

Stitching Resistance: Women, Creativity, and Fiber Arts

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Text-Tiles: Reflections of Women's Textiled World in the Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) Poetic Tradition

MICHAL HELD

Personal Prologue

ALADINO PROVERB:
 “*Ken guadra para otros guadra*”
 meaning “The keeper, keeps for others.”

In a square olive-oil tin
 Grandma Bulisa
 kept old buttons their price far above rubies
 And she would spread a large sheet on a cold floor
 and we would scatter the buttons that turned
 into vessels

and we would sail the sea of their colors to the
 regions of garments from which they dropped
 the gowns of Victoria, Sultana and Flor
 Sephardic ladies

And i was bequeathed the custom
 of buttoning the eyes of those faded dresses
 to my new attire, so that i might
 wear silks and purple (Held, 1996).

Being born into a family that belongs to the Jerusalem wing of Sephardic culture, and in which women were always holding an embroidery needle or a pair of knitting needles, the invitation to contribute to a book about the female existence among textiles encouraged me to revisit not only the Sephardic culture that had been my field of research for many years, but also my home and myself. The closeness between fabric as a material and fabrication as a cognitive activity (“to fabricate a story,” “a fabricated fact”) lies under the surface of the following

reading, whose scholarly and creative aspects both derive from a reflexive standpoint.

I grew up experiencing women exchanging knitting instructions, and magically turning yarn into the most complicatedly designed sweaters. A few years later, I would watch them take the sweaters apart, wash the yarn, roll it and turn the yarn into new garments, no less beautiful. Around the creation of sweaters, crochet, and cross-stitch projects, stories and histories too were “fabricated,” taken apart and reassembled.

According to a family legend, many years ago my aunt Victoria’s comment to a friend that she had to undo a piece of knitting in order to correct a mistake in it, was met with the remark “I will burn myself and not do that!” To which Victoria replied: “Shall I get you some petrol?” The humorous nature of this incident hints at much deeper meanings that women associated with the making of textiles in the traditional society, and carried on when they stepped into modern life.

After my grandmother Bulisa died, her old nineteenth-century-style Singer sewing machine caused a big argument when more than one woman in the family wished to keep it for herself. Each had a brand-new electric sewing machine of her own by then, yet the bygone object, to use Jean Bodriard’s term, has become a psychological item marking the passage of time and embodying in it a family portrait that nobody was eager to let go of.

As echoed in the poem that opens this chapter, according to the rules set by the women of my fam-

ily, buttons are never to be thrown away with an old clothing article, but must be removed and saved for future use. The hardships that the family struggled to survive in the past may have been the original reason for this custom. Yet, when I experienced it, it became a symbolic act of recreating the past in the present, and carrying its echoes on to the future. My mother still keeps my grandmother's jar of old buttons that are still full of nobility. We often use them to replace the less-pleasing ones that come with new clothes.

The context of my personal experience with the creation of fabrics and textiles serves as a vehicle for the following discussion, setting out to explore the way in which scenes from the lives of Sephardic women, evolving around the creation of handcrafted textiles, are reconstructed in traditional folk literature and echoed in contemporary poetic works.

A useful key for deciphering the complex net of meanings embedded in the process may be found in the breaking up of the word "textiles" into *Text-Tiles*, representing the link between the material (textile) and its transformation into a virtual set of signs (tiles) that enable a hermeneutic analysis of the way in which the lives of women are experienced and reflected on. This paradigm shall be further developed throughout the reading.

Definitions and Frameworks: The Sephardim¹ and their Poetic Tradition

The following close reading of folk songs and poems stitched around the characters of Sephardic women and their handcrafted artifacts should be preceded with an exposition of the sociocultural context out of which they grew.

In 1492, the Catholic monarchs decreed the expulsion of Spanish Jews, most of whom left Spain

and settled in various parts of Europe, north Africa, and the then-powerful Turkish Empire. Those who had been expelled and their descendants retained the Spanish language and a culture with Hispanic roots for nearly 500 years (Díaz-Mas, 1992, page xi).

Today, the attitude of the descendants of traditional Judeo-Spanish speakers towards their Sephardic culture and language, which is ceasing to exist as a vital tool of communication, is of a movement towards a *personal ethnicity*: an individual identity nourished by the memory of a decaying collective state. Sephardic personal ethnicity in our times hardly serves a collective function, while fulfilling a strong personal psychological and emotional need.

