



Early Modern Conversions

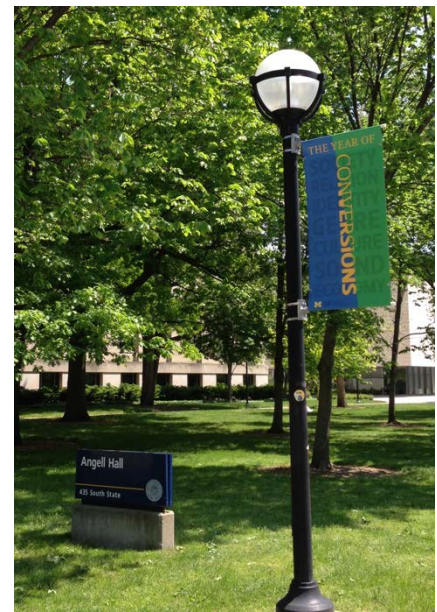
Report on the team meeting, University of Michigan, May 25-27 2016

The fourth full meeting of the Conversions research team took place at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, May 25-27 2016. The meeting began with a reception at the Ann Arbor Brewing Company the evening of May 24. What followed were three days of presentations, discussions, the appearance among us of the some of greatest figures in the history of conversion, what might be called a conversion theatre workshop led by Linda Gregerson, a trip to the Detroit Institute of Art, a presentation about history and narrative by Carla Nappi, and a summary reflection by Peggy McCracken. (See the meeting program at the end of this report.)

The team meeting was planned by research co-leaders for 2015-16 Helen Smith and Angela Vanhaelen, by University of Michigan PhD student Sarah Linwick, by Project Manager Stephen Wittek, and by Project Director Paul Yachnin. The planners and the members of the meeting are happy to acknowledge the institutional support of the UM Department of English and the Institute for the Humanities, with especial thanks for administrative assistance to Doretha Coval and Jane Johnson. The members of the project were thrilled to see banners on campus celebrating the University of Michigan's "Year of Conversions." For that, we thank our Conversions colleagues at UM, with special thanks to Sidonie Smith, Director of the Institute for the Humanities.

The planners set out with a number of goals for the Ann Arbor meeting. (1) One was to pay greater attention to visual culture and visual art than we have done at past meetings. (2) Another was to bring a number of key texts related to conversion—old and new texts—into the discussion at the meeting and to find a way of doing that that would also bring team members together around the texts. (3) Another was to highlight conversion and narrative form. (4) Another was to provide time for team members to share their work in progress. (5) A final goal, perhaps the major one, was to bring conversion, gender, and sexuality to the centre of the work of the meeting. One way to do that was to reprise a number of the papers from the January symposium, "Metamorphosis, Transformation, and Conversion: A symposium on Ovid, Lyly, and Benserade," organized at UM by Valerie Traub. Another way was to recruit Valerie to do the lead-off presentation at the meeting.

In her presentation, "Becoming Converted: Gender, Sexuality, Race," Valerie pointed out that the Project Director had persuaded her to join the project, which on the face of it might look like a collaborative study of religious conversion, precisely because her work had very little to do with



religion. She surprised the meeting by saying that she was in fact going to talk mostly about religious conversion. Her presentation made two important contributions to the meeting and to the project as a whole. One was her argument, based on a large number of (mostly English) early modern as well as pre-modern texts (including scripture) and taking into account the most significant work on conversion, gender, sexuality, and race over the past thirty years, that religious conversion, both shifts between kinds of Christianity and between Christianity and other religions, were very often represented in terms of gender, sexual, and/or racial transformation. “Rhetorics of gender, sexuality and race,” she said, “provided early moderns with a variety of creative ways to cognitively process conversion, both in terms of its attractiveness and the anxieties to which it gave rise.”

