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As the child of Jewish parents in predominantly Catholic Chile, who later spent a lonely adolescence in Southern Georgia during her family’s exile following Salvador Allende’s assassination, Marjorie Agosín recalls in *The Angel of Memory* the ancient Diaspora of the Jewish people. In these poems Agosín links her own migration to “a long line of magician-travelers” (29) specifically that of her Viennese great-grandmother, whose “lineage” she seeks to join to her own (103). In so doing, she joins a generation of Latina Jews who came to the United States as children, went on to an education at American schools and universities, and who are now beginning to write the histories and stories of their double Diaspora (Latin American Jewish writers exiled again in North America).

For Agosín, as for other Latina Jewish writers—Ruth Behar, Miriam Bornstein, Aurora Levins Morales and Ester Shapiro Rok, to name a few—the Diaspora is a source of creativity and reality. It is a place, she writes, where “our precarious / genealogies / made memory magnificent” (29). It offers, too, an opportunity for transcending and reconstructing history by recalling “two voices moving in the sinuous harmony of remembrance” (119), stories told to her by her mother and the elder Helena Broder, both of whom form the focus of these poems.

Embracing inclusion and cosmopolitism, Agosín links ancestral displacements (“they were my cousins, / women we knew, / with whom we shared a history” [63]) and contemporary disappearances of women. “I ask for a second, for a century of peace,” she writes, in order to honor “the dead Jews, / the gypsies, / the women of Bosnia” whose identities collapse geographic borders and time zones in her memory (63). Today, Agosín is a renowned poet and professor at Wellesley College, but feels that, like her parents and those before them, she will always be a foreigner, an “uncertain traveler” in a long line of Jewish wanderers without a country (141).

As a transmitter of the social consciousness of a people, Agosín enacts a typically Jewish attitude toward the historically important injunction to remember and the contemporary drive to bear witness. In “Joseph,” a poem written for her son on his Bar Mitzvah, she explains that “to be Jewish” entails “Tikum Olam”; to care for not only neighbors but also foreigners, to become a “beacon in the paradise of the world” by transforming exile and extermination into a life of mending the world, this is the heritage that she passes on (183). Just as people in exile often invent their lives in books, so words become the means for Agosín to authenticate traditional values. “May your voice be a refuge to the dispossessed,” she tells her son, “may your voice be always a chorus of angels,” she hopes for him as he grows into a man (183).

By her own assessment, Agosín places her characters within a female space—here her great-grandmother’s bedroom, with her “feathers from Vienna” and “velvet bedspreads,” a domestic confine in which her mother’s stories about Helena would turn
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the poet further inward toward memories (7). As a Jewish Latina, Agosín also inhabits a space in-between. Like she describes the Torah, in a poem of the same name, Agosín appears “confident in...[her] pilgrim life,” at home in the word if not the world (133). “I know we live in memory, / or in the metaphor of memory,” she observes of Jewish people (75). This past is not just what came before her; rather, it defines who she is in the present, her identity. Of her great-grandmother she attests that Helena’s memory “remains entwined with mine” (9).

Having lost her own country, Agosín turns also to the land. In “The Prater Lilacs,” she explains that her garden is named for both her mother and Helena. “It welcomes foreigners / and uncertain travelers,” but it also “knows to forgive” (141). With such imagery, Agosín exposes the improvisational but also comforting nature of home. Always in transit, she creates an inner dwelling. Prominent in these poems, images of nature remind readers that the exiled often invent utopias of their own, natural places, both imaginary and real, where those without acceptance by the dominant culture can find nourishment and grow.

The matter of place, more accurately of displacement and creating a new space that is the realm of the writer, is central in this collection. To know Helena better, she decides to return to Vienna, “to stand at corners crumbled by memorable and nonexistent oblivion” (9). Looking to her memory, she recovers not only the lost world of German-speaking Jews but herself, too. “I do not know if I found you everywhere,” Agosín writes of her great-grandmother, but “I did find myself, “she affirms, through Helena’s history (9). Connecting the past with whatever country she is currently calling home, Agosín finds that her “role is to be a woman beset by memory” (85), a position that provides self-discovery as well as loss.

For Agosín, the safest and most enduring places for abandoned homes—whether desolated homelands of Europe or later Latin America—are the stories that contain and supplant them. In her poems, the various landscapes emerge as a different kind of homeland, regions that have utopian desires, where “memory does not become diluted,” a zone that is the very backbone of this collection (7). “The possibilities and risks of memory” bring her closer to Helena’s history by exposing both the remembered and imagined parts of her family’s Diasporic culture (7). “Poetry is the most certain gift of our survival,” concludes Agosín; restored by the portability of memory recreated in words, home becomes for her a place where nomads who carry their stories with them are not extinguished (7). In The Angel of Memory, then, the text becomes the homeland.

For Agosín, memory becomes an antidote for loss. It is with this vision of Diasporic culture, focused on memory and remembrance, that she recalls the story of Helena. Focusing on her origins, on her family, by her questioning, memory is transformed and becomes something different from that of original tellers. “Memory is confounded by what others have told me,” writes Agosín, just as it is by “crevices of perverse silence” (25). Through the act of recalling Jewish history Agosín acknowledges her own subjectivity: like reflecting mirrors, Agosín’s personal approach to questions of identity and memory is multilayered and self-reflective.

Relying upon the written word, the metaphor of the refugee, the displaced past, and the presence of ritual and tradition, Agosín’s poems create a kind of threshold between past and present, old and new. As Elizabeth Horan notes in the prologue, the
intermediary angel occupies a place “between age and youth, old and new worlds, realms of life and death, hope and uncertainty,” and so becomes a fitting title for this collection. Always in motion, Agosín, too, carries with her certain memories that rescue and invent the past, thus making her family’s complex past her own.