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Renegado: Immigrant Identities and Aspirations of White Muslim Converts in Morocco

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Renegado: Immigrant Identities and Aspirations of White Muslim Converts in Morocco

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Location of Primary Research: Africa, Morocco, Rabat, Fes, Marrakech

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Abstract

If one turns over enough stones in Morocco, they will come across hundreds of Western converts to Islam, most of whom are white. Some are obvious: one might spot a blue-eyed Belgian wearing a jellaba on a train to Fes or a Danish woman in a hijab running a bakery in central Casablanca. Others might be mistaken for tourists, like an American woman with her hair pulled back into a ponytail seated in the corner of a high-end café in Rabat. These converts are immigrants, and most chose to live in Morocco as a form of *hijra*, or migration for religious purposes.

Rather than a full anthropological research paper, I have elected to present my ISP as a podcast. Career aspirations and personal preferences aside, the podcast format is particularly well-suited to personal narratives, and consequently well-suited to my research.

This ISP investigates how and why these white converts chose to build their lives in Morocco, and ultimately how their relationships to both their homelands and Morocco developed once they arrived. I conducted interviews with eight white converts from both Europe and North America. Among them were a Belgian military veteran and Salafi convert planning his *hijra*, two American Sufis who have run language schools in Morocco for decades, and a journalist who was introduced to Islam while in Tangier with his fellow beatniks in the early 1960s. I also spoke with the Moroccan-born and -raised daughter of two American Sufis, two Dutch anthropologists who specialize in the *hijra* of converts, two Moroccan Islamic studies professors with knowledge of Moroccan attitudes towards converts, and the Moroccan descendant of a Portuguese pirate and convert to Islam in the 18th century. Some elements of the story are drawn from anthropological research on white convert identity and conversion in Morocco, and particularly the presence of pirate converts in Rabat and Sale in the 17th-early 19th centuries. My work draws upon the personal narratives of many of my interviewees – and, in a few cases, the academic work of my interviewees – to illustrate the innumerable complexities and nuances of life as a white convert immigrant in Morocco. When presented together, these narratives reveal white convert immigrants to be both perpetually foreign and privileged by their whiteness, a status that they pass on to their Moroccan-born descendants. Their relationships with their new country appear to be based

primarily upon their expectations of Morocco prior to their decision to immigrate, not upon opinions they developed in Morocco.

Acknowledgements:

This research relied heavily upon support and inspiration from a host of mentors, academics, converts, and assorted friends and acquaintances. I will offer my appreciation in chronological order. I was introduced to the topic itself by Professor Cecile Evers of Pomona College, to whom I also owe gratitude for passing me the abstracts of Professors Vroon and Ter Laan's papers. Upon my arrival, I turned first to Taieb Belghazi for guidance, literature and moral support, and he generously provided all that I needed. Likewise, my research advisor, Dr. Khalid Saqi, was a crucial guide during the construction of my research questions, the planning of my interviews, and the narrowing of my focus. Courtney Erwin was not only a delightful and flexible interviewee, but a generous and patient provider of connections and direction. I owe gratitude to each and every person I interviewed: Abdulrahman Fitzgerald, Hamza Wineman, Yeo Mohammed, Sarah Casewit, and Sameer Khan, as well as all of my interviewees who preferred to remain anonymous. Vanessa Vroon and Nina Ter Laan were not only spectacular interviewees, but also generous enough to share their preliminary papers with an eager young researcher. Professor Sadik Rddad was likewise both a valuable source of information and a fascinating interview subject. I owe special thanks to Joel Green for his brainstorming assistance and company during my time in Fes. Finally, I owe credit to every member of my immediate family – Mary Williamson, Kurt Kiefer, and Philip Kiefer – for their assistance in outlining and editing my written work.