To some degree, our work in the project has unfolded along parallel tracks. One might be called “Paul,” the other “Ovid.” “Paul” has stayed mostly in the archive of religious history and theology, religious conversion, strong variants of religious conversion, and the philosophy of the subject (certainly not ignoring the social and material conditions of living); “Ovid” has had more to do with the mixing of material, corporeal, and subjective transformations as well as with philosophies of Ovidian changefulness (often thought of as postmodern but actually comprising a tradition going at least as far back as Lucretius).

Valerie’s presentation, we might say, asked the members of the project to reunite Paul and Ovid, invited us to bear in mind that the early moderns themselves thought about conversion—regularly, normally—in terms of sexuality, gender, and race.

And that was not all. Valerie also sketched a case against thinking about conversion in the modern terms of identity. “In the logic of modernity,” she said, “if one converts to Islam or Christianity, [one] then simply is a Muslim or Christian—just as if one were to come out as a homosexual, be naturalized as a U.S. citizen, or claim one’s authentic identity as that of a different gender. A modernist conception of identity formation, which elides the process of formation in order to fixate on identity, has governed many of our discussions.” Instead of thinking in ontological terms—moving from one kind of being to another—it would make more sense to think epistemologically (how can we know if another is converted?), and also to focus on becoming rather than on being. She quoted Deleuze: “Becoming produces nothing other than itself. . . . What is real is the becoming itself. . . not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes.” (Deleuze indeed goes further than Ovid here; the changes in *The Metamorphoses* often end in fixed, intelligible forms of gender, species, mortality.)

The members of the meeting then formed groups and wrote responses to Valerie’s talk. There was strong agreement about the entanglement of the rhetorics of conversion, gender, sexuality, and race. The groups added to the account of conversion as becoming the ways in which language, representation, ritual (baptism, marriage, communion, etc.), including bodily ritual (like circumcision), habits of prayer, diet, etc. seek to transform conversioning (so to speak) into conversion, becoming into being. The tension between the two is critical. One group also drew attention to how the argument for conversioning made it a necessity to think about conversion in terms of relationships among people as well as in terms of changes to the person.

Several of the sessions that followed over the course of the three days developed the ideas of the opening presentation and discussion. The “Sex and Gender” roundtable featured presentations on the temporality and materiality of conversion; the remarkable scratching and marking of painted images on walls and furniture in the home (scholars have blamed children for the scratching, but the

practice was widespread, was certainly done by adults, and was related in some ways to the transformative power of images); and the ritual, corporeal, gendered, and sexual dimensions of how women transformed into nuns. The “Ovid and Conversion” roundtable provided a valuable opportunity to think further and in specific terms about conversion. We were invited to consider Montaigne’s ideas about the fluidity, even the imaginary constitution of gender; to think with John Florio about the sexuality of words; and to visit the Ovidian world of shifting land, water, and gender in John Lyly’s play, *Galatea*.

And “becoming” turned up elsewhere in what we said and did. Carla Nappi’s extraordinary performance of the history-writing of the fictional historians called the Elizabeths (<https://theelizabeths.org/>) showed how narrative was itself an instrument of conversion, how conversion was always a process of becoming, and how the conversion of the person was of a piece with material and corporeal transformation. Under the guidance of poet, actor, and scholar Linda Gregerson, the members of the meeting played in a theatre of highly changeable narrative and character. When a new participant entered, someone already in the play had to exit, the new actor had to invent a new story-line on the spot, and the player(s) still on stage had to adapt instantly to the new play. On the make-shift stage in the centre of the meeting room, the members of the research team created what emerged as a conversional playhouse. Finally, Peggy McCracken’s summary reflections developed a valuable account of the importance for the Conversions project of critical animal studies: animals are not the other that confirms the exceptional character of human conversion; rather, they are our companion species and fellow travelers on the pathways of transformation. She drew our attention to something we’d discussed at the Cambridge meeting (and will discuss again at the 2017 team meeting)—the problem of periodization. A scholar of medieval literature and culture, she reminded us that conversions of many kinds thrived in the medieval period, which is usually “the before” to our historical focus on what we call “early modernity.” To conclude, she endorsed Valerie’s emphasis on becoming, especially since that kind of focus could lead us toward a more detailed, more historically specific study of conversion—what Valerie and John Sutton have called “conversion in slow motion.”

