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Desconocido: Conversion to Islam in México

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Desconocido:
Conversion to Islam in México

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Honors project in International Studies

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In articulations of the subaltern, the subject is assumed to lack agency, unless proven otherwise. This interpretation partially stems from the idea that she is subject to powers—of overlapping, congruent, and uneven forces of political, social, and economic rule. This assumption underlies scholarship from a number of disciplines and areas of focus in postcolonial study. Anthropologists like Saba Mahmood have upended conventional understandings of agency by demonstrating how subjects assert agency through ways that potentially appear as if they are buying into their own oppression.¹ Her claim that submission and piety are forms of agency strikes at the very heart of the perennial question of whether Muslim women “need saving.”² It still relies, however, on this idea that agency must be proved. The dominant assumption is that Muslim women do not have agency; Mahmood artfully argues and challenges this assumption. By phrasing the question in this way, it leads to the assumption that subaltern subjects do not have agency, and must fit certain criteria to prove that they do in fact. While scholars like Mahmood have expanded the range of what those criteria are, it nonetheless lays on the subaltern to prove to the Western academy that they in fact have agency.

Spivak complicates the question of the burden of proof by questioning if the subaltern can “speak,” ultimately concluding that an essential subaltern voice and the reinterpretation of anti-hegemonic actions prevents the subaltern from having a “voice.”³ In Spivak’s vision, subaltern subjects cannot prove that they have agency because every potentially agential action is recorded within Western frameworks of knowledge-

¹ Saba Mahmood, "Politics of piety," *The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005).

² Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others," *American anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783-790.

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?," *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea* (1988): 21-78.

production that prohibit the subaltern from controlling the narrative construction of their own choices and actions. If the subaltern is not ascribed agency, but also does not have the power to claim it, then subaltern subjects are stuck as victims to forces they cannot control, to oppressions that shape it. This view is not only depressing, but mandates that Western academics see the subaltern as an object that may or may not be granted the status of agent. Determinations of agency, especially in the West, should be interrogated. Why is the focus on the subaltern subject's fundamental lack? Why is the critical lens turned toward labeling groups of individuals (agents/non-agents) rather than looking upon the institutional powers that prevent people from expressing or fully expressing the agency that they do have?

Like Mahmood, I will seek to expand the criteria of what is considered agency. My arguments about the possession of agency will focus on demonstrating the inherent agency of the subaltern subject. In other words, I will argue that the subaltern subject has agency until proven otherwise. To do so, I will focus specifically on conversion to Islam in México. As Mahmood herself showed, religious adherence is often discredited as the ultimate submission instead of a form of agency. Religious conversion is often viewed through the same lens that Mahmood critiques: as a force that acts upon subaltern subjects, something that happens to them without their input or desire.

My point is not to prove that converts to Islam in México necessarily have agency. Rather, I will engage in a critique of the ways that discussions of agency occur within and outside of academia. To try and prove that a community, or even an individual is an agent is related to but aside from the crux of what I'm arguing: that the way discourses around otherized subjects assume passivity is flawed. Putting the subaltern to

trial with the assumption of passivity, and the opportunity to prove agency demonstrates not the subaltern's natural tendencies towards passivity but our own biases towards who the subaltern is and what actions they can and are allowed to take. Arguing that the community of converts has agency only perpetuates this standard of assumptions. In many ways, my goal is similar to the one that Fanon expresses in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He says, "it would be quite easy to prove, or win the admission, that the black is the equal of the white. But my purpose is quite different: What I want to do is help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment."⁴ Likewise, I could prove that some subaltern subjects have agency, but my point is to intervene in the perpetuation of colonial thinking.

Converts in México are often treated with some degree of strangeness by those who study them, as something that is worthy of observation because it seems out of place or bizarre. This is especially true of converts in the southern state of Chiapas, who are overwhelmingly indigenous Maya. The overlap of religious, ethnic, legal, economic, gendered, and national concerns allows examination of the way agency is constructed amongst these routes. This inquiry is epistemological, digging at the ways in which people think and talk about subaltern subjects. In many ways, this piece will mirror the approach of Srinivas Aravamudan in his book *Tropicopolitans*.⁵ Aravamudan searches for agency in colonial-era literature (claiming that resistance is not simply a method of the post-colonial era). This inquiry is based on the assumption that colonized subjects had agency that was expressed in their literary works. I will work to show why this should be

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 30.

⁵ Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

applied more broadly. Rather than showing agency as an expression of choice or resistance, I will strive to show how agency is inherent, even in acts of submission.

I will begin by exploring both religious conversion and colonialism to demonstrate both the need for a new approach toward the treatment of the subaltern. I will then explain how and why approaches toward agency should be the norm by exploring the ways this affects converts to Islam in México. In the first chapter, I will discuss the way in which conversion is related to discussions of authenticity and judgements of the authentic, and especially how that relates to Mexicans who have converted to some strain of Sufism. In the second chapter, I will look at the ways in which converts form new communities, and other acts of creation. In the third chapter, I will analyze desire, looking specifically at arguments about conversion and cosmopolitanism. To conclude, I will look to the future and new questions that arise from this research.

Religious Conversion

Religion, and especially religious conversion, has long been a sticky subject for postcolonialists. Conversion has always been a difficult issue to clearly delineate because of the many forms that religions themselves take. The boundaries of what is considered religion often predetermine what is considered true conversion. Take for instance the debate over whether or not ideologies like Marxism are religions.⁶ While certain rituals could perhaps be associated with Marxism, it would primarily be an intellectual conversion. Where then, does that place systems like Shintoism, practices that many

⁶ For examples of this discussion see Kurtz 1988 or Riegel 2007.

Japanese people claim are not rituals associated with a religion? What is defined as a religion changes what is defined as conversion.

It is not within the scope of this project for me to claim or argue what is or is not a religion. I will interrogate how religious conversion is talked about, especially concerning the treatment of conversion narratives created by those in power. Western scholarship on conversion has origins in a psychology, as scholars sought to understand what internal factors led to conversion. These theories were predicated on the assumption that religion is determined by internally held beliefs. Scholarship like that conducted by William James and Arthur Nock in the early 20th century dominated academia, promoting the conclusion that religion operates as it does in the Western Christian context. Both men relied on the idea of another psychologist, Edwin Starbuck, that conversion was a “process of struggling away from sin.”⁷ Conversion as described by this school of thought is determined by an individual who makes a conscious choice to escape negative consequences. People who convert for materially or societally beneficial reasons are not deemed “true” converts because the impetus of conversion must be internally held beliefs, with ritual actions a mere reflection of those internal beliefs.

New religious movements that arose in the middle of the 20th century prompted sociologists to observe the effects of conversion. This research challenged the views of conversion posited by scholars in the tradition of William James. John Lofland and Rodney Stark spearheaded the efforts to offer a new framework for conversion. In “Conversion Motifs,” they outline six themes that classify conversion literature based on certain dimensions (e.g. degree of social pressure, intellectual inclinations) that were

⁷ Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The psychology of religion: An empirical study of the growth of religious consciousness*. Vol. 38. Walter Scott, 1899.

present in accounts of conversion.⁸ The six motifs that Lofland and Skonovd identify--intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive--seek to offer a broader scope of what constitutes religious conversion. This offers a more inclusive view of religion; the differing degrees of social pressure and individual choice allow for religious traditions that are more community oriented. Most evidently, Lofland and Stark strip individual agency from the conversion process by preventing a notion of conversion that happens out of a communal setting and thus, ignoring the theological appeal of a religion. Even the two motifs that Lofland and Stark identify as having a low degree of social pressure--intellectual and mystical--require a community in order to sustain the change in belief. This model also denies the theological appeal of a religion to (potential) converts, placing almost all of the impetus of conversion upon the social relationships that converts have with a religious community.

Robin Horton, a social anthropologist, sought to expand the notion of society within this model by analyzing external forces, attributing conversion to cultural and historical shifts. He specifically notes economic downturns or encounters with other societies that put stress on a specific culture.⁹ If the Williams/Nock model is personal and the Lofland/Stark model is intra-personal, Horton's model is external, stripping the individual from any potential action. To Horton, the religion itself is irrelevant; as long as the religion is "global," the external forces and stresses prompt conversion over the allure of specific beliefs. These "universal" religions are constructed monoliths that are unaffected by the encounters they have with new belief systems. This lack of discourse

⁸ John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion motifs," *Journal for the scientific study of religion* (1981): 373-385.

⁹ Robin Horton, "A Definition of Religion, and its Uses," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 90 (1960): 201-226.

between hegemonic and the dominated beliefs strips agency from people, especially those dominated by colonial empires that ascribe to universal religions.

Max Heirich and Eugene Gallagher, among others, have sought to reevaluate these standpoints. Gallagher, in *Expectation and Experience*, criticizes the individualists for prescribing what conversion ought to look like and the sociologists and anthropologists for denying agency to converts. He seeks to identify a middle ground that allows for external pressures and internal beliefs. The definition of conversion that Max Heirich proposes summarizes this line of thinking:

If experiences or encounters take place that can not be encompassed within current explanatory schemes yet cannot be ignored, present understandings of root reality may come into question. Alternatively, when quite unacceptable outcomes appear imminent and inevitable, if current understandings of root reality are correct, many persons begin to reexamine their most basic assumptions.¹⁰

While one could argue that this widens the scope to include belief systems that are not typically considered religions--say, human rights or Marxism--this widening perhaps illuminates the relationship between conversion and modernity. Heirich's definition allows what are traditionally considered religions to be analyzed alongside those that are not. After all, are there not certain rituals related to human rights? Certain faith values withheld ("democracy")? Certain words recited at certain moments ("equality" "self-determination")? Certain powers invoked for protection? A proselytization of those who are "unbelievers"? A theoretical basis of the human as sacred? Rather than relying on theo-centric definitions, Heirich designates religion as a fundamental belief about the way the world operates. This helps distinguish between groups about what is a proper form of religion, de-essentializing religious communities that are often construed as a single

¹⁰ Max Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 3 (1977): 674-5.

monolith that has certain, set beliefs. Any number of worldviews can be present in what is considered one religion--perhaps as many as there are adherents. However, general streams of thoughts and trends can still be analyzed on a macro level. In other words, an analyst may begin a framework of study by examining certain worldviews, diminishing the need for academics to add commentary to the discourse about what truly constitutes the religion that they are studying. Conversion in this light can be studied without denying the converts' own feelings and experiences while also applying social and structural analysis to the conversion.

This definition also helps prevent the temporal relocation of religion as pre-modern. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, posited that nationalism inherited the role that religion did as a cultural unifier. It is interesting to note that Anderson himself delineates the development of nationalism in his own theories of "empty time."¹¹ Consciously or not, Anderson situates religious community as before the age of nationalism. (Anderson is far from the most egregious offender. Secularists often placed themselves as more advanced and modern than their religious counterparts, as epitomized by the "new atheist" movement. One could argue that Anderson situates the imagined, unified religious communities as pre-modern, and not religious communities themselves.) The definition Heirich poses instead constructs all of us as religious--after all, we each hold views about the world. While those beliefs don't necessarily include a spiritual element, the comparison discourages temporal relocation because it insists that everyone operates within this same temporal sphere.

In some ways, Anderson complicates the idea of both nationalism and religious

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso Books, 2006.

affiliation. Anderson is careful to note that nationalism did not replace religion signification--rather, he understood religion as one part of an imagined nationality. Religion is entangled with the imaging of self and nation. Anderson helps explain the fallacy of assigning certain nationalities to certain religions, or acting as if converts are no longer part of ethnic or national communities. Certain people and groups claim that India is Hindu, that Japan is Shinto, or that México is Catholic. Majority religious groups shape the national narrative in many ways. Anderson's theories explain why and how religious and national identities are entwined in people's imaginations to the point of essentialization: where one cannot be Indian without being Hindu, cannot be Japanese without being Shinto, or Mexican without being Catholic.

The Question of Colonialism

Defining precisely what colonialism encompasses is a controversial and perhaps impossible task. Scholars and dictionaries speak of "domination," "dependent areas," "control," "exploitation," "settlers," "territory," "political power," but come to little consensus on whether colonialism is the ideology or the practice, whether it refers to the domination of land or people, whether direct political interference (as opposed to say, economic interference, although it is hard to imagine one without the other), or whether it means the same thing as imperialism. Was France colonized by Nazi Germany during World War II? Is Basque country currently colonized by Spain? Could different iterations of Chinese dynasties be considered colonial? Was Czechoslovakia colonized by the USSR? Was the Aztec Empire a colonial power? Or the Inca? How dominant must the

dominant power be in order to be considered colonizing? Is economic domination enough, or must it be political, or cultural?

Postcolonial theory falls almost laughably short of providing a satisfactory answer. The temporal and spatial boundaries of postcolonial theory links colonialism with modernity (and postcolonialism with postmodernity) in which a certain Enlightenment understanding of the nation gave rise to competitive colonialisms, culminating in an end of colonialism following the liberatory struggles of the 1940s-1970s. It further restricts postcolonialism spatially through an Orientalist lens, in which the exotified Other that was famously described by Edward Said remains firmly rooted in Easternness. This naturally excludes a large potential range of colonial subjects.

Many scholars criticize postcolonial theory by linking it with other posts and debunking the idea that there has been some shift from current temporality to a future “post” temporality. In particular when it comes to postcolonialism, but also visible in other posts (like poststructuralism, postmodernism), there is no clear divide between what is postcolonialism and what is colonialism. Colonialism in this way is restricted to purely political power, postcolonial theory referring directly to methods of thinking that stem from societies that have gained independence. Many scholars have criticized the term postcolonial for the implications that there is a clear divide between the colonial and afterwards, and that modernity exists in the afterwards, despite the fact that many (perhaps, arguably, all) colonized communities are still facing problems based on the imposed historical structures of colonialism. This endurance is not represented in the term postcolonial, nor does the term represent the complicated histories of colonized spaces.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall denounces blanket criticism of postcolonial theory based on discursive realities (usage of the prefix “post”). Postcolonialism, as described by Hall, is marked by the transnational reimagination of subjectivities. In this theoretical mindscape, the postcolonial subject is one that occupies a space at the limits. Capitalism, globalized media, and the weakening of boundaries are cited as the forces that mark the post- of postcolonialism as more than simple political liberation from direct dominance. The dissolution of the boundaries that previously demarcated identity formation, to Hall, is a constant and uneven movement that makes the present a different time than the preceding colonialisms. To Hall, the borders of culture, politics, economics, etc. are constantly erased and redrawn into formulations that negotiate new shapes and identities.¹²

Disagreement between these two camps--both of whom hold clearly anti-colonialism dear to their academic scholarship--seems to stem from a lack of consensus on whether or not the present (however defined) is different in some fundamental ways. That perhaps, with advent of ways in which the world is integrated politically, economically, and culturally, that the rise of Appiah’s cosmopolitanism has drastically changed how people relate to each other and to their own identities. From a number of academic perspectives, labeling this time as different makes sense: epidemiologists, computer scientists, and social historians, for example, could perhaps utilize this idea of a world completely changed by new media and technologies.

However, from a standpoint of looking at colonialism, calling the present era a postcolonial one is problematic in that presumes that the forces that Hall speaks about,

¹² Stuart Hall, “When was ‘the postcolonial’? Thinking at the limit,” in *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, eds. Iain Chamberlain and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996).

the borders and limits that he notes are being redrawn are influenced by and stem from lines and borders that preceded them. As Hall says, scholars who pick at “post” merely for sake of being pedantic, have missed the general point about how the world is changing. And yet, criticism of a “post” raises necessary discongruities in the invention of a new order dictated by different rules that become especially problematic for scholars of Latin America. Postcolonial theory has not fit well in certain contexts because of its exclusionary temporal and geographical connotations. It is difficult (although not impossible) for scholars to place Latin America within this postcolonial framework because of its spatial relationship and its distinctive temporal political development. Latin America is geographically situated within the west--further west than most of what is considered the West. Orientalization, in this sense, seems as both a misnomer and a poor label for the processes of Otherization that Latin American people endure. Colonization began earlier compared to many cultures and societies and formal political independence came a century before revolutions that are prototypically postcolonial (see India, Algeria). Can we really claim that Latin America has been a “postcolonial” society since the early 19th century, right at the apex of conquering and colonization in other parts of the globe? It seems farcical to lump Latin America in 1850 with the modes of thinking that dominated the revolutionary experiences in many parts of the world more than a century later. Considering the influence that other dominators (not necessarily the direct colonizers) imposed upon Latin America, in what way are Spain’s economic exploitations different from the economic exploitations faced at the hands of the United States?

Aníbal Quijano, a leading subaltern scholar of Latin America, coined the term “coloniality” to bridge the gap between the experience of colonialism and postcolonial theory.¹³ Specifically defining the coloniality of power, Quijano seeks to deconstruct the persistent dualisms that haunt postcolonialism. If postcolonialism exists as a discourse of subjects at the limits, then coloniality seeks to place the subject as an object of heterogeneity and hybridity that fundamentally crosses borders. The coloniality of power seeks to tear down the constructed divide between the colonial and the postcolonial, arguing that the structures and hegemonies that were constructed and reinforced in colonialism continue. Quijano claims that there is not a different capitalism, or a different racism, and arguing that there are disconnects these structures and realities from their deep roots in colonial histories. Not only are these symptoms all connected to colonialism, but to each other. He speaks at length at how capitalism cannot be disentangled from racism, demonstrating how labor is monetized differently based on who is performing it. He explains too how this is connected to the appropriation of and derision at the ways of the colonized. Quijano claims that “[Europeans] repressed as much as possible the colonized forms of knowledge production, the models of the production of meaning, their symbolic universe, the model of expression and of objectification and subjectivity”.¹⁴ His emphasis on the forms of the relationship between knowledge-production and power reframes the question of colonialism in contemporary scholarship.

¹³ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Social Classification,” in *Coloniality at Large* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 541.

In tandem with Quijano, Walter Mignolo further develops Quijano's ideas on the coloniality of power to challenge the very epistemic basis of the current world order. Postcolonial theory, to Mignolo, is disconnected from the biopolitics of the subaltern, remaining nothing more than a thought experiment of the academy to talk about improving the lives of the oppressed by creating knowledge about them. The coloniality of power is extended through the very modes of epistemic knowledge production that works in a cycle of words, beliefs, and actions that self-reinforce. Mignolo challenges the basis of what is considered rational, arguing for the adoption of alternate cosmologies that reclaim what is known from the oppressors for the sake of the subaltern. He defines coloniality as a four-pronged method of control: over economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and over knowledge and subjectivity.¹⁵ He then goes on to argue that "coloniality is constitutive of modernity and not derivative" of it.¹⁶

Although neither Quijano nor Mignolo directly claim that the centrality of the subject, coloniality focuses on how, through different strains of oppression and domination, through different times of history, different ideological motivations, the forced reimagination of self runs at the heart of coloniality. Santiago Castro-Gómez, depending on the work of the former scholars, says that the goal of coloniality is "eradicating any belief system" that does not fit into the "worldviews" of the colonizers.¹⁷ While one could argue that this simply points to a conflict in contesting ideologies, "worldview" implies the subject's relationship to the very world around her. If, as

¹⁵ Walter Mignolo, preamble in *Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klaren (Marden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷ Santiago Castro-Gómez, "(Post)Coloniality for Dummies: Latin American Perspectives on Modernity, Coloniality, and the Geopolitics of Knowledge," in *Coloniality at Large* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

Mignolo claims, the rationale at the roots of the global system is based on specific cultural logic, then it would stand to reason that this global system promotes a specific subjectivity that is also constructed to support the coloniality of power.