1. Introduction

On September 3, 1726, the first article in the Flying Post, a bi-weekly was about a pirate attack off the Moroccan coast. A corsair ship based in the notorious port city of Sale had captured another British ship. The final sentence of the brief article read: “These hostilities are imputed to a French renegado, one Piliet, who is in great favor at Sallee.”¹ The point of interest in that sentence is not Piliet himself, but the newspaper editor’s assumption that the average reader would be familiar enough with the term “renegado” that it merited no explanation. A “renegado” was a pirate; a traitor; a European convert to Islam who had defected to North Africa. Piliet was one of an estimated 300 such European converts from as far away as Iceland who lived and worked in the port of Rabat-Sale in the 17th and early 18th century.² Some were former captives of the corsairs themselves who converted to attain freedom; others were former Spanish and Portuguese soldiers who abandoned Catholic outposts on the North

¹ The Flying Post

² Staples, p. 210

African coast and converted to begin a new chapter in their lives³. Converts served as advisors, military commanders, and architects in Rabat-Sale and in cities and towns across Morocco. Many more lived out the rest of their lives in the middle- and lower-classes. The Moroccan term for these converts – *al-Alj*, roughly equivalent to “renegado” – survives as a last name and a subtle reminder of their presence in the not-so distant past.

Pirates on the Bouregreg sit at the roots of a towering family tree of white converts to Islam who, at some point along their path, landed in Morocco. Elsewhere in the tree sit the founder of Britain’s first mosque, a beatnik protégé of Allen Ginsberg, and members of a gated community of ultraorthodox Dutch women with an almost spiritual appreciation for Ikea. Whether they stay for life or pass through for a few months, Morocco has a magnetic effect on white converts.

Because of that magnetic effect, white convert immigrants are seemingly everywhere in Morocco. There is the reclusive French family on a beach in Agadir, the beardy new arrival from Belgium on the train from Casablanca to Fes, the pair of Germans in the farmers’ market in central Rabat. They own bakeries, run language schools, own farms and organize spiritual retreats. Shake any bush in Morocco and a convert might tumble out.

And, in an interesting reversal of roles, they are the mirror image of the Muslim immigrants to the West – immigrants whose distorted image has sent Europe into an identity crisis and prompts the President of the United States to warn of Muslims crossing into the country from Mexico.

As immigrants from Muslim-majority countries immigrate to the US, Canada and Europe in search of opportunity and space for personal expression, a stream of white converts is migrating in the opposite direction for opportunity and space for personal expression, albeit in a very different sense.

³ Staples, p. 206

These converts leave their countries in search of a place where they can be spiritually free, where they can find opportunities to deepen their faith, where they can *belong* – not despite being Muslim, but *because* they are Muslim. There's a word in Arabic that is used to describe this kind of spiritual migration: *hijra*.

Some of the same questions that come up in conversations about Muslim immigrants in the West can be asked about white convert immigrants in Morocco: What do Muslim immigrants hope they will find in their new countries? How do their hopes compare to the reality they encounter? To what degree do they want to assimilate, if at all?

Those questions served as my guide as I interviewed convert immigrants - both those who have lived the greater part of their lives in Morocco and those who are currently mulling the decision to immigrate – as well as the Moroccan-born daughter of converts, born-Muslim *muhajirin* (spiritual immigrants), Moroccan academics and convert descendants, and European anthropologists who specialize in this phenomenon to develop a picture of white convert immigrant identity in Morocco.

Out of the answers to those questions, a story appears: a story about being perpetually privileged, perpetually foreign, and on a quest for something that may not exist.

I have chosen to present this research in the form of a documentary podcast. The podcast I produced on white convert immigrant identity in Morocco is focused upon the perspectives and narratives of converts and those connected to them. Most of the interviews I conducted – in fact, the vast majority of the content, primary sources, and background literature I collected – are not included in the podcast itself. Rather, I used those resources to form my approach to the research and the conclusions I drew from it. The podcast itself is, therefore, a distillation of a much larger body of research.

This paper serves as a complement thereto; it is an opportunity to define my terms, offer a rationale for my choice of medium, credit prior research on the topic, explain and critique my research methodology, and analyze the efficacy of my medium.

2. An Explanation of the Terms 'White,' 'Convert,' and 'Immigrant'

Three identifiers feature most heavily in my research: 'white,' 'convert,' and 'immigrant.' My liberal use of these identifiers to describe the subjects of my research does not necessarily reflect the identifiers they assign to themselves. The definition of 'white,' 'convert,' and 'immigrant' upon which I based research are not universal, so I must clarify my use of each term.

