Introduction to the Special Issue
“Contested Conversions”

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1 Introduction

This special issue of Religion and Gender on Contested Conversions presents seven articles related to the programme “Beyond ‘Religion versus Emancipation’: Women’s Conversions to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe” of the Dutch Research Council, which was executed between 2016 and 2022 at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. This programme and the key insights into which it has resulted will be presented here, followed by an introduction to the seven articles. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Karin van Nieuwkerk, who has co-edited this issue with me.

2 NWO programme “Beyond ‘Religion versus Emancipation’: Women’s Conversions to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe”

In post-9/11 Western societies, the idea that conservative and traditionally organised religions are in many ways opposed to women’s emancipation (in the sense of the social and political struggles for gender equality and sexual self-determination) is gaining high priority, especially when the issue is raised in public debates. This tension is currently one of the most visible aspects of the so-called ‘culture wars’, which are gaining momentum in Europe (Corredor 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte 2018). It is constituted by the fact that, on the one hand, conservative religious institutions and organisations increasingly emphasise patriarchal and heteronormative family life as both divinely ordained and nature-given in order to distinguish themselves from modernity and secularisation (Case 2016; Garbagnoli 2016), while, on the other hand, the discourse on women’s emancipation in public debates and policy-making in
the Western world affirms this modern and secularised stance and is predominantly framed in terms of individual rights, equal opportunities and inalienable autonomy. This emancipatory programme is inextricably linked to a political and philosophical framework of liberal secularism, which is assumed to be beneficial for women (Braidotti 2008; Scott 2009, 2013).

The ‘oppositional pairing’ of women’s emancipation versus conservative religion thus seems to be strongly based on the assumption that secularism foregrounds moral individual autonomy and equality, while monotheistic traditions create hierarchical differences between men and women and divinely sanction women’s subordinate roles (Bracke 2008; Nyhagen 2019). The question of why women are nonetheless “attracted to and support religious groups that seem designed to perpetuate their subordination” (Chong 2006, 697) seems urgent to investigate (Avishai et. al. 2012), especially when it is raised in the context of secular, well-educated women converting to religious traditions that distinguish themselves through strict rules on gender relations and sexuality (Riesebrodt and Chong 1999). What drives these women to convert to such conservative religious communities, against the expectation that they will live up to the emancipated and liberated role they can claim as ‘modern women’? And why is this very phenomenon so ‘scandalous’, or at least a subject of great suspicion, when it is raised in public debates?

To explore this ‘gender paradox’ (Martin 2001), sociologists of religion, religious studies and gender studies have focused on women’s conversion—and, more generally, on women in religious traditions that identify with the strict regulation of gender and sexuality—by showing the improvements and benefits women gain from involvement in such conservative religious communities (Davidman 1993; McGinty 2007; Van Nieuwkerk 2006; Vroon-Najem 2014). They point to women’s choice, autonomy, agency and influence, and counter the idea that women’s religious conversion and involvement make them objects of subjection. In addition, they counter the dominant public image of women’s religious engagement within patriarchally structured institutions or movements as consisting of (only) ‘submission’ (Griffith 1997; Manning 1999). In contrast, studies focusing on ‘fundamentalist’ tendencies and religious radicalisation explain women’s conversion and engagement in terms of submission and response to a divine call or religious vocation and duty (Karagiannis 2012; Korb 2010). Both types of research reflect the diversity of experiences and practices of women converts. However, they tend to measure women’s conversion either in terms of individual development, improvement, and recognition, which often implies the centrality of a modern autonomous subject in their conceptual frameworks; or they understand women’s conversion in terms of individual submission to divine will and patriarchal religious rules,
which implies a conceptualisation of conversion as the abandonment of modern autonomous subject formation.

