On November 9, 1606, a Moorish gardener named Miguel F. de Luna appeared in front of the members of the tribunal of the Holy Office of the Lisbon Inquisition to denounce Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão (1557–1618) and his family of crypto-Jewish practices. Miguel F. de Luna justified his accusation by explaining that on more than one occasion while working in the garden of Fernandes Brandão’s house located in the Calçada do Combro, Lisbon, he saw and heard the family act in strange ways that convinced him that they were secret Jews. According to the accuser, through an open window of the living room he had repeatedly observed the family reading a book in the morning and evening hours, and fasting for three days preceding Yom Kippur. Through the same open window he said he had heard complaints against the Inquisition and the sufferings of New Christians in the prisons of the Holy Office. The gardener also stated that a New Christian woman named Maria da Costa, who visited Brandão’s family weekly, criticized him for working on Saturdays. Although Brandão had been previously accused of being a secret Jew, the denunciation by the Moorish gardener did not lead to an Inquisition trial against this wealthy and respected New Christian who was acquainted with high government figures in Lisbon and Brazil, and who at the time held the position of treasurer general of the Office of Deceased and Absent Persons in Lisbon. After being cleared of the charges, Brandão once more crossed the Atlantic and returned to Brazil, where he apparently remained for the rest of his life.

Despite the fact that Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão twice escaped persecution by the Inquisition, it seems that he was indeed a follower of the Law of Moses. This argument can be evidenced through the anonymous and apocryphal writings attributed to him. As in the previous chapters, however, the episode of the gardener’s accusation and the lack of a trial against the accused reveal the “cracks” in the Inquisition as an institution. The ambivalent and inconsistent manner in which the inquisitors treated New Christians accused of being crypto-Jews leads us to agree
with Bento Teixeira’s observation that the Inquisition was like a spider web that trapped small flies and let the big and noisy bugs escape.

The present chapter provides an overview of the impact of the imperial and political rivalries involving Spain, Portugal, France and the Netherlands on the descendents of Portuguese Jews and New Christians in the New World, particularly Brazil, during the seventeenth century. On one hand, it traces the intensified persecution that New Christians of Portuguese descent faced in the Spanish American colonies as a result of imperial rivalries with the Dutch. On the other hand, it studies the development of a strong identification with the New World among Portuguese New Christians in the same period. This identification, which can be observed in the writings attributed to Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão and Manuel Beckman (1630–1685), can be associated with what scholars of colonial Spanish America have called “criollo consciousness,” an emerging sense of difference from Europe that began to intensify in the early seventeenth century. 1 Until now, few critics have appreciated the parallel phenomenon that Brandão and Beckman embody in Portuguese America. In my analysis, I underline the socially advanced ideas that these two New Christian authors defended through their writings, as well as their strong attachment to the New World. Through Fernandes Brandão’s Diálogos das grandezas do Brasil and the letters and inquisitional testimonies of Manuel Beckman, one can detect opposition to the hegemonic European discourse and clear instances of an emerging criollo consciousness in the seventeenth century in Portuguese America. 2

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1 In “Creole Subjects in the Colonial Americas,” Ralph Bauer and José Antonio Mazzotti explain that the new elite that emerged in the New World in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century were considered suspect by the crown and also by the Old World nobility “who were aware of the lowly social origins of the most of the American conquerors” (23). In “Racial, Religious, and Civic Creole Identity in Colonial Spanish America,” Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra expresses a similar opinion when he admits that although the “self-styled Criollos or Creoles … presided over racially mixed colonial societies of Indians, blacks, Spaniards, and castas (mixed bloods), [they] felt voiceless and discriminated against by Peninsulares” (423). Since many of the first settlers who came from Brazil descended from Sephardic Jews, discrimination against the Creole elite of Portuguese origin by Spanish Peninsulares was intensified between 1580 and 1640, when Portugal and its overseas domains were under the Spanish crown.

2 As previously stated, during the first two centuries Portuguese America, known nowadays as Brazil, was comprised of two major colonies: the state of Brazil, with seat in Bahia de Todos os Santos, and the state of Grão-Pará and Maranhão, with seat in São Luís. These two colonies were not governed by viceroyos, but by governors who reported directly to the Portuguese crown.