The carriers of Sephardic tradition today are the last representatives of a rich Jewish culture. An interesting embodiment of this shift occurs in cyberspace. When Judeo-Spanish is often used more frequently online than offline, we witness the formation of what I defined as the Sephardic *digital homeland*.²

The current situation of Sephardic culture may be deciphered in the light of Benedict Anderson's definition of an imagined community (Anderson, 1983), as the reconstruction of an imaginary identity based on a culture that has virtually no function in today's world. Pierre Nora's description of the cultural stage in which, when *lieux de mémoire* no longer exist, *milieux de mémoire* are created provides a most relevant approach to the situation we are looking at (Nora, 1989). The following discussion shall demonstrate the way in which a fascinating Sephardic *milieux de mémoire* revolves around the "text-tiled" sphere.

A central part of the Sephardic cultural identity is formed around the group's ethnomusicological tradition. Folk songs were put to music and orally transmitted among Sephardic Jews for centuries, originating in medieval pre-expulsion Spain and constantly developing in the post-expulsion Sephardic communities. An important branch of

¹ Hebrew for Spaniards, and thus "Sephardic," etc.

² For a definition of the digital homeland and a discussion of its Sephardic version see Held (2011).

this rich musical and textual tradition includes the *romansas* – narrative songs in a definite poetic formal structure, most of which stem from the Jewish medieval Hispanic experience and reflecting the melodies and themes that characterized it.

The medieval songs continued to illustrate Sephardic life in the Ottoman Empire, accompanied with the creation of new *romansas* alongside new genres of folk songs, such as the *kantigas* – lyric songs created after the expulsion and often adopted to the music of popular songs in Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Israel, and other countries surrounding the Sephardic experience.³

The following paragraphs are concerned with the way in which the Sephardic woman's world is reflected and interpreted in traditional poetic texts portraying her and performed by her. The role of women in the process of transmitting traditional Sephardic poetry received much scholarly attention. Edwin Seroussi studied the multilayered social mechanism that allowed for the continuous practice and the survival of Judeo-Spanish folk songs among Sephardic women, enabling them to express themselves until modern times in a patriarchal traditional society that limited their expression. He goes further into exploring men's appropriation of the female repertoire, which shows that the repertoire is rooted in the female identity but is not limited to it (Seroussi, 1998).

Susana Weich-Shahak points out that the Sephardic folk songs form one of the richest and most vibrant Jewish repertoires that reached the twentieth century in full blossom. She shows how they were transmitted by Sephardic women in Morocco and the Ottoman Empire. According to her, many of the plots that comprise the rich repertoire of *romansas* and *kantigas* sung by Sephardic women include assertive female characters, although the

actions of these characters are generally triggered by their male counterparts. Sephardic women could have identified themselves with the ambiguous roles of the female characters of the ballads for they are carriers of action and at the same time are fully dedicated to their men (Weich-Shahak, 1998).

Experts from medieval and modern *romansas*, *kantigas*, and contemporary Judeo-Spanish poems looking back at the traditional folk songs are interwoven into the following discussion. The fusion of collective and individual creativity forms a transparent text-tile representing multilayered Sephardic feminine memory and identity formation mechanisms.

“Lavrando el bastidor”: A Poetic Vehicle for Understanding the Sephardic Woman

This chapter sets out to trace and decipher the connection between textiles and the Sephardic women associated with them in various Judeo-Spanish poetic texts. The textiles that women wear and create in the texts are internalized as parts of the body and the self, and thus we are looking at what I suggest may be defined as “text-tiles”: texts that depict and decipher the Sephardic woman by building layers of meaning around her interaction with textiles.

The reading process includes an attempt to understand the reflective and the reflexive nature of poetic works that are looking backwards and inwardly at the women who are portrayed in them, and at the women who created some of them.

The majority of the Judeo-Spanish texts with which we are concerned were created and orally transmitted in medieval Spain and/or in the post-expulsion Sephardic communities in the Ottoman Empire and northern Morocco. Ottoman culture, and its Jewish community, attached great importance to textiles. Apart from serving a useful

³ For a detailed analysis of the Sephardic traditional poetry, its genres, themes, geographical distribution, and cultural importance see Díaz-Mas (1992, pages 117–32).

purpose in daily domestic use, on festive occasions and in places of prayer, textiles were also symbols of social and economic status (Juhasz, 1990, page 65).

Traditionally, the making and decorating of textiles played a central part in the life of traditional Sephardic woman, who mastered skills such as couched and gold embroidery, colored embroidery, metal appliqué decoration, and fabric patterning to create Torah Ark curtains (*parokhot*), mantels (*vestido*), and binders (*fasha*, *mitpahat*), ceremonial textiles such as *Huppah* (marriage canopy) covers, as well as men's and women's festive and ordinary costumes and textiles used in the domestic realm such as bridal bed covers, infants' clothing, tablecloths and cushions (Juhasz, 1990, pages 68–97).

