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THE IMMANENT REFUSAL OF CONVERSION

Conversion is never now. Conversion is often narrated as a moment of turning, a turning that happens in an ineffable instant, and this gets us in the habit of linking conversion to the now. Conversion happens quickly, instantaneously, decisively, in the blink of an eye, and this seems like a good way of describing how the now happens. So it seems like conversion happens like the now happens. But conversion does not happen this way. Conversion does not happen now. And we can push this a bit further: if conversion does not happen now, if conversion never happens now, then this is because conversion denies the now, because conversion never wants the now to happen, or because conversion wants the now never to happen.[1] If conversion happens, then the now does not.

Let me try to elaborate this point by briefly getting at the basic operation of conversion, or the logic of conversion. To convert is to move, but it is simultaneously to identify or to position, for conversion is a movement from one identity to another. Movement requires the emplotment provided by at least two positions, and these positions gain their meaning through the narration of the movement between them. All this is to say that movement and identity depend on one another, and that their dependence is articulated as a narrative. If one looks to a conversion narrative for identification, then one will find some satisfaction, just as one will find some satisfaction if one looks to it for movement. Conversion refuses neither—in fact it demands both. And it is precisely because it demands both, and because this demand involves a certain relation between identification and movement, that looking for identity or looking for movement fails to get at the essence of conversion's logic, which is about the *relation* between identity and movement. When we look at identity, or when we look at movement, the logic of their relation is abandoned for the satisfaction of the look: there we see identification, and there we see movement, but never do we see them together. The desire for movement, or the desire for identification, is gained at the expense of an analysis of how movement and identification depend upon, play off of, and engender one another.

How this play operates is no doubt a pretty massive theme, so let me stick to the key point: the instability at work in conversion is produced by conversion. In other words, the instability at work in conversion is not instability as such, it is rather instability as it is narrated by conversion, the instability between movement and identity. Consider what conversion tells us: you are this, but you can, and should, become this other thing; or, you are now this other thing, and

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[1] For an account of how conversion's temporality forecloses the demand for justice now, see the account of human rights discourse provided by Robert Meister, in his *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (Columbia UP, 2012).

you can be sure you are this other thing by knowing that you were that. In either narration, we have two identities, past and future, old and new, now versus yet to be or now versus once was. These two identities need one another, and this need is narrated in terms of movement, namely the movement between these two identities. Thus it is not only that the two identities need one another, it is also that their need for one another needs movement as the movement between one another. And, taken together, all of this need amounts to instability—it can be deployed backward, the new looking at the old, or it can be deployed forward, the old looking at the new, or, ultimately, it can be deployed as a movement stuck between, but still deployed by, motivated by, the tension, the undecidability, between old and new. However one finds this instability deployed, it remains the case that it is being deployed by conversion. In other words, and to say it once again, this instability is not instability as such, it is instability working within the conversion narrative, or the narrative demand of conversion. This instability at work in conversion is instability being put to work by and for conversion. It is the conversion of instability to the work of conversion.

Having said all of this, let me return to my initial remark that conversion is never now. I think we can see what this means: conversion is never now because conversion is always tensed between, motivated by, and narrated as the movement between new and old identities. These new and old identities can be Christian and heretic, or Christian and other religions, though in a more modern form they may be recapitulated as secular and religious. In any or every case, for conversion, the now moves backwards and forwards, it is narrated in between old and new, and precisely for this reason it never has autonomy from old and new. The movement of conversion's narrative has nothing to do with the autonomy of the now. On the contrary, it puts the now to work for the narrative—the now is always working out the relation between old and new, articulating this relation's movements, its potentialities and/or its losses. In fact, it does not matter whether the conversion is achieved, whether the narration is successful or unsuccessful, because the point is simply that the now is doing work. It can be the work of achievement or the work of failure, but in either case it is work. In either case, the now works for conversion. It is never now as such, it is always now as work.

It is probably clear that everything I am saying about the now is what I have said about instability. In sum, the now as such is not the now of conversion, just as instability as such is not the instability of conversion. To this I can add that the now is instability as such, or that instability is the now as such. They are immanent: there can be no affirmation of one without the affirmation of the other. And this affirmation of the immanence of instability and the now requires a certain antagonism toward, or refusal of, conversion, a refusal of work, the work demanded by conversion.