My use of 'white' as a descriptor of my convert subjects is drawn from mainstream American race theory. On the most basic level, it refers to any person of primarily European heritage. That said, 'of European heritage' does not carry the same meaning as 'white,' because 'white' also connotes a privileged position in a racial hierarchy. That racial hierarchy varies from country to country and region to region, as do the boundaries of 'whiteness.' Despite those variations, I treat 'whiteness' as applicable in Morocco – in other words, a 'white person' would occupy a privileged social position relative to 'non-white' people in Morocco. I feel comfortable assuming the applicability of 'whiteness' to Morocco because a number of my interviewees and mentors – both Moroccans and those with substantial experience in Morocco – confirmed the privileged status of 'white' people in Moroccan society. I describe converts who do not describe themselves as white but are of primarily European ancestry as 'white,' under the assumption that the combination of their appearances and national origins grant

them the same degree racial privileges in Moroccan society that self-described 'white' converts claim to experience.

That said, the identifier 'white' is also occasionally used to describe light-skinned Moroccans. While those Moroccans may also experience privileges based on their skin color, when I refer to 'white,' it is implicitly linked to foreignness.

I use the term 'convert' to describe any person who officially declared their conversion to Islam from any other faith or lack thereof. A convert may have a Muslim parent or Muslim family members, as was the case for two of my convert interviewees, so long as they consciously chose to identify as Muslim independently of said parent or family members. There are, of course, Muslims who do not fall into this category but closely identify with converts because of they equate the renewal of their faith or their rediscovery of their faith with conversion. That said, they did not experience the transition from 'non-Muslim' to 'Muslim,' so they cannot qualify as converts.

Some converts prefer to describe themselves as 'reverts,' in reference to the Muslim belief that all people are born Muslim, and therefore that they have 'returned' to their natural state. While I respect and understand their use of the term, for the sake of clarity for a non-Muslim audience, I use the term 'convert.'

I employ the term 'immigrant' to refer to those who settle in a foreign country. Given that several subjects of my research either did not come to Morocco with the intention of settling permanently or eventually left Morocco, my use of the term 'immigrant' to describe most subjects of my research appears inconsistent with the standard definition. In the case of Courtney Erwin, an American who came to Morocco without any clear intentions to stay permanently, I choose to use the term 'immigrant' because she now plans to settle in Morocco for the foreseeable future. In the case of the Dutch-speaking convert women described by Nina Ter Laan and Vanessa Vroon, I base my use of the

term 'immigrant' upon the women's intentions to settle in Morocco, despite their tendency to return to their home countries. While those two uses of the term 'immigrant' may appear at odds, the cases share one key trait: both Courtney and the Dutch-speaking converts attempt to settle in Morocco.

My definitions of 'white,' 'convert,' and 'immigrant' are not strict – instead, I prefer to use them flexibly to reflect the fluidity of those lived identities.

3. Rationale for the Choice of the Podcast Format

My decision to present my research through the medium of a podcast contains three layers of reasoning.

The most basic of those layers pertains to my prior experience as a primary researcher. I was trained as an interviewer while working as a youth reporter and podcast producer at a National Public Radio affiliate station in Seattle, Washington in 2015. Consequently, I developed an affinity for the documentary podcast format and the style of reporting associated therewith. Therefore, I seized upon the opportunity to produce a documentary podcast in order to practice a skill I value.

The second layer of reasoning for my decision rests upon the qualities of the documentary podcast format itself and their applicability to my research topic. While I certainly draw conclusions from and identify themes in the narratives of the convert subjects of my interviews, my primary role is as a curator of their immigration stories and perspectives. The inclusion of recorded interview segments in the podcast allows my interview subject to directly share their experiences as immigrants or immigrant descendants with my audience, rather than handing all storytelling responsibilities to me. Furthermore, the speech patterns and accents of my subjects – particularly the accents of longtime residents of Morocco and the Moroccan-born children of convert immigrants – are windows into their immigrant identities. For instance, Abdulrahman Fitzgerald, a convert from the United States who immigrated to Morocco in 1976, stumbles over a relatively common English phrase while explaining his

reasons for leaving his home country. That moment is revelatory of Abdulrahman's withering connections to the country of his birth, and its impact would be lost if it were not presented exactly as it occurred. To put it more succinctly, the podcast format allows me – the researcher – to present a narrative about the diverse experience of an immigrant group in a similarly diverse array of voices.

