Sepharadim/conversos and premodern Global Hispanism

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ABSTRACT

Sepharadim participated in the Hispanic vernacular culture of the Iberian Peninsula. Even in the time of al-Andalus many spoke Hispano-Romance, and their Hebrew literature belies a deep familiarity with, and love of, their native Hispano-Romance languages. However, since the early sixteenth century, the vast majority of Sepharadim have never lived in the Hispanic world. Sepharadim lived not in Spanish colonies defined by Spanish conquest, but in a network of Mediterranean Jewish communities defined by diasporic values and institutions. By contrast, conversos, those Sepharadim who converted to Catholicism, whether in Spain or later in Portugal, Italy or the New World, lived mostly in Spanish imperial lands, were officially Catholic and spoke normative Castilian. Their connections, both real and imagined, with Sephardic cultural practice put them at risk of social marginalization, incarceration, even death. Some were devout Catholics whose heritage and family history doomed them to these outcomes. Not surprisingly, many Spanish and Portuguese conversos sought refuge in lands outside of Spanish control where they might live openly as Jews. This exodus (in the 1600s) from the lands formerly known as Sefarad by a generation of conversos trained in Spanish universities led to a parallel Sephardic community of conversos who re-embraced Judaism in Amsterdam and Italy. The Sephardic/converso cultural complex exceeds the boundaries of Spanish imperial geography, confuses Spanish, Portuguese, Catholic and Jewish subjectivities and defies traditional categories practiced in Hispanic studies; it is a unique example of the Global Hispanophone.

This special issue of the Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies makes clear the need (or at least the desire) for a discussion of global Hispanism across regional and chronological specializations within Hispanic studies. There is much to be gained by reading the Hispanic culture of a single moment and place in light of global practices and phenomena. Most theories of Hispanism, global or otherwise, flow from the experience of colonialism and tell the story of subject peoples and colonial administrators. This collection of essays pays special attention to areas of hispanofonía that are generally neglected by Latin American and Iberian studies. The case of the Sepharadim/conversos is exceptional in that, once expelled from Spain, the Sepharadim/conversos’ engagement with Castilian and with Spanish culture was not defined by Spanish coloniality, but rather by diaspora from Spain. As we will see, the

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most “Hispanic” moment of Sephardic/converso culture takes place in Amsterdam, outside the sphere of Spanish political power. Their religious and cultural heritage (diasporic Jewish), literary languages (Hebrew and Spanish), and transimperial subjectivity set them apart as a curious case in the panorama of global Hispanism. Also, the relationship of Sephardim/conversos to the Spanish language does not sustain the philosephardic vision that early twentieth-century Spanish writers such as Ángel Pulido (1904, 1993, 2006) and Ernesto Giménez Caballero articulate. If the national literatures paradigm of literary history that shaped academic Hispanism in the twentieth century tends to exclude all production that falls outside of national or colonial territory, the Spanish philosemitic discourse adduces to the Sephardim/conversos a monolithic and two-dimensional Spanish national essence or identity (Rohr 2011; Friedman 2011) to which actual Sephardic/converso cultural practice does not give voice. The goal of this essay, then, is to demonstrate the complex and ambivalent Hispanophone identity of the Sephardim/conversos during the Middle Ages and early modern period, as a critique of both Spanish philosemitism and academic Hispanism’s interpretation of the Sephardic/converso experience.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, specialists in premodern Hispanic studies began to issue calls to rethink the field in ways that made meaningful connections with the currents of thought that had been transforming colonial and Latin American studies since the “theory revolution” of the 1980s (Dagenais and Greer 2000; Fuchs 2003; Cascardi 2005). This emerging discussion of global Hispanism all but omitted the Sephardim and conversos, whose study suffers a double marginalization in the field for being geographically and religiously outside the scope of most specialists in Hispanic studies. Jewish religion and Hebrew language do not typically form part of the Hispanist’s training except among specialists in Sephardic or Latin American Jewish topics. In the 2004 Cambridge History of Spanish Literature, John Dagenais (54) and María Rosa Menocal both called for renewed attention to Sephardic literature as part of a Hispanic literature, in Menocal’s words, “defined now as being multifaceted and encompassing languages that would later be rejected and exiled” (71). In the pages to follow, I will attempt to answer their call, by framing the Sephardim/conversos as part of a global hispanofonía.