Three other sessions require special attention in this report. The first is the presentation by the members of the Summer Seminar. Two members of the seminar were unable to stay for the team meeting; their sections were covered by colleagues. The nine individual presentations covered a great range around the question of conversion and theatre, from the body as a conduit for conversion (Caliban in *The Tempest*) to Machiavelli and the limits of conversion (in Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*) to how to turn from whoredom to chastity (Dekker’s *The Honest Whore*) to the transformation of Shakespeare himself into an Arab poet to debating Las Casas in the transatlantic Spanish theatre. This partial account of the work of the seminarians suggests how strong a case they made for the dynamism and creativity of the relationship between theatre and forms of conversion.

The second was the authors’ theatre, which issued from advance work done by the reading groups around six books that team members had identified as particularly worth our attention (works by Augustine, Erasmus, Spinoza, Donna Haraway, Talal Asad, and Bruno Latour). With the exception of the Latour group, whose leader thought that her taking on the voice of Latour would not fit well with the highly collaborative nature of the reading group’s work, the five other authors appeared before us, performed by team members. The authors were subjected to searching questioning by members of their respective groups, and they entered into discussion and debate with each other and with the whole meeting.

Third was the combination of the trip to the Detroit Institute of Art on Thursday afternoon and the “Visual Culture” roundtable on Friday morning. The DIA was a splendid surprise to many members of the meeting. It features a remarkable collection of early modern art, including the Breugel “Wedding Dance,” illustrative of the social power of the conversional ritual of marriage. The staff at the DIA was welcoming and their introduction to the work of preservation and to the collection itself was illuminating. The roundtable’s four presentations on how visual art can represent conversion, can be converted and can convert its partakers enhanced the experience of seeing the DIA works of art. The presenters helped us understand the conversional dimensions of visual culture in both formal and functional terms.

In the course of the work throughout the three days, we found we missed a number of leading team members. However, we were delighted to be able to welcome many Graduate Student Associates to the meeting as well as a number of distinguished guests. Owing to a very large degree to the creativity and collegiality of the participants, the meeting succeeded in advancing significantly the coherence of the project research program. The meeting did that without diminishing the range, energy, inventiveness and contestatory character of our approaches and ideas about conversion and early modernity.

In sum, the 2016 team meeting fulfilled the principal aspirations of the planners, but did not do so equally across the board. (1) The meeting succeeded in bringing new and valuable attention to visual culture and visual art. (2) It did bring important texts by thinkers from Augustine to Spinoza to Haraway to shared, lively attention; it remains to be seen how far the thinkers who appeared among us will influence the work going forward.

(3) The work on narrative and conversion was originally intended to feature a session by team members telling and also reflecting on their own conversion narratives (or the stories of family or friends). Not surprisingly, there were very few willing to come forward with a conversion narrative of their own. Carla Nappi’s presentation was wonderful and even capable of opening new ways of thinking about—and new ways of doing—narrative, history, and conversion; but it was a beginning only for work on narrative form and the forms of conversions within the project. (4) The program did provide ample space for team members, especially early career scholars, to present their work-in-progress and to get valuable feed-back on that work. (5) The principal goal, to bring gender, sexuality, and conversion to the centre of attention, was formatively successful. Paul will not find it easy to take the stage all alone in the future; as in Shakespeare’s great syncretic comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Paul will find himself inextricably bound together with his conversional twin Ovid.

