

# ***Dibaxu*: A Comparative Analysis of Clarisse Nicoïdski's and Juan Gelman's Bilingual Poetry**

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This essay reads Argentine poet Juan Gelman's 1994 bilingual Ladino-Castellano book *Dibaxu* in light of its intertextual relationship with Franco-Bosnian author Clarisse Nicoïdski's work, especially her 1986 bilingual Ladino-English poetry collection *Lus ojus, las manus, la boca*. I return to Gelman's text, written in a foreign, diasporic, and Jewish language in order to acknowledge Nicoïdski's work not only as a pre-text, but as a fundamental intertextual source for *Dibaxu*. In doing so, I observe the different reasons these two poets have to use the Ladino language: while Nicoïdski seeks to establish a link with her Sephardic community, Gelman uses the language to escape the limited trappings of a national identity. Both, however, work towards the maintenance, or survival, of Ladino.

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In 1994 the Argentine poet Juan Gelman, one of the most important contemporary Latin American poets, published a bilingual Ladino-Castellano book entitled *Dibaxu*.<sup>1</sup> In his past textual practice Gelman had already called authorship into question, as he emphasized 'altership', by creating different poetic *personae* and translating real and fictitious authors.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, he had developed an authorial fiction accompanied by a translational poetics and practice in previous volumes such as *Traducciones III: Los poemas de Sidney West*,<sup>3</sup> where he invents poets he claims to translate, and *Composiciones*,<sup>4</sup> where he translates or re-writes medieval Spanish Hebrew poems he claims to compose. Following *Citas y Comentarios*, yet another book of exile with which it has to be read, *Dibaxu* epitomizes this trajectory, radicalizing it with the poet's departure from his own language — Castellano — and the inscription of another diasporic and markedly Jewish language: Ladino.

*Dibaxu* consists of twenty-nine poems in Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, translated by the author into Castellano, and presented in a 'facing page translation'. How does an Argentine Jew, from Eastern European origins, in whose home Russian and Yiddish

were spoken, but who wrote only in Castellano, end up writing in the language of the Sephardic Jews, those expelled from the Iberian Peninsula? Elsewhere I have discussed this long process, identifying deterritorialization, intertextuality, and multilingualism as the three central components that prompt an Ashkenazi Latin American Jew to write — and translate — Sephardic poetry.<sup>5</sup> I have shown how Gelman points to a possible (or necessary) permeability of ethnic borders and to a personal, spiritual and cultural process of identity construction when he performs in his work the process I call self-Sephardization.

An aspect to be treated in greater depth is the intertextual relationship he establishes with the work of another Ladino poet — in this case, an ethnically Sephardic Jew and Ladino speaker — the Franco-Bosnian poet Clarisse Nicoïdski. Gelman is usually read on his own and the comparative analysis of his work with Nicoïdski's has not been attempted. I propose to return to Gelman's text, acknowledging Nicoïdski's work not only as a pre-text, but as a fundamental intertextual source for *Dibaxu*. In doing so, I will observe the different reasons these poets have for using the Ladino language: while Nicoïdski seeks to establish a link with her Sephardic community, Gelman uses the language to escape the limited trappings of a national identity defined by an oppressive military regime.

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Gelman wrote *Dibaxu* from 1983 to 1985 while exiled in Europe. In its preface, he writes:

Escribí los poemas de dibaxu en sefardí, de 1983 a 1985. Soy de origen judío, pero no sefardí, y supongo que eso algo tuvo que ver con el asunto. Pienso, sin embargo, que estos poemas sobre todo son la culminación o más bien el desemboque de *Citas y Comentarios*, dos libros que compuse en pleno exilio, en 1978 y 1979, y cuyos textos dialogan con el castellano del siglo XVI. Como si buscar el sustrato de ese castellano, sustrato a su vez del nuestro, hubiera sido mi obsesión. Como si la soledad extrema del exilio me empujara a buscar raíces en la lengua, las más profundas y exiliadas de la lengua. Yo tampoco me lo explico. (*Dibaxu*, p. 7)

This is Gelman's first public acknowledgement that he is Jewish. The formula he uses is not as assertive as one might expect — instead of 'I am Jewish' he uses a more timid 'I am of Jewish origins'. In Spanish, the expression carries the attenuating connotation, but not to the same extent as in English. Most importantly, the word 'origins' is here directly connected to 'Sephardic'. Gelman's Jewishness is affirmed through the negation of Sephardic origins, as he seems to be aware of crossing an ethnic boundary by using Ladino. It is precisely because he is not Sephardic that Gelman feels the need to reveal that he is (at least) Jewish when he decides to write in Ladino, since Ladino is considered the Sephardic language *par excellence*, and, to many, the defining element of a Sephardic identity. The awkward 'and I suppose this had something to do with it', even as it does not reveal what the 'it' refers to, points to the fact that Gelman's 'Jewish origins' contributed to his choice of the Sephardic language.

The central role of language in Gelman's enterprise is clear from the direct linguistic link he establishes between *Dibaxu* and *Citas y comentarios*,<sup>6</sup> a book of exile

where he rewrites Spanish mystics San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa de Ávila and tango lyricists, such as Carlos Gardel, Alfredo Lepera, Discépolo. *Dibaxu* follows *Citas y comentarios*, the result of an extended wrestling with the origins and development of the Spanish language. Gelman engages in what I have called an ‘archaeology of the language’, delving into accumulated layers of the language in reverse order. He begins with present-day Argentine Castellano — ‘our Castellano’ — and proceeds towards sixteenth-century Castellano — named for the Castilian House that dominated the Spanish Empire — in his 1978–1979 books. In the process Gelman retrieves an earlier version of Spanish, one which he calls ‘sefardí’,<sup>7</sup> represented by the language spoken in the Spanish kingdom in the fifteenth century and maintained, with new additions and variations, by the Jews dispersed across different lands after their expulsion in 1492.