For this reason, coloniality as a framework is preferable due to its placement of the individual and the community as the center of moral and analytical concern. Through the structuring and restructuring of identities, we can see the continual and shifting forces of oppression through time and space than if we traced merely the political, cultural, economic, social, or religious transitions of a nation or community. The structures of self can be changed without a shift in any of the macro-structures listed above, or can stay constant even in external flux. Other frameworks, including those lent from postcolonial theory, tend to rely on the production of knowledge that either neglects the subaltern subject or relegates her to not quite living up to Western norms.

Take for instance, the idea of the irrational. Edward Said claimed that through the Otherization of people, communities were able to define themselves.¹⁸ He applied this example most prominently to the Western world and the civilizations that have abutted it, of which the character was primarily Islamic. In this way, the Andersonian idea of “imagined communities” is defined not simply by the characteristics of the group itself, but by the qualities of what the group is not. His negation is critical to understanding that qualities that are attributed to the Other that are taken as factual are all viewed from the lens of the community doing the otherizing. Thus, claims of rationality/irrationality are rooted in specific cultural logics. Postcolonial theory has sought to demonstrate the rationality of what is considered irrational. And yet, those arguments reify the root logics

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

that determine what is rational and irrational. The very qualifications and methods of analysis are rooted in culturally-specific values. If rational simply means based on thoughts and calculations, then it is hard to think of a situation in which an action is irrational. Even if a person or society is unaware of the origins behind ritual actions does not mean that they do not have strong rational associations. If a person's fundamental understanding about how the world operates depends on a certain conception of the self as both an agent and a subject of forces that are disjunctive and uneven, then it is impossible to think of a situation in which something could be irrational.

In Melanesia, colonialism uprooted many of the roots and routes with which the people living there operated previous to colonial incursions. One phenomenon that emerged during the colonial encounters have been labeled "cargo cults." Indigenous people would perform elaborate rituals that mirrored the military actions of the colonizers--marching around with sticks, or constructing graves with crosses upon them, or constructing copies of airports, radios, and other technologies that they had never encountered before with materials that they had on hand (coconuts, leaves, wood, to name a few.) These rituals were supposed to be for the procurement of goods. Seeing that the colonizers performed certain rituals and had access to objects, cargo cult members replicated those same rituals in order to gain access to objects. Scholarship about cargo cults focuses upon the materialism that is inherent in such religious practices, in which rituals are staged and performed for access to what has been labeled cargo. Cargo cults are represented as the antithesis of the rational. The idea that such performances could bring physical results is mocked.¹⁹

¹⁹ Andrew Lattas, "Hysteria, Anthropological Disclosure and the Concept of the Unconscious: Cargo Cults and the Scientisation of Race and Colonial Power," *Oceania* 63, no. 1 (1992): 1-14.

Cargo cults represent the height of the rational/irrational duality in Otherization, in which the acts of Others are perceived and studied as inherently senseless or without basis in thought when in reality, the modes and basis of the sense and thoughts differ. Some scholars might say that attributing cargo cults to the ephemera of materialism actually reveals Western materialism. Why focus on the procurement of goods over all other spiritual and ritual practices? One could argue that the spiritual aspects (ancestors or spirits are attributed with granting the accesses to the goods) are much more central to the belief system. Or alternatively, the colonizers in many ways do have access to the commodities because their ancestors granted them access--through material invention, transmission, and learning that culminated in the ability to transport goods. To act as if the Melanesians believe that their spirits and ancestors could and would grant them the same rights is irrational denies the complex histories of people and products.

I would argue that cargo cults are a way to reclaim one's self in relation to new networks of oppression and difference. By re-enacting rituals that are associated with the colonizers, the members are expressing their deservedness and temporality in a way that reaffirms and places their values and practices as fully modern and productive while placing and defining the colonizer within their value system rather than submitting to the value system of the colonizer. In this way, the colonizers are participating in a system of values (rituals in order to procure goods) that belongs and is narrated by the colonized.

Conversion was often used as a tool of colonial power, a violent form of stripping away of the culture of the colonized. To fight back against the forms of colonial knowledge production, some academics have used "agency" to reclaim and justify their cultural/religious norms. Colonized peoples are often accused of assigning agency to

objects that do not “truly” have agency--be it the “wrong” god or plants or other humans. These objects were derogatorily named fetishes by colonizers in order to degrade the worth of these worshipped objects.²⁰

Other groups of subalternists have explored how colonized people expressed agency even though the historical conversion project. Often indigenous people are constructed as passive receivers of conquering colonizers--literature is full of analogies of the colonized culture as the sexual receptacle of their dominators, especially when it came to religion. Scholars are demonstrating how colonized people changed and co-opted religious structures that were enforced upon them and transformed them into their own systems of belief. This form of disruption shows colonized people as agents in these circumstances, people who have taken new ideas and placed them into their worldview, instead of letting their worldview bend to that of the colonizer.

Gauri Viswanathan, a leading thinker about postcolonial conversion, especially conversion in India, has argued that conversion more recently, outside of the times of direct colonialism, also serves as a form of agency for colonized subjects. In *Outside the Fold*, she notes that conversion and increased religiosity subvert and challenge British secularism and “tolerance.”²¹ This is part of her larger argument that within modernity, conversion disrupts the constructions of selves and communities. Viswanathan argues that conversion--whether assimilative or oppositional to the broader community--allows converts to express both “assent and dissent” of community norms. It is in this blurring, allowing a convert to be at one part of but also challenging their role in society, that

²⁰ Webb Keane, "From Fetishism to Sincerity: On Agency, the Speaking Subject, and Their Historicity in the Context of Religious Conversion," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 4 (1997): 674-93.

²¹ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the fold: Conversion, modernity, and belief*, Princeton University Press, 1998.

Viswanathan demonstrates the agency of converts. This necessarily challenges narratives that propose that assimilative conversion is assent and that oppositional conversion is dissent that often is displayed in re-tellings of conversions.²² Her argument also refuses to decouple religious identity from a variety of other social identities, including race and gender. Depending on Talal Asad's reasoning that the modern secular only allows for freedom of internal consciousness, Viswanathan shows a weakness in postcolonial readings because of the assumption that although colonized subjects were dominated based on race, gender, class and other identities, there is a general sense that religious identities were not impinged upon because the internal consciousness of the subjects were not violated. In other words, colonized subjects were not forced to change internal beliefs, only external ones, revealing a Euro-centric (or perhaps more aptly, Euro-Christian-centric) sensibility about the way religion operates and relates to the self.

In conversation with both Viswanathan and Asad, Laura Dudley Jenkins promotes the idea that in response to this assertion of agency that does disrupt the community as it has imagined itself, power will seek to control the narrative of religious conversion by questioning the authenticity and the sincerity of the converts. If conversion stems only for political, social, or material benefit, then it is less disruptive. Rather than challenging the very norms and identifications of the community, the conversion is reconstructed to support the powers that be. The concern with the genuineness of conversion of mass movements in India that Jenkins explores is a response to the disorder caused by conversion. After all, if lower caste converts are changing religion for bicycles and bread, then they are not converting to challenge the system of castes themselves; conversely, if

²² Colonial conversion to Christianity in a variety of circumstances were assimilative, for example, and black conversion to Islam in the US would be oppositional.

lower caste converts are converting for purely uncoerced, spiritual reasons, then Christian missionaries are not participating in what Jenkins characterizes as “an auction of souls.”²³ Jenkins questions why the mundane/political and the sacred/religious motivations cannot coexist.

Asad, one of the most well-known thinkers in contemporary religious studies, comments on this supposed dichotomy between the mundane and the sacred to interrogate why people are so concerned with the reasons behind religious conversion.²⁴ People do not question the reasoning behind forms of conversion that are not typically labeled as religious. Asad points to modernity as an example: when individuals and groups adopt the tenets of ideological modernity and all of its related rituals, fetishes, and regulations, there is no question as to why they did so. One could argue that shifts into modernity are constructed as natural processions based on ideas about the progress of society. Asad contends that the obsession with religion and choice is rooted in secular ideologies of self and the role that religion is supposed to play within an individual. Asad argues that all conversions are rooted in very specific historical circumstances and in a mixture of both individual choice and forces beyond one’s control.

In México

Of the 130 million people who live in México today, it is difficult to ascertain the number of converts to Islam. Estimates range in the couple of thousand to the mid-hundred thousands. Most scholars believe that estimates of around 2-3,000 is much too

²³ Laura Dudley Jenkins, "True Believers? Agency And Sincerity In Representations Of" Mass Movement" Converts In 1930s India," in *Converting Cultures*, eds. Dennis Washburn and A. Kevin Reinhart, pp. 435-464. (Brill, 2007):462.

²⁴ Talal Asad, “Comments on Conversion,” in *Conversion to Modernities*, ed. Peter van der Veer, (New York: Routledge, 1996): 263-274.

low because Muslims tend to be concentrated in a few areas and because people would not necessarily admit their new faith. However, we can be certain that Muslims make up far less than 1% of the population of México, and converts even less than that.²⁵

There are three main centers of conversion around which I will center my paper: around *la frontera* with the United States, in the southern state of Chiapas, and in México City. There are certainly *da'wa* efforts elsewhere in the country (evidenced by Facebook videos of new converts taking the *shahadah*) but at a lower concentration compared to the locations I identified above. On the borderlands, conversion has stemmed primarily from the efforts of people who were converted in the United States and were deported or joined family who were deported joining with Muslim immigrants to convert other residents of the Northern México. In Chiapas, conversion has stemmed from the outreach efforts of a Sufi lineage that went in an attempt to affiliate the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation or EZLN) with Islam, and an offshoot of this group. In México City, there are several distinct groups that are sometimes antagonistic and sometimes cooperate in their efforts to spread the messages of God.

Each of these conversion communities faces a number of different and sometimes overlapping relationships with coloniality. We can see some of the effects of capitalism in the poverty of the laborers in Chiapas. We can see political disenfranchisement in the *barrios* in the United States where undocumented immigrants are converted alongside their black neighbors. We can see gender oppression in the disparagement of the female-led Sufi *tariqa* in México City. These are all connected to different forms of oppression

²⁵ Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, "Islam in Mexico and Central America," in *The Routledge Handbook to Islam in the West*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (New York: Routledge, 2015), 154–69.

that México faces at the hands of the United States, an institutionalized hatred that has endured with a particular vengeance.²⁶

Mignolo explains “that the very concept of coloniality of power is already a decolonial move that, subsequently opens up the gates for imagining possible futures rather than just resting on the celebratory moment of critical explanation of what the social world is really like.”²⁷ This particular project does not seek to “give them a voice” or to give the converts exposure in academia. Rather, I will seek to “[open] up the gates for imagining possible future” in which the ways we talk about the subalternized fundamentally shifts.

²⁶ That is not to say that the United States is the singular cause of all of México’s problems. However, none of these problems can be completely isolated from interventions and discourses that stem from the US.

²⁷ Mignolo, preamble to *Latin American Literature and Culture*, 22.

Authenticity

Colonialism took away the right for communities to define themselves, as Quijano discusses in relation to indigenous and black identities. In this chapter, I will seek to demonstrate the need for frameworks that assume agency by focusing on Sufi converts to Islam in México. Debate over whether Sufis were properly Muslim has raged since the genes of Islamic mysticism, and certainly isn't a new phenomenon nor exclusive to México. A number of prominent Sufis have in some way come in conflict with authority, or with non-Sufi Muslims, over different practices or beliefs. These points of contention have been exacerbated by perceptions of antinomian Sufis, that Sufism is about finding God through hallucinogenic mushrooms or alcohol, or about Westerners finding themselves through a sanitized version of Rumi. This perception endures despite a significant number of nomian Sufis who contributed and continue to contribute to Islamic philosophy and other scholarship.

Some Sufis have run amok with law or authority because of their popularity and the threat that posed to power. Hallaj, for example, ended up on the wrong side of political intrigue when he was ultimately condemned to death by the Abbasid court. Recently, the rise of Wahhabism and Salafism has put Sufis under fire for practicing “innovations” to what they consider the faith as practiced by Muhammad. What does this mean for the definition of a community? On one hand, Sufis claim to be Muslims; on the other hand, Wahhabists do not include Sufis within the community of Muslims. With whom does the authority lie to make such decisions?

Part of this is solved by using plural terminology when referring to larger communities. Here we have *Islams*, a way to represent that while all communities assent

to being Muslim, their practices and beliefs can vary widely, to the exclusion of others. While this certainly helps, we shouldn't pretend that adding the letter "s" somehow solves the issue of bias in community self-definition. The exclusion and inclusion of certain communities in a definition is not a value neutral definition. In some way, we must judge the authenticity of the claims that are made, and evaluate whether they are true. In the following chapter, I will argue that the ultimate mark of authenticity is the subjects' own words and actions. The subaltern should not be forced to prove that its own cosmovision is authentic. To prove this point, I will discuss two groups of Sufi converts, one in Chiapas and one in México City This is partially done because Sufism has always had a troubling relationship with judgements of authenticity. Even amongst Sufis themselves, whether someone was at a high enough station to make certain proclamations has depended on judgements of whether they were authentically at the station at which they claimed to be.

Sufis of Chiapas

Born into a well-off family in Scotland in 1930 as Ian Dallas, Abdalqadir as-Sufi emerged on the scene of London popular culture as a screenwriter--especially for his adaptations of classic works of literature, like *Jane Eyre* and *The Secret Agent*.²⁸ Increasingly disillusioned with the culture of London in the 1960s, as-Sufi traveled to Morocco to further engage with Islam.²⁹ His "reversion" to Islam was overseen by

²⁸ Barney Henderson, "Radical Muslim leader has past in swinging London," *The Telegraph*, Feb. 20, 2010.

²⁹ Rumor has it that as-Sufi introduced the story of Layla and Majnun to Eric Clapton, which inspired Clapton's hit song "Layla."

Shaykh Abdalkarim Daudi, the Imam of the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fes.³⁰ As-Sufi changed his name to Abdalqadir, or “servant of the capable one.” To continue his education, as-Sufi studied under Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib, a Sufi of the Darqawi-Shadhili-Qadiri tariqa--a lineage entwined deeply with both Morocco and the Maliki *fiqh*.³¹ This *tariqa* has a long history of political activism in Morocco. In the face of first anti-Ottoman Wahabi-leaning rulers and then the French, the *tariqa* fought against power to ensure the continued survival of their worldview as the “incarne parfaitment le bicéphalisme politico-spirituel.”³²

During his years in Morocco studying with al-Habib, as-Sufi continued to work in the film industry--a connection that led him to convert others. One day in Tangiers, he met an artist from Berkeley who told as-Sufi that he had many friends that were interested in mystical themes (although they tended to focus on Buddhism); when as-Sufi was in Los Angeles for his next project, he contacted some of the artist’s friends.³³ Notably among them was Daniel Moore, a poet who compared listening to as-Sufi describing Muslim history as beyond psychedelic experiences. At the end of three days, Moore reports that as-Sufi asked him if he wanted to accept Islam; at Moore’s hesitation, as-Sufi responded, “That’s not good enough. You have to decide now, yes or no. If it’s a yes, then we start on a great adventure. If it’s no, then blame no one, I’ve done my duty, I’ll just say goodbye and go on my way. But you have to decide now. I’ll go downstairs

³⁰ I could not find many references to Shaykh Abdalkarim Daudi outside of his role in as-Sufi’s reversion. There is a forum post that appears to contain information about his life besides his encounter with as-Sufi (while also confirming that they encounter did occur). However, since it is a forum and much of the information cannot be found in reputable sources at this time, I will concentrate as-Sufi’s learnings from his teacher al-Habib. The forum can be found at <http://www.ahlalheeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=258963>.

³¹ Patrick Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States* Vol. 1, Leiden: Brill, 2015.

³² M. Peyron, “Derkaoua, Derqaoua, Darwawa,” *Encyclopédie berbère*, Vol. 15, Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1995: pg. 2279-2283.

³³ Bowen, 357.

and read a magazine and wait. Take your time.”³⁴ Moore ended up choosing Islam, a legacy of one of as-Sufi’s early conversions. This emphasis on *da’wa* has endured in as-Sufi’s methods and teachings. He incorporated these views and created the Murabitun World Movement, which through *da’wa*, has become a global organization.

In his discourses, he tells his followers to proselytize certain groups--Shi’a (whom he does not consider true Muslims), ethnic and racial minorities, secular humanists/atheists in primarily Muslim countries like Turkey, and people of any religion who are disenfranchised by the global capitalist system.³⁵ The Murabituns choose specifically to try to convert peoples who are negatively affected by globalization to offer an alternative system of economic governance that rejects usury, the underpinnings of the modern financial system. This is how the Murabituns ended up in Chiapas in the mid-1990s, hoping to convert the Zapatistas; but it is also how the Murabituns ended up with adherents in the UK, the US, Spain, Mexico, and South Africa, Thailand, Morocco, Germany and Malaysia.³⁶

Many prominent Muslims scholars today are or were affiliated to as-Sufi, like Hazma Yusuf and Aisha Bewley. However, his reach goes beyond that of close students because of the importance of *da’wa* to the Murabituns--as-Sufi claims that he has led the most successful *da’wa* of the 20th century.³⁷ As stated before, as-Sufi has adherents around the world. As-Sufi believes that knowledge is the only difference between a true

³⁴ Abd al-Hayy Moore, “Why I Embraced Islam?” *The Islamic Bulletin*, Issue 8, June/July 1992.

³⁵ Abdalqadir as-Sufi, “Address to Dallas College Students,” (speech, Capetown, Feb. 27, 2016). Other discourses describe these groups more specifically.

³⁶ As-Sufi is now based out of the Juma Mosque in South Africa. He has never been to the mosque in Mexico, as it was opened by two missionaries from the Murabitun World Movement in Spain. Their *da’wa* was incredibly successful in converting indigenous people in the state of Chiapas. See Marcia Hermansen “Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements.”

³⁷ “Biografia,” *Shaij Abdalqadir as-Sufi*, 2016.

Muslim and a *kuffar*; thus, all people must be extended this knowledge.³⁸ He cites how the “anti-dawa” of the media in the wake of 9/11 has actually led to an uptick in conversion in the US, especially among groups that are in particularly oppressed and in particularly unaware of Islam before the “anti-dawa.”³⁹ Not only does he see God’s will in the “anti-dawa,” but evidence of the need for teaching in all corners of the world.⁴⁰ In this way, as-Sufi has not just brought Muslims into Sufism, but brought new converts into the folds of Islam. His commentaries on political events help serve to universalize Sufi praxis without under-emphasizing more traditional Islam, as has happened in other mystical movements. If God can be in the fight of the Zapatistas, he can also be in the hearts of the *campesinos Chiapanecos*; if the British Parliament can serve the will of God, so can an artist in Chelsea; if God challenges inequality, then the oppressed have no room to deny Him.

