

# Blood *and Sentiment*

## Anthropology, Race, and Spain's Sephardic Citizenship Law

*CCS Seminar Series: The Politics of Difference*

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**Charles A.  
McDonald**

Postdoctoral Research Fellow  
(Jewish Studies, Rice University)

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McElhinney Hall 111

UNIVERSITY of  
**HOUSTON**

COLLEGE of LIBERAL ARTS  
and SOCIAL SCIENCES

**Comparative Cultural Studies**

In 2015, the Spanish government passed a so-called "Law of Return" offering citizenship to the descendants of expelled Sephardic Jews (but not their Muslim counterparts), which was predicted to attract several hundred thousand applicants. Described as an "historical reparation" by the government, the law's passage was widely covered by international news and hailed by many Jews as a progressive victory. But with the law set to expire on October 1 of this year, many have declared it a scandalous failure, since fewer than ten thousand applications have been approved. In the ensuing debates about the law, the politics of history, justice, nationalism, religion, and migration have taken center stage. "Race," however, has remained noticeably absent. Yet, this "new" law belongs to a much older political genealogy than is commonly assumed, in which Sephardic Jews have been imagined as racial kin who were "naturally" attached to Spain by blood and sentiment, and whose "return" might usher in a deferred Spanish modernity. In early 20th century Spain, a philosephardic movement was deeply influenced by anthropological theories of "racial fusion" and saw Sephardic Jews as uniquely suited for regenerating Spain and resurrecting its defunct empire. Key to this imperial vision was the assertion that Sephardim did not "harbor rancor" toward Spain for the Expulsion and could thus be trusted as loyal subjects. By examining how empire, affect, and race are tightly linked in projects of Sephardic repatriation, we see that the "gift" of citizenship in the 2015 law also operates as a racialized claim on Sephardic Jews by the Spanish state.

What makes this ostensibly inclusive gesture so pernicious is that it is unfolding as the borders of Spain and the rest of Europe are being fortified against nearly everyone else, including Arabs and Muslims whose ancestors were also expelled from Spain, but have not been invited to "return." This talk is thus a history of Europe's unsettled present — one in which racial thinking underwrites liberal strategies of inclusion and exclusion alike.

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Charles A. McDonald is the Samuel W. and Goldye Marian Spain Postdoctoral Fellow in the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University. He is currently working on a book manuscript provisionally titled, *Return to Sepharad: Jews, Spain, and Europe's Moral Order*, which addresses the vexed entwinement of Jewishness, modernity, and citizenship in Spain from the 19th century to the present. His broader research interests include the anthropology of race, religion, and sexuality; kinship and inheritance; conversion and subjectivity; affect and ethics; liberalism and multiculturalism; empire/colonialism; Europe, and experimental ethnography. He received his PhD in anthropology and historical studies from the New School for Social Research, where he is the Managing Director of the Institute for Critical Social Inquiry.