In addition, women created homemade textiles for every stage of the Sephardic life cycle – a phenomenon that is reflected, for example, in the Judeo-Spanish proverb “*De la fasha a la mortaja*” (“From the baby's diaper to the death shroud”) that uses textiles as a metonymy for a person's complete life cycle. This move from the objects of textile to their textual representation demonstrates what the following reading shall develop on a larger scale.

The Sephardic tradition that inspired the reading of texts about textiles is one that I define as the *wandering textile*. Esther Juhasz describes this tradition that was documented in various Sephardic communities:

When domestic articles were donated to the synagogue, they underwent certain changes to adopt them to their new functions, and thus new compositions were produced. The most useful alternation was to sew several small pieces together, such as wrapping cloths and cushion covers, to make an Ark curtain or Torah mantle. Sometimes the old pieces were sewn onto a new background. Articles of clothing were usually cut up and re-stitched to make the desired ceremonial object. The composition of the new piece was thus based on the motifs that had been used on the old dress, kerchief or cushion ... When the fabric background of an embroidered piece disintegrated, the embroidered parts which

were still in good condition might be preserved to make new small articles of personal use, such as a bag for the *tallit* or *tefillin* (Juhasz, 1990, pages 80–1).

The nomadic nature of the wandering textiles created by Sephardic women derived from the fact that their function was not single-aimed but evolving. Not only that their personal function was redefined when they changed form, but they have also emigrated from the private space of the home to the public one of the synagogue. The process of handmade, embroidered wedding dresses reassembled and re-composed into a Torah Ark curtain represents a fluidity of meanings associated with the textile, whose relevance to the life of the woman who created it and to her community is constantly regenerating. This notion is a pathway into the following reading of Judeo-Spanish texts about feminine textiles, which often behave in a similar way.

The Text-Tile Connection

“Text” and “textile” both originate in the Latin “woven.” Judeo-Spanish traditional folk songs and contemporary poems relating to the making and decorating of textiles echo this etymological connection and offer a hermeneutic key for understanding both the texts and the textiles with which they interact. Anchored in a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to culture, the following reading concentrates on and offers a close reading of a few representative texts as microcosms reflecting a wider phenomenon.

Women Taking Care of Textiles

Our journey opens in medieval Spain, following the road taken by the Jews who kept a rich Iberian musical tradition when they were expelled from the cradle of Sephardic culture. Many of their creations, some of which are still performed today with melodies by Sephardic Jews, portray women in text-tiled environments.

The association of the text-tiled situation with the very essence of femininity is characteristic of the Sephardic *romansas* inherited from the medieval Iberian tradition. One of them is “*El suenyo de la ija*” (“The daughter’s dream”):⁴

<i>El rey de Fransia tres ijas tenia</i>	The king of France had three daughters
<i>La una lavrava, la otra kuzia</i>	One laundered, the other one sewed
<i>La mas chika de eyas bastidor azia</i>	The youngest of them did [worked] an embroidery hoop
<i>I lavrando, lavrando, sfuenyo le venia.</i>	And working, working, a dream came to her.

The princess’s mother was upset with her youngest daughter dreaming away, until she found out what the symbols were that appeared in the dream. Interpreting those as signs of her daughters’ good fortune, she calmed down:

<i>M’apari al pozo, vid’ un pilar de oro</i>	Standing by the well, I saw a gold pillar
<i>Kon tres pasharikos pikando el oro</i>	With three little birds biting the gold
<i>Los tres pasharikos son tus tres kunyadikos</i>	The three little birds are your three little brothers-in-law

⁴ Judeo-Spanish was written in Hebrew characters until the mid-twentieth century, when attempts were made to apply different systems of Latin transcriptions to it. In this chapter, I have unified all quoted texts and re-transcribed them according to the writing system presented by the *Aki Yerushalayim* periodical that is recently being adopted by the majority of Judeo-Spanish writers worldwide. I thank Nivi Gomel for her help in transcribing the relevant texts.