In the Dutch Research Council (NWO) programme “Beyond ‘Religion versus Emancipation’: Women’s Conversions to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe” (2016–2022), to which the articles presented in this special issue are linked, the ‘gender paradox’ outlined here was taken up and confronted by a comparative study of Western women converting to three different religious traditions, and by unpacking the underlying dichotomy of ‘autonomy versus submission’ through an exploratory study of theoretical approaches of the religious/secular divide in the light of critical gender and sexuality studies. This project, conducted within the framework of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Utrecht, was carried out in three different sub-projects by Lieke Schrijvers as PhD candidate and Nella van den Brandt and Marieke van den Berg as post-doctoral researchers, under my supervision. In terms of our disciplinary backgrounds, we shared critical gender studies as a common ground as well as a ‘lived religion’ approach (Ammerman 2013; Korte et.al. 2017; McGuire 2008; Schielke 2010) and, to varying degrees, cultural anthropology, cultural analysis and literary criticism, and religious studies and theology.

We aimed to analyse and problematise the assumed incompatibility between liberal-secular societies and conservative religious communities (Asad 2009; Casanova 2009; Göle 1996, 2010; Taylor 2007) by exploring their points of contact and friction, thereby problematising the stigmatisation and exoticisation of conservative monotheistic traditions. We have also sought to explore how the conflict between secular and religious discourses of gender and sexuality (Butler 2004, 2009; Mahmood 2001, 2005; Scott 2009, 2013) is perceived and experienced by female converts, and the different ways in which they reconcile the perceived incompatibility. By studying female conversion as an ongoing and multi-layered negotiation between secular and religious gender discourses, we hoped to gain insight into the stratification of these discussions and the complexity of the different positions that are part of these debates. Moreover, we expected that conducting comparative research on three different religions, both at the level of the experiences of female converts and at the level of religious and public debates about these conversions, would provide a better understanding of the different patterns of conversion in these religions (Gooren 2010; Jindra 2011; Rambo 1999) and help to counter the negative social stereotyping of conversion to conservative religions, to Islam in particular (Jouili 2011; Özyürek 2009, 2014).

The first project of this NWO programme was a PhD study by Lieke Schrijvers. She employed gender studies, religious studies and empirical meth-
ods from cultural anthropology to investigate how gender and religion are intertwined in the lives of Dutch women who converted to (Pentecostal) Christianity, (Orthodox and Liberal) Judaism and (Sunni) Islam in a predominantly secular context. Based on ethnographic research and within a ‘lived religion’ approach, this study explored the different layers of women’s conversion, critiquing the premise that often dominates conversion research, namely that a (radical) change or boundary crossing is at the centre of the conversion process (Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Schrijvers found that the women interviewed negotiated—unconsciously and consciously, rationally and embodied—different ethical frameworks and (religious) practices. She described their conversions in terms of their social environment, their daily routine, their specific dress, and their general sense of purpose and comfort in believing in God, as a process of gradual transformation. Using a comparative approach, the findings were also nuanced in the light of the differences between the processes of conversion and the different positions of these religious traditions (especially majority versus minority). The implications for what it means to ‘belong’ in contemporary religious communities and in Western secular societies were explored. Cumulatively, this study has challenged the assumption that conversion means moving from one (secular) sphere of life to another (religious) sphere, and it has highlighted the specific role of gender and sexuality in the construction of the religion/secular divide. The comparative analyses also problematised scholarly, public and political views in which liberal-secular society and conservative religious communities are seen as opposed on the basis of gender and sexuality (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020; Schrijvers 2021, 2022).

One of the two postdoctoral projects of the NWO programme was conducted by Nella van den Brandt. Van den Brandt analysed contemporary controversial cases on religion, gender and sexuality from Dutch, British and Belgian public debates using a cultural analysis approach from a gender and religious studies perspective. By tracing the constructions of religion, gender and sexuality in these debates, this project aimed to critically broaden the discussion on the ‘gender paradox’ through a comparative and interdisciplinary analysis of cases of Western European art and culture in which conversion narratives about Judaism, Christianity and Islam are (re)presented. By examining the perceived incompatibility between mainstream liberal-secular society and traditional religious communities, and by exploring their points of contact and friction through a consideration of constructions of religion, gender and sexuality, this project also problematised the stigmatisation of particular religious-ethnic communities in Western Europe, especially those of Islam. In addition, this project made a specific contribution to the above-mentioned discussion.
of conversion by exploring the opposite of conversion: deconversion, disaffiliation and ‘moving away from religion’. It concluded that contemporary Western European literary and visual arts and media contain examples of stories of girls and women moving away from their religious upbringing to find emancipation in a secular way of life, but also stories that nuance and/or problematise the binaries of religious oppression and secular liberation. It also recognised that narratives about women and girls of Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions are differently inflected by historical and contemporary socio-political realities of religion, gender, race and post colonialism (Van den Brandt 2023; Van den Brandt forthcoming).