Recently, scholars such as Adam Lifshey (2012) have argued for more global visions of the history of Hispanic culture that include former Spanish colonies like the Philippines and Equatorial Guinea alongside Spanish-speaking Spain and the Americas:

Asian and African literature in Spanish emerges in moments of late colonialism that do not fit into the accepted frames of when, where, how, and why literatures in Spanish outside of Spain came into existence. The tradition … is invisible to nearly all those who study or teach in Spanish programs worldwide. (2012, 6)

Like the material Lifshey studies, the Sephardim/conversos existed throughout and beyond the boundaries of the Spanish, Portuguese and Ottoman Empires. Theirs was, and continues to be, a Global Hispanophone culture, yet their literature is all but invisible to most Hispanists.

**Who are the Sephardim/conversos?**

The Global Hispanophone as a category of critical inquiry seeks to deconstruct the concept of hispanidad, or a sense of pan-Hispanic cultural commonality as a legacy of Spanish
colonialism. While philosephardic writers such as Ángel Pulido and Ernesto Giménez Caballero attempted to enlist the Sepharadim as agents of Spanish colonialism and cultural imperialism in Morocco and the Ottoman Empire, the history and cultural practices of the Sepharadim (as with those of all the peoples swept up in the dragnet of hispanidad) tell a different story. Spain was to be sure a place of origin, sometimes a source of nostalgia too, but a nostalgia tempered by the trauma of expulsion and the bitter memory of persecution and the Inquisition. Sepharadim is the Hebrew plural of Sephardi, the gentilicio or demonym for Sepharad, which is the Hebrew word for the Iberian Peninsula. There is an unbroken Jewish presence on the Iberian Peninsula going back to at least the Roman period, and possibly before. Jewish culture famously flowered during the Andalusi period, after which Jews served as a key colonial elite in the transition to Christian rule. Jewish fortunes on the Peninsula went, on the balance, gradually downhill between 1150 and 1350, culminating in the infamous pogroms of 1391 that triggered a wave of mass conversions to Catholicism and created a class of conversos or New Christians who were technically Christian, but whose spiritual beliefs and practices varied wildly and produced some very innovative hybrid forms (Cardoso 1679, 90–91; Bodian 1997, 97; Meyerson 2010).

Eventually the large numbers of Judaizing conversos (real or imagined – the distinction is still the major bone of contention among specialists), now technically Christian heretics, spurred the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478, and led to the eventual expulsion of Jews from the Spanish kingdoms in 1492, from Portugal in 1497 and from Navarre in 1498. Tens of thousands of Peninsular Jews chose conversion over exile. These conversos – joining those who converted in the wake of 1391 and largely free of the social restrictions Jews experienced in Christian society, entered the Church, the royal administration and other sectors of public life closed to them as Jews – soon became a very powerful elite who attracted no little resentment and suspicion from other, so-called Old Christians.

What might have looked like the end of the Sephardic period was really just the beginning of the Sephardic/converso period, and some conversos continued to practice various forms of Jewish spirituality for centuries, despite (and in some cases thanks to) the constant threat of punishment at the hands of the Inquisition (Gitlitz 2002). Literary scholars and cultural critics often imagine conversos and Sepharadim as two related, yet distinct, groups whose cultural practice formed separate spheres (Wacks 2015, 2–4). The documentary record both confirms and disproves this rift, depending on the angle from which one views the problem. Inquisitorial records suggest that religious and cultural identity was fluid, emergent, confused and often contradictory. Some conversos/Sepharadim alternated between identities as was convenient: Jewish in Italy, Catholic in Spain.

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What is gained by reading the culture of the Sepharadim/conversos as part of a global cultural system? For one, studying converted and unconverted Sepharadim together as speakers of Spanish (and Portuguese, to be fair, as we will see) allows us to form a more comprehensive theory of Sephardic cultural production in its engagement with imperial powers and languages. Living across at least three empires (Spanish, Portuguese, Ottoman), and a number of other societies, the Sepharadim/conversos are a unique case of a Hispanophone cultural group living largely outside of Spanish imperial power, yet intimately bound to it. Their deterritorialized, diasporic Hispanicity challenges some of our basic assumptions about Hispanic culture (Wacks 2015, 8–33).
Are the Sepharadim Hispanophones?