<i>I el pilar de oro es el rey, tu marido</i>	And the golden pillar is the king, your husband
<i>M’apari a la puerta, vidi la luna entera</i>	Standing by the door, I saw the full moon
<i>I la luna entera es la reina, tu sfuegra.</i>	And the full moon is the queen, your mother-in-law. ⁵

What led to, and inspired, the dream in this folk song was the princess’s use of the embroidery hoop, and the result is a characteristic text-tiled situation, in which the connection to textile evokes a discovery of the woman’s future life. What we witness here is the emergence of a Sephardic ecotype of two international folk literary types relating to a woman’s needlework leading to the anticipation of her future life (AT709 Snow-White and AT410 Sleeping Beauty). It should be noted that in AT410, Snow-White pricking her finger with a needle leads to her eternal sleep, whereas in the Judeo-Spanish song the needlework leads to the prediction of the princess’s long life. In AT709 and ATU709, there is no reference to needlework, yet the association of it in relation to the Sephardic songs with which we are concerned derives from the Grimm brothers’ version of *Sleeping Beauty*, in which as the princess falls asleep while spinning, her life undergoes a dramatic change.⁶

The background for the dramatic development of another medieval *romansa* portraying the loyal wife’s encounter with a knight coming back from a long war is a textile-oriented setting, in which a young woman is busy doing her laundry. It opens with the following exposition:

⁵ For the full text and information regarding the *romansa*’s origins and documentation see Weich-Shahak (2010, page 150).

⁶ For full information see: Aarne and Thompson (1964), Uther (2004), and Owens (1981, page 177).

<i>Kuando la blanka ninya</i>	When the fair young woman
<i>Lavava i esbandia</i>	Laundered and wringed
<i>Kon lagrimas lo lavava</i>	With tears she laundered
<i>Kon suspiros l'akojia</i>	With sighs she collected [gathered]
<i>Por ayi paso un kavayero</i>	A knight passed from there
<i>Un copo d'agua le demando</i>	A cup of water he asked her for
<i>De lagrimas de los sus ojos</i>	With tears of her eyes
<i>Siete kantaros l'incho</i>	Seven pitchers she filled for him.
<i>De ke yores, blanka ninya?</i>	Why do you cry, fair young woman?
<i>Ninya blanka, de ke yores?</i>	Fair young woman, why do you cry?
<i>Todos tornan de la gerra</i>	Everyone came back from the war
<i>I el su marido no ay tornar.⁷</i>	And [for] him her [my] husband there is no return.

In response to her begging for information concerning her husband who never returned from the battles, the soldier makes her describe his physical traits. Not only does she provide this, but she also announces that she should forever stay loyal to the missing husband. Only then does the knight reveal his identity as the husband, and the couple may be reunited.

⁷ For the full text and a commentary see Attias (1961, pages 93–4).

A character of a woman reconstructing her lost identity through a textile-related interaction is the focus of another Judeo-Spanish *romansa* originating in medieval Spain. Most of the Sephardic versions of this song were documented from the descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain who settled in northern Morocco, and thus the shift of its geographical setting. The three versions presented by Weich-Shahak, for example, open with the line “*Al pasar por Kazablanka, pasi por la moreria*” (“On the way to Casablanca, I passed through the Moorish quarter”) (Weich-Shakak, 1997, pages 80–4).

The narrator is a knight who encounters a beautiful young woman busy doing her laundry by a fountain. Offering water for his horses, she reveals her identity to him and confesses that she is not Moorish, but a captive girl from Spain. When he suggests that she returns to Spain with him, her reply concerns the textiles that frame her existential situation:

<i>I la ropa el kavayero –</i>	And the clothes knight –
<i>donde yo la desharia</i>	where shall I leave them
<i>Lo ke es de seda i grana –</i>	Those that are of silk and velvet –
<i>en mis kavayos se iria</i>	Shall go with my horses
<i>I lo ke no vale nada –</i>	And those that are good for nothing –
<i>por el rio tornaria.</i>	Shall go to the river. ⁸

All versions of this “Sepharadized” medieval Iberian *romansa* alike maintain the central function the clothes – the textiles that symbolize the woman’s change from life in captivity back to her origins. The unfamiliar knight whom she meets while taking care of them is finally proved to be her Spanish brother who, instead of bringing back a bride, presents their parents with their long-lost daughter.

⁸ Matilda Keon-Sarano, *Vini kantaremos: Koleksion de kantes djudeo-espanyoles*, Jerusalem, 1993, page 152.

The clothes are a key symbol of the quest for rediscovering her identity. By deposing of some of them, the worthless ones, she departs from her life in captivity, while keeping only the most important parts of her personality. The wandering textiles – those that may help her reassemble the shattered parts of her life and of herself – are the ones carried back to what shall soon be discovered as her lost family and homeland.