While as-Sufi’s discourses preach a universal God, he nonetheless promotes culturally sensitive *da’wa*. One of the most evident examples of this is his view of the veil. As-Sufi believes that the only men who police women’s dress are men who are not fulfilling their own spiritual obligations, usually in the form of financial sins like committing *riba* or failing to properly pay the *zakat*, instructing people to judge modesty based on the standard of “what is normally covered” --a standard they may differ (and may require the men to cover and not the women).⁴¹

As-Sufi’s writings appear to be fairly sober; in most cases, he focuses on a specific political event. Sometimes these analyses do not include any reference to

³⁸ Abdalqadir al-Murabit, *Root Islamic Education*, Madinah, 1993: pg. 4.

³⁹ Abdalqadir as-Sufi, “The Ummah and America,” July 3, 2004.

⁴⁰ Abdalqadir as-Sufi, “Dhalika -that is it!” Dec. 26, 2012.

⁴¹ Abdalqadir as-Sufi, “Fatwa on Women’s Head Scarves,” March 12, 2005.

anything related to God. Take for instance, the recent vote on independence in Scotland, in which the only reference he makes to religion is “All Scottish Muslims in reason must vote YES to be free of English rule” --with no reference to why Muslims (and not just Scots broadly) should do so.⁴² He often depends on Western scholars to argue his points, mapping out logically his views; his discourses do not read as particularly Sufi or mystical. For this reason, a comparison to Muhasibi is especially apt. Michael Sells in his work on classical Sufis, “the rigorous self-examination exemplified in Muhasibi’s psychology” did not create a “particularly Sufi world.”⁴³ However, as-Sufi contradicts this claim about Muhasibi. When writing on Muhasibi, as-Sufi comments, “Harith al-Muhasibi was almost like a policeman on himself, and is perfectly named al-Muhasibi because what he did was took account, on the beginning of the path, at the end of every day...Then he made it by the minute, and then at a certain point he said, ‘I cannot do it. I have got to account for every breath.’ So then he was watching every breath in remembrance of Allah, subhanahu wa ta’ala.”⁴⁴ In this way, as-Sufi demonstrates how Muhasibi’s constant ruminations on his own ego is a “continual calling-into-account” that serves as a form of *dhikr* that is indeed spiritual.⁴⁵ As-Sufi innovates this idea by applying it to a global scale. Instead of examining each of his own breaths, as Muhasibi did, as-Sufi examines world political circumstances. In every instance, he finds some imperative of God--whether it be a tsunami punishing perversions of Islam, *kuffar* media attempting an anti-*da’wa* that only leads people to accept Islam, or a Scottish election that could

⁴² Abdalqadir as-Sufi, “Scotland’s Independence,” Sept. 14, 2014.

⁴³ Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1995: pg. 167.

⁴⁴ Abdalqadir as-Sufi, “A Commentary on Surat Al- Waqia,” May 3, 2006.

⁴⁵ Sells, 143.

liberate them from what as-Sufi considers a failed British state.⁴⁶ Some of these examinations culminate in as-Sufi making statements that are incredibly controversial. He is unabashed about his conspiratorial views on 9/11, assigns all negative aspects of the modern financial system to Judaism (to the point of anti-Semitism), and polices who is truly “Muslim” to the exclusion of millions who would consider themselves to be so.⁴⁷

Some of the problems with the Murabitun Movement and as-Sufi are pointed out by Tomás Navarro, a reporter who wrote a book seeking to expose the movement called *La Mezquita de Babel: El nazismo sufita desde el Reino Unido la Comunidad Autónoma de Andalucía*. Navarro was interviewed about the movement:

Granada reporter and former Murabitun Tomás Navarro finds it a bit too eclectic, disparaging the movement as a “sect.” If they were Christian, he said, they would be comparable to the Branch Davidians of Waco. “The real Muslims, native Muslims or the Arabs of Andalusia, are not buying it; that’s why the Murabitun only capture converts, preying on weak people and going to places like Chiapas to confound simple-minded peasants.” As-Sufi, he said, “is a child of the Seventies: He went to India with the Beatles and to Morocco, had psychedelic drugs and saw Allah, or what he thinks is Allah, and has been peddling his vivid imagination to feeble people ever since.” Navarro no longer belongs to any religion. “I’m a 27th-generation Ladino, and absolutely secular.”⁴⁸

What Navarro is doing is questioning the authenticity of the faith of the Murabituns. He claims that there is a difference between “real Muslims” and the Murabituns. Part of that is based on as-Sufi as a problematic leader. Navarro’s book clearly does not shy away from linking as-Sufi’s anti-semitism to Nazism. He also questions as-Sufi’s motives as a Western convert to Islam, asserting that as-Sufi’s vision of Allah was only drugs. There

⁴⁶ Abdalqadir as-Sufi, “The Failure of Democracy,” March 18, 2009.

⁴⁷ John Rosenthal, “German Public Broadcasters Promote Newspaper of Controversial Muslim Publisher,” *The Weekly Standard*, Nov. 4, 2010.

⁴⁸ Avedis Hadjian, “The Gods of Chiapas: Mexican Muslims In the Shadows of the Zapatistas,” *International Business Times*, Sept. 20, 2013.

It must be noted that Navarro is Spanish, and his usage of the term *Ladino* is not connected to the racial caste system that arose in Latin America.

are plenty of religious traditions in which drug use is part of the rituals, but to Navarro, as-Sufi's drug usage negates his religious ardor.⁴⁹

I have no desire to defend as-Sufi against Navarro's claims. He must live with the consequences of his anti-Semitism, and should be free to practice his brand of Islam as he sees fit. My concern with Navarro's comments comes from his treatment of the Chiapanecos. He calls them "simple minded peasants" and implies that they are "feeble." *Perhaps* he means that prior to conversion, the indigenous Mayans are not very knowledgeable about Islam. One of the converts himself says that "El mexicano tiene dos particularidades: está poco informado [se refiere a la mala imagen del islam en los medios de comunicación] y es de naturaleza creyente y tiene buen corazón."⁵⁰ [The Mexican has two particularities: he is not informed (of the bad image of Islam in the media) and is naturally a believer and has a good heart.] México has not been involved in any of the many conflicts that have taken place in Muslim-majority countries, even refusing to send troops on UN peacekeeping missions until recently. México is not a part of NATO, and had no part of either of the Gulf Wars or War in Afghanistan. Thus, there is less inducement for the media or the government to push Islamophobia as a national policy. Muslims are not the enemy that is killing them. Rather, a number of controversies with Mexican-born soldiers who enlisted in the US armed forces revealed that it was the US that was seen as the enemy.⁵¹

⁴⁹ There is also no mention of drugs in any of as-Sufi's writings. That is not to say that as-Sufi never used drugs in either a religious or non-religious context, but I cannot independently confirm that Navarro's assertion that as-Sufi's visions of God are in anyway related to drugs at all.

⁵⁰ Jacobo G. García, "Alá en los montes de Chiapas," *El Mundo*, Jan. 31, 2014.

⁵¹ The funeral for Juan Lopez Rangel, who was killed in Iraq led to a standoff between the (armed) US Marines in México for his military funeral and Mexican soldiers. His wife was an undocumented immigrant. His complicated death shows some of the fault lines between the two countries. Alfredo Corchado, "Mexican-born soldiers take different paths home," *The Dallas Morning News*, July 4, 2004.

However, if he meant that the converts were not very knowledgeable about Islam, then Navarro would have no need to call them “prey.”⁵² Rather, he is using their conversion as a point against the Murabituns. The Chiapanecos were taken advantage of by the Murabituns; Navarro is calling them gullible. While ultimately laying the culpability for such trickery at the feet of as-Sufi and his “cult,” Navarro still treats the converts poorly. He treats them as almost animalistic, as “weak people” who do not have the intelligence to tell the difference between a scam and reality. Since Navarro thinks that as-Sufi’s beliefs are suspect, the beliefs of the converts are also suspect. Here we get to a problem of the authentic. If the beliefs of the leader are inauthentic, are the views of the followers also inauthentic? I will argue here for both authenticity and agency for the converts.

Perhaps the strongest argument for the awareness that the converts have for their situation is the fact that a number of converts rejected the community they were in. In 1999, about 40 families broke away from the Murabitun movement, citing some of the teachings and urgings of Emir Nafia as the reason for the split. According to one of the men who left, Abdul-Haq, Emir Nafia told the group “que ellos no tenían derecho a leer el Corán; que los enfermos no se merecían el Islam ni los que lo aprendían lentamente. Les dijo que no mandaran a sus hijos a la escuela, que dejaran de comer tortillas ¡y que no trabajaran en el mercado!”⁵³ [that they didn’t have the right to read the Quran; that the

⁵² This relates to the trope of the questioning the veracity of conversion. In India converts are called “rice-Christians” to emphasize the material over the spiritual gains.

⁵³ Marco Lara Klahr, “¿El Islam en Chiapas?: El EZLN Y El Movimiento Mundial Murabitun,” *Revista Académica Para El Estudio de Las Religiones* 4 (2002): 79–91.

It is unclear why they were not allowed to eat tortillas, although possibly because many flour tortillas are made with pork lard. However, it is uncertain whether the tortillas made without the pork lard were still forbidden, or if the breakaway group make an exception to the ban on pork products specifically for tortillas.

sick were not deserving of Islam, nor those who were learning slowly. He told them not to send their children to school, to stop eating tortillas and to not work at the market!] They happened to meet a builder who was a member of the Centro Cultural Islámico de México (CCIM) in México City, who connected the break-off community with resources and guidance. If they have questions about Islam, they call or check the CCIM website.⁵⁴

Here, we see complete awareness of the situation of the converts. They were displeased with the doctrine of the Murabituns and have thus started their own community which is not only unaffiliated with the Murabituns, but is unaffiliated with Sufism. While they certainly have had help from the CCIM, they are directed by their own leaders, men and women from amongst their own ranks. These families have clearly expressed agency by challenging power and forming their own community. But where does that leave the converts who remained with Emir Nafia? For those that were old enough or a part of the community in 1999, they too made a choice, as did the converts who left. Their choice was to stay. Yet this still excludes younger and newer converts. Were they duped, powerless in the face of the Spanish Muslims?

I have elucidated at quite a length on as-Sufi and his thoughts. I did so in order to demonstrate some of the controversy surrounding him, but also to point out that it is impossible to judge authenticity in a purely academic sense. There are certainly ways that we could classify as-Sufi that make him fall either within or outside what we consider to be Muslim. However, that classification does not change anything about the way he will practice or whether or not he truly believes he is a Muslim. As-Sufi's classification is also irrelevant to the question of the authenticity of the Muslimness of the converts. Their

⁵⁴ Ibid.

participation in Muslim thought and ritual is not predicated on his adherence to thought or ritual. They can be pious Muslims without him being a pious Muslim and are living authentic Muslim lives.

To judge the converts as authentic or unauthentic places the converts in a space where they must defend their actions solely for our benefit as academics. Part of what we are to do is to sort and to categorize in order to make sense of the world and the people in it. However, judgments of authenticity--even if they are simply implied, like not deeming a community “Muslim enough” to mention--strip the agency of the out of the hands of subjects who may not have the power to access academia and thus the definition of truth. Our judgments never exist simply for the sake of judgement: what we write intrinsically contributes to the ways in which people are viewed and treated. We are in a position of power when we write about and define subaltern subjects. Assuming that communities are living authentically, that they are not being duped, keeps us from writing and teaching about communities as if they are somehow lesser than us for not seeing the dupe.

This of course is complicated by power, and there certainly are moments and communities where people are taken over and exploited by charismatic leaders. But many discourses doubt the authenticity of beliefs even without a discussion of the influence of power. The International Business Times reported:

Despite the Islamic inroads in Chiapas, Carolina Rivera Farfán, an anthropologist at the CIESAS Anthropology Research Center in San Cristóbal, is not convinced there has been real conversion of core beliefs. “I don’t know if they are converting or simply switching their religious [affiliation],” she said in an interview.⁵⁵

This expresses a disbelief in the converts own words and affiliations, and also ignores changed behaviors. The converts cannot win: their actions cannot prove that they are

⁵⁵ Hadjian, “The Gods of Chiapas”

truly Muslim, nor can their statements about their own faith be trusted. We as academics should be critical of what people tell us about themselves and their own communities, and should seek to understand biases. However, the burden of proving that what a subaltern subject says about themselves or their community should fall on us. Making them prove to us their sincerity and authenticity only leads to contradictions like that of the *Chiapanecos*, who cannot do anything to prove their beliefs.

Sufis in México City

In the 1400s, an Azerbaijani *pir* named Yahya Shirvani spread the “Khalwati way,” which learned from his teacher. Shirvani popularized the movement, spreading it to tens of thousands of followers. Further popularized by the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II who joined the order, one branch developed into the Halveti-Jerrahi *tariqa*, which was based in Istanbul.⁵⁶ In 1980, the leader of the order, Muzaffer Ozak al-Jerrahi traveled to New York City from Istanbul to authorize two of his followers to teach in the new world. The first was Nur al-Anwar al-Jerrahi (previously known as Lex Hixon), and the other was Fariha al-Jerrahi (previously known as Philippa de Menil). Shaykha Fariha currently leads the Nur Ashki Jerrahi order, the Western hemisphere offshoot of the Halveti-Jerrahi.

Philippa de Menil/Fariha al-Jerrahi is an oil heiress whose French parents immigrated to Houston where she was born. Her parents began privately collecting art in Houston, before starting to fund public art. Philippa invested millions of dollars in the Dia Art Foundation/Dia Center for the Arts, which she founded with her husband Heiner

⁵⁶ Helveti is the Turkish version of Khalwati.

Friedrich (now known as Haydar). Dia has sponsored numerous artists, from Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Walter de Maria, and Donald Judd, and whose board included Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer.⁵⁷

Fariha met Muzaffar al-Jerrahi when her mother sponsored a tour of dervishes around the US. Already interested and studying forms of Buddhist spirituality, Fariha stayed in touch with the shaykh. In 1979, she and Haydar joined the order and were wed by Shaykh Muzaffar. While he was in New York, a woman of Puerto Rican descent named Edlín Ortiz Graham visited the mosque for the first time. She was 20 years old and working as a journalist at the time. When she said the *shahada*, she was renamed Amina Talisma.

Fariha, but especially Nur, had training in other mystical traditions. Farhia had been involved with mystical Buddhism. Nur had a doctorate in comparative religions from Columbia University. He at one point or another was initiated by Hindu swamis, Buddhist lamas, and Eastern Orthodox priests, as well as with the Muslim shaykhs. He called these traditions “parallel sacred worlds.”

In 1987, Nur traveled to México City to speak about spiritual dancing. One of the converts, renamed Sharifa said:

La segunda vez que vino Nur me preguntó si tenía algún conflicto en haber hecho la iniciación con él y haber conocido el Islam, y no, al contrario. La tradición conchera tiene códigos, disciplina, reglas y es muy rica... La llegada del sheij fue muy enriquecedora, supe que estaba en el lugar correcto porque era lo que Dios había destinado para mi alma... Pertener a esta Orden y ser danzante es un compromiso muy grande... para mí, no hay impedimento ni disconformidad porque siempre tuve claro que... no voy a danzarle al Papa o a los sacerdotes, yo voy a danzarle a Dios.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Bob Colacello, “Remains of the Dia,” *Vanity Fair*, Sept. 1996.

⁵⁸ Cynthia Hernández González, “El islam en la Ciudad de México: La orden Halveti Yerrahi y su ritual de iniciación a partir de los años 80 del siglo XX,” (México, D.F., 2009): 51.

[The second time that Nur came he asked me if I was conflicted about becoming initiated with him and about having come to know Islam, and no, on the contrary. The Conchera tradition has codes, discipline, rules and is very rich. The arrival of the shaykh was very enriching, I knew that I was in the right place because it was what God had destined for my soul...Belonging to the order and being a dancer is a huge commitment...for me, there is no impediment or discomfort because I have been clear that I'm not going to dance for the Pope or for priests, I am going to dance for God.]

Sharifa is referring to Concheros dance, a form of dancing that emerged in México as a fusion between Aztec and other Central American traditions and Catholic rites. Nur met with concheros to discuss similarities between this tradition and Sufi dancing. Omar, a dancer who converted said that “La devoción hacia un Dios verdadero, a un solo Dios verdadero es la coincidencia fundamental. Nuestro lema en la danza es unión, armonía y perseverancia, esa es una coincidencia también con la tradición sufi.”⁵⁹ [Devotion towards a true God, to only one true God is a fundamental concurrence. Our motto in dancing is union, harmony and perseverance, which is also a concurrence with Sufi tradition.] Amina clarifies, “El sincretismo no tiene que ver con lo que pasó no buscó una fusión entre el sufismo y la tradición conchera él entiendo que podía enriquecer su visión con la tradición que encontró en sus *derviches* y en Mexico y viceversa.”⁶⁰ [Syncretism has nothing to do with what happened, he wasn't looking for a fusion between Sufism and Conchera tradition, he understood that he could enrich his vision with the tradition that he encountered, between his dervishes and in Mexico and vice versa.] Some of the concheros converted, and started a community in México City of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 49-50.

Eventually Amina, who was living in México as a correspondent for Univision, took over the responsibilities of running the order. She has started a number of interfaith initiatives in México, and has also studied other forms of mysticism, like her teachers.

What is to be made of such a group? They are certainly not the only group of Muslims, or even Sufis in México City. There are a number of groups, some established by Muslim immigrants, some connected to embassies, some founded by Mexican converts. There are other Sufi options as well, like the Murabitun (whom I'll discuss at greater length in the following section). The Murabitun are more traditional than the spiritually-diverse Nur Ashki Jerrahi. It is especially interesting considering Shaykha Amina's insistence that the *tariqa* is not interested in hybridity. Often the Nur Ashki al-Yerráhi (the name of the *tariqa* in México) are excluded from academic sources about Islam in México, or brushed aside as more "mystical" than Islamic.

Shaykha Amina uses the specific term "syncretism." Syncretism has a unique place in the history and study of religions. The phrase syncretism was applied to churches that were established in Africa but were led by African leaders, independent of the European Christian missionaries in order to degrade and accuse the practitioners of "illicit mixture."⁶¹ The word was used in a way as to devalue Christian practices that were not subject to control by the colonizers, to insist that their Christian practices were mixed with African forms of religion, and thus not "pure" Christianity. The term is not neutral, and in some ways, mirrors the word "multiculturalism" in secular society. Like multiculturalism, syncretism is valued for its blending, and is often lauded as better than homogeneity, whether that be ethnic or religious.

⁶¹ David Chidester, *Savage Systems*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996): 224.