Gelman admits that his quest for roots stems from the ‘extreme solitude of exile’, a force that acts upon him and ‘pushes’ him to recover origins. Moved by this force, he delves into the ‘search for roots *within* the language, the most profound and exiled roots *of* the language’. The prepositions conflate a double search: Gelman’s personal search for his roots, specifically, his Jewish roots, and the search for the roots of Castellano, which also play a significant role in shaping Gelman’s identity. But they also speak of the exile of the language, Ladino, and through that, metonymically, they speak of the exile of a people. Prompted by his exile, Gelman approaches Judaism through language: his ‘search for the roots within the language’ deftly follows his earlier sentences, ‘I am of Jewish origins [...] and I assume this had something to do with it’. As for ‘the most profound and exiled roots of the language’ in his text, they point to ‘Sefardí’, or Ladino, as the profound roots of Spanish, recasting it as an essentially exilic language.

Ladino is literally a language of exile. A creation of the Jewish Diaspora after the expulsion from Spain, it exhibits the conservatism typical of languages distanced from their center (hence the retention of fifteenth-century forms), along with the dynamism and fusion resulting from the encounter with several different languages over the ages. It is also a language of exile because with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, where it had survived and flourished, Ladino suffered additional dislocations and losses; then, following the Nazi genocide, it was further marginalized and displaced with the death of most of its speakers. Furthermore, in much of mainstream Jewish culture, and certainly in Gelman’s Jewish world, Ladino is seen as marginal to Hebrew and even to Yiddish. Ladino is also the unknown other for the modern Spanish speakers who are unaware of its presence in the history of their language — hence Gelman’s reference to ‘the most profound and exiled roots *of* the language’.

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At this point I will make a detour to clarify the names ‘Castellano’, ‘Ladino’, and ‘Sefardí’. Not only are these terms still debated among users and scholars, but they also contextualize Gelman’s claims of finding Ladino in his ‘archeology of the language’ and choosing a ‘stateless language’. ‘Castellano’, when used by Gelman to refer to his language, means the Argentine language. ‘Castellano’ was the name chosen to refer to the language spoken in this South American country after intense

debates that took place *c.* 1930, with the participation of the poetic *avant garde*, academics, and politicians. Figures such as Amado Alonso and Jorge Luis Borges were involved in these debates. ‘Spanish’ was understood as the name of the national language of Spain. As Argentina, along with many other recently independent American nations, sought to establish its political and cultural independence from the former metropolis, a different name was deemed necessary to refer to its own specific national language. ‘Castellano’ harkens back to the original settlers, who spoke ‘Castilian’ because they came from the kingdom of Castilla, but, as Amado Alonso argues, the name does not necessarily suggest ‘a man from Castilla’, and does not evoke citizenship, in the way ‘Spanish’ does. Amid nationalistic concerns, ‘Castellano’ eventually prevailed over ‘Spanish’ and the more ambiguous, or vague, ‘national idiom’.<sup>8</sup>

‘Ladino’, when referring to a language, has two different meanings. According to Haïm-Vidal Sephiha, ‘Ladino’ can only be defined as ‘Judeo-Spanish calque’, that is, a liturgical and pedagogical language into which rabbis translated the Hebrew Bible in a literal manner, and which is a fusion of Hebrew syntax and Spanish vocabulary:<sup>9</sup> ‘Ladino is only Hebrew clothed in Spanish, or Spanish with Hebrew syntax’.<sup>10</sup> Sephiha explains that Ladino predates the vernacular Judeo-Spanish, which only appeared around 1620, as a *koiné* of the many varieties of Spanish (from Aragón, León, Cataluña, Galicia, and Castilla) brought with the Jewish exiles after the 1492 expulsion from Spain. Because it was not influenced by the phonetic changes that occurred in the peninsula, it retained more archaic features, and began to be identified by Christian Spanish travellers as a characteristically Jewish language. The Judeo-Spanish language, or even the ‘Judeo-Spanish ethnicity’,<sup>11</sup> only takes shape in the Ottoman Empire and in northern Morocco, and is therefore an exilic phenomenon.

This strict terminology proposed by Sephiha, however, is not necessarily consensual. Whereas most agree that ‘Ladino’, *strictu sensu*, is the liturgical and translational language, the term has acquired a broader and more popular sense among active speakers around the world. Moshe Lazar recognizes that ‘the widespread view that the term “Ladino” is only applicable to the “sacred” language of the Bible translations and prayers, whereas the other names are reserved solely for the spoken language, seems hardly tenable’.<sup>12</sup> Harris<sup>13</sup> and Malinowski<sup>14</sup> show similar results in their studies, reaching the conclusion that an average of 75 per cent of their informants use ‘Espanyol’, and 23 per cent use ‘Ladino’. So, a second, less precise, meaning of ‘Ladino’ is simply the vernacular Judeo-Spanish.

What is certain is that Ladino has traditionally been written with the Hebrew alphabet — more specifically, *ketivad raši*, or ‘letraz de eskritura’, known in English as ‘Rashi characters’ — while for handwritten texts Eastern Sephardis used the cursive script called *solitreo*.<sup>15</sup> Several circumstances, such as wider contact with other languages, forceful ‘modernization’ and westernization, and an increasingly infirm command of Hebrew among speakers, led to the gradual replacement of the Hebrew characters with the orthographies of co-territorial non-Jewish languages. In Turkey, for instance, this happened in 1928 by a decree issued by the new republican power of Mustapha Kemal Pasha, better known as Atatürk. Cyrillic was adopted in Bulgaria, but in most of the Sephardic world Ladino became a language predominantly written with Latin characters.<sup>16</sup>

My attempt at clarifying terms only reveals the lively and ongoing debates about the name of the Sephardic language. The same speaker may use several names, depending on the context — the place and the interlocutor. Israeli poet Margalit Matitiahu affirms that at home she uses ‘Spanyol’ and ‘Muestro spanyol’, but in many articles and official events she writes ‘Ladino’. Many users and scholars alike refer to the language as ‘Ladino’, and ‘I use Ladino’, even as they refer to the vernacular language.

