"Modern Conversos and the Performance of Modern Sephardi Citizenship in Spain"

Reflection on the 2021-22 Jewish Gender Performance and Drag Working Group

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It's a stunningly monstrous moment when the writer and translator Rafael Cansinos Asséns (1882-1964) first proclaims his *converso* identity. Writing quasi-autobiographical pieces in the early twentieth century in Madrid, Cansinos "trembles with emotion" as he declares to his sister Pilar the unthinkable: "We are Jews," he stresses, "we descended from Jews." Speaking in confidence to his sister, Cansinos's utterance is at first greeted by her with alarm, followed by a cascade of insults. In the vaunted confessionary moment, Cansinos cries out to her, "There is no doubting it, Pilar!"[1] Embarrassing and fraught, Cansinos had uncovered these facts in an "ancient book," which he confirmed in later sources, social stigmas in Spain be damned. Stretching back more than four hundred years, some ancestor on their father's side had been a *converso*—a Jewish convert to Christianity in the throes of religious cacophony in medieval Spain.

In reading over the years Cansinos's dramatic *converso* confessions, I'm often reminded of *The Children's Hour* (1961), a movie based on Lillian Hellman's 1934 play of the same name. It's that moment where the figure Martha Dobie (Shirley MacLaine) collapses into her couch sobbing as a shocked Karen Wright (Audrey Hepburn) watches helplessly at Dobie's tears, sweat, shame, and desire. Cast out of the cloistered girls' school they ran because of presumed queer proclivities, Dobie eventually confesses in private her love for Wright: "You're afraid of hearing it, but I'm more afraid than you!" Hellman's Dobie meets a tragic end—death by suicide—which Cansinos spared his own protagonist figure, even if Cansinos himself would be eventually banned as a journalist under the long dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-1975) in Spain due to his 'Jewish affiliations.' In discussions of contemporary Jewish identities, however, the figure of the *converso* often occupies a quotidian presence, and largely without any of the above horror. From 2015 to 2019, a Spanish nationality law opened a pathway for the descendants of Sephardi Jews (Jews who trace their lineage to Spain) to win full citizenship in Spain, absent any residency requirements. By the close of 2019, more than a hundred and thirty thousand Sephardi persons applied for Spanish citizenship, with a portion of those identified being of self-described *converso* heritage. Although hardly a Jewish renaissance for Spain, this was no trivial matter. While postwar Europe has generally been the site of Jewish out-migration, Spain remains one of three European countries in which Jewish populations grew "considerably" between the 1960s and 2017—following behind Germany and edging out France in proportionate terms (Staetsky & DellaPergola 2019).

Although recent works have fruitfully explored various literary and sociological aspects of modern Sephardi citizenship in Spain, I wanted to probe at some of its novel aspects within the rubric of the Jewish Gender and Performance Working Group. In many ways, the law had created a Kafkaesque set of requirements for all of the applicants—who had to provide documented genealogical evidence of a Spanish Jewish bloodline, while demonstrating a continued connection to

contemporary Spain, as well as passing exams in language and civics, the entirety of which was to be judged based on ambiguous metrics (Benmayor & Dalia Kandiyoti 2020; McDonald 2021). For the *conversos* in particular, the burden of proof for citizenship seemed perhaps the greatest, even as the gendered and performative dimensions of the law variously played out for everyone involved.

In several recorded testimonies from these *converso*-identified applicants—from Arizona, New Mexico, and Venezuela, among others—which had been brought together in a video conference by the American Sephardi Federation, the personal archives had been impressive.[2] These individuals had weaved together multiple and overlapping sources, as they highlighted family oral histories, material objects, and residual practices, alongside detailed genealogical records. One *converso* from the U.S. Southwest remarkably traced her family's lineage back to Spain across nearly two dozen generations. In the process, she echoed almost verbatim the precise words penned by Cansinos one hundred years earlier, when he declared, "I was the survivor, a son of the timid" (Cansinos 1920)—a historical pathos now deepened by the modern Spanish state's new ethno-racial signaling, refashioned as a contemporary nationalizing project.

Leaving questions of authenticity to the side, part of what was remarkable in these testimonies was the insignificance of the maternal line of descent, deemed largely irrelevant by the Spanish state. If the maternal line had traditionally grounded Jewish continuity and descent, that concern was relegated here mostly to silence. Instead, these applicants had looked to the Iberian nation-state, as identities became reiterated, reconstructed, and tailored to the needs of Spain and its functionaries—an observation that can be made without upholding any notion of 'essential truths' or identities (Parker & Sedgwick 1996).

And then there was the seemingly perfunctory nature of the application process, which was anything but routine. The unique horror which gave meaning to Cansinos's *converso* as a potential social 'monster'—as a "meaning machine" (Halberstam 1995) in which a Jewish body might be reborn as a fifth column within the late liberal Spanish state—would now have to be methodically considered by the state. Perhaps one unintended ramification of Spain's excising of the maternal line from its historical equation, meant that contemporary *converso*s could reasonably assert a mundane case. The more complicated issue—one of actual in-state migration—would likely be of greater concern, to the extent that a far more limited population, that of practicing Jews, and Sephardi Jews in particular, had been the initial aim behind the law's creation (Flesler and Friedman 2023). Intentions aside, for many of the Venezuelan *conversos*, living at the front lines of deepening authoritarianism, their future livelihood hung the most on the fate of the state's review process. If Spanish citizenship had served as yet another passport for many applicants, who would never permanently immigrate to Spain, not so for the Venezuelans.

Which brings me to the late José Esteban Muñoz. In an older but still poignant piece, the Cuban-American writer observes the freedom of release from the stigma of being a queer "spic" within the

edgy punk rock subculture of the drag superstar Vaginal Davis. "I was able to enact a certain misrecognition," Muñoz writes, "that let me imagine myself as something other than queer or racialized." It was precisely the performative modalities, like disidentification or passing, that Muñoz marks as potential strategies of survival (Muñoz 1997). Or, to reframe this concept in the context of modern *conversos*: One can only ask what lives and selves might be erased in the process of self-articulation as one adjusts to unstable appetites in a modern state—even as the cultural and political tides continue, even now, to shift.

Sources

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