A return to a discussion of the Concheros dancing will help clarify the problem of syncretism. Many early Spanish priests were highly suspect of the conversion of the indigenous people of México to Christianity. Trained in the era of the *Reconquista* and the Inquisition, Catholic priests held onto doubts about the veracity of the faith of the *conversos* and *Moriscos* that translated to doubts about the beliefs of the indigenous Mexicans they converted. Many practices that the indigenous people embraced about Christianity seemed based in pre-contact traditions: elaborate plays with costumes, images of saints/*ixiptlas*, alters, and of course dances like the Concheros.⁶² To the Spanish, it appeared that the indigenous Mexicans were still adhering to their old religion under the guise of Christianity. Different records iterate different motives to the converts--perhaps newness of faith, perhaps fear of the Spanish, perhaps purposeful deception--but nonetheless, to varying degrees, found something not completely right about their Catholic practices.⁶³ The Spanish believed that the indigenous Mexicans could only be one, either Catholic or pre-contact religion. Yet this view of how religion operates with a society or culture is a very Eurocentric one.⁶⁴ The Aztecs didn't have the same conceptions of religion as their European counterparts. The practices that the Spanish would label religion were merely life, and could not be separated from other aspects of living. Their political system, their agricultural system, their time keeping system, their military system, and even the way they designed Tenochtitlán was intricately linked to

⁶² Inga Clendinnen, "Ways to the Sacred: Reconstructing "Religion" in Sixteenth Century Mexico," *History and Anthropology* vol. 5 (1990):105-141.

⁶³ Clendinnen articulates the views of Franciscans Toribio de Motolinía and Bernardino Sahagún and Dominican Diego Durán. The first thought that it was silly for the Inquisition to try to look for idolatrous behaviors considering the patience that his converts had for Spanish oppression. The latter two were less enthusiastic about progress. (see pgs. 107-8)

⁶⁴ Of course the great irony of this is that European Christian practices contain a number of a pre-Christian pagan elements that were not judged as tainting their practice.

their gods and rituals that would be labeled as religious. Their pantheon was also a mixture of shared and more community-specific gods. For the Aztecs, Quetzalcoatl was borrowed from the Tollan, and Huitzilopochtli led them to the land they were gifted. Thus, the very idea that worshipping Huitzilopochtli and the Christian God is an import. The enthusiasm for Christianity was not necessarily faked; indigenous converts probably truly believed in many of the tenets of Christianity.

Indigenous practice should not be labeled syncretism because they were not fusing two distinct entities to create a new form that resembled both but was neither. Because they did not view religions in the same way as the Spanish did, the classifications that the Spanish brought with them did not fit neatly on the heterogeneous practices of the conquered people. The converts who were Christian were Christian. They accessed Christianity through familiar routes, and practiced rituals that the Spanish viewed as un-Christian. That is not to say that there was not mixture of traditions, as there certainly was mixture. However, to look upon the practices as the Spanish did, as a bastard child that was neither an indigenous religion nor Christian, is an error. Firstly, any religion is a mixture, and mixture with indigeneity is not somehow radically different than the fusions that took place over centuries of praxis. Secondly, this assumes that the indigenous religions and Christianity occupy the same spaces in people's lives and behaviors so that the resulting system also occupies the same space.

We can see some of the issues of those who believe in universal religion. It is hard and potentially impossible to regulate a religion of any scale to the point that belief and practice are identical across adherents. This means that there are going to be people who claim to be a religion but fall outside of the lines that others draw (like Wahhabist

judgement of Sufis). But we can also see how those who praise and rely on syncretism as a model make false equivalences in order to show the beauty of mixture. As an author of a recent discussion on the fetishization of mixed race people so aptly put it, “If we could fuck away white supremacy, wouldn’t it be gone by now?”⁶⁵ Likewise, the mixing of religious traditions or cultures does not confront problematic systems of power and agency in the colonial process. Syncretism as a model further enforces the narrative that the colonized are simply reactors, as the mixtures happen without their input. On assuming the agency of the colonized, however, we can see how the indigenous people were actors that chose to embrace beliefs (that sometime originated outside of their own ethnic group), and certainly didn’t need to compromise between two distinct positions. The case of indigenous Mexicans is more complicated than Sufi converts because of the amount of coercion involved in their conversion. However, I stand behind the assumption of agency. Converts could express agency by retaining and practicing contrary to Spanish desires, by embracing aspects of religion they had not before, or by picking the parts that fit with their cosmovision.

Taking the same lens towards the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufis, one can see how their conversions are constructed as passive by positing that they are simply mystics. They have no agency in specifically choosing *Islamic* mysticism, or deciding in what form their practice will take because of the leader’s connections with other mystical practices and looser forms of interpretations than in other Islamic practices.⁶⁶ Labeling this practice as syncretic goes directly against what the leaders of the movement said about the

⁶⁵ Lauren Michele Jackson, “Why A New Mixed Race Generation Will Not Solve Racism,” *Buzzfeed*, Feb. 10, 2017.

⁶⁶ The sect of course is led by women, and women are often the prayer leaders. There is no separation of genders during prayers, nor is there a dress code.

movement itself. Rather than thinking as if they are confused or uncommitted, we should assume that they are aware of exactly what they believe and why, and that they actively want to believe those things.

Creation

Colonial Knowledges

In “America and the Colonizer Question,” Gordon Brotherston discusses about the scientific inadequacy of European conquistadors compared to the Aztec Empire. He discusses at length Aztec knowledge of astrology and their advanced calendrical system, both of which posed a threat to European ideas of superiority.⁶⁷ The Aztecs too had a codified governance and justice system, complex cosmologies, and both philosophical and scientific advancement, and yet these systems were coded as lesser by the Europeans who would take power. However, these knowledges created a great deal of anxiety within the colonizers. Worried about new cultural, economic, and technological spaces, the Spanish conquerors assuaged their fears through conversion.

Peter Hulme addresses this anxiety in his discussions of the myths of romance surrounding English settlements and colonies, especially the drama between John Smith and Pocohontas that has become so ingrained in the national imaginary. He states:

The colonial self-image was one of cultural and technological superiority, but not only did European culture *not* attract converts and European technology *not* produce food, but the English lower classes deserted in large numbers to the Indians... In such circumstances, the establishment of a colonial presence could only find the necessary support through massive efforts of discursive projection and psychotic disavowal.⁶⁸

The situation in México differed from that of the Jamestown because survival was not as perilous. There were not widespread desertions to the Aztecs, nor as much pressure on agricultural knowledge systems. However, this points to the ways in which anxiety leads

⁶⁷ Gordon Brotherston, “America and the Colonizer Question: Two Formative Statements from Early Mexico,” in *Coloniality at Large* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁶⁸ Peter Hulme, “Polytropic Man: Tropes of Sexuality in Early Modern Discourse,” *Europe and its Others* proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature (1985): 26.

European colonizers to define the colonized as without civilization--thus denying the merit and weight of their knowledges.

Gaslighting is a term that is typically used to describe actions with an abusive relationship. The abuser will not only harm the abused physically or emotionally, but systematically manipulate the abused so that they are forced to question their own experiences and sanity. The play "Gas Light" and subsequent movies based on the play popularized the term. In the play, a husband convinces his wife that she is going insane by questioning her experiences--hearing footsteps in an empty apartment, convincing her that she is losing jewelry and other items, and ultimately, telling her that she's imagined the gaslights dimming in their house. He does this in order to control her. He had murdered a woman in search of her jewels, and it was his search to find them that caused her to hear footsteps in empty rooms, and his turning on the gaslights in the attic that dimmed the lights elsewhere in the house.

One of the systems of coloniality is what I will call "societal gaslighting." What I mean by "societal gaslighting" is the widescale denial of certain experiences, practices and actions in order to make subjects of the abused society question their own knowledges and the sanity of practice. Although unevenly enforced and experienced, colonialism/coloniality don't just work to shift identifications, but to shift them to identities that align with the colonizer's goals and worldviews. A colonizer desires for the colonized to see themselves as the colonizer sees them, adopting the identities that the colonizer assigns and making the colonized question that abuses that inevitably happen under systems of colonialism take place. The colonized are not only abused, but are in manifest ways told that what they are experiencing is not abuse, forcing them into

questioning their own realities and narratives. That is why systems of colonialism are often closely tied with conversion projects; conversion makes people question the very essence of the way they experience the world. While the modes, methods and scale of these attempts look very different, in each case of colonialism, the colonizer sought to change the very essence of how the colonized thought of themselves as individuals, as a community, and within the global network.

One of the most apparent ways this was completed through homogenizing racial projects. Quijano notes that colonialism sought to reduce disparate groups into a single racial identity. In México, after the disintegration of the Aztec Empire, indigenous peoples from a variety of different traditions and cultures were categorized into a single indigenous identity, despite the fact that prior to that time, imagined themselves as different and distinct communities, with different languages, different customs, and no sense of racial unity. The same sort of racial reductionism was also applied to African slaves, who came from communities around the African continent that were politically, socially, and culturally distinct, and yet were forced into a singular black community. While this was certainly true in the Americas, it also applies to later colonialism on the African continent, where disparate groups were forced together for the benefit of the colonizers. Today, people identify themselves as part of racial groups that were devised from specific colonial encounters.

While there are limitations to the idea of “societal gaslighting,” the framework helps show how colonialism/coloniality changes the subjectivities of colonized people. The goal of systems of coloniality is not necessarily to shift subjectivities or to gaslight other societies. In the colonization projects of the Spanish in México, religious conversion

was at the heart of making the indigenous people colonial subjects. Societal gaslighting in this way was overt and part of governance. After gaining independence from Spain, where the Latin American nation-states supposedly have sovereignty over their own affairs, the gaslighting may appear more subtle, or at least not overtly within plans to exert power. And yet, the questioning of experiences and the denial of the cultural rights and legitimacies that stem from systems of knowledge-production other than a Western one is a harsh reality to this day.

In this section, I will argue that the revival, construction, and creation of alternative forms of knowledge-production demonstrate an inherent agency in those who produce them. I will speak to the way that converts along the border have created forms of existence and knowledge that challenge the U.S. hegemony, especially concerning the economic implications of their conversion and activism. I will touch upon the history of Catholic Liberation theology in Latin America and the way that converts create knowledge without this framework. Lastly, I will discuss the Murabitun movement in Chiapas, where the creation of new forms of community should be considered agential.

Border Challenges

Walter D. Mignolo calls upon the idea of border thinking to describe how the colonality of power rules over the subject. The border technically occupies a space of in-betweenness that stretches from the Gulf of México to the Pacific Ocean. However, the economic power that the US has over México allows the US government to push the Mexican government into extending that border throughout the country. People from across México, the Caribbean, Central and South America use México as a conduit to

arrive at the US. The US pays and pressures México into strictly enforcing immigration imperatives so that these people (or at least fewer of them) never reach the border.

Immigration checkpoints have been set up around the country. A train that many migrants use to travel northward referred to as *la bestia*, has been targeted as a way to stop people from reaching the border. Although *la bestia* already had a reputation for extreme danger—quick motion and sharp turns has caused many people to lose limbs or their lives from falling onto the tracks. The US has paid for beams to be placed low across the tracks to knock people off the top of the train, and also for lasers to be installed that can be shot at people to induce them to falling. These assertions of US sovereignty mean that migrants are in the state of border inbetweenness that should only constitute the liminality at the border for thousands of miles. Migrants in this way are subject to the powers of both states, but their inbetweenness does not give them the rights or protections of either.

Thus, when I speak of the border, I do not speak only of the physical land that touches, nor simply strategies of policing of said stretch of land, but of the entirety of the effects that stem from the idea of borders on the bodies and subjectivities of the people who are in some stage of liminality. The phrase *fronteras*, aids in understanding how multiple different borders overlap, change, challenge, and reinforce each other.⁶⁹

US capitalist influence is extremely evident just south of the border, in cities filled with US corporations and workers whom the US deported. On a purely institutional level, it is clear how free trade and US corporations damage the Mexican economy. However, the fact that the corporations can cross the border but laborers cannot shows the disparities between the two countries. The border regime itself is a capitalist structure built for US

⁶⁹ *Fronteras*, besides being plural, has the benefit of having larger implications than the narrow geographic strip of water and land between the two nations.

economic benefit. After the Mexican-American War, the US has opened and closed the border according to their economic needs--in times of labor shortages (WWII, for instance), border regulations were loosened to encourage migration.⁷⁰ However, when the US labor market is less competitive, different strategies are used to prevent migration and to criminalize the migrants once they arrive. People who immigrate with the blessings of the US government must be paid a living wage and be cared for by social services that range from medical care to police response; people who cross the same border are criminalized simply for crossing a line in *el río* and thus are denied guarantees like minimum wage and police protection. Economically, this is extremely beneficial to the US. US companies have a source of inexpensive labor from undocumented immigrants who can't claim minimum wage.⁷¹ Undocumented immigrants also pay local and state sales and property tax, and in some cases, contribute income tax as well to the state or federal government. This creates revenue for the US that the government never has to invest in the care of these immigrants. Undocumented people won't claim social security, Medicare, and aren't eligible for the most basic human services, like SNAP benefits.⁷²

Furthermore, the border regime actively promotes racism by policing of bodies based solely on the color of their skin.⁷³ People are told to “go back to their own country,” ignoring that the US may very well be their own country and that even if the US is not their country of citizenship, economic neoliberalism perpetuated by the United States has

⁷⁰ Juan Gonzalez, “Free Trade: The Final Conquest of Latin America,” in *Harvest of Empire* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000).

⁷¹ Eden Torres, “Dangerous Proximities: Latinas/os and the Mechanisms of Racial Capitalism” (Macalester College, February 22, 2016).

⁷² “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Guidance on Non-Citizen Eligibility” (US Department of Agriculture, June 2011).

⁷³ See for example, Arizona SB 1070, that allows police officers to check immigration status for anyone stopped for any reason based on “reasonable suspicion” that the person is an undocumented immigrant. Experts say this requires racial profiling.

driven many people here to find opportunities and safety they are denied in their homelands because of exploitative capitalist globalization models. These racial tropes are built into the US vocabulary in terms that construct Mexicans as “lazy” or “takers” or “gang members” and blame Mexicans for their poverty, refusing to call into question why many Mexicans are criminalized, why they are unable to achieve mass economic mobility, or why people are willing to move in order to support themselves and their families. Just south of the border, people see the deportation regime of the United States and of the *maquiladoras* that benefit from their cheap labor.⁷⁴ Especially post-NAFTA, México and Mexican people are facing slow economic growth, “food poverty,” and development stunted by prohibitions on “protective tariffs, support for strategic sectors and financial controls.”⁷⁵ People in northern México are likely to face these structures of coloniality that manifest themselves in discriminatory ways.

Conversion efforts in Northern México have been spearheaded by people who were converted in the United States uniting with Muslim immigrants. Many are in México because either they or a close family member was deported.⁷⁶ In the US, news sources have noted how Latino conversion has been notable in prisons and inner-city neighborhoods, in tandem with black conversion.⁷⁷ These Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are excluded from the dominant economy and subject to racism stemming from that purposeful exclusion. This is a demonstration of the appeal of Islam to those that are economically excluded and victims of racism. Many women also cite the effects of the

⁷⁴ A *maquiladora* is a factory that can import raw materials and machinery and export finished products without paying tariffs. The word *maquila* comes from Arabic for a measured amount.

⁷⁵ Laura Carlsen, “What We’ve Learned From Nafta,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 2013.

⁷⁶ Brooke Binkowski, “Growing Population Of Muslims Calling Tijuana Home,” *Fronteras*, March 28, 2013.

⁷⁷ Daniel J. Wakin, “Ranks of Latinos Turning to Islam Are Increasing; Many in City Were Catholics Seeking Old Muslim Roots,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 2002, sec. N.Y. / Region.

US patriarchy. Wendy Diaz, a Latina woman who converted to Islam, says her experience after conversion led her to start dressing as she felt necessary to follow her faith: “I found myself to be getting more respect as a woman. I would be able to go to a job interview and get a job based on my intelligence, not on the way that I looked. And likewise, from the opposite sex I wouldn't get that negative attention that a lot of women get.”⁷⁸ The converts themselves recognize that US hegemony does not operate to serve them.⁷⁹ Conversion serves as an active protest against these structures because it is a rejection of the status-quo and the embrace of a theology that they can wield to fight against the oppressions they see and experience.

This protest is made evident in a number of ways. Amir Carr, a former resident of California who left when his wife was deported, said, “Many Muslims, whether or not they end up in Tijuana by choice, end up staying in México rather than trying to get back into the United States...it's much easier to be openly Muslim here.”⁸⁰ He goes on to talk about the prevalence of Islamophobia in the US and how people actively demonstrate against the building of mosques and hold prejudices about what it means to be Muslim. This is important because not wanting to go back into the US out of fear of Islamophobia constitutes a rejection of the ideology that coloniality wants people to accept. The US system of coloniality wants Mexicans in particular to cross the border they've increasingly criminalized so that countless industries can operate on the low-cost labor that undocumented immigrants provide.⁸¹ This is not a solitary means of rejection. The

⁷⁸ Rachel Martin, “Latinas Choosing Islam over Catholicism,” *Weekend Edition* (NPR, September 24, 2006).

⁷⁹ Lisa Viscidi, “Latino Muslims a Growing Presence in America,” *Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs*, June 2003, 56–58.

⁸⁰ Binkowski, “Growing Population of Muslims Calling Tijuana Home”

⁸¹ Adam Davidson, “Q&A: Illegal Immigrants and the U.S. Economy,” *NPR*, March 30, 2006,.

community itself participates in a number of different methods of subtly rejecting the systems of coloniality. One mosque in Tijuana, for instance, runs soup kitchens for the poor⁸², veiled women handing out food on the street both a subtle reminder that capitalism cannot provide a living for everyone within the system and a way to solve one of the ills that capitalism propagates for some people. A mosque in Monterrey combats racialized stereotypes, saying that not all Muslims are terrorists, nor are all Mexicans “narcos.”⁸³ A mosque in Guadalajara shared a Youtube video discussing environmental protections and how they relate to the Quran, a protest against capitalism that I have not previously discussed, but nonetheless counters the narrative of coloniality regarding the usage of environmental resources.⁸⁴ A mosque in Tamaulipas seemed to call for the most direct anti-coloniality actions, encouraging their community to stand in solidarity with Palestine (against the US-Israeli regime), for the acceptance of Syrian refugees, and for women’s equality.⁸⁵ This participation in a counter discourse gives converts a space to express and fight the systems of coloniality that conspire to oppress them. To fight both discursive and economic neoliberal pressures, converts in *la frontera* have embraced a language that gives them the power to contest the production of knowledge that allows them to be exploited.

Liberation Theology

⁸² *Masjid Al-Islam Tijuana Food Drop 1/2* (Tijuana, Mexico, 2012).

⁸³ “Los estereotipos y la ignorancia, enemigos grandes de nuestra humanidad,” Centro Islámico del Norte, November 25, 2015.

⁸⁴ *Eco islam, episodio 1* published by islamhouses, shared on Islam en Guadalajara, March 2, 2016.

⁸⁵ These are a few examples. However, the *Musulmanes en Tamaulipas* page has a number of highly political posts. “Cover Photo,” *Musulmanes en Tamaulipas*, July 16, 2015. Post from *El éxito está en seguir el noble Corán y la Sunnah* on July 19, 2014, shared on *Musulmanes en Tamaulipas*, July 19, 2014.