Other possible names of Judeo-Spanish are: *espanyol*, *spanyol*, *muestro espanyol* (in opposition to ‘*espanyol halis*’, from the Turkish), *espanyolit* (as used by Canetti, a calque of the German *Spaniolisch*), *espanyoliko* (a variation of the former, but with the affectionate connotations provided by the diminutive Spanish suffix *-iko*), *djudyo* and *djidyo* (literally ‘Jewish’, a translation of the Turkish *yahudice*, a name given by the Turks to the only Spanish they knew), *djudezmo* (with a Spanish ending that usually marks nouns), *jargon*, a derogatory term used by the speakers themselves, *haketía* (the Moroccan, arabized variation of the language, now practically recastilianized), and *tetuani* (the Algerian variety, from the city of Oran, where the speakers originally came from Morocco). Finally, there is the academic option, *Djudyo-espanyol*, which, in its dynamic evolution and contact with other languages, has bred not only what Sephiha termed ‘Djudyo-franyol’, referring to the contact of Judeo-Spanish and French, but also his suggestion for the variety of Judeo-Spanish developing in interaction with Israeli Hebrew: ‘Djudyo-Isranyol’. An interchangeability between ‘Ladino’ and ‘djudeo-espanyol’ is observed today in several websites and documents about the language (cf. *Ladinokomunità*).

These variations are not exhaustive. To further complicate matters, modern Spanish speakers contribute names such as ‘sefardí’, or ‘español sefardí’. Juan Gelman is one who calls Ladino ‘sefardí’, a term that can be confused with the ethnic group. ‘Ladino’ happens to be a regular Spanish word, an unflattering one at that. The modern usage of the Spanish word ‘ladino’ is ‘cunning, shrewd, wily’,<sup>17</sup> a development from the sixteenth-century ‘astute, clever, wise’. The usage of ‘Sefardí’ to refer to the Sephardic language is unknown anywhere else.

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El acceso a poemas como los de Clarisse Nicoïdski [*sic*], novelista en francés y poeta en sefardí, desvelaron esa necesidad que en mí dormía, sorda, dispuesta a despertar. ¿Qué necesidad? ¿Por qué dormía? ¿Por qué sorda? (p. 7)<sup>18</sup>

In his preface to *Dibaxu*, Gelman makes clear that the impulse to write in Ladino came about after reading poems by Clarisse Nicoïdski. The dedication of *Dibaxu* includes the friend who presented him Nicoïdski’s poems. However, as an intertextual source, Nicoïdski is not recognized in his texts in the same way that San Juan or Santa Teresa are — their names in parentheses following each poem’s title in *Citas y comentarios*. In *Dibaxu* Gelman does not offer specific information: there are no book titles, names of poems or any other bibliographical reference that might lead us to this reasonably unknown Jewish Franco-Yugoslavian writer.

From a multilingual background, growing up in a house where Italian, Serbo-Croatian, German, and French were spoken, Clarisse Nicoïdski, born Abinoun

(1938–1996), became an accomplished novelist. She wrote more than fifteen novels as well as a book on women painters. Her novels were all in French, and with the exception of a few poems in a journal, the only poetry collection published during her lifetime was *Lus ojus, las manus, la boca*, in Ladino.<sup>19</sup> Nicoïdski learned the Sephardic language as a little girl hiding with her family in Lyon during the Nazi occupation under the Vichy government. Following the end of the Second World War she and her parents moved to Morocco, living in Casablanca from 1954 to 1959.

Nicoïdski's decision to revert to her childhood sounds and to write in the language of her parents and grandparents, their 'el spaniol nuestro', was prompted by her mother's death. She began writing one poem in Ladino for each novel she had written in French. Then the shame associated with Ladino, for its 'lack of noblesse, grammar and literature',<sup>20</sup> was overshadowed, and eventually transformed, by the realization that the language was dying along with her mother, who, in her mind, metonymically stood for its speakers: '... comprendí que con [mi madre] se iba definitivamente un poco de esta lingua de mi infancia, y que para nuestra generación, la muerte de nuestros señores significaba la muerte de un lenguaje'.<sup>21</sup> Ladino resurfaces in its feminine trappings, as the mother language and the language of the mother, 'En esta lingua se hallaban el amor de mi madre, nuestra complicidad y nuestras risas'.<sup>22</sup> Ladino erupts both as the site of memory and as that which can save memory, and as the mother's language it marks and is marked by affection and pain. Ladino is, in Nicoïdski's work, a language to recover the past, to claim an ethnic identity and to reaffirm the links she maintains with the Sephardi diaspora. Coupled with his increased interest in Jewish sources and in the history of the Spanish language, Gelman is captivated by the recovering role Ladino plays in Nicoïdski's work.

Gelman was attracted to the language and to the images used by Nicoïdski. He found in her poetry motifs and concerns that were germane to his, as they both speak of displacement, exile, nation, and death in their lyric, also marked by love and language. Many words present in Nicoïdski's work had appeared in several of Gelman's earlier books, and the poetic qualities that he saw in Nicoïdski's variety of Ladino came to him at a moment in which, in painful exile, Gelman was performing his own personal, poetic and linguistic exploration. 'The Ladino [Sefardí] syntax returned to me a lost candor, and its diminutives offered me a tenderness from times of old which is still alive, and, for this reason, can still bring consolation', writes Gelman in the preface to *Dibaxu*. Gelman does not speak Ladino, he does not belong to the ethnic community that speaks Ladino, and the Ladino he uses is basically the one he reads in Nicoïdski and learns from her — the vernacular Balkan Judeo-Spanish — with its particular sounds and spelling.