The other postdoctoral project in this programme was carried out by Mariecke van den Berg. Using literary research and cultural analysis in the fields of gender studies, theology and religious studies, Van den Berg explored different conceptions of conversion in public discourse and in literary and religious sources, with the aim of contributing to the above-mentioned discussion of female conversion. Her supposition was that, alongside specifically religious conceptions of conversion, conversion in the context of modernity is generally seen as a narrative of a ‘successful and happy self’ that has overcome adversity for the better. This raises the question of which social mechanisms, ideological beliefs and assumptions create the conditions under which personal transformations (such as conversion) are welcomed or rejected. This research brought together conversion studies and gender studies as pre-eminent fields in the study of human transformation, and initiated discussions between the two in light of the study of the different types of transition stories that this programme has focused on, especially of religious conversion and gender transition. It examined the role of corporeality in processes of religious and gender transformation, concluding that religious conversion also involves some form of embodied gender transition, while a physical gender transition usually also involves a spiritual or existential transformation (Van den Berg 2020). In addition, it deepened the research on notions of conversion by drawing parallels with the coming-out narratives of LGTB people, and identifying points of convergence both at the level of narrative and in the reception of these narratives in public discourse (Van den Berg 2022). Finally, an attempt was made to deepen the NWO project by exploring men’s conversion and the relationship between conversion and masculinity, in addition to the exploration of women’s experiences that was central to the other sub-projects (Van den Berg and Grimell 2019). It showed how conversion acts as a ‘useful’ screen onto which ideologies of religion and secularism can be projected.
3 Results: Five Focal Points

Looking back on the journey of the NWO programme over these five years, our understanding of conversion in relation to religion, secularity, gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity has been greatly enriched and transformed by the following five focal points, resulting not only from the projects described above and their interaction, but also from exchanges with (inter)national researchers, research periods and study stays abroad, and expert meetings and conferences.

First, we have taken up the concept of conversion and thoroughly unpacked it in different directions, starting with the field of conversion studies as part of religious studies (Gooren 2010; James 1902; Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Taylor 2007), but also as religious conversion is approached from cultural anthropology (Asad 2009; Van Nieuwkerk 2006; 2018; Özyürek 2014; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999) and within literary and cultural studies (Van der Veer 1996; Viswanathan 1998). Studying ‘conversion’ in the above frameworks, at the empirical level, especially in light of concrete practices of gender and sexuality, and at the theoretical level, in light of the political, religious and social tensions in which these conversions take place, has meant dealing with a heavily loaded term that has had to be ‘unpacked’ in several ways: conversion functions alternately as a term, a point of reference, a concept, and a ‘marker’ in these various debates. This required both exploration and clarification of the term, as we have done, for example, by approaching conversion—in successive phases of the NWO programme—as a religiously bound practice, as a story told by individual converts, as a metaphor for bringing together different types of transition, and as a ‘marker’ for shifting and contrasting meanings of conversion in public discourse. The latter has been done in this NWO programme, for example, by using a data research method to show how public debates about conversion in the Netherlands and Flanders have developed in various newspapers over the past thirty years. Cultural analysis and critical theory have provided insights into the different forms of conversion present in these debates and how they have been charged in the light of national, political and religious events.

Secondly, we choose to adopt a constant and consistent critical gender perspective itself; not only with the intention to move away from the masculine Christian model of conversion as a single, individual, inward and rational event, which still dominates parts of academic discussions on religious conversion and has a significant impact on public debates on the subject (Kent 2014); but more importantly, because this has given us a position and a framework from which to explore conversion experiences and debates in a multi-layered approach, taking into account that issues of religion and secularism are not only intertwined but also fundamentally embodied and gendered. It
became clear that the interpretation of conversion processes should focus on the interrelations and oppositions between religious and secular positions, which meant emphasising the interweaving of religious and secular perspectives in the analysis of conversion processes and the discussions surrounding them. In addition, an intersectional perspective on the subject matter of this NWO programme implied that nationalism and racism in particular have become important factors in understanding conversion processes in contemporary Western societies and the position of women within them. This has led, for example, to deeper insights not only into the religious conversion processes themselves, but also into the position of different women in relation to the wider social and political developments within which these conversions occurred and from which these conversions derive their meaning (Van den Brandt 2020; Schrijvers 2022).