Liberation theology formally arose from the 1986 Medellín Conference where a group of Latin American bishops came together to discuss how and why the church was failing their parishioners. These ideas had been codified by a Peruvian priest named Gustavo Gutierrez (who had been thinking about such issues for many years) in a book called *Teología de la Liberación*.⁸⁶ Gutiérrez argued that orthopraxis was as important as orthodoxy, and thus, the Catholic church, especially in Latin America, should promote the liberation of the oppressed. Gutiérrez identifies economic oppression as the most pressing problem in Latin America, (calling for a preferential option for the poor) but he expands this argument by calling on to the church to fulfill “its prophetic function of denouncing every human injustice” to reach a state of true liberation.⁸⁷ Gutierrez claims, nothing has changed in Latin America since 1492 except “modifications to the systems of dependence” through which peoples are oppressed, a view that tightly mirrors Mendieta’s claim.

Although the abuse is committed against their own parishioners, the Catholic church has justified nonintervention by claiming the church ought to stay out of the realm of the political. To counter this, Gutiérrez cites a story from the the Biblical account of the Exodus as an example of God’s preference for liberation.⁸⁸ The Israelites were victims of enslavement, stringent birth control policies and ethnic discrimination under the rule of the Egyptian Pharaoh. According to the Bible, God freed the Israelites by sending a number of plagues that destroyed the Egyptian economic and social systems (by devastating crops, causing illness, turning water sources into blood, for instance) that

⁸⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸⁸ My description of this this text comes from a reading of Exodus 4-15, from the English Standard Version of the Bible. Gutiérrez hypothetically would have used a different version.

culminated in the violent drowning of the Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. These actions are inherently political; to pretend that God does not care about suffering and injustice because it is related to political systems would, to Gutiérrez, be a misreading of the Biblical texts.

Having the church on a certain side--of the powerful or the weak--grants that side with God's blessing and moral consent. For this reason, Gutiérrez says that "Not to exercise this influence in favor of the oppressed of Latin America is really to exercise it against them."⁸⁹ Because he identifies capitalism as the most severe form of oppression, he demonstrates why the church should be opposed to it. In order to criticize the capitalist systems, Gutiérrez draws on Biblical texts about the early church. Jesus himself criticized the accumulation of wealth and a major component of his teaching was caring for the poor and fighting against poverty; he ultimately died as the empyrean liberator, freeing everyone from slavery under sin. After Jesus's death, his disciples created a fellowship that provided for each other by pooling their collective wealth to care for the needs of the entire community--a very socialist ideal. Gutiérrez claims that Christianity and Marxism can be compatible. Gutiérrez criticizes how Christianity often is used to support inequity and systems of oppression by aligning with power structures that reinforce economic and political systems that conflict with these Biblical teachings. Christianity, unlike Marxism, argues Gutierrez, is not necessarily fundamentally opposed to capitalism, but against oppression, including political and economic oppression. Because the capitalist system perpetuates oppression by giving those with economic power political power which allows them to ensure further economic power, heightening a cycle of inequity, Christianity in a

⁸⁹ Ibid., 76.

framework of Liberation theology should be opposed to capitalism because of the way it enforces oppression in the modern world.

People within and outside of the Church took issue with Liberation theology (exemplified by Rodney Stark, who claimed that “Liberation theology is a naive clerical leftist fantasy”).⁹⁰ Gutiérrez’s efforts illuminate a divide between the Catholic hierarchy and the priests and bishops intimately involved with people on the grassroots level. Gutiérrez faced criticism from a number of actors within the Catholic church, who thought he was simply a Marxist, even garnering condemnation from Pope John Paul II and displeasure from Pope Benedict XVI⁹¹ (although Pope Francis has proved himself friendly to the Liberation theologians, and possibly is one himself).⁹² The difference between the Vatican and Latin American priests was seen very clearly during the height of the Cold War, when the church hierarchy cooperated with the CIA to identify thousands of priests and nuns that were associated with Communism, Marxism, or Liberation theology.⁹³ In Latin America at the time, 80% of people lived in poverty and 90% of the people were Catholic; thus, grassroots Catholicism posed a perceivable threat to military dictators in the region. If the people were to rise up through Liberation theology and overthrow the military regimes, the CIA predicted that many of the newly established governments would turn to Communism. As of 1983, 1,500 priests and nuns had been killed, imprisoned, or tortured because of their associations with economic leftism--that number surely has risen since the article was published 33 years ago.

⁹⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason* (New York: Random House, 2005): 230.

⁹¹ Jane Barnes, “Solidarity and Liberation Theology,” *John Paul II: His Life and Papacy*, Frontline, PBS.

⁹² Jim Yardley and Simon Romero, “Pope’s Focus on Poor Revives Scorned Theology,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2015.

⁹³ Martin A. Lee, “Their Will Be Done,” *Mother Jones*, August 1983. This and the rest of the information in this paragraph are based on an exposé done by *Mother Jones* that discusses how the CIA and the militant arm of the Vatican colluded on various Cold War projects.

Due to the prevalence of Liberation theology before, during, and after the EZLN guerilla war, some scholars claim that Islam serves as a Liberation theology. This argument is appealing. Like Catholicism, Islam has textual basis for claiming liberation, and without the troubling history the Catholic hierarchy has had with Marxism.

Like the Bible, the Quran also has a version of the Exodus story, and it undoubtedly serves a similar role by describing God's preference for the end of economic oppression for His people. Moses, who who is the prophet/intermediary with God in the Exodus account, is like many of the Quranic prophets in that he leads a community out of slavery. One only need to look at the life of Muhammad, the preeminent and final prophet, to discover the extent of the pervasiveness of egalitarian economics. Mecca in the years before Islam had grown wealthy by selling goods and services to pilgrims who came to worship at the Kaaba and the other deities that were held around it. The Quraysh, the tribe which controlled Mecca, had grown rich and powerful off of these economic ventures. They were originally antagonistic to Muhammad and the religion that he preached, to the point that he was in danger for his life because of the threat he proved to their livelihood by offering a religion that had no need for the idols that they controlled. Islam sprung from roots that were meant to speak truth to power.

Muhammad and his adherents were forced to flee from Mecca to Medina, where Muhammad, informed by God and Islamic ideals, led the creation of the first Muslim community. In this space, Muhammad continued to demand economic justice. He specifically instructed the faithful to care for those in poverty, orphans, widows, travelers, and neighbors in need, but also created safety-nets that could care for the economically

marginalized groups.⁹⁴ Muhammad's role as a spiritual and political directly links theological impetus to state action. Creating a space for a number of identities was especially important to Muhammad. The community in Mecca, was built around *ummah* rather than tribal/ethnic/racial discrimination or gender discrimination because all people had a place in the community dependent merely on their Muslim faith.⁹⁵ Participation was based on closeness to God.

One of the strongest arguments against capitalism in Islamic discourse is Muhammad's declaration that *riba* or usury was *haram* or non licit. He was expressly against making money off of the possession of money (a practice in pre-Islamic Arabia--*riba al-jahiliyya* or usury of the days of ignorance) that is ubiquitous in the modern finance industry.⁹⁶ Many banks owned by Muslims or Islamic-leaning countries refuse to operate on usury because of these prohibitions. This is a direct criticism of the economic systems as exemplified to Muhammad through the Qurayshi modus in Mecca that can be extended to the present day.⁹⁷ It also places the systems of Islamic finance in opposition to capitalist finance systems. This dichotomy has led scholars to associate Islamic economics with Marxism.

Relating to Islam's view of the capitalist world, one of the many scholars who claims that Islam is a liberation theology, Hamid Dasabi, discusses how Samuel

⁹⁴ For example, see Sura ar-Rum 30:38.

⁹⁵ Arabic for community, contextually used to describe spiritual community in contrast to state or national identity

⁹⁶ Cynthia Shawamreh, "The Legal Framework of Islamic Finance," in *Contemporary Islamic Finance: Innovations, Applications, and Best Practices*, ed. Karen Hunt-Ahmed, Robert W. Kolb Series in Finance (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

⁹⁷ The main role of Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, is to determine the correct interpretation of Sharia in a contemporary context. This allows a jurist to say, for example, that people may be considered pure if they clean their hands with soap rather than stones. Thus, although capitalism as it exists today did not exist in the time of Muhammad, some legal scholars claim that Muhammad would have ruled capitalism *haram* based on the usury model.

Huntington's famous *Clash of Civilizations* theories are wrong: capitalism is the true oppressor. Dasabi argues:

The battle was never between 'Islam and the West.' Kuwaiti sheikhs and Enron executives are of the same ilk, culture, and disposition; so are the inner-city kids from Harlem and Bronx who join the US army and the Taliban fighters from Kandahar. Islam of the Saudi princes is not the Islam of Algerian migrant laborers in France and there is no Western corner of any globe in universe that can bring together Park Avenue in New York City and the slums of Newark, New Jersey. Left to the ravages of Katrina, New Orleans looks uncannily identical to Baghdad.⁹⁸

Throughout history, Islam has had a much less contentious history with Marxism than Catholicism. Because of the similar focuses of caring for the poor, many thinkers have found the ideologies compatible (besides Marxism's atheist agenda that would obviously be incompatible with Islamic political exegesis). One prominent philosopher--Ali Shariati--is a notable exception. From Iran, Shariati wrote a book entitled *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies* in which he disengages Islam from Marxism. He argues that opposing ideologies use similar frameworks; one example he uses to illustrate this are the genocides committed by German Nazism and Jewish Zionism. To Shariati, Marxism fell to the same problem as capitalism in that it revolved around material wealth and accumulation. While Marxism argues for a more equal redistribution of material wealth, it nonetheless revolves around need for capital. He agrees that while Marx was correct in his criticisms of capitalism, he was "wrong in the affirmative" because his system still values

⁹⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 141.

Donald Trump, while running for the GOP nomination for US president, has said that he will extend a ban to all Muslims entering the United States; however, he claimed that his rich Muslim friends would still be allowed entry, showing the further collusion of wealth across the "Western" and "Muslim" worlds in a conspiracy that does not pitting these civilizations against one another. For news on this statement, see Hafner's article.

people on their ability to produce and acquire wealth.⁹⁹ He calls both capitalists and Marxists religious "worshippers of capital" that are inherently at odds with Islam.¹⁰⁰ To Shariati, Islam values the Unseen and closeness with God, an important distinction because it focuses on a system of all-encompassing valuation that differs from Marxism, which admittedly, has a strong materialist flavor. Another strong criticism that Shariati mentions is that while Marxism is used as a tool to fight the hegemonic West, it is an idea system firmly rooted in Western thought and liberalism. To this effect, Marx doubtlessly excluded Latin America from his theories.

Depending on a Hegelian concept of "periphery" and thus "non-historic," Marx wrote scarcely about Latin America, and often only did so as a mirror of European reality, an exteriority--similarly to the way that he discussed any non-Western country.¹⁰¹ In this way, Marxism ought to face criticism that it too is another export of the European Enlightenment era, full of Orientalist themes. These criticisms have not prevented Islamic scholars from being explicitly Marxist. Regardless of whether one agrees in their compatibility, it can be said that Islamic and Marxist ideas are similar in their emphasis on liberation, even if they have different views for what that liberation might entail.

While based in Catholic thought and theology, a liberation theology is not necessarily Catholic: it only needs to be a theology that emphasizes and *practices* liberation. Some black churches in the US, for instance, may embrace a liberation theology that focuses on the religious aspects of civil rights (like Martin Luther King Jr., who combined the roles of pastor and civil rights activist and who could possibly

⁹⁹ Ali Shari'ati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, ed. Hamid Algar, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1980): 23.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 32

¹⁰¹ Castro-Gómez, "(Post)Coloniality for Dummies," 261-2.

posthumously be labeled a liberation theologian). Different factions of different religions have embraced feminist liberation theologies to protest injustice perpetuated by the patriarchy.

Liberation theology as a form of analysis places economic class concerns at the center of the oppressions perpetrated by coloniality. While Gutiérrez certainly notes racial oppression as something that the church ought to be fighting against, Liberation theology places ultimate importance on economic liberation. This primacy of economics demonstrates part of the weakness of claiming that Islam operates as a Liberation theology for converts in México. The association, intentionally or not, makes the Catholicism and Islam essentially interchangeable. If either can liberate, why distinguish between the two communities at all? Religion is a secondary concern to class and power based analyses. However, it seems that the convergence of Islam with Liberation theology reveals the doctrinal biases of the academy more than it reveals anything about the nature of Islam or Liberation theology. Choosing Marxism (or class-based study) as a framework of analysis demonstrates the primacy of the economic concern to the academic. Especially because many of the converts to Islam were at least nominally affiliated with Catholicism in the strain of Liberation theology, it seems strange to assume that it was Liberation theology that the converts were seeking. To say that they are simply unaware of the oppressions of Islam because they are not local is to assume ignorance, of knowing the true limits of the religion.

The primacy of geographic space reigns over this characterization. Rather than linking Islamic converts to one of any of the many frameworks of liberatory thought that have arisen or are developing from an Islamic context, it is a local liberatory movement

that is accredited with the conversions. The idea that certain ideologies, religious ones included, inhabit particular spaces is both popular and unfortunate. While surrounding contexts hold important sway over the way people imagine themselves, it is negligent to assume that geographic spaces necessarily determine ideological legacies.

This association is problematic because it also accredits Islamic praxis to Catholic thought. The strategy of linking subaltern actions to Western thought has a long colonial history. The dominance of the French model of revolution, for instance, is emphasized in scholarly work. It is Alexis de Tocqueville, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the other Enlightenment thinkers that are read and analyzed, despite a long history of revolutions led by the “people” that both succeeded and failed outside of the Western world. Revolutionary actions by other groups are nonetheless compared to and put into context with the French one as the epitomic example of a true revolution. The same can certainly be said of Marx and Marxist thought. Subsequent fights between the lower and the ruling classes have been labeled as Marxist, despite key ideological or structural differences that partially emerge from time/space difference and partially emerge as distinct situational ideological difference.

The Murabituns in Chiapas

Chiapas is one of the poorest states in México; according to the *Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social*, 74.7% of the population of Chiapas lived in poverty in 2012.¹⁰² Chiapas is also the state with the highest population of

¹⁰² The National Council for Evaluation of the Politics of Social Development “Chiapas 2010-2012,” *Pobreza 2010*, CONEVAL.

indigenous people in the country.¹⁰³ One could claim that Chiapas is a colonized state within México--populated by a racialized other, and tasked with providing natural resources for the benefit of others. One third of the oil produced by México comes from Chiapas; considering that one third of all government expenditures are paid from earnings from the petroleum industry, we can see how the colonial natural resource dichotomy is very present in Chiapas, and in the day-to-day lives of Chiapanecos themselves, many who don't have access to electricity that the petroleum they produce could potentially provide (in addition to the fact that Chiapas also provides around 40% of electricity from hydropower).¹⁰⁴

The economic situation of the Chiapanecos was exacerbated by an influx of asylum seekers and refugees from neighboring Guatemala. In the 1950s, the US removed the democratically elected leader of Guatemala (who unsurprisingly was a leftist) and replaced him with a right-wing military dictator, Carlos Castillo Armas. The US often directly intervened to keep Armas and his successors in power, including bombings and the routine "disappearances" of leftist leaders. Racism and local support for the leftists led the government to commit genocide indigenous people. By the 1980s, the mass killings and ongoing violence drove many Guatemalans to flee into México. Conflicts arose over wages, medical supplies, and public safety; the US put further stress on the already impoverished state by pressuring the Mexican government to keep the refugees in place (and most certainly prevent them from reaching and crossing the Río Grande). Despite US involvement in perpetuating the violence in Guatemala, the US refused to recognize Guatemalans arriving to seek asylum as anything other than economic migrants, claiming

¹⁰³ Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998): 38.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

that no human rights violations were taking place in Guatemala.¹⁰⁵ Refusing to admit genocide is taking place is one form of cultural gaslighting that demonstrates the enormous power of narrative creation that still hold under the systems of coloniality (and the necessity of extending colonialism from beyond beyond direct rule). Like the husband who told his wife she was crazy for seeing the dimming of the gaslights, the US denied the very genocide and violence that it helped perpetrate.

After the refugee crisis in the 1980s, the economic situation of Chiapas residents became even more strained with the tenure of President Salinas de Gotari who pursued a number of neoliberal measures. Land reform in the *Selva Lacandona* meant to break up communal farms in favor of more efficient corporatized agriculture meant that many indigenous families lost their land; the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed two years later meant that even those who had land had no markets to which sell their agricultural goods. Since Mexican buyers could purchase grains tariff free from the US from large-scale growers.

According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, NAFTA has destroyed small farms, slowed economic growth to paces below almost all other Latin American countries, and has not decreased poverty, unemployment, or increased real wages.¹⁰⁶ The coalescence of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) around these issues in the late mid-1990s in Chiapas demonstrates how subaltern subjects can reimagine themselves in order to counter coloniality. Scholars tend not to call them revolutionaries because the goals of the EZLN never revolved around taking over power, but rather

¹⁰⁵ Neighboring El Salvador also was going through a similar crisis.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Weisbrot, Stephan Lefebvre, and Joseph Sammut, "Did NAFTA Help Mexico?: An Assessment After 20 Years," *Center for Economic and Policy Research*, February 2014.

creating a counter-hegemony to the neoliberal/capitalist regime.¹⁰⁷ They fought the notion of citizenship and personhood as based on economic competitiveness that codes indigenous people and women as less valuable.¹⁰⁸ This distinction between taking over power and creating new sources of power is incredibly important. The EZLN created new meanings for what it meant to be Mexican, indigenous, a specific gender, and/or a subaltern subject.

Many leftist social movements do not revolve around women's rights preferring a class or nationally based fights. However, the EZLN was created because of oppression of *all* indigenous people, and women played a part of the formative movement. The Zapatista movement created a space for indigenous women to express their political autonomy that did not exist prior to the movement. Women comprised one-third of the militant forces, and many of the greatest military victories were commanded by women. It was a strict rule that tasks generally coded as feminine--like cooking and cleaning--were to be shared equally among all, regardless of gender. Even women who could not leave to actively fight were able to support the cause in other ways, including operating radios and sending information about troop movements. These actions allowed indigenous women to reimagine themselves as actors, subject to different rules, norms, and customs but evading ones that previously oppressed them.¹⁰⁹

In many communities, indigenous groups are often pointed out as particularly misogynistic in order to justify the imposition of social codes based on the worldviews of the community in power. The EZLN rewrote those codes and questioned how an

¹⁰⁷ Adam David Morton, "Mexico, Neoliberal Restructuring and the EZLN: A Neo-Gramscian Analysis," in *Globalization and the Politics of Resistance*, ed. Barry K Gills (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁸ Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 200.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

indigenous movement could exist without the active involvement of indigenous women. That is not to say that the EZLN was a perfectly egalitarian institution, nor that the EZLN somehow gave women a voice or somehow allowed them participate; rather, the EZLN served as a method through which indigenous people, including women, could reimagine themselves in relation to global hierarchies that they were supposed to silently participate in.

In 1994 missionaries from the Murabitun World Movement (MWM) arrived in Chiapas.¹¹⁰ The MWM is a Sufi *tariqah* that has a strong emphasis on *da'wa* and on dismantling the global banking system.¹¹¹ The Murabitun movement is directly and outspokenly opposed to global capitalism and the Western hegemony intertwined with it.¹¹² This includes a "total rejection of the Western capitalist banking system, to be replaced by an Islamic one based on the *zakat*, on the abolition of bank loans, and on the re-establishment of *halal* currency".¹¹³ They saw the dynamic message of the EZLN's fighting from freedom from the oppression of global financial interests as aligned with their spiritual goals.