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The language of the Jews of Sarajevo in the former Yugoslavia has distinctive traits briefly described by H. V. Sephiha<sup>23</sup> as follows: the unstressed /e/ and /o/ close into /i/ and /u/ as in the Spanish dialect from León, e.g. de fazer>di fazer, vino>vinu; los ojos>lus ojus. Before /r/, the /e/ opens into an /a/, as in muertu>muartu; puerta>puarta, or, in some of Nicoïdski's examples, verdad>varda; abiertos>aviartus, cerradas>sarrada, and meldar>maldar. There is a tendency to conserve the initial

Latin /f/ in words where usually there is no letter to represent the non-aspirated /h/ sound of the Spanish. Possible examples are ‘fazer’ instead of ‘azer’, ‘afogar’ instead of ‘aogar’, and I would add ‘fondo’ in lieu of ‘ondo’.

Kalmi Baruch<sup>24</sup> also lists ‘fámbrri’, ‘fayar’, ‘fórnu’, ‘figo’, ‘furmiga’, and ‘fijo’; ‘vedre’, in lieu of ‘verde’; ‘povri’, for ‘pobre’, or Nicoïdski and Gelman’s ‘curiládu’, in lieu of ‘colorado’.<sup>25</sup> Lexical formations specific to the Ladino of Sarajevo include ‘sulvidar’ in lieu of ‘olvidarse’, where the reflexive ‘se’ changes from an enclitic to a proclitic position and the vowel /e/ ellides; ‘pasiyitus’ replacing ‘pasitos’, and ‘solya’ in lieu of ‘findjan’ (‘coffee cup’), a word more common in Istanbul.<sup>26</sup> Nicoïdski, like the Salonikis, uses ‘palavra’ for ‘word’, and not ‘avla’ or ‘byervo’, the latter used by Stambulis and chosen by Gelman, for poetic effect. The Spanish /ll/, which suffers the phenomenon of ‘yeísmo’, appears in Nicoïdski’s text as /l/ followed by a diphthong. An example of this is ‘liurando/liurar’. In Spanish it is ‘llorar’, in Ladino it is ‘yorar’, while in Nicoïdski’s Sarayli Ladino it is ‘liurar’.<sup>27</sup> In such phonetic phenomena, the tendency to vocalization is audibly perceptible. A marked characteristic of Nicoïdski’s spelling (which reappears in Gelman) is the use of /x/ to represent the /š/ sound for which the *Akí Yerushalaim* method establishes the /sh/ (and which usually replaces the modern Spanish /j/, pronounced almost as a Hebrew פ, ‘chet’), thus words such as ‘páxaru’ for ‘pásharo’, ‘dixu’ for ‘disho’ or ‘dibaxu’ for ‘debasho’. She sometimes prefers /dx/ to /dj/ as in ‘dxaru’, instead of ‘djaru’.

There are at least three instances in which Clarisse Nicoïdski’s Ladino words clearly reveal Hebrew, Turkish, and Italian elements. This mixed composition stresses the fact that Ladino is a fusion language that has evolved in dynamic contact with other languages, building upon a medieval Spanish substratum.<sup>28</sup> In the verse ‘ondi sta scritu mi masal’, one can read the Hebrew ‘mazal’ (‘fortune’, or ‘fate’).<sup>29</sup> In the line ‘il suluk di alma’ (life’s breath . . .), ‘suluk’ is Turkish for ‘breath’, and in ‘saviendu qui mas prestu mas tardi’, one can clearly identify the Italian ‘presto’.

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In October 1978, three hundred copies of *Lus ojus, las manus, la boca* were printed by Braad Press in France, originally in a bilingual Ladino-English edition. Below the title *Eyes, Hands, Mouth*, the title page adds, in italics, the following information: ‘Sephardic poems by Clarisse Nicoïdski with translations by Kevin Power’. This international and multilingual volume contains sixteen text pages divided into four parts that correspond exactly to four poems each, all written in lower case letters, their sections of one or more stanzas divided by graphic ellipses. Each page is divided in two: on the left a poem in Ladino, and on the right the italicized English version. Each part includes only its title in Ladino: ‘Lus ojus’, ‘Las manus’, ‘La boca’, and there is also a last untitled piece dedicated to Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. I describe the layout and organization of the volume because, among other things, they foreground issues of language choice and dissemination of an agonizing language.<sup>30</sup> They also form the intertextual model for Juan Gelman’s editorial decisions, which are quite revealing of his relationship with the Ladino and Spanish languages.

In Nicoïdski’s book body parts, taken individually, are ways for the speaker to understand her placement in time and to express her conflictual dealings with a

national and linguistic past. *Lus ojus, las manus, la boca* opens with a claim for and an affirmation of memory. *In medias res*, the speaker begins her apostrophe: ‘i comu mi sulvidaré di vuestrus ojus pardidus’. In a sombre atmosphere, evoking nights of fear and apprehension, the reaffirming of life through death — the continuation of life through the memory of the dead — is developed thematically in these verses, where the subject, synecdochically representing the ancestors, remains ‘the eyes’:

i comu mi sulvidaré  
 ...  
 cuandu di spantu  
 si avrian lus di lus muartus  
 para darmus esta luz  
 qui nunca si amató  
 di  
 comu mi sulvidaré

