

Naomi Leite, *Unorthodox Kin. Portuguese Marranos and the Global Search for Belonging*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), pp. xvi + 344.

by Davide Aliberti

How does the quest for a sense of belonging to an imagined community<sup>1</sup> in the globalized world from a position of triple social exclusion (neither Jew, nor Christian, nor crypto-Jew) take place? What role do tourism and social media play in the construction of both individual and collective identity? These are two of the main questions answered in the book *Unorthodox Kin. Portuguese Marranos and the Global Search for Belonging* written by Naomi Leite, Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

The book is the result of eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the author between early 2004 and mid-2005 among the members of the two Portuguese urban Marranos associations: HaShalom Jewish Association in Lisbon, and Menori Jewish Cultural Association in Porto. Urban Marranos is a term coined by Naomi Leite (p. 9), referring to the self-titled Marranos from major Portuguese metropolitan areas. Urban Marranos are very different from the rural/ancient crypto-Jews like the Belmonte community, whose members secretly maintained Jewish practices and rituals until they were first discovered in the early 20th century.

Urban Marranos are not necessarily descendants of crypto-Jews. Their sense of Jewish self is often formed through cloudy legends about crypto-Jewish family traditions, handed down over generations, as well as through a lonely process of introspection. Moreover, prior to media coverage of the Belmonte community, they were also unaware of the existence of Portuguese crypto-Judaism. Nevertheless, they share a conviction that they have Jewish ancestors, as well as desire for acknowledgment of their Jewishness by others and experiences of being individually and collectively marginalized (even by the Portuguese Jews from Lisbon and Porto). Their sense of being “other” is not due to their Jewishness but to other criteria underlying Portugal’s profoundly stratified society based on

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

countless forms of social hierarchy and exclusion, from social class to regional, geographical, and genealogical distinctions (p. 12).

In the first chapter of the book, the author retraces the foundation of the social category of Portugal's crypto-Jews,<sup>2</sup> from the fifteenth century to the emergence and rapid growth of urban Marrano associations in the late 1990s and 2000s. In her reconstruction of Portuguese Marranos' history, Leite pays special attention to crucial developments such as the survival of crypto-Judaism in Belmonte and the rise and fall of Barros Basto's revival movement.

In the second and third chapters, Leite explores the processes through which people become Marranos in contemporary urban Portugal, as well as the practices through which the Marrano self is constructed and expressed. More specifically, chapter 2 focuses on the identification process. This is achieved through delineating three different modes of self-identification as Jewish, through three different life trajectories of seven representative individuals sharing certain features. Identification is described as a dialogical process that takes place through social interactions, whether face-to-face or through ICT (Information and communication technology),<sup>3</sup> which allows the individual or a collective to become self-aware and develop their sense of self (p. 79). Consequently, the encounters with Jewish foreign tourists and expatriates (a continual presence for members of the Marrano associations since the 2000s), as well as Portuguese Jews and other self-identified Marranos, play a crucial role in shaping urban Marrano identity (p. 40).

Chapter 3 describes the processes through which these individuals become Marranos, the existing social category closer to their way of feeling. Here, the author gives particular attention to how they learn to recognize and narrate the ways in which they feel ancestrally or essentially Jewish. Future urban Marranos acquire their first notions about Judaism and Jewishness through the internet and books. Specifically, social media such as the *Nostalgia* forum, which allows them to get in touch with, and be acknowledged by, other people who are

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<sup>2</sup> The "crypto-Jews or Marrano" social category refers to people practicing Judaism in secret after having converted to another religion; Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1941).

<sup>3</sup> Colrain M. Zuppo, "Defining ICT in a boundaryless world. The development of a working hierarchy," *International Journal of Managing Information Technology (IJMIT)* 4/3 (2012): 13-22.

experiencing (or have already experienced) the same identity quest, as well as by foreign Jews.

Furthermore, Leite investigates what happens when urban Marranos try to enter the world of Portugal's organized Jewish communities, which rejects them as non-Jews. This refusal places them in an in-between space,<sup>4</sup> not between Catholicism and Judaism, as the standard definition of Marrano would suggest, but between their intimate sense of belonging to Judaism and the eternal quest for acknowledgment among Jews merely on the basis of this personal feeling. It is this tension between their internal sense of self and their treatment by others that shapes their otherness, and thus their conception of themselves as Marranos.

In the fourth and fifth chapter, the author examines all the facets of the interactions between urban Marranos and their Jewish foreign visitors. In particular, the fourth chapter shows how they began to see one another as individuals, with diverse life stories that diverged from the main historical narrative about crypto-Jews. Acknowledgment and acceptance through first-person interaction lead to the formation of a completely new identity. However, in chapter 5 the author explores the repercussions of the two primary ways urban Marranos are approached by foreign visitors, as described by Leite's informant (p. 222): being looked at as a "beautiful thing" and being treated as a "brother in the faith." These two main trends are not necessarily characteristic of a specific category of foreign visitors (e.g., respectively, tourists and rabbis) and are due to the importance given by visitors to urban Marrano narratives and collective status. These two ways of seeing lead to different ways in which urban Marranos could feel recognized by, and incorporated into, the Jewish people.

As the author demonstrates, it is both the creation of the associations and the continual face-to-face interaction with visitors from abroad that led to the consolidation of urban Marrano identity. It is an identity characterized by a triple perceptive dissonance: on the one hand, the feeling of being intimately Jewish; on the other hand, the experience of being continuously excluded by the local Jewish communities; and finally, the acknowledgment by foreign visitors and online correspondents (the global dimension).

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<sup>4</sup> The "in-between space" is a third/new space that allows other positions to emerge, as explained in Jonathan Rutherford, "The third space. Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity. Community, culture, difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, (London: Lawrence&Wishart, 1990), 207-221.

In her conclusions, the author refers to the law that went into effect in 2014, amending the Portuguese Civil Code by providing ways to acquire Portuguese nationality for the descendants of Jews persecuted by the Inquisition and forced to leave the country in the 15th and 16th centuries. Leite highlights the contradictions of this law, which, like the one proclaimed by the Spanish government that same year, awards full decisional competence to Orthodox religious bodies (the Jewish communities of Lisbon and Porto). These religious bodies bear the responsibility of deciding who has Jewish origins and who does not, often according to ancient criteria of kinship which consistently exclude urban Marranos.

One of the most interesting issues highlighted in the book is the ethnography of Portugal's urban Marrano movement, through which the author realizes that technological connectivity, although essential in the process of self-awareness and searching for other people who share the same sense of otherness, does not necessarily give rise to social intimacy. Face-to-face social interactions still take primacy. Global interconnectivity produces new localities (p. 28), new face-to-face interactions that in turn shape global processes. Direct one-on-one interaction remains an essential component in both the process of exclusion and the acknowledgment of collectivities that transcend the local sphere.

Finally, it can be suggested that Naomi Leite's book is an essential work in several respects: firstly, because it brings to light the peculiarities of a very specific group, urban Marranos in modern day Portugal; secondly, because it contributes to reconsidering the role of social media in the processes of identity building; and finally, because it redefines the role of tourism and foreign actors in the processes of exclusion and inclusion in a given social category.

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