In order to enact this refusal, however, we face various difficulties. The difficulty on which I want to focus is that of figuration. Figuration presents a difficulty for the refusal of conversion because to give a figure to instability is to risk converting instability. Specifically, we are in danger of converting instability to the figure, of making the figure into something that instability must achieve.

Consider, for instance, the conjunction "instability and its figure": the "and" in this phrase indicates a gap between instability and figure, a gap—it is implied—that must be closed or crossed. This gap is the gap of transcendence. Regarding the conjunction, "instability and its figure," transcendence emerges in the gap of the "and." The figure is imagined as transcending instability. Perhaps the best examplar of this figural transcendence is Christ, understood in terms of standard Christology.

Christ saves the world by arriving from beyond the world, by transcending the world—but, at the same time, he is part of the world. This is the logic of incarnation, and Christ is its figure. Transcendence here begins through division, as the gap between the world and its beyond. Yet it does not stay this way, for the figure of Christ incarnationally crosses this gap, it ties together the world and what transcends the world. What is powerfully insidious about this figuration is that transcendence is not strictly beyond or unreachable. On the contrary, transcendence is readily available, figurable. One can figure out transcendence. So transcendence does not repel, rather it mediates, it takes the figure of media. Transcendence appears not as the gap between world and beyond, for this gap is already closed in the figure of Christ, who is both beyond the world and in the world. The gap instead emerges in, and as, a figure: transcendence thus becomes the gap between the figure of Christ and what refuses this figure, or the gap between what converts to this figure and what does not convert to it.

One way out of this difficulty would be to refuse any figure at all. This would be to oppose figuration in the name of instability. But such a strategy then produces a new difficulty: instability becomes a new, inverted transcendence, an unfigurable excess that transcends every figure. One focuses on what is excluded by the figure, one turns the gap against the figure, but in doing so one leaves the figure in place. What is preferable, it seems to me, is to find a way of figuring instability as such, where there would be no gap between instability and figure, where instability would be figure and figure would be instability. This would amount to immanence, the immanence of figure and instability.

Let us shift gears a bit in order to briefly make some comments about some comments made by Jacob Taubes. For the purposes of what I am trying to get at, what is interesting about Taubes is the attention he generally gives to the non-arrival of the messianic. For Taubes, I think it is fair to say, the history of Christianity cannot be understood at all unless it is first understood as an attempt to come to terms with the failure of the messianic promise. He instructs us, for instance, to "consider the dialectics in the messianic experience of a group at the moment when prophecy of redemption fails. The 'world' does not disintegrate, but the hope of redemption crumbles."[2] For Taubes, this experience is the key to understanding the emergence of Christian identity, which, in the wake of this failed, crumbled hope, becomes a matter of interiority. Extending his insight, we can say that Christianity is defined by a denial of this messianic failure. In other words, Christianity, from the very beginning, depends on

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[2] Taubes, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason* (Stanford UP, 2009), p. 4.

surviving this failure.[3] And if I call this survival a denial of failure, then this is because the failure does not provoke the end of identification with hope. On the contrary, the failure actually constitutes identity, though precisely as the denial of failure: Christians are those who identify with a messianic hope that seems to have failed, but that cannot have failed; Christian identity is constituted by the conversion of failure to an only-seeming-to-have failed, to a cannot-have-failed; Christian identity *is* conversion, the conversion of failure to survival, the conversion that simultaneously makes failure unthinkable.

Along these lines, the history of Christianity, or conversion, can be seen not only as a refusal to encounter the failure of messianic realization, but also as a replacement of messianic realization with conversion's achievement. Conversion does not just turn us away from the failure of messianic realization, it does not simply forget about it and do something else — no, it makes messianic realization into a matter of conversion. How can the messianic promise have failed, given that the task of conversion remains? This is the question that Christianity poses. And the very posing of this question allows us to forget or deny the failure of messianic realization. The very posing of the question renders this failure unthinkable, because there is no distinction between the messianic and conversion.

What is useful about Taubes' approach, then, is that it enables us to draw a line between conversion and the messianic, or more specifically between conversion and the failure of the messianic. Furthermore, by giving attention to this line, it also accounts for how the line has disappeared: if we do not give attention to the line between messianic failure and conversion, then this is because conversion has captured the messianic, it has denied messianic failure by making messianic success part of conversion's ongoing task. Conversion thus appears as a tremendously pervasive overcoding of messianic failure. Put another way, we can say that the figure of Christ, by transcending instability, likewise transcends messianic failure. Consequently, an immanent refusal of this transcendent figure is bound to an insistence on what the transcendent figure wants to deny and to disappear: instability and messianic failure.