Thirdly, we decided to consider conversion narratives—which were central to all three research projects of this NWO programme—as a form of cultural critique, which helped us significantly to evaluate these narratives in the light of the central questions of the programme. It is precisely in and through conversion narratives that the individuals and groups researched in this NWO programme ‘talk back’ to dominant debates about religion, nationality, gender and race in Western societies. This meant to see these conversion narratives as challenging and reworking harmful interpellations, enabling linguistic agency, responding and talking back within, but also over and against, hegemonic forms of discourse. This idea, expressed by bell hooks in her analyses about sexual politics in the context of white and male supremacy (hooks 1989), and exemplified by Gauri Viswanathan in her post-colonial and post-secular analyses of conversions in India (Viswanathan 1998), has become a guiding principle in the research projects of this programme (Van den Brandt 2019).

Fourthly, the comparative approach of this NWO programme has not only been carried out at the level of comparing different religions and their specific forms of religious conversion, but has also been extended to compare religious conversion stories with narratives of other forms of transition, particularly LGBTQ+ related, drawing parallels with LGBTQ+ people’s coming-out narratives and identifying points of convergence both at the level of storytelling and in the reception of these stories in public debates. For example, gender transitions often have a spiritual component, while religious conversions frequently are made possible through some form of gender transition. This was extremely helpful in making more explicit the complex relationships between gender, sexuality and modernity in the cultural and religious productions we focused on (Van den Berg 2020). Another example of this approach was when we explored the interrelated processes of conversion and decon-
version in the light of issues of gender and sexuality. Dutch Islam scholar and anthropologist Karin van Nieuwkerk coined the term ‘moving in and out of religion’ to describe these processes of religious transformation in Islam studies (Van Nieuwkerk 2018). She argues that this approach better captures the fact that conversion, but also deconversion and in-betweenness, are part of comprehensive and long-lasting processes of religious transformation that seem to have become much more varied and complex in the modern context. In particular, it emphasises ambiguity, doubt and non-linear trajectories as part of the processes of moving in and out of Islam. From a multidisciplinary perspective on gender in religion, we posed some additional questions based on our own research. What makes it more difficult for women, in both Western and non-Western contexts, to take such steps towards deconversion? Is the process of deconversion more accessible to male members of religious communities because of its ‘image’ of independence, rationality and heroic behaviour? Are women more discouraged from deconversion because of their involvement in family relationships and religious duties? Asking these questions and attempting to answer them has helped to adjust the initial framework of this research programme by approaching conversion narratives as part of a wider trajectory of religious transitions and transformations.

Fifthly, in the later part of the programme, we began to examine conversion also as a contested practice, for example through the concept of ‘failed conversions’ (Beekers and Kloos 2017). In the Western world, conversion is predominantly seen as an individual trajectory of religious transformation, with ‘strong’ (personal, coherent, unambiguous) narratives of converts. In contrast, in deconversion, where the individual trajectory often consists of narratives of confusion, loss and reorientation, the stories of the deconverted focus on escaping the religion in question and building a new life-world outside of it. In both cases, however, these stories are predominantly interpreted as examples of ‘authentic’ religious transformation in and out of religious ‘homes’. The idea of contested conversions takes a different angle by discussing stories of conversion and deconversion in the light of the social, political and religious debates that these stories generate and the impact of these debates on the telling of these stories. This puts new questions on the agenda, such as: what makes a conversion ‘real’, what happens when the conversion ‘fails’, what makes it count as a deconversion, and who determines whether a (de)conversion has taken place? This gave us the opportunity to explore more explicitly the added value of cultural studies and critical studies (such as postcolonial, queer and critical race studies) for the field of conversion studies, in which religious studies and the anthropology and sociology of religion are often most dominant.
All in all, these five points not only provide a succinct summary of our academic work over the past five years, but also well illustrate the urge to engage with and think through the current religious, political and social relations and tensions in the Western world, and to understand their impact on women in different religious communities.

