The Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Digital Library

Bruce Rosenstock and Belén Bistué

The Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Digital Library contains over 200 digitized reel-to-reel audiotapes that record the fieldwork of two of America's foremost Romance medievalists, Samuel Armistead (University of California, Davis) and Joseph Silverman (University of California, Santa Cruz), who gathered ballads and other folk literature in the Hispanic tradition as preserved by Sephardic Jews. Their fieldwork extended over several decades in the latter half of the twentieth century and spanned three continents and many dozens of informants. The audio recordings can be heard in their entirety or they can be searched for specific ballads across a number of different tapes. The transcriptions of the ballads and other folk material can also be searched for words and phrases. The digital library is now permanently hosted by the University of Illinois library and can be accessed at http://sephardi folklit.illinois.edu.

Fig. 1. Homepage for The Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Digital Library at http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/.

Part One: Background and Goals of the Digital Library (Bruce Rosenstock)

It is with a heavy heart that I compose these lines about my friend, Sam Armistead. Samuel Gordon Armistead passed away at the age of 85 on August 7, 2013. He had retired only

two years earlier from the University of California, Davis, where he taught in the Department of Spanish for 28 years. Those who knew him understand that "retirement" was perhaps the only word in his immense repertoire of languages that held no allure for him.

I was a Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Davis in the fall of 1998 when I attended a public lecture delivered by Sam. He described the fieldwork that he and the late Joseph Silverman (his former colleague at UCLA) had conducted for over two decades in the United States, Europe, North Africa, and Israel among the descendants of the Jews who had been expelled from Spain in 1492. These Jews, who called themselves Sephardim (from "Sepharad," their name for the Iberian peninsula), preserved a tradition of oral Hispanic folk literature that, even at the time of the expulsion, had already a centuries-long history, at least in some of its genres. Sam approached this material as a medievalist, seeking to trace the complicated lineage of often fragmentary, orally transmitted Hispanic ballads to their Carolingian and, in some cases, Germanic oral epic ancestry. His scholarly interest in Sephardic (and other Hispanic) folk literature quickly came to include far more than the ballad fragments of the pan-European epic tradition. As Armistead explains (2003:154):

> The Hispanic oral tradition comprises not only the "classic" genres of folk literature: narrative poetry (ballads, *corridos*), lyric poetry, orally improvised poetry (*décimas*, *puntos*, *bertsoak*), children's rhymes, riddles, proverbs, folktales, and folk theater, but also local legends, memorates, jokes, folk prayers and incantations (*ensalmos*), cumulative songs, counting-out rhymes, curses and blessings, folk comparisons, calls to animals, tongue-twisters, formulaic phrases, baby talk, thieves' jargon, microtoponymy, folk beliefs, and, indeed, language itself, in all its diversity, as a constantly changing and consistently creative manifestation of folk culture.

The epic that Sam's work uncovered was, one might say without too much exaggeration, the epic of the human experience itself. Listening to Sam describe his fieldwork, I imagined that I sat in the presence of the Shekhinah, the indwelling of the divine Person in the world according to Kabbalistic theosophy, a figure whom Sam invoked at the start of the talk, perhaps not entirely in jest, as the power watching over him until he completed all the projected volumes of his *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews*.[1] I had, in fact, come to the talk precisely because I was interested in the development of the Lurianic Kabbalah that arose in large part as a response to the trauma of the Jewish expulsion from Spain. I had no idea that a collector of shards of song might be an agent of *tikkun olam*. Little did I know.

In that public lecture, Sam explained how the Judeo-Spanish tradition of folk literature had largely ceased to be a living tradition, just as the Judeo-Spanish language itself was under threat of extinction. He said that the voices of his Sephardic informants were preserved on reel-to-reel tapes and, he hoped, they would be a resource for scholars in the future. I approached Sam after his talk and asked him if he would be willing to work with me on a project to digitize the tapes and make them available (on what we then called the World Wide Web), for not only

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[1] See the References section at the end of this essay for a listing of the individual volumes (*FLSJ* I-VIII), six of which have been published and two of which (VII-VIII) are currently in preparation, the latter posthumously.

