken by something which rejects this logic. Places lose their singularity; things which are inert begin to move. The boundaries which sustain the organizing binaries of life and death, now and then, self and other, subject and object are blurred, broken and mocked. The stories which tell us who we are become less convincing because singularity and certainty are now impossible. Worse still, haunting grips us
viscerally, eroding further our illusions of control by seizing us in a place beyond language. Reason in the above sense has been rendered forever elusive. Stability, if it ever existed, is gone.

Given the negative consequences of haunting, the solution would seem to be to avoid it at all costs. We should run from ghosts, do what we can to keep them far from us or turn them away as quickly as possible. This may be one of our instincts when reacting to situations of haunting, but that which haunts also has a tendency to draw us in for a number of reasons. One of these is the combination of the familiar and repellent embodied in things which haunt. They are instantiations of the uncanny, Sigmund Freud’s Unheimlich. Literally un-homelike, they are the making strange of something known and intimate. Such a combination piques our curiosity, attracts and repels at once and calls on our desire to simplify and erase ambiguity. The ambivalent push and pull we feel towards haunting also results from the queries it engenders. Ghosts signal a problem left unaddressed. Entering a haunting place or encountering a ghostly object means confronting a sense that things are still unresolved, maybe even criminally or tragically so. But even though these things are deeply unsettling, we go towards them because they seem to promise answers, not just to the questions they pose directly but the questions that gave rise to their presence. We want to know the shape of the mystery they carry, and we believe that they hold the key to solving that mystery. Even when we do not go towards haunting out of any will or need of our own, its figures still reach out for us, for ghosts are demanding. They may appear just to remind us of the burden of memory that Giorgio Agamben says “we owe to the dead” (474), but often this is more extreme. They may bear an injunction, seek revenge, divulge a damning secret and mandate that a hidden crime be punished.

Haunting is traditionally understood as described above. It is a negative consequence, an unwelcome outcome, and though it may fascinate us, we want it to come to an end. In the
traditional Jewish ghost, the dybbuk – immortalized in S. An-sky’s Yiddish play *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds* (written 1912-1914, premiered 1920) – the dead man who possesses the young woman does so to punish her father for not complying with his word, for leaving a debt unpaid. In general, we need to lay ghosts to rest so that they no longer return uncontrollably. The assumption is that we want to be rid of the ghostly and that we can be. This is part of the premise with which Jacques Derrida opens *Specters of Marx*, the touchstone for most critical works on haunting since its publication in 1993. He invokes Hamlet’s father’s ghost to demonstrate – among other things – that the specter can be dispelled if his injunction is met, if his son rights the wrong committed against the father and the State. A lot is at stake: the revelation of truth, the restoration of time – and relatedly History –, and the peace of the father’s immortal soul. Hamlet translates the presence of the ghost as “time [being] out of joint” (Act 1, Sc. 5 211), and the actions which follow are meant to fix something broken and to honor the ghost, so that he will cease to return and time will be “set right” (Act 1, Sc. 5 212). Though Derrida does not elaborate on the ending of the play or its meaning in the context he sets up, it is important to note that in this example which frames the philosopher’s theories, Hamlet achieves what he seeks. Yes, everyone dies at the end, but the dead are corpses, not ghosts. Denmark is restored in honesty, it has a future once more because its past is both known and over. Setting things right is achieved through bringing things to light, making them fully perceptible, and conferring on them an objective or object-like manifestation. In addition to not respecting the boundaries of time, ghosts defy tidy borders of existence. They are there and not there at the same time. They haunt because “this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge” (Derrida, *Specters*, 5). If you could know their shape, if you were able to “ontologize [the] remains” (Derrida, *Specters*, 9) and turn what is left of the dead into an
observable object, then you could restore the boundaries of past and present, here and gone, and all the other binaries troubled by haunting.

Closure is the ultimate end in numerous analyses of haunting. Haunting typically results from trauma and loss. This is the case with the ghostly monarch above, whose criminal death is devastating for his son – one of the reasons why it is to him that the ghost appears –, but also represents a wounding of the State and the institution of family. The vocabulary surrounding trauma and loss tends to focus on “healing,” “working through,” and “moving on” because there is a fear that subjects will get trapped in the endless resurgence of a past that has no future. The paradigm of mourning versus melancholia is typically called on to elucidate opposing paths in dealing with tragedy and extreme events. Melancholia is a condemning fate in which loss cannot be understood as separate from the person who experienced it. (We may think of this loss as one of a person, a thing or an idea, as Freud does, or as that of a life story unmarred by horror, as is the case with trauma). It haunts; it takes over one’s existence and plunges the person affected into a world obsessed with what is gone, plagued by depression and regret, and reduced to behaviors which follow from these feelings. Mourning, on the other hand, is a healthy approach to grieving; it allows for evolution facilitated by a balance of remembering and forgetting. Not shrouded in the enigma of repression or partial knowledge nor invisible because it is simply too close, what is lost and the experience of loss seem to be understood. It has spatial and temporal boundaries and can be moved on from. While neither argues that haunting trauma can be entirely overcome, prevailing theorists on it like Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra refer to how and why ghastly events must be confronted, touching on the consequences of psychological injuries left unmended in individuals and communities. Both LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* and Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* draw on Freud’s concepts of mourning and melancholia to parse what
happens to people or nations that do not get a grip on crises in their history. Theorists in this genre, along with psychologists and psychoanalysts, prescribe various means of confronting trauma and loss precisely to avoid the consequences of being ruled by it. They must foreclose the possibility of haunting, or continued haunting, and its unsettling effects. If they do not do so, there is no chance of maintaining the tidy timelines of past, present and future which undergird so much of our identities and realities.

3. Why Haunting?

This description of haunting shares a number of aspects of Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, which deals with a particular type of disturbing transgenerational memory. The people who populate these works are children and grandchildren of immigrants and trauma survivors, and they fit well into what Hirsch calls the “generation of postmemory.” She describes her concept:

‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (The Generation 5)

At a remove from the trauma of religious persecution, exile or penury, this generation experiences memory in a way that is similar to haunting; with no direct access to the events of the past, they still suffer its consequences. The works produced by postmemorial artists frequently have ghost-like qualities or aim to ameliorate the effects of being haunted. They might feature palimpsestic photographs that print elements of the artist’s life on top of pictures from the
parents’ or grandparents’ youth. Or, a journey of return and the telling of it seek to heal the rift caused by exile, attempting to end the indiscriminate layering of past and present that continues in the lives of subsequent generations. Postmemory constitutes a particular type of haunting that tends to affect the very population of Jews who pen and protagonize the works in this study.

But haunting in general exceeds the topics and parameters with which Hirsch concerns her work. Many of our current definitions of haunting proceed from criticism originating in the same vein as that which gives birth to Hirsch’s ideas. Ghosts come up frequently in work on memory, violence, genocide, museum studies, and psychological and psychoanalytic writing on trauma. This is the case with a number of texts that emerge from analyses of the Holocaust and its aftermath, from Giorgio Agamben’s Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (1998), which looks at the limits of witnessing and testimony, to Gabriele Schwab’s Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma (2010), which centers on how memory is transmitted and the consequences of that transmission. But, haunting is not confined to these topics nor to Hirsch’s focus on the individual, her largely unidirectional sense of troubled times or the somewhat melancholy conclusions that seem to be an inescapable terminus in her analysis of postmemory. Two recent collections of essays attest to the breadth and importance of this trope in contemporary thought, drawing from the topics mentioned here as well as addressing transitional justice, alternative histories, societal others, and even our relationship to technology. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren’s The Spectralities Reader:

---

2 Marianne Hirsch treats this subject in her chapter with Leo Spitzer “What’s Wrong with this Picture?” in The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust and in her chapter “Past Lives” in Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory.

3 Hirsch’s postmemory dwells on the troubling of times and time-spaces but mostly of the past laying over the present. This is not always the case. Consider the way she analyzes her interpolation in old family photographs; when she sees her aunt or her mother in pictures taken before the War, she imagines her own face there, looks for her features in theirs (Family Frames 81-2). Haunting can be this, but its lingering, when it is confined to a mere lingering, points to a more fundamental breaking of time, for the specter “is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back” (Derrida, Specters 11).
Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory (2013) unites looks at haunting from a number of perspectives, with sections on “The Spectral Turn” (which aims both to define haunting and contemplate its recent resurgence), “Spectropolitics: Ghosts of the Global Contemporary,” “The Ghost in the Machine: Spectral Media,” “Spectral Subjectivities: Gender, Sexuality, and Race,” “Possessions: Spectral Places,” and “Haunted Historiographies.” Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Petersen’s Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narratives (2015) similarly attempts to capture the wide range of topics invoked by the ghostly, from haunted histories and specters of the market to photographs and the persistence of violence, doing so specifically in contemporary Spanish-language literature and film. Idelber Avelar’s The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning (1999) also examines the trope of haunting – though more obliquely – in recent Latin American cultural production with an eye toward how allegory assists in the task of turning national melancholia into a more productive type of mourning. Derrida’s work springs from questions of what we owe to the past and how it exists in our present. Avery F. Gordon’s Ghostly Matters (1997) – also a touchstone in what some have called “spectral studies” – uses a sociological perspective to look at the effects of exclusions from the hegemonic discourse.4

Looking at this rather reduced list of works on haunting, we see how this trope can easily become the container of a number of different topics, each of which evokes the others in differing measures. The versatility and open scope of the ghostly is in part why it forms the glue of this study as well as the reason it appears so frequently in these works. We might think of haunting as a sort of sign-node in a rhizome of associations, engagement with which brings the realization that experience and memory are organized more rhizomatically then we are at first

---

4 Notably, this is what María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren’s Spectralities Reader names this kind of work.
inclined to admit.\textsuperscript{5} Haunting brings up various themes, none of which constitute the center of a constellation. These topics weave in and out of one another and, like the ghost, mock any attempt to make them too orderly. Ultimately, haunting poses phenomenological questions. As manifestations of that which is radically other but perhaps unseen, what is simultaneously present and not, they bring up how we perceive, what we are conditioned to see or not see, how we believe our reality exists. The reevaluation of perception and reason necessitated by confronting something so affectively evocative and so egregiously boundary blurring, something which refuses to be apprehended purely by our senses more linked with reason, leads to issues of control and certainty. As a literary trope, haunting is a platform for interrogating our relationships to and in the world. In the presence of ghosts, all of our relationships become suspect, those to memory and the past (as we shall see throughout this study), to identity and to our relatives (Chapter 2), to our places and spaces of belonging (Chapter 3), and to objects themselves (Chapter 4).

4. To Haunt or not to Haunt?

The issue remains that haunting is theoretically something we do not want, something we ultimately seek to resolve and be rid of. When the authors and protagonists of this study confront its various instantiations, the initial thinking is that haunting must be addressed with the aim of seeing it come to an end. Ghosts must and deserve to be laid to rest. But, both recent theory and these works force us to reconsider whether this actually is or should be the goal of either haunter or hauntee, and, furthermore, if someone who is haunted should expect eventual resolution.

\textsuperscript{5} In their explanation of the rhizome, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari understand the impulse to “search for roots” and organize all thought “aborescent[ly]” (8), but they see this as wrong-headed, limited and potentially damaging (the last of these opinions is emphatically stated in their evaluation of Freud and Melanie Klein’s work with children (14)). The rhizome chapter of \textit{A Thousand Plateaus} attempts to work against this type of ordering in all its forms and to explain how the very writing of the text operates by a mechanism which seeks to embody rhizomatic thinking and undo the ills and blind spots generated by overly “genealogical” thinking (8,11).
Haunting seems to be inherent to both the Jewish and postmodern conditions. In different, sometimes overlapping ways, these two positions confront questions of exclusion and multiplicity, the cohabitation of occasionally contradicting world views, compromise with the desire for truth and the awareness of its impossibility, experiences of time which defy tidy linearity, and a sense of overriding responsibility to the past.

Because of their unique historical and identitary positions, Jews seem to be ripe for haunting. Exile, diaspora and persecution have been common themes throughout Jewish history and religion even before the relatively recent events of the Holocaust and pogroms. Hunted and kept apart, Jews outside of Israel have often occupied a special space, as a group within another nation, as individuals with hybrid or multiple allegiances, or as a people excluded from the place in which they reside. In modern history, the acute sense that home is somewhere else is exacerbated by recent exiles that sent Jews to new continents, precisely when after many generations, they had come to feel a part of countries in Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa. Once in Latin America, Jews continue to inhabit ambiguous or multiple group identities. Both the new host nation and family can reinforce a sense of separateness for the descendants of immigrants, each communicating and producing ambivalent feelings about assimilation. Anti-Semitism and inherited nostalgia act as some of the powerful motivators that can pull children and grandchildren in several directions. For Sylvie Ann Goldberg, alternative time is one of the resources that has allowed Jews to sustain their identity over generations of exile and mixed identitary influences. “By establishing new temporality,” she states, “Judaism managed to perpetuate itself among the nations. Through this unique temporality Jews were enabled to continue living in the midst of other peoples, as much by the rhythms of Judaism as by a time that was not theirs” (xv). She asserts that this ability to occupy multiple times “became one of the
key markers of the distinctiveness of Jewish identity” (3). The “new temporality” Goldberg brings up here is not a single alternative. She refers to the existence of the separate Jewish calendar as well as how time governs and is governed by Jewish practice. Recent traumas are related as new instantiations of old ones and cyclical ceremonies make a point to fuse living Jews with their biblical ancestors. It could therefore be argued that the very concept of time and the relationship of the individual to the past is communicated in a way that promotes haunting as a glue holding a diasporic people together.

This combination of responsibility, alternative relationships to time, and a sense of identity that remains multiple (on an individual and group level) is paramount for philosophers addressing the ghostly in the grand scheme of History. For Derrida or Walter Benjamin, haunting is the only honest and ethical position one can maintain towards the past. In their work, as in that of many recent scholars of the Holocaust, we see a call to maintain the affective power, multiplicity and irresolution that such a relationship to the past sustains. Master narratives are dishonest, reductive, even lazy. An ongoing dialogue with the past helps us sustain a more ethical relationship to it, one that does not silence those who are marginal or objectify history into a state of oblivion. The issue is that the singular, master narratives postmodernism explodes and argues against are also extremely helpful in creating functional citizens, structuring individuals and reinforcing group ties. We do not cease to want these things. The push and pull continues for Jews and for any modern citizen. In the first case, a desire to fit in with the

---

6 These topics will be elaborated on the first chapter, but briefly, these comments relate to what Yosef Yerushalmi outlines in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* as particularly Jewish approaches to the two practices that form the title of his text and specifically to parts of the Passover Seder, the ritual meal eaten for the Jewish holiday of Pesach, in which the story of the exodus from Egypt is retold as though it happened to the speaker.

7 I would be remiss if I did not mention that many of the critics whose work provides the base for “spectral studies” were Jewish, whether practicing or not. In particular, Derrida, Benjamin and Freud.

8 Recently, discussions on the Holocaust have begun to center more and more on how to preserve the affective connection to these horrors and on how transmitting the facts of what occurred is only part of the scholar, the Jew and the human’s responsibility. We will explicate this further in the first chapter.
dominant society is often a drive to make a complex Jewish identity simpler by taking part in the 
hegemonic narrative of the place they are from or, more often, forging the type of narrative 
embodied by it. Jewishness is not passed down in a way that facilitates an identity story with an 
uncomplicated sense of linear singularity, something which autochthonous (at least discursively 
autochthonous), hegemonic cultures of the West tend to take for granted. While he does not 
propose “hauntology” so that it might reinforce a particular group identity, Derrida advocates for 
a constant negotiation with the past that keeps it and the present alive and evolving, a past that 
disturbs time in order to make us conscious of the movement of the world.

The arguments for and against haunting battle on in ethical, logistical and emotional 
renditions, and quite frequently end up going in circles. Considering this from the emotional and 
logistical perspective, there is a sense in which people want their ghosts to stick around because 
they are loathe to let loved ones go or because a ghostly presence is the only existence a person 
or place was ever able to muster. For those with a complex relationship to personal, familial or 
group identity – a difficulty which can result from persistent unknowns, disorienting distances or 
specific traumas, as we see in the following works – there is a need to maintain the nearness of 
the past as it assists in shedding light on who they are. The options become either to embrace the 
spectral or embrace nothing. Haunting makes the past feel viscerally close, and people fear 
losing an intimate connection with something so integral to the affirmation of identity, whether it 
has to do with family, heritage, homeland, or an object of memory. But, theoretically, ghosts 
must be laid to rest in order to make way for an unfettered, singular identity, a sense of self with 
an organized existence in time. This becomes an inescapable paradox that finds a very 
postmodern solution – something which happens repeatedly throughout the narratives analyzed 
in this study. The recourse is one of fiction, and it is in the analysis of this process, which
attempts to find what it can of the truth and reassemble it, that we discover that any construction of a reifying narrative will borrow from this genre. One cannot know everything of the past, especially if he or she is at one or more generational removes from it, and neither the past nor the present is actually singular. Yet, this does not mean that we have no need of simple narratives, or, at the very least, to pursue them, for they inscribe us in the world, place us in a chain of ancestors and events that have led to who we are. Pursuit of this goal leads us back to the ethical proposals outlined in their Jewish and postmodern versions above.

While it may not be possible or preferable to actually be rid of ghosts, those who are haunted must nevertheless go through the attempts to do so. This may seem like a fruitless or interminable exercise. The thing that motivates the process, both to begin and to continue, is the promise that by going through these steps, by pursuing these actions, the initial thing which instigated this desperate search that is now underway will disappear and the process will come to an end. In modern haunting, at least as we see it in recent criticism and in these works, the ultimate goal to be taken from confronting haunting is actually the process itself. This of course creates a paradox, but it is an incredibly hopeful one as it leads us to new territories of thought. Movement seeks stillness all the while knowing that stillness is not an ethical, desirable or even achievable goal. But, embarking on the process is, in part, how ghosts are honored, shown that they are worthy of respect and eternal rest. Furthermore, achieving a connection to the past that contributes to a settled sense of self, especially in the cases examined here, also necessitates going through this process, even if it likely will not yield the desired result. Characters in the works examined here demonstrate varying levels of naiveté regarding the feasibility of what they seek, and some make a compromise with fiction. Others seem to understand that their undertaking is a process without end, and creation and pursuit of truth are the best and most
ethical approximations they can achieve with regard to understanding their haunted pasts. The difference here tends to be generational. Characters – and often writers, as most of these works fall into the category of auto-fiction – who are the grandchildren rather than the children of those who suffered a trauma seem to better understand that both the past and personal identity are variegated and fluctuating, that they are sites of constant construction. For both generations, the tension persists, however, between wanting a traditional, integrated sense of self that is the natural product of a well-defined lineage, that resembles a hegemonic discourse which procures an uncomplicated and straightforward narrative of history and identity, and knowing that such a thing is impossible and always at least a bit of lie. Confronting ghosts and attempting to lay them to rest – by making them seem whole and separate, by knowing them and their stories, by making them fully dead, over, inert or object-like – addresses these issues.

5. Organization of this Study

The present study approaches the trope of haunting in these works phenomenologically. It is thus divided into chapters on theory, ghosts, haunted spaces and ghostly objects. This look facilitates a thorough investigation of haunting by highlighting different themes which come to the fore in its distinctive instantiations and likewise can better examine each of these interwoven themes in the Latin American Jewish context. When considering haunting in the form of ghosts, questions about individual identity and inheritance are paramount. Ghosts activate issues surrounding Jewish genealogy and responsibilities of heritage. While these still lurk in the background of the other chapters, just as their themes do in the section on ghostly people, in the subsequent chapters, different issues take center stage. In the case of experiences of haunted places, what people inhabit – spaces, languages – and how they do so are central, as are the concepts of origins and of homeland. Looking specifically at ghostly objects – heirlooms, objects
of memory, family photographs – shifts the focus to the material practices of relating to the past while testing the methods by which haunting might be or, rather, might not be dispelled. All of these ultimately touch on the function of writing as both a tool of organization and a mode of coming to terms with the impossibility of fully realizing such a task. Writing, the theme which closes our study, becomes a featured method by which the processes instigated by haunting are undertaken and the principal instrument for preserving and coping with openness and multiplicity as well as embracing that which disturbs us.

Chapter 1, “The Ghost takes Shape: Interpreting 20th and 21st Century Haunting,” provides a base for understanding haunting throughout the rest of the study by assembling a picture of its modern and contemporary rendition. It begins with the psychoanalytic perspective, which views haunting as a type of melancholia which should be resolved into mourning if properly worked through. The psychoanalysts who frame this section are Sigmund Freud, Nicolas Abraham, and Maria Torok as well as theorists who work specifically on trauma, like Caruth and LaCapra. Each looks at melancholia as resulting, in a certain sense, from a problem of distance. Because the traumatic event or thing that has been lost – or was always lost, as is the case with secrets – is either too close or too far to afford a thorough understanding, it continues to haunt the subject, dragging him or her into the unproductive, in-between that is the realm of the ghost. This outlook paves the way for thinking about the role of objectivity in overcoming one’s ghosts, for such an act imposes boundaries, helping the haunted to restore timelines and structure organizing narratives. The poststructuralist take follows this one, principally employing Derrida’s interpretation of specters (which itself depends in no small measure on Freud) to access what haunting augurs as a metaphor for our relationships to History. Also employing Walter Benjamin, this section looks at what we owe to the past and how it interpellates us in the
present and future. The chapter closes with how haunting as we see it in these works may already be implicit in Jewish approaches to identity and the past, concluding with the question of whether haunting might be unavoidable for Jews in general.

Chapter 2, “Inheriting Ghosts: Forging Stories and Selves out of an Unknown Past,” looks at ghosts who are or were once people. This chapter represents the most traditional perspectives on haunting and the consequences of leaving it unresolved, in part because the examples which contribute to it all feature men, two sets of fathers and sons and one of a grandfather and a grandson. The main focus derives from issues of biography, centering on how genealogy contributes to our concepts of self and what happens when a rupture causes us to be robbed of this organizing heritage in some way. Isaac Goldemberg’s *La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner* (1978) – actually written before the rest of the works studied here and therefore anterior to the environment which formed the others – helps to set a precedent for what happens to children who are denied a heritage by a persistently absent father. While the son in *La vida* is condemned by his father’s ghostly half-presence, the son in Sergio Chejfec’s autofictional *Lenta biografía* (1990) is able to strike a compromise with what he can and cannot know. He invents a story of his father’s past, and this fiction substitutes for the reifying family history that his father is unable to pass on to him. The grandson in Eduardo Halfon’s *El boxeador polaco* (2008) and *Signor Hoffman* (2015) – two collections also belonging to the genre of autofiction – embarks on a similar project, in which Halfon tries to give his grandfather and his past a more defined, even material, presence. But, unlike Chejfec/his eponymous character, Halfon/his eponymous character remains uneasy with his fictional compromise and continues a seemingly endless process of seeking resolution. The genre of autofiction with the border blurring and improvisational characteristics it shares with haunting underlie the analysis of how these men
attempt to forge a settled sense of self in circumstances which expose the impossibility of such a thing.

Chapter 3, “Rites of Return: Claiming Haunted and Haunting Spaces,” is less governed by a mostly temporal task of organizing a life story – one which searches a familial timeline for a some kind of origins – and turns to spatial issues of homeland and belonging. The characters in the works analyzed in this chapter deal with an unstable sense of home, and their haunting engenders projects meant to organize the spaces of past and present. The children of exile featured in these texts grew up with a feeling that home was elsewhere, frozen in a place they had little access to except in the forms of nostalgic memory and language – itself habitable like a portable homeland. Ostensibly, the rites of return on which they embark are meant to give shape to the hazy places of the past and provide a bit of metaphorical closure for those who could not return. While they do so, it is not quite in the way the protagonists expect, for haunting persists. This is particularly true of Frau Grunwald’s journey to Berlin in Eliah Germani’s “Volver a Berlín” (2010), in which a young doctor is compelled to the former home of her recently deceased parents. There, she sees the palimpsestic layering of two Berlins and is eventually able to leave the city with a feeling of distant belonging to this space. But, though it is a drive for resolution which sends her there, it is in fact ghosts which compel her to this place and guide her through it. She must embrace her parents’ and, by extension, her former home as a haunted space in order to derive a feeling of identifying belonging from it. Myriam Moscona’s experience, slightly fictionalized and chronicled in *Tela de sevoya* (2012), deals with these topics more head on and comes to a much less tidy conclusion. Her protagonist suffers from a displaced sense of belonging, and pushed out by a Mexican home haunted by her dead family, she journeys to the Balkans on a trip meant to sort out the current spaces of life – the language of Ladino, a new
Sephardic homeland in Mexico – from the places of death – various cities in the Balkans where her family’s former homes have been destroyed and replaced.

Chapter 4, “Objects of Memory: Embodied Absences, Haunted Bridges and Ghostly Albums,” looks at different objects meant to carry the past, examining how instead of providing a reassuring material touchstone, they actually haunt those who interact with them by defying the dependable inertness expected of an object. Objects are bounded and contained; they are sites which provide distance and knowledge. Whether preserved as evidence or as a surrogate for a missing loved one who should be mourned but not entered into the morass of melancholia, their very ontology would seem to work against haunting. But, the personal effects featured in Eliah Germani’s “Objetos personales” (2015) and the cameo which circulates throughout Marcelo Birmajer’s *El alma al diablo* (1994) defy their objective qualities and influence those who come into contact with them. Though this is fundamentally disturbing – protagonists in both texts experience great fear in the presence of these objects capable of dragging them back in time or altering their perception of it –, these uncannily powerful artifacts embolden those who touch them, actually helping them to grow and move forward with their lives.

The second section of this chapter centers on photographs, of which we expect a similar coupling of objective and evidentiary qualities with a sense of the past embodied. Yet, in the context of Mauricio Rosencof’s *Las cartas que no llegaron* (2000) and Cynthia Rimsky’s *Poste restante* (2001), pictures are both the problem and the solution. *Las cartas* fashions two types of artifacts that attempt to connect the protagonist Moishe (not so loosely based on Rosencof himself) to a past from which he is largely excluded by multiple traumas, including his parents’ exile, the Holocaust and his brother’s death at young age. The text includes made-up letters and constitutes an invented family album, and while the former come off as more treacly and morbid
than ghostly, the latter activates questions about the inherently haunting qualities of pictures and the organizing expectations we have of family albums. *Las cartas* has some measure of success in forming a story of self that inserts the first member of the family born in the Americas into a genealogical trajectory that links him both reasonably and viscerally to people he never knew. The reader is able to contemplate this process, mentally and affectively, in part because the photographs actually appear in the novel. Rimsky’s work is perhaps even more evocative of the issues of family photographs because she chooses to make a point of not including any images from the ghostly album which anchors, or rather fails to anchor, the novel. Marked “Rimsky” and ostensibly from 1940s Eastern Europe, this collection of pictures found in a Santiago flea market sets off the search for roots recorded in this mixed-genre work. It could not possibly contain her family, yet, as though testing the limits of invention as a replacement for truth, the author/protagonist allows herself to be guided by this ghostly object. Her project seems largely fruitless, as her attempt to lay ghosts to rest ultimately generates more ghosts, yet as a granddaughter of exile – one more generation removed from trauma – it is not surprising to see her lean into the uncanny frustration produced by present absences as well as the endless need for process which they generate.

The conclusion returns to the subject of writing and what we might expect of this consolidating tool. Most of these works touch on writing as a method well-suited to dealing with the disruptive consequences of haunting, focusing both on the objects and actions it produces. Yet, though writing happens in the realm of the concrete, few works seem to see it as a definitive answer to the problems affecting their authors/narrators/protagonists. In fact, writing is a mode of process which looks for answers but can embrace inconclusiveness. It fights haunting as a gesture towards organization, but it allows the ghostly to persist through its potential to be
endlessly open-ended. It embodies well the paradoxes offered by haunting. It allows for stillness and movement, closure and irresolution, reason in its traditional, cold forms and affect in its mutable, unpredictable forces. Uncomfortable as it is, haunting is a bid to keep us honest. It alters our perceptions about how we assemble or should assemble stories of self and history and keeps us engaged with a vision of the past, present and future as sites in constant flux.
Chapter 1:  
The Ghost takes Shape: Interpreting 20th and 21st Century Haunting

1.1. Introduction

It is that profoundly unsettled feeling. Perhaps something unseen watches you from just beyond the corner of your eye. Something not quite there persists and refuses to leave. It is that disquiet that comes from a combination of familiarity and unassailable strangeness. You feel a pulsing, breathless lack of control. Something endures that should be gone, yet the logics of your time and place have no power over it. It refuses the consequences of your world, your reason. Even as it threatens and terrifies you, it is alluring. You want it to stay, to return again, to tell you what it knows, as much as you want to be rid of it forever. You are haunted. You perceive the hazy incarnations of the immaterial, the ghosts that inhabit and conjure the liminal and ambivalent. You step into a haunted place that blurs the borders between past and present, troubles the linear passing of time, undoes the comfortable separation of self and other, individual and environment. An uncanny feeling creeps into you, unsettles your neat perceptions of the world and demands you address unfinished business before it will allow you to move forward in a productive life narrative.

Haunting – expressed through the ghosts that objectify it, the places where it occurs and the objects that set it off – is a difficult concept to capture not just because elusiveness is one of the qualities from which it draws much of its power but also because it is a trope that harbors a number of tangled, overlapping and occasionally disparate concepts. In recent decades, especially in the last 20 years coalescing around the moniker of “spectral studies,” ghosts and haunting have been used as a theoretical framework for addressing trauma and loss, literary,
cultural, historical and familial inheritance, alternative discourses and historiographies, societal others and marginalized subjects, technology and media, and general experiences of alienation in the age of globalization and late capitalism. While all of these approaches may not be specifically relevant to our present study, each remains implicitly (and often explicitly) in the foundation of the others. The two main lines in explaining haunting – that attempt to define ghosts, their causes, appearances and effects – conflict even as they intersect, create paradoxes and encourage ambivalent conclusions. We examine these here as the psychoanalytic or trauma-based construction and the poststructuralist or Derridian conception. The former tends to see the ghost as linked to some fundamental, explanatory origin that when unlocked, decoded or confronted properly will elucidate a person and lead to solving his or her problems, while the latter revels in the very irreducibility of ghosts, centering on their ambiguous or contradictory qualities, for their refusal of the neatness of reason provides ample space for the analysis of contemporary phenomena that do or should do the same. In what follows, we will examine these approaches and the way they address various elements of haunting and ghosts in an attempt to assemble relevant theories for addressing their appearance in Latin American Jewish renditions of the last 30 years, that is the 1990s through the 2010s.10

1.2. The Ghost on the Couch: Psychoanalytic and Trauma-Based Approaches to Haunting

In Freudian terms, haunting is a result of unresolved mourning, the type of mourning which is actually melancholia. In a normal process of grieving, an object – whether concrete such as a person or a home or something more conceptual like an ideal or one’s liberty – is lost,11

---

10 Isaac Goldemberg’s novel, *La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner* (1978), does not fit into this time span. While his work looks at questions of temporality and modernity, in this study, it stands more as an anterior example or counterpoint for discussing qualities particular to the more postmodern questions developed in the other narratives analyzed.

11 Freud himself gives these examples: “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (243).
and the mourner, able to recognize that the entity that is now gone is separate from him or herself, eventually moves on. The melancholic, on the other hand, has trouble maintaining this division. She will continue to carry the lost thing with her; she cannot leave it behind. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok point to these reactions to loss in their own appraisal of mourning and melancholia, which they associate with introjection versus incorporation, the former a “fantasy” and the latter a “process” (125). Incorporation figuratively takes the lost thing in, and by refusing to see the lost object as distinct, “exempts the subject from the painful process of reorganization” of the self whereby he confronts the loss and reclaims the part of himself that he placed in what is now gone (126). For Torok and Abraham, this sort of reaction produces “a gap within the psyche; it points to something that is missing just where introjection should have occurred” (126). The process of introjection avoids such gaps or holes in the self because the subject is able to mentally apprehend the lost object and learns to metaphorically “fill the emptiness” (128), restoring at least the notion of a whole self.

Mourning and melancholia, and the associated introjection and incorporation, play on the oppositions of distance versus excessive proximity (verging on convergence) and the related knowledge versus non-knowledge, or rather, the knowable versus the unknowable. Freud notes “that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness” (245). The burying of the lost object in the self that categorizes incorporation makes it too close to see; it is unavailable to consciousness, irretrievable to understanding. When something is known, it can be seen as outside the self. A healthy mind “faces” or “confronts” a loss or trauma. Likewise, it is also distance and detachment (although not always) that can allow for objectifying knowledge. The repeated linguistic turn to “objects” here is important, for when we completely objectify something, we render it inert, effectively killing it. The completely dead
do not return and cannot linger. They are not a present absence but rather truly gone. Melancholia, therefore, and its accompanying haunting are frequently a reaction to the blocking of knowledge, an essential element in giving something an object-like existence or at least having the potential of such. One definition of phantoms, according to Abraham, attributes them to secrets; the phantom acts as a symbol of “the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life...[In this case] what haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (171). Again, it is a thing that is not there, something that seems to flaunt its absence and inaccessibility, that produces haunting. Lingering and repeating, trauma similarly haunts because it produces gaps, distortions and amnesia, especially in the generation with immediate experience of it (Schwab 14). Cathy Caruth in her extensive work on trauma says it causes a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (Caruth 4).

Caruth elaborates on Freud’s take on trauma explaining that in part it is so affecting because it is a “belated experience” (7) and often undergoes “latency, the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent” (17). Here, latency might be mistaken for the distance and detachment essential to properly working through a trauma or loss, but this delay is really a forgetting that causes another hole or gap to be buried within the self and one’s experience.12 Forgetting and latency cause the past to repeat unpredictably, unfixing it from its place in a personal timeline and destabilizing the subject and her sense of self. Much of the “working through” encouraged in trauma studies, and in situations of mourning a loss, necessitates talking about what happened, speaking of the dead and telling what occurred. This mode of addressing trauma makes it available to consciousness. It is a way of pulling the event

---

12 Caruth explains Freud’s take on what makes trauma actually haunt: “The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all...it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a [traumatic] history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (17-18).
out of repression in an attempt to keep it from returning uncontrollably. Recounting, assembling a testimony, has the potential to constitute the open wound left by the people and events of the past, giving them shape through narrative. Such an account will render sense upon what came before, stymying its unpredictable repetition and forcing it into forming part of a productive notion of past, present and future.\textsuperscript{13} Narration may encounter its limit when trauma is the result or product of not a loss or a lack but rather an absence. Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between the two, for in the former, some process of working through is possible because what is no longer present is historically specific; it might potentially be known and understood to be part of the past. The latter, on the other hand, is transhistorical or structural; it does not occupy a place in time and there is no possibility of complete knowledge because its existence depends on non-existence (46-47).\textsuperscript{14} It is particularly disturbing because “the affective power of absence challenges the integrity of both the subject and the social body” (Ribas-Casasayas and Peterson 3). In the haunting presence of absence, the whole and sovereign self, of both individual and community, is made unstable, open, vulnerable.

These questions of distance, knowledge and productive relationships to the past take on an interesting valence when discussing what Marianne Hirsch terms the “generation of postmemory”:

\textsuperscript{13} For more on the configuring nature of self-narrative and identity as a discursive construction, see Gina Saraceni on Roland Barthes and Paul Ricoeur (21).

\textsuperscript{14} He cautions particularly against the conflation of the two, noting not just the danger of collapsing these distinctions (on both a political and a personal level) but also that this very act can turn a situation of loss into a situation of haunting: “When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted...The very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss). Indeed, in post-traumatic situation in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realizes one is living in the here and now with future possibilities” (46-47).
‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before -- to experiences they 'remember' only by means of stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (The Generation 5)

Despite being both temporally and often also physically far from the events which now haunt them, those of the generation of postmemory still struggle with fully understanding what has been lost, with turning the melancholic presence of the past into a story that facilitates mourning. They possess a sort of mediated memory that creates an ambivalent mix of proximity and distance, of familiarity and lack of knowledge. Things that happened long ago and/or far away and to someone else are still very personal. For the children of postmemory, these things have also happened to them; they shape their childhood environments and are integrated into their senses of self. Occasionally, people of this generation will figure the haunting presences in their childhood as a type of palimpsest, underlying or overlaying their physical environments. Eva Hoffman writes extensively on her experience of growing up and sorting through being of the generation of postmemory. In After Such Knowledge, Hoffman unites seven essays which describe her reception of her parents’ memories as Holocaust survivors, although she repeatedly struggles with the insufficiency of “memories” as a word to describe what she and others like her have inherited, calling them “both more potent and less lucid” (7). Overwhelmingly intense yet splintered and hazy, knowledge of her parents’ past was transmitted not as a narrative, but as splinters and sensations (33). The acuteness with which this generation feels these memories coupled with their lack of direct experience creates, according to Hoffman, “paradoxes of indirect knowledge [which] haunt many of us who came after” (25). She asserts that this generation “has inherited not experience, but its shadows” (66), alluding to having received not
just memories of ghosts (i.e.: specific people, place and things that were lost) but also memories as ghosts.

A number of circumstances contribute to this perfect recipe for haunting, in which loss is communicated without a picture of what was taken away, where a wound is passed on without a clear image of the circumstances of its making. In *Haunting Legacies*, Gabrielle Schwab describes how transgenerational haunting results from the handing down of improperly resolved trauma, circumstances in which the past was never truly confronted (49). Hoffman explains this troubled inheritance as well:

> Transferred loss, more than transferred memory, is what children of survivors inherit; and how do you get over loss that has no concrete shape or face? That way, placeless loss itself, a dimensionless melancholia, may become the medium in which we live. (73)

The failure to communicate knowledge in a way that would seem to constitute memory can occur when previous generations pass on silence or when access to their previous world is irreparably blocked. Silence can result from secrets or simply from an inability to talk about the past, as when parents or grandparents are still too haunted themselves to speak of what they went through.  

Often, the trauma to the previous generation is or is coupled with exile. In this case, the homeland is frequently communicated as a “transferred loss,” but not simply as an object of ceaseless mourning, but one in which identity is grounded. Who the child is, her authentic

---

15 Abraham distinguishes between phantoms, the result of secrets and ghosts, originating in cases of loss. Nevertheless, both haunt: “Since the phantom is not related to the loss of an object of love, it cannot be considered the effect of unsuccessful mourning, as would be the case with melancholics or with those who carry a tomb in themselves. It is the children’s or descendants’ lot to objectify these buried tombs through diverse species of ghosts. What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others. The phantoms of folklore merely objectify a metaphor active in the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact within the love-object” (171-2).

16 Hirsch speaks of exile and the generation of postmemory often. She notes: “The children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and the destruction of home, remain always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora. ‘Home’ is always elsewhere...This condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is characteristic of postmemory” (“Past Lives” 420-21).
roots, is located far away and access to it is barred. The child is raised with a hole in her sense of self. Places of exile would seem to escape the fate of fodder for “dimensionless melancholia,” but despite the fact that it might be fully described or even visited should history allow some sort of return, the place of exile can never be known. Parents and grandparents may speak of a location, but in reality, this homeland resides in a particular place and a particular moment. It exists only nostalgically, remote in time and space. Svetlana Boym says of nostalgia that it “appears to be a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of dreams” (“Off-Modern” 152), or the time before the moment of exile. Nostalgia confuses time and space and preserves a foggy period, one that is over, as childhood, or one that is liminal, as dreams. It acts as ghosts do, blurring boundaries and carrying around things long past. In instances of exile, this is what is communicated to the generation of postmemory.

Hirsch prefers to draw a distinction between “postmemory” and “rememory,” the latter being the type of memory that identifies too closely with the tragedies of previous generations while the former “can be narrativized, integrated – however uneasily – into a historically different present” and therefore “open up the possibility of a form of second-generation remembrance that is based on a more consciously and necessarily mediated form of identification” (The Generation 85). In this framing, it is not the inheritance of memory that produces haunting but the blurring of the boundary between self and other across generational lines. Occasionally we see this figured as a parent or grandparents’ ghostly existence infecting subsequent generations, turning all family members into ghosts, those who haunt and those who are haunted. With difference to Hirsch, however, I would argue that this muddying of borders

---

17 This is the case in at least two of the works which figure in this dissertation. Sergio Chejfec sees his father as a ghost in Lenta biografía (1990) due to the latter’s inability to speak of his past, while in Tela de sevoya (2012)
is somewhat inherent to the very definition of postmemory, in which experiences are relayed “deeply” and “affectively.” Affect resides, like ghosts, in a sort of liminal space that can cause effects but does not quite belong to the realm of reason; it is “a kind of ‘thinking’ done by the body and not the mind” (Labanyi 224). By virtue of this, things communicated affectively are already difficult to appreciate as we would objects of knowledge, things to be apprehended and understood. Furthermore, the nature of affect is to blur boundaries. In *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan balks at the modern construction of “affective self-containment” (2), arguing against the implicit bias that a mentally sound person maintains stable boundaries between self and environment, that a healthy mind is able to protect the individual sovereignty of the subject against the influence of the feelings of others.18 Her grievance opens up a larger question about whether being haunted and suffering the collapse of distinctions entailed therein is not perhaps mistakenly framed as a sign of maladjustment or diseased living. Leaving this query aside for a moment, we can at least assert that affective inheritance, such as that of postmemory, always implies a too close identification that complicates (if not hinders entirely) the construction of “second-generation remembrance” that effectively restores an ordered sense of time in which the past is past, and the present is no longer haunted. Nevertheless, those of the generation of postmemory still seek to lay their ghosts to rest, frequently addressing what Hirsch calls their “need not just to feel and to know, but also to re-member, to rebuild, to re-incarnate, to replace and to repair” with postmemorial acts of art and investigation (“Past Lives” 420). They undertake journeys and research that will illuminate their parents’ past, seeking to fill gaps in their knowledge. They produce books and works of art that can illustrate and exteriorize their

Myriam Moscona dreams of her father, mother and grandmother’s ghosts visiting her in dreams and rendering the author herself a ghost through a type of proximal contamination.

18 Brennan analyzes and tries to debunk the implicit association of mental illness with unstable boundaries in chapter 2, “The Transmission of Affect in the Clinic.”
tangled senses of self, make their condition more objectifiable and showcase identities
influenced by their parents’ lives yet are still observably distinct.

Despite the varying degrees of success of these exorcising methods, ultimately, growing
up in an environment of ceaseless mourning and melancholic memory produces haunting in
individuals. Children of postmemory live in a world of ghosts generated by an inheritance of
trauma, absences, losses and silences. Perhaps this is the nature of all inheritance. In Escribir
hacia atrás: Herencia, lengua, memoria, Gina Saraceni describes “la idea de herencia como
deuda que el heredero contrae con sus antecesores, es decir, como una forma de con-vivencia
con los espectros del pasado que sobreviven en el presente” (14). The dual meaning of “contraer”
summarizes important aspects of the transgenerational haunting that is inheriting. To inherit is to
contract, like a disease, to be afflicted with a condition that impinges on living unburdened in the
here and now, in a productive trajectory of past, present and future. But, it is also to be a party in
a contract, to participate in a binding promise. This is the ghost that bears an injunction, that
demands responsibility, but in exchange it offers a sense of identity, inscribing the inheritor in a
genealogy, connecting him or her to a personal, familial and collective history.