Such insistence, however, is necessarily total, and in this regard we should note that at times Taubes seems ultimately to resist this necessity. In a discussion of Freud, for instance, he affirms that "the psychoanalytic critique of religion can serve as a critical measure in order to discern all magical elements in the eschatological hope," but he wants to use this critique as a means of weeding out the "priestly magical" in order to uphold "the prophetic-personal element in eschatological religion."[4] His fear, in other words, is that Freud throws out the baby with the bathwater. The psychoanalytic critique, he claims, cannot be allowed to extend to the messianic promise as such: "If the eschatological hope is illusory, then the future itself turns out to be an illusion."[5] Yet if we are to take

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[3] On the interrelation of the themes of survival, denial, and Christianity, see Gil Anidjar, "Survival," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon 2* (Winter 2012), available at:
http://www.politicalconcepts.org/survival-gil-anidjar/.
[4] Taubes, p. 340.
[5] Ibid., pp. 340-341.

seriously the now and its instability, then it is precisely this illusory character of "the future itself" that must be articulated. It is in virtue of the necessity of a more radical refusal of redemptive futurity[6] that we should turn, finally, to Malcolm X, and specifically to some comments he made about the "Oneness" of Islam.

Islam, he says, "accent[s] the Oneness of Man under One God,"[7] and in doing so it turns against racialization, here described as "the inability of God's creatures to live as One."[8] We can begin to unpack these comments by noting that Oneness should be understood not as something to strive for, but rather as what is always already there. In this sense, conversion has no place in Oneness. This is because conversion requires the division of old and new identities, it requires the demand to move from one position to another. Conversion may call for a movement toward unity, toward a unification that supersedes division. Yet if there is Oneness,[9] there can be no division in the first place. Similarly, conversion's unification may involve a process of stitching together, of constructing the union to be achieved—yet if there is Oneness, then there is nothing to stitch or construct or achieve. Oneness is thus without the need of unification. This is also to say that Oneness is without the need of conversion.

Programmatic or prophetic as this refusal of conversion may be, there remains the question of difference: If there is Oneness, then how can there be difference? This is—to put it mildly—a pretty old question. It is the question of the one and the many, which was posed philosophically by the Greeks, and which gained immense social power with Christianity and its missionizing, globalizing demand for conversion. In fact, the logic of conversion is, at its essence, an attempt to construct a unity out of difference. We can see this right away in Paul. His concern was nothing if not that of determining the identity of the Christian body. How can such a body fully include the differences of its members while maintaining its unity? How, in other words, can the Christian body be both many and one? (And note that the Christian body, this "new race,"[10] is forced by its *essentially* conversionistic character to pose this question again and again and again—it is no accident.) In order to find an answer to this question, Paul proceeded allegorically. He divided two registers of being, the particular and the universal, so that the former could accommodate diversity and the latter could accommodate unity. This two-registered approach agrees with the incarnation,

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[6] On the notion of redemptive futurity, see Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (Duke UP, 2011), Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke UP, 2004), and Leo Bersani's *The Culture of Redemption* (Harvard UP, 1990).

[7] Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Ballantine, 1999), p. 337. The gendered language—that is, the Oneness of *Man*—should be observed, especially because such gendering, which is obviously a matter of division, resists the logic of Oneness that is being set forth.

[8] Ibid., p. 345.

[9] In the phrase, "there is Oneness," the "is" cannot be translated into standard ontology, given that such ontology involves the very protocols of identity and difference essential to the logic of conversion refused by Oneness.

[10] On the genealogical connection between Christianity and the race of humanity, see Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (Columbia UP, 2005).

which makes Christ the figure of division between the register of God and the register of the human. Christian unity, or Christ's unity, is thus founded on the recognition of difference, but in such a way that inclusion requires the overcoming of difference in the name of the unity of Christ. Difference is recognized, but only as that which is overcome through the unifying achievement of conversion. And the differences that refuse this conversion, this recognition in the figure of Christ, are disappeared.