While I could achieve the same effect with a video documentary, that format requires more equipment and technical expertise than podcasting. The challenge of developing a visual storytelling style would also likely distract me from my primary focus: the personal narratives of converts. Additionally, the podcast format can both include a diversity of recorded voices and protect the anonymity of interviewees who desire it. Thus, I was likely able to gain more access to converts than I would have been had I requested to film interviews.

The final layer of my reasoning is – at least partially – a critique of a standard anthropological research paper. I firmly believe that my research topic – and specifically the parallels and contrasts between white convert immigrants to Morocco and Muslim immigrants to the West – merits the attention of an audience that extends beyond academic circles. A standard style and format of anthropological research papers render them largely inaccessible to non-academics; while they may include narratives, they are often formulaic collections of data that are stripped of personality and laden with jargon. That characterization is a generalization – many anthropologists work tirelessly to make their work accessible to a broader audience.

The podcast is one medium through which an anthropologist could achieve that goal. In a sense, podcasts are a form of *entertainment*. I built my script upon content – interviews and secondary research – that I gathered through methods identical to those used by anthropologists. In my podcast script-writing process, I cast aside much of the content of an anthropological paper – a literature review, an explanation of methodology, etc. – and instead focused upon organizing the content into the most

engaging and accessible narrative possible. While omitting those elements from my podcast may sacrifice transparency about the work upon which I built my podcast, the sacrifice is worth the flexibility I gain in the storytelling process.

In summary, my choice of the podcast format is both based upon personal preference and a belief that the podcast format is the best format for presenting narrative-focused research.

Literature Review

The topic of white convert immigration to Morocco is largely unresearched; as far as I have encountered, only three anthropologists have studied some form of the phenomenon. Two of those anthropologists – Vanessa Vroon and Nina Ter Laan – appear in my podcast.

Vanessa Vroon and Annelise Moors, her collaborator at the University of Amsterdam, are currently in the process of finalizing a paper entitled “Doing Hijra/Coming Back: Transnational (Im)mobility Among Women Converts to Islam in the Netherlands” which, while not specifically focused upon Morocco, provides an outline for the process of convert identity construction that leads European convert women to contemplate *hijra* to a handful of Muslim-majority countries – including Morocco. Vroon and Moors raise the topic of race while discussing the demographics of the convert women in their study, but the role of race in the experiences of converts is not central to their research.

Nina Ter Laan, on the other hand, *is* focused specifically upon convert immigrants to Morocco. Her preliminary paper on the topic is tentatively titled “‘They have no taste in Morocco’: Home-making practices and feelings of (be)longing and disappointment among Dutch-speaking *muhajirat* in Morocco.” While Ter Laan’s research is not explicitly focused upon whiteness, the theme arises implicitly, and the

other themes of my research – immigrant aspirations, convert identity, and convert relationships with Morocco – feature prominently in her analysis. Ter Laan’s research is so thematically similar to my own that her work fits perfectly into my broader survey of white convert immigration to Morocco.

During the course of my research, I also encountered two personal essays by white anthropologists who converted to Islam while in Morocco. Rachel Newcomb’s “A Distant Episode” is a reflection upon the disorienting process of converting out of a combination of curiosity, appreciation, utility, and social pressure. Many of Newcomb’s sentiments echo those of converts I interviewed. In the essay, she remarks that “to convert would not suddenly open me up to an imagined community of Sufi love poetry enthusiasts and trance dancers, which is probably part of the Orientalist fantasy that attracts me. Rather, conversion would entail being fair to the orthodoxy of the people I know best in Morocco...”⁴ Newcomb’s sentiment almost directly echoes my reflections on an interview with Courtney Erwin, a convert who was likewise drawn to Islam by an Orientalist fantasy. Emilio Spadola, the author of the second essay about converting in Morocco, happens to a friend of Courtney Erwin. His essay, entitled “Forgive Me Friend: Mohammed and Ibrahim,” addresses his relationship with a Moroccan friend as he grapples with his new religious identity. Spadola’s personal anecdote is a perfect first-hand example of a convert navigating their relationship with the Muslim world: another central theme of my research.

Withdrawing from Morocco and immigration, the topic of converts renegotiating their relationships to their national identities was addressed in a paper by Tarek Younis and Ghayda Hassan entitled “Changing Identities: A Case Study of Western Muslim Converts Whose Conversion Revised Their Relationship to Their National Identity” (2004). Younis and Hassan’s paper touches upon the sense

⁴ Crawford and Newcomb, p. 143

of foreignness that many converts I interviewed feel in their home countries, which is among the primary motivations for *hijra*.