1.3. Citizen Ghost or the Role of Haunting in Approaches to History

Jacques Derrida and others who investigate the idea of the ghost not for the possible
psychoanalytic light it may shed but rather as a phenomenon to be examined with a
poststructuralist or cultural studies lens, still overlap a great deal with the former conception of
haunting described even as they differ in what they think its ghosts might be primed to figure and
accomplish. In his seminal Specters of Marx, Derrida gives a description of mourning that is
similar to that we outlined above: “It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to
make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the
dead... *One has to know it. One has to have knowledge*” (9). Mourning necessitates an object with real existence. If this cannot be found, the mourner will seek it out, find a way to make death what exists in the present rather than a lingering absence. In one of his first descriptions of the ghost as the specter or the spirit, Derrida underlines its relationship to the realm of knowledge:

> It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know; not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. (*Specters* 5)

The ghost is interstitial, ambivalent; it incarnates a seemingly impossible ontological status, one of being and not being at once.

Derrida is particularly interested in haunting’s ability to destabilize time, its “non-present presence,” its ability to return ceaselessly. The ghost who opens and floats throughout his text is that of Hamlet’s father, who arrives again at the beginning of the play. The very paradigm of a haunting apparition, the ghost and its “repetition and first time” (Derrida, *Specters* 10) combine the acuteness of a first and the menace contained in the possibility of not-the-last and does so every time it appears. Succinctly, it is both evidence and cause that time is “out of joint,” and this representation and creation of a rupture in time is one of the most disquieting attributes of the specter:

> If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presentation, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth. (*Specters* 48)

By putting the opposition upon which linear chronology rests into question, the ghost not only undoes time as we imagine it, but, in so doing, undermines a number of other binaries as well as the assured definitions which rest on them. The denial of familiar structures, as the ghost mocks
borders of past and present, real and imaginary, empirical knowledge and gut feeling, is also what makes haunting such a prevalent mode of figuration in our postmodern period. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock suggests that as “unstable interstitial figures that problematize dichotomous thinking... phantoms have become a privileged poststructuralist academic trope” and elaborates that the “current fascination with ghosts arises out of a general postmodern suspicion of meta-narratives accentuated by millennial anxiety” (62-63).19 As Wendy Brown explains it, “[g]hosts are what rise from materialism, periodicity, and objectivity after each has been slain by the exposure of their untenable predicates” (146).20

One of the most unnerving meta-narrative murders, that Derrida would ask us to allow ghosts to perpetuate, is the end of the idea that history is both linear and progressive, that it can be seen as a series of events in a causal chain inevitably heading in the direction of improvement. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin argues for an approach to history that is similar to (though not exactly the same as) the one Derrida advocates in proposing hauntology. He decries the limited view of historicism that assembles “universal history,” which, with its claim to objectivity, “musters a mass of data to fill homogenous, empty time” (Illuminations 262). It sees the past as a series of more or less equivalent and empty facts amounting to the reinforcement of the same societal structures. This is the version of time which benefits the victors and administers forgetting.21 Wary that empty, homogenous time precludes change, Benjamin endorses nonlinear times, for they guard against the forgetting of the past and

19 This comment also obliquely refers to a vision of ghosts that we treat insufficiently here, that is ghosts as anything or anyone who once invisible now imposes alternative discourses, such as revisionist history or the genre of testimonio, to give only two examples among countless. These give contesting versions of events and reality that trouble official or long accepted meta-narratives.
20 See Wendy Brown’s chapter “Futures: Specters and Angels: Benjamin and Derrida” in Politics out of History for a thorough analysis of how Derrida’s specters aim to undo our comfortable paradigms in an effort to forge a new ethical relationship with history.
21 It also in fact supports a construction of history upon which rests the national identity described by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities.
invest time with the presence of the now, what he calls Jetztzeit (Illuminations 261). For Benjamin, cyclical rituals (like holidays or commemorative festivals) represent one version of time that may do this because they bring past events back into the present through remembrance in a way that meaningfully breaks the steady passage of time. Ultimately, Jetztzeit makes possible the appreciation of events as irruptions out of empty, linear, causal time; rather than time as a transition between moments, it becomes many pregnant nows. This is not unlike the way David Eng and David Kazanjian explain the melancholic object, what we might take as the ghostly remains of the past in the present, for this too becomes a “flexible signifier” that can condense meaning and allow us “to understand the lost object as continually shifting both spatially and temporally” (5). Benjamin’s advancement of this type of time is meant as a possibly healing rupture that will arrest “the storm of progress’s” endless piling of historical debris before the powerless Angel of History (Illuminations 257-8). The ghost is meant to function similarly, for it not only brings and represents a wounding of time as we are taught to traditionally understand it but makes experiences ever more visceral and pertinent. Avery Gordon summarizes haunting as:

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

The ghost refuses to let someone live in empty, homogenous time.

The same motion that undoes this idea of linear history seems to thwart the construction of reliable personal narratives, the kind that promise to restore a reassuring identity to someone who is haunted by trauma. Esther Peeren and María del Pilar Blanco explain in their compendium on spectral studies that Derrida’s hauntology serves “as a counterweight or corrective to a stable, unitary sense of self” (Specters 95). This can be incredibly freeing and
more accurate in our current period of globalized, pastiche identities and appraisals of personal identification as multiple and mutable, but it leaves us wondering if traumatic hauntings are ever resolvable. One might confront the past in an attempt to exercise some control over its comings and goings, but a survivor may not ever be able to assemble a coherent sense of self that keeps the events of the past out of the present. The foreclosing of access to the construction of linear narratives of self (or rather, the announcement that such a possibility never existed except as a form of indoctrination) also leads us to wonder about the consequences for the generation of postmemory. If all attempts to recover the past, to know what came before, to understand the shape of things that shaped their childhood environments, to see their places of origin, are doomed and misguided at the outset, will they always carry a hole in the self?

This more active past, that is empowered to surge up unpredictably, that refuses the death that is belonging to the before in a tidy telling of knowable events, categorizes Derrida’s view of inheritance. He sees it not as the tragedy of impossibility, a permanent haunting that arises out of the not known, but as a hopeful and ethical endowment of perpetual process. This is also where we can detect how Freud underlays Derrida’s position, for, as Eng and Kazanjian read it, Freud’s melancholia need not be simply pathologized (as a sign of disease) but rather that it could be a mark of creative potential, a sign of sensitive perception, and a mode of relating to the past and its remains (3, 23). When Hamlet’s father arrives, he comes with an injunction, and in giving his son the knowledge of the circumstances of his death, leaves a haunted Hamlet feeling the full responsibility of what he has learned. The scene and the act close with his declaration: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite./That ever I was born to set it right!” (Act 1, Sc. 5 211-212). I relate Hamlet to the children of postmemory; he feels it is his birthright to repair, to compensate for the wound inflicted on his father, and in so doing, re-right the steady flow of time. I would add that
in a way, this call to vengeance and exhortation to expose the truth also acts as a moment of claiming. The ghost pulls Hamlet into the family as he gives him responsibilities in its future; he reminds him that he is his son and the prince of Denmark. The father’s spirit reinforces Hamlet’s identity, and while it does not promise any feelings of resolution, it does give Hamlet a passionate sense of direction in his life. It sets him on a process of deciphering the past and making visible its place in the present. This is inheritance as a contract of genealogy that we mentioned before, yet there is a power dynamic in this that augments the composition of the threat inherent in haunting even as it shows its utility in defining an ethical relationship to the past. Derrida explains that “the specter is not simply someone we see coming back, it is someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed, as if by the law” (Derrida and Stiegler 40). The relationship with the ghost is an uneven one, whereby it seems to have the power and moral right of the law. In Specters, Derrida fixates on the form of the ghost when he delivers Hamlet’s birthright, mentioning in particular that the king’s visor is down when he first appears, making it difficult to see him. He calls this impossibility of an equal exchange of gazes the “visor effect”: “[t]o feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross, that is the visor effect on the basis of which we inherit from the law” (7). Derrida expands the personal relationships at play in haunting inheritance to a much broader plane. This is no longer a simple question of how children relate to parents, grandparents and ancestors, but one that speaks to how members of a society interact across time, the responsibilities they owe to one another and the feelings that that duty might impose.

In explaining the type of relationship to the past that Derrida is advocating, it might be helpful to rely on a binary whose poles are functionally inseparable (and ever more so in our postmodern age) yet when defined as opposing impulses or approaches, provide an illuminating
metaphor for how haunting works. Derrida wants a more visceral connection with the past; he argues for keeping the channels to it open, for reveling in ambiguities that allow for alternative discourses, for maintaining a dialogue with the past that encourages process over decision. In a way, his “hauntology” promotes an approach to history that has the power and versatility of memory. In speaking of his lieu de mémoire, Pierre Nora draws a distinction between memory and history in which the former “remains in permanent evolution,” is “affective and magical” and is embodied in the “ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning” (“Between Memory” 8), while the latter “binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things” (“Between Memory” 9), is made up of “analysis and criticism” (“Between Memory” 9) and is ultimately “how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past” (“Between Memory” 8). Memory implies a relationship to the past that is still felt, that is part of a process in constant evolution, while history seeks a “historical past that is gone for good” (“Between Memory” 7), one that having gone through reason and emerged as an organized picture can now be put away, shoved into the before and forgotten. History then has the chronology of the linear past, present, future that is thought to resolve haunting (and recapitulate the meaningless and hegemonic continuity that Benjamin derides). Memory refuses this in favor of the preservation of affect, repetition and ritual. Nora’s assessment that history is “suspicious of memory” and that “its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (“Between Memory” 9) then makes sense, for it acts as a veritable ghostbuster in the face of memory’s insistence on haunting.22

---

22The malicious intents of history aside, his appraisal of a mutual distrust between the two is echoed by Beatriz Sarlo in Tiempo pasado: cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo in which she too meditates on the relationship between memory and history and the differing levels of faith we invest in each to preserve the past: “El pasado es siempre conflictivo...porque la historia no siempre puede creerle a la memoria, y la memoria desconfía de una reconstrucción que no ponga en su centro los derechos del recuerdo (derechos de vida, de justicia, de subjetividad)” (9).
Accepting this dichotomy, we can frame the impulse to history as a recourse meant to repair trauma and ameliorate haunting, and efforts to make memory more resemble history as attempts to dispel ghosts. Nora’s later work, particularly “Histoire et roman: où passent les frontières?” (2011), better recognizes the tendency for genres to blend, for the evocative writing that calls on the affective to show up in historical accounts. In “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” (originally published in 1984), Nora portrays the two as separate and perceives a tendency in approaches to memory that seeks to give it the more dry, “scientific” (as he calls it in “Histoire et roman” (7)) aspect that history aims to embody. He outlines different types of memory which have emerged with what he calls “the passage from memory to history” (“Between Memory” 15). The first one he outlines is a type of “archive-memory” which is born of our recent obsession with archiving and recording everything in a type of “materialization of memory” (“Between Memory” 14) that obliterates memory’s immediacy by confining it to the trace which may represent it. To archive something, to turn it into a confined, codifiable and definitive version, is to render it immobile; in other words, it means to kill it, bestowing the type of death that stymies ghostly return. Benjamin might call this equivalent to the data that can be mustered to fill empty, homogenous time, facts that fuel hegemonic narratives of history. But a fear of forgetting or of being forgotten that causes the past to be preserved paranoically might be eliminated by knowing that a record is being kept. The irony here of course is that this type of historical archive also has the potential to remove the power of memory that guards against forgetting. This is why Derrida notes that “the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory” (Archive Fever 11); archive obliterates the spark of life and spontaneity contained in memory. While I believe Derrida’s appraisal of archive’s destructive relationship to memory may be overstated, especially as testimony often draws power
from its foundations in memory, it is worth noting that as a historical and objectifying process, archiving initiates a type of murder of its object.

The invocation of archive here is not accidental; as much as it illuminates methods of resolving haunting through likening it to the transformation of memory into history, it also shows where this dichotomy starts to functionally collapse, simultaneously revealing that alleviating haunting might not be possible or even what is truly desired. Let us consider testimony as a prime example of something that moves from the realm of memory to that of history. Paul Ricoeur calls testimony the moment “when things said tip from the oral field to that of writing, which history will not henceforth abandon. It is also the moment of the birth of the archive, collected, preserved, consulted” (146). Testimony is when subjective experience becomes documentary evidence, a viable object for the archive. This would seem to alleviate haunting, for the past is now safeguarded against forgetting because it is materially preserved and such material preservation makes full understanding seem more possible. Furthermore, it makes the past past, a citable source in recounting an explanatory trajectory of past, present and future. We can read these impulses as part of the impetus behind USC Shoah Foundation’s collection of Holocaust survivor stories, which intends to somehow preserve our living link to the past as those who lived there are dying out. But does it have its intended effect? Witnesses and those who receive their stories can remain haunted even after the past has been narrated and saved. In addition, this archive is actually the receptacle of a seemingly endless process: new stories are still being collected. Is the resolution of haunting even what is ultimately sought here or does the Shoah Foundation’s collection reflect additional desires? In one sense, it is trying to unnaturally prolong life past death. This archive does not fully resolve ghosts and, to some extent, actually represents a place of haunting.
While not on exactly the same grounds that I proposed above, Derrida does argue that the archive itself is always a haunted place and that the impulse to archive represents not a potential path to freedom from haunting but rather a sign that someone is haunted. In discussing noted Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi’s book on what is commonly regarded as the only work Freud published on Jews and Judaism, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Derrida comments on Yerushalmi’s address to a long dead Freud. To him, the invocation of a ghost here is to be expected as the archive is “spectral *a priori*; neither present nor absent ‘in the flesh,’ neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met” (*Archive Fever* 84). Ghostly traces make up the archive in spite of whatever material existence in which it is incarnated. Additionally, looking to the archive also implies taking on genealogical responsibility, which as we already noted, involves an uneven power dynamic leading to a continuously open process of collection and interpretation. The impulse to archive for Derrida is a type of sickness, a *mal d’archive*. It is to endlessly search for something elusive, “to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement” (*Archive Fever* 91). Here, the archive is not a place for preserving the past in a way that safeguards and lays it to rest; it removes control from the subject, driving him or her towards the archive as an endless promise of definitive answers that do not exist.

In some cases, the archive itself may be haunted from the outside. Testimony can disrupt history’s orderly narratives by collecting alternative accounts of what has occurred and allowing them to gain the status of history. In becoming documentary proof, stories from marginalized, oppressed or silenced people can achieve official recognition, and do so through a maneuver in which memory borrows the tools of history. They take traumatic memory and turn it into an
object and offer it to furnish proof. But even as this act uses history to validate subjectivity and empower alternative discourses, it still garners much of its power from its relationship to personal memory, again undermining our tidy binary of memory versus history. In addition, they are a type of ghost work, for they force the visibility of populations who might contest official versions of what happened. They forbid the closure of history into an account of singular truth. In an extended discussion of how the archive blurs the lines between internal and external, Derrida touches on how haunting is inherent to the archive in this sense as well, as a place that is threatened by haunting in its very construction. The archive is constituted by what it includes and what it leaves out, by its drive to preserve and to efface: “There is no archive without…a certain exteriority. No archive without outside” (Archive Fever 11). What is outside supports the borders that make a within possible and is therefore never entirely obliterated. It is not surprising then to see this outside erect itself into a form capable of contesting those borders, to witness the emergence of alternative discourses that utilize the same tools as the archive to undergird their authority. Upon further inquiry, we see that memory and history are not so separable as concepts nor are they tidy ends of a polarity in which on the side of history, haunting is resolved and with memory, it is mightily preserved. Nevertheless, as concepts and impulses, they can be illuminating indicators of the presence and parsing of haunting.

1.4. The Jewish Ghost: On Haunting in Jewish Identity and Experience

A number of the themes we have discussed above show up in Jewish experiences of haunting and are condensed in the figures of Jewish ghosts. This is especially true of the particular population who authors and protagonizes the works we will be examining, that is

---

23It should be noted that in true Derridian fashion, exteriority is being used in multiple senses in the quote above, not only referring to what is exterior to the archive but also in a more complex discussion as something opposed to what is interior, intimate and not yet recorded.
children and grandchildren of Jewish immigrants to Latin America. Most of these can be considered as belonging to the generation of postmemory; whether their familial exile was due to politics, pogroms, penury or, as is often the case, the Holocaust, some sort of trauma preceded the decision to move to a new continent. Often the exile itself could be categorized as trauma; adjustment to a new place occasionally coupled with the knowledge that friends and family were dying back home could be unspeakably difficult. The internalization of parental trauma, especially that engendered by the Holocaust, inspired Marianne Hirsch, the Jewish daughter of survivors and immigrants, in the development of the concept of postmemory. While it can hardly be confined to Jews, postmemory and its attendant impulses towards repair and knowledge are obviously partially responsible for the outpouring of historical and artistic work undertaken by Jews in the latter half of the twentieth century. Undertakings which seek to piece together what occurred by surveying and creating endless documentation parallel what we previously described as the impulse to history that is meant to ameliorate haunting. Projects designed to preserve this horrific past lest it should be forgotten can in part be linked to feelings of duty owed to those who bequeathed not only haunted memory but also better lives for their children and grandchildren. Artistic works by this population such as palimpsestic photographs of previous generations or places of exile, novels that recount family sagas and chronicles of rites of return combine many signs and impulses of haunting. They seek to make their ghosts perceivable, they endeavor to embody the past in some sort of more knowable form and they strive to honor their inheritance. They aim, as I mentioned before, “to re-member, to rebuild, to re-incarnate, to

---

24 In The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust, Hirsch uses a number of Jewish artists as examples and looks at their attempts to use art to access the past experiences of parents and grandparents. Her first chapter focuses on Art Spiegelman and acts as one of the principal introductions to the concept. She does not use only Jewish artists (she looks at Charlotte Delbo and Toni Morrison as well), but the vast majority of the dozens of artists she cites are Jewish.
replace and to repair” (Hirsch, “Past Lives” 420), and in the process, to construct a sense of self amidst this inheritance.

As much as the acts of artists and scholars who belong to the generation of postmemory are inspired by an impulse to resolve haunting, recent discussions of approaches to Holocaust memory question whether recording and transmitting this history is or really should be a project of laying ghosts to rest. Many of the artistic undertakings that Hirsch describes in her seminal work either are or invoke palimpsests, or ghostly overlays where the past has not been completely erased. Lorie Novak projects photographs of Buchenwald survivors onto trees in her piece Night and Fog (The Generation 122-123) and Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger superimposes the same pre-Holocaust photograph taken of her parents in Lódz in a number of her works, some even with an image of her own childhood face (The Generation 216-219). These types of ghosts and ghost images are common throughout these works (as is evidenced by many of the works examined in this dissertation), and while it may signal a desire to make sense of the past as it exists in the present, an effort to make it known and therefore possibly over, it also preserves it as something which haunts. This impulse to resolve haunting through knowledge and figuration may have guided much of the scholarship and art on the Holocaust (especially that undertaken by Jews), but now, as the living link to this period passes on and the Shoah appears to be the most studied event in human history, there seems to be an increased call to preserve the affective or haunting quality of this past. More than half of the eleven speakers at the March 30th, 2016 conference “Children of the Holocaust: Writers of the Next Generation” at CUNY, Graduate Center spoke of the need to retain and pass on the affective memory of the Shoah. Hoffman touches on this same idea as early as 2004 in After Such Knowledge where she cautions against the consequences of Holocaust studies’ transforming into simply memory studies, which loses
the referent in its contemplation of form and structure, and she presages “the kind of amnesia in which the Shoah is in danger not so much of vanishing into forgetfulness as expanding into an increasingly empty referent” (177). As a response, she emphasizes the need for the link to the past to be “felt” (196). In children of postmemory, we see how this event has been transmitted as an inheritance of trauma but also one of obligation. In fact, the Holocaust as a particular type of inheritance transcends even the population with more or less immediate experiences of its effects. The responsibility to teach and remember is passed on as both a Jewish and a moral duty.

The Holocaust is a fairly powerful specific example of inheritance as haunting, as something that links a subject to the past while placing demands on his present and future, but inheritance has an important and multifaceted role in the construction of Jewishness and Jewish identity more generally. As mentioned before and as Saraceni outlines in detail in the introduction to *Escribir hacia atrás*, to inherit is to be inscribed in a genealogy. This is obvious in almost all Western last names. Typically, we are given the last names of our fathers, or in some cases of both our fathers and mothers. While the use of last names that stretch back for generations is historically recent for Jews (beginning only a few centuries ago), the previous prevalence of patronymics (which are actually still used in religious ceremonies, for instance when someone is called for an honor before the congregation) recapitulates this idea nonetheless. The explicit link to the dead is more pronounced in Ashkenazi Jewish naming practices, in which children are named after departed loved ones by using the Hebrew name, whole first name or just its first letter.25 Children are very explicitly named to carry on a person who has been lost; a ghost is given to them at birth, and this ghost is theoretically invoked every time the child’s name

---

25 This is not to say that Sephardim do not partake of this tradition as well, but there is less of a taboo amongst Sephardim in naming children after people who are still living, whereas for Ashkenazim it can be regarded as an ill omen.
is uttered. This sort of inheritance transfers a sense of identity to the inheritor as well as a duty to bring honor to one’s ancestors as a representative of them in name.

For Agnieszka Legutko, inheritance and personal Jewish identity are two of the overriding themes in XX\textsuperscript{th} century literary representations of the dybbuk, the quintessential Jewish ghost, who is a dead person who possesses by literally “cleaving” or “clinging” to a living one.\textsuperscript{26} In her dissertation \textit{Possessed by the Other: Dybbuk Possession and Modern Jewish Identity in Twentieth-Century Jewish Literature and Beyond}, Legutko examines renderings of the dybbuk in Polish, English, Hebrew and Yiddish, beginning with what she calls the “ur-text,” S. An-sky’s \textit{The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds} (written 1912-1914, premiered 1920) (3).\textsuperscript{27} She takes the dybbuk and its adaptations (there is at least one for every decade from 1920 to 2012)\textsuperscript{28} to be a metaphor for modern and postmodern Jewish identity, for the trope unites themes on trauma, gender, memory, suffering and living “between worlds.” The correspondence between possession and trauma is easily drawn, for as Cathy Caruth explains, to be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or event located in the past (Caruth 4). Legutko outlines how in literary representations this trauma can be personal or inherited and that the dybbuk does call up Hirsch’s concept of postmemory (12). In An-sky’s play, a young woman loses the man she loves because her father breaks an oath, resulting in the young man’s death and the young woman’s possession. In a number of post-Shoah narratives, guilt, rage and lost relatives are metaphorized as dybbuks who possess the children of survivors.\textsuperscript{29} Legutko traces the history of the link between possession and explorations of self from the first works of psychoanalysis, noting that “Freud’s

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} For more on the Hebrew and its translations see Legutko (27) or the introduction to Matt Goldish’s \textit{Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present} (2003).
  \item \textsuperscript{27} The dybbuk is not an exclusively XX\textsuperscript{th} century phenomenon. There are documented cases of dybbuk possession dating from at least the XVI\textsuperscript{th} century. Legutko’s thesis focuses in particular on modern literary representations, which I feel to be more relevant to our current discussion.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Legutko adds that were several different adaptations in 2011 alone (17).
  \item \textsuperscript{29} See chapter 3, “Disillusionment, Rage, Vengeance and Compassion: Dybbuk Possession in Holocaust Narratives.”
\end{itemize}
metaphorical reading of possession as hysteria and demons as repressed wishes has been endorsed by many scholars of possession, as it invites new interpretations of the phenomenon now seen as a projection of internal struggles, frustration and repressions” (62). Throughout her thesis, Legutko gives an account of both authors and protagonists whose connections to their Jewish past and Jewish community are figured through dybbuks and who tackle the cultural ambivalence of being “between two worlds,” of Jewish and non-Jewish, of now and then. Her examination of the dybbuk in XX\textsuperscript{th} century literature leads her to conclude that “the metaphor of possession [is] a core element in the construction of modern Jewish identity” (4) and “haunting attachment to the past becomes an essential part of Jewish identity. The possession motif can be read as constituting an unbroken link to the mystical ancestral past even in a postmodernist age” (6).

Personal dybbuks represent the bearing of the past on the present in an individual’s life and naming practices enact a bequest of identity and responsibility on a personal and familial level, but we might see haunting inheritance as a larger metaphor for how Jewishness is passed on as a collective memory. Linear, progressive history is often instrumentalized in the formation and reinforcement of national identities that are grounded in a nation-state, i.e.: a particular territory. But this type of perpetuation of founding myths and ideas of mutual progress is less tenable in the absence of a grounded space where standardized education and institutionalized memory – for example, that sponsored in the form of national monuments and museums – are consonant with the dominant culture. The chronotopic experience of nationality, that is the way the subject experiences her cultural time-space on a personal level and as a part of a nation, is relatively uncomplicated and can be reinforced by the dissemination of a singular history.\textsuperscript{30} Such

\textsuperscript{30} The use of the chronotope in literary theory originates with Mikhail Bakhtin. His most compelling link between the chronotope and nation is in his “Forms of Time in the Chronotope of the Novel,” in which he describes the
a straightforward and undifferentiated sense of self as a member of a community is already increasingly complex in our postmodern, globalized period, but in cases of exile or in a state of diaspora (as one can label more than half the world’s Jews and certainly those that live in the Americas), it is impossible. For this reason, those who live in diaspora are said to inhabit multiple chronotopes, making personal and communal identity a project of continual construction.\textsuperscript{31} Diasporic existence, with its continual ruptures and displacements, especially as they preclude the transmission of cultural heritage by facile environmental osmosis, has predominated for Jews for almost 2,000 years, so it is not surprising, therefore, to see Jewishness passed down with a great deal of attention towards pathos and duty. Continual fears of oppression by and assimilation into the dominant culture (often to the point of erasure of Jewishness) have led to a sense that, in part, to be Jewish is to bear the responsibility of passing on a legacy.

One might say that this is the reason that Judaism has evolved as a culture of “memory” rather than “history.” The unnatural separation of these categories is problematic (especially given that the Jewish past is communicated with the tools of both), as is the resulting representation of time-space of the individual as finally coinciding with that of the national territory in the novels that served to undergird nation formation in 18th century Europe. The cultural imaginary that unites personal time-space to that of the nation and those of other citizens of that nation is described by Benedict Anderson as the essential underlying factor of the creation of the “imagined communities” which make thinking nation-states possible.\textsuperscript{31} The editors of Diaspora and Memory say that such subjects belonging to multiple chronotopes inhabit three time-spaces ("Granted that some kind of dispersal in time and space is constitutive of any form of diaspora, diasporic identities can be seen to be characterized by a triple sense of belonging: to the other members of a distinctive local diasporic community; to diasporic groups in other locations around the world; and, finally, to the point of origin, the actual or imagined homeland that binds these groups together" (10)), while Althusser says only two. For more on the chronotope of diaspora see Esther Peeren’s article “Through the Lens of the Chronotope: Suggestions for a Spatio-Temporal Perspective on Diaspora” (67-78). This continual construction of self is Peeren’s conclusion: “Viewing diaspora as dischronotopicality prompts a view of identity not as involving some ‘true self’ than can be recovered by returning to a homeland presumed to have stayed frozen in time-space, but of identity as a continuous becoming that is predicated on the various construction of time-space encountered and performatively enacted by the subject” (75).
exemplification of Jews as the paradigmatic “people of memory,” but the dichotomy does serve to underline some of the unique ways in which Jewishness and Jewish memory are transmitted from one generation to another and how these modes of transmission invoke mechanisms and feelings of haunting. The emphasis on memory, especially as a non-passive act, is couched as mandatory in religious texts. Yosef Yerushalmi opens his Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory by enumerating the number of times the Bible exhorts practicants to “remember” or “not forget” (5). But this memory moves beyond a simple act of recall of an event or something told; memory is meant to be embodied and the past is supposed to be taken personally. During Passover, the story of the Exodus is to be told to children as though it happened to the teller, and sons who do not take on this story as something that happened to “us,” who respond to parents that religious mandates are directed at them and not at him, are considered wicked. In a similar vein, traumas in the Jewish past are not solely related within the linear chronology of a historical narrative but rather as repetitions in the life of a people. Yerushalmi posits in the same volume that until the modern period, historical events tended to be understood in terms of similar religious or biblical predecessors, where the original “served as a paradigm, and the new events were interpreted accordingly” (47). Although this was more common in the Middle Ages, the ideas that gave rise to it and the tensions it produced are still present in more contemporary Jewish historiography (89). New traumatic events are often understood as new versions of past ones, meaning that every trauma experienced or mentioned invokes the others. An-sky’s The Dybbuk also makes reference to a past trauma being replayed in a present version. From the

---

32 Jacques Le Goff in his 1977 History and Memory says that “the Jewish people are the people of memory par excellence” (69).

33 I am referring here to the Haggadah, the text used in the Passover Seder, and its explanation of how to answer children’s questions regarding the Exodus story and the Passover holiday.
outset, the grave of two newlyweds, martyred by invading Cossacks, haunts the stage until the couple at the center of the play finally meet in death as well.

Repetitions, like those that categorize traumatic memory above, can work against notions of time which support traditional history and, as we have seen, often characterize or facilitate haunting. Replete with rituals based on cycles, nonlinear time governs Jewish religious practice. Weekly Torah readings (preceded by blessings, songs and parading the Torah around the congregation) are the most obvious example of this, but the practice of yartzeit, the anniversary of someone’s death, is especially revealing in terms of our discussion of haunting. Mourning practices in the Jewish religion are bounded. Burials are to be done as soon as possible, usually within 24 hours barring extenuating circumstances. This is followed by seven days of mourning called shiva, which lasts one week and is carried out by immediate relatives. Certain mourning practices (like wearing bereavement clothes or not partaking in joyous celebrations) may continue for 30 days, again for immediate relatives. The Mourner’s Kaddish, or blessing said by the bereaved, is recited for the death of a parent for 11 months after his or her passing. All of these practices point to the idea that mourning is eventually to come to an end, but in yartzeit the Kaddish is repeated during the anniversary week of the parent’s death. I would not argue that this actively works against the healing powers of proper mourning or that it is a type of haunting (for it recurs dependably), but this cyclical repetition prevents full closure. This yearly invocation of a time of bereavement, that recognizes and revisits, reinforces that the temporal logic of Jewish practice, and relatedly its subjective experience, is not exclusively linear.

According to some, the vision of time as one time that is linear and progressive is distinctly not Jewish. Jonathan Boyarin points out that this vision of time has its roots in early Church fathers' idea of the progression from Judaism to Christianity, in which Christianity is the
mature version of an archaic Judaism (xv). In Clepsydra: Essays on the Plurality of Time in Judaism, Sylvie Ann Goldberg elaborates on concepts of time in Jewish history, culture and religion, especially as they distinguish themselves from dominant, mostly Western Christian notions. As she traces the origins of the developments of the cyclic Jewish year and chronicles how Jews settled on the current calendar (finally adopted in the XII\textsuperscript{th} century, Goldberg 3), she posits that “[b]y establishing new temporality, Judaism managed to perpetuate itself among the nations. Through this unique temporality Jews were enabled to continue living in the midst of other peoples, as much by the rhythms of Judaism as by a time that was not theirs” (xv). She asserts that this ability to occupy multiple times “became one of the key markers of the distinctiveness of Jewish identity” (3), and I believe it is a telling metaphor of the Jewish ability to inhabit multiple worlds. This “unique temporality” most clearly manifests today in the way Jews may use two separate systems to make time. This is not simply the division of a secular time from a sacred one but is manifest in double dating practices, in which Jewish documents and celebrations recognize the year and date of the society surrounding them, usually that corresponding with a dating system that begins with the birth of Christ, as well as the Jewish ones, that is the Jewish calendar which takes its first year as the time of Creation.\footnote{The adoption of this particular Jewish calendar was the result of a choice from among different Jewish dating practices. For more on the history of this, see Goldberg, especially (206-208).}

As we proceed with our specific analysis of haunting in these Latin American Jewish texts, we will strive to keep in mind these various explanations of the origins and shapes of its various instantiations. The coincidence of the outpouring on trauma studies in the 1990s as well as the increase in work that examines and utilizes specters as a critical lens beginning at this time is not accidental. Nor is the appearance of ghosts in literary works at the same moment. These authors are wrestling not just with what it means to be Jewish in this period but with what it
means to a person in a certain nation and in the world during a time when traditional modes of relating to the past have been undermined but not replaced, when citizenship and subjectivity have shifted in meaning yet new parameters remain far from definitive and old ones are not entirely gone. Perhaps to be alive in these conditions is to be haunted. Perhaps, as Derrida would argue, this is the only ethical mode of living. The reasons are usually multiple, contradicting and overlapping, and as we proceed through this study, we will see that, for these authors, representing a life means representing its ghosts.
Chapter 2:
Inheriting Ghosts: Forging Stories and Selves out of an Unknown Past

2.1. Introduction

Identities are made up of narratives. We tell ourselves the story of who we are, often in an explanatory fashion, recounting the chronological sequence of events that brought us to where we are now, to the person we are here – at this job, in this relationship, in this country, with this way of viewing the world.\(^\text{35}\) Reaching back is a way of making sense of the present. We look to our own histories as places of revelation, tracing and composing our causal lines so that the result – the self we are now, the self that plans to move forward into the future – seems reasonable, whole and integrated.\(^\text{36}\) We look to these same sorts of narratives to illuminate others as well, probing for the secrets to who they are in their backgrounds, their formation and the subsequent experiences informed and determined by the things that came before. Stories of self almost always begin with origins. Even beyond when people are born, \textit{where} they are from and \textit{who} they are from are questions which search for a type of bedrock. They seek the fundamental materials of an identity, the most original starting point. This tendency is all the more

\(^{35}\) Discussions of autobiography provide the most direct reflections on this confluence of identity and self-narrative. In \textit{Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing in Victorian and Modern England} (1983), Avrom Fleishman actually argues against the existence of autobiography as a genre, asserting that “indeed, the idea of \textit{a life} – is already structured as a narrative” (quoted in DiBattista and Wittman 3), declaring all lives to be stories of self. In \textit{Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention} (1985), Paul John Eakin seems to go further by recognizing that structures of fiction are inseparable from imagining any life. He states that his goal in this study of autobiography is to argue "that autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3). The constructedness of identity (rather than the belief in the existence of a stable, absolute and ineffable self discoverable through investigation) becomes a more overt topic in literature in the 1970s, with the beginnings of postmodernism, but also has roots in psychoanalysis (as in Jacques Lacan's belief that language creates the unconscious or as it is implicitly in Sigmund Freud's faith in the talking cure).

\(^{36}\) This idea is relevant to Eakin's analysis of Henry James's goals in writing his autobiography. He frames this act as particularly directed at initializing a process of physical and mental healing meant to help the writer move forward productively with his work after suffering a breakdown (58-9).
pronounced amongst those belonging to marginalized groups, like minorities, immigrants and children of immigrants. When someone inhabits the same culture from which she originates, she generates fewer questions; his heritage is about him all the time, his history is told in his surroundings.\(^{37}\) Outsider status, a sense of displacement or difference, contributes to a desire not only to locate a place of belonging but also to elucidate an identity forged there. This is particularly relevant for Jews because they are the perennial immigrants, always from elsewhere,\(^{38}\) and because of the fear and guilt associated with assimilation. Integration into non-Jewish milieus can look or feel like a traitorous or inauthentic act, a betrayal of oneself and one’s people.\(^{39}\) This place of origins can be physical (an idea we will investigate more thoroughly in Chapter 3), but more often the question “where are you from?” is really asking “who are your people?.” Whether posed to ourselves or about others, these questions look for a starting point that inscribes a person into a community, for the story of self begins with placement into the trajectory of a larger history. The telling of who we are begins with seeing ourselves as a part and product of our people.

Given that knowing origins is essential to assembling a coherent sense of self, the importance of inheritance to identity is not surprising, for inheritance gives information about one’s people in a gesture that links the past to the present and the future. When speaking of inheritance here, I am not just referring to the house or money someone receives upon the passing of a parent or relative, although these objects that come with death represent in very

\(^{37}\) After some consternation over which pronouns to use to refer to an abstract “one,” I have decided to alternate, feeling “he or she” to be too unwieldy and “they” too ungrammatical.

\(^{38}\) This is not so much the case for Jews living in Israel, for they are not considered to be in diaspora and the dominant culture in that country is Jewish.

\(^{39}\) Even when appearing merely in the background, the loss of “Jewishness,” especially amongst descendants of immigrants, is a nearly constant topic in Latin American Jewish literature of the XX century. Examples are too numerous to generate a comprehensive list in this space, but to name a few: Sabina Berman’s *La bobe* (1990), Rosa Nissán’s *Novia que te vea* (1992) and *Hisho que te nazca* (1996), Moacyr Scliar’s *O Centauro no Jardim* (1980), Marcelo Birmajer’s *El alma al diablo* (1994) and Alicia Freilich’s *Cláper* (1987).
material terms the way we understand the movement of more abstract inheritance. It seems to be a simple act of giving and receiving, the present accepting the goods of the past. The inheritance invoked here is more one of heritage and is usually passed on while a member of the family is still alive, although, as we shall see in the ensuing analysis, this is not necessary even if it makes transmission easier and less complicated. It is the patrimony of blood and knowledge. It is something detectable in the features, integrated into the body and often visible in one’s face and stature. But, it is also something taught; culture and family history are bequeathed through stories, rituals and instruction. These two types of inheritance intertwine, the former frequently serving as evidence of the seeming naturalness of the latter. Culture is embodied as the lessons of ancestry become muscle memory or when stereotypes are born that associate things like dark hair and large noses with certain behaviors and outlooks. We come to justify particular attitudes and talents as results of these things’ “running in the family,” explaining how someone is now by connecting her to her familial past. Although less interested in the interaction of these physical and cultural aspects, the salience of inheritance for Gina Saraceni in *Escribir hacia atrás:* *Herencia, lengua, memoria* also resides in its identity bestowing powers. In addition to determining how we act and the ways we perceive and are perceived in the world, inheritance, for Saraceni, is “cómo el sujeto se inscribe en una genealogía” and “el proceso de ‘adquisición' de un apellido y una procedencia” (*Escribir hacia atrás* 14). Inheritance gives someone a genealogy that not only places him in the history of his ancestry – one that supposedly traces his descent from an original progenitor – but labels him as belonging to that lineage. Inheritance as a mechanism of genealogy grants identity from within and without; it speaks to and about an individual by giving him a history and a community.

---

40 Saraceni also develops these ideas in her article “El regreso de los fantasmas. Escrituras de la herencia en las ficciones de Sergio Chejféc y Roberto Raschella” (20).
But this type of inheritance is not actually transmitted as a simple act of a giver and receiver. Heritage is not unitary or simple and the way it is passed on is demanding, requiring attention and discerning. This concept of inheritance is somewhat implicit in the philosophical concept of genealogy Michel Foucault extracts from Friedrich Nietzsche. As a branch of history unfettered by constraints demanding unity and pure origins, this genealogy is able to “refuse the certainty of absolutes” (Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 154) and forge a dynamic relationship to the past that recognizes mutating contexts, discontinuity, heterogeneity and alternative histories. The inheritance of *Specters of Marx* (with its attention drawn slightly more towards the psychoanalytic) shares this genealogy’s capacity to connect individuals to their pasts in a way that actively links them to a society and its history (but differs in that it is not free of the desire for origins and the pull to search for absolute beginnings). This is a link mediated by obligation, and those of the present generation frequently feel the weight of the past looking at them, verifying that they have complied with a precious duty (7). The obligation that accompanies inheritance does not remain an underlying feeling. Derrida’s inheritance is a demanding contract, for “one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction” (18). In Derrida’s analysis, inheritance ceases to be a simple object, or even a discrete collection of knowledge, and begins to take on a life of its own, a life that calls for recognition and interaction. This is where the notion of stable origins starts to fall apart, for our mode of accessing our beginnings, the essential ground of our identities, reveals a world of multiplicities and preexisting wills. Inheritance as an active relationship with an active past disrupts the possibility of creating an easy, linear narrative of self even as it reveals itself as indispensable in parsing personal identity. This is part of what makes haunting intrinsic to any inheritance, for instead of connecting the inheritor to an origin that places him at the end
of a static genealogical chain – a reifying capacity for which it is frequently invoked –,\textsuperscript{41} the inheritor is obliged to take part in an ongoing dialogue with ancestors that may be dead yet remain vigorous and continue to fluctuate.

Derrida is aware that inheritance implies haunting, stating plainly at one point that “[o]ne never inherits without coming to terms with…some specter” (24) – whether it be in the form of insistent ancestors or imprecise messages about the past –, but certain conditions are liable to produce even more ghosts. There is a question as to whether Jewish heritage implies an increased level of haunting due to the particular way in which it communicates identity and history. In the previous chapter, we discussed the tradition amongst Jews of taking distant Jewish history personally, especially in the example of the telling of the Exodus story in which, during the Passover Seder, parents are exhorted to relate the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt as though it happened to them. This ritual reviving of the past refuses to let history become something that is comfortably behind the present and also forms part of an important idea in the imparting of Jewishness. The idea of teaching your faith to your children is paramount to Jewish education and is repeated twice daily in the form of the Shema. This prayer is also contained in the mezuzah, a piece of parchment placed on the doorpost of every Jewish home. The Shema and its continuation the V’ahavta quote Deuteronomy, in which Jews are exhorted to honor the Lord and to teach these words “diligently unto thy children” (6:4-9 and 11:13-21). L’\textit{dor Vador} – literally from generation to generation – also encapsulates this sentiment well. It is an oft-invoked concept variously used to encourage Jewish education, explain the relationship with God over history,\textsuperscript{42} or assert the importance of the transmission of memory. It encourages Jews

\textsuperscript{41} Here I am, of course, no longer referring to Nietzsche and Foucault’s concept of genealogy but rather a more general one.

\textsuperscript{42} Here I am thinking of its appearance in the Amidah, a prayer said at almost every prayer service. It appears in the third section, the \textit{Kiddushat ha-Shem}, which speaks about God’s holiness and honoring God over generations.
to identify with their ancestors and carry on their stories as though they were their own, but it also turns this practice into a duty or, to borrow Derrida’s preferred term when referring to ghosts, an injunction. There is a deep sense that if memory is not passed from generation to generation, if each person does not take responsibility for this undertaking, then past sufferings will not be honored or learned from and the Jewish line will be disrupted and potentially disappear. Thus, negotiating Jewish identity can bring its own Hamlet-like situation, leaving children with the onus of maintaining a dialogue with the past that will facilitate its proper projection into the future, of being the one who is meant to deal with the “time out of joint” and of having the responsibility to “set it right” (*Hamlet* 1.5.190-1).