On the other hand, there is no disappearance in the Oneness of Malcolm X. Or, more precisely, what is disappeared by conversion's process of unification is always already there as Oneness. How is this the case? How, to say it again, can there be difference if there is Oneness? The answer, in a sense, is that there cannot be difference with Oneness—at least not if difference is understood in competition with unification. The difference that threatens unity—the difference of conversion—does not exist with Oneness. But there is another manner of difference. To see this, we should look at how Malcolm X superposes the Christian-Islam asymmetry with the colonizer-colonized asymmetry—and this superposition should not seem abrupt, for in talking about conversion, or religion, we have all along been talking about coloniality, or race. Here is what he says: "Two-thirds of the human population today is telling the one-third minority white man, 'Get out!' And the white man is leaving."[11] This anti-colonial movement is simultaneously an anti-Christian movement, which is to say that just as colonialism is bound up with the divisiveness of Christianity, so anti-colonialism is bound up with the Oneness of Islam.

Here we see another manner of difference, a difference that is not mutually exclusive with Oneness, a difference that can just be whatever, which is to say different, because there is no need for unification, because Oneness already is. Malcolm X thus affirms, "the non-white peoples returning in a rush to their original religions, which had been labeled 'pagan' by the conquering white man … The Africans are returning to Islam and other indigenous religions. The Asians are returning to being Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims."[12] In other words, while Oneness articulates a theology of Islam, Oneness does not require conversion to Islam. On the contrary, it enables a refusal of conversion as such (including conversion to Islam). It enables a reversion to existence disappeared by conversion.

Such reversion is not unrelated to the refusal of the patronym, or of the patristic inheritance. The name X, it should be noted, is a replacement for and a refusal of a name that is not one's own—in the case of Malcolm X, "Little." The slaveowner name of Little mediates a divisive kinship produced by the appetites of Western coloniality. Such appetites should not be separated from the giving of names, for these names are what organize, what render imaginable and recognizable, the structure produced by colonial appetites. Giving and receiving names is

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[11] Malcolm X, p. 376.

[12] Ibid., p. 376. However, the names of what is returned to—such as "Hinduism"—are still involved in colonial conversion. This is not to resist the reversion here invoked, but rather to insist that this reversion must be radicalized, such that reversion refuses even the recognition supplied by "being Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims."

inseparable from appetites, and this remains the case even when one tries to name oneself in a supposedly unmarked, "philosophical" manner. The question "Who am I?" and the names produced through the resolution of this question—names produced for oneself and one's others—are inseparable from appetites. Perhaps the exemplary modern instance of this sort of questioning is found in Descartes' dualistic attempt to count as nothing all materiality—to make it disappear—in order to attend to a pure act of thought, a thought whose separation enabled Descartes to name his self into existence: "I think, therefore I am."

To refuse this duality is to insist that Descartes' attempt is inseparable from an appetite. It is, furthermore, to call attention to the fact that his dualism, his separation of thought from appetite, is already an appetite—an appetite to divide. As Enrique Dussel points out, "The modern *ego cogito* was anticipated by more than a century by the practical, Spanish-Portuguese *ego conquiro* (I conquer) that imposed its will … on the indigenous populations of the Americas. The conquest of Mexico thus became the first sphere of the modern ego."[13] In other words, the appetite at issue in Descartes' naming of his own existence is inseparable from an appetite for conquering. Yet the way in which Descartes structures this naming allows him to evade awareness of such inseparability. For if conquering is material, and if one is named through a thought divided from materiality, then the name of one's existence is divided from conquering. Or—keeping in mind the disappearance enacted by conversion, and taking up Ramón Grosfoguel's rewriting of "I conquer, therefore I am" as "I exterminate, therefore I am"[14]—we can say that Cartesian duality enables one's name to be divided from the reality of extermination. This means that naming, insofar as it proceeds by way of duality, is essentially unable to provide a space for recognition of the self and the other, for in the first instance it divides itself from the materiality of power, of the history of domination. The space of critical self-reflection, and the complexities of intersubjective relations, are premised on the forgetting of—the conversion from—the material incommensurabilities and asymmetries of domination. This space is a space for converts, or a space whose price of admission is conversion. In fact, Cartesian dualism amounts to the appetite for conversion: from the reality of extermination to the transcendence of thought. Such an appetite for conversion is the appetite both to exterminate and to forget—and in some cases to forgive—extermination; it is the appetite to put extermination in the past, to confess that extermination is not now, that domination is superseded.