future scholars to hear and study but also for laypeople who wished to explore this extraordinary cultural treasure. Sam did not hesitate to agree and, despite his busy work and research schedule, he met with me to plan our grant proposal to the National Science Foundation for digital library projects (the Digital Library Initiative Phase 2 grant cycle). After getting support from the University Library, I ventured into the then uncharted territory of using XML (the Extended Markup Language) to create a multimedia library with the possibility of annotating audio and textual files through "link libraries" and an associated "ontology" of concepts that could be used by registered scholars to tag the massive amount of data that would be included in the proposed digital library. These ambitious goals for experimenting with the new XML-based "semantic web" might have themselves persuaded the NSF to support the digitization project, but, as I later learned from well-placed sources, everyone was simply astounded by the richness of the material and the need to preserve it for posterity. I received a call from the NSF in the spring of 1998 informing me that Sam and I had been awarded a three-year grant of nearly $500,000 to digitize, transcribe, and place on the web for searching and annotating the audiotapes that would become the Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Multimedia Digital Library.

My move from theory to practice in the creation of a digital library was rather labor-intensive, trained as I was as a classical philologist and lacking a background in computer programming or even the most minimal training in library science. I knew, however, that the material would be ill-served if its encoding was not as information-rich as possible and if its transcription did not conform to the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) standards that had already been established for digital texts. I therefore made certain that the audio files were digitized both as WAV files and also as the more compressed MP3 files. I also developed a computer program to process the transcriptions into standard TEI XML files. The transcriptions themselves began as simple text files and went through up to three levels of review (involving Spanish-speaking undergraduates who produced an initial version as well as graduate students in the Spanish Department who corrected and annotated the texts) before their final version was accepted by Sam's longtime editorial assistant, Karen Olson. Near the end of our grant, a new technology was made available that permitted the linking of transcriptions to specific segments of the full audio file: the RealAudio server and client that could stream digital audio by means of a web-based platform using information in a special XML file encoded in the Synchronized Multimedia Integration Language (SMIL) format. Until the introduction of SMIL technology I had no idea how to permit individuals to listen to the audio file while reading the transcription. Sam's Shekhinah smiled upon us, I suppose.

After completing the software architecture for web delivery of the digitized and transcribed files, the University of California, Davis librarians informed me that it was beyond their abilities or resources to provide a permanent platform for the website. They generously offered to preserve all the files, but they could not make them available online. For the next seven years I kept the website alive on my office computer at home. Needless to say, this was not the best way to provide the world with access to this material. In 2010, after I had resettled at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I met with librarians there who immediately agreed to take over the digital library and provide a permanent platform for it.

The homepage of the site (http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/) offers links in the upper right-hand corner to various portals of entry into the digital library. The "Browse Tapes" link

takes visitors to a list of the digitized reel-to-reel tapes that make up the backbone of the archive. The "Details" link to the left of each tape name opens a page where metadata about the tape are provided, and an embedded audio player allows visitors to listen to the entire tape. The "Browse Transcriptions" link on the upper right of the homepage allows visitors to see the segments on the audiotapes arranged according to the ballad name represented by each segment. The "Details" link to the left of each segment opens a window where metadata about the whole tape and the segment are provided, with an embedded audio player to play the segment. The transcription itself is provided with several levels of formatting. Searches for words and phrases are also possible across the entire archive. A visitor who wishes to find all transcriptions of a particular ballad can use the browser's "Find" function when the page of all transcriptions is open (http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/BrowseTranscriptions/). The homepage of the library also offers two introductions to the material, both written by Professor Armistead: "The Oral Literature of the Sephardic Jews" and "The Oral Literature of the Hispanic World."
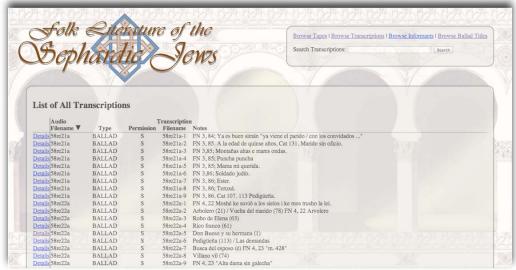

Fig. 2. All transcriptions as listed in the database's "browse" function at http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/

Fig. 3. Sample transcription of a ballad, associated metadata, and audio player link (http://sephardifolklit. illinois.edu/FLSJ/transcriptiondetails/1230).