Throughout its existence, the EZLN relied on tropes of Liberation theology in order to justify their actions. Despite the fact that Chiapas already was one of the least

¹¹⁰ Murabitun is derived from the Arabic root for tied or attached and implies someone tied or attached to God. This was the name for the Muslim dynasty that conquered the Iberian Peninsula from present-day Morocco. Clifford Geertz outlines the origins of the word *murabit* in his book *Islam Observed*, in which he tries to distinguish what Islam is by anthropologically studying Indonesian and Moroccan versions of it.

¹¹¹ *Da'wa* means something along the lines of offering an invitation in Arabic. It is usually used in sense of teaching one's neighbors or proselytizing.

¹¹² Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, "'Occidentalism' and Conversion to Islam in Mexico," *Anthropologies* Anthropologies (February 15, 2016).

¹¹³ Francesco Alfonso Leccese, "Islam, Sufism, and the Postmodern in the Religious Melting Pot," in *The Routledge Handbook to Islam in the West*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (New York: Routledge, 2015), 154–69. *Zakat* is one of the Five Pillars of Islam that requires Muslims to give charity. *Halal* means permitted (the opposite of *haram*, forbidden). Until they can move to gold dinars, members are encouraged to use e-dinars, an unregulated online currency.

Catholic states in the country, the EZLN nevertheless used many tropes of Liberation theology in their campaign--and even commented on how aptly it described their struggles.¹¹⁴ When discussing the role of the church in their movement, Subcomandante Marcos, the spokesperson for the EZLN, used the Exodus to describe their fight:

Dios quiere que salgamos a la libertad, como el antiguo pueblo judío. El pueblo judío vivía en tierras de otro pueblo llamado Egipto...Entonces Dios habló al corazón de uno de los principales y le dijo: 'He visto los sufrimientos de mi pueblo, he escuchado el llanto que le arrancan los capataces. He bajado para liberarlos de los sufrimientos que están pasando y los voy a llevar a otra tierra mejor'.¹¹⁵
[God wants us to leave to liberty, like the old Jewish people. The Jewish people lived in lands of another people called Egypt...Then God spoke to the heart of a one of the leaders and he said: 'I have seen the suffering of my people, I have heard the cry that the foremen have torn from them. I have come down to liberate them from the suffering that has passed and I am going to go bring them to another better land.]

Liberators have often used the story of the Exodus to represent their struggle. It naturally aligns God on the side of the liberators, bringing religious legitimacy to their cause.

Harriet Tubman as the “Moses of her people” invokes the sense of not only rightness but righteousness to her actions. Regardless of the actual spiritual composition of Chiapas, Subcomandante Marcos affirms and draws upon a collective idea of righteous liberation that can exist within Christianity. While the EZLN allowed reimagination of one’s subjectivity away from racist, sexist, and imperialist ideas of self, it failed to promote a reimagination that included the religious self.

The Murabituns targeted missionary efforts to populations that were disenfranchised by a world order built upon the concepts of coloniality. They planned to meet with the leaders of the EZLN, but the leaders refused. They did convert a number of civilians and fighters associated with the EZLN. Emir Nafia, one of the Spaniards, stayed

¹¹⁴ Yvon Le Bot, *Subcomandante Marcos: El Sueño Zapatista* (Barcelona, Spain: Plaza & Janés Editores, S.A., 1997): 46.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

behind to lead the new community.

They created a commune in San Cristobal de las Casas that includes a carpentry shop, a school, a library and a mosque. In the city center, they run a pizza and espresso bar, multiple restaurants, and a bakery, all called *Las Alpujarras* after the remaining stronghold of rulers of Muslim Spain during the *Reconquista*.¹¹⁶ They have opened mosques in other cities and communities in Chiapas--namely Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Palenque, and Comitán, as well as other neighborhoods of San Cristobal de las Casas besides the commune where believers gathered to speak and pray.¹¹⁷ All of the converts are indigenous, primarily Tzotzil Mayans. The converts work and live with their fellow Muslim converts.

Indigenous Chiapanecos serve as an other within México. Their existence is coded as necessarily before nationhood. In the Mexican imaginary, all citizens are *mestizos*, a mixture of indigenous and Spanish ancestors. To be only indigenous is to exist temporally before the colonial encounter. Chiapas serves as an internal outside, a place where the state can colonize the land and bodies of the people in order to assert what it means to be Mexican. In surveys of urban-dwelling Mexicans, a majority of respondents felt pride in their indigenous roots but also expressed that they were other, a poorer other that was less integrated in national culture.¹¹⁸ The concerns that the respondents felt about indigenous poverty did not touch upon how poverty was enforced through continued economic exploitation. Indigenous people were especially associated with tourism to the ruins of

¹¹⁶ "Radical Islam takes Root in Chiapas," *San Antonio Current*, October 3, 2002. One article also claims that the restaurant sells the best olive oil in México.

¹¹⁷ "Musulmanes Chiapanecos Piden Paz En Palestina," *La Razón*, December 28, 2015.; Angeles Mariscal, "Abren mezquita en Comitán," *La Jornada*, May 30, 2007.; Mirena Mollinedo, "Musulmanes En San Cristóbal, Se Deslindan de Actos Terroristas: Ibrahim Chechev," *Prensa Libre Chiapas*, November 19, 2015.

¹¹⁸ "Percepción de la Imagen del Indígena en México: Diagnóstico cualitativo y cuantitativo," Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2006.

ancient architecture, a clear demonstration of the ways in which indigenous people are constructed as historical.

The indigenous converts identify distinctions as well. As one of the converts notes, "A los indígenas les cala más el islam que a un español porque allí están sólo preocupados por el banco, las hipoteca..."¹¹⁹, [The call of Islam is stronger to indigenous people than to someone of Spanish descent because they are only worried about the bank, the mortgage...]. In this, we can sense some degree of subverting the discursive hierarchy. Rather than indigenous people, it is the Spanish-descended who are behind, who have not learned, who lack.

In a review of the Murabitun World Movement, specifically in México, scholar Natasha Garvin relates:

In particular women, have noted the experience of communal living..., especially the exclusive space for women, the feeling of protection provided by the headscarves, a more harmonious family life, mainly due to the prohibition of alcohol, a better economic situation, and a change in status relations among the Murabitun in which age is more important than ethnic group or gender.¹²⁰

Here we can see how women too have created and maintained spaces for themselves in ways that challenge the dominant discourse both about the way they should be treated and about Islam.

I mean to hit a more theoretical note on the way in which the formation of communities reclaims spaces. Unification across lines means that the actors have transcended whatever the border is--whether that is physical or more abstract. Just because the war is not fought with tanks does not mean that claiming space to occupy (even in a

¹¹⁹ García, "Alá En Los Montes de Chiapas."

¹²⁰ Natascha Garvin, "Conversion & Conflict: Muslims in Mexico," *ISIM Review* 15 (Spring 2005): 18–19.

purely academic sense of space) is not a victory. While the converted *Chiapanecos* are not fighting in the same way as the EZLN does not mean that they are not exposing the weakness of places and spaces that are not built for them.

Although this paper refers specifically to *da'wa* in México City, in talking of the Muslim geographies of México City, the authors note, “La apropiación de lugares profanos como parte de este proceso de territorialización y territorialidades es importante para la extensión de la *da'wa* y la integración de un modo de vida distinto en términos no religiosos.”¹²¹ [The appropriation of profane places as part of this process of territorialization and territoriality is important for the extension of *da'wa* and the integration of a different way of life in non-religious terms.] This demonstrates the relationship between spiritual and physical geographies. Creating new communities is both a spiritual and physical act, an internal and an external one. We can also see how acts of transformation, of making something that was profane into something sacred is also a method of creation.

Both the converts in the north and the south face issues with coloniality and oppression that operate in a number of manifestations. However, we can see how talking solely about the way in which they are harmed ignores the multitude of ways that in which they have sought to heal from the damages they've felt, gaslit even about the injuries they've suffered. Like in the example of gaslighting, I am not trying to minimize the damage that an abuser does to his victim; however, I do wish to focus on the strength of

¹²¹ David Román Islas Vela and Armando García Chiang, “La *Da'wa* Tenochtla: islamizando la Ciudad de México,” in *Territorialidades y arquitecturas de lo sagrado en el México contemporáneo*, eds. Marín Manuel Checa-Artasu, J. Jesús López García, and María Cristina Valerdi Nochebuena, (México: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2014): 101. This article also expresses some views that Islam is invading México City, even discussing “la penetración del islam en tierras mexicanas.” This is just to say that Islamophobic academic writing is in no way confined to the US or Western Europe.

the survivor who creates for the purpose of liberating herself. Let us write toward an agency as a model of creation, rather than destruction. Rather than forming the mold of agency to the abuser, the abused merely a reaction, a shadow of the abuser, let us form agency to fit the model of the survivor, who manages to make in the face of opposition. The way in which the subaltern create knowledge and new communities should dictate the way in which agency itself is defined.

Desire

An Argument Concerning Cosmopolitanism

Reports about the converts in Chiapas treat the trend with bewilderment. For instance, an article in the *San Antonio Current* claims that:

There are whispers that Protestant Maya men are embracing Islam so each may frolic with four young Spanish wives to breed new warriors for a Holy War, right on America's doorstep. Others accuse well-heeled Gulf Arabs of buying Mayan souls by doling out food, shelter, and jobs to derelicts.¹²²

We can see here an application of Jenkins's theories about the narrative around conversion. The conversions are discredited based upon the fact that it was for something in return--in this case, wives. These points to stigmatize the converts are built on tropes about indigenous people, starting with their base sexual nature. Indigenous people are more animal-like, more beastly in the colonial imagination. Thus, their motivation for conversion lies with their ability to have sexual relationships with multiple women (polygamy also a way in which colonialist constructed the colonized as backwards and misogynistic). Not just four women, but *Spanish* women. The addition of Spanish relies on a narrative of fear of tainting the racial purity of white women. The article could have said Mexican women, or left out a descriptive all together, but the choice to emphasize the Spanishness--and thus the whiteness--of these women promotes racial fears of the tainting of white womanhood. The sexual encounters leads directly to *jihad*, linking directly to associations between the tainting of purity and attacks on American civilization. It also relies on racialized fears of white Americans who see the higher birth

¹²² "Radical Islam Takes Root In Chiapas," *San Antonio Current*, October 3, 2002.

rates of American people of color as a threat. The word “breed” especially evokes this idea of animalness that is ascribed to indigenous people.

The unsubstantiated claim that Islamic extremist groups are using México as a staging ground to wage war against the US plays on the fears of both the putative permeability of the border and of Muslim terrorists. A number of nationally recognized politicians (Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, Marco Rubio, to name a few examples) as well as many conspiratorial right-wing online communities have promoted the idea that terrorist groups like ISIL are staging operations in México to attack the US.

That indigenous people are reduced to “derelicts” relies on a stereotype of indigenous poverty (without mentioning that historical and current political and economic structural barriers that prevent them from achieving and maintaining communal economic success). The indigenous men convert in order to have “food, shelter, and a job.” Islam is not the appeal, but material possessions. Oil rich Arab men can provide these inducements; the logic goes that if it had been wealthy Indians the community would be Hindu, or wealthy Israelis would cause the community to embrace Judaism. The interchangeability of the religions relies on that converts have not “truly” converted; that they exist in the same spaces and occupy the same discursive realities that they did before, with the same desires and cosmologies. Besides, the article is careful to mention that they are Protestant Maya, implying that perhaps there has been a previous conversion. Islam is just the current preference, one in a sequence of many. The indigenous people in this sense can never truly be Muslim because they are delineated by a specific geographic space. Their indigenusness will always predetermine any perception of religious views.

This article is written to evoke fear of indigenous people, relying on unspecified “whispers” while simultaneously denying any theological appeal that Islam might hold for the converts. These functionalist discourses seem to sever any reasoning beyond the economic, rather than relying on a more complex picture of the multiplicitious possibilities of desire. The emphasis is completely on the trade, a conversion for something in return. While this article is very blatant about the trades made, it is not unusual for scholars to rely on less-blatant but still damaging discourses that Jenkins identifies. Academic articles do not make such flagrant conjectures nor promote outright lies about converts. Most take the approach of analyzing conversion from a postcolonial lens. Take for instance the work of Camila Pastor de Maria y Campos, an academic who studies Muslims in México, that claims that the reason that the appeal of Islam to Mexicans is so strong because:

In a postcolonial setting, where hierarchies of race, class, and "civilization" index and constitute each other in complex ways, conversion allows new Muslims in Mexico to step outside of local ideologies of dominance and difference. It offers the opportunity to sidestep, to circumnavigate discourses that define them as subaltern, by establishing direct access to far-away regions and the privileges of foreignness and cosmopolitanism through faith.¹²³

Pastor de Maria y Campos’s scholarship seems to allow for and show agency. She addresses the oppressions that continue to endure against subaltern subjects and how conversion allows subversion of those hierarchies. This is obviously a stark contrast to some scholarship about conversion that leaves converts as passive vessels upon which new religious identities are written. Rather, Pastor de Maria y Campos argues that converts have the power to subvert oppressions that permeate every aspect of convert’s

¹²³ Camila Pastor de Maria y Campos, “Guests of Islam: Conversion and the Institutionalization of Islam in Mexico,” in *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, ed. María del Mar Logroño Narbona, Paulo G. Pinto, and John Tofik Karam (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015): 146.

lives. This characterization falls very much within what I am arguing--of the assumed intrinsic power of subaltern subjects. It is the method that she claims that converts assert their agency that is problematic. She claims that the way that converts fight these discourses is “by establishing direct access to far-away regions and the privileges of foreignness and cosmopolitanism.”

In order to fully dissect the implications of “the privileges of foreignness and cosmopolitanism” we ought to define both foreignness and cosmopolitanism. Foreignness is the idea of outsideness, of something coming from a geographic space that is not one’s own, derived from the Latin word for “door.”¹²⁴ Cosmopolitanism is more ideological but is related to this concept of foreignness. I will rely primarily on Kwame Anthony Appiah’s views of cosmopolitanism because they are both well-expressed and influential, although as he notes, the ideological components have existed in some form for centuries. He argues that cosmopolitanism is an ethical way of living with difference, of fallibilistic and changing attitudes, of getting used to other ways of doing things.¹²⁵

To label Islam as something that belongs to “far-away regions” essentializes the religion to its Arabness and to detract from its universality. By claiming foreignness, it constructs Islam as a non-universal ideology that is for other people, and not for Mexicans. Islam has always had a complicated relationship with Arabness--there isn’t a non-Arab Muslim society that has not in some way engaged with what role Arab culture and tradition is supposed to have upon the practices of Islam. Neither is their consensus

¹²⁴ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “foreign.”

A similar idea is true of *extraño*, the word in Spanish for foreign, which is derived from roots that mean “outside of.”

¹²⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers (issues of our time)*, (WW Norton & Company, 2010).

on the issue, of the role in cultural context in interpretation. However, converts in México are not trading their geographic and ethnic identities to become Arab.

Similarly, cosmopolitanism is not an intrinsic human desire. The desire for cosmopolitanism, for wanting a universalism where people embrace differences stems from a specific time and place. When people seek cosmopolitanism, they often do so by increasing surface level identifications with otherness perhaps by eating “ethnic” food or by studying abroad. That is not to say that cosmopolitanism is not an ethical approach to globalization, but rather that to demonstrate cosmopolitanism is to engage with other social or cultural systems through a hierarchical positionality that allows certain people to “understand” others’ cultures because of short encounters with those cultures. Take for instance the emphasis on study abroad in academia as a value symbol of hierarchal cosmopolitanism in which people on the top of hierarchies (like civilizational or class) engage with difference for a short of amount of time for their own edification.

It is not that I take issue with Pastor de Maria y Campos’s supposition that “foreignness” and “cosmopolitanism” provide certain privileges to those who can access these traits. It is uncontested that Islam is foreign in that it has its origins in the Arabian Peninsula and cosmopolitan in that it offers educational, travel, and networking opportunities inaccessible to converts previously. However, her commentary implies that the converts believe Orientalizing discourses about Islam. There are plenty of ways to express cosmopolitanism or foreignness within the capitalist system that don’t require conversion--as evidenced by the rise of “Mideast fever” in Latin America, where people prove their cultural capital by exploiting Orientalized products that represent the Middle East.

In the following chapter, I will explore some of the ways in which Latin Americans engage with Arabness, Islam, foreignness and cosmopolitanism in order to demonstrate why Pastor de Maria y Campos's ideas are insufficient in describing the motivations of conversion. I argue that there are ways to express agency through cosmopolitanism for non-converts as well as there are ways for converts to express agency without cosmopolitanism.

“Seamos Moros”

While conversion to Islam in México has been a relatively new phenomenon, Islam may have come to México as early as the sixteenth century. For centuries, Spain was ruled by a Muslim Almoravid dynasty. In 1492, as Columbus was encountering what would later be named the Americas, his patron country of Spain was completing the *Reconquista*, driving out Muslims and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. The Spanish brought their ideas of classification of difference with them, calling mixed-children “Moriscos,” the word used for Muslim converts to Christianity during the era of the Inquisition. Because of the *Reconquista* and the Inquisition, many scholars speculate that Muslims might have arrived in México with the early *conquistadores*, driven to hide their religion to avoid persecution.¹²⁶ Regardless, Islam has definitely been present in the Western Hemisphere since the arrival of African Muslim slaves in the late 16th century.¹²⁷

Although there were some Muslim slave revolts, under the force and weight of Christianity or new hybridized religions, Muslim practice mostly remained either deeply

¹²⁶ Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle, “Islam in Mexico and Central America,” 155.

¹²⁷ An estimated 2.25-3 million African slaves in the Americas were Muslim. Diouf, Sylviane. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*, (New York University Press, 1998).

underground or petered out. Islam began to flourish in Latin America with both high immigration from the lands of the Ottoman Empire as well as the transportation of laborers from British colonies in South Asia to British colonies in the Americas.

This shared history has played prominently in the Latin American imagination, and has attracted calls for Arab-Latin post-colonial solidarity, especially from Muslim countries that were fighting independence battles. Hisham Aidi discusses a few of the more prominent examples of this appeal.¹²⁸ Cuban writer José Martí famously said “Seamos moros! [Let us be moors]” as he expressed solidarity with an anti-Spanish independence revolt in Morocco, saying that together Cubans and Moroccans both faced Spanish oppression. Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez both have claimed and promoted a mix of Moorish and African Muslim roots in themselves and their constituencies. There is a general sense that Latin American identity is closely linked to Muslim identity. Spanish culture that had its roots in centuries of Muslim rule, African Muslim slaves, and Muslim immigrants.

Today this is evident in fascination with the links, as people note the shared roots of words like *inshallah* and *ojalá* or gastronomic similarities like *shawarma* and *al pastor*. This is to say that Islam is not foreign to Latin America generally or México in particular. In order to construct Islam as foreign, one must ignore the long history and the role that Islam has played in the imagination of self in Latin America. In what way is Islam more foreign to México than Christianity? Neither emerged from the geographic space that is now México, and to act as if Christianity is some sort of natural religious outpouring is to deny the colonial legacy that created the Christian context. Catholicism

¹²⁸ Hishaam Aidi, “‘Let Us Be Moors’: Islam, Race and ‘Connected Histories,’” *Middle East Research and Information Project* 33, no. 229 (Winter 2003).

is part of the imaginings of what it means to be Mexican, and those imaginings were created as part of a continuing colonial project and are reinforced in coloniality.