Two important and correlated themes developed throughout Nicoïdski’s volume are orality and the relationship between speech and writing. It is through language, spoken and written, that any connection with a past and its disappearing world can be established. In the first poem, ‘Lus ojus’, the speaker asks her addressee, ‘cántami la cunseja qui si camina in tus ojus’. The ‘cunseja’ is among the main forms of Sephardic cultural transmission, and an important vehicle in the preservation of the language itself. Telling ‘cunsejas’ was one of the bases of communal life among the Sephardim. Evoking the ‘cunseja’ is in itself evoking the past, a link to a life that now barely exists. ‘Cunseja’ and Ladino go hand in hand in several ways; somehow one feeds the other, giving life to one another — a life amid death, as in the verses ‘i no savin puluque vieni i si va la sangri qui lis da vida in la muarti’. Poem IX in Gelman’s *Dibaxu*, presents remarkable echoes of this poem: ‘*tus islas comu lampas cun una escuridad yendu viniendu nil tiempu*’.

After an explicit request of orality to the addressee — ‘cántami’ — Nicoïdski’s speaker expresses her fear of no longer speaking: ‘il friu di no puder avlar/di nunca mas/puder dizir’. The verse and the stanza remain incomplete, for the verb ‘dizir’ never receives a complement. We do not know what exactly the speaker fears not saying, but we know that she fears losing her speech. This plausible threat, said in Ladino, might as well apply to the generic Ladino speaker. After stressing Ladino’s oral character with the ‘cunseja’, the poem alludes to the death of the language. However, it does so by way of a *written* poem, contributing to the reaffirmation of Ladino as a literary language — among the chief ways to guarantee its afterlife. The relevant connection of voice, orality, and word does not go unnoticed by Juan Gelman. Those will shape the thematic axis in *Dibaxu*.

It is perhaps in ‘La Boca’ where the connection between language and death is more blatantly expressed, amid strong, violent imagery. The mouth is ‘aviarta com’un pozzo ondi mi pudía ichar’ and ‘sarrada com’una cuarta cuandu matavan in la cay’. ‘La boca’ insistently refers to the past with images of aridity and erosion, which, representing silence, alternate with the characterization of the mouth as a site of anguished cries and words of fire. As the ‘gritus fuegu palavras hurlandu’ turn into ‘una sola palavra di fuegu’ and then into a ‘silenciu qui pudi dar il spantu’, all



attempts at communication become increasingly futile. The speaker's anguish facing a growing silence that overcomes the earth ('cuandu si avrirá la boca di la tiara') becomes more acute as a piece of glass goes deeper in her mouth ('tengu vidriu in la boca . . . y cuandu il vidriu si entra mas adientru'), provoking in her a corresponding aphasia that she compares to 'un dxaru rotu taniendu un cantu di aligria sulvidada'.

Silence then appears even more explicitly when 'writing' is inscribed in the poem — the 'song of forgotten joy' is followed by 'writing' in 'a lost language'.

scrita  
 racha di la primer scrituria  
 palavra di una lingua pardida  
 aprovu intenderti  
 cuandu durmin lus ojus la cara la frenti  
 cuandu  
 no sos nada mas qui un barcu al fin di su viaje  
 nada mas qui una scrituria muda

Loss and failed communication continue to be emphasized as the speaker tries to understand this language, without success ('aprovu intinderti'), and when it becomes to her 'nada mas qui una scrituria muda'. If the song's language is now inaccessible to the speaker as a hieroglyph she cannot read, in the end even the mouth's attempts at an almost primal scream — since she cannot speak — also fail. The 'gritu para matar' that 'salio di tu boca' instead 'entre tus labios murio'. The connection between 'writing', 'mouth', 'past', and 'lost language' again stresses the association of speech to writing, but it also points metalinguistically to the language of the poem, Ladino. In a poem that discusses the language and the memories of the language that triggered Nicoïdski's writing, the fates of Ladino and its speakers are closely identified.

The last poem of Nicoïdski's volume is structurally different from the others. Nicoïdski's vocabulary, which reappears in Gelman, is simple and limited; emphasis instead is on assonance and rhythmic variety — although there are several instances of traditional Spanish meters, such as heptasyllables and hendecasyllables. The poem opens under the sign of blood, under the aegis of García Lorca, to whom it is dedicated. It carries the following epigraph, matching the bloody and violent imagery of the previous piece, and combining some of the words and images that are leitmotifs throughout the volume:

Cóntami la cunseja insangritada  
 qui avrirá las puertas sarradas

The poem itself begins with and is marked by the word 'dibaxu':

i.  
 Dibaxu di tu camisa  
 batía  
 un páxaru locu  
 si caió  
 com'una piedra  
 sólu

il cuchillu di su voz  
 alivantada nil airi  
 mus dixó tu gritu  
 matadu

The first image is that of a ‘frenzied bird’, beating under the addressee’s shirt, in a depiction of the heart as the traditional Jewish *tzipor ha-nefesh* (ציפור הנפש). Such a bird ‘falls like a stone’ after being killed but its voice remains in the air and leaves behind the addressee’s cry. This image follows the prior poem, ‘La Boca’, which ends with ‘un grito para matar’ previously compared, in a parallel stanza, to a fish trying to plunge from the river to the sea. Now, the knife reappears in ‘the knife of [the bird’s] voice’, and again the connection between ‘cry’ and ‘death’ is made, but this time more ambiguously. In ‘La Boca’ it was ‘un grito para matar’; now it is ‘tu gritu matadu’. Because ‘matadu’ stands alone at the end of the stanza, it can be read either as referring to the bird, in the beginning of the stanza, or to the most immediate cry. The different layout allows for a reading of the poem that takes into account spatialization, a reading in which it is possible to see the falling movement on the page, and the bird, like a stone, standing at the bottom of the stanza. In either case, the bird, ‘beating’ ‘under [your] shirt’ can be seen as the spirit, ‘di suluk dil alma’, of the poet.