The experience of trauma — also a theme throughout Jewish history but hardly exclusive to it — represents another situation surrounding inheritance that tends to generate more ghosts. When people undergo extreme and painful events, it is often difficult for them to speak of what went on or even broach any topic remotely related to it. This leads to an inability to communicate personal histories from parents to children or grandparents to grandchildren. This may block an entire biography, where someone will not speak of any portion of their past, or simply mean that this one, obviously very formative, event is never addressed. All family secrets already haunt, but traumatic ones are especially powerful. Nicholas Abraham analyzes the phantoms that result from “the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object's life,” explaining that in this case, “what haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (171). Abraham cuts to the heart of the effects of other people’s unspeakable secrets. They shroud personal biographies, placing looming unknowns where children and grandchildren seek ground to found their own identities and begin to elaborate their personal histories. In the case of trauma, this absence seems to constantly appear, repeating uncontrollably for the one
who suffered it personally and vicariously for those close to them. Children and grandchildren are then persistently aware of an inheritance that is being withheld from them.

The idea of postmemory best summarizes how this can manifest across generations. Marianne Hirsch’s concept is generally invoked to refer to situations in which memory has been passed down in an excessive way, in a manner that troubles the boundaries between one generation and the next. She summarizes it:

‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (The Generation 5)

This explanation would seem to suggest that postmemory only applies in situations when actual memories have been communicated, but the “stories, images and behaviors” that subsequent generations receive can consist of actual, detailed information or their utter lack and all the things that rise up around this absence, as is common with trauma generally. In both cases, postmemory describes a situation in which inheritance is even more haunting for a number of reasons. It blurs boundaries between generations in a deeply unsettling way. It makes someone else’s memories too close – for subsequent generations bear an affective relationship to this past – and too far – because the real experience of these memories will always elude those who have inherited them. This ambivalent sense of ownership and restricted access produces basic questions about what is knowable at a point of contact with the past that is fundamental to personal identity. Such queries often give way to doubts about the nature of truth and the possibility of ever communicating anything of the past in precisely the interaction between generations where children and grandchildren seek essential origins. Neither do these obstacles
and consternations release the inheritor from feelings of filial duty. These memories that are too little and too much leave a sense that action is required.

The qualities of postmemory, like trauma more generally and arguably traditional means of passing on Jewish identity, produce a maelstrom of ghosts, ghosts that reveal that the search for fundamental origins begins with a mistaken premise. But, these ghostly circumstances are not without their redemptive aspects, for even as they undermine conventional modes of grounding identity narratives, they provide new avenues for envisioning the self and fortifying the relationship to one’s ancestors. Hirsch elaborates her definition of postmemory by noting that its “connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation” (The Generation 5). Ghosts force people to let go of the idea that an unbroken line reaches back into the past and explains the present. They instead give a certain type of agency, encouraging individuals to rely on their creativity. They lend credibility to invention, and some would say they even demand it. Saraceni sees this as not simply endemic to situations when the transmission of heritage has been disrupted in some way, but as a mark of all inheritance, noting that for Derrida, it is not a passive act, but rather “exige una construcción, un trabajo crítico de elaboración, adecuación y actualización de la herencia recibida” (Escribir hacia atrás 18). Ghosts expose that all inheritance requires work, and for those who take up the task, for those who are equipped to do so, they also enable people to forge their own stories in a way that recognizes the mixed and ambiguous nature of truth and selfhood.

These ideas are also at play in the concept of autofiction – a term coined in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky to describe his novel Fils. He refers specifically to a fictionalized account of real personal experiences, but autofiction is now variously employed when speaking of fictional

---

43 Ana Casas’s edition on autofiction contains an essay by Dubrovsky, “Autobiografía/verdad/psicoanálisis,” in which he explains his idea in detail, outlining especially its relationship to psychoanalysis.
autobiographies or memoirs, autobiographical novels or any other work making some deliberate gesture at blurring the line between the invention and the truth of a personal life story. Most frequently this is expressed as a troubling of Phillip LeJeune's autobiographical pact, in which there is a promise of veracity expressed through the correspondence of the names of the author, narrator and protagonist (19-35). Ana Casas explains that autofiction grows out of “una de las direcciones más importantes de los estudios sobre la autobiografía [que] parte del problema de la identidad como construcción del yo” and which acknowledges that it is not “la textualidad” that is “un resultado del sujeto; al contrario, se suele pensar que es el yo quien resulta construido en el texto” (14). We have already touched on the idea that any “I” is the result of a narrative construction, whether or not it is rendered in text, but considering this concept within the genre of autofiction allows for a more deliberate treatment of the relationship between self and story, truth and fiction. Autofiction reexamines notions that are taken for granted concerning a number of topics. In the same gestures that force the recognition that a self is not some univocal or unitary being that is related through language but rather assembled through it, the genre also questions any easy correspondence between things referred to in the text and their existence in the real world. (In its extreme, these queries lead to the postmodernist questioning if any “I” exists at all). These lines of thinking require more effort from both reader and writer, asking the

---

44The first idea appears in Manuel Alberca’s article “Las novelas del yo.” Paul De Man’s “Autobiography as Defacement” (1979) eventually gets to the latter issue of the relationship between text and reality and Sylvia Molloy (drawing on De Man) discusses both of these ideas in At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America (1991). De Man interrogates the idea that a life gives birth to an autobiography rather than vice versa, asking “does the referent determine the figure, or is the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly simply a referent as all but something more akin to a fiction” (920). Molloy uses the paradoxical nature of autobiography as her starting point in discussing examples of it in Spanish America (1-3). She is particularly attentive to how text produces an enunciating subject, what events produce this situation and what effects this feeling has on self-writers’ perceptions of themselves and their reality. 45 Casas begins to refer to these ideas in the introduction to her edition on autofiction (33-40) as does Manuel Alberca in his attempt to parse autofiction's place “entre dos pactos” (126-129) and his queries about if an “I” exists (145).
former to perform “una lectura simultánea, que sería al mismo tiempo autobiográfico y ficcional” (Casas 23) and the latter to maintain that compelling ambiguity in both her writing and her view of herself. The tension and doubt invoked by this genre point to the ways in which its effects resemble those of ghosts. Casas focuses on its subversive aspects (23); Manuel Alberca fixates on its liminal generic status (126-7); while Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf explicitly relates autofiction to ghosts through their dexterous and troubling border crossing (237-239). It is unsurprising, therefore, to find that the latter two authors treated in this chapter pen works that fall into the category of autofiction as they grapple with highly personal questions of who they are and who they come from.

The novels examined in this chapter provide a range of situations that generate ghosts and modes of reacting to them. They trace generational and historical trajectories of the production and negotiation of ghosts and are born of both the times in which they were written and the different experiences of being at increasing removes from the most formative point of their protagonists’ family sagas, that is immigration or immigration combined with the Holocaust. In the first novel, La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner (1978), Isaac Goldemberg gives us the story of an immigrant’s failure to adjust to his new world, how this renders him a ghost and how this condemns his family line. Inheritance breaks down, and its ghosts are too heavy and withholding to allow for any productive transmission of memory or identity. It speaks to a time when answers still felt indispensable, and there was little remedy to living without them. The second novel, Sergio Chejfec’s Lenta biografía (1990), is most directly an account of a son’s life as a child of postmemory. Unlike the first novel, lack of access to the truth of the father’s life becomes a starting point for invention rather than a condemning sentence. His experience

46 Isabel Cuñado turns to Jo Labanyi to describe this trend specifically in the work of Javier Marías: “the trope of haunting is a self-reflexive trend that questions the ability of narrative to capture reality” (39).
becomes the impetus for the investigation of the very nature of truth and our need for it. The protagonist/author wrestles with a desire for origins even as he knows such a search is undertaken with a mistaken premise at its core. Ultimately, ghosts in this novel facilitate an uneasy peace with the idea that identity and inheritance are a process rather than part of something essential and knowable. The last works treated in detail are from Eduardo Halfon’s *El boxeador polaco* (2008) and *Signor Hoffman* (2015). Although published seven years apart, the stories in them are connected through an autofictional gesture; they are loosely fictionalized versions of their author’s life. Considered together, they display an author/protagonist grappling with many of the same questions about identity and origins and seeking answers from ghosts. Although writing helps him work through the inheritance he receives in the form of his grandfather’s Auschwitz story, it scarcely produces the feelings of resolution one might suppose, not even generating the uneasy peace we find in Chejfec’s work. Despite receiving concrete information about the past and his dedicated effort at parsing that inheritance, the Halfon of these short stories remains haunted.

2.2. Isaac Goldemberg’s *La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner*: Ghosts as a Failure of Inheritance

Isaac Goldemberg’s *La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner* (1978) is the earliest work to be treated in this study, and, published at least 12 years before any other narrative studied here, might seem not to belong. Yet its ghosts, as particularly Jewish and as significant across generations, make the novel relevant to the present study while their origins and effects, as both similar to and drastically different from those of later narratives, provide an interesting starting point for beginning our discussion of ghostly people. *La vida a plazos* recounts the life of

---

immigrant Jacobo Lerner who leaves his native Russia for Peru. A disjointed collection of monologues, letters, newspaper clippings and “crónica” chapters narrated by a third person omniscient voice provide the reader with a portrait of Jacobo, the Peruvians and other immigrants with whom he interacts, the son he bears by a Catholic woman and the context of Jewish life in Peru in the 1920s and 1930s. Through these fragments, the reader can assemble a trajectory of Jacobo’s life, from anxious immigrant, to peddler, to brothel owner, to despaired and dying man. The text presents a number of ghosts, principally León Mitrani, Jacobo’s friend and fellow immigrant from Russia who comes to haunt him as a dybbuk; Efraín, Jacobo’s ailing son; and finally Jacobo himself, whose present absence hangs over the entire text and contaminates all the lives he touches. In some ways, these resemble the ghosts found in more contemporary narratives. They are rendered ghostly by guilt and longing, loneliness and half-hidden truths, and a failure to integrate into the life of the present time and place. They break time and occupy border spaces, manifesting in dreams and blurring the boundaries between life and death. They speak to a complex connection to Jewish legacy, arising out of mixed emotions about tradition and the past and mediating intergenerational relationships. Despite these similarities, the ghosts of this novel differ in that they are explicitly connected to conditions of hybridity and marginality and ultimately presage a damning fate for both ghosts and haunted.

2.2.1. Jacobo: Protagonist, Immigrant, Ghost

While the others might be considered results, refractions or repercussions of his ghostliness, Jacobo is the main ghost in the novel, a fact which is reinforced at the levels of structure, symbolism and content. The English translation of the work, *The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner* refers to the disjointed nature of the man’s life in itself and underlines a telling stylistic choice. Jacobo’s biography is told non-chronologically, in pieces and through
disparate voices and styles of media. As Harry Rosser puts it “[a] kaleidoscope of memories, narrated activities, inner musings and documentary material shows the fragmented nature of Jacobo Lerner’s personality and very existence” (45). While a more holistic approach to the telling of a life than works that focus exclusively on their protagonists, it also flatly refuses the traditional mode of representing a person in which a trajectory of self can be neatly traced from a causal beginning to an understandable end. Rosser remarks on the “strategy of shifting unpredicatably from one temporal or spatial plane to another,” saying that “[t]ime is broken into little pieces” (45). Rosser’s articulation of the narrative structure of the novel calls to mind Hamlet’s lament at the arrival of his father’s spirit. Ghosts signal and produce a broken time that calls for repair, and as we addressed in the first chapter, their haunting obstructs the tidy progression of linear time. Whether through the repetitive nature of trauma (Freud) or through the crippling of master narratives that provide singular explanations for events of the past and present (Derrida), haunting produces an experience and understanding of time that countermands any notion of “a stable, unitary sense of self” (Peeren and Pilar Blanco 95). The shards of Jacobo and his life must be assembled by the reader and never aspire to more than a pastiche person, neither integrated nor whole.

In another gesture against a “unitary” telling of self, Jacobo lingers above and throughout the text, but, unlike most of the other characters, he is never heard from in first person. His son, some of his friends and most of the women in his life each express themselves (and opinions or misgivings surrounding Jacobo) in lengthy monologues. Jacobo, on the other hand, is only ever spoken about.48 The closest he comes to speaking for himself are mediated moments in a letter to

---

48 Edward Friedman answers the possible objection to this by saying that although a third person omniscient voice narrates Jacobo’s inner thoughts and feelings, “the narrative is distanced from its subject by a master ironist, whose lexicon both supersedes and undermines the unexpressed idiom of Jacobo’s thoughts” (16).
the editor of a Jewish newspaper (138) and a letter to a doctor, also printed in the newspaper *Alma Hebreia*, and not sent directly to the man whose opinion he seeks (226). Neither of these is self-reflective or biographical and serves more to underline the causes of Jacobo’s ghostliness (i.e. his refusal to integrate into society and his illness, both of which we will address later) rather than a man who is active in his life and his world. Speaking for oneself is a not necessary requirement for establishing a character with presence, but when deliberately contrasted with others who do, Jacobo comes off as all the more absent and ghostly. Interestingly, the only other moments approaching a first person perspective for Jacobo come in the form of dreams. Dreams constitute a type of ghost place. Liminal by definition, between sleep and consciousness, dreams are where boundaries are blurred and time and space are in a sense “out of joint,” not functioning as we normally conceive of them in the real world. Their presentation in the novel, as phrases and fragments of sentences without punctuation scattered across the page in Yiddish and Spanish, again refuses customary presentation, appearing to shirk order of any type. That Jacobo should seem to finally speak for himself only within the confines of a dream is not surprising, and that memory and death fill these dreams further reinforces an impression of our protagonist as a ghost. In the first dream, which happens in 1929, Lerner is flooded with memories of fleeing Russia, grotesque images of León’s chewing on bones, and being informed of his father’s death in both Spanish – “Yankel Acaba morir tu padre” – and Yiddish – “Dain tate iz ersht Itst geshtorben” (152-53). In the second dream, which takes place in 1935, far closer to Jacobo’s dying, the protagonist imagines a funeral. In it, León (who by this point has already died) and a priest are praying beside a coffin, saying “almas descarnadas ya son sombras” (244), in a phrase that unites the imageries of death and ghostliness by associating the scene of death with shadows and souls that have lost their materiality. At first it is difficult to discern if it may be Jacobo’s
funeral, but by the end, we suppose it is that of Efraín, for the estranged father is forced to open the coffin and find his son there, surrounded by roses (244).

Death surrounds Jacobo almost constantly and produces a protagonist who is all but dead in life. The novel itself opens with Lerner on his death bed, contemplating what he will leave behind and to whom. The first friend to speak about him, Samuel Edelman – a successful, assimilated Jewish immigrant –, speaks to Jacobo in his mind as though he were already absent, encouraging him to accept the end and “dedicar su tiempo para purificar su alma, como buen judío prepararse para recibir muerte” (35). Not only is this plea not addressed to an actual interlocutor, coming off more as a prayer than advice to a friend, but it is followed by a description of the last time Samuel saw his friend Jacobo during a visit in which the latter already appeared to be dead: “última vez lo vi parecía espectro sí mismo, encogido era como hongos mochos y arrugados crecían junto río de mi pueblo; olor muerto tenía encima, toda la noche le velé sueño” (37). More than a year before he dies, Jacobo smells of death and looks like something belonging to a dark and dank place. Again, death and dreams are brought together as Samuel “vela” his friend’s sleeping body, invoking a scene that reminds us of the Jewish practice of shemira (translated in English as “watching” or “guarding”), in which the body of a dead person must be watched over until the time of burial. Jacobo’s former fiancée Miriam echoes this sentiment in her recollection of Lerner at her first husband’s unveiling (the occasion in Jewish tradition, in which, some time after burial, a tombstone is finally put on a grave, often ending the official period of mourning), saying “parecía que era él y no Daniel a quien habían enterrado ¿no?, y me dio pena haber pensado eso, porque la verdad Jacobo tenía los ojos inflamados y me acompañó a la casa” (100). Jacobo is alive, he even walks Miriam home, but to her, he seems
long dead. That he persists even after the period of mourning is sealed underlines the sense of his being a ghost, an unshakeable, eerie present absence.

During his life in Peru, Lerner is a ghost, nothing more than “un fantasma huidizo” as his son’s grandfather shall remember him (92), but what causes Jacobo to live in this state? The most explicit causes of Jacobo’s ghostliness are his marginal position and failure to adjust. Jacobo comes off as incredibly lonely. Despite having family in Peru, he has very little to do with them. His relationship with his brother Moisés is perfunctory at best – neither of them particularly likes the other – and Moisés’s wife Sara constantly needs to remind him to be good to Jacobo, especially since the latter saved them from financial ruin. His connections in Peru remain few and he ultimately rejects anything that borders on intimacy. His closest relationship was with León Mitrani, but even before his childhood friend dies, Jacobo feels a growing distance between them, at one point even pretending not to know him (113). He comes close to marrying Miriam, but this wedding is ultimately called off, in part due to Jacobo’s less than honorable profession as a brothel owner. Towards the end of his life, he takes on a mistress, Juana Paredes, but in spite of her enthusiasm to play wife for him even without the title (207), he continually shuts her out (206). Given an opportunity to form a family and set down roots, Jacobo chooses to leave the town, Chepén, where he had taken a Catholic lover who would bear him a son. He moves to Lima, repudiating both son and mother. When Mitrani suggests to him that he recognize Efraín and marry Virginia, Jacobo feels that “[q]uedarse en Chepén significaba romper con el orden tradicional de su familia y de su raza, para dejarse caer sumisamente en el caos” (110). Jacobo cannot bring himself to betray his Judaism, and as a result, he remains without any sort of anchoring to his place. Yet, neither does Jacobo invest in his Jewish connections. He becomes estranged from family and friends, and despite the fact that he spends
some amount of time bemoaning the assimilation of Jews in Peru (examples include his letter to the Jewish newspaper (138) and his evaluation of Mitrani as already having descended into chaos by marrying a non-Jew (110)), Jacobo becomes almost non-observant whilst living in Peru.

Already burdened with the marginality of being both Jewish and an immigrant, Jacobo suffers further by neither fully embracing his Jewish past nor his Peruvian present. It is a double negation that leaves him unable to take root anywhere, for he adjusts neither to his present surroundings nor to the memory of his previous life. Often, a marginal position can carry a certain type of authority, constituting an opportunity to provide a contestatory version of history, or a place from which to see an alternative reality. For Friedman in “Theory in the Margin: Latin American Literature and the Jewish Subject,” this is a virtue of Latin American Jewish fiction, for it makes the presence of Jewish people in Latin American society visible and gives a space for Jews to inscribe themselves within it. These narratives therefore become a highly self-affirming gesture because there is a “direct relation between self-identity and inscribing oneself into society, into history” (22). While La vida a plazos embodies these themes well, Jacobo is unable to “inscribe himself into society.” He remains a marginalized subject – a condition which is both self and societally imposed – remaining separate from the mainstream Peruvian (i.e.: Catholic) world as well as the new Jewish community growing inside it (a community which, although also marginalized, could potentially provide a welcoming space for Jacobo). As a ghost, he symbolizes the alienated position of the Jew and the immigrant, but his character does not possess a voice that forces the center to recognize his alterity and integrate him into an expanded notion of Peruvianness (even if the novel itself is this voice). Normally, Jacobo’s ghostly condition might result from an inability to let go of the past, but Jacobo’s experience is far more ambivalent. Friedman summarizes his identity as a “flawed synthesis,” calling him “a man in
search of a new or renewed identity which will correspond to his new life while selectively apotheosizing the old, confirming his religious heritage in a land of economic opportunity” (14). Jacobo is caught in between, prevented from belonging either to his past or his present. As we have seen, Jacobo is unable to set down roots in any community and is plagued by guilt over not being more Jewish and over not recognizing his son. On his death bed, he dreams of Moisés, Samuel and León recriminating him, “al borde de su cama…le reprendieron despiadamente el haber abandonado a su hijo en manos de cristianos” (49). When Jacobo “negó a declararse culpable” the three figures disappointedly abandon him (49-50). Efraín crystallizes a squandered redemption for Jacobo. If he had recognized the boy, he may have realized a synthesis of self that would have helped him to find peace as both a Jew and a Peruvian, one that grounded him in his time and place and turned him into a productive bridge between past and future. Instead, he is rendered a perennial outsider, hopelessly haunting from the margins.

2.2.2. León: Friend, Symptom, Dybbuk

As a ghost and dybbuk, León makes manifest Jacobo’s yearning for an impossible belonging. The Mitrani that haunts Jacobo corresponds with traditional definitions of both dybbuks and ghosts, things that possess and linger past death. Mitrani is a ghost because his coffin is lost (209), making it impossible to fully know him as dead. For Derrida, mourning “consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead” (9). The loss of Mitrani’s body makes this idea literal. Some knowledge is left unanswered; Mitrani will always be an absence and his material existence will forever carry a mystery. He cannot be mourned and instead possesses his friend, becoming the talisman of what Freud would call a reaction of melancholia rather than mourning, a coping mechanism that prevents someone who has lost something from moving
forward and preserves the ghostly presence of the thing lost within a ceaselessly mourning host. Worse still, Mitrani’s spirit wanders because in all likelihood, if he was finally buried, “lo más seguro era que a Mitrani le hubiesen colocado una cruz sobre la tumba” (50). León’s burial, one of the circumstances integral to a proper mourning, indicates a serious transgression of Jewish practice and a denial of a Peruvian recognition of who he really was. Mitrani, like Jacobo, has not been integrated in this soil with the blessings of Judaism. From this perspective, it should not be shocking that the two souls come to be paired in the same body because Mitrani’s body makes literal a feeling in Jacobo’s spirit. His existence has not been resolved; he has been robbed of a settled, hybrid incorporation into this new land.

Mitrani’s dybbuk also symbolizes a Judaism that has not received the respect it deserves, for he is united with Jewishness in general in Jacobo’s mind and the possession occurs just as Jacobo takes on a renewed interest in Jewish practice. He begins to go to temple more and seek friendships with other solitary Jews like himself: “Fue por ese entonces que Jacobo Lerner empezó a sentir que había sido poseído por un dibbuk. Sabedor de que el dibbuk era el espíritu de un cadáver insepulto, Jacobo estaba convencido de que el alma migratoria de León Mitrani había hallado oscuro refugio en su cuerpo” (219). Here, Jacobo’s desire to belong finds outlet through Mitrani. Jacobo becomes the receptacle for a wandering soul and through this possession, returns to Judaism. Friedman evaluates the possession not as something that happens to Jacobo but as something the lonely man seeks out, noting “Jacobo is seized by – or, more properly, reaches out for – the dybbuk of León Mitrani” (14). He wants the connection to his religion and his past, and while it gives him peace for a moment, bringing him back to a community, ultimately it distances him from the world, causing him to withdraw into his home.
and eventually landing him in a sanitarium when love for the Jewish community turns into ravings about pending anti-Semitism.

Mitrani’s dybbuk also metaphorizes the guilty feelings that overwhelm Jacobo regarding both his son and his religion. Dybbuks are typically a product of guilt. In S. An-sky’s Der Dybbuk, the young girl at the center of the play is possessed as a result of her father’s transgression; the haunting is a product of an unredressed wrong. When he finally manages to rid Jacobo of Mitrani’s dybbuk (expelling him through a hole in Lerner’s pinky toe), Rabbi Schneider reminds him of this provenance of such ghosts, explaining “el dibbuk sólo poseía a aquellos que guardaban un pecado secreto y que el haber sido poseído por un alma migratoria correspondía al pago de una culpa” (235). Part of Jacobo’s guilt originates in his abandoning his religion, honoring the superficial aspects which reaffirm difference without engaging in its spiritual practices or meanings. As we saw, Jewishness and León are linked in Jacobo’s mind, and through his possession, in which Mitrani takes control of his actions – because with León’s dybbuk inside him “ahora su vida le pertenecía a León Mitrani y era él quien, tenaz, solemnemente, controlaba sus actos” (219) –, Jacobo is able to return to the temple and to the study of Talmud. More powerful still is the guilt Jacobo feels but will scarcely admit to regarding his son. Mitrani acts as a bridge between Jacobo and Efraín. He brings Lerner news of his son’s life and for the boy, Mitrani and Jacobo become fused. He is the only source of information on the child’s father (he tells Efrain that he and Jacobo share features, that he belongs to their people (137)), and in Efraín’s dreams the two men are the same (187).

49 Der Dybbuk was written between 1913 and 1916 and first performed in 1920. It was subsequently translated into over 15 languages and continues to be performed throughout the world today (for an exhaustive list of productions see Legutko’s Appendix). S. An-sky, or Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport (1863-1920), was a Belarussian-Jewish author and playwright (writing in both Russian and Yiddish) as well as an ethnographer specializing in Jewish life and folklore.
Additionally, it is León who encourages Jacobo to accept his son, to embrace him and a rooted life in Peru. Whether he admits it or not, this refusal condemns him, and with reason Eduardo Hopkins Rodríguez suggests that integration, marriage and the recognition of his son would have saved Lerner from his fate with the dybbuk (191).

It is worth noting that Mitrani’s possession of Jacobo is figured as an illness. This makes sense given that, as we have seen, León’s dybbuk, besides being a foreign body, is a symptom of the conditions which render Jacobo nothing more than a present absence. Mitrani haunts his friend as a response to Jacobo’s loneliness, to answer his desire to belong and connect back to his Judaism. Yet, he also makes manifest this yearning and incarnates a guilt which Jacobo refuses to recognize. This dybbuk eventually causes Lerner to withdraw even more from his surroundings, to engage even less with his community and his family, and ultimately it plunges him further into a world of madness populated by shadows and memories. But the appearance of Mitrani’s dybbuk and the specific ways in which he takes hold of his friend point to the continuous association of ghostliness and sickness throughout the novel. The first sensations of possession are described in detail:

A mediados de 1934 Jacobo Lerner comenzó a presentir que había sido poseído por el espíritu de León Mitrani, que éste había venido a guarecerse en sus entrañas cual alimaña pertinaz, árida en un comienzo, inflándose más tarde con su sangre como una esponja insaciable. (217)

This visceral description gives the reader the impression that some sort of vermin or parasite attacks and ravages Lerner’s body and makes plain that this possession has very real consequences for Jacobo’s health, as happens to the fiancée in An-sky’s drama. After a few months, Jacobo himself seeks the council of a doctor to relieve his pain, explaining “[v]an varios días estoy en cama con agudos dolores en la cintura y temo es inflamación del riñón. Últimamente he empezado sufrir del estómago, con un estreñimiento se va volviendo crónico”
In the sanitarium, Jacobo lives his strongest experience of haunting and himself becomes his most ghostly. He sees only silhouettes and vaporous bodies and slips further and further into their world. His state of isolation persists, as even his madness is viewed in terms of illness. Sara, the only person who goes to see Jacobo during this period, understands others’ not visiting the ailing man, expressing her own fears that “la locura es contagiosa” (170). This contagious nature of ghosts persists as an idea throughout the novel, for insanity, sickness and ghostliness often appear together, each frequently acting as sign of the others.

2.2.3. Efraín: Son, Heir, Condemned

Efraín is the last major ghost of the novel, and his condition is expressed in much the same way as that of Jacobo. He is constantly sick or associated with death, and he too eventually falls into a madness that presages a dark end. Efraín is always ailing; he sees it as an exception when “no me duele la cabeza ni me dan esos mareos” (158). From the very first time the reader encounters him, Efraín comes off as sickly and weak. His illness is constantly interpreted as death, a fact which Efraín absorbs from those around him. He explains how the doctor examines him, and “[c]ada vez…se queda mirándome por un rato largo como si yo ya no existiera y me tuvieran que llevar al cementerio” (79). His grandmother reproduces the same link, asking when Efraín will get out of bed because when he is sick, “la casa tiene como un olor a cementerio” (86). Even Samuel Edelman sees the boy this way, lamenting “tan triste Efraín además, no parecía de este mundo, como muertecito era y a lo mejor se ha muerto ya” (40). This illness
which causes Efraín to be and be treated as someone dead in life is framed as arising from his origins. His grandfather explains that these “mareos” are a vestige of his birth, for he nearly died when he was born (80). His mother’s family traces the illness even further back, blaming it on Efraín’s Jewish side. Efraín overhears his grandfather say “‘[e]sto debe ser cosas de judíos, porque en mi familia jamás se dieron estas enfermedades tan extrañas’” (85). While the grandfather is clearly trying to distance himself from Efraín and not accept responsibility for the boy’s condition (despite the fact that his ill treatment of the boy contributes to his poor health and isolation), he does alight upon something that the novel itself communicates. Efraín is sick and dead in life because of his father, because of an inheritance that has come to him in some ways like a congenital disease and in others more resembles the legacies of secrets. He is rendered ghostly by what his father has passed down to him physically, that is, a resemblance that makes his otherness apparent to everyone; religiously, as in the case of his barely transmitted Judaism; and personally, or due to the ambiguity surrounding identity that Jacobo communicates through his present absence.

Jacobo’s most obvious ghostly inheritance to Efraín appears nearly genetic, something passed down through the blood. Father and son’s conditions resemble one another; each exhibits a ghostliness characterized by illness, madness and isolation. This “disease” or family trait is not the only one they share. Mitrani tells Efraín the first time he meets him “‘eres el mismísimo retrato de tu padre, los mismos ojos, la misma nariz y esas orejas pronunciadas, no hay más que verte para saber que perteneces a los nuestros’” (137). Efraín looks like his father, and this

---

50 The tendency to link the Jewish “race” with infirmity, especially mental infirmity, was already well rooted in the XIX century of both Europe and the Americas. Gustavo Faverón Patriau (supporting his analysis in Sander Gilman’s Difference and Pathology as well as Edward Said’s observations on the subject in Orientalism) discusses this in relation to Jorge Isaac’s María (1867), noting that her sickness was grounded in the thinking of the time that saw Jews as “biológicamente degradados” (348) and naturally prone to mental illness and hysterical crisis (347).
physical likeness gives him away as different, reinforces visibly that the boy belongs to the one of them of the Jews and not the one of us of his mother’s family or Peru’s majority. But, as discussed, Lerner rejects his son, and in the same gesture denies him an affirming patrimony and dooms him to the same ghostly fate of marginalization and unintegrated hybridity that Jacobo suffers. Although Mitrani tells the boy that he is undeniably a Jew in his blood and in his features, welcoming him with the sentence “perteneces a los nuestros,” Efraín in fact seems to belong nowhere. He finds some solace in the Church, but when the local priest finds out that his father is Jewish, he ceases to receive the compassionate attention the man once gave him. He finds no home in Judaism either, and any association with it actually frightens him. At one point he overhears his mother speaking about Jacobo’s potential reaction to Efraín’s involvement in the Church. She references his father’s being Jewish, and in an internal address to his mother, Efraín says “yo sin saber de quién hablabas, sin saber si te referías al diablo o al señor Mitrani que es el único judío que conozco, porque ese viejo cojo no puede ser mi padre, porque eso sería morirse del espanto” (25). Immediately, he tries not to think about these things because “me empiezan los mareos y me pongo tembloroso y ya sé que no podré pegar un ojo en toda la noche” (25). Instead of being a potential spiritual home, Judaism haunts the young boy, bringing on the symptoms of his ghostliness. He inherits a genetic Jewishness; it is on his face and in his DNA. But, he does not inherit it as one would an heirloom or a family legacy. He possesses no knowledge about it other than the anti-Semitism he infers from his mother’s family and at church. It is not passed down to him as a spiritual system or a religion of parents and ancestors. Jacobo’s Judaism exists in Efraín as a condemning lack.

Jacobo’s existence for his son is in this way similar to that of Judaism; he is a present absence that hangs over every aspect of his son’s life. Efraín receives mixed messages about his
father, sometimes hearing he is dead, sometimes that he is a Jew living far away, and once being
told that “ya no tengo padre, que se murió hace siete años antes de que yo naciera” (21). He
dreams of him and sometimes longs for the Apocalypse, thinking that he will see him then, when
the dead have risen and the condemned appear (25). Without his father ever being there and
without really knowing anything about him, Efraín is plagued by what he does not, and cannot,
know, for Jacobo is nothing more than a ghost for his son. As a result, both Jacobo and Judaism
function like Abraham’s phantoms; they are the product of internalized gaps, lacks and secrets.
For a boy without a father and just enough Jewishness to render him an outcast, these phantoms
are particularly condemning because they replace sources of identity. Friedman points out that
“Efraín’s discourse, like his life, reflects a hunger for identity and a consciousness of his
difference” (16). But in these circumstances, the boy will find no place to belong and no place
ground his identity. Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda Peterson note that “the affective
power of absence challenges the integrity of both the subject and the social body” (3). Absence
resides in Efraín’s origins and is the overriding characteristic of his paternal inheritance. Far
from the conditions necessary to forming an integrated self-image, Efraín grows up in the
shadow of a ghost and is thus fated to be a ghost himself.

The message about Jewish ghosts in La vida a plazos is overwhelmingly negative. They
present a bleak picture of the potential of the past to productively shape the future. Within the
Lerner family, they are a sign of irreparable damage and rupture. Efraín will obviously not make
it to adulthood; he is, in reviewer Francine Masiello’s words, the “último vestigio del árbol
genealógico” (102), a sign that this Jewish tree will not take root in America. In addition to
having a condemning nature not exhibited in most contemporary works employing the same
trope, ghosts in this work are predominantly bound up with questions of marginality and failed
hybridity and integration. Jacobo is a ghost not because he is stuck in a traumatic past which grips him in every moment, but because he is an immigrant who cannot adjust to his new surroundings and because he refuses every chance to produce a positive synthesis of self. Efraín, alternatively, exhibits a combination of themes that are unique to this novel and that repeat in other works which employ ghost imagery. Like his father, a particular brand of dysfunctional hybridity condemns him to a half-existence, but he also incarnates the consequences of ghostly inheritances, of knowing very little of one’s origins. The novel’s ghost trope initiates postmodern questions about the power of alternative voices, the nature of identity, and the project of portraying a biography in words. It forces the visibility and integration of a marginal figure in Peruvian history. It focuses our attention on the role of origins in the understanding of a self. It expresses a man’s life by attempting to collect his entire context, hammering home that such a project cannot be achieved through a single style, type of writing or even a linear conception of time. But, while the novel opens queries about identity, and in spite of its fragmented structure and narrative, it communicates a feeling that a positive sense of identity is possible and desirable, and ghostliness is the consequence of missed opportunity rather than a symbol of endless nebulosity. In addition, the innovative figuring of Lerner’s ghostly character bears a greater resemblance to La muerte de Artemio Cruz (1962) than to the consternations raised through the rendering of ghostly people in the works we will examine in the rest of this chapter,51 in which ghosts arise because true biographies are taken as impossible projects to begin with yet call to us nevertheless.

51 There is in fact a tendency to link this work with writers of the Boom generation rather than works more contemporary to it. Masiello lists its “parentesco” with Juan Rulfo, Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez (101) while Rosser, despite writing his article 12 years after the initial publication of La vida a plazos, feels the need to begin his discussion by inserting the work into a genealogy that begins and ends with this same generation of writers (43).
2.3. Sergio Chejfec’s *Lenta biografía*: The Subtle Revelations of Ghosts That Do Not Speak Like *La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner*, Sergio Chejfec’s *Lenta biografía* (1990) features the relationship between a father and son and asks questions about inheritance, identity and the limits of biographical representation, but its ghosts also differ in their creation and consequences. In both works, the father is a ghost who passes incomplete knowledge to his son, creating issues in the son’s understanding of himself and generating larger questions about the possibilities of depicting someone’s life. But, rather than a condemning failure that contaminates the son with the phantom existence of the father, the ghostly inheritance received by *Lenta’s* author/protagonist becomes the impetus for a search, whereby both inheritance and identity become a never resolved process. *Lenta biografía*, Chejfec’s first novel, is a fictionalized account of its author’s attempts to write an autobiography, but, in so doing, he realizes he must write the story of his father, a Holocaust survivor and immigrant to Argentina. This proves difficult as Chejfec’s homonymous character possesses very few details regarding his father’s past and the man is unwilling to share or even deliberately return to that time in his mind. Because it was so traumatic and because he will not speak of it, the father’s past renders him a type of ghost. Present but silently haunted and haunting, he becomes a tomb for his lost family, a vessel expressing traces of relatives and a past that the author/protagonist longs to know. The son responds to his father’s condition by undertaking a project of deciphering and inventing, searching for genealogical clues in his father’s gestures and songs. This project, condensed into the very writing of the novel, attempts to ameliorate both father and son’s haunted states by turning secrets and absences into knowledge and materiality. He imagines not only his lost uncles’ faces but records the collective invention of yet another ghost, the “perseguido.” Every Sunday, the father’s group of immigrant friends in Buenos Aires tries to recapture the unknown fate of their mutual acquaintance, whom they call the pursued or persecuted one. The
“perseguido” becomes a cipher for what Chejfec cannot know of his father’s past, and the project of reconstructing his destiny occasions reflections on the ambivalent divide between supposed opposites like knowing versus imagining and truth versus invention. Ultimately, the ghosts in *Lenta biografía* testify to the next generation’s desire to resolve haunting through knowledge, even while being aware that resolution and truly understanding the past are impossible.

2.3.1. The Progenitor’s Ghost Becomes the Progeny’s Project

While we tend to think of biographies as the direct treatment of one particular person’s life – a story that might cast a larger net by incorporating the many factors and facets that contribute to someone’s character or, as we saw in *La vida a plazos*, include the lives of those the person touched –, Chejfec emphasizes that his biography is not so straightforward, for one biography is often multiple and identities are tied to one another. The feeling that his father’s past is partially his draws Chejfec to search for the man’s story because, as he says in the novel, “yo no encuentro forma de hablar de mí si no hablo de él” (101). He writes this biography “para poder así entender mejor lo que yo tenía como mi pasado en la persona de mi padre” (47). His attempt is somewhat successful, for in an interview after publication, he explains that in writing the novel, he felt that he had “rescatado un ser anónimo, tomaba prestada su vida para escribir sobre ella, y al hacerlo, me daba vida a mi mismo” (qtd. Saraceni, *Escribir hacia atrás* 50).

Many critics, including Gina Saraceni and Hermerson Siquiera, comment that the vision of biography in the novel is based around the idea that the story of one is also the story of the other (Saraceni, “El regreso,” 25; Siquiera 12). For both father and son, turning one’s life into a narrative of self involves recognizing the biographies of an entire family. The father cites this as his reason for never writing his own story because “para comenzar como correspondería por su nacimiento e infancia debía remitirse a sus padres, y luego también a sus abuelos – a las vidas de
todos ellos –, y que aquella era una empresa de lo más trabajosa y pesada; que el carecía de la suficiente ‘paciencia’ para hacerlo” (10). For the father, a complete picture of him would require the biographies of several generations. The author/protagonist harbors a similar feeling, but for him, this reaches back even further, as he sees all of Jewish history as condensed in the father, from Egypt to Poland to Buenos Aires. He ponders what he does not know about his father – the history “que pertenecía a mi padre, que yo debía reconstruir” – and explains that he “la ubicaba en el intervalo imaginario que va desde el vadeo judío del mar Rojo encabezado por Moisés hasta su nacimiento en una aldea polaca” (15). His father’s life is the history of all Jews, and discovering his past inscribes him – and by extension, Chejfec himself – within it.⁵²

Already central in the Jewish context, the focus on the individual’s relationship to past generations is a topic throughout the novel. As already discussed in Chapter 1, there is a tendency to learn Jewish history as something embodied in each Jew and to teach it as though its events are personal. This is particularly pronounced in the yearly Passover Seder (the ceremonial meal commemorating the expulsion from Egypt, the liberation from slavery and the reception of the Ten Commandments), in which parents tell their children the story of their ancestors as though it happened to them specifically. Chejfec picks up this theme in the text by invoking Passover and through his references to a song often sung at the end of the meal called Had Gadya. The song does not speak of generations explicitly. In fact, it begins with a goat that is successively eaten by cat, which is eaten by a dog, which is beaten by a stick, which is consumed by fire and so on. But, more importantly, it is cumulative, and Chejfec relates this aspect to his understanding of generations. Each new verse repeating and building on the last, Had Gadya, as Edna Aizenberg points out, “looks forward to the future by remembering the past” and can only

⁵² This is also an essential point for Sergio Waisman’s short article on Chejfec and Jewish tradition (56).
add new content by recognizing and incorporating what came before (*Books and Bombs* 42). For this reason, Aizenberg sees it “as a thematic antecedent for *Lenta biografía* but also as a formal model” (“*Lenta biografía*” 55). The author/protagonist himself comes to view his place amongst the generations of his family in a similar way. As the book closes, he wonders once more about what he has managed to learn about and from his father, about the “didáctica particular dirigida a la genealogía que fuera mi persona” (190). Relating these things and his relationship to them to *Had Gadya*, he explains, “[d]e parecido modo, es así como yo terminaba también encarnando cierto aspecto del relato del cabrito, donde todo cambiaba – cambia – mientras al mismo tiempo se repite, donde cada presente sucesivo era condensación del pasado” (190). At the conclusion of this biography, as he meditates on his father and what the man has passed down to him as his progeny, Chejfec returns to the idea that his life repeats aspects of his father’s, that present generations contain the past and that he himself is an embodiment of that.

This focus on generations begins to reveal the importance of familial genealogy and inheritance in Chejfec’s desire and ability to parse his father’s past and, in it, his own. As discussed earlier, inheritance, that which comes in the form of blood ties and that constituted by knowledge, plays an essential role in constituting identities. It inscribes the son into a genealogical line that links him to a familial, ethnic and historical community, making him part of a group and a unique individual within it. Inheritance implies a debt, which can be exhausting, as the novel admits through the voice of one of the Sunday story tellers, who calls it the “‘[c]ada vez más fatigosa y degradante labor de las generaciones’: [condensar y representar continuamente un pasado]” (156; brackets in original), but this contract with ancestors also establishes continuity over the generations, something essential to placing one’s own identity into a larger history (Saraceni, “El regreso,” 20-1). Chejfec cannot help but see his father’s past
as an inheritance that belongs to him, always “creyendo que éste [el pasado] era una realidad que me pertenecía tanto como a él el suyo, o aún más” (67; my brackets added for clarity). The author/protagonist longs for this familial inheritance as a key to his own past, as a sort of explanatory origin that will stabilize his present. But ultimately, Chejfec is a child of postmemory. The knowledge the son seeks is partial, occluded, yet so palpable as to seem to be as much his own as it is his father’s, if not more.