But where did this Cartesian logic of duality and its appetite come from? Where did Descartes get the habit of dividing reality into the two registers of immaterial and material, and of privileging the former? We cannot overlook or forget the Christian character of this habit. The Christological division between divine and human, or the ecclesiological division between one body and its many parts—

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[13] Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1.3 (465-478), p. 471.

[14] Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11.1 (73-90), p. 73.

division that orders conversion—has been converted by Descartes into modern form. While the modernity of Descartes' *cogito* is not simply identical to the account of a human race unified in Christ, the differences between them should not distract us from a certain recapitulation: the logic of conversion is at work in both, so much so that we can find the logic of conversion converting from Christianity to modernity. Regardless of the differences, conversion still works. Conversion keeps converting, and in doing so it advances the demand for the work of conversion. Its habits are inherited, passed down like the name of the Father. To disinherit such names, it is necessary to refuse the divisions these names produce, including the division of modernity from coloniality and the division of both from Christianity.

This is to agree with, but also to modify, Anibal Quijano's claim that the "racial axis," even as it "has a colonial origin and character ... has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established."[15] While Quijano is absolutely right about this survival of racialization beyond the colonial period—about the fact that racialization is not in the past but on the contrary is now—he is less evidently right in implying that racialization originated in the colonial setting. Coloniality transmutes divisions articulated through race, but this very tendency to divide through racial naming is not novel to colonization. Habits of racialization are essential to, but not invented through, colonization. In fact, colonization could be imagined precisely because Christianity had already established habits of racialization. Just as Descartes inherits the Christian appetite for duality, for conversion to self-unity, so colonialism inherits the Christian appetite for racialization, for conversion to a human race unified in Christ. It is not only that racialization survives beyond the colonial period, it is also that it was established by Christianity prior to the colonial period. Quijano is right to insist that the conversion from coloniality to postcoloniality does not undo racialization, but we must add to this insistence another one: the capacity to establish structures of racialized domination through conversion, and to continue converting while leaving in place these structures, is a capacity established—prior to the colonial period—by Christianity. Opposition to racialization necessitates opposition to Christianity.

With this in mind, let us return to Malcolm X, who knew and enacted this necessity. One of his most striking enactments was his replacement of the name Little with the name X. Unlike Descartes, he insisted on the inseparability of naming and extermination. He knew very well that the giving and receiving of names is inseparable from the establishment of an order of domination. The order of domination is an order of names. Therefore while X is undoubtedly a name, it is—importantly—a name that is asymmetrical to the order of naming. It is a name that breaks with the order of names, yet in doing so it does not offer yet another name. The name X is both a name and an absence of name, a name that shatters namability, an incommensurable assertion of one's own name that simultaneously leaves one without the inheritance of what is supposed to be one's own name. X is a name that refuses to stay within the bounds of inerited memory, that refuses to forget extermination, but that likewise refuses to give a

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[15] Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1.3 (533-580), p. 533.

name adequate to what is unavailable to memory. After all, what name could be adequate to what is exterminated, to existence disappeared by conversion? X thus names unavailability without either sticking to what is available or putting the unavailable in terms of the available. In this way, the unavailable is given force, but the force is irreducible to the force of inherited memory, just as X is irreducible to inherited names. X is therefore not the lack of a name so much as the power of namelessness. X articulates a knowledge of suffering, a knowledge that knows a suffering that wipes out knowledge. That there is, *now*, a knowledge of, despite, and against this wiping out is the power of X, which makes the unavailable memory of suffering into a power of unconvertability. This power of unconvertability is the power of Oneness.

If Oneness is advanced by Malcolm X's Islam, then this is not because it brings together difference in a better way. The figure of Oneness does not provide an alternative conversion or a better recognition of what is excluded by and exceeds the figure of conversion. No, it refuses from the beginning the very demand to do conversion's work, the work of recognizing inclusions and exclusions. It does not advance unification, in fact it does not "advance" at all. Instead it invokes a right of return, or an immanent power that refuses conversion's advances. This refusal of conversion's redemptive futurity is not about getting back to how things used to be, it is about making present that which has disappeared, and doing it now, with all of the instability this involves. Attention is thereby shifted from a future of reconciliation, a future in which all would be included, to a past that is constitutively excluded—so excluded, in fact, that it is a matter not of recognizing exclusion but of naming disappearance. To do this is to say that the past is not past, that the past is not the old divided from the new, but that it is now.

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