4 Outline of This Special Issue

The articles presented in this special issue of Religion and Gender all relate to the research questions of the above described NWO programme, and each connects to several of the focal points mentioned here. The first three articles were presented at this programme’s expert meeting at the conference of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego in November 2019, entitled ‘Contested Conversions’; the other articles come from the networks built around this NWO programme.

The first article is entitled “Producing Authenticity, Difference and Extremism: The Framing of Religious Converts in Dutch and Flemish Newspapers”, written by Nella van den Brandt and Mariecke van den Berg in their function as NWO project researcher and by project assistant Béracha Meijer. In this article, they explore the framing of religious converts by Dutch and Flemish newspapers in the period 1991–2017, using a data research method and focusing on the differences and similarities in the way these newspapers present religious conversions to Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Their approach is to explore the ‘figure’ of the convert: How is the religious convert framed and understood? They present a typology of figures of the religious convert that emerged from their material, including the ‘authentic seeker’, the ‘model believer’, the ‘cultural other’, the ‘victim’, the ‘opportunist’ and the ‘extremist’. This approach allows them to explore how newspapers promote particular notions of conversion and to show that the framing of religious converts is mediated by religion, gender, race and citizenship.

Véronique Lecaros and Samuel Asenjo Alvarado, both appointed at the Instituto de Democracia y Derechos Humanos de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, wrote the article “Masculinity Challenged? Religious Conversion in Peruvian Jails”. This article presents the results of an ethnographic study of prisoner conversion to evangelical churches among (ex)convicts in Piura, a northern Peruvian city, and in Lima, the capital of Peru. The aim is to explore highly debated and under-researched issues about this type of conversion process: is this conversion an individual process or a strategy to gain protection from the Church in a dangerous environment (Algranti 2017)? What changes
do (ex)convicts undergo through conversion, especially in the way they perform virile masculinity, a very important feature of gang members and also of evangelical churches? Many (ex)convicts’ religious careers oscillate between extremes, from delinquency to strict church discipline, until some may stabilise. It is argued that despite conversions and apparent changes in behaviour, the social religious imaginary (Morello 2018), especially in terms of ideals of masculinity, remains almost unchanged, based on relations of power, struggle and domination. (Ex)convicts move from a ‘perverse’ to a ‘virtuous’ version of masculinity (Fuller 2012). For them, the ideal of femininity remains rooted in submissive women.

Vanessa Rau is the author of the third article—which was presented at our 2019 expert meeting—entitled “Between Symbolic Distancing and Following Desires: Conversion to Judaism among Women in Germany”. Rau is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Department of Socio-Cultural Diversity and part of the ZOMiDi project “Civil Society Organisations and the Challenges of Migration and Diversity: Agents of Change” at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Niedersachsen, Germany. This article presents the findings of ethnographic research and looks at recent female conversions to Judaism in Germany, recognising that Judaism and Jewishness have been subject to change and have got more fluid boundaries in recent decades. By analysing several biographical trajectories, this article shows how individuals negotiate their desire to become Jewish, which is often closely linked to a stay in Israel and/or having a Jewish partner. As context makes the conversion, it becomes clear how these desires and negotiations are deeply intertwined with the socio-historical context of German society, as well as with the erotic and with sexuality. This article shows how becoming Jewish is a way of symbolically distancing oneself from the biographical experiences of difference that are negotiated in and through conversion. As these conversions are not untested, it is also shown how becoming part of Jewish socialities evokes a negotiation of one’s positionality at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and religion.