Women Wearing Textiles

The association of the wearing of textiles with a traumatic situation forced on a young woman reappears in another Sephardic interpretation of an Iberian medieval *romansa*. Exposing the tabooed theme of incest, it enables women to deal with it and learn how to prevent it through the unexpectedly progressive messages conveyed in a traditional folk poem. Opening with the line “*Se paseava Silvana*” (“Silvana was strolling”), the *romansa* develops into a story of a king attempting to sexually abuse his daughter. Two major turning points occur in the plot after Silvana had been seduced by her father. Her initial reaction is an attempt to postpone the king’s seductive approach by asking:

<i>Deshame ir a los banyos</i>	Let me go to the baths
<i>A los banyos d'agua fria</i>	To the baths of cold water
<i>A lavarme i entrensarme</i>	To wash myself and comb my hair
<i>I a mudar una kamiza</i>	And to change a shirt
<i>Komo azia mi madre</i>	Like my mother did
<i>Kuando kon el rey durmia.</i> ⁹	When with the king she slept.

⁹ Attias (1961, pages 131–2). For a detailed thematic and social analysis of this song, see Alexander-Frizer (2007, pages 350–7).

The begging to change a shirt is a textile-oriented symbol that emphasizes the princess’s wish to make it clear to the king that it is her mother and not herself to whom he should be directing his lust.¹⁰ The second and even more meaningful turning point takes place towards the end of the *romansa*, when the queen encourages her daughter to exchange garments with her:

<i>Trokadvos veustros vistidos</i>	Change your clothes
<i>Los mios vos meterias</i>	Put on mine
<i>I dezilde a vuestro padre</i>	And tell your father
<i>Ke no asienda kandeleria</i>	That he should not light a candle
<i>Al eskuro a la entrada</i>	At dark you enter
<i>Al eskuro a la salida.</i>	At dark you leave.

As the plot progresses, we learn that Silvana never entered the king’s chamber. Instead, the queen did so dressed in her daughter’s clothes, and when the king demanded Silvana’s “honor,” she revealed her identity and made him repent. Family order is regained in this *romansa* by feminine wisdom and resourcefulness, and the process is based on the exchange of women’s clothes forming a perfect example of what we have defined as *wandering textiles*.

The color of textiles worn by women as symbols of their life cycle and the rites of passage during which the colored garments are made use of appear in many Sephardic folk songs. A *romansa* opening with the line “*Triste esta el rey David*” (“King David

¹⁰ During field work I conducted in relation to this *romansa*, a native Spanish-speaking Orthodox Rabbi suggested that Silvana’s plea to take a bath echoes the Jewish law of *tevilah*, according to which a wedded wife is required to take a ritual immersion prior to having sexual relations with her husband. This interpretation reinforces the reading of Silvana’s begging to change a shirt as a reminder to her father that he should behave lawfully.

is sad") exposes the biblical story of the death of King David's beloved son Absalom. Central to it, is the description of the king's begging his daughter-in-law to dress in black after her husband was killed (Weich-Shahak, 2010, page 91).

The Sephardic wedding song opening with the line "*Muchachika esta en el banyo*" ("The young girl is bathing") was traditionally performed by the women who accompanied the bride to her ceremonial immersion. According to the Jewish law of *tevilah*, a bride must take a ritual immersion before the wedding. In many traditional Sephardic communities this purification ceremony was supplemented with a ceremonial immersion of both bride and groom (separately, of course), which took place in the public bathhouse.

The song portrays the bride wearing red at the beginning of the ceremony, and white at the end of it. In this text-tile, the color alternation symbolizes the progress of the purification process and the transition it marks in the individual and social identity of the bride-to-be.¹¹

Women Making Textiles

An interesting example of the poetic tradition that intimately connects the woman's body and the textiles she creates is found in a Greek ballad that the Sephardic Jews have adopted after the Spanish expulsion as part of their own tradition. It tells the story of a slave crying out for his wife who is kept in tall, unreachable towers. Sewing a blouse for the queen's son, the wife replaces the missing materials required for making the royal garment with parts of her own body:

<i>Si le mankare un klavedon</i>	If she misses a thread
<i>De sus kaveyos le ajusta</i>	She adds it from her hair
<i>Si le mankare una perla</i>	If she misses a pearl
<i>De sus lagrimas la ajusta.</i> ¹²	She adds it from her tears.

The image of the woman sewing or working with an embroidery hoop as a *mise en abyme* of the complex story of her life emerges from the medieval Iberian poetic tradition that the Sephardic Jews inherited and developed in the centuries to come.