Kozmopolitanizm

A Turkish television interpretation of *A Thousand and One Nights* (“Binbir Gece”) that was dubbed in Spanish was incredibly popular when broadcast in México and across Latin America as “Las mil y una noches.” Turkish dramas have found a wide audience--the success of “Binbir Gece” was followed by a number of popular dramas: “Muhteşem Yüzyıl” (“Suleimán, el gran sultán”), “Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne?” (“¿Qué culpa tiene Fatmagül?”), “Aşk-ı Memnu,” “Karadayı,” and “Kara para aşk,” to name a few. When asked about the popularity, a number of reasons are cited. Some viewers and commentators mention that Turkish people look physically similar to Latin American audiences, with tendencies to darker brown hair and dark eyes that make the actors relatable. Others remark on the social similarities between Turkey and Latin America, claiming that so called “developing” countries face problems like rural to urban migration and integration into a new global “modernity.” Others still remark on cultural similarities, remarking on the centrality of family, and of less sexualized and violent plots than American dramas, or more intimate and slow moving character development.¹²⁹ I will not argue that having actors that look like the audience, that not feeling disgusted or uncomfortable with graphic violence or nudity, or a certain intimacy with characters is not important in enjoying television shows. However, I will argue that in addition to the aesthetic similarities and preferences that are expressed, the popularity of Turkish dramas

¹²⁹ For examples, see Ziyad Varol, “The Success story of Turkish TV series in Latin America,” *Daily Sabah*, Feb. 2, 2016. Esra Gürmen, “How Turkish Soap Operas Took Over The World,” *The Fader*, March 1, 2016. Didem Tali, “An unlikely story: Why do South Americans love Turkish TV?” *BBC*, Sept. 8, 2016.

(and specifically “Binbir Gece”) offer an accessible cosmopolitanism for Latin American viewers.

It is important to note that neither “Binbir Gece” nor any of the other Turkish dramas are being exclusively exported to a Latin American audience. In fact, the shows have reached audiences across the Arab-speaking world, eastern Europe, southern and southwestern Asia, the former USSR, and occasionally western Europe. Each of these places surely have a specific and unique relationship with Turkish dramas. The Macedonian government, for instances, has passed legislation to ban the dramas, the Information and Society Minister that “Turkish servitude for 500 years is enough” for the Balkan nation.¹³⁰ Similar concerns have been taken up in Greece and Egypt, where nationalists have called for boycotts of the show. Gulf Arab men have responded by seeking facial hair implants to display their virility and at the best of their spouses, who ask them to groom like their favorite male characters.¹³¹ That is not even to mention the complicated relationship between fundamentalist Islamists who take issue with which Muslims are portrayed in television: drinking alcohol, pre- and extramarital sex, and unveiled and strong women amongst the most noted points of contention. It is not within the scope of this paper to comment upon the ways in which Turkish shows offer (or do not offer) an accessible cosmopolitanism to viewers outside of Latin America. I do want to ensure to demonstrate that a single show can have a number of different “decodings” to use the framework of Stuart Hall.¹³² I will be analyzing one of these decodings, and how it affects the Mexican viewer of said shows.

¹³⁰ “Macedonia bans Turkish soap operas,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, Nov. 14, 2012,

¹³¹ Piotr Zalewski, “As Turkey Turns,” *Slate*, Aug. 16, 2013.

¹³² Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, (University of Bingham, 1980): 128-138.

The series begins with Şehrazat Evliyaoğlu, a widowed architect who lives in Istanbul, searching for 200,000 Turkish liras for her young son's cancer treatment.¹³³ Her husband's family, who is wealthy, disowned the couple and refuse to pay, and Şehrazat cannot get a loan.¹³⁴ She approaches her boss, Onur Aksal, a successful businessman who is bitter over women because his fiancé cheated on him. He offers her the money if she agrees to spend the night with him, a plan that he comes up with partly out of desire and partly to prove himself right that women are selfish. The *siyah gece* or black night overshadows the rest of the series and their continuing tumultuous relationship.

Brent Peterson, in “*Turkish for Beginners: Teaching Cosmopolitanism to Germans,*” analyzes “*Türkisch für Anfänger,*” a television show about a mixed German-Turkish family.¹³⁵ He explains how the show, targeted toward adolescents, sought to teach cosmopolitanism to a young German audience by demonstrating sympathetic and relatable German-Turkish characters and how German characters learned to interact with them. Similarly, “*Binbir Gece*” seeks to teach Turks how to be cosmopolitan.

“*Binbir Gece*” should not be disconnected from its context in Turkey. Despite focusing on the numerous problems of the cast of characters, the show is careful to portray a certain vision of the Turkey. Over just 90 episodes, the characters suffer a number of tragedies: a shooting spree that kills numerous employees besides two separate attacks on two different characters with guns, a plane crash, multiple car crashes, a stabbing, two successful kidnappings as well as an attempted one, a voyeuristic stalker,

¹³³ The series can be watched dubbed in English on Netflix through about halfway through the series. The Spanish dubbed version can be found on the website for El Trece, an Argentinian television station.

¹³⁴ Şehrazat is the Turkish version of Scheherazade, the name of the protagonist/primary storyteller in *1001 Nights*.

¹³⁵ Brent Peterson, “*Turkish for Beginners: Teaching Cosmopolitanism to Germans,*” in *Turkish German Cinema in the New Millennium*, eds. Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel, (Berghahn Books, 2012): 96-108.

three cases of cancer, a heart attack, several robberies, multiple deaths, affairs, fist fights, suicide attempts, white collar crimes, multiple divorces, and a miscarriage, to give a brief idea. However, the Turkish government is only criticized in one brief scene, when one of the main characters says that although the government knows what to do to solve the financial crisis that is bankrupting his company, that they have not yet done it. Otherwise, the apparatuses of state are always on their side, or at least unquestioned. For example, Şehrazat never questions the high price of her son's treatment even with insurance. The police are always helpful and there are no hints of corruption within the police or the government.

Perhaps more telling than the brief mentions of the state are the relationships with foreigners and other countries that reveal the way Turkey is imagined in relationship to the world. The bone marrow donor that saves Şehrazat's son, Mihriban, is Azeri, and other characters often comment on her interesting phrases or accent. Part of the urgency in Şehrazat procuring the money is that a Swedish family was trying to get Mihriban to save their family member. At her arrival, Mihriban says that she is glad she ended up in Turkey rather than Sweden because Turkey is her homeland. Şehrazat convinces Mihriban to stay and help take care of Kaan once she finds out Mihriban was widowed in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and that her son died from cancer. Mihriban as a character is a symbol of greater pan-Turkic solidarity. Not only does she actively express that Turkey is "homeland," her enduring connection to the Turkish characters is predicated on a war that helped solidify pan-Turkish sentiment in both Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Binyapı Holding, the company that Onur runs, does business with a number of regional partners in a way that reinforces the narrative of Turkey as an intersection. They designed and built award winning towers in Dubai, power plants in Almaty, along with unspecified projects in Moscow, Ukraine, Germany, Azerbaijan, as well as in Turkey. The in-betweenness of Turkey, the idea of Turkey as a bridge that crosses both cultural and geographic boundaries, is reinforced in the projects that Onur and the other characters work on. On a more basic level, we can see a Turkish vision of itself in the fact that it is a reimagination of *1001 Nights*, a narrative that is viewed as very “Middle Eastern” (despite disdain for the text in many Arab contexts¹³⁶) but has sparked the imagination of the West. *1001 Nights* is often quoted at length by Onur, sometimes in his thoughts and sometimes aloud to other characters. Embracing and taking a classic Middle Eastern story represents the imagined relationship of roots that stem from the Middle East but express that Turkey is firmly situated in a modern context.

These expressions may not be clear to someone who is unfamiliar with Turkey or Turkish politics. A person may not have heard of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, or even be aware that Azerbaijan is a primarily Turkic country. Someone may not know that *1001 Nights* was not written in Turkish and that what Onur is reciting is a translation, or the contentious relationship that Turkey has as being both not-Western-enough for Europe and too-Western for countries dominated by more hardline Islamist governments. Thus, while these expressions do promote a form of cosmopolitanism, I would not label them an accessible cosmopolitanism because they require some form of specific knowledge.

¹³⁶ Faten Morsy, “Thus Spoke Shahrazad: Contemporary Arab Women’s Rewritings of *The Nights*,” in *Genre: Women, Sexuality, and Early Modern Studies* 28 (2007): 234.

Rather, it is the forms of difference that do not require some form of pre-knowledge that make Turkish dramas accessible cosmopolitan. Take for instance “Muhteşem Yüzyıl” (which literally means “magnificent century” although it was broadcast in Latin America with names like “Suleiman, the great sultan” or the “The great sultan”) a Turkish drama about the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Süleyman. The drama does contain a great deal of historical context, but the show is ultimately driven by the relationships between Süleyman, his wives and mistresses, his friends and advisors, and their families and lovers. The frame of reference for the series is undeniably both temporally and spatially distant from Latin American viewers. However, it is the very ability to understand difference that is valued as a demonstration of cosmopolitanism.

“Binbir Gece” gives viewers a taste of some uniquely Turkish practices and customs. Even the sweeping overlooks of İstanbul that are used to transition between scenes portray information--from famous landmarks like the Ayasofya and Galata Tower, to the cats that roam the streets. Away from plot devices, there is hardly a scene that does not in some way involve tea--either someone inquiring if someone would like tea, making tea in the double-leveled *çaydanlık* or else someone drinking from the iconic tulip shaped glasses--giving a glimpse of why Turkey has the highest consumption of tea per capita world wide.¹³⁷ An İstanbul specific example is the prevalence of water. Onur’s apartment overlooks the Asian side of the Bosphorous Strait, and both his mother’s home and the house he will eventually share with Şehrazat sit right on the banks of the European side. Kerem, his business partner, lives on a boat. Beyond these dwellings, the water is often a

¹³⁷ Roberto A. Ferdman, “Map: The Countries that Drink the Most Tea,” *The Atlantic*, Jan. 21, 2014.

backdrop for arguments and reunions and revelations.¹³⁸ These scenes serve not only as geographic markers, but show the natural beauty of the city and the centrality of water to living there.

Through the details that are shown through the series, one can construct an idea of İstanbul. Şehrazat's brother-in-law's mistress gets her fortune told from her coffee grounds. Kaan's school has a prominent sculpture of Atatürk. Şehrazat's father-in-law produces and sells leather products in a market, where he bargains with the customers, plays backgammon with his fellow shop-owners, and casually puffs on nargile. He also is always carrying around *tespih*, beads that are used to help with prayers. Other than his *tespih* and the occasional appearance of a mosque in the background, there are very few visual cues that show the main characters as religious. None of the main characters wear a headscarf, although the occasional minor character does (especially those who come from rural areas).¹³⁹ However, the characters often invoke God, both colloquially (*inşallah* or *maşallah*) and seriously when discussing sin, blessings, and punishment. Even the treatment of the all of the children by both family members and strangers gives a small glimpse into the value of children in Turkish society. One could say that these markers are familiar differences, actions that are different enough to be noticed but not so strange as to be completely incomprehensible. Şehrazat's father-in-law is not carrying a rosary, but his actions are understandable without an overt explanation (nor does the show offer one).

¹³⁸ One water-centric scene shows Onur reading the diary of Yasemin, his ex-girlfriend from his college years. They encountered each other professionally when she returned to İstanbul. The diary was given to Onur after Yasemin committed suicide. He read that she was desperately in love with him. Guilty that he might have in some way contributed to her death, he throws the diary in the Bosphorus, along which he was sitting while he read the diary.

¹³⁹ The head scarves are tied around the neck and are not the *türban* style that was banned for many years in public institutions in Turkey, and is more controversial.

These details among others mark to some degree what it means to be *İstanbullu*. Each of the details allows audiences to *produce knowledge* about societies that they may never encounter personally. “Binbir Gece” and other dramas give Latin Americans a chance to prove their cosmopolitan credentials. In a world where being a cosmopolitan is valued, it is not necessarily easy to demonstrate that one is able to both understand and embrace difference. Like in Abu-Lughod’s work on the construction of subjectivities in Egypt by women watching melodramas, Turkish television allows Latin Americans to reimagine themselves as part of a cosmopolitan order.¹⁴⁰ Especially for people who do not have access to prove cosmopolitanism in several established ways--through travel or studying cultures in an academic setting--watching foreign dramas lets viewers produce knowledge about difference and others.

As stated before, “Binbir Gece” is important to Latin America because it was the first widely popular *telenovela turca*. The actors who played Onur and Şehrazat, who fell in love while filming the series and married after its completion, have made several tours to Latin America together to raving fans.¹⁴¹ Through an analysis of the themes of “Binbir Gece,” one can see two effects at work. The first is that part of the appeal of “Binbir Gece” is that it offers difference in an engaging way that does not require traditional modes of accessing cosmopolitanism. The other that implied is that watching is a form of agency. We can see through the framework of Abu-Lughod how watching dramas allows the audience to shape their own subjectivities. However, beyond the self, the act of a

¹⁴⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Egyptian Melodrama--Technology of the Modern Subject?” in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, eds. Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002): 115-133.

¹⁴¹ Constanza Hola Chamy, “Cómo Turquía está cambiando el mercado de las teleseries de A. Latina,” *BBC*, Sept. 3, 2014. “Sherezade y Onur, pioneros de novelas turcas en Latinoamérica,” *El Universo*, Nov. 14, 2015.

community watching and transforming something into its own contexts is agential.¹⁴²

Latin American watchers are not passively watching imported television, but learning, observing, and transforming the messages and tropes that they see on screen.

Productions about the Middle East

Besides consuming cultural products from the Middle East, Latin America produces cultural products about the Middle East. Jewelry and clothing patterns that are portrayed as Middle Eastern are extremely popular, and people throw Middle Eastern themed parties.¹⁴³ While these trends could be studied on their own (probably most effectively with ethnographic research), I will focus on visual representations of the Middle East produced in Latin America.

In “El privilegio de amar,” a Mexican soap opera, the main character interacts with a bushy-moustached *turco* who tries to cheat her out of money at his shop. Alfaro Velcamp comments on how the character claims that the vendor is “cheap.”¹⁴⁴ The trope of a scheming Middle Eastern shop owner is incredibly pervasive. However, there are newer interpretations of the Middle East/Middle Easterner that do not fit solely into the “slick, mustached, shop-owner” stereotype that warrant consideration.

There are countless references to the Middle East in music, but I will point to music videos of the most blatant examples: Los Master Plus in “Suave Leve” and Don Omar in “Salio el Sol” and “Belly Danza,” which both use the same musical themes and

¹⁴² Don Kulick and Margaret Wilson, “Rambo’s Wife Saves the Day: Subjugating the Gaze and Subverting the Narrative in a Papua New Guinea Swamp,” *Visual Anthropology Review* vol. 10 no. 2 (1994).

¹⁴³ See Aidi for more information on “Mideast fever.”

¹⁴⁴ Theresa Alfaro Velcamp, “Mexican Muslims in the Twentieth Century: Challenging Stereotypes and Negotiating Space,” in *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (Oxford University Press, 2002): 278.

much of the same footage for the music video.¹⁴⁵ None of the lyrics of any of the three songs refer explicitly to the Middle East; it is visual clues like clothing and landscape that demarcate the videos as “Middle Eastern.” Los Master Plus is a Mexican duo and “Suave Leve” was released in 2014. The music video shows the pair captured by a woman who is wearing almost nothing besides the headscarf, and a few matching pieces of fabric to cover her genitalia and her breasts. Other women are wearing long dresses and headscarves that cover their mouth, or else belly dance in the background unveiled inside the woman’s opulent palace. The singers are shown in long *thawbs* with leopard-print *keffiyehs* that are topped with cowboy hats. The ruler-woman has a man beheaded before she is presented with the two singers. Upon seeing them, she removes the veil from her mouth and licks her lips suggestively. After several sequences of choreographed fighting and more belly dancing, the singers escape and run away with one of the servants and one of the guard women, taking the truck that was used to kidnap them. The lyrics of the song relate to the singer’s appeal to women, and it’s clear in the video how both women-ruler and those in her household are seen as potential sex objects. Why is the ruler only wearing a headscarf? For whom are the belly dancers dancing--they are never shown dancing for the ruler. There is not a clear textual reason for the music video to take place in an unspecified Arab world. The appeal must be that there is something gained from showing the world as particularly Arab. The music video is not trying to show the oppression of Muslim women--while she is incapable of keeping a hold of the singers, the ruler is otherwise demonstrated as having complete control. There is a very strong message about the relationship of the singers to the imaginary Middle East. The singers

¹⁴⁵ Although one might think that Omar is a nod to a Middle Eastern past, there is no evidence that the Puerto Rican singer has any roots in the Middle East or North Africa.

are captured (but also captivated) by exotic Arab women. The women in turn are charmed by the singers and help in their escape and ultimately participate in it. In this way, all of the four are liberated, and drive away together. The video is both silly and deeply Orientalist, but still manages to show cosmopolitanism--four people coexisting with each others differences.

“Salio el Sol” seems to be a nod to some post-apocalyptic world. People are in modern but tattered clothing dance hip-hop among the ruins of an old brick structure, and turbaned men in a market appear to be either stealing or concealing goods. In “Belly Danza,” the video begins with a knight, or perhaps crusader, dueling with an enemy before entering a castle in search of a mysterious belly dancing fortune teller. Both of the videos have the same footage of Don Omar sitting upon a throne, clutching a golden scepter in the shape of a snake. Around him, women adorned in feathers and *bedlahs* dance. One of the women is holding a large snake over her shoulders. Most of the dancers have strange makeup, bejeweled and colorful, and hairstyles like braids across the face.

It is important to note that the “Middle East” that is portrayed and each of Don Omar’s videos does not appear to be a contemporary one. Rather, “Salio el Sol” happens in a post-apocalyptic future and “Belly Danza” happens in a past. The unity of the footage implies a certain timelessness: that from the past to some distant future there is some enduring exoticism of the Middle East. Although the tone of “Suave Leve” is much lighter, many similar scenes occur in the modern presentation of the region, adding to this endurance of sensuality and opulence that is part of some of the oldest Orientalist discourses. The blatant orientalization does not detract from the fact that these music

videos are a way to contribute to a global music scene.¹⁴⁶ Despite the problematic aspects (of which there are many), the videos let viewers participate in a demonstration of a higher degree of worldliness and connection.

Musical icon Shakira is a prime example of this connectivity. Born in Colombia to a Lebanese father and a Spanish mother, the pop star bases her songs on Arab and Latin American stylings. Her music had brought her incredible success both in South America and around the world. She is famous for belly dancing in her music videos or in concert, a form of dance coded as traditionally Middle Eastern. She has been labeled a truly global singer, with roots in Colombia, Lebanon, the US, and Spain (where she currently lives with her partner, Gerald Piqué, a defender for Barcelona FC).¹⁴⁷ While her popularity can not be attributed to her ability to bridge the Middle East with Latin America, she nonetheless represents a facet of the commercial popularity of Latin American cosmopolitanism that she represents because of her access to an exterior, global culture.