The privileges of white converts to Islam has also been addressed in scholarship, both in Leon Moonsavi's "White Privilege in the lives of Muslim Converts in Britain" (2015) and Madhi Tourage's "Performing belief and reviving Islam: Prominent (white male) converts in Muslim revival conventions" (2012). Both works highlight both the challenges to whiteness posed by conversion and the respect and reverence shown towards white converts by the broader Muslim community based solely upon the social value assigned to whiteness.

My research contains echoes of each of the aforementioned works – or, in the cases of Vroon and Ter Laan, the voices of the researchers themselves – because I set about to produce a survey of white convert immigrants in Morocco, which required casting a wide net. That said, so little research has been conducted on white convert immigrants in Morocco that the interviews I collected amount to a substantial expansion of the body of knowledge on the topic.

Methodology

As I have previously mentioned, finding a white convert immigrant in Morocco is not particularly challenging. I happened to have the email address of one – Hamza Wineman – prior to my arrival in Morocco. A second – Courtney Erwin – appeared in my Arabic class as a guest of my professor. Throughout the month I spent conducting research, I routinely spotted converts in mosques or heard reports of converts from Moroccan acquaintances, I conducted a total of fourteen interviews. As I mentioned earlier, eight of those interviews were with converts, seven of which I recorded. Many of those interviews were not fruitful enough to be included in the podcast: those interviewees were a Quebecois man who represents a Michigan-based Sufi order in Fes; a Russian anesthesiologist planning

his *hijra*; a Belgian military veteran with a dedicated interest in biodegradable plastics; and a Chinese acupuncturist who is functionally homeless.

Due to both time constraints and the limitations of my network of contacts, all my face-to-face interviews with converts took place in either Rabat, Marrakech, or Fes. While Fes is a magnet for converts in and of itself, my choice of cities does not necessarily reflect the geographic concentrations of converts.

The first convert with whom I spoke was Courtney Erwin, with whom I met twice – first in a popular café in central Rabat, and again in her apartment in Agdal. Those meetings served both as interviews and opportunities to develop my vision for the project with the help of a fellow convert.

I then caught a train to Marrakech to meet with Hamza and his father-in-law, Abdulrahman Fitzgerald. Because their experiences as immigrants are so thoroughly intertwined, and because I found conversational interviews more productive, I asked to interview the two together. We sat together in Hamza's humbly-furnished office in the language school he runs just outside of the Marrakech medina, a position he inherited from Abdulrahman. That interview, like my interview with Courtney, was accompanied by a conversation about the goals of my project. The following night, Hamza invited me to his home for a *majlis* with a group of roughly 30 Moroccan men whom he considers his community in Morocco. That encounter reinforced statements Hamza made in our interview the day before – namely his appreciation for traditional Moroccan spirituality.

The following day, I moved on to Fes: a city where Courtney assured me that I could find converts. While I certainly found many converts in Fes over the next three weeks, I only included the thoughts of one – an English teacher – in my podcast. In order to protect his identity, I agreed not only to give him a pseudonym – Muhammad – but to conceal how and where I met him.

Because I am a convert myself, I was able to lean upon shared identity to build working relationships with the converts I interviewed. Courtney, for instance, relished the opportunity to discuss her religious identity with a fellow convert and offered to provide support for my project. Of the eight converts I interviewed, I prayed alongside seven and attended Sufi *dhikr* ceremonies with four.

Those religious connections were critical to approach to interviews. While I sent each interviewee a short list of sample questions while introducing my project, the interviews themselves took a form mid-way between storytelling and conversation. The fluidity of the interviews was also made possible by a shared language: every interviewee spoke English either fluently or proficiently.

Because my interviews were focused upon the personal narratives of convert immigrants, rather than conducting interviews exclusively in neutral locations, I relished the opportunity to speak to converts in their offices and homes – the places where they feel most comfortable.

When possible, I began each interview with my digital audio recorder turned off. The conversation prior to the interview both served to build trust and to guide me towards possibly fruitful lines of questioning that I could pursue once I turned on my recorder.