This poem keeps its sombre tone and ends without joy, triumph, or celebration, despite evocations of the Biblical Song of the Sea (Exodus 1:15–18). The mouth reappears, but there is no song. Instead, there is a mouth that speaks of physical and emotional losses, ‘di una madri pardiada una casa un amor’, and tells ‘una vardá asulada’ (‘a savaged truth’). The past of a people, its culture and language, are practically lost, sunk at ‘the bottom of the sea’.

In this poem there are several instances of superimposed layers: a frenzied bird under the shirt, a falling bird with a rising voice, falling stars, along with blood that falls or gushes from the mouth onto the sand, dreams that flow beneath the dead trees, dead men under white snow which is under a horse, and, finally, a horse that ends up in the sea, under volumes of water. This succession of depositing elements creates the impression that each surface hides something underneath, that the end is never where it can be seen, and there is always another layer to be uncovered. The word ‘dibaxu’ recurs and gathers special relevance.

\* \* \*

‘Como si buscar el sustrato de ese castellano, sustrato a su vez del nuestro, hubiera sido mi obsesión. Como si la soledad extrema del exilio me empujara a buscar raíces en la lengua, las más profundas y exiliadas de la lengua’, Gelman explains. His personal exile pushes Gelman to uncover the foundation of his language and of his self, peeling away layers in his downward search. His diction reinforces this downward direction as a representation of the past, of distance in time: ‘substratum’, ‘roots’, ‘profound’. In that same vein, the book that visually would represent the top of an inverted pyramid (below *Citas y comentarios* and *Composiciones*) he names ‘Dibaxu’. Voice is related to ascending or descending movements and to space, as the

layers enhanced by the use of ‘dibaxu’ acquire importance in the volume, in a curious combination of archaeological and botanical metaphors. The predominance of the downward movement is better evidenced by the repeated use of the verb ‘caer’, which appears ten times in *Dibaxu*. In poem II, for example, the movement of falling and the superimposition of layers combine in one final stanza, where the synaesthetic aspect is paramount:

*dibaxu dil cantu sta la boz  
dibaxu di la boz sta la folya  
qu’il árvuli dexara  
cayer di mi boca*

debajo del canto está la voz  
debajo de la voz está la hoja  
que el árbol dejó  
caer de mi boca

Language is at the centre of Gelman’s preoccupations. It prompts a reflection on time, memory, and history, but in Gelman’s poetry language also becomes the space in which time reveals itself. Time is indeed one of the dominant themes in *Dibaxu*. The word ‘time’ appears throughout the volume, often as a physical, spacialized, material entity. Gelman speaks of ‘*la puarta dil tiempu*’, ‘*la caza dil tiempu*’, ‘*la manu dil tiempu*’, and ‘*pidazus di tiempu*’. He temporalizes space when he writes in poem XVIII, ‘*todu lu qui terra yaman/es tiempu*’, or when in poem XIX the ‘here’ of the poet is a ‘grain of sand’ which is simultaneously space and a minute in an hour:

*quirinsioza:  
no ti vayas d’aquí/  
di mi granu di arena/  
desti minutu/*

querendona:  
no te vayas de aquí/  
de mi grano de arena/  
de este minut

Time is also thematized in the repeated use of words such as ‘pasadu’, and the unexpected employment of verb tenses (‘*si sentirá in tu pasadu se oirá en tu pasadu*’), in which past and future co-exist, shaping a historical or historicized present that is also synchronic. Language is the site *par excellence* of this reflection about time; it is there that the different streams that compose time meet and engage each other. The dynamism of time and its circular ebb and flow has its parallel in the way the two languages affect each other, in their active relationship. Ladino and Spanish are in *Dibaxu* like the islands in poem IX:

*tus islas comu lampas  
cun una escuridad  
yendu/viniendu  
nil tiempu*

tus islas como lámparas  
 con una oscuridad  
 yendo/viniendo  
 en el tiempo

‘Dibaxu’ is the predominant word in the last poem of Nicoïdski’s volume. Even without explicit recognition of Nicoïdski in the poems themselves, several of her words and leitmotifs, and her Balkan variety of Ladino, reappear in Gelman’s bilingual work. The organization of Nicoïdski’s volume is the intertextual model for Gelman’s own layout — he too places Ladino on the left (where the original version is typically found), facing Castellano on the right, but he italicizes it, marking the Jewish language as foreign and thus prompting the questions, ‘Who is the target reader?’, ‘Which text is the original, which the translation?’ Furthermore, the juxtaposition of languages as different as Ladino and English, in Nicoïdski’s case, allows separate readings of each version — especially if we take into account that English readers are unlikely to know any Ladino, and can simply ignore the Ladino text without undue consequences. Ladino and Spanish, however, are close enough to prompt contemporary Spanish speakers to at least approach the Ladino version. This almost natural impulse is encouraged by Gelman himself, who asks the reader to read both texts aloud: ‘... *ruego [al lector] que los lea [estos poemas] en voz alta en un castellano y en el otro para escuchar, tal vez, entre los dos sonidos, algo del tiempo que tiembla y nos da pasado desde el Cid*.’<sup>31</sup> Readers eventually feel a heightened sense of ‘strangement’: the physical proximity of Ladino and Castellano underscores their differences, while confirming their similarity.

In *Dibaxu*, sounds, but especially voice and word/speech, are central themes, developed through different motifs: birds, leaves, trees. The volume opens with a mouth, site of word and voice, and origin of poetry. Explicit references to ‘*cantu*’, ‘*boz*’, ‘*dixera*’ (and ‘*dizin*’), ‘*sentí*’ ‘*silenziu*’, ‘*gritus*’, ‘*avla*’, and ‘*caya*’, serve to emphasize the pervasive presence of orality throughout the book and in the poet’s reflection about language and poetry.