However, the connection between cosmopolitanism as a capitalist value is perhaps most evident in Latin American productions of TV shows with “Middle Eastern” themes: the epitome of which is *El Clon*, a Brazilian drama (*O Clon*) that was remade by the US network Telemundo and premiered around Latin America.¹⁴⁸ The main character, Jade, is a Muslim woman living with her mother in Miami. Her mother’s sudden death leads her to live with her conservative uncle and his family who reside in Morocco. Her uncle invites an old friend from his university days to discuss the morality of the friend’s

¹⁴⁶ The Middle East is not the only place to receive orientalist treatment in music videos. Take for instance “Ginza” by J. Balvin or “Desde esta noche” by Thalía ft. Maluma for examples of the orientalizing of East Asia.

¹⁴⁷ Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁸ *El Clon* is available on Netflix with English subtitles.

newest project: human cloning. Lucas, the son of a business partner and investor in this venture happens to tag along, and makes dramatic eye contact as Jade belly dances in the women's section of the house. They fall in love, but are thwarted by the death of Lucas's twin brother and Jade's forced marriage to another man. Unbeknownst to them, the old friend cloned Lucas because he missed his twin. Twenty years later, when Jade reencounters Lucas, she must choose between the actual Lucas she fell in love with, but who is older and more damaged, and the young Lucas clone, who fits with her memory of who Lucas is supposed to be.

The series has much of the drama that one would expect from a soap opera-- Lucas's twin accidentally slept with his father's fiancée, Jade's cousin can't marry the man she loves because they had the same wet nurse, just to name a few examples. Most strikingly, however, are the Orientalist stereotypes that resonate through every aspect of the series. Jade's uncle is the stereotypical overbearing Arab man, who keeps Jade and her cousin imprisoned within his home and physically strikes them at the slightest provocation or rumor of impropriety. Men have multiple wives and dictate the terms of their own marriages, as well as those of their sisters and daughters. Women waver between the tropes of the sexualized and exotified belly dancer and the oppressed, veiled Muslim woman (tropes that they navigate as a part of Jade's dual identity as both Latina and Arab). Every stereotype imaginable about the Maghreb is embodied within one of the subplots of the show--from camel rides, to scheming Arab merchants, to deveiling as a form of liberation.

In other ways, the show fits in well with other Latin American dramas, relying on

contrived drama and extreme emotionality.¹⁴⁹ The extreme Orientalism present in the text overshadows a barer truth about the content of the stark essentialization of of Muslimness and Latin Americanness as disparate objective identities with rigid boundaries. Jade is the most able to cross freely, as she inhabits both identities. However, even though she is identified as “ethnically Muslim” (read: Arab), she always fights for and tends to act towards her inclinations of *latinidad*--epitomized by her undying love for Lucas. Her cultural context is more important than her “ethnic” identity.¹⁵⁰

El Clon was one of the most watched television dramas in Latin America at the times of both its Portuguese and Spanish releases. Like other forms of media, the show was a way for the Latin American audiences to access a part of the world that most will never see in person. These forms of access to the Middle East act as a capitalist conduit of the commodity of cosmopolitanism. *El Clon* serves as a paragonic example of Latin American cosmopolitanism because the audience is able to navigate and transcend the Islamic East while also drawing connections to their own lives.

In other words, coloniality promotes a one-way flow of information and knowledge-production as a continued legacy of colonialism. This information flow itself acts as a marker of civilizational indices. In this way, access to other places is a marker of development, both individually and societally. Study abroad programs often demonstrate this phenomenon as they add to the cultural capital of both the person studying abroad and the society from which they come. However, this accessibility is a commodity, something

¹⁴⁹ Twins that switch to fool their lovers? Check. Scheming for family fortune? Check. Unrequited love turned violent? Check.

¹⁵⁰ Interestingly enough, Sandra Echeverria who plays the main character, Jade, who is Moroccan stars in a romantic film called “Cambio de Ruta” in which she plays an indigenous woman who leads tours in southern México. Echeverria’s ability to “pass” as several “others” further exposes the ways in which Mexican cinema imagines race and ethnicity.

that not everyone has the ability to obtain. Watching *El Clon* or a Turkish drama, or wearing “harem style” jewelry allows Latin Americans to tap into this commodity and construct themselves more favorably in the civilizational rankings.

It is not the converts who necessarily desire this cosmopolitan foreignness. It appears that it is the people who access Islam through non-religious methods, as described before (like the dramas) are more aptly described by this statement. They are subjects of coloniality, and thus seek the benefits that cosmopolitan credentials incur. Throwing a Middle Eastern themed party or belly-dancing like Shakira allows them to participate in an appropriative project of Orientalization.

This is not to detract from the agency of watching, producing, and engaging with cultural products. Part of Appiah’s argument is that people will react to cultural imports--he cites TV shows like “Dallas” --in ways that affirm or contribute to their own sense of identity. Consumption or creation of certain products do not make watchers “passive vessels.”¹⁵¹ To assume that a person, when exposed to a television show (or even multiple television shows) must fall under some intractable spell and adopt the beliefs that are encoded within. It seems laughable that this is even possible. Rather, I am arguing that cosmopolitanism is not the only way through which agency is expressed for subaltern subjects. Appiah argues against cultural-imperialist visions in which cultural products from the center (usually the West) homogenize and destroy the cultures of the periphery. Appiah is correct to argue that individuals are able to decide for themselves what their own authenticity looks like.

Additionally, I’m not arguing that converts to Islam in México are not

¹⁵¹ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 110 .

cosmopolites. Very few converts at least visibly seem to express what Appiah calls neo-fundamentalist views, ones that would clash with cosmopolitanism. Nor do I take issue with the majority of the argument that Pastor de Maria y Campos makes. Rather, her emphasis on resistance very much aligns with my own arguments about the agency of converts. Her ethnographic research especially demonstrates her assumption that subaltern subjects have agency (and she could hardly argue that converts are able to fight the oppressions she addresses if she didn't believe that the converts possessed some form of agency). Rather, I'm seeking to show why assumptions about the desires of subaltern subjects are problematic.

We must also question the way in which cosmopolitanism operates in ways that reinforce oppression. People are shamed for not traveling abroad, for not being familiar with "ethnic" foods, and generally for not displaying cosmopolitanism. This intersects with classism and racism. Think too of the ways in which globalization has enforced the idea that one's own culture is not "good enough" --that one must watch "Star Wars" and eat Chinese food and listen to the most recent Pitbull/Enrique Iglesias collaboration in order to be worthwhile global citizens. That is not to deride anyone who does any of those things, or claim that they are erasing or destroying in acts of cultural imperialism. Rather, it is the combination of power and cosmopolitan ethics that I wish to critique.

Lost in a discussion around cosmopolitanism are the many ways in which converts continue to affirm their identities. The Tzotzil Mayan converts conduct services in Tzotzil and gather for meals that reflect their own tastes. They often break the Ramadan fast with a communal meal of tacos. Women will wear traditional Mayan dresses along with the veil. The CCIM runs a *da'wa* focused around surfing, and the leader, Omar Weston, wears

shorts that conform with modesty dictates while on his board.¹⁵² Converts don't shy from wearing "Peña Nieto" hats or commenting on government policies.¹⁵³ Converting to Islam can affirm these identities and does not necessarily cause difference. The converts are not sacrificing their Mexicanness and/or their indigeneity for Islam (or possibly Arabness).

This section, more so than the others, demonstrates the universality of agency in México. Whatever is desired and pursued is agential; whether someone desires to be cosmopolitan and seeks that out in cultural productions or if someone desires God, each of these is a form of agency. Neither demonstrate someone merely reacting to outside forces, a passive object defined by others, but as someone working to make themselves in a form that they want to be. I'm digging at the terminology and ways in which words have meaning, especially ones that we use to describe others.

I also want to ensure that it is clear that I'm not trying to say that people are responsible for their own oppression. My argument is not that we ought to put the responsibility on people to revolt against power *à la mode* of the EZLN. I am not saying that because everyone has agency, or that it is their fault that oppressions remain because they have not fought them.

The burden of proof in articulations of the subaltern

Academics in some ways impose their own psychoses on the subaltern. We question their agency when it is we who are trapped, wondering if what we think is important, always questioning whether our work somehow makes our communities stronger or contributes in some way to the world. Our concerns about our own lack of

¹⁵² Omar Weston, "Muslim Surfing Society," *Dawa in Mexico*. Weston previous to conversion was a professional surfer, and continues to lead surfing lessons to outreach to young Muslims.

¹⁵³ "Mexican Muslims," produced by Luis Chaparro, *Vice*, 2014.

agency are reflected upon those whom we write about. It is this effect that also allows us to write our own desires upon them, and does not force us to question the frameworks of knowledge production under which we operate. To liberate the subaltern subject from the burden of proving agency also liberates us: our work is a clear expression of agency as well. We need not worry that work, as menial or unimportant as it may seem, does not matter. This is not to take the focus off of the subaltern subject, but to remark on some of the other benefits of shifting framework of analysis.

Researching literature on conversion to Islam in México (rather than ethnographically) seems like a project that be labeled as overly epistemological and as unnecessary. The population is small, there is not an overwhelming amount of literature, and I am not making new discoveries in the field. Yet I am convinced that the ways in which the conversion narratives and communities have diverse connections and experiences with both oppression and liberation justify the existence of such work.

Early on in my research I considered working on conversion to Islam in Latin America. Both Belize and Panama have incredibly active affiliates of the Nation of Islam. In Panama, a slave named Bayano led a rebellion and created a Muslim community during the mid-1500s, although he was eventually captured by Spanish authorities. However, this story of the historical connections of Islam and Panama have aided conversion efforts.¹⁵⁴ Conversion in South America has been concentrated in Afro-Brazilian communities, Bolivian and Chilean indigenous groups, and people in some way connected to the large numbers of Arab-speaking immigrants to the region.¹⁵⁵ The former president of Argentina,

¹⁵⁴ Lindley Highfield, "Islam in Mexico and Central America," 166.

¹⁵⁵ Marco Gallo, "Muslims in South America: History, presence, and visibility of a religious minority in a Christian Context," in *Routledge Handbook of Islam in The West*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (New York: Routledge, 2015): 176.

Carlos Menem, was a Syrian-Argentinian Muslim who converted to Roman Catholicism (although he would later marry a Syrian woman in a Muslim ceremony, causing some to doubt his affiliation to Catholicism--especially because his wife refused to say that he was Christian).¹⁵⁶ During his presidency, there were two terror attacks on Jewish targets--the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy and the 1994 bombing of the Association Mutual Israelita-Argentina. Both attacks were said to be related to Hezbollah and Iran, although a number of cover-ups and corruption scandals have obfuscated the connection.¹⁵⁷

Argentina has the largest Muslim population and the largest Jewish population in South America, and these incidences reveal some of the complex ways in which politics, religion, and power align around Muslims in Latin America. In Brazil, like in the United States, conversion has been primarily driven by people of African descent, with many of the same antagonisms between immigrant and converted Muslims.¹⁵⁸ There is a bit of scholarship on the active Muslim Puerto Rican hip-hop and rap scene.

There is some overlap and some major differences between these convert communities and those in México. It would be both interesting and informative to see whether proximity to the United States has any effect on conversions. Although México was the focus of this paper, the US plays a strong supporting role since it enforces the coloniality of power in other Latin American countries, but none of them (with the exception of Puerto Rico, whose relationship with the US looks very different) share a border with the US. There is also internal recognition of the ways in which both Muslims and Mexicans play an “other” in the imagination of US identity. Sometimes this

¹⁵⁶ “Menem 1976-1981: El mismo preso, otra historia,” *Clarín*, June 8, 2001.

¹⁵⁷ Gallo, “Muslims in South America,” 174.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

recognition is cheeky—like news articles that instruct “How to tell a Mexican from a Muslim: A guide for the panicky American”—poking fun at Americans who can’t tell the difference between thick-moustache stereotypes.¹⁵⁹ However, sometimes this is recognition is more insidious—take for instance the infamous Samuel Huntington, who has written controversial pieces on the threats that Mexicans and Muslims play to “Western civilizations.” Think-tanks write about the threat that Mexican converts pose to the US because of the possibility of al-Qaeda recruiting the converts to cross over to the US.¹⁶⁰

Even within México, one could do touch on so many more important communities and so many more practices than I was able to mention. While the Centro Cultural Islamico de México (CCIM) was spoken about tangentially in relationship with other communities, the CCIM has led many *da’wa* efforts in and around México City I talked about the Sufi *da’wa* led by Omar Weston, the founder of the CCIM, but they have extended their community through more traditional *da’wa* efforts as well. Even within the communities I did write about, there is so much that is left to be discussed. One could compose an entire piece on the myriad of right-wing conspiracy websites about the converts in Chiapas (almost all of whom claim that it is an ISIS terrorist training ground in preparation for a holy war against the United States). Someone could do an analysis of the videos posted on Facebook of converts saying the *shahadah*, discussing where the converts are sitting, what information is provided about their lives outside the Muslim

¹⁵⁹ Tony Ortega, “How to Tell a Mexican from a Muslim: A Guide for the Panicky American” (Raw Story, February 17, 2014).

¹⁶⁰ Chris Zambelis, “Islamic Radicalism in Mexico: The Threat from South of the Border,” in *Terrorism Monitor* vol. 4 iss. 11, The Jamestown Foundation, (2006). To be fair to the center-right group, they do ultimately conclude that there is little threat from converts in México, and that issues like poverty rather than religion posed the largest danger to US security from México.

community.

I wanted to point firstly to the reaction I often got from people (some of them in academia) when describing what I was researching and writing about. The overwhelming response was one of confusion and they would proceed to say something along the lines of “I suppose then that’s actually happening, then.” Not everyone reacted that way, but the general trend was of incredulity. I very much wanted to ensure that this project was not the commodification of the strange--so often in academia, that which is deemed as out of the ordinary is treated as the most important to study. This project was not to point out that conversion to Islam is happening in México, but to break away from thinking conversion is strange at all.

Desconocido is a Spanish word that can mean either unknown or unfamiliar, a stranger, ignorance, hiddenness. The word is derived from *conocer*, to know, *des*, which serves as not, and *-ido*, the suffix which expresses that something was acted upon or made by.¹⁶¹ *Desconocido* can be used as the word of that or whom is unknown but also for the person who does not know, the person who does not recognize the unfamiliar, that is ignorant of the unknown. This word pokes holes at the assumptions that are made about strangeness and otherness. *Desconocido* is both for the converts and for us. The converts are not strange because they are inherently so, because it’s strange to have surfing *da’wa* or even to have Muslims reside in México. Rather, the converts are unfamiliar because we, the *desconocidos*, fail to recognize their existence.

I am not arguing that we ought to know every detail about every religious minority around the world because that would be completely impossible. However, I’m trying to

¹⁶¹ Think *comida* (food), from *comer* (to eat) with the *-ido* suffix: that which is eaten or made to eat.

press at our relationship as academics to the subjects we are writing about, of how all of the *desconocidos* are linked. I've mentioned our potential paranoia, and how that reflects in our writings about subaltern subjects. We should try to shift away from projecting our own insecurities, as well as other problems related to our positions of power and biases in Western lineages of thought.

We ought to approach the subaltern as students with them as our teachers. It is we who are ignorant about them (and what we do know is often to perpetuate coloniality because it is based in frames of knowledge production that do so purposefully). Rather than treating them as sufferers under forms of oppression, we should treat subaltern subjects as experts in their methods of subverting oppression. Our work should focus on them, their cosmovisions, and their forms of knowledge.

I do not have a precise answer for where agency begins and ends. However, we as academics should question the ways in which we produce knowledge where agency looks like the agency of the colonizer. The actions of the subaltern are assumed to be passive ones, mere responses to the coloniality of power. Because more power structures dominate them, there is the assumption that they are more subject to power. Because they are oppressed, it is assumed that they must be given a voice, and that the voice will be a unified, homogeneous, and anti-imperialist one. When their desires are interpreted, the articulations of those desires are supposed to be of a Marxist materialist flavor.

To take a longer view of history, we can see how the colonized do not need to be given a voice, nor our Western intellectual history of economic liberation. Certainly, Marxist or otherwise postcolonial terms and categorizations can be helpful to both communities and individuals in expressing their desires--but only because the

communities chose to embrace these visions and terminologies. It is people's *identification* with tools like Marxism that makes the ideas so widely spread. The actions of the subaltern are assumed to be passive ones, mere responses to the coloniality of power. Because more power structures dominate them, there is the assumption that they are more subject to power. Because they are oppressed, it is assumed that they must be given a voice, and that the voice will be a unified, homogeneous, and anti-imperialist one. When their desires are interpreted, the articulations of those desires are supposed to be of a Marxist materialist flavor. We can see the failure of these modes of thinking when the actions and affirmations of the subaltern subjects themselves are not believed authentic. Their ability to create communities and seek what they desire in ways that subvert colonial ways of thinking demonstrate that even in submission there is agency. The converts submitting to new forms of authority is not defeat, but expressions of realignment, of questioning the borders and hierarchies of global-structures that are imposed upon them.

I spoke about the way that colonialism forced people to reimagine themselves. Shifting the definitions of agency to fit that of the subaltern demonstrates how subaltern subjects are reimagining their own subjectivities that undo the epistemologies of colonialism. The converts to Islam in México are subverting Western knowledges about converts, about Muslims, and about Mexicans, with all the complications that entails.

At the beginning, I quoted Mignolo "that the very concept of coloniality of power is already a decolonial move that, subsequently opens up the gates for imagining possible futures rather than just resting on the celebratory moment of critical explanation of what the social world is really like."¹⁶² Mignolo addresses some of the many problems that

¹⁶² Mignolo, Preamble in *Latin American Literature and Culture*, 22.

assuming agency leads us to. What use is the word agency if it is applied to everyone? If the academic is to assume that the entirety of the Mexican population has agency, why even use the word? First, I want to point to the fact that it is not that I am claiming that every single subject to the subaltern has agency. Rather, I want to shift the framework with which we ask the question of agency. Rather than assuming that every subject does not have agency, we should begin thinking about every subject as if they do. Too often in discussions and in writing, people will claim that the thoughts and feelings of the subaltern are not enough. I recall distinctly people criticizing that works written by women authors in British colonies in the late 19th century as not feminist enough, or that entirety of the arguments made by medieval philosophers are irrational because of their logical basis in Christianity. However, choosing to see these people as agents who are doing what they can to fight against sexism or to propagate knowledge challenges such narratives. Perhaps Descartes acknowledgements of God are not submission to the Roman Catholic church, but a subversion of it, a way to spread knowledge and survive *in spite of* the church. Likewise, why do we assume that the women authors are unable to imagine a radical feminist world that converges to our standards? I believe that they were and are capable of producing utopias that look like ours, and they choose not to. They are expressing their utopia, their feelings, and not our own.

Finally, we are not at a point where agency is applied to everyone. Mignolo points to “imagining possible futures” and redefining agency is simply one way in which we can collectively push together against the epistemological powers of coloniality. The Mexican who converts to Islam is making a choice (in some senses of the word): a choice that she makes for something that she wants. Why must she prove her agency to us?

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