In most cases, rather than breaking the flow of the interview to obtain written consent, I explained the contents of my consent forms out loud and recorded my interviewees' verbal consent. My consent forms – and, by extension, my verbal disclaimer – informed my interviewees of their right to anonymity, the possible uses and storage of the recorded interviews, the purposes of the project, and the possibility that I will seek the publication of a version of the project for possible profit in the future.

While based in Fes, I conducted interviews over Skype with Vanessa Vroon and Nina Ter Laan, both of whom I had contacted for guidance and interviews at the outset of my research. Through Courtney, I also reached Sarah Casewit, the Moroccan-born daughter of American converts who

currently lives in Argentina. All three Skype interviews were preceded by weeks of emails in which I sought guidance and reflected upon my findings.

I was also able to turn to a Moroccan friend, Meryem al-Alj, for an interview about the significance of her last name and the convert ancestor from whom it came. That interview was the result of mutual excitement about the project: Meryem is both deeply curious about convert immigration and interested in storytelling, so she was eager to participate in whatever way possible.

As the substantial number of interviews I collected attests, my methods for finding converts and those with valuable perspectives on converts were effective. That said, my choice to spend most of my time in Fes may have limited the variety of converts I encountered. While Fes is crawling with converts, the vast majority are attracted to the city's association with Sufism; of the five interviews with converts that I collected in Fes, four were with converts on the Sufi path. As both Nina Ter Laan and various Moroccan acquaintances would later inform me, most Salafi converts are concentrated in the vicinity of Tetouan in the north. While Sufi converts may have been easier to access, I certainly should have at least attempted to find Salafi converts in Tetouan for the sake of including their voices directly in the story.

Critical Analysis

I set out to produce a podcast centered upon three questions posed to white convert immigrants to Morocco:

What do Muslim immigrants hope they will find in their new countries? How do their hopes compare to the reality they encounter? To what degree do they want to assimilate, if at all?

My final work presents answers to those questions from three radically different white convert immigrant perspectives, as well as from the perspective of the Moroccan-born child of converts. Each answer reveals a nuance about the confluence of white, immigrant, and convert identities.

Hamza Wineman and Abdulrahman represent both experience and satisfaction: of all the converts I interviewed, they have been in Morocco the longest, in large part because they can reap the benefits both of their privileged position as white foreigners and of traditional Moroccan religious life, which provides them with the spiritual sustenance they sought by immigrating.

Courtney Erwin's narrative touches upon Orientalist visions of Morocco that so often capture the imaginations of travelers from the West, the transition from traveler to immigrant, and the power of a white immigrant in Morocco to thrive in isolation from the culture that surrounds them after their Orientalist dreamland is proven to be a fantasy.

The account of Dutch and Belgian convert women shared by Vanessa Vroon and Nina Ter Laan depicts both raw disappointment and the European (i.e. white) sense of cultural superiority that seeps into convert identity, especially after immigration.

Sarah Casewit's descriptions of her childhood as the daughter of convert immigrants and the impact thereof on her cultural and religious identity are revelatory of the challenges that privilege and whiteness pose to assimilation in the Muslim world, as well as of the survival of elements of 'convert identity' in first-generation Muslims.

While each of these stories contains extremely valuable insight, stringing them together runs the risk of diluting them all. The podcast would have benefitted greatly from a central narrative – a character or voice to guide the listener through each iteration of convert immigrant identity. That central narrative could have been that of one particularly experienced white convert immigrant reflecting on their process of identity building and identifying with elements of each sub-narrative. It

could also have been my own narrative – I included my perspective as a convert at the end of the podcast, but my search for belonging in Morocco could also have served as a unifying thread throughout the podcast.

Furthermore, though I have now defined my use of the terms ‘white,’ ‘convert,’ and ‘immigrant,’ those terms merited definition in the podcast itself. I use the terms somewhat recklessly and presumptuously; for instance, I routinely refer to the privileges inherent in whiteness without explaining the foundations of that assertion.

Nevertheless, I stand by the conclusions I drew in the podcast. Those conclusions were based not only upon the narratives included in the podcast, but upon all of my additional interactions with converts during the course of my research and upon my own experience as a convert in Morocco.

My final work may be somewhat disorienting in its complexity, but that reflects the disorienting complexities of white convert immigrant identity.

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