In a sense, all inheritances haunt; they are persistent, demanding, contained in the blood and the features as well as outside the inheritor in the form of objects and knowledge; they are both too close and too far. But, cases of postmemory exacerbate this condition because the too close quality manifests as an affective internalization and the too far quality often results from absences and secrets, things which flaunt their inaccessibility. Chejfec wants to know what happened to his father, where he came from, what his family was like, who his father was and is. This information – a patrimony that should connect him to a personal and ancestral past – is denied him. He feels that it belongs to him, that it constitutes his own identity as much as his father’s. He perceives this past at all times – its mystery fills his childhood, leaking through the cracks of Yiddish songs and undisclosed nightmares –, but trauma prevents the father from passing this information down to his son. The father is instead classified overwhelmingly by his unremitting, pregnant silence, sometimes causing Chejfec to think that “le temía – literalmente – a las palabras” (61). As Saraceni puts it, he lives “en estado de memoria” but “nunca habla” (“El regreso” 24). Always hiding his “vida pretérita” (Chejfec 34) yet bound ceaselessly to it, the father becomes a ghost. He does not entirely exist in the present, nor is he part of the past. This

53 Mónica Szurmuk takes this as her main topic and links it to concepts of citizenship in her article “Usos de la postmemoria: Lenta biografía de Sergio Chejfec,” and Ariana Huberman touches on it briefly in “Parentesis sobre parentesis: memoria y escritura en Lenta biografía de Sergio Chejfec” when speaking about Chejfec’s reaction to his father’s silence (97).
feeling comes through in Chejfec’s tendency to constantly adjust tenses when referring to him, often first employing the preterite – the tense for things that are over and done – and then correcting this to the present, almost as though for him, the father is both dead and alive. There are no physical descriptions of the father, and his most material presence is as a metaphorical tomb for his murdered family (62). Locking the ghosts of his family within him turns the father into a ghost himself, or, as Saraceni explains, “estar ‘entre’ los espectros de los tíos y los hermanos implica su propio devenir-espectro, su estar en el presente como fantasma de sí mismo, ocupando la frontera entre la vida y la muerte, ausente y presente a la vez” (Escribir hacia atrás 55).

2.3.2. Using Ghosts to Bury Ghosts

In 

La vida a plazos the ghostliness of the father contaminates the son; the boy receives a legacy of absence and secrets and it prevents him from forging a productive sense of self. Chejfec’s situation is similar, but, despite being haunted by what he does not know, by the people and stories he senses but has no access to, this son is not rendered a ghost. This is due to the unique perspective he develops towards his father and the phantasmatic heritage he receives from him. Chejfec both accepts and refuses the conditions of his father and his inheritance; he acknowledges the presence of ghosts but continuously tries to ameliorate their haunting. This is most obvious in his attitude towards his uncles, of whom he says that “su condición de muertos, de inexistentes, de personas que ya nunca volverían, fue la manera natural que para mí siempre tuvieron” (13), yet he unremittingly seeks details about them in his father’s features. He contents himself with imagining how his uncles must have been, realizing as an adult that “[e]sas preguntas eran, ahora pienso, una manera sutil de imaginar” (12). He discovers that his constantly asking for facts about them was really a way of approaching the past with a spirit of
invention. He seems to realize that this is the very nature of being haunted, an idea which he sums up in a refrain with its own ghostly repetition, “[e]s como si los muertos nos visitaran a los vivos, pero ataviados por nosotros” (13, 14, 26). This dressing up of the past is a type of “projection” and “creation” typical of a child of postmemory (Hirsch, *The Generation*, 5). It also represents one of the more redemptive aspects of postmemory, for ghostly inheritances can become a site of conjecture and creativity rather than simply a failure of inter-generational communication and, by extension, of a positive sense of identity.

Chejfec’s willingness to invent allows him to imagine his father’s past, but this is an ambivalent tool, as combatting haunting requires embracing ghosts. Within the text, he creates various other ghosts who act as ciphers for his father, namely his uncles and the “perseguido” described at the Sunday gatherings.54 He invents features for his uncles in his father’s face, yet knows that his search for them is really one for his father. He states plainly that looking for “las caras de mis tíos” was “una manera de pretender descubrir algún o algunos rasgos velados de la figura de mi padre” (42). Numerous times he admits that it is precisely his father’s family’s being dead, their status as ghosts, that facilitates the fabrications on which he comes to depend:

> A pesar de saber que nunca podría corroborar ante sus rostros las caras que yo había imaginado que tenían mis tíos – su condición de muertos, como antes puse, era justamente lo que me autorizaba a intentar suponer en la de ellos algo de la de mi padre –, constantemente me preocupaba – con una ansiedad secreta y febril – por hacerlo de algún modo que me garantizara exactitud y fidelidad. Esto, por supuesto, era imposible; y sin embargo lo hacía. (99-100)

In spite of the aid provided by the ghosts Chejfec assembles, we see here that he still feels fairly unsettled. There is a conflict between what he desires and what he understands is possible, and reason can override neither his compulsion for “truth” nor his feeling that he could attain it. In some senses, this inner quarrel is the backdrop of the whole novel. The author/protagonist seeks

54 Szurmuk touches on the use of the “perseguido” in this way as well (317).
a touchstone that is essentially elusive. The father and his past are ghosts, yet he looks for them just the same. The search for ghosts to help dispel the ghostliness of his father here leads him back to the same irresolution with which he began.

The discussion of the “perseguido,” another ghost Chejfec invents and records as a mode of searching for his father and coping with the haunting inheritance the man has given him, sheds light on how the exchange of one set of ghosts for another can, if not allay haunting, present its own type of compromised solution. In the “perseguido’s” imagined pasts, he imagines that of his father. Even the meetings themselves help him to look for his father, for “[e]sas reuniones, también me ofrecían la posibilidad de variar…el lento espectro de fantasías que yo trabajosamente podía elaborar a partir de la observación de las conductas y actitudes de mi padre” (33). The process of inventing a ghost helps Chejfec to ameliorate haunting as it does those of the Sunday meetings who themselves are haunted by traumas:

Los invitados y mi padre necesitaban completar un pasado que había sido fracturado brutalmente y – al mismo tiempo – dependían de esa especie de afable sociabilidad dominical que los constituía – constituye – para poder seguir haciéndolo. (98)

While it seems that the Sunday group assembles to effectively repair a broken timeline, to restore a past as something past by giving shape to it, their success is in fact mixed. Not only do they need a ghost in order to effect a process of laying their own ghosts to rest, but their mode of doing so reenacts its own type of haunting quality. They must do this repeatedly and the timeline they restore consists only of “presagios del pasado” because “es que el carácter incierto de ellas [their stories] no estaba dado sólo por la absoluta carencia de certezas – datos, situaciones – sino también por el dolor de haberlas padecido y – de alguna manera – no poder reconstruirlas” (98). Chejfec suggests an impossibility of ever truly dispelling ghosts. The past the assembled group makes continues to be out of joint; the uncertainty of its temporal status is expressed through
changing and impossible verbal tenses, best exemplified in the future quality – the “presagios” – inherent to this past. A sense of concreteness will always elude them, even experience itself stands in the way. But rather than representing a doomed process, perhaps we might think of these outcomes of the invention of ghosts as more of an adjustment of expectations. His father’s peers’ struggle with the same feelings of haunting as the author/protagonist confronts confers legitimacy on invention and discussion as modes of coping with these eerie but necessary pasts. The fact that ambivalence, mystery and pain classify the memories and identities of even those who experienced the lives and traumas Chejfec seeks to elucidate seems to validate Chejfec’s postmemorial process, laden with shortcomings as it is.

2.3.3. Materializing Words or Writing the Story of the Past

In addition to turning to the invention of ghosts, the author/protagonist also uses writing in an attempt to bring enough shape to his father’s life to dispel the haunting that accompanies it. The work itself, the assemblage of stories and language, constitutes a postmemorial endeavor that tries to imbue the father and his past with enough concrete information – real or imagined – to cause it to cease to haunt. For Saraceni, this is one of the main thrusts of the novel, for it “apela a la escritura para explorar el pasado familiar y asumir la herencia que sus padres le transmiten” (“El regreso” 23). It uses writing precisely to sort through inheritance, to organize it in a way that makes sense for him. Other critics also perceive the novel as a gesture designed to combat haunting with writing. Ariana Huberman calls the father’s memory “un vacío que el texto busca desesperadamente llenar” (93), and Katja Carrillo Zeiter explains that “escribir el pasado resulta entonces ser una lucha entre el movimiento espiral de la memoria y la línea recta de la escritura y su afán de abarcar un todo donde solo existen huecos” (200). She sees writing as an attempt to confer a reassuring linearity to this haunting inheritance.
The writing moves beyond simply giving an organizing narrative because, especially for Chejfec (the author and the protagonist), it contains a certain materiality. As a book, as something one can hold in one’s hands, it does this, and the author explains a similar idea as his impetus for the writing of the novel:

Aguardaba comenzar con la prolija impaciencia de quien espera algo que sabe ineludible, como si estas palabras no hubiesen sido otra cosa que una materialidad que, condensada en algún punto de mi conciencia, necesitaba únicamente de cierto tipo de maduración – o sea, de tiempo – para sobrevenir. (9)

The patience he learns in writing the slow biography is meant to bring forth almost object-like words. They are condensed inside him; they have weight and materiality. Words with the potential of tangibility come up again as a theme when Chejfec discusses the language most frequently employed to speak of the past: Yiddish. Mónica Szurmuk comments on the “corporalidad del lenguaje” (313) while Chejfec repeatedly calls it “idioma tan parecido a la masticación” (23). He once describes listening to his father and “su voz mientras pronunciaba palabras como si masticara,” elaborating that “[p]ensábamos que aquélla era una manera natural de hablar del pasado, una acostumbrada forma de contar” (26). Yiddish, with its tactileness, with its quality as an object that one could take in, swallow and use to nourish the body, becomes the only way to speak about the past for the descendants of Chejfec’s father. For this reason, it is not surprising that Yiddish underlays all the writing in the novel. Edna Aizenberg points out that “the traces of an imperfectly erased Yiddish continually appear beneath the Spanish text of Chejfec's novel, as in a palimpsest” (Books and Bombs 46), a trend observable even in the title, in which the order of adjective, “lenta,” and noun, “biografía,” is inverted to parallel Yiddish rather than expressing the correct Spanish syntax of noun followed by adjective. Yet, the fact that no Yiddish actually appears in the novel, that instead it possesses a palimpsestic quality, brings us back to the same issue we saw in Chejfec’s invention of ghosts as a mode of undermining
haunting. The very means of bringing himself closer to a truth substantial enough to invest in, of externalizing a hidden history and making it part of his past, already relies and always will rely on ghosts and remains plagued by haunting.55

In the absence of a concrete inheritance, Chejfec is able to invent one by imagining stories and people that have little purchase on verifiable truth. He answers the demand of a haunting heritage by both trying to combat it and recognizing he cannot. He seems to arrive at an uneasy peace with what he cannot know, ultimately deciding that “su pasado, virtual y oscuro” (161), composed of allusions, had to be the lesson in itself; the “especie de residuo educativo” is all he is going to receive (162). Despite this heritage classified more by absence than presence, passed down by a man who is categorically ghostly, the author/protagonist does in the end feel a positive sense of identity derived from his connection to his father’s past. Towards the end of the novel, after going through these processes of creation and reflection, he decides that as his father’s son, “en cierta medida yo encarné una pedagogía dirigida a la genealogía” (162) and continues this thought by invoking one more story, the specifically Jewish Had Gadya that also serves as a model for the entire novel. Ultimately, it is a willingness to endlessly play detective and an investment in words woven into stories that allows the author/protagonist to accept his ghosts and insert himself into an identifying genealogy.

55 Chejfec’s use of Yiddish brings to mind Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of a minor literature not simply because it is a minor Germanic language infiltrating a major one (“[a] minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16)) but because its modification of Spanish to its own ends sets a path for new and contestatory paradigms. It deterritorializes both reader and writer. But, the similarities likely end there. It is difficult to argue for an inherently political nature of Lenta biografía simply because it utilizes the tools of the outsider to innovate nor would I argue for the reading of Sergio Chejfec’s novel as something of collective value. (In fact, I believe reading Latin American Jewish literature as the work of native informants intending to educate the main stream is reductive). Chejfec’s journey in this work is about an individual’s struggle for a fairly traditional concept of identity having to do with fathers and sons.
2.4. Eduardo Halfon’s *El boxeador polaco* and *Signor Hoffman*: The Gift of the Ghost or Stories that Haunt

Two of Eduardo Halfon’s collections of short stories, *El boxeador polaco* (2008) and *Signor Hoffman* (2015), contain ghosts relating to Judaism or being Jewish. *El boxeador polaco* echoes many of the themes of Jewish ghosts and identity that we have treated thus far. This is especially true of its titular story, which recounts the grandfather’s time in Auschwitz, the advice of the Polish boxer he met there, and the reception of this account by the author/protagonist. The grandson seeks information about his grandfather’s life – information largely denied to the entire family, as the grandfather would not speak of his past – in order to satisfy his own need for better defined origins as he tries to sort his identity as both Guatemalan and Jew. But it is not a lack of knowledge that haunts the author/protagonist or his work. The grandfather and the Polish boxer haunt both collections by being too present. In the first, they appear where they are not expected and do not seem to belong, and in the second, they continue to have an influence on Halfon’s life and the consternations he brings to his writing. Halfon’s approaches to dealing with ghosts and inheritance share much in common with what we have previously analyzed. The unknowable disturbs him, for he is aware of its bearing on his identity. He approaches the past with a spirit of investigation and a willingness to invent. He attempts to use writing to undermine the ghostly powers of the past and understands that fiction is necessary even if its efficacy is mixed and limited. But unlike Chejfec or Goldemberg’s works, there is no sense of resolution, either uneasy – as is the case with *Lenta biografía* – or unhappy – as in *La vida a plazos*. The grandfather’s story constitutes an inheritance that never ceases to haunt, that Halfon feels compelled to tell and retell and that leads him to a seemingly endless web of ghosts and tangentially related associations rather than facilitating a linear way of composing self-identity. His tendency to tell and retell stories, to repeat and fill out earlier versions with new details not even within the same
book but rather in subsequent collections, forms what Matías Barchino calls a “hiperrelato” and bears out this idea almost materially.  

2.4.1. The Ghost and the Self

*El boxeador polaco* is governed by a ghostly thread that runs the length of the collection; both the grandfather and the Polish boxer haunt the text and the fictionalized Eduardo Halfon who voices its stories. The grandfather is referred to in all six stories, and in the four prior to his first appearance as a speaking subject, it remains difficult to determine if he and the Polish boxer are one and the same. Before the titular story, he surfaces amongst subjects and situations that seem to have little to do with him: in the scar on the face of an indigenous student, during a drunk trip to the bathroom in a Guatemalan bar, upon hearing the original last name of a colleague at a conference on Mark Twain, and in an oblique reference to Frederic Chopin. By the time Halfon’s grandfather finally arrives, he incarnates Derrida’s specter, for he “is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*” (11). This specter who “begins by coming back,” who comes and goes without discernible reason, already infuses a certain disorder into the volume, for it underlines that the temporal relationships amongst the stories are unclear. The stories themselves do not even abide by tidy narrative logic, frequently breaking into long digressions set off by subtle associations. But the grandfather, as a uniting vein throughout the work, also disrupts the accustomed structure of short story collections. *El boxeador polaco* undeniably is not a novel, but its stories are not independent of one another. The grandfather’s appearances highlight their inseparability. Halfon himself admits the uncertain status of this work, equivocating between calling it an “especie de

---

56 See Barchino’s article, especially 1-3. Magdalena Perkowska dissects this tendency as it runs through Halfon’s collection *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* (2011) (603-5), at one point referring to it as part of an “*ambigüedad discursiva y genérica como una forma de negociación entre memoria y relato*” (604).
novela o un especie de conjunto” (“UFM.edu”). Matías Barchino sees this as a trend in all of Halfon’s work. His article “Los cuentos de Eduardo Halfon: Hiperrelato y autoficción” looks at his work until 2013 and analyzes “la ausencia de linealidad, la complejidad estructural y la proliferación de tramas aparentemente distintas pero vinculadas por conexiones intertextuales e hipertextuales que configuran estructuras narrativas más grandes o hiperrelatos” (1). Given this, it should not be surprising to see the grandfather break not only the expected form of a single collection, but jump to another. The specter of the grandfather shapes and unsettles Signor Hoffman as well, prompting a trip of discovery to Poland and a haunting speaking engagement in Italy.

In some ways, Halfon’s approach to his grandfather’s past is similar to the postmemorial situation we see in Lenta biografía; he is obsessed by what he does not know and considers it essential to understanding himself. In an interview, Halfon explains that “el libro parte de un imagen,” “la imagen más fuerte que tengo de mi abuelo” (“Eduardo Halfon entrevistado”), that is his grandfather’s tattoo from Auschwitz. For him, this series of numbers hid a history, which the grandfather repeatedly refused to tell, and, somewhat like Chejfec’s father’s Yiddish songs and pregnant silences, they came to denote a secret trauma communicated to subsequent generations as a haunting unknown. In the same interview, Halfon repeats these numbers, adding “lo tengo tatuado en mi memoria” to explain how he has taken in his grandfather’s symbol of trauma (“Eduardo Halfon entrevistado”). This installation of the tattoo in his memory summarizes most plainly Halfon’s particular experience of postmemory, for it embodies an affective link between him and his grandfather’s unknown past and because it demonstrates Halfon’s tenacious desire to uncover secrets buried within his grandfather and now himself. This need to know has been with him his whole life; he elaborates on his attitude to the persistent image of the number, saying
“más que el número tengo la imagen de preguntarle a mi abuelo: ¿qué es eso?” (“Eduardo Halfon entrevistado”).

This spirit of searching is reflected in the story as well and links more specifically to a desire for origins. The grandfather’s Holocaust story is interrupted by Halfon’s recollection of asking his mother where babies come from and imagining himself just before being born (92). She tells him that when a mother wants a child, she asks the doctor for a pill – blue for a boy and pink for a girl –, and Halfon pictures “la sensación de soledad y abandono que sentí metido en aquel frasco de vidrio” (93). The author/protagonist explains that a series of things brings him back to this sensation, including the image of his grandfather’s time in Auschwitz. Although the birth story that erupts unexpectedly within “El boxeador polaco” appears convoluted and out of place, its inclusion indicates that Halfon places his own origins at the particular moment when the Polish boxer saved his grandfather’s life. He likens his pre-birth feelings of solitude and abandonment enclosed in a jar to the “imagen claustrofóbica del calabozo oscuro y húmedo y apretado y harto de susurros donde estuvo encerrado mi abuelo, sesenta años atrás, en el Bloque Once, en Auschwitz” (93). It seems that for Halfon, one of his birth places is that cell, and asking for information about it is like asking how he was born. A less theoretical genealogical link opens the story. After a few words about the grandfather’s number, the author/protagonist moves quickly to setting the scene of how he finally received this foundational story. He explains how he and his grandfather called one another by the same Yiddish pet name and brings our attention to his pinky – “único rasgo físico que le heredé: ese par de meñiques cada día más combados” (83). Traditional concepts of heritage thus open the story in the form of introducing the grandson as a double of his grandfather and by drawing attention to a beloved, shared physical trait. “El boxeador polaco” may be about the grandfather, but it is also about Eduardo Halfon.
2.4.2. Ghost Narratives

As in Chejfec’s work, Halfon reacts to this lack of identity affirming information by investing in stories, and while he attributes to them some of the same qualities, they do not always function in the same way nor do they provide the same solace. Before knowing what happened to his grandfather, before receiving the story denoted by the numbers on his arm, the author/protagonist invented a number of possible explanations. But, his inventions are not of the same stock as Chejfec’s; they are not constructed as a mode of parsing an absent heritage or to truly dispel the preoccupations arising from the mystery surrounding the past. He classifies his approach as a type of play, saying of his grandfather’s numbers that he “jugaba a inventarme la escena secreta de cómo los había conseguido” (83-4). He fashions fantastic stories that include half-moons of officers watching the tattooing spectacle, a large German woman with a date stamp and a clown on a unicycle (84). The outlandishness of these accounts underscores their contrast to Chejfec’s inventions, which, with similar imagination, still employ some level of verisimilitude in an attempt to replace what cannot be known so that it ceases to haunt. The story he actually receives from his grandfather seems more suited to driving away ghosts by giving an indistinct heritage a discernible shape. In the final story of El boxeador polaco, he probes his reasons for asking his grandfather to tell him what happened: “no sé cómo me atreví a preguntarle si podía hacerle una entrevista. Para saber un poco, para enterarme, para dejar constancia (por no decir evidencia), para quizás luego contarlo yo” (101). His asking for this interview comes from a desire for legacy, for identifying information that also possesses the capacity to be passed on. Furthermore, he believes this legacy will constitute something like proof, something with a reliable, tangible quality, precisely the type of story capable of curing the haunting produced by ghosts. In his grandfather’s words, he perceives a certain materiality, recounting how while telling the story “se lamió los labios, bastante, como si lo que acababa de
decir fuese comestible” (86). This edible language used to speak of the past brings us back to Chejfec’s descriptions of Yiddish, a language with a tactile quality. Although the metaphor of food also seems to play with boundaries – specifically that between inside and outside –, if we think of it in conjunction with concepts of heritage, it can symbolize a type of inheritance that does not haunt. It is an object given that can be taken in and used as nourishment for an individual, a food-like knowledge of family that can help provide sustenance to the identity of a self.

It is clear that Halfon believes in the organizing power of stories. He attributes to them qualities that allow the past to be brought down from the ether into something concrete and knowable. It is stories – words woven into coherence and impact – more than simple details that do this because, for him, it is literature “que hace a la realidad parecer entera, que crea la ilusión de que la realidad es una” (El boxeador 102-103). This sense of wholeness is essential to creating the types of unhaunted identities we have discussed. But, if we examine Halfon’s ideas about the relationships between self-construction and literature more closely, we find an ambivalent attitude. The above comment belongs to a longer meditation on the interaction of literature and reality:

La literatura no es más que un buen truco, como el de un mago o un brujo, que hace a la realidad parecer entera, que crea la ilusión de que la realidad es una. O tal vez la literatura necesita construir una realidad destruyendo otra – algo que, de un modo muy intuitivo, ya sabía mi abuelo –, es decir, destruyéndose a sí misma y luego construyéndose de nuevo a partir de sus propios escombros. O tal vez la literatura, como sostenía un viejo amigo de Brooklyn, no es más que el discurso atropellado y zigzagueante de un tartamudo. (102-103)

He attributes great power to literature, likening its mechanisms to those by which his grandfather, phoenix-like, rebuilt himself and his life in the New World. But he also belittles it, calling literature no more than the trick of a magician or a witch and dismissing it as possibly the
hurried, zigzagging discourse of a stutterer. This indecision regarding the status of literature is accompanied by a commentary on its ability to create – and destroy – multiple realities, particularly realities of self. Literature thus becomes an organizing instrument but also one that puts the nature of singular realities into fundamental doubt. Here, we come to one of the reasons why despite knowing what actually happened to his grandfather, despite turning it into a coherent account meant to reflect its unique existence in both grandfather and grandson’s lives, Halfon remains haunted, and, in a sense, he is haunted by the very thing that should dispel ghosts by replacing them with shape and detail, that is, his grandfather’s survivor story. Almost more than the grandfather’s ghost, pieces of his narrative crop up without warning and in places they do not belong both in *El boxeador polaco* and outside of it, as in interviews and subsequent collections like *Signor Hoffman*. The story even comes to symbolize its own type of debt, for Halfon is the only family member who receives it (101). It is transmitted with a directive. “Entiende,” his grandfather tells him “a manera de afirmación, no de pregunta” (87).

Halfon’s continued grappling with identity and ghosts reflects this irresolution. In an interview in June 2014, Halfon agrees that part of his project in all of his writing is to “descifrarme, sí, pero como hombre y no como autor,” and he goes on to say that he considers *El boxeador polaco* a type of “libro original como matriz” which has generated subsequent work (“Eduardo Halfon: ‘La incomodidad’”). *El boxeador polaco* as a starting point from which continued meditations emerge is obvious in the fact that other collections contain reworked versions of stories contained therein, but his repeated allusions to the same story of his grandfather also indicate that that inheritance is far from worked through, that it still leaves unresolved questions in his project to “descifrarse.”
In *Signor Hoffman*, two stories deal explicitly with the grandfather’s life and legacy, the title story “Signor Hoffman” and “Oh gueto mi amor.” In both of these, the grandfather and his story prompt journeys full of haunting and ghostly encounters. In the first, Halfon is invited to present about *El boxeador polaco* at a reconstructed concentration camp in Italy, a trip that produces ambivalent and eerie emotions. His name becomes the site of a slippage of identity when, after repeated references to the protagonist as “Signor Halfon,” the presenter, Panebianco, introduces him as “Signor Hoffman” and remains uncorrected by an already dazed Halfon. Later that day, he finds out that Philip Seymour Hoffman has died and wonders if there is a connection between the two, speculating that his being called Hoffman was:

más que un desliz, más que una casualidad. Como si al morir se hubiera liberado su nombre y estuviera éste suelto por el mundo, flotando por el mundo, para que cualquier persona del mundo de pronto pudiera atraparlo en el aire, y decirlo, y encarnarlo…Como si todos los hombres, entonces, en ese preciso instante, nos llamásemos Hoffman. (34)

This coincidence leaves Halfon open to the acceptance of other ghosts, ghosts that seem to have nothing to do with where or who he is. They provide the opportunity to connect people but undermine any burgeoning sense of coherent, individual identity, for he and everyone else become potential Hoffmans. The episode leaves Halfon more confused and dejected. After this news, he returns to his table, feeling “eufórico y abatido a la vez…Se me había escapado cualquier noción de espacio y de tiempo y aun de mí mismo. De pronto no entendía que hacía ahí, en Italia…No entendía nada” (34). He then proceeds to get drunk with a mix of images in his mind: dreams of himself in the Holocaust, Italian soldiers returning from war and Panebianco calling him, as Signor Hoffman, to the podium to speak (35-36). The story ends with Halfon displaying many of the symptoms of haunting and contamination by ghosts: an uncertain sense of self, an uncertain sense of the world and a loss of coordinates in both time and space. He tries
to blot these out with drink but is instead flooded by random images connecting him intimately with several different pasts, real and invented.

In “Oh gueto mi amor,” the name Hoffman appears again, once more surfacing with its unjustified and uncanny identifying powers. The story relates Halfon’s journey to Poland to see where his grandfather lived during part of the war. It opens with his struggles with local customs and a reference to his grandfather’s Auschwitz story, his tattoo and the Polish boxer who saved his life. The author/protagonist attempts to introduce himself to an employee at his hotel, but upon finding that his name is impossible for the young man to understand, “que éste le sonaba demasiado ajeno, demasiado desconocido, que mi realidad, en fin, no entraba en la suya” (123), he tells him his name is Hoffman: “Entonces, me pegué una vez en el pecho con el puño, y adopté una voz grande y firme que ya no era la mía, y Hoffman, le dije” (123). Halfon has gone to Poland to find a piece of his past and of his grandfather, but he discovers that in order to connect with it, he must in some way agree to play the role of Hoffman, that he must adopt as his own the name and voice of another spirit. This interaction gives way to a longer anecdote about Jewish names that posits an incontrollable and haphazard quality at their foundations. When he tells the woman leading him around Łódź about the interaction with the hotel employee, she is reminded of yet another Hoffman – the third in the collection –: E.T.A. Hoffmann, author of fantastic stories, including *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*.\(^{57}\) According to the woman, he came to Poland as a Prussian functionary and was in charge of giving Polish Jews last names. Halfon playfully imagines the process: certain names out of hunger, others out of satisfaction, and once, “de mal humor o pereza, decidía darle su propio nombre a un judío barbudo de un shtetl, y este judío, al recibirlo, le arrancaba la última letra y la dejaba sobre la mesa y se

\(^{57}\) In another coincidence, E.T.A. Hoffmann is also the author of “The Sandman,” the story Freud uses to explicate his *Unheimlich*, or the uncanny, an essential concept in understanding haunting and its destabilizing powers.
Marchaba escupiendo injurias en yidish” (128). Plausible or not, this story brings together Halfon’s ghostly experience with the name Hoffman and the experiences of other Jews with their last names, for they all have a last name foisted upon them with which they are forced to identify. This symbol of origins, this word which condenses a patrimony, momentarily reveals itself to be arbitrary but nevertheless permanent. The name Hoffman seems to pursue Halfon, promising the only conduit to the past, but here, depicted as a randomly assigned identity, it also introduces a sense of meaninglessness into any search for familial beginnings.

Halfon (it seems difficult to refrain from calling him “Hoffman”) finds more ghosts in the very actions he undertakes to lay other ones to rest. He embarks on these writing projects as a means of parsing his identity in part by recording his grandfather’s past in a more organized way, in a literary mode meant to confer shape, wholeness and dispassionate distance. Once written down and given a sort of materiality, the past and the men to whom it belongs – namely the grandfather and the Polish boxer – assume a certain ontology and, with this, should no longer float aimlessly through the text and the author/protagonist’s thoughts. But, the very things which are best equipped to dispel ghosts in these collections and in Halfon’s life instead haunt and engender more ghosts. Halfon cannot write his grandfather’s Auschwitz story just once and have his feelings of debt and confusion eradicated. He culls it into words time and again, yet it remains untamed, taking on a will of its own that propels Halfon into more haunted worlds. In these places, his search for sense and personal meaning spins out into the adoption of many ghosts who are one. These multiple Hoffmans, who are and are not Halfon, help him to shed some light on himself and his familial past, but they do not serve the construction of a linear, singular sense of self. The three Hoffmans are a versatile ghost, both signifying and exacerbating Halfon’s penchant for free-association, his tendency to tie together seemingly unrelated facts and
fantasies. In *Signor Hoffman*, Halfon’s identity as something that traces a solid line back to a discernible origin seems even more elusive than in *El boxeador polaco*. Yet, these ghosts still do not represent a complete failure to integrate a productive sense of self but rather reveal a willingness to yield to uncertainty and multiplicity in matters of identity and a readiness to continue working things through using reality, fiction, literature, facts and fantasy as tools in this endeavor.

2.5. Conclusions or “Endings That Are Not Over”

The men in these narratives confront questions of identity and inheritance, but the desire to understand the self and one’s relation to the past is answered by ghosts. Precisely where these actors seek clarity and detail, they instead find entities that not only conceal such information but complicate the ideas of what they expect to find. Even when they are silent, ghosts speak of debt, of the elusive or mistaken notions of truth, of timelines which defy linearity. Patrimony is bequeathed by fathers and grandfathers who carry death in life, whose presence is, at best, an indication of intolerable absence, of information that cannot be known, of experience that cannot be communicated. Nonetheless, the scarcity or haziness at the heart of this heritage still has a deep and affective hold on these sons and grandsons. Some, like *La vida’s* Efraín, are undone by this overwhelming lack, while others, like the author/protagonists Chejfec and Halfon, greet it as a challenge, as an instigation to process. Their conduits to the past demand a reevaluation of the concept of stable identity, for they reveal fundamental instability in the very foundations upon which it rests, such as those that posit that selves can be coherent, whole and in possession of certain essential, immutable qualities. Ghosts contest certainties and mock the boundaries used to

---

58 This is one of the cruxes of haunting for Avery Gordon (139).
delineate them. They demolish the divide between presence and absence; they hinder the organized passage of time in which pasts are from before and stay there; they undermine the idea that someone’s experience could be known and that knowing will lead to understanding. Chejfec and Halfon rise to the challenge, and respond to insecurity and ambiguity by accepting them and finding ways to exist with them. They acknowledge that haunting must be an intrinsic part of their relationships to their ancestry and themselves and answer its highest calling by undertaking an active position with respect to their concepts of the past and constructions of themselves.
Chapter 3:  
Rites of Return: Claiming Haunted and Haunting Spaces

3.1. Introduction

There are many different types of haunted spaces. Cemeteries, houses. Dreamscapes and cityscapes. Places where atrocity has been blotted out; places where it has been monumentalized. Places where fear and death haunt local and visitor alike through cold preservation or through its opposite – the exposure of utter erasure. Whether they house a living death or the memory of one, homes may be animated by their proximity to mortality or degradation. They may turn on their residents, mimicking their decay as in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) or expelling them as in Julio Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” (1951). Ghosts can wander the streets of dead towns choked by unredressed wrongs and unfulfilled promises as they do in the Comala of Juan Rulfo’s Pedro Páramo (1955). Anthony Vidler’s Pompeii is haunted because this place of life is now inhabited by the dead, because of the unhomely “domesticity of the ruins” (46), because in the archeological site of Pompeii, “history, that solid realm of explanation and material fact, was taking a kind of revenge on its inventors” (47). The countryside can haunt when an unassuming landscape betrays nothing of its past, when only the observer bears the traces of the site of violence, concentration camp or mass grave that once stood there.59 Dreams can be haunted because they mix real and imagined, throw together now, then and maybe tomorrow but maybe never, with little regard for the logics of space or time. What these haunted places share are relationships to death and memory, strange emergences of history, and a refusal

59 Some recent photographers undertaking work like this include, Sophie Ristelhueber (Beyrouth, 1984; Fait, 1992), Ori Gersth (Afterwars, 1998), Bart Michiels (The Course of History, 2001-) and Anne Ferran (Lost to Worlds, 2000, 2008).
to be unitary and still. They buzz with the past, put their fingers in the wounds of irresolution and subvert our notions of how time exists in a place. Myriam Moscona’s Mexican home as well as her family’s former countries in Tela de sevoya and the Berlin of Eliah Germani’s “Volver a Berlin” are such places, and the protagonists’ visiting these sites, their attempts to come to terms with their pasts through experiencing these places, elucidates the issues condensed there and the limited potential for haunting to be resolved as one might expect.

Exile turns all inhabited spaces into potential sites of haunting. In the new country, exiles bring their ghosts with them, the people who were left in the past– sometimes dead, sometimes alive – in a homeland to which they cannot return. The memory of these people is a present absence forged in trauma, the trauma of leaving and the trauma of whatever forced the exile to go. Stronger still is the ghost represented by the home country. Those who move somewhere new tend to bring their old customs with them, occasionally clinging to a preservation of traditions that prohibits any integration into their new surroundings. The place they left is always referred to, always compared to and always not here. It is a locus of melancholia rather than mourning, something brought into the self rather than seen as a lost object that can be understood and eventually let go of.60 For Svetlana Boym, the relationships to both old country and new are mediated by nostalgia, literally nostos – the return home in ancient Greek – and algia – longing.61 Pining for home creates “a double exposure or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life” (“Off-Modern Homecoming”

---

60 The previous two chapters go into more detail on the idea that failed mourning, or melancholia, is what causes haunting for it means that the person who experienced the loss is unable to grasp it as something outside of him or herself. The failure to see the lost object as separate and whole unto itself prevents a person from moving on in a productive trajectory of life and rather plunges the experiencer into melancholia. For more on this, see Abraham and Torok “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation” and Freud’s oft-cited essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” to which Abraham and Torok’s work is a response.

61 For a thorough investigation of the concept of nostalgia see Svetlana Boym’s The Future of Nostalgia (2001), the introduction of which outlines the word by beginning with its etymological roots and history.
This description of nostalgia is consistent with others meant to elucidate the exilic condition in general. Michael Seidel explains in his introduction to *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* that “[a]n exile is someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another” (ix). We might see the exile as living in two places at once or, similarly, as inhabiting neither.

Exile – distant, imagined, repeated or internal – is a defining characteristic for Jews, and nostalgic longing for a lost homeland is part and parcel of Jewish identity, especially in Diaspora. But for the majority of the children and grandchildren of Jewish immigrants to the Americas, the feeling that home is elsewhere in space and before now in time usually frames the place of true belonging as somewhere in Europe, the Middle East or the Levant. While Israel is more of a mythic place of lost origins, the “old country” located in these regions seems to still exist as a far off place of authentic identity and possible plenitude. Wherever its locus, belonging, especially mediated by space – both physical and that constituted through practices – remains essential for Jews. Spatially considered, belonging is the space or place of home and is important not only for its implications of safety, but because it is from here that identity emanates. It is a place where one is most oneself, a space of comfort, inhabited amongst one’s people. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, *where* you are from is a primary question in knowing *who* you are. In their article “Diaspora and Jewish Identity,” Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin explain the two traditional modes of constructing group identity: “It has been figured on the one hand as the product of a common genealogical origin and, on the other, as produced by a common geographical origin” (693). They differentiate between what they call a diasporic

---

62 Their analysis is also an ethical proposal involving Zionism. They advocate for a Jewish identity founded in genealogical origins over geographic ones, calling the first a diasporic identity because it “affords the possibility of a flexible and nonhermetic critical Jewish identity,” while the second “merely reproduces the exclusivist syndromes of European nationalism” (701).
identity, maintained through a lineage of culture covetously preserved, and autochthonous identity, which binds a community by tying it to the land. Diasporic Jewish identity is largely passed down in the genealogical way the Boyarins describe. This thinking is at play in what we saw in the previous chapter on inheritance. Customs, histories and modes of conceiving the world are bequeathed to children with the duty to bequeath it to theirs. Foods, rituals and language sustain the notion of generations stretching back into an essential, identifying past and also carve portable Jewish spaces into any place of exile. But, taken strictly, the idea that genealogy and geography remain separate in these identity supporting mechanisms is naïve.\(^{63}\) Consider the different foods and rituals of Jews from Eastern Europe versus those from North Africa or the myriad hybrid Jewish languages. Grandmothers making matzo ball soup and speaking Yiddish and those making chreime\(^{64}\) and speaking Ladino are passing down site specific Jewish customs. Cultural mixing aside, even if we view Jewish communities as essentially isolated from the countries in which they find themselves, those communities still exist in a particular place and an imagination of them sees them there. Therefore, children and grandchildren of exile do not just reach back through their genealogical line for their sense of Jewish identity but can reach back through generations to a particular place where they feel that identity to inhere.

3.1.1. Inheriting Exile

This is in part how parents and grandparents pass on their sense of exile to their progeny. Through the preservation of native customs, children, and often grandchildren, are raised with the traditions and memories of their elders. Food, rituals and language all evoke particular places

---

\(^{63}\) I would add that I do not see this as the goal of the Boyarins’ emphasis on this differentiation, nor would I call them naïve.

\(^{64}\) This is a spicy fish stew from Tunisia often served on Shabbat.
and are a manner of recapturing the past (saving it from the status of being over) and bringing it to a new space where it might continue to live. They act as a delivery system for culture and memory and, in the process, shape a home that links that past to this present (and hopefully the future). Without ever having been to their parents’ place of birth, children can feel that they too are of that place. We see this especially in the dishes Rosa Nissán’s protagonist learns to prepare in *Novia que te vea* (1992) and in the Shabbat rituals the granddaughter takes on in Sabina Berman’s *La bobe* (1990). This is particularly striking in the case of language. The mother tongue is a profound communal glue, and even though it can be carried anywhere, can constitute a portable homeland, can connect vast networks of people independent of their locations, it is difficult to separate it entirely from its association with particular places. As with these other practices, speaking a foreign language in exile reminds children that they are from somewhere else.

The association of language and belonging has a long (and admittedly problematic) history. Coincidentally (for German will be a topic in our subsequent analysis), discussions of the association of national identity and language tend to cite this theme as beginning in the 18th century German context, frequently turning to Johann Gottfried Herder as a father of the modern

---

65 One of the problematic parts arises in the extreme linking of language and peoplehood. Anthropologists of the first half of the 20th century still operated under the notion that language was part of national identity and that such an identity had an essential character. Combining this concept of identitary essences with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which can be used to justify the idea that a people cannot express ideas for which they do not already have language, the belief in the supremacy of one race or people over another gains a scientific backing in sociocultural anthropology and linguistics. Asya Pereltvaig and Martin W. Lewis comment on the persistence of these beliefs in the scientific realm into the mid-twentieth century: “Despite his staunch opposition to scientific racism, [Franz] Boas, like [V. Gordon] Childe, remained wedded to the idea that language embodies the worldview of the group that speaks it, revealing its *volksgeist*, or ethnic essence. This idea would be further elaborated by his student Edward Sapir and Sapir’s student Benjamin Whorf into eponymous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativism, which claims that language determines thought” (28).
notion linking everyday language with national or group identity. Such thinking was used as grounds for advocating for a German state, tying the legitimacy of homeland to unifying speakers of a common language. For Jews, this issue is more complex. Jewish language can be linked to Jewish space (as an abstract notion of where living happens) without necessarily being confined to a particular place (as a territory defined by and charged with particular symbolism). Even given these caveats, separating the space of identity from the place of identity gets tricky. Joshua Fishman, a linguist and supporter of bilingual education and the preservation of Yiddish, draws on Herder’s legacy when he asserts, that the “soul (the essence of a nationality) is not only reflected and protected by the mother tongue, but, in a sense, the mother tongue is itself an aspect of the soul, a part of the soul, if not the soul made manifest” (cited in Myhill Language in Jewish Society 45). This estimation, put forward here by someone immersed in the fight for a language spoken in exile, believes in essences and advocates for Yiddish by calling on nationalist rationales (ideologies which necessarily unite people and place), indicating once more that even diasporic languages cannot escape an association with a place of origin. Diasporic

---

66 Myhill discusses this briefly, mentioning “the development of what I am calling the ideology of everyday/native language-and-identity, whose first great exponent was Herder (1744-1803)” and elaborating on other thinkers who advocated for similar positions (Language in Jewish Society 45). Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) used a similar notion to argue for the racial superiority of the German people based on their language (see Pereltvaig and Lewis 27).

67 The use of a common language to justify the creation of a nation state has a certain amount of history in Germany, as we already saw with Humboldt and Herder, but it appears as a rallying point – rather than simply a justification of supremacy – in the German Idealist’s “Address to the German Nation in 1806.” See John E. Joseph for a brief discussion (110). In the case of Jews, the linking of language and nation is trickier, due in part to the number of “Jewish languages” and the acquisition of languages in diaspora. It is not uncommon for Jews (and immigrants) to feel multiple group allegiances manifest especially through the metaphor of language. Arguments for national unity and identity basing themselves on shared language tend to work in the singular, but the history of this is knotty for Jews, Jewish languages and the languages of the countries they called home. It is important to keep in mind that historically for Jews these arguments could ring true while still being complicated by identification with multiple languages. Several theses could be written on this matter but John Myhill’s Language, Religion and National Identity in Europe and the Middle East: A Historical Study gives a fairly thorough look at this matter with specific attention to histories of national belonging and my article “Las posibles polémicas del Léxico Judío Latinoamericano” discusses it as well (Gartenberg 110-114).
languages too, when spoken outside of their original points of gestation, can form part of nostalgic act.