Part Two: Use and Significance of the Digital Library (Belén Bistué)

One of the main values of the Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Digital Library is the possibility it offers for better understanding the oral dimension of the *Romancero*. Access to different performances of the same ballad recorded at different times and places can help us conceptualize how processes such as variation and fusion work. In addition to a comparison of the different final products that result from these processes (which is what written editions offer), this multimedia collection allows us to *witness* moments of improvisation in the use of vocabulary, formulae, and metrical patterns. We can listen, for instance, to the subtle change of rhythm that sometimes accompanies an improvised-creation moment, or to the critical comments that are often made by an informant's friend or family member who was present at the time of the recording. In fact, the creative changes that occur in the performance sometimes elicit brief discussions to which the user of the FLSJ library has access.

In 2011, with the support of the Auge Foundation directed by Graciela Roiz, I had the chance to offer at the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo in Mendoza, Argentina, a class titled "El Romancero sefardí: un espacio de intersecciones culturales y su pervivencia en la tradición oral" ("Sephardic Ballads: A Space for Cultural Intersections and its Survival in Oral Tradition"), which was based on the analysis and contextualization of recordings and transcriptions of ballads in the FLSJ digital library. One of the exercises we performed in this class was the analysis of variations in the ending of different versions of the ballad of "Tamar y Amnón."[2] Until they reach the end, all versions that we accessed followed the story without much variation. Tamar is raped by her brother Amnon, who created the occasion for the crime by pretending to be sick and asking his father, David, to send Tamar to his room with some food—and by specifying that she should come alone. While most versions coincided on the argument and on the menu (the suggestive "pechuguitas de una pava"), we found an interesting amount of variation in the closing lines of the ballad, which are spoken by Tamar's other brother, Absalom. After Tamar tells him what happened, in some of the versions he comforts Tamar by telling her that she will be well regarded and receive a good judgment:

> —No se te dé nada, Tamar,
> no se te dé nada, mi alma.
> Mañana por la mañana,
> *tú serás la bien juzgada.*
> (reel4a-1; re25a-5)[3]

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[2] To find these variations, open the "Browse Transcriptions" page (http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/BrowseTranscriptions) and use the browser's "Find" function to search for "Tamar." There are 14 transcriptions that have been identified as instances of this ballad.

[3] Reel4a-1: http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/16; re25a-5: http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/1219. In all my quotations from the archive, I have regularized the spelling. I have provided links to the transcriptions wherever possible. One can also search on the "Browse Transcription" page for the segment designation provided and use the "Details" link to the left in order to reach the page with the embedded audio player and the full transcription of the ballad.

[—Don't you worry, Tamar,
don't you worry, my soul.
Tomorrow morning,
you'll be deemed a good woman.]

—No te dé nada, mi alma,
no te dé nada mi vida.
Mañana por la mañana,
antes que amanezca el sol,
tú serás la bien juzgada.
                    (luna09a-6)[4]

[—Don't worry, my soul,
don't worry, my life.
Tomorrow morning,
before the sun rises,
you'll be deemed a good woman.]

In other versions, Absalom assures his sister that she will be *well married*: "No se te importe, Tamar, / *que tú serás la bien casada*" (62re37a-5)[5] ("Don't you mind, Tamar, / *you will be well married*"); "No estés de nada tú, Tamar, / *tú serás la bien casada*" (isr15-1-3)[6] ("Don't worry yourself, Tamar, / *you will be well married*"); "No te se importe, Tamar, / *que tú serás la bien casada"* (ro16a) ("Don't you mind, Tamar, / *you will be well married*"). And in yet others, the ending addresses concerns about Tamar's honor and about revenge: "tú serás la más honrada" (62-43b5)[7] ("you will be the most honored"), "tú serás la bien vengada" (reel8b-2)[8] ("you will be well avenged"). Indeed, there are versions in which the final emphasis fully shifts from Tamar's future status to Abasalom's revenge on Amnon:

—No se te dé nada, Tamar,
no se te dé nada, mi alma.
De antes que arraye el sol,
su sangre será derramada.
De antes que arraye el sol,
su sangre será derramada.