The main character of another song that may be regarded as a new *romansa* is a Sephardic woman from the city of Hebron. Opening with the words "*Povereta muchachika*" ("Poor little girl"), it had long been considered to be an anonymous folk creation. Only recently, was it proven to have been created by musician, songwriter, cantor and singer Asher Mizrahi, who reached enormous popularity in Jerusalem and Tunisia in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.¹³

The realization that this text was written by Mizrahi is important because it enlarges our insight of the text-tiled Sephardic women, who in this case was originally portrayed by a male author and only then incorporated by generations of Sephardic women who made it part of their feminine tradition.

Asked by the narrator why she is locked up in a dark prison, the poor girl unfolds the tragedy that led her to murder the woman for whom her fiancé deserted her. News of his engagement to the other woman was brought to her when she was working

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of this song and its multilayered meanings see Held (2007).

¹² Weich-Shahak (2010, page 92).

¹³ In a letter of September 11, 1959, Mizrahi gives an account of his poetic repertoire: "I have written more than 300 songs in Arabic but in Spanish I wrote three to four." Among the Judeo-Spanish songs he mentions as his own creations is "*La hevronica ke es povereta muchachica*" ("The girl from Hebron who is the poor little girl"). See Mizrahi (2001).

on an embroidery hoop by the window – a text-tiled situation affecting the morphology of the plot.

The image of the woman working a *bastidor* re-emerges in this song, as it did in the medieval *romansas*. The turning point in the modern Sephardic song's plot is marked by the poor girl's realization of her lover's disloyalty. The round embroidery frame she is working on when this occurs, and that is about to be replaced with a knife for killing her beloved's new bride, is turning the situation into a text-tiled one, symbolizing the approaching catastrophe in her life.

As Galit Hasan-Rokem and Hagar Salamon (1997, page 58) noted, on the symbolic level the embroidery process projects the juxtaposition between the feminine essence (the fabric and the thread) and the masculine one (the needle). Our corpus demonstrates the way in which Sephardic culture reverses this paradigm on two levels. Generally, the needle is not mentioned and instead we have the *bastidor* – a round object holding together the fabric that is an essence of femininity resembling a womb. Furthermore, in the last song we referred to the object that symbolizes femininity being replaced with a knife, emphasizing the fact that in the traditional Sephardic society a woman could cross the borders of gender, step into the male territory, and perform the extreme act of murder in order to express her resentment of her lover's disloyalty.

The *Bastidor* Chronotop

The *bastidor* is an embroidery hoop consisting of two wooden frames, in between which the cloth is stretched so that a design can be easily worked on it.

Having been commonly used in the traditional Sephardic home, the *bastidor* has made its way from the reality in which it was associated with women and with their needlework into the Sephardic poetic tradition. Having immigrated into the texts about women, while gradually losing its functionality outside of them in modern times, it became

an important code in the text-tiled world that this essay aims at deciphering.

Today, when the *bastidor* rarely functions as an actual object, but merely as a textual representation of what it used to be, it gains a symbolic status reinforced by its repeated poetic use in relation to ancient and modern Sephardic women.

What shall we make of the fact that the exposition of many *romansas* and *kantigas* focus on a feminine character working a *bastidor*? A key for answering this question may be found in Michail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotop" (literally "time space," the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature). In the literary artistic chronotop, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole (Bakhtin, 1981, pages 84–5).

Bakhtin argued that the chronotop as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature, and in the context of our reading, it represents the image of the woman in the Sephardic poetic tradition. Following him, I suggest a definition of the *bastidor* chronotop – the round microcosms of the woman's world, framing her dreams, her beliefs, and her identity.

The *bastidor* may be seen as an implication that the life of women in the traditional Sephardic society was framed by social norms restricting them to narrow down their ability to express themselves and to take control of their lives. No matter how innovative they were in their embroidery, it always was restricted to the boundaries of its frame.

A careful reading of the text-tiles in which a *bastidor* appears, leads to a more complex interpretation. As the texts develop, the women who are stereotypically presented in their expositions working the embroidery hoop, put it away and stand out to express strong, individual personalities. Even though they sometimes pay a price for it, they often step forward and attempt to take control of their lives – be it by following their dreams, by acting against instinct and saving their family, or even by

murdering the woman that their lovers preferred over them.

The poetic tradition we are looking at echoes and shapes the cultural conception of Sephardic women. The encounter with the object of textile (making it, wearing it, or caring for it) is depicted in the texts that transform the textile into a memory, while reflecting important junctions in their lives and encouraging them to follow their hearts within a traditional, patriarchal society mostly without breaking up its laws and norms.