Passing down a native tongue is a mode of sharing one’s exile with one’s progeny not simply because of this nostalgia though. When children speak a language that is from a different time and place, exile is acute because there is a sense of foreignness and loss injected in daily life. But, customs that harken to another time and place practiced in a new land also create a layering of spaces or places, causing a “double exposure” as Boym calls it (“Off-Modern Homecoming” 151). This idea becomes clearer when we consider language as a sort of dwelling space, which can be parsed from Michel de Certeau’s explanation of space versus place. In his analysis, a place indicates stability (117); he calls it “a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the being-there of something dead” (118). Places are made up of things that do not move; they are reliable and inert. Space, on the other hand, has to do with movement, vectors and the passage of time (117). He relates it specifically to language: “space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, caught in the ambiguity of actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts” (117). By this distinction, places have the quality of monuments and tombs (118) – they are locations of fixed time and static memory –, while spaces are inhabited, full of life. Spaces are a spoken language. When children of exiles speak their parents’ native tongue, they animate it, they live in it, turning the place of their parents’ past into the space of their own lives. When that native tongue is also theirs, then children of exiles share a provenance as well. Language thus provides a salient example of how people in this position feel they inhabit more than one space and likewise feel more than one space to be home in spite of the traditional notion that such a word refers to a singular place of
origins. Yet this language does not cease to belong to the past, nor does it cease to garner definition from its “place-like” qualities. Voicing this language in a new land calls up a place left behind, enacts a layering of places and spaces, and “projects” – as Seidel might put it – a different reality onto the current environment.

3.1.2. Haunting Exile

Exile is passed down through the propagation of a far off referent of home, through the doubling of current spaces and through the even more intimate mechanism of postmemory, and it is in instances of postmemory where we begin to see that exile can actually haunt those who inherit it. Through language and culture, children and grandchildren receive a faraway homeland with its ever- looming absence, but parents also bequeath their memories of that place, their longings and their ghosts. While we will not go into great depth on it here, Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” demonstrates well how children of trauma come to take on the memories of their parents in such a way that the generational difference can almost collapse. Experiences of those who came before are communicated “so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (The Generation 5), meaning subsequent generations

68 Frequently, this situation manifests as a feeling of hybrid identity, leading to a lifetime of organizing a hyphenated designation. There are numerous Latin American Jewish novels that deal with this subject and a large portion of existing criticism on Latin American Jewish literature also focuses on this topic. Such a list could be endless, but some novels are Andres Neuman’s Una vez Argentina (2003), Ricardo Feierstein’s Mestizo (1988), Alicia Freilich de Segal’s Cláper (1987), Manuela Fingueret’s Ajo para el diablo (2011), Isaac Goldberg’s Tiempo al tiempo (1984), Rosa Nissán’s Novia que te vea (1992) as well as its follow up Hisho que te nazca (1999), Gerardo Kleinburg’s No honrarás a tu padre (2004), and Moacyr Sciar’s A extranha nação de Rafael Mendes (1983) as well as his O Centauro no Jardim (1980). Some critical texts include various articles in edited collections like Verena Dolle’s Múltiples identidades: Literatura judeo-latinoamericano de los siglos XX y XXI (2012), Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein’s Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans (2008), Amalia Ran and Jean Axelrad Cahan’s Returning to Babel: Jewish Latin American Experiences, Representations and Identity (2012), and Haim Avni, Judit Bokser Liwerant, Sergio DellaPergola, Margalit Bejarano, and Leonardo Senkman’s Pertenencia y alteridad : judíos en/de América Latina: Cuarenta años de cambios. (2011), as well as the introduction to Passion, Memory, Identity: Twentieth Century Latin American Jewish Women Writers (1999) written by Marjorie Agosin.

69 For a more thorough treatment see the previous two chapters, the second chapter of Gabriele Schwab’s Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma (2010), Eva Hoffman’s After Such Knowledge (2004) or Marianne Hirsch’s two books on the topic, Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory (1997) and The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust (2012).
inherit traumas and ghosts and carry them as their own. When speaking about countries and cultures of origin, this type of transmission is tangled up with that which gives children of immigrants a second, unseen homeland but goes beyond it in that a keenly felt melancholy and all the tragedies of loss accompany it and feel highly personal. Despite profoundly sharing their parents’ exilic situation – a double sense of space, a layering of places, a persistence of traumatic memory – that turns both new and old countries into haunted or haunting sites, children of exiles experience an additional displacement which redoubles the factors contributing to haunting.

This far off referent does not always produce spectral situations. Frequently, especially in Latin American Jewish literature, this manifests as an endless parsing of a hybrid identity.\(^70\) In these cases, the topic is present and weighs on the subject, but it is not as though a land or home possesses uncanny qualities, exceeds or defies its own spatial boundaries, or can be defined by its inhabitance by ghosts. Haunting happens when the space or place of the old country is too present – as when it layers relentlessly on top of the current surroundings –, is too present in its absence – as when very little is known about it despite a desire for that knowledge or when it is constantly referred to as not here –, or when the link to it seems threatened or lost. All three of these combine in the haunted cases we will analyze. The first two instances relate particularly to postmemory, and the last, in which the need to know somehow becomes more desperate, frequently precipitates haunting and precedes action. In both the narratives we will examine, parental deaths intensify dormant haunting in the new homeland and send their children in search of the old one.

\(^70\) See footnote 9 for a preliminary list of novels and critical work on hybrid identity in Latin American Jewish literature. Again, such a list could constitute another bibliographic project in itself.
But, it is not only the new home that is haunted as a consequence of exile; the act of return confronts children with a haunted place of origin as well. This is counter-intuitive, for return is supposed to be a reparative and – when undertaken by children or grandchildren – postmemorial act. It is meant to address “the need not just to feel and to know, but also to re-member, to rebuild, to re-incarnate, to replace and to repair” (Hirsch, “Past Lives,” 420). This can be done on behalf of family members who cannot make the journey or in order to lay their ghosts to rest. It fulfills a sense of duty and confers closure, essential components of ending haunting. In addition, by effecting a return as the parents’ proxy, the child symbolically ends exile, ameliorating the pain and displacement felt in nostalgia. For Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer, return was a literal cure to the condition of Heimweh, or the sickness of aching for home for which he first coined the term nostalgia in 1688. But these efforts to “re-member,” “rebuild” and “re-incarnate” are also meant to make the place real for subsequent generations. Seeing the place of origin, standing in it, would seem to confer solidity to a place which haunts with its immaterial presence and promise of identity affirmation. “Going home” attempts to turn a place that inspires melancholia into one of mourning and grounding knowledge by objectifying the inaccessible, by bringing substance to the ghostly place of the child’s and the parents’ past.

In this way, the exilic homeland is visited as a place of memory, and when children undertake that journey, it is in part to restore memory and cause it to participate in a productive and affirming sense of self and belonging. Pierre Nora provides us with a legitimately oft-referenced understanding of “places of memory” as lieux de mémoire:

they are lieux in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional... [They are] created by a play of memory and history...mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death.

71 See Spitzer 373-374 for a brief history of the term and Boym’s Future of Nostalgia 3-18.
with time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual...the immutable and the mobile...the most fundamental purpose of the lieu de mémoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial... (“Between Memory” 18-19)

These lieux are constituted by a concrete as well as an imaginative existence. They consolidate around actual places – which in other renderings of this concept can also include objects such as photographs and actions such as rituals –, and their purpose is to fight forgetting, to give a sense of reassuring ontology to the past that fosters productive and affirming memory.

Haunting arises in part because the “places of memory” to which children return present a disconnect between what is anticipated and what is actually encountered. In some ways, the home they find most accurately encompasses Sigmund Freud’s original meaning of uncanny, or Unheimlich. This word is made first by establishing its opposite.72 Heimlich, literally homelike, can be variously translated as “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar” or “[i]ntimate, friendly, comfortable…arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house” (Freud 932-3). Unheimlich arises where these feelings have been unexpectedly eroded, when one finds the strange and unfamiliar precisely where she anticipated feeling most at home. Carrying the memories of their parents and expecting to find a place of plenitude and belonging, these returned children instead step into environments that can only deliver on such a promise in a roundabout way, if at all. For Boym, who sees exilic homelands as largely a nostalgic construction, such an experience of the uncanny is the only possible outcome,

---

72 This definining of Unheimlich by its opposite is particularly significant to Anthony Vidler in his analysis of “uncanny homes.” He places great importance on seeing the two as so intimately connected as to occasionally bleed into one another (25-7).
for the homes that exiles carry no longer exist if they ever existed at all.\textsuperscript{73} Therefore, any version of them given to children will obviously not match what is found upon return. Haunting occurs here not just because of this strange instantiation of home but also because of the ambivalent existential status of the sites to which they return. In these cities and at these former homes, children expect to find a place and instead find a space that contains places. Time has moved forward, and while the city may include traces of the place it was before, or sites that represent a fixed point in time, these places have continued to evolve. Children of exile learn about their family’s place of origin through stories and pictures (portable \textit{lieux de memoire}, if you will). These incarnations of the past present places frozen in time. If we keep in mind the hand nostalgia plays in the conservation of these places, we remember that what is preserved is at best a snapshot if not a dream. Children, sometimes with a literal photograph in hand, often return “home” expecting to find what their parents described, a place where time is stopped, even when they rationally know that their search looks for a memory rather than a real place. Between the “then” of their parents and the “now” of actually being there, these places were spaces; time continued in them, and people continued to live there.

In the ensuing analysis, we will encounter examples of haunted and haunting homes, both in the new country in the Americas and in the old country in Europe, along with ambivalent relationships to places and spaces of belonging. Longing and belonging intermix, each carrying an elusive promise of settled identity, and protagonists will trace the former in an attempt to

\textsuperscript{73} Boym clarifies from the outset of her monograph that nostalgia harkens to a place that does not exist. She warns “[t]he danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland” (xvi). She talks specifically about the experiences of uncanny for exiles experiencing “restorative” or “reflective” nostalgia, noting that the first refuse to acknowledge the uncanny, while the latter project it everywhere (251). (For more on restorative and reflective nostalgia, see her chapters 4 and 5 in the same volume). She concludes this chapter by referring to the impossibility of ever returning home: “There is no place like home, but in some cases home itself has been displaced and deliberately reimagined” (258).
settle the complexities they feel in the latter. In Myriam Moscona’s *Tela de sevoya* (2012), a sense of duty, a desire for identifying connection and a fear of definitive loss cause the past to take up a disturbing residence in the protagonist’s Mexican home. As though pushed out by a home that can no longer serve as a place of plenitude and rest, Myriam Moscona returns to her parents’ and grandparents’ native countries in the Balkans. Her return helps her to bring some closure to the past, both by laying ghosts to rest and by giving a certain shape to places – literal and figurative – of belonging. Though her visit to these former places of belonging is not what she expects – they have been spaces in the interim, the trace of their past has been completely erased in some cases –, seeing them allows her to mentally situate them as back there in time, closer to something dead and over. Enmeshed in her familial or genealogical story is also the story of her relationship to Ladino. Her efforts to rescue the language from becoming a ghost place reanimate it, saving it from being a space solely inhabited by ghosts and causing it to assist in releasing her Mexican home from haunting.

The titular story of Eliah Germani’s *Volver a Berlín* (2010) also opens with a protagonist whose links to the past and to her German home have been lost, and while one could make the argument that Frau Grunwald’s native Chile is haunted by her parents’ German exile, the story focuses more on the haunted space of Berlin. In this case, the journey undertaken to heal a rupture and restore a sense of solidity to the places of the past actually forces the protagonist to encounter ghosts and haunted spaces. While rendering an ontology to past places would seem to

---

74 Boym refers to the potential pitfalls of such a process from the beginning: “the moment we try to repair longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding” (xv). Here, she is calling on the wider, political and social implications of her study. My attention is more individual, but her observations, especially as they allude to the defying of expectations as inevitable when it comes to longing and belonging, remain relevant.

75 It is difficult, as with much autofiction, to determine where to divide the author from the protagonist and narrator in this text. For analysis more specifically directed at the link between autofiction and stories of ghosts see chapter 2.
be the only route to ending their disruptive intrusion on one’s present (this is, ultimately, what occurs in the case of Moscona’s protagonist), Grunwald’s visit to Berlin does this by opening her up to haunting. The ghostly facilitates Grunwald’s final feeling of peace and sense of German belonging and helps her to return to Chile with the sensation that Germany is also hers but not in an intrusive or destabilizing way.

3.2. *Tela de sevoya*: A Journey to Locate Places of the Dead and Spaces of the Living

There is no question for either reader or protagonist that the main character of Myriam Moscona’s *Tela de sevoya* is haunted. This autofictional novel tells the story of a Mexican-Jewish woman’s journey back to her family’s native Bulgaria, a trip made possible by a Guggenheim grant the author received for a poetry project recording the last speakers of Ladino. The novel chronicles this experience in dizzying chapter types; its episodes, dreams, reflections, historical asides and journey are related in disordered fragments, projecting the disorientation of the protagonist into the reader’s experience. Later details illuminate an earlier life, and though they only occasionally contribute to a neat chronology, they play a role in our constant reevaluation of this woman and her story while priming us to feel just a little of what she feels. While recording Ladino is the official reason for her trip and this book, their more immediate impetus is the death of her parents and grandmothers. These familial deaths are not a recent wound (they are in “Volver a Berlín”), but their effects are still unresolved. The father died when Moscona/the protagonist was a child and the mother and grandmothers decades after him, but here these deaths seem fresh. This is in part because the family was forced into exile by the horrors of the Holocaust, and their traumatic exit makes Myriam Moscona a child of

---

76 Though the author’s name is never used in full within the novel, it is very clearly her life depicted fictionally. Because the work is autofictional and to avoid confusion, henceforth I will be referring to the protagonist as Myriam and the author as Moscona. “Myriam Moscona” therefore refers to both author and protagonist.
postmemory. She connects to her parents’ memory and experience in a nearly visceral way, and their haunting of her metaphorizes this condition, manifesting as an occupation of all her mostly homely spaces.

These haunted Mexican spaces are not, initially, unique to situations of exile, affected by a superimposition of a faraway land and time. Restful, comfortable spaces, like that of sleep and the home, are overwhelmed by family deaths and, while these are bound up with larger, exilic longings, at first the haunting that pervades the work and the space of Myriam’s life springs from personal loss. Myriam’s haunted dreams and house push her to effect a type of healing homecoming that could lay her family’s ghosts to rest, something that can only be done through physical presence, one that makes her parents’ place of exile real and symbolically returns them, and by extension her, to it. Whether she truly achieves this is arguable, but by seeing her family’s place of origin, she is finally able to move forward in her life. All of this is further complicated by the fact that the exile Myriam has inherited is double; a Sephardic legacy transmitted to her through her family’s language of Ladino connects her to a second, more distant expulsion while constituting a space of belonging. Therefore, in addition to giving shape and a sense of peace to her parents’ ghosts, to know and connect to the spaces where they lived, she wants to do the same for Ladino. To rescue its voices, hear them in situ and write them down preserves the Sephardic language and culture but also seeks to animate them, giving them a presence that will keep Ladino from being a place that haunts and turn it into a space of life, a living site of identity and belonging.

3.2.1. Haunted at Home

The first and most consistently haunted space for the protagonist is that of dreams, for they are where Myriam’s loved ones most often emerge. Most of these dreams are contained in
chapters titled “Molino de viento” and pepper the book from beginning to end. The dream space is a privileged one for author Moscona because here “las fronteras se adelga[zan],” permitting both visits from the dead and a softening of the borders which divide the living (“Tela de sevoya”). The world contained within sleep, then, is not just one of repose and regeneration, but of transcendent knowledge and encounters with love. Its permeable edges let in the unexpected, but this weakening of boundaries which permits close contact with those who have passed contains a frightening consequence, for proximity puts Myriam’s own status as alive or dead into question. In one dream, she asks the elusive shade of her mother “si estamos muertos” (25), and in another, in which a child version of her loses track of her father at the circus, the master of ceremonies announces in Ladino, “todos estamos moertos” (59). The ghost presences of her family contaminate her with their deaths, a sign of severe haunting in examples of postmemory and in the psychoanalytic paradigm that sets mourning against melancholia. The dream of her father ends with Myriam’s brief possession by a voice of terror that she names a “dibuk, esos espíritus que son el alma de alguien muerto encajada en el cuerpo de un vivo, obligando a la persona a comportarse como ‘otro’ y hablando a través suyo con distintas voces” (59). Once she figures out in this dream scene that she is not dead, she is invaded by a Jewish ghost, a Jewish ghost that later on she will confuse with her father (259) and who here tells her that the “cosas de las que más huyes son las más difíciles de evitar” (60). The dream space is an illuminating one. In it, she sees family and learns things about this life and the next. But, it is also a harrowing

77 In the former, melancholia causes the person affected by loss to incorporate, or take in, the loss as part of the self. Unable to distinguish between himself and what is gone, this person is dragged down by it. This being dragged down by the loss distances him from life and plunges him into a deep, inescapable depression (Freud 125, Abraham and Torok 245). In her discussion of postmemory, Hirsch distinguishes rememory (a distinction I find to be overwrought, preferring to see rememory as simply an extreme instance of postmemory), in which there is a blurring of the boundary between self and other resulting from over identification rather than inherited memory (The Generation 85). For more on these, see Chapter 1.
space, one in which she can feel lost and pursued. The space of sleep is, for Myriam, not able to be a space of rest.

Myriam’s ghosts exceed the space of her dreams and quickly take up residence in her house, turning it into the second haunted space of Myriam’s Mexican life. This first house in which she lives without her family – as the previous generations have all passed – becomes an unhomely home, shifting in dimensions and inhabited by specters. She is convinced that “[p]or las noches la casa crece por dentro, la descubro siempre con asombro y temor” (148). Her mother visits her there, and though she misses her, “[n]o logro entender qué hace mi madre metida en mi casa. Verla a los ojos, oír su voz, me produce escalofríos. Quiero decirle cuánto la extraño, lo feliz que soy de volverla a ver, lo difícil que ha sido llevar el duelo” (149). This welcome presence is still eerie, producing confusion and a gut reaction of fear. It has specifically to do with the protagonist’s mourning process. She misses her mother. She does not know how to mourn her, and this ghost provides little assistance in that process. The inaccessible mother wandering her halls turns into an actual modification of the house itself in the subsequent depiction of Myriam’s haunted home. She dreams of struggling with her sight and stumbling through her house to find her glasses. Her search leads her to the bathroom, where she steps through a hole in her wall and wonders why she did not know about this “especie de casa adentro de mi casa” (154). It seems that this haunted space was always there, and she is only now discovering it, placing a fundamental strangeness in her dwelling space, for it has perhaps contained this unknown space at its core all along.78

78 For Gaston Bachelard, the house is a space of intimacy and security. It is a refuge where dreaming and memory internix (6). To see it thus threatened by the addition of unknown houses within is destabilizing both to present and past selves but doubly interesting in light of Bachelard’s conviction that the house is the place where the psyche is made and the metaphor through which it may be read (15, 72).
This unknown house within her home has a certain life of its own and something to tell her. It pulls her in and shows her its contents; its “pasillo me conduce a una enorme sala con fotografías. Husmeo. Descubro que esas imágenes son de mi familia” (154). This uncanny space within is full of family. In fact, they are dead and uncanny family. When she looks at their pictures, she feels assaulted by a poem by Anna Ajmátova: “Cuando muere una persona/tambiién cambian sus retratos/sus ojos miran de otro modo y sus labios/sonríen de otra forma” (155).

Later on, as she leaves, she will notice that these photographs have changed, as though those they depict have changed positions slightly. This house full of family members who move because they are dead, who defy the parameters of their object-ness, give way to a full-on ghost.

In another room, the protagonist finds her grandmother Victoria sitting calmly in a rocking chair. Victoria tells her where to find her glasses – rankling her briefly for always losing them –, and Myriam leaves, kissing her grandmother on the head amidst a feeling of confusion and slight disgust. While the protagonist does not comprehend why this space is here nor what exactly it has told her, she ventures some level of understanding, noting “comienzo a entender todo lo que vi atrás del muro: una extensión de mi casa del otro lado de la pared, un espacio habitado por una muerta, siempre cerca de mí” (157). Her home is a space inhabited by a dead person, a dead person who is always with her. But, in reality, her home is actually the dwelling of a number of dead: her father, her grandmother, her grandfather Ezra whom she never met, and her mother.

Myriam acknowledges that she has courted this haunting; although she eschews the thought that she may have done so on purpose. As she stares at a line of cypresses and ponders why her house undergoes strange mutations at night, someone tells her that the trees outside her window belong to the Panteón Jardín. Just as Myriam was contaminated by the ghosts of her parents in the dreams we spoke of above, here, her living space is affected by the contiguity of the
cemetery, the place of the dead.79 Furthermore, it is the place of her dead, turning the revelation into an almost obvious explanation for the protagonist:

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

Just before the official year of mourning closes,80 Myriam discovers that this house, that she chose “para vivir sola por primera vez en mi vida” (148), may have been appealing to her for its proximity to her mother. It keeps her near, and it is not surprising that from this realization forward, the haunting becomes even more pronounced. Myriam believes her choice was instinctual, perhaps made through a power beyond her comprehension, perhaps made by her mother’s ghost. For the reader, it becomes clear that it is the mother’s death and the inability to move past it – something that here manifests at the level of her residence – that has turned the protagonist’s home into a haunted house. This second haunted space is then both the second and the third, for the place of the cemetery is given life by its interaction with the space of Myriam’s dwelling.

79 Foucault would immediately spot something awry in living in proximity to a cemetery in the modern age. In “Of Other Spaces,” he touches briefly on the history of the cemetery especially as it relates to his concept of heterotopias, of which the cemetery is a prime example. Most relevant for Myriam’s choice here is Foucault’s observation that after the 19th century, cemeteries were moved away from the rest of the living population as the space was associated both practically and theoretically with illness, and proximity bore the possibility of contamination. That a woman living near a cemetery was having trouble maintaining a traditional relationship with time would also come as no shock to the philosopher, for “the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of break with their traditional time. This situation shows us that the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance” (25).

80 The mourning period for a parent is 12 months. No other family, neither a spouse nor a child, receives a mourning period of this length.
3.2.2. Parental and Postmemorial Haunting

Pushed out, in a sense, by a haunted Mexican home – a space/place populated by the protagonist’s dead – Myriam undertakes a trip that might restore the homeliness of her dwelling space by allowing her to bring a sense of rest to her exiled parents and positioning her to confront her own condition as a daughter of exile and postmemory. Her reasons for effecting this journey of return are complex, but she makes an attempt at a succinct explanation at the beginning of the novel. In the first “Del diario de viaje” chapter, one of many such chapters of the same name that detail Myriam Moscona’s trip to the Balkans, she clarifies:

> Yo, en cambio, en mi herencia desnuda, más allá de la lengua, en los cuerpos que rodean mi *chikez* [childhood], 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. (18)

She speaks here of what she has inherited, of the world in which she grew up, of the language she grew up in and the people that made it the space of her childhood. The Ladino heritage of her “*chikez*” factors into her choice to go back to the Balkans (an aspect into which we will delve in greater detail ahead), but the principal impetus has to do with her parents. The ties to them have been definitively cut, and this leaves her feeling that the threads that make her are also hanging loose, unresolved. This sensation might describe any child who loses her parents, but here it reminds us more specifically of the experiences of haunting in the children of the generation of postmemory discussed in the previous chapter. Having to negotiate an inheritance of ghosts – that is parents who are not there to tell her about their past and a past that, even when her parents were alive, existed only as sketches on the other side of a great trauma –, Myriam does the best she can to render a reassuring solidity to the things she cannot but still needs to know. She seeks
to invent biographies for her mother and father and goes to the only place where it seems possible to do this.

The need for solidity, for some sense of knowledge that she can assign to her parents’ broken pasts and her broken relationship to them, is one of the main reasons for her journey to Bulgaria, and consequently, the writing of this novel. She has mixed feelings about her trip, admitting “[m]e inquieta conocer la casa de mi madre en Sofía y después Plovdiv, la ciudad de mi padre, del que perdí toda posibilidad de rastreo” (40), but she will look for them all the same: “Eso voy a buscar, sabiendo que la imagen se fijará” (40). Myriam needs an idea of these places that is stable, for these places define her family. They are an origin, and seeing them will cause them to be “fixed,” as she says. Describing them, and the journey to see them, is meant to have a similar effect. The novel is called Tela de sevoya, and one of the epigraphs tells us the purpose of an onion skin: “Una telita de cebolla sobre la herida ayudará a cicatrizarla y a calmar el dolor. Remedio casero.” The onion skin is a home remedy for closing wounds, for lessening pain. It is a physical metaphor for the psychological process of mourning. This novel, with its thorough “Del diario del viaje” chapters, is meant to do this. It comprises a fact finding mission and an act of creation. In the revelatory space of a “Molino de viento,” Myriam discovers many papers under a paperweight, and in this moment, realizes “[a]lgo me dice que el escrito me ayudará a construir mejor el plano de un rompecabezas incompleto, incluso fugaz, pero imprescindible para comprender los distintos estadios del tiempo” (31). Her reconstruction of the past through the act of writing will bring some clarity to her confused and haunted sense of time. The object as an object, in turn, speaks to a desire to make the places of the previous generation into something knowable, or at the very least comprehensible. Derrida explains that the trouble with ghosts is that, “[o]ne does not know...because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of
an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge” (4). If something does not or cannot belong to knowledge, then it cannot be understood. What this journey and its chronicling aim to do is assist in turning melancholia into mourning by giving this inaccessible past something akin to a material existence by creating a thing. Investing the present absence (of the parents, of their past, of their place of origin) with a sense of real existence is, for Derrida, part of the work of mourning, for it “consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present” (9).

Going to her mother’s house is one such “making things present,” an act meant to be a “tela de sevoya.” When she is there, she even thinks about the Sephardic refrain printed at the beginning of the novel amongst the other epigraphs: “El meoyo del ombre es tela de sevoya. (La fragilidad humana es como la tela de cebolla.” Its second appearance while at the mother’s house in Sofía (173) underlines that this moment is crucial to deciphering the purpose of the novel, that this scene brings together the heart of man, his “fragilidad humana,” with the cure to open wounds. Visiting her mother’s former home effects this remedy to a certain extent, freeing her of some of the more damaging aspects of haunting, but the trip reveals a strange mixing of space and place, of the sublime and the ridiculous. She goes to Iskar 46, takes pictures, cries and has a cathartic experience. There is no trace of the place she is looking for, it was a space in between and the house is no longer there, but it works well enough to give Myriam some of what she needed; the chance to document, the chance to connect, the chance to return. As if fate were making fun of her attempts at control, at knowledge, at fixity, it turns out that the protagonist has gone to the wrong address. Her mother’s house was at Iskar 33, and after her brother reminds her of this fact, she goes to this second address and repeats the whole experience, tears, photographs and all. The mistake and the fact that the catharsis can take place at either site add a certain arbitrariness to the act, robbing the place of its specificity and placing its sacredness and its
power almost entirely in the mind of the protagonist. Adding to the ridiculous quality of the moment, to the “tragicómica” (173), as the protagonist names it, sense of the scene, Myriam’s mother’s home has been demolished and turned into a pizzeria, a detail which prevents her from ever having full knowledge of the place nor really picturing her mother there. In a sense, Myriam tries to force the perception of a trace of the past in this space; the space resists her desire to invest it with the qualities of a personal place. There is only the flat, banal presence of a pizzeria. But it still does the trick to some degree; after seeing and standing in this space, in its bland, quotidian reality, Myriam is able to begin to move on, is able to begin to separate her parents’ place and time from her own. Perhaps it is the utter indifference of this space that makes her realize that the place she seeks truly is gone.

We can see the fruits of this mixed experience in the valuable thing she gains from it, what she calls “la revelación de un molino de viento” (178). In the dream that follows, she is in her house (the haunted one from Mexico) and comes upon her mother who tells her “[e]stamos aquí, reunidos, con las manos mordidas” (179). When the narrator asks where her father is, the mother answers “vengo a decirte que no dejés que estás dentelladas también entren en ti” (179). She comes upon the wounded ghost of her mother who in response to her search for her father’s ghost, warns her against allowing herself to be wounded as they were. After assuring her mother that she has not been bitten nor had her hands compromised by damage – a significant change from dreams in which she wonders if she is dead like her parents –, Myriam continues to try to help her mother, to which she replies “[e]scúchame, tú no hagas nada, hija. Todo se está haciendo en nuestro lugar y en nuestra hora” (180). The protagonist dreams that when she goes looking for ghosts, her mother tells her not to take on the lacerations of her family’s trauma – here figured as wounds on a part of the body that prevent them from doing things – and tries to
release her from the feeling that it is her responsibility to fix their pain. Most importantly, she separates the events of their time and place from the protagonist’s. In going to her mother’s former house, she already saw that she could have no access to her place or the time in which it existed. The ghost appearances of her parents after this scene are goodbyes, assurances that this is the last she will see of them, whether this is what she wants or not.

Myriam’s desire to heal her parents’ exile, to repair the damage wrought by their trauma and create for them and herself a “tela de sevoya,” is typical of a child of postmemory. She feels, as Hirsch says, “the need not just to feel and to know, but also to re-member, to rebuild, to re-incarnate, to replace and to repair” (“Past Lives,” 420). Myriam wants to ontologize the past – as well as her departed parents and their hidden lives – and repair familial wounds in the process. Knowledge and healing are integral parts of mourning; they lay ghosts to rest. Myriam goes to Plovdiv in part to recite Kadish, the Jewish mourner’s prayer, for her father in his native city. Kadish is principally said at the graveside when a parent dies, initiating or closing a period of mourning beside the place of the parent’s interment. Myriam’s father is not buried here but in Mexico, yet she feels the need to say the prayer “en su ciudad natal” (81), a gesture which figuratively brings him back home and paints a picture of an exile ended by ghostly presence. Here, we see how Myriam’s return can effect a combination of healing and letting go, how it can be a “tela de sevoya.”

This place-based postmemorial act bears the secondary benefit of giving the protagonist a sense of connection, turning it into something that contributes to a personal rather than a proxy healing. Standing in her father’s birth city, she says the prayer which “[d]urante generaciones y generaciones, miles, millones de deudos, han dicho estas palabras en momentos de dolor” (81). Here, we begin to see how Myriam’s being in this place/space is about more than just restoring
something to her parents – the creation in her mind of the shape of their lives, the return to home, a final palliative to the uprooting of exile –, it is part of an act which places her amongst her people, generations of Jews brought together in mourning. The link between being in the Balkans and seeking personal belonging becomes more apparent in another “Del diario del viaje” chapter in which she again explains some of her reasons for undertaking the journey. She opens a view towards seeing her parents’ exile as an exile she shared, proclaiming, “[n]uestros anhelos van enredándose unos con otros, así llego a esta tierra: para reunirme” (24). She feels this land, to which she has never been before, to also be hers, for her longings are tangled up with those of her family. Here, in Bulgaria, she can “atar los cabos sueltos” not only because of what the country means for her parents but because of what it means for her. It concretizes a space of personal reunion and constitutes a site where she feels a certain sense of belonging.

3.2.3. Haunted Language: Belonging in Ladino

Questions of personal belonging help us to see that the Balkans is more than just a place for Myriam to enact a postmemorial debt and lay her parents to rest. Her emotions regarding her parents are tangled up with broader feelings of belonging and displacement. Myriam’s Mexican home is clearly haunted by her familial losses, and these push her to “return” to Bulgaria. But, their uncanny persistence also points to larger, more personal questions, which speak of dislocation and spark the protagonist’s actions. The place where the mother is buried invokes familial and group bonds of which Myriam is not explicitly aware during her first blushes with haunting. While it could have been referred to simply as the cemetery, the Panteón Jardín carries much more specific associations; it is the Sephardic cemetery, a place whose history she discusses in detail 100 pages before (38-9). The death of the mother then comes to symbolize a number of losses – not just that of the mother but that of the father and the rest of her family –
and potential losses, i.e., the link to her Sephardic, and by extension Bulgarian, heritage. The mother’s death provokes anxiety about the severing of ties to the past, for she is Myriam’s last living relative from a previous generation, a generation who hailed from and knew that place from before, a generation who came from Bulgaria and spoke Ladino as a mother tongue.

We already know that the Ladino of her childhood, her parents and Bulgaria bear a close association in the narrator’s mind, but the Ladino of Myriam’s family and girlhood also carries a connection to multiple spaces and places. We perceived the family-Bulgaria-Ladino link in the closing lines of the first “Del diario de viaje” chapter, in which the protagonist makes reference to the language of her “chikez” and describes it as being amongst the bodies that surrounded her growing up (18). Her grandmothers spoke it to her as a child, and her parents spoke it to each other. Ladino is a language of memory for Myriam, of her memory and her childhood. In her imagination of Bulgaria, it is the language of the memory of generations. Surrounded by Bulgarian “pasajeros del avión” that “se parecen a mi familia maternal,” she considers “las decenas de generaciones que vivieron en este país y hablaron el judezmo” (17). This country, with its people who still bear the features of her family, sheltered the people who spoke Ladino. Bulgaria is a territory of belonging, apparent through physical likeness and all the associations we discussed before, but also due to a long history of life in a common tongue spoken in a particular space. For Myriam, Ladino as a language has always been a common territory anchored in a particular, personally significant place (Bulgaria), but it has constituted a shared space on its own. A sort of portable patria, Ladino represents a past and present network. When she prepares for her trip, she is contacted by a woman in Israel named Rina who is researching the language (40). Rina puts her in contact with someone else doing similar research in Bulgaria, a León Karmona who guides her trip and provides her with an archive of Ladino proverbs (43-4).
The network of people linked to Ladino grows throughout the novel, from researchers to editors of newspapers to speakers and writers in different places. In another “Del diario de viaje” chapter, she quotes several authors and famous thinkers on and in Ladino, from countries as distant as Mexico and Bulgaria, France and Syria (133-4).

Ladino constitutes a home in diaspora; it is a space of belonging largely defined by that status, forged and maintained in exile. The novel contains histories and analyses of Ladino, variously denominated as “sefardí, judeo-español, dnudescmo, djudiú, djidyó, spanyoliko, o spanyolit y yahudice (‘judío’, en turco)” due to its having existed and developed in so many different regions (47). She gives its history in one of many paperweight or “Pisapapeles” chapters:

En la historia del judeo-español se entrecruzan tiempos y naciones en los que una comunidad, sin proponerse un programa de resistencia, lo siguió hablando y transmitiendo a los suyos en forma continua durante quinientos años. El judeo-español no nació en la España donde convivieron árabes, cristianos y judíos durante ocho siglos, sino en el momento de su separación de la península. Fue allí, en ese exilio (46)

The space of Ladino – and it is truly a space in the de Certeau sense, something spoken and transmitted, full of vectors and movement – almost seems haunted, crowded with disparate times and places. It is certainly not anchored in Spain. The language lives on without it, something that impresses the narrator – because “durante alrededor de treinta generaciones el ladino se haya mantenido en efervescencia pese a que sus hablantes estaban ya integrados en distintos países” (90) – and the author, who comments on the perseverance of this language past the normal one or two generations of a language in exile (“Myriam Moscona”). It has survived as the mark and unifier of “una comunidad” for over 500 years. Yet, it cannot rid itself of its association with Spain. This place remains a touchstone of it and the identity to which it links, and thus a
primordial expulsion is always transmitted through Ladino, forming an integral part of Sephardic belonging. Myriam’s exile is double, and these exiles – the Sephardic and the Bulgarian – are baked into her identity and mode of being in the world.

Ladino comes to be a haunted or haunting dwelling space not only because it bears strong associations with the past and with tragedy but also because of Myriam’s fear of its death, or rather what she is loath to admit might be a pending death. The protagonist several times calls it an old Spanish (55). She worries constantly that it is condemned to being a space of lost pasts: an “apartado nostálgico” or a mode of expressing “el dolor de la Shoá” (139). The author herself reiterates this dread in an interview (“‘Tela de sevoya’”). Anxiety about Ladino’s forever looking backward or being stuck in the past – i.e., that it will become a language meant only for ghosts – gives way to a more pressing dismay that the language might die. One comment from the “Del diario de viaje” chapter which lists statements on Ladino from various authors and thinkers succinctly accesses what is so distressing about this prospect. María Yosifova is quoted: “Cuando una lengua se pierde, no sólo desaparecen sus palabras” (134). The death of the language means the death of its people and of a space that is uniquely theirs. Not surprisingly, Myriam Moscona feels a great responsibility to this language. Within the novel, this is a duty passed down with her inheritance in an act of transmission much like that which carries her identity, her heritage, her familial trauma and her haunting. In another “Pisapapeles” chapter, the protagonist wonders about the impact of the internet on the preservation of minority tongues because most information provided there is given in less than one percent of the world’s languages. The grandmother’s ghost responds to these concerns in Ladino. She tells her granddaughter to speak their language and then accuses her of not even understanding what she is saying. This scene frames the duty to preserve Ladino as somewhat of a ghost’s injunction,
like that which Hamlet’s father gives him. It is a directive which claims her as progeny by investing her with the responsibilities of inheritance.  

3.2.4. Other Hauntings Ended or Animating Ladino

The author/protagonist responds to these concerns, those which relate to the haunting of Ladino, in much the same way she treats the loss and resulting strange instantiation of her parents, by trying to give it a sense of ontology, an existence which has shape, is knowable, can be seen and potentially grasped. One of the motives for her trip, in fact the reason for which she received a fellowship, was to “ir en busca de los últimos judíos que aún hablan ladino, escuchar sus inflexiones, registrar sus voces” (40). This novel, though not capable of truly capturing the sounds of Ladino, does capture its voices. It attempts to archive the language in a sense, register it and create of it a lasting object that cannot fade away or die. Tela de sevoya commits to text people speaking and writing in Ladino. It contains recipes and original poems. In this way, it acts as a “tela de sevoya” not just by attempting to give solidity to the parents’ place of exile, by, in some small way, ontologizing their past (their biographies, their origins) and shoring up her connection to it, but also by doing the same for Ladino. In an interview, Moscona justifies her dedicated incorporation of Ladino in the novel: “Los hombres olvidamos, pero las lenguas, no. Las lenguas contienen todas esas huellas. Por eso mi libro es una historia contada de una manera no muy tradicional y atravesada por esa lengua” (“Myriam Moscona”). The explanation captures her mingled intentions well. The book seeks to rescue people and their language from forgetting. This is largely done by way of language, for language constitutes a space where people can live, a space where they can “dejar huellas.”

---

81 For more on this idea as it relates to Hamlet and Derrida’s concept of specters and their relationship to our framing of ghosts, see Chapter 1.
But Myriam Moscona’s rescue operation is achieved through a mix of archival acts and animating ones, presenting a new take on the expected effects of recording something so that it may belong to the realm of knowledge. In the case of her parents, her registering of their places, despite its shortcomings, helps her realize that they are gone but not lost. It helps her lay them to rest, and the success of “ontologizing their remains” through the journey and its chronicling is symbolized eloquently in her repeated encounter with cemeteries in the Balkans, including the one in which she says Kadish for her father. In the process of placing her own dead in this place of the past, in seeing that the Balkans is a place of the before, Myriam releases Mexico to be one of the present and the future, especially for Ladino and Sephardism. This is depicted starkly in Myriam’s visit to the city where her father’s maternal family once lived: Esmirna (Smyrna in English) as it was under the Greeks, now Turkey’s Izmir. She goes to the cemetery and though she does not find her ancestors’ names, “[v]arios apellidos me son familiares y sonrío al identificar homónimos de gente que conozco. Están vivos en México” (236-7). Whereas at the beginning of the text and before the journey, the Mexican presence of Ladino and Sephardism were limited to the graveyard and a reproachful dead grandmother, when she finally places her ancestors (that is, Sephardic Jews if not specifically her family) here – in a place that houses the dead and honors them as gone –, Mexico becomes a space of Jewish life and ceases to be a haunted home.

3.3. “Volver a Berlín”: Ghost Guides in a City of Specters

While Eliah Germani’s story “Volver a Berlín” does not begin in its protagonist’s birth country, nor does it contain a detained picture of a Latin American home space made uncanny by loss and displaced belonging, it is still these things which push the Chilean born daughter of
German Jews to go to her parents’ former home in Berlin. She harbors some level of kinship with Germany and Berlin Jews – a sensation we would expect from a child of exile –, yet this space was very strictly denied her, constituting not only a present absence but perhaps all the more powerful for being forbidden. Unsurprisingly, her feelings regarding Berlin are reticent, and her trip “back” does not at first feel like a return to her. The goals of her journey therefore become multiple; she must seek ghosts, allow herself to admit she wants to identify with and feel a part of her parents’ past place, and then embrace the type of knowing offered by haunting – one that allows for closure only by accepting irresolution. Realizing the imperfect benefits of haunting requires first seeing Berlin as a personal home and second recognizing that it is a home inhabited by ghosts. This involves finding a mode of connecting personally with her parents’ former home and situating her family legacy in an evolved context. In some ways, the protagonist is primed to do this, but ultimately, it is ghosts who act as a conduit, facilitating her seeing Berlin and her parents’ old apartment as haunted spaces pertinent to her own life. Not only do they help her to acknowledge and develop this charged relationship to the space and place of her parents’ past but they also aid her in making peace with it. Fully realized, the ghostly thus becomes both problem and solution. As agents of the homely and the unhomely, these things which are and are not present help this child of exile to heal and to forge a more sustainable relationship to the past.

3.3.1. Volver a Berlín? An Ambivalent Approach to Home

As a daughter of exile, Frau Grunwald carries complex feelings about her parents’ home country, and the story opens with her contradicting attitudes about Germany and her attachment to it. She begins her narration by explaining the posture communicated to her by her parents:
A mis padres no les hubiese agradado mi viaje a Berlín. En realidad no lo habrían aceptado. Ellos mismos, berlineses durante quince generaciones – como sostenía mamá – fugitivos judíos abandonados en Chile por el absurdo de la historia, en el fin del mundo – como lamentaba papá – se negaron durante todo el tiempo que aún les deparó la vida a reanudar las fracturadas raíces, evitando con orgullosa obstinación cualquier anhelo de soldar el alma rota y ahogando como una insoportable flaqueza toda añoranza de retornar a Alemania. (65)

Her parents’ posture is one of pain and anger, and romantic nostalgia is treated as intolerable weakness, better met with an excoriating response than with attempts at repair. Amid this awareness of irreparable loss and in a cloud of negative sentiment, a sense of belonging is also communicated. Germany is the place of roots, however severed, for the family lived in Berlin for 15 generations. Even in Chile, they are German. The protagonist’s parents effectively transmit their exile to their daughter. Berlin is a past that belongs to her and is forbidden to her, and the end of the opening paragraph cited above reflects this complex inheritance:

Yo, su única hija, tampoco tuve alguna vez la intención de visitar ese país – aún cuando mis primeras palabras fueron en alemán y la lengua alemana nunca dejó de ser mi patria más íntima – quizás para no pasar a llevar la consabida voluntad familiar o, más bien, por la ilusión inexplicable de que Alemania ya no existía. (65)

She cannot determine if her aversion to visiting Germany, to taking the trip her parents would and could not, is the result of her sharing their feelings or whether it stems from an existential attitude that this inheritance has instilled in her regarding that country. In a reversal of what we would expect to see in a victim of exile – that is, the conviction that the place of exile survives in the space of the home country –, Grunwald assumes not just that her parents’ Germany no longer endures, but that Germany does not exist anymore at all. But, this translation of the nostalgic
fantasy into its opposite extreme, brought about through a rationality bordering on cruelty, is still the product of exilic sentiment.