Similarly to Nicoïdski’s focus on voice and body parts, Gelman’s speaker addresses a woman and refers to her body parts: hand, eyes, feet, heart, belly, and even blood. But it is her voice that receives most of his attention and elicits most of his words. Variations in voice describe the relationship between poet and addressee, as in poem XV: ‘*tu boz sta escura di bezus qui a mí no dieras di bezus qui a mí no das la noche es polvu dest’ixiliu*’. Here Gelman conflates the absence of the beloved woman with exile from his land. The Song of Song’s initial verses seem to shadow these lines, but instead of a request for kisses — ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth’ — the speaker admits that kisses are not offered. Darkness appears as absence, and mouth as the void, the primordial feminized abyss. The combination of ‘voice’ and ‘kisses’ makes ‘mouth’ present, even if by its absence, by its not being named. The speaker uses multiple synaesthesiae, all motivated by synecdoche: the mouth. In ‘your voice is dark of kisses’ there is sound in ‘voice’, sight in ‘dark’, and touch in ‘kisses’. Those kisses that are not given ‘darken’ the voice, and such darkness is parallel to the night, which in turn refers to exile. Note that the fourth verse does not seem to follow previous ones — the voice’s darkness in the opening verse, explained and intensified by the emphatic and almost exact repetition of the medial

verses, is precisely what connects it to 'night', thereby establishing a crucial correspondence among the elements: dark voice, absence of kisses, night and exile. These are all linked via absence — of light, love, kisses — and abyss.

As in Nicoïdski's book, the thematization of voice and speech is related to writing. Gelman's choice of Ladino as a language of writing is in large part guided by its oral qualities — the vowel sounds and the tenderness he sees in its diminutives — and its role as a vernacular language and a language of affection. At the same time, the act of writing poetry in Ladino also reaffirms it as a literary language while contributing to its survival: with his text Gelman pays tribute to the Ladino tradition of oral poetry, while by writing in the language he helps disseminate it and add to its life, to its *after* life.

The last poem in Nicoïdski's book is central to Gelman's *Dibaxu*. Several of the images and specific words present in earlier poems reappear here, as in a somber synthesis — except, perhaps, for the word 'dibaxu' and the place it has in the poem. Words repeated here — 'sol', 'árvulis', 'dibaxu' — are among those most used by Gelman in his own Ladino collection. Other words and images recurrent in Nicoïdski, such as 'aviarta', 'sarrada', 'paxaru', 'arvuli', 'foja', 'spantu', also recur frequently in Gelman's book. The poet as bird, the bird as voice and/or speech, the movements of descent and ascent, the centrality of voice and orality, and the atmosphere of death, are the foundation of Nicoïdski's poem, and they establish its tone. All of these elements, including the specific lexical choices, are at the core of Gelman's *Dibaxu*. Gelman revisits several images and words present in his previous works and combines these with the treatment they receive from Nicoïdski. In a way, Gelman provides a synthesis of his work, marked by the experience of exile and the violence of the Argentine dictatorship, but also by his intense lyricism, and experiments with language. The important dialogue established between *Dibaxu* and this last poem of *Lus ojus*, *Las manus*, *La boca* strengthens my assumption that not only is Clarisse Nicoïdski Gelman's main interlocutor, but that he uses this poem specifically as the primary intertext to his Ladino book.

In the works of many contemporary poets Ladino takes on a role of reconquering memory and vanquishing death; it becomes a safeguard of the memory of a culture, and by this process it is itself safeguarded or 'saved'. By writing in Ladino, Nicoïdski and Gelman embark on the same project: to create a future from a past endangered in its present form. But they do it for dissimilar reasons. Nicoïdski takes the Sephardic language as a mark of memory of her family and people; she uses it to honor her community, to establish links with it, longing for and attempting to maintain its culture. Gelman's Argentine exilic strategy is different: his particular identity is not communal, but built in solitude. Ladino appears in his poetry as the language of the exile who has lost his homeland and yearns to name it — and recover it — resorting to the Castillian language's early stages. With *Dibaxu* Gelman breaks the monoglossia of the Argentine national idiom and begins a heteroglossic poetics in Ladino and Castellano through which he stresses the essential ambiguity of the exilic poetic discourse that is out of place, where it no longer matters which is the 'original language' and which the 'translation'.<sup>32</sup>

If Gelman, like other Latin American authors, turns to the Spanish past of the continent and undergoes a process of self-Sephardization through language, it is