Behind the text-tiles that this essay is dedicated to, hide actual textiles made by Sephardic women and then turned into Judeo-Spanish texts telling the story of the same or other women in medieval Spain, in the Ottoman Empire and in the communities worldwide that Sephardic Jews immigrated to in modern times. In all of these places, embroidery frames called *bastidores* formed part of traditional Sephardic life and texts, and are recently becoming what Jean Baudrillard defined as “bygone objects”:

Rare, quaint, folkloric, exotic or antique objects. They seem inconsistent with the calculus of functional demands in confirming to a different order of longing: testimony, remembrance, nostalgia, escapism. [...] For all their difference, these objects also form part of modernity, and this is the source of their double meaning. It [the bygone object] is astructural, it denies structure, and it epitomizes the disavowal of primary functions. Yet it is not afunctional, nor is it simply ‘decorative’. It has a quite specific function within the framework of the system: it signifies time (Baudrillard, 1990, pages 35–6).

Conclusion

The above reading of Sephardic text-tile chronotops does not end at their categorization as bygone objects, but offers an understanding of texts relating to women and textiles as a movement from the actual object to the way in which it is conceived as a bygone object signifying time and constructing an identity through it. The reading is anchored in

two frames of reference: thoughts about women and textiles inside and outside the Sephardic circle, accompanied with my personal experience within the Sephardic home and culture.¹⁴

Hasan-Rokem and Salamon (1997) examined a group of Jerusalem women who “embroider themselves” and express a complex feminine consciousness through cloth, colored thread and needle, ritual interactions, and verbal discourse. Their craft-based processing of femininity and feminine identity revolves around the categories of women-men, women-family, and fertility, and, most significantly, the “feminine frontier” of women. Although the members of the group they explored are not Sephardic, the study of their activity reveals various aspects that are quite relevant to the concerns of this chapter. The group members related to their craft-making as “a verbal reflexivity processed into a narrative that parallels the embroidery activity and the ritual that characterizes it.” The analysis of their creative activity offers an interpretation of the material expression (embroidery) and the linguistic expression (feminine narrative concerning the embroidery) as two parts of a wider holistic system of cultural process and design (Hasan-Rokem and Salamon, 1997, page 55).

Our exploration of a similar system goes a step further: whereas Hasan-Rokem and Salamon analyze the interviews they conducted with women who spoke about their own embroidery, we are concerned with a multilayered poetic reconstruction of the relationship between women and textiles that was not realized by the original embroiderers, but by their Sephardic followers down the centuries.¹⁵ Thus, the understanding of the actual women

¹⁴ The relationship between Sephardic women and needle crafting that is focused on here deserves further investigation, which shall, I hope, be elaborated on in the future by the researchers of material cultures and ethnomusicology.

¹⁵ For another study of women’s interpretation of their own needlecrafts see Salamon (2013).

embroiderers who in Jerusalem of the twentieth century conceived themselves as various texts, transformed and expressed in different forms is reinforced and deepened in the exploration of the Sephardic feminine text-tiles. In both cases, the concept of women embroidering themselves is a powerful tool for deciphering the complex identity that is being stitched around and inspired by feminine needlework in traditional societies and also when stepping out of them into modernity.

The *arpilleras* – the handmade tapestries that were created by Chilean women during the dark times of dictatorship and denial of human rights, managed to articulate an unspoken tragedy and make it known to the world. According to Marjorie Agosín, the *arpilleras* reside in the collective memory they contribute to, relating personal histories to the narratives of the country (Agosín, 2008, page 17).

Sephardic culture that was born in medieval Spain and developed mainly in the Ottoman Empire has little to do with the point in the history of Chile that enabled the creation of the *arpilleras*. Yet, Agosín's understanding of the relationship between women and textiles is quite relevant to the way in which it is reflected in the Judeo-Spanish text-tiles focused on in this essay:

The women making an *arpillera* are working among the rituals of memory, but while they are creating *arpilleras* they are also re-creating life ... the *arpillera* is sent into the world, outside of the personal body of the creator, so that the recipient receives and can feel history (Agosín, 2008, page 24).

Agosín's observation resembles the process this chapter attempts to demonstrate concerning the wandering textiles associated with the female protagonists and performers of the Judeo-Spanish songs about women making, taking care of, and wearing textiles. The above reading of the reflections of women's textiled world in the Judeo-Spanish poetic tradition is among the rituals of memory and shows how, while creating their textile objects and re-creating them into songs, the Sephardic women also create life. The final stage of the process is achieved

when the traditional texts are interpreted in retrospect and their recipient can feel history and weave it into a contemporary fabric that grows out of it.