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[4] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/1871.

[5] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/252.

[6] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/675.

[7] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/427.

[8] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/1052.

(62-46b-4;[9] and similarly in ta51b-3[10])

> [—Don't you worry, Tamar,
> don't you worry, my soul.
> Before the sun comes out,
> *his blood will be shed*.
> Before the sun comes out,
> *his blood will be shed*.]

Interestingly, there are also cases in which we can see almost all of the above possibilities creatively brought together. We have, for instance, Absalom not only promising Tamar that she will be well married, but also that Amnon's blood will be shed, and also that her honor will be avenged:

> —No se te dé nada, Tamar,
> que *tú serás la bien casada*.
> Mañana por la mañana,
> *su sangre será vertida*
> y tú, mi querida hermana,
> *tu honra será vengada*.
>   (62re36a-4)[11]

> [—Don't you worry, Tamar,
> *you will be well married*.
> Tomorrow morning,
> *his blood will be shed*.
> and, you, my dear sister,
> *your honor will be avenged*.]

In yet another creative combination, the final lines take the form of a parallel between the blood of Tamar and that of Amnon. Absalom says that Tamar's blood will be well avenged and Amnon's blood will be well shed: "que *tu sangre* irá bien vengada. / Y antes que el sol apunte, / *su sangre* irá bien vertida" (ro14a)[12] ("*your blood* will go well avenged. / And before the sun shows up, / *his blood* will go well shed"). Both combinations, we must note, force the rhyme a bit (they insert an *-i-a* verse into the ballad's *-a-a* pattern). Other performances in which the

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[9] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/381.

[10] Unfortunately, there seems to be an error associated with the data associated with this audio file.

[11] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/269.

[12] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TapeDetails/346. Unfortunately, transcriptions are not available for this tape. One can hear the whole tape, however, using the embedded audio player on the webpage. The tape named "ro14a" can be found on the "Browse Tapes" page.

perspectives are combined are even less seamless. In one case Absalom tells Tamar that Amnon's blood will be avenged: "Antes de que raye el sol, / *su sangre* será vengada" (ro11a)[13] ("Before the sun appears, / *his blood* will be avenged")—rather than her honor being avenged or Amnon's blood shed. And in another instance, the blood that is shed seems to be Tamar's instead of Amnon's:

> —No se te dé nada, Tamar,
> tú serás la bien casada.
> Y antes que apuntara el sol
> *tu* sangre ya era regada.
> (62re31b-4)[14]

> [—Don't you worry, Tamar,
> you will be well married.
> And before the sun rose,
> *your* blood was already shed.]

This could very well be a slip of the tongue, but the informant sounds quite confident, and it may also be that she is hinting at a more tragic ending—especially if we consider that, although these lines are still addressed to Tamar (there is a second person possessive "tu"), the tense of the verb changes from future to past in the last verse. This final change may give us the feeling of a different temporal perspective, almost as if we were now listening to the narration of the actual ending, rather than to Absalom's speech.

In any case, whether the informants got confused or actually wanted to convey a different meaning, the more interesting aspect of comparing these various endings is the possibility for discussion that they create. At the most immediate level, we can see this possibility in the recordings themselves. After they have finished singing, some informants comment on the closing lines they've chosen. In the file I first cited, the informant and her daughter add, after the song has finished, that Tamar will not only receive a good judgment but also a prize from Heaven: she will be "juzgada y bien juzgada y de los cielos premiada" (reel4a-1) ("judged and judged good, and she will receive a prize from heaven"). In another file (isr15-1-3), the informant adds an explanation as well: Absalom wanted to calm his sister by telling her that she would have good fortune, as if he were saying, "No te apures, esto no es nada, que tu suerte será buena" ("Don't you hurry, this is nothing, and your fortune will be good"). In file reel8b-2, before remembering the line in which Absalom promises that Tamar will be rightly avenged ("bien vengada"), the informant interrupts himself to explain that Absalom promises to kill Amnon and then kills him. Actually, before he had begun reciting the ballad, this informant had already explained that Amnon's passion was in fact a punishment for King David, who had fallen in love with Bathsheba. And in reel15a, when the informant cannot remember the ending, someone else explains that Absalom kills Amnon in order to avenge his own dishonor as Tamar's

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[13] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TapeDetails/341. This tape also lacks transcriptions.