In the year 1300, it was difficult to say what a Hispanophone was, religion notwithstanding. There was as yet no country called España, no national language referred to as español (Dagenais 2004, 40–44). While Alfonso X of Castile-León (1252–1284) did espouse what we may call some protoimperial linguistic policies (Bossong 1987; Cárdenas 1990; Rojinsky 2010, 59–91), Hispanism as policy was still centuries in the future, and would not really take recognizable shape until the reign of Emperor Carlos V, and arguably later (Menéndez Pidal 1943, 31–33). If by Hispanophone we mean simply speakers of Castilian/Spanish, there are many Sephardim/conversos who fall into this category. By the fifth century CE, Hebrew had ceased to be a Jewish vernacular, and so Peninsular Jews spoke the various vernaculars of the Peninsula: dialects of Latin, Arabic, Tamazight (Berber). By the later years of Christian rule, Sephardim were generally native speakers of Ibero-Romance dialects (Galician, Astur-Leonese, Navarrese, Castilian, Catalan, etc.). Although they wrote almost exclusively in Hebrew, their literary practice belies their participation in the vernacular culture of the times (Wacks 2015, 129). Until the fifteenth century, the only (surviving) significant work in a Peninsular vernacular by a Jewish author is the Proverbios morales of Shem Tov ben Isaac Ardutiel de Carrión (ca. 1335). However, during this period we do see an increasing use of the vernacular within the Jewish communities for paraliturgical and administrative purposes, if not for belles lettres (Abrahams 1981, 261). Despite this Sephardic ambivalence toward vernacular literature, it is clear that the Sephardim were full participants in the vernacular culture of the times. The descendants of those exiled in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa continue to speak a dialect of Castilian to the present day, and for centuries continued to sing the songs, tell the stories and practice the folkways they had learned in Spain and Portugal. In this sense, at least, their Hispanophone bona fides are quite solid, even if the Spanish Empire had no interest in them as subjects. The feeling was – especially in the early modern period when conversos living within the Spanish Empire were in real danger of being denounced to the Inquisition – mutual.

The Sephardim/conversos have lived as Hispanophones in a multicontinental diaspora for half a millennium. Historically, the vast majority of Sephardim have never lived in the Hispanic world, and only a small minority have lived as Spanish subjects. In this respect, the study of their culture challenges many of the assumptions and habits of mind of Hispanicism. Hispanists tend to focus their attention on Spain and the territories conquered by Spain. In early modernity, the most significant concentrations of Sephardim were to be found in the Ottoman Empire, the Netherlands, Italy and England, while only a few lived openly as Jews in imperial lands (Israel 1997, 223). They are Hispanophones whose culture existed largely outside of the state structures that would define Hispanic studies.

To complicate matters, studies of the Sephardim tend to exclude conversos, those Sephardim who converted to Catholicism, whether in Spain or later in Portugal, Italy or the New World. Philologists do so for linguistic reasons: conversos tended to speak normative Spanish, while Sephardim are believed by some to have spoken a distinct dialect of Castilian even before their expulsion from Spain and Portugal. However, Isabel the Catholic herself complained in the very Edict of Expulsion of 1492 that it was the social entanglement of the conversos with the Sephardim that caused so much trouble, and this was the basis for her justification of the expulsion of the Sephardim. This suggests that it was the
cultural similarity – and not the difference – between Jews, conversos and Old Christians that was problematic for the state. To wit, it is most likely that the Castilian spoken by Sepharadim/conversos was the same as that spoken by Christian Castilians, at least in the fifteenth century.\(^5\)

The Sepharadim who chose to leave Spain rather than convert were soon joined by Portuguese Jews in 1497 and settled in communities in North Africa, Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, Italy and beyond. The Ottoman sultan Bayazid II is said (legendarily) to have remarked (and I paraphrase), “How foolish these Catholic Monarchs, who impoverish themselves by sending away their Jews, and send them to me, making me rich in the process!”\(^6\) In some cases they joined other Sepharadim who had left in the previous century on the heels of the pogroms of 1391. In others, they joined communities of North African, Romaniote (Greek-speaking, formerly Byzantine) and other Jews, often overwhelming and assimilating the established communities due to their numbers and cultural prestige.