Participants in the 2016 Conversions team meeting (non-team members are indicated by an asterisk)

Lisa Anderson, PhD student, Art History, University of British Columbia
Abdulhamit Arvas, Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow, Drama Department, Vassar College
Patricia Badir, English, University of British Columbia
J.F. Bernard, English, Champlain College
Juan Luis Burke, PhD student, Architecture, McGill
Michael Cop, PhD student, English, University of Otago
Julie Cumming, Music, McGill
Anthony Dawson, English (Emeritus), University of British Columbia
Amrita Dhar, PhD student, English, University of Michigan
Hussein Fancy, History, University of Michigan
Maia Farrar, PhD student, English, University of Michigan
Joseph Gamble, PhD student, English, University of Michigan
Madiha Hannachi, PhD student, English, Université de Montréal
George Hoffman, French, University of Michigan
Tiffany Hoffman, Fellow in Neuro-History, Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill
Megan Holmes,* Art History, University of Michigan
José Jouve-Martin, Spanish, McGill
Torrance Kirby, Religious Studies, McGill
Sonya Kohut, PhD student, Architecture, McGill
Anna Lewton-Brain, PhD student, English, McGill
Sarah Linwick, PhD student, English, University of Michigan
Kathleen Perry Long, French, Cornell
José Juan Lopez Portillo, History, CIDE (Mexico City)
Peggy McKracken,* French, University of Michigan
Steven Mullaney, English, University of Michigan
Carla Nappi,* History, University of British Columbia
Yelda Nasifoglu, PhD student, Architecture, McGill
Jennifer Nelson,* Art History, Theory and Criticism, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Benjamin Post, PhD, History, University of Wisconsin—Madison
Marjorie Rubright,* English, University of Toronto
Kilian Schindler, PhD student, English, University of Fribourg (Switzerland)
Benjamin Schmidt, History, University of Washington
Alison Searle, University Fellow in Textual Studies and Digital Editing, University of Leeds
Helen Smith, English, University of York
Stephen Spiess, Thinking Matters Fellow, Stanford University
Allie Stielau, Art History, University College, University of London
Valerie Traub, English and Women's Studies, University of Michigan
Angela Vanhaelen, Art History and Communication Studies, McGill
Ivana Vranic, PhD student, Art History, University of British Columbia
Bronwen Wilson, Art History, UCLA
Stephen Wittek, Academic Associate, McGill; Project Manager
Paul Yachnin, English, McGill; Project Director
Carla Zecher, Executive Director, Renaissance Society of America



early modern
CONVERSIONS

2016 TEAM MEETING

Koessler Room, Michigan League Building (3rd floor), 911 North University, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1265

TUESDAY MAY 24

7-9pm	Reception at Ann Arbor Brewing Company (114 E Washington Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48104)
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WEDNESDAY MAY 25

8-9	Continental breakfast -- Koessler Room, Michigan League Building (3rd floor)	
9-9:45	Opening presentation	Valerie Traub
9:45-10:15	Divide into four groups. Each group should compose a response to Valerie's presentation and send it to stephen.wittek@mcgill.ca for display on Powerpoint.	
10:15-10:45	Attendees reconvene in the Auditorium to share and discuss responses	Moderator: Kathleen Long
10:45-11	Break	
11-12:30	Presentation from the summer seminarians: Jean-François Bernard, Madiha Hannachi, Tiffany Hoffman, Benjamin Post, Kilian Schindler, Alison Searle, Stephen Spiess	
12:30-1:30	Lunch	
1:30-3	Presentation Session A: Auditorium	Moderator: José Jouve-Martin
	Instruments of Conversion	Yelda Nasifoglu
	Hameter/Elcius: The Construction of a Jesuit Martyrology, 1580-2	Amrita Dhar
	Supplementing Stewards: Converting English Political Identity in <i>The Squire of Low Degree</i>	Maia Farrar
	Presentation Session B: League Room A (3rd floor)	Moderator: Steven Mullaney
	Home Sex	Joseph Gamble
	Pattern'd by that the poet here describes": Arab Adaptation of Shakespeare as Reversal of the Early Modern Pattern of Representation	Madiha Hannachi
	Sympathetic Bodies: The Feeling of Conversion in <i>The Tempest</i>	Tiffany Hoffman
	Presentation Session C: League Room C (3rd floor)	Moderator: Paul Yachnin
	Converting the affections: Richard Hooker's defence of the 'sensible excellencie' of the 'publique duties of religion'	Torrance Kirby
Dynamic Conversions: Grief and Joy in George Herbert's Musical Verse	Anna Lewton-Brain	
John Dee and the mirror of conversion	Sonya Kohut	
3-3:15	Break	
3:15-4:15	Reading Group Presentations. Group members interview their authors. José-Juan Lopez-Portillo as Augustine (<i>Confessions</i>), Torrance Kirby as Erasmus (<i>Enchiridion</i>), and Paul Yachnin as Spinoza (<i>Ethics</i>)	Moderator: Julie Cumming
4:15-5:15	Business Meeting, including publication program	Paul Yachnin and Stephen Wittek