Along with exile, the protagonist’s parents bequeath to her a mobile homeland, an inheritance given in the form of language. Grunwald does feel a dual national identity. She identifies as “chilena” (66), and at the end of the story when she departs for Santiago de Chile, she refers to this as a “retorno” (77). Chile is clearly her home, but so is Germany, or more specifically, the German language, a sentiment we also see with Myriam Moscona’s attitude towards Ladino. Grunwald calls German her first and most intimate “patria,” and when she goes to Berlin, she is told that she “habla como una típica berlinesa!” (73–4). As we already discussed, language and belonging have been associated in discussions of nationalism for over two centuries. This metonymic association of language and “patria” that frames language as a space of dwelling and identification is unsurprising in this context. Here, even whilst still in Chile, Grunwald’s German is an integral part of her selfhood as well as a marker of that self’s being German or, more specifically, a Berliner. This is a sentiment she shares without its disrupting her being Chilean as well, but it belies the sentiments of a child of exile. Her parents’ lost world introduces a foreign element into every part of her Chilean life, for it is remains an identifying space since her birth.

Despite these affiliative feelings, the protagonist does not at first go to Berlin in an act to which she would assign the verb “volver.” Frau Grunwald is invited to present at a conference on German Jewish doctors who were forced to leave or who perished during the Holocaust. Herself a pediatrician, she read about “uno de los padres de la pediatría alemana,” Professor Heinrich Finkelstein, in the Revista Chilena de Pediatría (66). This textual source sparks in her the desire to restore his memory. She explains, “[d]e inmediato me motivó la olvidada epopeya de ese
judío alemán, que como mis padres – fallecidos hacía poco tiempo – parecía haber sido definitivamente borrado de cualquier historia por la misma arbitrariedad que un día decretó su exterminio” (66). Because she cannot “tolerar ese silencio,” she gives talks and publishes articles about him. She embarks on a project meant to rescue this man from a violent disappearing by giving his memory a type of ontology, by creating and promoting evidence of his existence and contribution to the world. Such an act is normally undertaken to lay ghosts to rest, for it confers a sense of materiality on something overwhelmingly classified by its insubstantiality. He becomes a known and knowable entity, preserved through the mechanisms of archive rather than silenced, disappeared, made into an eerie, empty place holder. But, in this case, it actually revives Professor Finkelstein. She is conscious of this to some extent; her assertion that she “[r]ememoré” this doctor quickly becomes a conviction that she “[r]eviví el viejo exiliado” (67). When she undertook this “tarea vital” (66), embarked on a project concerning life and death – hers, his and so many others –, it seems she was inviting his ghost to haunt her. It possesses her permanently and becomes for her “una verdadera obsesión de la cual ya nunca más me podría apartar” (66-7).

This ghost’s appearance, or creation, has a significant chronology, for he manifests, or is sought, shortly after the protagonist’s parents die. The ghost arrives when the links to the past have been definitively severed but so have the barriers to an open interest in it. The interjection about her parents’ having “fallecidos hacía poco tiempo” (66) within her summary of how she discovered and became involved with the memory of this doctor along with her explicit relation of his experience to theirs is not coincidental. It turns him into a proxy for them and frames her mental and emotional state in taking up the cause of the persecuted exile whose memory has been erased. Her obsession with this doctor is precipitated by the death of her parents and,
whether she admits it or not, forms part of her mourning for them and the connections embodied in them. She elaborates on her reasons for her actions as they link to her personal identity as a member of a group and as someone in a genealogical line. She feels compelled to “[p]reservar su memoria…como pediatra chilena, como hija del Holocausto y como heredera de un pueblo que en miles de años nunca cedió al olvido” (66). Her need to continue memory is a result of multiple affiliations – professional, national, religious and familial – and her status as a “heredera.” She is the daughter of trauma and of a people with a long history of survival achieved through emphasis on memory. When her parents die, these facts seem to become all the more important and begin to override their stated desire that she not return to Germany. They move her towards the actions of a child of postmemory and initiate a more open approach to bereavement and honoring the past.

3.3.2. Ghost Bridges to a Haunted City

The timing and reasoning of the protagonist’s project on Doctor Finkelstein points to the possibility that his ghost is acting on behalf of the parents, or at least acting as their substitute by realizing something that they could not. When she goes to Berlin and gives her talk, she perceives the presence of Doctor Finkelstein with her, watching over her, feeling like a proud parent. “Me sentía plena, satisfecha,” she explains; “mi corazón palpitaba vigoroso, estaba henchida por esa alegre excitación que solo viví a veces en mi infancia” (68). It would be difficult to assert that Grunwald’s parents were not proud or supportive of their daughter, but here, the ghost helps her find a little experienced sense of achievement, plenitude and peace. More remarkably, she credits his ghost with bringing her to Berlin to begin with. Grunwald’s mother and father refused to return or encourage a return to this city while they were living, but, for the protagonist, “la invitación a Berlín nacía del propio profesor Finkelstein y que en su
nombre al fin me estaba permitido pisar mi tierra prohibida, la tierra que, por lo demás, era también el polvo disperso de mis antepasados” (67). Finkelstein’s ghost is a bridge, an outstretched hand, which offers the protagonist an opportunity to reconnect with her people, here figured as the dust covering the German land. The concept of a homeland is frequently sustained by the conflation of place and group; you are of the place where your ancestors’ ashes are mixed with the soil. Growing up, this soil and, with it, a sense of belonging to this people and the spaces in which they lived were denied to her by exile and her parents’ inability to see in their home country anything but pain and loss.

Doctor Finkelstein’s ghost is not the only one Grunwald encounters, and when she goes to Berlin, she finds another who acts as an even more powerful and dynamic guide. Doctor Dora Lichtman welcomes the protagonist, helping her to feel a sense of belonging as a German Jew. Grunwald discovers later in the story that Dora Lichtman is one of these Jewish “antepasados” whose ashes float over the streets of Berlin, but when she meets her, Doctor Lichtman is simply a Jewish Berliner with whom she has a rapid connection. Dora at first takes Grunwald for a German, telling her “Usted habla el alemán sin acento, o más bien con un inconfundible tono berlinés. ¿Creció usted en Alemania?” (69). Lichtman validates the protagonist’s sense of being German at precisely the same site in which Grunwald feels it most acutely – in her language. Her comment goes further by linking Grunwald’s language to her place. Could she call Germany a homeland? Her later interaction with some other conference goers presents a telling contrast, for when they tell her she speaks like a Berliner, it is preceded by a caveat of surprise: “¡Usted, siendo chilena, habla como una típica berlinesa!” (73-4). Lichtman actively confirms Grunwald’s identity and membership in the German community by commenting on her language without any need to first signal her foreign status. An individual connection reinforces this linguistic one.
through the similarity between the two women. Lichtman, like Grunwald, is a Berlin Jew, and in her, the protagonist sees herself, first describing her as “[u]na joven de mi estatura” (69). As a type of native double, Lichtman can act as a surrogate self through which the protagonist might identify as a Berlin Jew, one who fits in among Germans by speaking the language – and with a local accent – and by imagining herself as someone who may have physically grown up and lived there all her life. The connection personified in Lichtman herself is reinforced by the notion that Berlin is a city of Jews, an idea that she repeatedly insists on to her new friend. When Dora asserts that “Berlín es una gran ciudad judía” (70), she opens the opportunity for Grunwald to envision herself as part of a whole community she thought had disappeared in a place she thought had ceased to exist.

The same gestures that tie Grunwald to Berlin also build the image of it as a ghostly city, mixing belonging and haunting. Doctor Lichtman herself is the primary and strongest example of this fact, for her appearance is the first indication that this is a haunted city. While neither reader nor protagonist is aware that Dora perished in the Holocaust until later in the story, in the perfect fashion of ghosts, her revelation causes both to go back and revise everything she said and everything that transpired while with her, investing it with new import. Consider how she describes her being Jewish and German in Berlin:

> este es mi hogar y ¿cómo podría pretender no amarlo? Naturally, ello sin olvidar el pasado. Pero tampoco permitiendo que sus sombras me agobien. ¿Usted me creería si le cuento que esta ciudad está llena de judíos? ¡Pues no se han ido! no pudieron aniquilarlos! ¡Berlín es una gran ciudad judía! Todos los días veo sus almas luminosas en cada esquina, paseando por las avenidas y en los parques, en el S-Bahn, en las tiendas elegantes… ¿Meschugue? No. ¡Simplemente es así! ¡De otra manera significaría que los asesinos vencieron, que tenían razón, y la vida no sería más que el engendro de un Dios enemigo! (70)
First and foremost, Berlin is the home of the ghost. In reality, it is the home of many ghosts, not just “sombras,” but “almas luminosas,” Lichtman’s being perhaps one of the brightest, for her name makes her literally the “light man.” (In fact, everything about Dora radiates light, even her “reluciente Volkswagen Golf” (71)). She anchors these ghosts in the space that is Berlin; they walk the avenues and parks, wait for the train and shop in the stores. Lichtman’s celebration of these fellow inhabitants suggests a particular symbolism of and relationship to ghosts that, without robbing them of their uncanny associations, places emphasis on their capacity to stand as a bulwark against oblivion. These ghosts are a proof of survival and the failure of the Final Solution. Dora attaches a profound ethical and Jewish responsibility to the recognition of these ghosts, responding to the notion that she might be “meschugue” – Yiddish for crazy – for seeing people who are not really there (again, a comment that only makes sense upon revision undertaken with facts learned later in the story) by saying that if she did not, then the Nazis will have prevailed and it would be impossible to believe in a Jewish God. Accompanying her religious and moral stance is a refusal to find these ghosts overwhelming. Recast as “almas luminosas” instead of “sombras,” they no longer “agobi[an],” but they do change the character of the city. Lichtman encourages Grunwald to see Berlin as she does, as full of fellow Jews who are not so much reminders of loss but symbols of a vibrant triumph over it.

Lichtman’s role in making the space of Berlin both homely and unhomely is most pronounced when she takes Grunwald to visit her parents’ old apartment. Even their journey there does this, for retrospect shows us that when Dora “condujo flotando veloz por las verdes avenidas de Berlin” (71), the action may not have been metaphoric. Her mode of carrying the protagonist to her parents’ home forces Grunwald to move as ghosts do, again placing her amongst her community – she physically inhabits the space as they do – but in a way that we will
later evaluate as defying reason. Once there, it is Dora who encourages her to connect with it and to do so through the mechanisms of haunting. While the protagonist hesitates to go too near the building, Lichtman urges her towards it. She points to her parents’ window, something Grunwald acknowledges it would be impossible for her to know, and asks if she can see her mother there. She tries to encourage Grunwald into another time, to indicate that it still exists here. Waving enthusiastically, she continues “¿Ve que nos ha sonreído?” (72). Dora’s gesture addresses a number of issues at the same time. It invites Grunwald to project herself into this place, to see her family and by extension herself there. More strangely still, it attempts to turn melancholia into mourning, or, at the very least, to end the more painful aspects of melancholia, through embracing ghosts. Grunwald’s parents spent their lives yearning for yet rejecting a place they missed dearly and communicated this sensation to their daughter both as a summary of their lives and as a personal feeling. The image of a happy ghost mother implies that Grunwald’s parents’ wandering of the earth has come to an end; they have returned home. Seeing the happy ghost suggests a possible end to the haunting of exile for parents and child. In addition to closing exilic haunting, the appearance of the ghost mother also effects a type of “localizing the dead,” which for Jacques Derrida, is essential to laying ghosts to rest (9). We have already seen that Grunwald has recently lost her parents and already equates them with an unhonored ghost (that is, Doctor Finkelstein). Their death lingers as one of the things left to be resolved, and while the ghost mother’s waving welcomingly at her daughter from her house seems to indicate a prolonged haunting – her specter would likely not, for Derrida, represent “ontologiz[ed] remains” (9) –, her presence here tells the daughter where she is and that she is at peace. Though Grunwald does not initially believe her, she views Dora’s attempt to foster this uncanny connection with gratitude and hidden incredulity rather than fear and rejection.
The fact that Dora acts as the herald of haunting does not mean that Grunwald does not encounter Berlin and specifically her parents’ apartment building as a haunted home without the ghost’s guiding hand. To begin with, Dora’s ghostly presence is something unique to the protagonist’s experience of this space; other conference goers report seeing Grunwald alone when she believed she was speaking with Doctor Lichtman. Even if the protagonist cannot perceive all of Berlin’s ghosts, for her, it is still the home of this one. More in keeping with the typical situation of the returned child of exile, Grunwald distinguishes multiple chronotopic layers in her parents’ building. These layers are pulled from memory and, despite being mediated and second hand, still have a powerful effect. Looking at the building, “[e]n forma instantánea tuve ante mí la materialización de aquella fotografía en blanco y negro que guardaba mamá. Sin vacilar, como si hubiese vivido siempre allí, identifiqué el ventanal de la sala de estar de mis padres” (71). She connects immediately with this place; she sees the memory of it given to her by her mother and feels that this home has always been hers as well. At the same time, she perceives the palimpsest; she sees that the building is different. She enumerates what has changed and conjectures as to how the war affected the building. Though she can see two places on the same site simultaneously, she eschews this perception for one that views it as one place that time has altered and that in the interim was still a space of life and history. The protagonist allows and rejects an appreciation of this as a haunted place and, in reaction, continues to shy away from completely giving in to a true affinity with this unhomely home. She decides to “no acercarme al edificio” because it seems pointless to her (72). “¿Con qué fin?,” she asks, giving the excuse that “debía ser ya completamente distinto” (72). Grunwald’s elliptical movement regarding the building, as she alternatingly gets close and sees it materializing into its past and
moves away from its “actuales moradores” (72), demonstrates an ambivalent attitude towards the healing powers of haunting. She embraces and resists it.

3.3.3. Taking the Ghost City with You

Despite the protagonist’s hesitancy, it is ghostly solutions which help her to find resolution regarding her parents’ home and her feelings of displacement. As we might expect, Grunwald seeks something concrete as a remedy to memories which are far and will not lie still. She decides to buy a book “del tiempo de mis padres” because “[b]usco preservar algún fragmento de su mundo” (72-3). She looks to condense a lieux de mémoire in this book, explaining that it would be a replacement for the apartment, “que sería como poderme llevar ese edificio entero en la maleta” (73). She goes to the bookstore recommended by Lichtman and finds a book “instintivamente” in the medical section, “un libro que – ahora reconozco – en verdad vino a mis manos” (76). This book, meant to end the disturbing sensations of haunting and confusion with its tangible solidity, is an object with the properties of a subject. It chooses her. As though this were not uncanny enough, Tratado de enfermedades del lactante turns out to be by Doctor Finkelstein. It even bears an inscription, proof of its having once passed through his hands. Instead of making things too strange to be calming, the idea that Finkelstein’s ghost has once again reached out to her and handed her this connection causes Grunwald to buy it instantly. She brings it home – to her home in Santiago – in her suitcase, “cuidadosamente protegido entre mi ropa interior” (76). She places this object, which embodies her parents’ home and symbolizes its uncanny existence, amongst her most private things and returns home with a sense of peace.

It is perhaps not surprising that Grunwald develops this relationship to haunting – one that happily accepts the mixed properties of her parents’ home as the only answer to the irresolution which plagues her – once she discovers that Dora is a ghost. We might see Lichtman’s presence
as what finally tips the scales, pushing the protagonist to yield completely to haunting and its potential. She is panicked when she first learns Doctor Lichtman’s true nature, but the way in which she perceives an $S$-Bahn station right after reveals a different inclination towards haunting. To her, “la vieja estación,” Lichterfelde West, “parecía aún anclada en la época de mis padres,” and she walks through it still aware of – though indifferent to – the smells of the current season (75). The willingness to see Berlin as unchanged since the time of her parents while concurrently acknowledging the current space of the city, perfumed as it is by the spring (75), is the expected perception of the haunted child of exile. But, the $S$-Bahn station with its layering of times in a single place is not a mournful space, but rather, like all the Jewish ghosts of Berlin, categorized by light. “Lichterfeld” is a field of lights in German and Yiddish.

Her encounter with and acquisition of Finkelstein’s book immediately follows this scene. She follows the lights to the most tangible connection with Germany, its Jews and her parents’ past that circumstances can possibly offer her. The end of the story is the strongest indication that the protagonist has accepted haunting and its healing powers. As she embarks on the plane to return to Chile, carrying her little piece of her parents’ home with her, “vi de pronto entre el público a Dora Lichtman, vital y juvenil…agitando su mano en gesto de despedida. Ya era imposible caminar hacia ella. Llevé mis manos al pecho como en un abrazo a la distancia” (77). When she leaves, Grunwald is at peace and literally embraces the ghost insofar as circumstances allow. She holds her from afar, an unstable position she will sustain towards Berlin and her family’s old home.

3.4. Codas and Conclusions
Both Myriam and Grunwald’s journeys are precipitated by an evidentiary impulse, a desire to make things neater and knowable in a way that guards them from improper endings, ones left either unfinished or unhonored. Making their exilic homes real, giving them a shape, restoring their ontology lays ghosts to rest and makes these places cease to haunt. In Moscona, this is in part what happens. She sees her parents’ places of exile, which are also hers, and they finally form part of the past, allowing her to move forward, undisturbed in her (and her family’s) new space of belonging, that is, Mexico. But this trip so invested in making things real, rescuing them from a ghostly half-life by giving them an appreciable form, does not just assist in making things definitively dead, or at least in separating the time-space of her life from that of her family’s lost time-space. Her efforts with Ladino actively eschew nostalgia; they bring it to life and also contribute to releasing her Mexican home from its haunting. The same gestures are at work in “Volver a Berlín.” The protagonist returns to Berlin with the notion of creating evidence that will act against forgetting. The impulse explicitly directed at cultural memory is also the inspiration for her going to her family’s former home. She wishes it to have a materiality that will make it real to her, that will imbue it with a sense of personal belonging. But rather than restoring a livable space by separating the old country from the new through a clearer delineation of a place of the past and space of the present, her trip allows her to embrace haunting, and it is this haunting which allows her to live free of the negative effects we normally associate with the persistence of the ghostly. Rites of return would seem to be seeking the restoration of a linear conception of time and of self in the world by sorting out the spatial instantiations of past and present. Yet, the varied results yielded here by traditional modes of combatting haunting demonstrate that a tidy idea of space – a location where, in de Certeau’s analysis, time and
movement persist – and place – one in which they remain still – might not always be desired or the most effective in guaranteeing a reifying sense of self and belonging.

Myriam Moscona and Frau Grunwald’s mostly satisfying interactions with ghosts and haunted places find an interesting counterpoint in Eduardo Halfon’s “Oh gueto mi amor.”82 Published in his collection *Signor Hoffman* (2015), the story takes place primarily in Lodz where the protagonist meets the Polish Madame Maroszek, an old friend of his grandfather who helps him find the Halfons’ former apartment and navigate the visit. His experience of “return” shares elements with those of the women discussed above – especially in the haunting sensations it produces – but differs in terms of the attitudes towards belonging and resolution achieved by the trip. As the protagonist of *Tela* does deliberately and Frau Grunwald does more by accident, Eduardo goes to Poland seeking some type of feeling. He is compelled there by his genealogy and his family’s traumatic past. Though the grandfather repeatedly insisted his grandson not go, the old man eventually gives him the information he needs in order to do so. He gives him a piece of paper with the address as “[u]n último legado a un nieto, quien lo recibe de la mano misma de su abuelo, como si en ese momento, durante esa última cena, estuviese recibiendo la totalidad de su herencia” (120). Information about this mysterious place, the grandfather’s former space of belonging before it was torn from him by the horrendous events of history, seems to Eduardo to constitute a last inheritance. This information puts him in his familial line; it connects him to the grandfather and his past.

Eduardo goes to Poland presumably to follow what he has learned, to give shape to his family’s former space and to feel himself connected more firmly to their history. He does and does not find what he expects. At the Warsaw ghetto, he touches “los ladrillos del último vestigio

82 As is the case with Moscona’s novel, *Signor Hoffman* is autofictional. As such, I will refer to the author as Halfon and the protagonist as Eduardo.
del muro del gueto, entre las calles Sienna y Zlota, y…no sentí nada” (115). At Auschwitz, he thinks of his grandfather and the Polish boxer who saved his life, yet he still feels very little. He is far more distracted by the bad hamburger he eats and the young couple groping one another than by the horrifying history of the place or its connection to his family and his people (116). At his grandfather’s former apartment, this finally changes. It affects him deeply. Before he even makes it to the actual apartment, he feels “una puñalada de miedo en el pecho” as he enters the building and “cosquillas en el vientre” when he looks up in its courtyard (129, 132). These sensations which barely make it into the language of specific emotions seem to follow from what Eduardo imagines in the space and the resulting change wrought on the building as a place. He looks up:

Y pude imaginarme en esas ventanas los rostros en blanco y negro y ya demacrados de tantos judíos mirándome hacia abajo, juzgándome hacia abajo. Y pude imaginarme en esas ventanas las manos en blanco y negro de tantos judíos tirando hacia abajo sus desechos…Y pude imaginarme los cuerpos en blanco y negro de tantos judíos lanzándose hacia su muerte de las ventanas más altas, en el cuarto nivel, al no soportar más la vida en el gueto, ni la vida en sí. (131)

He imagines the space in the moments just before death came and, in some sense, when death had already come. He pictures the Jewish faces crossing the temporal divide and looking at him. The past space vanishes, and he thinks “que un patio interior también puede ser una lápida, y todo un edificio un mausoleo” (131). The building vacillates between being a space of the past and a space of the present and a place of death. The “pequeña piedra gris” that Eduardo finds in the courtyard embodies this best (131). At first, its reminder of sea and sunshine makes it out of place, but “[l]uego pensé que sí pertenecía ahí, a un patio interior de Łódź, como una de esas piedras en un cementerio judío, puestas por los familiares al visitar las lápidas de sus muertos” (131). The building has a modern life and had a past life, but it is also a Jewish grave.
Amidst this palimpsest of past, present, of moving and inert, Eduardo finds a haunting connection, but this connection is limited and does not stem from nor impart a feeling of belonging. He cannot quite imagine his family in the apartment which now houses a young Polish woman and her child. He attempts to project his family’s life onto the woman’s modern furniture, trying to picture his great-grandfather “sentado en ese horrendo sofá color turquesa” and his great-grandmother hanging clothes “entre las plantas de plástico” (135). Perhaps the difficulty arises from the generational remove. Eduardo tries to imagine people he never met in a space/place that was an utter mystery to him until shortly before his grandfather died. He does not even preserve the living link to this place in his language, for he does not speak Yiddish and his grandfather refused to speak Polish after the War. Nothing specific about Poland nor this building form any part of his personal memory. The black and white faces of the Jews which look down at him seem like the memory of a photograph, but such a photograph bears more resemblance to those utilized in historical memory than those perhaps shared by a parent or even a grandparent. It is as though Eduardo watches part of a Holocaust documentary play out above him. They are his people, they connect to him, but no memory of them is his.

In his grandfather’s former home, Eduardo finds haunting—a deep, melancholic bond—, but he does not quite find resolution nor does he seem to think that such resolution is possible. When asked why he has come, he cites a long-standing compulsion to do so (136), but he has trouble clarifying his motivations. He asks himself:

¿Por qué había viajado a Polonia? ¿Por qué mi insistencia en rastrear los pasos de un abuelo? ¿Qué creía que iba a comprender al conocer ese apartamento, cuya apariencia posiblemente ya nada tenía que ver con aquel apartamento de septiembre del 39? ¿Qué buscaba en realidad? ¿Acercarme a un abuelo, a una tradición? ¿Husmear entre los últimos huesos y fósiles de una truncada historia familiar? (132-3)
His honesty about his confusion and this open questioning of his goals – a questioning which borders on scorn – already distinguish Eduardo’s experience from the two analyzed above.

Eduardo Halfon can still be identified as a member of the generation of postmemory. He has inherited affective impressions of a traumatic familial past. It leads to a compulsion to search, to effect healing, to understand something unfinished and unanswered. It primes him to be haunted and even to seek both haunting and its resolution. But, this paragraph of questions and his banal, coarse and almost obscene experience once he actually enters his grandfather’s old apartment suggest that the redemptive and palliative potentials of haunting do not exist for him as they do for the daughters who protagonize the works analyzed above. The closest he comes to actually feeling his grandfather’s presence in this space is while going to the bathroom. As he tries not to “salpicar tanto,” he thinks “ahí mismo, hacía setenta años, también había salpicado un poco mi abuelo” (137). This crude yet ironically tender moment turns unabashedly vulgar when he notices a collection of pornographic videos starring the current apartment owner. He decides to steal one, the dirtiest one he can find, thinking “que a lo mejor en el apartamento del gueto donde los nazis habían capturado a mi abuelo vivía ahora una actriz porno, una ya deslucida actriz porno, y cómo no entonces masturbarme luego, en recio, en polaco, en su honor” (138-9). In this mashing together of the basest of daily acts with events normally approached with the careful singularity of things sacred, Eduardo embraces a certain senselessness and indifference of history. Haunting, and all the compulsions it includes, remain a major part of his life and his actions. But, this grandchild of exile and postmemory seems to understand from the outset that he can neither find nor replace the type of resolution and reifying sense of belonging that the women above encounter in their experiences of haunted rites of return.
Chapter 4:
Objects of Memory: Embodied Absences, Haunted Bridges and Ghostly Albums

4.1. Introduction

One would think that objects would help lay ghosts to rest or, at the very least, be free of the conditions which generate them. Haunting highlights a gap in knowledge, an ontological ambiguity, a lack of fixity in both time and space. Ghosts arise when there are questions surrounding remains, whether metaphorical – as when anxieties categorize the relationship to the past –, emotional – as when grief has not been properly realized –, or physical – when literal remains, whether a body, a house, or a town, are missing. Objects seem to incarnate the opposite of these ideas. Their physicality makes their parameters known. Stable and inert, they can serve as pieces of evidence, aides to memory and talismans of mourning through their seemingly uncomplicated presence. Despite these properties, however, the objects that we will encounter in the ensuing analysis actually haunt. They act as ghosts do. More embodied absences than spectral presences, the objects here still defy existential expectation. They trouble time and assert a certain subjectivity. Buzzing with the past, these insistent objects exert influence upon those who possess them, and as bridges, they provide a type of comfort not derived from resolution but rather from open ended connection. What relief can be obtained from these objects results from grappling with them as ghostly, from going towards the possibility that their connections to the past might make them ideal as replacement remains, that their solid existence might help close unanswered questions. Ultimately, the interactions which seek closure by means of these objects give them their ghostly powers. While these do not always deliver on the characters and writers’
expectations of them – closure is, in fact, less possible and less desirable than it seems – they do provide a touchstone for coping with pasts full of trauma, absence, mystery and loss.

4.1.1. Objects of Knowledge

The physicality of objects fights the instability generated by ghosts in a number of ways, but perhaps the most apparent is when they contribute to proof. In the event of a crime, evidence is collected in the form of testimony but also in terms of items. These tangible items contribute to a case by offering concrete support to the narrative which has been deduced. Their entrance into the juridical world (and, in a similar vein, into the study of history) is granted based on their ability to provide supposedly verifiable knowledge based on reason and empiricism. This ability answers one of the major issues of the ghost, the condition of being outside knowledge, for, as Jacques Derrida explains, a ghost is “this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one” and such a thing “no longer belongs to knowledge” (*Specters* 5).

Ironically, objects gain the solidity of knowledge through a mechanism which flattens and abstracts them, one which looks to them more for their representational capacities than for the other qualities which accompany their physicality. In criminal cases, objects are valuable for their indexicality, that is, their ability to point to something else, their status as sign. This process is integral to what endows objects with the ability to fight ghosts from this particular angle. Rendered a type of document, these objects participate more seamlessly in forging histories that are singular and definitive. Placed in the realm of representation as objects read and interpreted, they participate in a much more stable narrative. As objects of knowledge, they

---

83 Such objects function as a type of index, a sign which implies or indicates something in a given context through a relationship of facts, a causal connection for example, rather than through things like resemblance or metaphor.
84 Bill Brown cites Cornelius Castoriadis in an attempt to parse this prejudice regarding the relationship between objects and representation: “‘certain segments’ of representation ‘take on the weight of an ‘index of reality’ and become ‘stabilized’” (8). He quibbles with this assessment – rightfully, I would add – by pointing out that this stability depends on the narrow mindedness of one cultural perspective.
both gain and contribute to a certain fixity, thereby serving as a counterweight to ghosts which refuse to lie still. Knowing provides resolution and does so by a set of parameters governed by an epistemology primed to neutralize haunting. This line of thinking helps us to see how the notion of knowing can be collapsed with that of definitive endings, for the narrowness of cold reason prefers the dead not to rise.

The status of knowledge is crucial to the ghostly, for it fosters situations of haunting when it is either excessive or not enough. This is due in part to what is described above; knowledge grants a reassuring sense of time and existence that ghosts break as entities which persist past death, by moving when they should be inert. Beyond this structural import, it also has a hand in the psychological roots of haunting. Too much or too little knowledge has an impact on the mourning process, and either extreme can turn healthy grieving into haunted melancholia. The first chapter detailed how Sigmund Freud’s concept of mourning and melancholia hinged on objectifying knowledge. As he puts it, melancholia is the result of a “loss which is withdrawn from consciousness” (245), and this can result either from the inability to recognize the loss as separate from the self or from secrets, from being either too close or too far.  

In this latter case, objects help dispel ghosts through a mechanism similar to that which we discussed in talking about proof. When little or nothing is known of the past, artifacts can be used to make up for this gap. Consider the way new archeological finds are studied, how museum objects are regarded as signs of life before our time. These objects are instrumentalized

---

85 For more on how secrets foster ghosts, see Nicolas Abraham “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology.”
as informative; we utilize them in the construction of our history. They are employed, cited even, in order to point to facts in a narrative. They function as documents in an archive. Items connected to transgressions of law are used similarly both on the particular level, as in our example of criminal evidence, and on a wider one, as with the detritus of genocide. Laura Levitt draws together these two types of objects, that is, evidence from crime scenes and Holocaust objects, in large part for their “empirical insistence” (“Evidence” 12), noting that much of the preoccupation with remnants of the Holocaust has to do with shoring up a case before those who would deny it, to turn the provisional quality of a claim without details into a vivid fact. One of the purposes of placing these objects in museums is to support materially the representation of a history where this atrocity cannot be denied. Bozena Shallcross also refers to how Holocaust objects are used, focusing at one point on how, in a museum, they are subjected to specific “epistemological demands” (132). They are called on to serve a historical narrative; “these objects, through their physicality, remain malleable and humble as they gesture, collectively, to a documented, described, and collected experience” (Shallcross 132–3). In this estimation, these artifacts are largely valuable for their representational qualities.

Though the stakes do not seem quite as high, personal items perhaps better illustrate how in furnishing proof for a narrative, objects can contribute to a personal teleology which neutralizes ghosts. Heirlooms attest to the lives of their former owners, sometimes in details inferred from the object itself and sometimes simply by existing at all. My great-grandmother’s wedding ring supports my deduction that she was married in a certain time and place because the cut and setting are typical to a specific where and when. Numerous objects like this taken

---

86 Alan Radley talks about how objects are used in museum settings to reinforce singular, collective histories: “Museums, as with other edifices in the community (cathedrals, town halls, castles) are repositories of objects which exist as special artefacts, by reference to which past epochs may be read and understood” (47).
together contribute to a family archive of sorts and can be essential in composing a family history, especially in cases where links have been lost. Such a consideration begins Nina Fischer’s examination on memory work in the children of Holocaust survivors. She opens her chapter on objects by explaining how heirlooms serve as a framework for family histories; they are “signifiers for a story” then assembled into a narrative by the family (29). This fights ghosts by making up for a gap in knowledge and, in so doing, restores a productive continuity to the familial, and thus personal, story. These objects connect their new owners to the past, allowing them to regard it as an originary before that explains aspects of the present and holds promises for the future. Such objects not only help to reconstruct a causal timeline but do so in a way that gives a sense of continuity.

Too much knowledge, or too intimate a knowing, also leads to haunting related to melancholia. Freud and fellow psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok treat this subject at length, and relate this type of melancholia to a taking in of that which has been lost in such a way that it cannot be appreciated as separate from the self. In both the victims of trauma and their progeny, this haunting results from an excess of memory; they know so much and so viscerally that they cannot separate experiences belonging to a different time, place and person from their own lives. Objects, and their physicality, can provide great aid in these cases. Family heirlooms, keepsakes of dead loved ones or photographs of former homes can all act as objects of mourning, concretizing an abstract loss outside the self, making a “non-object” or “non-present present” into a present object (Derrida 5), and thereby allowing the grieved to hold the cause of their pain at a speculative distance. This idea lies at the heart of Abraham and Torok’s

---

87 See Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Abraham and Torok’s “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation,” or the first chapter of the present study for a summary of their ideas.

88 Again, this subject is treated in detail in the first chapter.
analysis, for no longer being contaminated by the loss, resolving what it has changed and evolving allows a person to move forward (“Mourning or Melancholia” 126). Leora Auslander draws on these ideas when she asserts, “human beings need objects to effectively remember and forget; and we need objects to cope with absence, with loss and with death” (1019). The very real, inviolable boundaries of an object aid in this because they assist the productive forgetting essential to moving on. It is easier to place something definitive and static in the past. Auslander gives an example of how even missing objects are able to condense abstract losses in a way that stimulates mourning. Through her study of claims submitted by Jewish families to the French government for goods stolen during World War II, she discovers that these petitions were an important step in mourning lost lives (1036). Listing the objects taken, focusing on the physicality of the home, was a way both of retrieving memory and priming oneself to move on from it (1038).

4.1.2. Objects of Memory, Subjects of Affect

The types of items we have addressed here are not everyday things, though they may once have been, and by paying closer heed to how the power of these particular objects is constituted, we will notice their ability to counteract haunting suffer but not people’s desire for them. Thus far, we have seen how objects fight haunting by incarnating passive and definitive presences which may be utilized in the construction of tidy narratives. From this angle, objects function in the rational, Western epistemology which reassures and simplifies. But, what happens when these same objects gather strength from other modes of knowing like touch and affect? Can objects still fight haunting if they are admitted a certain level of agency, subjectivity

89 Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins refer to the passive and to be perceived qualities of objects in Western reason in their introduction to the collection The Object Reader (11).
or even life force? What if they actively disturb our perceptions of time? What if we are forced to admit that part of the force they muster as evidence, props of narrative and reminders of the finality of loss emanates from ghostly sources?

The artifacts treated here are objects of memory, considered explicitly for how they connect us to the past, how they participate in the construction of both memory and history. The heirlooms, ritual objects, letters, recovered artifacts, collected evidence, and even photographs we point to all contain a certain “out of joint-ness” in time and in their functioning. They, or the subjects they depict, have all been removed from their original contexts, causing them to stand out and be appreciated in a different way. Objects which form part of our everyday become, in a sense, invisible. When objects maintain a stable relationship to us and to one another, we barely perceive their existence let alone our dependency on them to structure ours (Radley 46). We do not notice a door that opens and closes, a necklace we never take off or a family photo that fades into the background of living room décor until the knob does not turn, the chain breaks or the frame cracks. Objects that do not serve their prescribed function bring attention to themselves because they cease to form part of the flow to which we are accustomed. Removed from their context, such items disrupt our experience of time. Objects of memory belong to this category of artifacts, yet they are more disturbing still because they upset our experience and our concept of time. Their disruption is more profound but also acutely uncanny, for the mechanisms by which we expect them to sustain a linear chronology serve to break time as well.

Objects of memory are similar to lieux de mémoire, for they present physical sites for the practice of memory. Fischer turns to the term “nodes of memory” in an attempt to differentiate

---

90 Chapter 1 contains an extended analysis of the relationship between ghosts and time being “out of joint” by drawing on how Derrida reads Hamlet’s ghost and the young prince’s attitudes towards his responsibility to it.
such objects from Pierre Nora’s concept and emphasize their availability to multiple narratives (9), yet the two have much in common. 91 In these places “a ‘residual sense of continuity remains’ in both” (Fischer 9). Continuity is relevant for the construction of tidy timelines, but the idea of residue alludes to a second way in which such continuity is achieved. There is a sense in which objects of memory seem to contain a piece of the past, that even they themselves constitute a trace, or a vestige, of the before. This means that they enable people to bring the past into the present, granting them an impossible reach over the temporal threshold. As “physical mnemonic bridges,” in Eviatar Zerubavel words, they enable the holder to literally cling to the past (43). The same quality that supports reliable representations of history allows for the physical presence of two times in one place, meaning that such objects trouble time in the most disturbing possible way. The quality which lends itself to an epistemology sustained by the symbolic also supports what Shallcross succinctly puts as a “metonymic objectual paradigm” (115). They not only stand for the past, they are a piece of the past. To touch them is to touch the before; to touch them is to touch the people who touched them. The intimacy of such a gesture should not go unremarked, for to touch the possessions of others is akin to touching the people themselves. Considered from this angle, holding a memory object is to touch a piece of the dead not just as a type of inert remains, as objects symbolically are in the paradigm described above, but as something still imbued with their lives and the time when they were alive.

91 Like Michael Rothberg in the special issue of Yale French Studies, Noeuds de mémoire: Multidirectional Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture (2010), which introduces this term, Fischer emphasizes “nodes of memory” in order to expand Nora’s concept beyond the tradition-sustaining or State-linked sense with which his lieux de mémoire are imbued. Drawing from Michael Rothberg, Debarati Sanyal and Max Silverman’s idea of knots of memory, she aims to highlight the openness of memory processes in general (9-10). Fischer includes texts written after the Holocaust by the “second generation” among these nodes of memory, extending this particular concept to things created far after in an attempt to parse past events.
These objects which disrupt time – whether it is the hiccup in the flow of the day produced by a door that does not open properly or the uncanny collapsing or multiplication of time inherent in an heirloom – demand attention. This removal from context which results from and in a disturbance of time is, for Bill Brown, the crux between “objects” and “things.” Drawing from Martin Heidegger, he distinguishes objects as used while things imply an irreducible enigma contained therein (4). Objects lend themselves more to the uses we cited as neutralizing haunting; “we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things” (Brown 4). These categories are not mutually exclusive however. Brown suggests we imagine things “as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems” (5). Brown points to an uncanny aspect of things which we outlined already; they are lifeless things which have been inexplicably imbued with life. He refers to the attributes by which they come to embody this contradictory existence as excessive. This quality is communicated affectively. Affect is feeling before it has gained the clarity of emotion. It hangs in the air and in the body, strong and often nameless. Occasionally, affects can even exert specific influence. They can draw people to objects, or they can push them to action, as they do in the works we will examine here. These affective things buzz with life; “exceeding” their functional or symbolic existences, they begin to take on the qualities of a subject. In this way, they become agents of haunting because they collapse the tidy categories of subject and object. They exude a sense of personal autonomy and cannot be contained by external definition, yet they still garner much of their power from the objective qualities we described initially.
All of these traits – subjectivity, affective potency, the living link to the past – seem to be instilled within the objects themselves, and their haunting power derives in large part from the sense that these qualities are intrinsic to them. But, it is contact between a person and an object which brings forth these qualities. We imbue objects with these powers through our interaction with them in such a way that we place them retroactively as having been there all along. I may not remember at all times that the tray where I place my glasses while I sleep belonged to my grandfather, but on the occasions I do, I feel his presence once more and simultaneously think back to his having been beside me, in a sense, the whole time. In a few days or weeks, this feeling abates, but the tray always carries the potential for it to be initiated once more. The distinction of who invests these objects with power, whether it is the object which does so or a person, is nearly irrelevant because, functionally, the capacities which allow them to haunt still appear permanent and innate. The salience of this detail will become more apparent in our conclusion, but here it should serve to remind us that it is our relationship to these objects which makes them relevant and sparks the work of haunting. It is contact which initiates process.

In the first works analyzed here, Marcelo Birmajer’s *El alma al diablo* (1994) and Eliah Germani’s “Objetos personales” (2015), certain objects exhibit the qualities of haunting. Imbued with the spirits of the past, they act as witnesses and evidence. Imbued with trauma and nearly venerated for their connection to it, these objects signal what has been lost and partially preserve it through an uncanny materialization of a time, place or person that is now gone. They bear the invisible traces of the hands that once held them and are kept for their ability to evoke the past. These objects serve as bridges but their powers do not remain entirely in the control of their new owners nor are they limited to the comforting links they provide. These items can also drag their owners back into a sensation of helplessness and alter the new environments which house them.
Equally, they can bring people together or enter into new battles which echo the old. They are instruments, but they are not passive. They are remains that assist in mourning, connecting their possessors to a potentially organizing past through their existence as symbols and as tools, but they have life in them yet. In these two works, we see how such artifacts are both disturbing and useful, how as both inert objects and as uncanny subjects, they aid memory and help people move forward with their lives.


*El alma al diablo* is a Bildungsroman in which protagonist Mordejai recollects the most formative moments of his 1950s childhood in the Jewish barrio Once of Buenos Aires. Most of the action centers on his relationship with the neighborhood outcasts, Salomón and Tamara, who, despite having fled the Holocaust, are shunned by the rest of the community for their connections to crime and their ready embrace of Argentine customs over Jewish ones. Mordejai finds himself drawn to the pair after his friend Rony gives him a cameo that he stole from their house when the couple was not there. Later, Mordejai learns that this cameo belonged to Salomón’s deceased wife, and this token with her picture inside is all that remains of her and Salomón’s daughters. Condensed in this memento are Salomón’s European life and family and, in the hands of Rony and Mordejai, the aura of Salomón himself. But, it does not merely serve as an object of memory and cannot be possessed passively. Though there are ways in which the cameo exhibits qualities of a typical object, specifically in its instrumentalization and its ability to act as a symbol, it also exceeds these characteristics. For Salomón, it is more than an object of mourning; in fact, it is a thing which retains the elusive vestiges of his murdered family. In his hands, it helps him prolong mourning into melancholia. For Mordejai, it is a mysterious totem which connects him to others and changes the course of his beliefs. Ultimately, we can read this object as haunted
both for its eerie subjectivity – it functions as a major actor in the novel, bringing together a number of characters and pushing the action of the story forward – and for its specific relationship to time. Whether in Mordejai’s hands or in Salomón’s, the cameo possesses uncanny powers, affecting those who touch it and disturbing linear understandings of a life story.