In their new homes in Tétouan, Izmir, Salonika and elsewhere, Sepharadim continued to speak their language. What exactly we should call this language has been a bone of contention among specialists, though the Sepharadim themselves seem less troubled by this question, content to refer to it variously as judezmo, ladino, haketa, mustero español or spanyolit (Bunis 1992, 1999, 402; Díaz Mas 1992, 74–75). By any name – why not refer to it as Sephardic Spanish, or, the variety of Spanish spoken in the Sephardic world – their language was primarily medieval Castilian, which came to dominate and assimilate the other Ibero-Romance dialects spoken by the exiles who came from all areas of the Peninsula (Attig 2012, 836). Memories of this early linguistic diversity persist in Sephardic folklore, in a rhyme collected in the twentieth century describing the unintelligible (to Castilian speakers) dialect of the Galician exiles: “Somos gallegos, no nos entemdemos [sic]” (Nehama 1935, 27).\(^7\) To this base of medieval Castilian, the Sepharadim added bits of Hebrew drawn from ritual and communal life, Arabisms, Turkish loan words and Italian and French influences (Díaz Mas 1992, 89–90).

Here, the hispanidad of the Sephardic community is revealed to be every bit as much a construction as that of Spanish subjects, whose linguistic and ethnic diversity (among Basques, Galicians, Asturians, Catalans, etc.) is plainly evident. Eventually, however, through both sheer numbers and greater social prestige, the Castilian-speaking Sephardim came to dominate their neighbors who spoke other Ibero-Romance dialects, and Sephardic Spanish, in all its varieties, preserved more features of Peninsular Castilian than of the other dialects.\(^8\)

A well-documented corpus of Sephardic folklore and written literature demonstrates that Sephardic Spanish, written in Hebrew letters until the twentieth century, was a very productive language for centuries.\(^9\) While Hebrew continued to be the prestige literary language in most Sephardic communities into modernity (as it had been in Spain), Sephardic authors began to experiment with Spanish as a literary language as early as the fifteenth century, when they translated parts of the liturgy and, in one case, the Takkanot of Valladolid, the Jewish community charter, into Spanish for the benefit of community members who did not read Hebrew (Moreno Koch 1987). A late fifteenth-century aljamiado (Spanish written in Hebrew letters) manuscript, from Spain or Italy, Parma 2666, is a compilation of learned texts including courtly Spanish cancionero poetry, Aristotelian philosophy and other genres typical of the Spanish court (Hamilton 2014). This manuscript
demonstrates the extent to which some Jews had begun to use Spanish as a language of learning within the Jewish community. This was far from the norm in the Ottoman Sephardic press, in which Hebrew titles dominated, despite the viability of Sephardic Spanish as a vernacular. One area of religious life in which the Sephardim did use written Spanish was in their responsa, or legal decisions. Annette Benaim has edited a sizable corpus of such responsa written in Sephardic Spanish and explains that Spanish enjoyed sufficient prestige in Ottoman Jewish communities to be used in contexts normally reserved for rabbinic Hebrew (Benaim 2012, 18).