From the networks brought forward by this NWO programme are the following four articles. Karin van Nieuwkerk, Professor of Contemporary Islam in the Middle East and Europe at the Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands, wrote “‘Islam Is My Washing Line’: Long-term Religious Trajectories of Dutch Women Converting to Islam”. According to Van Nieuwkerk, although conversion is an ongoing religious journey, it is rarely studied as such. In her article, she presents a longitudinal study of Dutch women’s conversion to Islam. As people who have recently converted may be very firm in their new convictions, leaving little room for doubt and uncertainty, studying the long-term process gives us insight into moments of weak belief, doubt and ambivalence, or grow-
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ing faith and spirituality. Not only are these internal contestations important to examine, but also the external context of the conversion narrative is fluid, often changing over time. Conversion is a contested issue, but the aspects of conversion that are contested can shift according to societal debates about Islam. This article develops an ethnographically informed approach to the study of long-term conversion experiences. It proposes to study conversion experiences as contextual narratives of the continuous religious transformations of the ‘self’ in relation to different ‘others’ over time.

Nina ter Laan is a postdoctoral researcher on the project “Digital Public Spheres and Social Transformation in the Maghreb” at the University of Cologne, Germany. Her article is entitled “‘Assalamu ʿAlaykum, Can We Add This Sister?’ WhatsApp Group Chat as a Homemaking Practice among Dutch-speaking Muhajirat in Morocco”. This article examines a WhatsApp chat group used by Muslim women (born and converted) of Dutch and Belgian nationality who are considering or have made a *hijra* (religiously inspired migration to a Muslim country) to Morocco. It shows how WhatsApp is a crucial tool in facilitating, organising and narrating the religious migration of these interlocutors. In addition to providing a support network, WhatsApp shapes a sense of community and belonging. Drawing on theories of religion, mobility and digital media, this article argues that in the context of *hijra* to Morocco, WhatsApp can be conceptualised as a social practice of homemaking that serves to alleviate the precarious condition in which these women find themselves. In addition, attention is drawn to the complex interplay between online cultivations of belonging and offline practices of homemaking. This entanglement of digital and material realities gives rise to a community of practice and a highly specific form of trans-local kinship among Dutch-speaking Muslim women who live (or wish to live) in Morocco for religious reasons.

Maria Vliek is a researcher at the Netherlands Institute for Social Research in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Her article is entitled: “Let’s Talk About Gender: Women’s Narratives of Moving Out of Islam in Contemporary Europe”. Within Europe, gender and Islam have a complex and often polarised discursive history. While some see only the oppression of women in patriarchal and religious structures, others hail Islam as the birthplace of emancipation. This article explores the experiences of women who have moved out of Islam in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and finds that many navigate between these narratives of oppression and liberation. The aim of the article is twofold: firstly, based on 22 life history interviews, it explores gendered experiences of growing up (from personal experiences of inequality to observations of theological or legislative problems) that may have led to various degrees of doubt or distress. It then unpacks gendered embodied experiences, such as veil-
ing, modesty or mosque attendance, as having relative importance in moving out of Islam. Secondly, this article elaborates on how these women position themselves within religious and secular expectations of what it means to be a former Muslim woman. It explores their positionality in a polarised debate: how did they relate to discourses of suppression and liberation, from either secular(ised) or religious environments?

Lucy Spoliar is a PhD candidate in Islamic Studies at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, and has completed an internship with the nwo research project “Beyond ‘Religion versus Emancipation’”. For this special issue, she interviewed Julia Martínez-Ariño, Assistant Professor of Sociology of Religion at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, about her research on ‘collective feminist apostasy’ in Spain and Argentina. In her project, Martínez-Ariño explores the motivations and experiences of female apostates leaving the Catholic Church in these two contexts, and reveals an increasingly activist, feminist bent among apostates in recent years. In this activist form of apostasy, issues of gender equality, women's reproductive rights and women's sexuality emerge as central sites of contention. While the paperwork of apostasy is often carried out in private, in a slow, bureaucratic process, the decision to apostatise is presented by many of Martínez-Ariño's interlocutors as a public and political response to biopolitics within the Catholic Church. In this article, Spoliar shares her reflections on whether and how such an example might fit into the ‘religion vs. emancipation’ paradigm problematised by the “Beyond ‘Religion vs. Emancipation’” programme. Spoliar also explores the similarities between this example and others in the literature on gender and de/conversion in relation to themes such as visibility, continuity, cultural identity, individual and family biographies.

References


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