In some ways, the cameo at the center of the novel has the qualities of a typical object, the type of object associated with use and clarity. It seems to point to things rather than embody them; it seems to be a concrete reference rather than a living entity in itself. It is described as something over which the characters have power, instead of vice versa. After he receives it, Mordejai reflects on having something which belongs to Salomón and Tamara: “yo tenía en mi poder un objeto que les pertenecía” (24). This comment reflects the thrill of having something that does not belong to him, something which brings him closer to Salomón and Tamara, the neighborhood outcasts. But, more pertinent for our discussion here is that he clearly conceives of the cameo here as an object that is possessed by people rather than an object which does the possessing. In this language, it is a belonging in his power, and not the other way around. As such, it can serve instrumental purposes; it can be utilized by those who hold it. Rony uses it to drive a wedge between his sister Paloma and the young man with whom she shares affection by compelling Mordejai to give it to her as a “regalo de compromiso” (42). (The gift giving appears to be a somewhat ridiculous act coming from a 12-year-old boy to a 13-year-old girl, but it serves Rony’s purpose in changing his sister’s affections). Later in their lives and even in its absence, the cameo still serves this purpose for Mordejai and Paloma. They joke that they cannot get married in their middle age because she returned his gift and they no longer have it (71). The cameo is instrumentalized through its symbolic function. To some extent, this is also true of its existence for Salomón who values the object because it helps him remember his dead family and
the life that he lost. Mordejai goes to Salomón and Tamara’s house to give it back, and when he receives the cameo, Salomón opens it, looks at the photograph and tells the boy about his family.

4.2.1. Reminder or Ghost?

But, in its return to Salomón’s hands, the cameo reveals more plainly that it is not the same as other objects. Salomón does not hold onto the cameo purely as a memento, for it does more than remind him of what he lost. The cameo allows him to hold close not just a memory of people but a sensation of guilt. It acts more as a talisman of failure and culpability, for it reminds him that when the Germans came for his family, he was with Tamara, the woman for whom he planned to leave his wife and children. This is what he does not want to forget, and for this, he wants to be condemned. On one of Mordejai’s subsequent visits, Salomón tells him again about his wife and the cameo. He retrieves it from his bedroom and, after looking at it, asks if he already told Mordejai about his wife. Though the boy tells him he already has, he proceeds to elaborate on the details of his story. After, he leaves and Tamara explains, “[a]hora se va a quedar un rato tranquilo…Tal vez se duerma, o llore en silencio. Pero por una hora o más, no lo vamos a escuchar. Siempre se queda así después de contar su historia” (88). Mordejai has gotten a glimpse of a mourning ritual. Salomón holds the cameo, he remembers, he recounts, he mourns and then there is relief, a sensation that he has put the past behind him once more. But this is not what is actually occurring. The ritual repeats in a way that is not in Salomón’s control, and is rather an indication that this story of leaving and losing his wife and children dominates Salomón’s— and by extension Tamara’s—whole existence. Mordejai answers Tamara’s explanation by insisting that “[s]u historia es mucho más larga” (88), but Tamara corrects him, “[n]o, su vida es más larga; su historia, no. Ésa, la muerte de su mujer y sus hijas mientras él estaba en Budapest conmigo, ésa es su historia” (88). Mordejai wants to believe that this guilt
and loss is just a part of their life, a part of their past, but it is Salomón’s whole life. It is as though he stopped living in this moment; his whole story is reduced to this event, and he does not really continue to live after it. He represents Gabriele Schwab’s “death-in-life,” which can “be read as figurations of a traumatic foreclosure of mourning or… inability to mourn” (15). He chooses melancholia; he lives a “vida” that continues without a “historia”; he embodies a type of living death. The opening lines of the novel gain a second layer of clarity. Mordejai tells the reader that Salomón and Tamara “[v]ivían a dos cuadras de mi casa” but quickly questions his own word choice, asking “¿Vivían?” (3). This modification refers at first to the couple’s ostracism from the community, but it also touches on the idea that they are not really alive, that their existence could not properly be called a life. Tamara says it most plainly: “Salomón y yo no sentimos como personas vivas” (90). They are ghosts living in the echo of Salomón’s guilt and in the guilt of survival.

The cameo sits at the center of the evocation and communication of these facts and feelings. In Salomón, it makes more vivid his guilt and sadness; it drags him back to the time of leaving and losing his family and makes clear that, in a way, he is stuck in this time and place. But, the cameo also inspires strong emotions in those who do not know its story, and these emotions lead to particular actions. For Rony and Mordejai, the cameo is connected to Salomón; it is a souvenir of his “casa embrujada” (10, 69). The object then becomes a proxy for Salomón and his haunted home. Already haunting for its connection with a “diablo” or ghost (in the terms of our analysis) and a haunted house, the cameo is actually all the more disturbing because it exceeds the boundaries of a “recuerdo” even for those who know little about it, and its associations have consequences. After taking it from Salomón’s house, Rony seems unable to touch it, and in Mordejai’s interpretation, this is the real reason he supposedly forgot it in Mordejai’s care and
subsequently made him give it to Paloma as a token of love. He does not accept Rony’s justification, asserting that “la verdadera razón era que Rony le tenía pánico a ese objeto, y no se atrevía a tenerlo en sus manos” (32). Since it frightens Rony to the point of panic, he treats it in a particular way, and the cameo becomes a bridge. It brings Mordejai and Paloma together – they eventually do get married – and later brings together Mordejai and Salomón. Haunting things – whether they are people, places or objects – usually act as bridges between the dead and the living, the past and the present. This is how they play both with the boundaries of subjectivity and objectivity and with the neat separation of times. For Salomón, the cameo is already a bridge to his dead family, and taken from his house, it acts as a bridge between those who are alive. But, its extreme affective power, a type of power that changes the course of the lives of those whom it touches, demonstrates that this is not a typical object, that it has some of the capacities of a subject.

The subject-object boundary crossing embodied in the cameo even while away from the person for whom its traumatic history is significant points to an excessive quality inherent to the object. We might already interpret this as a sign that the cameo haunts, but its particular influence on time adds a component that places the object undeniably in that realm. When Mordejai goes to return the cameo, he feels the action interrupt the normal day. He senses “que el día se interrumpía” and refuses to believe “que todo el tiempo que tardé en caminar esa media cuadra hasta la casa de Salomón pueda entrar en los quince minutos que marcó el reloj” (57). The act of bringing the object to Salomón, the realization of the cameo’s pull, causes time to flow differently for Mordejai. In fact, it makes him doubt another object’s mundane ability to perform its function of keeping time; he doubts an instrument of rational measurement and rational measurement itself. Not only does the deed confuse his perception of time in the short
term, but it is actually something which brings him outside of it. When he leaves school for their house, he states “[i]ba a realizar un hecho fuera del tiempo” (57). Things to do with Salomón and the cameo actually reside in a strange temporal plane for Mordejai from the beginning of the novel. He relates memory to the making of film, remarking on how things can be filmed in a different order than that they have when finally edited together. This helps him explain how he remembers his life and Salomón and Tamara in it:

Pues bien, ese director cinematográfico que es mi memoria insiste en armar una secuencia con mi recuerdo de la noche en que volví de la casa deshabitada y el recuerdo de la tarde en que vi por primera vez a Salomón y Tamara, como si no hubiese pasado un año entre un hecho y el otro. (22)

Matters concerning the couple already collapse real time for Mordejai. Here, the disturbance of actual time serves the recounting of a narrative that makes linear and somewhat causal sense. When the cameo is added to this dynamic, time is thrown out of rational behavior entirely, elongating it, throwing the regularity of minutes on a watch into question and even completely removing Mordejai from its flow.

Though all of the things linked to the cameo are disturbing, for Mordejai, they also end up being empowering. Bringing back the cameo is frightening, but it brings the young boy to a person and then a way of thinking that was expressly forbidden to him. With Salomón, he tries mate for the first time; he hears about criminality; he is told a first-hand account of pre-Holocaust life that is marked more by betrayal than nostalgia. Salomón gives him a new view of the world. Even his perception of objects is different from Mordejai’s previous understanding. When Mordejai returns the cameo, Salomón invites him to drink a mate. Having never tried the tea before, Mordejai burns himself. Salomón, “tomando el mate, como si fuera un ser vivo, lo arrojó con fuerza contra las baldosas” and explains that when he was a child, his mother always did this: “si algo nos lastimaba, ella lo rompía” (59). This mode of thinking which is so different
from the one Mordejai had been taught to this point includes a take on objects that sees them as alive and capable of wrongdoing worthy of punishment. It is not surprising that the cameo should come from and lead back to such a man. Ultimately, Salomón has a profound impact on Mordejai, causing him to turn from the strict Judaism with which he grew up in favor of other modes of expressing his Jewish identity and group affinity. Salomón dies and the cameo is lost somewhere in the history of Mordejai’s childhood, but this object will always stand at the center of their stories.

4.3. “Objetos personales”: Guests in a Home Museum

In *El alma al diablo*, the connections evoked by the haunted object are personal. Mordejai knows Salomón and Tamara; Salomón preserves a piece of his wife and children. The ghostly sense evoked by possession of and by the cameo reads as nearly logical given the intimacy of those who had and have contact with it. Eliah Germani’s story “Objetos personales” treats the personal objects of others, keepsakes of people the protagonist never knew. Yet, in her care, they have become personal. This is in part due to the onus she has taken up in relation to them and in part because she shares a past with their former owners. The story recounts the thwarted break-in of a Señora Kraunik’s apartment in Santiago de Chile. A Holocaust survivor, the old woman acts as a custodian of memory, giving lectures on the war and saving the personal effects of many of its victims. Upon first consideration, the collection functions like museum or archival documents. They are kept in file folders and bookshelves; they are maintained as references for the talks she gives everywhere from the local Museum of Memory to television interviews. But her relationship to them is more than one of an archivist or curator. These personal objects – personal to their former owners and personal to her – do not make up the background of her life nor remain passive items to be read, interpreted or signaled as symbols of a larger narrative. For
señora Kraunik, each stands in for a person, and she lives in a particular symbiosis with them, sharing her space equally with these object-people and allowing her home to be transformed by their presence. When she and they come under threat, we see that they bear uncanny powers, ones that can drag señora Kraunik to them as a refuge of fear or inspire her to strength. These changing capacities show that though these items have fostered a haunted space, their disturbing effects are only harmful to those who mean to harm. These items may haunt, but the consequences of their ghostly nature can yield positive outcomes for the woman who welcomes them.

4.3.1. The Archival Reference becomes Invited Guest

Upon first consideration, the objects in señora Kraunik’s apartment do not seem of the haunting type. They appear as a list of “los objetos más diversos” (65) and function predominantly as evidence. The “viejos candelabros de Shabat, una antigua menorá de brazos rotos, yamulkes judíos con agujeros de polilla” are not objects used in the Jewish rituals of memory (65), for they are too broken to perform this function. Instead, they are proof of the attempt at decimating a people; they are what is left of individuals who were destroyed. Gathered here, they constitute the material from which señora Kraunik generates her work. Repeatedly referred to as part of an archive, this collection is made up of “órdenes militares europeos,” “un manuscrito de su archivo” that she is translating (67), or the endless “libros de lomos gastados, sucios archivadores rotulados a mano, cajas de cartón etiquetadas con letras hebreas, y un revoltijo de los objetos más diversos” (65). Their utility lies in the assistance they provide señora Kraunik in writing lectures and promoting Holocaust memory. This is in fact how both she and her objects are known in the community: “[l]a señora Kraunik y su archivo ya eran una referencia en la ciudad. Ella, empeñada en guardar la memoria, exhortaba a no olvidar, en
cualquier sitio, a quien la quisiera escuchar” (66). As these types of archival objects, they are inert; they act as references, supports to señora Kraunik’s lessons of memory. In this light, these items deprived of their place in day-to-day life and held apart from the world in filing cabinets and glass cases seem to bear less the aspect of Brown’s things and more the aura of museum items. They are maintained and nearly venerated for their instructive distance. Señora Kraunik has in part sought this existence for them. Having “hecho de sus dependencias una especie de museo” (65), she uses them in the production of knowledge and a stable narrative. They help her tell the story of those lost in the Holocaust and ensure that their memory will be preserved.

But, these objects also exceed an instrumental and easily abstracted existence. Occupying her apartment as a disorganized mass, this “heterogénea colección de cachivaches, un conjunto inclasificable…solo podía tener valor sentimental” (65). Here, the objects are less the consultable archive that aids in the discovery of facts and the construction of history and are more a mess of sentiment. As materials of emotional value, they might find a role as objects of mourning, as items which bring reifying knowledge to the unknown or concretizing existence to what has been obliterated and therefore can be understood as evocative but still separate from the mourner and gone from this world. But, señora Kraunik’s emotional investment in them is too extreme. These personal objects are personal to their former owners and to señora Kraunik. She feels a certain intimacy with these “cosas cuya historia y significado ya no conocía nadie más que ella” (65). While they provide a touchstone to seeing an organized history, they do so because they contain a piece of those to whom they belonged. The “muñequita de trapo que perteneció a Sosha

92 The concept of aura from which I am drawing here is Walter Benjamin’s from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (670).
93 S.A. de Simine talks about this as one of the original, 19th century purposes of museums that endures today even as these sites and institutions have and continue to evolve (7).
Diament, la única huella que aún persistía de una niña judía desaparecido en el gueto de Lodz” is more than an object (65); it is a piece of a little girl that persists terribly displaced in time and space. The apartment is filled with these “huellas”; the traces or remains of these people – almost they themselves – are always within reach. When she touches the doll, the old woman accesses a portal or a bridge and can feel both little Sosha Diament and Lodz during the war. This is true of all of the objects because each is listed with the person to whom it belonged, collapsing their existence with that of the object. Already these objects display a tendency to undo boundaries, between the then of the horror these people suffered in Europe and the now of señora Kraunik’s Chilean apartment, between señora Kraunik and the previous owners of these items, and also between the spaces of the dead and the living.

The boundary blurring that comes from señora Kraunik’s extreme intimacy with these items and from their particular maintenance of the dead becomes yet more uncanny, for the object-people in the apartment not only occupy the space but inhabit it. The transition from museum pieces to people may seem subtle, but it is in fact implicit from their first introduction. Señora Kraunik “había hecho de sus dependencias una especie de museo, un apretado albergue para su heterogénea colección de cachivaches” (65). While these objects do, in a sense, have the qualities of those in a traditional museum, señora Kraunik’s apartment is not such an institutional space, and in choosing to keep them here rather than in a public house of history and memory, señora Kraunik quickly transforms her apartment from a museum into a refuge, a shelter, a place of lodging. In this turn, she invites the items to lose some of their objective utility and become guests. Furthermore, she shares her home equally with them, for her “departamento no parecía otra cosa que una atiborrada y caótica trastienda, sin más mobiliario doméstico que el mínimo necesario para una persona sola” (65). However chaotic, the apartment is purposefully arranged
to make space for the guests she has accumulated. She even compromises some of the comforts of a normal living being in order to accommodate them. Señora Kraunik means to live with them and has for some time:

Ya hacía mucho tiempo que los desaparecidos propietarios de aquellos objetos le hacían compañía, sometiéndola sin reservas a la obviedad de su muda presencia. No había una barrera física que les separase, ellos se habían convertido en parte de su vida, con una proximidad tan natural que ni siquiera necesitaba explicación. (66)

In the fashion of ghosts, these objects have life when they are not supposed to, and further, their coexistence leads to a bleeding of boundaries. They merge with señora Kraunik; their mute presence becomes a tacit part of her life.

4.3.2. Dead Objects or Inspirational Subjects

Given that señora Kraunik has turned her apartment into a house of the dead, compromised her space so that those who have passed might continue to live there with her, it should not surprise us to find that she and her home appear to be haunted. The story opens with a frightened señora Kraunik alarmed by a noise that she is sure has not come from the street. She is startled by “una especie de chasquido que venía de la puerta” and she “sintió crujir el piso” (63). These opening lines present a home that itself seems uncannily alive. Its doors sigh; its floors move in a way that its dweller can feel. While the objects are not the immediate cause of the house’s creaks and shudders and the narration insists that “a pesar de la razón trágica que motivaba su colección, de ninguna manera [señora Kraunik] se sentía perdida entre los restos de un terrible naufragio, ni mucho menos extraviada en los confines de una pesadilla” (66), they have still fostered an environment that turns quickly to haunting. She knows someone is in her home, causing it to make unaccustomed noises, yet according to the opening narration, it is not the invader who produces these effects but the space which comes eerily alive. When señora Kraunik tries to name her fear, part of her cannot resist the assumption that it relates to the
object-ghosts which constitute her surroundings, which govern the mission of her life. She assumes first that the intruder must be a thief, but she wonders briefly that it might be a neo-Nazi. It is not without foundation that señora Kraunik should have this fear. Her house has been defaced with swastikas before. Nevertheless, that when a trespasser causes the house to come unexpectedly alive in the middle of the night, the old woman imagines a fresh version of the old horror suggests that the objects that shape her environment have caused the past to occupy more than a flat, informative presence in señora Kraunik’s home. She lives with the memory of the Holocaust at all times; she surrounds herself with it in her most intimate of spaces; and this practice causes her to interpret her atmosphere in a certain way. Señora Kraunik’s objects cause her home to be haunted.

Yet, while the haunting quality of these objects might debilitate their new owner, by giving in to their life, to the ambivalence of a ghostly thing which is dead and alive, señora Kraunik is actually able to draw strength from their presence. More and more frightened of what an armed robber or neo-Nazi might do to her, she decides to hide in her closet:

deseó entonces convertirse en un objeto más de su colección, no ser otra cosa que un inofensivo pedazo de trapo, y se dobló otro poco, tratando de empequeñecerse, de hacerse invisible. Entonces un escalofrío sacudió su cuerpo. ¡De nuevo estaba aprisionada en el armario del gueto! ¿Acaso alguna vez salió de allí? ¡Otra vez se encogía en el camastro del Lager, volvía a ser la humillada niña polaca, desnuda e inermne ante la ferocidad humana! (67-8)

Out of fear, señora Kraunik wishes to be more like her objects, but more like them in terms of their object-like qualities: inert, unremarkable, ignorable. Oddly enough, when she focuses on these aspects of her artifacts, then they truly haunt her. Almost as the proximity of a ghost contaminates those whom they haunt – rendering their existence just as plagued and uncertain – these objects now send chills through señora Kraunik’s body, make her passive and transport her
to their time. In becoming like them, she not only goes back to the Holocaust but wonders if time ever passed at all and becomes more petrified still.

After reaching the height of her fear (“[u]n fluido tibio como la sangre le escurrió incontenible por los muslos” (68)), she regains confidence and asks herself what she is most afraid of. It is precisely this situation: “su único miedo era volver a repetir la propia historia” (68). Her greatest fear is to be doomed by haunting, to repeat the past. Gathering her strength, she takes a different approach:

Entonces una energía desconocida se desató en su interior, un sacudón que una vez por todas venía a decir <<¡No!>>, una voz que sin palabras gritaba <<¡Nunca más!>>. ¡Y vio cómo sus muertos comenzaban a crecer desde las paredes, los vio surgir de los rincones llenando con su aura las habitaciones, borrando con su poder todo el terror y la angustia! La señora Kraunik volvió a sentirse inflamada de vida, dejó de ser pequeña y se agigantó sin límites. Al ponerse de pie ya era invulnerable. (68)

Señora Kraunik decides to break the cycle, to refuse the condemning aspects of haunting. But, in this moment, the ghostly qualities of her objects do not abate but rather increase. Their voiceless scream pulls señora Kraunik to her feet. They grow from the walls and fill the rooms. They have an “aura” of ingovernable power, and their presence causes señora Kraunik to surpass the confines of her own body, the limits of her own materiality. She inspires such fear in her intruder that he dies of a heart attack when he opens the closet door.

Señora Kraunik invites haunting by collecting these trauma touched objects. She wants to keep them close to help her tell the story of the past, to keep the memories of their former owners alive. But they do more than that; they preserve the people themselves, giving them new life in a far off place and time. Señora Kraunik enters into a potentially dangerous contract by keeping these objects with her. They bear the potential to drown her in an endlessly repeating past, one that preserves the memory of her own fear and helplessness. But, they are not limited to this
potential. When señora Kraunik chooses to not give in to the dead part of these living dead, they buoy her, giving her power which exceeds her tiny, human frame. The idea that these objects represent a more hopeful sense of haunting is mentioned earlier in the story. Señora Kraunik’s collection gives her “una ventanita hacia la eternidad, aquella dimensión donde debía palpitar la estrella inextinguible de los suyos. Estaba convencida de que la muerte solo existía para los asesinos, para quienes creían en la aniquilación y procuraban el exterminio” (66). These objects help their former owners conquer death and simultaneously open an alternative view of life and death to their new owner. By keeping these objects and using them to honor the past, señora Kraunik is able to come to the conclusion that true death, true annihilation, only exists for those who seek it. She forgets this momentarily when fear intrudes in her space, pushing her objects more into the realm of the uncanny and invoking her and their passivity. But señora Kraunik recovers, and with the souls of her object-people she refuses to be cowed.

4.4. Photographs as Memory Objects, Photographs as Imprints of the Past

Haunting photographs garner their eerie quality from many of the same characteristics and inherent oppositions as those found in the ghostly objects of memory above, but in photographs, each of these qualities is amplified because they are both artifact and copy of something lost. They belonged to the dead and represent them at the same time. They would seem to fight ghosts through their faithful recording of the past. Such documentation amounts to proof and may serve knowledge and a definitive narrative. Similarly, they aid mourning by facilitating a proper balance of memory and forgetting. Dead loved ones are remembered through photographs, but like objects, they help the mourner to hold the loss away from him or herself while still feeling assured that it will not be forgotten. The memory cannot fade entirely because it can always be refreshed with an exact likeness. The ideas regarding the documentary capacities of photographs
which undergird these particular uses of them can be and have been long debated – from the questionable truthfulness of a picture to the limits of its ability to capture someone or someplace in their entirety –, and such inquiries already place a border-blurring uncertainty at the heart of all perception of photography. Relevant to the analysis undertaken here however is that photographs are typically seen as having a high level of fidelity to reality. Impressions from the past rendered through light, they seem to reprint their subjects but, in the same process, cause them to express numerous times. This play with time is a quality of all photographs. It is the gesture which makes the subject a present absence, a harbinger of its own death, or a condensation of then, now and the future all in one image. This existence supports the notion that all photographs haunt, and such an argument could be made, but what definitively tips any photograph into the realm of haunting is an affective charge. Such a charge can result from qualities intrinsic to photographs – especially those connected to how we perceive the life of the subject – or from the context of its taking and exhibition.

4.4.1. Photograph as Tangible Record

The idea that photographs constitute proof, “furnish evidence,” as Susan Sontag puts it (5), has persisted since photography’s inception. Though it is legitimately argued that they include underlying subjective and mediated bases that go unremarked by the casual viewer, most still perceive photographs as innocent, honest, and authentic – a favorite adjective of Walter Benjamin’s in their description.95 Their guileless evidentiary quality should make them a perfect

94 Consider the irony in Walter Benjamin’s report that some of the world’s first photographs were taken in a cemetery. (See “Little History of Photography” where he speaks about David Octavius Hill 512-4).
95 Most analyses of the status of photographs at some point make it to a discussion of their relationship to truth, their birth in ideologies and, consequently, their relationship to power. But, in “A Little History of Photography,” Benjamin closes by urging his readers not to underestimate or forget the “authentic” quality of photographs (527). Eduardo Cadava seems to echo this as late as 1997 in his opening to Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History, in which he dwells on the citational quality of photographs and invokes one of photography’s pioneers, William Henry Fox Talbot, and borrows his description of photographs as “words of light” (xvii).
tool in combatting ghosts, for things subjected to the lens of the camera are stopped and entered into the realm of the knowable. Capturing a moment and even delivering that which the eye cannot easily see, photographs seem to promise not to move without warning or hide unnamable mysteries. Like other objects, they condense the past by forming a piece of it. But, in addition, they are recordings rendered through the magic of light.\textsuperscript{96} While she argues that such an apprehension of pictures is limited— even overly credulous—, Sontag begins her explanation of the perception of photographs as one which attributes to them an unfiltered quality. For her, “[p]hotographic images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality” (4). They are not representations condensed into the prose of a report but rather a piece of the world itself. This is not the conclusion of her evaluation; she ultimately asserts that “though there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are” (6). But, the idea that photographs appear to cut out an intermediary in their delivery of facts is an indispensable starting point in their perception. A photograph is still read as providing viewers the opportunity to hold a piece of the past in their hands and see it for themselves. Roland Barthes explains this as the origin of the impact of a photograph of a slave market he once found: “there was a certainty that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality: the historian was no longer the mediator, slavery was given without mediation, the fact was established without method” (80; italics in original text).

This immediacy of subject to viewer combined with the assumed imminence of subject and method of capture lends photographs a testimonial credibility that goes beyond that of narrative

\textsuperscript{96} This is a favorite metaphor of many writers, particularly Roland Barthes, who dwells on the Latin definition of photograph as “image revealed, ‘extracted,’ ‘mounted,’ ‘expressed’ (like the juice of a lemon) by the action of light” (81). See also Cadava’s \textit{Words of Light}.
alone. But, more often than not, pictures are sought as instruments of narrative, a use that puts them back in the service of representation, a service which flattens the past and frames the photograph as merely a reliable vessel of facts, not unlike objects of memory used in the same way. As evidence, they can support a certain version of events and become both touchstone and proof in its telling. This role is quite obvious, especially to Marianne Hirsch, when it comes to the composition of family albums, for they sustain a “familial mythology” that tells people who they are in their nuclear and larger social contexts (*Family Frames* 8). Photographs are exhibited and returned to with particular narratives in mind, as an occasion for relating those narratives. Hirsch calls this a “hegemonic familial ideology” not because of the particular story it imposes but rather the way in which it is imposed. This function is close to that of museum objects, which are valuable for their instructional potential.\(^97\) Hirsch gets at how this works on a personal level in the family album; it pretends at definitive answers which govern identities in a prescriptive way (8). It is hegemonic in that it creates “portrait-chronicles of selves” (Sontag 8). This gesture can be helpful and personally organizing; in fact, it is precisely what fights ghosts for those with a fraught relationship to the past. It explains the yearning to forge something like family albums in the works analyzed here, but the family album also pretends at a version of selfhood that conceives of the individual as singular, integrated and explainable as the natural product of a certain lineage. Photographs sustain tidy and reliable stories of self, of peoples, of countries, and of history in general by giving individual recollection the authority of history and the tangibility of proof. They do so by providing a physical rendering of memory, the same token which keeps mourning from slipping into melancholia, for photographs assure the mourner that the memories

---

\(^97\) Both Barthes and Sontag compare photographs to museum objects. Sontag calls pictures a “feather-weight, portable museum” (68), and Barthes remarks on the photograph’s ability to “transform subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object” (13).
of people and places will not be lost while still maintaining those things as separate from the bereft. Frozen in a photograph, lost loved ones can always be reconjured. The idea that their memories are only as far away as the paper their faces are printed on gives the mourner a sense of control over a static past.

4.4.2. Photography’s Restless Subjects

Despite their ghost-fighting constitution, photographs display a great propensity for haunting both due to qualities inherent to them and when they are coupled with narratives. Photographs freeze time, place their subjects in a capsule where they remain unchanged and unchanging, and, in so doing, render to those subjects a type of death. In Camera Lucida, death is inextricable from being a photographic subject. Barthes balks at his own tendency to pose for pictures, at his willingness to offer himself up to be turned “ferociously, into an object…classified in a file” (14). He calls photographers “agents of Death” (92). The photograph both kills or objectifies its subject and acts as the vehicle for its constant reviving. The “Spectrum” part of the photograph, as Barthes dubs the subject depicted, implies “that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9). As an object which carries subjects made into objects, which displays a moment of life seized into death, a photograph always harbors a potential ghost. The objectifying act is necessary to making the past past, to keeping it from surging up uncontrollably in the future and breaking linear notions of chronology, but just as it makes and carries ghosts, it also allows for the past to be made present, to materialize a present absence in a way that defies time. A photograph is therefore not simply the vehicle for ghosts but an agent of temporal displacement. The collapsing or confusion of times implied in a picture can effect both subject and viewer, transporting either through different periods and occasionally allowing for the experience of multiple times at once. In a
photograph, the past appears in the present and prompts notions about the future. In Camera Lucida, this is one of the salient features of Barthes’ interaction with his mother’s childhood photo in the Winter Garden. It moves him through time, from her death and childhood to his own (70-3). Just as photographs can bring the past forward, they can also send viewers back. This is Hirsch’s experience with her own family photographs; she looks at a picture of her aunt and grandmother and sees her own features there (82).

The photograph as an embodiment of a past and a past person is what makes the cameo in El alma al diablo particularly haunting for Salomón. It contains a time of guilt for him and preserves a piece of his wife in a dead and living form. Looking at her photograph drags him back to the moment he left her and his family alive; it eclipses his present with past shame. The photograph represents her death and those of their children in a metaphoric sense; it prints the reminder of an irreparable regret, a condemning mistake. But, as an emission of light captured on paper, it is also the dead wife in a metonymic sense. It is, as Sontag might explain it, her photo-image as an extension of the subject or a piece of the subject itself (54). The photograph brings the woman from the past into the present. It is her as a ghost, it is her proxy, and it is her remains. The cameo thus becomes the woman’s crypt, making the object both tomb and bridge. Though the cameo is the literal object of our attention in this example, it also points to the impact of the photograph’s object-ness in general, to its material existence, for it is the contained embodiment of the woman’s spirit that turns the cameo into an uncanny vessel of the dead. Like other objects of memory, photographs are an example of what Zerubavel calls “physical mnemonic bridges” (43). They allow the viewer to touch the past with eyes and hands. Barthes underlines the less figurative aspect of this interpretation of the photograph’s connection to the past:
The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (80-1)

This tangible connection invoked in heirlooms – which are powerful because they stand for a mutual touching shared by a person in the past and one in the present – is in photographs more extreme. The idea of the photograph’s physical connection to the world, as a physical manifestation of reality or a piece of its subject, thus enables the movement of its subject, and occasionally its viewer, through time and space.

Barthes would argue that this temporal and spatial border dissolving is only possible in cases where there is a sense of punctum. Photographs truly exist for him – essentially have affective rather than simply informative power, animating viewer and subject (20, 71) – when they possess a sense of punctum. Typically, photographs are interesting for their utility as studium, a quality similar to that discussed above, that which makes the photograph an effective and thorough informant (26-7). But studium remains passive and delimited (40), while punctum transcends the flat and bounded existence of the photograph. It is “a sting, speck, cut, little hole”; it is that “which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). Punctum makes a photograph capable of provoking affect. It transcends the limits of reality and “wound[s]” (21), transforming it into the very opposite of an instrument of knowledge and closure. Like a ghost, it is the sign and the cause of a scar which refuses to heal. This affective power is all the more uncanny because it is produced by an object expected to serve its purpose by remaining passive and inert and by delivering subjects and scenes which are likewise passive and inert. In wounding and pricking, the photograph claims a bit of subjectivity which defies its role as object
and tool of knowledge. This idea already resides in the conception of the photograph as a piece of reality, a piece of its subject or as something inseparable from its referent (Barthes 5), but through affect, it acts.

A photograph’s wounding, and therefore haunting, can be wrought on its viewer. This is what happens to Hirsch and Barthes when they look at family photographs and are sent on a mental journey through family histories which scramble past, present and future, which make others of the self and project the self into others. Salomón experiences this punctum every time he even gets close to his wife’s picture let alone looks at it. These experiences of punctum are highly personal, but I would argue, with Barthes, that with context, a photograph can haunt someone without an immediate connection to it. This is where a photograph’s placement within a text starts to make it more dynamic still, for text can contribute to a picture’s ability to haunt a reader or project the haunting of its author or protagonist. Evoking a particular subject’s point of view, the narrative places the reader in position to experience the photograph in a different way. But, a picture can also haunt the text itself by producing a counter-narrative, something which attacks a supposedly simple narrative by contesting or complicating it.98 This is particularly poignant when the photographs do not serve the context they are meant to corroborate, seeming to accidentally multiply or even dispute its interpretations. The particular claims to truth imputed to photographs along with their more viscerally evocative ability turn pictures set in text into a powerful potential ally or an elusive and galling ghost.

98 Magdalena Perkowska’s essay “La mirada ilusionada y el ojo de la guerra: Percepciones del pueblo invadido y la lógica del colonizador en La llegada (Crónica con ficción) de José Luis González” presents a concise and thorough example of how photographs can contest a narrative which initially appears as a “superficie lisa, sin grietas ni brechas” by presenting an alternative to the verbal account narrated within the text (47).
As with the ghostly objects discussed above, photographs in the following works appear as both origin of and solution to the problem of haunting. They are sought as a mode of closing open wounds or giving shape to pasts which remain hazy. They are meant to contribute to a type of family album which can help their author/protagonists better organize a history of self and link that self to a knowable past. Yet in these works, unlike in those above, contact with haunted objects provides little to no comfort. They fall short as a remedy to the issues they are invoked to address and do not present hopeful alternatives. In Mauricio Rosencof’s *Las cartas que no llegaron* (2000), the photographs and the knitting of them into the text does present a type of resolution to the haunting experienced by the protagonist/narrator/author who places the two together, allowing him to imagine a family history that he can form a part of, but in Cynthia Rimsky’s *Poste restante* (2001), they very pointedly do not.99 They do not lay ghosts to rest or provide answers to unknowns. When in *Las cartas* they manage the latter, such answers are partial and haunting at best. Rather than giving birth to a new direction for the persistence of ghosts, as do the objects in *El alma al diablo* and “Objetos personales,” these photographs point to more haunting. Perhaps, this derives from the expectations placed on the pictures from the outset. They are meant in part to combat the ghostly quality of traumatic pasts whose shape is only partially known. But, instead of contributing to a defining history, they mostly make apparent the multiple ways that reality can be understood and how each representation will always fall short.

---

99 Both of these novels belong to what has been denominated in recent decades as autofiction, for each is narrated in first person by someone sharing his or her name with the author. For more on the relationship of this genre to ghosts, see chapter 2. In the case of these novels in particular, they are usually taken to be faithful tellings of their authors’ lives. Ilan Stavans’s introduction to the English translation of Rosencoff’s work corroborates the story as truthful and Rimsky’s novel is in fact classified in the history section of many US libraries rather than placed amongst other novels. This analysis continues to treat both as fictions, referring to the authors by their last names and their protagonists by their first.
4.5. Las cartas que no llegaron: Album of a Ghost Family

*Las cartas que no llegaron* is an autobiographical novel which centers on the author’s childhood and experience as a political prisoner. Numerous traumatic ruptures mark his life: his parents’ immigration, his brother León’s death, the Holocaust and his own 12-year imprisonment and separation from his worried family. Mauricio Rosencoff, known in the novel as Moishe, is the second son of immigrants who fled Poland and the first to be born in Uruguay. Already in the shadow of his parents’ flight from poverty and persecution and aware even as a child of the chasm between their reality and his own, Moishe is further cut off from his parents’ world by the Holocaust and later his older brother’s death at a young age. The horror of the war, though distant, constitutes the background of Moishe’s childhood in Montevideo, where his father awaits letters that never arrive. In the recounting of those days, Rosencoff invents these letters, a gesture which attempts to rewrite the past for both father and son. The imagined letters are a nearly categorical sign of the work of postmemory, for at an insuperable “temporal and spatial remove from that decimated world,” Rosencoff attempts “to re-member, to rebuild, to re-incarnate, to replace and to repair” (Hirsch, “Past Lives” 420). The letters seek to assuage some of his father’s anguish by supplying the news he sought and, concurrently, to inscribe the son more firmly into this part of his father’s story by providing a link to his past. They fail to do this for a number of reasons, not least because even if those in Montevideo were aware of what became of the family members who were left behind, this would not change their fate nor restore a homeland twice obliterated by exile and atrocity. But, this failure feels all the more tragic because Moishe yearns to know and be part of his father’s story. As for Sergio Chejfec in *Lenta biografía*, the father’s biography is his own, and the search for the father is the reason for all the
letters in the novel and the novel itself. He explains his actions in an address to his absent father: “papá, que te escribo para escribirme...lo que hoy por hoy siento es que yo, hoy, soy tú” (60).

4.5.1. The Letters: Inventing Correspondence with Ghosts

While the whole novel attests to Rosencoff’s struggle with trying to know what has only ever been alluded to and the importance of this in his own self-understanding, very few things are successful in delivering this sort of definition to origins plagued by trauma, distance and loss. The letters inserted into the first section, “Días de barrio y guerra,” clearly attempt this but are more successful in setting up a theme of haunting than in acting as physical agents of ghosts or in laying them to rest. In this first part, which recounts his childhood, young Moishe is made constantly aware of the absence of his parents’ family and their near inaccessibility to him. Once the war begins, the father constantly awaits the arrival of news of his family. The definitive status of these letters punctuates the end of the novel’s introduction of sorts: “Las cartas que esperaba mi papá no llegaron nunca” (14). The first letter appears immediately after this announcement of their non-existence, and like each subsequent one, invents news of the family and retraces the fate of typical Polish Jews from ghetto to gassing with harrowing ingenuousness. They portray hope, gullibility and blindness to their fate from the outset. The first letter speaks optimistically about Theresienstadt. It reports “El Führer construye una ciudad para los judíos” and looks forward to walking on the sidewalks and not wearing a Jewish star (15). The irony of the situation is painful to the reader, simultaneously making the characters more vivid and more heartbreakingly murdered. These imagined missives from people known to be dead – or in the

---

100 For more on this situation for Chejfec in Lenta biografía and how he uses the writing of the novel to parse his and his father’s shared past, see chapter 2.
letters, on their way to dying – come off as haunting. They are the words of the ghosts of the
parent’s siblings and parents and illustrate who exactly was missing from Rosencoff’s life, who
had been obliterated by history, forcibly removed from his family line.

While the letters indicate who haunts both father and son and the context of that haunting, it
is difficult to consider them ghostly objects in the sense outlined above. True, they intend to
provide knowledge to fill in a gap, to heal an unbroachable rupture with information. They
animate people who have died to have them speak for the history of the Holocaust and the story
of their lives. Their morbid voices interrupt the account of Rosencoff’s childhood without
warning so that protagonist and reader are constantly aware of who is missing. They even show
the prescience and border collapsing typical of ghosts. This is particularly apparent in one of the
last letters from the father’s brother:

Estas cartas nunca te van a llegar, Isaac. O te van a llegar cuando ya no estemos, y
entonces será para nosotros una forma de estar. Tal vez estas cartas las escriban
otros. Que Moishe sepa que también son nuestras, para que sepa qué fue de sus
tíos, de sus primos, de sus abuelos. Queremos formar parte de su memoria, Isaac.
Cada uno de nosotros es cada uno y todos los demás. También Moishe. Moishe es
él y todos los demás. (31)
The letters are meant to be a present absence, to embody the dead when they are gone, to ensure
memory and the family line even if only through this partial existence. They seek to transcend
the boundaries of the bodies and lives for which they might stand and install the Rosencoff
family in the body of its youngest heir. They ask him to be for them; they say he already is. Even
if he is not invaded by their spirits, he still acts on their behalf, trying to address unfinished
business by writing their letters, trying to right unredressable wrongs. This letter gives a very
clear picture of who haunts and how – i.e., by their absence, traumatic disappearance and
unfulfillable promise of connection – but it, like the others in this section, does not constitute an
object of haunting.
These letters have no physical presence either within the book as an object or within the plot of the novel. They simply appear as more text, only occasionally set off by an extra line break. The English edition makes this more apparent; in that version, the letters are differentiated by italics and spacing. These small editorial choices which cause them to garner some sense that they are their own entities do not exist in the original, Spanish version. The letters also lack physical presence in the life of the novel. No one interacts with them – they are not opened, read or even touched – and they have no impact on the characters either emotionally or practically. Other letters have more physicality and not simply because they are real while the family letters from the Holocaust are invented. The father is described writing to his family on paper that León brings home from school, and “las hojas que le da a mi papá tienen rayas y las letras las pone arriba de las rayas para que no se caigan” (23). This poetic description facilitated by the naïve voice of the child-narrator Moishe gives materiality to the pages and essence to the words which fill it. Letters from before the war have more presence within the action of the novel. Receiving and reading them initiates a family ritual in which all members stop what they are doing and go to the kitchen to hear what they say.

A letter which arrives after the war, after the father has given up hope of hearing from Poland and their family there, exemplifies best both material and ghostly presence in a letter as an object. It is announced and handed to Moishe’s father (44). It has shape and size; it is “un rectángulo de papel sellado, aún sin abrir, entero, vivo lleno de vuelos, tal vez con halo” (45). Its existence is certain, yet it also contains something extra, something indistinct yet full of life. Beyond its physical and other worldly presence, this letter has influence. This object interrupts the day to day of the family – the cat sunning itself on the balcony, the mother peeling potatoes (44, 45, 49) – and continually resurfaces in the narrative of the second section. Each time it
comes up, there is repetition and progress. Its appearances review portions of its arrival and move towards the moment of its opening. With this repetition which taunts the desire to know, the letter embodies the actions of a ghost, promising answers and not delivering them. Reader and characters alike are haunted by something which comes from afar and from the place of before yet cruelly reveals no information. The second section of the novel closes without the letter ever being opened, and no knowledge of the family in Europe is ever definitively given. Like the heirlooms and memory objects described above, this letter is a physical bridge to the past that has the potential to provide a sense of connection to those who touch it yet not without disturbing their reality. It contains the paradox of other such objects, promising answers and closure and only partially delivering these things. It is a ghostly object for Moishe because it contains his dead family and exemplifies his being cut off from them. While his parents debate opening it, Moishe feels that he is and is not part of his family. He recounts standing next to them: “yo estaba ahí papá, y no estaba. No estaba ni en tus ojos ni en los de mamá. No estaba cuando hablaban en yiddish…Era algo que estaba ahí, aislado por ondas de una intensidad que no me llegaban, estaba del lado de afuera” (53). In the presence of this letter, Moishe’s desire to be part of its world is palpable, as is his exclusion from it. This is what haunts Moishe: the desire to know his parents and their past, to be a part of their family, to be linked to a world and people from whom he feels cut off by a difference in his experience and by their death.

4.5.2. Moishe’s Family Album

Like the letters, the photographs which appear throughout the work bespeak a desire to forge an inclusive family history, but unlike the letters, they have some success in bringing Moishe closer to people he never knew and knitting him into a familial fabric torn by tragedy. Photographs appear throughout the novel and represent an attempt to know. The entire work
might be considered a type of family album, a “portrait-chronicle” in the sense Sontag and Hirsch invoke. The photographs in the first section contain the most obvious references to how such pictures can be used to teach about a family, especially in the absence of the people who form that family. Mother, father and brother each use photographs to educate young Moishe about his family in Poland. His mother shows him pictures from a shoebox of keepsakes. She tells him about each person in the photographs, and the sense of these people as part of a unit is punctuated by an actual photograph of the mother and her sisters surrounding their own mother. The picture screams family. Four faces stare at the camera together, posed yet holding hands or with their arms around one another. There are no spaces between the bodies, and each face looks like a variation of the others. This becomes Moishe’s mode of learning what family is and who the members of his family are, and the reader too recognizes their reality because he sees them in a photograph. The age of the photograph is visible in its rounded corners and the girls’ dresses, and its being from another time authenticates it further. León also explains to Moishe about family. He says that his father had a mother — a “mámele” — and that this is his grandmother — his “búbele” (27). Her photograph follows this exchange and both Moishe and the reader get a sense of her having existed and what she was like, at least insofar as what she looked like. The photograph provides a way for her to seem real and for Moishe to know her.