The prestige Spanish enjoyed in the Sephardic world made possible its development as a literary language as well. While scholars tend to locate the origins of Sephardic Spanish literature in the eighteenth century with the publication of the Biblical commentary Meam Loez by Rabbi Isaac Khuli, Olga Borovaya has recently shown that there is a significant corpus of Spanish-language publications by Sephardic authors working in the Ottoman Empire beginning in the sixteenth century. These include works of geography, such as Moses Almosnino’s Grandezas de Constantinopla (later also published in Spain in Roman characters for an ostensibly Christian audience), Almosnino’s compilation of Aristotelian philosophy, Regimiento de la vida (Salonika, 1564), the anonymous religious polemic Fuente clara (Salonika, ca. 1595), and Mesa de el alma (Salonika, 1568), an abridged translation of Rabbi Joseph Karo’s Hebrew Talmudic digest, the Shulkhan Arukh (Venice, 1565) (Romeu Ferré 2007; Borovaya 2017a, 2017b, 45). Fuente clara and other works were published to cater to recently arrived conversos as yet ignorant of Hebrew. These and other travelers coming from Spain brought Spanish books that circulated in Sephardic circles and thus created linguistic and literary connections to the Peninsular linguistic communities (Borovaya 2014). This process of recasting Spanish learning in a Sephardic key, and in the Spanish language, mirrors the same process described by Mabel Moraña taking place in Latin America among Creole elites in what she calls a creole archive:

With the advancement and consolidation of colonialism, the Spanish language was also crucial to the organization and transmission of a creole archive that would define the cultural parameters of a new, emerging American elite which, in spite of its subaltern position to Peninsular sectors, would claim the right to re-discover, register, and interpret pre-Hispanic cultures as part of the process of the “invention of traditions” initiated by Spanish missionaries and men of letters soon after the “discovery”. (2005, xi)

Sephardic intellectuals such as Almosnino and others in the sixteenth century, and those working in Italy and Amsterdam in the seventeenth, engaged in their own interpretation of Hispanic culture outside the borders of the empire (Wacks 2015, 191–196). As we will see, the massive influx of conversos into Western Sephardic communities during the seventeenth century gave rise to a Sephardic literary boom that was very much global in its perspective. 10

This story, however, starts much earlier and on the Iberian Peninsula itself, and it brings us directly to the Sephardic/converso question. In Spain, until 1492, conversos lived in constant contact with professed Jews, and the tension between the two groups and vis-à-vis the Christian majority defined their experience. It would be, at least officially, one of the main justifications for their expulsion by the Catholic Monarchs (Suárez Fernández 1991, 307). The enforcement, legal and penal practices of the Inquisition shaped converso consciousness. In the most direct way, conversos living in Spain or its territories from 1480 forward
lived in constant fear of the Holy Office (Melammed 2004, 26–28). Apart from the resulting atmosphere of terror that affected all conversos regardless of their actual religious convictions or practices, the workings of the Inquisition’s institutions shaped converso culture in unintended ways. Inquisition prisons were informal Jewish schools where traditions were transmitted mostly in Spanish. Inquisitorial literary genres, the written records of legal proceedings, also helped to shape certain converso texts (Gitlitz 2000). The Relación of Antonio de Montezinos mimics the structure of the discurso de vida, or biographical statement required of most defendants before Inquisitorial tribunals from the middle of the sixteenth century (Perelis 2016, 15–17). Sephardic poets working outside the Peninsula cultivated a genre of elegies commemorating victims of the Inquisition (Bodian 2007, 188–189). In this way, converso education, spirituality and writing, all took cues from Inquisitorial practice, for which Spanish – and a particular legal register of Spanish – was the official language. In this way, Spanish became a language of Jewish religious practice as Hebrew became less prevalent due to conversion, expulsion and the Inquisition.

Hispanists who have studied converso literature are not in agreement as to what this term might mean: literature by conversos, literature about conversos, or literature written in a converso voice (Hutcheson 1996; Edwards et al. 1997; Aronson-Friedman 2000; Kaplan 2002). It is difficult to say. To begin with, there is no one converso experience or subjectivity: conversos, even those living in Spain in the fifteenth century, represented a wide variety of experiences, spirituality and practice (Faur 1992, 41; Gitlitz 2002, 82–85).

The annexation of Portugal by Spain in 1580 opened a floodgate of converso migration from Portugal and the Portuguese Empire to Spain and the Spanish Empire. The fact that the Spanish Inquisition did not prosecute crimes committed against the Church in Portugal, together with Castile-Aragon’s superior economy, encouraged many Portuguese conversos to cross the border into Castile-Aragon and from there to many of the Spanish Empire’s territories, where Inquisitorial surveillance and control was less rigorous than in Castile-Aragon proper (Graizbord 2004, 20–21). These migrants became bilingual in Portuguese and Castilian; many were educated at Spanish universities and published works in Spanish. At this time many of Spain’s literary lights were conversos or descendants of conversos (Roth 2002, 156–182).