[14] http://sephardifolklit.illinois.edu/FLSJ/TranscriptionDetails/328.

brother. As we can see, the ending of "Tamar y Amnón" seems to be a particularly unstable place. It provokes change, perhaps because it provokes thought, too.[15]

The decision to include recordings and instrumental transcriptions of these comments in the library was felicitous. As a scholar, I see them as possible entry points into the study of the cultural and historical tensions that the doubts regarding how to repay Tamar, or Absalom, may represent. As a teacher, I see them as an opportunity for my students to experience moments of creative change. Indeed, the comparison of changes, seamless combinations, and discussions can also provoke thought and participation in the classroom. By *witnessing* these moments of instability, we can see ballads not only as past literature, but also as an open tradition that offers room for debate and creation. It is in this sense that the digital library adds an invaluable dimension to the study of the *Romancero*.

Conclusion

The Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Digital Library offers laypersons and scholars an opportunity to share the results of decades of fieldwork across several continents with over 240 informants. The researchers who engaged in this fieldwork preserved on tape the last stage of an oral tradition whose history reaches back to the earliest strata of Romance epic but no longer exists as a living and evolving transmission practice. The digital library captures moments of performance that no book can possibly offer. There are now six volumes in the *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews* series authored by Armistead, Silverman, and the musicologist Israel Katz. These books and many articles offer critical editions and discussions of the ballads preserved in the digital library. Our hope, therefore, is that the digital library will make it possible for the cultural treasure that Armistead and Silverman captured on tape just before it perished to live on in the continued tradition of their vibrant scholarship.

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Armistead 2003   Samuel Armistead. "Pan-Hispanic Oral Tradition," *Oral Tradition*, 18.2:154-56. http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/18ii/armistead

FLSJ I   Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman, eds. *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews, I: The Judeo-Spanish Ballad Chapbooks of Yacob Abraham*

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[15] I would like to note that this is not the case in all ballads. The ending of the ballad of the "Infantina," for instance, is much the same in most of the library's versions. The man who goes to ask for his mother's advice before rescuing the beautiful maid from the tree invariably deserves the same punishment: "que le aten pies y manos y le arrastren por la villa" ("let them tie his feet and hands and drag him through the village") (for instance, isr10-1-6, luna09b-4, re21a-3, re29a-5, 62re32b-7, 62re34a-3, 62re38b, ta54a-3), except for the version in file re30b-1, where after the tying he should throw himself into the sea.

                     Yoná. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1971.

FLSJ II   Samuel G. Armistead, Joseph H. Silverman, and Israel J. Katz, eds. *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews, II: Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Oral Tradition, I. Epic Ballads*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1986.

FLSJ III   Samuel G. Armistead, Joseph H. Silverman, and Israel J. Katz. *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews, III: Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Oral Tradition, II. Carolingian Ballads (1): Roncesvalles*. Technical editor, Karen L. Olson. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1994.

FLSJ IV   Samuel G. Armistead, Joseph H. Silverman, and Israel J. Katz. *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews, IV: Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Oral Tradition: III: Carolingian Ballads (2), Conde Claros*. Technical editor, Karen L. Olson. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta. 2008.

FLSJ V   Samuel G. Armistead, Joseph H. Silverman, and Israel J. Katz. *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews, V: Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Oral Tradition, IV. Carolingian Ballads (3): Gaiferos*. Technical editor, Karen L. Olson. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta. 2005-06.

FLSJ VI   Samuel G. Armistead, Joseph H. Silverman, and Israel J. Katz. *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews, VI: Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Oral Tradition, V. Carolingian Ballads (4): Montesinos*. Technical editor: Karen L. Olson. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta. 2014.

FLSJ VII   Samuel G. Armistead, Joseph H. Silverman, and Israel J. Katz. *Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews, VII: Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Oral Tradition, VI. Carolingian Ballads (5): Celinos*. Technical editor, Karen L. Olson. Forthcoming.

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