THURSDAY MAY 26

8-9	Continental breakfast -- Koessler Room, Michigan League Building (3 rd floor)	
9-10:30	Sex & Gender Roundtable	Helen Smith, Megan Holmes, Joseph Gamble Moderator: Carla Zecher
10:30-10:45	Break	
10:45-12	Conversions workshop	Linda Gregerson
12-1	Lunch	
1-6	Afternoon at the Detroit Institute of Art -- 1:00 Bus leaves Ann Arbor; 2:00 Session at DIA; 5:00 Bus leaves Detroit; 6:00 Arrival in Ann Arbor	

FRIDAY MAY 27

8-9	Continental breakfast -- Koessler Room, Michigan League Building (3rd floor)	
9-10:30	Visual Culture Roundtable	Allie Stielau, Bronwen Wilson, Ben Schmidt, Lisa Anderson Moderator: Angela Vanhaelen
10:30-11:30	Reading Group Presentations. Helen Smith as Donna Haraway (<i>When Species Meet</i>), George Hoffmann as Talal Asad (<i>Genealogies of Religion</i>); gathering around Bruno Latour (<i>We Have Never Been Modern</i>)	Moderator: Stephen Spiess
11:30-11:45	Break	
11:45-12:45	Presentation by Carla Nappi	Moderator: Helen Smith
12:45-1:45	Lunch	
1:45-2:45	Presentation Session A: Auditorium	Moderator: Stephen Wittek
	Playhouse Conversions	Paul Yachnin
	Pour Pressure: Tapsters, Drink, and Temporary Conversions in Early-Modern English Drama	Michael Cop
	Presentation Session B: League Room A (3rd floor)	Moderator: José-Juan Lopez Portillo
	Secret Virtues of the Supreme Unity: The Moral Theology of Peter Sterry (1672)	Eric Parker
	Converting Saul, Converting Cortés: Crusading Violence in Colonial Náhuatl Theater	Benjamin Post
	Presentation Session C: League Room C (3rd floor)	Moderator: Anna Lewton-Brain
Text-Mining Early Modern Travel Writing	Catherine Nygren	
Christ's Burial: A Site of Artistic, Cultural, and Religious Conversions	Ivana Vranic	
2:45-3	Break	
3-4:30	Ovid & Conversion Roundtable	Kathleen Long, Patricia Badir, Marjorie Rubright Moderator: Allie Stielau
4:30-5:30	Summary reflections	Peggy McCracken Moderator: Paul Yachnin
5:30-6:30	Meeting for all ingoing and outgoing members of the Management Committee	Valerie Traub, Ben Schmidt, Bronwen Wilson, Torrance Kirby, José Jouve-Martin, Steven Mullaney, Patricia Badir

The members of the 2016 Team Meeting Planning Committee are Angela Vanhaelen, Helen Smith, Sarah Linwick, Stephen Wittek, and Paul Yachnin. It is our pleasure to gratefully acknowledge the institutional support provided by the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan and the UoM Institute for the Humanities—with extra special thanks for the administrative assistance provided by Doretha Coval and Jane Johnson.