The Portuguese conversos were more confidently identified as Jews and had more and more recent Jewish education. Their arrival in the converso communities of Spain was an inspiration and a source of Jewish education to those Spanish conversos who sought it, even as the Inquisition’s campaign of terror raged around them. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, many Portuguese and Spanish conversos emigrated to countries where they might practice Judaism openly. Large communities of Iberian conversos joined Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire, Italy and Amsterdam (Israel 2002). The latter city, as a religiously tolerant hub of global commerce, became a mecca for Iberian conversos seeking to revert to Judaism. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam had become the most important and economically powerful Sephardic community in the world (Swetchinski 2000).

Amsterdam Sephardim were connected to communities in the Ottoman Empire via trade associations, but the more significant routes were North Africa/Amsterdam (Roitman 2011, 79). Venice was an important node linking Amsterdam and Iberia with the Ottoman Empire. The rapidly expanding Portuguese Empire was home to many Portuguese conversos (Roitman 2011, 92–97). The wealth generated by these Sephardic
merchants provided for numerous influential religious academies or yeshivot, and a rich artistic and spiritual life for Amsterdam Sephardim.

The role of Spanish in this environment was significant, and the Sephardic press at Amsterdam produced a robust corpus of works in Spanish, and to a lesser extent in Portuguese, written by, and for, Sephardim, many of whom had been raised as Christians and educated in Spanish universities (Den Boer 2013). In short, it was a kind of parallel Sefarad, where Sephardim continued to create and consume Spanish literature free of the restrictions of Church and Inquisition, under the aegis of a tolerant, multicultural, pluriconfessional regime where they were free to be Hispanophones – in every sense of the word – and Jews. The Amsterdam Sephardim benefitted from the prestige of their literary legacy (authors like Lope de Vega, Quevedo and Cervantes were well known throughout Europe) without suffering the oppression of the society that had produced it (Kaplan 2017, 22).

This flowering of Sephardic Spanish literature in Amsterdam was perhaps the peak Global Hispanophone moment of the Sephardim. Authors such as Daniel Levi de Barrios penned works on secular and religious topics in the same crisp Castilian that flowed from the pens of Lope and Quevedo, but proclaiming the superiority of the God of the Hebrews and condemning Jesus as a false messiah: the experience of reading them is wildly dissonant for readers of Spanish who associate seventeenth-century Castilian with strict Catholic doctrine and Spanish casticismo. The Amsterdam Sephardim mirrored the literary culture of the Peninsula in many ways, forming literary academies that imitated those they had left behind in Spain and Portugal (Den Boer 1995, 135). They re-Judaized Spanish poetics by shifting the symbolic center of their writing from classical antiquity to the world of the Hebrew Bible (Den Boer 1995, 136). Their literature was patently Iberian, but at the same time very Jewish, which calls into question the categorically Catholic nature of Hispanic literature of the time. Some genres, like the sermon, as cultivated by the Amsterdam Sephardim, were a unique hybrid of Jewish, Christian and classical genres that defied easy categorization (Den Boer 1995, 22–23). This stands in sharp contrast to the modern Spanish discourse of hispanidad that emphasizes a cultural similarity and unity among Spanish speakers of various regions and backgrounds. While it is true that Amsterdam Sephardim/conversos were proud of their Iberian origins, their literary practice was so profoundly Jewish that it does not fit the idealized image of the universal hispanidad promoted by Spanish philosephardists.