neither to obtain nationalization, like Argentine Alberto Gerchunoff, nor to inscribe himself in the national narrative, like Brazilian Moacyr Scliar. Gelman proceeds backwards in an exploration of the Spanish language and arrives at Ladino as a way of rejecting a limited and oppressive national identity — that of an Argentina controlled by a military dictatorship. To write his exile and express his deterritorialized, decentered identity, Gelman instead writes in a minor and diasporic language, one of a culture created without a State. Through Ladino Gelman regains a powerful position by forging a new singing, poetic voice.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Juan Gelman, *Dibaxu* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1994).
- <sup>2</sup> See María del Carmen Sillato, *Juan Gelman: Las estrategias de la otredad — Heteronimia, Intertextualidad, Traducción* (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo, 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> Juan Gelman, *Los poemas de Sidney West* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1994).
- <sup>4</sup> Gelman, *Composiciones*, in *Interrupciones 2* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1998), pp. 149–212.
- <sup>5</sup> Monique Rodrigues Balbuena, *Sephardic Literary Identities in Diaspora* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).
- <sup>6</sup> Juan Gelman, *Citas y comentarios*, in *Interrupciones 1* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1997), pp. 189–307.
- <sup>7</sup> Please refer to my discussion of these terms below.
- <sup>8</sup> See Amado Alonso, *Castellano, español, idioma nacional: Historia espiritual de tres nombres* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1936), especially pp. 145–58; and Gustavo Ferrari and Ezequiel Gallo, *La Argentina del ochenta al centenario* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1980).
- <sup>9</sup> Haïm-Vidal Sephiha, *Le ladino (judéo-espagnol calque), Deutéronome, versions de Constantinople (1547) et de Ferrare (1553)* (Paris: Editions Hispaniques, 1973).
- <sup>10</sup> Haïm-Vidal Sephiha., 'Judeo-Spanish: Birth, Death and Re-birth', in *Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish, a European Heritage* (European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages/European Commission: 1997). Available online at <<http://www.sephardichouse.org/judeo-spanish.html>>, p. 3.
- <sup>11</sup> He calls the Sephardim 'Judéo-Espagnols'. See *L'agonie des judéo-espagnols* (Paris: Entente, 1977).
- <sup>12</sup> Moshe Lazar, 'Ladino', *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-Rom edn (Jerusalem: Judaica Multimedia, 1997).
- <sup>13</sup> Tracy K. Harris. *The Death of the Language: The History of Judeo-Spanish* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), pp. 25–29.
- <sup>14</sup> Arlene Malinowski, 'Aspects of Contemporary Judeo-Spanish in Israel Based on Oral and Written Sources' (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1979); and 'A Report on the Status of Judeo-Spanish in Turkey', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 37 (1982): 7–23.
- <sup>15</sup> Eastern Sephardis are those from the former Ottoman Empire (Turkey, Greece, former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Rumania) and North Africa. Cf. David Bunis, 'Response', in *Jewish Languages — Themes and Variations*, ed. by Herbert Paper (Cambridge, Mass.: Association for Jewish Studies, 1978), p. 99, fn. 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. David M. Bunis, 'Types of Nonregional Variation in Early Modern Eastern Spoken Judezmo', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 37 (1982): 41–70 (p. 51).
- <sup>17</sup> See Joan Coromines and José Antonio Pascual, *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispánico* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1997).
- <sup>18</sup> Juan Gelman, 'Preface', in *Dibaxu*, p. 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Clarisse Nicoïdski, *Lus ojos las manus la boca* (France: Braad, 1978). See also Avner Perez (ed.), *Cara Boz I Locura* (Ma'aleh Adumim, Israel: Ma'aleh Adumim Institute, 2006).
- <sup>20</sup> From Nicoïdski's testimonial in the booklet included in the CD *Una manu tumó la otra*, by Dina Rot. Named after a poem by Nicoïdski, part of the book *Lus ojos, las manus, la boca*, the CD contains poems by Juan Gelman and Clarisse Nicoïdski, set to music by Argentine Dina Rot.
- <sup>21</sup> CD booklet.
- <sup>22</sup> CD booklet. Nicoïdski's original spelling.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. H. V. Sephiha, 'Le Judéo-espagnol de Sarajevo: Clarisse Nicoïdski, née Abinun, conteuse et poétesse judéo-espagnole', in *The Proceedings of the Tenth British Conference on Judeo-Spanish Studies*, ed. by Annette Benaim, 29 June–1 July 1997, pp. 53–64; 'Clarisse Nicoïdski, la dernière poétesse judéo-espagnole', in *Homenaje a Mathilde Pomès: estudio sobre la literatura del siglo XX* [Revista de la Universidad Complutense, 26] (1977), pp. 293–301.
- <sup>24</sup> Kalmi Baruch, 'El judeo-español de Bosnia', *Revista de Filología Española*, 17 (1930), 113–54 (p. 132).
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. Baruch, 1930: 139.
- <sup>26</sup> Cf. Sephiha 1997: 55.
- <sup>27</sup> Kalmi Baruch does not register this in his work. He affirms that 'in Bosnia, like in the other Sephardic

colonies, the palatal pronunciation of ll does not occur; rather, the “yeísmo” is generalized ...’. However, he does not acknowledge Nicoïdski’s option for ‘l+diphthong’ among the ones found within the Bosnian community of Ladino speakers. See Baruch, 1930: 136.

<sup>28</sup> David Bunis defines ‘fusion language’ as a language that ‘is created when elements derived from two or more different stock languages are blended into a new, unified structural whole’ (63, fn. 5).

<sup>29</sup> Nicoïdski writes ‘masal’, with an ‘s’, and Power translates it as ‘fate’. The word for ‘fate, fortune’ is ‘maza’, with ‘z’, voiced, from the Hebrew מַזַּל. The use of the voiceless ‘s’ makes it sibilant, and there is no word like that in Ladino. I can speculate it is perhaps a typographical error. Another interesting reading possibility would be if Nicoïdski had

intended to write ‘mashal’, story or parable, from the Hebrew מַשַּׁל, with ‘sh’. This would be quite acceptable in the verses: ‘si avrin las manus comu un livru ondi sta scritu mi masal’. But one main reason forces me to disagree with it: Nicoïdski never represents the /s/ sound with ‘sh’, but always with an ‘x’ (as in ‘páxaru’ and ‘dibaxu’).

<sup>30</sup> I see Nicoïdski’s choice of publishing her only poetry book in Ladino in a Ladino-English edition, in France, as an attempt to guarantee a larger readership to her work and at the same time disseminate Ladino more effectively. She recognizes the politics of translation: the fact that, through English, the major cultural language of today, she might more successfully add life to her dying language.

<sup>31</sup> Juan Gelman, *Dibaxu*, ‘Escolio’ (‘Preface’), p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> I thank Leonardo Senkman for his comments.

## Notes on Contributor

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