But, even as these pictures aid in the construction of an organized family story by constituting a dependable bridge to the past, they bring with them a ghostly quality which is both helpful and harmful to Moishe/Rosencoff’s attempt to give himself a family line. This tension is most visible in the same photographs from the first section, for they play with the childlike understanding of what a photograph is and what family is. When León shows his younger brother the picture of their grandmother, Moishe displays a sense of knowing her and not
knowing her: “Yo nunca la vi. Bueno, la vi. Papá le hizo una foto” (27). Here, there is an intrinsic grasp of the tension in a photograph. She has somewhat of a real existence for him because he saw her photograph. But, his understanding is still muddled; he has seen her and has not. Above the actual photograph of the grandmother, Moishe clarifies his version of what he has been taught about family: “Ahora ya sé. Las búbbeles son las mámeles que están en una foto” (28). The photograph almost replaces the grandmother. The reader wonders if the boy thinks the two are one and the same. He later betrays an understanding of photography that believes pictures to actually take a piece of the person whom they depict. Though he later learns that this not the case, he does worry that “cuando a uno le hacen una foto duele mucho” (31). Therefore, when Moishe thinks that grandmothers are mothers in photographs, the line between a person and the object representing him or her gets rather cloudy. Nevertheless, this is as close as the boy can get to connecting to his family, to making the family in Poland real to him. After this statement, the grandmother appears to the reader, a disembodied bust on a dirty, fading background. She is the woman Moishe speaks of and just her image, both more real and more distant. The photograph of the mother’s family and the boy’s comments on it capture even more pointedly the ghostly aspect of these family photographs. Because of a misapprehension of the relationship between photograph and reality, Moishe collapses the photographs with the women they represent. He thinks that his mother “en la caja de zapatos tiene a las hermanas de ella” (21). This linguistic play in which the photographs are the sisters is the expression of a child’s clumsy use of language and incomprehension of the world, but it is also the collapse of the referent into its image. The girls become the object, rendering to them a type of death, and the object becomes the girls, giving it a type of life. The family’s only existence in young Moishe’s life is a ghostly one, and their pictures seal this fate even as they try to combat it.
As Moishe/Rosencoff’s pursuit of his family continues into his adulthood, photographs continue to be one of the main objects by which he seeks them. He travels to Poland and Auschwitz to search for details of his family. While visiting the concentration camp, he finds a corridor full of photographs of former prisoners and reports that “yo siento algo” which he translates as “[a]quí estuvieron, aquí están” (66). It is unclear if the “theys” of “they were here; they are here” refers to the family members or the photographs, but the uncertainty of both time frame and referent makes sense given the context and the understanding of family with which Moishe grew up. Here, photographs are ghostly not only because they incarnate the subject-object confusion of the ones Moishe saw as a child, but also because this is combined with strong, unclassifiable sensations – an “algo” – and the indiscriminate layering of multiple times. Mauricio looks through the “galería de fotografías de rostros famélicos,” lined up as a makeshift grave that others have honored with flowers (66). He expects to find ghosts here, for the corridor is a graveyard and a hall of ghosts, where an occasional survivor is pictured, “[a]lguien que murió pero está vivo” (66). He searches for his family in this place by looking for “el apellido, o por un aire, porque puedo comparar foto con foto, aquellas que mamá guardaba en la caja de zapatos, ‘y esta es Anna y este Samuel y la de aquí Sarita”’ (66). He hunts for them by searching through photographs. He believes he can use this way of knowing them from his childhood, from the shoebox where they existed, to find them. He looks for an “aire,” a resemblance, an essence that he knows from photographs. The childhood understanding of his family persists in front of these photographs, but without the childlike filter on the world, these pictures reveal their ghostly existence for Mauricio.

Mauricio/Rosencoff explicitly links his father to these images. He thinks of the survivors’ pictures, and explains their subjects as being like his father. They are the ones who “muri[eron]
pero est[án] vivo[s], como tú papá, cuando moriste en la guerra y retornaste andrajoso, pero retornaste” (66). He is describing a scene from his father’s youth in Poland when he returned from World War I and his family had presumed him dead. The comment might also be read as referring to the father in general, for in this section of the book, called “La carta,” Mauricio/Rosencoff writes a letter to his absent father. Absent because the father never would have received the letter when the son composed it, absent because by the time he wrote it down, the father was already gone, and absent because, to some extent, the father’s life was always a bit of a mystery to his son. The father’s ghostly existence elucidates the need for Mauricio/Rosencoff to make the man appear present, especially given his sensation that the two share a biography (60). But, the explicit linking of haunting family photographs and the father as ghost should not go unremarked, for the same connection frames the first two pictures of the father to appear in the novel. The picture of the father in uniform standing over the mother and another of the Rosencoff men in their Poland tailor shop immediately follow the first telling of the father’s ghost story, that is, when he went off to war and his family did not recognize him upon his return to work with them. Though this placement announces to the reader that the man pictured here is a ghost, the photographs are still printed here in service of the creation of a tidy timeline of the father’s life. They work with the text in a way that corroborates its facts and underline the elusiveness of the man they try to bring to life. Ultimately, within the world of the novel, the photographs have an ambivalent status. They have the power of truth, of evidence, which makes them apt tools for composing a biography, but they are also credited with possessing a certain life which exceeds their boundaries, something which gives them an affective pull. When they are not haunting themselves, the images depict ghosts, and death is never far from these pictures.
Much of what makes the photographs haunting within the novel is their context, is how the novel frames the attitude towards these photographs and the people they depict. Moishe/Rosencoff knows that he is looking at pictures of ghosts, and in some places this is conveyed as pictures as ghosts. This context is also what makes the photographs haunting to the reader, to a person not implicated in the consequences of the story. Principally, pictures might haunt a text – and by extension the reader – by contesting it, by providing a meta-textual narrative that counters that of the story. This is a more recent tendency that Magdalena Perkowska signals in *Pliegues visuales*. She opens by explaining the habit of reading “imagetexts,” that is works that include photographs with writing or vice versa,\(^\text{101}\) as composed of two aspects which work in tandem. In “novelas fotográficas,” the pictures “parecen ser un complemento documental, un elemento de veridicción que corrobora los hecho enunciados en la narrativa” (56). This use is apparent in Mauricio/Rosencoff’s attempt to forge a type of family album in the pages of *Las cartas* as already addressed. Yet, photographs can trouble, or haunt, a text in several ways. They hold the act of representation up for scrutiny. They can signal the temporal distance between event and telling; they can “fractura[r] la superficie aparentemente lisa del texto, creando estos pliegues y complejidades que cuestionan la inmediatez referencial asociada con el discurso histórico o documental” (Perkowska, *Pliegues* 88). They can even tell a story which runs counter to that being told in the text.\(^\text{102}\) Their corroborative powers diminish upon phenomenological and meta-textual consideration.

Yet, this is not really what occurs in *Las cartas*. The photographs do make apparent certain time gaps and the struggle with representation. But, the novel seems aware of the disconnect

\(^{101}\) Perkowska credits J.T. Mitchell with the coinage of this phrase in his volume *Picture Theory* (1994) (*Pliegues* 17).

\(^{102}\) Perkowska’s “‘El ojo de la guerra y la mirada ilusionada: Reflexiones sobre el corpus fotográfico en ‘La llegada (Crónica con ‘Ficción’)’ de José Luis González” gives a great example of this.
between the desire for a coherent story that gives a family shape and brings its memory close to the present and the reality that this is impossible. The pictures appear dark and tragic, and the context provided to them by the novel encourages that reading. The text contributes to the haunting aspect of the photographs not through an antagonistic relationship, but rather by giving the reader a supporting context. This is what allows the photographs to appear haunting to those with no preexisting affective connection to their subjects. The story explains that these people are dead and that trauma surrounds their deaths in every way possible. The text tells the reader that the context is one of dictatorship, Holocaust, loss of family and the absence of identitary connection and pairs these details with the faces of children and grandmothers known to be dead. This contextual frame enables the photographs to reach beyond the pages where they are printed.

4.6. Poste restante: Ghost Album of a Family

Poste restante is not easily classifiable. Part travelogue, part memoire, part diary and part fiction, Rimsky’s first novel chronicles the story of what follows her finding a photo album from the 1930s and 1940s in a flea market in Santiago. Thinking that the “Rimsky” written on the cover refers to her family, she takes this collection of pictures from a family vacation as the impetus for a journey searching for her family’s origins. Like Rosencoff’s work, it combines letters, photographs and narrative in an attempt to forge a family album of sorts, in order to heal a gap in knowledge produced by trauma and distance, and with the aim of filling in the unknowns that contribute to an unsettled identity. One of the salient differences between these two works, however, is that while both use pictures, in the present novel, the family photographs do not actually appear. Rather, they are manifest only as descriptions, set off, given their own space, yet definitively not there. The effect is haunting. This absence well expresses the existence of Rimsky’s family for the writer/protagonist and the ambivalence of allowing
inventions to stand in for facts. The album does not and could not possibly depict her family, as it was highly unlikely that Jews were vacationing in the Austrian countryside in 1940. The present absence of the photographs therefore makes clear what she seeks from this album and the journey it inspires while communicating to the reader the frustrating sense of uncanny that surrounds her past and any attempts to access it.

4.6.1. Looking for a Link

Cynthia Rimsky is the granddaughter of immigrants to Chile, and the major trauma which governs her family’s past is that of immigration and the hardships implied in the act of exile. Though she knows little of that history, she sees traces of the old countries in her parents’ behavior. She remarks on this in her mother’s practice of saving plastic bags because, at the time of her grandparents’ living in Ukraine, they were scarce. There is a tragic tone in the comment that “su madre no recuerda el nombre de su abuelo ni del pueblo donde vivió éste, pero atesora las bolsas plásticas en un país donde sobran” (140). Essential pieces are missing, but the habits are still there. Cynthia/Rimsky wishes she had this knowledge: the grandfather’s name, the location of his town, the shape of the lives that came before hers. The brief mentions of her youth repeatedly comment on the denial or absence of such information. She recalls asking her grandmother about growing up as an immigrant in Chile:

Cuando preguntaba detalles de su infancia en Temuco, recuerdos simples, un juguete, el primer baile, Rosa S. respondía que su vida era demasiado triste para una jovencita con todo el tiempo por delante…Y con el mismo velo cubría la incertidumbre de su vida y la de su nieta. (125)

The author/protagonist is deliberately denied the details of her grandmother’s life, and this shrouds not only that woman’s biography in uncertainty, but that of her granddaughter as well. Ironically, Rosa S. refuses to give her this information because she fears that such sadness will
disrupt the linear trajectory of her life. But, by not giving her a past, she leaves the granddaughter to be ever facing backwards, scrambling to make her origins take shape. The result of this heritage – or its obstinate lack – is that Cynthia/Rimsky is haunted by what she does not know yet knows is missing. From the beginning, she establishes that for her, “[l]a historia familiar se convirtió más en una pregunta por el olvido que en una certeza de la cual asirse, fragilidad que se traslada al nombre, ya que muchos inmigrantes vieron cómo el funcionario de aduana chileno inscribía a los Cohen como Kohen, Levy como Levi” (10). This feeling of lost yet haunting family history – a loss that continues inscribed in a name – is visible in her obsession with exile, her family’s and that of others. It is a near constant theme, exhibited most deeply in the sense that the narrator/protagonist feels lost. Though this is obvious in the very inspiration for the work, it also comes across in the structure of the novel. The text mixes media and genres. As already mentioned, it is not easily classified, combining memoire, travelogue, fiction, letters, emails and omniscient narrative. While this narrative is more or less linear, possessing a beginning, middle and end, the generic mixing combined with a fairly unpredictable vacillation between first and third person well communicates Cynthia/Rimsky’s tenuous grip on her own biography and identity.

Both the album and the journey it inspires are meant to give some shape to her family’s past and by extension, to the narrator herself. She feels the need for some sense of proof, some physical trace that will link her to origins. She seeks this first in Israel, where she finds neither family members nor records of them. She goes to the Department of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Tel Aviv looking for clues about her family and has little luck. She goes to the Diaspora Museum, where “hay un servicio computacional donde los visitantes se informan acerca de su árbol genealógico. Escribe sus apellidos en un papel. –Lo siento –dice la funcionaria
al cabo de unos minutos. –¿No existen? –No los tenemos registrados” (27). For the protagonist, the family’s not being registered is the same as not existing at all. The text tries to render this existence in a variety of ways. On the page after her interaction at the museum, there is a photograph of her family names written in Ukrainian on a crumpled piece of paper. Presumably, it helped her to ask about them as she neither speaks the language nor knows how to write in it. The photograph is evocative of her distance, of her struggle, but it is also a mode of making her name appear somewhere, even if not where she seeks to find it. Other photographs in the text can be seen as attempting something similar. She includes pictures of maps she used in almost every place she traveled. This sort of official evidence supports the reality of her trip and of these places, both of which are increasingly necessary as she seems to feel more and more lost as her journey progresses and because her ultimate destinations are the former towns of her grandparents. The inclusion of an evidentiary type object like a photograph which depicts an certified document like a map draws on multiple sources of authority – among them, her having actually been to these places, the reproduction possible in a photograph, the reliability of a published source. It grounds her journey and makes the stops in its trajectory more real. Additionally, putting maps of Tel Aviv, London and Jerusalem in the same volume as ones of Ulanov and Kazimierz – her grandparents’ places of exile which now bear no trace of them – forces these sites into the same realm of recognizable existence as large, well-known cities. Even if she cannot find a record of her grandparents and great-grandparents’ having been in these places, at least she can establish one of her having been there and searching for them.

The text can be interpreted as part travel record and part family album, and both are meant to help her organize an image of herself. She states very clearly that “viajar es una forma de mirarse: no al espejo, sino en el charco” (143), and this work is the story of that “viaje” and an
earnest attempt to document it and to have the book act as the journey itself. The text is a scrapbook of sorts, including maps and even photographs of receipts and budget calculations from her journal. But its other choices seem to surpass its sense of registering facts and tip into its being the act itself. Instead of a final “índice,” it has an “Itinerario,” which lists all the places she went. Whether it is purely a record of her trip or verges on a stand in for her figurative travel mirror – or puddle, as she clarifies – this physical object is meant to reflect her in an organizing and informative way. A similar thing is expected from the text’s incorporation of the family “photos” along with its many “Álbum de familia” chapters. These chapters tend to have “pictures” from the album Cynthia/Rimsky discovered in Santiago along with stories of her family’s past and chronicles of her current globe-trotting search for their past. All of these – the family narrative, the journey of discovery, the album she found, and the concept of a family album in general – all contribute to a construction of self. This is a physical “portrait-chronicle” realized from many angles.

4.6.2. Photographic Ghosts

The text and the pictures it incorporates fight the haunting sense Cynthia/Rimsky has inherited through their relationship to proof and their material existence. The album photographs along with the album itself are introduced in the first pages with particular attention to their physicality and the intersection of this physicality with that of the book in which they are printed. The very first chapter is one of the many titled “Álbum de familia” and it describes the author/protagonist’s discovery of the album. It reports when she found it and where, its dimensions, and the dimensions of its photographs:

Un domingo de octubre de 1998, encontró en el mercado persa de avenida Arrieta, en Santiago, un pequeño álbum rectangular de 11,5 x 9 centímetros con las tapas forradas en un tapiz de reconocible origen extranjero. Las fotografías
This description is excessively detailed, and this attention gives the impression that the importance of this object as an object, particularly as one that went through human hands, was composed, put together and marked, cannot, for the author/protagonist, be overstated. She wants to connect with this object as a link to her familial past, to touch what they touched and feel implicated in their composition of family. She goes on to describe looking at the first photograph, and “al dar vuelta la página y ver la primera fotografía” so too does the reader (9). This mutual page turning by author/protagonist and reader may be coincidental, but the effect, purposeful or not, is that both come upon the first picture together. In a sense, each “experimentó la emoción del viajero cuando escoge un camino desconocido” (10). Again, the album and the journey are collapsed into the same physical object, the object the reader now has in his or her hands.

The principal – and purposeful – roadblock to either the text or the album completely serving the goal of laying ghosts to rest is that the photographs do not appear, and their absence is a major feature of the text. In the novel, there are actual photographs in the novel of places, objects and souvenirs from Cynthia Rimsky’s journey, but the pictures from the album are only described. They are set off and written in smaller type – a feature which gives them a certain physical autonomy – but this quality which puts the picture-text on a different plane than the words which surround it underlines their present absence rather than supports their physically being there. This effect is perhaps most uncanny in the instances where photographs that are missing show up in the same way as those which are described. Twice, whole pages are occupied
by the announcement “[e]n las siguientes páginas del álbum faltan sus fotografías…” (96) or “[e]n las siguientes seis páginas del álbum faltan las fotografías” (132). Being there and not being there shows up in the same way. The photographs then haunt doubly, by their own present absence and by that of their subjects. Their haunting might be considered to be triple, for the subjects described are also only place holders for Cynthia’s own family members that she hoped to catch a glimpse of in this found album. These descriptions incarnate a multi-layered present-absence, and the ways in which they appear parallel those of a ghost. Sometimes, they surge up in the middle of a coherent thought or story; the first one even interrupts mid-sentence.

Sometimes, they occupy their own pages between chapters, emphasizing the fragmented nature of the whole text. With the exception of the first one and the scene in which a friend removes one of the photographs to decipher when it was from, none of the “pictures” is particularly related to the plotline in which it appears. Their contents seem to have little to do with what surround them, even if occasionally, they seem as if they might. Whether coded meta-commentaries on the rest of the text or merely a distraction, they ultimately drag the eye and the mind away from the narrative in a gesture that will not allow the reader to move comfortably with the story. The “pictures” pepper the text as constant reminders of questions still unanswered.

That the photographs are described rather than reprinted facilitates certain meditations on the ghostly qualities of photographs in general. A majority of the “pictures” end in ellipses, alluding to the idea that while any photograph and these photograph-descriptions in particular look circumscribed, their contents are not actually completely closed off. Their descriptions can only be provisionally finished. It is difficult to determine what exactly the ellipses indicate – that there is more to the photograph than what can be told, that its subjects continued forward past this moment – but even without knowing what is missing, the punctuation points to the idea that
there is always something more which escapes representation. The ellipses give each “picture” an unfinished quality which prevents them from being seen as objects with definitive boundaries. The “pictures” are told in present tense, a convention typical of captions, to which these photograph-descriptions could easily be compared. But in this context, when the people and events are clearly valued for being from the past, the decision to narrate them in the present can be interpreted as underlining their photographic existence over any actual one they may have had before or as an attempt to invest them with new or continued life. This vacillation between dead object and living subject continues in a number of ways, and undermines typical conceptions of time and any fixed ontological status that might be attributed to the photographs. Sometimes, the descriptions are flat, mere verbless lists recounting the objects making up the composition. Printed by itself, there is “[u]n bote a la deriva, en la parte posterior, sobre una tabla que sirve de asiento, una joven en traje de baño…” (69). There is no action in this description; the girl, the boat, the “picture” itself float immobile in the middle of the page. This sort of account plays up their lifelessness, focusing more on their status as photographs than as a moment capturing someone or something with its own life force. While most do not, some descriptions even go so far as to focus specifically on these “photographs” as photographs. They speak of “[u]na isla fotografiada desde tierra firme” (33) or “[u]na montaña pedregosa enfocada desde abajo” (100), and by referring to the mechanisms of their making as part of what they are, they never let the reader forget their status as objects that were made.

But, many of the “photographs” pointedly retain vitality. Their alive quality evokes a more typical uncanny aspect of pictures wherein the subject is and is not there, is and is not still alive, is and is not flattened by the process of being photographed. In one of the first, an “adolescente en traje de baño levanta los talones del suelo y extiende los brazos hacia el cielo: la
pelota ha salido fuera de cuadro y el movimiento se congela…” (11). Here, the girl is in movement; though it is suspended – frozen, as the description has it – it is clear that the action had a before and an after that exceeds the frame in both time and space. The verbs train the viewer/reader’s eye on the girl as a person; they give the subject life as does the notion that just a moment before someone through the ball and in the next moment, she will catch it. Something similar occurs with the “photograph” just before this one. The very first “picture” is simply a waterfall, but in the second, “[u]na niña en traje de baño, sentada en una roca, roba la atención que concita la caída de agua en segundo plano…” (10). The verb at the center of this description has powers akin to those described in the analysis of the girl with the ball, but the idea that she steals the focus from the waterfall takes this a step farther. The girl with the ball exceeds her frame by being someone whose life extends backwards and forwards; this girl’s life extends out towards the camera. She steals not only the focus from the waterfall, but abilities from the apparatus meant to capture her. She is not just a subject in an object, but one who decides the terms of her objectification and, in so doing, transcends it.

Some of the “photographs” acquire a certain liveliness when they are seen as part of a collection. Subjects who may have once appeared as the paused hiccup on a forward trajectory or flat objects in the photographic plane begin to move as many “photographs” of them are seen one after another. A woman on skis – interjected, in fact, in the grandmother’s non-story of her childhood – goes from static to moving as the photograph-descriptions of her progress. In the first, she is “[u]na mujer sobre esquías en la nieve…” (125). In the second, she remains just as motionless: “[l]a mujer sobre los esquías en el mismo lugar…” (126). She does not seem to have moved even in the past. Yet, the third “photograph” corrects both reader and narrator’s notions of her: “[t]omada a una mayor distancia, la fotografía revela que la mujer sobre los esquías
siempre estuvo en camino…” (128). Seen in a series, this woman must be reconsidered and granted some element of being alive. Nevertheless, the subject-object tension remains because it is the camera’s movement which reveals hers. Additionally, there is a question here as to whether the woman on skis might be an oblique comment on the narrator/protagonist herself, who at this point in the novel seems to be more lost and stuck than at some stage of a larger trajectory. Metaphoric or not, it is worth noting that the woman on skis gains her liveliness by being part of a coherent whole. There is a symbiosis between the “pictures” and the concept of an album. As described, the being in an album can give the subjects life, but the agency of the subjects, especially in their reappearances, gives the album coherence as well. The bathers of one “picture” are a “grupo de personas que aparecen en fotografías anteriores” (141), while a white wall becomes a real place by its association as “donde antes se fotografiaron el militar austriaco y la mujer con sombrero y cartera, que en una fotografía posterior hizo caminar a un perro por sus patas delanteras” (172). While in Las cartas, it is the novel which draws the photographs together, these “photographs” can, especially as things described and therefore pre-determined in their presentation, reach towards one another to make a whole object. The album’s coherence as an object should not be forgotten because it is in this aspect that it has the eeriest power. This thing, found out of context, dictates the actions of the writer/protagonist. Not only does she initiate her trip because of it, but later, she decides to alter her plans to better reflect what it contains.

In the end, Cynthia/Rimsky is unsuccessful in her attempt to write herself a family album. This is most obvious in the fact that the fragmented style of the text does not change throughout...

---

103 Barthes comments on how the “object-signs” of single photograph can change their meaning within the lexicon of a picture when forming part of a series (Image-Music-Text 24-5).
and the vacillating of the narrative voice, from first person to third and back again, only becomes more pronounced and frequent. By the time she makes it to her grandfather’s native Ulanov towards the end of the novel, the third person begins to appear in diary-type sections previously only written in first and switches back and forth in the space of a single paragraph. The album and its photographs were supposed to guide her through a journey of self-discovery by leading her to her family’s past, and while they constitute the excuse for her to go there, neither the places nor the pictures provide the information or closure that she seeks. The album has enough power to haunt her, but not to answer the questions opened by that haunting. They do not even do so partially as they do in Las cartas. This may account for the photographs’ absence in the text because, since this family is not hers, their pictures are simply more curious blanks in her life. It is clear that she believes in the ability of photographs to sustain a personal story because one of the photographs from the album does appear in the novel. Finally admitting that the “Rimski” printed on the cover was a reference to particular Roman baths rather than a misspelling of her last name, Cynthia/Rimsky goes to Jezersko to see the places she has carried around throughout her journey. She shows the owner of the place where she is staying her album, and the woman finds something which looks familiar: “Es la fotografía de la primera casa que constuyeron sus abuelos – donde ella nació –, y que estuvo todos estos años extraviada en Chile. Saca la fotografía del marco de papel. Su biografía está completa. La de ella, entretanto…” (185-6). Cynthia/Rimsky gives this photograph to the woman, and it is reprinted in the text. It is given the proof-like reality of an actual appearance because for this woman, the place was and is real, the place was and is part of her biography. This closing gesture also summarizes the great expectation of this album and its not being fulfilled in Cynthia/Rimsky’s case. For the woman, her “biografía está completa.” The author/protagonist’s biography, on the other hand, remains a
“meanwhile” followed by the same ellipses seen time and again in the photograph-descriptions scattered throughout the novel. Her biography is unfinished, suspended, as present an absence as the photographs meant to help her compose it.

4.7. Conclusion

Authors and protagonists are able to extract different levels of closure and connection from the ghostly objects which they encounter in these texts. Sometimes, it is by engaging these things as paths to resolution that characters reap the unexpected gifts of their haunting. Sometimes, they reveal that haunting is inevitable and perhaps desirable, especially when the alternative is nothing at all. The tensions manifest in these objects of memory, in these items which house both life and death, past and present, definition and elusiveness, attract and repel their new owners. In some cases, these objects exhibit the haunting qualities one might expect from them. They condense irreparable grief, unending yearning, and unbroachable distance like the unopened letter in Las cartas or the cameo for Salomón in El alma. Sometimes, they make room for new uses and instantiations of the past in the present, as they do in “Objetos personales.” In other instances, these objections are merely provisional answers which show case their inability to ever be more than that, to be more than temporary or make shift. This can be extracted from Mauricio Rosencoff’s attempt to make photographs contribute to a coherent story of family and self. In Cynthia Rimsky’s work, these themes are even further exaggerated, and while her conclusions are less than hopeful, the engagement with process instigated by contact with haunted objects points in a positive direction. Ultimately, these things which manifest a play with time, that trouble the boundary between subject and object, provide ground for working out what the descendants of those affected by trauma can expect from the past and how they might control how that past exists in their present.
Conclusions without Endings

Ambivalent attitudes surround haunting. On the one hand, it inspires fear. It signifies the persistence of pain – of trauma, of loss, of unredressed wrongs. It points to a lack of control. Coming and going as they please, ghosts mock the sovereignty of individuals over their lives and their realities. They undo the most certain of borders by persisting past death and blur the lines which maintain the separation of subjects and objects, present and absent, now and then. They undermine the steadiest of ground, and they promise to continue to do so. On the other hand, haunting is also comforting. It reassures the bereaved that the dead are never truly gone, that a deep feeling still connects the living to what they have lost. The refusal of closure that so disturbs one’s sense of time, place and self also bears a redemptive potential. Perhaps mysteries can still be revealed, crimes answered for, histories reevaluated. Haunting is a condemning and hopeful symbol, and characters in these works must embrace their haunting in both of these aspects. For these people, there is little relationship to the past not colored by haunting. They are the descendants of exiles and victims of trauma. As Jews and as citizens of postmodernity, they are the inheritors of a culture with a particular relationship to memory and with a history which seems to make that relationship inescapable. To refuse haunting would be to refuse the past, and though living unfettered and unthreatened by the events of another time and place might seem appealing, it would make people unreflecting, memory short and both personal and group identity impossible.

While Jews are not the only people susceptible to haunting, we have seen that certain religious, cultural and historical factors effecting those in Latin America open this particular people to a haunted relationship with the past. The principal of these is a proximity to trauma. The authors and protagonists of the works examined are normally children and grandchildren of exiles and occasionally the exiles themselves. Memories of persecution and flight combine with
grief over a lost homeland or relatives lost in it. Pogroms, penury and the Holocaust live on in
the minds of immigrants who bequeath them to their descendants. The latter belong to the
generation of postmemory, those who, without having been to the time and place of before, still
preserve affective memories of it. Parents and grandparents pass down their experiences to their
progeny in various forms, often as either an excess of information (as we might say of El
boxeador polaco, Signor Hoffman and Tela de sevoya) or its utter lack (central to Lenta
biografía, “Volver a Berlín,” and Poste restante). The birthright of these children of immigrants
is at best the nostalgia and melancholia associated with loss and at worst pregnant silences. Such
silences do not save their listeners pain. Maintained through anger and sorrow, they shroud the
past in a magnetic mystery even as they leak hints of what the hide. Growing up in these
conditions, of too much and too little past lingering on, is not only the perfect circumstances to
foster haunting – for the production of ghosts, haunted places and ghostly objects –, it is already
haunting itself.

Even if ignoring memory and culture packaged in this way were possible, the pull to
know the past would persist among these Jewish children and grandchildren of immigrants. On
the American continent, their roots are shallow, and the lost homeland and the people of it hold
the fantasy of a less complicated selfhood. The locus of authentic identity has been displaced to
far away, long ago and permanently gone. A more tenuous and complex sense of identity might
be said to classify all people living in today’s globalized world. This is part of our postmodern
reality; singular narratives of self, nation, history are no longer tenable even if they are
comforting. To a certain degree, rootlessness classifies the condition of all modern citizens, but,
for exiles and Jews, it has long been a theme. It engenders a seeking of ghosts, remembering the
absence of a vanished home, and, occasionally, an active preservation of the type of time which
sustains haunting. Jews recount the story of the Exodus every year, and each new expulsion, from the Spanish one of 1492 to those which brought the majority of Jews to Latin America, is linked to all the others which came before. This lack of roots, or roots which grow out over roads and oceans rather than down to a bedrock, unites with a vision of history which frames their being taken as repetitive instantiations of the same event. New rootless children are modern versions of ancient Jewish brethren who shared this experience. This is an explicit theme of some works – like *Lenta biografía* and *Tela de sevoya* –, but even in those in which it is not, the ambivalent preserving and combating of a sense of dispersal still lurks at the heart of the relationship to the past. Jewish identity inherited in the Americas combines a yearning for a lost or unattainable sense of permanence and security with a non-linear concept of history. Communicating the past in this way is a Jewish mandate of sorts, an overriding responsibility to previous and future generations.

This relationship to the past may be born of – and sustained by – a melancholic condition, but it is infused with an ethics and a great deal of hope. This is most visible in conversations taking place in the broader, non-Jewish environment which shapes the 20th and 21st century definition of haunting. As we saw in the first chapter, the idea that we should have an ever-renewing experience of the past, one that demands action and attention, is the main thrust of both Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida’s tracts on attitudes towards history – that is, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and *Specters of Marx*. In some ways, the debates they address in this vein predict our contemporary relationship to history in general, and the persistent, volatile sense of past has implications for the identities and personal relationships of those who experience it

---

104 Though the philosophical and psychanalytic texts which help elucidate modern haunting are written in a secular vein, I feel it would be remiss to not point out that many of the thinkers who helped frame these thoughts were Jewish. Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida all identified as Jewish even if they did not necessary practice Judaism as a religion.
most acutely. But, the ideas they introduce also raze ground for constructing new realities and perceptions of them. We might learn to be comfortable with multiplicity, boundary blurring a growing acknowledgement of our lack of control.

Despite an unavoidable and almost preferable relationship to the past as one mediated by haunting, the impulses it inspires always aim towards resolution, whether, from the outset, such resolution is perceived as possible or even the true purpose of the process undertaken to achieve it. Either by making them alive or, more often, by conferring on them a definitive death, the actions stimulated by ghosts are assumed with the initial intention of being rid of them, even when those haunted recognize that ghosts may be the only link they have to an identifying history. Every work analyzed here encounters these tensions – the disquiet of being haunted and the comfort of the promises it seems to hold, the promise of a sense of singularity and security and the knowledge that this is neither possible nor ethical. Sergio Chejfec and Eduardo Halfon would like their respective father and grandfather to constitute a knowable presence with a closed past, but they can neither muster this reality nor stomach the idea of having these men go from present absences to being totally gone. Love binds them to their progenitors as does the need for a genealogy, a stabilizing heritage. Myriam Moscona and Eliah Germani’s Frau Grunwald would like their parents’ places of origin to sit comfortably in the realm of family memory – preferably the memory of their parents and grandparents –, but they are drawn to these places nonetheless. They wrestle with what they cannot part with but wish would let them live in peace. The same is true of Mauricio Rosencoff and Cynthia Rimsky’s relationships to the frozen faces of their family albums. Haunting is disturbing and seductive, and the characters analyzed here go toward that which haunts them in part because they cannot help but do so. There is a desire to end the disruption haunting creates in their lives and to enjoy its promise of connection.
Both of these goals search for something static, resolved, knowable and bounded, yet the instigation to process is the most rewarding and revelatory gift the ghostly can provide. It is perhaps also the only thing engaging with haunting can reliably deliver.

Ghosts demand action, and authors and characters must go through the motions that might lay them to rest. Traditionally, not doing so condemns the haunted to suffer only the negative aspects of ghosts, as we see in the case of the son in La vida a plazos de don Jacobo Lerner. His father is a ghost, and Efraín has recourse neither to giving him more shape nor to wholly dismissing the man’s image from his life. The boy languishes, helplessly contaminated by this existence. Unsure of who he is and his place in the world, he is doomed to a ghost-life of his own. In attempting to lay his ghosts to rest and avoid an incipient feeling that fears the fate of someone like Efraín, the author/protagonist of Lenta biografía presents a compromised solution to the problem of haunting. Unable to truly know his father’s past yet repeatedly reminded of it, Sergio Chejfec contents himself with a fiction and takes what he can from the process of creating it. The fiction may not be truth, but as a story with an end, it can help constitute his beginning.

Another generation removed from exile and trauma, Halfon’s character attempts to do the same, to force a haunting familial past to form part of a traditional sense of identity by turning it into a narrative. But, as we might expect of someone at one more generational remove from the trauma which forged his ghosts, he approaches the matter with an ambivalent posture, sensing both the necessity and futility of his actions. The rites of return in the third chapter get to questions of haunted identities specifically as an issue of belonging. Again, solutions are sought through closure and knowledge and achieved through process. Daughters of exile go back to honor their dead, to heal the trauma of expulsion by figuratively returning their parents to their homeland. Frau Grunwald imagines her mother in her old house. Myriam Moscona says Kaddish for her
father in his native city. Concurrently, the women get to render a certain bounded reality to the vague notion of a place of origin. The journeys do not rid them of ghosts, and the sites they visit do not embody the reassuring fixity of stable foundations. But, pursuing these things allows the women to flesh out the language-spaces they were born into and find a new and reassuring relationship with their ghosts.

Time and again, authors and characters try to combat haunting by creating the conditions for the dead to remain dead and for the past to remain fixed in the past. In theory, this is achieved by pushing ghosts into the realm of knowledge and forcing them to stay there. Ultimately, this is an objectifying procedure, which reasserts the living’s hegemony as subject and removes the dead’s ability to exceed their rational place. The problem we find in our analysis is that the objectifying stability brought about by knowledge can only be rendered provisionally and through movement. The disruptive paradoxes of haunting are only neutralized by way of making peace with the coexistence of oppositions and working towards the impossible end of resolving them. Ghostly objects reveal inevitable contradictions from the outset but are also quick to show the benefits of accepting haunting as well. They are all the more disturbing because they embody these contradictions in the most exaggerated possible way. To render something an object is to kill it, to keep it from exercising the uncanny qualities which mock our understandings of reason, the flow of time and the singularity of spaces. An object is a dead thing with its remains on display for all to know. Ghostly objects incarnate the apogee of haunting because its unnerving qualities are placed in the metaphor most effectively employed to combat it, but when señora Kraunik of “Objetos personales” and Mordejai of El alma al diablo give in to these objects, they become a source of strength, helping each to grow and confront that which frightens them.
Photographs constitute a particular type of ghostly object. Proof and trace, a piece of frozen past brought to the future, they are perhaps the most haunting of ghostly objects. In the family albums of Mauricio Rosencoff’s *Las cartas que no llegaron* and Cynthia Rimsky’s *Poste restante*, an attempt is made to have such objects serve a stabilizing narrative of self. Organized in this way, they can contribute to a story of genealogical identity that reinforces an uncomplicated relationship between a transparent familial past and a productive personal present. Again though, this can only be achieved partially and through action. The ghosts which abound in Mordejai’s life in *Las cartas*, which float just out of reach within and beyond the photographs which might contain them, are pushed into a coherent story by a man deeply in need of a sense of solidity. The benefits he reaps from the ghostly photographs is gained more by confronting and attempting to transform their haunting qualities than by giving in to them. But, make-shift as it is, the novel as a sort of family album appears to impart a sense of resolution to a man who now has a future and family of his own. For him, the fiction is mostly sufficient; he still finds a way, however faulty or fictional, to forge a traditional timeline, to make his ghosts behave somewhat reliably. The family album within *Poste restante* as well as that constituted by the work itself take the idea of haunting photographs to their extreme, and, again as we might expect from someone who is younger and at a further generational remove from trauma, Cynthia Rimsky makes a point of the impossibility of closure. She attempts to use a family album and the journey it prompts as a mode of knowing the past and organizing herself, but her efforts send her increasingly adrift. This granddaughter of exile allows an album that likely does not belong to her family to inspire her trip and displays its pictures in a gesture that can be read as the pinnacle of ghostliness: the photographs are described and not printed; they show the figurative absences from her life through their literal absence in the work. Rimsky goes through the motions meant
to resolve ghosts more out of compulsion than out of a real expectation that they will dispel them.

Writing seems to be the best mode of combatting – or at least confronting, as in the cases of second-generation authors Eduardo Halfon and Cynthia Rimsky – haunting and the disturbing situations from which it results. Writing, especially the writing represented by these works, combines process and objectification as it channels haunting elements into an organized narrative set into a material thing, that is, a book. Books come up repeatedly throughout these works. The photo album Rimcksy turns to for answers is ultimately a book. It is an object meant to give a coherent narrative of a time, place and family through pictures. Frau Grunwald takes Doctor Finkelstein’s treatise back to Chile with her as an embodiment of both the doctor’s ghost and her parents’ former life. Books are also the comforting yet ambiguous offering and lesson of Eduardo Halfon’s trip to his grandfather’s former home in Lodz. Before he leaves, Madame Maroszek gives the young man three. The first two represent works composed by Jews who perished in the ghettos. They are copies of books in which two men wrote their lives in the margins. The third is a collection of poems written during Yankele Herszcowitz’s time in the ghetto and published afterwards. One of his refrains, “oh gueto mi amor” (Signor Hoffman 142), gives the title to the story. Eduardo cannot entirely decipher what the woman meant in giving him these books, but he ventures several guesses:

Acaso esto: que lo importante para madame Maroszek era usar papeles escritos como lugar de encuentro y reconciliación. Acaso esto: que lo importante para madame Maroszek era el papel mismo donde alguien escribe su historia…acaso lo importante, para alguien como madame Maroszek, no era dónde escribimos nuestra historia, sino escribirla. Narrarla. Dar testimonio. Poner en palabras nuestra vida entera. Aunque tengamos que escribirla en papeles sueltos o en papeles robados. Aunque tengamos que levantarnos de una última cena para buscar un último papel amarillo. (143)
Books and the paper on which they are written are important for a number of reasons. They are a space of exchange and meeting with ghosts. They are a potential site for telling the self, for asserting and validating one’s existence through text. They, like the yellow paper on which the grandfather wrote his former address for his grandson, are the last connection to the past. They are the occasion that inspires narration. They are a site where essential processes may materialize. But they are not just one of these things are definitively any them. This speculation is just that, a series of redemptive maybes.

Narrative has a specific power as a tool in combatting the condemning features of haunting and melancholia. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian talk in the introduction about Giorgio Agamben’s take on melancholia and loss as having the potential to make space for the “existence of the unreal” (13). From this, they extract:

> [A]pprehensions of and attachments to loss and its phantasms never simply dwell in the past, for the very process of narrativizing loss orients an impulse toward the future. That is, such a process allows remains to apprehend, and to be apprehended by, the future. Those remains, we must emphasize, are no simple reconstructions, as if they were restored ruins installed in a museum as a record of what was. Rather, Agamben’s medieval melancholia materializes the ghostly remains of an unrealized or idealized potential – the unreal image of an unobtainable object that never was and hence was never lost. Indeed, it is precisely by imagining such a space for the remains of the past that those remains can emerge as constricting forces or motivating ideals. (13)

Making a narrative of ghosts is a mode of constructing remains even where there may have been none to be had. Even when the narrative act does not get rid of haunting, in itself, it constitutes remains that can be utilized in forming a productive sense of time in which there is past, present and future. Agamben’s view, as it is broken down here, turns modern stories of ghosts into new, inspiring foundations – “constricting forces or motivating ideals” – of self and history. All the works analyzed here participate in this act, whether they are successful in their attempts or not. This is the fictional father Chejfec creates. It is the journey to Bulgaria and Ladino poetry of
Myriam Moscona’s *Tela de sevoya*. It is Cynthia Rimsky’s diaries and even the invented letters which never arrive in Rosencoff’s novel. Writing allows a provisional taking control of the past and acknowledges that such control can only be rendered through a compromise with haunting that must be ever renewed.

Even when not specifically a narrative, nor a narrative reflecting a traditional causal structure, writing remains a vehicle well-suited to the negotiation of haunting described above. As an action of reason and clarity which produces a coherent object of sorts, writing is well-positioned to make this compromise. But, what happens when writing itself is haunting? The numbers on Halfon’s grandfather’s arm float throughout *El boxeador polaco*. They are evidence of order in the extreme, yet their presence points to death, loss and trauma. The letter which arrives after the War in *Las cartas* is also a type of haunted writing. Yes, it contains answers and might substitute as a tangible symbol for the family that was killed, but it remains unopened within the novel as though to say whatever it contains could never be sufficient in accounting for the loss, in converting the physical and emotional rubble left in the wake of a time of horror into something belonging to the realm of reason. Do these examples point to the idea that some ghosts cannot or should not even be partially laid to rest? Or, are they calling for more to be done; are they part of the first step in the process of honoring the past? Are there some aporia we can or should not seek to resolve? Does such a decree rob haunting of the hopeful aspect we have discovered in it in this analysis? More work is required to probe these queries which point to the limits of representation and the responsibilities we owe in writing personal, familial and world histories. But, as we struggle with what we want from the past as it persists into our present and future, as we increasingly allow it to disturbs our traditional notions of time, we must also
contend with what it expects of us. Haunting may not be perceived as the condemnation it once was, but it is unlikely that ghosts can or should leave us alone any time soon.
Works Cited


___________. Pliegues visuales: Narrativa y fotografía en la novela latinoamericana contemporánea. Iberoamericana; Vervuert, 2013.