We see this effect in the works of the Italian and Dutch Sephardim themselves, who often wrote sermons and other texts in the more vernacular Portuguese, reserving Spanish for belles lettres and philosophical treatises (Kaplan 2017, 22). In the Western Sephardic communities, Spanish, while being replaced by Portuguese, Italian, French and other languages as a vernacular, retained its status as a learned language used for religious education. A parallel phenomenon took place in the East, where the spoken and written registers of Sephardic Spanish diverged, the former as a vernacular and the latter as a language of religious ritual and textual study sessions or meldados (from the Spanish medrar) (Díaz Mas 1992, 72–73). The influential Biblia de Ferrara (1554) was key in this process. Its Hebrew-inflected style, which the translator calls “nuestra lengua española” (Lazar 1996, 4) in the prologue, made Sephardim feel closer to the Biblical Hebrew and shaped the literary register of many Sephardic authors (Den Boer 1995, 39).
The predominance of Spanish over Portuguese in the literature of the Amsterdam Sepharadim—among whom Portuguese was for many the lengua madre and Spanish the language of Jewish learning—was probably due to a desire to reach more conversos beyond Amsterdam who might be convinced to return to Judaism. Because Hebrew was out of reach for so many newly reverted conversos, Spanish experienced a sort of classiﬁcation, standing in for Hebrew as a sort of quasi-sacred language, until Hebrew in the community could reach levels comparable to those elsewhere in the Jewish world (Méchoulan 1987, 42). Outside of Amsterdam, the extent to which Sephardim were readers of Spanish books is diﬃcult to assess. We know that Spanish continued to enjoy some prestige as a literary language in places like Venice, where Flemish printer Daniel Bomberg’s 1525 edition of Maimonides’s Mishne Torah has a dedication written in Spanish (Marzo Magno 2013, 71). Rabbinic sources are fairly silent on the circulation of Spanish (as opposed to Hebrew) books in Sephardic communities outside of Iberia. While there were large communities of both conversos and Jews in cities where presses published books in Spanish (Amsterdam, Antwerp, Rome), and documented connections in the book trade between these cities and the Ottoman East, sources on the experience of the Sephardic communities limit themselves primarily to the case of Jewish books published in Hebrew, but indicate the high level of interconnectedness that the international Jewish press made possible (Ruderman 2010, 102). What we do know is that Sephardic writers working both in Italy and in the Ottoman Empire made translations of popular Spanish works, such as Fernando de Rojas’s Celestina, Rodríguez de Montalvo’s Amadís and Francisco López de Gómara’s Historia de las Indias, into Hebrew. It is possible that they produced these translations for the beneﬁt of non-Sephardic Jews who read Hebrew (and not Spanish), but that they themselves were regular readers of the original Spanish titles coming out of Amsterdam, Venice or Spain itself, rabbinic objections notwithstanding (Wacks 2016). One testimony is the complaint of Rabbi Menahem di Lunzano, who, during an extended stay in Jerusalem, chastises the Sephardic Jews there for reading Amadís de Gaula (Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, 1507) and Palmerín de Oliva (Francisco Vázquez, 1511), blockbuster chivalric novels in Spain, on the Sabbath, instead of books of Jewish learning (Wacks 2015, 197–198).

As these remarks suggest, the situation for the Sepharadim in the Ottoman Empire was very different from that in Amsterdam. There, Sephardic Jews and New Christians formed an indispensable class of imperial administrators (Levy 1994, 28). Thousands of Iberian Jews and conversos poured into the Ottoman Empire, beginning in the fourteenth century and steadily increasing throughout the sixteenth. In many cases, the Sephardim overwhelmed local communities and assimilated them culturally. In this way, Sephardic Spanish gained numbers of new speakers who had no historical connection with Spain, mimicking the colonial expansion of Spanish in the Americas within the Ottoman Jewish context. Because Hebrew was so well established as a language of Jewish learning, the overwhelming number of books printed for Jews in the Ottoman Empire were written in Hebrew. There was, however, a steady trickle of titles in Sephardic Spanish, followed by a stream of religious literature in the nineteenth century, and a torrent of both religious and secular works in the twentieth century (Díaz Mas 1992, 132–150; Lehmann 2005; Borovaya 2011, 2017a).

In both cases, Western and Eastern Sepharadim/conversos formed an important and mostly overlooked (in Hispanic studies) group of Hispanophones whose use of the
Spanish language (and in many cases, Portuguese as well) fell outside the sphere of Spanish imperial power, and whose identity as Hispanophones did not respond to official discourses and practices of hispanidad. They fell beyond the reach of the imperial hispanidad of Nebrija and Carlos V. The literary activity of the Amsterdam Sephardim/conversos mirrored, but also parodied, that of the Spanish academias, and their counterparts living in the Ottoman Empire likewise developed a Hispanophone identity that fell outside the reach of imperial power and the influence of the Church.