Personal Epilogue

Text-tiles combining the work with fabric and the reconstruction of it by a verbal art were presented in this discussion as a mirror reflecting the process of feminine identity formation and its interpretation within the cultural frame of Sephardic existence from medieval Spain until our days. Had it not been channeled through the consciousness of a Sephardic woman from a family in which women used to relate to textiles both practically and emotionally for many generations, it could have been completed.

“Actual texts on items of dress are comparatively rare, and are not inherent to Jewish dress” observes Esther Juhasz (2012a). Taking her observation figuratively, we can say that poetic creations *about* Jewish dress replace the texts that are not appearing *on* it. Juhasz goes further into explaining that “the biographies” of clothing items can follow many routes. Sometimes they are interwoven with the biographies of their owners; at other times they take different courses and may be worn, torn and discarded, or mended and transformed into other garments (Juhasz, 2012b). Again, this reading follows her words figuratively by seeing in text-tiles, or texts about textiles, a unique form of a feminine biography.

My personal involvement with Sephardic textile chronotops makes me an inside reader of my own culture and of myself within it. This process intensified when the fabrics I experienced growing up with textile-making Sephardic women were re-fabricated into my own texts. The combination of the two formulates a feminine identity through space and time. Thus, what I previously defined as a wandering textile reflects a journey through Sephardic culture planted in the soul that faces its disappearance from today's world, inviting a self-reflexive and self-reflective contemplation.

A virtually seamless dialogue grows out of the connection between the poetic text-tiles created in my grandmother's mother tongue and my own poems, which were written at a time when both the Sephardic traditional fabrics and Judeo-Spanish traditional poetry focusing on them are hastily disappearing from the world.

Nothing is more suitable for concluding this chapter than a poem that enables me to revisit the bygone world of Sephardic text-tiles, by looking at the fabrics kept inside the closet of the women who created them.

Out of the Closet

The image of Grandmother may she
rest in peace
emerged as I gazed at an *ogadero* that in Ladino means
a necklace
or hanging
rope

The note next to it said that the heavy necklace
was worn
By Jewish women in Rhodes
In Izmir and in Jerusalem

In most cases a wife received it from her husband
and its high value made it possible to purchase a plot
for burial
when it was
time

But Grandmother may she
rest in peace
received no heavy necklace
only thin Damascus chains and died
not knowing that they
had been stolen

Opposite the necklace in the display case
at the opening of the Jewish wardrobe exhibition
i thought the time had come to plant a cypress
at her head
as Grandfather may he rest in peace had wished
but never did
and to restore the crumbling letters on her tombstone
but i never did.

When this chapter was being prepared, I happened to be visiting Copenhagen, the Danish capital. A lace-like cover of a construction site caught my attention, and I carelessly took a picture of it. Only looking at it in retrospect, did I realize that the lace-covered façade was actually emblematic, tying together the thoughts about women and their text-tiled world. I read the half-transparent screen of lace wrapping the building as a symbol of the condensed relationship between the textile associated with women and the system of memory connected to the house, the home and the text-tiled lives of women inside them.

The protagonist of the above-mentioned traditional Sephardic *kantiga* about *la povereta muchachika*, the poor young girl deserted by the man she loves (see page 138), declares that:

<i>Asentada en la ventana</i>	Sitting by the window
<i>Lavrando el bastidor</i>	Working the embroidery frame
<i>Haberiko me trusheron</i>	A piece of news was brought to me
<i>K'el mi amor se despozo.</i>	That my lover got engaged [to another].

La povereta muchachika, like all other women whose life and culture I tried to grasp in this poetical journey, like myself when writing to them, is a figure covered with transparent lace, inhabiting a building in which text-tiles are being created, performed and interpreted.

Marjorie Agosín tells us, "All works with fabric imply a close relationship between a person's hand and history and the fabric itself" (Agosín, 2008, page 20), and goes further into identifying needlework traditions as a universal female artistic elaboration.¹⁶ It seems that this building whose life is

¹⁶ For a further analysis of the holistic relationship between women and needlework see Parker (1986).



FIGURE 14.1 Copenhagen's text-tiled building.

being renovated behind a laced fabric visually encompasses her understanding of the relationship between women and textiles, as well as the unique Sephardic embodiment of it.

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Dedicated with love and appreciation to my mother and to her mother – the magic weavers of threads into dreams and of dreams into textiles. Their skills remain a wonder to me, who can only re-weave their creations into words.

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