Notes

1. In this essay Sepharadim refers to Jews living in, or originating in, the Iberian Peninsula. Conversos (literally “the converted”) refers to Sepharadim who have converted to Catholicism (regardless of the circumstances), and their descendants.

2. In a series of works written at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pulido argued for restoration of Moroccan and Balkan Sephardim as Spanish citizens and colonial administrators (Pulido 1904, [1905] 1993, 2006; Bel Bravo 1993; Alpert 2005). Giménez Caballero, who in 1931 made a short documentary on Sephardic Jews in the eastern Mediterranean titled Los judíos de patria española, followed Pulido’s line, combining it with protofascist ideals (Friedman 2011).

3. The name Sefarad is from Ovadiah 1:20: “The captives of Jerusalem, that are in Sefarad, shall possess the cities of the South”. While the location is historically uncertain (though it may refer to Lyria in Asia Minor), in Jewish tradition, Sefarad has been associated with the Iberian Peninsula since the Roman period (Gerber 1992, x).

4. For an overview of Sephardic/converso history, see Gerber (1992), Díaz Mas (1992), Benbassa and Rodríguez (2000), Roth (2002) and Zohar (2005).

5. See Díaz Mas (1992, 72–73) and Attig (2012). While the philosephardic discourse of Ángel Pulido emphasizes the timelessness and perfectly preserved Castilian of (at least the Moroccan) Sephardim, the reality, as described by scholars of Sephardic tradition, such as Samuel Armistead and Joseph Silverman, is more complex. Sephardic Spanish was not in fact a time capsule, either linguistically or culturally; while it is true that the various dialects conserved features that later became obsolete in Peninsular speech communities, it also continued to evolve in its contact with South Slavic, Turkish, Arabic, French and other languages. See Armistead and Silverman (1982) and Díaz Mas (1992, 78).

6. Seventeenth-century Sephardic author Imanuel Aboab relates the famous yet unlikely apocryphal anecdote (2007, 304–305).

7. Gonzalo Correas records this saying, in a slightly different form, in his 1627 Vocabulario de refranes y frases proverbiales, as “O somos gallegos o no nos entendemos (“Either we are Galicians [who are dull witted] or we are not understanding one another”) (1967, 165). My guess is that the Sephardic communities adapted the version recorded by Gonzalo Correas to mock the non-Castilian speech of the Galician members of their communities.

8. In a 1964 remarks to the Sephardic community of Tétouan, Spanish Hebraist Federico Pérez Castro claimed that the greatest evidence of Sephardic hispanidad was their cultural tendency toward imperialism, their having imposed (impusieron) Spanish culture on the communities where they settled:

   Tan profundamente calaron en el alma de nuestros judíos las raíces de lo español, que los hispano-hebreos, al salir de España, si bien físicamente la dejaron atrás, se la llevaron consigo dentro de sus corazones, y en lejanas tierras, no sólo siguieron viviendo según nuestros modos, sino que los impusieron allí donde fueron a establecerse; fenómeno espiritual y social éste tan perfectamente español, que acaso sea el que más netamente defina su honda indentificación [sic] con España (Pérez Castro 1964, 83–84; Wacks 2015, 192)

9. For an overview of Sephardic folklore, see Díaz Mas (1992, 112–132) and Bunis (1992, 63–66). For studies of oral traditions see, for example, Armistead and Silverman (1971, 1982), Koén-Sarano (1994, 1986, 1999) and Alexander (2008). On its decadence, see Harris (1994).
10. On the formation of these communities, especially their religious and cultural life, see Ray (2013).
11. On the effect of the Inquisition on the literature of early modern Spain, see Gitlitz (2002) and Fontes (2005).
12. In 2004 I attended religious study session in Seattle in which participants complained of the sixteenth-century Ladino translation of one of the Prophets: “I can’t understand this stuff! My grandparents didn’t talk like that!” The spoken language of their elders was a far cry from the Cervantine Spanish of the Biblical text, much like the English of the King James Bible to a speaker of contemporary US English.

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